

***It's like hammering into nothing
when I speak it***

by k.g. Guttman

k.g. Guttman was a student when she first met her friend Nancy Ring. Years later, in 2009, she asked the professor, art historian and writer the same seven questions every day for seven days. From their conversation emanates a complex, constellational rapport, surpassing the likes of even a strong professional mentorship (which itself is rare, particularly among women). They talk as if in past lives they'd taken long trips together, shared clothes, lovers, losses, and were kept awake at night by questions of a similar character.

Ring had cancer when they spoke and she passed away six months later. Guttman sat with the 120-page transcript for years before its release as *It's like hammering into nothing when I speak it* in late 2016.

Beyond Guttman's interest in, first, Ring and second, the outcomes of replicated questioning in a concentrated period, the project feels like an effort to stock up on something before it's gone. A framework to capture a cross-section of a woman, a life of the mind. It's clear that the project – or more broadly, “art” – became an excuse to undertake something that otherwise might just have been too much to ask. Hence the lack of any specific, tangible end in these means. (Says Guttman: “Like when does this become anything but us, fucking spending time together.”) The dialogues were a pre-emptive defense against memory, with the wisdom that nothing moves grief along like the decomposition of de-

tails. The cooling embers of grief edge the deceased further out of those who outlive them, too near extinction.

What questions does one ask at the end of a life? Guttman asks Ring about having once said, “I have no reaction outside of language,” and about the folding and fluidity between life and teaching. She asks what things Ring returns to, and if that's what she does with what she loves. There's one question that involves a dictionary and another wherein a recording of Duchamp from 1968 is played. But at a certain point, *The Questions* become indistinguishable from whatever was borne of circumstance. Guttman and Ring routinely break the fourth wall. They veer into the meta, following suit with the project's dubiousness about interviews. They're playfully combative. They contradict themselves and take up the contradictions with earnest curiosity, as if they were sweet, cake-y little UFOs that had just floated in through the window.

Five days in, Ring says, “I think we are talking really, really personally.” Guttman responds saying that she doesn't know how that happened; she remembers that Ring agreed to participate as long as she wouldn't have to talk about herself. And then, as if reflecting on measures she took to respect that boundary, Guttman says, “My questions to you were about professionalism in a certain way.” While it's not entirely untrue, this intention stationed at this point in the book, though well-meaning,

**Review by
Jaclyn Bruneau**

is kind of charmingly null. They're not trying to decide who is to blame, nor is Ring reprimanding Guttman for going back on her word. Rather, they seem to be marvelling together at the inverse question of my own: *How does one respond to questions at the end of one's life?* The subjective, come hell or high water, is what's at stake.

“Whether we are talking about ourselves or not, we are showing up in an intimate way, as much as we are showing up in an intellectual way... I don't think that really happens in interviews,” Ring adds.

Furthermore, it's Guttman's decision to confront the fraught nature of her relationship to the resulting document – or, more broadly, the material leftovers of a life – that gives the book its conceptual heft. The book is not bound but instead is a folio of folios. Each day's conversation is printed on 8.5 × 11-inch printer paper, laid out in a standard Q&A format, and tucked into a larger, folded paper of slightly heavier coloured stock. Five days in five shades of yellow. A yellow light makes people feel more comfortable than a white one does and, in many languages, words like “brilliant” and “bright” refer not only to a quality of light but also to an exceptional mind, grounded and sound. The two other days are two shades of grey: an overcast day, a colour without colour, a space between two things, a no-man's-land, ashes. These seven yellow and grey folios rest in a larger folio of a yet heavier stock.

Book Review

There's something seductively unpolished about this book, its loose printer paper giving it an iterative quality, like one attempt in a realm of many. Guttman's redactions are excessive. While the markings of each speaker's turn are maintained throughout, the transcript drops off without warning. Blank tracts, a sentence, a paragraph, some paragraphs, or several pages long, omitted according to an esoteric criterion reserved for the bereaved.

There's a tendency for writers who write about grief to decry the text *in* the text, disavowing their own effort to force language through, just as they're letting it be read. In Barthes' *Mourning Diary*, wherein he writes about his mother's death and his resulting condition, he writes, "I don't want to talk about it, for fear of making literature out of it – or without being sure of

not doing so – although as a matter of fact literature originates within these truths." Although it's a complete published work, this book is tenuous, like a case that can never feasibly be closed. Like a person who paces the room. It denies the primacy of a final draft.

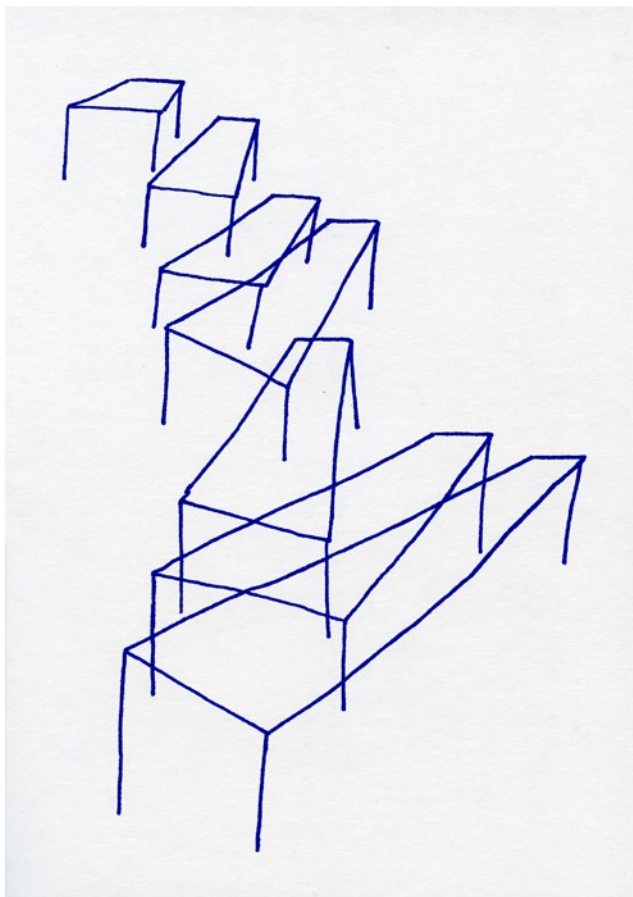
The reader's frustration and impatience with Guttman's redactions are tuned precisely with the frustrations and impatience we have with our own memory, especially after a death. The omissions are so glaring, so deeply disruptive that it's questionable sometimes whether this could even be called a process of sharing, of externalizing. Anne Carson, in *NOX*, a book-length eulogy for her brother, offers one translation of the Latin word *mutum* that reads, "likes to show the truth by allowing it to be seen hiding." This thoughtful contradiction is reflected in Guttman's way of articu-

lating the simultaneous speechlessness and need to speak that characterizes profound loss.

I give the last word to Ring, who says: "You know, I have these memories, I have very fragmentary memories of certain things, that I equate to bliss, but they are very evanescent, and if I put them into speech, the bubble would pop... you know, it's like hammering into nothing when I speak it..."

Jaclyn Bruneau is a Toronto-based writer, editor, organiser and installation technician.

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into nothing when
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Accumulative interview:
k.g. Guttman with
Nancy Ring

Over seven lunches,
the same questions were
repeated every day