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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “an intimate voice rooted in a listening empathy.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

INTO THE WILD

The collective voice of children and beasts in Bhanu Kapil’s poetry.

By Laynie Browne

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Humanimal: a Project for Future Children, by Bhanu Kapil. Kelsey Street Press.
\$17.95

How does the voice of a writer enter one’s being and create an intimate space where a reader may travel safely through the text? Bhanu Kapil, a poet raised in London who currently teaches at Naropa University and Goddard College, does so by writing from multiple perspectives. In her newest book, *Humanimal: a Project for Future Children*, Kapil explores liminal identity, turning to research and documentary to create a mosaic-like account based on the true story of two girls found living with wolves in the Bengal region of India in 1920. Kapil’s source material for the text is the diary of the Indian missionary Reverend Joseph Singh, published in 1945. Kapil also traveled to Midnapure with the French filmmaking company Mona Lisa Production as part of a documentary on human-wolf contacts, and was filmed as she went about her research on the two wolf girls, Kamala and Amala.

In choosing this subject, she poses questions about female identity. What does it mean to be civilized? How is the body a culprit? What are the historical and narrative circumstances that create a feral existence? How is the story of the feral child a metaphor for violence and neglect of those who experience themselves as outside, primal, territorial?

The reader must continually ask of the voice of the narrator, “Is she of one form or another? Human or wolf?”

I want to stand up but I can't do that here. They would know I am a wolf by my sore hips, the look in my eyes. At the edge of the garden was a line of blue chalk. My mother was crouching there, waiting for me in her dark coat. In the dream I walk towards her and she stands up. She opens up her coat like two wings and I step into her cloth heart, her cleft of matted fur.

Her voices' sympathies are never singular, and they are spoken in a space between boundaries, localities known and unknown: the space of the unescorted. And yet, her voice escorts us. The poet-detective traces a line, and we are compelled to follow. In the jungle we learn that the notion that history moves in one direction is a myth. Culture is beyond time, a learned mechanism of being. We become caught within the questions of the *Humanimal*.

What is the opposite of feral? Feral: "Latin, from 'fera' a wild beast. Relating to, or having the nature of, a wild beast; uncultivated; undomesticated; barbarous; wild." The question is deliberately not answered. Would one say civilized? Hardly, considering that the violent treatment of the two feral girls by the "civilized" is not at all civil:

A girl is a dot arising in space, and then the girl after that, and the next. Viral, schizophrenic, the two girls shook in the garden, and then in their beds like photographs. In the first days of their captivity, they screamed for their mother, then stopped. Dehydrated, they sucked tea from rags. Accepting nourishment like this was a primary act of human culture. Hopeful, their Father brought them home. No. They were home and then they got sick, unable to tolerate the food they were given.

This book gives voice to "monsters"—to those who are unnamed, uncounted, unclothed, unemployed, uninsured, represented only in the margins—and provides another way to approach subjects often explored only under the guise of anonymity. Kapil searches out voices not often heard, because of either invisibility or the opposite—a type of gawking that is not seeing at all, as if at an animal. Of the feral girls she writes,

For a few minutes a day, Joseph's wife, the Home's Mother let them [spectators] in and they swarmed to the room where the youngest girl was failing. They watched her fade and jerk in her cot, the spittle coming down over her chin.

The girl is captured from the jungle and placed upon a cot in full view of the civilized. The civilized and domesticated have unintentionally made the feral child ill. The "civilized" cannot understand or aid but wish to watch her decline. A revelatory cruelty exists in the story of *Humanimal*. Through Kapil's deft interweaving of perspectives, we can almost hear the breath of the wolf-girl in protest. It is beyond language.

Each of Kapil's books presents poetry as journey, social document and investigation. Her voice is a roadmap and an inquisitor revising the probable. Kapil elegantly and dramatically carves out a space for the unutterable. She writes beyond singular personhood, in an intimate voice rooted in a listening empathy.

Laynie Browne is the author of seven collections of poetry and one novel. Her most recent publications include *The Scented Fox* and *Daily Sonnets*. This article first appeared on www.poetryfoundation.org. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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