

**BHANU KAPIL**

From *Humanimal* [a project for future children]\*

\* This work is based upon the true story of Kamala and Amala, two girls found living with wolves in Bengal, India, in 1921. My source text was the diary of an Indian missionary, Reverend Joseph Singh, a document that was first published in 1945 as a companion text to *Wolf-children and Feral Man*, a book of essays by the Denver anthropologist Robert Zinng. In the jungle, on a Mission to convert the tribal population, Singh had heard stories of "two white ghosts" roaming with a mother wolf and her pack of cubs. He decided to track them, and, upon discovering the "terrible creatures" to be human, killed the wolves and brought the children back to his church-run orphanage, the Home, in Midnapure. For the next decade, he documented his attempt to teach the girls language, upright movement, and a moral life. Despite his efforts, Amala died within a year of capture, of nephritis. Kamala lived to be about sixteen, when she died of TB.

In 2004, I traveled to Midnapure with the French film-making company, Mona Lisa Production, as part of a documentary on human-wolf contacts. There, in India, I found the graves of the two girls. I found a ninety-eight year old woman who recalled their howling. I found a tree that Kamala had been photographed in, reaching out to grab the tail of a cat. I found the room the girls were kept in. I found the overgrown garden of the Home with its crumbling brick wall. I found the grandson of Joseph Singh, and it was he who placed the blurry photographs, which sections of this work are written from, in my hands.

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*They open up a body that is a lesion in the tissue of words and discourses and the network of powers.*

—Alphonso Lingis, *Abuses*

*That girl has had aberrated physiological patterns all her life—very slender, flattened, ribs-down pattern. When I was working on her, I was pulling her back from her unique pattern. I was changing a unique but very poorly operating girl to a normal pattern of a woman who could no longer look in the mirror and know that she was unique. I was afraid to say to her, “You are beginning to look like other people.” This was what I wanted to say, but I realized that that was the wrong thing to say.*

[Transcribed remarks on a photograph]

—Ida Rolf, *Rolfing and Physical Reality*

8.i. Where is the future child? Curled up with wolves, sub-red, the wolfgirl's eyes reflected light. She was seven when her Father found her, coiled in a den. A tall, extremely handsome Father, sidetracked from his Mission—dressed in black despite the heat—caught her in a bed-sheet, and wrote: “I cut a hole and removed her from the cave.”

8.ii. Your scars lit up then liquefied. Lucidly, holographically, your heart pulsed in the air next to your body; then my eyes clicked the photo into place. Future child, in the time you lived in, your arms always itched and flaked. To write this, the memoir of your body, I slip my arms into the sleeves of your shirt. I slip my arms into yours, to become four-limbed.

10.i. This is the humanimal project. All the fingers are still inside the hands. A mother-to-be's hips ache. In the forest behind her hut, the birds are so red, the wrong red, against the bed of green. A forest is a bed for animals. When the rains come each June, these animals make nets in the upper branches, suffering nightly, twitching, from an incomplete, lunar darkness. It's the time before electricity. Those are not birds. They are wolves, switching their glossy brown tails in the heat. As custom dictates, the woman gives birth, then places her newborn girl on a shawl beneath a tree, massages her with coconut oil, and leaves her there to sun. Lit up like that, the baby is vulnerable, naked thus flesh-like, fleshed like prey, but flailing—four legs in the air like pink, elongated stars.

10.ii. I am not interested in animals. Return to the work as memory. Say it is a wolf becoming a girl, the action in reverse.

10.iii. They strapped her down to the limited table where a knife spun in a jar of blue water. There were marigolds and red thread sewn into the white cotton curtains. Oranges lined up on the sill. Like a spell. Like an angel, the priest fed Kamala from a coil of linen, squeezing water into her open mouth. She spat it out and so the doctor came with his packet of edges. Dipped one into the glutinous foam and began. Her arms first. The thick dorsal hair, ashy. Her legs first and then her skull.

11. The air is pink by seven and there is Naxalite graffiti on the tree trunks of the stupid jungle. These are sal trees in West Bengal. A girl facing sal, 1920; it's still Orissa. These are notes for a separate project. But I'm here and I'm trying to see it, eighty-four years later: the humanimal trait. How she, through a density I can't manage but overlaid by a separate forest. I can't manage her forest and say it is sal, but a century on the sal is regulated.

12.i. How she moved, through sal. But these new trees are new, too young to be hers. The de-forest. The way land is always settled, gives up and then there are mercies. A planting. People—Britishers, then Hindi speakers from the north—swerving sal with their agricultural systems. In this third space, the trees make a sort of heart, a red space filtered loosely—pink light—to the rim. Gleaners—nomads, from Bhutan and present-day Orissa—are pushed back each year into the darker, more rigid sections of the jungle. Behind the film-makers, I walk through alternating bars of sunlight and shadow, luxuriating, nowhere. Footsteps. The police escort assigned to our party, panting, says: "Madam! Please tell them, they are not understanding. Are you Indian? Please talk to them on this point. The tribals have started up again. They know you are here, with your film equipment and all this. Madam, are you France? Are you American? I think you are born in a different country. Am I not right?"

12.ii. Walking through a jungle lit by blue paper. When they filmed the jungle they made pockets of soft blue light. "Walk more slowly, like you're thinking. Again! One more

time. Yes! Now . . . very naturally, very casually, look left, into the trees, as if you're looking for wolves."

13. But how she went into her garden, an indivisible red, and was not seen by her mother when a passing wolf picked her up in her quick beak. The mouth of the wolf was the sharp pink O that covered her and kept her still as they—the girl and her new, animal mother—crossed into the green. Nearer to the sal, I can see the tree trunks are red-orange, dusty, and that the lines they make are clear. I walk for hours between the rows as she did not. This is a different place and I want to know what happened, to the trees.

f. The cook scraped vernix or matte and saw a shape beneath the fats, suitable for reaching. "Your arm." "Your hand." "Your left." And sliced them free of the wild animal.

44. Imagine a body emitting red worms, thick as a finger and as long.

45.i. In a companion text, intrusion functions as an organizing principle. As an adult, for example, I take pleasure in the well-ordered house with the furry dog on the floor and the leg unaffectedly balanced on the mantelpiece. It's a human leg. It's art.

45.ii. My father's body, in those first fifteen or sixteen years of his life, changed from a liquidy, peeled thing -- constantly re-opened spots of tissue -- into another kind of body. The scarring process is regenerative in that you're healed but now you look different. My father's legs, for example, pooled with a silvery protein that hardened into long ovals and other shapes on his shins and thighs, though his feet were beautiful. Perfect, long-toed and white, as I recall. In the hospital, I massaged his legs, something that distinguished me from the other grown children in the reservoir of breath, that public bedroom. Pressing two rows of points, the spleen and the liver, I waited until he was asleep before I left. In the basement cafeteria, I ordered tomato soup, which I drank from the bowl, cupping my hands to bring it to my mouth as I gazed out at the trees and the rain and the darkening, indigo sky. My father died young, in his fifties, though the doctor told me privately that his body was clearly ravaged by the debilitating effects of poverty, early malnutrition and the multiple musculo-skeletal traumas that he appeared to have sustained as a child. "On the contrary, Miss Kapil," he said in a theatrical whisper next to the bed, "it is a miracle he lived this long. He should really have died as a child." "You should go home, ducks," said the nurse, and I did, passive to the ward's routines.

45.iii. As a child, I was waiting just outside my father's office, kicking my legs on a chair as I read *Bunty*, my weekly comic. I was waiting with a tall black boy of about twelve, already six feet tall. "What did you do?" "Nuffink." Without warning, both incredibly fast and in slow motion, my father came out of his headmaster's office with a cane. Within moments, the boy was writhing on the carpet, doubled up -- "Please, sir!" Without thinking, I stood and ran through the corridors of the school. I have a vivid memory of a frieze of gold and silver spray-painted coffee beans, arranged to form the spirals of a galaxy on a huge sheet of black paper. It must have been many pieces of paper, stapled together. I forget.

O.

47. I want to make a dark mirror out of writing: one child facing the other, like Dora and little Hans. I want to write, for example, about the violence done to my father's body as a child. In this re-telling, India is blue, green, black and yellow like the actual, reflective surface of a mercury globe. I pour the mercury into a shallow box to see it: my father's right leg, linear and hard as the bone it contains, and silver. There are scooped out places where the flesh is missing, chunks, and those places are filled in by silvery tissue as they

would be (shiny) regardless of race. A scar is memory. Memory is wrong. The wrong face appears in the wrong memory. A face, for example, condenses on the surface of the mirror in the bathroom when I stop writing to wash my face. Hands on the basin, I look up, and see it: the distinct image of an owl-girl. Her eyes protrude, her tongue is sticking out, and she has horns, wings and feet. Talons. I look into her eyes and see his. Writing makes a mirror between two children, but I don't know how to make them touch. In a physical world, the mirror is a slice of dark space. How do you break a space? No. Tell me a story set in a different time, in a different place. Because I'm scared. I'm scared of the child I'm making.

48. They dragged her from a dark room and put her in a sheet. They broke her legs then re-set them. Both children, the wolfgirls, were given a fine yellow powder to clean their kidneys but their bodies, having adapted to animal ways of excreting meat, could not cope with this technology. Red worms came out of their bodies and one of them, the younger, died. Kamala mourned the death of her sister with, as Joseph wrote, "an affection." Where this death-scene was was a dark room deep in the Home. Many rooms are dark in India to kill the sun. In Midnapure, I stood in that room, and blinked. When my vision adjusted, I saw a picture of Jesus above a bed, positioned yet dusty on a faded turquoise wall. Many walls in India are turquoise, which is a color the human soul soaks up in an architecture not even knowing it was thirsty. I was thirsty and a girl of about eight, Joseph's great-granddaughter, brought me tea. I sat on the edge of the bed and tried to focus upon the memory available to me in the room but there was no experience. When I opened my eyes, I observed Jesus once again, the blood pouring from his open chest, the heart, and onto, it seemed, the floor, in drips.

49. I met Mahalai in Godamuri where we were, to film a troupe of Marxist actors dressed as wolves, jungle animals, and children. I hung back in the village as the film-makers constructed a bamboo cage and R., the translator, persuaded a mother to undress her daughter, cut her hair, and dress her in a makeshift cloth diaper. I walked away from this scene and asked a woman rolling a cigarette if I could rest in her garden. Smiling, she said yes and offered me papaya from a stainless steel bowl at her feet. In Bengali, and I ate it. I ate language. As Mahalai, dexterous and blank, pinched finger after finger of tobacco to construct, in seconds, tight-looking bidis to add to the white pyramid before her, she sang. Her song was familiar and it made me want to cry. I was exhausted. Mahalai got up and poured some tea from a terracotta jug into a smaller clay cup and brought it to me. She was a wiry, tiny woman somewhere between forty and sixty with a long, oiled, grey-black braid down her back. She watched me drink and then we talked, in the place where her Bengali and my Hindi crossed. Then, without warning, she took my cup and set it on the ground. She grabbed me, shoved my head into her lap and started to massage my scalp. Her husband came home, carrying a bucket of wet clay and disappeared into their hut. My whole body felt rigid but then, abruptly, I submitted to her touch. When I woke up, I was covered with a shawl and someone, Mahalai, had covered me with tiny pink-orange blossoms from the pomegranate bush at the gate. Was there a

gate? R. found me and shook her head. I was officially somewhere on the edges of the story. A light rain set in and we returned to the lodge for a late dinner of fried fish, yoghurt and rice.

50. My own mother told me another story of possession, with its attendant fable of exorcism, as a child. There was a girl of nine in the village of Nangal, who had been overtaken by an evil spirit after a failed pilgrimage to the Kali temple in the hills above her home. Kali had come to her that night and stuck out her long, black tongue. The girl told her mother the dream but by nightfall, she had a fever and by the next was unconscious. Each night, the priest fed her purgative herbs and at midnight, she was permitted visitors. "A few days later, my friend was dead and I remember when we played by the river. Our cousin-brothers buried our dolls in the sand, but the rains came before we could dig them up. I cried and cried."

o. Citron-yellow dots collect and scatter. A silver sky collapses in folds upon the canopy. The grid divides then divides again. When the girl crawls out of the broken jungle, she's soaked in a dark pink fluid that covers her parts. Fused forever with the trees of the perimeter, she can't. The branches fill her mouth with leaves. I can't breathe.

51. What are your primal images? The man walking knee-deep across the outdoor swimming pool, a candle cupped in his palm? The ever-present running water at the corner of each black frame? Rain? Dogs? The color indigo or midnight blue next to gold. Your mother or father lighting the candles for Friday night dinner? Are you from another country? I wasn't expecting it, the immediate response to a temperature. My blood let out a deep sigh. Is it wrong to feel immediately at home in India, where, if its citizens knew you felt that way, would laugh you out of the house? But I felt it. Two minutes out of Kolkata airport, driving to the city, I breathed in the air in deep gulps, releasing the chemicals of permanence.

52. Seven years ago, I walked to the University of Colorado from my rented apartment on Goss. There, in the dark library, I closed my eyes and let my right hand drift over the stacks. Where my hand stopped, I opened my eyes, chose a book at random and read this: "October 17 Captured; Oct. 28 Leave Godamuri; Nov. 4 Arrive Midnapore; Nov. 10 Loincloth stitched on; Dec 16 Noticed sleeping on overlapping position; Dec 10 Only sound peculiar cry in dead of night. 1921. Jan 3 Can see in dark. January. They try to escape, morose, bite Roda. To end of January, complete dislike for everything human (A. also) Lips tremble; Sept. 4, A. falls ill; Sept. 12 Worms evacuated; Sept 21 A. dies, K. will not eat or drink, wants to be with corpse; Oct. 8 K. smells all places A. used to frequent, pants in sun, tongue out; Nov 25 Improves, becomes old self-via massage; Dec 2 Comes in room where Mrs. S. is, takes red toys in mouth; 1922: March 4 Can stand on knees whenever she likes without pillow; March 6 Finds dead chicken, runs into bushes

and devours it, understands endearments; May 10 Wall bracket exercise begun; Sept 15 K. smells meat at 70 yards—growls; Dec 24 Fear of fire; 1923: Sept. until Sept., 1923, (during first 3 years) no laugh or smile; 1924, March 11 Says 'soo' for saraju; 'toom' for 'toomy'='I am'; Nov. 18 Locked out of inner compound; extremely frightened, takes refuge in haystack. Tries to open door by force, fails. I called to her...instead of shunning my company, (she) now sought it."

53. Jungle space is zero space. How could you stay? Imagine a girl in her childhood dress, fluttering at the edge of the jungle, pinned by it yet living. On February 22, 1924, Joseph wrote: "Kamala pulled out a red frock. Mrs. Singh asked her why she wanted this frock. She at once replied in a drawn-out expression, 'L-a-l' (the Bengali word for 'red'). This was sufficient to show she understood what she meant."

54. I place a mirror in a cave, in a garden, on a leaf. It is a tiny, circular mirror of the sort used in the embroidery of chests and hems. In this way, I can train or invert an obsidian frame to hold light, make a face clarify. Today I saw a face dormant in the darkness of the jungle. Coming near and kneeling, I saw it was the open face of a child. Future child, I slip one hand under the curve of your skull and another beneath the vine of your neck.

55. Beneath the glorious canopy, I see a zero continuously crossing the line where it thins. Red next to green: a vibration. Something loosening inside a color and it is a similar desire that makes her cross. Is it? The edge of the jungle is not the place where the line shifts the most. That is deeper in where the caves are, pink with bones.

56. Her mother walked to the edge of the village and placed her in the roots of a tree where the sounds of human activity were still clearly audible. Her pulse rose but her mother left her, which is an ancient story. Near night, she stood; the child stood, undying, already partially metallic in her effort, her resiliency, and went in. Perhaps she crawled. This is a text to keep her safe and so I followed her into the jungle. Worms, flowers. I stayed awake all night and watched her while she slept, deflecting predators with my intensity, my pressure just before appearance. Nevertheless, I did sleep and inevitably, when I woke up, she was gone.

57. The tropical modern is breakable, a fragile globe enclosing the jungle, reflecting back the green. When it breaks, the green is, thus, muted, intensifying the pink of feathers, eyes, clothing and flowers. Heat doesn't break it. The sky does. No. I don't know what perturbs then banishes environment forever, but it does. I wrote another book like a blue lake then drained it, to write from a dip. I am writing to you from depression, from a body of black cloud through which a bird's shadow passes, like a knife.

58. A girl returns to her jungle home, shedding her dress at the perimeter. No. There's a citron-yellow flare of thunder and simple, pure red blossoms hang in the silver air. The

girl is lying in a nest, endangered yet coiling like a sea-creature in her sleep. I stay awake all night on the tip of love, a test of sight's force. How come you love her too? Do you have a child? Do you want a baby? These are the wrong questions but they pass the time. They make a body real. This is a text to do that. Vivify.

o. I've exhausted the alphabet. I can't keep writing this, even for you.

59.i. With nets or sheets, shawls and ropes, they get her and bring her down. For humanimals, this is a destiny that cannot be averted. Each time she crosses, in truth or fiction, she breaks the tracery of delicate glass threads that mark the border. A border is felt in the body as fear and sometimes...no, I cannot speak for her now. Here, there are mango trees wavy with light green vines. Each crossing disrupts the gelatin envelope of the jungle, producing tracks. With a stick, Joseph lifts a strand of long black hair where he finds it curled over the orange fruit.

59.ii. Flexion, a dominant feeling like surge. This is revision, a re-telling of planar space. In the enchanted forest, a finger strokes the forearm of the reader reading of a tree in flower. He opens the flower to see a human eye, which is muscular: a motif moving of its own accord—animate, but with a future inviolate to perception and its memories intact.

60. Reaching and touching as the beginning actions, re-organized in time as desire. On our last night in Kolkata, in the hotel corridor carpeted with pale yellow wool, I said goodnight to the film-makers, suddenly shy. As the aeroplane banked above the pink-orange ocean the next morning, I understood that the humanimal moment occurs most powerfully at dawn, when the eyesight adjusts to the light of the upper rooms of the jungle. I understood it in the air. As the plane descended to Oman, I felt the one to ten worlds contracting: red fish hanging in a butcher's window; hotel bed sheets, coffee with milk, cinnamon and sugar -- then London, where the sun at seven was a wet fire. In the morning, from the sky, I saw Atlantic flocs pulsing imperceptibly in the darkness below. As the plane descended to Denver, I took a dry leaf, a banana leaf with three raised seams, from its place in my book and crumpled it, crushed it really, onto my leg through my skirt.