

The Wolves

The wolves who take up residence in his lungs make their presence known each time he breathes. At first there is only a solitary lament, so faint he barely notices it slumping down from the hills. Now it has grown to a full pack. He listens until sleep overcomes him. He tells no one, not even his wife. It is a secret he must keep to himself. By day they are gone, coursing his veins, perhaps, in search of game, but when it gets dark, they come back with each expiring breath. He learns to distinguish their howls: the low-pitched one is Lobo, after a story he read when just a child. The mate's voice is higher. He calls her Blanca. That's all the Spanish he knows, so he gives the others names like Black Leg, or Gray Wing. Where the words come from, he has no idea—no wolf he's ever known in life or myth can fly. They just sound good to his ear. He goes to the library,

checks out all the books he can find,
one by Barry Lopez, *Of Wolves and Men*.
No illustration is even close
to the images his brain conceives.
He stays up late, tries not to wake
his wife with the chorus he brings
to bed, the voices he has grown
to love. He adjusts the counterpane,
takes a deep breath, lets it out slow.
When the air is almost gone, the wolves
begin, as he knew they would.
He counts to see if someone new
has joined the pack, inhales again,
lets go. Yes, there it is. He can
see him, darker than all the rest,
stalking down. No need to find a name.
The name he's heard since birth,
but never speaks aloud, crouches,
ready to leap with its taste of salt
from the tip of his tongue.

—Donnell Hunter