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