

Wolf Rising

by

Tara Waters Lumpkin

Published in *Hawaii Pacific Review: The Best of a Decade 1986-1996*, Volume II, Honolulu, HI, Spring 1997

and in

***Hawaii Pacific Review*, Honolulu, HI, Spring 1993
(Also published in *The Rural Sophisticate*, Number 2, Maysville, GA,
Winter 1993)**

"Then I remembered. Each man who walks has his animal which follows him. Isn't that so? Even if he doesn't see it and never guesses which animal it is. According to what he is, according to what he does, the mother of the animal chooses him and says to her little one: 'This man is for you, look after him.' The animal becomes his shadow, it seems."

The Storyteller, Mario Vargas Llosa

A White Wolf Speaks:

You are dead—all of you. Smoke and ashes blown by the wind, alighting here, alighting there. Nothing. The sky blue. Two fat clouds brushing against each other in a mating dance. Wind and water making love. Come hold me. Nestle beside me. Stroke my thick, soft fur. I am the wolf rising. I am the beast inside you, the spark of life you have smothered in clouds and mist. Taste fire on your tongue like a wafer. Cold does not penetrate. Fleet, hard, muscular, I course across snowy fields bathed in moonlight. Feel the burning inside you, warmth radiating to your fingertips. Love. Not ashes drifting in the breeze. Love—not open mouths screaming, caves, hollows of emptiness. Caress me. Hold me. Imprint me on your drifting soul. Let me turn you into light. Let me love you, breathe you alive. I remember fat buffalo on green plains. Man tilled the soil. Man grazed his beasts. I was hunted, trapped, poisoned. It had been decreed: the real must die; the world must pass into shadows. Ghost dance.

Now a fire burns, consumes all that remains, eats spirits. Smoke and ashes raining down upon the earth. But you—you bury your heads, buy cars, have children because money alone isn't enough, so modern, so safe—you'd like to believe. All of you dead. Now I have come to make you dance, to light you afire as I burn what once was this earth and what is now this thing you have all but destroyed insisting on calling it your own: your women, your animals, your forests, your mountains, your prairies, your rivers, streams, and oceans. As if you could own them. You forget: prisoners too have power. You forget you are dead. I breathe fire down your cold throats. Warmed, awakened, you feel the clouds burning off, believe the end is near, rip your flesh with drugs and wine, then turn away and try to deny yourself all feeling, all pleasure, try to escape—floating, scattering, ashes from mounds of charred bones—your own, the bleached bones of buffalo drying beneath the sun. Save you? How can I, wrapped as you are in death's caul? Save you? You will not allow it, shut away from the world in your houses of steel. I burn away ghosts, destroy. And you want it, you like it, you need it, you let me. The wolf rises, pawprint in blue white snow.

A Woman Lives:

The dog wanders in the meadow sniffing out field mice. She's a pretty dog, my dog, and her name is Amarok, an Inuit word meaning spirit of the wolf. To the Inuit the wolf is a symbol for power and transformation. I had to name her after something exceptional, something that reached into another world. Amarok. She leaps upon a field mouse, tosses it high in the air, catches the creature again, then bites down hard crushing its bones and swallows. I rub my bare feet in the prickly grass as sunshine casts a warm net around me. I am perspiring although there's a soft breeze blowing. Here in the mountains there are no weekends or weekdays, only things that need to be done: the wash, cooking, picking vegetables, weeding the garden, picking herbs, digging roots, gathering berries and later nuts, fishing, collecting reeds and vines and plaiting them into baskets. Light shifts across the peaks above me and I think how friends have asked, "Can't you see what you're doing?" pulling me aside as if doing me a favor. "Come back. Leave him. He's bad for you. What do you do all day long up in those mountains?" But I'm here now—that's all that matters, and anyway I've nowhere else to go.

I call Amarok. She races across the meadow, jumps up smearing dirt on my shirt, then turns and follows me inside. The cabin has one large downstairs room. On the floor are two priceless navajo rugs. A shaman's medicine drum hangs on the wall near the front door, two eagle feathers dangling, shifting in the breeze that breathes on them like an old woman's sigh. I am a potter and pottery clutters the room. A round vase, decorated in black, red, and white stands on the coffee table and beneath that same table are boxes filled with ceramics waiting to be fired.

Daniel and I sleep upstairs in a bed made of ash. Its headboard is carved with hieroglyphics that remind me of Anasazi petroglyphs. On the floor next to Daniel's bedside is a wolf pelt, a family heirloom. It's fur is soft and silver. Family legend says

the wolf, a cattle killer, brought down many of Daniel's grandfather's young calves one autumn. The old man took three months to kill that wolf—three months of tracking and hunting and concentrating on nothing else, while he lived up here in this same cabin. Finally Grandpa shot and skinned the wolf. The pelt remained in the family and Daniel used to sleep on it when he was a boy. Perhaps he loves this place, because he associates it with the battle between his grandfather and the wolf. When his father died, Daniel sold the ranch, keeping only this cabin. He insulated it, put big double-paned windows in, installed a kitchen, and built a woodshop out back. Then we married and moved in.

Amarok nuzzles me. I stare at the pile of breakfast dishes in the sink. Yes, I tell myself, I'm better off here in the mountains: I love Amarok and she loves me and we try to let the past float away like clouds sweeping across a mountaintop. Looming peaks, smell of earth, meadow larks singing at morning. After drying and putting away the dishes, I sit at the table and stare at the palms of my hands—long life lines on both of them. I should leave; I should go, but I can't. It's as if a magnetic force holds me here, binding me to him. Amarok scratches to be let out. I get up and open the door. I'm no better than him: I see myself as a woman whose only friend is a dog, a strong woman all alone. I'm a pioneer woman and Amarok is a wolf running across a sunlit meadow towards the trees. Amarok is what I'm unable to be—free, alive, aware. I fill a flask with water, put it in my knapsack, then set off across the meadow following her.

It's warm. Mosquitoes are out. The tall grass rubs my thighs as I walk. The sun beats against my face, shoulders, and back. I hear water rushing—Elk Run—the stream from the summit of Elk mountain. I take long strides feeling better. Why does Daniel hate me? Why is it wrong to love a dog? Why does growing up mean giving up? What happened to passion and love? The usual questions, I think, women's questions. Oh, we women know all about love and its million and one definitions, not one of them ours. We've lost our myths. We've adopted a culture that stresses individuality, war, and dominance: eat or be eaten. Only nature can show us how to reconstruct new myths, but she frightens us. Our bodies blow up and deflate as we bear children who are taken away from us. Beggars, we've sold our souls for false love, for a clean place to sleep, a little food; but, God knows why, we still hope. We hold our pain inside, biding time patiently, waiting for that fearful hour of destruction, trying to stop it from coming, yet thrilling a little to the knowledge that it is coming, that it has been coming for a long time now, and that if anyone is to somehow stop it, it will be us, although we have no idea how. Swallows swoop across the stream wetting their wings as they try to catch insects. Amarok chases another field mouse. I try to imagine a new world in my head...and fail.

A White Wolf Speaks:

She's alone in the clearing. Amarok hears me and raises her head, stares into my eyes. The woman hears nothing; she's busy thinking. She is resting, warm. I lean against her log, invisible, listening to grass rustle. Her hands reach down to stroke me like petals closing at night around the center of a flower. I'm here, but she

does not sense me. I take her flying in a dream, but the ground is still solid beneath her feet, tree bark cool to her fingertips, plants pliant and soft, sun warm on her back. I walk her down a path that winds into darkness.

A Woman Lives:

After hiking all afternoon, I return to our meadow, where I tie Amarak to a tree, then creep slowly towards the cabin, bending low in the tall grass. Quiet. The pick-up truck is in the driveway, so Daniel's still there, passed out more than likely. I peer in the window of the woodworking shop. He's bent over the table, head in his hands, a bottle of tequila more than half-empty before him. I ease back quietly and walk to the house. Inside, I find my sleeping bag and backpack, pull them out and stuff the sleeping bag in the pack, then add matches, flashlight, warm clothes, human food, and two cans of dog food. I leave, shutting the cabin door quietly behind me, looking back over my shoulder as I walk away. Amarak whimpers when she sees me and I untie her. We burrow deep into the forest following a trail that criss-crosses Elk Run and ascends the mountain. I'm happy—I've got dried onion soup and a hunk of cheddar cheese and some bread. The sun is red, leaning on the horizon, bathing the sky crimson. Night animals are awakening—I hear them rustling in the woods. In this dusky hour birds are twittering, flickering from limb to limb. Amarak and I move along rapidly toward where I want to camp tonight, a flat, circular spot partially surrounded by boulders, not too far from Elk Run. The site has an old fire-ring and beneath an overhanging rock is dry firewood I cached last May.

When we reach camp, the sun has slipped off the horizon and the moon has risen, a sliver of white bone in the dark violet sky. In semi-darkness I lay a fire but do not light it, then unroll my sleeping bag, positioning one end in a cleft between two boulders. One of the boulders resembles a horse's head—nostrils flaring, ears pricked forward, mane blown back. I lay my palms against it, shutting my eyes, feeling for a pulse. There's something there—not a pulse exactly, not a heartbeat, more like a steady hum, a thick, soft flow of liquid light. I pull my hands from the rock. The forest creeps up to the boulder. Already the woods are black. Nocturnal animals are active. An owl hoots. A moment of silence, then field mice resume their skittering. I'm not frightened. Instead I feel peaceful as if I'm where I belong, as if my body has merged with all that is here, as if the moon has cast a spell that stops time. Wind stirs the pine trees, brushing limb against limb, needle against needle. A sound of running water. Pine scent bathes the mountain. Again an owl shrieks and the call reverberates, tossed by wind. My childhood, growing up in Maine—that's what this reminds me of. This is all there is, I think as I lean my head back against the cold rock: nature and this landscape. How gentle the night seems. I pull on a sweater and move to the fire, lighting it. Sweet smoke rises; embers spark the air. I open a can of dog food and spoon it onto the ground for Amarak. Then I boil water for instant onion soup. The first star appears and I make a wish to remember this perfectly, to never forget this feeling.

The fire flames warm me. I tear off chunks of bread and cheese and wash them down with hot soup while I stare into amber coals which tell stories. Daniel

could be sitting peacefully here with me, I think. I wish he were here, but of course, I know that if he was, we'd sit here in mutual misery, frozen, unable to even feel the wind touching our cheeks. Amarok wakens and her blue eyes seduce me. I dive into their watery depths, swim down through earth that is viscous as water and reach a tree root which I slide down landing in a large cavern that appears to be a tunnel. Although it's dark, I can see. A stream meanders along the bottom of the cavern. Its warm, mineral-laden waters pull me gently. I'm relaxed, warm, comfortable. At the end of the tunnel is a glimmer of white light. I walk toward it. The darkness turns gray, then lightens to gold. Outside it's noon; the light is forceful, striking hard against the cave entrance. I reach daylight and look down two-hundred-feet upon sage, pinyons and arroyos. The stream falls from here, a thin ribbon of water ending in a small pool. A wolf looks up at me, raises its head, then melts away. A white wolf. I awaken suddenly. Amarok is staring at me. "Come here." She rises, stretches, yawns, comes over and nestles beside me. I lower my head into her soft, downy fur, press my face into her earthy, pine-scented undercoat, wrap my arms around her and squeeze her tight. She lies next to me, her back touching my left thigh. I throw two more sticks on the fire, pour water into instant cocoa mix. Then steam spiraling up from the cup, I stare at the stars. There are no myths forthcoming—nature guards her secrets. When I finish the cocoa, I put out the fire, undress, and crawl into my sleeping bag. I feel the soil beneath my sleeping bag, the circle of rocks, the surrounding forest. I think about how much I love Daniel. I think about how the human race is wearing down. Dying. Daniel's mother, Theresa, had her myths. She understood the dying and tried to fight it. Theresa grew up where Minnesota touches Canada, a land of bitter winters and pleasant summers, a land of lakes and islands, of moose, deer, bear, and wolves, of eagles, beaver, mink, and fish. She went to a church-school and learned to think like a white woman. She learned to sew and cook and read, but she also learned from her grandmother not to trust the way of the whites. Her white father, who was embarrassed by her Indian blood, told her, "You will be a lady, if it kills you." He chastised her when she was a small girl for going outside to play with her brothers, chastised her with the same words when she was older for not lowering her head when a gentleman entered the room. But Theresa knew that she would never be a "lady" and she knew that her real name was not Theresa. Her real name was White Wolf. The wolf was white as the stars and moon. The wolf would see many changes and try to stop the whites from destroying the earth. She would come to them in dreams and visions, in books and movies, in love and hate, happiness and sadness, courage and fear. They would speak of allowing her back into Yellowstone. She was the mysterious world they had lost. She was another way of seeing.

"...the worst enemy you can encounter will always be yourself; you lie in wait for yourself in caves and woods."

Thus Spake Zarathustra, Neitzche

A White Wolf Speaks:

My belly is full of memories—I am pregnant with them. My belly is swollen with thoughts which I cannot abort. Fools, do you not realize that thoughts affect the spirit world? What are you afraid of? The worst is almost here. The worst is almost here, but still you hide among your toys, hide behind your jobs, use your families as an excuse. There are no excuses. The tinder has been lit; the fire builds. Howling upon the mountainside, I cry: "Wake up, wake up." Accept your own death and become dangerous. See your own death, pass through it, leap into the flames. You will die and be reborn. You will understand. You will see. The ocean shall be inside you, and the whispering pines. The earth shall become your heart. You shall be flooded with light. I will tell you a secret: Sorcerers do not kill; they allow you to kill yourself.

A Woman Lives:

I'm pregnant. This knowledge seeps into me slowly like small waves lapping at a sandy shoreline, moistening it, darkening it, changing its contours forever. I'm six weeks pregnant. I know because I had a blood test, which unlike urine tests, are always right. No mistake. In the mornings I'm sick, and all day I'm tired.

"It's just depression," I tell Daniel. "My depression is getting worse. My nerves are frayed."

"Oh, if that's all," he says, leaving me standing there with my mouth open. If that's all, if it's only your soul that aches. A shrug of his shoulders. Such things cannot be doctored. There is nothing to do for them. His green eyes are flat.

He came in late one evening. It had been a night of falling stars. I'd lain outside on the grass in the chilly early autumn air, Amarok at my side. Daniel had been working in the woodshop. Light spilled out from beneath its door and tumbled from its windows. I watched the stars fall and ate a piece of carrot cake sucking the thick cream cheese icing from my fingers. Then I went inside, fixed myself a cup of blackberry tea and took it upstairs to the loft. When I finished the tea, I put my book face down on the night table, turned off the light and fell asleep. He must have had a few drinks—I awoke, hearing his footsteps below. A few beers perhaps, nothing much, because later when he crawled into bed and began kissing me, I couldn't taste tequila or bourbon or scotch, just the faint salty taste of beer. I had been dreaming about making love to a tall man with brown eyes and loose, long, brown hair. He wore only a breechcloth and a red blanket around his shoulders. He had been kissing my breasts. Daniel began kissing my breasts.

"I've finished the rocking chair," he said, "the one you wanted."

"That's good."

I snuggled closer, still half asleep. He stroked my back, kissed my stomach, ran his lips along the inside of my thighs. I almost pushed him away. For a moment my body clenched, with fear, I guess. Stay away. Don't hurt me. But his lips were gentle and soft like butterfly wings, and I gave in to them. I immersed myself in the hot jungle of his body, blue morphos flitting everywhere. Perhaps that's what he put inside me, a giant, iridescent blue butterfly. Perhaps that is the soul of my child.

I knew the very next day. The diaphragm was beneath the sink in its plastic container, two weeks since I'd last menstruated, and a feeling in my womb—a viscous substance jelling, hardening, tightening into a point of light. I considered driving all the way to Aspen for a morning-after pill. Did they still make them? I'd known a girl in high-school who used them. You're panicking. Wait and see. You're overreacting. So I waited. As soon as I'd missed my first period, I had the test done. The needle glided into my vein sucking out red blood, blood that proved I was bearing a child, that a foetus was already growing inside me. His child. Daniel's child. The child already like an insect inside me, a caterpillar in its cocoon waiting to emerge as a blue morpho butterfly.

I have nightmares now. I dream of a winged red horse who comes to me. I leap upon his back. We fly up into the star-studded sky, his tail flung out behind him trailing sparks through the sky. Below I see mesas and mountains covered with pine and aspen. I hear Elk Run singing, sounding like an angels' choir, as it trips over stones. Every night it's the same; every night I fly up into the sky over familiar countryside. Then the stallion flies faster, the scenery changes into places I've never been before, veil after veil of mist, the heavens vibrating, humming, air cold against my face, the stallion's tail sweeping the constellations, his mane tossing against my face, flecks of foam scattering like diamonds behind him, faster and faster. And then I begin to slip. I wrap my hands in his red mane and try to regain my balance, but I'm slipping from his back, falling off to one side. The more I struggle, the more unbalanced I become, and the stallion doesn't seem to notice—he continues faster and faster, gaining momentum. I'm slipping, his mane cutting into my fingers. I fall off—tumble through the dark sky, plunge toward earth, my heart in my throat. I'm going to die, and yet it's so exhilarating—this falling, spinning out of control, the heavens reeling. If it could last forever—but the ground is approaching, drawing close. Hard. I will splatter upon impact. I envision my body hitting, bones breaking, crumbling in upon my organs, my skin splitting open as if at a seam, blood spraying around me. I try to stop my fall, claw at nothing but air, my throat tight with fear, and suddenly the ground is there, so close, getting closer. I'm at the level of pine tree tops, so close, too close, getting closer, and the ground is just beneath me, a few yards away. I can see each blade of grass, purple-headed clover, white-headed dandelions. Then I always wake up, eyes wide open, staring into darkness. I hear Daniel breathing, sense his warm body in bed.

Decisions must be made, but I am unable to make them. Like the foetus, I am in chrysalis. I wait and watch. When I feel the child in my body, I'm frightened of what it will do to me. I feel the earth now. She stretches like a cat, her muscles rippling—volcanoes, earthquakes, mud slides. She can no longer mend the damage done to her. There are holes in the sky. As man continues to cut her forests, to scrape her bald, a new myth is being born. She is angry now. Soon she will rebel. "Help," I cry. "Help me! What have I done to deserve this?" I am like an innocent person suddenly set upon by military guards who drag me off to prison and torture me. I know nothing. The guards do not believe me. They beat me. They rape me. They apply electric shocks to my breasts. I try to think of answers that will stop the pain. And finally, because I am lucky and my father knows the colonel (he plays tennis

with him), I am released. But I am not the same person—I have become political. I am now the person they mistook me for.

A White Wolf Speaks:

A waterfall cascades from a canyon rim and splashes into a spring-fed pool. Where there is great fear, there is great power. Push through the wall of fear and kneel at the spring's edge and drink. Illusion fades as you enter the Void and return knowing.

A Woman Lives:

I abort. I do not tell Daniel. Those who would sit in judgement upon me might say that I am a murderer. I would respond that I have been murdered by them. But it does not matter. A new myth was born inside me. I am whole. I am alive. I am free. I am a wolf.

—The End—