Literary Analysis: “The Last Wolf,” “Wolf”

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Two poems which feature wolves -- Mary Tallmountain's *The Last Wolf* and Aurora Morales' *Wolf* -- deal with the same issues in different ways. One of the main themes expressed in both poems is man's alienation from himself and the world he inhabits, and the negative consequences this can result in. While the ultimate impression one receives from Tallmountain's piece is downbeat, Morales offers at least a glimmer of hope.

Mary Tallmountain's *The Last Wolf* is, essentially, a poem about apocalypse, and although the precise manner in which that apocalypse occurs is never completely clear, the devastation wrought in its wake is obvious:

the last wolf hurried toward me
through the ruined city
and I heard his baying echoes
down the steep smashed warrens
of Montgomery Street and past
the few ruby-crowned highrises
left standing
their lighted elevators useless

The "last wolf" which winds its way through a gutted urban landscape toward the nameless narrator is symbolic of the natural world of animals and the earth. It is this natural world that has been defiled and destroyed, directly or indirectly, by human greed and stupidity. Whether the calamity that the poet describes is the result of nuclear war or ecological disaster is beside the point; what matters is that man is responsible.

Indeed, as the wolf continues its journey, the narrator is acutely aware of the cries of anguish the animal emits as it surveys the "clutter and rubble" of quiet city blocks, now deserted and devoid of life. It bays and whines, and the narrator knows somehow that the wolf will end up inher apartment, suggesting that she is the last human being alive: "I heard his voice ascending the
hill / and at last his low whine as he came / floor by empty floor to the room / where I sat / in my narrow bed looking west / waiting."

Though as readers we might expect the wolf to simply stop at the door and stare balefully at the narrator in silent rebuke for the sins of mankind, instead

he trotted across the floor
(and) laid his long gray muzzle
on the spare white spread
and his eyes burned yellow
his small dotted eyebrows quivered

These lines indicate that although the wolf, as a symbolic representative of nature, has every right to hate all things human (including the narrator), his behavior is strangely conciliatory; the eyes certainly burn yellow, but he lays his head on the bed nonetheless. The wolf is less an avenging angel of nature than a vulnerable creature, with "small dotted eyebrows that quiver," seeking out another of nature's creatures, now also vulnerable and alone. The implication here could be that whatever evil men may do, nature has an infinite capacity for forgiveness and healing.

And too, the last lines of the poem make plain that the narrator is well aware of the source of the wolf's sorrow -- "Yes, I said / I know what they have done" -- suggesting she's someone who's always identified with nature and is just as appalled by what's transpired in her own way as the wolf is in his... In the end, however, The Last Wolf is not a particularly optimistic poem.

Nor, for that matter, is Aurora Morales' Wolf, though it does manage to leave the door to positive, proactive change open, if only a crack. The piece begins like a vivid entry into someone's private dream journal, with the dreamer inside a clay house with whitewashed walls as lightening flashes and rain falls outside. It's nighttime, and the mood evoked is dark and foreboding. Then, a wolf appears, and the author is overwhelmed with feelings of joy and empathy: "This is my true self," she says. The wolf is emblematic of the dreamers inner self, that part of her which remains wholly natural and completely unique, untouched by the constraints and dictates of Western society.
The wolf also stands for her Native-American identity, her heritage and the troubled history of her people. As she watches, the wolf changes into different animals -- a buffalo, an anteater -- to "protect itself from extinction," a metaphor, perhaps, for the enforced "assimilation" which Native-Americans have had to endure merely to survive since the arrival of white Europeans relegated them to minority status on their own land. Morales notes, with more than a hint of irony, that "all the animals (the wolf) changes into are also endangerd."

The scene shifts, and the dreamer is now sitting outside in the darkness, near a campfire with several people, all apparently Native-American, although this is never explicitly stated. Those nearby are younger than the dreamer, "more unaware." She attempts to share her intense feelings about what wolves represent to her, their "utter wildness and beauty," but the young people have never seen a wolf, don't even know what a wolf is. They nod listlessly to her entreaties, bored and distracted. To me, this is a powerful metaphor for the lost connection between the young Native-Americans and their heritage, More, it symbolizes their alienation from themselves. Not only have they lost touch with nature and the ways of their ancestors but they've also become separated from any notion of who they really are. There may be two reasons for this: One, being marginalized and effectively isolated from mainstream American culture has led to a corresponding apathy and self-destructive behavior (i.e. drug and alcohol abuse). Two, by trading in their own culture for the values espoused by the white one, Native-American youths have also traded in their identities, although they don't realize it.

The poem ends with the dreamer frantically searching for a way to impart the knowledge of the wolf's nature. The understanding and reconnection to nature, to the inner self, is vital, she feels, for the survival of the young people she has encountered, for herself, even for the world. Clearly, the wake-up call Aurora Morales so desperately wants to deliver in Wolf is applicable to everyone who reads it, not just Native-Americans, and I believe there's reason for hope. More and more people, whatever their ethnicity are (finally) listening.