

SP2: The Last Wolf?

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It is somewhat ironic that Mary TallMountain's poem, *The Last Wolf*, is titled as such. The word *last* denotes a firm sense of finality: when the last wolf finishes its journey, there will be no one to follow it. However, it is clear by the end of the third stanza that TallMountain has found herself a friend in this wolf. Perhaps it symbolizes herself, though she clearly differentiates herself (the observer) from the wolf (the observed). In this sense, TallMountain is of the same mold as the wolf, and therefore, neither of them are the last one.

Intuitively, from our perspective — that of the reader — the distinction between Mary TallMountain and her wolf is a completely artificial one. After all, the wolf exists only her mind; it is a projection of her own thoughts and fears onto paper, nothing more. There are two possible outcomes of this act: her words may fall on deaf ears (or rather, be read by deaf minds) and fade into nothingness, or the reader will find he can identify with the wolf just as she did. In the latter case, we again find that *The Last Wolf* is not, in fact, the last. Undoubtedly, this was TallMountain's hope in writing this.

The first stanza finds the wolf wandering through a ruined city, and we realize that the wolves were not the only ones to have been ruined. In the far north, where Mary TallMountain grew up, this was a common theme; species did not keep to themselves, disparate and alone. The weather was far too unforgiving for that sort of foolishness. In most other parts of the world, the opposite is true, so we can glean from this stanza that this wolf's home was the same as hers. However, there is an important difference between the wolf's plight and TallMountain's: while the wolf finds itself physically exploring the remains of a ruined city, TallMountain's ruins are entirely in her mind. In this sense, the city (and the wolf inside it) represent Mary's memory of her native past, a memory eroded and trampled by her life outside that world.

Given TallMountain's illness (and consequent reclusion) at the time of writing, it makes sense that her mind would wander toward her past, and that she would liken it to a wolf, searching through the destruction to see what is still left. The memory came quickly, which she describes as "the last wolf

hurried toward me/through the ruined city” (1-2), and stayed with her for the duration of the poem. In the first two stanzas, she sees the world through the wolf’s eyes: a cacophony of different images, most of which are fading away and deserted, skewed and incomplete. She contemplates this view, describing the wolf’s travel as “the mystery of his wild loping gait” (12), symbolizing the way in which memories tend to fall apart. Still, the memory comes together, “closer the sounds in the deadly night/through clutter and rubble of quiet blocks” (13-14) — the deadly night, of course, being her own forgetfulness, and the rubble her remaining memories.

In the third stanza, the wolf has arrived at TallMountain’s bedside, and she sees it for what it is: not quite a ghost, but still not entirely alive. There is another important development: she brings herself into the poem, using the first-person narrative, and speaks to the wolf. This is important because it signifies that *she* is not *her memory*. While the image of the city in her mind may fade away to nothingness, her legacy will go on through her writing, and she will do what she can to bring the wolf out of her mind and into words. This was her intent in describing the wolf so vividly, in the fourth stanza, as “he laid his long grey muzzle. . .and his eyes burned yellow/his small dotted eyebrows quivered”. Her intense verbs, *burned* and *quivered*, were chosen to emphasise the life still remaining in the wolf.

The final two lines should be considered on their own: “Yes, [she] said/I know what they have done.” There are two major ideas in this stanza. The first is that TallMountain *knows* what they have done, in far more than an academic sense. Since the wolf represents her memory — which, interestingly, resolves the initial paradox of her and the wolf being separate beings and the “last” wolf — she knows the wolf’s experience better than any other person. Now, this is not to say that she knows exactly who the wolf is and where he has come from; the poet’s dilemma is that no matter how perfectly one communicates her thoughts, the thoughts themselves are incomplete. Still, she writes the word *knows*, in the deepest sense possible.

The second idea of the last stanza comes from the word *they*. It is not clear who *they* are, though given TallMountain’s past, it is possible she meant her foster parents, her mother’s death, society in general, or something else entirely. Even without knowing who exactly *they* are (and it is possible that even TallMountain did not know), we can understand what she meant. The wolf is her memory, and “they” are everyone and everything that has broken it down.