Angela Carter, “The Company of Wolves”
Published in The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories (1979).

One beast and only one howls in the woods by night.
The wolf is carnivore incarnate and he’s as cunning as he is ferocious; once he’s had a taste of flesh then nothing else will do.
At night, the eyes of wolves shine like candle flames, yellowish, reddish, but that is because the pupils of their eyes fatten on darkness and catch the light from your lantern to flash it back to you – red for danger; if a wolf’s eyes reflect only moonlight, then they gleam a cold and unnatural green, a mineral, a piercing colour. If the benighted traveller spies those luminous, terrible sequins stitched suddenly on the black thickets, then he knows he must run, if fear has not struck him stock-still.
But those eyes are all you will be able to glimpse of the forest assassins as they cluster invisibly round your smell of meat as you go through the wood unwisely late. They will be like shadows, they will be like wraiths, grey members of a congregation of nightmares; hark! his long, wavering howl . . . an aria of fear made audible.
The wolfsong is the sound of the rending you will suffer, in itself a murdering.
It is winter and cold weather. In this region of mountain and forest, there is now nothing for the wolves to eat. Goats and sheep are locked up in the byre, the deer departed for the remaining pasturage on the southern slopes – wolves grow lean and famished. There is so little flesh on them that you could count the starveling ribs through their pelts, if they gave you time before they pounced. Those slavering jaws; the lolling tongue; the rime of saliva on the grizzled chops – of all the teeming perils of the night and the forest, ghosts, hobgoblins, ogres that grill babies upon gridirons, witches that fatten their captives in cages for cannibal tables, the wolf is worst for he cannot listen to reason.
You are always in danger in the forest, where no people are. Step between the portals of the great pines where the shaggy branches tangle about you, trapping the unwary traveller in nets as if the vegetation itself were in a plot with the wolves who live there, as though the wicked trees go fishing on behalf of their friends – step between the gateposts of the forest with the greatest trepidation and infinite precautions, for if you stray from the path for one instant, the wolves will eat you. They are grey as famine, they are as unkind as plague.
The grave-eyed children of the sparse villages always carry knives with them when they go out to tend the little flocks of goats that provide the homesteads with acrid milk and rank, maggoty cheeses. Their knives are half as big as they are, the blades are sharpened daily.
But the wolves have ways of arriving at your own hearthside. We try and try but sometimes we cannot keep them out. There is no winter’s night the cottage does not fear to see a lean, grey, famished snout questing under the door, and there was a woman once bitten in her own kitchen as she was straining the macaroni.
Fear and flee the wolf; for, worst of all, the wolf may be more than he seems.
There was a hunter once, near here, that trapped a wolf in a pit. This wolf had massacred the sheep and goats; eaten up a mad old man who used to live by himself in a hut halfway up the mountain and sing to Jesus all day; pounced on a girl looking after the sheep, but she made such a commotion that men came with rifles and scared him away and tried to track him into the forest but he was cunning and easily gave them the slip. So this hunter dug a pit and put a duck in it, for bait, all alive-oh; and he covered the pit with straw smeared with wolf dung. Quack, quack! went the duck and a wolf came slinking out of the forest, a big one, a heavy one, he weighed as much as a grown man and the straw gave way beneath him – into the pit he tumbled. The hunter jumped down after him, slit his throat, cut off all his paws for a trophy.
And then no wolf at all lay in front of the hunter but the bloody trunk of a man, headless, footless, dying, dead.
A witch from up the valley once turned an entire wedding party into wolves because the groom had settled on another girl. She used to order them to visit her, at night, from spite, and they would sit and howl around her cottage for her, serenading her with their misery.
Not so very long ago, a young woman in our village married a man who vanished clean away on her wedding night. The bed was made with new sheets and the bride lay down in it; the
lay bleeding and gasping its last, the pelt peeled off again and he was just as he had been, years ago, when he ran away from his marriage bed, so that she wept and her second husband beat her.

They say there’s an ointment the Devil gives you that turns you into a wolf the minute you rub it on. Or, that he was born feet first and had a wolf for his father and his torso is a man’s but his legs and genitals are a wolf’s. And he has a wolf’s heart.

Seven years is a werewolf’s natural span but if you burn his human clothing you condemn him to wolfishness for the rest of his life, so old wives hereabouts think it some protection to throw a hat or an apron at the werewolf, as if clothes made the man. Yet by the eyes, those phosphorescent eyes, you know him in all his shapes; the eyes alone unchanged by metamorphosis.

Before he can become a wolf, the lycanthrope strips stark naked. If you spy a naked man among the pines, you must run as if the Devil were after you.

It is midwinter and the robin, the friend of man, sits on the handle of the gardener’s spade and sings. It is the worst time in all the year for wolves but this strong-minded child insists she will go off through the wood. She is quite sure the wild beasts cannot harm her although, well-warned, she lays a carving knife in the basket her mother has packed with cheeses. There is a bottle of harsh liquor distilled from brambles; a batch of flat oatcakes baked on the hearthstone; a pot or two of jam. The flaxen-haired girl will take these delicious gifts to a reclusive grandmother so old the burden of her years is crushing her to death. Granny lives two hours’ trudge through the winter woods; the child wraps herself up in her thick shawl, draws it over her head. She steps into her stout wooden shoes; she is dressed and ready and it is Christmas Eve. The malign door of the solstice still swings upon its hinges but she has been too much loved ever to feel scared.

Children do not stay young for long in this savage country. There are no toys for them to play with so they work hard and grow wise but this one, so pretty and the youngest of her family, a little late-comer, had been indulged by her mother and the grandmother who’d knitted...
her the red shawl that, today, has the ominous
if brilliant look of blood on snow; her breasts
have just begun to swell; her hair is like lint, so
fair it hardly makes a shadow on her pale
forehead; her cheeks are an emblematic scarlet
and white and she has just started her woman’s
bleeding, the clock inside her that will strike,
henceforward, once a month.

She stands and moves within the invisible
pentacle of her own virginity. She is an
unbroken egg; she is a sealed vessel; she has
inside her a magic space the entrance to which
is shut tight with a plug of membrane; she is a
closed system; she does not know how to
shiver. She has her knife and she is afraid of
nothing.

Her father might forbid her, if he were home,
but he is away in the forest, gathering wood,
and her mother cannot deny her.

The forest closed upon her like a pair of jaws.

There is always something to look at in the
forest, even in the middle of winter – the
huddled mounds of birds, succumbed to the
lethargy of the season, heaped on the creaking
boughs and too forlorn to sing; the bright frills
of the winter fungi on the blotted trunks of
the trees; the cuneiform slots of rabbits and
deer, the herringbone tracks of the birds, a hare
as lean as a rasher of bacon streaking across the
path where the thin sunlight dapples the russet
brakes of last year’s bracken.

When she heard the freezing howl of a distant
wolf, her practised hand sprang to the handle
of her knife, but she saw no sign of a wolf at
all, nor of a naked man, neither, but then she
heard a clattering among the brushwood and
there sprang on to the path a fully clothed one,
a very handsome young one, in the green coat
and wideawake hat4 of a hunter, laden with
carcasses of game birds. She had her hand on
her knife at the first rustle of twigs but he
laughed with a flash of white teeth when he
saw her and made her a comic yet flattering
little bow; she’d never seen such a fine fellow
before, not among the rustic clowns of her
native village. So on they went together,
through the thickening light of the afternoon.

Soon they were laughing and joking like old
friends. When he offered to carry her basket,
she gave it to him although her knife was in it
because he told her his rifle would protect
them. As the day darkened, it began to snow
again; she felt the first flakes settle on her
eyelashes but now there was only half a mile to
go and there would be a fire, and hot tea, and a
welcome, a warm one, surely, for the dashing
huntsman as well as for herself.

This young man had a remarkable object in his
pocket. It was a compass. She looked at the
little round glass face in the palm of his hand
and watched the wavering needle with a vague
wonder. He assured her this compass had taken
him safely through the wood on his hunting
trip because the needle always told him with
perfect accuracy where the north was. She did
not believe it; she knew she should never leave
the path on the way through the wood or else
she would be lost instantly. He laughed at her
again; gleaming trails of spittle clung to his
teeth. He said, if he plunged off the path into
the forest that surrounded them, he
guarantee to arrive at her grandmother’s house
a good quarter of an hour before she did,
plotting his way through the undergrowth with
his compass, while she trudged the long way,
along the winding path.

‘I don’t believe you. Besides, aren’t you afraid
of the wolves?’

He only tapped the gleaming butt of his rifle
and grinned.

‘Is it a bet?’ he asked her. ‘Shall we make a
game of it? What will you give me if I get to
your grandmother’s house before you?’

‘What would you like?’ she asked
disingenuously.

‘A kiss.’

Commonplaces of a rustic seduction; she
lowered her eyes and blushed.

He went through the undergrowth and took
her basket with him but she forgot to be afraid
of the beasts, although now the moon was
rising, for she wanted to dawdle on her way to
make sure the handsome gentleman would win
his wager.

Grandmother's house stood by itself a little
way out of the village. The freshly falling snow
blew in eddies about the kitchen garden and
the young man stepped delicately up the snowy
path to the door as if he were reluctant to get
his feet wet, swinging his bundle of game and
the girl's basket and humming a little tune to
himself.

There is a faint trace of blood en his chin; he
has been snacking on his catch.

He rapped upon the panels with his knuckles.

aged and frail, granny is three-quarters
sickened by the mortality the ache in her
bones promises her and almost ready to give in
entirely. A boy came out from the village to
build up her hearth for the night an hour ago
and the kitchen crakles with busy lightfire. She
has her Bible for company, she is a pious old
woman. She is propped up on several pillows
in the bed set into the wall peasant-fashion,
wrapped up in the patchwork quilt she made
before she was married, more years ago than
she cares to remember. Two china spaniels
with liver-coloured blotches on their coats and
black noses sit on either side of the fireplace.
There is a bright rug of woven rags on the
pantiles.

The grandfather clock ticks away her
eroding time.

We keep the wolves outside by living well.

He rapped upon the panels with his hairy
knuckles.

'It is your granddaughter,' he mimicked in a
high soprano.

'Let us up the latch and walk in, my darling.'
You can tell them by their eyes, eyes of a beast
of prey, nocturnal, devastating eyes as red as a
wound; you can hurl your Bible at him and
your apron after, granny, you thought that was
a sure prophylactic against these infernal
vermin. . . now call on Christ and his mother
and all the angels in heaven to protect you but
it won't do you any good.

His feral, muzzle is sharp as a knife; he drops
his golden burden of gnawed pheasant on the
table and puts down your dear girl's basket,
too. Oh, my God, what have you done with
her?

Off with his disguise, that coat of forest-
coloured cloth, the hat with the feather tucked
into the ribbon; his matted hair streams down
his white shirt and she can see the lice moving
in it. The sticks in the hearth shift and hiss;
night and the forest has come into the kitchen
with darkness tangled in its hair.

He strips off his shirt. His skin is the colour
and texture of vellum. A crisp stripe of hair
runs down his belly, his nipples are ripe and
dark as poison fruit but he's so thin you could
count the ribs under his skin if only he gave
you the time. He strips off his trousers and she
can see how hairy his legs are. His genitals,
huge. Ah! huge. The last thing the old lady saw
in all this world was a young man, eyes like
cinders, naked as a stone, approaching her bed.

The wolf is carnivore incarnate.

When he had finished with her, he licked his
chops and quickly dressed himself again, until
he was just as he had been when he came
through her door. He burned the inedible hair
in the fireplace and wrapped the bones up in a
napkin that he hid away under the bed in the
wooden chest in which he found a clean pair of
sheets. These he carefully put on the bed
instead of the tell-tale stained ones he stowed
away in the laundry basket. He plumped up the
pillows and shook out the patchwork quilt, he
picked up the Bible from the floor, closed it
and laid it on the table. All was as it had been
before except that grandmother was gone. The
sticks twitched in the grate, the clock ticked
and the young man sat patiently, deceitfully
beside the bed in granny's nightcap.

Rat-a-tap-tap.

'Who's there?' he quavers in granny's antique
falsetto.

'Only your granddaughter.'

So she came in, bringing with her a flurry of
snow that melted in tears on the tiles, and
perhaps she was a little disappointed to see
only her grandmother sitting beside the fire.

But then he flung off the blanket and sprang to
the door, pressing his back against it so that she
could not get out again.

The girl looked round the room and saw there
was not even the indentation of a head on the
smooth cheek of the pillow and how, for the
first time she'd seen it so, the Bible lay closed
on the table. The tick of the clock cracked like
a whip. She wanted her knife from her basket
but she did not dare reach for it because his
eyes were fixed upon her – huge eyes that now
seemed to shine with a unique, interior light,
her woollen stockings, her shoes, and on like a magic bird and now off came her skirt, the thin muslin went flaring up the chimney into the fire with it, too, my pet.

'What shall I do with my blouse?'

She bundled up her shawl and threw it on the fire, dear one. You won't need it again.'

'Those are the voices of my brothers, darling; I love the company of wolves. Look out of the window and you'll see them.'

The blizzard died down, leaving the mountains half-caked the lattice and she opened it to look into the garden. It was a white night of moon and snow; the blizzard whirled round the gaunt, grey beasts who squatted on their haunches among the rows of winter cabbage, pointing their sharp snouts to the moon and howling as if their hearts would break. Ten wolves; twenty wolves – so many wolves she could not count them, howling in concert as if demented or deranged. Their eyes reflected the light from the kitchen and shone like a hundred candles.

'It is very cold, poor things,' she said; 'no wonder they howl so.'

She closed the window on the wolves' threnody and took off her scarlet shawl, the colour of poppies, the colour of sacrifices, the colour of her menses, and, since her fear did her no good, she ceased to be afraid. 'What shall I do with my shawl? 'Throw it on the fire, dear one. You won’t need it again.'

'All the better to see you with.'

She saw how his jaw began to slaver and the face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, in the fiery wake of her own face, she ripped off his shirt for him and flung it into the fire, appeases him.

'What big teeth you have!'

She will lay his fearful head on her lap and she will put die lice into her mouth and eat them, as he will bid her, as she would do in a savage marriage ceremony.

The blizzard will die down. The blizzard died down, leaving the mountains as randomly covered with snow as if a blind woman had thrown a sheet over them, the upper branches of the forest pines limed, creaking, swollen with the fall. Snowlight, moonlight, a confusion of paw-prints.

She will bid her, as she would do in a savage marriage ceremony.

All silent, all still. Midnight; and the clock strikes. It is Christmas Day, the werewolves’ birthday, the door of the solstice stands wide open; let them all sink through.

See! sweet and sound she sleeps in granny’s bed, between the paws of the tender wolf.