

# Little Red-Cap by Carol Ann Duffy

At childhood's end, the houses petered out  
into playing fields, the factory, allotments  
kept, like mistresses, by kneeling married men,  
the silent railway line, the hermit's caravan,  
till you came at last to the edge of the woods.  
It was there that I first clapped eyes on the wolf.

He stood in a clearing, reading his verse out loud  
in his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw,  
red wine staining his bearded jaw. What big ears  
he had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!  
In the interval, I made quite sure he spotted me,  
sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif, and bought me a drink,

my first. You might ask why. Here's why. Poetry.  
The wolf, I knew, would lead me deep into the woods,  
away from home, to a dark tangled thorny place  
lit by the eyes of owls. I crawled in his wake,  
my stockings ripped to shreds, scraps of red from my blazer  
snagged on twig and branch, murder clues. I lost both shoes

but got there, wolf's lair, better beware. Lesson one that night,  
breath of the wolf in my ear, was the love poem.  
I clung till dawn to his thrashing fur, for  
what little girl doesn't dearly love a wolf?<sup>1</sup>  
Then I slid from between his heavy matted paws  
and went in search of a living bird – white dove –

which flew, straight, from my hands to his hope mouth.  
One bite, dead. How nice, breakfast in bed, he said,  
licking his chops. As soon as he slept, I crept to the back  
of the lair, where a whole wall was crimson, gold, aglow with books.  
Words, words were truly alive on the tongue, in the head,  
warm, beating, frantic, winged; music and blood.

But then I was young – and it took ten years

in the woods to tell that a mushroom  
stoppers the mouth of a buried corpse, that birds  
are the uttered thought of trees, that a greying wolf  
howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out,  
season after season, same rhyme, same reason. I took an axe

to a willow to see how it wept. I took an axe to a salmon  
to see how it leapt. I took an axe to the wolf  
as he slept, one chop, scrotum to throat, and saw  
the glistening, virgin white of my grandmother's bones.  
I filled his old belly with stones. I stitched him up.  
Out of the forest I come with my flowers, singing, all alone.