

# The Wolves of Chernobyl

The exclusion zone around the Chernobyl nuclear power plant extends for a radius of nineteen miles

At twenty below, the wolves forsake the forest's  
infinite birches, padding over snow.  
Habitable human settlements  
cling to the zone's edge, snowbound. Then and now,

trefoil signs warn travelers not to pass.  
Searching for prey that's scarce in winter's freeze,  
the wolves move quietly. They're gone by day,  
leaving their prints to trail past human boundaries,

back and forth. They scavenge in the dark.  
Villagers at the zone's edge scavenge, too.  
Displaced or very old, they gather mushrooms,  
farm, and graze their cows what can they do?

Whatever the soil contains, they have to eat.  
Close to the epicenter of the zone  
past tracks and transport bridges, younger trees  
a "red forest" turned rust-red by radiation

lies bulldozed, pristine. A hunter, armed,  
tracks down a wolf, its snow-prints filling in.  
The night it happened, witnesses reported  
colors in the sky they'd never seen

ionized iridescence, a beam of blue...  
Today, the wolves reclaim the land, and thrive.  
A woman swings an ax beside a bonfire  
in the snow. This winter, she'll survive

As will the troops who dig the earthen trenches  
in the red forest's dust: conscripts unsure  
of why their armored vehicles stop here  
where no one welcomes them, and wolves endure.

**Background:** See "Chernobyl broke down over 30 years ago. These photos show the effects aren't over yet" (Raul Moreno and Kenneth Dickerman, *Washington Post*, September 16, 2019) and "Forests Around Chernobyl Aren't Decaying Properly" (Rachel Nuwer, *Smithsonian*, March 14, 2014).

During the current war with Ukraine, Russian troops inexplicably encamped in Chernobyl's "red forest" were exposed to radiation levels whose long-term effects are likely to be deadly (Geoff Brumfiel, "Satellite photo shows Russian troops were stationed in Chernobyl's radioactive zone," *National Public Radio* webpage, April 7, 2022).