

SHARON
BLACKIE

FOXFIRE,
WOLFSKIN

*and other
Stories of*

SHAPESHIFTING
WOMEN

Illustrated by Helen Nicholson



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Author's note

Most of the stories in this book are either reimaginings of older tales, or contain characters, beings and motifs which appear in older tales. To fully appreciate these new stories, then, or to understand who these characters are who are speaking, it may be helpful to know something about the older versions – not all of which are particularly well known outside their place of origin. And so, at the back of this book, you'll find a set of notes which indicate the inspirations for each of the stories, and brief outlines of the originals.



THE LAST MAN
STANDING



H E SHOULD HAVE been down from the hill by now; he's been gone too long. She turns away from the window; wipes her wet hands on the tea towel. She's learned not to worry, over the years. Or rather, not to fuss. There's nothing he hates more than a fuss. But he's been gone three hours now, and still she hasn't heard the shot.

She wishes he hadn't gone today. Not today, with his hands still red-raw from digging the grave for the old dog in yesterday's freezing rain. Not today, with a heart so heavy that she's not sure his stiff old legs can carry it all the way up the hill. His heart's been heavy before, and he's found a way through it – clamped his jaw shut, straightened his bent back and set his sturdy granite chest against the wind. But she knows that this is different. Saw the difference in him this morning, when he came back from the shed and the feeding and there was only young Ruaridh to keep him company. A dog, right enough – but not the right dog. Not enough. Not the dog that he needs.

Yes, it was then that she saw – really saw, as if for the first time – that he is indeed old. Old, and all that he cares about – all that holds him together – has changed or is fading away. The old ways are all but gone now, and they'll never come

back. Almost all of the crofts along this narrow lochside road have been bought up by incomers – most of them ‘retired’. Retired from what? she wonders. From life? No one wants to work the land, now; they just want to sit and look out of their picture windows and stare at the water. A ‘view’, they call it, as if they had nothing but eyes to know this place with – and as if their eyes could ever even scratch the surface of it from where they stand. His friends and family have been dying all around him for years, and some days it seems that there’ll only be him left standing at the end of the world. A crumbling saint; a reluctant relic of a way of life that’s gone forever. Just like that poem she read, years ago now – about a stone statue, all that was left, dissolving in the desert at the end of everything.

He might be made of granite, but granite is a good solid rock, and it has to be said she’s had a good life with him. You couldn’t call him a soft man – but a quiet man, for sure. Not a man to show his emotions – but what man of his generation ever did? That’s a new-fangled thing they do now: emoting at the drop of a hat. She doesn’t understand it, doesn’t see the need for it. Maybe if they’d had children who’d survived, she could make sense of this strange new world that was elbowing its way into all the sacred places. Maybe if there’d been grandchildren . . .

Aye, they’ve both carried on through losses before – for isn’t that the way of all life? You gain and you lose, you lose and you gain – and it all cycles round again, year after year, as sure as the seasons and the transit of earth around sun. There have been harder losses than the death of an old dog. Calum,

lost in the Falklands. Getting on for forty years ago, now. He carried on through the loss of a son; why wouldn't he carry on through the loss of a dog?

Calum. She mustn't think of Calum. She's thought enough of Calum, over the years. Hiding her pain so as not to increase his. Did he ever really feel it as she did? He would never think of telling her what he felt. And she knew better than to ask him. She understood her part in the strange bargain that was the marriage she had devised between them. There had still been things left in this world for her to learn.

She looks at the clock again: almost eleven.

She'll be worrying about him by now, he's sure of it. Ach, she tries to hide it from him, but he knows how she is. She thinks he doesn't see it: the nervous clenching of her fists; the quick smile, rapidly suppressed; the reflexive swallowing. He sees it. He sees it but what can he do? He can't protect her from it. Not from any of it. Couldn't protect her from Calum dying, all those years ago. Couldn't save her; couldn't even share her pain. Doesn't know how; never knew how. Never learned how. Too late now, to learn.

He picks his way up to the ridge, treading carefully through the boggy ground, stepping on clusters of dormant rushes to save from sinking too deeply into the wet. A hooded crow breaks into the silence with a harsh caw and he jumps. Ah, for God's sake. He never used to be jumpy. But then he never used to be slow, either. Never used to be old. He shivers, pulls the damp tweed more closely around him, inhaling the old familiar smell of wet wool and old dog.

It isn't the same, without the old dog. Nothing's the same. He got up this morning and although the young one was there, bouncing up and down with joy to see him, it wasn't the same. He hasn't the patience with the young ones any more; they need too much attention, draw too much out of you. It was the old dog that had wormed his way into his heart, over the years. The quiet dog. Stout, sturdy dog. Down to the shed in winter mornings with him to feed the sheep; up the brae behind the house to give the hens their mash. Aye, he was a fine dog. A great dog for the sheep, too.

The delicate drizzle hasn't let up since yesterday afternoon, though it's a wee bitty warmer today than it was yesterday when he dug out the grave. Eagerly accepting the sharp physical pain that coursed through his old body with every shovelful of earth. Gritting his teeth against it, setting his back to the wind. Digging in, digging on. For isn't that the way of it? Isn't that what he's always done?

Ach, but he's tired now, and old, old, old. He doesn't want to dig any more; he just wants to rest. That's how he'd always imagined it, getting old. With a few sheep for the comfort of it – just to keep him going – and an old dog beside him for warmth. Not that mad young bounding thing – and a good dog Ruaridh will turn out to be, no doubt, in his time – he just doesn't want to see another dog grow up and grow old and then die. Hasn't the heart for it. Can't bear it, if truth be told, and you bear so much, over the course of any human life. Doesn't everyone? But sometimes it seems he'll just struggle on through forever: another generation of dogs will grow old and die and still he'll be holding on.

He knows that he shouldn't complain. He has a good life. He always returns from the morning chores on the croft to a warm house and a bowl of hot porridge and the quiet comforting presence of his wife.

His wife: his beautiful, mysterious wife. It is strange to him still, that word. For he grew up without a woman in his life; his mother died when he was six, and nothing left but a houseful of silent men. And even after all the long years of marriage she is still a mystery to him. It is still a surprise to find her there waiting for him, quietly, smiling softly, trying to spare him her concerns. He has no idea where she came from, really; he has no idea what goes on inside her head.

He was out at seven-thirty, rifle slung over his shoulder and a hip flask in the pocket of his old tweed jacket. She'd tried suggesting gently over the years that he might go out in waterproofs. Well, waterproofs were fine, it seemed, for jobs around the croft – but waterproofs were not for stalking. For stalking you wore your tweed, and that was the end of it. That was how it was done, and there were too many things by far that were dying in the world now. He would keep to this one. This, at least, was within his power to keep. This one thing he would keep the way it always had been.

The way it always had been, except for the loss of the dog.
The clock strikes eleven and she jumps.

It was here that he saw the hind last month: he's sure of it. Over the ridge and down in the sheltered hollow below. And on a day like today, with no wind and only this fine drizzle,

they're likely still to be up and about. He walks slowly now, and silently; eyes scanning, ears alert. Watching for a sign, rifle slung heavy over his shoulder.

He misses the old dog by his side. They'd all thought he was mad, taking a dog stalking with him. The scent alone will throw the deer off, they'd said. One whiff and they'll be away. And besides, they said, you can never get a dog to be still enough. He'll scare them off, you know it fine well. But for fifteen long years – ever since he was just out of his puppyhood – the old dog had come up the hill with him, padding softly along behind him, shadowing him. Had lain quiet beside him, paws stretched out in front, head cradled in between. Eyes open, nose twitching, ears pricking – never moving an inch. And still the deer had come.

It's the emptiness behind him that he feels, more than the cold drizzle that penetrates the old tweed and makes him shiver again. It's hard for him, now, to do this. Hard to get up the hill at seventy-seven; harder still to drag the heavy carcass of a hind down again with him. His bones are stiff and he can't lie still for hours like he used to, waiting for the deer to come into his sights. But he does his best: that's all any man can do. Sometimes it seems that stalking is the one thing that doesn't change – the only thing that stays the same. That stays true. Everything else is gone. The wild salmon have fled from the over-fished rivers and stinking loch; the ash trees are dying, and snow comes but rarely to the hills and fields.

A movement to his right – and there it is. A hind. But not just any hind: a white hind. One of his wife's strange breed. She brought them with her, when she came – from wherever

it was that she came. He dips down again below the ridge, crouching, perfectly still despite the quiver in the muscles of his thighs. A clump of heather shields his head from view, and he watches her dance like a ghost through the dark green stems. He waits for a normal hind, a red – but it seems she’s alone. For a moment it hangs in the balance; the hind raises her head and sniffs at the air, up towards the ridge. But there’s no wind to carry the scent of the man, and the hind moves in closer and lowers her nose to graze.

He has the perfect chance of a shot now, and she’ll be waiting, back home there, for the sound of the shot. But he promised he’d never kill one of her hinds. Promised her other things as well; never broke his word. Came close to it, once or twice – but if he’s anything, he’s a man of his word. Always has been. Unfashionable thing, now – but then nobody has a word worth keeping in this godforsaken age. It matters to him still, though, and it matters to his wife. And if it matters to her then it matters to him, for she is another thing that has always stayed true.

He can’t imagine why she chose him. It’s not as if there weren’t other men around – men who would have been a likelier catch than him. All he had was the croft – his father dead and his brothers all gone to the city, one by one – and it had always been a hard way of life. Why would a woman like her want it? She was so beautiful – still is, with her lily-white hair and lips that are dry now, but always rose-red. She loved the land, though; understood it from the first. She walked it as if she’d known it all her life. She must have come from farming stock herself, though she never would say. Why else would she

have brought the animals with her? Almost like a dowry. The strange and secretive white hinds who took to the hills from the first day; the creamy, red-eared cows who settled right into the thin-grassed fields as if they'd never dreamed of anything finer. And the long-lashed, lily-white bull who'd bellowed at them daily from the paddock down by the byre. He'd looked at them all when first they came and shook his head. How could creatures like that possibly survive this harsh northern country? They looked like summer breeds to him, in need of richer grass to flourish. And this land nourished only the sturdiest of stock: feisty, long-coated Highland cattle, or the wee grey and dun Shetlands like Roddy Alec had, down the road. But to his surprise they'd thrived. Thrived and bred, and brought in enough to keep them both fed and warm down all the years. Not rich, but rich enough, and rich enough is more than enough, in his book. Those cattle were the envy of the lochside, back in the day. Now, no one even notices them. Except to complain about cow pats on the lane when he moves them to the field next door.

He loved her, of course, right from the start. Loves her still, more than anything ever in his life. She was what held it all together; holds it all together now while the world wastes away around them. He's never actually told her, though. Couldn't ever get the words out. You need to have grown up softer, to speak them. Every time he opened his mouth they'd stuck in his throat. Men like him didn't do it, and it couldn't be helped now. He just hasn't ever been able to get the words out. He thinks she knows, though. Hopes she knows. She knows so much else. The use of meadowsweet to

ease a headache; yarrow to staunch a wound. In all the years she's been with him, he's never once needed to get the vet out. She's always known what to do.

He lowers himself full length to the ground and lies flat, the rifle butt cradled against his right shoulder. He lines up his body with the gun, all pointed in a straight line towards the target. Comfortable, natural; man and weapon perfectly in tune. Just as it always has been, just as he was taught by his grandfather, all those years ago. He lines up the hind's neck in his sights, and . . .

. . . Ach. The Devil take it. The hind lifts its head again; stands poised, ready for flight, as he curses to himself quietly. Take the shot while you can, he tells himself, and be damned. She'll be waiting to hear the shot, and what does any of it matter, now? Take it while you can, this once, this last time, for you may never have another chance to walk up this hill. He closes his eyes, and for a moment it seems that he can sense it beside him: the quivering concentration of the old dog, every instinct telling it to jump up and give chase. But the old dog knew fine well when to stay, and when it was time to go. The old dog would hold itself there if it must, against its nature.

Satisfied that all is well, the hind lowers its head and sets to grazing once again.

He raises the rifle . . .

Pulls the trigger.

She hears it then: a single shot. A heavy crash that propagates; clatters down the glen like the sound of shattering glass. She clenches her fists reflexively, feels the warm worn metal of her