

# FOXFIRE, WOLFSKIN

---

*and other  
stories of*  
SHAPESHIFTING  
WOMEN

---

SHARON  
BLACKIE

*Illustrated by Helen Nicholson*



An extract from  
September Publishing

## 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.



WOLFSKIN



SAY YOU GO alone into the woods. It's winter, and you're hungry. So you take up your rifle, put on your deerskin jacket and your boots lined with rabbit fur. Off you trot.

Say it's dawn, and the light in the woods is thin. Air clear, and snow on the ground to give the game away. Crow calling your name; ready-to-roost owl hooting its warning into fire-filled sky. Fledgling morning, Orion no more than a glimmer now, Hunter hanging over hunter.

But say you don't think much of all that. You're there to kill your dinner, not to admire the scenery.

Say you're tired; you were up late the night before. Slim pickings in the woods, and on you walk. Say you're tired as evening falls; the rabbit is still warm. A long way back home, and the mill house which takes you by surprise invites you in. So you go inside to spend the night. Tomorrow there might be hind. Make a fire in the parlour, skin and cook the rabbit. You climb into the loft to sleep. Leave the fire burning in the grate; hot air rises. Leave broth and bones in the pan for breakfast.

Say you hear the door open just as you're falling asleep. Door creaks, like all the best stories say. Say a wolf comes in.

Sniffs; smells something tasty. Say she goes to the fire; raises herself up on her hind legs, shouts, *Skin down! Skin down!* Sure enough, down comes her skin. Slips out of it, and out slips a woman. The mill house is her home. Hangs the skin up on a peg behind the door, goes back to the fire, gnaws bones, drinks warm broth, falls asleep on the rush mat.

Say you watch this from a hole in the loft's wooden floor. Say you creep down the ladder and snatch away the wolf-woman's skin. Nail it to the mill wheel, tight and true. Walk over to the fire and nudge the wolf-woman with your foot. Say she screams, *Skin on me! Skin on me!* but it's the mill wheel the skin is on.

The wolf-woman cries.

Say you laugh.

Ha ha ha.

You know the rest. Wolf-woman has to marry man, because man has her skin. Man moves into enchanted mill; wolf-woman cleans and cooks. Same old story. Say you tell her you like stories; make her tell you stories each night before bed. Wolf-stories; they make you laugh. Promise to give her skin back if she tells you a story you really like.

But say you actually decide to sell the skin; it'll fetch a pretty price. Didn't even have to skin the wolf; it came ready made for sale. Say the wolf-woman sees that her skin is gone, and cries.

Say you laugh.

Ha ha ha.

Say the wolf-woman begins pregnant with hope, but ends up pregnant with a man-child. Say the man-child kills his brother Hope in the womb.

Don't you like this story? Say you do. You don't seem to be laughing now.

Well then: say the man-child hears people whisper that his mother is really a wolf. *Mama!* he says. *Are you a wolf?*

*What nonsense,* says the mother, and turns away.

Say the man-child asks his father whether his mother is a wolf. Father says yes. Man-child asks father where his mother's skin is. Father says he sold it.

Say the man-child starts to wonder whether he is a wolf too. Asks his mother how to find his wolf-skin. Say she tells him only his mother can show him how to discover his skin, and only when she's a wolf. The boy cries.

Say you laugh for the third time.

Ha ha ha.

Say the father sends the man-child over to the preacher's house. Takes a fresh buckskin and a basket of buns. Man-child smells his mother there, but mother is at home. Man-child sniffs; follows his nose. Follows his wolf-nose to the wolf-skin thrown on the seat of the preacher-man's wooden bench. Say he goes home and says to his mother, *Mama, Mama! I know where your skin is!*

Say the wolf-woman has lost her skin, but still has a wolf's bones. Say the wolf-woman has lost her skin, but still has a wolf's heart. Say the wolf-woman has lost her skin, but still has a wolf's eyes. Say the wolf-woman creeps out in the dark while her husband is away hunting, and steals through the window of the preacher's house. *Skin on me!* she says. And on the skin comes. Skin reaches for her, clamps around her, tightens. Caresses her like a lover, and she shudders. Skin

flows all over her, down her back, around her thighs. Skin wraps itself softly around her throat, loosens her hurt heart.

Say the hunter comes home to find his wife gone and a wolf sitting in the kitchen. The cub is alongside. Say the wolf growls and bares its teeth. Say you never see it coming.

Say the wolf gets the last laugh.

Ha ha ha.



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,