

UEA Creative Writing Anthology 2011

Shey Hargreaves

The Stag

EXT. BRADGATE PARK, LEICESTERSHIRE, NOVEMBER 1256, NIGHT

Dusk in a country park in medieval England. A stone hunting lodge stands atop a wooded hill. Mist hangs over the damp trees. Birds CALL, water DRIPS.

A small river winds around the foot of the hill. Heavy bracken creates a dark tunnel over the water.

EDWARD and CALDWELL paddle downriver in a wooden dinghy. Edward is 21, gaunt, dark-haired, eyes constantly moving. CALDWELL, 44, sits in the stern. He is stocky and red-faced. He takes furtive sips from a small flask, licking his lips.

The boat glides over the water. Edward looks up at the full moon rising through the branches. He breathes in the air.

Caldwell BELCHES. The BELCH resounds throughout the bracken and the trees beyond, echoing over the water.

Edward looks back at Caldwell. Caldwell smiles, folding his arms to conceal the flask. Edward regards him, suspicious.

UEA Creative Writing Anthology 2011

Edward turns back to the prow, still frowning. A clear patch on the left bank up ahead comes into view. Edward moves his oar to his right hand, and paddles towards the spot. The water GURGLES around the oar. Caldwell stows the flask inside his jacket and takes up his oar. They guide the boat into the shallows.

EXT. RIVER BANK, BRADGATE PARK

Edward and Caldwell heave their dinghy ashore, their breath misting in the air. They overturn it and cover it with bracken. They straighten up. They are each wearing a thick cloth shirt, a woollen jerkin and crude leather boots.

Edward takes a felt hat from his pocket and pulls it on. He checks his belt; knife, slingshot, stones. Caldwell takes an old, well-polished bow from his back and strings it. He bends down to pick up his quiver of arrows; the flask falls out of his inside pocket.

Edward springs forward and grabs the flask. He flings it away down the river. The two listen. There is a faint PLOP. Edward smiles; Caldwell shrugs. He HICCUPS. Edward rolls his eyes. They set off into the woods.

EXT. WOODS, BRADGATE PARK

Edward and Caldwell creep uphill. Edward's hand stays on the hilt of a long hunting knife at his belt, his eyes scouting the trees.

Edward pauses, listening. Caldwell narrowly avoids bumping into Edward's back. Edward tilts his head at a mossy boulder that juts out of the ground nearby. He and Caldwell slip behind it.

Edward leans forward to peer from behind the rock. Caldwell peeps around his elbow. Caldwell shifts for a better position; there is a quiet CLICK. The two men freeze.

The woods are still. Nothing moves.

UEA Creative Writing Anthology 2011

A SCYTHING, METALLIC sound; the leafy ground moves in a sudden rush. Edward and Caldwell leap apart. They stare down at an iron mantrap, jaws now sprung together.

Edward's eyes are wide. He looks up at Caldwell. Caldwell wipes a sheen of sweat from his forehead, and smiles at Edward. Edward hesitates before turning back to the woods beyond the boulder. Caldwell looks down at the trap, no longer smiling.

Edward becomes motionless. Caldwell notices this and steps over the mantrap to crouch behind Edward once more, peeping around his elbow.

A doe stands, ears pricked, forty yards away. She has white markings around her eyes. She gazes away from them, into the woods.

Caldwell brings his bow up. Edward reaches over Caldwell's back and slides a single arrow from the quiver. Edward brings his arm down and, eyes still fixed on the doe, slots the arrow into place. Caldwell bends the bow, sighting along the arrow.

A dog BARKS in the distance, and the doe darts into the undergrowth. Caldwell relaxes his bow. Edward looks in the direction of the dog's bark, down through the woods and over the hill.

The hunting lodge stands dark.

Caldwell taps Edward on the shoulder, and sets off after the doe. Edward takes a last look at the lodge, then follows.

EXT. EDGE OF THE WOODS, BRADGATE PARK

The woods peter out into grassland. The doe moves between the trees, grazing.

Forty yards away, Edward and Caldwell steal forward.

UEA Creative Writing Anthology 2011

Caldwell bends his bow. Edward takes a round stone from a pouch at his belt and slots it into the cradle of his slingshot. He and Caldwell exchange nods.

Edward fires his slingshot; the stone shoots past the doe's nose and hits a tree trunk. The doe shies away from it and takes off, bounding away over the open grass.

Caldwell sights along his arrow. The doe keeps running.

Caldwell HICCUPS, surprising himself. He misfires and his arrow whistles past the doe's flank. She dashes full pelt across the open ground, and disappears over an outcrop.

Edward sinks his head in his hands. Caldwell winces.

Edward raises his head; his eye is caught and he stares up the hill. Caldwell turns to look.

A light is shining from the top window of the hunting lodge.

The dog BARKS again, closer at hand. Edward and Caldwell turn and run, jumping over fallen logs, keeping low.

Caldwell trips on a root and falls. Edward drags him to his feet. They run headlong into a clearing.

EXT. CLEARING, BRADGATE PARK, NIGHT

They stumble to a halt. The clearing is a smooth circle of grass studded with white flowers. The moon shines down.

Edward's hand slips from its hold on the hunting knife. He looks behind him at the way they came, then back at the clearing. Caldwell smiles in wonder.

UEA Creative Writing Anthology 2011

Edward peers into the dark woods across the clearing. He frowns.

A DOZEN MEN, clad in hooded black cloaks and leather riding boots, appear out of the darkness in a ring, surrounding Edward and Caldwell. Back to back, Edward and Caldwell scan the circle. There is no way out. Edward draws his knife. One man steps forward; his eyes are covered in a black cloth. Shiny, healed scar tissue stands out over his cheekbones, disappearing underneath the blindfold. He lifts a hand; the other men raise crossbows to point at Edward and Caldwell.

Edward and Caldwell drop their weapons. The Blind Man comes forward. He reaches up and finds Edward's face. He runs his hand down Edward's nose to his mouth. He places a finger against Edward's lips.

BLIND MAN

Shh.

The finger bears a ring, gold, with a ruby that glints in the moonlight.

Edward stares at the Blind Man. The Blind Man moves his finger to his own lips, and smiles. He turns away.

The Blind Man beckons. Two of the men step into the undergrowth. Edward peers after them. They pull a WOMAN upright from where she has lain slumped amongst the bushes. There is a CLINKING sound. The men bring the woman into the clearing. They drop her to the ground in front of the Blind Man.

The woman, about 30 years of age, is unkempt and dirty. Her eyes are reddened and her hands and feet are manacled. Caldwell looks at her; she has bruises on her face and a split lip.

One of the men brings out a fiddle and bow from a bag on his back. Edward stares at the instruments.

UEA Creative Writing Anthology 2011

The Blind Man crouches next to the woman. He touches her swollen face. She tries not to wince. The Blind Man takes a key from his pocket, feels for the manacles and unchains her hands. The man at his side passes him the instruments; the Blind Man places the bow in the woman's right hand, the fiddle in her left. He steps back.

The woman turns her head away from him. One of the men touches the tip of his loaded crossbow against the back of her head. Her face crumples. She puts her bow down on the ground, raises her fiddle, and tunes it with shaking hands, one string at a time.

She picks up the bow and slowly draws it across the strings.

A LOW NOTE hums through the clearing. The Blind Man is still, his face turned towards the woods. The woman breaks off playing; the man standing behind her pushes his crossbow harder against her head. Edward swallows. He and Caldwell are rooted to the spot, staring. The woman begins to play again, her eyes squeezed shut.

The woman's TUNE is slow and calm. She breathes in suppressed gulps as she moves the bow back and forth over the lower strings. The Blind Man lifts his nose as though sniffing the air. The woman's MUSIC rises to high, piercing notes as it becomes a melancholy lullaby. The sounds of the wind and the rustling trees have faded; the fiddle's notes fall into a breathless silence. The music brings tears to Caldwell's eyes. Edward follows the Blind Man's sightless gaze.

A glimmer of white, far away between the trees. The LULLABY soars; as it does so, the woman lets out a sob, but keeps playing. Edward squints. The glimmer of white disappears, then returns. It is closer. As Edward watches, the glimmer resolves itself into the shape of a white stag.

The stag is large, its eyes dark and clear. It listens to the music, inquisitive. It approaches.

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The stag reaches the edge of the clearing. It steps onto the grass. The Blind Man walks directly over to it. The stag holds its ground, watching him. The Blind Man reaches up and strokes its neck. The stag looks at him steadily. The MUSIC changes key, taking on an uplifting, joyful tone. The stag pricks its ears forward, still looking at the Blind Man.

As the fiddle hits the highest note of the piece, the Blind Man pulls a silver knife from his belt and sinks it into the stag's chest. The stag starts back. It stumbles and falls to its knees. The Blind Man leans over it. He presses its head to the ground. Another man holds it still by the antlers. The Blind Man cuts its throat.

He sinks down next to it. The stag twitches, its muzzle in his lap. The Blind Man grips its antlers.

The stag is still.

The woman stops playing. She drops her fiddle and bow, raising her hands to her face. She sobs. Several of the men go to where the stag lies and begin stringing it up by its feet onto a wooden pole.

The Blind Man walks over to the woman. Edward eyes his knife which lies on the ground, several feet away. Caldwell sees him looking and grips his arm. The Blind Man raises the woman to her feet. He manacles her hands, gently. He gathers the instruments from the ground with care, and passes them to the man with the bag. He pushes the woman into the arms of the man behind her. She stares back at him as she is led away.

The Blind Man turns to face Edward and Caldwell. One of the men hands the Blind Man Edward's knife. Edward watches him.

The Blind Man comes very close to Edward and Caldwell. In a swift movement, he sheathes the knife in its place at Edward's belt. Edward flinches. The Blind Man pats Edward on the cheek with exact precision. He turns away; the rest of the men have disappeared along with the stag.

UEA Creative Writing Anthology 2011

The Blind Man walks away into the trees.

Edward and Caldwell stand alone in the clearing. The wind RUSTLES the leaves. Edward shivers. Caldwell puts a hand on Edward's shoulder, pushing him gently towards the trees. Edward won't move. He stares across the clearing. Caldwell follows his gaze.

The doe that they failed to shoot earlier that evening stands on the opposite edge of the clearing. She looks at them. The white markings around her eyes stand out in the dimness.

Edward reaches for his slingshot with trembling fingers. Caldwell stays his hand. The doe watches them. She is calm.

CALDWELL

Not tonight.

The doe turns and, in no particular hurry, paces away through the trees. Edward and Caldwell watch her. She fades into the dimness under the trees. She is gone.

Shey Hargreaves wrote her first play at college when she was 17. She went on to study for a BA in Drama at UEA, where she developed her playwriting and expanded into screenwriting for the first time. The Masters programme has also introduced her to writing for radio and television.