The Doe

By Leah Thewlis

A gentle breeze stirs the fallen leaves as you make your way through the forest. As they settle the silence seems so perfect, like time had frozen and you had been blessed with the opportunity to walk around and enjoy it. You close your eyes and take a deep breath, trying to slow your racing heart with the crisp, fresh Autumn air.

The piercing shrill of a far away bird quickly shatters the perfect stillness. You sigh, annoyed, the air is nothing but damp and rotten smelling. You move further into the woods, trying to be as quiet as possible. Something darts past your leg, you yelp and crouch behind a nearby tree. After waiting several minutes you work up the courage to glance around the large oak, the only movement is a young sapling a few metres away, waving lazily in the breeze so gentle it fades unnoticed. You sigh and lean against the rough tree trunk,

“Some hunter.” You mutter sarcastically, looking down at the bow and arrow in your hands. It’s your older brother’s bow and arrow, he’s normally the one that goes out and hunts for the family. Everyone in the village always joked that a real daughter wasn’t needed with you around. It was true.

When your brother was out learning to hunt and ride, you were inside learning to sew, cook and clean. You didn’t see the point in the both of you learning the same chores, leaving your Mother to do everything else. As a result you grew to be the oddball of the village, boys shouted insults and girls whispered behind their hands, which one was worse you couldn’t tell. Your mother always assured you that being kind and quiet was much better than being rough and loud, but even she grew irritated when you gagged over a half-plucked pheasant. But now your older brother can hardly stand, and your father is too old to trudge around the forest. It’s up to you. You know you can’t return home without at least a few rabbits, so you manage to nock an arrow and keep walking.

When the once early morning glow of sun had become a midday shine, you start to lose hope. Everything you see either runs or hides too fast for you to even aim.

You’re about to start your way home when you look up and freeze, you don’t even dare to take a breath. Standing a few metres away, is a large, beautiful, doe. Her legs and neck are stretched out elegantly as she nibbles on some low hanging greenery. Her fur is a dark mahogany colour and looks as though it would be softer than the finest spun wool. Her ears are folded back delicately, and her belly is the colour of freshly simmered caramel. But what captivates you the most is her eyes, they are like perfect pools of smooth black ink, so deep they threaten to swallow the world. You have never seen a creature more beautiful in your entire life.

Your hands shake as you slowly raise the bow, pull back the string, and take aim.

You blink rapidly to keep your vision clear of tears.

“I’m sorry.” The string whips past your ear and with a sickening thud, the arrow finds its mark. The deer bellows and stumbles away. Hot tears stream down your face as you force yourself to take up your knife, stumble to her side, and put the gentle creature out of its misery.

Her fur is stained and brittle, her neck is bent at an unnatural angle and her legs are splayed out on the forest floor. Her ears are stiff and cold, and her eyes, once so mesmerising, are now dull and glazed. Your clothes are soaked in blood and the insurmountable weight of guilt crushes your lungs. You fall to your knees as your tears draw streaks in the dry blood that coats your hands. You stay like that long enough for insects to begin wandering across your legs, then you are forced to put aside your grief, and begin to drag the creature back to your village.

When you finally arrive, you are greeted with many shouts of approval and hard claps on the back. You smile to ensure a false sense of accepted gratitude is achieved, when really you can hardly hear them over the agonising bellow of the slain doe.