A Poet's Meeting with a Brown Hare by Diana Sanders

A trespasser slips under the fence leaving green streaks in cobwebbed grass. She comes with the dawn in a tangle of smoking breath, boxing with birch shadows. A russet and black apparition whose eyes glitter and flame.

She is the frisky-one, the dew-hopper, the furze-cat, the snuffler, the swift-as-wind, the light-foot, the way-beater, the sitter-in-bracken, the shapeshifter, the boxer, the witch-hare. She was sacred to Celts and Anglo-Saxons, pet to the goddess Eostre, bringer of fertility and new life.



She has come into the garden of my cottage which is just outside the village of Llanfihangel Glyn Myfyr, the village being the inspiration behind William Wordsworth's poem *Vale of Meditation.* It lies 350 metres above sea level, on the edge of the Hiraethog Moors. Apart from hares it is the home of otters, dippers, foxes, stoats, weasels, raptors, song birds and the occasional shy woodcock. It is a landscape of streams, glacial lakes, and reservoirs. It is a land overflowing with history. Old farmhouses lie in the bottom of reservoirs, drowned to provide water for people of the Wirral. Old roads can be seen disappearing into the water. Medieval sheep enclosures make rectangular patterns in the grass and bronze age mounds crown hilltops. The weather can be wild, with winds that shake buildings and bring down trees. Horizontal rain leaves sheep hunched and me miserable but there is something about this valley that gets under your skin and gives meaning to the word hiraeth.

Llyn Brenig

Wind creates shapes.
Waves curl and swarm
into a walk-on-water heron
which trembles into wood smoke
and a girl skimming stones across
the river. River, hidden under the lake.
Full of memories and dreams and windows.
Bryn Hir, farmhouse, where wood is popping
in the hearth and flames warm chilled fingers.
Winter holds fast and the shepherd curls into his
sheep's wool bed. He dreams of waves

breaking in through thatch and door.
The land is sighing out an ache.
Hiraeth, home lost to flood,
Valley lane, moss soft.
Tarmac rippled.
Falling into water.



The April full moon is the Hare moon, and it is April when hares come from the surrounding sheep fields into my garden. They come for the daisies, herbs, carrot tops and other shoots. The Brown hare, unlike the rabbit, makes no burrow or permanent home. They are nocturnal wanderers covering several kilometres per night. During the day they lie in a 'form' or 'scrape' (a bed of flattened grass surrounded by vegetation) to be spotted only by the keen sighted, as their brown fur with tints of red and gold gives perfect camouflage. Hares are thought to have been brought here by the Romans but are now naturalised and have populations throughout Britain. According to the Hare Preservation Trust in the late 1800's there were about four million hares in Britain. Recent surveys show that the brown hare has declined by 80% over the past 100 years. The reasons for this are possibly the intensification of agriculture, the loss of wild flower meadows and shooting.

On a particular morning in April, working quietly in the garden, I saw a hare in a scrape behind the barn, enjoying the sun-warmed corrugated steel on one side and a strategic view of the valley on the other. It's black-tipped ears resting flat on its back. I looked for a few moments and then tip-toed away.

The sun is an old coin
falling into peat.

An aureole sneaks
around hare's ears.

She lowers them
and folds into grass

but lifts her nose
to the quiet light.



Hares lie still in the face of danger until there is no choice but to run. If that happens, they spring out and can outrun any other wild mammal in Britain. They are top athletes with large hearts and specialized bones in their noses which allow more oxygen for their sprints.

Wind

After Ted Hughes

The moon shudders and folds inwards.
Pinhole stopped down pulls in the sky.
Clouds are shadow puppets that rear and buck
and I am like the swallow, shaken
and raw, diving into holes of wind.
A refuge away from the flight
of shrieking tree boughs and debris.
A quiet place in this topsy-turvy rumble
but even the eaves tremble as the wind bites.
This house has been far out at sea all night.

The noise of the night has silenced the frogs;
quiet now under crusts of water. They wait
for beams of light to burn holes in the cold.
Only then will they resume their singing.
Inside I listen to the deranged musician
who pounds the roof with fiendish drumming.
He is the drummer, the horn blower.
Calling the revenants. They swarm in the wood
and come. I cry at the hurtling:
The wood crashing through darkness, the booming.

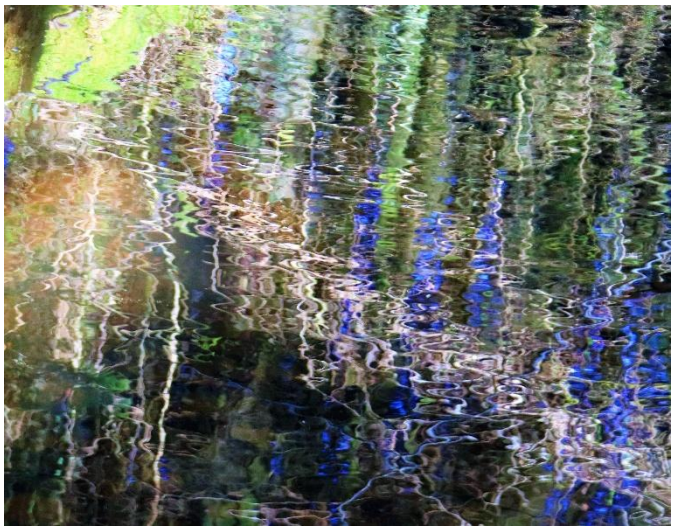
The storm brings flashes of light.
Ravens harassing birth-bloody lambs.
Their eyes sparking forks and black beaks delving.
Craven thieves stealing sight from the new born.
There is no mercy just throats that gobble.
Out of sight, a hare lies under a scarecrow,
playing dead under the swaying straw man.
If he ran, they could not catch him. He is
faster than flying geese and the raging
winds stampeding the fields under the window.

The rain pounds. Glass is a river, grass
is a river. Wind and water are all there is.
I shut the curtains and push back the night,
turning inward like a dormouse. Warmth spreads
outwards from orange-gold hazel. Hands
and feet, a flickering yellow duet.
Light turns out shadow, flashing on stone
and through stone, like a daffodil growing
out of rock. A stalwart beauty and yet
floundering black astride and blinding wet.

Female hares box. They rise on their hind legs to fight off unwanted male attention. When they give birth, they find a quiet place, usually in long grass where the young can remain undisturbed. Leverets are born with eyes open and soft, fluffy fur. They are odourless, which is necessary as the mother leaves them as soon as they are born, returning only once a night (for the first month or two of their lives) to feed them. They can have three or four litters a year.

Later, on in that morning in April the female hare had shifted to the front garden. She moved from plant to plant, sniffing and tasting until she settled by a large rosemary bush near the kitchen door. She sat under it and scraped away at the earth. When she had finished, she moved off into the adjoining sheep field. That evening when I came home from work, she sprinted by me as our paths crossed near the house. Opening the curtains, the next morning, her two newly-born leverets were sitting still as stones near the kitchen door.

New life knocks at her belly, impatient
for the taste of fresh grass. I watch
her from the window as she races the merlin
over the meadow leaving two bleary-eyed
leverets under the rosemary bush.



I experience something almost sacred when watching hares - a gift that lifts me out of the ordinary. Separateness falls away and I become part of something finer, deeper. To imagine the world of the hare is to have all senses heightened. Colours are brighter, sounds sharper. You can hear a vole rustle in the next field — know the secret places where the fox does not go. Drink from gold-mirror pools lit by the dawn sun. On moonless nights you find your way by the stars and on pitch-black nights trust remembered paths to guide you back to the untamed moor.

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