

The Leveret

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For all the creatures I have held and who have held me

Clare

I move, foot and root and rock and dirt. Hair left on branches, skin pricked by brambles, my right shin stung up and down by nettles. Phoebe chews on dock leaves, she's all mouth. Shaping like this and that, a tongue and teeth forming around the leaves, chewing, chewing and spitting out. And she is rubbing the green stuff into my skin, turning me into something new, the stained hairs on my legs become grass growing out of me. And talking as she does it, always talking. Giving me little pieces of how it was to grow up in a place like this. The hardness and the softness that comes with it. I watch her face for small movements, see that there are pieces of green in her teeth. When I tell her, she sticks out her tongue.

Phoebe's hand points as she talks. There, a tree she climbed when she and it were both smaller, there, a collared dove, no, a pair of them, and there a little stream, a dragonfly, can you see? I am learning this

place. How it looks, how it smells, how it feels. I'm trying not to think. And the days have bled into each other, unmarked by plans or by work, just the slow unpacking, making calls from the landline phone. No signal there, Phoebe had warned, on the car ride over. Let's buy some DVDs for the evenings, she'd said, because there'll be no internet until we get it put in. But didn't I try to find some signal anyway? Didn't I stand in the bedroom that first day, holding my phone to the eaves?

She shows me how to touch the nettles so they don't sting, and why would I want to? I ask, why would I do that? She pinches leaves off and drops them to the ground. Says, nettle seeds make you feel buzzed. Tells me she used to eat them on walks as a child, so she could keep going. And one time, she says, one time she did get lost out here, properly lost, and survived on berries and leaves and it felt like weeks but it couldn't have been more than twelve hours before her dad found her wandering about like a lamb. He dragged her home to her mother, who smacked the back of her legs with a wooden spoon, then held her close and wouldn't let go.

She asks me how it feels to be so far from anything, to be somewhere so different, and I want to tell her

that I don't know if I'm supposed to be here. I want to tell her that I feel like a splinter. A splinter or maybe a weed. I want to say these things, but I can't make my lips into the right shape. I say, the house is lovely, just beautiful, and wasn't it kind of her granny to give it to us? And are there any ghosts? It feels like a house that would have ghosts. And she laughs but she doesn't say no. She points at flowers and leaves, saying, cowslip, toadflax, harebell. It sounds like a potion, I tell her, it sounds like a potion, and she agrees. She tells me about potions she made with her granny, elderberry syrup for a cough, a balm made from conkers to rub on sore feet. She tells me some of the stories her granny told her before bed, black dogs, white stags, babies being swapped. We don't talk about the other thing. She pretends that we left it behind, in the old flat. But we didn't. We brought it here with us.

And I didn't mind the packing, I did most of it while Phoebe was at work. I made my way through each room and touched so many things that hadn't been touched since we moved in. So many things my hands were surprised by, but my eyes were used to, that my eyes had given up looking at, or seeing, maybe. My mum brought round boxes and tried to help. She packed the plates and cups and asked what she could

get rid of. Nothing, I told her, again and again. Don't throw that out, just leave it, please can you leave it, you're making it worse. Every day I did a bit more, I took all the pictures off the walls and filled in the little holes. I used Polyfilla and pressed it in with my fingers, felt the way it caked into my skin. I packed the books into boxes with cushions, I wrapped our ornaments up in tea towels, stuffed our duvet into an Ikea bag, filled one box carefully with the dried flowers that Phoebe had hung around the house. I looked at the stain in the carpet, thought about using bleach, but couldn't do it. Every day when she got home, Phoebe would kiss my head and tell me I'd done a good job. I didn't have anything else to do.

On moving day, the men came to lift and carry our boxes and furniture, to pack up their van and drive all our things to the house. They took apart our bed, split it into pieces so they could get it out the door. I watched the men's hands grip our mattress. I wish I'd covered it in a sheet but I left it bare. I felt my face get hot when I saw one of them eyeing the stains, spilt coffee, sweat, period blood. Now, I keep having these dreams about hands creeping out from under the bed frame in the middle of the night.

The men were everywhere, crawling all over the flat like ants. It felt like there were fifty of them, but

there were only two. I kept having to go into the hallway cupboard and face the wall, to stand in the dark with my eyes closed. At one point, a man opened the door. I think I said I was looking for something, or maybe I said, hmm where is it? I didn't turn around, I didn't move, but I could feel his eyes on me and I wondered if he'd ever grabbed a woman by the back of the neck and pushed her face into a wall. He made a sound and closed the door, and then it was dark again, like it had never happened.

We checked the flat so many times. After the men left, we went through it together and then, while Phoebe sat in the car outside, I went back in alone. The flat was strange without our life inside, bigger and smaller than it had been. The carpet was still stained and is surely still stained now. I wanted to cut that part out and take it with us, but I wasn't allowed. I told Phoebe, I did try to explain that I couldn't leave it behind for the landlord to bleach or to pull up and throw away. I lay on the floor beside the stain, staring up at the ceiling, and I thought, in that moment, I might never be able to get up again. Maybe, if I could have chosen, I would have seeped into the carpet and never left. But then Phoebe was beside me, and she pressed the back of my hand to her mouth, and her lips were warm and I could feel the places where they were

peeling. And when she stood up, she pulled me up too and led me out to the car. I asked her, as she turned the key, I said, can we drive by her? Phoebe shook her head, not again, and that was it.

When we were finally on the road, I couldn't hold my limbs in the right way, and I think that was the reason. I felt like I had left something behind and my body was being pulled back. I tried to find the shape that my body wanted to make, folding myself, shifting this way and that. A leg held to my chest, then the other, noticing the difference. I tried with them crossed, tried with both knees held to my chest, tried with feet up against the dashboard. Phoebe was glaring at me. If we crash, she said, if we crash, your body will be crushed, your legs will shatter. And then what? I wanted to know, and then what, but I didn't ask, I just put my feet down where they were meant to be.

We had all the plants in the car because Phoebe didn't trust the men to pack them right. We had to wedge the tall ones in awkwardly and I accidentally shut the car door on one of the parlour palm's fronds. We didn't notice until we stopped at a service station. I thought I might cry. Phoebe sighed, before cutting the crushed frond from the body of the plant with her fingernail, letting the wind take it. I watched

Phoebe in small snatches during the drive. Biting her lips and chewing the insides of her cheeks in concentration. She'd turn the radio on, then off. She'd start talking about chickens or paint colours but her voice would trail away. I stared out of the window, saw the way the blur changed colour, morphing from grey to green over the course of the drive. We kept having to stop so I could go to the toilet and I made a joke about not being able to keep anything inside me. She just looked straight ahead. We ate lunch in the car with the windows closed, and Phoebe wondered out loud whether we'd get closer to her brother and his family, if he'd let us babysit sometimes. When we were around an hour away, she squeezed my hand and asked me how I was feeling. I wanted to tell her I was terrified. I wanted to say, I've changed my mind and I want to go back. I wanted to say, I think this is a bad idea, I don't want to only know your family, to be looked at and spoken about, to be the only queer people for who knows how far, I don't know how to be in a place like this. I wanted to ask her if this meant we had given up. But I didn't. I didn't say any of it, I told her I was excited, that it would be nice to be somewhere different. I think I said it too quickly or my voice was too high. We sat in silence for the rest of the drive.

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And now Phoebe has stopped with her pointing and talking and she's looking at her phone, creasing her eyes in the light, dropping my hand and holding her own up to her head. We should start heading home now, she says, my parents are already there. But, I mean, really there's no need to rush, they've let themselves in, though we should get going now anyway. So we walk a bit faster but not too fast, because they've let themselves in. And they'll be putting the kettle on, going through the cupboards, looking for teabags, sugar and biscuits, making themselves at home. And they do this all the time, just let themselves in, didn't they do it when we first arrived? Didn't they call and ask us why we weren't there when the men already were? And wasn't it just as well that they were there, to let the men in and tell them where to put our things? And Phoebe's mum had already unpacked our kettle and our mugs and had brought over milk and sugar and was offering us cups of tea. Wasn't it just as well they had a key? And it was strange, to me, that Phoebe's mum had unpacked the box my mum packed, I never even touched it. I went to the toilet and didn't come out until the men had gone. Phoebe's parents stayed quite late that first night. I was so tired, but they had brought us a big thing of pasta and a bottle of champagne. Phoebe's dad had

taken me on a tour through the rooms and pointed out the little marks on the door frame that measured his height, and Phoebe's height, her brother's height and now her brother's kids'. I looked at the floor and said nothing.