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THE NAMES OF A HARE IN ENGLISH

LES NOMS DE UN LEVRE EN ENGLAIS

*The mon that the hare i-met
 Ne shal him nevere be the bet,
 Bot if he lei down on londe
 That he bereth in his honde,
 Be hit staf, be hit bouwe,
 And blesce him with his helbowe;
 And mid wel goed devosioun
 He shal saien on oreisoun
 In the worshipe of the hare
 Thenne mai he wel fare.*

*The hare, the scotart,
 The bigge, the bouchart,
 The scotevine, the skikart,
 The turpin, the tirart,
 The wei-betere, the ballart,
 The go-bi-dich, the soillart,
 The wimount, the babbart,
 The scot, the deubert,
 The gras-bitere, the goibert,
 The late-at-hom, the swikebert,
 The frendlese, the wodecat,
 The brodlokere, the bromcat,
 The purblinde, the fursecat,
 The louting, the westlokere,
 The waldenlie, the sid-lokere,
 And eke the roulekere;
 The stobhert, the long-here,
 The strau-der, the lekere
 The wilde der, the lerkere
 The wint-swift, the sculkere,
 The hare serd, the heg-roukere,
 The deudinge, the deu-hoppere,
 The sittere, the gras-hoppere,
 The fitelfot, the foldsittere,
 The cawel-hert, the wortroppere,
 The go-bi-ground, the sittest-ille,*

*The pintail, the toure-hohulle;
 The coue-arise,
 The make-agrise,
 The wite-wombe,
 The go-mit-lombe,
 The choumbe, the chauart,
 The chiche, the couart,
 The make-fare, the breke-forwart,
 The snattart, the pollart,
 His hei nome is srewart;
 The hert with the letherene hornes,
 The der that woneth in the cornes,
 The der that alle men scornes,
 The der that nomon ne dar nemmen.*

*When thou have al this i-said,
 Thenne is the hare migt alaid;
 Thenne migt thou wenden forth,
 Est and west, and south and north,
 Wedrewardes so mon wile,
 The man that con ani skile.
 Have nou godne dai, sire hare,
 God the lete so wel fare,
 That thou come to me ded,
 Other in ciue other in bred! Amen!*
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I

Just an old poem. Beyond us,
 worn as a bone—but this one
 seems to keep doubling back.
 Look: fresh tracks, a crosspath. Nervous,
 I glance around, I want to know
 who wrote it. What liar would claim
 forty-three names for a rabbit?

I think I know what happened.
 I get these fits myself.
 For a moment language is everything,
 a path to the heart, a small
 city of stars on the tongue:
 then everything looks in the mirror
 and sees his cool twin nothing . . .
 Forty-three names are none.

In the time before dawn, in graylight,
 a fur purse hops through the soaked grass,
 a stump stands by a stump and then is gone;
 this is the time when names are none and many,
 the time when names themselves have names.

Say the word, things happen.
 Say the long hare is a deer, there's
 a crash in the bracken. Say
 fiddlefoot, you hear pounding
 on the packed door of the earth.

Prospero stands in his sour ring,
 somebody else's fict. "Turpin,"
 he whispers, and a small
 furzecat appears at his feet.
 "Dewbert," he says, and now
 there are two, sidelookers,
 late-at-homes, the master smiles,
 says "Budget," there are four,
 says "Hedgescroucher" and
 there are eight but
 you know how this
 story comes out . . .

What do we have for animal magic
 but names, our mumbled spells and charms,
 baskets of epithets spilled down the page?

A straw deer stood here
 right at this line
 but a grassbiter ate it
 and then a broomcat swept it away
 a windswift blew or flew to where
 the westlooker stood looking east
 toward the wastelooker in his hair
 shirt, but

you know how this goes
 you turn the corner of the line
 and startle a fernsitter who evaporates
 now you see him now
 you don't now you name him now . . .

3

Along the Vermilion River
 the farmer's wife points out some shallow caves
 where slaves hid on the way to Canada
 and Indians rested, migrating south.
 Settlers stood on the bank and watched,
 I figure, as I do, hands in my pockets,
 wanting to belong to this, or it to me.

An old woman with us knows
 the name of every plant.
 "What's this?" I ask, testing her.
 "Mary's Bedstraw," she says!
 I'm shivering. To know the name,
 to possess and be possessed!
 Don't apologize. Wild Geranium, Dog Violet,
 Sneezewort, Bloodroot, Jack-in-the-Pulpit,
 so we trail through the riverbottom woods
 and names bind us to strange forms of life.
 A good new name, I tell myself,
 is what the farmer feels, turning
 an arrowhead or axehead up.
 His hand closes around the past,
 the mystery of why he's here;
 the world extends too far
 and yet he's in it, holding a small rock!

We pace on through the woods. Trillium everywhere
 stars on a green spring evening,
 bones in an Irish pasture.

4

And what's the rain's name?
 Certainly not cloudcurd, aireggs.

A bear staggers through the raspberry canes,
 a crowfeather falls through a noontime pine,
 a pail of yellow oil tips into a cistern.
 Rain walks down the gangplank, waving.
 Climbs windbreaks. Stipples windows. Freckles sand.
 The farmhands' faces glisten, yes

that name is right. The one name. Rain.

5

We have some quiet families in this neighborhood.
 Constellations, let's start from there. Bear, Plough,
 Charles's Wain, how choose? Pleiades: better
 as Seven Sisters, but I like Hen and Chickens best.
 Is that Pandora, lid-lifting? No, President Taft,

strolling with his cigar. Andromeda,
 chained lady? How about Rita Hayworth's
 Iceboat? Go on, make up your own,
 holding a child's hand, saying: See, there's Moth.
 Glove. Submarine. Malcolm's X.
 Chandelier. Cottontail. Moebius' Strip: God's Ring.

Well, drop your head.
 The field's still here, with its milkvetch and thistles,
 the house with its one lamp lit.

6

eye,

strange that your name should be an ideogram,
 two peepers with a crooked beak between;

82

and on beyond the thing itself
 a jelly bleb, bubble of stare,
 loll-in-a-socket, goggle-in-a-purse,
 buttonboll, turret, this slick blister,
 the little leak that floods the cave:

I came to the rim of the crater
 to see where it lay asleep
 under its flaps and dark spike fence,
 work never stops in the observatory,
 then it jumped open and I ran home
 back to the name, hearing behind me:

I am blue. My name is Helen.
 Haply I squeeze a tear
 and it rolls away with a wet spoor.
 In the dark hole where all of you go
 you will not need me. See?

7

Shakespeare's portrait hangs in my office.
 The round, poised face, balding and bone-yellow,
 hovers on its ruff against
 a dark brown background. Lately
 when I glance up it is
 my father's face. And I am pleased. Afraid.
 What the prince told the ghost flares a second
 against brown sky: *I'll call thee . . . father.*

My father's alive and well
 in Minneapolis. His business
 was business, but the other day
 he gazed at me from a dustjacket
 in Wallace Stevens' look. That's dangerous,
 that father-saying. A breath huffs, jaw drops,
 tongue jumps between teeth. To say
 I'll call, I'll call you, I'll call *you*

father. And call. And you. Then
 they start to call you father. What a name.
 A cloak, a jacket.
 You take it off.
 Your head floats off the ruff. Your gaze
 travels. Your sons wince.

8

I look at the backs of my hands and get lost:
 an old wind bends the grass, blue trails fan
 from wrist to flushed and cross-hatched knuckles;
 stand on one, look out along
 the five peninsulas, ridges crossed
 by ravelins and runnels, at the tips
 the slick nails flaring; you could do
 a tap dance, smiling, and fall off . . .

I look at my hands, searching for their names,
 picker and stealer, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz,
 the scarred serf who dropped the crystal goblets,
 the oldest cups, the simplest maps,
 furrow-makers, strangling partners, fist and claw,
 smoothing the child's hair, poking shadows,
 wringing laundry, helpless in sleep. I look
 at my hands. How could they have names?

9

The dogs were barking over at the pigfarm,
 the leaftruck was crawling through autumn,
 lovers were unbuttoning in cellars
 and what was I up to in that badlit attic?

I sat sewing my own name to my arm.
 Young? What thing is Young? I was going
 to help the spelling of wrinkles, welts,
 scar tissue, crowsfeet, veinscript, I'd be

84

my hospital wristband, walking dogtag, and when
 my palms and their spidery letters were gone,
 scrotum and brain with their intricate scribbles,
 I hoped my bone-bald cranium, somebody's paperweight,
 would show its old faint Y. If I couldn't
 be the Book, I could at least
 be one or two of the letters.

10

One time,
 he came through the trees in a helmet.
 We couldn't see his eyes. There were long-needed pines:
 at each needle's tip stood a round drop
 catching the light. When we looked back
 whoever was there had vanished.

And from the hill
 we watched him mowing the meadow.
 His sleeves were rolled up. A horse
 stood patient, hitched to a gig.
 It was like watching the river
 racing among its rocks.

Was it
 near the empty factory you heard him?
 A fear-stab: faintly
 he was singing inside. Brickdust
 sifted, cinders crunched under boots.
 You didn't know the song, you didn't
 know his name. Oil in a puddle
 when you were a child, made rainbows. Your face
 wore the same soft fascinated look
 when the bonfire made sparks that spiraled up
 and then were gone.

85

It got away again:

“the deer with the leathery horns
the deer that lives in the corns
the deer that all men scorns
the deer that no one dares to name”

Names, get between me and the things I fear.
Names, for godsake tell me who I am.

Nothing and everything. The time comes
when you shut the door, step off the porch
and walk across the fields without a word.

A day swings past. A husk of hares
disappears over the hill. Dawn again.
I've looked at the small change in my pocket:
eye, star, hand, rain,
father, mirror, bedstraw, bloodroot.
Now, doing my act I find a bone,
step in the sour circle, find
the bone knows how to sing:

“Fowles in the frith
The fisses in the flod,
And I mon waxe wod.
Mulch sorwe I walk with
For best of bon and blood.”

Fishes in the flood, and I could go mad:
language, that burrow, warren, camouflage,
language will deceive you and survive you.

Well then, so what?
I look up *frith*.

Oh game preserve of words!
Oh goldfinch feeding in the buttonbush!
The dogs of death are loosed
upon that little rabbit, Metaphor,
but he can double back. And does.