

## **FISHSKIN, HARESKIN**

Dew beater, Dew hopper,

Layer with the lambs,

Fiddle-foot, Light foot,

Skulker in the ferns.

Go-by-ditch, Go-by-ground,

Yellow speckled one,

Flincher, Snuffler,

Dweller in the corn.

“What use is that?” Turpin says as Ervet struggles to lift the pot and swings it too quickly to the hearth, spilling water onto the stones. He is already gathering up cap and boots, stamping his feet on the gritty rug. “What use, Ervet? Now I’ll go without warming.”

Ervet watches him slap his arms and thighs, bending to peer through the window into the stubborn night. Rain scurries over the roof. Drips pat at the panes to be let in.

“Fox got your tongue, Ervet?”

A hare, she longs to say. A hare got it, but she bites the spite into her lip. It was one of the first lessons in Turpin's house: no speaking of hares, no thinking of them, even, if Ervet wished her new husband to return safe in his fishing boat. A hare is the worst bad luck for a fisherman. Whole nights, whole hauls, have been lost, because a fisher glimpsed a hare on his trudge down to the boat, and turned right back.

Ervet knows every name for a hare that there is. She kept Turpin home that way, one night soon after they were wed. "Dew beater, fiddle-foot, dweller in the corn," she cried, and he had laughed as she pulled him back behind the box bed curtain. It was that night, she was sure, in their bed that reeked of the sea, that Turpin planted inside her the gleaming herring that swelled in her belly, all those months, slithering and flicking its awful tail.

The pot is still cold. Turpin is ready.

"Mother will come at sun-up," he says, picking a sealskin off the hook and shaking out the salt. She bites harder on her lip. "Be kind, Ervet. It's a kindness she does you." He leans to stroke her head and she flinches away from the fish-skin stink that is already on his hands. Turpin slams the door, leaving a spray of water behind him.

'Go-by-ditch, go-by-ground, skulker in the ferns,' Ervet mumbles, sinking back to sleep.

She is woken by her own name, bellowed. Ma Turpin has in one clenched fist a crumple of rags, in the other the handle of a pail. Soon Ervet is dressed in one of Ma Turpin's smocks, and all morning, while a bleary sun beckons beyond the cold stone walls of the cottage, Ma Turpin shows her what she does not wish to learn. How to scrub a hearthstone with sand to shift the herring grease. How to oil a sealskin just

enough. How to sharpen gutting knives; how to gut and salt and thread so that always the smoking chimney will be hung with strings of curing bodies, like foul washing lines.

Ma Turpin's hands are barnacled with warts. When she scolds Ervet her voice is like a seal's bark. Turpin's clothes are crusted and unwashed, she barks. Turpin's cup is dirty. There is not enough soap, there is too much grime. "What," she asks Ervet, "have you been finding to do all the long day that's more pressing than making spick and span for your husband?" They are standing in the garden, shaking out fish scales from the rug. Ervet looks over Ma Turpin's shoulder at the green hill. Beyond it lies the marsh and the dry, sweet scent of rushes. "My son's one thing." Ma Turpin is glaring at Ervet. "But that bab's his own, which makes it mine, and I won't see it suffer in all this smirch. You see I won't." Ervet longs to drop the rug at Ma Turpin's feet and set out for the marsh. All those long days, with Turpin out on the sea and the herring curled inside her, she crept there, leaving these fishwife tasks undone. But it is Ma Turpin who drops the rug, and rushes past Ervet, all toothless smile, for the girl Werrity has come with the shawl-wrapped bundle. Ma Turpin seizes it from the girl's arms and brings it to Ervet, leaving Werrity on the path.

Inside the shawl, fishscale-patterned and smelling as much, are the grey eyes that never seem to close, just stare and stare at her, shining. There is the mouth that pops open and sucks at air.

"See that," Ma Turpin barks, too close, her hot herring breath in Ervet's own mouth.

"It's your milk he wants. It's been a month now, Ervet. Time to take your turn, or he'll take the teat girl for his own mam and you'll have a life of trouble off him."

Let her, Ervet thinks. Let her take him, fishskin and all.

“Ma Turpin,” the girl calls. She won’t come close to Ervet. “We’ve a lad has torn his hand at the barn with letting a rope slip too fast. Mucking about and acting a dunnock, he were, but we can’t staunch it. Will you come and see?” They both look at the bundle Ervet holds, then.

“You know what to do and what not to,” Ma Turpin says, less of the bark in her voice. “You stay put with your bab and I’ll be back round by tide turn.” She is asking Werrity has she salt, is the wound very deep, as they stamp away down the path. When their voices have faded, Ervet steps out after them and begins to walk, taking the other path towards the dunes.

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It was bafflement that made her father give Turpin his nod, in the end. Six herrings, Turpin had brought on the first day of courting, then twelve, and lastly twenty-four. They’d been laid out on the table, where her father had stared at them like rows of useless silver tools. She’d been glad even then to leave the smell of them and walk out with Turpin, to be his wife. The only sadness on that day when the gift of fishes had done its trick and released her, was that her beloved hares could not follow her to Turpin’s house. Bad luck for fishermen. They had been a gift too, one her father came to rue. He’d come home from hunting one day with bulging pockets. Ervet, still a girl, had screamed to see them squirm, believing he’d brought snakes, but when he’d let out the three tiny leverets, she had laughed as they bounded around her feet, hind legs already as strong as trap-springs.

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Ervet does not hurry through the maze of dunes as she often has, darting between the tufts of slicing grass. Instead she clammers up the sand, better to look at the shore. Out over the grey sea the cloud is low, ruffled like a deep belly of fur. The bundle is squirming against her shoulder, that same twist and lurch she felt when it was swimming inside her, when she was certain of its silver gleam and strong tail. The grey eyes match the sea so well. Ervet slithers down the dune onto the wet shore sand. Her feet leave dints that well with water as she walks.

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Her father loved nothing as much as his tools. He made the cunning trap that caught the leverets' blue-grey mother and while Ervet coaxed the creatures from their corners that day it was the scent of dark meat roasting that filled their draughty house. But he had let her keep them, and Ervet ate her hare supper with the three small bodies nestled soft as skeins of wool in her lap. Mawkins, she called them. She was only a child, then, and her favourite was the yellow-speckled one. He followed her about the house, while his grey sisters stretched themselves near the hearth, happy as dogs. She learned to smooth a finger along his scalp between his ears so that he would shiver and then lie still, letting her look into the puddle of his eye. When he beat his feet on hers she would lead him along the plank walk and up into the fields, where he ran his own mazes but always returned, to stretch his long yellow body beside her own, heart flickering under sun-smelling fur.

All three mawkins, Ervet kept, and they grew with her. And on the blue bright morning after Turpin carried her away, she went back for them. She needed her dresses, her woollens and shoes, after all, but her yellow-coated friend and his sisters were more in her mind as she knocked and pushed the door. No father in his

carved chair. No mawkins on the hearth rug. She followed the scrape and chuck of tools on wood through to the leanshed.

Two blue-grey pelts hung from the drying hook, blood black as tar dripping into a pail. On the workbench lay a yellow skin, piebald with purple stains, and beside it the skull, still flesh-streaked, still wet. Her father's eyes blinked at her where she blocked the light in the doorway.

"You've Turpin now," he said. "You'll not be needing these old pusses." Ervet gripped the uprights either side of her, felt the wood grain slide through her fingers. "Besides, they're the worst of bad luck to a fisherman."

She stared into the dark of the skull's wide eye-hole until she and the leanshed and her father had all sunk inside it.

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Ervet squats at the foam line, scoops bubbles into her palm where they vanish. When water trickles onto the head in the bundle, the grey eyes blink but still stare at her, all clouds and sea. She lets the fishscale wrapping drop into the foam. The grey underlayer of swaddle is hot in her hands. Turpin is out on this same gritty sea, dragging up fish from their hidden swarms, dragging them up and bringing them home on his skin.

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"It's no good, Ervet," was what Turpin said from behind the box bed curtain when she slipped into the cottage from the deep dark of the night. She hadn't meant to stay so long at the marsh house, but the hushing of the reeds as she worked at her

mending, hammering back the fallen slats, sealing the gaps with yellow marsh mud, had lulled her so, she had been able to forget the fish sleeping in her belly.

“We’ve a child coming, Ervet,” he said. “Think of that. Where have you been?” She was silent. “For pity’s sake, Ervet.”

The curtain swept to one side and Turpin hauled himself up from the bed. He was still in the shirt he had put on in the chill of the night before, and as he moved towards her the stink of fish and sea seemed to wash right through her.

“Such a face! Is that your feeling, now, for your own husband?” He gripped her by the shoulders as she retched, her belly heaving, the fish inside churning, and when he tried to bring her close to him she pushed his chest.

Ervet sat in the garden, then, breathing the night air clean and fresh as stream water, letting herself chill in it until the pinch of the cold faded. When the moon had sailed right across the sky and she no longer felt anything at all, not even a flicker of fishtail against her ribs, she stumbled indoors and set about lighting the fire. This much she could do. This she had done for her father.

When she lifted the pot of water, pain tied a knot around her belly and pulled. She gasped, but did not drop the pot, and stood bent over until the knot loosened. When the pot was on and the fire steady, she was nearly at the box bed when the knot tightened again.

“Turpin?” she said. “Turpin?” He woke with a grumble and looked right past her to the glow of the flames.

“That’s better, Ervet,” he said, stretching, and got up to go and warm himself. “We’ll make a fishwife of you yet.” She let herself fall into the fish-skin sheets and curled

herself up there, listening to Turpin stamping his feet and splashing water across his face.

“Don’t go out,” she called. “Not tonight.” There was quiet and she knew he was bending to look through the window.

“It’s calm as noon out there, Ervet. It’ll be a good catch.”

“Please. Not tonight.” The knot was squeezing the breath from her. How to keep him here, how to make him untie it for her and bring her back to herself? “Dew beater, Dew hopper, Layer with the lambs,” she cried out. “Fiddle-foot, Light foot, Skulker in the ferns.”

The splashing and stamping stopped.

“You curse your own husband.” Turpin’s voice was clenched. “Then so be it. If you’d have the fish alive, swimming out beyond reach, and me dead.” She felt it then, the thrash of tail, and sea water poured from her. Turpin was gone.

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The bundle squeals and writhes against Ervet. She takes another handful of foam, but when she looks up, along the shore, she lets the water seep through her fingers. There on the black rock that runs down the shoreline like a charred spine, stands a hare. Its head is high, sniffing the sea wind that ruffles its yellow pelt.

“Dew-hopper, Light-foot, Layer with the Lambs,” Ervet murmurs. The hare watches her as she steps along the thinning strip between the sea and seaweed line. When she reaches the black rock the sea has covered her path and lifted the seaweed up on its furling shoulders.



Ervet hefts her bundle higher. The hare takes the shore path in halting lollops, keeps on where the sand turns earthy and traces the edge of the marsh. When it reaches the point where the plankwalk juts out away from firm ground and into the reeds, the hare turns its puddle gaze on Ervet.

“Go home,” she whispers, but she walks alone with her grey bundle along the plankwalk, her feet finding the safe spots amid the broken slats.

Ervet unhooks the loop of plaited reed at the marsh house door and breathes in the first deep draught of wind-dried wood and old smoke. The blackthorn sprig lies on the table where she left it, dropped petals spread across the wood she waxed. She leaves the door open, for the wind, for the hare, and petals scuttle across the floor. She thinks of Ma Turpin’s broom, of fishscales. When she goes to lay her bundle in the chair she notices the lack then of heat against her breast.

She watches the bundle for a while. The marsh house is whole again. She has made it just as it was before, its wind-warped slats straightened, its rush roof wadded deep and dry. There is nothing left to mend. She feels the chill the wind brings where her chest is still damp with sea water. The only part of the house she has not touched is the leanshed.

The door through to it hangs crooked on the salt-rusted hinge. On the threshold she smells rot, the green seep of the marsh water. The bench is bare; the hooks and ledges where her father’s tools once glinted are all empty. But high in the corner, three pelts still hang, two blue-grey and one yellow. Cobweb knits about her fingers as she pulls one down.

He will not have taken the needle and thread, not the finer kind meant for cloth and broken skin. Mother's work, stitching up. He had said this even as Ervet mended a slit in his palm, once, and neither had said she was no mother, not then.

The pelt is tough, and soon speckled with her own red blood as she pushes the needle in, out, through. It is not dainty work. There are tears where her father was rough as he skinned. When she is done, she sucks the blood from her fingers.

"Flincher, Snuffler, Yellow-speckled one," she whispers, as she unwraps the grey linen from her sleeping bundle and folds around the pink skin a new, soft-furred one. The feel of fur warmed from within is soothing sweet. Ervet lies down on the old rug and folds herself around her mawkin.