



THE WAY OF THE HARE

MARIANNE TAYLOR

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Marianne Taylor

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Contents

Introduction	7
Chapter 1: The Mythical Hare	15
Chapter 2: Lagomorpha	47
Chapter 3: The Biology of Hares	73
Chapter 4: The Lives of Hares	103
Chapter 5: Hares Past and Present	133
Chapter 6: Hares at Home	171
Chapter 7: Hares and People	207
Appendices	253
Acknowledgements	262
Recommended Reading	264
Index	265



INTRODUCTION

Lepus

I don't remember the first time I saw a hare. There certainly were hares to see on our family summer holidays in Wiltshire cottages. They'd appear from nowhere and go racing away through the long meadow grass as we went out on our birdwatching walks. To me they were just big, fast bunnies, nothing terribly exciting, not compared with the birds that were my obsession. And because they were there and gone in a heartbeat, there was no chance to see that there was anything more to them.

I do, though, remember the first time that I *looked* at one, properly. I was at Rye Harbour Nature Reserve in East Sussex. I'd have been 17 or 18. My boyfriend, Joe, had grudgingly agreed to come birdwatching with me. We sat in the hide, overlooking a shallow lagoon teeming with screaming, flapping, frenetic avian life. There were redshanks

and Sandwich terns and teals and wagtails, and Joe made polite noises, but I could tell he wasn't exactly gripped. Then I noticed a brown hare making its way along a sparsely vegetated shingle bank. I wasn't particularly surprised by this – I'd seen hares here before. But I pointed it out to Joe, and he showed proper fascination for the first time. His interest sparked mine. I looked at the hare.

It was a way off, and shimmered in the heat haze that silvered its rough-looking tawny coat. Bony joints and long, lean muscles shifted under its fur. It moved in a curious slow, exaggeratedly awkward way on its precipitous supermodel legs, a sort of half-hop half-shamble of tightly contained power, nothing like the comfortable round-rumped lolloping of a rabbit. Its ears were lovely and ridiculous, tall, broad radar dishes, nothing like a rabbit's. Its head was shaped like a toy bus, and its high-set staring eye, even over that distance, was wide and pale and looked utterly haunted, on the edge of reason. Not even slightly like a rabbit's. It had the look and wary demeanour of some delicate, leggy, hoofed animal on the brink of bolting, a deer or antelope or even a racehorse, wrapped up in a slightly twisted mind's caricature of a rabbit. It didn't bolt though because it didn't know it was being watched. It found some plant that it liked the look of and plucked it from the ground. It ate sitting upright, the greenery moving from side to side in its mouth and slowly disappearing as it chewed. Its wild eyes stared and stared. How had I ever dismissed this beautiful, strange thing as an oversized rabbit?

It was another year or so later that I saw my first mountain hares. I studied at Sheffield University, on the edge of the Peak District. I spent as much time as I could exploring the hills, checking out the fast-flowing rivers with their dippers and grey wagtails, the oak woods full of pied flycatchers, the stone-walled little meadows on the gentle slopes and the achingly pretty villages tucked between them. Once in a while my birding friends and I would drive out into the bleak Dark Peak of the north-west, looking for red grouse and golden plover, and the other hardy birds that live on the highest tops. One

winter day, we were driving home at dusk along some tiny single-track road over endless black, snow-patched heather moorland, and suddenly there was a little party of white ghost hares loping away from the roadside ahead of us. We stopped the car and watched them go. They were not running full-tilt, barely more than ambling, but were lost to our gaze within moments, swallowed up by the foreboding black hugeness of the moor. The landscape for as far as we could see seemed so bleak – featureless, utterly exposed. And freezing. I knew the hares didn't burrow, so all they had for shelter were rocks and heather clumps. And yet this was the most southerly outpost of mountain hares in Britain.

Seeing hares by mistake, while out looking for something else, seemed easy enough. But when I started to work on this book and began to set out into various wild places with the *intention* of seeing hares, I found that luck was not on my side. Take a certain hot sunny day a couple of Augusts ago, which saw me standing on a footpath alongside a big field, my binoculars pressed to my sweaty brow, scanning back and forth, near to far. The field stretched away into the distance. It was the same field that I'd seen in photos, with a dozen or more brown hares drag racing across it, but today, under that too-intense sun, there were none. I plodded on. A few lapwings yodelled overhead, and gatekeeper butterflies danced along the boundary hedge. High overhead, two newly fledged red kites wheeled and squealed and tumbled, thrusting talons at each other. The dispute was over the scrap of prey one of them had, the severed and stripped-bare leg of a tiny bird. I was amazed how much energy they were investing in it when I was finding my slow walk quite hard-going in the throbbing heat. There was certainly plenty to see at the beautiful RSPB reserve of Otmoor, just not the one thing that I'd particularly hoped to see – not today. I stopped to scan the field again and it remained hare-less, and it was obvious now that it would stay that way for hours. Over the last few years, I've learned quite a lot about how to not find hares. Of course, every failure just made the addiction worse,

and bolstered my determination to find them. Hares are tricksters, and humans never learn.



Most days, sad to say, looking for hares isn't an option because I'm not in hare country. On many days, I don't even make it out of town. That doesn't mean wildlife-watching is off the table though – when you're hooked, you're hooked, and there's something to see almost everywhere. St James's Park in London, for example, is a lovely place in which to stroll and admire ducks, geese and even pelicans. But it isn't the place to see hares, or even rabbits, at least not living and breathing ones. However, there are fabulous numbers of hares to see at the Society of Wildlife Artists' annual exhibitions, at the Mall Galleries opposite the park. I have been to these exhibitions most years since about 2004 and admired the image of the hare painted, drawn, etched, printed, carved and sculpted – a cornucopia of interpretations. Hares have been prominent in many other exhibitions of wildlife and nature art that I've viewed – hares in every medium and every mood.

Harriet Mead sculpts animals from random scrap metal – she fashions her hard-running hares from shovel heads and other old garden tools, horseshoes and toothed gear wheels, all reddened with rust and spliced together in airy yet robust structures. Max Angus's *Alexander and Racing Hares* is a beautiful linocut of four hares in racehorse mode, crossing the neat bands of a ploughed field. Another linocut, by Andrew Haslen, is *Hare and Rook*, a rufty-tufty hare resting in a sparse crop field, its coat rendered in white, gold and frosty blue, fixing a passing neon-blue rook with its worried, unblinking stare. Nick Mackman's hare sculptures are bronze, weighty and lustrous, sitting upright and examining the world with the expressive puzzled gaze of the real thing. David Bennett's sketch *March Hares* captures a string of chasing hares in deft loose daubs of oil paint. The animals are

vividly alive, dashing over a rain-freshened green meadow beneath a wild, stormy sky.

Hares appeal to artists because of the shapes they throw in motion and at rest, their odd exaggerated proportions, their extreme expressiveness and their combination of grace and gangly awkwardness. But they also catch the imagination through their rich history of legend and folklore, and their links with themes that inspire and disconcert in equal measure – moonlight, madness, motherhood, magic. Hares – real and in art – are not like most smallish furred animals. They are not doe-eyed and fluffy, they do not look cuddly, they do not inspire us to say ‘ahhhh’ and feel all mushy inside – they are not *cute*. Their beauty is deeper and stranger than that, and it speaks to a stranger and deeper part of our own natures.

And it is not just modern art that is hare-filled. Hare motifs are common in religious and secular art through the ages, from the Three Hares in their circular race to the moon-gazing hare with its otherworldly fixation, and the shadowy suggestion of a hare that cultures the world over have seen outlined on the actual surface of the full moon. Hares have also long held appeal to figurative artists. *The Young Hare*, a simple but meticulous watercolour study of a reclining brown hare by Albrecht Dürer, is one of the most famous animal paintings in the world. It was created in 1502 and now resides in the Albertina Museum in Vienna, while reproductions of it on the wall can be found in many a German living room. Perhaps the most startling piece of modern hare art is Dieter Roth’s *Köttelkarnickel* (‘turd bunny’), a rather sardonic copy of Dürer’s hare, sculpted from rabbit droppings.



Rarely do humans have uncomplicated relationships with our more charismatic wild animals. There might well be admiration, expressed through our efforts to capture their

likeness or impression in two or three dimensions, but there is often also jealousy, possessiveness, competition and manipulation. And brown hares are particularly problematic. They are good to eat and big enough to be worth killing. But hares are fast and full of guile, so catching them is an exciting challenge – for our canine sidekicks and for us. They eat the crops we plant (a bit), so there is justification for controlling them. Also, they are not part of our indigenous wildlife – they are introduced rather than home grown, and some would say that means they needn't be valued as much as any native animals. And there is something mystical and out-of-reach in their wildness that unsettles us – they inhabit a space in nature that we cannot touch. So we need to show them who's boss, just as we need to blow the birds out of the sky and haul the sharks from the deep ocean. It's a perfect storm of qualities that places the brown hare at our mercy.

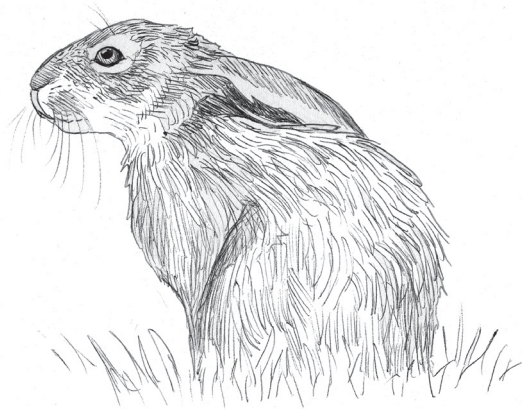
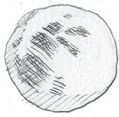
The mountain hare, which is native, is also quarry for the hunters, but less so than the brown hare of the lowlands. Killing these hares can only be for food or sport, as they are not in any way a threat to crops. However, they are interpreted as a danger to red grouse on keepered estates, as the hares may pass on disease-carrying ticks to the birds. Driven-grouse shooting estates are managed like farms, even though the grouse that live on them are technically wild. Every effort is made to protect the birds from natural threats of all kinds – and this includes killing mountain hares in, it's now becoming clear, quite astounding numbers. Another threat is much more subtle. As animals dependent on snow and cold, climate change, caused by our various short-sighted industrial practices, is chipping away at their habitat and holds the potential to wipe them out over the coming centuries.

The unique Irish subspecies of the mountain hare, known as the Irish hare, has its own particular biology and, accordingly, its own set of worries. It is hunted, legally and illegally, and it is coursed in legal but brutal contests for sport, but perhaps the biggest danger it faces is the brown hare, introduced to Ireland fairly recently, which threatens to

outcompete the smaller Irish hare and displace it from its habitat. The extent of this problem is only just becoming apparent.



I came to this book as a wildlife-watcher fascinated by hares, but with limited knowledge, especially about their representation in our collective consciousness. What I've learned since beginning to delve seriously into the wider world of hare life and lore is that these animals' reality is as strange and magical as their mythology, and their mythology is tied up in the darkest places of our minds. Today, our hares, all three types, are in trouble, and we need to understand them as fully as we can if we are to help them. If not, then we might end up turning the hare into a real-life version of the unicorn – a creature too magical and strange to exist.



CHAPTER ONE

The Mythical Hare

No matter how snugly ensconced we are in our brick houses, in our orderly towns and cities, the natural world still finds ways to send shivers down our spines. The drawn-out fluting cry of a tawny owl, or the rasping shriek of a vixen in love. A gang of swifts dare-devilling past your bedroom window, screaming in delighted unison like feral children. The disconcerting moment when a passing dragonfly halts its flight and hangs in the air to inspect you, eye to compound eye, before darting on, its whirring wings sending a little slap of air across your face. A hare, though, doesn't need to do a thing to cast its spell. Just one look into that beautiful, wild, crazy golden eye and every far-fetched myth and tale ever told about hare-kind suddenly makes sense.

Here's a moment between a human and a hare, somewhere on the flatlands of the north Norfolk coast. The human is

walking along a muddy footpath, and the hare is just mooching about in an adjacent field when they notice each other. The hare stares, and the human stares back. The hare recognises a threat, and the human recognises an opportunity. But there are a couple of hundred metres of ploughed earth and crisp December air standing between the two of them. What happens next? The air's charged with something – something age-old yet sharply intense. It's a scenario that's been played out up and down rural England for millennia, but the outcome is by no means set in stone.

This time, the hare is seriously spooked, enough that it takes the initiative at once and launches itself away across the flat emptiness of the field. The human – well, this time, the human is me, and I have no gun and no greyhounds and no desire to harm or scare the hare. All I have is my camera, which I use to take some frankly disappointing photos of the hare's heels and muscular backside as it hurtles away, faster than even my thoughts can follow it, and moments later there may as well never have been a hare here. I might not have much to show for it, but the encounter's still left me spine-tingled. Hares are startling, exciting, they rarely hang around for long but they leave a frisson of magic in their wake.

The reality and unreality of the hare are deeply intertwined. We have always hunted them, and they have never harmed us, yet in many of the tales we tell about them hares are full of menace. Hares are phantoms – they seem to appear and vanish at will – no wonder we cast them as tricksters. They're capable of astonishing feats of athleticism – no wonder we set them above much more formidable creatures in the talent show of life. Some of the most bizarre of their many claimed magical powers have turned out to be rooted in fact, not fiction. No wonder we imagine them to belong to worlds other than our own. From their remarkable reality has sprung an astonishing array of fantasy.



Folk tales, mythology, humour, literature ancient and modern, poetry. All are ways to help us to make sense of it all, to find deeper meaning, comfort and beauty in our lives – to enable us to escape from the vagaries of fate, the cages of our fragile bodies and the tyranny of our too-short existence. When we speak of animals in any way other than strictly descriptively, they inevitably become caricatures of particular types of human-ness, and vehicles for our hopes and fears.

*There was an old man whose despair
Induced him to purchase a hare.
Whereon one fine day
He rode wholly away
Which partly assuaged his despair.*

By Edward Lear

This limerick is illustrated with a sketch of the despairing old man, eyes tight shut and mouth downturned in an expression of absolute stubborn denial, mounted on the back of a horse-sized, cheekily smiling hare. These words and their illustration provide as unusually straightforward and joyous a representation of hare-kind as you'll find anywhere. What other animal could be more suited to carrying us away from our despair than a magical hare?

But we're a complicated and contrary lot, we humans, and our relationships with animals and our feelings about them demonstrate this quite vividly. Throughout most of our history, animals were primarily things that we caught and ate, and we found other uses for the inedible parts. In some parts of the world it's easier to keep domesticated animals, and eat those instead. Once we started allowing and encouraging animals to live with us, we found different ways to use some of them – they became our workmates, companions and pets. We came to appreciate them as fellow feeling, thinking beings. In wealthier cultures today, there is access to so many different kinds of plant-derived foods that no one really needs to eat

animals or animal products at all (though most of us do anyway). Hunting wild animals in these cultures is now something done for fun rather than out of necessity, and those who hunt are often reviled by those who don't. But there are also some modern cultures where almost no edible plants can be found or grown at all, and where domestic animals can't be kept either, and eating lots of wild animals is the only way to stay alive.

One thing that all cultures have in common, at least when it comes to the 'higher' animals, is a recognition that they are self-directed beings that share at least some of our most intense and primal emotions, and we can empathise with their joy and their suffering. Hunters, by and large, respect their prey, just as pet owners adore and cosset their furry friends. Another cultural commonality is our passion for telling animal stories – especially about charismatic creatures such as hares. They feature, it's been calculated, in a startling 7 per cent of all animal-based proverbs. They have been the stars of folk tales and legends, poems and sayings, from time immemorial, and of novels, picture books, films and even video games today.

Some general ideas crop up again and again in ancient cultures' folklore. Among them are: creation myths; explaining how the world was formed; stories about great floods; the notion that the world is overseen by an array of gods, each with his or her own particular powers and proclivities; theories about why we need love and want sex; and ideas about the true nature of the moon and the stars. Hares – our own brown, mountain and Irish hares, and other members of the genus *Lepus* from around the world – have provided inspiration for beliefs and tales about all of these, and much more, and have their own particular set of associations too. I have looked into the folklore surrounding our wildlife a fair bit over the last few years, and was surprised many times by the existence of lore and legends about even the most obscure British species. Hares are far from obscure, but still the breadth and variety and sheer contrariness of beliefs,

stories and representations centred around them is mind-boggling.



For a start, hares are unlucky – just uttering the word ‘hare’ when at sea would doom your voyage. But then hares are lucky as well, as Boudica knew – the Celtic Iceni queen kept a hare hidden in her dress, and would release it when she needed some celestial guidance, and whichever direction that it ran was a directive from the gods. A hare caught and torn apart by eagles represented victory in war ... or was it defeat? Hares represent both life and death – destruction and rebirth. They are also intimately linked to the moon – they are active at night, and best seen (and hunted) on a night lit up by a full moon. For peoples around the world, the dusky shadows cast across the face of the full moon have been interpreted as forming the image of a hare.

Because hares court and mate and breed so fast and furiously they are seen as icons of fertility as well as rebirth, and also of lasciviousness, with sexual behaviour that is not so much deviant as physically impossible in some cases – for example, it was once widely believed that they could change sex at will. Because the full moon carries its image, the hare is the child of the moon or messenger for the moon, or it just lives there. And because hares seem to completely lose their reason in their ‘mad March’ chases for the right to mate, they are unreliable, devious, insane and dangerous. The shape-shifting hare is found in a variety of cultures, from Nanabozho, the hare god who could be human, hare, or any other form he chose, to seventeenth-century witches in Britain who could transform themselves into hare-spirits. This idea perhaps comes from the real-world skill that hares have of disappearing – whether through speed or stillness.

We have attached many themes to our idea of what a hare is, but there are a few key strands that seem to be near

universal. Although the detail in the stories and legends shows diversity from nation to nation, it is striking how consistent the general ideas remain. They begin with the first days of the world itself.

For the Powhatan Indians, the hare was the original and greatest god, and creator of the Earth and of the first people. This hare-god gave his human creations a forest to dwell in, and filled it with deer for them to eat. Other hare deities include the Egyptian god Osiris, judger of the dead, arbiter of resurrection, and ruler of the afterlife, who was sometimes depicted as having a hare's head. Egyptians would sacrifice a hare to him to help ensure the Nile flooded each year to irrigate their crops. A minor Egyptian goddess, Unut, was also hare-headed. Ancient Egyptian art often depicted a hare greeting the rising sun, but there is a closer link with the moon – a hare was the messenger of Thoth, the ibis-headed moon god. There was also at least one hieroglyph depicting a hare – its most widely used meaning was 'to be'. How fitting that this culture picked the lightning-fast, always alert hare to be their representation of the state of being alive.

A mystical connection between the hare and the moon is common to a great variety of cultures. The universality of this idea may well come down to the fact that the dark areas on the full moon's surface appear (if you use a bit of imagination) to show the outline of a hare or rabbit, holding a ball or a box (different cultures have their own views on what this object might be). Across many parts of Africa, the tale is told of a hare that was appointed to be the messenger for the moon, but who let himself down right from the start. When Earth was created, the moon decided that she would give the people on Earth the gift of eternal life. So she sent her hare-messenger down to say to them, 'Just as the Moon dies and rises again, so shall you.' The hare made a mistake, though, and muddled up a couple of vital words, instead telling the people, 'Just as the Moon dies and perishes, so shall you.' The people believed this and were forever mortal. The unimpressed moon gave her messenger a whack in the face

with a stick as punishment for his error – and that is how the hare got his split lip.

In China, the hare-in-the-moon is a companion to the goddess Chang'e, and his accessory object is a pestle and mortar, which he is using to prepare the ingredients for a potion of immortality. The hare carries the blessings of the moon to the world and is guardian to all animals. Hare figurines carved from jade bring good luck. Hindus have also noted the lunar hare and called the moon *Sasanka* – marked with the hare. Another deity to link moon and hare is Kaltes-Ekwa, of the Hungarian Ugric peoples. Goddess of the moon, and dawn, and fate (but in a nice way), and childbirth, this benevolent and highly feminine goddess can change form at will, and her chosen shape is often that of a hare, to match its outline on the face of her moon.



It's worth pausing here to consider the place of the hare's cousin, the rabbit, in all these beliefs and stories. As we'll see later on, the names that we give to rabbits and hares don't necessarily reflect their true biological differences. A jackrabbit, for example, is a hare, and a Belgian hare is an oversized domestic rabbit. It must also be said that the tellers of folk tales aren't necessarily as pedantic about correct species identification as I might like them to be. In a lot of stories, rabbits and hares are interchangeable, or stories that start out as featuring hares are changed to be about rabbits when adopted by cultures in regions with no hares (or vice versa).

The rabbit/hare situation in North America is further confused by the fact that here there are several species each of true rabbits and true hares, but both are called rabbits (the rabbits are cottontail rabbits or just rabbits, and the hares are mostly called jackrabbits). So any American story featuring a rabbit, without further detail being given, can probably be taken to be about a rabbit or a hare.

The Uncle Remus stories of Br'er Rabbit and his associates, told in the southern states of the USA, are a bit different as they have their origins in parts of Africa where there are hares of various species but no rabbits. So, in this case, Br'er Rabbit is surely Br'er Hare, although the other characters – and the stories themselves – have also been tweaked to fit an American setting. Perhaps the Chinese zodiac's rabbit ought also to be a hare, as rabbits are not native to China, while several species of hares are. Oddly enough, the Korean zodiac replaces the rabbit with a cat, even though Korea does have a native hare.

The Buddhist *Jātaka* tales, which tell of the Buddha's various former lives, mention hares now and then and there is little doubt these are real hares. One story offers an explanation for how the hare got to the moon in the first place. The tale begins with a hare, a fox and a monkey deciding to live together. The unusual arrangement was sealed by each animal promising, in turn, to always be helpful to the other two. The Buddha, a sky-spirit at that time, observed this and decided to investigate these good intentions. He came to Earth and called at the animals' home, in the guise of a weary hunter seeking rest. The animals invited him in and extended their principle of helpfulness to him immediately by offering to bring him food. They went out in turn to the forest, and shortly afterwards the monkey brought back some fruit and the fox brought some hominy (dried, cooked maize). Then it was the hare's turn, but he came back empty-pawed, having found nothing. The Buddha asked where the third course of his meal was because he was still hungry, and the hare said, 'Build a fire, and I shall give you food'. The Buddha did so, and when the fire was roaring the hare said, 'I have heard that men eat flesh that is taken from the fire, and I will give you my own.' And he jumped into the fire. The Buddha caught him mid-leap, saving him from the flames. Then the Buddha thanked the fox and the monkey for the food they had brought, and said to the hare, 'But you have done more, for you have given me yourself. I will take the gift, little hare.'

Then, cradling the hare in his arms, he carried him away and up to the moon, so that people would forever see the hare's image on the face of the moon, and pass the story of his sacrifice down through the generations.

(An alternative version of this story has the hare actually removing all the fleas from his body one by one before making his fire-dive, explaining that while he was happy to sacrifice himself, he couldn't speak for his ectoparasites.)

The emblem known as the Three Hares is also surprisingly ubiquitous. It is found as an illustration in various forms, at sacred sites across Asia, the Middle East and Europe, with the majority clustered in southern England and Wales. An image as pretty as it is clever, it depicts three running hares arranged in a circle, their heads all pointed inwards. If you look at any one of the hares it seems to have two ears, as you'd expect, but the three hares actually have just three ears between them, each one being shared between two hares, and the three ears meet tip to base to form a triangle at the centre of the image.

This motif has been linked with various religions. It is found in a number of Christian churches, where it is interpreted as a symbol of the Holy Trinity. However, its earliest occurrences, dated back to about AD 600, were in China, in cave temples. Its use spread west along the Silk Road, and it was linked with Buddhism, possibly as a symbol of peace and tranquillity. The Three Hares also turns up on Islamic artefacts, and in synagogues – the latter often using it to represent the Jewish diaspora. The Kabbalah interpretation is that the Three Hares represent the three fundamental elements – earth, water and fire/heaven. In Devon, the Three Hares are the 'tinnners' rabbits' after their image was adopted by tin miners – the motif's appearance in a great many Devon churches may be a nod to the fact that the prosperous tin miners of Dartmoor funded the churches' repairs and upkeep.

That one highly distinctive symbol should have come to mean so many things across so many nations and belief

systems is as unusual as it is intriguing. Or perhaps it is not so unusual. Some historians consider the Three Hares an example of what we would now call a meme – it has transcended its origins and spread like a (slow) virus from person to person and culture to culture across the (Old) world, its essential meaning mutating along the way.

If you're in the market for a hare-themed ornament for the house or garden, or a hare-themed artwork or piece of jewellery, have a stroll through the gift shops of Glastonbury or anywhere else that draws in the hippy crowd, for want of a better term. Many of the items you'll find on the shelves will be described as 'moon-gazing hares'. A moon-gazing hare sits very upright or stands on its hind legs, its head tilted up to stare into the heavens. The image may also include the moon at which the hare is gazing. There's a moon-gazing hare on my desk right now, a simple, pleasingly robust little thing in dark green jade marbled with black and gold, its tucked-up hind legs just suggested by painted spirals. The hare's exaggeratedly long ears lie along the full length of its back, and its blunt little face is pointed skywards.

The visual motif of the hare looking up into the moon – making eye-contact with its lunar sibling, presumably – crosses many cultures, just like the link in stories between hares and the moon. My first introduction to the moon-gazing hare occurred when I went with a friend to her home in a rural (but hare-less) village in Kent. As we arrived, my friend quickly reached up and touched a little white plaque hanging from the house's wall just before she unlocked the front door. It was an action so fleeting that I almost thought I'd imagined it. I looked at the plaque as I went in, and saw that it bore an image of a moon-gazing hare. When I asked her about it, my friend told me that she touched the plaque as a sort of superstitious reflex, to ask for luck and protection for the people she loved. The idea of the hare as guardian has also crossed cultures and centuries.



Some of our favourite idioms are hare-related, and none too flattering, either. There is 'haring about', to describe fast but pointless dashing from one place to another. The 'hare-brained scheme' (not 'hair-brained', although technically that version works too) is an ambitious but too-hastily thought-out plan, doomed to failure. The crazy show-off behaviour of hares in spring is all the more remarkable when you consider how reserved and cautious they are most of the time. It is surely 'mad March hare-ness' that is behind the many impetuous, boastful, devious and even shape-shifting hare characters of legend.

Nanabozho is an important figure to the Ojibwe Indians of North America. He is a benign spirit but one who is rather devious and fickle – a bit of a rascal, in short. He can change his shape to anything he pleases, and sometimes takes the form of a white hare – in this form his name is Mishabooz – the 'great hare' or 'big rabbit'. He often presents himself in shapes other than that of a rabbit or hare, though, and also goes by a wealth of other names. Although he has his naughty side, he is not immoral and always respects Ojibwe culture. A child of the sun (literally), he was initially sent to the people as a teacher, and also named the animals and plants when the Earth was first born. He is the inventor of fishing and, according to more recent folklore, he also saved the Ojibwe's forests from the devastating attentions of Paul Bunyan, a gigantic mythical lumberjack, by whacking him with an enormous fish.

One of Nanabozho's pranks involved an encounter with the 'buzzard' of North America (actually the turkey vulture) – at that time a handsome, fully feathered bird of prey. Envyng the bird its powerful flight, Nanabozho begged for a ride on its back. The buzzard agreed, promising to fly carefully so as not to dislodge its passenger. But the buzzard was a trickster itself and, having gained good height, banked sharply to one side and Nanabozho fell off, plummeting back to Earth and knocking himself unconscious on the hard ground. After recovering from the uncomfortable landing (which so

contorted him that he woke up staring at his bottom), Nanabozho vowed revenge and transformed himself into an apparently dead deer. The buzzard flew down to rip open and feed on the carcass, and once its head was fully inside the deer's body, the open wound on the deer snapped shut, trapping the buzzard's head. The disguised Nanabozho laughed at his panicking victim and said, 'Now pull out your head.' The bird flapped and struggled mightily and eventually extricated itself from its gory prison, but in the process it ripped off all the feathers from its head and neck and that is how the handsome buzzard became the ugly, bald, red-headed turkey vulture that we see today – though the experience didn't put it off tucking into deer carcasses.

Br'er Rabbit (who, as discussed above, was probably a hare) is the consummate trickster, always getting one over on Br'er Fox, Br'er Bear and a host of other animals that are eager to kill and eat him. He is much admired for his quick thinking and ability to deceive. Most famously, after Br'er Fox manages to capture him after an earlier prank and is deliberating over which terrible punishment to administer, Br'er Rabbit pleads not to be thrown into the briar patch. He would rather be hanged, or burned, or skinned, or drowned, he says – anything at all, if only he can be spared the horror of being thrown into the briar patch. Br'er Fox, a good deal less cunning than the average fictional fox, falls completely for the ploy and does throw Br'er Rabbit into the briar patch. Of course, Br'er Rabbit then runs away to safety, hooting with laughter at how foolish the fox had been to give him exactly what he said he didn't want. This account of psychological manipulation has been repeated (with variations) and parodied so much and in so many ways that it's difficult to believe that the technique could ever still work. But no doubt there are enough naive Br'er Foxes out there that it sometimes does.

In a popular African story, a farmer hare has a field on the crest of a hill that he wishes to plough and feels disinclined to tackle the back-breaking job himself. So he takes a long rope

and gives one end of it to an elephant, challenging the great beast to a tug-of-war contest. The elephant naturally sees this as a no-brainer and takes up the challenge. Then the hare goes away, carrying the other end of the rope over to the far side of the field, out of sight of the elephant, and offers it to a rhino (or in some versions a hippo), with the same invitation. The two mighty animals, determined not to be beaten by the mere hare they believe is pulling the other end, tug the rope back and forth all day, from one end of the field to the other, and the moving rope does a perfect job of ploughing up the land. When the two tuggers find out what happened they are naturally furious, so the hare has to avoid them for a while, but in due course even the elephant forgets, and there is no lasting ill-feeling. A strikingly similar tale from the Native American Creek/Muscogee tribe has a rabbit setting up another 'blind' tug-of-war between two snakes on opposite sides of a river, just for fun. But this time there are real consequences – the snakes discover the deception and forbid the rabbit from drinking at the river ever again.

A Tibetan folk tale describes a hare whose idea of fun very definitely tips into psychopathy. This hare first lures a tiger off the edge of a cliff, then tells a shepherd where to find the dead tiger to harvest its skin. While the shepherd is away, the hare tells a wolf that it is a good time to come and attack the shepherd's unattended sheep, and then tells the ravens that they can safely go to the wolf's den and pluck out the eyes of her cubs. After setting all this devilment into motion, the hare laughs so hard and loudly that he splits his upper lip. Folk tales that explain interesting quirks of animal anatomy are not unusual, and most that attempt to explain the divided upper lip of hares and rabbits involve the animal being dealt a blow to the face as punishment for some devilry or other.

Japan also has a legend of a trickster hare, as told in the eighth-century *Kojiki* chronicle. This particular hare wanted to cross from the small island of Oki to Cape Keta on the