

Rabbits

By Cass
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At some point in your life, you may become aware that you have a totem. A totem is an animal or other living thing with which you identify. You may not have consciously chosen it, and it may not reflect your physical aspect or personality at all. You just find that you have been collecting various versions the same animal over time. I have a friend who has pictures, wall hangings, note cards, plates, and many other things with images of salmon on them. Another friend's totem is a hippo, and one of my sisters-in-law has a penguin totem. When you discover your totem, don't tell anyone, or soon your house will fill up with all sorts of gifts featuring images of your critter. Each giver thinks that they have cleverly come up with the perfect, personal gift.



My totem is the rabbit. I don't know why. Rabbits are known for being cute, soft, mild, quiet, bottom of the food chain, and avid reproducers. Our culture has two particularly well-known rabbit identities—Bugs and Peter. Br'er Rabbit is an example of the trickster rabbit that is portrayed in many different forms in many cultures. Another story, shared by both China and South America, tells how the lowly rabbit

sacrificed his own body to feed a God disguised as a starving traveler. For that sacrifice the rabbit was rewarded by having his image set in the moon. As a result, in Asia when the people look up into the night sky, they see the rabbit-in-the-moon, instead of the man-in-the-moon. The rabbit is often associated with the moon in Europe, too. Other associations are mystery, romance, and sometimes madness, like the March Hare of *Alice in Wonderland*.

Gardeners are not big fans of rabbits. The beginning gardener is apt to claim love for all God's creatures and look forward to entertaining some backyard wildlife—until they get some, that is. Deer decimate roses, raccoons flatten corn stocks, mountain beavers chew off rhododendron roots, and moles pockmark lawns daily.

Just so you know, when people talk about backyard wildlife, they are mostly referring to birds, and not all birds at that. Remember the year that the cherry tree was just covered, I mean covered with cherries, until the day the crows found it.

I get a kick out of wildlife when it defies our romanticized notions of how it should behave. Nature shows as little regard for the affairs of people as people show to nature.

I have a client with a flamboyant and fabulous garden that reflects her own

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larger-than-life personality. In the beds in her huge garden, she spends endless hours watering, disbudding, and staking, along with many other chores.

This year I was shocked to hear her announce that she was forsaking her prized and terribly expensive oriental lilies. She was through because wild bunnies had eaten many of them to the ground overnight. Though we never actually saw any bunnies, the signs were unmistakable. Little grey ornamental grasses looked like someone had taken a pair of haircutting scissors to them. I found burrows beneath shrubs, but said nothing to the client, lest she trap. She decided to wait for the local coyote to finish rearing her kits and go back to hunting in her garden, which it did. The client has areas in her garden designated as coyote corridors, where we, the paid garden help, are not allowed to remove fallen branches, brambles, and debris. When this client says she gardens for wildlife, she means very wild wildlife, the top of the food chain kind.

Vegetable gardeners get especially hard hit by rabbits. Most of them are not so lucky as to have, nor are they particularly want, coyotes. According to Google, the two most effective ways to deal with a devastating bunny infestation is to either 1) get a rabbit chasing dog, or 2) put in a chicken wire rabbit fence around the veggie patch. Such a fence must be 24" high and buried 8" below ground, with the bottom part flaring outward underground. Happy digging.

Many nature-loving gardeners keep their faith by using exclusion methods to protect their yards from various marauders. Baits

and traps just seem so cruel, and sometimes they catch nontarget animals.

When I came home from college one year, my mother alerted me to the fact that my sister, Liz, had her new pet rabbit roaming free in our finished basement. I thought, "No big deal." But when I opened the door to go downstairs, I spotted a giant black and white fuzzy skull looking up at me. Once it started to ascend the stairs—thump, thump—I quickly reared back and shut the door. Turns out that Liz had brought home a Checkered Giant.



His name was Fred. Fred turned out to be a lovely bunny. House-trained and friendly, he amused us when he ate parsley because it disappeared like a string of spaghetti trying to get past his twitching nose. He'd lick us affectionately with his tongue, which is much softer than a cat's tongue as it has no bristles. There was that little problem with wallpaper, though. Fred liked to strip

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and eat it. I noticed our black and white cat, Wally, had taken to sitting on top of furniture to be out of reach of Fred lest he be mistaken for a female Checkered Giant. But the best part of knowing Fred was how he would run, leap, twirl, and dance with me when I took him out to the back yard. This is called binking, I believe. In the old days it was called gamboling and is something that rabbits and lambs do at certain times of the year. Gamboling is not to be confused with boxing, which is also something hares do in the spring. It looks just like it sounds and is part of the reason for the references to mad march hares.

Later in life I met a few people who owned pet rabbits and was surprised by how often they described their rabbits as cranky or ill tempered. "Cwabby wabbitt!," Elmer Fudd might say. The internet has an amusing blog on how to deal with them kindly.



JACK HAD STILL NOT PERFECTED A "POKER FOOT"...

"OH, THOSE GAMBOLING RABBITS"

On the blog House Rabbit, I found the following story, which I shortened here.

The great English poet William Cowper (pronounced, "Cooper") was born in Great Berkhamstead, Hertfordshire, England on November 15, 1731. His father was a minister, and his mother died when he was but six years old, and he suffered from an especially sensitive nature throughout his entire life.

[His] poems raging against the tyranny of slavery are intense and emotional. He staunchly called for the care for the poor. In other poems, he sang the praises of a bee, told an amusing story about his cat getting accidentally locked in a drawer, and lamented that the shady poplar trees were felled by the axe.

In 1774, he was given three young hares, known as leverets, as companion animals by the children of a neighbor who had grown tired of the animals. He had written to a friend that he had been seeking something that would "engage his attention without fatiguing it," and the hares met that demand perfectly. The hares went out to play in the garden (a backyard) with Cowper daily, and he wrote that Puss [the name of one of his hares] would tug on his pants leg when he wanted to frolic outside. They danced for him in the evening, and he said that they often brought him out of his depression simply by being there. In the epitaph to Tiney, Cowper wrote, "A turkey carpet was his lawn, whereon he loved to bound, to skip and gambol like a fawn, and swing his rump around." Puss was a lap rabbit, and Cowper wrote that he often licked his hand and leapt into his lap for attention.

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Tiney had a retractable personality that was well loved anyway, because he made Cowper smile often with his antics. Tiney was almost nine years old when he died. Cowper wrote at his death, "Old Tiney, surliest of his kind...was still a wild jack- hare. Though duly from my hand he took his pittance every night, he did it with a jealous look, and when he could, would bite."

Cowper dedicated his book *The Garden* to his beloved hares, saying "For I have pledged all that is human in me to protect thine unsuspecting gratitude and love. If I survive thee, I will dig thy grave; and when I place thee in it, sighing say, I knew at least one hare that had a friend."

Talk about romanticized nature—I admit that it brought a tear to my eye.