

Peter Rabbit / Jonathan Holden

The sunlight was dull, it might have been morning or evening before the word “Don’t” was said. The grass, if there were grass, might have been gray, it didn’t make any difference. The temperature of the air outside the burrow was normal. “Don’t.” It cast all the shadows. The sun shrank back into focus. He could see. Under that harsh brilliant judgment each whetted blade of grass had a black shadow. And a gate was rearing against the sky, a rebuke, a giant affront. He squeezed under it, his heart twittering. Scritch. Scratch. He could hear—a rake, a bee fizz as it rose from a daisy, the wind’s restless crowds in the high reaches of the oak trees behind him, wind encompassing fields for miles, birds swinging on it, sparrow trapezes, wind, enough sound to cover his tracks, don’t, don’t, to make sly twitches, faint substitutions of grass that could be other stealthy creatures, decoys to draw the fire of Mr. McGregor, as Peter, now sick with hunger, crept toward the clenched hearts of the lettuce, thinking, don’t touch the hidden parts you’ve heard about, don’t finger the wet leaves, don’t spit them out. “Stop! Thief!” It sharpened the shadows. Don’t. Don’t. The leaves poised. Each wisp of darkness held out the cool palm of its hand, its hollow of safety, a silk suit to slip into, try on, cast off. He’d never noticed such terrain. How its curves console, its hills reveal. Without Mr. McGregor, he might never have seen a pot before. “Stop! Thief!” The light was a nuisance. Each row was a bootstep. A scramble. A heartbeat. Each second a question. Each door a new answer. The gate was a daydream, and he was alive.