



**'A wildly
inventive,
deeply moving
work of art'
Jonathan
Safran Foer**

THE RABBIT HUTCH

TESS GUNTY

Advance praise for *The Rabbit Hutch*

‘Just when everything seemed designed for a brief moment of utility before its planned obsolescence, here comes *The Rabbit Hutch*, a profoundly wise, wildly inventive, deeply moving work of art whose seemingly infinite offerings will remain with you long after you finish it. Each page of this novel contains a novel, a world.’

Jonathan Safran Foer, author of *Everything is Illuminated*

‘In *The Rabbit Hutch*, Gunty writes with a keen, sensitive eye about all manner of intimacies – the kind we build with other people, and the kind we cultivate around ourselves and our tenuous, private aspirations.’

Raven Leilani, author of *Luster*

‘*The Rabbit Hutch* is philosophical, and earthy, and tender and also simply very fun to read – Tess Gunty is a distinctive talent, with a generous and gently brilliant mind.’

Rivka Galchen, author of *Little Labours*

‘Tess Gunty is a younger writer of uncommon originality, both in terms of voice and vision. I admire her work and expect to be reading it with especial delight for a long time to come.’

Rick Moody, author of *The Ice Storm*

‘As a testament to this book’s generosity, the music of George Saunders, Dorothy Parker, David Foster Wallace, maybe Rachel Cusk emerges...*The Rabbit Hutch* aches, bleeds, and even scars, but it also forgives with laughter, with insight, and finally,

through an act of generational independence that remains this novel's greatest accomplishment, with an act of rescue.'

Mark Z. Danielewski, author of *House of Leaves*

'Remarkable... Brilliantly imaginative... Gunty is a wonderful writer, a master of the artful phrase... Best of all, her fully realized characters come alive on the page, capturing the reader and not letting go.'

***Booklist* (starred review)**

'Tess Gunty is a masterful talent with a remarkable eye for the poetic, the poignant and the absurdly sublime. *The Rabbit Hutch* unspools the story of Blandine Watkins and other inhabitants of a rundown building on the edge of the once bustling Vacca Vale, Indiana. A brutal and beautiful novel that both delights and devastates with its unflinching depiction of Rust Belt decline, Gunty's debut is a tour de force that's sure to top this year's best-of lists.'

Lauren Wilkinson, author of *American Spy*

'Darkly funny, surprising, and mesmerizing... A stunning and original debut that is as smart as it is entertaining... A striking and wise depiction of what it means to be awake and alive in a dying building, city, nation, and world.'

***Kirkus* (starred review)**

'Gunty writes with such compassion for her characters as they build their lives and assert their agency in a country that utterly disregards them, and in particular Blandine's bright, fierce curiosity for the world kept me moving through the story; she's a warrior, an intellectual force, a young woman who refuses to be disempowered. This is a skilfully told, beautiful, human story.'

***Literary Hub*, '35 Novels You Need to Read This Summer'**

'The Rabbit Hutch is exquisitely written, acutely observed and breathtakingly original. There was not a single page that didn't contain at least one phrase or sentence that I wanted to underline to return to later. Gunty's prose crackles with energy, wit and intent. Reading *The Rabbit Hutch* is like experiencing a literary hallucination! I loved it!

Claire McGlasson, author of *The Rapture*

THE RABBIT HUTCH

TESS GUNTY



“ If you don’t sell them as pets, you got to get rid of them as meat. Them guys are all meat. But see, they start doing this to each other.”

Woman points to rabbits.

“What’s that?”

“Peeing on each other and stuff like that, when they get older. If you don’t have ten separate cages for them, then they start fighting. Then the males castrate the other males. They do. They chew their balls right off. Then you have a bloody mess. That’s why you got to butcher them when they get a certain age, or you have a heck of a mess.”

—RHONDA BRITTON, Flint, Michigan, resident, 1989

Invisible and eternal things are made known through visible and temporal things.

—HILDEGARD VON BINGEN, Benedictine abbess, 1151

PART I



The Opposite of Nothing



On a hot night in Apartment C4, Blandine Watkins exits her body. She is only eighteen years old, but she has spent most of her life wishing for this to happen. The agony is sweet, as the mystics promised. It's like your soul is being stabbed with light, the mystics said, and they were right about that, too. The mystics call this experience the Transverberation of the Heart, or the Seraph's Assault, but no angel appears to Blandine. There is, however, a bioluminescent man in his fifties, glowing like a firefly. He runs to her and yells.

Knife, cotton, hoof, bleach, pain, fur, bliss—as Blandine exits herself, she is all of it. She is every tenant of her apartment building. She is trash and cherub, a rubber shoe on the seafloor, her father's orange jumpsuit, a brush raking through her mother's hair. The first and last Zorn Automobile factory in Vacca Vale, Indiana. A nucleus inside the man who robbed her body when she was fourteen, a pair of red glasses on the face of her favorite librarian, a radish tugged from a bed of dirt. She is no one. She is Katy the Portuguese water dog, who licked her face whenever the foster family banished them both in the snow because they were in the way. An algorithm for amplified content and a blue slushee from the gas station. The first pair of tap shoes on the feet of a child actress and the man telling

her to try harder. She is the smartphone that films her as she bleeds on the floorboards of her apartment, and she is the chipped nail polish on the teenager who assembled the ninetieth step of that phone on a green factory floor in Shenzhen, China. An American satellite, a 4 the rabbi t hutch bad word, the ring on the finger of her high school theater director. She is every cottontail rabbit grazing on the vegetation of her supposedly dying city. Ten minutes of pleasure igniting between the people who made her, the final tablet of oxycodone on her mother's tongue, the gavel that will sentence the boys to prison for what they're doing to Blandine right now. There is no such thing as right now. She is not another young woman wounded on the floor, body slashed by men for its resources—no. She is paying attention. She is the last laugh.

On that hot night in Apartment C4, when Blandine Watkins exits her body, she is not everything. Not exactly. She's just the opposite of nothing.

All Together, Now



C12: On Wednesday night, in the nine o'clock hour, the man who lives four floors above the crime is staring into an app called: Rate Your Date (Mature Users!). The app glows a deep red, and he is certain that there is no one inside it. Like many men who have weathered female rejection, the man in Apartment C12 believes that women have more power than anyone else on the planet. When evidence suggests that this can't be true, he gets angry. It is an anger unique to those who have committed themselves to a losing argument. The man—now in his sixties—lies on his sheets in the dark. He is done with the day, but the day is not done with itself; it is still too early to sleep. He is a logger, past his professional expiration date but lacking both the financial and psychological savings to retire. Often, he feels the weight of phantom lumber on his back like a child. Often, he feels the weight of a phantom child on his back like lumber. Since his wife died six years ago, the apartment has seemed empty of furniture, but it is, in fact, congested with furniture. Sweating, the man cradles his large, bright screen in his hands.

nice enuf, like a dad, but fatter then his prof pic. his eye contact = wrong. doesnt ask about u and seems obsessed w/ the prices. velcro wallet, user MelBell23 had commented on his profile two weeks ago. smells like

gary indiana. ★★☆☆☆

The only other comment on his profile was posted six months ago, by DeniseDaBeast: *this man is a tator tot.* ★☆☆☆☆

Noise rumbles from an apartment below. A party, he assumes.

C10: The teenager adjusts his bedroom light to flattering bulbs of halo. He runs a hand through his hair, applies a lip balm. Smears a magazine sample of cologne on his chest, although he knows the gesture is absurd. Angles the camera so that it catches his best shapes and shadows. His mother is working the night shift, but he locks his door anyway. Does thirty jumping jacks, thirty push-ups. Texts: *Ready.*

C8: The mother carries her baby to the couch and pulls up her tank top. He's not supposed to be awake this late at night, but rules mean nothing to babies. While he nurses, he demands to bond, and the mother tries. Tries again. Tries harder. But she can't do it. He fires shrewd, telepathic, adult accusation upon her skin. She can feel it. He sucks hard and scratches her with nails too tender to clip, long and sharp enough to cut her. With her free hand, she checks her phone. A text from the mother's mother: a photo of Daisy the bearded dragon, wearing a miniature biker costume. Cushioned helmet strapped to her spiky coral head, black pleather jacket strapped to her belly. In a Hells Angels font, the back of the jacket reads: DRAGON DISASTER. The reptile peers at the camera from her perch on the dining table, her expression unreadable. The mother zooms in on Daisy's dinosaur eye, which seems to observe her from another epoch, 90 million years in the past.

U got ur baby, I got mine!! wrote the mother's mother, who now lives in Pensacola with her second husband. *HA HA HA! Roy found the costume.*

..... 🚲 🔥 ☠️ *isnt she a RIOT???* 🐉 🐉 🐉 *God bless u and my sweet Grandbaby* 😊 ❤️ 🙏

Agitated, the young mother swipes out of the text thread and drifts

between three social media platforms, feeling the weight and warmth of her baby beneath her right arm, cherishing his tiny sounds of contentment as he nurses. As usual, predators are wreaking havoc on the internet. Predators are the only people in town. If she had to summarize the plot of contemporary life, the mother would say: it's about everyone punishing each other for things they didn't do. And here she is, refusing to look at her baby, punishing him for something he didn't do.

The mother has developed a phobia of her baby's eyes.

He is four weeks old. For four weeks, she's been living in the cellar of her mind. All day, she has been feeding her anxiety with Mommy Blogs. They are dreadful, the Mommy Blogs, worse than the medical websites, but likewise designed to exploit your Thanatos. *Mothering is the most valuable work you will ever do*, the Mommy Blogs declare with rainproof conviction. Before clicking on them, the mother prepared herself for what she previously believed to be the worst possible diagnosis: *You are a bad mother*. But that was not, in fact, the worst possible diagnosis. *You are a psychopath*, the Mommy Blogs concluded. *You are a threat to us all*.

On her sofa, cradling her baby, the mother begins to panic, so she self-soothes. *Deep breath in, exhale the tension. Let the forehead, eyebrows, and mouth go slack. Hear nothing but the whirr of the ceiling fan*. She's supposed to imagine her body as a jellyfish, or something. Visualize the boundaries between her body and the rest of the world dissolving. Her cousin Kara taught her these tricks, back when they were roommates.

Before she was a mother, the mother was Hope. "It's funny that your name is Hope," Kara once said. "Because you're, like, so bad at it." After high school, Hope got a job as a waitress, Kara as a hairdresser. Together, they rented a cheap house near the river. Kara had a taste for neon clothing, cinnamon gum, and anguished men. Her hair color changed every few months, but she favored purple. She was a bafflingly happy person, often belting Celine Dion and dancing as she cooked. Frequently, Hope wondered what it would be like to vacation in her cousin's

psychology. When they were twenty, Kara found Hope in the fetal position on the bathroom tile at three in the morning, sobbing about how frightened she was, frightened of everything, an everything so big it was essentially nothing, and the nothing swallowed her, swallowed everything. The next day, Kara drove Hope to the Vegetable Bed, the only health food store in Vacca Vale—a small cube of flickering light that beguiled them both with its perfume of spices and variety of sugar substitutes. They returned with a paper bag of homeopathic remedies that Hope could neither understand nor afford: aconite, argentum nitricum, stramonium, arsenicum album, ignatia. Whenever Hope would nosedive into one of her electrocuting shadows, Kara dispensed a palmful of remedies, brewed lavender tea, subscribed walks. Meditation. Yoga. Magnesium. Often, she'd put on an episode of Hope's favorite television show, *Meet the Neighbors*. "Wear this necklace around your neck," Kara would say. "It's amethyst—the tranquilizing crystal, great for fear. Disperses negativity. Here, do this breathing exercise with me." As Kara often informed men at bars, she was a Myers-Briggs INFP ("the mediator"), an Enneagram Type 2 ("the giver"), an astrological Virgo ("the healer"). It was her vocation, she believed, to nurture.

Now, in her apartment, Hope can still hear Kara guiding her through a breathing exercise, her lilac voice hovering in the room. *Deep breath in. Exhale. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Again.* As she breathes, Hope can feel her baby against her skin, warm and soft.

Her fear is not so mysterious, she reasons. Her husband has been gone at the construction site all day, and there is no sleep in her recent history, just a lump of an oncoming cold in her throat. Her breasts are swollen to celebrity size, there are bolts of electricity zapping the powerlines of her brain, and without any assistance from coffee, her body has awakened itself to the pitch of animal vigilance. The hormones have turned the volume of the world all the way up, angling her ears babyward, forcing her to listen—always listen—for his new and spitty voice. She feels like a fox.

Like a fox on Adderall.

Not to mention the greater body-terrors. After the birth, it stopped being a pussy and went back to being a vagina. She is discovering that pregnancy, birth, and postpartum recovery comprise three acts of a horror film no one lets you watch before you live it. In Catholic school, they made Hope and her peers watch videos of abortions, made them listen to women weep afterward, made them watch the fetus in the womb flinch away from the doctor's tool. But did anyone ever tell them what would happen when you pushed the fetus out of your body and into the world? No. It was "beautiful." It was "natural." Above all, it was a "miracle." Motherhood shrouded in a sacred blue veil, macabre details concealed from you, an elaborate conspiracy to trick Catholics into making more Catholics.

Afterpains strike the mother's body like bolts of goddish lightning when she nurses. Nursing is not intuitive, and pumping makes her feel like a cyborg cow. Whenever she sneezes, she pees. To address this, she's supposed to do Kegels, an exercise from Hell. The internet instructs her to imagine she is sitting on a marble. *Then tighten your pelvic muscles as though you're lifting the marble.* "Quite frankly," the mother said to her husband the other night, after reading the instructions out loud, "what in the fuck?" She describes her physical states to her husband compulsively, in detail, as though she is a dummy and a ventriloquist is making her do it. If he doesn't share the cost, she will force him to imagine it.

But she doesn't need to force him. When she starts to speak of the toll the birth has taken, he holds her hands, her gaze, her pain. "I wish I could take it," he says. "I wish I could take it all from you and put it into myself." Then he kisses her neck, gently defibrillating her back to life. He wants this, he tells her. He wants the gore; he wants four in the morning; he wants the beginning and the middle and the end; he wants to fix whatever he can fix and be there through the rest; he wants the bad and the good; he wants the sickness and the health. "I want you," he says. "Every

you.” He calls her a goddess. A hero. A miracle.

No, the mother thinks. No, she is not losing it. And, yes, it is normal to feel abnormal, after a body has left your body. Despite the absence of her particular condition online, the mother reasons, it is not so freakish to mortally fear your own baby’s eyes, when so much weather is raging inside you, and Twitter is cawing the news. Gunfire, murder, oil spill, terrorism, wildfire, abduction, bombing, floods. Funny video in which a woman opens her car to find a brown bear sitting in the driver’s seat snacking on her groceries. Murder, murder, war. The internet is upset. To experience reality as a handful of tap water, at a time like this, is to find oneself in good company. The baby blues—could they be like this? Neon and shrieking?

What is it *about* her baby’s eyes? They are too round. Permanently shocked. The baby catalogues each image with an expression of outrage, inspecting the world as though he might sue it. He doesn’t blink enough. She tries to engage him—jangling her keys, refracting light in an old jam jar, dancing her fingers—but visual stimulation overwhelms him, and whenever she tries something like this, he gets upset. The baby prefers to behold plain and unthreatening surfaces, like the walls. And they are arresting, his eyes, almost black, always liquid, often frantic. A feature inherited from his father’s family—a handsome tribe, each cousin moody and gorgeous and good at puzzles. The mother *loves* this pair of eyes, this pair her body formed like valuable carbon minerals under pressure. She loves his eyes as much as she loves his microtoenails, his fuzz of black hair, the scent of his head, the rash that resembles a barcode on his chubby, lolling neck. She loves her baby in colors she’s never seen before, just as the Mommy Blogs warned that she would. But love does not preclude terror—at twenty-five, the mother knows that the latter almost always accompanies the former. His eyes terrify her.

The mother tries to determine what the eyes evoke. A security camera. A panther’s gaze in the dark. A stalker in the bathroom. The eyes of the

man who repeatedly thwacked the driver's side window of that old van, years back, while she idled at the drive-through, dreaming of fries and sweet tea.

The man had used a child's shovel to hit her window. Yellow plastic. He did not blink. There was no language in his throat, just ripping growls, his motivation unclear. A man who had lost it—and that was the right phrase, it contained the right holes. At the drive-through, the man's eyes were dark, scared, and open. Lost it.

She had cranked down her window and offered to order him something, but he didn't seem to hear her.

“Look at me,” he said over and over. “Look at me.”

She rolled up her window, wishing it were automatic so that this gesture of disregard wasn't quite as violent, afraid of him but also, suddenly, bound to him. The coincidental nature of all social collision has always troubled the mother, even before she was a mother. To have a nationality, a lover, a family, a coworker, a neighbor—the mother understands these to be fundamentally absurd connections, as they are accidents, and yet they are the tyrants of every life. After she rolled up her window, she approached the drive-through speaker and ordered. The man hit the glass of the next car with his beach shovel, his eyes wide open.

Now, when the baby pushes away, the mother offers him milk from her left breast, but he refuses it. She burps him against her toweled shoulder, flooded with chemical love for this fragile being. He fusses. She rocks him. Within fifteen minutes, he's asleep again. This is life, she has learned, with a newborn: it's easing someone into and out of consciousness, over and over, providing sustenance in between. As though infants inhabit a different planet, one that orbits its sun four times faster than Earth does. If you want to understand the human condition, pay close attention to infants: the stakes are simultaneously at their highest, because you could die at any moment, and at their lowest, because someone bigger is satisfying every need. Language and agency have not yet arrived. What's that like?

Observe a baby.

She places hers in his crib and cracks her neck.

When her husband returns around half past nine at night, his head shelled in the construction hard hat, his boots dusty, his odor of perspiration and sunblock a kind of home, their baby is still asleep. For the first time, the mother realizes she hasn't spoken to anyone all day. She meant to take the baby for a walk but forgot. Television and radio did not occur to her. Fourteen hours tense and alone, panning the day for peril.

She hands her husband a plate of fish sticks and ketchup.

"What a feast." He smiles, kissing her bare shoulder. "Thanks, baby."

Don't call me that, she doesn't say. You're welcome, she means to say, but she can't remember how to transport words out of her head and into the world. It's been years, she feels, since she tried.

"Hey, I'm really sorry about Elsie Blitz," her husband says as he washes his hands. "That must've been sad for you."

The mother blinks rapidly, as though trying to clear something from her vision. "What?"

Elsie Blitz is the star of *Meet the Neighbors*. It was Hope's mother who first introduced her to the mid-twentieth-century family sitcom. Perhaps because *Meet the Neighbors* showcases a fraught but affectionate alliance between a conventional housewife and her rascal of a daughter, watching the show was a kind of matrilineal tradition in Hope's family: when Hope was a kid, her mother viewed it alongside her, just as Hope's grandmother had viewed it alongside Hope's mother. Hope still summons the show to her screen when she can't sleep, gradually identifying more with the mother than the daughter; maybe she'll watch it with her own child, one day. Elsie Blitz plays Susie Evans, a trouble-loving spitfire at the center of the series. Elsie Blitz was a child so optimally childish, she came to represent all children to Hope. She had a face like an apple, a sunny grin, plentiful confidence. She could tap-dance, sing, and whistle. Her disobedience, however reckless, was always redeemed by the fun that it

generated and ultimately forgiven by authorities. As a kid, Hope measured her deficiencies against the idealized Susie Evans, but neither the character nor the actress inspired envy. Just sisterly aspiration. In Hope's mind, Elsie Blitz was forever frozen at the age of eleven—the age of Susie Evans in the series finale. It had been so nice to know that at least one person in the world would never have to grow up.

Her husband sits down at the kitchen table, his posture freighted with guilt, like he's accidentally disclosed someone else's secret. "I thought you would've heard by now." He frowns. "I'm sorry. I wouldn't have brought it up otherwise."

"Why? What happened?"

"She passed away today," her husband replies. "She was in her eighties."

The mother braces for a feeling that never arrives. It's as though she's underwater, and the news exists above her, on a dock. "Oh," she finally says. "Sad."

Her husband studies her with concern but drops the subject. While they eat—while he eats—she considers telling her husband about the eye phobia. She has considered telling him every night for four weeks. *Hey*, she could say, once she remembered how to talk normally. *There's this weird thing. This weird thing that's been happening, sort of funny, nothing crazy, just weird.*

"How's our big guy?" the husband asks between bites.

The mechanics of speech return to her, jerky at first. "He's . . ." Not big. *He's tiny*, she wants to scream. He needs to be rescued from his own smallness, like everyone else! She swallows a glassful of water in one breath. "Babies. What I like about babies." Her eyes lose focus.

"Hm?"

"Babies know that just because you have it easy doesn't mean that life is *easy*."

Her husband chews a fish stick. "So he's alive?"

She nods.

“Terrific.” He smooths her eyebrow, his finger rough. “I love you,” he says. “You’re tired, huh?”

“There’s this . . .” She fixes her eyes on the smoke detector. “This funny thing, that’s been happening.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?”

She hesitates. Her husband believes that she is a good mother, a normal person, a worthy investment. “I’m scared. . . .”

Her husband puts down his fork, takes her seriously. “What?”

“Nothing.” She begins to cry as quietly as she can. “I’m—so—tired.”

Her husband wipes his mouth and studies her with his dark and searching eyes. “Babe,” he says. He stands and takes her back in his hands, kneading muscles and skin, and she wonders who designs costumes for bearded dragons, what species will study evidence of hers in 90 million years, and what misunderstandings will result. What would a nuclear explosion feel like? Would the death be instantaneous? Are there physical buttons involved? Will her busted vagina ever resume its life as a pussy? Where did the dead mouse land after she flung it out of their window? Where is that man she saw at the drive-through, and what is he doing right now? Is this the most valuable work of her life? Is she a psychopath? Is she a threat to them all?

“Oh, babe,” he says. “Of course you are.”

“What?”

“Of course you’re tired.”

C6: Ida and Reggie, both in their seventies, sit in their living room, smoking cigarettes and watching the news on high volume. Bad factory fire in Detroit, Michigan. Pageant queen starts nonprofit phone-case business, proceeds funding dental care for refugees. Superpest destroying monocrops of pepper in Vietnam.

Ida remembers what she wanted to tell Reggie earlier that afternoon.

“Reggie.” She coughs. “Reggie.”

“What?”

“Can you hear me, Reggie?”

“Huh?”

“Turn it down.”

“Huh?”

“Turn it *down*. I got to tell you something.”

He presses a gnarled thumb to the remote. “What?”

“Frank’s in jail again,” announces Ida.

“Tina’s Frank?”

“What other Frank do we have?”

“What’d he do this time?”

“What do you think?”

“Another robbery?”

Ida nods. “This time he had a gun.”

“I thought that knee surgery would keep him out of trouble.”

“Bad knee can’t stop a dog like Frank.”

“Well, feels good to be right all along, I guess.” Reggie takes a long drag. “We did what we could.”

“He had that flashy car,” mumbles Ida. “Those stupid boots.”

“I just hope Tina knows she can’t come whining to us, hauling her kids over to do ‘chores’ around the place and expecting us to pay them.”

“We should’ve tried something different,” says Ida. “One of those barefoot schools. Piano lessons. Vitamins. No gluten. None of the kids turned out right.”

“Ida, it’s done and gone now. Tina’s a grown woman. The best thing we can do for her is let her take care of herself.”

Ida bobs a cigarette between her teeth.

“And you’re wrong,” Reggie says. “The kids turned out fine.” He restores the volume of the news. Australian parents beg national governments to rescue their daughters and grandchildren from camps in