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Moving House

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I sit me in my corner chair / That seems to feel
itself from home.

—John Clare, “The Flitting”

The clock ticks on Hardy’s mantelpiece; Woolf’s reading chair is next to the fire; Erasmus Darwin’s geological specimens are laid out under the window at Lichfield. House museums go to great lengths to make things look settled and accustomed. There are curtains at the windows and shades on the lamps, and no reason to question the position of the bedroom chest that fits, just so, in the alcove. When I think of the homes of friends and family, too, they come to mind fully formed; it’s obvious where the coats live and the hallway has never been other than green.

Or at least so it was until I moved house and found myself shaken in previously unsuspected ways by the strangeness of objects pulled out from their habitual moorings, the physical effort and logistical cunning required to collapse rooms into taped cartons and reassemble them in new combinations, and most of all the imaginative effort, the sheer invention, involved in making up the life of a new home. I realised then that feelings about homeliness are liable to assert themselves most acutely when the furniture is upended and the books stacked in crates. I wanted to ask some of those who have thought most intensely about belonging, and belongings, how they responded to these episodes of upheaval when the still point goes spinning.

“O what a dislocation of comfort is contained in that word moving,” Charles Lamb lamented: not only the lamps but comfort itself turned out from its usual home.¹ William Cowper could get nothing written: “The confusion which attends a transmigration of this kind is infinite, and has a terrible effect in deranging the intellects.”² As I packed and sorted, phantasmagorias of combined removing seemed to appear: long caravans of borrowed waggons and laden people, tallboys with the drawers out, half-wrapped mirrors, and confused pets. I started to see the lampshades of the past dislodged and waiting vulnerably on top of boxes into which they would not fit. I began to be aware of movers of many kinds and from several centuries, each making their way from one life to another with a different combination of anxiety, exhaustion, loss, and hope.³

The processions I conjured were in reality a common annual or bi-annual spectacle across Europe and America from the Middle Ages to the early twentieth century. Leases ran from one quarter-day to another and expired in tandem, so that almost every tenant intending to move house that season would do so at the same time. The spring quarter-day was generally the one for moving: Whitsun in Scotland (25 May) and Lady Day in England (25 March or, after the calendar reforms of 1752, “Old Lady Day”: 6 April). There might be another round of removals at Michaelmas, and Martinmas (11 November) was the traditional date in large parts of continental Europe, but in Britain the spring Flitting Days were firmly established.

The timing suited the agricultural year, with the winter crops gathered and the ground open again for sowing. But it only suited at a stretch: outgoing tenants wrangled over rights to a “flitting crop,” to be squeezed in before departure, and new arrivals were hard-pressed in April, and certainly in May, to plant in time for summer harvest. Farmers asked themselves each year whether they would sow again in the same ground, or try a change. These decisions were generally made at Candlemas (2 February), the time when deals were done at hiring fairs and land agents knocked at doors to ask tenants whether they intended to “sit or flit.” By association with holy days, moving acquired forms of transferred liturgical significance. Candlemas, the feast of the Purification, came

with questions about how to start afresh, whether to clear out, to white-wash the walls for a newcomer and take on newly washed walls of one's own. Robert Chambers described in his *Book of Days* the practice in nineteenth-century Scotland: "The two or three days following upon the Purification become distinguished by a feathering of the streets with boards projected from the windows, intimating A House to Let. Then comes on a most lively excitement for individuals proposing to remove."⁴

Moving was part of the shared annual cycle. The Flemish artist Abel Grimmer (compared with Brueghel the Younger in his time but not now much remembered) painted a series of season pictures in 1599 and chose to fill his *Spring* panel with a combination of garden planting and house-moving. A horse-and-cart in the foreground is so laden with belongings that it needs a push.⁵ The iconography makes clear that the sowing season was also the time of new beginnings in new homes.

The practice of regular, and synchronised, moving became more and more common amongst farming families in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thomas Hardy in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* described the annual moment of flux: "At length it was the eve of Old Lady-Day, and the agricultural world was in a fever of mobility." Exodus recurred, each family's cart filled with anticipation of something better: "The Egypt of one family was the Land of Promise to the family who saw it from a distance, till by residence there it became in turn their Egypt also; and so they changed and changed."⁶ Flitting Day was still such a fever of mobility in Edwardian rural England that the traffic ground to a halt. Ford Madox Ford observed the "tall waggons with tarpaulins" to be seen in the lanes of Kent and Sussex each spring. They were liable to become stuck in the "elbow-like angles of sunken lanes," with long queues building up behind them.⁷ An inveterate mover himself, Ford sensed excitement in these covered waggons that lumbered, however slowly, towards new prospects. He knew the hard and hopeful work that would await them in the planting season; several times in his life he joined the Lady Day migrations and took on the ancient challenge of rapidly digging his new ground in time for summer crops.

Town and city moving days were another kind of spectacle. In New York, through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, 1 May was notorious for its chaos of furniture in the streets. Businesses stopped trading for the day to allow the great reshuffling of people and their things. The furniture itself, from those times when even prosperous families were more likely to rent than to own property, seems to speak of moving. Rugs could be rolled and trimmed (no one thought of fitted carpet). The tables of choice were gate-legged, or snap-topped, or—like the ubiquitous Pembroke tables—ready to lower their flaps for transit. The most sought-after moving men were carpenters, who would alter cabinetry to fit through doors and repair it again once in place. Often, too, they had furniture ready to hire out by the year: tables to be leased like the house.⁸ Much more so than it is today, moving on was an expectation from the start. And more than today, when moving is the private fate of individual households, there was about it the sense of a common enterprise.



Tables may fold and rugs may roll, but moving has always been a heavy-laden business. “Flitting,” the Scottish and northern English term (used across Britain in the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth), sounds so quick and weightless. Bats flit in the dark: blink and you miss them. A mercurial hostess might flit about her party; Bathsheba Everdene’s heart flits with excitement. Was a flitting between houses ever so light as its name? In some circumstances it was best to depart unnoticed; “moonlight flitting” was long synonymous with the rapid departure of those in debt or disgrace. Victorian cartoonists had cruel fun with images of families trying to melt into the night. The children are always lugging things too large for them while dogs and chickens circle at their feet. No degree of light-footedness can silence the clunk and clatter of removal. Though the term “flitting” has come down to us from the Old Norse “fleet” and “float,” so that one thinks fancifully of Viking ships moving fast and soundlessly through water, domestic removals are more likely to evoke sensations of sinking.

Vincenzo Campi's *San Martino* (or *Trasloco*) is one of a series of large paintings showing scenes from rural life in the 1580s.⁹ St. Martin's Day was Moving Day in Italy (in wine-growing areas, especially, it made sense that removals should follow the grape harvest), and here is a farming family all packed to go. The picture suggests horror if not outright disaster. A high wind is whipping through trees that struggle against a thunderously dark sky. The open door of the house is a black depth from which the whole paraphernalia of a household have spilled into the lurid light of the stormy day. Women sort linens and carry trays while a horse is being loaded in the courtyard, and the immediately striking fact is that we have a close-up view of the horse's backside. This is the opposite of an idealised composition; its very subject is life discomposed.

Campi was one of the first painters of still life, inventing the new genre as he went, packing his canvases with the whole contents of kitchens and fishmongers' stalls, painting teeming material worlds with all the greedy urgency that came of his realisation that tangible daily things—these infinitely various fishy, fleshy, rotting, wooden, ceramic, dirty, shiny, ordinary, and utterly compelling things—might now be the subjects of art. His attention was not drawn to the beauty of a single peach or the glint of a well-cleaned copper pan but to unsuitable combinations and upendings. At the birth of still life, then, he painted the turmoil of moving. *Trasloco* sets up a game in which we try to identify the objects piled onto the horse and stacked on the ground. One by one they become clear—colander, sieve, andirons, basket, rush-stool, wooden ladles—and there's a touching specificity about each. But as a whole they are hideous. It's hard to believe that this chaos of sticks and legs and levers might be the ingredients of orderly life.

Campi was interested in the coarse rusticity of his subjects; he was painting for his time and place, sharing with his patrons his laughing disgust at the peasants as well as his rapt attention. But he caught and held ideas that concern movers everywhere. He saw that private possessions come into the outdoor light where they were never meant to be seen. He saw the absurd, comical, ugly conglomerations that are also intimate and eloquent. He saw, most simply and enduringly, that moving involves the making strange of familiar things in ways that are both

disturbing and charged with possibility. The contraptions piled onto the horse might have been put there by Duchamp. In fact Duchamp hung a bottle rack from a gallery ceiling in 1914, which was only slightly more alarming. Displaced from its work of drying bottles, it looked a gruesome thing, its prongs designed for some uncertain form of torture. In 1920 Man Ray wrapped up a sewing machine in a blanket and tied it with string. The resulting package, called *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse*, was both sinister and banal. It sat there quiescent; why then wouldn't one want to touch it? It was threatening: if you didn't know the contents the imagination would supply horrible possibilities; if you did, the machine seemed to loom with its glistening needle poised. It was also pitiful: the string confined the sewing machine in its muffling blanket like a victim gagged and bound.

The house-mover is forced to confront the peculiar liveliness and deadness of objects. "It belongs to furniture of all kinds," remarked Cowper, "however convenient it may be in its place, to be a nuisance out of it."¹⁰ It will trip you up or crowd you out. Some things, released from their usual places and functions, look grotesquely misshapen or unwieldy; others settle obligingly into new corners. Some harbour associations in every scratch; others seem barely to know you. Packing requires the appraisal of each and every item: should it be kept, what can it be grouped with, where will it end up? Taxonomy is the mover's special branch of learning, and lists become an art form. Some writers on the process have relished the mounting gallimaufry. Walter Scott enjoyed reporting (if not supervising) the progress of his belongings across the Tweed from Ashestiel to Abbotsford in 1812. "Old swords, bows, targets and lances, made a very conspicuous show," he told his friends, trundled along in twenty-five carts, accompanied by dogs, pigs, ponies, a herd of cattle, and "a family of turkeys accommodated within the helmet of some *preux* chevalier of ancient border fame."¹¹ But even Scott, with his taste for bizarre collections, said his flitting "baffled all description."¹²

Charles Lamb, who loved the familiar presence of his books and objects, looked in horror at those same things strangely massed and tumbled. Worst of all was the "heap of little nasty things" left over once the

main items were in the cart: “worn-out brushes, gallipots, vials.” And then for ages afterwards he couldn’t find what he wanted. “You must comb your hair with your fingers, wash your hands without soap.”¹³ In his later life it was his maid Becky who took charge of the operation (“O the moving Becky!”) so that when Lamb eventually sat down in his new room in Enfield at Michaelmas 1827 it was as if he had been transported in the night, like Gulliver in his flying house. But he knew what dust and labour went on beneath that magic. Even the process of relocating his beloved library had roused a sense of shame. “I am a dray-horse if I was not asham’d of the indigested dirty lumber as I toppled ’em [the books] out of the cart.”¹⁴ These books are thrown up in a bout of nausea, or have they not yet been swallowed down?

Lamb’s language is extraordinarily raw and bodily. “’Twas with some pain we were evuls’d from Colebrook,” he continued in this same letter to his friend Thomas Hood, straining for language adequate to the experience and alighting on that word “evuls’d,” of which this is the first recorded use. It’s as if “convulsed” and “ejected” have been smashed together, perhaps with “pulverized” as well. Evulsed was already extant as an adjective, from *vellere*, to pluck. A chicken might be evulsed: left naked, pink, and goose-bumped. Lamb seems to have felt himself left equally bare. “You may find some of our flesh sticking to the doorposts,” he went on, suggesting an attachment to the old house so bodily and strong that to sever it was a kind of flaying.¹⁵



John Clare walked with his family to a new home in Northborough on the last day of April 1832. Three hundred books and a large bookcase had gone on ahead; now Clare, his wife, and six children, one a baby, set out from their cramped cottage in Helpston towards a larger, brighter house about three miles away that had just been refurbished for them. There were three bedrooms, a large kitchen, and most importantly a plot of land on which they could be at least partly self-sufficient. Clare had been disablingly ill all through the last year at Helpston, seeing little ahead of him except “stupid and stunning apathy, or lingering madness and death.”¹⁶ The unpaid rent and doctor’s bills were “millstones” pulling him down.



FIGURE 1.1. A moonlight flitting illustrated by George Cruikshank in *The Comic Almanac*, 1836. (Credit: Spitalfields Life)

The move now offered a “promised land,” a “sunny prospect” of solvency and independence: he could see that he must do it and do it well.¹⁷

None of which made the leaving of Helpston any easier. For months Clare had been trying to prepare himself, paying his respects to birds and plants and “favourite spots that have known me so long,” working out his emotions in letters (some of which he could not bring himself to send). “The very molehills on the heath & the old trees in the hedges,” he thought, “seem bidding me farewell.”¹⁸ Like many movers who have witnessed great changes in their habitual surroundings, he reminded himself that Helpston itself had changed irreparably. Even at home he had felt an exile since the enclosure of lands and the felling of trees eradicated some of his most loved corners. “All the associations are going before me,” he wrote sadly when a favourite elm was felled and a plum tree blew down: he was losing the old place whether he moved or not.¹⁹

He moved. By the summer, after several months at Northborough, he was still missing terribly his familiar spots. He needed to imagine his way back to them and in his poem “Remembrances” he inhabited again the country of his boyhood. He wrote the names of fields and paths



FIGURE 1.2. *Cowper's Summer House*. (From *The Rural Walks of Cowper*, James Storer, 1825. Copyright © the British Library Board 11643.k.1)

as if his sanity might depend upon it, and it may well have done. He conjured the sounds of boys playing on the grassy bank of Langley Bush and skipping on the “roly-poly up and downs of pleasant Swordy Well,” but the banks were silent and flattened now, and “words are poor receipts for what time hath stole away.” He sorrowed for the moles, “little homeless miners,” feeling that he shared their fate.²⁰

Yet he had a house: a good one. He reproached himself for attachments that felt childish and worked with all the power of his mature mind to establish a homely relationship between himself and his new place. He planted energetically in the garden; he studied the flowers and Northborough village trees as another person might go round to meet the neighbours. Out on the fens, he watched the snipe, that “lover of swamps,” which made its nest in places that looked to Clare devoid of comfort. The snipe’s home, he wrote, “teaches me / Right feelings to employ / That in the dreariest places peace will be / A dweller and a joy.”²¹ But that effort of “right feeling” involved an almost mystical

concentration, a willed lifting of himself away from the love of particular things. What lay beneath was bafflement and mourning. “I’ve left my own old home of homes,” he wrote, “Green fields and every pleasant place / The summer like a stranger comes / I pause and hardly know her face.” This was to be one of the great poems of dislocation: “The Flitting.”²²

He had been used to the particular expression of the seasons in fields close to home, but summer was not now to be found in certain clumps of hedgerow flowers and well-known patterns of heat and shade. Light, sounds, scale, colour—all were different. Nightingales sang in his new orchard, and he knew they should give him delight; why then did they sound so strange? “A nightingale is singing now / But like to me she seems at loss / For royce wood and its shielding bough.” Clare himself was at a loss and heard loss in every voice. The house itself offered little sanctuary in these alien surroundings. To sit in a familiar seat, especially a corner chair with its associations of tucked containment, should have been some relief at least in a time of disturbance, but it was not so: “I sit me in my corner chair / That seems to feel itself from home.”



In November 1786, William Cowper took his last look round Orchard-side on moving day. He had lived there eighteen years and had written *The Task* there: a poem rich in appreciation for quiet contentment in a secluded home. Yet he had never liked the structure of the house, or its awkward, gloomy rooms, or its windows fronting onto Olney marketplace. It was his “old prison,” he was “weary of every object,” he had “long wished for a change.” He had thought the house ugly when he first moved there and it was still ugly. All the same, he said farewell to it with a fondness that surprised him, even “something like a heart-ache.” The scene “certainly in itself had nothing to engage affection.” “But I recollected that I had once been happy there, and could not without tears in my eyes bid adieu to a place in which God had so often found me.”²³

For Cowper a home was, first and foremost, a home for God. Comfort was where God entered, and a place from which he was absent was

a void, no matter what pleasant surroundings might be contrived in the arrangement of books and rugs. For Evangelical Christians of many kinds, the home was a place in which to be discovered; one must always be ready to be seen and known. Though the front door may be closed, the house must be conceived as always open, to be entered at any moment by the longed-for visitor. “Amazing Grace,” one of the songs of praise written by Cowper and his friend John Newton for their *Olney Hymns*, sung out again and again the joy of that finding: “I was lost, but now am found.”

For long stretches of his life in Olney, however, Cowper had believed himself abandoned. When God refused to come, Cowper held on as tight as he could to small domestic supports that might help him across the gulfs of emptiness. The presence of familiar items like cups and trays were to him the handrails of a narrow bridge or the bannisters of an agonisingly steep and long staircase. He knew that he was clutching ephemeral things: any Christian’s house, like his body, is merely on temporary loan. Cowper would go into his garden, water the plants lovingly, and turn away saying, “This is not mine; ’tis a plaything lent me for the present; I must leave it soon.”²⁴ Yet where many devout householders left their rooms plain and permitted little talk of these trifles, Cowper gave his utmost attention to his material surroundings. Their temporariness deepened his feeling for them.

This is partly what mattered so much to the late eighteenth-century and Victorian readers who responded to him as if he were a personal friend. He sang the sofa with all the conviction Virgil had reserved for singing “arms and the man,” insisting that the sofa mattered. The set-piece celebrations of home life in *The Task* were purposely charming in their conversational ease, but layers of feeling were at work in them. If God were to visit the lonely soul of William Cowper, it would be amongst tables and chairs that in their very design seemed to speak of peaceful life. So he expressed his attachment to his fireside and writing desk, and the Turkish carpet that became an indoor lawn for his tame hares, while unashamedly hoping he might one day find a better house with less rot and brighter rooms. The move was in November (the lease taken from Michaelmas), but the new place felt “verdant” to him, like



FIGURE 1.3. Cowper's sofa. (Reproduced courtesy of the Trustees of the Cowper & Newton Museum)

a late spring in his middle age. He hardly dared believe that after deepest glooms the evening of his life might “open clear.”²⁵

A few weeks after leaving, Cowper went back. “Once since we left Olney I had occasion to call at our old dwelling, and never did I see so forlorn and woeful a spectacle.” The emptiness he saw was the absence of God, as he told Newton. “The coldness of it, the dreariness and the dirt, made me think in no unapt resemblance of a soul that God has forsaken. While he dwelt in it and manifested himself there, he could create his own accommodations and give it occasionally the appearance of a palace, but the moment he withdraws and takes with him all the furniture and embellishment of his graces, it becomes what it was before he enter’d it, the habitation of vermin and the image of desolation.”²⁶ Cowper was used to thinking of his own soul as one deserted by God; in an extraordinary turn here the old house became a self-portrait. The building before him was an external version of the desolate ruin he had often imagined to be deep within him. Might a soul be like a house,



FIGURE 1.4. The cottage in Helpston that Clare left behind. (Illustration: R. K. R. Thornton)

with echoing corridors and dank corners, and might a house look like one's soul? There was a note of terror, as often in Cowper, but his letter was one of praise—for a God who, where it pleased him, furnished rooms more finely than could ever be achieved with joint stools and linens.



What is an empty house? A mould, a negative impress, a hollowed shell. Room by room it is revealed. The hefty furniture goes first onto the van outside, followed by chairs and side tables, and then boxes. Inside, the sound of voices changes and the echoes take hold. No longer are words caught between sofa cushions and curtain folds; they bounce about itinerantly from floor tiles to ceilings. A restless optical illusion starts up as the walls draw towards each other and out again: are these bare rooms larger or smaller than they always seemed? The quality of light is grainier and flattening. The bulb blazes out, but the hallway feels dim, as if light slipped from plain walls, finding nothing to refract it.

The empty house is an immediate to-do list presented in the form of filthy skirtings and undusted corners. It is accusatory: there, revealed, is the long-ago stain. Bare cupboards stand with their doors open ready for inspection. Nothing now may be swept under the carpet. Here is

the creased envelope of an escaped letter never answered. An imaginary Hogarth, fresh from *The Rake's Progress*, surveys the scene with a knowing eye. Even the most virtuous householder is at risk of feeling their guilt exposed.

The mover from one house to another is likely to face two empty buildings on a single day. How is the new one to be made a home? Relations with the relics of previous occupants must be rapidly negotiated. Should one attempt an all-out conquest or play guest amongst the fixtures and fittings of an absent host? A home with no resident spirits can be the strangest of all, emptiness more frightening than a supernumerary presence. Some movers will feel a house to be theirs as soon as they take hold of the keys. For others there will be a realisation, months later, in some unexpected moment, turning on the lights perhaps, or taking a saucepan quite routinely off the heat, that home is no longer somewhere else but here.

The ghosts most commonly seen by movers are those of past and future selves. Lives can be counted out in house-moves, and biographers will often begin a new chapter when their subject changes homes. Like birthdays and new years, but generally more so, flittings are occasions for taking stock. When a home is to be yours for the whole foreseeable future, all life is suddenly unfolding before you. Here you are; this is it. Painting his newly acquired London flat in 2014, happily occupied with brushes and masking tape, Laurence Scott and his partner felt themselves shadowed by a domestic future indecently speeded up. The idea came to them that “this was all part of a montage in a commercial for a department store, or life insurance. ‘Whatever stage you’re at, we have you covered!’” It was hard to banish the time-lapse advert once it had taken hold: “cut to us in middle age with talcum-powder temples, waving some young scamp off to university. Then onwards still, stage after stage, until we’re two dandelion clocks cuddled on a park bench, shot from behind.” Then the logical end not featured in the soft-lit brochures: “the pair of us dropping to dust beside a pot of Vanilla Mist Number 4.”²⁷

People with firm ambitions to belong in a single place have been known to recoil in panic from the fixity of the long-term homes to which, after all the myopic attention to contracts and deposits, lists and

boxes, they find they are unalterably locked. To take possession of one front door requires, after all, the closure of all other doors. Not only the past houses but the dream houses rise up: the brass handles that will never now turn in your hand, the windows through which you will never watch a dusk draw in until the room is reflected in the pane. These are the ghost houses that will take their places, more or less quietly, more or less contentedly, in the rooms where you are now to sit.

