

ANN CLARE LEZOTTE

Author of the Schneider Family Book Award Winner *SHOW ME A SIGN*

DEER RUN HOME

"Will break your heart and
then make it whole again."

—Holly Goldberg Sloan





DEER RUN HOME

A Novel in Verse

BY ANN CLARE LEZOTTE



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**In memory of my first and always
poetry teacher, Jean Valentine
(1943–2020)**



As the story goes

*when Iphigenia's
father, the king,
killed a favorite deer
of the goddess Artemis,
she demanded
his daughter
in return.*

*Or else
the sails of his ships
would have no wind
to carry the soldiers
to war.*

*All of Greece
turned to point
at the girl,
expecting her
to simply give up
her life.*

*Yet some women
gathered round
Iphigeneia—
to cry, protest,
and sing of hope.*

I keep watch

for the stray deer.
We live on CR 124.

CR means country road,
but lately, they're cutting
down all the trees, leveling
the land to nothing, dirt.

I know how that feels.
The deer cannot live
in the new, small-box,
too-close-together houses.
They try to cross—
fast cars,
bulldozers,
men yelling—
to our side.
But it's not
safe here either.

My name is Effie

I am twelve years old.
I live with
my sister, Deja,
and our father.

When we had
to do school from
home, and wait
in lines with masks
to get into
the grocery store,
we lived with our mom
and stepfather, Nick.

Even though no one
in my family ever learned
my first language,
American Sign Language,
or ASL, it was fine,
just fine, for a while.

When Covid-19 started

we only had one computer
with patchy internet
in the house, and the Zoom lessons
didn't yet have an interpreter.
I couldn't understand
my teacher.

Mom and I
went to my school to pick up
paper copies of my lessons—
big piles, with nothing in order.
Some pages were blank because
they left the printer going
after it ran out of ink.

Mom yelled at a woman
in the office who was watching
us from behind a window, but
she just went back to typing.

Do your best

Deja wrote
when she saw the
messy heap of papers.

I don't think
Mom brought
my worksheets back to school.
Just as well,
because I tried but didn't
complete them all.

I was happy to
hang out
in her big yard,
watching the
vegetables and
rabbits grow.

Deja sits with me

on the nights
she's not talking to her friends.
We're near the computer so we can
watch videos as I style her hair.

She likes the way I do French braids
but when I scrape her scalp
with the comb,
she always yells loudly.
She's mostly teasing,
and it makes me smile.

She rolls her neck around
wherever I'm braiding
as if I'm pulling too much.
I poke her shoulder and
stick out my tongue at her.

We are both giggling because
the auto-captions on the videos
get a lot of things wrong.

"SEAGULLS!" they read
when a couple is fighting onscreen.
Deja tells me it should be,
"Stop it now!"

When I finish her braid,
she beams and twirls,
and I feel warm inside.

I kept washing, washing

washing my hands,
after watching
a captioned video online.
It said to use
hot water
and sing the alphabet,
so I pictured each letter

in my head.
Nick would reach over
and shut off the tap.
He'd turn out
his jeans pockets.
I didn't want to waste money.
I was just trying
to stay healthy.

That summer, dark shadows

crept in. I was locked
in a closet without
a doorknob.
Nightmare man,
long hands.

I woke up screaming.
Deja cradled me
in her arms and tried
to talk to Mom.

She'll only listen to me
if I use my oral voice,
but that feels far away,
too hard, not mine.

I guess Mom got tired
of my problems. She
sent us to live with Daddy.
Deja sobbed when she heard
but I felt a weight lift
off my shoulders.

My bedroom

is the smallest
in Daddy's trailer
but I can lock
the door.

I sleep
in a green sleeping bag
on an air mattress.
My clothes are in
plastic bags.

One window
looks out on
CR 124.
Goldenrod, horse tracks,
and turkey vultures
waiting for kills.

The first few days

Deja sulks,
keeps her arms
crossed, so
she can't write
or gesture to me.

She looks around
the trailer like
it's a garbage pit.

I haven't been
around here
for a while.
I was expecting dirt roads,
fields of cows, wildflowers.
But there are neat stucco houses
with tidy green yards and
newly planted saplings.

Fancy homes for showy people
who buy up the land
from families like ours
and push us
and the deer out.

My communication with Daddy

is him stomping
on the floor,
pointing to things.

He gets annoyed if I sign.
He doesn't have
the patience to write,
unless it's one or two
words—or a joke
without all the lines.

Finally, after five days,
Deja writes,
*You were having bad dreams
and acting out. I thought
they'd move just you.
All my friends
are at the other house.
Maybe we can go back.
I'll make sure
you don't have trouble.*

I nod my head, but I can't
do what she's asking.
Will I be given a choice?

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