Baldwin E. Hart

Hares Hunting Hares



Julian Fir

‘Meanes to an ende,’ sayeth the black goat as he dresseth a lamb leg off meat.

‘Isn’t this un—,’ I cut off, hesitate. ‘Unethical?’

‘We’ve found our selves a philosopher! Maynard, thou keep’st amusing me.’

I shudder. Being addressed by my first name soundeth almost hostile from the man’s mouth. I take a deepe breathe and looke away for a split seconde.

‘Al-Ma’az, we’ve talked about this. There is no excuse for the butcherie, even if the law approveth of it.’

‘That’s what we do ‘round these parts. And darest thou not preache new-age wisdoms to me.’

I refuse to let this go, my bodie betrayeth me in its hare instincts. Ever since the city passed that bill and all the deceased citizens started going under the knife, I’ve felt sick smelling the bloode that lingereth in the aire, even three blocks downe from the butcher’s.

‘Thou wanted work. Then use the goode will thy father’s friend is lending thee.’

‘I should call you uncle, should I not? You’ve been great friends with him…’

He looketh at me not, keepeth slicing in a mechanicall, yet somehow delicately artfull manner. ‘Thou want’st the job or nay?’ he produceth flatly.

‘Aye. Aye, I do.’

‘Then come to-morrowe at 6.’

‘Aye…’

I am unsure of how to proceede from here on. Rahim is a goode butcher, a great one even, but eache cut soundeth to me like the lip smacking of a beaste, moist and squelching, and his low humming of a melodie under his breathe like a growl now. Glint of the knife in the crowne glass windowe light. The sound of his hooves on the floore tiles. It keepeth on. Keepeth on.

‘Why art thou still here?’

‘Apologies. Farewell.’

And I leave.

#

My quarters are two blocks downe. Built in the Dark Ages, the streetes lie perfectly perpendicular, the flowe of aire is goode. Or so they call it, *Dark Ages*, still a time without such brutality in broade daylight. And crops died all the same, the famines… Some things never change. Some only growe worse. In our day, the consumption of flesh justified by povertie seemeth almost faire to most. Blame the smell, I open my window shutters no more. But Phillip prefereth it so.

I enter the tenement house, third floor, and the heate is settling in. As I unkey the doore, I can heare the scratching and the chirping — a goode beetle he is, loyall, gratefull. Dumbledores typically are, fore’er disliked for their faecal affinities, but be kinde to them and meete love unending. Phillip receiveth a fat fly for dinner, his favourite. I reade a chapbooke before the day withereth, and Phillip settleth in my lap, stretching his legs.

It hath been merely a month since Father’s succumb to the detriment of eld, but barely have I been scraping by. Without him, whose many a year of expertise upheld the standard of our practice, I was left cluelesse and helplesse, and the pots reeked of sorrowe, and the glaze bubbled in rage, as the blessing of his handes was gone from the wheele. I’ve shut the workshoppe a fortnight ago now, I throwe no more pots in attempts to save my dignitie, and artifice mattereth no longer.

#

Al-Ma’az cometh to me in a dreame. He standeth at an Altar, Satan of a Man, with a cleaver and a hooked chaine, his coiling hornes glistneth in the candlelight, and he bleedeth a lamb o’er a Chalice, and the cup runneth o’er tenfold, and it floweth and floweth fore’er. One cannot see the bloode in his black fur, only streakes of clumping haires, but the odour is there, the odious stench of a greasy olde man bathed in women’s bloode, and no sound in the Abysm nor the Heavens can dwarf the screams echoing betweene my eares.

#

When I see his face at dawne, he still holdeth that same terrible grimace, or mayhap my eyes playe tricks on me I cannot subdue. He showeth me the trade as best I can learne, that day and many later following, it taketh little time for me to grasp the basics, some intrinsic movement so unnatural for a man of my species, and yet so smoothe to acquire, but there still standeth many yeares remaining towards masterie. Goode enough I am, a pleasant pupill. Soone, I run the counter.

‘Bloodmeale for Amalia Agnew,’ she sayeth as she entereth. ‘Ordered ereyesterday.’

I turne to the front, and the ewe eyeth me at an angle, another prey animall, her faire curls pinned daintily, sweetely framing her face.

‘Bloodmeale? For plants, is it?’ I ask out of habit.

Her shoulders tense up. ‘We do not eate meat.’

‘Times are hard, I’d ne’er assume.’

And she knoweth. Mayhap that is the thought which standeth at the edge of her collapse. The illusion. She thinketh herself too noble for such endeavours. Mayhap. And I am the saddest arbiter of it all, as I remaine on the very line betweene the buyers and the bought. Doth the butcher cast Judgement alone, or is his hand Divinely led? Are the Gods there standing with us, or are they deade? Doth man choose to dine with Satan buying meat, or is Satan in his breade? And the times we call our owne shall commande us to our ende.

I let not my thoughts be knowne. Musings only fare as long as they stay suspended beneath the boundarie of common acceptance, the rest is left unspoken. May societie’s burden be shouldered by the weakest in his perseverance. And my father lieth in the dark awaiting peace so long as I can afford to pay for doctors.

‘Couldeth be better. But couldeth be worse,’ the ewe replieth softly, as if she were ashamed of her owne reasoning.

‘It sayeth here that the order was placed by Siegfried Agnew. Husbande?’

‘Son. My husbande…’

She smileth politely with moist eyes. I understande. Mayhap her circumstance is closer to mine after all. Mayhap the quiet apollogie is not for the bloode, but for her existence, for her owne last threade of hope as cast onto her offspring, the mirror of her husbande. I take three tins from behinde the counter, alreadie packed and signed and stamped with our shoppe’s insignia.

‘Bloodmeale, three pounds in weight, as requested. That’ll be four shillings.’

‘Cheaper than arste.’

‘You may thank the city councill.’

As she leaveth, another man cometh by, a black bear. He asketh for deere if we have it, if not then beef. I give him freshly butchered roebuck, butchered by Al-Ma'az, and I remember the man, a locall lawyer, John Doe was his name. It feeleth like a crime to pick up a parchment packet ascribed with the name of a neighbour, it feeleth like trading soules, as my paws were ne'er supposed to be lain upon the raw, stripped flesh of another. There is a justice about the new regulations, the wealthy ende up on the plate, it seemeth almost comforting. Yet, somehow, the golde-clad ne'er come in for butchering. Somehow 'tis always citizens of proper employment, even if their clothes are soft and finely weaved, as if to shred their personhood and squeeze till the last drop.

And some poore come, some lesse fortunate, for now the flesh is sold for pennies. And none hide where the meat cometh from, no secrets kept, yet more and more soules appeare before me, and the streetes are lined with bones. A wolfe next, soone a marten. Goode day it is, nearly all merchandise sold, and the foule scraps from the day before I am told to feede to the flies out back. Rahim butchereth in the cellar, as he can now use the peace I grant him dealing with customers. I feele he enjoyeth the processe more than he doth the transaction.

#

And the bloode, I think I've growne to it. As I come back to Phillip in the afternoone, there is no stench anymore, it permeateth the floorboardes no longer. I poure my selfe a bathe, for once, as bloode requireth a rinse proper. And the water runneth and runneth with browne now, it wanteth not to leave my haire, the lingering shaddowe of bloode, the dark veil over my foreheade. I feele the eyes upon me, the heades turning away not towards, the scoffs and sighs.

But Phillip mindeth not. He lieth at my feet loyall and gratefull, he doubteth not, loveth me for my lone existence.

Such as doth insects. They ask no questions, they breathe one's aire and chirp excitedly, for no thoughts unfavoured can taint them as long as they're cared for. I yearne for such a life. I yearne for a bliss beyonde this world of gloome, and I wish at times to wake no more.

#

Eache Sunday is a lungfull of a breathe — to wake long after sunrise and heare the organs sing, to stroke Phillip's smoothe, metallic back and leave him sleeping soundly till I returne from church. Having woken late this weeke, I arrive to a brim-full halle, all seates occupied and people swarming neare the front, and I stande to the side of the seventh row, before me a faire number of familiar faces. Mister Taube, our landlord, his pigeon beake all polished to a shine, and his teale and purple feathers styled akin to a ruff. Mister Niedźwiedzki, a counte from forreigne lande, a bear tall as the doorway and wide as a dresser, upon his owne fur a coat of fur in grey, that of a different creature. Mistress Ricci and her husband, both in leaves weaved through their urchin spikes,

hers red with flowres added, his browne. Miss Purcell whitened on the alreadie pale piggish complexion, all powdered and blushed in rosie pigment, her snout glossed in linseede oil.

And I see the Agnews, mother and son, she prayeth, he standeth there to aide her, for she is weake. Siegfried, I remember his name, such a gentle soule he seemeth, helpeth his mother better than I have ever helped mine. They are one bloode indeed, both in creame curls of wool and face white, she only adorned with daintie pearles and ostrich feathers in her haire, he with eare rings of copper. As the son guideth his mother to the altar for communion, he looketh back at the congregation briefely, and that is when our eyes meete. He recogniseth me just as I do him, and in his eyes I sense a knowing.

#

Amalia's day hath always been a Thursday, but that following Thursday she cometh not. Saturday eve, just on closing, I see Siegfried at the doore, I see him closely now, and he is my age or barely my junior, we stande at the same height and his shoulders wider than mine.

'Mother's ailed by sickness, I neede an ounce of bloode and a heftie strip of seale fat.'

'Doth she eate—?'

'Nay. But 'tis an emergencie.'

In his eyes, there is feare, mayhap, or guilt and desperance and paine. Were it anyone else, I would refuse, but I cannot say no to him, not in his circumstance, as I recall the church service. I pack all of the requested and I looke back at him as his lower lip quivereth.

'I'll close and I'll walk thee home. Speake not if thou ache, just… Nod.'

And so he nodeth.

I come back home an houre late, and Phillip remembereth, he climbeth on me as if relieved I have not been lost, just strayed off path. He bringeth me a scrap of the larva he was given for breakfast, and I pretende to eate, as to make him happy. As of late, 'tis the only joye I see, a beetle content with feloweshippe. There is a spark in him which maketh me consider mutuall understanding, some thing beyonde wordes, some bonde betweene distant kingdoms.

#

Following Thursday, no Amalia in sight. And no Siegfried. Friday, I come late, heavie aire stretcheth mine efforts through the wet and blackened morn, and the shoppe standeth open, in it Al-Ma'az with lamb in hande, as the first day I ever stepped o'er his thresholde. Yet this time, the lamb is knowne, the face of the severed heade aside crieth at me with her mute motherly yelp.

‘Looke now,’ Al-Ma’az voiceth. ‘Ever seen a growth like this?’

And I looke, and in her stomach lieth a stone of flesh enorm as her heade or larger.

‘We cut it out, make sure none remaineth, but the rest is goode and we sell it as usuall.’

I stande there motionlesse, mine eyes widen at the monstrositie growne inside the guts of a woman, her death embodied. It taketh a seconde for me to speake. ‘How could I sell a mother?’

‘All mothers die. Paine is transient and it meaneth thou art living. Tremble not, for ‘tis only naturall.’

And I see his wisdom now, despite all crueltie, mayhap that crueltie is within our mindes a flickering delusion, mayhap the truth only shineth as bright, for the darknesse and the paine paveth the grounde of it.

Then he carrieth the bulge outside, he throweth it to the stray insects, and he turneth to me with a tinderbox and a pipe in hande.

‘It was Baldric’s,’ he sayeth. ‘He gave it to me when his coughing worsened. I thought it would only be faire for his son to have it.’

#

Saturday, I awaite Siegfried the whole day, yet he cometh not, not morrowe nor eve, and it paineth me to think of his mother, and my father, yet I feare to meete his eyes, for I have been merely sending him payments and letters the past weekes, pulling the curtaine closed on Baldric Lapine. And Baldric named *brave* by his owne father, named me *brave* and *strong* to counter our species, but I keepe failing to prove his conviction as I feare every step taken and every breathe released.

That eve I smoke father’s pipe at my windowe with Phillip beside me and my heade rid of thoughts. For once, I breathe the aire off the city streetes in briefe claritie, as if all the horrors ended at the thresholde.

I make my way to church as soone as I wake, for I cannot stande thinking in circles. And he is there, Siegfried, he lieth at the altar, he speaketh not until I do, and then he begineth to weepe. I kiss his foreheade and mine eyes let their owne teares flowe, and the silence enshroudeth us, and I kiss him, and I kiss him, that one time not one soule can witnesse but God alone. As the congregation gathereth, we are alreadie sat in the first row and quiet, and we pretende to be praying through the fleeting memorie which seemeth a dreame.

Father dieth on that Sunday eve, one of many, he is collected shortly and little time have I to bid my farewells. Let the morrowe truly be a renaissance, I would be content, yet it waketh with equall weight on the soule and on the heart. Monday cometh like an executioner, masked, for it is morrowe as ev’ry other, and uncaring, for time only forgiveth the silver-mouthed and the golde-clad.

With the dawne, I open alone, and for once I miss Rahim in his sterne demeanour, his heavie hoof step, his booming voice. My feet meete the thresholde, the iron hatch ringeth out a bell roar of the Abysm, and for the first time I stande there alone, and the black goat's Beatitude collapseth. With the minde voyd and the heart frozen and the liver heavie of sorrowe, I move through the bodies uninterrupted, the blade of fire, the flesh of butter, and none is left as Sun waketh. I notice not until the pile is finish'd, but there beneath the mice and the pigs alreadie rendered lieth a hare.

I stande o'er the body with trembling handes. The knife, my sweate, his cloudy eye just drilling into me, the honeygolden iris dulled and dried and blurred, and the circular pupill pallid. I lift him with much struggle, it feeleth like the last hug I can ever get from familie ever again, and it is with a limp sack of fatherly flesh I refuse to acknowledge as emptie, as the past weekes I visited the man not, I spent my futile time on this earth busy with frivolous affairs, and I've failed him, failed terribly, and now he lieth in my arms freezing colde and breathlesse and absent, for I can ne'er heare a worde from his dry mouth ever.

ever

Ever. Ever, ever again.

I hang him. The hooke sinketh into his stiffened skin, and I cut his throate open, and I bleed him, I bleed him downe to the bottom of his soule, I bleed him dry, and it feeleth endlesse, and it taketh chunks out of my breathe as it hitcheth, and I can ne'er ne'er look back at him, I just heare the drip drip dripping, the plink, finall plinks, my petrified muscles resisting the turne back to see, to beholde, and I shift, finally, and there is red and red and red and red and red and browne.

And browne. Browne it shalt become if I do not sell it in time. The batfolk shall enjoy their premium beverage. Bled, he's ready to skin. I take him off, slam on the metall table, and turning the corpse, I grab his paw and it floodeth me… he held mine this same way as I mourned mother, he offer'd it to pull me up as I fell too weake to keepe standing when the mourning floored my appetite. And I am still thin all these yeares later, I ne'er fully bounced back. And his is a stomach of a sixty-year-old man, now I imagine if I will ende up looking—… I slice the hide away from the muscle. The fur is sparse in places, it shalt not suffice, but may the leatherworkers handle it.

They say it hath always been so. Since the Dawne, there have been the eaters and the eaten, and so it shalt till Dusk. The Wolfe shalt not concern his selfe with the woes of the Lamb, and She is to be thankfull for the order of world so straight and cleare, so well-devised and preserving Natural Inclinations. So it hath been ascribed in the Stars. Feare pusheth us to eate, and so doth abundance, mayhap the point to life is to devour, to digest the World from which we are growne, to wipe all life and returne to Ashes. Survival suffuseth all bloodflowne appendages and what is left of life is not even breathe, it is a ravenous quaff. And as we consume infants in desperation, we soone

consume our owne progenitors, we consume our selves, lest the world should consume us.



Oliwia Dawidowska

Bare muscle. His face stareth at me with cloudy, lidless, shrivelled balls of fibrous tissue clutched onto by pale muscle. I cut them out and toss them into a tray. I gut him, the innards set aside to processe next, the meat is what we savour with priority. But he was olde, no prime cuts here, just mince and scraps for canning. And I cut, and I mince, and it no longer resembleth a person, only the bones on the table, but now disjointed and naked. Bones for broth, the innards cleaned and sliced. The stomach cleaned, the liver slightly fatty, mayhap better then, knowing customer tastes, kidneys sliced and rid of their core, intestines washed for sausage casing.

Rinse and repeat. To the front, time to open.

The lamb boy cometh again, his locks almost prettier in the aire of mourning. Somehow a man standeth sweeter in his vulnerabilitie, a figure raw and unposed and unshaven of emotion.

‘’Tis ‘bout thy mother still?’ I ask.

‘Aye.’

‘I butcher’d her not. Mister Al-Ma’az—…’

‘Not about this.’ He looketh at me in this freezing, slicing way, like slicing meat, but through the soule. ‘Hast thou her bones still?’

‘Might. I think… There’s the pelvis.’

‘I want to buy it back.’

I looke at him petrified, my own bones in state of crumble, I say not what I want to say first, Father quivereth from under me, the meat of his behinde the counter trembleth as

if breathing, and Sigi's mother, although absent, judgeth both of us equally, ruthlessely, and her heade-sized tumour weigheth upon my spine.

'We are disallowed from selling to immediate fami—…'

'I have no remaining ways of honouring her,' he speaketh flatly, moist-eyed, hollowe-cheeked. 'Consider that.'

'Wouldst thou like it bleach'd?' I nearely whisper. And yet it carrieth heavie, mirrored tenfolde through the shoppe.

'I'll handle it. How much?'

'Just take it. I breake no rules if I sell it not.'

And there is silence. Rotten stench in the aire, the carrion of wordes.

'Thou art goode to me. Thou knowest paine.'

'Nay, I…'

'There's still bloode on thy hands. 'Tis not thine owne, yet it is.'

And he leaveth with said bloode still in copper on the tongue.

Paine spreadeth in ways previously unknowne to me. It siteth at the roote of haires, in the ligaments and inside the nails. The veins like a pulsating riverbed of sorrowe, they let me knowe no rest. Father still eyeth me from the tray of gouged eyes, I knowe which one is his, and as light catcheth on it with the doores' movement and the shaddowes circling, it seemeth as if blinking at me. There is no pride in his iris, only voyd emptinesse, and I long to knowe if the disappointment ever breacheth the colde glaucoma of his deade soule.

And the golde-clad come like a foreign army unannounced, seemeth as though they are, so distant from my owne cognition, so far from faire reasoning. Many such come as customers, and Rahim hath showne me proper manners, yet I cannot forget the silk-mob's hauteness, as they stande motionlesse, expecting me to grant their whims, and in rush, I oblige, I bow low, I move fast, I wrap meat swiftly and precisely so, and then I heare from a lynx's mouth, 'thou keep'st running, Hare, thou keep'st running.' And he dareth address me *thou* not *you*, as if he were familiar. The customer is no king, for a king is only worth as much as his orders.

By the weeke's ende, all the paternall meat is gone. Devoured. Even the eyes, and the bones, and all which could remotely be reminiscent of a man, there is none. And with my leaden eyelids fallen and my parchment lip gaping, now through a stiffened throate aires the question — what is of soule when the bodie falleth to dust, what is of a pot when it crumbleth back to soil, what is of glasse when it shattereth back to sande? Baldric Lapine now sitteth in a red clay pipe and a sharde of flint, none of which hath ever been a part of him.

Sunday morn, Sigi doth not appear in church. I leave mid-masse, and people stare, but I care no longer, I care not to masquerade before the silk-mob as they fan their selves with feathers plucked of deade men.

The cobblestone lieth in moist petrichor as emptie streetes greete lone me in their repose. Freed from lies and from delusion, I walk in the breezy morn as the aire I previously despised ruffleth my fur. It bloweth of the fieldes outside towne and of the mountaines, and thus I care no longer.

Sigi's not to be found in his mother's house, he waiteth for me at the thresholde of my flat, and our eyes meete soundlessely, breathlessely, now as mirrors they shine in eache other.

'Mug of tea,' he asketh of me.

And I bringe a mug of Father's hande, throwne by him and glazed by me. I heate the tea with milk, and Sigi addeth a stem of lavender from his mother's garden, and we drink from one vessell, with handes intertwined, the thicke and frothie liqued warme as a man's heart.

I take a nip at his eare, I draw bloode and it tasteth of freedom.

It tasteth of yeares in hiding and of passion subdued, and now his sorrowe leeketh along with red, and shackles snap, and I take a bite, bigger, hungrier, for meat hath ne'er tasted of goode before, only of eville.

He taketh my paw as I kiss him with his owne bloode still metallic in my mouth, and he gnaweth off a little finger, and the paine spreadeth through my veins, and it pulsateth, and it cleanseth all blacknesse from the soule. And Phillip the beetle looketh, Phillip seeth, he moveth not as the bloode mixeth, as the bloode dripeth into milk and staineth the creamy browne pink.

There is a packt of peace, the beetle knoweth, he readeth off me and my lover, that mutuall consumption shalt secure the soules in one another. Siegfried Agnew sucketh on my severed knuckle and when the bloode floweth lesse, he lighteth the tinder and heateth a butcher's knife blade, both for his notched eare and for my disjointed finger tip, to seare the endes closed in the name of the Father and the Son and the horned black Goat in his annciente wisdom.

Baldwin E. Hart

* Evidence that hares functioned as a social and literary metaphor for homosexuality in the Middle Ages appears in the poem *Ganymede and Hebe*, originally written in Latin in the 12th or 13th century; the poem uses this metaphor explicitly in relation to Ganymede, who also served as the model for a positive or neutral term for a gay individual in the period (as opposed to "sodomite"), often used in poetry by and about gay people. In line 23, *Hic agitat lepores lepus*—translated in the source text as "Here a hare hunts hare"—refers to same-sex desire, and it is from this line that the title draws

its particular inspiration, alongside the more literal reversal of roles that places a prey animal in the position of a butcher.

Source: Boswell, John. Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 253, 392-398.