



Lone Warrior

Dry Point Etching by Richard Sheehy

The Hunt is Better Than the Kill

From the castle comes the command:
"Mount up!"

A fortress deep in the moors.
Moated isolation.
Drawbridge closed.
Like no other, this castle hovers dream-like,
Forbidden, alone.
Surrounding life accepts its presence,
Hoping never to attract its secret denizens.

The comand given, war-like hunters converge at the gate.
Steeds paw the rock floor, sparks flying.
The Master — large, fearless, fearsome —
Grim in black trappings.
Knife, sword, chainmail
Well-protected against all,
Known, unknown foes alike.
His name, all his followers heed;
They look to his instruction,
Eager to please, ready marauders.
"Today we hunt fox."

The gate falls, the neoplastic forces, armed,
Explode.
The small creatures vanish into the far reaches of safe woodland,
Though none can escape.
Hounds, a pack, two packs,
Salivating, growling, glowering,
Scatter
Ahead of all, some noses pressed to the ground,
Some sniff the air,
All with one purpose:
To hunt the fox.

I am the fox.
I have lived in these forests, with others like me,
For years, our generations have thrived
Wily, lean, handsome,
A race of thinkers,
Mortals given to life to support death.
Our lives include the hunters,
Whom, lo these many years, I have seen (heard)
The Pack
The Riders
The Master,
Converge on one
But never on me.

I've heard this before, many times before:
A peaceful air disturbed,
Then a low rumble,
The thunder proclaiming the storm
All too sudden, it strikes:
From a straight, verdant tree line
A mass of murderous hunters, maniacal,
Living creatures attack living creatures
For sport.

I have no choice now but to run.
I turn my back to the assailants,
Hoping, as before, they will direct their madness
On one other, any other;
Let my turn pass.
But they chase me.

No child's play, this.
No longer can I scurry behind dense foliage
Or into a hollowed hillside.
All the tricks of my science now must
Save me.
I pray for escape.
Seldom, if ever, do any.

I run until the baying fades.
I rest.
Barking, shouting, again, they return.
It is just barely dawn:
I'll be at this awhile.

I run through water,
I run over rock.
But just when I think I can run no more — I will run no more —
The surge of the hunters presses again.

I am mad with excitement,
Feverishly I stumble into a long-dead log.
The light at the end beckons.
Then it blackens with the face and fangs of my rabid pursuers,
One end, then the other.
Ferociously, jealously guarded by the animals
Whose whine shocks me;
They're sure they've won.
Out of the side, my secret passage —
But they spy me and converge.

Teeth catch my back,
A searing pain burns me up and down.
Another few steps, and I escape. . .
Their jaws are too strong.
They grip me:
Rip my hair away
Tear my belly
Sink sharp teeth into my throat,
My underlegs, my head.
I know the end nears
Yet I struggle:
If only I could escape this,
If only —

Then one by one, the dogs are ripped away,
Hands pull the dogs backwards,
Amidst howls, resentful.
Death so near, the sweet smell of blood and tissue.
One lone rider looms above me,
My ears rush with a mindless sound.
I study him,
He, me.
Panting, fallen, much less life than I had,
Barely more to give, I grimace,
Life's breath hauling between clinched teeth,
Death would be sweet
Could it but come quickly.

He looks down
A smile, malevolent, malignant,
Stretches across his teeth.
"No, let him live, this one.
He entertains me, I like his will."
He reins his steed to move past,
"Besides,
The hunt is better than the kill."

So they ride away,
An army of black clouds,
Low thunder
Flashing spears.
I lie, picture of violent disease,
No less than dead.
The Master has won, or will win,
At least.