

Mahon, The Hunt by Night

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The Hunt by Night

--Uccello, 1465

Derek Mahon

Flickering shades,
Stick figures, lithe game,
Swift flights of bison in a cave
Where man the maker killed to live;
But neolithic bush became
The midnight woods

Of nursery walls,
The ancient fears mutated
To play, horses to rocking-horses
Tamed and framed to courtly uses,
Crazed no more by foetid
Bestial howls

But rampant to
The pageantry they share
And echoes of the hunting horn
At once peremptory and forlorn.
The mild herbaceous air
Is lemon-blue,

The glade aglow
With pleasant mysteries,
Diuretic depots, pungent prey;
And midnight hints at break of day
Where, among sombre trees,
The slim dogs go

Wild with suspense
Leaping to left and right,
Their cries receding to a point

Masked by obscurities of paint--
As if our hunt by night,
So very tense,

So long pursued,
In what dark cave begun
And not yet done, were not the great
Adventure we suppose but some elaborate
Spectacle put on for fun
And not for food.

Paolo Ucello, A Hunt in the Forest

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

