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Translator's Preface

Mini Chandran

N. S. Madhavan, who started writing in the 1970s, is a reputed short story writer in Malayalam. His writing career is marked by an early phase and a later phase, separated by a long gap when he inexplicably wrote nothing at all. In the later phase, the concerns shift to larger socio-political realities like the communal riots that have repeatedly seared the heart of India. His setting is not always restricted to the author's home state of Kerala. "Muyalvetta" (Rabbit Hunt) belongs to this later period. The style is lucid and hard-hitting. He has written numerous short stories, and has won awards at the state and national level. Short story is his forte, and Madhavan has only one novel in his repertoire. He works as a senior civil servant.

"Rabbit Hunt" has to be understood against the backdrop of the infamous Emergency period in India that lasted from 1975 to 1977. The then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's decision to suspend all fundamental rights and impose a state of emergency on a nation that was not at war ushered a state of totalitarian control into a democratic country. The period saw the worst cases of human rights violations, mass arrests for political reasons and police excesses. One of the worst hit was the Naxalite movement in India, an extreme leftwing political group. The movement, which originated in the eastern state of West Bengal also thrived in the southern states of Kerala and Andhra Pradesh, and attracted a lot of students who were drawn to its pro-poor revolutionary ideology.

The post-Emergency period literally saw a lot of skeletons tumble out of the closet, forcibly making the people realize that the Emergency, which had been touted as the time of peace and general law and order, was a lie perpetrated on them by the government. The 'stories' of the Emergency brought to light the depths of human rights violations that crisscrossed, in subterranean fashion, the smooth roads of public functioning. People also realized that the so-called 'anti-national Naxalites,' that it took all of organized police power to beat down, was a 'children's crusade', a ragtag assortment of intellectuals and students who were barely out of their teens.

In this story, we witness a similar skeleton tumbling out of the grandfather's closet when the puny rabbit he is hunting turns into an ogre

from the past that he is unable to confront. The grandfather was a police inspector during the Emergency period, who also had to deal with the purgation of Naxalites. The arrest and murder of the student in the story is very loosely based on a real life incident in Kerala, the arrest and custodial murder of an Engineering college student Rajan.

The most difficult task of any translator is the attempt to capture the subtle connotations that certain culturally specific words/objects will have. In "Rabbit Hunt," the flora and fauna of Kerala play a remarkable part. 'Pala' for instance, has many connotations for a Malayali reader; it is a flower that is associated with the concept of the 'yakshi' an apparition of a beautiful woman, a seductress who enchants and lures men away in the dead of the night, sucks out their blood and leaves only the nails and hair. The scent of pala in the cool night air evokes romance, but also a fatal obsession. Karuka grass is considered pure and holy as it is usually used for sacred Hindu devotional rites like a yaga. So it becomes significant that the rabbit's spittle is scattered over karuka.

"Rabbit Hunt" by N. S. Madhavan

Translated by Mini Chandran

If the sarcasm imprinted on the wide upper lip of camels originates from deep wisdom, the grimace on the split lip of the rabbit comes from unalloyed stupidity. So Manish did not feel very enthusiastic about going for the rabbit hunt that his Muthachchan¹ was organizing. Muthachchan began his preparations days ahead of the scheduled full-moon day of the hunt. He woke Manish in the wee hours of the morning and made him do one hundred and one sit-ups. Before he could recover from that, he would be taken for a walk. "You've got to walk a lot in the forest—cannot afford to get tired," Muthachchan would say from time to time.

It was not as if Manish did not feel that there was something of a level playing field in a hunt, as the animals were encountered in their own habitats. Considering the fact that they were at home in the forest, the creatures definitely had a bit of an advantage. But when he started thinking about the fairness of dragging them into a game in which they did not have a stake themselves, he would again feel distaste for the hunt.

As the evening of the hunt approached, Muthachchan's enthusiasm had spread throughout the house. The smell of moth balls spread all the way up to the front verandah as soon as Muthachchan's and Manish's sweaters and mufflers were taken out of the steel almirah. Manish asked Muthachchan, "What time will Augustine come with the jeep?"

"Calm down, boy. He'll be here at eight. We'll be going to the place near Varuthunni's estate where there are a lot of burrows."

Manish's mother came and went from the front verandah many times. As she came out with long trousers for Manish to wear, Amma said, "Roll it up to the knees. There will be choruthanam² all over the forest."

When Manish got tired of hanging around Muthachchan the whole day and was about to retire into the house, he heard Amma's voice being lowered. He stood in the darkness of the corridor. Amma asked, "Why are you taking Manish along on the hunt?"

¹ Grandfather

² A weed that causes intense itching.

"I've been feeling bad ever since I saw him perform his father's bali³ last month."

"What's the connection between the two?" Amma was asking exactly what Manish wanted to know.

"Nothing, it's just that I was wondering . . . if his father had been alive... Mol,⁴ what is the only thing that we remember about our dead fathers?" Without waiting for an answer Muthachchan continued, "a few trips. That's all, a few trips. I don't even remember my father's face. But even yesterday I remembered the trip that I took in a metre-gauge train with father and his man-servant, Raman Nair, from Olavakkode to Palani. It's an old story, about sixty years old.. I can still feel in my mouth the taste of the parippu vada dipped in kadalapparippu⁵ chutney that we had on the way from Pollachi railway station, on plates made of leaves stitched together by earkil."⁶

Amma stood there for some time without comprehending anything. Just as Manish got ready to move ahead in the corridor, he heard somebody outside. He again went to the front verandah. A person had come up the front steps put a big newspaper packet in front of Muthachchan.

"Babu," Muthachchan called without getting up from his armchair, "please open this packet."

As he untied the jute strings, Manish, as always, enjoyed its piercing smell. Batteries were the first thing that he saw.

"Muthachcha, what is this for?"

"For the headlamp. Hunters strap a headlamp on their cap. They need two hands for the gun, right?"

"Are you taking the police gun today?"

"The service revolver? Fool, wouldn't I have given it back before I retired?"

³ Rites performed after the death of somebody related by blood; usually performed at every anniversary of death.

⁴ Endearment for daughter.

⁵ A spicy fried eatable taken with chutney ground of chickpeas, coconut and chillies.

⁶ The spine of the coconut leaf.

Setting aside the battery, Manish took out a cardboard box from the paper packet. Small iron pellets were stacked inside it. "The shots for the air gun," Muthachchan said.

"Is an air gun enough to shoot a rabbit, Muthachcha?" Manish asked in a disappointed voice.

"Of course. Rabbits do not need even an air gun. Actually there is no need for a gun at all. You just need to have a headlamp and a piece of firewood. They become bewildered by the light. You creep up and give them a blow on the head. That's all."

"Muthachcha, let's not kill the rabbits. Just as we chase and catch hens, let's put a huge bamboo basket over them and trap them. I'll look after them."

"Come on; rabbit meat is very tasty," Muthachchan said. "It is also white, like chicken. Spices will not stick to it much. You grind turmeric and chili together and marinate it. There should be a bit more of the turmeric. Otherwise, the meat will have the smell of all the forests. We have to avoid that, don't we?"

"Muthachcha, we'll rear the rabbits."

"Don't be silly. You just turn it over and make a neat incision with the knife, from the throat downwards. Then, like taking off a shirt, peel the skin off. Marinate it in the masala for eight hours."

Manish felt that it was not Muthachchan but Circle Inspector Karunakaran Nair who was lying in the armchair. As he glanced sideways, scared, he saw his Muthachchan with the face of a child greedy for rabbit meat. Manish asked bravely, "What if rabbits become extinct? Like dinosaurs?"

"They breed and multiply. Honestly, we are helping out the farmers."

Finally Manish had been give a reasonable justification for the hunt. He started making preparations for it with no compunction whatsoever.

"Wear canvas shoes. This is February. There will be lots of dry leaves amidst the shrubs. You shouldn't let them hear even a footfall. Haven't you seen rabbits' ears? Long like the pothumbu;⁷ they can pick up sounds from three kilometers away."

"Have you ever caught thieves from inside the forest?"

⁷ The covering over the bunch of flowers on the coconut tree.

"Once. I think it was in '75. He was not caught in the forest, but in Kozhikode. He was being taken from there in a jeep along the Mysore Road when he made a scene as we reached the forest, saying he wanted to piss. He bolted when we stopped."

"What happened then?"

"What happened? Now that's a good one; it was during the Emergency period.⁸ How could he dodge the eyes of the police? We dug him out of the forest."

"Did you beat him badly, Muthachcha?"

"Of course not. I made him do a hundred sit-ups, cuffed him on the head too. The thief was just a kid of about 18." Manish looked at Muthachchan with gratitude.

"How did you get information about thieves?"

"We paid a few people for that and made all the arrangements. Spies. You could also call them police informants."

"Who gave you the information to catch the thief in the forest?"

"A lady informant."

"Lady?"

"Yeah."

It was when a girl who studied in the engineering college mentioned it that they got the information that Benoy, the first accused in the Bathery case,⁹ used to frequent Room no.106 in the boys' hostel. The young Superintendent of Police Ajith Kumar paid more attention to the strategies of the capture than actually catching Benoy. He told the policemen, "A vanload of policemen will surround the hostel—in canvas shoes, without making a noise. If someone tries to jump over the wall, you should catch him. Circle Inspector Karunakaran Nair and Sub Inspector

⁸ The Emergency spans two years from 1975 - 77, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared internal Emergency in India, citing the breakdown of law and order. This period is seen as a dark one marked by police repression and curbs on freedom of expression. India resembled a military dictatorship.

⁹ Refers to a particularly troubled time in the 1970s, when the extreme leftist Naxalite (also called Naxal) movement spread over parts of the country. The movement owes its name to a village called Naxalbari in West Bengal where it originated. The Bathery case is a fictionalized version of the Pulpally case in Kerala, where a group of Naxalite youths stormed a police station and killed a policeman. A large-scale manhunt followed this incident, which reached its peak during the Emergency.

Bhuvanachandran Nair will go inside the hostel along with four or five plain clothes policemen. I will be outside providing cover."

As Karunakaran Nair and the rest went inside, the entire hostel turned away in fear, resigned like one who knows she cannot avoid an attack. There was the flutter of switches being turned off in the rooms. As the police moved forward through darkness marked by barren light sockets, the grinding stone in the kitchen fell silent with a final groan. Just one knock, and room number 106 opened.

On the clothesline that was tied across the room, there were a shabby towel, a neatly folded blue checked cotton shirt, and faded pants that had sadly dented safety pins instead of buttons on them. The policemen went in one after the other, looking at themselves in the mirror that was hanging from the lintel of the window directly opposite the door. On the window ledge there was a comb covered with dandruff and a bottle of coconut oil entwined with hair.

Karunakaran Nair, who came in last, looked at the mirror, unconsciously passed his hands over his balding head and bolted the door from the inside. In the uncompromising nature of that sound, the student who was standing in front of the table clad in a dhoti and vest came to life for the first time. Karunakaran Nair remembered that he had oily black curls but downy hair along his spine, just like a new-born infant.

Posted next to the laundry bill on the wall, the square boxes of the timetable lay like a patchwork handkerchief, covered with information about the strength of materials, power systems, material science and industrial management. On a paper next to that in smudged ink, was written something in big bold letters.

"Whose literature is this? Mao's?" SI Bhuvanachandran asked. The student did not say anything.

"Tell me, whose is it?"

"Khalil Gibran's," he managed to say in a faltering voice.

The policemen looked at each other. "He's not a trouble maker. He's not on the list given by the Special Branch," Karunakaran Nair remembered a policeman saying.

"Aren't you Varghese Mani?" Bhuvanachandran asked.

"Yes."

"Did that Benoy of the Bathery case come here?"

"No."

As Bhuvanachandran was about to hit Varghese Mani, Karunakaran Nair intervened and said, "Let's see if we can find any reason to bring him in. Let's search the room."

As Karunakaran Nair's hands burrowed into the pile of clothes in Varghese Mani's rusted trunk, he felt a warmth like that of a mother's embrace.

Suddenly a policeman shouted: "Hey! There are a few papers under the mattress."

"What is this?" Karunakaran Nair asked.

"Nothing."

"Talk, you son of a bitch."

"It is a story that I've written."

"Story?" Karunakaran Nair was taken aback by the complete unexpectedness of the answer.

"Story, sir!" Bhuvanachandran said. "Now we get three or four stories every time we raid a hostel. Parents slave and prostitute themselves to send them to college and they write stories!"

"Read your story, you dog!" Karunakaran Nair demanded.

"Please do not ask me to do that sir!" Varghese Mani pleaded.

"Of course you'll read it," Karunakaran Nair said. He sat on the only chair in the room, beating a rhythm on his palm with the short, silver-headed cane. The other policemen spread themselves out on the cot. A shiver began to ripple through the papers in Varghese Mani's hands.

"Kill me if you want. But I cannot read this," Varghese Mani said.

Since he had not much dealt with these sorts of situations before, Karunakaran Nair sat silent for a moment and then snatched the papers from Varghese Mani's hands. After flipping through the pages he said, "Can't follow a thing, you bastard. Why can't you write a story as if you're testifying, clearly like a police report?"

Jumping up suddenly from the bed, Bhuvanachandran said, "Tell us, you Changampuzha's¹⁰ son, did Bathery Benoy come here?"

¹⁰ Changampuzha is a famous early 20th century poet in Malayalam, noted for his Romantic poetry.

Varghese Mani did not say anything. Bhuvanachandran took him to a corner of the room.

"Tell me, where is Benoy?" After that, there came the uncomfortable sound of a head being banged against the wall.

"I do not know," Varghese Mani said.

A constable who was flipping through Varghese Mani's story that was lying on the table said loudly: "This is no story. 'Spring Thunder'. Naxal literature."

"Sir, he's a tough nut to crack," Bhuvanachandran said, "If we don't question him in the proper way, he'll make fools of us again."

They made Varghese Mani sit hunched on the spare tire on the floor of the jeep to take him to the lockup. In the front seat of the jeep SP Ajith Kumar sat speaking an alien language into his wireless.

"I have to urinate." Varghese Mani said, as the jeep was going through the forest.

"There's no need for that," Bhuvanachandran said.

"I'll do it here."

"Let him piss before he dirties the jeep," Ajith Kumar said without looking back.

As the policemen were struggling to open the half door of the jeep, Varghese Mani jumped out. The jeep swivelled back sharply and began to follow him. For a brief while Varghese Mani was trapped in the jeep's stream of light and then disappeared among the trees. Ajith Kumar kept sending messages non-stop on the wireless. Many police vehicles came and parked themselves by the edge of the forest. The glare of searchlights and the barking of police dogs turned the forest into a scene from a World War II movie where deserted POWs are hunted down. As they turned a corner, they saw Varghese Mani move like a shadow, on the edges of an unexpected clearing.

"Shall I give him one on the knee?" Ajith Kumar asked, loading his revolver with bullets.

"No, sir, this is dangerous game," Karunakaran Nair said.

"I was first in pistol shooting in the Police Academy," Ajith Kumar said, changing aim. Varghese Mani fell with the very first shot that sent up a host of white cranes into the sky. As they crossed the grassland and reached the other side, he had become motionless. When they tore

Varghese Mani's shirt aside they saw the bullet hole on his back, like a mark of benediction made with sandalwood paste.¹¹ As they turned him over, they saw that the circuitous path taken by the bullet had made a small hole that burned like a moon in the heat of the day. Varghese Mani was a different person above the neck. His face lay in unwrinkled peace, completely at odds with his body. Without making a grimace, Varghese Mani parted his lips and said, "Ouch."

When he heard the jeep outside, Manish went inside and put his feet before his mother for her to tie the shoelaces. The driver Augustine came inside with a packet. "Babu," Muthachchan called out, "Put this in a bag and take it along. Parippu vada and palayankodan banana, just in case we feel hungry on the way."

Muthachchan went inside, changed into shorts and flannel t-shirt and came out. It took some time to fix the strap of the headlamp on the helmet. After fixing his leggings, with a muffler round his neck, Muthachchan went and sat in the front seat. The helmet with the headlight lay nestled in his lap like a child.

When the jeep had gone some distance Muthachchan said, "On our way back you'll have the company of a few plump rabbits with you in the backseat"

By the time they reached Periyar, Manish's face had become a frozen mask half an inch thick due to the cold wind blowing on his face. "Now we have to walk," Augustine said.

The river had water just enough to wet the soles of their feet. Since they wore canvas shoes, Muthachchan and Manish did not take them off and crossed the river putting one foot after the other, like steps in a group dance, following Augustine who had his sandals in his hands.

"There are lots of burrows here," Augustine said. After he had gone some distance, Augustine stopped suddenly. He kilted up his dhoti, stood on tiptoe and without any warning, making the veins stand out on his neck, let out a baying cry. Muthachchan and Manish were startled. Augustine looked at them and said, "Now we'll hear something fun. I made the sound of a vixen."

¹¹ Sandalwood paste is usually given from temples after puja and applied on the forehead.

After a short interval the desire-filled baying of foxes from various parts of the bushes was heard. Augustine laughed out loud. Muthachchan was angry. "Stop your childish pranks. You frightened me."

The forest grew thicker as they walked along. As usual, the fragrance of pala¹² was cold. When a civet cat crossed their path Augustine crossed himself. "Belongs to the cat family," he said.

When they had walked along a bit further, they saw fireflies darting among the kaitha¹³ that was slanting across an unused pool. "Careful, where there is kaitha there will be a snake," Muthachchan said.

The trees became unfamiliar to Manish. The ancient history of their leaves frightened him. The sound of crickets had stopped accompanying them. The forest fell silent. When Augustine looked up at the moon, the sky was bare save for a dark cloud that appeared like a mole underneath the moon. "Early warning," Augustine said. "The first rain will come today. Let's go back."

"Let's walk up to that neem tree below the hill. We can go back if we do not get any rabbits by then," Muthachchan said.

"I'm not going back without at least one rabbit," Manish said.

"Don't be silly boy. We've been walking for over one and a half hours."

Augustine stopped walking and began to search for something in the ground with his toes. There were rabbit droppings in the dry grass, like tiny beads. Augustine lowered his voice and said: "Rabbit nearby."

Suddenly, hearing leaves move, Muthachchan switched on the headlamp. A rabbit that was trapped in the circle of light of the torch stopped eating grass and lifted up its head. It took some time for Manish, who was used to seeing white bunnies kept as pets, to take in the cream-striped brown rabbit.

As Muthachchan kept the gun on his shoulder to take aim, the circle of light danced about slowly. The rabbit grew nervous, as if being subjected to an earthquake, but was unable to move out of the mesmerizing glare of the headlight. Bereft of the deep wisdom of a camel's lips, its lips kept

¹² Tree with greenish blossoms with piercing fragrance; usually blooms from November - February, in the cold months.

¹³ Plant with broad leaves and fragrant flowers. It is believed that cobras like to make nests under it.

moving in helpless contempt. The beam of the headlamp scattered on its spittle that lay frothing on the tips of karuka grass. The rabbit bounded and attempted to breach the barriers of light, but returned, unsuccessful.

Muthachchan stopped trying to take aim, and went up to the rabbit with the other end of the gun upraised to hit it over the head. The rabbit looked at Muthachchan with its grey eyes. Stopping the movement of its split lip, showing its protruding, childish front teeth, and without any grimace, the rabbit parted its lips and said: "Ouch."

Muthachchan switched off the headlamp. The rabbit, intoxicated by the light, bounded about and then withdrew into the nearby arrowroot thicket with the tranquility of an actor retiring from the stage.

While driving home, Manish sat in the front seat between Muthachchan and Augustine. The trucks coming from the opposite direction lowered their beams upon seeing the jeep. The drowsiness of passengers—seen only in window seats of the train huffing its way along the track parallel to the road—spread across the earth. The dew had come down on the tips of hay that lay in the fields. As they made a turn, Augustine reduced his speed on seeing a festival taking place in a temple. It took about two kilometers for the rattle of the tambourine that accompanied the kathaprasangam¹⁴ artist to die down.

Manish looked at Muthachchan who kept his eyes glued to the windshield. The sweat that broke out on his cheeks collected in his aged wrinkles. Manish felt that it was a touch that Muthachchan needed just then. He took his unaged left hand and put it on Muthachchan's shoulder.

¹⁴ A popular art form where the artist recites a story interspersed with songs. He would have an orchestra to accompany him in singing.