

THE BLOODLESS BOY

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...these creatures do not wound the skin, and suck the blood out of enmity and revenge, but for meer necessity, and to satisfy their hunger. By what means this creature is able to suck, we shall shew in another place.

Micrographia or some Physiological Descriptions of Minute bodies Made by Magnifying Glasses with Observations and Inquiries thereupon.

Robert Hooke (1665)

OBSERVATION I OF A BODY

The water began to stick, splashes fattening on the glass.

Harry Hunt, Observer of the Royal Society of London for Improving of Natural Knowledge, stopped to view more closely this change in form, as rain turned to snow. Fingers stiffened and reddened by the chill, he wiped at his spectacles, and watched the first flakes settle onto the brown leather of his coat sleeve.

He moved on, the soles of his boots beating percussive strikes on the cobbles edging the muddy lane. The early morning sky was violet, the colour of a bruise. His purposeful stride took him east by the Roman wall, past the Bethlehem Hospital sprawling over Moorfields, smudges of light escaping its windows.

He had a slight frame and pale London skin.

South down Broad Street. The narrow buildings shouldered one another, pressing together for warmth.

Untouched by the fury of the Conflagration, they followed the old scheme.

He made his way towards Gresham's College, the mansion used by the Royal Society, to see the Professor of Geometry and Curator of Experiments there, Mr. Robert Hooke.

The snow fell thickly, settling already despite the wet ground.

Harry's steps echoed through the archway leading to the College's quadrangle. In the stables the horses snorted, and he heard the grate of their shoes. He turned for the south-east corner, and stopped at a door.

A window clattered open above him and the head of a boy appeared.

‘Mr. Hunt! Mr. Hooke is already gone!’

Harry put his finger to his lips. Tom Gyles, with a pantomime grimace, acted out his understanding. Ah, discretion was required. No less loudly, he called down again.

‘I shall come to you! Mr. Hooke would desire no stranger hear the business.’

Harry let himself in with his key, shaking off the snow from his coat onto the lobby’s neat flagstones.

Did a philosophical business engage the Curator? Robert Hooke was kept busy demonstrating experiments to the Fellows of the Royal Society. He also worked as Surveyor to the City of London, with Sir Christopher Wren. A far more lucrative employment, rebuilding the new London. Perhaps he went to perform a view.

The rest of the boy belonging to the head arrived, hopping from one foot to the other as if his young bladder was about to burst. A rope of hair stuck up from his crown, giving him the look of a shaggy sundial.

Harry looked past him, eager to see the Curator’s niece, Grace. At this hour she still lay in her bed. A little wistfully, he returned his thoughts to Tom.

‘Mr. Hooke is gone to the Fleet, at the Holborn Bridge, to meet with Sir Edmund Bury Godfrey! The messenger’s knocking woke us all.’

‘I shall return then later, when his business is done.’ So Grace was awake...

‘He asks that you join them there.’ Tom looked slyly up at him, watching the widening of Harry’s eyes, pleased with the result of his information, happy that he had held it back for most effect.

Harry stared at him, feeling a pulse of anxiety. He had no desire to become involved with the Justice; Sir Edmund was renowned throughout London as a pervasive and threatening presence.

‘I shall go there,’ he replied reluctantly. ‘Oh, I have forgot – a Happy New Year’s Day to you, Tom.’

‘And to you, Mr. Hunt. A prosperous 1678 for us all.’

Harry left the boy, and walked across the quadrangle.

Behind him, Grace watched from her window, observing the trail his boots left, as they dragged through the snow.



The smell of fish, flesh, and fruit from the Stocks. Breakfast.

By the statue that looked over the market, the second Charles and his mount trampling the head of Oliver Cromwell, he bought a pastry and Dutch biscuits from a man half-asleep by his stall.

Up the gradual climb of Cheapside, the pastry too hot to eat, and too hot to hold, Harry swapped it from hand to hand as he walked. Past where the Cheapside Cross had stood until its destruction by Puritan enthusiasm. This had happened ten years before he was born, yet people still referred to it as a landmark, the more pious offering their thoughts on the Whore of Rome as they did so.

Friday Street, Gutter Lane, Foster Lane, and Old Change.

Here, all had burned in the Conflagration. In between these townhouses, warehouses, and shops, of brick and stone, built to the new regulation and standard, some spaces still remained. Sad patches of land, never reclaimed, their charred ruins dispersed over time, replaced by litter, nettles and dirt.

Lines of stones reached up from the wharfs; the largest took days to be dragged from the quayside. The new Cathedral awaited them, ribs and stomach open to the sky. Around it lay more stones, bricks, earth, and timbers, like organs cut from it rather than materials to build it up.

From where the arch of Newgate used to be, before it too was destroyed by fire, he walked carefully down the winding lane of Snow Hill, slipping, almost falling, and then on to Holborn Hill.

He wiped the last pieces of pastry from his fingers, and transferred his attention to a biscuit.

He was at the bridge spanning the Fleet tributary.



‘Hoy! Go no further!’

An old Constable moved out from the doorway of the Vulture and stopped him with a raised and shaky palm. His face, a cracked glaze of lines, peered out from under a shabby montero. The wool of the hat was wet through, sagging onto his shoulders. Despite his age, he was tough-looking, far broader than Harry.

‘What happens here?’ Harry asked, in as business-like a tone as he could muster, wiping biscuit from his chin.

‘A finding - no mind of yours!’

‘If Sir Edmund Bury Godfrey has done the finding, then I am to meet him. Mr. Robert Hooke accompanies the Justice, does he not?’

The man blinked at him.

‘I am Mr. Harry Hunt, Observer of the Royal Society, and assistant to Mr. Hooke,’ Harry added grandly.

With a cursory thumb the Constable sent him down to the river.



Robert Hooke had shaped this place, overseeing the Fleet’s straightening, deepening, and widening. The watermen in their wherries could now reach as far as the new bridge and beyond. Before, its main users had been floating dead dogs, their corpses bumping each other, appearing to sniff one another in death as they had in life. Further upstream, the Fleet disappeared into the hillside through an arch, its huge iron grating holding back the filth carried from the Turnmill Brook.

Hooke sheltered beneath the span of Holborn Bridge, wearing his favourite overcoat, a natural grey colour. The Curator’s hunched form was easily recognised, the twist in his back diminishing what would otherwise have been a tall stature. Without the cover of a wig, and untied, Hooke’s hair hung over his large forehead and stuck to his sharp chin. His long nose, nostrils red-rimmed with a busy gathering of hair protruding from them, had a dewdrop hanging from its tip. His protuberant silver eyes acknowledged the younger man’s arrival, but he said nothing to him.

Next to him, contrastingly upright, stood a tall, impressive man in a long black camlet coat, black leather gloves and a large black hat. A rapier, sheathed in a black scabbard, poked out behind him. His black periwig swept around a large head and down over his shoulders. This Puritan severity was lessened by a single touch of ostentation, a band of gold fabric encircling the hat.

He resembled, Harry thought, a large inquisitive raven.

Harry jumped from the quayside's low wall down onto the bank. The river slid viscously over the mud, eroding the snow to a clean, frosty edge.

Hooke merely pointed further along the bank, directing Harry under the bridge.

Harry walked past the two men, through the shadow of the arch and back out into the brightness of the falling snow.



His reaction was not worthy of a New Philosopher of the Royal Society. Harry urged himself to become cooler, more dispassionate.

The dead boy, naked, possibly as young as two years, at most as old as three, had been left in a foetal position, on his side, back curved, head bowed, arms and legs pulled in to his body.

The snow falling over him softened his outline, making it look as if he came up from the ground, digested and then expelled.

'Happy New Year's Day to you, Harry,' Hooke said ironically, now striding after him, his feet sucked at by the mud under the snow. His thin voice struggled through the phlegm at the back of his throat.

Sir Edmund followed them out from under the bridge. His head hosted a meat-coloured face, long with a strong jaw, and a mouth with lips so thin it looked like an incision. His complexion, with its furrows and broken veins, betrayed a life spent in the open air.

'Mr. Hooke described you.' Sir Edmund did not wait for Hooke to make the proper introduction. His voice resonated from his diaphragm; Harry thought that he felt it and heard it in equal parts. 'Already I am impressed.'

Flattery from men of such rank was seldom received. Harry wondered how Hooke had termed his description.

‘Harry was my apprentice, but is his own man now,’ Hooke said. ‘To business, Sir Edmund?’ He stooped nearer the body. ‘An angler made the find,’ he explained to Harry. ‘Looking for grig eels, says he. He must be a night-bird for suchlike.’

‘Eels tend not to stir by day,’ Harry affirmed, swallowing. He tried to control the trembling that had started in his right thigh, hoping the older men would ascribe it to the cold. A spot of red was vivid on each of his cheeks, and the vapour in the air signalled his short, shallow breaths.

‘There are marks of unusual dispatch,’ Hooke said.

‘The eel-fisher,’ Sir Edmund added, removing his gloves, ‘ran to tell of his discovery, and cannot now bring himself back. He cowers in the Vulture.’ He produced a black notebook, leather-bound, and a portable pen and ink set. ‘A blasphemous crime. Papistry, mark my words.’ The whiteness of his knuckles, as he rubbed at his mouth, signalled his distaste.

Still trembling, but mindful of the dictates of the Royal Society, and of Robert Hooke, the man who used to be his master, Harry bent to brush snow from the body.

The boy’s skin, as pale as the snow around him, was untouched by signs of decay or being left in the water.

Harry lifted the dark fringe and looked into the eyes, their irises an unusual blue, moving towards indigo. He had heard it said that an eye withheld the image it last perceived: looking into them, Harry saw only his own reflection.

‘The eyes are not filled with a pestilent air,’ the Justice observed. ‘He is recently dead.’

‘Not recently, Sir Edmund,’ Hooke corrected him. Hooke saw the Justice’s perplexed look, but offered no further explanation. Instead, he placed the end of his finger over his right nostril and ejected snot from the left forcefully, directing it into the river.

‘What is this rectangle upon the torso?’ Harry asked, looking at a thinner dusting of snow on the uppermost part of his ribs.

‘A letter was left upon him,’ Hooke answered.

‘I have it,’ the Justice said, producing it from an inside pocket of his coat. It was small, with a broken black wax seal. ‘I shall study it later, in the warm.’ Sir Edmund slid the letter back, out of their sight.

Hooke held Harry’s arm, stopping his question for the Justice.

Harry, instead, brushed more snow from the boy, rolled him onto his back, and moved the limbs to see.

‘The manner of death is easy to read,’ he said.

‘Immediately explicable,’ Hooke agreed.

‘Well, then? How did he die?’ Sir Edmund asked them brusquely.

‘You have seen these puncture marks on the body, Sir Edmund?’ Harry indicated the insides of the tops of the legs. ‘Each with writing by it, written in ink.’

‘I have observed. The neatness of lettering next to each hole is remarkable.’

‘Going into the skin,’ Hooke continued, ‘and on, deeper, into the iliac arteries, these holes show the insertion of hollow tubes. They have a diameter about that of the shaft of a goose-feather. There are four such apertures, used to drain him of blood.’

The Justice looked steadily at the two philosophers, then made a note into his book.

Hooke felt the boy's flesh, and inspected the writing by each hole. 'A living body, when pierced, seeks to stem the blood's flow. The blood sticks at the wound, growing thick from coagulation, for the loss of too much blood brings death, by its heat being lost, and elemental or humourical imbalance.'

He loudly cleared his other nostril. It seemed to aid his thinking. 'When the action of the heart has ceased, the flow of blood goes still. The texture of this boy's skin, papery to the touch, and the feel of his flesh beneath, together with the presence of these piercings, reveal that all of his blood was laboriously removed.'

'His heart weakened, and stopped finally, before it could further expel his blood through these holes.' Sir Edmund demonstrated his understanding. 'How, then, was the remainder of his blood taken?'

Harry thought for a moment. 'The making of a Torricellian space, the vacuum encouraging the blood to flow?'

Hooke looked pleased at his assistant.

'Why a need for the entirety of this boy's blood?' Sir Edmund asked.

Hooke shrugged, his hunched back rocking with the gesture. 'These holes show the signs of repeated insertion. This writing on the body shows when.'

They stared at the sequence of dates, and at the four holes, each hole having a cluster of dates around it.

'The oldest is from nearly a year ago,' Harry observed, seeing *15th Febr. 1676/77*. 'Whoever marked these days clings to the old style of calendar.'

'The holes show no signs of healing,' Hooke said.

'He was preserved, then, for perhaps a year or more,' Harry said.

‘There are no signs of freezing, or immersion in a liquid to embalm him.’

‘Again, a Torricellian space, Mr. Hooke. The vacuum preventing decay.’

‘Why, though, this Catholic need for blood?’ Sir Edmund asked them, writing furiously.

Hooke looked at him mildly. ‘You try to steer us where we do not necessarily wish to go, Sir Edmund. There is nothing here that shows Papistry.’

Sir Edmund’s expression grew dark, and he snapped his gloves together loudly.

‘Infusion?’ Harry suggested, a little to cheer the Justice.

‘Into another, Harry? Our own trials at the Society have been too often unsuccessful.’

‘Mr. Coga received very well the blood of a dog, and of a man.’

‘We only ever risked small amounts of blood to be so transferred. Other infusions ended in agony, and tragedy. Into many others then, Harry? In modest amounts?’ Hooke, ignoring Sir Edmund’s irritable look, spoke with a professorial air, that of a teacher with his favoured student.

Sir Edmund Bury Godfrey had never met two people who discussed such phenomena quite as *affectionately* as these. Even the lowliest chirurgeons of his acquaintance maintained at least pretence of delicacy and deference in his company.

But they would be useful to him.

‘Pope Innocent VIII,’ he offered tentatively, ‘when given the blood from boys to rejuvenate him, received Catholic blood; there was no countenancing any other.’

‘The project failed,’ Hooke replied dismissively. ‘Innocent died soon after.’

Sir Edmund growled at the Curator’s discourtesy, and one hand clenched into a fist. He forced himself to relax it, and clenched his jaw instead.

Harry wiped off the falling snow again, using the edge of his hand. On the boy’s chest were fine splashes, white, almost transparent. He picked at one, and it folded flakily onto his fingernail.

‘Candle wax,’ he observed. ‘Beneath, the skin is unaffected by the heat of the wax. These splashes were made after he died.’

‘Worked on at night?’ Hooke wondered. ‘Or in a darkened place, a candle lodged upon his ribs to provide a light to work by.’ Hooke bent next to Harry, looking closely at the wax. ‘This is bleached bees-wax, an extravagance in most households.’

‘Liturgical candles?’ Sir Edmund asked. ‘Catholic practises!’ He looked triumphantly at them.

‘Such candles are not only employed at Mass,’ Hooke said.

Sir Edmund seemed unconvinced, and he showed them his annoyance by his laboured concealment of it. He gestured at the snow around them. ‘You see the curious lack of prints.’

‘There are only our own, and those of the angler,’ Harry agreed. ‘How did the boy arrive here? Surely, then, by water.’

‘There are no marks in the mud leading from the Fleet,’ Hooke replied.

The Justice looked about them. ‘The fall of snow covers the mud around the body. Any impressions upon it have disappeared.’

‘You play the Devil’s Advocate, Sir Edmund.’ Hooke indicated the smears on their legs. ‘We make deep impressions; such holes could not have filled.’

‘We are close enough to the Thames for the ebb and flow of its tide to have an effect. The tide has removed any footprints...?’ The question in the Justice’s voice suggested a lack of conviction.

‘The tide ebbs, but slowly, and we are close to the neap tide, in the first quarter of the moon, when the water does not rise and fall so greatly,’ Hooke replied.

Sir Edmund stared through the murky water of the Fleet. ‘This mud is surely impossible to traverse,’ he said. ‘And there are no rubs from a wherry’s keel. The body was not dropped from up on the quay - it being too far from the wall. Nor was it dropped from the height of the bridge.’

He shifted uneasily. 'Everything must have its cause. Everything leaves evidence of its passing. A murderer may not show clear reason for his crime, yet, given the body, his methods at least - of killing and disposal - are always apparent.'

A little further along the bank was the angler's large box of bait. It had ropes attached, to be transported on the eelerman's back. Moving to it, Harry saw that it was full of lampreys. Their sucking mouths pouted stupidly up at him, and a film of slime covered their lengths. 'He wants a large haul, with this much bait.'

They walked back along the side of the bridge and climbed up onto the quayside.

'Here in this place openly - it is not a thing hotly wrought.' Sir Edmund looked morosely back down at the bank. 'This boy suffered an elaborate killing.'

The Justice sent the old Constable into the Vulture to bring out the angler.

His head a little resembling the fish he preyed upon, the man had thick stubble high up to the cheekbones, and his boots and hands were filthy with the mud of the bank.

He told them his name was Enoch Wolfe.

'Do you remember anything further than you told Sir Edmund?' Hooke asked him. 'Was anything here that is not here now? No skiff, no wherry?'

Wolfe shook his head. 'Only night and rain,' he replied. 'Traded for day and snow.'

He looked at Sir Edmund for reassurance that he should answer questions from this odd-looking, twisted man with his youthful colleague. The Justice he knew well - who did not? - but who were these two with him?

Sir Edmund, with a snarl, confirmed that he should.

'No person on the bridge, by the water, nor up upon the quayside?' Hooke enquired.

'Just me, my lampreys, and the eels I was after,' Wolfe declared.

‘I caught you peeking at the missive left upon the boy,’ Sir Edmund said accusingly.

‘I was curious, as any man would be.’

‘You can read?’ Sir Edmund asked.

‘My father taught me,’ Wolfe replied proudly. ‘But that with the boy was just numbers on each page.’

Harry looked across at Hooke, whose expression signalled that if Sir Edmund wished them to know more, he would say it soon enough.

Satisfied that Wolfe had no more to tell, Sir Edmund committed the angler to silence about the discovery.

‘Where can we find you again, Mr. Wolfe, should we have need?’ Harry enquired.

The man shifted his weight again, and gestured vaguely westwards. ‘Over the bridge. Go into Alsatia. Anybody there knows me.’

‘I recognised you, from Alsatia,’ Sir Edmund told him, ominously.

‘*God spared not the Angels that sinned, but cast them down to Hell.*’ Wolfe let a mischievous look twitch across his lips, no sooner seen than gone.

‘We are, all of us, lower than Angels,’ Sir Edmund chastised him.

As Wolfe moved away he became faint in the falling snow.

‘We have no hope of his remaining quiet,’ Sir Edmund said. ‘He is off to tell all, in return for his drink.’ He wiped his mouth. ‘I need time to brief my intelligencers, to hear what is said about the town. If the boy is from loving kin I feel sorry for them.’

They sheltered together in the doorway of the tavern. The Constable stood miserably in the snow, his rank dictating his exposure to the elements. Harry felt some guilt at displacing him, but did not offer to swap places with the old man.

‘Mr. Hooke,’ Sir Edmund said, ‘I need a more close examination of this boy. Perhaps at the Fleet prison? It would be convenient there.’

‘At Gresham’s College,’ Hooke replied. ‘I have my own tools. But I cannot promise the participation of the Royal Society. I am merely its Curator. You will need the President’s permission.’

‘You have the skills to anatomise the body?’

‘I studied medicine under Dr. Thomas Willis, and assisted him with his chirurgical and chymical work. I can perform an autopsy well enough,’ Hooke said, nettled by the Justice’s question.

‘Well enough is well enough. It would be more private at Gresham’s. I shall not yet make known the finding; such a diabolical murder will cause unease. The taking of blood from so young a child is irreligious, and points to Papistry. If word escapes, the mob will add its own shine to the affair.’

‘It would influence only the credulous,’ Hooke said.

‘It may be designed to influence precisely those!’ Sir Edmund answered, his temper rising again at Hooke’s unsubtle dig.

‘We will not divulge a thing of it,’ Hooke promised for them both.

Sir Edmund gripped him firmly by the elbow. ‘Before his dissection, have you the means to renew his preservation?’

Surprised by his question, Hooke answered. ‘That you ask shows your knowledge that we have. I shall speak with Viscount Brouncker, the President, to seek his agreement. The boy will fit the receiver of the Air-pump at Gresham’s.’

‘It must be done soon, before he decays.’

Hooke gently removed himself from Sir Edmund’s grasp. ‘I can preserve the boy in the Air-pump. That is Mr. Boyle’s property rather than the Society’s. He is engaged in the writing out of

his chymico-physical doubts and paradoxes, and has no need of it presently. The boy, I am sure, will fit the receiver. Any dissection I will not do without Brouncker.'

Sir Edmund accepted this. 'I shall get the boy to Gresham's.'

He instructed the Constable to find his man Welkin, at Hartshorne Lane in Westminster, to transport the body. The man scuffled off through the snow, to find a waterman to take him west. His whole body communicated complaint.

'I believe,' Sir Edmund announced, his deep voice emphasising his faith, 'that you both together will explain away this killing. Your knowledge of blood and *vacua* will greatly assist in the finding of this child's murderer. London affords many places for the concealment of bodies; disappearance is a common phenomenon. The finding of them, left so deliberately to be found, less so.'

Sir Edmund left them abruptly to commandeer a tumbrel that he saw; the trader, at first belligerent, was by the end of their short discussion subservient and agreeable.

'Sir Edmund is persuasive,' Hooke observed, still sheltering in the doorway, wiping at his nose with the sleeve of his coat.

'Unlike the trader there, you were willingly coerced.'

'True enough, although I find the Justice to be difficult, like rubbing up against a smoothing paper. Why does he press to keep the boy preserved?'

'In truth, I cannot say, Mr. Hooke.'

Hooke looked anxiously down at the scene by the water, the Fleet flowing past them, and past the body of the boy, being steadily covered by the snowfall. 'Sir Edmund assumes a Catholic cause for this murder. The finding of this boy may lead us into an unfathomable matter, like sailors dragged down after their sinking ship. We must take a care to keep our eyes steadily fixed upon the facts of Nature, and so receive their images simply, as they are.'

Harry nodded pensively. 'You must return to the warmth, otherwise we will have a second death. Sir Francis Bacon died from his trial to preserve the chicken with snow.'

'You are entirely right, Harry.' Hooke's stuffed head and lungs made his words sound as if they are expressed through treacle. 'Let us return now to the College.'

'I shall meet with you there presently. I must attend to something first.'

Harry watched Hooke saying his farewells to the Justice, who was pushing the sequestered tumbrel back towards the bridge. Seeing his curved spine, and hearing his wheezing breaths and sniffs fading as he moved off along the quayside, he wondered how far the Curator would want to help Sir Edmund. Hooke lived for his natural philosophy and for his building, and had enough demands for his time; he was not a politicker.

The Justice had powerful allies, though - perhaps Hooke had no choice but to extend his assistance.

The snow blustering around him, Harry, in the doorway, at last allowed his body to react to the finding of the murdered boy. He scooped up a handful of snow to take the bitter taste from his mouth, and kicked some over his breakfast, the undigested pastry and biscuits.

'Get yourself to Bishopsgate, Mr. Hunt!' the Justice called. 'I shall wait with the boy. My man will deliver him to you. I shall meet you there at Gresham's College, to see him preserved.'