The Grauballe Man

By Seamus Heaney

As if he had been poured in tar, he lies
on a pillow of turf and seems to weep

the black river of himself. The grain of his wrists is like bog oak, the ball of his heel

like a basalt egg. His instep has shrunk cold as a swan’s foot or a wet swamp root.

His hips are the ridge and purse of a mussel, his spine an eel arrested under a glisten of mud.

The head lifts, the chin is a visor raised above the vent of his slashed throat

that has tanned and toughened. The cured wound opens inwards to a dark elderberry place.

Who will say ‘corpse’ to his vivid cast? Who will say ‘body’ to his opaque repose?

And his rusted hair, a mat unlikely as a foetus’s. I first saw his twisted face

in a photograph, a head and shoulder out of the peat, bruised like a forceps baby,

but now he lies perfected in my memory, down to the red horn of his nails,
hung in the scales
with beauty and atrocity:
with the Dying Gaul
too strictly compassed

on his shield,
with the actual weight
of each hooded victim,
slashed and dumped.


Caution: Users are warned that this work is protected under copyright laws and downloading is strictly prohibited. The right to reproduce or transfer the work via any medium must be secured with Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.