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.


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