

CIARAN BERRY

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*The Irish Sheep Boy*

Consider first his knees, calloused as the bare soles  
of feet that know no shoe, and how his toes point  
skywards now that he goes on two limbs and not four,

now that he stands before us naked, on display.  
What must it be for the spine to go parallel  
to the soil? What must it be for the tongue to make

no human sound, and for the food that fills the mouth  
to never touch the hand? Even if he's only myth,  
consider him, head down, the one black sheep

in the flock that dots the hill's incline, or the wind-scoured  
precipice of a sea cliff, where his gnarled teeth  
picked between clover and vetch—this boy brought

across the dykes and fens, into this refrigerator  
of a room, where Nicolaes Tulp considers him,  
noting his firm flesh, his rigid hands, scorched skin,

how he's destitute of all softness and ignorant of fear.  
And who's to say what the *Praelector Anatomiae* wants here  
isn't to cut into the flesh, to be the butcher hacking

bone he was once when ice kept the canal barges  
frozen, the rope burns still wet round the neck  
of the ex-burglar brought through on a stretcher and laid

down before the good doctor, who ran his thumb  
over the stopped jugular, opened like flowers  
the fingers of the half-closed fists, while the soon to be

revered painter steadied his easel's wobbly leg,  
steadied his hand, and the eager merchants waited by the door.  
Oh the wonder going in and going in, plucking

like a harp string the exposed tendon to make the fingers  
dance down the far end of the arm, to pry open  
the mouths of those bearded men who, let in, look on,

who might as well clap hands as Rembrandt fixes them  
to his canvas in their white ruffles and black robes.  
But what happens to the body after this of Aris Kindt,

that broke-necked thief, and the only corpse  
the city allows cut up that year? A paper shroud perhaps?  
A pauper's grave? And the painting named instead

for the doctor who presides, so that everyone who stands  
before that portrait in The Hague knows nothing of the dead man,  
not even his name. What happens to the Sheep Boy,

creature who exists only in Tulp's six sentences,  
where he shifts forever his ovine form, and I can't take my eyes off him,  
reading again between the lines of my *mutus*, *tetrapus*,

*hirsutus* countryman, his rapidness of body, his nimbleness of foot,  
his depressed forehead and his knotty occiput,  
his lack of human voice, his love of grass and hay?