

England · Casey Finch

he was alert and sad, like a sparrow.
on the day of his death, the rain
was merciless and tore, with its thousand
hooks, at the forests and the plowlands.
the rain was merciless and cold, as
in elegies, and broken umbrellas lay
like bats along the roads, with wind-
inverted ribs, abandoned, twisting and
flexing in the invisible air. on the
day of his death, for a tiny moment,
all the visionaries stopped shuffling
their marked, mysterious decks of
cards and gave back, to their customers,
the coins they had stolen. and in
the afternoon, the poets, happy to
seize on the fresh material, carried
the news of it to the drunken kings
of northumbria:

how, when he fought,
the sparks that rose from the
blade of his battle-axe covered
the canopy of stars. the sparks that
rose were counted, one by one, and
took their fixed, significant places in
the stories of his outrage and courage;
how, robbed, at last, of his friends
and retainers, he stared out, dumbly, from
the ridiculous solitude of the mead-hall;
how, in the end, an animal broke his
spine in two, like a cardboard shirt-
liner from the cleaners; how the companions-
in-arms gathered together and bore his
body on a shield over the blackened hills;
and how, at dusk, the sun, a kind of old
and rusted pinball, fell gracelessly
out of the air, down a ramp, and back
into the terrible belly of the earth. dusk



which smelled like his last meal of
lamb raised by the labor of peasants
whose farms he sacked when he was bored
and ambitious.

he was alert and sad.

he used to stretch the evening sky across
the lands he brought his battles to,
to make of blood an ocean and throw the
bodies of his enemies there, until the waves
began to groan and plead that he
release them, until the waves were choked
with the deaths of men he might have
liked, he might have fed and entertained
at great expense.

he was strong and loved
to brag and pity himself. he was alert
and sad, like a sparrow. once all the
crouched halls of the countryside shook
with the episodes of his cruelty. once
the moon itself grew hot and breathless
when his sword and shining loins
sparkled in the light with which it
followed him around, like a dog.

but now

he's gone. now the mead-halls are emptied
of their criminals and their feasts.
only a handful of men continue the lies
he initiated. and of the sons they
send forth onto the bombed-out battle-
fields, into the torched buildings,
fewer and fewer remember the noisy,
unreluctant man whose hands and breath
stank of mead, who, delicate and insane,
pushed countries about with his feet, whose
laughter was so frightening and rare.