

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Habitus

by Steve Brown

'A human being has so many skins inside, covering the depths of the heart. We know so many things, but we don't know ourselves. Why, thirty or forty skins or hides, as thick and hard as an ox's or a bear's, cover the soul.' – Meister Eckhart

I.

Coming on this photograph by chance,
I thought 'I have my dead....' in half-quotation:
there she was, as I recognise and remember her –
the half-turned wrist, fingers extended in explanation,
the scraped-back black and ballerina hair,
the white expanse of forehead, a half-smile
of sunlit irony. She is there as she was –
in the full habit of her soul: a revenant,
so that I half-way want to believe
what some people believed: that photography
stripped off a layer from the soul – that would be
at least some surface of survival,
an onion-skin of meaning: icon.

II.

In the closing weeks, just before
the abrupt dismantling of that dark alembic
that Belsen was, one particular guard, one Irma Grese,
said to one of her charges/victims:
'We'll soon be home' – as if both stood
in some shared plight: that both had
been shifted far from habit, far from home:
Irma from the village where she'd come from,
where she'd never met a Jew. It's as though
'habit' was some safe, soft groove
you could always slip back into – as though
it was always there, and that the years between
could easily be cancelled. 'Not my usual habit' –
open cheque, soft exoneration: 'your true self'.
Perhaps she stood amazed at all the violence
she had done; 'home' was some cleansing melody,
'habit' were the clothes she could change back into.