



ALL SOULS NIGHT.

Days of skeletal emotions
the weather-blistered
countryside
signals its coming.
This primal night
of fear and dread
falls at last
on cold, wet stone
and crow-racked garden.
I am ten autumns old,
yet the unimaginable
business performed this night,
chills and drains
my blood and bones.
Evening dies quickly,
waked by steel-blue clouds
and chattering magpies.
I gaze upwards;
the sky, thick and starless,
gives no comfort.

Almost time to go to church!
A sullen fire
spits sparked messages
from those suffering souls
waiting for release below.
Hurry! Hurry!
Window-panes creak and groan;
the unknown
raps loudly; the unseen
stares.
I shuffle and juggle
with soap and comb,
leather and a boot-lace;
until, too soon,
it is time to go.

Then they rise in me,
images; tortured, agonised.
Images that crowd
my racing imagination.
How many souls
will my childish prayers release
before I go to sleep
tonight?
Do souls have eyes?
Does my soul see me?
And if I die
before I wake,
will mine go down

to burn with them
and await my turn
next All Soul's Night?

We set out,
my brother and I;
false courage filling
overcoat pockets.
We trudge
through the whispering gloom
to the waiting church.
From the gate,
it looks tomb-like;
shadowy, hollow, final.
Blinking, I peer
into its cavernous belly.
From the door
its emptiness is crushing.

Shadows
take human shape.
Sounds
take prayer word.
Hail Mary! Holy Mary!
Save us! Save us!
No turning back now.
I creep in silence
into the waxen glow
of funeral-candle flickerings
to kneel and wait
and watch
an old man, toothless,
work-worn,
wiping glistening hail
from his Sunday cap.
Gazing glass-eyed
at a chipped chalk icon,
an old woman, death faced,
kneels; crow-bone fingers
shuffle and twitch;
rosary beads knit and purl
Embroidered placations.
Hail Mary! Holy Mary!
Pray for us! Pray for us!
Footsteps
echo and ring;
noses
sniff and scent
the acrid incensed air;
beads and bones
rattle and drum.
The ritual has commenced.
Jesus falls the first time!

Furtively, I peer
at a mottled wall.
Dark and faded,
the Stations of the Cross
peer back.
Jesus falls the Second Time.

Sighs, mingled
with yellow candle smoke
and endless, wordless chanting
float
Jesus falls the Third Time.
to rest eternal
among prayer-stained rafters.

Outside, the wind stirs
new terrors
as I race my rounds.
One soul, two souls,
ten souls saved!
In the half-light
a cold rain stings and burns.
Grim-faced pilgrims moving;
unconscious players
in some eternal mime.
I gaze upwards,
a star winks
and is gone.
I walk quickly
away from this place.
Don't look behind!
Dead leaves and gravel converse
and crunch
under polished boots.
We speed homeward,
my brother and I, to light and life
and the safety
of hot buttered scones.
There, at last, the weight
is lifted; the dread
is swallowed
by warm kitchen smells
and a mother's eyes.

An hour ago
I was old as Death.
Now again, I am ten
and my blood runs red
and shadows and spirits
and long-dead faces
are quickly banished.
Now life and play
and laughter
fill the night hours
'till sleep comes creeping;
this All Souls Night.