

## ‘November’

*Commentary by Michael Woods*

**This poem is a memory of driving a friend’s terminally ill grandmother to a hospital or hospice where she will die. The title of the poem not only records the time of year in which the incident happened, it is coincidentally the month that is emphatically part of winter after the dying time of autumn.**

**The opening** of the poem takes the reader right into the middle of the action described: “We walk to the ward from the badly parked car” (line 1) is an accurate presentation of a situation in which so many people with elderly relatives find themselves. The contrast between the able bodied younger adults and the frail, elderly grandmother is evident in the fact she takes “four short steps” to their “two” (line 2). The third line begins with the first person plural pronoun “We”, just as the first did, indicating a shared experience. The end of the line indicates the shared knowledge of the couple concerned who might not articulate the reality of the situation but do not need to: “We have brought her here to die and we know it” concludes the first stanza in a stark way that states what the grandchild and the speaker do not need to say to each other. The matter of fact nature of the reality of the statement is reinforced through Armitage’s use of monosyllabic words.

**The second stanza** shifts the focus from “we” to “you” as the speaker is clearly someone who is sensitive to the friend’s need to minister to her last needs. The need to treat the dying with dignity is foregrounded here. The grandson (John, we assume) tends to the grandmother’s needs, ensuring that her washing things and comforting “family trinkets” are with her. The phrase “parcel her in rough blankets” conveys a sense of someone about to be dispatched somewhere just as a package is through the post; the destination will, though, be the grave. The adjective “rough” reinforces the harsh reality of the situation and this is shockingly clinched in line 6, “she sinks down into her incontinence.”

**Stanza three** graphically confronts what old age does to the human body in a manner that is redolent of Philip Larkin’s poem, ‘The Old Fools’. In what reads like a litany of decay, the speaker catalogues “bloodless smiles”, “slack breasts”, “stunned brains” and “baldness”. He tells his friend in a moment of recognition that so often accompanies the experience of being so close to the elderly and to death when we ourselves reach a certain age: “we are almost these monsters” (line 9). The word “monsters” may seem a very harsh word to use about other human beings but it is not necessarily to be construed as callous in this context because the speaker is clearly envisioning his own decline and that of his friend, John as dying men. Nothing is more powerful than death to remind one of one’s own mortality.

The speaker continues his concern for his friend by driving his car home for him, having recognised that he is “shattered” (line 10). This word is clearly ambiguous in its use because we are used to it being used by people who are describing how tired they feel but

we sometimes use it to describe being emotionally “shattered” , and this is clearly the case with John. The “drive / through the twilight zone” has air of surreality about it as it recalls the title of a science fiction series that these friends may well have watched on television together but it also keys into the limbo-like sense that we can have after being newly bereaved. The friends “numb” themselves with alcohol as much, we sense, to try to forget their own mortality as much as to come to terms with the death of John’s grandmother.

The friends “feel the terror of the dusk begin” in a description that clearly invites us to see the falling of night-time as a metaphor for the impending death of us all. The coming of night is inevitable and unstoppable. The speaker feels impotent as the friends find themselves “failing again” to do anything about it. Whether “Inside” or “Outside”, the predicament is the same, “We can say nothing.” (line 15)

The **tercets** that make up the first five stanzas of this poem and that presents the reader with the experience of death, modulates into a couplet at its conclusion. For all of us it will one day “be time” but before it is we must make the most of the time we do have left and to recognise that there are bright times as well as dark ones:

Sometimes the sun spangles and we feel alive.  
One thing we have to get, John, out of this life.

This **closing couplet** emphatically affirms life at the ends of both of its lines, “alive” and “life” remind John that life must go on. There is a sense that buried in the line is the idea that we need to make sure that we get something out of this life before we are forced to get out of it.