DUBLIN BEGGAR

In the courtyard of St. Teresa of Avila’s, just before mass, she sprawled on the stones, her back against the building, a thicket of black hair tangling across her face. Her age was unknowable—but nearly old—as I am nearly old, skirts spread in billows around her like shadow. I leaned down and touched her. No, I leaned on the church wall and watched her. No.

She made me sad and terrified. You know how it is— you don’t know what helps and what doesn’t. You want to be good. You want to walk away and not think about it. I walked half a block beyond her, then turned and went back.

As I dug through my change-purse for coins, I tried to look into her ruined face; she didn’t look at me—there was no sign that she saw me—No sign she saw anything, her black eyes focused on nothing, or on something far off beyond the high wall.

How can the spirit fall from the body—who allows it and where does it go? No one can carry it back after it’s gone too far. Beyond us, three tolls of the church bell, and the tuppence, the twenty pence, I tossed into the black hat turned upside-down on the walk made no sound when they fell.