

Sixteen steps to the ice-house



Before the invention of refrigerators and freezers, ice was a great luxury. An ice-house was a special building, usually covered with earth, that was once used to store ice. During the winter, wealthy people would arrange for large blocks of ice to be cut from frozen lakes. They would store the ice in their ice-houses where, packed with straw, it would stay frozen until summer. A few ice-houses can still be found today in the grounds of grand old houses.

SIXTEEN steps to the ice-house
BLACK with slime-slither mould,
SIXTEEN steps to the dungeon depths
AND that petrifying cold
5 THAT holds the souls of servants
LIKE breath afraid to breathe
LEST it disturbs some sinewy shape –
NOT of this century.
CLATTER! as rat-scattered bones
10 SHATTER the stagnant still,
ECHO empty tunes to the dead
WHO guard, in ghostly chill,
SIXTEEN steps *from* the ice-house
BLACK with slime-slither mould,
15 SIXTEEN steps *from* the dungeon depths
AND that petrifying cold.

Gina Douthwaite

Glossary

dungeon a dark underground prison
petrifying turning things to stone
sinewy lean and wiry
stagnant still, without movement

1 This poem is called a 'concrete' or 'shape' poem. What is 'concrete' about its layout and construction? Your answer should explain why capital letters are used at the start of each line, why the lines are laid out as they are and anything you notice about the number of lines in the poem.

2 marks

2 At the beginning of the poem, is the speaker going up the steps or down them?

1 mark

3 Name two clues suggesting that the ice-house has been there for a long time.

1 mark

4 Give one example each of:

a) an end-of-line full rhyme

1 mark

b) an internal near-rhyme

1 mark

5 Quote two phrases suggesting that the steps are haunted.

2 marks

6 Who might the ghosts have been when they were alive? Explain your answer.

1 mark

7 Certain lines are repeated or said again in a slightly different way. What is the effect of this repetition?

1 mark