

Chapter 3 Terror: *The Hawk in the Rain, Lupercal, Wodwo*

Hughes almost always began his readings and successive editions of his *Selected Poems* with 'The Thought Fox', as though he regarded it as an appropriate overture to his oeuvre. It represents, perhaps, what he understood by opening negotiations. 'The Thought-Fox' is obviously an animal poem; but it is also, primarily, something else. The opening words of the poem 'I imagine' confirm what we have already been alerted to in the title, that this is not, primarily, a poem about a fox, but a poem about writing a poem, about the kind of thinking which produces poems, or produced them for Hughes at that stage of his career. In 1956, the year after the writing of the poem, Hughes tried to explain this kind of thinking to his wife Sylvia Plath. He tried very hard, very patiently, because it was what he thought she most needed to learn to release her own hitherto cramped poetic imagination.

The thing to do in thinking about anything is not to try and get a clear mental picture of it, or a distinct mental concept, with all its details there, vivid in your brain, but to try to look at the actual thing happening in front of you. I find a clear distinction between these two types of thinking about a thing. As soon as I begin imagining the thing happening in my world, everything comes right. That's not quite it. It's as though in the first way of thinking I thought about the thought, taking the thought and forcing it into shape or realness. In the second way it's more like the process of memory, I think straight to the thing and am not conscious of any mental intervention. ... The second way I get the feel, weight, sound, every nuance of atmosphere about a concrete thing.¹

This is very similar to the instructions Hughes was later to give to children in *Poetry in the Making*:

Imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it. Do not think it up laboriously, as if you were working out mental arithmetic. Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it. When you do this, the words look after themselves, like magic.²

¹ *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Reid, Faber and Faber, 2007, 52.

² *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. Scammell, Faber and Faber, 1994, 13.

What, then, are the thoughts and memories, the ‘feelings and energies’, which Hughes here tries to articulate through the metaphor of the fox? His experiences of foxes had been so many and so vivid that he had already, when he wrote this poem in 1955, come to regard the fox as his totem. In *Poetry in the Making* he recalled

An animal I never succeeded in keeping alive is the fox. I was always ,
frustrated: twice by a farmer, who killed cubs I had caught before I could get
to them, and once by a poultry keeper who freed my cub while his dog
waited. [*Winter Pollen*, 13]

In his story ‘The Deadfall’ the young Ted goes camping with his older brother Gerald in Crimsworth Dene. In the middle of the night he is woken by a ghostly old lady, who takes him to the deadfall, where he is able to release a fox cub caught by its tail and a hind leg under the edge of the fallen slab. He does not notice until next morning that an adult fox lies dead under the slab. The brothers remove it and bury it. From the loosened earth Ted picks up what he thinks is a white pebble. It is an ivory fox. I asked Hughes if this had really happened. He said it had, and he still kept the ivory fox.

After the move to Mexborough when Ted was seven, he would get up early in order to walk along the Don before school. The river in spate had scooped out great hollows between the tree roots. He found that if he crept up the side of one of these hollows as quietly as possible, and peeped over into the next, he might see some interesting wildlife. On one occasion, as he crept up one side of such a slope, a fox, unknown to him, was creeping even more stealthily up the other. They reached the top at the same moment, and from a distance of about nine inches, for a split second that seemed an eternity, gazed into each other’s eyes. The presence of the fox, its perfect selfhood, was so intense that it seemed to enter the boy’s head and dislodge his own more provisional self.

At the end of Hughes’ second year at Cambridge he was becoming increasingly disillusioned with reading English, which was not, as he had hoped, helping his writing. In the early hours, unable to begin his essay on Dr. Johnson, he went to bed and dreamed that his door opened and

across the room towards me came a figure that was at the same time a skinny man and a fox walking erect on its hind legs. It was a fox, but the size of a wolf. As it approached and came into the light I saw that its body and limbs had just now stepped out of a furnace. Every inch was roasted, smouldering, black-charred, split and bleeding. Its eyes, which were level with mine where I sat, dazzled with the intensity of the pain. It came up until it stood

beside me. Then it spread its hand — a human hand as I saw now, but burned and bleeding like the rest of him — flat down on the blank space of my page. At the same time it said: ‘Stop this — you are destroying us.’ Then as it lifted its hand away I saw the blood-print, like a palmist’s specimen, with all the lines and creases, in wet, glistening blood on the page.

[*Winter Pollen*, 9]

The page was, indeed, blood-printed.

Yet another experience which had imprinted itself on Hughes was a scene in an Ingmar Bergman film where a fox crossed an expanse of virgin snow.

By recognizing the fox as his totem I meant that Hughes had instinctively recognized it (along with the wolf) as an outward living embodiment of everything within his own psyche which had been persecuted, injured, imprisoned, either by his culture or by his own rational intellect.

Clearly it was never Hughes’ intention to compress all these images of fox into the poem, rather to let those which were attracted by the theme of the act of writing a poem, come together and cohere. The poet must hunt for what will give his thought a living body, with a life beyond his own. The first words, ‘I imagine’, are his opening of the door, his invocation to ‘something else’ (whatever happened to be out there) to visit him out of the darkness. At that point his ego abdicates control. In the words of Neil Roberts ‘Hughes does everything possible to suggest that the agency of creating the poem has passed from the speaker to the fox’.³

What he imagines first is not the fox, but ‘this midnight moment’s forest’. Midnight is the witching time of night, when human consciousness is most exposed to the non-human. Darkness is the subconscious world with all its primeval fears. The unconscious projects its demons and horrors onto the creatures of night, such as bat and owl. The wolf, which never harms humans, has been so demonized for centuries.

The fox has been similarly victimized and persecuted. So the fox in the poem emerges indistinctly from the forest and falling snow, one step at a time, seeking what cover it can find, lame from some trap it has barely survived. But the forest at midnight is also the time when the stranglehold of culture and rational intellect is at its weakest, can be, with sufficient courage, momentarily shed. The ‘clearing’ made by the poet’s openness and receptivity emboldens the fox to assume its confident, brilliant foxhood, to come about its own business, and to enter in safety its true home, the ‘dark hole of the head’.

It is for this reason that Hughes recommended a ten-minute time-limit for children to write poems:

³ *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 21.

‘Animals’ are the subject here, but more important is the idea of headlong, concentrated improvisation on a set theme. ... These artificial limits create a crisis, which rouses the brain’s resources: the compulsion towards haste overthrows the ordinary precautions, flings everything into top gear, and many things that are usually hidden find themselves rushed into the open. Barriers break down, prisoners come out of their cells.⁴

The poet has also been demonized, as a lunatic who lets his fingers move over paper as if they had a life of their own, who willingly enters the darkness to negotiate with ‘whatever happens to be out there’, who rashly opens the self to the not-self and the animal self. Why does he do it? The point is that the monsters which maraud in the unconscious have become monstrous only because of their imprisonment there. They are actually what Blake called the Energies. Their acceptance and release into the light makes it possible for them to begin to operate creatively. They are necessary to our wholeness. It is only when Prospero breaks the staff of his dominating ego and drowns the book of his rational intellect, frees Ariel from servitude, and acknowledges Caliban (a ‘thing of darkness’) as an essential part of himself, that he recovers his buried humanity.

In 1957, the year of the publication of ‘The Thought-Fox’ in *The Hawk in the Rain*, Hughes wrote:

In each poem, besides the principal subject ...there is what is not so easy to talk about, even generally, but which is the living and individual element in every poet’s work. What I mean is the way he brings to peace all the feelings and energies which, from all over the body, heart, and brain, send up their champions onto the battleground of that first subject. The way I do this, as I believe, is by using something like the method of a musical composer. I might say that I turn every combatant into as formal and balanced a figure of melody and rhythm as I can. When all the words are hearing each other clearly, and every stress is feeling every other stress, and all are contented — the poem is finished.⁵

The relevance of this to ‘The Thought-Fox’ is underlined by the resemblance of these closing words ‘the poem is finished’ to the closing words of the ‘The Thought-Fox’, ‘the page is printed’.

⁴ *Poetry in the Making*, Faber and Faber, 1967, 23.

⁵ Faas, Ekbert, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*, Black Sparrow Press, 1980, 163.

Here Hughes seems to conceive of the negotiator as peace-maker, using his poetic craftsmanship to impose form and resolution on the warring elements of his being. The fifties was a time when the American New Critics were very much the vogue in Cambridge, and Hughes' formulation comes close to theirs. The fox enters the head to become a thought, which can then be composed and modulated into a poem. Where the 'principal subject' is less amenable than a passing fox, the method is in danger of erecting formal insulation against the full impact of the other when let into the self. Hughes was soon to find that Nature cannot be so easily tamed, caged almost, by Art.

Almost all the poems Hughes wrote before the death of Sylvia Plath are in regular stanzas, usually of four lines. One of these very regular poems, which even has several rhymes, is 'Egg-Head' (1956), where Hughes deliberately selects those aspects of nature, of 'the world's knocking' — 'the flash of the sun, the bolt of the earth' — which are most other, and therefore most threatening to the complacent ego:

A leaf's otherness,
The whaled mostered sea-bottom, eagled peaks
And stars that hang over hurtling endlessness,
With manslaughtering shocks

Are let in on his sense:
So many a one has dared to be struck dead
Peeping through his fingers at the world's ends,
Or at an ant's head.⁶

Peeping through one's fingers does not sound much like negotiating.

Hughes mocks the juggleries and sophistries of the egg-head, but his own defence is to drown out the reality with a performance of verbal pyrotechnics. The style does not authenticate the content. The horror is theoretical. A man who is terrified does not write such confident verse. Hughes trumpets the reader's ear dead to anything beyond the printed page. The masterful rhetoric, the 'masculine persuasive force', remained Hughes' typical mode in *Lupercal*. The mode is still there in *Wodwo*, but so are many alternative modes, including the completely opposite title poem (1961), where those features are stripped away completely. After the death of Plath in 1963 any formalism is rare, as increasingly-free verse becomes the only form which can express the unprocessed other. There was no

⁶ All quotations from Hughes' poems for adults are from *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems*, Faber and Faber, 2003.

question of turning the howling of wolves and the screeching of rats into ‘formal and balanced figures of melody and rhythm’.

Roger Elkin⁷ suggests some influence from Roethke, who wrote:

There are areas of experience in modern life that simply cannot be rendered by either the formal lyric or straight prose ... The writer in freer forms must have an even greater fidelity to his subject matter than the poet who has the support of form. He must keep his eye on the object, and his rhythm must move as his mind moves, must be imaginatively right or he is lost.⁸

When Hughes spoke in 1970 of being ‘all for opening negotiations with whatever happened to be out there’, those negotiations had at last begun to bear fruit, but he had had to pass through many harrowing years in which it had seemed that what was out there was an implacable enemy with all the weapons and with no interest in negotiation.

When we consider how early Hughes acquired the label ‘animal poet’, it is surprising to note that of the forty poems in *The Hawk in the Rain* only four are animal poems. Of those, ‘The Hawk in the Rain’, ‘The Thought-Fox’ and ‘The Horses’ are at least as much about the narrator as the animal; and ‘The Jaguar’ is as much about the crowd watching the jaguar. These are thought-animals; and the same applies to such later animals as pike, bull and thrushes. They are, in addition to being wonderfully evoked real creatures, theriomorphic images of aspects of nature, or of human nature. Hughes’ first animal poem, ‘The Jaguar’ (1954), was much admired by Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello:

Hughes is feeling his way towards a different kind of being-in-the-world, one which is not entirely foreign to us, since the experience before the cage seems to belong to dream-experience, experience held in the collective unconscious. ... We know the jaguar not from the way he seems but from the way he moves. The body is as the body moves, or as the currents of life move within it. ... He shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves.

⁷ Elkin, Roger, ‘Hidden Influences in the Poetry of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath’, 2009. www.earth-moon.org/crit_elkin.

⁸ Roethke, Theodore, *On The Poet And His Craft: Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*, ed. Ralph J. Mills, Jr, University of Washington Press, 1965, 83.

When we read the jaguar poem ... we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us.⁹

Another label Hughes acquired early was 'poet of violence'. Given his obvious predilection for top predators, big cats, wolf, fox, falcon, pike, we might expect the two labels to overlap. But none of the four animals in *The Hawk in the Rain* is violent. All are victims of violence, the violence of the elemental world which they endure. The horses are 'patient as the horizons' as the rising sun thaws them. They seem to be there specifically in order to provide Hughes with a Wordsworthian lesson as he echoes the ending of 'Resolution and Independence':

In din of the crowded streets, going among the years, the faces,
May I still meet my memory in so lonely a place.

The hawk is equally still, despite the big wind. It is the eye of the storm (the original title was 'The Hawk in the Storm'). The potential violence of the jaguar ('on a short fierce fuse') is rage at imprisonment. As originally published 'The Jaguar' ended:

But what holds them, from corner to corner swinging,

Swivelling the ball of his heel on the polished spot,
Jerking his head up in surprise at the bars,
Has not hesitated in the millions of years,
And like life-prisoners they through bars stare out.

Amazingly, there is not a hint in these poems that three of these animals are predators. In 'The Hawk in the Rain' it is the banging wind that kills. It is the hawk which dies, when 'the ponderous shires crash on him'. Hughes here seems to be writing under the influence of Hopkins, who assumes, in 'The Windhover', that the kestrel hovers in order to display for his benefit 'brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume', and not, as in Dylan Thomas' 'Over Sir John's Hill', the better to crash down on its prey.

Just too late for *The Hawk in the Rain* came the remarkable poem 'Quest', where the speaker can imagine his role only as a doomed attempt to kill on behalf

⁹ Coetzee, J. M. *The Lives of Animals*, Profile Books, 2000, 85, 89.

of his people the all-devouring monster – ‘the bellowing, heaving / Tangle of a dragon all heads all jaws all fangs’. The inevitable outcome will be the triumphant flight of the dragon ‘with fragments of my body dangling from its hundred mouths’. Hughes described the poem to me as the beginning (late 1956 or early 1957) of a new technique of composition which continued with ‘Thrushes’, ‘A Dream of Horses’, ‘Pig’ and ‘Pike’, then, after an interval, ‘Pibroch’.

The first line of the first poem in *Lupercal* is ‘All things being done or undone’ [‘Things Present’], which is the whole of life, dreaming of ways to deflect death. In July 1959 Hughes wrote to Leonard Baskin that ‘the general drift’ of his new collection was ‘Man as an elaborately perfected intestine, or upright weasel’ [*Letters* 147]. This echoes the third poem, ‘Mayday on Holderness’, probably just written¹⁰:

What a length of gut is growing and breathing —
This mute eater, biting through the mind’s
Nursery floor, with eel and hyena and vulture. ...
The crow sleeps gluttoned and the stoat begins.

At about the same time Hughes wrote to his sister Olwyn:

An entire vision of life seems to have grown up for me around the notion of God as the devourer — as the mouth & gut, which is brainless & the whole of evil, & from which we can only get certain concessions. [*Letters* 148]

He goes on to argue, in exactly Schopenhauer and Tennyson’s terms, that whatever is without love, including all the ‘lower orders of life’ is ‘entirely evil’. In 1818 Schopenhauer had written:

We see only momentary gratification, fleeting pleasure conditioned by wants, much and long suffering, constant struggle, bellum omnium, everything a hunter and everything hunted, pressure, want, need and anxiety, shrieking and howling, and this goes on in saecula seculorum.¹¹

¹⁰ The title is obviously heavily ironic, since we associate Mayday with all that is most joyful and creative about an English spring. Hughes recorded that he began the poem at Willow Street, Boston, which he left at the end of June 1959. If the poem was actually begun on Mayday, the irony is doubled by the comment in Plath’s journal: ‘Today we sat in the park — clear, chilly Mayday — high blue sky and apple-blossoms out’ [*The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough, Dial, 1982, 381].

Margaret Dickie Uroff claims in *Ted Sylvia Plath and Hughes*, (University of Illinois Press, 1979), that Plath was ahead of Hughes stylistically, stating specifically that ‘Mayday on Holderness’ was influenced by Plath’s ‘Poem for a Birthday’; but that poem was not written until the last week in October.

¹¹ *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. Payne, Dover, 1969, vol. 2, 254.

The dominant theme of *Lupercal* is that of nature as devourer, the brainless mouth and gut. The image of two large pike, both dead, ‘One jammed past its gills down the other’s gullet’, is an image of mindless instinct. In ‘February’ mouths are ‘clamped well onto the world’. In ‘To Paint a Water Lily’ horrors nudge the root of the water lily:

Prehistoric bedragonned times
Crawl that darkness with Latin names.¹²

‘Hawk Roosting’, is equally horrifying. This hawk is a robot programmed by an insane god. The hawk’s ‘hooked head and hooked feet’ testify to a ravenous nature single-mindedly perfecting its killers. It assumes that it is the exact centre, the sole purpose and acme of creation. Everything that is not hawk was created for the benefit of hawk. It is an extreme example of solipsism. Since real hawks do not use language, and have no concept of manners and arguments, this must be a thought-hawk, a projection of human solipsism such as that of Shakespeare’s Richard of Gloucester (‘I am myself alone’). Hughes’ hawk almost quotes Richard (‘For many lives stand between me and home’), and the sadistic God of Job (‘Whatsoever is under the whole heaven is mine’). In his 1970 interview with Ekbert Faas Hughes admitted that although what he had in mind ‘was that in this hawk Nature is thinking ... He sounds like Hitler’s familiar spirit’ [Faas 199]. Faas wrote: ‘Every line, with its clipped self-sufficiency of madness, seems to pronounce its deadly verdict like an oracle of destruction [67]. Nevertheless, several critics accused Hughes of admiring the mentality of the hawk. And as early as 1965 Hughes was giving them some encouragement by describing ‘Hawk Roosting’ as a poem ‘about Peace’ [*Letters* 244]. To read Hughes’ hawk poems in the order in which they were written is to chart his changing perspective on nature.

¹² The poem is a verse exemplum of Carlyle’s observations on Nature in ‘Characteristics’:

Boundless as is the domain of man, it is but a small fractional proportion of it that he rules with Consciousness and Forethought: what he can contrive, nay, what he can altogether know and comprehend, is essentially the mechanical, small; the great is ever, in one sense or other, the vital; it is essentially the mysterious, and only the surface of it can be understood. But Nature, it might seem, strives, like a kind mother, to hide from us even this, that she is a mystery. ... Under all Nature’s works, chiefly under her noblest work, Life, lies a basis of Darkness, which she benignantly conceals; in Life, too, the roots and inward circulations which stretch down fearfully to the regions of Death and Night, shall not hint of their existence, and only the fair stem with its leaves and flowers, shone on by the sun, shall disclose itself and joyfully grow.

This horror of the incarnate world made Hughes at this time susceptible to such life-denying religions as Buddhism. Shortly after finishing *Lupercal*, Hughes spent several weeks at Yaddo Writers' Colony at Saratoga Springs. There he met the Chinese-American composer Chou Wen-chung, and wrote a libretto for him based on the *Bardo Thödol*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which, according to Chou Wen-chung, he was already familiar with. This text provided Hughes with a fund of imagery he was to draw on heavily for several years. The Bardo is a short period immediately after death in which the soul is encouraged to resist the attractions of reincarnation (especially sexual desire), and to 'close the womb-door', thereby escaping forever the Wheel of Blood (Karma) and rising to Perfect Buddhahood (Nirvana). It must abandon desire to be saved

From the deceptions of the senses
From the blind angers of the animal body
From the blind pride of the forlorn ego
From the fearful heart's blind hold,
From the slavish mind's blind stupor.¹³

It is urged to 'recognize the Shining Void' for its true consciousness, as the only Reality. The 'forms of earthly existence' appear to Hughes as nightmare women, the white goddess in her most terrifying manifestations:

A white woman
Drinking blood
Out of a skull-bowl
Brandishing a human
Corpse as a club.
A woman of yellow,
The arrow at her ear,
The point at my heart. ...
A dark-green woman
Stirring with a scepter
A skullful of blood
And deliciously drinking.

[9]

¹³ *Selected Translations*, ed. Weissbort, Faber and Faber, 2006, 5.

More females, with the heads of lions, tigers, foxes, wolves, vultures, crows, owls, yaks, snakes, leopards, bears, bats, scorpions, kites, eagles, dogs, stags, hoopoes and elephants (the entire Hughes bestiary), also strip carcasses, drink blood, and eat heart and lungs. This is the psychic condition which produced most of the poems in *Lupercal*, *Recklings* and *Wodwo*.

In both his 1970 interview with Ekbert Faas and the elaborated answers of his 1992 essay 'Poetry and Violence', Hughes defended the animals in *Lupercal* as 'divine' insofar as they all obey the creator's law which is built into them. 'They are innocent, obedient, and their energy reaffirms the divine law that created them as they are' [*Winter Pollen*, 259]. Nevertheless, at the time of writing these poems his spirit was not sealed to the horror of 'tearing off heads' ['Hawk Roosting']. These creatures may all be embodiments of the goddess, but of the goddess at her most monstrous. Hughes claimed, in retrospect, that his roosting hawk is 'Isis, mother of the gods' [Faas 199], but in the *Bardo* the eagle-headed woman is 'a whitish-yellow woman / Plucking a head off / And drinking the carcass', an image of 'the fleshly anguish of an earthly existence' in the diseased imagination of the slaves of evil Karma [Weissbort 12].

'Poetry and Violence' seems to me a dishonest essay in that Hughes there foists onto 'Thrushes' (written within weeks of the letter to his sister) and 'Hawk Roosting' untenably 'positive' interpretations deriving from his unwillingness to admit in retrospect the degree of hostility to nature which had actually informed his poems at that time. Try as he might, mainly by reiteration, he cannot convince us that a shark that 'hungers down the blood-smell even to a leak of its own / Side and devouring of itself' is 'divine', 'at rest in the law' and 'at peace with essential being' [*Winter Pollen* 260]. On the contrary, it is clearly, and was clearly intended to be, an image of nature's insanity. Hughes leaves no doubt that the predatory perfection of the thrushes horrifies him. They are killing machines, 'more coiled steel than living'. He had not, within those poems, even begun to pay for the claim that these creatures were 'angels — hanging in the radiant glory around the creator's throne' [261]. There is nothing in 'Hawk Roosting' to indicate that the hawk's killing is 'a sacrament' [262]. There is a huge gulf between this poem and 'Tiger-Psalm' (first published in 1969), where Hughes does begin to earn the right to make such a claim.

In 1958 Hughes had met the American artist, sculptor and engraver Leonard Baskin, and attended an exhibition of his work, which he thought 'magnificent'. He encouraged Baskin to exhibit in England, and when this had come about in 1962, Hughes wrote a brief introduction for the catalogue. There Hughes wrote of 'one of the deepest and most intense imaginations of our time':

It has identified itself with the naked form of the Angel of Life. So these engravings, in their endless variety, are the self-portraits of the Angel of Life in its wholeness: men, beasts, birds, insects, plants and supernatural beings, each in the terrible immobility of being forced and fated to move at once in two opposite directions, for the Angel of Life is also, in spite of itself, the Angel of Death. ... These are emissaries from the sole source.

[Faas 166]

What Baskin calls the Angel of Life and Death Hughes was later to call the Goddess of Complete Being. Hughes recognized that Baskin's vision was far ahead of his own. He identified 'The Hanged Man' as the greatest of Baskin's engravings: '*The Hanged Man* is not dead: it is the Angel, shattered by death, dispersed to the Universe, reassembled by joy'. But Hughes was unable, at this stage, to explain the source of this joy, or to find it in his own poems. Virtually all his works for the next thirty years were to be part of his effort to do so.

Nevertheless, there are also hints in *Lupercal* of a slightly less hostile attitude to nature. In 'Crow Hill' the wind and rain 'shall level these hills at length', yet, in spite of that, nature persists in creating and maintaining its creatures, against all the odds:

What humbles these hills has raised
The arrogance of blood and bone,
And thrown the hawk upon the wind,
And lit the fox in the dripping ground.

And at the end of 'Pennines in April'

Those barrellings of strength are heaving slowly and heave
To your feet and surf upwards
In a still, fiery air, hauling the imagination,
Carrying the larks upward.

And the title poem of *Lupercal*, (this time placed at the end of the collection), affirms that there are, or at least once were, rituals whereby the persistent life-force of hawks, foxes and larks, even the churlish life of the dog and the rank life of the goat, ('the lust of the goat is the bounty of God' wrote Blake), can be channeled into human beings:

Maker of the world,
Hurrying the lit ghost of man

Age to age while the body hold,
Touch this frozen one.

Early in 1961 Hughes wrote to Lucas Myers that his daughter Frieda (born within a month of the publication of *Lupercal* in 1960) ‘has the effect of some highly effective religious ritual in the way of bringing life’ [*Letters* 178]. He described this as a ‘thaw of my three-year freeze’ (‘a barrenly spiritless time’). *Lupercal*, he wrote, ‘seems to me to suffer from the lack of the natural flow of spirit & feeling’. Hughes’ fox dream at Cambridge had been an early warning of the seriousness and consequences of that lack. At the time Hughes interpreted this dream in purely academic terms:

I connected the fox’s command to my own ideas about Eng. Lit., & the effect of the Cambridge blend of pseudo-critical terminology & social rancour on creative spirit. [*Letters* 423]

It may be that this interpretation was too narrow, localized and subjective. The meaning of the dream hinges on the two simple words ‘you’ and ‘us’. ‘Us’ surely means all the creatures which inhabit our unconscious as images of wildness, naturalness. If the ‘you’ is plural, ‘destroying us’ takes on a far wider application than Cambridge English. It refers rather to the tendency of modern Western man to repress these images and demonize the creatures themselves, to consign to the Heraclitean fire not only foxes but the whole bestiary of natural impulses (Lawrence called them ‘the first messengers, the primeval, honorable beasts of our being’) which are the only true source of our creativity. Without them the mind is disconnected, ‘frozen’. The ‘lit’ fox of ‘Crow Hill’ is the opposite of the burnt fox of the dream, a fox whose vitality, whose ‘flame of life’ (to use a phrase from Lawrence), is too strong to be extinguished by any amount of rain.

The second poem in *Wodwo*, ‘Still Life’, written in 1961, suggests a more inclusive, balanced, even tender, view of nature. The poem begins with a typical description of outcrop stone, ‘hoarding its nothings’. Like the hawk in ‘Hawk Roosting’, ‘it expects to be in at the finish’. But its complacency rests on its ignorance of everything in nature which is not elemental, particularly of that which in its vulnerable delicacy is as far from stone as matter can be:

Being ignorant of this other, this harebell,

That trembles, as under threats of death,
In the summer turf's heat-rise,
And in which – filling veins
Any known name of blue would bruise
Out of existence – sleeps, recovering,
The maker of the sea.

Hughes' 'natural flow of spirit & feeling' is unfrozen and released in the penultimate poem, 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' (1962). There we have balance instead of intolerable pressure, fullness instead of lack, unspilled milk instead of spilled blood, and a human being, albeit a child, in a reciprocal and rewarding relationship with a human world and a natural world at one with each other. The poetry here does not impose the momentary resolution, but mirrors it while remaining itself transparent, like water in a brimming pail.

Again, in *Wodwo*, the title poem (1961) ends the collection, and is far more positive than the bulk of the volume, like a charm designed to leave open the possibility of finding some meaning in life – 'I'll go on looking'. What the wodwo is looking for is nature's laws ('there's all this'), and its own purpose and identity in relation to them ('What am I?').¹⁴ As in 'Hawk Roosting', the speaker in the poem is the creature itself, speaking, therefore, on behalf of nature. But the hawk and the wodwo could not be more different. Hughes' hawks, pike, thrushes, sharks, were all machines (as they had been for Aquinas and Descartes). There is nothing mechanical or programmed about the wodwo. Its life is a matter of acute sensory awareness allied to free choice, 'the sensation — a heavily affective sensation — of being a body with limbs that have extension in space, of being alive to the world' [Coetzee, 46]. The hawk has no doubt at all what it is or how it is supposed to live, and no interest in 'all this' — everything in the world which is neither perch nor prey. In fact it asks no questions at all, since it finds nothing questionable. The wodwo is a sort of larval Hamlet, questioning everything. In fact Hughes chooses to call the creature a wodwo precisely because the wodwo has such a 'questionable shape' that no dictionary or bestiary can define it. Its name means simply 'wood-dweller', but it is an open question whether it is a wood-

¹⁴ In an unpublished collection of 'Wise Words' Hughes included this passage from Pascal, which he might well have had in mind when writing 'Wodwo':

I know not who put me into this world, nor what the world is, nor what I myself am. I am in terrible ignorance about everything. I know not what my body is, nor my senses nor my soul, not even that part of me which thinks what I say, which reflects on all and on itself, and knows itself no more than the rest.

Roger Elkin has noted remarkable similarities in both style and content between 'Wodwo' and Roethke's 1951 collection *Praise to the End!*

demon, or a humanoid animal, or a primitive half-man. It occupies the space between the human, animal and spirit worlds. Perhaps, for Hughes, it represents a creature of the unfallen world, before the human, animal and spirit worlds became separated in Western consciousness.

‘Wodwo’ is remarkably prophetic of what Hughes was shortly to find in the work of his contemporary Eastern European poets, of whom he wrote:

Their poetic themes revolve around the living suffering spirit, capable of happiness, much deluded, too frail, with doubtful and provisional senses, so undefinable as to be almost silly, but palpably existing, and wanting to go on existing ... homing in tentatively on vital scarcely perceptible signals, making no mistakes, but with no hope of finality, continuing to explore.

[*Winter Pollen* 221, 223]

Hughes was also to write of children as occupying a world very similar to that of the wodwo:

Theirs is not just a miniature world of naive novelties and limited reality — it is also still very much the naked process of apprehension, far less conditioned than ours, far more fluid and alert, far closer to the real laws of its real nature. It is a new beginning, coming to circumstances afresh. It is still lost in the honest amoebic struggle to fit itself to the mysteries. It is still wide open to information, still anxious to get things right, still wanting to know exactly how things are, still under the primeval dread of misunderstanding the situation. Preconceptions are already pressing, but they have not yet closed down, like a space helmet, over the entire head and face, with the proved, established adjustments of security. Losing that sort of exposed nakedness, we gain in confidence and in mechanical efficiency on our chosen front, but we lose in real intelligence. We lose in attractiveness to change, in curiosity, in perception, in the original, wild, no-holds-barred approach to problems. In other words, we start the drift away from the flux of reality and so from any true adaptation. We begin to lose validity as witnesses and participants in the business of living in this universe.¹⁵

Like Blake, Hughes sought to recapture that childlike innocence, but, like the Eastern European poets, it had to be on the far side of the experience, the ‘turmoil’, of twentieth century history.

¹⁵ ‘Foreword’ to *Children as Writers* 2, Heinemann, 1975, v.

But this deliberately engineered sense of an ‘upbeat’ ending to *Wodwo* is achieved only by juggling the order in which the poems in *Wodwo* were actually written. ‘Full Moon and Little Frieda’ and ‘Wodwo’ were written in that brief window before the life-bringing event of the birth of Frieda in 1960 had been overshadowed by the death of her mother in 1963.

However, even within that window, the majority of the poems are not upbeat. In the same letter to Lucas Myers in which he reported the thaw in his three-year freeze, Hughes commented on his latest poems, specifying ‘Pibroch’ and ‘Eucharist’ (an early title for ‘Gog’) as ‘very different from the earlier ones’; yet though they may be different stylistically, the vision of nature is as negative as ever. Roger Elkin has pointed out that in the immediate post-*Lupercal* poems there is a shift from animal imagery to mineral and vegetable imagery, (perhaps under the influence of Roethke), as though the hot lives of animals in the same time-scale as our own, might distract us from the permanent realities of inanimate nature. The title ‘Still Life’ is significant. In ‘Pibroch’ sea, stone, tree and wind are described as equally meaningless, purposeless, crazy.

Minute after minute, aeon after aeon,
Nothing lets up or develops.
And this is neither a bad variant nor a tryout.
This is where the staring angels go through.

This is where all the stars bow down.

In ‘Gog’ ‘everywhere the dust is in power’; nature is an ‘octopus maw’.

‘Pibroch’ and ‘Gog’ Hughes placed in part III of *Wodwo*, the poems he regarded as ‘after the event’ [*Letters* 274]. The event in question, which he described as ‘a mental collapse into the condition of an animal’, he dates from a year or two before the death of his wife, Sylvia Plath; but since he also described some of the poems from that period as ‘prophetic’, they are clearly related to it.

Hughes described the ‘single adventure’ of *Wodwo* as a ‘descent into destruction’ [UU 205]. Its keywords are ‘dark’, ‘nothing’ and ‘ashes’. Its vision is close to that of the madman described in Beckett’s *Endgame*:

I’d take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness! (*Pause.*) He’d snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes.

‘Theology’, for example, written in 1961, imagines that we are all living inside the serpent which swallowed Eve: ‘This is the dark intestine’. ‘The Green Wolf’ (1962) echoes Hopkins’ ‘Million-fuelèd, nature’s bonfire burns on’, and Dylan Thomas’ ‘The lips of time leech to the fountainhead’. It ends:

That star
And that flower and that flower
And living mouth and living mouth all

One smouldering annihilation
Of old brains, old bowels, old bodies
In the scarves of dew, the wet hair of nightfall.

‘Nightfall’ was the original title of ‘Ghost Crabs’, which has, like *Macbeth*, the atmosphere of a world shrouded in thick night. The crabs, which ‘own this world’ and are ‘God’s only toys’, are very like the ‘murth’ring ministers’ invoked by Lady Macbeth, ‘wherever in your sightless substances / You wait on Nature’s mischief’. Like Duncan’s horses they eat each other:

All night, around us or through us,
They stalk each other, they fasten on to each other,
They mount each other, they tear each other to pieces,
They utterly exhaust each other.
They are the powers of this world.¹⁶

If the ‘event’ of a year or two earlier had not entirely stifled the glimmers of hope in ‘Wodwo’ and ‘Full Moon and Little Frieda’, the tragedy of February 1963 certainly did so. The poems which followed it are the most horrific Hughes had yet written, ‘Song of a Rat’ and ‘The Howling of Wolves’. Nature is now a steel trap and a ‘widowed land’. The victims

never learn how it has come about
That they must live like this,
That they must live.

¹⁶ Hughes chose to call these creatures ghost crabs because they are obviously spirit beings, nightmare creatures, or psychological phenomena. They have little to do with actual ghost crabs, which are nocturnal and do make a bubbling sound, but are small harmless shore-crabs, which, far from eating each other, have highly ritualized combat which rarely involves any contact at all. They are currently the beneficiaries of many conservation schemes. Hughes’ description is somewhat closer to horseshoe crabs, which are primitive, large and helmet-shaped, and come ashore at night in vast numbers at the breeding season. But these too are harmless and in need of conservation.

The poems which followed Hughes' subsequent three-year silence showed no remission of this agony. In 'Logos' 'creation convulses in nightmare' to produce God, whose first cry is 'like that cry within the sea'

The sea pulling everything to pieces
Except its killers, alert and shapely.

In 'Karma' this cry becomes

That cry for milk
From the breast
Of the mother
Of the God
Of the world
Made of blood.

Even before its publication Hughes said of *Wodwo* that 'interpreted properly it's a rather sickly book' [*Letters* 270]. He later wrote to János Csokits:

My own criticism of the whole book is that it's too subjective – too dominated by a long nightmare in which I was for the most part incapable of projecting my notions into a world of real action, incapable of real detachment. ... Also I thought that if I arranged them [the poems] in this way, they would work powerfully to bring me back to the objective world where my talent really belongs. [274]

Hughes described *Wodwo* as 'the end of my first period' [280].

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Keith Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature: 'Terror and Exultation'*, www.keithsagar.co.uk, 2009, page number.