

On Ted Hughes
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English poet Ted Hughes (1930-1998) near the end of his life was designated Poet Laureate of Great Britain. Below are excerpts from his letters.

Last night a hedgehog came into the garden and we all went out to have a look at its face. Long and pointed with black eyes in brown bristly hair, and a wet wet snuggly nose.

The birds are interesting—the robins are big as thrushes and shaped like them. The jays, which are everywhere, are smaller than ours, and give the impression of being bright blue all over. They make a smacking rawk like ours. Last night I saw fireflies, twinkling in and out like little aircraft on fire.

I was walking across the park in Boston, hot afternoon, middle of the festival, plenty of people about, when I saw a bat on the path. I thought it was a black slug pushing at a brown leaf at first. It was directly under a big tree, so I suppose it fell in its sleep. It didn't want to be picked up—snarled at me, little furry pig face, and tried to crutch itself along on its wing joints. Its teeth pricked my finger in one place. I put it back on the tree trunk and it went scrambling away upwards, upside down, snarling downwards and shrieking.

We spent a week in Haworth [England], near where my parents live, introducing Frieda [his three year-old daughter] to five hundred or so baby pigs. She's a great one for animal noises—she barks at dogs, moos at cows. Her latest game is running round with a ball of fluff that looks nothing like a chicken, though it is intended to be a chicken, and going "tweet tweet tweet" in a high voice.

We met Henry Williamson the other day. He wrote Tarka the Otter. If you haven't read it, read it—about a Devonshire otter.

Last night I bought some plastic model animals and gave Frieda the giraffe. Then early this morning I put a penguin beside her bed, but as it is so tiny at first she didn't notice it. When she found the penguin she could hardly believe her eyes. She's talked about it ever since.

The lines of Plum-Blossom [his poem]:

The plum-tree has battled the whole way
Up the hard road of the roots, its mouth full of stones.
The buds of the plum-tree are scarred veterans
Full of last words, the old saws of zero.

But the plum-blossoms open
Volcanoes of frailty,
Mouths without hunger but to utter
Love, love, to each other.

Today I was sitting in my hut eating an apple and reading. A jenny wren flew on top of the door, which stood open. We looked at each other and he decided I was not a daddy longlegs or a spider, but something quite uneatable. He flew off. Then I heard a rustling in the brambles. The rustling stopped. Then it started again. I separated the brambles. I saw an eye watching me. It was a hedgehog. Now he is asleep in a tin inside my hut.

The other day we acquired a badger—saved it from execution, more or less. From a condemned pet shop where the animals were all being destroyed. We can't liberate it—it was caught as a cub. So we feed her and talk to her and try to befriend her. So far, she responds only up to a point. Badgers are something special. They have a gleeful intensity about them.

We now have a farm. We have some beautiful animals. I'm getting quite involved with them. Impossible not to. They're giving me more than I give them. I was quite enmeshed in their world when I was an infant—but I felt I was losing it. But now these animals have given it all back double. I feel to be waking up for the first time in my life.

I made the association between the world of animals, which is excluded by culture and persecuted (killed and eaten), and the real thing, the divine, in human beings—the part that our own culture tortures, i.e. sacrifices, crucifies. For me, animal life (the whole of life outside the human ego) became identified with the divine world from which ego has separated us. With what I had absorbed of mythology, literatures of religion, etc., I fitted this into a universal sort of system. I didn't fit it—it simply fitted itself. A synthesis began to form itself where all mythologies and religions fitted themselves into what I conceived as the spiritual crisis of the human animal. The basis of the system is that the processes of creation and created life are divine and whenever human life becomes united to those

processes the experience is felt to be divine, a subjective, inexpressible state, a condition of a different order of awareness than our usual human one, and an infinitely desirable one.

The animals have never been detached from Creation and are therefore in a state of bliss. They live a divine life in a divine world. They live in a perpetual Samadhi and have never fallen from it into ego-consciousness, into the acculturating, detached cerebration that separates us from the bliss of our animal/spiritual being and from the divine world in which we ought to be living.

I was trying to find words for that irritated, black-lipped half-snarl that jaguars have when they're going to and fro in cages.

When fish are hooked or snagged in gill net they struggle naturally enough and then at some point begin to produce the chemicals corresponding to physical pain in human beings. Presumably the whole body goes into shock, fighting for its last gasp.

By putting the individual back in contact with the primitive being Jung means back in a contact that both satisfies and contains its requirements. Once contact is lost, the requirements will exert satisfaction, in the end, in an uncontained, uncontrolled way—crime, terrorism, etc. First the deadness and misery of alienation, and then the explosion.

I've known for some years what a hunted deer goes through physically. And a hunted fox.

For years I've kept having the idea, why aren't wild animals simply given the legal status of fellow citizens.

I draw [in a poem] on both meanings of pinioned—one a bird winged and unable to fly; two a prisoner immobilized by his arms being twisted up his back.

Lambs' cries as they panic shorten, as though they can't bear to let their distress out except in short little blips that don't hurt so much.

I once caught a fox cub in a snare and it was sitting there like a dog in a kennel, pretty healthy. I sold the skins.

I sat all afternoon in the orchard near a fountain that used to be crowded all day with birds. I didn't see a single bird till about 7 p.m. Then a magpie flew across.

In a dream I saw a wolf under a tree, watching me from behind the trunk. It came loping toward me at great speed. All I had was a spade. As it came toward me, I became blind. I tried desperately to strain some bit of sight through the fog of my eyes, and hit the wolf with the spade as hard as I could. I went on battering it to death. Suddenly my eyes cleared. I had killed a kitten.

I began to dream about Cookhill pond. When I was in good contact with myself, the pond was full of big pike. Other dreams it would be empty of any except one or two very tiny pike. That meant a general state of being in poor contact with myself. Once or twice, the pond was lined with tiles and empty.

As I got to the bottom of the cliff and stood beside the big river, I saw masses of huge salmon rushing up it. I stood there being showered as they went up crashing past me.

Source, Christopher Reid, selector and editor, *Letters of Ted Hughes* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007).