

A poem by Ted Hughes

Ted Hughes was unusual in not writing about himself or, for that matter, about anyone else. Most poets are not like that. They want to share their feelings with us, assuming that, because we are all human, we will find their feelings as interesting as they do and will learn more about ourselves and human nature in general by reading their poems.

But Ted Hughes was different. When he wrote about a house in *Wind*, a poem from his second collection, *The Hawk in the Rain*, published in 1957, he meant the house, not the people in it.

This house has been far out at sea all night

The windy night should not be taken as a metaphor. He is not, as a reader might be tempted to think, describing some inner torment in the mind of someone in the house, or some conflict between the inhabitants, whoever they may be. He is describing a windy night.

The woods crashing through darkness, the booming hills,

Winds stampeding the fields under the window

Floundering black astride and blinding wet

He captures in his five present participles - crashing, booming, stampeding, floundering, blinding - the way in which wind imitates a wild animal or a herd of wild animals. Wind itself is a force of nature which can be heard and felt, but not seen.

Only the words 'house' and 'window' remind us of the presence of humans.

A subtle shift of language in the second verse creates a new mood as the wind continues to blow in the light of day.

The hills had new places, and wind wielded

Blade-light, luminous and emerald,

Flexing like the lens of a mad eye.

He uses the past tense to convey the sense of perspective which light brings to the wind. The sounds of wild animals in the night are replaced by optical illusions. Daylight is a sword, the wind an invisible swordsman. The danger comes now from a force of nature that is both precise and unpredictable.

The third verse is the first in which the poet himself plays a part. But it is at most a bit-part.

At noon I scaled along the house-side as far as

The coal-house door. I dared once to look up -

This bit-part player is merely an observer, his insignificance and vulnerability made evident by another sudden shift of language to the banality of human existence: the house-side, the coal-house door. The extent of his daring is to look up.

The narrative of human fragility continues without a break in the next verse and the next after that.

Through the brunt wind that dented the balls of my eyes

The tent of the hills drummed and strained its guyrope,

The fields quivering, the skyline a grimace,

At any second to bang and vanish with a flap

The language has reverted to onomatopoeia, like the English language itself going back to its roots: brunt, dented, drummed, strained, grimace, bang, flap.

The wind flung a magpie away and a black-

Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly. The house

Rang like some fine green goblet in the note

That any second would shatter it.

The house, that to begin with had 'been far out at sea all night', returns in a new shape, transformed. While the forces of nature play havoc with creation, birds flung away or bent out of shape, the house, a human creation, waits its turn in trepidation.

What, if anything, should we read into the house ringing in the note that would destroy it? The ethereal sound of a finger run round the edge of a wine glass standing for the fragility of all human creation compared to nature's? The vulnerability which is the essence of beauty?

The poem ends with the occupants of the house, of whom there are at least two. Night returns, the wind still blows, the humans in the house just sit and wait.

*In chairs, in front of the great fire, we grip
Our hearts and cannot entertain book, thought,
Or each other.*

The characters in the poem are the wind and people, human beings and nature. Human activity of any kind - books, thought, affection - has no chance against the forces of nature.

*We watch the fire blazing,
And feel the roots of the house move, but sit on,
Seeing the window tremble to come in,
Hearing the stones cry out under the horizons.*

The comparison is not with any of his contemporaries, but with Shelley in *Ozymandias*, his poem about the futility of human achievements of any kind.

*Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

The best British poets of the first half of the twentieth century, the war years, wrote about people and politics. The post-war poets generally did the same, though there was a new strand of what can loosely be called confessional poetry.

Ted Hughes wrote mainly about animals, not people. His subject was nature and human beings as part of nature, often the least successful part. He didn't write about himself in the way that most poets do and most of his contemporaries did. Confessional poetry was not for him, though some say that he had plenty to confess.

Perhaps that was why he chose to write about nature, hearing the stones cry out instead of the men and women.