

## Moon-Bells and Other Poems

As Ted Hughes's great friend and collaborator, Seamus Heaney, observed: 'Poetry is more a threshold than a path, one constantly departed from, at which readers and writers undergo, in their different ways, the experience of being at the same time summoned and released.'<sup>1</sup> *Moon-Bells and other poems* is very much a selection of poems concerned with the notion of crossing thresholds; of inhabiting, and occasionally being trapped, within boundaries and borderlands.

*Moon-Bells and other poems* was the only trade collection by Hughes not to be published by Faber and Faber. Perhaps this was because it was a collection aimed at younger readers - one of the last of the fine series of *Chatto Poets for the Young*, and also the first winner of the *Signal* Poetry Award. And in so many ways it is a threshold/boundary crossing selection. It includes poems such as 'Coming Down Through Somerset', 'Roe-Deer', 'Foxhunt' and 'Birth of Rainbow' (all uncollected in 1978 when *Moon-Bells and other poems* was first published, but which would later be published in *Moortown*), and a previously unpublished *Crow* poem, 'Horrible Song'. Alongside these 'adult' poems are poems written specifically for the young like 'Nessie', 'I See A Bear' (which would later appear re-titled as 'The Grizzly Bear' in *Under The North Star*), and of course a selection of the Moon fantasies that Hughes had been writing specifically for children and had published first in *The Earth Owl and Other Moon Creatures*. It is one of the most haunting of these moon poems that gives the collection its title; a poem in which oracular messages from the bells slung in the moon's craters ring out their oracular messages, which travel across the great threshold of space until they are heard on earth:

...with clung

And clang of mumbling boom

Out of one bell: 'Towers fall

And dunghills rise.' And from another

'He who thinks he knows it all

Marries his own mother.'<sup>2</sup>

The book opens with *Pets*, in which a house-trained kitten - itself on the threshold of cat-adulthood - hesitates on the threshold of a kitchen step ("Dare he go for a pee?"), fearful not only of the 'adopted' but still wild badger - "A Stripe-faced rusher at cats, a grim savager" - and the half-wild tom cat, "the battered master of the house", who himself hesitates on the threshold as he "...poises, head lowered, muscle bound/Like a bull for the judges."<sup>3</sup>

Many other creatures in this collection are, like the kitten and presumably the young readers, too, poised; caught on a threshold. The fox in 'Foxhunt' is discovered by the hounds "At the threshold of the village"

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<sup>1</sup> Seamus Heaney, *The Government of The Tongue*, London: Faber & Faber, 1986, p108

<sup>2</sup> 'Moon Bells' from Ted Hughes, *Moon-Bells and other poems*, (2nd edition), London: The Bodley Head, 1986, p40

<sup>3</sup> *Pets* from Ted Hughes, *Moon-Bells and other poems*, (2nd edition), London: The Bodley Head, 1986, p7

and glimpsed as he "...runs still fresh, with all his chances before him".<sup>4</sup> In 'Roe-Deer' the deer seem to have crossed a threshold from another world, possibly with a message of some sort: "I could think the deer were waiting for me/To remember the password and sign/That the curtain had blown aside for a moment."<sup>5</sup>

But it would be a great mistake to think that *Moon-Bells and other poems*, despite its concern with boundaries and thresholds and being a collection principally for young readers, is in any sense a marginal collection. As many critics, including Anne Skea, Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford, have all remarked, Hughes's poetry for children (and his other work for young readers and writers, including his long service as chair of the W H Smith Young Writers' Competition and, of course, his steadfast support for the Arvon Foundation) were as much a part of his main 'mission' as *Crow*, *Shakespeare And The Goddess of Complete Being*, or his acceptance of the Laureateship. As Terry Gifford noted: "What is remarkable about this body of work for young readers is that none of these books is anything other than a part of the author's central creative project."<sup>6</sup>

For Hughes nothing was more important. As he declared in the second of his two essays entitled 'Myth & Education': "Every new child is nature's chance to correct culture's error....They want to escape the ugliness of the despiritualized world in which they see their parents imprisoned."<sup>7</sup>

In his introduction to a reading from *Season Songs* in September 1977, Hughes explained that: "My only concern was to stay close to simple observation, directing my reader's attention to things which had interested me and keeping my self within hearing of children." And he proposed an opposing and reciprocal transaction in a letter to the Canadian academic Lissa Paul in 1984: "In writing for children, it seems to me that there's an attractive possibility - of finding, in some way, on some wavelength of imagery & feeling, a lingua franca - a style of communication for which children are the specific audience, but which adults can overhear. In other words, it reaches adults - maybe - because assuming this is not for them, they suspend their defences and listen - in a way secretly - as children."<sup>8</sup>

None of Hughes's books better exemplifies the idea, so dear to Hughes, of breaking down the barriers; starting a healing process whereby adults and children might 'overhear' - or, to put it another way: share - poetry within a common borderland, than *Moon Bells & other Poems*.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Foxhunt' from Ted Hughes, *Moon-Bells and other poems*, (2nd edition), London: The Bodley Head, 1986, p10

<sup>5</sup> 'Roe-Deer' from Ted Hughes, *Moon-Bells and other poems*, (2nd edition), London: The Bodley Head, 1986, p14

<sup>6</sup> Terry Gifford, *Ted Hughes*, London: Routledge, 2009, p.76

<sup>7</sup> Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, ed. W Scammell, New York: Picador USA, 1995, p 149

<sup>8</sup> Ted Hughes, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid, London: Faber & Faber, 2001, p. 482