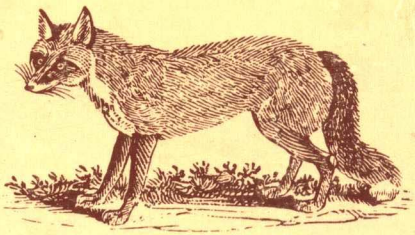
TED HUGHES

Poetry in the Making



An Anthology of Poems and Programmes from "Listening and Writing"

POETRY IN THE MAKING

by the same author

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CROW

THE HAWK IN THE RAIN

LUPERCAL

WODWO

SELECTED POEMS 1957—1967

SELECTED POEMS
(with Thom Gunn)

A CHOICE OF SHAKESPEARE'S VERSE
(Edited by)

THE EARTH-OWL AND OTHER MOON PEOPLE

THE IRON MAN

NESSIE, THE MANNERLESS MONSTER

MEET MY FOLKS

HOW THE WHALE BECAME

THE COMING OF THE KINGS AND OTHER PLAYS

Poetry in the Making

An Anthology of Poems and Programmes
from *Listening and Writing*

TED HUGHES

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To
Pauline Mayne
and
John Edward Fisher

CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

In this book I have collected together programmes I wrote at the invitation of Miss Moira Doolan of the BBC Schools Broadcasting Department, for the series *Listening And Writing*. The final piece, *Words and Experience*, was written for the series entitled, *Religion In Its Contemporary Context*. Nothing has been changed, except for the odd word, but a small group of poems, supplementary to those quoted in the programmes, has been added, and also a few suggestions which I hope will help teachers to turn the programmes to immediate classroom use.

The idea behind the first of these programmes, "Capturing Animals", was that I, as a practising writer of verse, should talk about writing in general and my own in particular in a way that might spur my audience—aged between ten and fourteen—to more purposeful efforts in their own writing. I was aware of the dangers, both to me and indirectly to my audience, of assuming a role of this sort, and in the subsequent talks I became deliberately more impersonal. Nevertheless, that first autobiographical setting of my course does continue more or less throughout the book, and it explains several things, such as the emphasis on my own work, which would otherwise have no justification.

I share the general ideas of my generation, and much of what I say is already the practice of many English teachers. The few simple principles of imaginative writing which I collect here are the ones I have found in one way or another especially useful. I keep the talks in their original form in order to keep what could well be the most essential thing in them—the tone and atmosphere which derive from my basic assumption. This

assumption is not so common and may even be false, but it is fruitful, so long as one operates within it flexibly and in a practical way. In these talks, I assume that the latent talent for self-expression in any child is immeasurable. As I say, this is very likely false, and even if it were true no teacher could arrange for the psychological crises and the long disciplines that awaken genius in an otherwise ordinary mind. But by showing to a pupil's imagination many opportunities and few restraints, and instilling into him confidence and a natural motive for writing, the odds are that something—maybe not much, but something—of our common genius will begin to put a word in.

The examples I quote and append are meant to serve as models for the kind of writing children can do without becoming false to themselves. As a judge of the *Daily Mirror* Children's Literary Competition for the last three years, I have had plenty of opportunity to confirm or modify my ideas about this. Reading Milton or Keats to children is one thing. Asking them, or allowing them, to use such as models for their own writing is another. All falsities in writing—and the consequent dry-rot that spreads into the whole fabric—come from the notion that there is a stylistic ideal which exists in the abstract, like a special language, to which all men might attain. But teachers of written English should have nothing to do with that, which belongs rather to the study of manners and group jargon. Their words should be not "How to write" but "How to try to say what you really mean"—which is part of the search for self-knowledge and perhaps, in one form or another, grace. So in my examples I have avoided specimens whose great and celebrated charms or powers or both are beyond the sympathy of children. I debated whether to include Dylan Thomas's *Poem In October* which seems to me a unique and beautiful poem, and which looks as though it ought to interest children, but I decided against it finally as being much too sophisticated for my purpose. I have stuck to poems where the language is basically plain, modern speech, and the mental

operation simple or very simplified—as in description or fable. At the same time, there will be inevitably more artistic and intellectual and psychological complexity in these works than any child will ever exhaust.

The talks were meant for children, and together with the poems are still for children, though in so far as they are the notes of a provisional teacher, they are also for teachers. Specifically for the teacher, I have added a few notes to Chapters one, two, three, four and five, where I enlarge somewhat on the classroom possibilities of the chapter material. So this book can be used—much as it was in the programmes—as a text and anthology for the class, or as a general handbook for the teacher. Either way, I hope it will be justified.

The Small Box

The small box gets its first teeth
And its small length
Its small width and small emptiness
And all that it has got

The small box is growing bigger
And now the cupboard is in it
That it was in before

And it grows bigger and bigger and bigger
And now has in it the room
And the house and the town and the land
And the world it was in before

The small box remembers its childhood
And by overgreat longing
It becomes a small box again

Now in the small box
Is the whole world quite tiny
You can easily put it in a pocket
Easily steal it easily lose it

Take care of the small box

VASCO POPA

CHAPTER ONE

Capturing Animals

There are all sorts of ways of capturing animals and birds and fish. I spent most of my time, up to the age of fifteen or so, trying out many of these ways and when my enthusiasm began to wane, as it did gradually, I started to write poems.

You might not think that these two interests, capturing animals and writing poems, have much in common. But the more I think back the more sure I am that with me the two interests have been one interest. My pursuit of mice at threshing time when I was a boy, snatching them from under the sheaves as the sheaves were lifted away out of the stack and popping them into my pocket till I had thirty or forty crawling around in the lining of my coat, that and my present pursuit of poems seem to me to be different stages of the same fever. In a way, I suppose, I think of poems as a sort of animal. They have their own life, like animals, by which I mean that they seem quite separate from any person, even from their author, and nothing can be added to them or taken away without maiming and perhaps even killing them. And they have a certain wisdom. They know something special . . . something perhaps which we are very curious to learn. Maybe my concern has been to capture not animals particularly and not poems, but simply things which have a vivid life of their own, outside mine. However all that may be, my interest in animals began when I began. My memory goes back pretty clearly to my third year, and by then I had so many of the toy lead animals you could buy in shops that they went right round our flat-topped fender, nose to tail, with some over.

I had a gift for modelling and drawing, so when I discovered

plasticine my zoo became infinite, and when an aunt bought me a thick green-backed animal book for my fourth birthday I began to draw the glossy photographs. The animals looked good in the photographs, but they looked even better in my drawings and were mine. I can remember very vividly the excitement with which I used to sit staring at my drawings, and it is a similar thing I feel nowadays with poems.

My zoo was not entirely an indoors affair. At that time we lived in a valley in the Pennines in West Yorkshire. My brother, who probably had more to do with this passion of mine than anyone else, was a good bit older than I was, and his one interest in life was creeping about on the hillsides with a rifle. He took me along as a retriever and I had to scramble into all kinds of places collecting magpies and owls and rabbits and weasels and rats and curlews that he shot. He could not shoot enough for me. At the same time I used to be fishing daily in the canal, with the long-handled wire-rimmed curtain mesh sort of net.

All that was only the beginning. When I was about eight, we moved to an industrial town in south Yorkshire. Our cat went upstairs and moped in my bedroom for a week, it hated the place so much, and my brother for the same reason left home and became a gamekeeper. But in many ways that move of ours was the best thing that ever happened to me. I soon discovered a farm in the nearby country that supplied all my needs, and soon after, a private estate, with woods and lakes.

My friends were town boys, sons of colliers and railwaymen, and with them I led one life, but all the time I was leading this other life on my own in the country. I never mixed the two lives up, except once or twice disastrously. I still have some diaries that I kept in those years: they record nothing but my catches.

Finally, as I have said, at about fifteen my life grew more complicated and my attitude to animals changed. I accused myself of disturbing their lives. I began to look at them, you see, from their own point of view.