

If Ted Hughes Rewrote Shakespeare

by Iain James Robb

*The Phoenix Asks the Turtle-Dove if He Can Get a Drop of Water:
After Shakespeare — In the style of Ted Hughes*

Let the bugling bird come up that burst a big loud lay,
On the solitary tree of old Arabia (sound its thunder!):
Be a herald sad, but not as proud ring as a trumpet.
Sound out, for the chaste winds' sake obey.

Yet you - RAWK! — shrieking, black harbinger, fiend,
Relent you, here — foul precursor of plague-boils.
Sound out a mad burst for the end of the fever-
To this broken troop may you come not to war.

To our consternation at this funeral session,
Every ragged black bird big with scraggly wings
Comes out, without the eagle to lend us its graces-
I would have put them out of doors.
But they were big-beaked as well as scraggly.

The priest goes by in a surplice bright. His is an image of white.
It reminds me of a song that I once heard on the radio.
Can he be our death-pre-telling, swimming swan,
Since the requiem without him would be a blank space.

It is devoid save of nothing in the season of winter.
With our breath give and take, and you a thirty-year crow.
Not in mourning with mourners it seems you must go,

As my eyes are screwed up from the pain of a splinter.

The dooziest anthem now sounds the long years.
Love and constant devotion make a celluloid cell
That makes a film of nothing. It is out here as well
That we feel where the phoenix fled, the same burning turtle.

Well, so they loved. But love in flames has went dying.
They were made of two souls. Their souls went missing as one.
They were a twin-souled one soul that knew no division.
It was almost as though their sword was self-slain.

Remote as twin hearts that weren't yet cut asunder,
Still no visible border between them was seen.
The phoenix was master or a slave by his turtle.
She was also the same. Slave or queen? Thus I wonder.

Love without Factor X, sunscreen, in sun shone.
The turtle (made man) saw it his nuptial right
To be a firework flicker in the eyes of the burnt bird
That made the other say, "This other burning was mine."

Property of single form discredited! I stood appalled,
That neither of them could be the same as before.
Nature was made plural in head-strength, sense, gender.
Neither two cracked in one! It was like a packet of crisps.

In itself and of my reason was my reason confounded.
Both halves were there, but one that grew together,
Yet they were not me. They did not share my confusion.
But I guess that's fair enough. Not a concept I had of these things.

Then a blackbird cried, "Forget me, not theirs so forget me."
It was a larger black bird that was discordant of voice.
Reason and not reason redoubled its clangour,

That could not see with I, of what their love was to reign.

It made a special funeral march. It was not quite a disaster.
Phoenix and dove went waltzing right round the room.
They were like two magic superstars.
They went up unadorned with make-up.
They were not painted with a human touch.
So was this tragic scene.

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Truth and rarity are both gone with beauty,
Their fire has burned out to cinders
And their three ghosts turn to die.

The phoenix makes her bed by a death's head
Moth. The turtle heaves out his once maiden chest.
To eternity goes his once masculine bride.

There is nothing left them, O nought to posterity.
They were as infirm in life as a wheel-chair bound pensioner,
But as chaste as a snowman's nuptial vows.

Well, all seems well and true. But can this be?
Beauty is a braggart but not buried is she,
It is truth along with beauty that has fell off the edge.

A big blue urn will be the pilgrim's last refuge.
He will go with like sinners who'd save their own souls,
Or will weep like a hermit in a cave I see weeping,
And to these dead birds he will smoke groovy incense and sigh.

