

Suttee

Ted Hughes

In the myth of your first death our deity
Was yourself resurrected.

Yourself reborn. The holy one.

Day in and day out was our worship—

Tending the white birth-bed of your rebirth.

The unforthcoming delivery, the all-but-born.

The ought-by-now-to-be-born.

We were patient.

The grueling prolongueuer of your labour pangs

Gave our dedication altitude.

What would you be—begotten

By that savage act of yours committed

On your body, battering your face to the concrete,

Leaving yourself for dead

(And hoping you were dead) for three days?

We feared

Our new birth might be damaged.

Injured in that death-struggle conception.

Our hope was also dread. The dolorous

Agony you performed was also happy:

The part of your own mother. I was midwife.

And the daily busyness of life

Was no more than towels, kettles

Of hot water, then the rubber mask

Of anaesthetic that had no gas in it,

The placebo you kept grabbing for,

Gulping it like cocaine.

Your labour frightened you.

What was trying to come frightened you.

You had no idea what it might be—

Yet it was the only thing you wanted.

Night after night, weeks, months, years

I bowed there, as if over a page,

Coaxing it to happen,

Laying my ear to our unborn and its heartbeat,

Assuaging your fears. Massaging

Your cramps into sleep with hypnosis

And whispering to the star

That would soon fall into our straw—

Till suddenly the waters

Broke and I was dissolved.

Much as I protested and resisted

I was engulfed

In a flood, a dam-burst thunder

Of a new myth.
In the warp of pouring glair,
Me bowled under it, I glimpsed
Your labour cries refracted, modulating—
Just as in a film—not to the cries
Of the newborn in her creams and perfumes,
Not to the wailing of joy,
But to the screams
Of the mourner
Just after death far-off prehistory.
After death and outside our time.
The now of it
A scream stuck in a groove—unstoppable.
And you had been delivered of yourself
In flames. Our newborn
Was your own self in flames.
And the tongues of those flames were your tongues.
I had delivered an explosion
Of screams that were flames.
'What are all these flames?' was all I managed to say.
Running with my midwife's hands
Not to wash them, only to extinguish
The screeching flames that fed on them and dripped from them.
I could not escape the torching gusher.
You were a child-bride

On a pyre.
Your flames fed on rage, on love
And on your cries for help.
Tears were a raw fuel.
And I was your husband
Performing the part of your father
In our new myth—
Both of us drenched in a petroleum
Of ancient American sunlight.
Both of us consumed
By the child in the new birth—
Not the new babe of light but the old
Babe of dark flames and screams
That sucked the oxygen out of both of us.

Hughes, Ted. *Birthday Letters*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux,
1998. Print.