

Ol' Higue

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Ol' Higue

You think I like all this stupidity
gallivanting all night without skin
burning myself out like cane-fire
To frighten the foolish?

Analysis: The poem opens in Creole/dialect, immediately grounding it in a Caribbean rural community; this is not a generic ghost story but a specific folk tradition. The simile "like cane-fire" emphasizes intensity and rapid consumption, suggesting that her existence is exhausting and destructive. "Burning myself out" also carries a pun: she literally transforms into fire as part of her ritual, and she is also "burnt out" in the modern sense: exhausted, depleted, worn down. The alliteration of "fire to frighten the foolish" (f-f-f) adds a spitting, exasperated rhythm to her complaint. The rhetorical question conveys frustration and establishes a defensive tone.

And for what? A few drops of baby blood?

Analysis: The rhetorical question minimizes the reward, highlighting how irrational and burdensome her actions are, reinforcing her resentment.

You think I wouldn't rather
take my blood seasoned in fat
black-pudding, like everyone else?

Analysis: This reflects her desire to be normal. She does not want raw baby blood; she wants blood "seasoned in fat black-pudding," a dish that is both a gustatory image and a pointed cultural reference. Black pudding is a blood sausage, a beloved Caribbean delicacy made from seasoned pig's blood. By invoking it, the poem makes her longing for normalcy vivid and specific rather than abstract: she wants to sit at a table with the community and eat, not haunt nurseries at night. The contrast between raw blood and cooked communal food emphasizes her alienation from human society.

And don't even talk 'bout the pain of salt
And having to bend these old bones down
To count a thousand grains of rice!

Analysis: References to salt and rice act as folkloric constraints, showing how she is constantly obstructed. The exaggeration emphasizes her physical suffering and frustration.

If only babies didn't smell so nice!
And if I could only stop
Hearing the soft, soft call

Of that pure blood running in new veins,

Analysis: The repetition functions as repetition "soft, soft", emphasizing the irresistible lure of the babies. The metaphor "pure blood running in new veins" represents vitality and youth, which she is drawn to.

Singing the sweet song of life

Tempting an old, dry-up woman who been

Holding her final note for years,

Afraid of the dying hum...

Analysis: The metaphor "sweet song of life" presents life as something musical and alluring. The metaphor "holding her final note" suggests she is prolonging her existence unnaturally, resisting death.

Then again, if I didn't fly and come

to that fresh pulse in the middle of the night,

Analysis: The metaphor "fresh pulse" represents living vitality, reinforcing the contrast between youth and decay.

how would you, mother,

name your ancient dread,

Analysis: The rhetorical question shifts the poem's focus entirely, from the Ol' Higue's own suffering to her social function. "To frighten the foolish" is significant: she can only harm those who believe in her. Those who dismiss her as myth are immune. This implies that belief itself creates her power, and that "the foolish" who fear her are the ones who sustain her existence.

And who to blame

for the murder inside your head...?

Analysis: The metaphor "murder inside your head" is the poem's most unsettling line. It suggests that mothers themselves have violent or resentful thoughts toward their children: thoughts that cannot be admitted, that have no name, that society refuses to acknowledge. Historically, this connects to what we now recognise as postpartum depression: a condition that was not named or understood but which isolated mothers experienced as dark, frightening thoughts about their own babies. The Ol' Higue gives those thoughts a face. She is the scapegoat, a figure on whom unacknowledged feelings can be projected and blamed, so that the mother does not have to confront what is "inside her head."

Believe me –

As long as it have women giving birth

A poor ol' higue like me can never dead.

Analysis: The statement reflects inevitability. Her existence is sustained by human fear and guilt, making her effectively immortal.

About the poem

Author: Mark McWatt (1938–)

Context: Caribbean folklore; explores the Ol' Higue (soucouyant) as both myth and psychological construct. The poem is set in the Caribbean rural community where this folklore originates, and its use of Creole dialect grounds it firmly in that world.

Core idea: The Ol' Higue is not just a supernatural figure but a symbol of human fear, guilt, and suppressed impulses, existing because society needs something to blame.

- **Main themes**

- Supernatural belief and folklore
- Temptation and compulsion
- Fear and guilt
- Mortality and survival
- Blame and scapegoating
- Human nature and hidden impulses
- **Mood:** Irritable and tense, with underlying bitterness
- **Tone:** Defensive, argumentative, and ultimately resigned

Remember

- Ol' Higue is both **real and symbolic**: a supernatural creature AND a projection of human fear
- **Dialect/Creole** grounds the poem in Caribbean rural life; this is not generic horror but specific folk tradition
- **"Burning myself out"** is a **pun**: she literally becomes fire + she is burnt out/exhausted
- **Alliteration** "fire to frighten the foolish": the f-sounds mimic spitting frustration
- **Black pudding = gustatory imagery**: she wants to eat at the community table, not haunt it. Blood sausage is a Caribbean delicacy; her longing is vivid and specific
- **"The foolish"** = only believers can be harmed; her power depends on whether you believe in her
- **"Murder inside your head"** = postpartum depression / suppressed maternal resentment; she is the scapegoat for what mothers cannot admit
- She represents **compulsion**, not pure evil
- Final line shows she is sustained by human fear, not just myth