

*poems*

*forty-five*



Frieda Hughes



# Forty - Five



Poems

FRIEDA HUGHES

*To my husband, László, with love.*

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to the thirty-first of March of the following year.*

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## FOREWORD

When your life—and your parental heritage—is the subject of lifelong speculation and intrusion, it is harder to tell your story than it would be for most of us. When you are the daughter of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, your past and your parents get stolen from you on a regular basis and reworked according to a dozen different dialectics: gossipy, ideological, literary, romanticized, quarrelsome. When I first met Frieda Hughes over a decade ago, I found it impossible not to blurt out that she was the baby in my favourite poem of childbirth, beginning, “Love set you going like a fat gold watch . . .”

But then at least I remembered the last words of that poem, acknowledging that every baby comes individual into the world, “a clean slate, with your own face on.” Over the years since then I got to know Frieda, and see that, indeed, her voice and talent are individual, idiosyncratic, and nobody’s but her own.

Now, in typically headlong and original fashion, she has chosen to tell the story of her first forty-five years: from the sadness overshadowing her early childhood, through marriages and betrayals and mistakes, to the high plateau of her partnership with another remarkable painter, László Lukacs. This is not a plodding autobiography, but the internal story, the utterly subjective way in which—if we are truthful—we all remember our own lives. The poems are a string of glittering or alarming moments, a necklace of life. They are, quite simply, the way it felt to her at each time.

There is fear here, and desertion, confusion, infant rage,

and adolescent misery; there are also joy and understanding and boundless, raging energy. Ideally, anybody reading them should also turn to find reproductions of the forty-five abstract paintings which run alongside each year, a 225-foot-long artwork of breathtaking vigour and awkward size whose final home is still uncertain.

It is an original way to record your life, this partnership of short lyrics and large canvases—but then, it has been an original life. We are privileged to share it.

*Libby Purves, May 5, 2006*

## INTRODUCTION

On my fortieth birthday, April 1, 2000, I wanted to celebrate what was a significant date for me. Being a poet and a painter, I thought of writing a poem and painting a picture for each year of my life, from birthday to birthday—the paintings to express the emotions that coloured each year and the poems to provide the actual subject matter which provoked those emotions.

I had been trying to break free from the constraints of figurative painting in order to better express my emotional reaction to my subjects, and these paintings, being emotionally based, could only be abstract.

From conception to completion the project took five years, so I added five paintings and poems to bring it up to date as, by my forty-fifth birthday, my life had reached a happy plateau and a good place to end my project.

The outcome was the poem sequence in this volume and an abstract landscape of my life, four feet high and two hundred and twenty-five feet long on forty-five canvases.

In writing the poems, I concentrated on the events and incidents—however big or small—that affected me most. What developed were snapshots of the difficult times in my life, because they had the most profound effect on me, requiring my effort, my energy, and my full attention, while dragging my emotions through the mental equivalent of a gorse bush.

There were happy times, but happiness was not what chiselled a shape out of me, and often it flowered in a garden of broken glass from more painful experiences. There was also

peace, but it was generally stolen from other more taxing situations. Nor did humour shape me, although I adopted it as a coping mechanism.

So these poems by no means form an autobiography, but are concerned with the more challenging moments in my life, and my resolution to do the best I could in meeting those challenges.

The incidents I have described are in the moment; they do not define my whole existence and should be taken in the larger context of my life, which is perpetually evolving and in which I feel to have been very lucky in so many ways.

Relationships mentioned here are also not set in stone, except in their historical sense, and from only my point of view and my feelings at the time. Outside that, they too are constantly changing.

Each person's experience of a life widely differs; this is my experience of my own life.

While the paintings do not accompany this text, they may be viewed on:

[www.friedahughes.com](http://www.friedahughes.com).

## FIRST YEAR 1960

When I was born  
There were several things about me  
That were true,  
But I didn't know them yet.  
I breathed,  
I was held lovingly,  
I was so completely new  
I'd nothing to forget.  
I explored  
My ground-bound world with curiosity,  
Blotting paper blank as parchment  
Where nothing's written yet.

## SECOND YEAR 1961

London was going to make way for Devon  
In September. I wouldn't have known.  
Familiar faces, smells and sounds  
Cradled me to my new home.

Towering nettles and raspberry bushes,  
Butterflies with wings like eyes,  
Cabbage white caterpillars  
And the three elms that filled the sky

From atop the Roman mound  
Marked out my boundaries.  
I crawled with woodlice, voles and centipedes  
Among the fallen apples and the lilac trees.

Mice and hedgehogs,  
Rabbits, frogs and blackbirds  
Welcomed me as a stump among them,  
Taking root and learning my first words.

## THIRD YEAR 1962

My thoughts were complicated,  
Too hard to describe by the frustrated  
Tongue in my mouth, too weak  
And tangled in syllables to allow me speak.

I wanted to grow faster still,  
Improve upon my verbal skill  
And ask the questions plaguing me  
To define clear boundaries of safety.

Some things were given—company,  
A brother who would play with me.  
Some things were taken—a father told to go,  
The home I'd grown to know,

And at the loss my memory  
Crawled into a black hole for safety.  
Where before each tiny thing I saw  
Imprinted, I remembered nothing any more.

My mother, head in oven, died,  
And me, already dead inside,  
I was an empty tin  
Where nothing rattled in.



## FOURTH YEAR 1963

There were shapes, sometimes complex,  
Minor incidents that had been  
Remembered out of context.

Relatives emerged from the places  
Through which I travelled,  
Wilfully numb. Their faces

Replaced each other as if they were  
Different heads of the one body,  
The hydra

Nursing her young.  
Mostly, it was black. Waiting  
To live again hung

In the back of my mind,  
Consciousness, the held breath,  
Remained blind.

## FIFTH YEAR 1964

I crawled from the darkness  
In the back of the car, new again.  
I tried to remember stepping into it.  
I tried to remember daylight.  
I tried to remember anyone I knew  
But I'd been wiped clean, everything  
I'd ever been—obliterated.

All night, at journey's end, I expected  
My parents to fetch me  
From among these strangers.  
Their faces escaped me, but I thought  
I'd know them instantly.

None came. While I waited  
I struggled for my name;  
It wasn't there in my mind,  
On the tip of my tongue,  
Or anywhere in a crevice  
In my skull. Day by day  
I pieced myself together and believed  
I'd been borrowed—adopted even, convinced  
That this, my first new memory,  
Was the threshold where unconscious child  
Became sentient being, implanted like a tooth,

But lost, not found,  
In the mouth of this new family.

The boy became my brother,  
The troubled man, my father,  
And the woman I imagined was my mother  
Became my aunt,  
Who'd given up her life in France  
To look after the strange animals  
That children are.

I collected these facts with care,  
Committing them to the empty room  
In my head, adding to them there.  
But, in putting back  
My missing pieces, one by one,  
I could not undo  
My doubt that I belonged.

## SIXTH YEAR 1965

Books were more than walls  
Of rooms in houses built across the bedroom floor,  
Their pages opened up the door  
Beyond days at school and playground calls

Of friends with happier tomorrows  
And both parents still alive,  
While only one of mine survived;  
My father, bag of sorrow.

I read of palaces for kings  
And streams with talking fishes  
Granting people's wishes  
For all their happy endings

Yet to come. I wanted one for me,  
Time again I'd build a home  
Of books or blankets, wanting stone  
Or wood or bricks, a place to be

Where I could stay,  
But no sooner was each wall  
Familiar, we'd pack the car and haul  
Ourselves away.

In January we arrived  
In Ireland, my father searching for a new  
And different life to take us to,  
Now our family of three  
Was sometimes five.

## SEVENTH YEAR 1966

Ireland had fish in it, and crabs  
In the stream where we dug peat  
For the fire. Icy water—so cold to touch  
It was as if my fingers crushed—  
Split apart the moor a footstep wide,  
Clear as molten glass,  
I'd cross it in a stride. In school  
Mother Mary's effigy listened to my  
Irish vowel sounds and nouns  
From atop the stationery cupboard.  
Green and fecund woodland  
Fostered me, where trout at the riverside  
Cooked, their pink flesh steaming.

Water, pumped in by hand  
And heated on a stove,  
Was replaced in a move  
By plumbing and a beach of boulders  
Heaped with ropes of seaweed  
That undulated on the tide,  
Intestinal green bloating floaters  
Blistering the skin of fingers  
That reached for the shoreline,  
The chill and salt slap of exhaling sky  
Exhilarating.

Devon was warmer then, the hands of the aged  
Welcoming me home again. But I remained hidden,  
Somehow invisible in the wind's turmoil,  
Watching father and son tying flies  
And mother and daughter sticking paper  
Feathers to wings for angels,  
With my gooseberry eyes.



## EIGHTH YEAR 1967

I sharpened knives and skinned  
A roadkill badger, proud to see  
Its hide left stretched and curing  
In the barn of owls and bats.  
I worked with clay and Plasticine,  
My blue flowers became legendary,  
My dragons pink and green.

Strangers came and went, I'd catch  
Men embracing book-stacks  
Leaving. I started bolting doors  
And closing open windows  
On the ground floor,  
But nothing I did  
Could keep out the thieves.  
“We're friends” they said, and me  
So small beside them, a too-late thumb  
In the dam's chasm, through which  
Everything around me leaked,  
Friends, dogs, objects and relatives.

The knife I'd sharpened  
In the kitchen drawer  
Could take me away  
One day if I wanted,

And tonsils out for Christmas and ice cream  
Meant I'd no earaches anymore.

Sensitive to every pull and undulation  
Of the quag on which I stood,  
Accustomed to uncertainty and speculation  
I kept my council, feet in mud,  
Ordering the chaos inside my head  
From what I saw and read,  
To plot a nightly course across  
The bog of crocodiles  
Between my bedroom door and bed.

## NINTH YEAR 1968

In my funny-looking American clothes  
Sent over for Christmas and  
Too early for Devon, I curled self-consciously.  
We were already poor in the butcher's eyes, he knew  
We'd dripping on bread for tea.

My father taught me trees,  
And clouds and birds and animals,  
I brought wild creatures home with me,  
Broken winged or hit by car,  
To mend them. Some lived, some died,  
The little souls inside too fugitive  
For my desperate fingers feeding them  
Pipettes of milk and fresh flies.

Between school and a wish to be invisible  
And home and a wish to be seen,  
I made my first dress as square as a sack  
On a borrowed sewing machine,  
Its yellow gingham seams unfinished  
When the machine was taken back,  
But the love of making clothes,  
Curtains, cushions, bedspreads, anything,  
Never left me.

A toybox at Christmas  
Overwhelmed me with generosity, I believed  
It meant love from the giver I loved  
And would have kept for myself as a mother,  
A gift to me. I imagined all the things  
I might eventually find to fill it.  
I gazed in awe at its emptiness,  
And my name  
Painted on its door, it opened  
The New Year, bright and shiny with hope  
And white gloss.  
I waited, breath bated, to see  
If the mother was meant for me.

## TENTH YEAR 1969

My first ghost wore a black and white  
Flowered miniskirt and tight  
White sweater. I touched her cold air  
As she walked through the wall in the hall  
Instead of using the door.

I saw visions of my time to come,  
Episodes of my future life  
As memories in my head  
Where the past ones should be.  
I saw my husband, my mate,  
The right one at last,  
Walking towards me  
On a garden path,  
But no amount of focus  
Would disclose his identity,  
Or how long I'd have to wait.

I outgrew the village school  
As my grandmother outgrew life,  
My shells clattering on the door to her coffin  
At her funeral, so loud  
I cringed in shame  
At pointing myself out, weeping.

The only coins I ever stole  
Came from my father's pocket,  
To buy a fox fur and mantilla lace  
As gifts from him  
To dress the gaps and cracks  
Made by argument  
In the shoulders of the woman  
From whom I wanted mother-love.

The delicacy of stamps, the intricacy  
Of seals in wax, the immediacy  
Of a round pebble in the road,  
Unnaturally spherical,  
Were my treasure trove,  
And all the time I longed  
To fill the void in family  
Between father, aunt and brother.

## ELEVENTH YEAR 1970

All my wishes came true,  
I just wasn't a witness at the wedding.  
But with love came corners,  
And angles, and unspoken meanings  
Without resolution since no maps existed  
To find the solution. I was seeking my way in the dark.  
But the emotional maze I found myself in  
Echoed with messages and clues  
Not meant for me.

I had nightmares in the city,  
Ninety in a camera's click  
Skipping eighty years,  
My life over already,  
My face unrecognised  
By my family.

In Yorkshire, between the barking geese  
On the spine of the hill's back  
And school visits to the swimming pool,  
I moulded shells from molten lead over bonfires,  
Collected acorns amongst the bracken  
To plant forests, discovered gerbils  
Can eat their way out of anything not metal,  
And guinea pigs breed like rabbits.



Then Lumb Bank burned  
While I was loosing spinners in Loch Ness,  
Collecting ticks from an adopted dog, with my father,  
My brother and my new mother,  
In a mildewed tent at the lake's edge.  
The arsonist took only one thing—the box of tin  
In which I kept my treasures  
And my christening things.

When the girl came up to me  
And showed me how a silver fly  
Grasped its stud of bone,  
I recognised it as the one  
My father gave me. She even had  
My missing silver mug with teddy bear,  
And Granny's pearly beads as square  
As tea caddies. I knew then  
The woman who had broken in  
To set fire to our home  
And take my box of tin.

## TWELFTH YEAR 1971

Collecting stamps  
From my father in France  
I was at boarding school,  
Where near-death on penicillin  
Was disguised by matron as my wicked lie,  
When she gave me another child's medicine.  
Three days unconscious, my throat so dry  
I was speechless for the water  
The doctor dribbled into me,  
His voice a hammer on the anvil  
Of her stupidity.

Persia, sand and stone,  
And palaces succumbing to neglect  
And wild roses, had released its women  
From purdah. Amber and turquoises eschewed  
For striped socks and platform shoes, they were  
Learning TV. The desert seeped into me  
Like a stain, the cornelians, the cinnamon,  
Nutmeg and spice, the man's body,  
Hands chopped off at wrists,  
Mouth open, tongue-slit and earless,  
Left sodden in the gutter with  
Three-foot blocks of hotel ice,  
Where old men pissed.

Actors were my family; my aunts  
And uncles, trekking desert villages  
With improvised performances, greeted  
By impoverished locals in their finery; painted dolls  
Against the desert gravel, white as bone.  
I killed cockroaches, ate yoghurt and pistachio,  
And watched *Orghast* beneath a ball of fire,  
My father imprisoning his Prometheus  
In chains, recognising chains,  
And a sacred cow  
Led across a frozen sunrise.  
I sat in cold stone rooms,  
The open mouths  
Of Xerxes tombs  
And the ruins of Persepolis.  
I was a camera then.

When I returned to school again, Persia  
Still hung inside me like a lantern,  
Swinging as I walked, my new eyes  
Polished bright from inside,  
School and children transitory  
In the shadow of such  
Ancient, bloodied, golden history.

## THIRTEENTH YEAR 1972

Being stationary, fortnightly, at boarding school,  
Allowed the opportunity for apprehension  
To take on shape and grow a face.  
Mine had a name, a disciple,  
And a punch in the arm  
Like the kick of a mule.

Each weekend home exploded  
In my head with the longing for it,  
I would fill the idea like a cup  
Which overspilled, and exchange it  
For a bucket. Every other Sunday night  
I'd carry it back to school, rattling,  
Sometimes with bits of beach, or Dartmoor,  
My father's fishing lures  
All tangled up in the occasional  
Weekend friend and piles and piles  
Of washing up, clattering.

And what would I become?  
Too tall, I tried to dance,  
My legs like branches of a tree,  
I tried to learn piano  
With all ten thumbs  
And undiagnosed dyslexia,

The notes no more than ink spillage  
Despite the patient tutelage  
Of my frustrated teacher.  
But most of all I drew,  
Too shy to be the one to speak  
My pictures talked for me.

I was a teenager in waiting, bursting  
To have platform shoes an inch high,  
Beckoning adulthood as if it were  
A smiling boy with eyes like cut-out sky.  
Gauche and clumsy, dogged  
By doubt and mousy hair  
I found my home in books,  
Where dreams were realised and looks  
Were overlooked.

## FOURTEENTH YEAR 1973

Four willows rose from the dirt, tall  
And squared, trailing green  
By the churchyard wall.  
There I built a treehouse  
The year I was thirteen. Torn down in minutes  
In a boy's laugh for a woman's line of vision.  
Badger Bess scabbled tunnels in the cob of her stable  
To gouge bulbs from the flowerbeds. I'd cut up  
Raw liver and lungs for her, but most  
She wanted marzipan. At school  
I tied up loose ends  
With bullies and friends  
Before leaving at last,  
When early bed as the holidays began  
Made nights long as a noose.

On the day of my first necessary bra  
Bought with the woman wearing the mother-suit  
I carried in my head, my joy  
Was to be with her alone,  
Companions for the purchase.  
Incautiously, I loved her  
Right down to the mother-need  
That was the hole in my heel  
Where the poison would enter.

I believed I'd chosen right  
And that she cared for me,  
But she severed me from her side that night  
With words like blades of steel,  
Spoken to separate. She thought me too familiar  
She said, smiling over spaghetti sauce  
In the frying pan.  
She asked that I keep my distance,  
Adult and wise as she was  
To the child I was then, since one day  
I'd probably turn on her and say  
"You're not my mother," in a moment when  
She was exercising her unquestionable  
Authority again.  
The firm ground in which I'd dared  
To grow roots, was turned over and bared  
To the elements.

My new school had no weekends off,  
Friends at home grew bored and strayed  
Or simply moved away.  
Determined to excel I settled in,  
But would I ever thicken  
This too-thin skin  
So not to feel the spike

In every verbal slight?  
Self-consciousness was quickening.

In the holidays I'd try to write, always interrupted  
By heaps of washing up, even my diary says  
"There were humungous piles of it."  
It became the pivot  
Of everything I did,  
Filling my head with scouring pads,  
Cups, plates, saucepans, cutlery,  
Casserole dishes and washing-up liquid,  
And every morning I'd be woken  
To make that first cup of tea  
While my brother slept on,  
My name a chain  
That would not release me.



## FIFTEENTH YEAR 1974

I was bursting at my seams.  
No matter how I stood,  
Folded or unfolded, I could not  
Lessen the impression  
Of my overstuffed skin.  
I was exhausted  
At the daily weight of wearing it,  
I wanted to climb right up out of myself  
And fly off like dandelion fluff.

An item in the news  
Released my mother's story,  
Her suicide a secret  
Kept from me 'til now,  
My stepmother explained  
Before the revelation caught me.

I was silent at the sudden loss again  
When a friend had kept the article for me,  
In it I could clearly see  
That there I was, born my mother's daughter,  
It put an end to my belief  
I was adopted. I'd kept my secret,  
Now I hid relief.

I dragged my large and fleshy shell  
Through Cape Cod and Wellesley  
On a visit to my U.S. family,  
Hoping it would wear off  
Like some bad smell,  
But my curvy rounds clung on to me  
Like stubborn lovers.  
I dangled awkwardly between  
A child, in bed at night in broad daylight,  
And a teen, almost old enough  
To marry, vote, and drive.  
I felt to be waiting,  
Biding my time in my chrysalis  
As the days passed by and I became  
Something else. . . .

Meantime, I knew my size was sin  
And thought I'd be much prettier if thin,  
So dieted to slim, my fat removal  
A vain attempt to gain approval  
From the mother I boasted of  
To all my friends. I sang her praises daily,  
Our relationship, I said,

Was close and loving, as troublesome to her  
As my brother and I must have been,  
Half grown as we were  
And not her own. I believed  
That if only I could find a way  
Not to anger or repel her,  
She'd love me in real life  
As she loved me in my head.

But I couldn't find the language  
That would undo our distance  
Or cut through the seeming animosity  
That grew towards me. The more  
I laboured to be loved  
The bigger the divide.  
I'd harboured the illusion  
That a mother loved so strongly  
Would love me like a mother  
So I'd be open and confide,  
Wrongly, wrongly, wrongly.

## SIXTEENTH YEAR 1975

As if I had suddenly developed  
Some secret smell  
Men began to notice me,  
But I wasn't ready yet.  
I hadn't learned how to handle  
The size of my breasts,  
Nor did I want to think  
It was all they were after. Surely  
They could see my brain  
Gleaming with eager opinion?

Razor blades that shaved legs  
Developed a double purpose  
In a bath of quandary.  
Would a bucket of blood  
Open a woman's eyes?  
Death leaves nothing but vacancies,  
So I thought better of it.

A borrowed grandfather was buried now,  
His funeral forbidden me, the outsider  
In my stepfamily.  
I was determined to ignore  
Rejection of affection from  
My chosen mother, but

I harboured hope, a weakness  
That as good as strangled me  
In useless, knotting rope.

I tried to hide  
The shorn and ragged sides  
Of my pale moon after  
My first visit to a hairdresser  
Proved a disaster,  
But the damage was all  
On the top of my head,  
And daily visible  
For a whole year to come.

My father pointed at a mirror  
Where my face pooled back at me,  
And told me I was beautiful.  
Blinded by paternity  
Made him the fool.  
But I stared into myself and knew  
I could make myself worthwhile beneath  
This plain and fleshy sheath,  
Every necessary thing could be put in  
To the box of me, the sum  
Of all I wanted to become.

I made myself a set of rules  
And stuck to them, I hoped  
To polish like a jewel.

## SEVENTEENTH YEAR 1976

Three things occupied my mind,  
Men, poetry and vomiting.  
I wanted the blue leather jacketed  
Man on a motorbike, fastest,  
Most dangerous, making him  
Most attractive. And he  
Fell in love with me.  
I'd seen him in the spring  
And known instantly we'd marry,  
And that he wasn't the one  
In my mind's eye,  
But that man might be  
As far off as my eighties.  
We'd wait, we knew,  
With me at school.  
Meanwhile, cigarettes became good friends,  
I'd walk long ways to out of bounds  
To sit and smoke, write poetry, and think.  
Still trying to get thin  
I'd stick my fingers down my throat  
At every snack or meal, recovery  
A state of mind I'd not condone  
Until I finally reduced myself  
To skin and bone. My chosen mother, then,  
Would think me beautiful,  
And as she was in control

Of every aspect of my life,  
This one thing I controlled.

In my dorm at night  
With no one there at all  
I'd take my dagger from the drawer  
And practise throwing  
Into the flower-papered wall.

During holidays I'd shop  
For my deteriorating grandfather  
Who'd not  
Recognised me for some time.  
I'd sit with him as he watched  
His paper hankies drying  
On the plastic logs that lay  
In his electric fireplace. It was as if  
The room was empty, he no longer  
Recognised my face  
Or heard the things I said.  
I was just a passing figment  
On the periphery of shadows  
Of all the World War dead,  
That were more real than I was  
And still inhabited his head.



## EIGHTEENTH YEAR 1977

Turkey's pearly throne glittered  
In the Topkapi Palace,  
My aunt on a carpet mission  
And me, fascinated by  
Jellyfish swarms in the Bosphorous and Vehbi,  
Who stroked and stroked my hair  
As if my head were a cat.

Dental roots were dug out like plants  
When three teeth died  
As my body slimmed,  
And I'd hardly manage stairs.  
Sent home from school it was easy  
To pretend I was mending,  
No one checked my inner self  
Still fat beneath the thin.

In holidays my biker friends  
Became my family,  
I'd brothers now, watching over me,  
And in my boot, a knife. No one  
Was going to slice my face  
Like the girl who smiled at me double,  
Her lips and her scar in tandem,  
Her jaw cut open by a jealous friend  
Who sat beside her, laughing, even as

She explained the reason was a man.  
And when my aim was tested  
My sudden accuracy quietened  
Both the clamouring doubt in my head,  
And my critic, whose respectful silence spread  
Faster than his shout. No one touched me then.

At school I worked hard  
To get my essays done by Tuesday,  
Which gave me time  
To write more poetry. I got engaged,  
It seemed a good idea to make the choice  
Between two very different boys.  
Afraid of floundering I hoped  
To give myself a base, somehow,  
To paint and write I'd need a life outside,  
Better start it now.

## NINETEENTH YEAR 1978

My birthday year's begun  
With sun and boyfriend's love,  
And anxiety at where I'd be  
When school was done;  
At home the space I'd taken as my own  
Was closing over, as if preparing  
To expel me like a spat pip  
From the safety of my room.

Crushed in a car hit head on at seventy,  
I was cradled by two firemen  
Who cut me from the wreckage  
Of the back seat with a power saw,  
Pulling me from the roof of a vehicle  
That had ceased to possess  
Any shape at all. For endless weeks  
My friends were legs between lessons  
When all I could do was swing  
My useless pendulums. I practised walking  
From school to town and back again  
Across the fields, oblivious then  
Of my fledgling biker guardians.

My English teacher told me  
That other work might add  
A few marks to my grades,

He tells me now  
That he still remembers how  
The ninety-six poems I gave him to read  
Were terribly sad.

To paint and write I waitressed,  
Until I found farm work and cottage  
For my husband-to-be  
In which we could live  
And one day be married.  
Kettle from uncle, iron from father,  
Candy-stripe sheets from the back  
Of my stepmother's cupboard,  
A fifty-pence horsehair bed from an auction, and  
A chest of drawers from my childhood bedroom  
Furnished our torn linoleum and yellow walls.  
Friends brought a sofa and chair  
From the rubbish tip, thin cushions on springs,  
The gaps between which  
Our buttocks would slip.  
Out of work I took  
Every hour I could get on the potato picker  
And bought a typewriter.  
Mad, the boyfriend said, not knowing  
How I imagined I'd write us out of poverty.

He ploughed the garden, I planted,  
Weeded, grew marrows, carrots, peas and swedes,  
I could make a meal from stock feed  
Stolen from the fields, and would bake—  
If we'd had more than  
A one-ring cooker and two saucepans.

February found me work,  
Collector of Taxes, Exeter B.  
I laboured at my desk, back to the door,  
Head down for mushy peas and flour,  
Our lives plotted by the ha'penny,  
Beans worked for by the hour  
And clothes from the charity shop.  
In the winter cold my skin split  
From hand-washing sheets and cow-shit overalls  
And the one blue pleated skirt I worked in;  
A bloody grin between each fingertip.  
Painting and writing—just out of reach  
In time and materials—defined  
The image of the future me  
I strove to be.

## TWENTIETH YEAR 1979

A motorbike at last,  
The last one crashed a year ago,  
Gave me a ride  
Instead of walking seven miles to work  
And back. My father took me  
To a Royal garden party;  
My last outing as a single woman, to see  
The guests in all their finery,  
Hoping to shake hands with royalty. I wore  
A whole week's food on my head  
In white lace. September saw me married  
And milking cows at three a.m.  
Through frozen winter weekends,  
Keeping chickens fed to eat  
In the absence of any other meat.  
But I had a title now,  
A "Mrs" brought respect.  
I'd Hire Purchase on the cooker and  
A fridge at last, my plan  
To paint and write on hold  
While I paid off the motorbike.

For summer I had a second-hand dress,  
And in winter I wore it with a sweater  
And petticoat.  
A farmer and his wife moved in next door

When their house burned down.  
She and I made friends,  
Our husbands unequal, farmer and worker,  
Not speaking. But our empty wardrobes,  
Impoverished cupboards and chauvinistic men  
Bound us together. Her nothing  
Matched mine.

My driving test was passed at last,  
And set me loose in the old escort van  
My parents bought me second-hand.  
With wheels of my own my world  
Could rapidly expand.

## TWENTY-FIRST YEAR 1980

Tax accounting at the office,  
Hundreds, thousands, millions, my fingers fast,  
Catching themselves up and overtaking,  
The adding machine burning its digits into me,  
My tendons jamming in their fleshy sheaths,  
Crippled into plaster.  
My days were divided  
Into flexi-hours and minutes, my food  
Was divided into portions measured out  
Into infinity. My second-hand twin tub  
Gagged on my husband's  
Dung-encrusted overalls,  
And convalescing hedgehogs spilled their bowls  
Of jet-propelled maggots at night,  
I'd shovel them up and toss them  
Into the fire, their bodies  
Popping like corn, spattering the carpet scrap  
And torn linoleum.

My grandfather's death entered my head  
Like a missile. I knew  
The exact moment of his passing. I drove  
Twenty minutes. Twenty minutes too late  
Said my stepaunt at the door of her nursing home,  
Slamming it sharply. I knocked again,  
And her husband now let me in,



Her averted features contorted  
By some deep and inexplicable animosity.  
I sat beside my grandfather's husk, his head  
A still carving of himself.  
A long time now he'd not remembered  
Who I was. I didn't weep to see him dead,  
His body, empty of spirit, wasn't him, his skin  
Was just the thing that held  
His lifeless organs in.

Relatives gathered round his funeral  
As if it were fire, warming each other.  
My days, like abacus beads,  
Arrayed themselves obediently,  
And at last I was promoted  
To the M.O.D.

## TWENTY-SECOND YEAR 1981

The Triumph Bonneville motorbike  
Was mostly parked up  
Under repair in the living room  
Of my first real home,  
Bought by my father's care  
Of my mother's written words.  
Until my husband found a job  
To release him from the herd of cows  
That kept us caught up  
At the old address all summer,  
I painted walls at weekends,  
Tiled the kitchen and scrubbed the floors  
To make the cottage ours.

My one-time biker guardian  
In leather and chains, who visited,  
Bought the black veil pillbox hat I wore  
To the funeral of  
Another dead biker, and helped me  
Bake cakes under the astonished scrutiny  
Of my husband, who never availed himself  
Of a single household chore in case  
It castrate him. My days doubled up  
Between leathers and boot-knife  
And the Infantry Manning and Records Office;  
The end of life in Northern Ireland

Coming through in memorial boxes.  
I was crossing soldiers off  
For rape, or spitting, or dying.  
My new skirts and sweaters  
Were smart acrylic at six pounds a pairing,  
I was constantly flammable  
In a different colour  
For each working day of the week.

Nights home  
The blows of words, filled out and leaden  
Like little coshes, waited in ambush,  
In threats, or hidden in smiles.  
I was going to paint and write one day,  
But first escape.  
I searched for an exit,  
Applying for jobs I found one to take me,  
Sales manageress  
Of a greeting card company.

## TWENTY-THIRD YEAR 1982

Life began again, me as salesman,  
Selling greeting cards,  
My briefcase crawling  
With snakes and lizards, shellac  
Shaping them in black, I was painting  
In my coffee breaks and lunchtimes  
For their coloured jewels to shine.

I drove against the backdrop of the Falklands;  
Soldiers going to war in summertime,  
Their wives weeping on radio kept my eyes open  
In the miles between Devon and Cornwall,  
Card shop and card shop.

I sewed every hole in my husband's clothes  
For his move back to his mother;  
I could no longer face my nightly fear  
Of going home to his suppressed fury.  
But his frequent visits tormented me,  
And his refusal to give me his house key.  
Once he brought flowers, once the gun,  
Shooting a hole in the dark in his fury  
At my refusal to let him in  
And perhaps turn it on me.  
When his threats of violence  
Manifested one night, I sought sanctuary

In the one place I knew that I'd be safe,  
Only to be told to keep away  
By the figure with the mother-face,  
In case a stray bullet  
Hit a neighbour. Neither must I  
Disturb my sleeping father  
Who would have moved me in  
Against her hidden wishes.  
I had not the strength then,  
To be so unwelcome and stay  
In order to reach him. If she saw  
The livid bruises  
That escaped the scarf at my neck  
She did not mention them.

Three locksmiths refused to call again  
When my husband tapped the telephone  
And warned them off.  
Months later, with a concerned smile, he said  
My new lover was as rotten as bad meat  
At the bin's bottom. His truth  
Rang hollow in the separation  
That now divided me from his daily anger  
At my head full of independence.  
But my business plan became a funnel  
Straight into the new man's business arms,

His blacklisted insurance sales history  
Making a proxy of me,  
And I'd no idea he'd fuck a friend  
And make her my enemy.

By March I was divorced,  
But brief elation bottomed out  
On the unease that permeated  
My new relationship.  
There were cheques amiss, and money slipped  
Between excuses into this new man's abyss.  
I'd stepped into a world where nothing was  
Where it should have been,  
Though he'd deny it endlessly.

And there were we,  
Camping out in a rented room  
While my ex-husband stalked my home,  
And the boyfriend's ex-wife gave birth  
To a child he said was not his own.  
It was only later that I found  
The boy had his face on,  
It was just another lie  
That he polished 'til it shone.

## TWENTY-FOURTH YEAR 1983

I was digging mud and moving stones on weekends,  
Measuring myself out on a task in the garden  
That I could not complete;  
It would grow over, more lumpen than ever  
The moment my back was turned.

The business-partner-boyfriend  
Promised cheques, mostly fictitious,  
We lived on those promises  
And spun a real mirage  
Of future success out of our conclusions.  
Blacklisted, he couldn't get an account  
Without my name on it, I learned  
About pensions and savings,  
And futures from men in tall buildings,  
My suit as dapper grey-woollen  
As their faces, their eyes  
On the nipple  
Of my stocking fasteners  
Through the fabric of my skirt.

I learned mortgages and MIRAS,  
Futures reeled by me, their paper hearts ticking,  
Cram it in, cram it in, knowledge and learning,  
Fix it to the rafters of the head,  
And all the while the boyfriend's idle feet

Beneath the desk in an office  
I'd borrowed for, the secretary  
Unable to type. He squeaked like a hinge  
When I fired her for leaving  
My letters undone and heaped,  
While flanked by two admirers in the foyer  
She knitted.

My overstuffed head was gagging at the seams,  
I blacked-out frequently, oblivion  
As sudden as a switch. Each time,  
The last sound I heard  
Was the dull thud of my skull  
Like the slam of a door  
As my head hit the floor.



## TWENTY-FIFTH YEAR 1984

I'd learned more about money  
In six months. Meantime, partner, mine,  
Unscrewing minds to see his  
As the carrier of hope. I closed our office down  
To plug the money hole that his inability to keep it  
Had dug in the floorboards, stripped up the carpet  
And turn a blind eye to his infidelities,  
He was palling on me.  
I sent myself to college  
On the back of the sale of a children's book,  
And gave up writing poetry;  
The parental comparisons  
Would be too painful for me.

His lies piled up  
On lies and lies and he, keeping taut  
The necklace string of all his lying beads.  
Door knocks opened to reveal  
One debt collector after another;  
My world narrowed to a tunnel,  
End-blocked and filling  
With the man's sewerage.  
He'd been stealing, his name  
A mantra on the lips  
Of the disenfranchised. The telephone  
Became a thing of terror, I climbed

Deeper and deeper into the safety of myself  
Until I could no longer tell  
What was acceptable, or good, or bad, or hell.  
His frequent drunken vomit in the bathroom  
Repelled me, but no less  
Than his denial of it.  
The purgatory smell remained  
Despite my attempts  
To erase the evidence,  
My mind, he said, was all too colourful.

For three months I slept  
Foetal on the spare-room floor  
Without mattress or blankets, in between  
Compulsively painting and writing and hoping  
That in my hopelessness I might restore  
Some sense of balance.

When my father made Poet Laureate,  
The boyfriend ate six months' pay  
In a meal as my father's guest. I told him to go  
And he left when I wasn't looking,  
Collecting his fifteen stone mistress  
On his way out of the village,  
Giving her boyfriend  
All my best bed linen. For two weeks

I burned the six inches of discarded papers  
He'd strewn across my living room,  
Searching for my fallen pieces, finding evidence  
He'd forged my name and abused my identity  
Over and over again, and the debris  
Of all the other people the bastard cheated,  
Their lives as bleak and confounded  
As Exmoor, but at their end,  
When all hope of making up the deficit  
Was gone. I was the lucky one,  
Although I'd lost my home  
And almost everything I owned  
I was young enough to start again,  
If only I could recover from  
The shock of betrayal that hit me  
With the force of a swinging wall.  
My father came and sat and listened then,  
Not showing a single bone of judgement  
When others did, but simply understanding  
As I wept and wept and wept.

## TWENTY-SIXTH YEAR 1985

I was finishing an art foundation, drawing faces huge,  
So they gazed from the wall in their two-foot tall  
Terracottas and blacks, for my end-of-year,  
And I pushed weights until  
My shoulders could almost  
Walk on their own. I swam  
With air force friends from Chivenor,  
My country life about to end,  
Precarious for food and electricity,  
Each shilling measured out  
For petrol, or a single pair of shoes.

The husband who had once  
Hounded me to misery  
Introduced his new wife,  
Took us for a drink  
And became a friend again.  
The con-man boyfriend  
Who had dismembered all aspects of my life  
Was jailed for fraud—though not of mine—  
I couldn't relive that in court  
And go through it all  
A second time,  
And Central St Martin's gave me a place  
At the end of my art course in Devon,  
Though London was the heaving mass

I'd wanted to avoid, the millions of people  
Crawling over and around each other,  
Refusing to admit they were too many.

In Portugal with friends I noticed  
The odd man out, on a BMW motorbike,  
His exhaust pipes shining  
Among the tourists in their caravans,  
My Dutchman, a shipboard engineer.  
A holiday romance, they said,  
But he followed me to England and back again,  
He sailed me round the coast of Africa,  
Frieda on a freighter, an engagement ring glittering,  
On time borrowed from college, sketching,  
Drawing cartoons of my ship-board family,  
Photographing Morocco, Ghana and Gabon,  
And finding sea legs are only won  
After three days of bilious green.

I was brought to my knees by the rolling sea  
As the boat pitched from side to side  
At forty-five degrees, the gradient so steep  
That stairs were either horizontal or vertical.  
I lay starfish on the bed in order to keep  
From being tossed into a corner and heaped.  
Once I'd learned to navigate

The fluctuating gradient  
Of the surface beneath me,  
I'd dangle my legs at the ship's edge  
And watch the dolphins and flying fish  
Thread the wake as it melted  
Back into the sea.

## TWENTY-SEVENTH YEAR 1986

My twenty-sixth birthday on the freighter  
Was celebrated by officers and sailors  
In their second language, I was  
Seeing the world from the sea.  
My foot ripped open on rusted metal in Angola  
After a supply-boat party thrown for me  
And a man from Exxon,  
With Robert Mitchum's face on.  
I'd stay up late, kept awake  
By the pounding of Vesuvius beneath my skin  
As the wound formed a mountain range,  
And watch the oilrigs, their match-stacks flaming,  
Out on the far-off edge of the soot-black  
Watery plate of the earth, UNITA  
Only twenty-five kilometres away,  
And everyone ready to evacuate.

I left the boat in Brazil,  
Where a cab driver hid me  
On the floor of his car  
On the way to the airport,  
Lest he be ambushed at a red light  
For his passenger,  
Pointing out the colossal viaduct  
That was the proud spine at the crest  
Of the forests of trees

The people did not care about,  
And prostitutes fought for attention  
From the rich Dutch sailors,  
Their poverty disguised by smiles,  
And colourful clothes and careful nails,  
And their kindness to me  
As we danced together.

But I realised that as a sailor's wife  
My home would either be a suitcase  
Or an empty house and solitary life. I returned  
To my tiny room in a Bromley flat,  
My car crapped on by every bird in London  
And mould on crockery,  
Three months in the sink; the other tenants'  
Breakfast things from the day I'd gone.

Hunting for another home  
With yet another loan, I met  
The estate agent I knew in an instant  
Was next, whether I liked it or not,  
Though he still wasn't "the one."  
He bid at auction for me,  
And moved in when my flat was done,  
And I'd scraped the walls  
Of sixty years



Of a dead old woman's history  
In stripes and roses.  
Two lodgers subsidised my income  
And diagnosed dyslexia gave me the reason for  
The thought process that had hobbled me  
For all these years;  
Knowing set me free.  
Meanwhile, I systematically  
Embraced each art school project,  
Returning home each night  
To tentative security, and the belief  
This lack of progress  
Was only transitory.

## TWENTY-EIGHTH YEAR 1987

At college I finished  
Almost everything asked of me,  
And refined my flat continually,  
Making its humble parts pretty,  
At last replacing the dinner plates  
I'd bought second-hand at eighteen,  
And the camping cutlery.

Various lodgers continued to bring  
Their habits and boyfriends  
To my two spare rooms,  
While I sculpted Shakespeare's people,  
Their hands and faces drying separately  
As if they had been momentarily  
Put down by their owners  
And forgotten. Plaster powdered everything  
From floor to ceiling, and congealed on sheets  
That covered furniture. My white  
Powder footprints followed me  
Up and down the corridor, my skin,  
Crabbed and mottled with drying,  
Grew coarse. My partner revolved  
Like a wheel rim around  
The pivot of my life  
And his long-ago ex-wife. I ran his office  
In between my college hours

And hypoglycaemic black-outs,  
Working both ends of a day without pay  
For the first three months, and thinking  
Of the spectacular art exhibition I'd have  
If only I could find a gallery  
To take me on. At night  
I painted fish scales and feathers,  
Imagining a coastline of mountains and beaches  
Beyond the water I was treading,  
Where the nearest ground  
Appeared to be three miles down.

## TWENTY-NINTH YEAR 1988

Love persuaded me to work long hours  
In my lover's office as my  
Final college year passed by.  
From office, to college, to office  
My days were long and tired,  
I should have walked and let him be  
But lacked the stamina required.  
I believed his eighteen extra years  
Brought wisdom, and was most attracted by  
His consideration for me,  
So found it hard to understand  
When he favoured daily business lunches  
And weekend football on TV.

I emerged from college  
As a self-employed  
Artist-writer-part-time-estate-agent  
Of doubtful income and uncertain future.  
I'd loved enough to marry,  
But now, as put aside as I was,  
So was it. I felt myself  
Rolling forwards like a stone  
As the plane of the Earth tipped.  
My parents' Christmas gift  
Was a trip to Australia to see a college friend  
And relatives. And there, on a train

Across the Nullarbor Plain  
I fell in love with the outback  
And an Australian.

Tracked down to my uncle's in Melbourne  
I spent Christmas with a partner  
Whose grip on me grew tighter  
Now he felt me slipping;  
As faithful as I was 'til then,  
My mind was travelling.

Once back in London  
Among the thrashing bodies,  
The city seemed to be  
The whole country. I wanted  
The noise to recede  
As it had in the outback,  
And allow me to breathe. Inhabiting  
A narrow world that spanned  
Only the thin black Northern Line,  
It was only a matter of time  
Before I crumpled like tin.

## THIRTIETH YEAR 1989

Craving red dirt and kookaburras  
I was homesick for Australia.  
While a mile-long meal that had been dismissed  
By a college tutor's careless hand, became  
A book in America, Australia and England,  
My terracotta walls  
Were closing in on me, my husband-to-be  
Not understanding how football on TV  
In the corner of the living room  
Made my work a mockery, and me,  
Responsible for where we lived,  
The gas and electricity. I'd sit  
At my draughtsman's easel, staring from the window,  
Longing for some happening  
To set me free. A painting sold,  
My beginnings like small shoots.  
But all the while the days  
Became more and more the same.  
One day followed the other, like an echo.  
I wrote and painted, slept and ate,  
Swimming in a bowl the sides of which  
I could not negotiate. Driven by his loss  
When I escaped to Australia again,  
My lover begged me to marry him  
At last, at last, at last.  
Too late.

Not wanting to say “yes” but fearing  
“No” might send him off the edge  
I fell too low to fight,  
So made a bargain that I knew  
He could not meet, and he agreed,  
But covered up the break in it  
Until it was too late for me,  
As if the tickets to Gambia and registrar  
Were less changeable than marriage.  
And when I answered “yes,” I lied,  
But couldn’t spear him with the negative.  
I’d been buried too long inside  
To withdraw my sacrifice. Weak fool,  
My face in wedding photographs  
Is at my funeral. My spiral  
Was gripped in both hands  
And down I plummeted,  
Daylight escaping daily.  
I was younger when  
I was here before,  
And the dark looked different then,  
Whereas now the pit into which I fell  
Drilled right down through the floor  
As far as Australia.

## THIRTY-FIRST YEAR 1990

### *Waldorf and the Sleeping Granny*

Saved each other, but my children's novel  
Couldn't save me. My days were identical.  
I always believed that this brought comfort;  
No surprises, no upsets, no questions, just  
A slow pace from one end of the day  
To the other. My sky was grey, my landscape  
Flatter than Norfolk, my mood  
A numb and heavy thing. Sometimes  
I'd move my body sluggishly  
—Like luggage—  
To the kitchen for a cup of tea  
And forget halfway,  
So sit, and stay, and stay,  
And maybe sleep. By dusk  
I'd wake and work  
'Til three or four a.m. my husband  
Physically as far from me in mind  
As another species altogether.

By September, each foot  
Was welded to the floor  
The moment I placed it. It took  
An hour to walk fifteen houses.  
My doctor questioned me, my life so perfect  
There was nothing I could see



That put the surface of the earth  
At the level of my knees.  
I refused her pills. I was depressed,  
She said, but wanted to find my own way  
To raise my head from the table.  
I wrote myself down.

My father learned me through  
Seventy-four pages of the highlights  
Of my history, and his shingle blisters.  
I'd figured out my roots  
And needed him to see  
The real soil that grew me.  
He'd been uninformed 'til then,  
Sound and vision both impaired  
By my stepmother's translation  
Of all the thoughts I'd shared.

In my whole history with her  
I'd blamed myself for being less  
Than she could love,  
It was only now I realised  
I had nothing to be guilty of,  
And accepted that not loving me  
Was not a crime;  
It was just the way she was.

My mind, set free of puzzlement,  
Released other secrets too;  
The memory of the moment  
I'd lost it as a child  
Returned to me, completing history  
With pictures of my grandmother  
Reducing my mother to misery,  
Threatening to steal us while  
My father's back was turned,  
And take us overseas.

Another book accepted  
Was no joy to me,  
I lived daily in yesterday  
Which was also tomorrow  
And every day after.  
Even the cancerous beginnings  
Of a cervical anomaly  
In stage two, heading for three out of three  
Couldn't shake me from oblivion.  
It was just another  
Stone in my road to step over  
In my same old, same old world.  
Tissue was cauterised without anaesthetic,  
Because being this numb, what point?

Maybe now I'd feel something.  
As consciousness lost itself I realised  
The pain was three people away  
And I was only fainting by proxy.

## THIRTY-SECOND YEAR 1991

Our separation was as secret as our wedding had been.  
Red dirt from the Australian desert stained me,  
My passport languishing in the hands  
Of the authorities, until November  
When I was granted residency.  
I was planning my escape, my husband's hope  
The rope that constrained me,  
My need to free myself so strong  
I was dragging my burden,  
Heading for Australia  
And the arms of an Australian.

My sister-surrogate in California  
Employed me to redesign her home  
With architect, as if it were my own.  
It was the means by which I cut  
The stranglehold of Hessian  
I dangled from. My husband  
Became a lodger for free, and me,  
Paying, paying, penalty  
In spirit and mortgage and guilt,  
Treading water still.

Australia was the golden plate  
On which I rolled like an eager pea,  
All green from rainy England,

And more in love with desert stones  
And empty, open scenery, than you'd think  
From my home in the suburbs where  
Five weeks in six  
I lived alone, painting.  
And when my shoulder muscle tore  
While making furniture, the sound  
Like a wet shirt ripping,  
The pain so sharp my right arm  
Felt to be severed, dangling,  
I learned to paint left-handed,  
So the work that gave me shape  
And imbued me with purpose  
Would continue unabated.

New friends became my family,  
Orphaned from the Eastern States  
Or overseas, and for a while  
I revelled in this new-found freedom,  
My life so simple in  
The hot Australian sun.  
I pieced myself together from  
The cadmium orange flowers of  
The Australian Christmas tree,  
The grevillea and river gum.

## THIRTY-THIRD YEAR 1992

Summer in London, my ex-husband's lover  
Had moved things in my home,  
We were disentangled by divorce at last  
But the place was still my own.  
On a Devon visit I was faced  
With an afternoon's persuasion  
To change my name,  
So never give an interview  
And keep the secret safe. I refused,  
Insisting I was born a Hughes.  
My father, pointing out that this was true,  
Said I should only do what I wanted to.  
But the demand from someone  
I thought close enough to know  
The pain she'd cause, caused pain,  
Not least because she'd married  
The surname we both used.

Back in Australia again,  
With the man as my spouse,  
I bought a house, its tiny pool  
Taking up the whole back yard.  
My ageing face in the mirror  
Cracked back at me, my cigarette skin  
So bagged a thing I'd carry shopping in it,

It was fifteen years older than the rest of me  
After eighty cigarettes a day.

Another children's book began the year,  
But in order to exist  
I found myself a second job  
As magazine cartoonist,  
And gave up smoking.  
The immobile tongue,  
The inability to clearly speak,  
And the constant weeping  
At the loss of such a friend  
Took several weeks to pass.  
Cigarettes  
Had accompanied my breakfast, lunch and dinner,  
My anorexic efforts to get thinner,  
Good sex, bad sex, or any sex at all,  
Walking, dancing, drinking,  
Or simply thinking. Now  
The empty space they'd filled  
Was as wide as I could reach,  
As tall as I could stand  
And almost too heavy to carry.  
With friends or without,  
I was terminally lonely;

The void engulfed me.  
But the prison of addiction  
That had feigned friendship  
Now so repelled me, I could not go backwards,  
Lest my self-disgust at failing to escape it  
Choke me completely.



## THIRTY-FOURTH YEAR 1993

Painting, painting, a one-woman show the thing  
I worked for. Fattening, head in the fridge  
To avoid a smoke, I garnered the proportions  
Of a well-fed porpoise, perched at the pool-edge  
In between more paintings,  
Until they were all done.

Back in England my September exhibition  
Grew closer. My father typed  
The name of every single friend he'd got,  
And some he'd not, thinking  
They should come.

I wrote each one and they  
Turned up in droves, except for him.  
He came before, quietly, to see  
Everything, his face a lantern  
In the light of all that colour, his grin  
As good a thing to frame.

In England, the four months pregnant cyst  
That buckled me, was left inside  
As medical economy.  
In Australia they took it out  
By laparoscopy, and found the English missed  
The real cause of my years of monthly misery,  
Endometriosis.  
Now I became a testing ground

For different kinds of pill  
To alleviate the symptoms  
That made me ill.

In January my sold paintings secured  
An ugly prefab home  
On the most beautiful bit of land  
I'd ever seen,  
With creek and eucalyptus trees.  
Wooroloo took my breath away  
As a lover does,  
Its dry, sloping fields, its slow stream,  
Its boggy bits at the boundary,  
Brought stillness to my centre. That first  
Intake of breath was continuous.  
In the evenings  
I'd sit on the veranda  
To watch the sun drop into the horizon,  
And the kangaroos settling  
Up in the top field. Every night  
The kookaburras and ring-necked parrots  
Hacked the air into pieces between them,  
Until their discordant exuberance  
Was silenced by dark, and then, like a bright fog,  
The stars crowded infinitely.

In February  
My strength deserted me; my body  
Crumpled beneath the weight  
Of Chronic Fatigue. The weakness, the aching,  
The physical difficulties in waking  
Grew worse. My body became my jail.  
My fury welled up inside me  
And fell asleep.  
Unconsciousness enveloped me completely  
Like a black sack  
That split open only for occasional  
Glimpses of my surroundings,  
Before exhaustion dragged me back,  
Oblivion, my enemy.

## THIRTY-FIFTH YEAR 1994

He, who'd set up home with me  
Became gritted between  
The two stones of my exhaustion  
And our proximity, he had to leave  
So I could be single-minded  
About the small actions of a day  
That were now mountainous.  
I grasped my minutes  
In semi-conscious fingers,  
Fumbling for clarity, each thought  
A marble rolled across the floorboards  
And stopped in a knothole.  
My unfinished ideas littered like spilt jewels,  
Forever stuck in their hollows,  
M.E. they said, no cure, just sleep,  
Day or night,  
Forever and ever if necessary.  
If it were all in my head  
I could have fought it, instead  
It inhabited the whole of me  
Like some comatose parasite.

All this in secret, and then,  
Like a small raft  
In the black sea I floundered in,  
My stepmother arranged responsibility

For my mother's poetry  
To pass to my brother and me,  
With both benefit and cudgel.  
But in order to move  
I must persuade my brain  
There was no question to answer,  
No errand to run,  
No commitment to fulfil.  
My feet failed me.  
Each day arrived;  
Another mountain. Each day my tent  
Was pitched nowhere near the summit.  
My life was quiet. People  
Drained me, as if their conversation  
Punctured the bucket I swung in  
So I'd leak into the hot sand and evaporate.

I spent eight months asleep,  
And then my American friend  
Flew me to the States  
To see if recovery could be  
Brought in by lack of daily worry,  
In a moonscape of hot rock  
Utah mountains.  
My paintings were moments in passing.  
I took each waking hour as

A thing for which I had  
No expectations.  
I asked nothing of it.  
Poetry, stopped and bottled up a decade,  
Poured out. I couldn't read it  
But I wrote it down  
As fast as my fingers could stumble  
Between the two walls  
Of sleep and sleep. Without my defences  
It was set free.

I was going to find my way around mountains,  
I'd burrow holes,  
I'd trick myself into attaining  
Small goals, each rebuilding a little more  
Of the foundation of myself  
That had powdered beneath the weight  
Of too much expectancy.

## THIRTY-SIXTH YEAR 1995

M.E. is the secret I hide  
In my waking hours.  
I feed it sleep in my quiet, I balance events  
To match my small moments of energy.  
I write a children's book  
By placing words in rows  
Like obedient children, hoping  
They stand correctly. I can't read it.  
Excitement at my first Sydney exhibition  
Launched me straight into the gallery owner's  
Locked doors, behind which  
He drank my sales, and endometriosis  
Bled me inwards, until a hysterectomy.  
Full stop for any family. In Perth  
I worked doggedly,  
Sleeping at my canvases  
Until I'd made them sing louder  
Brighter, better than before,  
For another show in England.  
Like the most lovely children,  
They found homes, the private view  
The pinnacle of the mountain in my mind  
I had to climb a second time.  
But the last operation left me  
Unable to eat, as if I was somehow  
Separated internally. I knew

That if no one found the reason why  
After all the painful tests that specialists devise,  
Eventually I'd die.

I dared not share that fear  
With anyone, so going to a party  
Seemed a good idea,  
Cementing my resolve  
To be medically nonchalant.

Midnight, said the clock,  
When, as Cinderella going backwards,  
Skinny as hell and getting thinner,  
I stepped onto the garden path.  
The side gate swung open, and there,  
All my knowledge of my life's mate  
Met in a man's face. His gaze  
Knew me immediately.  
We stopped and stared, each riveted,  
And in that blazing moment  
In the dark, the silence in our heads  
Like the clash of cymbals,  
We knew we'd been prepared.

We moved in on our first date  
Without surnames or history.  
We'd marry, he said,



But I made him wait  
Eight months. Two days after  
He'd run his fingers over  
My unscarred skin, my complete covering,  
They found the colon twist that was starving me.  
When they cut it out it was he  
Who nursed my two separate halves as they knitted  
The crotch to navel split.

## THIRTY-SEVENTH YEAR 1996

László arrived in London beside me.  
I had to teach him how  
To walk through Londoners  
Who'd trample him into the pavement  
If he so much as stood aside  
To allow an old lady by.

We painted, our canvases crushed  
Into each other's edge  
By the roof pitch  
So we shared splashes.  
Lloyds Bank put on a private view  
For their favoured few, and we  
Practised weekly for the show,  
Boarding bars and hooking wire  
Into all their oak, the desks to go.  
A practise run at weekends  
Sharpened us, we were learning each other,  
Our hands on the map of ourselves,  
Fighting, in love and at war,  
Our identities struggling in disbelief  
At the thief of ourselves  
Who had stolen us,  
Marriage, an absolute foregone conclusion  
Where only denial had ever been before.

In Australia we renovated László's home  
To set it up for sale, interrupted only by  
Our December wedding  
On the banks of a bird river  
Full of black swans.  
I'd met my match, *the one*,  
My missing bit, my almost-twin, the man  
Who would stand beside me  
Come what may, and it did.

Western Australia blackened in a bushfire,  
Animals were cooked into their fields,  
My property blazed  
And my trees and saplings were severed  
At their burning knees, traced out in ash on ash.  
The insurance assessor who was removed  
For cheating on our claim,  
Piled disbelief on disbelief;  
Such a blatant thief in the midst  
Of all that carnage. In the black of night  
The stubs of trees glowed orange;  
Disembodied markers scattered across  
The thousands of acres of blackened ground  
Where no animal remained,

No bird flew,  
No insect made a sound.

For weeks I couldn't sleep. At László's house  
I paced, painted flames  
And wrote poems about the fire.  
I landscaped his garden as if I could  
Somehow put back all I'd grown and lost  
On his little plot. Then  
My brother phoned. My father  
Now had cancer and  
Impoverished as I was  
I must find the fare to fly me back to England,  
But couldn't get a loan.  
As if providence heard, a friend  
Brought a one-legged gold miner  
To our studio, where he bought my painting  
Of a one-legged bird, for enough  
To get me to my father's bedside.  
I knew then  
It was time to move home again.

## THIRTY-EIGHTH YEAR 1997

The Irish builder won the deal  
To rebuild the incinerated Australian studio;  
We were not to know  
The uselessness of him in the hands  
Of the useless designer, whose timidity  
Left gaping holes in our walls  
Where the windows should be,  
And gaps downside doors  
And leaning supports as drunk as he  
Who placed them so arbitrarily.

In England, we made  
A derelict home our own  
And, having moved in London, three days  
Into a house with water and power  
Only on the top floor,  
We had the thing we'd worked for;  
A double Cork Street exhibition  
In two galleries.  
The replies to invitations  
Deluged our efforts  
Until the death of a princess  
On the very day we hung, her funeral  
The day we took our paintings down,  
Our livelihood a pebble in  
The vast scow of national grief.

We lived in one room in the attic  
While the workmen took us on  
Daily, until the top floor was done,  
And Australia waited, unfinished,  
So that plasterwork and joinery  
Were what I dreamed of.

Christmas found us back on the edge  
Of the bush, our crooked studio erected  
By our crooked builder.  
We fixed things constantly,  
Exchanging London for Wooroloo,  
Picking up the hammer's twin.  
Fire came through again,  
But we caught it this time,  
Four fire trucks and beaters  
Fought it back from the creek line.  
Best of all I read a book  
For the first time in three years  
Since diagnosis of M.E.  
The words no longer escaped,  
Meaningless, gibbering senselessly,  
But clearly spoke to me.

We were managing a team of men  
In our London home,  
My father sickening, even as  
I began to wake again, reading  
*Birthday Letters* and cluttering  
Each empty room with storage furniture, so he  
Could look upon  
The blazing fire painting and the scarlet poppies  
He wanted for the covers of his book,  
His urgency not lost on me.

## THIRTY-NINTH YEAR 1998

*Wooroloo*, first my home,  
And now my first collection,  
Sat in my father's lap, its jewel  
Glittered in his eye of pride,  
He was beside himself with joy.  
My book of poetry  
Now trapped me in its pillory  
For everyone to see.  
He saw it firmly between covers  
Before he died, and the husband  
Who'd care for me as he'd want him to.  
He knew that all my other beginnings  
Had purpose in preparing me  
For endings.

Every waking day  
Between building inspectors and bags of cement  
My head was filled  
With the presence of my father,  
His voice on the telephone telling me  
Over and over how he loved me  
As if I must learn it, and  
Might not have heard him the first, second,  
Or third time.



My poetry was where I hid  
When my father died. The crevasse in me  
Opened up by my father's death  
Just wouldn't close. Into it  
Poured sympathy; bandages  
Tossed into the bottomless well  
Where I'd fallen, myself  
Into the pit of myself,  
My snake's tail eaten,  
Inside out, bellied up,  
The shriek in my bones  
Like the sound of eternal bagpipes  
Mourning, my limbs the sticks  
That funnelled the scream of wind  
From my father's funeral fire  
Through their hollows.  
Food sharpened and became nails, swallowed,  
Remorseless spikes digging  
Into Crohn's disease.  
I couldn't escape myself, my grief  
Followed me doglike from the inside.  
But astonishingly  
A mother rose from my father's ashes;  
It seemed she saw me now,  
Where before I'd not existed,

Her unexpected occasional kindness  
Raised me from my knees.  
Despite my husband's warning tone  
I brought her home to me,  
Whatever she offered of herself  
I'd gladly own, I hoped  
To be her daughter, finally.

Love, waiting an age  
For small encouragement  
Emboldened my phone calls of concern,  
Until the eventual request  
They cease. My sentiments, it seemed,  
Were unreturned.  
The illusion that I was not orphaned  
Was broken by the word.

## FORTIETH YEAR 1999

As if to practise me for public scrutiny  
In the sharp, clear light of misery  
My dead father won awards.  
T. S. Eliot, South Bank, and Whitbread,  
Each paid homage and I  
Each time would rise to take  
The things I wished he'd had alive.  
His last book had set him free,  
And he'd entrusted me  
To the woman  
Who meted out those parts  
Of his legacy to me, as he  
So carefully described  
In his self-titled will,  
As if it were the way  
It was always going to be.  
I'd got a mother now; the man was dead  
And she'd buried jealousy,  
Or had it been burned off in the furnace  
That took my father's flesh  
And made him bone?

When the memorial was over  
And the photographers had gone,  
My father's legacy was ended,  
My phone calls unreturned,

I found myself orphaned from  
The woman in whose promises  
My father's wishes shone.  
Dead now, he couldn't see  
The skill and brilliance  
With which she severed me  
From what he'd wanted done.

Two days before my birthday  
I received two envelopes. In one,  
Her lawyer's message unstrung me  
From all her letters promising  
To honour my father's written words  
In which he divided copyright,  
And remembered family.  
In the foul and broken sixteen months  
Since my father died  
She'd led me to believe  
Otherwise, and I'd clung on this as truth,  
Her assurances my evidence  
That deep down inside her mother-core  
She'd loved me more  
Than I'd once thought.  
But now it dawned on me  
It was a game she played, and me  
A trusting little pawn, betrayed.

In the other envelope she'd sent  
A card for my fortieth birthday,  
With love, both letters to arrive  
Simultaneously.  
She did not call me to explain  
Or speak to me again,  
Her telephone number changed.

I flailed, rootless, my husband  
The one that caught me as I was abandoned  
By the woman I'd wanted as mother,  
Since I met her at the age of eight  
And loved her.

And if I could see in her the pain  
Of her father's loss so long ago,  
Then how could she not see  
The devastation left to me  
By the loss of mine,  
Made more crippling by my loss of her  
A second time?

## FORTY-FIRST YEAR    2000

My mother's journals are out now,  
Complete; my father's last suggestion  
For her legacy.  
But I sleep whole days again,  
Chronically Fatigued by the argument  
Of relatives betrayed  
When promises to keep my father's wishes  
Were tossed aside, as we were.  
Reason failed as lawyers did,  
But after months of anguish  
I'd not take that last legal chance  
To end the matter since  
The quality of life and freedom  
Far outweighed the hope  
Of any positive advance.

I'd write what's happened, but  
The gawping stares, the gazes,  
Unfettered then, would poke and pry,  
So I disguised my truth in poetry  
Of waxwork effigies.  
But would anyone have pity on  
A daughter's loss? They'd think it money,  
Not stepmother cost,  
Not the betrayal of a trust misplaced.  
Daddy, Daddy, come and see

What she's done to me in your name  
When the words you wrote  
Were nothing like the same.  
My year rotted me from the core,  
I cried my father's loss  
And ocean levels rose, their tide  
Eroding cliffs of resolution.  
I wasn't anymore alive  
Then crawling took  
Just to reach a time  
When anger ended, leaving peace  
And freedom—the cost already paid.

My birth mother's blue plaque  
Brought me back from wherever  
I'd lost myself, and I saw  
No other mother could replace  
The one that went before,  
No woman would adopt  
The child I was,  
The girl whose mother's face  
Unknowingly accused them  
Of taking up her mother's place.  
I'll paint my life in abstracts now,  
These poems as the key  
To the incidents that shaped me,

And celebrate my journey through  
The thickets and hedges,  
The maze of thorny edges  
Thrown up by family and circumstance  
From which I now am free.



## FORTY-SECOND YEAR 2001

A second book of poetry was published,  
*Stonepicker*, encompassing what I witnessed in others.  
Slowly, I was creeping into the stanzas,  
My imprint practising itself and wondering  
If form and substance  
Could be braver next time.  
My pen at the ready, a third collection,  
This time more personal,  
Was evolving at my raw and bloodied core.  
It tracked the vulture of betrayal,  
My belief in other mother broken,  
Joy smashed. The culture of deceit  
Dumbfounded my efforts at clarity,  
The Devil woke in me, see  
The box my truth is in. Quiet, quiet, says  
False mother from afar, through lawyers,  
And what was to be yours  
That you've not had  
Might come in part, one day, sometime,  
When I've taken what is mine  
And seen if yours is left.  
My father's words were read  
But it seems that now he's dead  
They're ash and grit, as he is.

Searching for a bigger space to paint in,  
I met a woman living rat-like  
In one room of a house that was waist high  
In mail and newspapers,  
And old banana peel,  
Dating back to 1953.  
Bent so double her nose  
Rested on her knees, her clothes  
And body had not seen water  
In more than three years,  
She could be smelt around corners.  
Having vacancies in family  
I took her on at weekends,  
Sorting and clearing, washing  
Her fetid clothes and cooking weekly,  
So that she might eat something  
More than a Mars bar.  
I did not feel pity, but recognition;  
If I magnified almost any aspect of myself  
She could be me.

Meanwhile, a man who demanded residence  
In our spare room,  
Followed me around the inside  
Of my own home, until one night

I was stalked to a standstill  
In the dining room. He had to go.  
The Twin Towers fell,  
And all the people in them, I had never seen  
Such carnage on a TV screen,  
The images remain with me.

Truth, truth screams to be out and about,  
And here come the effigies,  
The mothers, fathers, brothers  
Born of me; *Waxworks* in the making,  
An allegory. Where I am dumb  
They speak for me,  
Swimming to resolution  
As if it were an island, but  
There's no land in this cold sea  
Of loss, of lies, of maternal infidelity.

## FORTY-THIRD YEAR 2002

Temptation offers contract for me to be one  
With money coming in. And so I sign,  
NESTA to be a governor of mine,  
To make more of me than I can  
On my own. Belief breeds effort.  
My sleep-sickening remained  
A hidden thing, for a step-mother  
Ripped off the edge of me  
As if hook-caught in passing, when really  
She was simply escaping  
At the earliest opportunity,  
Still attached to my gullibility.

Waxwork effigies took on life  
And walked and talked my poetry,  
Each husband, each wife,  
A suffering thing that brought its life  
To bear the fruit of all  
My father's death had left  
In bitter hearts. *Waxworks*  
Told my story, blow by blow,  
The truth so bald my small advance  
Paid for the lawyer's glance  
Upon my facts: Leave nothing to conjecture  
Where truth is evident  
And proof abounds, he said. My waxworks

Now enacted history;  
My father in his many guises,  
And then the others, demons  
Squabbling for their bitter prizes,  
Their rendition of my story  
Rescued me; loss of trust,  
Withered of love, stuck again, motherless,  
Grey, bloodied, waxy fission  
Told the truth at last.

Now that I was free  
From carrying the bag of knives  
Of other people's lies,  
The misery that ate holes  
Into the flesh of my foot soles,  
Leaking skin-fluid and blood into my shoes,  
Began to recede. Where once I bled,  
Now waxworks bleed.

## FORTY-FOURTH YEAR 2003

Until a prince's mention  
I had not known  
That my father's memorial  
—His Dartmoor stone—  
Had been placed as he wanted, the ceremony  
Forbidden to his family.  
It was autumn before my father's friend  
—Who picked the spot—  
Lead László and me across the moor to see.  
Already strangers had beaten a track  
Through the grass to this nowhere  
My father's marker lay, and me, his daughter,  
A trespasser in the mind  
Of the woman who had put him there.

In summer I broke from working on  
My forty canvases  
Of the abstract landscape of my narrative,  
For winter in Melbourne  
At a friend's side  
As she tried to stay alive,  
Her head a home for too many tumours.  
We only left when we knew  
She'd be here for a little longer.

Back in England, a plea was made  
For my martyrdom  
So better things could come,  
But if I sacrificed components of  
My history, the actual and factual  
A treasure to me, when denial makes a jail,  
A box, an airless tomb,  
It is a smaller thing than I can live in.  
I stepped aside and let it slide,  
To hide myself  
In painting images for sale outside  
The landscape of my life,  
A psychic mention having pointed out  
The holes pulling in the fabric  
Of all my constructions. Sleep was short  
As László helped me keep  
Momentum going 'til gallery walls  
Were hung. Our paintings sold enough  
To give us time to dress the house  
For some new love. The suitors came,  
The sale board flapping,  
They gaped and poked and prodded  
The grind and sod we made the place from  
To be beautiful. Suddenly,

The house had chosen someone  
And we must leave.

I felt happiness now  
At where I came from,  
All the pain of loss  
And being cast off  
By those I'd loved as family  
Was gone. No more pretence  
That all was ever well,  
No more lies that implied love  
Where none was felt,  
No more corners and sharpened edges  
Hidden in the false embraces  
And stony eyes of those other faces.  
The mother and father who loved me, died,  
But still I carry them inside  
And in my quiet, mourn for them.



## FORTY-FIFTH YEAR 2004

Reined in from moving, from shifting,  
From shedding the too tight skin  
That we painted in, up for sale,  
We waited until the deal was done.  
Meantime, we'd see a gem,  
Broken up and in need of polishing,  
The walls a tad tight  
But we'd rebuild later, only for  
Some eager hand to snatch it.  
At last we found "the one,"  
So mired in dispute  
That others passed it on.  
Love, instantly. Expectant rooms  
And hallways welcomed us, I was conscious  
Of their bated breath and knew  
Where each book, or rock, or lamp would fit,  
And the places I would sit at dusk  
To watch the sky pass overhead.

A kindly friend took on concern  
For the old woman I'd cared for  
At weekends, the self-confessed  
Miserly pack rat I had grown to love  
And feared leaving, in case she should die  
After all my efforts to keep her alive.

There were ten trucks of everything  
Over the two weeks it took to deliver us.  
We hired skips—big enough to park two cars in  
To junk the melamine  
The vendors left behind,  
And the house was occupied by fleas  
That blistered my ankle skin  
As I developed an allergy  
To their persistent biting,  
And wasps that swarmed and stung,  
And five thousand flies that filled the landing  
Outside our bedroom, but  
The walls were full of promise.

My daily joy in waking was new to me,  
And only briefly grounded  
When my painting grant was something else  
And taxable in retrospect  
With three years compound interest.  
We struggled then, with bills, but the hills  
Were comforting, like green and earthy  
Guardian whales. I was happy, still,  
In our new home among the daffodils,  
With László nailing ceilings up,

The electrician and plumber  
Working through two summers,  
The dust and mayhem  
And silly pheasants running, and the rain  
Just stunning against the backdrop  
Of Lebanese cedar that towered into the sky.  
Our work took on new life, as we did.

In the garden I dug up and shifted  
Earth and rock, and sculpted shapes  
In which I planted flowers, shrubs, and trees,  
Cementing rockeries in labyrinths,  
Occupying my mind in the moments where  
I'd like to leave the painful thing behind.  
Even recent history  
Could not dampen my ardour  
For this, our home,  
A place for truth and clarity,  
For peace and creativity  
At last. Our sanctuary.

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## About the Author

Born in London in 1960, FRIEDA HUGHES is a poet, an award-winning painter, and the author of seven books for children. Her poems have appeared in many leading publications, including, among others, *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *The London Magazine*, *The Spectator*, *The Times*, *Tatler*, *Thumbscrew*, and *Agenda*. Her first collection of poetry, *Wooroloo*, received a Poetry Book Society Special Commendation. She is a weekly columnist on the poetry page for *The Times* of London. She resides in Wales and is married to the painter László Lukacs.

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