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Poems

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Abstract

WOOROLOO, THE FACE, OPERATION, THIEF, CHANGES

Frieda Hughes

WOOROLOO

Wild oats pale as peroxide lie down among
 The bottle brushes. A beaten army, bleaching.
 Life bled into the earth already, and seeds awaiting,
 Stiff little spiked children wanting water.

Above the creek that split apart the earth
 With drunken gait and crooked pathway,
 Kookaburras sit in eucalyptus. Squat and sharp-throated
 They haggle maggots and branches from ring-neck parrots.

I have watched the green flourish twice, and die,
 And the marsh dry. In this valley I have been hollowed out
 And mended. I echo in my own emptiness like a tongue
 In a bird's beak. My words are all gone.

Out of my mouth comes this dumb kookaburra laugh.
 How my feathers itch.

THE FACE

Born blank, it was made up by children,
 At school, with wax crayons
 And small fingers sticky with sugar
 From half-eaten chocolate.

It was scribbled on at home,
 His mother's notepad. Thrown-away words
 Sank pock-marks in those soft, white features,
 Until he saw himself, a mass of chewed gum
 And other people's pieces.
 He had been added to by everyone,
 Their fingerprints tattooed him.

Old enough to shave,
 He took the blade and made
 His own shape from his chin,
 He sank his cheeks and sculpted creases in.
 He made his face a famous thing
 Until it was the signature
 With which he built his prison.

OPERATION

My head is lead, neck all bent
When I try to lift this melon,
I have no control. The stalk drags its fruit.
Sullen, he sits on the bed edge
Watching me helpless.

I am a damp moth with wings sticking to sheets,
Folded in creases – my chrysalis is split open
But a tube anchors me,
Leaking into my blood from a plastic bladder,
I am diluting.

He waits for me to connect my parts.
A leg slides to the floor, only minutes now
Until they lock the door, lock me in, leave me staring
Into the dark and seeing the needle
Sewn in to the open hole in my hand.

I hold still the medicine ball
That sags between my shoulders and sit,
Like a top-heavy hinge.
A small clown in open back gown,
Pale face and blood spots across my belly.

Each wound hole knitted with a single stitch,
Closing the small mouths of protesting flesh
In two bloody pouts. I am unhooked and escaping.
Each arm a dead albatross rooted in a shoulder blade,
Each leg a tree dragging mud and earth.

I am a monster of pieces.
My spirit watches from the corner
And follows at a distance,
Doesn't recognise its home,
I am alone.

THIEF

It was years before I dug her out
From where her shadow lay, like a bloodstain
Beneath the black stones I had
Weighted her down with.

Her smile was crooked,
She had been dead awhile.

Back then, when the small child watched,
She said she was a relative. She beckoned,
A sweet promise coated the lips that kissed, like honey,
But her eyes were empty already.

When the child reached small hands
Into those holes, she found nothing
Behind the sounds the mouth made,
But the tongue flapping.

'Come live with me!' it cried,
Nostrils spread above like nose wings
As if the face would take off from its neck-end
Like a ghastly bald crow.

Seeing her mother was a shadow not hearing,
The father not found
To know his daughter was disappearing,
The child became blank, wiped clean like a pale sea stone.

Made herself as hollow as a dead tree,
Not worth having.
Her days were as lost as marbles, even her name
Had rolled between a crack in the floorboards.

She was stolen after all, and in her silence
The visitor grew dim. Uncertain. Receded like a dull fox
Just before dawn, barely left a scent behind
On door frames and bed linen, then was gone.

CHANGES

I wore another woman once.
She arrived in a bucket of dye;
And began as a blond streak
With a blush like a carrot.

There I was, face beaten by the cold
In a cut-off winter, and a six-foot hearth
Burning paper left by the last supper:
The boyfriend, his girlfriend, her boyfriend

Eating without me.
Their chicken bones left to spit and crack
With the books and the bills and the savings certificates
Of total strangers. I was warm for two weeks.

This woman woke,
The streak had spread, her head was red,
Her face like stone. She swept up her ashes
And dressed differently.

She borrowed me awhile.
In fact, I had to take me back
When she married without me
And left me holding the husband.

It was only a very small box,
But the bottle inside poured me out
And coloured me in. I was found at last, in my own skin,
Still wearing her creases.