

MAKING A POEM Siân Hughes

I wrote this poem at an appalling time in my life. The baby in the poem is my second child – she never slept, I had been breastfeeding continually for two years – I was desperate.

Every generation seems to invent a new, terrible thing to do to babies. I've just been reading *Can Any Mother Help Me*, women doing terrible things to babies between the war. Our terrible thing – the book they were passing round my baby group – was sleep-training. It was by Richard Ferber, *Solve Your Child's Sleep Problem*. I had a baby who fed all night – a sleep problem. And you have to leave them to scream. I really wish I'd never done it.

At some point, during one of those nights that I must have spent listening to her scream, I must have written this. I don't remember writing it, but I do remember finding it, scribbled on a shopping list. And being surprised, because I was forgetting that part of myself – the writer, I mean. I wasn't giving that part of my life any attention. I was pleased, proud that there was still a part of me that wrote things down.

I did a little work on it, but not much. It always had that shape. Two stanzas – because there were two people – and two rooms. I'd put her in another room, away from me. The twist – the fact that is the adult that is learning despair – was always there. That was another thing I worked out on those terrible nights: that it was me that was learning to be alone, to sleep alone. That I couldn't work out which one of us was screaming.

The language was always very plain, very exact, very cool. I want my poems to be transparent, so that the reader goes straight through without the awareness that they are reading a poem. The language is also the language of the self-help manual: lifeskill, normal, adjust. The repetition is deliberate. The experience repeats, after all. Also I wanted 'normal' to seem less and less an adequate word..

I sent this poem off to the TLS, a publication in which I have published many poems, and the poetry editor replied, 'Though 'Sleep training' is palpably the best and most moving poem you've ever sent me, you wouldn't catch me accepting it.' 'Catch him' accepting what I wonder? Women-centred experience?

Lots of mothers go through this kind of experience. It's a very difficult time to write. You've got to value every scrap.

Sleep training

This is a life skill, and I will learn to go back to sleep without crying. It is normal to find myself alone at night. It is normal to call out and for no one to come. I will adjust.

Already I barely acknowledge the sound of my screaming, night after night. It is almost like silence to me, almost like the night itself. I will learn to close the door, turn aside, and sleep.

SIÂN HUGHES lives in Oxford with her two young children and teaches English and Creative Writing at the College of Further Education. Her poetry is published by Smith/Doorstop in a pamphlet called *Saltpetre*, has appeared in *Anvil New Poets One* (2001) and can be found in various anthologies, on the Underground, in waiting rooms, art galleries, snack bars and magazines such as *Poetry Review* and the TLS. In 1999 she won a Southern Arts Writer's Award for poetry, and in 2006 won the Arvon prize with 'The Send-off' (and yes, she did steal the title).

Interviewed by
Kate Clanchy