

## The Holiday Card

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It is the holiday season in London; the year is 1960. Two poets, married to each other, take sides when delivering a story to their friends in New York. She takes the right side; he occupies the left, and together they do what they incorporated doing in their marriage for the past four and a half years: writing side by side.

As poets, they each need a space to write. They began carving out individual writing spots when they were on their honeymoon in June of 1956 in Benidorm, Spain. While they were living in America in 1959, they shared a small two room apartment at 9 Willow Street in Boston, Massachusetts, with two bay windows in a tiny room, where they each had a writing spot. Ted Hughes wrote on a table he made from two planks, and placed into the niche of one of the windows, and Sylvia Plath wrote on her grandmother's desk, which had designs of ivy and grape burned into the wood, in the other window. In their small Chalcot Square apartment in London, they adopted several plans to invent individual writing areas. Their routine of living in minimal spaces, because of the limits of scraping by on poets' salaries, schooled them in finding ways to accommodate their individual writing needs while being in close quarters.

On the day in December 1960, when they write a holiday card to two of their friends in New York City, they together create yet another shared room. The décor of their joint effort, the card, is done in dark ink: she types on the right side of the card; he writes on the left side. This Christmas card is a place where Plath and Hughes together tell a tale, describe a day, a daughter, and play with sound and images. It is made out of paper, and Plath and Hughes are its foundation, its roof and its walls.

After they finish their paper place, they open the site to two special guests: Ann and Leo Goodman, the recipients of the card. Plath and Hughes further ready the gazette by decorating it with news of what they consider an intruder: an American Broadcast Corporation telegram had arrived in the morning, asking Hughes to appear as Poet of the Year. Then they both break into the magical wonder of their almost nine month old daughter, Frieda. They also both compliment Ann Goodman on her recent children's book, *Let's Draw Animals*, which she had sent to them. Plath and Hughes fill the room by

communicating in their side by side correspondence, revealing on each of their sides the details inside the paper place. The holiday card, which is now housed at the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts, now allows other visitors to enter from one rare room into another, and experience the side by side tale.

Inventing physical space for a writer becomes a demanding creative process in itself when lack of money does not allow for an additional separate room. These two poets began their marriage knowing that they would need to find spaces to allow each of them to write. On the honeymoon Plath and Hughes celebrated, which was a two month visit to Spain, one of the places they found to write on was a wooden table. A line carved into the wood designated sides. Plath memorialized the table in her piece, *Mr. and Mrs. Hughes' Writing Table* (JSP, 259). On Hughes's side of the table, books were strewn about and his papers were tossed around without order. Some of the pages in his stacks had been saved from when he had a job at a movie studio, and was taking notes for incoming scripts he read. His favorite kin, the red leather Shakespeare book, held court on Hughes's side. Plath's side was neatly piled with her books and pieces of paper. Her confidante, the *Roget's Thesaurus*, pulsed on her side. The honeymoon table was one of the first shared writing places Plath and Hughes laid down with their sheets of paper, writing poems and stories; creating scratch sheets.



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Paper was a totem for Plath and Hughes's relationship. They first met on a sheet of paper. As a newcomer to England's poetry scene in 1956, Plath had submitted her poems, "Three Caryatids without a Portico," and "Epitaph in Three Parts" to *Chequer*, a Cambridge University literary magazine, and the poems were published. Hughes had published his poems in *St. Botolph's Review*, another circulation literary magazine. Plath

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<sup>1</sup> "The Sylvia and Ted Honeymoon Dining Room, Benidorm, Spain" by Bernadette Conroy. Photograph of image by Gary Gullo.

had read and memorized Hughes's poems; Hughes had read Plath's poems. When she met him at the publication party for *St. Botolph's Review* in February, 1956, the new and hip poetry publication of which Hughes was one of the contributors, held at Falcon's Yard, she yelled the lines she had memorized of his poem into his ear, with music roaring in the background. He apologized for the bad review *St. Botolph's* editors had written about her work in the low-budget publication *Broadsheet*. The page, where they read each other's work before they met, was the reason they spoke. Plath recognized Hughes's handsome statue from across the room, and he saw her red fashion accessories, blond hair and attractive face and physique, but it was the page that had set them up for this conversation. By the time they moved into the closet, where she chomped down on his cheek, and he ran off with the earrings he had yanked from her ears, they already knew each other. The page, their original initial meeting spot, would continue to be a place they shared throughout their marriage.

Four-and-a-half years later, Plath and Hughes composed their Christmas card to Ann and Leo Goodman. Plath first met Ann Goodman, then Ann Davidow, at Smith College in 1951. Davidow chose not to return to Smith after her first semester. In 1952, Plath wrote letters to Davidow, which are part of the collection at The Mortimer Rare Book Room, by then back at her home state in Illinois and attending the University of Chicago. Plath would address her friend as *Dear Davy*, the nickname invoking an intimate connection. The two friends exchanged letters for a while, but did not meet again until May of 1960. Ann Davidow was writing her children's book, *Let's Draw Animals*, and Leo Goodman, her future husband, was at Cambridge University on a Guggenheim Fellowship before becoming a visiting professor of Mathematical Statistics at Columbia University. Plath, Hughes, Davidow and Goodman held a reunion during the spring of 1960, which included a trip to Stonehenge. (LH, 384). The poets introduced their friends to their new daughter, Frieda, during the visit. The relationship Plath and Davidow had shared several years earlier was rekindled.

Several months after the friends had met face to face, Davidow and Goodman married. Residing on the other side of the Atlantic, the Goodman's received a Christmas card from Plath and Hughes that invited them to enter the premises where Plath and Hughes were doing their thing: writing side by side.

The holiday card's cover was not designed by Plath and Hughes; it is the work of Shelia Perry. There are three kings, and the bright star of Bethlehem is in the upper left corner. The Magi, as tradition tells it, left their kingdoms and journeyed in search of the new Messiah, born unto Bethlehem. They were carrying containers filled with frankincense, myrrh and gold. Perry's Magi appear to be garbed in sixties mod style. The patterns on their attire are geometric shapes that blend into other shapes creating a symmetry. The king on the left is wearing a blondish yellow crown, and a lavender robe stenciled with rust and orange leaf-like shapes. His robe matches the crown of the king on the right, whose robe matches the crown of the king on the left. The leaf-like shapes on the robe of the king on the left become square and rectangular forms on a blond gold robe of the king on the right. The middle king wears a yellowish gold robe, also, with a triangle of orange in the area of his upper shoulders and chin. The design on this robe is done in muted brown black lines that appear as stripes. The colors create a balanced symmetry, which appears again inside the card as each poet chooses a two paragraph structure for their writing.

Protruding from the robes of each king is a pair of white hands that plays against their clothing, which is busy with patterns. Each king's hand is holding an urn, which houses the sacred ingredients. The kings on the sides have urns similar in height, while the king in the middle's vessel of offering is lower and longer. Their journey is paused on the front of the card, but when the paper door is opened, Hughes sends them traveling again, on a sacrilegious path, inside, on his side, and Plath tells why Hughes created his story on her side.

When the card is opened, the pre-printed message "Christmas Greetings" is offset by the thick, dark curves of Hughes's hand, and the typed, sometimes underlined words of Plath. Visually, Plath and Hughes create symmetry inside the card by each writing two paragraphs. Hughes's almost indecipherable handwriting is sprawled on his side of the card, similar to Plath's description of his side of the writing table in Benidorm, Spain. Plath's side, akin to her side of the marriage table, is neat, with its typed words.

When the card is closed, the paragraphs resume their position of lying on top of each other, or the left side folding into the right, or vice-versa—a type of coitus. When opened, however, the words inside the symmetrical boundaries deliver stories and moments,

which the two poets share, living side by side, and tell to their two friends who are living in America.

Plath and Hughes left England in 1957 and moved to America. While living in Massachusetts, Plath taught at her Alma Mater, Smith College and Hughes taught at the University of Massachusetts during the spring semester of 1958. Teaching consumed their time, so they both gave up their teaching positions and moved to Boston from September 1958 through June 1959. They had originally both wanted to move to America, Plath thinking England and its poets were dead: "Britain is dead; the literary and critical sterility and amorality which I long to take Ted away from is permeating everything" (LH, 323). Hughes seemed ready to try somewhere new. He had canceled his plans to go to Australia, and to teach in Spain, because he had met and married Plath. He developed what Plath called an "apparent willingness to book passage back to America with me next June" (LH, 286).

New England left them tired of suburban mentality. They yearned for a lifestyle different from the pretense of post-war 1950's living, the facade that all was well and happy. On August 2, 1958, Plath realized that "The great fault of America—this part of it—is its air of pressure: expectancy of conformity...I have my own dream, which is mine & not the American dream," (JSP, 411 and 412). Hughes, too, was ready to leave. In Elaine Feinstein's biography, *Ted Hughes*, she writes that "by 11 January 1959 they both decided that the only answer was to return to England to live. It was a move that Ted had been determining for some time was what he needed" (89). Plath was ready to live once again amid the cold water baths and poor dental health system. She writes in her journal, "We decided to live in England. I really want this. Ted will be his best there. I shall demand an icebox and a good dentist, but love it" (JSP, 464). They were both finished with America for the time being, and had decided to return to England and write.

Before they left the country, however, they took a driving and camping tour of the United States. They traveled from Massachusetts to Ontario, Wisconsin, Montana, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Washington D.C. and back to Boston. When they returned to Massachusetts from their driving journey, they took up residency at Yaddo, the Writers Colony in Saratoga Springs, New York from September 10<sup>th</sup> to late November. Plath was already pregnant with Frieda.

When they made their move to London in early 1960, they had left America, but America had not forgotten them. In fact, ABC television had telegraphed Hughes the morning the holiday card was written to the Goodman's, and asked him to appear as Poet of the Year on a show they were broadcasting. The ABC invitation had succeeded in causing an angry response in both poets.

Their reactions are expressed on either side of the card: Hughes on the left, projecting his cynical rage onto the three wise kings who appear on the front of the card, and Plath inhabiting the right side with her version of the story.

Hughes starts the discourse, though he does so without a greeting. He morphs the three kings into imposters who have lost their way, and been consumed by greed. The urns they are carrying have essentially been traded for different items that wield a different kind of power. Hughes's wise guys are not sacred travelers with meaningful gifts, but con men searching for a happening, a scene, a score; they lose sight of what is important. Their urns are purse strings. One container, carried by the king on the left, which may have transported the cargo of frankincense, is now filled with the high priced commodity: *petrol*. The vessel on the right, perhaps once filled with myrrh, now houses *brandy*. The middle offering, originally, possibly gold, is a stash of *cocaine*.

These are Hughes's substitutions. His eyes see through the urns's covering, and his mood, in reaction to the offer ABC proposed in the morning, changes the Christmas pilgrimage from holiness to greed. His side of the card rants about the kings and their insincerity. Plath's reveals the story behind Hughes's distaste for the image on the front of the holiday greeting. They share this tale by both using fifteen lines in one paragraph to tell it, balancing each side of the structure. When the Goodman's open the card and read both halves, they will understand both sides of the story.

In a December 1957 note written to Gerald and Joan Hughes, Ted Hughes's brother and sister-in-law, the subject of American television surfaces with Ted Hughes's hand. He questions whether his brother's children are reading books, and then has a piece of advice to offer his older brother: the inherent message is to keep the children away from television. Hughes watches how the American people become *gasping automated-- audiences consumers-* who want to be *shown, amused and fed* because of their relationship with the tube (LofTH, 114). When he is invited to enter into this arena, three

years later, he has a reaction which stems from his views on what American television has to offer, and he does not want to be associated with it.

Hughes allows the Three Kings their goal: even these unholy men are looking for the Messiah. They do not expect much; they do not get much, and he writes that this way of going about doing something of this nature is American in its distasteful duplicity. He has revealed a disdain for the American way, but it is still not clear why he is feeling such loathing about America. Plath's side is needed to elucidate the tale of what they consider to be a rude American request.

Traditionally, the wise men followed the direction of the bright North Star. The compass for Hughes's imposters is the mail; they arrive not in darkness, but by daylight in the form of a telegram. Hughes breaks into assonance rhyme as he juxtaposes the word *mail* with the word *hail*: *hail* being the holy apostrophe, and *mail* being the false deliverance. Once again, the sacred is exchanged for the insincere, and the smiles on the wise guys's faces are composed of those that originate from a public relations department: fake ones.

Hughes connects the last part of his fifteen line sentence with his third use of the phrase *as ever*. The final repetition of those two small words introduces the destination of the three wise men. They have come to the stable where they think a sacred encounter will take place. The men think, according to Hughes's version, that the next person born in the place the Magi have arrived at will write a book, become famous, and bring his parents into the large public domain: his mother will be given respect because of him, and his father will have repute. Hughes's kings will use Jesus, Mary, and Joseph for their own gain.

Hughes, at this time in his life, had made the decision to refuse speaking engagements, finding public life appalling (LH 403), Plath wrote to her mother from Yorkshire on December 24, 1960. The invitation Hughes had received from American television so enraged him that he transferred his contempt to the kings, embarking them on a most unholy journey. On the other side of the card, Plath shares Hughes's response, and notes that the ABC intruders did not take into consideration that they were entering the sacred realm of Plath and Hughes. *As ever, work*, is the line created from each of their three word repetitions: Hughes repeats *as ever* three times; Plath repeats *work* three times.



Writing, *as ever*, was their constant *work*, and they reflect its importance with their joint construction of repetition.

In line 10 of Plath's first paragraph, the explanation of what happened the morning the telegram arrived begins to surface. Plath indignantly fills their friends in on the injustice. When Plath and Hughes returned to London, after living in America, they had made a resolve: they were going to spend their time writing. It was a difficult commitment in that they would have to depend on their writing for their income. They once again lived in tight quarters, and this time they shared the spot with their daughter, Frieda. The two poets had made a resolution to live like hermits, and spend their time in the sacred act of writing. Their hermitage would be their private dwelling, allowing them the luxury of solitude. The occupants knew each other well; they were on the same page. The words that roll out from the ink of Plath and Hughes pull down the shades of their tiny reverent sanctuary, reestablishing their intimacy.

That was until three rollicking kings came along, with their smiles and *cocaine*, which they thought could lure one of the inhabitants out into the world of television fame. Plath calls the ABC telegram *wicked*, and she wonders how *they* knew the location of Hughes, who was probably at The Beacon to celebrate the Christmas holiday with his family when the interruption occurred. When the invitation arrived, it broke the spell that was cast over the hermitage. Hughes's invitation becomes known to his mother whose disappointment about his refusing the slot as poet of the year becomes a topic in Plath's writing. The sound of Mrs. Hughes is onomatopoeic in Plath's words: a *wailing wall*. Plath's poetic ear hears the wail, chants it to the Goodman's in New York, while Hughes releases his anger onto the innocent kings.

On Hughes's side of the card, it is as though he is not writing to his friends at all, but is off on a riff without any indication about why he sees the kings as a team of go-getters. Plath opens her side by greeting their friends, and inviting them into the hospitality suite. She addresses the Goodman's, referring to them as *you two*. Plath's manners are at the tip of her ink as she immediately apologizes for the long silence that has elapsed between correspondences. Each side of their card again reflects the writing table they used on their Spanish holiday. Hughes dives in, thrusts his pen into the inkwell, and writes. Plath lays her fingers on the keys of her typewriter; she uses ellipses, commas, dashes, parentheses,

and underlining. She controls the form of her fifteen-line paragraph with punctuation that stops and starts. He spits out his fifteen-line paragraph in one sentence, using six commas in all, and abandoning the last set of commas to offset his phrase, *as ever*. He also abandons the final period at the end of the paragraph. Plath uses two periods in her last line. She keeps him neat; he keeps her sloppy—a dynamic they share as they write side by side.

Hughes uses his branding pen to show that the three kings are a sacrilegious lot of charlatans. There is no spirituality in their urns. Plath types out in words the position that Hughes and she share: they are non-believers. They do have a savior, however, like the infant Jesus in the manger, who lives under their roof. Their experience with what is sacred froths in the angel of their daughter, Frieda Hughes. She tumbles through the second paragraph of each of her parents, as they frolic in gerunds and adverbs, presenting her magic in a side by side view.

Hughes makes room for Plath in his second paragraph by writing that he is making *room*. They were familiar with leaving room, skilled at creating space for each other, and sometimes did this when sending correspondence to family and friends. When Hughes wrote letters to his brother, Gerald, and sister-in-law Joan, (letters housed at The Lilly Library at Indiana University), while they were living in Australia, Plath and he would divide the page they were writing the letter on. On his side of the paper, he explained daily activities: Plath preparing huge cakes, the two of them editing each other's writing, or Plath being his best critic. On April 3, 1960, the page he shared with Plath when writing to his Australian family, included a different type of news: they announced the birth of their daughter, Frieda Rebecca Hughes, who arrived on April 1 at 5:45 a.m. This letter introduces Frieda to her uncle and aunt who lived thousands of miles away. Almost nine months later, they write about Frieda again in the December holiday card, acquainting the Goodman's with Frieda's activities seven months after the New York couple had met Frieda face to face in London.

Plath and Hughes create two visions of Frieda, framing her in their side by side portrait. On the left side, Frieda comes into view with Hughes's use of six adverbs and an adjective. Hughes strings the words along, releasing syllables for a count of four, five, four, four, four, four; unstressed, stressed syllables, using the words: *indescribably*,

*unearthingly* and *collapsively* to describe their daughter; then he casts her into the net of a three syllable adjective: *beautiful*. His word endings, which are a mix of assonance and consonance with the sounds invoked in the suffix *-ingly*, rock his daughter, in rhythm, across his side of the page.

Frieda is active in the seven verbs Plath uses to describe her. She is *standing* and *sitting* and *laughing*. She is an onomatopoeic wonder as she *clicks* her tongue and bangs the tins used for baking pies. Plath repeats the assonance sound of the long *e* ten times in her paragraph, which starts with the name of her daughter, Frieda: the initial *e* sound. She stops people on the *street* with her big blue eyes. She has the smile of a cherub and *cheeks* that are pink. In the morning, she *greet*s her parents, *sweeten*ing them. The endings of Plath's seven verbs create another prominent sound in her paragraph: the two syllable constructions end in the unstressed *ing*. Plath's repetition of the sounds of *-ing* and *-e* rhyme with Hughes's sound of *-ingly*. They share their daughter with the Goodman's in images and in a syncopation of sound.

Ann Goodman has an ear for rhyme. Her children's book, *Let's Draw Animals*, 1960, mixed pictures of animals with rhyming words; it was a recent addition to the book collection at Chalcot Square. Hughes compliments Goodman on her writing, telling her that the book is excellent, and that her rhymes are alive and just right for the drawings she has added to the text. He includes this compliment to her in his second paragraph of the 1960 holiday card. Plath honors Goodman's writing in the second line of her first paragraph written on the right side of the card. She offers her friend the highest praise by writing that Goodman's book rivals the rhyming children's author, Edward Lear. Plath informs her college friend that Hughes and she will teach Frieda the sound sequences in *Let's Draw Animals* as soon as she is able to *lisp* them. They are in accord when they commend Goodman on her writing from the place each of them holds on each side of the December card.

Plath and Hughes were sensitive to the sounds words conjured. When they address Goodman's work, they focus on poetic structure. Rhyme can be an easy sound, but it has its levels of sophistication. The trained ear can hear rhyme in all of its forms: off rhyme, slant rhyme, consonance rhyme. Plath and Hughes were well versed in the genres of poetry. They each had written their own children's books. Hughes's book, *Meet My*

*Folks*, was published just in time for Frieda's first birthday, April 1961. Plath's *Bed Book* was written on May 2, 1959, after she procrastinated about it for six months. The praise of Goodman's rhymes thus sprung from a learned environment. Their joint use of the word rhyme brews with a knowledge that they both share as readers and writers of poetry.

The Christmas season is a time of special gift giving, and the Goodman's must have felt that they received the most special of gifts in their morning mail when the Christmas card arrived to their 96th Street apartment in New York City. In closing her paragraph, Plath asks the Goodman's to become Frieda's godparents. Hughes and she had discussed this, and were in harmony on the decision. She suggests that the Goodman's have even been approved by the stars, astrology being a part of the Plath/Hughes household, and that they received the astrological stamp of approval on their invited roles.

The *we* of Hughes' side of the card is repeated with the *we* on Plath's side, joining them as the *we* in a partnership. The couple creates a corridor, which leads to where Plath and Hughes symbolically sit, side by side, revealing images of their lives, dipping and dropping their ink into word sounds.

Paper, the place where they each have room to write, is their own unique intimate construction, and it sets them up them side by side—a position they created at the beginning of their marriage. To enter their place, open the card.

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Correspondence from Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes to Gerald and Joan Hughes from May 1957-April 1960 is housed at the Lilly Library at Indiana University in Bloomington,

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