Classic Poetry Series

Tony Hoagland

- poems -

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Grammar

Maxine, back from a weekend with her boyfriend,
smiles like a big cat and says
that she's a conjugated verb.
She's been doing the direct object
with a second person pronoun named Phil,
and when she walks into the room,
everybody turns:

some kind of light is coming from her head.
Even the geraniums look curious,
and the bees, if they were here, would buzz
suspiciously around her hair, looking
for the door in her corona.
We're all attracted to the perfume
of fermenting joy,

we've all tried to start a fire,
and one day maybe it will blaze up on its own.
In the meantime, she is the one today among us
most able to bear the idea of her own beauty,
and when we see it, what we do is natural:
we take our burned hands
out of our pockets,
and clap.

Tony Hoagland

Jet

Sometimes I wish I were still out
on the back porch, drinking jet fuel
with the boys, getting louder and louder
as the empty cans drop out of our paws
like booster rockets falling back to Earth

and we soar up into the summer stars.
Summer. The big sky river rushes overhead,
bearing asteroids and mist, blind fish
and old space suits with skeletons inside.
On Earth, men celebrate their hairiness,

and it is good, a way of letting life
out of the box, uncapping the bottle
to let the effervescence gush
through the narrow, usually constricted neck.

And now the crickets plug in their appliances
in unison, and then the fireflies flash
dots and dashes in the grass, like punctuation
for the labyrinthine, untrue tales of sex
someone is telling in the dark, though

no one really hears. We gaze into the night
as if remembering the bright unbroken planet
we once came from,
to which we will never
be permitted to return.
We are amazed how hurt we are.
We would give anything for what we have.

Tony Hoagland

Lucky

If you are lucky in this life,
you will get to help your enemy
the way I got to help my mother
when she was weakened past the point of saying no.

Into the big enamel tub
half-filled with water
which I had made just right,
I lowered the childish skeleton
she had become.

Her eyelids fluttered as I soaped and rinsed
her belly and her chest,
the sorry ruin of her flanks
and the frayed gray cloud
between her legs.

Some nights, sitting by her bed
book open in my lap
while I listened to the air
move thickly in and out of her dark lungs,
my mind filled up with praise
as lush as music,

amazed at the symmetry and luck
that would offer me the chance to pay
my heavy debt of punishment and love
with love and punishment.

And once I held her dripping wet
in the uncomfortable air
between the wheelchair and the tub,
until she begged me like a child

to stop,
an act of cruelty which we both understood
was the ancient irresistible rejoicing
of power over weakness.

If you are lucky in this life,
you will get to raise the spoon
of pristine, frosty ice cream
to the trusting creature mouth
of your old enemy

because the tastebuds at least are not broken
because there is a bond between you
and sweet is sweet in any language.

Tony Hoagland

Reading Moby-Dick at 30,000 Feet

At this height, Kansas
is just a concept,
a checkerboard design of wheat and corn

no larger than the foldout section
of my neighbor's travel magazine.
At this stage of the journey

I would estimate the distance
between myself and my own feelings
is roughly the same as the mileage

from Seattle to New York,
so I can lean back into the upholstered interval
between Muzak and lunch,

a little bored, a little old and strange.
I remember, as a dreamy
backyard kind of kid,

tilting up my head to watch
those planes engrave the sky
in lines so steady and so straight

they implied the enormous concentration
of good men,
but now my eyes flicker

from the in-flight movie
to the stewardess's pantyline,
then back into my book,

where men throw harpoons at something
much bigger and probably
better than themselves,

wanting to kill it,
wanting to see great clouds of blood erupt
to prove that they exist.

Imagine being born and growing up,
rushing through the world for sixty years
at unimaginable speeds.

Imagine a century like a room so large,
a corridor so long
you could travel for a lifetime

and never find the door,
until you had forgotten
that such a thing as doors exist.

Better to be on board the Pequod,
with a mad one-legged captain
living for revenge.

Better to feel the salt wind
spitting in your face,
to hold your sharpened weapon high,

to see the glisten
of the beast beneath the waves.
What a relief it would be

to hear someone in the crew
cry out like a gull,
Oh Captain, Captain!
Where are we going now?

Tony Hoagland