

Classic Poetry Series

Tony Hoagland
- poems -

Publication Date:

2004

Publisher:

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

Tony Hoagland(1953 -)

He was born in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. His father was an Army doctor, and Hoagland grew up on various military bases throughout the South. He was educated at Williams College, the University of Iowa (B.A.), and the University of Arizona (M.F.A.). According to the novelist Don Lee, Hoagland "attended and dropped out of several colleges, picked apples and cherries in the Northwest, lived in communes, [and] followed the Grateful Dead . . ." He currently teaches in the University of Houston creative writing program. He is also on the faculty of the Warren Wilson low-residency MFA program.

In an interview with Miriam Sagan about his poetic influences, Hoagland said, "if I were going to place myself on some aesthetic graph, my dot would be equidistant between Sharon Olds and Frank O'Hara, between the confessional (where I started) and the social (where I have aimed myself). In a 2002 citation regarding Hoagland's Academy Award in Literature, The American Academy of Arts and Letters said that "Hoagland's imagination ranges thrillingly across manners, morals, sexual doings, and kinds of speech lyrical and candid, intimate as well as wild."

and the police station,
a little dogwood tree is losing its mind;

overflowing with blossomfoam,
like a sudsy mug of beer;
like a bride ripping off her clothes,

dropping snow white petals to the ground in clouds,

so Nature's wastefulness seems quietly obscene.
It's been doing that all week:
making beauty,
and throwing it away,
and making more.

Tony Hoagland

America

Then one of the students with blue hair and a tongue stud
Says that America is for him a maximum-security prison

Whose walls are made of RadioShacks and Burger Kings, and MTV episodes
Where you can't tell the show from the commercials,

And as I consider how to express how full of shit I think he is,
He says that even when he's driving to the mall in his Isuzu

Trooper with a gang of his friends, letting rap music pour over them
Like a boiling Jacuzzi full of ballpeen hammers, even then he feels

Buried alive, captured and suffocated in the folds
Of the thick satin quilt of America

And I wonder if this is a legitimate category of pain,
or whether he is just spin doctoring a better grade,

And then I remember that when I stabbed my father in the dream last night,
It was not blood but money

That gushed out of him, bright green hundred-dollar bills
Spilling from his wounds, and—this is the weird part—,

He gasped "Thank god—those Ben Franklins were
Clogging up my heart—

And so I perish happily,
Freed from that which kept me from my liberty"—

Which was when I knew it was a dream, since my dad
Would never speak in rhymed couplets,

And I look at the student with his acne and cell phone and phony ghetto clothes
And I think, "I am asleep in America too,

And I don't know how to wake myself either,"
And I remember what Marx said near the end of his life:

"I was listening to the cries of the past,
When I should have been listening to the cries of the future."

But how could he have imagined 100 channels of 24-hour cable
Or what kind of nightmare it might be

When each day you watch rivers of bright merchandise run past you
And you are floating in your pleasure boat upon this river

Even while others are drowning underneath you
And you see their faces twisting in the surface of the waters

And yet it seems to be your own hand
Which turns the volume higher?

Tony Hoagland

Disappointment

I was feeling pretty religious
standing on the bridge in my winter coat
looking down at the gray water:
the sharp little waves dusted with snow,
fish in their tin armor.

That's what I like about disappointment:
the way it slows you down,
when the querulous insistent chatter of desire
goes dead calm

and the minor roadside flowers
pronounce their quiet colors,
and the red dirt of the hillside glows.

She played the flute, he played the fiddle
and the moon came up over the barn.
Then he didn't get the job, —
or her father died before she told him
that one, most important thing—

and everything got still.

It was February or October
It was July
I remember it so clear
You don't have to pursue anything ever again
It's over
You're free
You're unemployed

You just have to stand there
looking out on the water
in your trench coat of solitude
with your scarf of resignation
flapping in the wind.

Tony Hoagland

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

I Have News For You

There are people who do not see a broken playground swing
as a symbol of ruined childhood

and there are people who don't interpret the behavior
of a fly in a motel room as a mocking representation of their thought process.

There are people who don't walk past an empty swimming pool
and think about past pleasures unrecoverable

and then stand there blocking the sidewalk for other pedestrians.
I have read about a town somewhere in California where human beings

do not send their sinuous feeder roots
deep into the potting soil of others' emotional lives

as if they were greedy six-year-olds
sucking the last half-inch of milkshake up through a noisy straw;

and other persons in the Midwest who can kiss without
debating the imperialist baggage of heterosexuality.

Do you see that creamy, lemon-yellow moon?
There are some people, unlike me and you,

who do not yearn after fame or love or quantities of money as
unattainable as that moon;

thus, they do not later
have to waste more time
defaming the object of their former ardor.

Or consequently run and crucify themselves
in some solitary midnight Starbucks Golgotha.

I have news for you—
there are people who get up in the morning and cross a room

and open a window to let the sweet breeze in
and let it touch them all over their faces and bodies.

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

Note to Reality

Without even knowing it, I have
believed in you for a long time.

When I looked at my blood under a microscope
I could see truth multiplying over and over.

—Not police sirens, nor history books, not stage-three lymphoma
persuaded me

but your honeycombs and beetles; the dry blond fascicles of grass
thrust up above the January snow.

Your postcards of Picasso and Matisse,
from the museum series on European masters.

When my friend died on the way to the hospital
it was not his death that so amazed me

but that the driver of the cab
did not insist upon the fare.

Quotation marks: what should we put inside them?

Shall I say "I" "have been hurt" "by"
"you," you neglectful monster?

I speak now because experience has shown me
that my mind will never be clear for long.

I am more thick-skinned and male, more selfish, jealous, and afraid
than ever in my life.

"For my heart is tangled in thy nets;
my soul enmeshed in cataracts of time..."

The breeze so cool today, the sky smeared with bluish grays and whites.

The parade for the slain police officer
goes past the bakery

and the smell of fresh bread
makes the mourners salivate against their will.

Tony Hoagland

Please Don't

tell the flowers—they think
the sun loves them.
The grass is under the same
simple-minded impression

about the rain, the fog, the dew.
And when the wind blows,
it feels so good
they lose control of themselves

and swobtoggle wildly
around, bumping accidentally into their
slender neighbors.
Forgetful little lotus-eaters,

solar-powered
hydroholics, drawing nourishment up
through stems into their
thin green skin,

high on the expensive
chemistry of mitochondrial explosion,
believing that the dirt
loves them, the night, the stars—

reaching down a little deeper
with their pale albino roots,
all Dizzy
Gillespie with the utter
sufficiency of everything.

They don't imagine lawn
mowers, the four stomachs
of the cow, or human beings with boots
who stop to marvel

at their exquisite
flexibility and color.
They persist in their soft-headed

hallucination of happiness.
But please don't mention it.
Not yet. Tell me
what would you possibly gain

from being right?

Tony Hoagland

Reasons to Survive November

November like a train wreck -
as if a locomotive made of cold
had hurtled out of Canada
and crashed into a million trees,
flaming the leaves, setting the woods on fire.

The sky is a thick, cold gauze -
but there's a soup special at the Waffle House downtown,
and the Jack Parsons show is up at the museum,
full of luminous red barns.

- Or maybe I'll visit beautiful Donna,
the kickboxing queen from Santa Fe,
and roll around in her foldout bed.

I know there are some people out there
who think I am supposed to end up
in a room by myself

with a gun and a bottle full of hate,
a locked door and my slack mouth open
like a disconnected phone.

But I hate those people back
from the core of my donkey soul
and the hatred makes me strong
and my survival is their failure,

and my happiness would kill them
so I shove joy like a knife
into my own heart over and over

and I force myself toward pleasure,
and I love this November life
where I run like a train
deeper and deeper
into the land of my enemies.

Tony Hoagland

Special Problems in Vocabulary

There is no single particular noun
for the way a friendship,
stretched over time, grows thin,
then one day snaps with a popping sound.

No verb for accidentally
breaking a thing
while trying to get it open
—a marriage, for example.

No particular phrase for
losing a book
in the middle of reading it,
and therefore never learning the end.

There is no expression, in English, at least,
for avoiding the sight
of your own body in the mirror,
for disliking the touch

of the afternoon sun,
for walking into the flatlands and dust
that stretch out before you
after your adventures are done.

No adjective for gradually speaking less and less,
because you have stopped being able
to say the one thing that would
break your life loose from its grip.

Certainly no name that one can imagine
for the aspen tree outside the kitchen window,
in spade-shaped leaves

spinning on their stems,
working themselves into
a pale-green, vegetable blur.

No word for waking up one morning

and looking around,
because the mysterious spirit

that drives all things
seems to have returned,
and is on your side again.

Tony Hoagland

The Change

The season turned like the page of a glossy fashion magazine.
In the park the daffodils came up
and in the parking lot, the new car models were on parade.

Sometimes I think that nothing really changes—

The young girls show the latest crop of tummies,
and the new president proves that he's a dummy.

But remember the tennis match we watched that year?
Right before our eyes

some tough little European blonde
pitted against that big black girl from Alabama,
cornrowed hair and Zulu bangles on her arms,
some outrageous name like Vondella Aphrodite—

We were just walking past the lounge
and got sucked in by the screen above the bar,
and pretty soon
we started to care about who won,

putting ourselves into each whacked return
as the volleys went back and forth and back
like some contest between
the old world and the new,

and you loved her complicated hair
and her to-hell-with-everybody stare,
and I,

I couldn't help wanting
the white girl to come out on top,
because she was one of my kind, my tribe,
with her pale eyes and thin lips

and because the black girl was so big
and so black,
so unintimidated,

hitting the ball like she was driving the Emancipation Proclamation
down Abraham Lincoln's throat,
like she wasn't asking anyone's permission.

There are moments when history
passes you so close
 you can smell its breath,
you can reach your hand out
 and touch it on its flank,

and I don't watch all that much Masterpiece Theatre,
but I could feel the end of an era there

in front of those bleachers full of people
in their Sunday tennis-watching clothes

as that black girl wore down her opponent
then kicked her ass good
then thumped her once more for good measure

and stood up on the red clay court
holding her racket over her head like a guitar.

And the little pink judge
 had to climb up on a box
to put the ribbon on her neck,
still managing to smile into the camera flash,
even though everything was changing

and in fact, everything had already changed—

Poof, remember? It was the twentieth century almost gone,
we were there,

and when we went to put it back where it belonged,
it was past us
and we were changed.

Tony Hoagland

When Dean Young Talks About Wine

The worm thrashes when it enters the tequila.
The grape cries out in the wine vat crusher.

But when Dean Young talks about wine, his voice is strangely calm.
Yet it seems that wine is rarely mentioned.

He says, Great first chapter but no plot.
He says, Long runway, short flight.
He says, This one never had a secret.
He says, You can't wear stripes with that.

He squints as if recalling his childhood in France.
He purses his lips and shakes his head at the glass.

Eight-four was a naughty year, he says,
and for a second I worry that California has turned him
into a sushi-eater in a cravat.

Then he says,
 This one makes clear the difference
between a thoughtless remark
and an unwarranted intrusion.

Then he says, In this one the pacific last light of afternoon
stains the wings of the seagull pink
 at the very edge of the postcard.

But where is the Cabernet of rent checks and asthma medication?
Where is the Burgundy of orthopedic shoes?
Where is the Chablis of skinned knees and jelly sandwiches?
with the aftertaste of cruel Little League coaches?
and the undertone of rusty stationwagon?

His mouth is purple as if from his own ventricle
he had drunk.
He sways like a fishing rod.

When a beast is hurt it roars in incomprehension.
When a bird is hurt it huddles in its nest.

But when a man is hurt,
 he makes himself an expert.
Then he stands there with a glass in his hand
staring into nothing
 as if he were forming an opinion.

Tony Hoagland