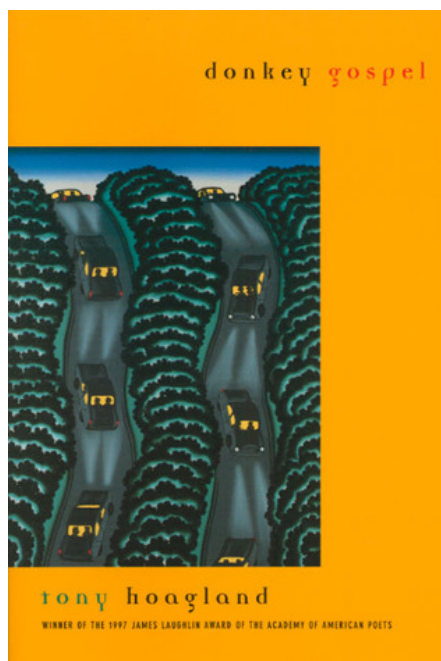




Donkey Gospel

Tony Hoagland

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Winner of the 1997 James Laughlin Award of The Academy of American Poets

In his second collection of poems, Hoagland's generous effervescence and a jujitsu cleverness sparkle through line after line confronting negotiation and compromise, gender and culture, sex and rock music, sons and lovers, truth and beauty, and so forth. From the boy who speaks only in "Kung Fu" dialogue to the guy who visits a lesbian bar and sees his mother, this often funny and always thoughtful book of poems offers fresh, surprisingly frank meditations on the credentials for contemporary manhood.

Donkey Gospel Details

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Author : Tony Hoagland

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From Reader Review Donkey Gospel for online ebook

Avi says

Reading this, I wanted to roar with rage and recognition, finally, a living poet I adore! And this poem in particular will be dear to my heart as long as I live with a still functioning brain:

Lawrence

On two occasions in the past twelve months
I have failed, when someone at a party
spoke of him with a dismissive scorn,
to stand up for D. H. Lawrence,

a man who burned like an acetylene torch
from one end to the other of his life.
These individuals, whose relationship to literature
is approximately that of a tree shredder

to stands of old-growth forest,
these people leaned back in their chairs,
bellies full of dry white wine and the ovum of some foreign fish,
and casually dropped his name

the way pygmies with their little poison spears
strut around the carcass of a fallen elephant.
“O Elephant,” they say,
“you are not so big and brave today!”

It’s a bad day when people speak of their superiors
with a contempt they haven’t earned,
and it’s a sorry thing when certain other people

don’t defend the great dead ones
who have opened up the world before them.
And though, in the catalogue of my betrayals,
this is a fairly minor entry,

I resolve, if the occasion should recur,
to uncheck my tongue and say, “I love the spectacle
of maggots condescending to a corpse,”
or, “You should be so lucky in your brainy, bloodless life

as to deserve to lift
just one of D. H. Lawrence’s urine samples
to your arid psychobiographic
theory-tainted lips.”

Or maybe I’ll just take the shortcut
between the spirit and the flesh,

and punch someone in the face,
because human beings haven't come that far

in their effort to subdue the body,
and we still walk around like zombies
in our dying, burning world,
able to do little more

than fight, and fuck, and crow,
something Lawrence wrote about
in such a manner
as to make us seem magnificent.

Other delights: Self-Improvement, Candlelight (probably my second favorite), The Replacement, and this passage about singing a song thought hated, "that's how it goes when your head and heart are in different time zones— you often don't find out till tomorrow what you felt today." Really was a pleasure reading this. Lots of lovely language and cleverness.

Courtney says

This is an amazing bok. Hoagland can be both hilarious and heartbreaking within the space of a few lines. I am continually impressed and moved by his work. My favorties in this collection are Adam and Eve, Medicine, whatever the one is where he holds his mother over the bathtub, just to torture her, and the one that starts:

(from "Fred Had Watched a Lot of Kung Fu Episodes")

so when the policeman asked
to see his driver's license, he said,
Does the wind need permission

from the hedgehog to blow?
which resulted in a search of the car,
which miraculously yielded nothing

since Fred had swallowed all the mescaline already
and was just beginning to fall in love
with the bushy caterpillar eyebrows
of the officer in question.

Joseph says

I became interested in Tony Hoagland through Hun Lye. He is a very witty turning into insightful, often to the point of laughter, yet also sometimes shockingly pointed. All of these qualities make for a very contemplative, enjoyable read, and I found myself earmarking the poems so that I could read them to somebody later.

Because I have lately been immersed reading Mary Oliver's *Rules of the Dance*, which is all about metrics and rhythm, I was particularly sensitive to these qualities, and while I've never had much interest in contemporary poetry because they lacked these qualities, and thus a significant "in" to my sensibilities, I nonetheless enjoyed the richness of his language, often enjoying a quasi-metric, quasi-rhythmic quality, that I could at least pinpoint and see, at least, that he was doing something. That aside, his language, especially diction, is rich, and has metaphors that seem straight out of a Haruki Murakami novel. Or maybe it's the other way around?

James says

Hoagland's poems deal with a variety of topics, but at their core they deal with masculinity in the contemporary world. He finds wonderful metaphors and images that speak to the frustrations, joys and confusions of being a man. Highly recommended.

You can sample some of his poetry here. (The first two poems are in this collection.)

Shaun says

Excellent and wise collection of poetry.

Eyal says

I can't remember the last time I read an entire book of poetry. I liked it very much. Very male, very American, very San Francisco.

I found it through Nick Hornby, from *The Polysyllabic Spree: A Hilarious and True Account of One Man's Struggle With the Monthly Tide of the Books He's Bought and the Books He's Been Meaning to Read*

Ilze says

Hoagland quite obviously writes from a male perspective. This is stating the obvious, though, even if you tried to think a woman wrote them, you can't (too much sex from his side!). This is not to criticise, it is simply to place the author in perspective; a perspective that is mainly autobiographical as one learns plenty about his parents without having known the details before. In several poems he states that a memory or feeling originated in the late 1960s early '70s and, let's face it, those days were filled with experimentation

with drugs and seeing how far sex can be pushed. He comes up with amazing descriptions for things, which unfortunately fell flat for me occasionally. The magic of some poems were dispelled in their closing lines.

I really liked "Lawrence" (Hoagland 1998: 31), where he describes wanting to make a stand for this famous writer, but is unable to in social situations. I can completely identify with that! How often have we thought we're being 'nerds' just because we want to defend someone we admire, but are too ashamed to do so? "Lawrence" depicts that experience/feeling perfectly! "Hearings" (Hoagland 1998: 29) starts with the beautiful phrase: *Autumn, and the leaves decide again they don't / need leaves*. This poem moves from nature to the nature of politics and does it so subtly you don't recognize it until you reach the end of the poem and the poet's point is made. How he manages to connect all these things is part of the spell he weaves with his adjectives. I end with another 'heart wrencher' (stanza 3/4 "Here in Berkeley" Hoagland 1998: 35):

Close your eyes,
swing a baguette horizontally,
you'll hit someone with a Ph.D.
in sensitivity,
someone who,
if not a therapist himself,
will offer you the number of his therapist,

which – it may take you years
to figure out – is a hostile act on his part
designed to send you on a wild-goose chase
through the orchard of your childhood
to fetch the tarnished apple of your mother's love.

Kyle Tresnan says

Marie and I don't use the word "hateboner" like most people do. Most people, I guess, get hateboners when they really, really, hate something. Like they hate it so much it gives them a boner.

We think that's dumb. That's just not how boners work. Whoever came up with that definition for hateboner (I'm looking at you, Urban Dictionary user Shannon Murphy) is silly and should feel silly.

For us, a hateboner is at the opposite end of the love/hate spectrum (Important: it's not in the middle of the spectrum where you can't decide whether you love or hate something; that's just indecision, and that's not boner-worthy). A hateboner is not extreme hate. A hateboner is extreme love. You get a hateboner when you love something so much that you *hate* it. You wish you wrote it; you wish it was yours. It seems to understand you so well that you can't believe it came from someone else. You aggressively love it, but how dare it startle your soul like that. That's a hateboner.

We have a hateboner for Tony Hoagland and this thin volume of poetry called *Donkey Gospel*. It is what poetry should be like and what every poem I have ever written has failed to be. Every poem is like a breath of fresh air that feels heavy in your stomach. There was a time in my life when I hated poetry. I wish someone would have read "Dickhead" to me or shown me "Memory As a Hearing Aid" back then. I might have changed my mind a lot sooner.

Kristen Northrup says

My plan was to read a couple poems per day or per week or something, but I ended up going through the entire book in one sitting. It was like eating chips. Not entirely surprising, because the same thing happened when I read *What Narcissism Means to Me*, which came five years after this one. I did not, however, have the immediate compulsion to buy five more copies of this one and mail them to friends, like I did with *Narcissism*. Nothing in this collection grabbed me in quite the same way as, say, *A Color of the Sky*. But it was still very good. Edgier. Repeated themes of sex and parents instead of friends and identity. The best metaphors again involved anthropomorphic trees.

Willow says

This is a decent collection of poems. I enjoyed some of them a lot but there were also a few that felt a little trendy. Hoagland writes strong last lines that are shocking and well crafted.

Jen Hirt says

Vivid characters intoxicate these poems, and each narrative is (as others have noticed) brilliant and heartbreaking and so masculine American. Hoagland has this talent for subverting the world of his poem every third or fourth line -- I love the pacing, the surprise, the recklessness, and the insight. Favorite lines, (although they seem flat without the context of the poem) are from "Hearings," where Hoagland writes:

Sometimes we think the truth
is the worst thing that could happen
but the truth is not the worst thing that could happen.

I had two Tony Hoagland books in my stack of summer reading, and I can say both books are wonderful. Sorry to wait so long to read his work!

Cindy says

I took a poetry writing course this summer with David Clewell (more on his collections later), and it has gotten me back among the poetry stacks. Well, I didn't know anything about Tony Hoagland but one of his collections was cited in *THE POLYSYLLABIC SPREE* (see my reference to this Nick Hornby book) and though the one he mentioned wasn't currently available at my library, *DONKEY GOSPEL* was. What a great title!!! And the poems follow the title's promise of being true but oh so funny. Many of the poem's touch on the politics of gender--what does it mean to be a man in this day and age? I can't wait to get my hands on the other collection mentioned by Hornby. Get this title...*WHAT NARCISSISM MEANS TO ME*. Awesome stuff.

Ryan Gato says

He has some good lines it's true. His tone is personable, allowing him to craft interesting scenarios from seemingly commonplace and overdone subject matter (i.e. life on the West Coast, masculinity, etc.) while juxtaposing these scenarios with increasingly intense and surreal imagery/speech.

My tiff with Hoagland is that he can get formulaic: his weaker poems don't struggle for their insight; and because Hoagland doesn't stray too far from his general project of "critiquing of our cultural values via my ironic/tempered tone", the poems can, at their worst, blend into a obnoxious mix of confession and didacticism.

However, on the whole, Hoagland is a pleasant guy, though not one I would bother going back to.

Michael Meyerhofer says

Donkey Gospel, the first book I encountered by Tony Hoagland, is very easily one of the best books of poetry I've ever seen. All of his poems are taut with lyrical courage, tempered with great risk, and resplendent with what I like to call a refreshing, emotional honesty.

Hoagland seems on every page to be both ferocious and vulnerable in a manner that is sadly lacking in much of today's elitist verse. In "Donkey Gospel", Hoagland overwhelmingly disproves the thesis of so many other poets--that good poetry must be accessible only to an uber-educated handful. Here, we see poems whose accessibility, lyricism, and good humor are matched only by their brilliance.

As a frequent reader of poetry books, I am often disappointed by what strikes me as the work of tone-deaf snobs who instill no real compassion in their work. Not the case with Hoagland. I literally dog-eared nearly every page of Donkey Gospel, and I happily share his stuff with my creative writing students. The looks on their faces says it all.

Wilbur says

"Bruce never played the light switch again,"

Antonia says

< href="http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/...

Jet

Grammar

Reading Moby Dick at 30,000 Feet

Jsavett1 says

I just realized that I've read three Tony Hoagland books in a week, though this is the first of his own poetry. I deeply enjoyed this. While I've read some of Hoagland's poems in anthologies or heard them via The Writer's Almanac, I'd never read them in context or seen several in a row.

It was delightful to read this collection right after having read his two books regarding craft, *Real Sofistikashun*, and *Twenty Poems That Could Save America*. I can see the poetics he advocates for (though he believes all forms and styles are welcome) reflected clearly in these poems---a kind of humorous intelligence which constantly grasps for light rather than the dark this poet is fully aware of. The best poems here are "Totally," "From This Height," "Memory As A hearing Aid," "Candlelight," and "Jet."

Hoagland's style is a really interesting amalgam of intuitiveness and reliance on unconscious association on the one hand, and an ecstasy regarding the events of real life on the other. Predictably, the poems which succeed the most are a marriage of these two impulses. Perhaps because I'd just read his strong feelings about Robert Bly's "Leaping Poetry" and Lorca's "duende," I expected a bit more surrealism here. But Hoagland remains (dare I say it) accessible in the best possible way that could be said; he is aware of the slipperiness and explosiveness of language, but that doesn't stop him from giving its use a try anyway...As he says in "From This Height," the stories and language which we can relate to, "considering their enormous price, would be a sin not to enjoy." In that poem, he's referring to "high-calorie pate," but the metaphor is strong here and it's clear that Hoagland intends to go about enjoying and celebrating the very small bit of order and equilibrium which, in *Twenty Poems That Could Save America* "a great athletic achievement." Indeed, as he reminds us at the end of "Jet": "we would give anything for what we have."

Dan says

I went out and immediately bought 'Donkey Gospel' after reading "What Narcissism Means to Me: Poems" by Tony Hoagland. I was not disappointed, a lot poems where I just laughed out loud while reading. Some really great writing about the day events in life and how we view them, remember them, or wish them to be. Favorite poems include "Mission," "Research," and "Beauty." Read this book and you will not be disappointed.

Ken says

This collection of poems offers a great mix of topics from Hoagland's own coming-of-age, marriage, family/parents to meditations on sex, what it means to be "a man," (a word that begs quotation marks in a big way) to popular culture (the category that freezes me on *Jeopardy!* every time).

You get Hoagland's signature, conversational style (see Collins comma Billy and Bilgere comma George) and, in this book, more than usual poetic flourishes and fine finishes.

By way of illustration, I give you Hoagland's poem about his sister's loss of beauty, called, reasonably enough, "Beauty":

Beauty by Tony Hoagland

When the medication she was taking
caused tiny vessels in her face to break,
leaving faint but permanent blue stitches in her cheeks,
my sister said she knew she would
never be beautiful again.

After all those years
of watching her reflection in the mirror,
sucking in her stomach and standing straight,
she said it was a relief,
being done with beauty,

but I could see her pause inside that moment
as the knowledge spread across her face
with a fine distress, sucking
the peach out of her lips,
making her cute nose seem, for the first time,
a little knobby.

I'm probably the only one in the whole world
who actually remembers the year in high school
she perfected the art
of being a dumb blond,

spending recess on the breezeway by the physics lab,
tossing her hair and laughing that canary trill
which was her specialty,

while some football player named Johnny
with a pained expression in his eyes
wrapped his thick finger over and over again
in the bedspring of one of those pale curls.

Or how she spent the next decade of her life
auditioning a series of tall men,
looking for just one with the kind
of attention span she could count on.

Then one day her time of prettiness
was over, done, finito,
and all those other beautiful women
in the magazines and on the streets
just kept on being beautiful
everywhere you looked,

walking in that kind of elegant, disinterested trance
in which you sense they always seem to have one hand
touching the secret place
that keeps their beauty safe,
inhaling and exhaling the perfume of it—

It was spring. Season when the young

buttercups and daisies climb up on the
mulched bodies of their forebears
to wave their flags in the parade.

My sister just stood still for thirty seconds,
amazed by what was happening,
then shrugged and tossed her shaggy head
as if she was throwing something out,

something she had carried a long ways,
but had no use for anymore,
now that it had no use for her.
That, too, was beautiful.

Beauty as a practical item in a toolbox, then. And a variation on the age-old theme of getting old (see Marvell comma Andrew's "To His Coy Mistress" and Herrick comma Robert's "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time").

Here, from the perspective of a teacher, is another musing on time and age and death, only this time in the first person point of hearing:

Memory as a Hearing Aid

Somewhere, someone is asking a question,
and I stand squinting at the classroom
with one hand cupped behind my ear,
trying to figure out where that voice is coming from.

I might be already an old man,
attempting to recall the night
his hearing got misplaced,
front-row-center at a battle of the bands,

where a lot of leather-clad, second-rate musicians,
amped up to dinosaur proportions,
test drove their equipment through our ears.
Each time the drummer threw a tantrum,

the guitarist whirled and sprayed us with machine-gun riffs,
as if they wished that they could knock us
quite literally dead.
We called that fun in 1970,

when we weren't sure our lives were worth surviving.
I'm here to tell you that they were,
and many of us did, despite ourselves,
though the road from there to here

is paved with dead brain cells,

parents shocked to silence,
and squad cars painting the whole neighborhood
the quaking tint and texture of red jelly.

Friends, we should have postmarks on our foreheads
to show where we have been;
we should have pointed ears, or polka-dotted skin
to show what we were thinking

when we hot-rodged over God's front lawn,
and Death kept blinking.
But here I stand, an average-looking man
staring at a room

where someone blond in braids
with a beautiful belief in answers
is still asking questions.

Through the silence in my dead ear,
I can almost hear the future whisper
to the past: it says that this is not a test
and everybody passes.

And, to the tune of "wish I knew then what I know now," I give you this:

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.

Unlike that much loathed category of inscrutable poems (dark shades of high school), Hoagland's poems are waiting out back, engine running and all warmed up. You'll get lines like "At the bronze hour when the sun meets on the horizon like an old doubloon" and "the velvet sibilance of waves" and "the almond trees drop their white petals of applause."

It's almost like the almond's petals have read this book. It's that rare type of collection that might be better owned for rereading (if your apprenticeship in conversational-yet-poetic-writing-that-might-tempt-poetry-phobic-readers-to-bite has a ways to go).

Mine, alas, is a library book. Still, if there's one Tony Hoagland collection I might want on my shelf for dip and re-dips, this one's in contention. What better can you say about a book of poesies than that?

Rachel Ann Brickner says

There's a dreadful humor to these poems. I've read "Self-Improvement" at least a hundred times now:

Just before she flew off like a swan
to her wealthy parents' summer home,
Bruce's college girlfriend asked him
to improve his expertise at oral sex,
and offered him some technical advice:

Use nothing but his tonguetip
to flick the light switch in his room
on and off a hundred times a day
until he grew fluent at the nuances
of force and latitude.

Imagine him at practice every evening,
more inspired than he ever was at algebra,
beads of sweat sprouting on his brow,
thinking, thirty-seven, thirty-eight,
seeing, in the tunnel vision of his mind's eye,
the quadratic equation of her climax
yield to the logic
of his simple math...

You really need to read the rest of the poem because it becomes just heartbreaking. "Medicine", "Lawrence", "Here in Berkeley", "Mission", "The Confessional Mode", and "Adam and Eve" are also memorable, often leaving you laughing with a sunken feeling in your chest.

