On Craft: Tony Hoagland on "Image Out of Sound"

November 20, 2013

Images are the most "solid-seeming" thing in a poem. In the way that a noun is more solid than a verb or an adjective, the image anchors a poem, holds it in place. And the mind of a reader almost always latches onto an image more strongly than to any idea. When the poem has passed by, the images will still be locked in memory. I may not recall what Sheila Black's poem "Minnesota" is "about," but I will not forget that cinematic scene in which the moose falls through the ice of the swimming pool.

What makes images so amazing is that they are, paradoxically, non-verbal. Thus they convince us, like nothing else, of the supernatural capacities of language, its ability to teleport the world onto the page. Images in poems gratify and satisfy our deep appetite for things: for a red-haired woman standing at the railing of a bridge; or the moon hanging in the sky like a birth control pill. They bypass the mind that translates words into ideas, and go straight into the visual cortex.

In this way, images are refreshingly non-conceptual. Or, as Robert Kelly says:

> What matters is a note
> stuck by a magnetic carrot
> to the refrigerator saying
> Don't look for me I am gone.

For the longest time, I thought of the poetic image as a word or set of words that transmitted a little picture-icon. Where did the icons come from? I seem to have believed, without having cross-examined myself too much, that the brain was a kind of capacious warehouse, full of preexisting moose and storm clouds and garbage trucks, and just about anything else you could want. Why do you think they call it *image-i-nation*? Out of memory and perceptions, this image-conjuring function could produce endlessly.

The big revelation is that images arise not just from the mind's eye, but from the ear as well. Writers who are good at "sight" (images) are usually talented at sound. This passage from a poem called "Sentimental Education" by the poet Mary Ruefle illustrates the strong relation between sound and image-making:

> Ann Galbraith
> loves Barry Soyers.
> Please pray for Lucius Fenn
> who suffers greatly whilst shaking hands.

Bonny Polton
loves a pug named Cowl.

Please pray for Olina Korsk
who holds the record for missing fingers.

Leon Bendrix loves Odelia Jonson
who loves Kurt who loves Carlos who loves Paul.

Please pray for Cortland Filby
who handles a dead wasp, a conceit for his mother.

Harold loves looking at Londa's hair under the microscope.
Londa loves plaiting the mane of her pony.

Please pray for Fancy Dancer
who is troubled by the vibrissa in his nostrils.

Nadine St. Claire loves Ogden Smythe
who loves blowing his nose on postage stamps.

[. . .]

"Sentimental Education" is a poem equally engaged with mouth, ear, and eye, with diction as much as image. To read it out loud is to fully exercise the lips and tongue and palette. What has surprised me when teaching Ruefle's poem as a generative prompt is how readily my students produce images of a particularity and vividness which surpass all their previous efforts. It seems to be the rich orality of Ruefle's writing that draws their image-making talent into the composition process. When drawing from their "visual" faculties, they are less impressive: they often cannot seem to vividly describe, or to invent images of any freshness. But when exposed to a poem like Ruefle's, which emphasizes *sound* and *diction*, they are suddenly able to produce memorable and original images. The difference in performance is the difference between writing images with the *eye* or with the *ear*. Paradoxically, the ear produces more memorable "pictures." Here is a set of couplets arising from the exercise written by my one of my undergraduate students:

Huangzhou Martinez
loves Samantha Smalls.

Please pray for Contessa Worthington
who never gets her stories straight.

Please pray for Davyd

who spelled his name with a Y in his tattoo by accident.

Felicia Lewis
loves a rapscallion named T Dog.

Ichiro Miyamoto loves Mitsuko
the femme fatale from a manga comic.

Please pray for the young girl Misa
who stands contrapposto next to candy-painted imports.

Valencio di Magliani
loves the eau de naturel of a girl's locker room.

Please pray for DJ Bhoy Ligawa
who can't believe he made a record deal.

Marie Theuriau loves the mysterious
painter at the Seine, who never paints her portrait.

This young poet's lines are full of sonic pleasures—alliteration, assonance, and consonance, as well as a kind of glee with polysyllabic and non-English vocabularies. The fact is, he has discovered the delights of diction in his poem ("femme fatale from a manga comic"), and it has empowered his image-making too. The fact that images are born in part from the sonics of language will come as no surprise to any working writer; still, this phenomenon is another example of the crossed wires of cognition, and of poetry; all the neurological roots, including language, are knotted together in the rich compost of the mind. The nature of creative imagination can't really be segregated. From the sidelines, we can only understand so much. Then we have to set analysis aside, wade into the water, and learn more, by doing.

One winter in Massachusetts, I lived next door to a poet whose considerable talent was deeply puzzling to me. The man spent every day indoors, in his little studio apartment, smoking Marlboros and eating Cheetos and typing. At night he watched the kind of television that has laugh tracks. If you took a walk with him, he would stare down at the ground beneath his feet and talk nonstop. He was about as observant as a shoe. But when you read his work, its imagistic brilliance would make you swear he had spent his whole life out of doors—it was all sassafras, and the sweet music of Blackfish Creek running through the barley field and the chuckle of the red-winged blackbirds. He seemed to know the names, the colors, and the textures of thousands of plant species and birds, and how to cut cypress wood with Daddy's handsaw and a chaw of licorice and wild ginseng in his cheek.

At the time, I couldn't help but be jealous of his amazing image-talent. What I realize now is that he was not writing out of his eyes, his memory, or his observation of the world. He was just a living music box, full of phonemes and consonants and vowels. He was composing all those images out of his ear, from and for their music—making the whole world up, like a kind of song.

Tony Hoagland is the author of four poetry collections, including *Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty*, *What Narcissism Means to Me*, finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, *Donkey Gospel*, winner of the James Laughlin Award and *Sweet Ruin*, published by the University of Wisconsin Press. Hoagland's honors include two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, a fellowship to the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center, the O.B. Hardison Prize for Poetry and Teaching from the Folger Shakespeare Library, as well as the Poetry Foundation's 2005 Mark Twain Award in recognition of his contribution to humor in American poetry, and the Jackson Poetry Prize from *Poets & Writers*. He teaches at the University of Houston.