

"Dickhead," by Tony Hoagland. From *Donkey Gospel* (Graywolf Press, 1998).

To whomever taught me the word *dickhead*,
I owe a debt of thanks.
It gave me a way of being in the world of men
when I most needed one,

when I was pale and scrawny,
naked, goosefleshed
as a plucked chicken
in a supermarket cooler, a poor

forked thing stranded in the savage
universe of puberty, where wild
jockstraps flew across the steamy

skies of locker rooms,
and everybody fell down laughing
at jokes I didn't understand.

But *dickhead* was a word as dumb
and democratic as a hammer, an object
you could pick up in your hand,
and swing,

saying *dickhead* this and *dickhead* that,
a song that meant the world
was yours enough at least
to bang on like a garbage can,

and knowing it, and having that
beautiful ugliness always
cocked and loaded in my mind,
protected me and calmed me like a psalm.

Now I have myself become
a beautiful ugliness,
and my weakness is a fact
so well established that
it makes me calm,

and I am calm enough
to be grateful for the lives I
never have to live again;

but I remember all the bad old days
back in the world of men,
when everything was serious, mysterious, scary,
hairier and bigger than I was;

I recall when flesh
was what I hated, feared
and was excluded from:

Hardly knowing what I did,
or what would come of it,
I made a word my friend.

Notes

Here is a first person poem that I think is a lot of fun, and has lots of things for fiction writers as well as poets to work with: although it's not exactly narrative, there are concrete images which give us a sense of place as well as time. Hoagland's narrator in this poem is an older narrator looking back at his younger self. His tone is casual, intimate, and light-hearted; he is not afraid to reveal his vulnerability; and above all, he sees language, and life, as something to celebrate.

Let's dive in and look at this line by line.

First, the title and opening stanza: Hoagland grabs your attention with the word "Dickhead" and draws us in with this surprising, charming statement, straightforward yet lighthearted: "To whomever taught me the word *dickhead*, / I owe a debt of thanks." He explains further: "It gave me a way of being in the world of men / when I most needed one." He's like a friend you are talking to; the voice is not reserved or high-minded, it's not morose or angry – he doesn't have a bone to pick.

As he goes on, the tone gets even more playful:

*when I was pale and scrawny,
naked, goosefleshed
as a plucked chicken
in a supermarket cooler...*

See how the narrator, and the writer, is looking at himself as a character? Notice how he chooses a funny image – there's no feeling sorry for himself here. He never comes across as angry or self-pitying; it's always sweet and funny. It's also very vulnerable – the narrator is willing to expose himself (metaphorically and literally, here), again creating an intimate

connection with the reader. Hoagland continues riffing on this thought, building both the images and the language:

... a poor

*forked thing stranded in the savage
universe of puberty, where wild
jockstraps flew across the steamy*

*skies of locker rooms,
and everybody fell down laughing
at jokes I didn't understand.*

Look at how much fun the narrator is having now! The tone is completely celebratory, and the images are playful. Without this, he couldn't have gotten away with those last lines ("everybody fell down laughing at jokes I didn't understand"). Here we get to the emotional core of the poem: the narrator's loneliness, his feeling of being an outsider. It could easily be self-pitying, but Hoagland avoids that because of all that buildup of language that comes right before. He also moves away from it as soon as he touches on it, and then we have that wonderful line:

*But dickhead was a word as dumb
and democratic as a hammer...*

And again, the narrator is off and spinning his language and images, playing with the concept of word as weapon, with a very light, whimsical touch.

Now he can really get to the heart of the poem, with ideas that have wisdom and substance:

*Now I have myself become
a beautiful ugliness,
and my weakness is a fact
so well established that
it makes me calm...*

...

*I recall when flesh
was what I hated, feared
and was excluded from*

Think back to the first line of the poem, and notice how different the feeling is here. The mood is coming through much more strongly now. If Hoagland had started with these lines, it might have been overwhelming; he needed to draw us in first with the fun language and images.

And finally, in the last stanza, we come back to the celebration of language – only now the tone is more thoughtful, quiet:

*Hardly knowing what I did,
or what would come of it,
I made a word my friend.*

This tells us how Hoagland feels about poetry and language, and it also tells us a lot about how he connects to his readers. Language is a "friend," something to celebrate and be grateful for, which he does with all his playful riffing throughout his poetry. And he connects to the reader as a friend and a peer in this same embracing way.

Exercise

Create a colloquial, witty yet vulnerable first-person narrator, who is remembering a situation from when he/she was young. The situation should be something painful, but the narrator doesn't make it painful—instead he/she makes it funny and endearing, through language. You might think of a word, like Hoagland does, to base the scene around—but something as “dumb/and democratic as a hammer...” Have fun with this one – it's all about the playful language, and though the mood comes through, the overall tone of the piece is light-hearted.