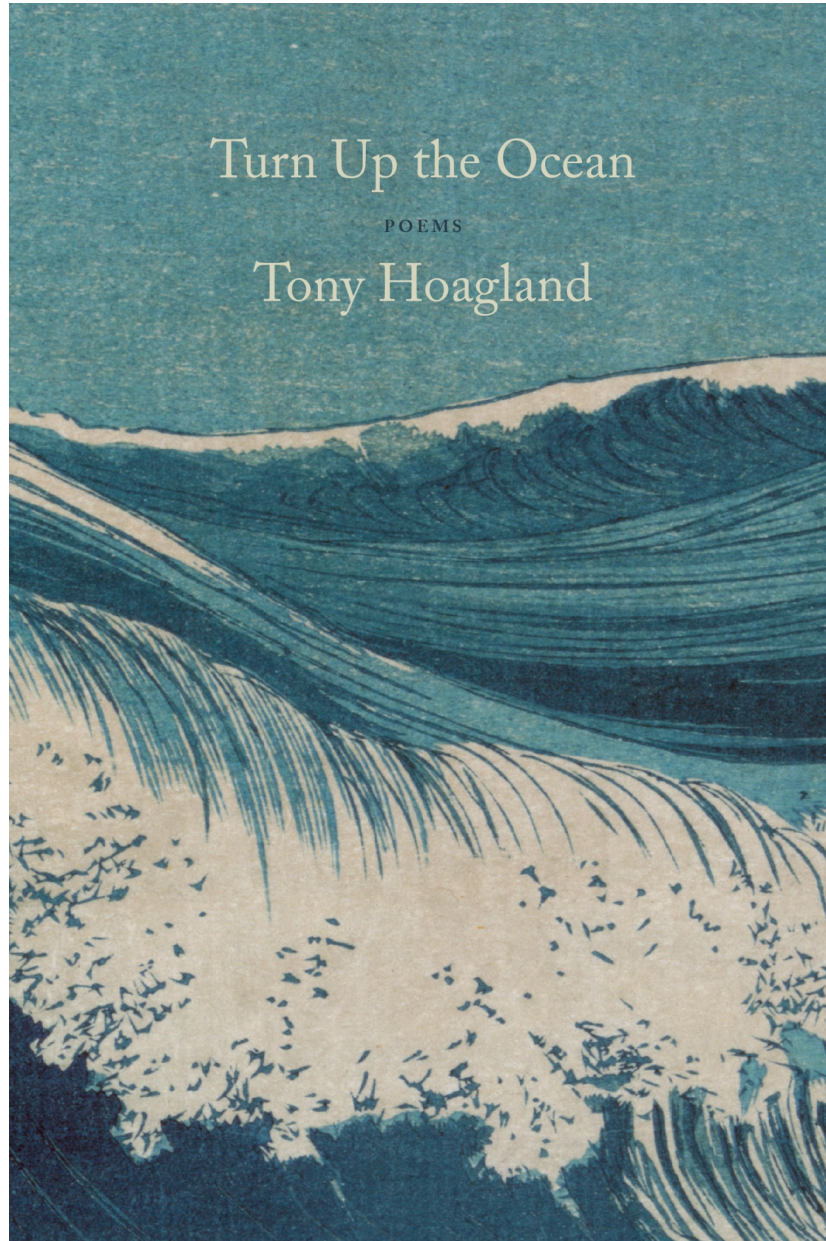


The Loch Raven Review



Tony Hoagland's Turn Up the Ocean, Reviewed by G.H. Mosson



Tony Hoagland, *Turn Up the Ocean*, Graywolf Press (2022), 80 p. \$16 ISBN: 978-1644450925 Publication Date: July 12, 2022 Publisher's URL: <https://www.graywolfpress.org/books/turn-ocean>

Poet Tony Hoagland began as a confessional poet, and in the last two decades, his personal satire has moved into a more social portraiture, while continuing to use the lyric "I" voice. In this way, Hoagland's poetry tracks some of the evolution in American poetry of the last forty years. Like Louise Gluck since she published *Wild Iris* in 1992, Hoagland's first-person narrator since his 2005 chapbook

Hard Rain often seems to be him. It's a persona, someone like him, and sometimes him. Out of this, it's a centaur of sorts: half confessional and half everyman, and agape in polyglot American society. One might say Hoagland's antic urge toward poetic satire channels a bit of Allen Ginsberg's poem, "America," often set in the chain store or grocery store parking lot. As poet Carl Dennis says, it is "one of the most distinctive voices of our time."

In 2018, Hoagland passed away from cancer. Turn Up the Ocean, his eighth full-length collection of poetry, came out posthumously in July 2022. Assembled from polished but still unfinished drafts, says the poet's surviving partner, novelist Kathleen Lee, in her afterward, it's his finest since Application for Release from a Dream in 2015. Offering the same satirical eye as his prior books, the tone here is less antic, calmer, more subdued. The similes and metaphors are less a cascade, more considered. Hoagland, of course, still has a knack for far-flung yet apt comparisons. His voice feels anchored more in actual autobiography this time around.

This said, Hoagland still presents a kaleidoscope of scenes from an American life as well as poems from the perspective of someone with a terminal illness. As he says in the book's opening poem, "Belief is not a requirement to go on living." This opening poem, "Bible All Out of Order," imagines mixing up the biblical stories, humorously put, to drive home the point that our narratives do not always work out as we wish them to. Our life will not unfold like literature, often or at all, with a beginning, middle, and end. This profound point of view is echoed in other poems dealing with illness in the collection, such as when he sends a friend's healing prayer back across the continental air, because Hoagland as a poetic speaker is honestly angry that other friends cannot save him. Such may be an unrealistic emotion. Yet the feeling's real enough. This lived honesty makes these poems touching and valuable. Hoagland's honesty is the sort of telling that helps us believe our ambiguous, multifarious selves.

Hoagland's fast-paced collection leads from the poem of a broken narrative to "Gorgon," where Hoagland calls the world a gorgon: many-headed, dangerous, wondrous, and non-human. In the poem's *ars poetica* ending, Hoagland writes: "Your job is to watch and take notes, / to go on looking. / Your job is not to be turned into stone."

The title poem of the book shows Hoagland finding comfort in listening to ocean sounds as he prepares for sleep. The poem likewise asks, if so, then what is the difference between sleeping by the ocean and listening to it on tape?

Hoagland remains humorous, visiting the library, the hospital, the back porch, and living life in "Squad Car Light," autumn. Disappointment looked at another way opens to wonder; that is one way to read Hoagland's posthumous collection.

In "Among the Intellectuals," Hoagland returns to his more public satirical vein that has elevated his poetry since *Hard Rain*. He writes:

They were a restless tribe.

They did not sit in sunlight, eating grapes together in the afternoon.

Cloud-watching among them was considered a disgusting waste of time.

Hoagland's satire here works in playing off of literary history. The restless "tribe" of intellectuals today won't be "eating grapes" and debating in the agora like the classical philosophers before them. They disdain the pleasures of nature here (grapes, sunlight, clouds) and the pastoral. They will not be

wandering lonely as a cloud with Wordsworth or his ilk from the inspiring Romantic era. As the poem continues, these intellectuals are less disinterested and more analytical. Their analysis leads to a sort of dead end of themselves:

*But then you also find
you can't stop thinking, thinking, thinking;*

tormenting, and talking to yourself.

I reviewed his *Application for Release from a Dream* (Graywolf, MN 2015) some years ago at *JMWW Journal*. That volume offered an inspiring and vibrant critique of American consumerism, with nudges toward living a more authentic life. Here in *Turn Up the Ocean*, Hoagland is more personal, but he's still looking inward and around. It is a self-portrait of someone engaged and entangled with the world, but also quieter in how he moves through it.

The *Library Journal*, in its review, wrote that "Hoagland's poetry earns the oft-misused adjective *uncompromising* for its directness in the face of reality's 'blithering whirlwind of wonder.'" If Hoagland's mixed tone is a salad dressing, his playful fancy is the delightful oil to the full-flavor vinegar of a no-holds-barred gaze.

Turn Up the Ocean has a sober grace not present in his more antic, more satirical collections of the last two decades. It's beautiful in the calmness with which Hoagland tackles the themes of home, hospital, illness, joy, friends, loved ones, longings, the body's pain, and resentments. I do not doubt if Hoagland finished this collection himself, it would have been different. However, the balance of grace, humor, sorrow, and irony could not have been improved.

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G.H. Mosson is the author of two books and three chapbooks of poetry, including *Family Snapshot* as a Poem in Time (Finishing Line, 2019). His poetry has appeared in *The Evening Street Review*, *The Tampa Review*, *The Potomac Review*, *Loch Raven Review*, and *The Hollins Critic*, and received four Pushcart Prize nominations. He has an MA from the Johns Hopkins Writing Seminars and an MFA in poetry from New England College. An attorney and writer, Mr. Mosson enjoys raising his children, hiking, and literary endeavors. For more, seek www.ghmosson.com.

Tony Hoagland is an award-winning poet, author of *Turn Up the Ocean* (Graywolf 2022), *What Narcissism Means to Me: Poems* (Graywolf 2003), and several other books of poetry and literary commentary. His 1993 debut, *Sweet Ruin*, won the Brittingham Prize in Poetry from the University of Wisconsin Press. His second, *Donkey Gospel* in 1998, won the James Laughlin Award from the Academy of American Poets. As the Poetry Foundation reports, "Tony Hoagland was born in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. He earned a BA from the University of Iowa and an MFA from the University of Arizona."

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