

Courageous Clarity

on Tony Hoagland's *Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty* (Graywolf Press, 2010)

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To come right out in the open: I think *Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty* is an outstanding book, among the best poetry books in many years. It may be even better than Hoagland's strong previous book *What Narcissism Means to Me*, though I'm wary of the way reviewers and blurbers feel summoned to say that someone's latest book is his or her best. Hoagland has made himself an important poet in our cacophonous American scene by developing his nervy brash lucid style that jars the reader into embarrassed wakefulness. Hoagland barges right into issues—social class, racism, sexism, complicity in capitalism, many kinds of dishonesty—that most poets prefer merely to graze fleetingly as if nothing but cliché were possible any more in relation to those issues. Hoagland takes risks that are more significant than the kind of daring that consists only in sliding from very odd metaphor to even odder metaphor. Hoagland's daring does lead him into some moves that aren't subtle or insightful enough, I think (my friends know that I can't praise everything in anyone's book). But of the forty-six poems in *Unincorporated Persons* there are at least a dozen that I'd rank alongside poems by Wislawa Szymborska (to name a great poet outside the American whirl); and all but a few of the poems seem to me wonderfully engaging.

My desire to praise Hoagland's poetry runs deep, and is not purely disinterested. (Perhaps the purely disinterested review is a chimera?) For one thing, he and I have been friends—not close friends, but friends—since 1994, and we have many friends in common. Moreover, Hoagland's poetry resembles my own in some basic ways. Naturally I'm invested in my belief that there are important differences between Hoagland and Halliday. (We all want to be special.) And I'd love to live in a world where smart persons would care enough to explore the comparison.

Meanwhile, though, I have to realize that if Hoagland's poetry isn't admirable in some key ways, mine can't be either.

What strikes you first about Tony Hoagland's poems is their clarity. They come straight at you. They walk up and start talking to you, in a voice whose rueful wryness does not sound tricky, but doesn't sound casual either. It's the sound of someone who has been bothered by something in life—something he will try to specify for you—and he is not interested in disguising it, or teasing you with hints about it. The directness of his approach is not only bold but edgy, slightly aggressive even; there's a sense of a speaker who has grown impatient with artfully elliptical poetry (and speech) and wants to cut through the fog to a place where speaker and listener might live more healthily on a basis of candor. When Hoagland uses metaphors—whether in passing, or as extended conceits—they have a clean, unornamented availability; if some are more telling and insightful than others, the reader is invited to discriminate among them without impediment. To write this way takes nerve.

Some poets lure the reader into syntactical and metaphorical mazes; there may be a lot going on in those mazes (intensity, complexity of thought, depth, finding of truth)—or not! Some difficult poets are great (Dickinson, Eliot, Stevens); many are bad. The same is true for poets who are easy or highly readable: many are bad; but some (Whitman, Hardy, Frost) attain a greatness inseparable from the openness and directness of their speech. We like to point out that Frost's meanings are more mysterious than they seemed to us (or our teachers) in high school, but there's still a serious reason why Frost can be successfully taught in high school. Of course, openness and directness are dangerous qualities for an artist, because if the work is banal, the banality is not shrouded, not swathed in gauzy figuration and arcane references. American poetry is overpopulated with poets who seem to sense that they don't possess a strikingly fresh perspective on human problems, so they'd better weave bundles of oddities and feints and ironic gestures. Tony Hoagland, instead, accepts the risks of clarity.

The riskiness is most noticeable in the poems that address pervasive social conditions, the poems that get called "political"

and are often quoted in reviews of Hoagland. (Actually, some of his best poems involve the inner life and are more personal than political, insofar as this dichotomy is tenable; a key impulse in Hoagland is to show how illusory the dichotomy is.) Consider a passage from “Dialectical Materialism” in which the speaker is strolling around a supermarket, feeling hyper-aware of political and economic forces behind the tempting merchandise. Is the passage imaginatively engaging, or do you feel its import is embarrassingly overfamiliar?

There was cornbread rising in the bakery department
and in its warm aroma I believed that I could smell
the exhaled breath of vanished Iroquois,
their journey west and
delicate withdrawal into the forests,

whereas by comparison
the coarse-grained wheat baguettes
seemed to irrepressibly exude
the sturdy sweat and labor of eighteenth-century Europe.

My god there is so much sorrow in the grocery store!
You would have to be high
on the fumes of the piped-in pan flutes
of commodified Peruvian folk music

not to be driven practically crazy
with awe and shame,
not to weep at the scale of subjugated matter:

the ripped-up etymologies of kiwi fruit and bratwurst,
the roads paved with dead languages,
the jungles digested by foreign money.

For my (American) money, the passage is imaginatively engaging, both funny and troubling—while at the same time we may say its meaning is embarrassingly familiar. That familiarity is a central subject for Hoagland, and the embarrassment is an objective. Hoagland knows perfectly well that anyone likely to read his book already “knows” that global capitalism is built on

enormous destructions and oppressions which we can, on most days, avoid facing. The irksome task he often sets himself is to cut through our jaded knowingness to reach fresh sensation. Watching his strategies for cutting through is a key pleasure in reading Hoagland. Writing “Dialectical Materialism” Hoagland takes for granted that his reader remembers Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California” and “All Lost in the Supermarket” by The Clash and other artistic evocations of the repressions behind capitalist abundance. Should the idea be simply avoided because it’s so Yesterday? Hoagland refuses that option; and he also declines the possibilities of farcical satire, or desperate phantasmagoria. He chooses a tensely reflexive irony in broad daylight. The choice limits his style and tone and tactical moves (as all choices bring limits) while giving him chances to explore variations within the ironic mode. In Hoagland, unlike lots of poets, irony is not an excuse for murkiness; on the contrary, his irony is like a machete clearing the underbrush of distractions to make room for patches of earnestness.

Thus he can make fun of his own hyped-up political consciousness in the supermarket—“I was seeing the whole produce section / as a system of cross-referenced signifiers / in a textbook of historical economics”—without denying the serious moral perceptions that accompany his (and our) liberal intellectual admiration-of-one’s-own-consciousness. We know he doesn’t literally weep over the “subjugated matter” displayed in, and reflected by, the supermarket, but we also realize he isn’t kidding when he says that an undrugged response to all this would be “to be driven practically crazy / with awe and shame.” The sorrow and anger are real—even if we fail to live up to their moral implications. Unlike some proud hortatory poets who model admirable attitudes toward war, racism, pollution, and other evils, Hoagland keeps remembering his own comfort within our social system. So he admits that as he leaves the supermarket he’s feeling rather cheerful—“the bossa nova muzak charmed me like a hypnotist / and the pretty cashier with the shaved head and nose ring / said, *Have a nice day*”—and then in the parking lot he finds that a minor traffic accident has occurred. Like many of us educated thoughtful comfortable Americans, Hoagland is very ready

to see minor misfortune as a metaphor for national and global misfortune. Hence the unhappy drivers are “these personified portions of my heart” and Hoagland imagines them thinking “how at any minute, / convenience can turn / into a kind of trouble you never wanted.” The point is that the convenience—the supermarket, the food industry, the auto industry—contains the causes of trouble which will nevertheless be surprising, even shocking, when it comes.

Having just written a sentence about “the point” of the ending of “Dialectical Materialism,” I’ll speak again about the transparent readability and thematic clarity of Hoagland’s poetry. It has a nakedness. You can imagine a critique of “Dialectical Materialism” which would smirk at the word “muzak” in the poem’s inventory of the supermarket’s disturbing comforts, since to complain about muzak as a symptom of cultural decadence was already a cliché forty years ago. But the reply would be that muzak—along with all sorts of narcotic commodification epitomized by it—continues to affect us in our real lives. How is a poet to face the lives we really live? Rae Armantrout, Charles Bernstein, Carolyn Forché, Jorie Graham, Kent Johnson, Ron Silliman, Charles Simic, and any dozen Ashbery acolytes will all be shopping in a supermarket in the next few days.

We’re all complicit. Yeah, we know it, as we know that death is coming, and that love requires imagination, and that humility is endless, and that nothing human is alien to us, and that power tends to corrupt. What good poetry often does is reanimate what we already inertly “know.”

Our complicity in off-camera evils is an obsession for Hoagland. There is a haunting passage in “Candlelight” in his 1998 book *Donkey Gospel* that ponders how “in this world // you have to decide what / you’re willing to kill.”

Saving your marriage might mean
dinner for two

by candlelight on steak
raised on pasture
chopped out of rain forest
whose absence might mean

an atmospheric thinness
fifty years from now
above the vulnerable head
of your bald grandson on vacation

as the cells of his scalp
sautéed by solar radiation
break down like suspects
under questioning.

Still you slice
the sirloin into pieces
and feed each other
on silver forks

under the approving gaze
of a waiter
whose purchased attention
and French name

are a kind of candlelight themselves,
while in the background
the fingertips of the pianist
float over the tusks

of the slaughtered elephant
without a care,
as if the elephant
had granted its permission.

Hoagland said in an interview with Miriam Sagan, “There was a time when I looked at a scene and saw a man and a woman kissing. Now I am aware that the man has a credit card in his pocket and that just behind the woman a beer commercial is on the TV, interrupting war coverage from Afghanistan.” The spirit of this perspective is not cynical, because, as Hoagland knows, cynicism is too comfortable—it is an inverted form of sentimentality.

In *Unincorporated Persons* the sensation of painfully half-voluntary complicity in political and cultural harm comes across in many good poems, though what the poems express is not simply limited to that sensation. Such poems include “Food Court,” “Big

Grab,” “Hard Rain,” “Confinement,” “Poor Britney Spears,” “Expensive Hotel,” “Complicit With Everything,” “Hinge,” “Foghorn,” “Disaster Movie,” “The Allegory of the Temp Agency,” “Snowglobe.” There is plenty to say about those, and critics should write about them carefully enough to move past simply categorizing them as “political poems.” A long article waits to be written about their endings and how, in a poem’s closing lines, Hoagland twists the knife, to make the poem disturb you after you felt sure you knew where he was going. An example is “The Allegory of the Temp Agency” which, thanks to the machete-slash of its last lines, manages to become *both* a satirical critique of banal polemical art *and* a startling reminder that banal political protests against global capitalism arise from horrible inequities that suave mockery cannot remove.

So I admire those poems, and I say that if Tony Hoagland had written only those he’d already be an important poet, doing something decisively that other poets do winkingly, evasively, or banally. However, in a way I now half-regret having focused on poems like “Dialectical Materialism,” simply because they are the most noticeable poems in Hoagland’s work and the ones most convenient for reviewers writing short reviews.

Hoagland also writes about love relationships, family bonds, the formation and deformation of one’s identity according to gender roles and gendered tendencies of desire; and about our efforts (including poetry itself) to use language to attain a calm grip on experience. In the latter category, *Unincorporated Persons* begins with “Description,” a poem that would be worth discussing alongside many poems by Wallace Stevens, as it ponders our constant need to imbue natural phenomena with human meaning, and the question of whether in doing so we imprison ourselves away from reality. The same theme is more comically engaged in “Cement Truck” which mainly succeeds, via boyish zest, in dodging the tremendous magnetic pull of metaphor—though of course Hoagland knows we will say that his desire to let the cement truck be just a truck is a metaphor for any poet’s hunger for concrete celebration of the world. “Personal” is a funny poem about being someone who has always been driven toward language by fun-

damental bafflements and damages and longings. “My Father’s Vocabulary” painfully meditates on the long-lasting cost of acquiescing in the impoverished and demeaning language wielded by a particular social group or class or generation. A lighter poem “Address to the Beloved” responds with hilarious cluelessness to a woman who has told our man to get real. For a postmodern protagonist, that injunction is the doorway to dervish-whirls of ambivalence. The half-misery half-excitement of constant self-consciousness is explicitly the subject of another funny poem, “I Have News For You.”

I say those are all good poems. Of course I can quibble with a phrase here and there, and occasionally I wish Hoagland would push farther into complications. Here, though, I want to stress the consistency of achievement in *Unincorporated Persons*—achievement inseparable from Hoagland’s explicitness. Take it or leave it. Readers come to poetry with many different wishes, some of them irreconcilable. (Charles Harper Webb usefully outlined this in his article “Apples and Orangutans: Competing Values in Contemporary Poetry” [*The Writer’s Chronicle*, October/November 2004] where he listed sixty-two qualities that poems are asked to evince.) Tony Hoagland will never be able to please those readers who are infected by ICFU. This syndrome—Instant Contempt For the Understandable—is always active in people worried about establishing that in poetry they are doing something difficult and mysterious that your aunt and uncle, and your average students, can’t do. People afflicted with ICFU (including even a few of my quasi-friends!) act condescending and disdainful toward a poem immediately upon realizing that it makes sense, coheres, and can be paraphrased (with a paraphrase more specific than “Life is so weird!”). To be consistent, ICFU readers should be disdainful of all the great poets in English (including even Blake and Hopkins) up to and including Yeats, Frost, and Stevens—or else they have to claim that paraphrasability was okay “back then” but that now, since, oh, 1970, our world is so atom-smashed the only artistic response is gaudy messes. In the ICFU-ist aesthetic, Frost’s hope for a momentary stay against confusion has been ditched for the sake of a momentary grooving in confusion.

The question that matters is: How much truth about life does a poem illuminate, express, waken us to? All sorts of lyrical and rhetorical felicity should be subordinate to a poem's depth of insight. Verbal dexterity and mellifluousness (names like Merrill and Muldoon flash on the screen) count for very little if the poem is shallow. (Note: a truly funny poem whose meaning is inseparable from the relief of laughter can bring a kind of insight; hilarity has a truth in it, whereas the poetry of Watch-me-being-exceedingly-clever doesn't.) Meanwhile, depth of insight has a splendid way of coming to seem felicitous; thus many of Hardy's gnarly, seemingly awkward poems turn out to be beautiful.

Plenty of contemporary poets have conveyed the truth of the misery of divorce. But there are other truths involved in divorce—new solitude becoming possibility becoming chilly new hope. Hoagland expresses this with his usual directness in "In Praise of Their Divorce." The poem begins with the word "And" as if replying to someone who has just murmured sadly that some marriages should not be saved.

And when I heard about the divorce of my friends,
I couldn't help but be proud of them,

that man and that woman setting off in different directions,
like pilgrims in a proverb

—him to buy his very own toaster oven,
her seeking a prescription for sleeping pills.

The poem would already be worth something if vivid, convincing sympathy for both wife and husband were its whole purpose. But Hoagland has more on his mind; "In Praise of Their Divorce" is also a meditation on metaphor. We need metaphorical ways of thinking about any frightening experience—thus the divorcing spouses, or their friends, might need to see the divorce as an earthquake that wrecks the surface but allows new energy to flow. Like most metaphors, this one is only satisfying for a moment (since the earthquake image doesn't guarantee that renewal and rebuilding will ensue), so the poem drops it after a few lines and moves on to improvise other metaphors in the effort to accept the divorce as something more than a disaster.

Because if marriage is a kind of womb,
divorce is the being born again;
alimony is the placenta one of them will eat;
loneliness is the name of the wet-nurse;
regret is the elementary school;
endurance is the graduation.

What do you think of those lines? I wouldn't like them if they struck me as self-pleased would-be brilliance from a writer wanting to be compared with John Donne. But Hoagland's lines instead want to sound makeshift, as if improvised after a few beers; the bluntness, the candid vulnerability of the metaphors is *itself* a kind of meta-metaphor for the way we need, under stress, to knock together a framework of ideas that will help us get through the day—or through the first year of a divorce.

That is why it would be a harmless shot if some snarky experimentalist were to mock that passage as a series of “workshop metaphors.” They are hammered together for a needful purpose like boards in the kind of (carpenter's) workshop that provides a non-ridiculous (though inevitably partial, provisional) metaphor for a poetry workshop. Candidly emphasizing his focus on metaphor, on the way metaphor is a good servant but a dangerous master, Hoagland in the poem's next sentence produces three examples that he says should be refused:

So do not say that they are splattered like dropped lasagna
or dead in the head-on collision of clichés
or nailed on the cross of their competing narratives.

Beware of metaphors whose cleverness might trap us into unwanted implications. (“War on terror,” for instance.) Hoagland is a poet intuitively skeptical of elaborately artful figuration; he knows we need metaphor, but he feels strongly that prettiness of metaphor is not the point, and may pull us away from the point. So he typically deploys metaphors in the frank provisional manner—as if saying *Let's try this one out*—displayed in “In Praise of Their Divorce,” which ends as follows, with two more

metaphors, which manage to be hopeful yet not exactly comforting about the splitting of spouse from spouse.

It is like a great mysterious egg in Kansas
that has cracked and hatched two big bewildered birds.
It is two spaceships coming out of retirement,
flying away from their dead world,
the burning booster rocket of divorce
falling off behind them,
the bystanders pointing at the sky and saying, *Look.*

Describing a relative lack of rhetorical adornment in middle-period Yeats, Richard Ellmann wrote: “It is as if the poet had an agreement with his readers to get on with the essentials.” Hoagland writes in a similar spirit of urgency, for readers who will trust him to grip a subject tenaciously. When I said his metaphors have a quality of being composed on the spot, as if improvised after a few beers, I didn’t mean to imply casualness; beer can foster intensity, after all. The Hoagland voice is the voice of someone trying hard to say the sharp-edged necessary thing in the pressure of the moment, as if his chance to address the reader before the evening ends (or before we get sick and die) may be brief. The mood is not frantic, nor is it grim, but it’s not relaxed and easygoing either. This distinguishes Hoagland from comic-discursive poets such as David Kirby, Albert Goldbarth, and Denise Duhamel, for whom *Ultra Talk* is a more useful categorization than it would be for Hoagland. They seem to assume we have hours available for listening to them; he expects only minutes.

It is true that a person speaking urgently, under pressure, is tempted to boil down his meanings, simplifying them for FedEx delivery. I don’t say Hoagland never does this, but I see it happening much less often and less expensively than his detractors do. Reviewing *Unincorporated Persons* in the May 2010 issue of *Poetry*, Peter Campion argued that the poems too readily “can be summed up by pat phrases.” Campion supported the complaint by quoting the endings of four poems, all of which

use the word “that” to set up a closing comment on something described earlier in the poem. It’s true that the four endings give a feeling of decisive thematic closure, but I think Campion succumbs to reviewer-glibness when he says that Hoagland “points you to the meanings of his own poems with all the rigid authority of a traffic cop.” I could remark that sometimes we want to encounter agents who exert firm (if not rigid) Miltonic authority; in a street situation where troubling and angry thoughts have been bashing into each other, we may want a traffic cop of ideas. But really that point could apply only to “Love” among the four poems whose endings Campion picks out. “Love” is about a man and a woman who try to keep their sexual romance alive though age and disease have made it much more difficult. “All that talk about love, and *This* / is what that word was pointing at.” The poem tries to respect the courage of people who have been unlucky but persist in being each other’s good fortune. I actually think “Love” is one of the weaker poems in *Unincorporated Persons*, because it doesn’t think its way far into the relation between desire and love; but still I resent Campion’s quick dismissal.

And in any case, the other three poems (“Jason the Real,” “Jazz,” “Voyage”) whose endings Campion quotes are less easy to summarize than he implies. Their effect is not traffic-coppy. It’s the effect of someone who wants to have gotten somewhere in his poem, and cares about our getting there too. Moreover, Campion is disingenuous when he pretends that the four endings are “a nearly random sample.” That is false. Hoagland’s endings do tend to be decisive, stark, but they are syntactically and rhetorically various.

Before I try another big rebuttal of Campion’s review, let me first say that in one respect I emphatically approve of it: Campion is willing to express a strong preference for one book over another book. He does not shy away from evaluation. Few intelligent poetry reviewers have the guts to say that a book is bad. Ironically, Tony Hoagland as an essayist specializes in unthreatening taxonomies that allow him to imply that various uninteresting poets are all somehow interesting. The courage I attribute to Hoagland as a poet is much less apparent in his criticism.

What really bothers me in Campion's review is his resorting to the most dubious and subjective criterion for poetry—how sound should enhance sense—and asserting (with a traffic-coppy air) that Hoagland's poetry suffers from "the almost total lack of music." To back this up Campion quotes the first six lines of "Foghorn":

When that man my age
came towards me in the fast-food restaurant
with his blue plastic cafeteria tray

and stood next to the table where I sat alone
(there was no place else to sit),
I looked up at him in welcome—

Now, those six lines are straightforwardly narrative, and I'm not about to call them beautiful. But they catch our interest by being ominous in an understated way—a frequent effect in Hoagland, one which Campion wittily but unfairly acknowledges by likening the voice to that of Eddie Haskell, the manipulative hypocrite in *Leave It to Beaver*. Haskell's tone is ominous because he has hidden selfish intentions; Hoagland's is ominous because we sense he is going to bring something out into daylight that we tend to keep decorously concealed or half-concealed by circumlocutory metaphors or "music."

The whole issue of "music" in poetry is much more mysterious than Campion pretends. If you wanted to complain about those first six lines of "Foghorn" (setting aside, for the moment, the way they work in the context of the whole poem, which concerns how citizens of different races are alienated from each other by their racist assumptions) you could say they don't contain a fresh turn of phrase or a particularly vivid image, and you'd be right—though you wouldn't have established anything about the value of the whole poem. There are many reasons why a poem might need a patch of simple, flatly stated phrases. Campion, who admires Louise Glück, must know this. But if what you seek in poetry is language loaded with poetic effects—every rift with ore—and you get along well with people who say (about Derek Walcott, perhaps, or Anthony Hecht) "Oh, the language!" as if self-evident glory is being recognized,

you're on much firmer ground praising passages for their density of reference, their elevated diction, their syntactical complexity, or their vividness of sensory description, than if you proclaim the favored passages are good due to their music.

If I were a certain kind of critic, I could defend those six Hoagland lines on "musical" grounds. Hear the tense, almost frightening inhuman harshness of "blue plastic cafeteria tray." Hear the acceleration-toward-crisis in the anapests of "and stood next to the table where I sat alone." Et cetera. Hoagland, master of music! But I always find that kind of "analysis" unconvincing and professionally pompous.

Probably what Champion really feels, when he decides to call Hoagland's six lines unmusical, is that they are not different enough from everyday speech. (Actually, though, it's hard to imagine a real conversation in which someone would say exactly "When that man my age came towards me in the fast-food restaurant . . .") How different from everyday speech does a poem need to be? Any answer to this question gets exploded by the next good poet—Horace, Wordsworth, O'Hara—who wants a new way to find poetic power in the moves of daily talk.

Like you, and like Hoagland, and like Champion, when I write a poem I care a lot about how it sounds. Getting this right is complicated in ways that are not encompassed by pieties about "music." Pace, tone, consistency or variety, grace, momentum, lexical register, roughness or smoothness—there are many factors. For me a crucial factor is convincingness of voice: the seeming reality of the implied persona. This too is hard to define. A lonely Jesuit priest, half-crushed by tedious labor and desperate for spiritual fulfillment, throbbing with obsessive awareness of his desires and fears, created the convincing voice (though it certainly doesn't sound conversational!) of Hopkins' late sonnets. It is certainly possible to write a bad poem in a convincing voice. I've done it, and one's more naïve students do it. But it is even easier, and much more common, to write a bad poem in an unconvincing voice.

Music? Reader, suppose you are asked to "hear" the following set of eight examples and decide which passages have the best music.

- 1) It's a year exactly since my father died.
Last year was hot. At the funeral, people talked about the weather.
How hot it was for September. How unseasonable.

This year, it's cold.
There's just us now, the immediate family.

- 2) Come the marrow-hours when he couldn't sleep,
the boy river-brinked and chorded.

Mud-bedded himself here in the root-mesh; bided.
Sieved our alluvial sounds— . . .

- 3) There are the suppressed reports. There is
a captain telling of villagers he befriended.
How he returned to find them kneeling in a line.

How a sergeant from another unit opened fire.
How his superior held the captain back
with his clipped, bureaucratic "no can do"

as the shots and pleading ripped the air.

- 4) I am very happy to be here at the Villa Hügel
and Prime Minister Nehru has asked me to greet the people
of Essen
and to tell you how powerfully affected we in India
have been by Germany's philosophy, traditions and mythology . . .

- 5) I walked into the room.
There were objects in the room. I thought I needed nothing
from them. They began to speak,
but the words were unintelligible, a painful cacophony . . .

- 6) From his desk your father asked for you
that Christmas morning. He explained. Last night
your mother ". . . passed." You would be leaving now
for boarding school. The silence of that ride
across Ohio echoed down our family.

tional atrocity. We might consider whether the un-idiomatic phrase “echoed down our family” improves the (musical?) effect of #6. We may be curious how the chatty pomposity of #4 can serve a poetic purpose. But the point is, *all* of these passages (excepting perhaps the two Riley quotes, which to me seem irredeemably hokey) could exist in very good poems. Their arguable lack of music is not what counts.

Passages #1 and #8 are from poems by Louise Glück (“Labor Day” and “Unpainted Door”). Passage #5 is from “To My Father” by Frank Bidart. Campion, in the review that has provoked my last several pages, cites Glück and Bidart as “the modern masters” of a “music” involving “perfect timing of statements.” Well, I say that *Unincorporated Persons* is full of perfectly timed statements, but I don’t ask you to appreciate them as musical—because the notion is too mysterious, as I’ve tried to show. Passages #3 and #6 are from “Protest” and “The Great Divide” by Peter Campion. Passage #4 begins a funny satirical poem by Frank O’Hara, “Image of the Buddha Preaching.” You can bet there were New Critic types in the Sixties well prepared to explain that such O’Hara lines (“I am very happy to be here at the Villa Hügel”—nice alliteration!) lacked poetical music.

The statements in Tony Hoagland’s poetry—observations, illustrations, reflections, speculations, laments, bits of narrative, direct addresses to the reader—all come from a man determined to stay calm, to think aloud, and to speak clearly. It’s not that he lacks complicated emotions, it’s that he wants to reflect on those emotions in the half-tranquility of composition; we hear the effect, for instance, in the opening lines of “Phone Call” (in *What Narcissism Means to Me*): “Maybe I overdid it / when I called my father an enemy of humanity. / That might have been a little strongly put, / a slight overexaggeration . . .” (Some exaggeration, the son feels, would be excusable under the circumstances, but maybe not overexaggeration.) Behind Hoagland’s poems we often sense rage, humiliation, frustrated desire, disgust, guilt, dejection—but the voice of the poems is never frantic or sweaty or upset-in-the-moment. It is not a mid-night voice.

Hoagland pays a price for his evenness of voice, and his concomitant effort to discuss specified real-life situations directly with the reader. Obviously he pays the price of losing ICFU readers, but more importantly he pays the price of doing without much strangeness, and potentially losing readers who feel that the baffling contradictions and intermixings of life should be met with a strangeness in poetry. Now, I've often argued that shallow strangeness (for instance, in some of James Tate, and most of Joshua Clover) vitiates much contemporary poetry. Still, some wonderful poetry achieves a combination of strangeness with understandability. Dickinson. Stevens. Kenneth Fearing. Claire Bateman. Kevin Prufer.

Since Hoagland has many poems energized by his sense of American society being terribly screwed up, it's interesting to compare *Unincorporated Persons* with Kevin Prufer's *National Anthem* (2008), a book obsessed with capitalism's future apocalypse. In a way Prufer's book is the midnight dream-steeped version of Hoagland's book. In *National Anthem* the protagonists are helplessly caught in violent nightmarish breakdowns of civilization, breakdowns so total that they can barely endure and grope toward pale vestiges of love. Such a vision could be Hollywood-cheesy, but Prufer explores it with such intelligence and resourcefulness that *National Anthem* is an outstanding book, giving us a picture of the awful world we seem to be drifting toward while we sleep. When we wake up each morning, though, we have to live in the banal folly (and comfort) of capitalism today, and we need to live as if it is still possible to make moral and compassionate choices. Tony Hoagland writes poetry for that part of our lives.

Readers crave many more things than any one poet can give. Moreover, any one poet can only write a few of the poems that float along on currents in his or her brain. Hoagland's poem "Requests for Toy Piano" expresses ambivalence about which poems he should write among those that seem desirable to him or to some audience. The voices in the first and third stanzas ask the performer to provide cozy sweet images, of the beauty of nature (a charming family of ducks) or the beauty of romantic love (lovers ready for their first kiss). But the performer, answer-

ing in the second and fourth stanzas, feels obliged to address grimmer realities, such as terrorism, or the economic forces behind romance:

No, I should play the one about
the hard rectangle of the credit card
hidden in the man's back pocket
and how the woman spent an hour
plucking out her brows, and how her perfume
was made from the destruction of a hundred flowers.

In the next stanza the requester voice unexpectedly capitulates and asks for further moralizing exposure of dark truths behind romantic scents.

Then play the one about the flower industry
in which the migrant workers curse their own infected hands,
torn from tossing sheaves of roses and carnations
into the back of the refrigerated trucks.

The performer, however, instinctively refuses to give the audience what it expects.

No, I must play the one about the single yellow daffodil
standing on my kitchen table
whose cut stem draws the water upwards
so the plant is flushed with the conviction
that the water has been sent
to find and raise it up
from somewhere so deep inside the earth
not even flowers can remember.

This daffodil in a vase is actually dying—its egotism is deluded—like yours and mine if we feel that our individual vitality can overcome the social and economic forces pulling our society toward injustice and massive suffering. Nevertheless, we live better—more morally, as well as more happily—if we can feel a deep worthiness in our lives, as the daffodil feels. By letting “Requests for Toy Piano” end with that affirmation, Hoagland is allowing us to feel its beguiling restfulness. At the same time,

the poem is organized to remind us how much that feeling depends on the repression of knowledge and perception that would spoil the feeling.

To appreciate “Requests for Toy Piano” it’s important to notice that Hoagland has written *all* the stanzas—both the requests and the responses—in a manner that satirizes the easy familiarity of each attitude. Marxist cynicism about credit cards and commodities can be as banally lazy as romantic piety about nature or love. Apparently the poet has to be like someone hopping across burning sand, trying never to put his full weight on one spot. However, when a poet’s hopping becomes too chaotic, or too crazed, or too postmod-trendy, we get an indeterminate goulash in which nothing can be cared about and nothing will be seriously thought about. That is the fate Hoagland’s poetry boldly, sometimes bluntly, avoids. What I admire about “Requests” is that Hoagland manages to satirize the attitude in each of the six stanzas (three requests, three responses) without simply demolishing any of them. They remain intact, and clear, and indeed attractive despite their limitations. Some contemporary poems offer you a handful of debris with a 21st-century shrug: What can you do? Tony Hoagland insists on taking *What can you do* seriously. On guard against poet-pomposity, he accepts “toy piano” as one metaphor for his instrument. But he is also on guard against the sly pleasure of self-deprecation, which is why the bulky title *Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty* is finally better than the funny title of his previous book, *What Narcissism Means to Me*. The newer title, though, has a tensely provisional quality, like so many of Hoagland’s metaphors: “Let’s look at it this way, and see where it gets us.” That truth-seeking energy, with its defiance of ICFU and its willingness to barge into subjects that make us nervous, is rare in contemporary poetry, and rarer still when combined with such non-evasive intelligence. Tony Hoagland is a poet to be grateful for.