

Memory As a Hearing Aid

By Tony Hoagland

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.

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Tony Hoagland was born in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and attended Williams College, the University of Iowa, and the University of Arizona. His poetry is known for its acerbic, witty take on contemporary life. He taught at the University of Houston and in the Warren Wilson MFA program.

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