

BY TONY HOAGLAND

## After Beauty

I'm going to read a poem about the difficulty of being a woman. This is a poem about my sister, and about the difficulty of being

beautiful. It opens so many doors for you, and on the other hand it's a difficulty you don't recognize and not everybody has.



My sister was a dumb blond. She got trained to be a dumb blond. She went to dumb blond school. She got trained to laugh a certain kind of way, to toss her head, her blond hair. And she's now a dumb blond in recovery. She went to dumb blond rehabilitation, which was called life. And she recovered, and now she's a full-grown, very interesting, accomplished person.

There was a period when she started to lose her looks. She got sick. I wanted to write about that moment in a woman's life when you lose your looks and no longer have that prettiness to lean on.

### Beauty

When the medication she was taking  
caused tiny vessels in her face to break,  
leaving faint but permanent blue stitches in her cheeks,  
my sister said she knew she would  
never be beautiful again.

After all those years  
of watching her reflection in the mirror,  
sucking in her stomach and standing straight,  
she said it was a relief,  
being done with beauty,

but I could see her pause inside that moment  
as the knowledge spread across her face  
with a fine distress, sucking  
the peach out of her lips,  
making her cute nose seem, for the first time,  
a little knobby.

I'm probably the only one in the whole world  
who actually remembers the year in high school  
she perfected the art  
of being a dumb blond,

spending recess on the breezeway by the physics lab,  
tossing her hair and laughing that canary trill  
which was her specialty,

while some football player named Johnny  
with a pained expression in his eyes  
wrapped his thick finger over and over again  
in the bedspring of one of those pale curls.

Or how she spent the next decade of her life  
auditioning a series of tall men,  
looking for just one with the kind  
of attention span she could count on.

Then one day her time of prettiness  
was over, done, finito,  
and all those other beautiful women  
in the magazines and on the streets  
just kept on being beautiful  
everywhere you looked,

walking in that kind of elegant, disinterested trance  
in which you sense they always seem to have one hand  
touching the secret place  
that keeps their beauty safe,  
inhaling and exhaling the perfume of it—

It was spring. Season when the young  
buttercups and daisies climb up on the  
mulched bodies of their forebears  
to wave their flags in the parade.

My sister just stood still for thirty seconds,  
amazed by what was happening,  
then shrugged and tossed her shaggy head  
as if she was throwing something out,

something she had carried a long ways,  
but had no use for anymore,  
now that it had no use for her.  
That, too, was beautiful.

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*Excerpted from Tony Hoagland's talk this winter to the Emma Willard community. He is a professor at the University of Houston and author of three volumes of poetry: Sweet Ruin, winner of the Brittingham Prize in Poetry, Donkey Gospel, winner of the James Laughlin Award, and What Narcissism Means to Me. He has received grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment on the Arts, and the Academy of Arts and Letters.*