

Tony Hoagland

Appetite

There are three of us in the restaurant
where I have dinner with my friend
— me, him, and one of those diseases
known by its initials.

There's a recently amputated rose
in a jar at table center
and in the kitchen, just this minute,
a lobster with my name on it
is being carried towards a kettle,
which doesn't bother me.

What bothers me
is how I imagine I can see
the virus looking out
from his dullish-bright dark eyes,
and the peculiar gusto
and which he eats and drinks,

taking two of everything,
touching all his food before he swallows it —
the bread, the crumpled dark green
money of the lettuce
entering his mouth, that keeps
on talking while he chews,

telling me how good life is now that he is
living on the edge,
now that he is tasting every bite —

until a weird contagious glow

creeps into our corner of the room,
and in that X-ray light

I can see the blackness hidden
in the tissues of the rose,
the sooty funeral procession just setting out
from the frail, veined
 edges of each petal,
and the pimples on the busboy's chin
ripen towards their bursting
moment of perfection.

How horrible it is to be alive,
to wake one day to feel the earth
begin to seethe and writhe beneath your feet —

the wilderness outside you pressing to get in,
the wilderness inside you trying to get out,
the tangled, penetrating vines,
the compost stink.

And in the forest of my brain
I can hear the thoughts now
 chewing on the underside
of other thoughts.

and under them, the humming, shifting feelings
which feed on anything,
and under them
the ink of anti-thought, liquidly unlinking
the little chains —
and then a clinking sound *tink tink*
from far away

as my friend
strikes his fork against his water glass
to bring me back *tink tink*
from whenever I am gone.

His plate is clean his teeth are white
his glass is raised. I understand
he wants to make a toast
to Dream
and Appetite
and Night.