

84. Little Champion by Tony Hoagland – A Friend to Michael Mark

Fiona Bennett

Hello, and welcome to The Poetry Exchange. I'm Fiona Bennett.

Michael Shaeffer

And I'm Michael Shaeffer. Lovely to see you, Fi. Very nice to be back with you this month.

Fiona Bennett

The relief is enormous!

Michael Shaeffer

I thought you did a great job. I really enjoyed last month's episode, which was fantastic. Salena Godden, what a force of nature she is, wow!

Fiona Bennett

Absolutely wonderful, wasn't it. So you've been busy, Michael. And I don't imagine in the brief time we have here, there's a way to speak about what you've been doing. But I did let everybody know where you were. And you're coming up to the last few performances of *Grenfell*, aren't you? *In the words of survivors*, as it's fully titled.

Michael Shaeffer

Yeah, we've got seven more performances, this is our last week. And I mean, it really has been the most extraordinary experience that sort of goes beyond, you know, just being a play. And getting to know some of the survivors who have contributed to the play, and representing them and their voices and their story has been just incredible, actually. And it's...I am a bit lost for words about it, actually. And I think it's really only when I get out the other side that I'll be able to fully process it. We are going to be filming it for NT At Home National Theatre At Home, which is their subscription service. And you can also do a sort of pay per view, I believe. So that will be available for people all around the world if they wanted to see it and to learn about that story. Yeah, it's gonna leave quite a - quite a void.

Fiona Bennett

Well, congratulations to you and the whole team that's put that piece of work together. I was lucky enough to see it and experience the full power of that piece. It's really extraordinary.

Fiona Bennett

So without further ado, I feel we should head towards this fabulous episode that we've got to share with everybody. We're lucky enough to speak to this wonderful guest based in America. So dear listeners, you'll be listening to John and Andrea talking about 'Little Champion' by Tony Hoagland, the poem that's been a friend to Michael.

John Prebble

So shall we dive in, Andrea, do you think?

Andrea Witzke Slot

Yes, yes! Well, we have the poem that is a friend to you in front of us. And we would love for you to read it.

Michael Mark

Happy to.

Little Champion
by Tony Hoagland

When I get hopeless about human life,
which quite frankly is far too difficult for me,
I like to remember that in the desert there is
a little butterfly that lives by drinking urine.

And when I have to take the bus to work on Saturday,
or spend an hour opening the mail,
deciding what to keep and what to throw away,
one piece at a time,

I think of the butterfly following its animal around
through the morning and the night,
fluttering, weaving sideways through
the cactus and the rocks.

And when I have to meet all Tuesday afternoon
with the committee to discuss new bylaws,
or listen to the dinner guest explain his recipe for German beer,

or hear the scholar tell, again,
about her campaign to destroy, once and for all,
the cult of heteronormativity,

I think of that tough little champion
with orange and black markings on its wings,
resting in the shade beneath a ledge of rock
while its animal sleeps nearby;

and I see how the droplets hang and gleam among
the thorns and drab green leaves of desert plants
and how the butterfly alights and drinks from them
deeply, with a stillness of utter concentration.

Andrea Witzke Slot

Magnificent. That is something isn't it? You don't come across many poems with the word urine in it.

John Prebble

No you don't do you!

Michael Mark

Right. And it's critical in the poem isn't it? It's so - I'm so happy that you mentioned that right off. Because it is that paradox, because it's given life. It's nourishing this beautiful butterfly. But we think of it as waste. And so I think that is the fulcrum by which the entire poem moves left and right in all directions...it's asking us to reconsider.

John Prebble

Yeah, I hadn't thought of it from that angle of, like, that for us it's a waste. But actually the poem as a whole is kind of about, I guess, that sense of a different kind of value.

Michael Mark

Yes, indeed. And it's about a shift in perspective, which I think the whole poem is about. Well, even think about the title. It's paradoxical. 'Little Champion.' We think of our champions as large - larger than life. No, no, no: *little* champion. So heartening for somebody who is not physically or mentally

strong, perhaps. And still maybe you too can be a champion. So from the very onset, the poet is - and the speaker - are challenging us. And I think comforting us, you know, right from the start - 'when I get hopeless about human life' - and that's comforting. I'm in contact with a voice that is sharing. But to me, it's such a human voice. And so I start to trust.

Andrea Witzke Slot

When did you first come across this friend? And did all of that grab you at first?

Michael Mark

I first came upon the poem in the magazine, *The Sun*, which is my favourite publication. It's a lifestyle magazine, where they publish two, sometimes one poem, maybe sometimes three, but not many. And I felt in the company of someone seeing me. I mean, that was 2014. And I still have that issue. I kept that issue. I don't think I understood....cognitively. What I felt was authenticity. I felt a comfort. I felt a truth. I felt a sense...but I don't think I felt that I knew of all the technique, the craft, which I care greatly about, because I want to find out.... You say a friend: you want to know what's behind that friend. Can I trust that friend? This one is telling me to trust and, well, if somebody says to you, 'well, honestly' - when somebody says 'honestly' to me, I go 'uh oh' - but it was the voice. And then I went ahead and I deconstructed it - do you want to know something amazing about this poem, I think? It's only three sentences. That's pretty remarkable.

Andrea Witzke Slot

That *is* remarkable. Yes, I did not notice that.

Michael Mark

The first two...and then there's this long, long one, which has, you know, parenthetical clauses...in the way that we might say to a buddy, you know, you see something and you kind of tilt over, you whisper... There's a lot of those parenthetical phrases in here, that keeps it going. But you don't notice it. I liken it to the butterfly, where you think it's gonna land, but no, no, no, it goes on. You think it's gonna land but no, no, no - the nature. And that's what this poem is doing.

Andrea Witzke Slot

So I want to go back to something you said about the poem when you first read it. You said you felt seen. You felt the poem saw you. What do you mean by that?

Michael Mark

Uh...I've had some challenges growing up. I had a 65% hearing loss that wasn't detected till I was 12. So the world was far from me. I had a sight problem that wasn't detected till I was 13. And I had a

speech impediment. And I still have some remnants. This poem talks about the ability to survive out in the desert. So I felt like I was that butterfly on some level...surviving. And so that's how I was seen, Andrea, you know, not that anybody should feel sorry for me. I feel very fortunate in my life. But that beginning, it still stays with me, I have to say, and that's why I think I was seen, if that makes any sense.

Andrea Witzke Slot

It does, it does. It's beautifully put.

John Prebble

And, you know, this creature, this little champion, you know, it's so vulnerable. It's so small, it's in the desert, and yet it's found its way to survive.

Michael Mark

It's found its animal. My question is, what is the animal?

Andrea Witzke Slot

That's exactly what I was going to ask! That's exactly what I was going to ask!

Michael Mark

I'm gonna ask you guys that...you guys tell me what the animal is! I'll tell you what I think the animal is.

Andrea Witzke Slot

What do you think John?

John Prebble

Well, it's so lovely that I hadn't almost noticed that...that I hadn't noticed that it wasn't named until you put it... I don't know. I've got a hippo in my mind, but I've no idea why! I think I'm thinking, maybe, I think I'm getting that idea of like birds on hippos...

Michael Mark

Mm hmm. For me, the animal is imagination. That's me. That's how I think I've survived those years. And I think that's what's going on with the speaker - 'when I get hopeless about human life, which, quite frankly, is far too difficult for me, I like to remember' - like a conjuring. For me the imagination, because I could not see as well, and I could not hear as well, I lived in that little small world, that world. That was my world. And then at the end - 'while its animal sleeps nearby' - the animal is at rest and peaceful. I love that the animal is at peace and restful. And the butterfly is not really beautifully described. But the most beautiful part I see is about the urine - 'I see how the droplets hang and

gleam'. So the most beautiful part is that which we go, 'wait a second, survive on urine?!' As you said, that's not a common word in poetry. And maybe the animal is providing for this. So there is this harmony. But it shifts the perspective.

Andrea Witzke Slot

You've got this sleepy animal. And then this quite sort of strikingly bright butterfly, fluttering around - it's a great visual image.

Michael Mark

I like what you just said a lot about the fluttering. Because in the poem, the speaker is talking about how linear time is in a way... 'when I have to take the bus on Saturday.' Saturday, you take the bus to work?! Okay, I guess that's what you have to do in human life, right? 'Deciding what to keep and what to throw away' at the table in the mail - you can just imagine this stacks of like, this is what I have to do, I have to do this, in contrast to the, to the fluttering, which is, you know, moving and dancing in the air... This progression that we need to take and it's just hopeless for the speaker. And in contrast with this, the butterfly that is just pretty much dancing and floating and living and existing now now now now. I love that contrast. I mean, this is the mental construct of the human versus the butterfly, floating along, following its animal in the desert. It's a conduit of one of that connection of reaching in for the animal within us. There - the simplicity of us, the knowledge of what we have kicked under the concrete of every day. But the butterfly living in the desert, I think that it's this hope of 'to get me through these meetings with the committee and then doing the mail and listening to the speakers speak and just getting through the day.' You know, I'll do that sometimes - I don't know if you will - in the dentist's chair. I'll say 'okay, how am I going to get through this?' And I start to just daydream and go to places that I want to be.

Andrea Witzke Slot

I was very moved by what you said about your earlier life too...how long it took for people around you to recognise the hearing loss and the sight problems too... Take me back there.

Michael Mark

I grew up with my mom, my dad and my brother in Queens, New York. And I had a skill. I had a sense of where during a ball game, if I were playing baseball, where the ball was going before it was hit. And I would go there. And it's something that you know, they say you compensate, you know. And so I had a sense where if I was playing a certain position, say third base, that the batter was going to hit it a little closer to the shortstop. I would slide over and, boom, there would be the ball. I was such a good athlete that it disguised the fact that I couldn't see or hear. Now I was born with those issues, so I couldn't compare, 'hey, my eyes are getting worse.' No, they were always that way according to the

doctors. And when I have my operations on my years, I said, 'Oh my gosh, I can hear them talking to me. I can hear what they're saying in the room when they're not talking to me.' So before that, I was just in my own head. And I was supported by the fact that I was a good athlete. I was welcomed by people. I had a place in society. I also was seen as a sunny disposition and likeable. Yep, I was likeable. And I used that too. So until the time when a guy came around with a hearing test and gave all the children hearing tests, and the first few times they said, 'well, Michael's not paying attention again. He's looking out the window again. You got to raise your hand when you hear the beeps.' And I wasn't because I couldn't hear the instructions. They couldn't believe it. 'How is he that unable to hear?' Until they did it again and again and again, and they recognise 'no, he's got a problem.' So, there was surgery. I still didn't do all that well in school though!

John Prebble

Michael, you talked about when you met the poem, and the relating to it as kind of a way of surviving almost. Can you continue that story a bit on for us, then?

Michael Mark

I hope this answers the question, but it brings to mind a dog that we had - a Newfoundland, you know, that breed. They're enormous. This is 120 pounds, Jessie. Beautiful, like a bear. Gorgeous and gentle, a gentle giant. And Jessie went blind in around her ninth year. And I was just so worried. And I didn't want to take her out of the house. Because oh my God, she'll bump into things that - she's very strong - and she'll step on the wrong thing, oh my God - pull me in the trash... And she'll even in the house bump into things. And I go, 'oh no, oh no, oh no. Oh my gosh, oh my gosh. Watch out, watch out.' But the tail, this beautiful black tail - plume, gorgeous plume - waving back and forth, telling me it's okay. And so I started calling Jessie my guru. Because it's okay, it is this way. For the speaker in the poem - they must go to work, and even on Saturday, and they must endure the boring 'agains' of conversations, the committees, even German beer. But there is this other place to go, there's the physical, but there's the spiritual. So I go back to my guru, my Jessie, to tell me it's okay. It's okay. It makes life easier. And it is not only what we see that is here. So for this, when I read this poem, I felt you are dealing with reality. It's not made up that you didn't hear that well. It's not made up that you didn't see that well. You need to deal with this. You need to accept this on some level. Not that you have to like it. But accept it in order to persevere, survive. How do you do that? Imagination. You know, for me, it was imagination. I think for the speaker, it's imagination.

Andrea Witzke Slot

Yeah, it's very conversational and very embedded in everyday life. 'And when I have to take the bus to work on Saturday', yeah, and all of those little mundane things - he doesn't try to make it super poetic. He just makes it conversational, you know, 'Having A Coke With You' kind of thing.

Michael Mark

Just like a friend.

Andrea Witzke Slot

Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Michael Mark

Right, there's no, no...we're not putting on airs here. I'm complaining - life is tough. And let me tell you what I do. And I think that it's clear eyed...you know some of our friends, they want so much for us not to suffer that they may inadvertently negate what we're dealing with. 'Oh, it's not so bad.' 'Oh, you'll get over it.' All with good intentions. But this voice, this friend says, 'yeah, it's tough. You're out in the desert. You don't have a lot of choices. But think this way, maybe, about this butterfly?' Oh! I think - I think it's clear eyed. I think it's hopeful. And I think it's encouraging.

John Prebble

Little Champion
by Tony Hoagland

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which quite frankly is far too difficult for me,
I like to remember that in the desert there is
a little butterfly that lives by drinking urine.

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And when I have to meet all Tuesday afternoon
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or hear the scholar tell, again,
about her campaign to destroy, once and for all,
the cult of heteronormativity,

I think of that tough little champion
with orange and black markings on its wings,
resting in the shade beneath a ledge of rock
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and I see how the droplets hang and gleam among
the thorns and drab green leaves of desert plants
and how the butterfly alights and drinks from them
deeply, with a stillness of utter concentration.

Michael Shaeffer

That was John with the gift reading at the end there. And of course, huge thanks to Michael for giving us that fantastic conversation and allowing us to share it with you. And to Graywolf publishing for giving us permission to use that incredible Tony Hoagland poem.

Fiona Bennett

And it appears in a fantastic collection, which is entitled [Application for Release from the Dream](#). And I'm going to be doing what we're often inviting our listeners to do, which is making sure I get myself a copy of that collection.

Michael Shaeffer

With a title like that, you've got to go for that collection, Fi. I love that. That's great.

Fiona Bennett

Yeah, I think so. Yeah. And I do also, of course, Michael want to invite people to find out more about Michael Mark our guest's poetry. And indeed, he has a fabulous chapbook entitled [Visiting her in Queens is more enlightening than a month in a monastery in Tibet](#). And that won the Rattle Prize. And we'll be putting information about Michael's work, his writing, his thinking, his interviews, he's got a lovely website. And we'll put the details for that on the description page.

Fiona Bennett

To make listeners aware, if you haven't noticed already, something we've been wanting to get properly organised for a long while has been transcriptions of the podcast just to support and make sure that anybody who wants or needs that additional text resource can engage fully with the episode. So you should be able to find that there. There'll be a little button for you and you'll be able to download or access a text version of the whole episode.

Michael Shaeffer

That's really great. Thanks Fi.

Fiona Bennett

So I was thinking about an extra poem today. And I thought, 'oh, I think what Michael's talking about in that poem about the real power and place of imagination to change our entire psyche....' And I thought about Emily Dickinson and I came across this extraordinary poem that I hope you're going to enjoy Michael. It's called 'I started Early - Took my Dog - ' by Emily Dickinson.

Fiona Bennett

[I started Early – Took my Dog –
by Emily Dickinson]

I started Early – Took my Dog –
And visited the Sea –
The Mermaids in the Basement
Came out to look at me –

And Frigates – in the Upper Floor
Extended Hempten Hands –
Presuming Me to be a Mouse –
Aground – upon the Sands –

But no Man moved Me – till the Tide
Went past my simple Shoe –
And past my Apron – and my Belt
And past my Boddice – too –

And made as He would eat me up –
As wholly as a Dew
Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve –

And then – I started – too –

And He – He followed – close behind –
I felt His Silver Heel
Upon my Ankle – Then My Shoes
Would overflow with Pearl –

Until We met the Solid Town –
No One He seemed to know –
And bowing – with a Mighty look –
At me – The Sea withdrew –

[Source: The Poems of Emily Dickinson Edited by R.W. Franklin (Harvard University Press, 1999)]

Michael Shaeffer

That's about all we've got time for this month. We'll be back with you next month with more poems as friends. Until then, thank you for listening.

Credits:

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