

Saturday, March 20

The Story of the Father

This is another story that I sometimes think about:
the story of the father

after the funeral of his son the suicide,
going home and burning all the photographs of that dead boy;

standing next to the backyard barbecue,
feeding the pictures to the fire; watching the pale smoke
rise and disappear into the humid Mississippi sky;

aware that he is standing at the edge of some great border,
ignorant that he is hogging all the pain.

How quiet the suburbs are in the middle of an afternoon
when a man is destroying evidence,
breathing in the chemistry of burning Polaroids,

watching the trees over the rickety fence
seem to lift and nod in recognition.

Later he will be surprised
by the anger of his family:

the wife hiding her face in her hands,
the daughter calling him names,

– but for now, he is certain of his act; now

he is like a man destroying a religion,
or hacking at the root of a tree.

Over and over I have arrived here just in time
to watch the father use a rusty piece of wire

to nudge the last photo of the boy
into the orange part of the flame;

the face going brown, the memory undeveloping.

It is not the misbegotten logic of the father;
it is not the pity of the snuffed-out youth;

it is the old intelligence of pain
that I admire:

how it moves around inside him like smoke;

how it knows exactly what to do with human beings
to stay inside of them forever.

Tony Hoagland