Ode to the Republic

Tony Hoagland

It’s going to be so great when America is just a second fiddle
and we stand on the sidelines and watch the big boys slug it out.

Old men reading the Times on benches in Central Park
will smile and say, “Let Brazil take care of it.”

Farmers in South Carolina will have bumper stickers that read
“One nation, with vegetables for all” and “USA:
Numero Uno for grade A tomatoes!”

America, you big scary baby, didn’t you know
when you pounded your chest like that in public
it just embarrassed us?
When you lied to yourself on television,
we looked down at our feet;

When your left hand turned into a claw,
when you hammered the little country down
and chanted the pledge of allegiance,
I put on my new sunglasses
and stared at the church across the street.

I thought I had to go down with you,
hating myself in red white and blue
learning to say “I’m sorry,” in more and more foreign languages.

But now at last the end of our dynasty has arrived,
and I feel humble and calm and curiously free.
It’s so good to be unimportant.
It’s so nice to sit on the shore of the Potomac
and watch Time take back half of everything.

It’s a relief to take the dog for a walk
without body armor and stun guns, without frightening the neighbors.

My country, ‘tis of thee I sing:
There are worse things than being
second burrito,
minor player, ex-bigshot, former VIP, drinking decaf
in the nursing home for downsized superpowers.

Like a Navajo wearing a cowboy hat, may you learn
to handle history ironically.

May you look into the mirror and see your doubleness—old blue eyes
in a brown face.

May your women finally lay down
the law: No more war on a school night.

May your shame at failing be cushioned by the oldest kind of chemotherapy:
stage after stage of acceptance.

May someone learn to love you again.

May you sit on the porch with the other countries
in the late afternoon,
and talk about chickens and rain.