**Classic Poetry Series**

# James Tate

## - 16 poems -

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## James Tate (December 8, 1943 --)

James Tate is an American poet whose work has earned him the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. He is a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Early Life

James Vincent Tate was born in Kansas City, Missouri. He received his B.A. from Kansas State University in 1965 and then went on to earn his M.F.A. from the University of Iowa in their famed Writer's Workshop.

Career

Tate has taught creative writing at the University of California, Berkeley and Columbia University. He currently teaches at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where he has worked since 1971. He is a member of the poetry faculty at the MFA Program for Poets & Writers, along with Dara Wier and Peter Gizzi.

Dudley Fitts selected Tate's first book of poems, The Lost Pilot (1967) for the Yale Series of Younger Poets while Tate was still a student at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop; Fitts praised Tate's writing for its "natural grace." Despite the early praise he received Tate alienated some of his fans in the seventies with a series of poetry collections that grew more and more strange.

He has published two books of prose, Dreams of a Robot Dancing Bee (2001) and The Route as Briefed (1999). His awards include a National Institute of Arts and Letters Award, the Wallace Stevens Award, a Pulitzer Prize in poetry, a National Book Award, and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. He is currently a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

Tate's writing style is difficult to describe, but has been identified with the postmodernist and neo-surrealist movements. He has been known to play with phrases culled from news items, history, anecdotes, or common speech; later cutting, pasting, and assembling such divergent material into tightly woven compositions that reveal bizarre and surreal insights into the absurdity of human nature.
Some of his additional awards not already mentioned include a National Institute of Arts and Letters Award, the Wallace Stevens Award, and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. He is also currently a Chancellor of the Academy of American

Poets.

Works:

"The Eternal Ones of the Dream: Selected Poems 1990 - 2010" (Ecco Press, 2012)
The Ghost Soldiers (Ecco Press, 2008)
Return to the City of White Donkeys (2004)
Memoir of the Hawk (2002)
Shroud of the Gnome (Ecco Press, 1997)
Worshipful Company of Fletchers: Poems (Ecco Press, 1994) —winner of the National Book Award[5]
Selected Poems (Wesleyan University Press, 1991) —winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the William Carlos Williams Award)
Distance from Loved Ones (Wesleyan University Press), 1990)
Reckoner (Wesleyan University Press, 1986)
Constant Defender (Ecco Press, 1983)
Riven Doggeries (Ecco Press, 1979)
Viper Jazz (Wesleyan University Press, 1976)
Absences: New Poems (Little, Brown & Co., 1972)
Hints to Pilgrims(Halty Ferguson, 1971)
The Oblivion Ha-Ha (Little, Brown & Co., 1970)
The Torches (1968)
The Lost Pilot (Yale University Press, 1967)
Chapbooks
Lost River (Sarabande Books, 2003)
Land of Little Sticks (Metacom Press, 1981)
Just Shades (Parallel Editions, 1985, illustrated by John Alcorn)
Apology for Eating Geoffrey Movius' Hyacinth (Unicorn Press, 1972)
Amnesia People (Little Balkans Press, 1970)
Wrong Songs (H. Ferguson, 1970)
Shepherds of the Mist (Black Sparrow Press, 1969)
Torches (Unicorn Press 1968)
Prose
Dreams of a Robot Dancing Bee: 44 Stories (Verse Press, 2002)
The Route as Briefed (University of Michigan Press, 1999)
Hottentot Ossuary (Temple Bar Bookshop, 1974)
Collaborations
Lucky Darryl (Release Press, 1977, a novel co-written with Bill Knott)
Are You Ready, Mary Baker Eddy??? (Cloud Marauder Press, 1970, poems co-written with Bill Knott)

## A Knock On The Door

They ask me if I've ever thought about the end of the world, and I say, "Come in, come in, let me give you some lunch, for God's sake." After a few bites it's the afterlife they want to talk about. "Ouch," I say, "did you see that grape leaf skeletonizer?" Then they're talking about redemption and the chosen few sitting right by His side. "Doing what?" I ask. "Just sitting?" I am surrounded by burned up zombies. "Let's have some lemon chiffon pie I bought yesterday at the 3 Dog Bakery." But they want to talk about my soul. I'm getting drowsy and see butterflies everywhere. "Would you gentlemen like to take a nap, I know I would." They stand and back away from me, out the door, walking toward my neighbors, a black cloud over their heads and they see nothing without end.

James Tate

## Father's Day

My daughter has lived overseas for a number
of years now. She married into royalty, and they
won't let her communicate with any of her family or
friends. She lives on birdseed and a few sips
of water. She dreams of me constantly. Her husband,
the Prince, whips her when he catches her dreaming.
Fierce guard dogs won't let her out of their sight.
I hired a detective, but he was killed trying to
rescue her. I have written hundreds of letters
to the State Department. They have written back
saying that they are aware of the situation. I
never saw her dance. I was always at some
convention. I never saw her sing. I was always
working late. I called her My Princess, to make
up for my shortcomings, and she never forgave me.
Birdseed was her middle name.

James Tate

## Goodtime Jesus

Jesus got up one day a little later than usual. He had been dreaming so deep there was nothing left in his head. What was it?
A nightmare, dead bodies walking all around him, eyes rolled back, skin falling off. But he wasn't afraid of that. It was a beautiful day.  How 'bout some coffee? Don't mind if I do. Take a little ride on my donkey, I love that donkey. Hell, I love everybody.

James Tate

**Happy As The Day Is Long**

I take the long walk up the staircase to my secret room.
Today's big news: they found Amelia Earhart's shoe, size 9.
1992: Charlie Christian is bebopping at Minton's in 1941.
Today, the Presidential primaries have failed us once again.
We'll look for our excitement elsewhere, in the last snow
that is falling, in tomorrow's Gospel Concert in Springfield.
It's a good day to be a cat and just sleep.
Or to read the Confessions of Saint Augustine.
Jesus called the sons of Zebedee the Sons of Thunder.
In my secret room, plans are hatched: we'll explore the Smoky Mountains.
Then we'll walk along a beach: Hallelujah!
(A letter was just delivered by Overnight Express--
it contained nothing of importance, I slept through it.)
(I guess I'm trying to be "above the fray.")
The Russians, I know, have developed a language called "Lincos"
designed for communicating with the inhabitants of other worlds.
That's been a waste of time, not even a postcard.
But then again, there are tree-climbing fish, called anabases.
They climb the trees out of stupidity, or so it is said.
Who am I to judge? I want to break out of here.
A bee is not strong in geometry: it cannot tell
a square from a triangle or a circle.
The locker room of my skull is full of panting egrets.
I'm saying that strictly for effect.
In time I will heal, I know this, or I believe this.
The contents and furnishings of my secret room will be labeled
and organized so thoroughly it will be a little frightening.
What I thought was infinite will turn out to be just a couple
of odds and ends, a tiny miscellany, miniature stuff, fragments
of novelties, of no great moment. But it will also be enough,
maybe even more than enough, to suggest an immense ritual and tradition.
And this makes me very happy.

James Tate

**It Happens Like This**

I was outside St. Cecelia's Rectory
smoking a cigarette when a goat appeared beside me.
It was mostly black and white, with a little reddish
brown here and there. When I started to walk away,
it followed. I was amused and delighted, but wondered
what the laws were on this kind of thing. There's
a leash law for dogs, but what about goats? People
smiled at me and admired the goat. "It's not my goat,"
I explained. "It's the town's goat. I'm just taking
my turn caring for it." "I didn't know we had a goat,"
one of them said. "I wonder when my turn is." "Soon,"
I said. "Be patient. Your time is coming." The goat
stayed by my side. It stopped when I stopped. It looked
up at me and I stared into its eyes. I felt he knew
everything essential about me. We walked on. A police-
man on his beat looked us over. "That's a mighty
fine goat you got there," he said, stopping to admire.
"It's the town's goat," I said. "His family goes back
three-hundred years with us," I said, "from the beginning."
The officer leaned forward to touch him, then stopped
and looked up at me. "Mind if I pat him?" he asked.
"Touching this goat will change your life," I said.
"It's your decision." He thought real hard for a minute,
and then stood up and said, "What's his name?" "He's
called the Prince of Peace," I said. "God! This town
is like a fairy tale. Everywhere you turn there's mystery
and wonder. And I'm just a child playing cops and robbers
forever. Please forgive me if I cry." "We forgive you,
Officer," I said. "And we understand why you, more than
anybody, should never touch the Prince." The goat and
I walked on. It was getting dark and we were beginning
to wonder where we would spend the night.

James Tate

**Like A Scarf**

The directions to the lunatic asylum were confusing,
more likely they were the random associations
and confused ramblings of a lunatic.
We arrived three hours late for lunch
and the lunatics were stacked up on their shelves,
quite neatly, I might add, giving credit where credit is due.
The orderlies were clearly very orderly, and they
should receive all the credit that is their due.
When I asked one of the doctors for a corkscrew
he produced one without a moment's hesitation.
And it was a corkscrew of the finest craftsmanship,
very shiny and bright not unlike the doctor himself.
"We'll be conducting our picnic under the great oak
beginning in just a few minutes, and if you'd care
to join us we'd be most honored. However, I understand
you have your obligations and responsibilities,
and if you would prefer to simply visit with us
from time to time, between patients, our invitation
is nothing if not flexible. And, we shan't be the least slighted
or offended in any way if, due to your heavy load,
we are altogether deprived of the pleasure
of exchanging a few anecdotes, regarding the mentally ill,
depraved, diseased, the purely knavish, you in your bughouse,
if you'll pardon my vernacular, O yes, and we in our crackbrain
daily rounds, there are so many gone potty everywhere we roam,
not to mention in one's own home, dead moonstruck.
Well, well, indeed we would have many notes to compare
if you could find the time to join us after your injections."
My invitation was spoken in the evenest tones,
but midway though it I began to suspect I was addressing
an imposter. I returned the corkscrew in a nonthreatening manner.
What, for instance, I asked myself, would a doctor, a doctor of the mind,
be doing with a cordscrew in his pocket?
This was a very sick man, one might even say dangerous.
I began moving away cautiously, never taking my eyes off of him.
His right eyelid was twitching guiltily, or at least anxiously,
and his smock flapping slightly in the wind.
Several members of our party were mingling with the nurses
down by the duck pond, and my grip on the situation
was loosening, the planks in my picnic platform were rotting.
I was thinking about the potato salad in an unstable environment.
A weeping spell was about to overtake me.
I was very close to howling and gnashing the gladiola.
I noticed the great calm of the clouds overhead.
And below, several nurses appeared to me in need of nursing.
The psychopaths were stirring from their naps,
I should say, their postprandial slumbers.
They were lumbering through the pines like inordinately sad moose.
Who could eat liverwurst at a time like this?
But, then again, what's a picnic without pathos?
Lacking a way home, I adjusted the flap in my head and duck-walked
down to the pond and into the pond and began gliding

around in circles, quacking, quacking like a scarf.
Inside the belly of that image I began
recycling like a sorry whim, sincerest regrets
are always best.

James Tate

**More Later, Less The Same**

The common is unusually calm--they captured the storm
last night, it's sleeping in the stockade, relieved
of its duty, pacified, tamed, a pussycat.
But not before it tied the flagpole in knots,
and not before it alarmed the firemen out of their pants.
Now it's really calm, almost too calm, as though
anything could happen, and it would be a first.
It could be the worst thing that ever happened.
All the little rodents are sitting up and counting
their nuts. What if nothing ever happened again?
Would there be enough to "eke out an existence,"
as they say? I wish "they" were here now, kicking
up a little dust, mussing my hair, taunting me
with weird syllogisms. Instead, these are the windless,
halcyon days. The lull dispassion is upon us.
Serenity has triumphed in its mindless, atrophied way.
A school of Stoics walks by, eager, in its phlegmatic way,
to observe human degradation, lust and debauchery
at close quarters. They are disappointed,
but it barely shows on their faces. They are late Stoa,
very late. They missed the bus. They should have
been here last night. The joint was jumping.
But people change, they grow up, they fly around.
It's the same old story, but I don't remember it.
It's a tale of gore and glory, but we had to leave.
It could have turned out differently, and it did.
I feel much the same way about the city of Pompeii.
A police officer with a poodle cut squirts his gun
at me for saying that, and it's still just barely
possible that I didn't, and the clock is running
out on his sort of behavior. I'm napping in a wigwam
as I write this, near Amity Street, which is buried
under fifteen feet of ashes and cinders and rocks.
Moss and a certain herblike creature are beginning to
whisper nearby. I am beside myself, peering down,
senselessly, since, for us, in space, there is
neither above nor below; and thus the expression
"He is being nibbled to death by ducks" shines
with such style, such poise, and reserve,
a beautiful, puissant form and a lucid thought.
To which I reply "It is time we had our teeth examined
by a dentist." So said James the Lesser to James the More.

James Tate

## My Great Great Etc. Uncle Patrick Henry

There's a fortune to be made in just about everything
in this country, somebody's father had to invent
everything--baby food, tractors, rat poisoning.
My family's obviously done nothing since the beginning
of time. They invented poverty and bad taste
and getting by and taking it from the boss.
O my mother goes around chewing her nails and
spitting them in a jar: You shouldn't be ashamed
of yourself she says, think of your family.
My family I say what have they ever done but
paint by numbers the most absurd and disgusting scenes
of plastic squalor and human degradation.
Well then think of your great great etc. Uncle
Patrick Henry.

James Tate

**Never Again The Same**

Speaking of sunsets,
last night's was shocking.
I mean, sunsets aren't supposed to frighten you, are they?
Well, this one was terrifying.
People were screaming in the streets.
Sure, it was beautiful, but far too beautiful.
It wasn't natural.
One climax followed another and then another
until your knees went weak
and you couldn't breathe.
The colors were definitely not of this world,
peaches dripping opium,
pandemonium of tangerines,
inferno of irises,
Plutonian emeralds,
all swirling and churning, swabbing,
like it was playing with us,
like we were nothing,
as if our whole lives were a preparation for this,
this for which nothing could have prepared us
and for which we could not have been less prepared.
The mockery of it all stung us bitterly.
And when it was finally over
we whimpered and cried and howled.
And then the streetlights came on as always
and we looked into one another's eyes?
ancient caves with still pools
and those little transparent fish
who have never seen even one ray of light.
And the calm that returned to us
was not even our own.

James Tate

**Shut Up And Eat Your Toad**

The disorganization to which I currently belong
has skipped several meetings in a row
which is a pattern I find almost fatally attractive.
Down at headquarters there's a secretary
and a janitor who I shall call Suzie
and boy can she ever shoot straight.
She'll shoot you straight in the eye if you ask her to.
I mow the grass every other Saturday
and that's the day she polishes the trivets
whether they need it or not, I don't know
if there is a name for this kind of behavior,
hers or mine, but somebody once said something or another.
That's why I joined up in the first place,
so somebody could teach me a few useful phrases,
such as, "Good afternoon, my dear anal-retentive Doctor,"
and "My, that is a lovely dictionary you have on, Mrs. Smith."
Still, I hardly feel like functioning even on a brute
or loutish level. My plants think I'm one of them,
and they don't look so good themselves, or so
I tell them. I like to give them at least several
reasons to be annoyed with me, it's how they exercise
their skinny spectrum of emotions. Because.
That and cribbage. Often when I return from the club
late at night, weary-laden, weary-winged, washed out,
I can actually hear the nematodes working, sucking
the juices from the living cells of my narcissus.
I have mentioned this to Suzie on several occasions.
Each time she has backed away from me, panic-stricken
when really I was just making a stab at conversation.
It is not my intention to alarm anyone, but dear Lord
if I find a dead man in the road and his eyes
are crawling with maggots, I refuse to say
have a nice day Suzie just because she's desperate
and her life is a runaway carriage rushing toward a cliff
now can I? Would you let her get away with that kind of crap?
Who are you anyway? And what kind of disorganization is this?
Baron of the Holy Grail? Well it's about time you got here.
I was worried, I was starting to fret.

James Tate

**Success Comes To Cow Creek**

I sit on the tracks,
a hundred feet from
earth, fifty from the
water. Gerald is
inching toward me
as grim, slow, and
determined as a
season, because he
has no trade and wants
none. It's been nine months
since I last listened
to his fate, but I
know what he will say:
he's the fire hydrant
of the underdog.

When he reaches my
point above the creek,
he sits down without
salutation, and
spits profoundly out
past the edge, and peeks
for meaning in the
ripple it brings. He
scowls. He speaks: when you
walk down any street
you see nothing but
coagulations
of shit and vomit,
and I'm sick of it.
I suggest suicide;
he prefers murder,
and spits again for
the sake of all the
great devout losers.

A conductor's horn
concerto breaks the
air, and we, two doomed
pennies on the track,
shove off and somersault
like anesthetized
fleas, ruffling the
ideal locomotive
poised on the water
with our light, dry bodies.
Gerald shouts
terrifically as
he sails downstream like
a young man with a
destination. I
swim toward shore as

fast as my boots will
allow; as always,
neglecting to drown.

James Tate

## Teaching the Ape to Write Poems

They didn't have much trouble
teaching the ape to write poems:
first they strapped him into the chair,
then tied the pencil around his hand
(the paper had already been nailed down).
Then Dr. Bluespire leaned over his shoulder
and whispered into his ear:
'You look like a god sitting there.
Why don't you try writing something?'

James Tate

## The List Of Famous Hats

Napoleon's hat is an obvious choice I guess to list as a famous hat, but that's not the hat I have in mind. That was his hat for show. I am thinking of his private bathing cap, which in all honesty wasn't much different than the one any jerk might buy at a corner drugstore now, except for two minor eccentricities. The first one isn't even funny: Simply it was a white rubber bathing cap, but too small. Napoleon led such a hectic life ever since his childhood, even farther back than that, that he never had a chance to buy a new bathing cap and still as a grown-up--well, he didn't really grow that much, but his head did: He was a pinhead at birth, and he used, until his death really, the same little tiny bathing cap that he was born in, and this meant that later it was very painful to him and gave him many headaches, as if he needed more. So, he had to vaseline his skull like crazy to even get the thing on. The second eccentricity was that it was a tricorn bathing cap. Scholars like to make a lot out of this, and it would be easy to do. My theory is simple-minded to be sure: that beneath his public head there was another head and it was a pyramid or something.

James Tate

**The Lost Pilot**

for my father, 1922-1944

Your face did not rot
like the others--the co-pilot,
for example, I saw him

yesterday. His face is corn-
mush: his wife and daughter,
the poor ignorant people, stare

as if he will compose soon.
He was more wronged than Job.
But your face did not rot

like the others--it grew dark,
and hard like ebony;
the features progressed in their

distinction. If I could cajole
you to come back for an evening,
down from your compulsive

orbiting, I would touch you,
read your face as Dallas,
your hoodlum gunner, now,

with the blistered eyes, reads
his braille editions. I would
touch your face as a disinterested

scholar touches an original page.
However frightening, I would
discover you, and I would not

turn you in; I would not make
you face your wife, or Dallas,
or the co-pilot, Jim. You

could return to your crazy
orbiting, and I would not try
to fully understand what

it means to you. All I know
is this: when I see you,
as I have seen you at least

once every year of my life,
spin across the wilds of the sky
like a tiny, African god,

I feel dead. I feel as if I were
the residue of a stranger's life,

that I should pursue you.

My head cocked toward the sky,
I cannot get off the ground,
and, you, passing over again,

fast, perfect, and unwilling
to tell me that you are doing
well, or that it was mistake

that placed you in that world,
and me in this; or that misfortune
placed these worlds in us.

James Tate

## The Wrong Way Home

All night a door floated down the river.
It tried to remember little incidents of pleasure
from its former life, like the time the lovers
leaned against it kissing for hours
and whispering those famous words.
Later, there were harsh words and a shoe
was thrown and the door was slammed.
Comings and goings by the thousands,
the early mornings and late nights, years, years.
O they've got big plans, they'll make a bundle.
The door was an island that swayed in its sleep.
The moon turned the doorknob just slightly,
burned its fingers and ran,
and still the door said nothing and slept.
At least that's what they like to say,
the little fishes and so on.
Far away, a bell rang, and then a shot was fired.

James Tate

## Thinking Ahead To Possible Options And A Worst-Case Scenario

I swerved to avoid hitting a squirrel
in the center of the road and that's when
the deer came charging out of the forest
and forced me to hit the brakes for all I
was worth and I careened back to the other
side of the road just as a skunk came toddling
out of Mrs. Bancroft's front yard and I swung
back perhaps just grazing it a bit. I glanced
quickly in the rearview mirror and in that
instant a groundhog waddled from the side
of the road and I zigzagged madly and don't
know if I nipped it or not because up ahead I
could see a coyote stalking the Collier's
cat. Oh well, I said, and drove the rest
of the way home without incident.

James Tate