

Classic Poetry Series

James Tate
- poems -

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James Tate(8 December 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.

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

A Vagabond

A vagabond is a newcomer
in a heap of trouble.
He's an eyeball at a peephole
that should be electrocuted.
He's a leper in a textile mill
and likely to be beheaded, I mean,
given a liverwurst sandwich
on the break by the brook
where the loaves are sliced.
But he oughtn't meddle
with the powder puffs on the golf links—
they have their own goats to tame,
dirigibles to situate.
He can act like an imbecile
if the climate is propitious,
a magnate of kidnap
paradising around the oily depot,
or a speck from a distant nebula
wishing to purchase a certain skyscraper

Well, if it's permitted, then
let's regulate him, let's testify
against his thimble, and moderate his gloves
before they sew an apron.

The local minister is thinking
of moving to Holland, exchanging
his old ballads for some lingerie.
"Zatso!" says the vagabond.
Homeless, like wheat that tattletales
on the sermon, like wages swigged.
"Zatso, zatso, zatso!" cries the vagabond.
The minister reels under the weight
of his thumbs, the vagabond seems to have
juttled into his kernel, disturbed
his terminal core. Slowly, and with
trifling dignity, the minister removes
from his lapel his last campaign button:
Don't Mess with Raymond, New Hampshire.

James Tate

A Wedding

She was in terrible pain the whole day,
as she had been for months: a slipped disc,
and there is nothing more painful. She

herself was a nurse's aide, also a poet
just beginning to make a name for her
nom de plume. As with most things in life,

it happened when she was changing channels
on her television. The lucky man, on the other
hand, was smiling for the first time

in his life, and it was fake. He was
an aspiring philosopher of dubious potential,
very serious, but somehow lacking in

essential depth. He could have been
an adequate undertaker. It was not the first
time for either of them. It was a civil

service, with no music, few flowers.
Still, there was a slow and erratic tide
of champagne—corks shot clear into the trees.

And flashcubes, instant photos, some blurred
and some too revealing, cake slices that aren't
what they were meant to be. The bride slept

through much of it, and never did we figure out
who was on whose team. I think the groom
meant it in the end when he said, "We never

thought anyone would come." We were not the first
to arrive, nor the last to leave. Who knows,
it may all turn out for the best. And who

really cares about such special days, they
are not what we live for.

Camp Of No Return

I sat in the old tree swing without swinging. My loafer had fallen off and I left it on the ground. My sister came running out of the house to tell me something. She said, 'I'm going to camp tomorrow.' I said, 'I don't believe you,' She said, 'I am. It's a fact. Mother told me.' We didn't speak for the rest of the day. I was mad at her for getting to do something I didn't. At dinner I asked mother what kind of camp it was. She said, 'Oh, just a camp like any other.' I didn't really know what that meant. The next day they got her ready to go, and then they drove off, leaving me with the neighbors. When they got back everything was normal, except I missed Maisie. And I missed her more each following day. I didn't know how much she had meant to me before. I asked my parents over and over how much longer it would be. All they said was soon. I told some kids at school how long my sister had been gone. One of them said, 'She'll never be back. That's the death camp.' When I got home I told my parents what that boy had said. 'He doesn't know what he's talking about,' my father said. But after a couple of more weeks of her absence I began to wonder. That's when they began to clean out Maisie's room. I said, 'What are you doing?' You said 'Maise will be back soon.' My mother said, 'Maisie's not coming back. She likes it there better than she does here.' 'That's not true. I don't believe you,' I said. My father gave me a look that let me know I might be next if I didn't mend my ways. I never said a word about Maisie again.

James Tate

Days of Pie and Coffee

A motorist once said to me,
and this was in the country,
on a county lane, a motorist
slowed his vehicle as I was
walking my dear old collie,
Sithney, by the side of the road,
and the motorist came to a halt
mildly alarming both Sithney and myself,
not yet accustomed to automobiles,
and this particular motorist
sent a little spasm of fright up our spines,
which in turn panicked the driver a bit
and it seemed as if we were off to a bad start,
and that's when Sithney began to bark
and the man could not be heard, that is,
if he was speaking or trying to speak
because I was commanding Sithney to be silent,
though, indeed I was sympathetic
to his emotional excitement.
It was, as I recall, a day of prodigious beauty.
April 21, 1932- clouds
like the inside of your head explained.
Bluebirds, too numerous to mention.
The clover calling you by name.
And fields oozing green.
And this motorist from nowhere
moving his lips
like the wings of a butterfly
and nothing coming out,
and Sithney silent now.
He was no longer looking at us,
but straight ahead
where his election was in doubt.
'That's a fine dog,' he said.
'Collies are made in heaven.'
Well, if I were a voting man I'd vote for you, I said.
'A bedoozling day to be lost in the country, I say.
Leastways, I am a misplaced individual.'
We introduced ourselves

and swapped a few stories.
He was a veteran and a salesman
who didn't believe in his product-
I've forgotten what it was- hair restorer,
parrot feed- and he enjoyed nothing more
than a day spent meandering the back roads
in his jalopy. I gave him directions
to the Denton farm, but I doubt
that he followed them, he didn't
seem to be listening, and it was getting late
and Sithney had an idea of his own
and I don't know why I am remembering this now,
just that he summed himself up by saying
'I've missed too many boats'
and all these years later
I keep thinking that was a man
who loved to miss boats,
but he didn't miss them that much.

James Tate

Failed Tribute To The Stonemason Of Tor House, Robinson Jeffers

We traveled down to see your house,
Tor House, Hawk Tower, in Carmel,
California. It was not quite what
I thought it would be: I wanted it
to be on a hill, with a view of the ocean
unobstructed by other dwellings.
Fifty years ago I know you had
a clean walk to the sea, hopping
from boulder to boulder, the various
seafowl rightly impressed with
your lean, stern face. But today

with our cameras cocked we had to
sneak and crawl through trimmed lawns
to even verify the identity of
your strange carbuncular creation,
now rented to trillionaire non-
literary folk from Pasadena.
Edged in on all sides by trilevel
pasteboard phantasms, it took
a pair of good glasses to barely see
some newlyweds feed popcorn
to an albatross. Man is

a puny thing, divorced,
whether he knows it or not, and
pays his monthly alimony,
his child-support. Year after year
you strolled down to this exceptionally
violent shore and chose your boulder;
the arms grew as the house grew
as the mind grew to exist outside
of time, beyond the dalliance
of your fellows. Today I hate
Carmel: I seek libation in the Tiki

Bar: naked native ladies are painted

in iridescent orange on velvet cloth:
the whole town loves art.
And I donate this Singapore Sling
to the memory of it, and join
the stream of idlers simmering outside.
Much as hawks circled your head
when you cut stone all afternoon,
kids with funny hats on motorscooters
keep circling the block.
Jeffers, ...

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 through 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 corkscrew 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

On The Subject Of Doctors

I like to see doctors cough.
What kind of human being
would grab all your money
just when you're down?
I'm not saying they enjoy this:
'Sorry, Mr. Rodriguez, that's it,
no hope! You might as well
hand over your wallet.' Hell no,
they'd rather be playing golf
and swapping jokes about our feet.

Some of them smoke marijuana
and are alcoholics, and their moral
turpitude is famous: who gets to see
most sex organs in the world? Not
poets. With the hours they keep
they need drugs more than anyone.
Germ city, there's no hope
looking down those fire-engine throats.
They're bound to get sick themselves
sometime; and I happen to be there
myself in a high fever
taking my plastic medicine seriously
with the doctors, who are dying.

James Tate

Poem To Some Of My Recent Poems

My beloved little billiard balls,
my polite mongrels, edible patriotic plums,
you owe your beauty to your mother, who
resembled a cyclindrical corned beef
with all the trimmings, may God rest
her forsaken soul, for it is all of us
she forsook; and I shall never forget
her sputtering embers, and then the little mound.
Yes, my little rum runners, she had defective
tear ducts and could weep only iced tea.
She had petticoats beneath her eyelids.
And in her last years she found ball bearings
in her beehive puddings, she swore allegiance
to Abyssinia. What should I have done?
I played the piano and scrambled eggs.
I had to navigate carefully around her brain's
avalanche lest even a decent finale be forfeited.
And her beauty still evermore. You see,
as she was dying, I led each of you to her side,
one by one she scorched you with her radiance.
And she is ever with us in our acetylene leisure.
But you are beautiful, and I, a slave to a heap of cinders.

James Tate

Shroud Of The Gnome

And what amazes me is that none of our modern inventions
surprise or interest him, even a little. I tell him
it is time he got his booster shots, but then
I realize I have no power over him whatsoever.
He becomes increasingly light-footed until I lose sight
of him downtown between the federal building and
the post office. A registered nurse is taking her
coffee break. I myself needed a break, so I sat down
next to her at the counter. 'Don't mind me,' I said,
'I'm just a hungry little Gnostic in need of a sandwich.'
(This old line of mine had met with great success
on any number of previous occasions.) I thought,
a deaf, dumb, and blind nurse, sounds ideal!
But then I remembered that some of the earliest
Paleolithic office workers also feigned blindness
when approached by nonoffice workers, so I paid my bill
and disappeared down an alley where I composed myself.
Amidst the piles of outcast citizenry and burning barrels
of waste and rot, the plump rats darting freely,
the havoc of blown newspapers, lay the little shroud
of my lost friend: small and gray and threadbare,
windworn by the ages of scurrying hither and thither,
battered by the avalanches and private tornadoes
of just being a gnome, but surely there were good times, too.
And now, rejuvenated by the wind, the shroud moves forward,
hesitates, dances sideways, brushes my foot as if for a kiss,
and flies upward, whistling a little-known ballad
about the pitiful, raw etiquette of the underworld.

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.

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 Blue Booby

The blue booby lives
on the bare rocks
of Galápagos
and fears nothing.
It is a simple life:
they live on fish,
and there are few predators.
Also, the males do not
make fools of themselves
chasing after the young
ladies. Rather,
they gather the blue
objects of the world
and construct from them

a nest—an occasional
Gaulois package,
a string of beads,
a piece of cloth from
a sailor's suit. This
replaces the need for
dazzling plumage;
in fact, in the past
fifty million years
the male has grown
considerably duller,
nor can he sing well.
The female, though,

asks little of him—
the blue satisfies her
completely, has
a magical effect
on her. When she returns
from her day of
gossip and shopping,
she sees he has found her
a new shred of blue foil:
for this she rewards him

with her dark body,
the stars turn slowly
in the blue foil beside them
like the eyes of a mild savior.

James Tate

The Chaste Stranger

All the sexually active people in Westport look so clean and certain, I wonder if they're dead. Their lives are tennis without end, the avocado-green Mercedes waiting calm as you please. Perhaps it is my brain that is unplugged, and these shadow-people don't know how to drink martinis anymore. They are suddenly and mysteriously not in the least interested in fornicating with strangers. Well, there are a lot of unanswered questions here, and certainly no dinner invitations where a fella could probe Buffy's inner-mush, a really complicated adventure, in a 1930ish train station, outlandish bouquets, a poisonous insect found burrowing its way through the walls of the special restaurant and into one of her perfect nostrils—she was reading Meetings with Remarkable Men, needing succor, dreaming of a village near Bosnia, when a clattering of carts broke her thoughts—
“Those billy goats and piglets, they are all so ephemeral ...” But now, in Westport Connecticut, a boy, a young man really, looking as if he had just come through a carwash, and dressed for the kind of success that made her girlfriends froth and lather, can be overheard speaking to no one in particular: “That Paris Review crowd, I couldn't tell if they were bright or just overbred.” Whereupon Buffy swings into action, pinning him to the floor:
“I will unglue your very being from this planet, if ever ...” He could appreciate her sincerity, not to mention her spiffy togs. Didymus the Blind has put three dollars on Total Departure, and I am tired of pumping my own gas. I'm Lewis your aluminum man,

and we are whirling in a spangled frenzy toward
a riddle and a doom—here's looking up

your old address.

James Tate

The Cowboy

Someone had spread an elaborate rumor about me, that I was in possession of an extraterrestrial being, and I thought I knew who it was. It was Roger Lawson. Roger was a practical joker of the worst sort, and up till now I had not been one of his victims, so I kind of knew my time had come. People parked in front of my house for hours and took pictures. I had to draw all my blinds and only went out when I had to. Then there was a barrage of questions. "What does he look like?" "What do you feed him?" "How did you capture him?" And I simply denied the presence of an extraterrestrial in my house. And, of course, this excited them all the more. The press showed up and started creeping around my yard. It got to be very irritating. More and more came and parked up and down the street. Roger was really working overtime on this one. I had to do something. Finally, I made an announcement. I said, "The little fellow died peacefully in his sleep at 11:02 last night." "Let us see the body," they clamored. "He went up in smoke instantly," I said. "I don't believe you," one of them said. "There is no body in the house or I would have buried it myself," I said. About half of them got in their cars and drove off. The rest of them kept their vigil, but more solemnly now. I went out and bought some groceries. When I came back about an hour later another half of them had gone. When I went into the kitchen I nearly dropped the groceries. There was a nearly transparent fellow with large pink eyes standing about three feet tall. "Why did you tell them I was dead? That was a lie," he said. "You speak English," I said. "I listen to the radio. It wasn't very hard to learn. Also we have television. We get all your channels. I like cowboys, especially John Ford movies. They're the best," he said. "What am I going to do with you?" I said. "Take me to meet a real cowboy. That would make me happy," he said. "I don't know any real cowboys, but maybe we could find one. But people will go crazy if they see you. We'd have press following us everywhere. It would be the story of the century," I said. "I can be invisible. It's not hard for me to do," he said. "I'll think about it. Wyoming or Montana would be our best bet, but they're a long way from here," I said. "Please, I won't cause you any trouble," he said. "It would take some planning," I

said.

I put the groceries down and started putting them away. I tried not to think of the cosmic meaning of all this. Instead, I treated him like a smart little kid. "Do you have any sarsaparilla?" he said. "No, but I have some orange juice. It's good for you," I said. He drank it and made a face. "I'm going to get the maps out," I said. "We'll see how we could get there." When I came back he was dancing on the kitchen table, a sort of ballet, but very sad. "I have the maps," I said. "We won't need them. I just received word. I'm going to die tonight. It's really a joyous occasion, and I hope you'll help me celebrate by watching The Magnificent Seven," he said. I stood there with the maps in my hand. I felt an unbearable sadness come over me. "Why must you die?" I said. "Father decides these things. It is probably my reward for coming here safely and meeting you," he said. "But I was going to take you to meet a real cowboy," I said. "Let's pretend you are my cowboy," he said.

James Tate

The Definition Of Gardening

Jim just loves to garden, yes he does.
He likes nothing better than to put on
his little overalls and his straw hat.
He says, 'Let's go get those tools, Jim.'
But then doubt begins to set in.
He says, 'What is a garden, anyway?'
And thoughts about a 'modernistic' garden
begin to trouble him, eat away at his resolve.
He stands in the driveway a long time.
'Horticulture is a groping in the dark
into the obscure and unfamiliar,
kneeling before a disinterested secret,
slapping it, punching it like a Chinese puzzle,
birdbrained, babbling gibberish, dig and
destroy, pull out and apply salt,
hoe and spray, before it spreads, burn roots,
where not desired, with gloved hands, poisonous,
the self-sacrifice of it, the self-love,
into the interior, thunderclap, excruciating,
through the nose, the earsplitting necrology
of it, the withering, shriveling,
the handy hose holder and Persian insect powder
and smut fungi, the enemies of the iris,
wireworms are worse than their parents,
there is no way out, flowers as big as heads,
pock-marked, disfigured, blinking insolently
at me, the me who so loves to garden
because it prevents the heaving of the ground
and the untimely death of porch furniture,
and dark, murky days in a large city
and the dream home under a permanent storm
is also a factor to keep in mind.'

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 pin-head 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 Motorcyclists

My cuticles are a mess. Oh honey, by the way,
did you like my new negligee? It's a replica
of one Kim Novak wore in some movie or other.
I wish I had a foot-long chili dog right now.
Do you like fireworks, I mean not just on the 4th of July,
but fireworks any time? There are people
like that, you know. They're like people who like
orchestra music, listen to it any time of day.
Lopsided people, that's what my father calls them.
Me, I'm easy to please. I like ping-gong and bobcats,
shatterproof drinking glasses, the smell of kerosene,
the crunch of carrots. I like caterpillars and
whirlpools, too. What I hate most is being the first
one at the scene of a bad accident.

Do I smell like garlic? Are we still in Kansas?
I once had a chiropractor make a pass at me,
did I ever tell you that? He said that your spine
is happiest when you're snuggling. Sounds kind
of sweet now when I tell you, but he was a creep.
Do you know that I have never understood what they meant
by "grassy knoll." It sounds so idyllic, a place to go
to dream your life away, not kill somebody. They
should have called it something like "the grudging notch."
But I guess that's life. What is it they always say?
"It's always the sweetest ones that break your heart."
You getting hungry yet, hon? I am. When I was seven
I sat in our field and ate an entire eggplant
right off the vine. Dad loves to tell that story,

but I still can't eat eggplant. He says I'll be the first
woman President, it'd be a waste since I talk so much.
Which do you think the fixtures are in the bathroom
at the White House, gold or brass? It'd be okay with me
if they were just brass. Honey, can we stop soon?
I really hate to say it but I need a lady's room.

James Tate

The New Chinese Fiction

Although the depiction of living forms
was not explicitly forbidden, the only good news
about famines was that the station was empty.
It was about 2 A.M. The truck drove away.
A tropical insect that lives in enormous cities
stroked my hair awkwardly, organizing everyone's
schedule. She drove me back to my hotel
in a misty and allusive style, while the old
schools continued the process of devolution.
Part of the roof was loose and flapped noisily
in the wind, who needed work like that?
Poor brethren, do you have any good prose yet?
The New Chinese fiction is getting better,
I suspect, people walking and thinking and fussing,
with a nest to fly out of, with a less intimate footing.
Are we responsible for their playtimes?
Keep up your music, my dears; there were a lot of people
like that, with strange eyes, green fields and orchards.
The little house they sat in produced simple people,
cars full of blood, all they needed was a hat,
extramusical sounds, purging the emotions.
Expect no mercy, I said, from the sickbay.
And try to imagine Howard Hughes piloting the plane
that flew Cary Grant and Barbara Hutton off
toward their marriage in 1950. Well, don't bother.
The New Chinese fiction shouldn't concern itself
with anything other than a stolen turnip
and a coldness in the heart, and a lit window,
a young man on a horse appearing and then disappearing.

James Tate

The Painter Of The Night

Someone called in a report that she had seen a man painting in the dark over by the pond. A police car was dispatched to go investigate. The two officers with their big flashlights walked all around the pond, but found nothing suspicious. Hatcher was the younger of the two, and he said to Johnson, 'What do you think he was painting?' Johnson looked bemused and said, 'The dark, stupid. What else could he have been painting?' Hatcher, a little hurt, said, 'Frogs in the Dark, Lily-pads in the Dark, Pond in the Dark. Just as many things exist in the dark as they do in the light.' Johnson paused, exasperated. Then Hatcher added, 'I'd like to see them. Hell, I might even buy one. Maybe there's more out there than we know. We are the police, after-all. We need to know.'

James Tate

The Search For Lost Lives

I was chasing this blue butterfly down the road when a car came by and clipped me. It was nothing serious, but it angered me and I turned around and cursed the driver who didn't even slow down to see if I was hurt. Then I returned my attention to the butterfly which was nowhere to be seen. One of the Doubleday girls came running up the street with her toy poodle toward me. I stopped her and asked, 'Have you seen a blue butterfly around here? ' 'It's down near that birch tree near Grandpa's,' she said. 'Thanks,' I said, and walked briskly toward the tree. It was fluttering from flower to flower in Mr. Doubleday's extensive garden, a celestial blueness to soothe the weary heart. I didn't know what I was doing there. I certainly didn't want to capture it. It was like something I had known in another life, even if it was only in a dream, I wanted to confirm it. I was a blind beggar on the streets of Cordoba when I first saw it, and now, again it was here.

James Tate

The Wheelchair Butterfly

O sleepy city of reeling wheelchairs
where a mouse can commit suicide if he can
concentrate long enough
on the history book of rodents
in this underground town

of electrical wheelchairs!
The girl who is always pregnant and bruised
like a pear
rides her many-stickered bicycle
backward up the staircase
of the abandoned trolleybarn.

Yesterday was warm. Today a butterfly froze
in midair; and was plucked like a grape
by a child who swore he could take care

of it. O confident city where
the seeds of poppies pass for carfare,
where the ordinary hornets in a human's heart
may slumber and snore, where bifocals bulge

in an orange garage of daydreams,
we wait in our loose attics for a new season
as if for an ice-cream truck.
An Indian pony crosses the plains

whispering Sanskrit prayers to a crater of fleas.
Honeysuckle says: I thought I could swim.
The Mayor is urinating on the wrong side
of the street! A dandelion sends off sparks:
beware your hair is locked!

Beware the trumpet wants a glass of water!
Beware a velvet tabernacle!
Beware the Warden of Light has married
an old piece of string!

The Workforce

Do you have adequate oxen for the job?

No, my oxen are inadequate.

Well, how many oxen would it take to do an adequate job?

I would need ten more oxen to do the job adequately.

I'll see if I can get them for you.

I'd be obliged if you could do that for me.

Certainly. And do you have sufficient fishcakes for the men?

We have fifty fishcakes, which is less than sufficient.

I'll have them delivered on the morrow.

Do you need maps of the mountains and the underworld?

We have maps of the mountains but we lack maps of the underworld.

Of course you lack maps of the underworld,
there are no maps of the underworld.

And, besides, you don't want to go there, it's stuffy.

I had no intention of going there, or anywhere for that matter.

It's just that you asked me if I needed maps. . . .

Yes, yes, it's my fault, I got carried away.

What do you need, then, you tell me?

We need seeds, we need plows, we need scythes, chickens,
pigs, cows, buckets and women.

Women?

We have no women.

You're a sorry lot, then.

We are a sorry lot, sir.

Well, I can't get you women.

I assumed as much, sir.

What are you going to do without women, then?

We will suffer, sir. And then we'll die out one by one.

Can any of you sing?

Yes, sir, we have many fine singers among us.

Order them to begin singing immediately.

Either women will find you this way or you will die
comforted. Meanwhile busy yourselves
with the meaningful tasks you have set for yourselves.

Sir, we will not rest until the babes arrive.

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