

POETRY IN
REVIEW



A B I G A I L D E U T S C H

In the striking fables of James Tate, strangers appear out of nowhere. One falls from a tree, another emerges from an alley, a third pops up in the middle of a living room:

“You’re probably wondering what I’m doing here,” he said. “Well, I am, too. I was flying along at a good speed, a bit low, mind you, when I seem to have entered your crawl space, or whatever it’s called. There was no way out, so I used my teeth. I mean, I had to chew my way out,
if you see what I mean.” “I don’t at all see what you mean. How could you be flying so low? And what were you flying in?” I said. “Yes, yes. These are questions I have been asking myself,” he said. “You don’t have any answers?” I said. “No, I don’t have any answers,” he said. [“Low Flying”]

Tate’s high-velocity poems offer no answers, either, though as they zip along into *our* crawl spaces, plenty of questions arise: Why the

Dome of the Hidden Pavilion, by James Tate (*Ecco*, 142 pp., \$25.99)

teeth? How the flight? What *is* that fellow doing there, not only acknowledging the oddness of his arrival but also implying that the narrator's situation is odd – that his house is in fact a crawl space? And finally, what does it all mean?

We won't ever know, exactly, and that tension is part of the point. The poems in *Dome of the Hidden Pavilion* – the final book by the prolific Tate, who died earlier last year at seventy-one – boast a twitchy energy, and reading them is as surprising and nerve-racking as riding a rambunctious horse: they try to throw you off. They twist, wriggle, bolt, and constantly shift direction; they zig-zag from one logical intimation to its opposite, from grimness to inanity, from logic to insanity:

When Roberta came home from the hospital she had tears in her eyes. I grabbed her and kissed her. “What happened?” I said. “He died,” she said. “Who died?” I said. “The doctor. When he entered Mother's room he was so startled he had a heart attack,” she said. “I don't understand. What startled him?”

I said. “Mother. She had grown nine feet tall, and her face is all contorted. She's really quite frightening,” she said. “Isn't there anything they can do for her?” I said. “All the medicines they have given her are tearing her apart. They are anxious for her to die, but she seems to just keep getting stronger. They are at an utter loss as to what to do next,” she said.

[“A Largely Questioning Article Offering Few Answers”]

Tate immediately cancels every narrative implication he proposes: we assume “he died” refers to a relative, but instead it refers to the doctor; we assume the doctor died of a bodily trauma, but instead he died of fear; we assume the mother is ill, but instead she's horrifyingly well; we assume the doctors are providing medicines to cure their patient, but instead they want to kill her. This poem doesn't just surprise us by upending our expectations – it alerts us to those expectations, illuminating our orientation toward the everyday by tirelessly challenging it.

Tate is a master of the absurd *and* of the conventional; his poems place these forces in constant juxtaposition. Speakers note

bizarre visions and events, then behave as though nothing at all unusual has occurred: immediately after one narrator discovers that a man he's been observing is, in fact, a gigantic doll, "I / stood up and brushed my collar and went to get myself a / lemonade" ("For Rent"). Another narrator learns that a friend is behaving like an armadillo, and in response, "I walked over to the drugstore and / bought myself some toothpaste" ("Dome of the Hidden Pavilion"). In a third poem, after a stranger insists that their town is, in fact, ruled by a king, "I stopped at the drinking fountain and had myself a drink." And two lines later: "I walked over / to the newsstand and bought myself a paper" ("The New Mayor").

These are banal activities, banally expressed. The frequency of Tate's transitions from the odd to the ordinary means that such shifts themselves come to feel banal – which, one at least hopes, is the point. More interestingly, these moments suggest that the absurd is, in fact, rather ordinary (how else could one manage that newspaper?), even as our ordinary behavior, given what else goes on, starts to appear absurd. All things considered, this view seems perfectly reasonable.

This interest in the commonplace infuses Tate's style, too. Lines give the impression of ending whenever they happen to – just far enough from the edge of the page that they won't risk running into it. His language tends toward matter-of-fact flatness; when his characters do voice emotion, it often comes off as so overstated that the effect, by design, falters: "Oh, Marcella, stop picking on me. I'm / always trying to pick you up. Why do you insist on putting me / down?" ("The"). Whether overstated or not, such dialogue dominates Tate poems: his characters are knowable less by what they do or think than by what they *say*, by what emerges from their private crawl spaces. Yet these speakers don't delve into their inner lives so much as talk around them, much as regular people do. They're elusive poets in conversation with the world – and the world is intent on mishearing and mishandling them.

Dome of the Hidden Pavilion brims with sinister figures, with cops, double agents, and other officials who treat Tate's protagonists with inexplicable distrust. One speaker sees his name on a list of "possible suspects" – for what crime, we never learn, though in a conversation with a police officer, the man does his best:

“Why is my
name on this list? I have done nothing illegal. I want my name
removed right now.” “Slow down, buster. You sound just like
all the guilty ones. I don’t know who made this up, but they
must
have had some reason to put you on it,” he said. “I am a law-
abiding citizen. I pay my taxes. I follow the speed limit.
I don’t molest children. I don’t rob banks,” I said. “You sound
like you’re not having any fun at all,” he said. “I listen to
the radio. I make pancakes.” “You’re pathetic,” he said.
“About once a year I go bowling,” I said. “This is the saddest
story I’ve heard since my grandpa died,” he said.

[“Possible Suspects”]

Tate’s surrealism takes a darker turn in this comically Kafkaesque exchange, where denying culpability proves culpability and following laws makes you guilty (if only of guiltlessness). This speaker has committed the everyday crime of leading an ordinary life, and the policeman’s wording – “all the guilty ones,” “don’t know who made this up” – hints that countless such criminals are afoot, despite the efforts of their countless, nameless opponents. The notion that normal behavior invites persecution, if not prosecution, underlies several other poems: “We were hiding from the law because we felt like it. We / hadn’t really done anything wrong, but we felt we had,” notes one speaker, shortly before the cops kill him (“The Blue Ones”). Nearly every Tate poem reveals the implicit outrageousness of everyday behavior; here that insight takes on a new ominousness.

These poems portray civil society as so thoroughly uncivil that it has, in a sense, declared war on its citizens. As if to literalize the metaphor, soldiers stomp through these pages. They often appear in surprising settings, such as American shopping malls – but out-of-place as they might seem, they fit right into Tate’s work. Uniformed, uniform, and devoted to improbable missions, they are the living embodiment of his marriage of the predictable and the unlikely.

In one poem, soldiers take to marching up and down the speaker’s street each morning. When he asks why, he learns that

it's to protect him from the enemy. "Who's the enemy?" he asks. But for him, as for the "possible suspect" above – as, for that matter, any reader of James Tate – no answers are forthcoming: "This I have not been informed about," the soldier says ("The Guards"). In another poem, the narrator discovers an army wandering through his American suburb. And in Tate's most striking poems on the subject, "Soldier's Rebellion" and "Toy Soldiers" (quoted below), speakers contend with home-front soldiers who are not – or not entirely – real:

Scattered about my house are many toy soldiers, but also
 a few real ones. Sometimes they get me confused. I'd be having
 a long conversation with one about the nature of the universe
 and bowling only to realize he was a toy. I'd get so mad I'd
 throw him across the room and break his head off. Then I'd
 glue
 his head back on and be really nice to him. Other times I'd
 move one from the window ledge to the top of a bookcase and
 he'd say, "What did you do that for? I like the window ledge."
 And I'd say, "It doesn't matter what you like. You're mine.
 I can do with you as I please." "I'm not yours. I am here to
 protect you, that's all. Now place me back on the window ledge
 or I will leave you to defend yourself," he said. "Oh, I'm
 so sorry. I thought you were a toy. If I had known you were
 a real soldier I would never have touched you," I said. "In a
 house such as yours filled as it is with many toy soldiers it
 is understandable that such a mistake might occur every so
 often,
 but please note that my weapon is real and I can use it
 whenever
 I want. I do not like being set upon a bookcase in the dark,"
 he said. "I'm terribly sorry, and I beg your forgiveness. I
 do appreciate your protection. I swear I will never again move
 you, unless of course you ask me to. You are new to me and
 these others I've had for a very long time. I am always moving
 them about," I said. "I understand, sir," he said. "It's just
 that they're all I have," I said. "You are really a very
 nice man," he said. "Oh, I know, I know, I know," I said. I

picked him up and placed him on the windowsill. “That’s
 much
 better. I can see the flowers in your garden,” he said. “They
 are toy flowers,” I said.

The speaker’s confusion is itself confusing; how can you possibly mix up toy soldiers and real ones? (The question of why real soldiers would lie scattered around the house is secondary.) For James Tate, of course, there is a way: here toy soldiers look and act exactly like real ones. And confusion of categories turns out to be the poem’s guiding strategy. The speaker’s identity shifts just as the toys’ do – though a grown man, he comes off as a child, playing with toys and dependent on others for protection. And though real, he comes off as a toy, manipulated by the soldier’s instructions. That soldier himself shifts from one role to the next, at once promising security and threatening damage (“my weapon is real and I can use it whenever / I want”) – and so does the man swing from kindness to cruelty, hurting one soldier and then gluing its head back on, telling another, during a rough patch, “It doesn’t matter what you like.” Such reversals provide an interpersonal variation on the preposterous plot twists that are Tate’s hallmark.

“Toy Soldiers” hints at several models for understanding war: as a mere game whose pieces are soldiers; as an element we must try to control, lest it control us in turn; as a force at once protective and horrifying, and more real to some than to others. Such violence, this poem suggests, undergirds even peaceful lives; real soldiers live in our houses, whether we see them or not.

Yet none of those metaphorical implications would resonate without emotional grounding, and emotional grounding is what this poem does best of all. “It’s just / that they’re all I have,” the speaker says, and suddenly we recognize this poem as the lonely lament that it is – the battle cry of a man dying to hear someone say he’s nice.

If Tate’s style could use more of anything, it’s cries: emotional spikes to break through the flatness, to add some melody to the familiar tattoo of “he said,” “I said.” One of this volume’s best poems is “The Blob,” whose speaker addresses, well, a blob – and a movingly articulate one at that:

“I am an old
 weathered bag,” it said. “Bag of what?” I said. “How could I
 know
 what’s inside. I have never been there,” it said.

Perhaps movingly *inarticulate* says it better. By and large, Tate’s poems don’t know what’s inside, either, which is one source of their power: they reflect how little we understand ourselves, how little – despite all our chatter – we have to say. His most effective characters, like the blob, talk around themselves with a gorgeous desperation, hinting at their own unexplored, limitless depths.

Or limited ones. But what of that? In his first book, *The Lost Pilot* (1967) – a volume strikingly different, in style and substance, from what his later work would become – Tate wrote:

a man of
 such exquisite emptiness
 (and you cultivated it so)
 is ground for fine flowers.

Despite his cynicism, for Tate even our emptiness is exquisite, even that must be cultivated – and the flowers that spring from our commonplace soil, no matter how scraggly, are fine indeed.