

## LOCO IN THE CABEZA



*Brian Henry*

JAMES TATE, *Selected Poems*. Carcanet, £9.95

Although only twenty-four years old when he won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Award for *The Lost Pilot*, James Tate already was a lyric poet of considerable linguistic skill and subtle emotive power. Consider the ending of that collection's title poem, an elegy for the poet's father, dead at twenty-two:

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.

It is those worlds in us—and between us—that occupy Tate's mind throughout his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Selected Poems*, a culling of more than 160 poems from nine previous collections.

Because Tate's inimitable comedic sensibility is the most obvious feature of his poetry, many critics have overlooked his ability to join that delight with terror—to render simultaneously the heart-breaking and the humorous in his poems. Like Beckett, Berryman, and Ashbery, Tate is aware that seriousness in poetry encompasses both the comic and the tragic. His complex tone—jaunty in one line, anguished in another—pays tribute to our emotional complexity, which too many other poets approach with hackneyed and sentimental language, overwrought emotion, and tautologies. A reader engaging Tate's *Selected Poems* will see that he is no mere jokester or poetic huckster: humour is neither a weapon nor a defense for him, but a part of life, just as pain is. Sometimes that pain appears in a subdued tone similar to that of

Donald Justice's poetry, as in Tate's "Land of Little Sticks, 1945":

Where the wife is scouring the frying pan  
and the husband is leaning up against the barn.  
Where the boychild is pumping water into a bucket  
and the girl is chasing a spotted dog.

And the sky churns on the horizon.  
A town by name of Pleasantville has disappeared.  
And now the horses begin to shift and whinny,  
and the chickens roost, keep looking this way and that.  
At this moment something is not quite right.

The boy trundles through the kitchen, spilling water.  
His mother removes several pies from the oven, shouts at him.  
The girlchild sits down by the fence to stare at the horses.  
And the man is just as he was, eyes closed, forehead  
against his forearm, leaning up against the barn.

The primary sense imparted by these poems is one of a fragile individual trying to hold together the fraying strands of a life. While absurd humour can distance the reader from a narrator, Tate's wit and deadpan delivery further humanize narrators who are introspective and vulnerable, as in "Why I Will Not Get Out of Bed":

My muscles unravel  
like spools of ribbon:  
there is not a shadow

of pain. I will pose  
like this for the rest  
of the afternoon,

for the remainder  
of all noons....

My nerves dissolve,  
my limbs wither—  
I don't love you.

I don't love you.

For Tate, that fragility extends to every sector—emotional, physical, and spiritual—of our lives. "There you lay", he writes in "Up Here", "your

small, white / body throbbing in my hand / like a bird”.

Throughout his *Selected Poems*, Tate explores the essence of the individual—that most delicate of constructions—in a crowded world. Hence, the silences and solitude in many of his poems, presented most poignantly in the meditative “Saint John of the Cross in Prison”, which challenges the *via negativa* of existence and utterance:

I went out  
of myself into....I did not go  
out of myself into the after-

noon of parrots; I did not go out  
of myself into the dew; I did  
not go out of myself into the  
bat-terrors. I did not say silence,  
I said nothing about the love I

did not go out of myself into.  
I said nothing fire, I said nothing  
water, I said nothing air. I went  
out of myself into no, into  
nowhere. I was not alone.

Repeatedly in these poems, Tate invites us into his solitude with linguistic innovation, surprising juxtapositions, and strange imagery—all backed by intelligence and wit.

Perhaps because any arrival at knowledge can be terrifying, Tate’s poems sometimes elude understanding as he skirts the act of comprehension. Occasionally these poems become too disjunctive, as if mimetic of their narrators’ disorientation, and resist the intelligence too successfully, as in this stanza from “Amnesia People”:

Now things were coming back and  
they were in small world he may have  
been once but never again one could  
bathe and by the second day the more  
perceptive villager along a gravel road  
before he dozed off to prove that he  
was overcome ask him as a question  
almost as though he were afraid.

Because these lines seem to have an encroaching yet hazy narrative behind them, the ambiguities created by the lack of punctuation con-

fuse more than they reveal (though I suspect the absence of connectives relates to the poem's title). When he succeeds (and he almost always does) in projecting the chaos of his mind onto what he perceives without resorting to disorder itself as a poetic strategy, the results are some of the best lyric poems written by an American poet within the past thirty years—"Coming Down Cleveland Avenue", "Neighbors", "Breathing", "The Mirror", "The Book of Lies", "Today I Am Falling", "Prose Poem", and "Manna" among them. We can be grateful that "trepid riding / Tate (gone loco in the / cabeza)" has devoted himself to exploring for us the places where "your / personality may undergo a radical // transformation in the next half / hour."

#### DIMITRIS TSALOUMAS

The editors wish to apologize to Dimitris Tsaloumas for the following mistakes which affect the sense of his poems in the last issue of *Metre*:

##### TOWARDS THE NEW MILLENNIUM

- ll. 1-2: for "unborn" read "unknown", and for "unknown" read "unborn".
- l. 18: for "of" read "in".
- l. 33: for "philosophers" read "philosopher".

##### PRAYING TO AN OLD IKON

- l. 23: delete "him".

##### SONNET

- l. 14: for "breasts" read "beasts".