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The Expert

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Four Poems · *James Tate*

THE EXPERT

talks on and on.
At times he seems lost
in his own personal references,
to be adrift in a lonely pleasure craft.
He has spent his life collecting evidence,
and now it is oozing away down the aisles
of indifferent eavesdroppers.
He spins and points out the window:
“There,” he says passionately,
“that is what I mean.”
We look: a squirrel flicks its tail and disappears.
His point made, the expert yawns
and we can see deep into his cavernous body.
We are impressed, but also frightened
because there appears to be a campfire
almost out of control on the left bank
of his cave. But then he is off
on one of his special obsessions
and we are back to feeling inferior
and almost non-existent. We have never
even heard of this phenomenon:
how a thing can hurt and still
grow that fast until it walks off
the map and keep growing while
falling through space. We want
to pinch ourselves, but softly
and slowly. Who among us
invited this expert? He is pacing now
as though flirting with some edge
only he can see. Someone shouts
“Jump!” and he wakes again
and eyes us with suspicion,

and maybe we are guilty of something
we have no idea what he has given
his life for, though I think
it has something to do with
a monster under the bed.
He is growing old before our eyes,
and no one can catch him now,
no one, that is, except his lost mother.

VITO TAKES HIS NEIGHBOR'S DOG FOR A DRIVE

A woodpecker is duplicating hellbent stitches
and, in the ravine, a ballet dancer is slithering toward a bunch of onions.
Vito stands by the heaving cedars and watches a salad
parachute into a trapeze net.

He remembers a sexual encounter in a janitor's closet
in an airport, zone of shelves darting into a beige milestone,
a cactus repulsing its own penumbra,
spun sugar slouching around without a vocation.

She said: "I don't know how I feel about being an angel
without a muddy carcass clattering around
in fluffiness without shoestrings or flippers."

Later, she said: "I might like being a nail driven into a cameo,
or calling Charlotte Brontë collect in the middle of the night."

Vito returned, after an absence of seven years.
His neighbor's dog was restless and wanted to join the rodeo.
Something happened in the night—two pterodactyls
were circling—a man was flying to Pakistan
to meet his mother after eight years—chewing gum—
the statistics, bellowing, the statistics, a fire—