

BEACON

After teaching my class I went down to the duck pond and sat on the grass. I felt stupid, like I was a big fake. My own words swarmed around in my brain like a cloud of pesky gnats. I wanted to spray them with some kind of lethal repellent. Several ducks swam up to me and I offered them the bread from my sandwich. They looked so intelligent. They looked perfect in their duckiness. When they quacked it really meant quack. I like that about them. The green-winged teal looked me in the eye for a long time. And during that time my mind cleared and I felt calm as if I were flying over a scenic coastline of rocky promontories and the occasional white lighthouse, and that was all I needed to know or would ever know.

Tate's poem "Beacon" is one of the very few poems that I can honestly say I carry in my head at all times. Very often it appears there, in my thoughts, amongst them, and fills me with the very calm the speaker feels at the end of the poem. I believe every word of it. As a teacher it is true to my experience. Of course the poem is more complicated than that, it is rich and deep and ends with that marvelous shadow of Keats, after the speaker is feeling like a flying duck himself—duck, the thing that quacks, though the other meaning of quack, which is never used directly, is behind the whole poem. The poem may be cloaked in lightness and smiles but it is to me a poem of infinite wisdom, a combination that Tate was a master of, and which characterizes so many of his poems.

- Mary Ruefle