

BOUNDED DUTY

I got a call from the White House, from the President himself, asking me if I'd do him a personal favor. I like the President, so I said, "Sure, Mr. President, anything you like." He said, "Just act like nothing's going on. Act normal. That would mean the world to me. Can you do that, Leon?" "Why, sure, Mr. President, you've got it. Normal, that's how I'm going to act. I won't let on, even if I'm tortured," I said, immediately regretting that "tortured" bit. He thanked me several times and hung up. I was dying to tell someone that the President himself called me, but I knew I couldn't. The sudden pressure to act normal was killing me. And what was going on anyway. I didn't know anything was going on. I saw the President on TV yesterday. He was shaking hands with a farmer. What if it wasn't really a farmer? I needed to buy some milk, but suddenly I was afraid to go out. I checked what I had on. I looked "normal" to me, but maybe I looked more like I was trying to be normal. That's pretty suspicious. I opened the door and looked around. What was going on? There was a car parked in front of my car that I had never seen before, a car that was trying to look normal, but I wasn't fooled. If you need milk, you have to get milk, otherwise people will think something's going on. I got into my car and sped down the road. I could feel those little radar guns popping behind every tree and bush, but, apparently, they were under orders not to stop me. I ran into Kirsten in the store. "Hey, what's going on, Leon?" she said. She had a very nice smile. I hated to lie to her. "Nothing's going on. Just getting milk for my cat," I said. "I didn't know you had a cat," she said. "I meant to say coffee."

You're right, I don't have a cat. Sometimes I refer to my coffee as my cat. It's just a private joke. Sorry," I said. "Are you all right?" she asked. "Nothing's going on, Kirsten. I promise you. Everything is normal. The President shook hands with a farmer, a real farmer. Is that such a big deal?" I said. "I saw that," she said, "and that man was definitely not a farmer." "Yeah, I know," I said, feeling better.

Hard to pick just one James Tate poem, so many that are marvelous and iconic, however, "Bounden Duty" represents so much about what I love about Tate's poetry and prose poetry. The bizarre scenario of getting a call from the President asking you to "act normal" just shakes my world up with laughter and pleasure, nodding my head, as if to good avant-garde jazz music.

In Tate's world so much is possible, so much is comical, so much is sad and puzzling. Tate delivers his absurd narrative worlds in a stripped-down aesthetic. Less is more. Tate's approach to the surreal was revolutionary to me. You didn't have to try so hard, nonchalance. Tate's work reminds me of the George Costanza quote, "it's not a lie, if you believe it."

Before I read Tate, I primarily wrote politically charged poetry. I still write the political, the personal, the real, always will. However, for me, Tate's poetry, American surrealism, one could say, is an escape from the otherwise harsh world. An escape to the paranoia of "acting normal," statues coming to life, aliens who enjoy The Magnificent Seven. Tate saw no boundaries in literature. He made me see that funny could be serious and seriously respected.

- Jose Hernandez Diaz