

JAMES TATE, poems from *The Ghost Soldiers* (2008)

HUMAN IN SHAPE

I reached out my hand in one direction and felt something like silk, a silk scarf fit for a princess. I reached out my other hand and something bit it, a monkey perhaps. Thus, I concluded, I must be in India. Someone entered the room and said, "Get up!" I attempted to stand but was bent double. I attempted to straighten out, but I could not. "Stand up straight," the voice said. "Sir, I cannot. This is how I am shaped," I said. "All right, march over here," he said. I had only a vague idea of where he was, but I marched over there, if you could call that marching. "Stop," he said, and I stopped. "You are to meet the captain and he is a very important man. You must listen to him and follow out his orders. Do you understand?" he said. "Oh, yes, sir, I will do exactly as I am ordered," I said. He opened a door and then another door and then another door. And then, finally, there was the captain bent over his desk with a green light shining on him. I was still bent over to my waist, but, still, I waited for him to notice me. He said nothing. I started singing a little ditty beneath my breath. Finally, he looked up and said, "What are you, some kind of crippled rabbit or something?" "That's very funny, sir. Crippled rabbit I may be, but I am here to follow your orders," I said. "That's my boy. Now can you hop for me," he said. I concentrated all my efforts and started to hop around the room. "Excellent," he said. "Now can you bend over

further and sneak around the room as quietly as you can," he said. The captain was just a green blur to me. I couldn't really see him. Still, I did what I was told, nearly bumping into a chair I didn't see. "Now I want you to charge me with all your might and see if you can knock me over," he said. "Sir, I weigh only a few pounds and am quite sickly. I do not think this is a fair contest," I said. "Who said anything about fair? I intend to crush you into a little ball of fur," he said. He really did think I was a rabbit. This bothered me. After so many years in the infirmary, how could anybody think I was still a rabbit. I slunk out of his room with my head nearly banging against my knees, longing for my bed again, not knowing if I'd ever find it.

TWO VISIONS

“I look around and I see two figures running across a landscape, their coats in tatters, their legs about to give out,” I said. “That’s funny. I see two figures dancing around a swing, flowers in their hair, a song bursting from their lips,” Nikki said. “They are falling down and crawling. I think, perhaps, they are dying of thirst,” I said. “These people are in love. It is so obvious. They can’t keep their hands off one another,” she said. “Wait a minute. There’s a third man on a horse. He rides up to them, offers them a drink from his canteen. He dismounts and offers them the horse. He helps them up and leads the horse,” I said. “She slaps him. He has said something terribly wrong. He raises his hand,” she said. “Nikki,” I said, “why aren’t we looking at the same picture?” “But we are, Harvey. It’s the same picture, it’s just that you have some funny ideas of your own,” she said. “I’m just reporting what I see,” I said. “Well, go on then,” she said. “These men on camels arrive and surround them. There must be thirty of them carrying sabers,” I said. “The lovers have embraced and are kissing,” she said. “Your people are so predictable,” I said. “I’m sorry. What am I supposed to do about it?” she said. “It’s not your fault. I guess there’s nothing you can do,” I said. “The Chieftain gets down from his camel and points his saber at the man leading the horse. He’s demanding money to cross the desert.” “I’m so

worried about your people. I don't think they're going to get out of there alive," she said. "What about your people?" I said. "I can't see them. They're nowhere around," she said. "Maybe they're dead in the gutter. Did you check the gutters?" I said. "I've checked everywhere. She left her scarf on the swing," she said. "Probably just went for some ice cream. She'll be back," I said. "What about yours?" she said. "You don't want to know. I'm sorry I ever tied up with them. They never had a chance from the beginning," I said. "But they were your kind of people. You liked them," she said. We sat there staring out into space for quite a while. Finally, I said, "What about your people?" She said, "What about them?" I said. "Did you kill them?" "I don't want to talk about that now. It's such a beautiful night."

WAYLON'S WOMAN

Loretta had a rooster that was so fierce nobody could visit her anymore. Loretta loved that rooster, and the rooster loved Loretta, thought she was his wife. So the only time we got to see Loretta was when she came to town. We'd meet her at Mike's Westview Café and drink beer with her all night. The rooster's name was Waylon, and she'd talk about Waylon all night, and if you didn't know better you'd think she was talking about her husband. Well, I knew better, and I still thought she was talking about her husband. "Waylon wasn't feeling very good this morning." "Waylon was real sweet to me last night." "Waylon is so handsome, sometimes I just can't take my eyes off him." She's still fun to be with, and she seems completely normal to me. At closing time, we say our good-byes, and I kiss Loretta, just a little peck, because I know she is married to a chicken, and I respect that. Waylon has made her happy in ways I never could. The starry sky, the police hiding in the bushes, God, it's good to be alive, I think, and pee behind my car in the darkness of my own private darkness.