

## Masters of Disguise

I was on my way to the town library when I saw a tall thin man wearing a Bugs Bunny costume on the opposite sidewalk. I followed him into a café and said, "You're James Tate. I thought you were dead." "Keep your voice down," he said, taking the goofy rabbit head from his shoulders and putting it on the floor. A guide dog wandered over to sniff at it then went to lie down between the legs of its blind owner. "I just let everyone think I was dead so I'd get more attention and sympathy for my new book, *The Government Lake*. Did you read it?" "Of course I read it," I lied. "Well?" he said. "Oh, Jim, it's your best yet. You really killed it this time with those funny little sad stories." His face visibly brightened, like an old lamp when the wick gets turned up. "Has it been a critical success?" he asked. "Jesus, Jim, it's HUGE," I said. "Seriously?" "Five weeks in the New York Times bestseller list, and they sold the film rights as well. Ryan Gosling is going play the Government, and Nicole Kidman is playing the Lake." "No way!" said Jim. We ordered a bottle of champagne to celebrate, but because it was a small family run concern with no alcohol licence we settled for two cans of cherry flavoured cola and a lemon donut each. "Shit," said Jim. "You don't like the donut?" I asked. "After my death got announced, the attorneys signed over all my copyright to some good-for-nothing blood relative of mine in Kansas City. I'll never see a dime of that money." "Bummer," I said, in a low and consoling voice. "But at least you still have your reputation and your health!" The blind man in the corner tripped over a foldaway chair and sent a trolley full of cakes and pastries spilling to the floor, which the greedy guide dog started to lick and guzzle, even though the waitress was beating it with a broom handle. Once everything had calmed down we took a stroll by the river. "You must be pretty hot in that outfit, why don't you take it off," I said. "Don't be an idiot, what if someone recognises me?" "I recognised you with it ON," I pointed out. "That's because you're obsessed with me. Admit it, you've practically stalked me for the last twenty years, parking outside my house at night, following me to the swimming baths, loitering in the store where I buy my groceries and liquor." None of this was true. I was actually an apprentice tree surgeon in a town about twenty miles away and nearly all my time was

taken up with the careful amputation of branches and limbs from poorly managed gardens and woods. But I didn't want to deepen his gloomy mood any further, so I said, "Forgive me, you're my hero, Saint James." We walked a little further upstream and I was just about to head off home when Jim started bounding with big bug bunny hops towards the riverbank. "Don't do it!" I shouted. "Are you kidding," he yelled back over his shoulder. "That guy on the other side is John Ashbery dressed as a nun. Son of a bitch owes me fifty bucks."

Simon Armitage