Winter 1994

The Documentary We Were Making

James Tate
The children ate battered fish wedges and then started to swim around a kind of island which turned out to be the Dowager Empress of China. Several of them were spitting up and turned pale and soon faded from view rendering the study incomplete and fathomless. No one was even allowed to speak their names for more than a thousand years. And then one fine morning the Dowager herself, sipping tea, recalled those cockamamie days, and it made her smile to see those battered fish wedges again, barely able to swim, and yet surprisingly fit and handsome. They were ready to talk about what history had misunderstood, how some of those little folk had turned out much better than anyone could have expected, establishing the Dixon Ticonderoga pencil factory in 1388 or some such year, and going on to become deans of industry and raising enormous families in the remote Pacific wilderness. A pencil wrote all this down on its own. It followed her everywhere for days and it never stopped taking notes.
One day when she was very old
she walked to the edge of her balcony
and bit the head off of a passing butterfly.
A lost tribe woke under a picnic table,
indicating that a sequel was still possible.