

I.
BODIES IN MOTION

*Two Cannibals Are Eating a Clown—
One Turns to the Other and Asks, “Does
This Taste Funny to You?!”*

If the groundhog can face
his shadow without a freak-out,
giving us an early spring, surely
I can go out bare-faced,
unashamed. Right—
and the bearded lady could just
shave!

A sick joke, moving
Clown Alley by the sideshow,
though we're all human
oddities to the lot lice crawling
the grounds. Still, a soapy cloth,
some water, and my balloon-inked

cheeks run red: I could almost pass
for a person, blending into townie crowds,
while the Human Worm inches along,
begging Milly Pinhead for a light.
There's value in deformity—

freaks flex in plexiglass stalls, a peek
is all you need, while I pile
into a Volkswagen with twenty
more clowns, shucking and gagging
for a laugh. Underneath the wig,
the clothes, behind my thick paint,
no damaged DNA marks me mutant
but I'm on the show, made-up, playing

the audience—the wacky dances
and honking rubber noses,
the ten thousand jokes I've told
and retold until they're all I hear
every time I roll to a new show,
wondering
if anyone can see the monster
twitching under my skin,
dying not to get out.

Lectio Divina of the Tattooed Lady

When you wake up, brash morning
busting through my gauzy curtains,
gloriole outlining this rollercoaster
of a body, use one finger. Trace
the green, blue, black, violet ink

carved into my skin, words from wounds
healed to beautiful scar. This is how
I mend: epidermis knits, but raised,
a topographical map, a kind of Braille.
Read me slow, mouth into the pillow—

bawdy apocrypha circling ears, down
to symbol-studded ankles, antiquity
transformed under Airstream roof
and you might as well learn something
after such a guilty night. Alphabets

intermingle. *What are you trying
to cover?* you ask, anonymous
novitiate, until I shush your mouth, drag
palm over apologia—*je ne viens pas
ce soir vaincre ton corps*—running

down my back. A small lie, blessed
but you linger, discerning what
I will give. Lay your thinking
aside. Runes etched behind my knee
reveal: it hurt, sure, but *only the one*

who inflicts the pain can take it away
frames my shoulder blade. Rest in me,

listen. Take what you will. I know:
it's all surface, it's all that keeps you
from cutting me open to count the rings.

The Lion Tamer's Act

Until you feel on your neck a dank breath
and the hint of teeth, like a new girl's
acrylic nails, how can you know blood
rushing out through artery, in by vein?
I have learned to read a jawline:

scan for tension—too loose, he loses
focus, yawns, smacking chops. Tight
means a trap snapped shut—
the bone crush! O the girly shrieks.
I dwell in the space between.

Trained for cues, he poses still. Cup
his muzzle, spread the jaws. Nobody
told me: how I would fall into blank,
dull eyes, my lungs flattened, useless.
There's one way in and two ways out.

When I'm in there, my mind goes
pliable, a fabric softener sheet, balled
up, then unfurled. His mouth, my head:
act natural. Count back, ten to one—
spectacle feeds on illusions of control.

The Aerialist Grounds Herself

Edge of the earth, slippered toes balance,
flexing. A platform lip, a spotlight. Freeze.

Unfrozen, instinct tips reflex: the inching
climb backwards. Stepping down, rung after rung.

Ring of mine, your perfect circle has no end, no
beginning. Rolling steps in reverse, sawdust swirling.

Swirl of ten thousand faces, a blur. Shocked
murmurs roll over me, out the door, music swelling.

Swollen hands begat swollen hands, arms without
question. One man's door is another man's window.

Windowless, a tent seizes air and holds. There is in
and there is out, but only within. All questions catch.

Caught in empty space, tumbling weightless, within,
a window is a door. Is a trap. Is a trapeze. Is a ledge.

A Tamed Lion's Dilemma

Amusing enough, our games:
treat for trick, what I won't do

for a touseled mane, a rump
steak cube. My paws press her

girly shoulders, horns grunt
our leonine waltz. My breath so

sharp on her neck. The algebra
of appetite—so much depends

on x . My cage, her ring. My
tongue lolling: she smells like syrup

& smoke. Some kinds of love
have you both on your knees:

her head inside my mouth agape.
This tension, hard to beat—

the hunger, the snack, they taste
the same: a little salty, a bit sweet.

*Pretty Young Girl and a Handsome Lad:
A Strip of Four Black & White Snapshots
from the Midway Photomat Booth*

I.

In the booth, every inch
is a yard. Three fingers
could fit between them
with room to spare. She
twists a finger through
her hair, chews on one
nail. Eyes rough denim.
He makes a silly face:
happiest fish in the sea.

II.

She is giving it her all,
teeth bared straight
at the lens. *Write this,*
her eyes throw back
at us. He's a farmboy
with a prize calf: so
eager, trying to press
temple to temple, but
O her getaway blur.

III.

How he got hold of her
hand, we'll never know.
He's raised it to his lips,
plants one large on her
third knuckle. Bold boy.
Shock, dread: those old
twins tapdance her face,
dragging what looks like
a future behind them.

IV.

A rope of muscle, his
arm coils her. Porcelain
teeth reflect the flash,
so cocky. Her mouth
half-open in mid-word:
what she's saying goes
without saying. Curtain
flapping, he will be left to
wait out the developing.

The Tattooed Lady's First

At fifteen I believed I moved in a rarified bubble, all feeling in the world contained within, the dichotomy of *in* and *out* sharp, a line in the crackling dust of a dark television screen: me *vs.* all. That summer,

I grazed on fudgesicles in the shadow of an abandoned power station, dragonflies zipping in tandem through skeletal metal: tumbling trapeze act, wings beating a rivergreen trance. Mating in thick August air, they hovered my sticky hand,

the clacking of Walkman cassette reels unnoticed. I played one song ten thousand times, my theme, headphones keeping it private, between my ears—an illusion of singularity, of experience. They flew off,

skimming a stagnant puddle, the fallow transformer dull under dwindling light, not humming. I didn't have words for the pins and needles. A mosquito

lit down and sipped from my thigh. I fingered the welt, blood drops smearing my leg. The red against white, almost membrane, almost a wing.

I knew a place. A guy with forearms graffitti'd like boxcars. *Somewhere they won't see*, I whispered. All you have is your skin, and what it covers.

How Do You Get a Clown to Stop Smiling? Hit Him in the Face with an Axe!

I'm not trying to be a nightmare, but please
yourself—*coulrophobia*, this kid's mommy
says, covering his eyes, as if,
under my name in the yearbook, ran my greatest
ambition: *to scare the shit
out of little kids!* Lemme tell you what's scarier
than clowns:

death, for starters, worse
than that, dying alone—pissing yourself,
coughing blood, last breaths labored in
and out, wondering when the Meals on Wheels
gal is gonna stop by with a hot lunch to find
you, maybe a week later, when your

Labrador

finally gives it up and starts eating your leg.
That is something to wake up nights
over, crying in the dark, huddled under
a Star Wars blanket. Afraid of clowns, what the fuck
kind of phobia is that?

We're neutered trick
poodles in greasepaint, not a 747,
or a skyscraper roof, see: I don't even use
bugs, or snakes, or rats in my act, so what's
the big deal?

When you've seen a pretty girl's
eyes go blank after risking *hello*, talk to me then,
son, tell me if a day's worth of beard under white
still gives you the terrors, if a guy in floppy shoes
can equal a biopsy, your wife's lawyer,

your father
after a fifth of Wild Turkey, look me straight

in my made-up eyes after seven sleepless
nights in an empty bed
and tell me the irrational is still more
frightening than walking out
your front door every morning,
that looking me in the face is so much worse
than anything your twisted
little mind can imagine, that you've been so
fucking lucky that
I'm
enough to give you the shakes.

The Tattooed Lady Falls

What blooms from the end
of a needle? Numbness: a way
to stop time during my afternoon
rotation, the dry tented air trapped
in bubble-wrap, swaddling my near-

naked form. There are fast ways
to forget the crawling eyes, but I
have a better addiction: another
needle floods a bouquet of exploding

Touch-Me-Not twisting my arm,
punishing: skin is not an open
invitation, though I love to be
watched. I could cruise into edge-
of-town honkytonks, but one
late-August knife scarred La Sirena
of my forearm, learning my lesson.
I've only been looking for a sure-

mouthed man: for that I might swallow
the largest sword. Today, I caught the hungry
eye of a clown in the dusty setup—
sweaty roustabouts humping tent pegs,

bolting the tilt-a-whirl into the ground.
We stood still in the moldering shade
of the elephant truck, dew squishing
my toes. *You're built like a violin*,
he told me, leaning close. My snare
drum heart tapped a rapid, rhythmic
beat, echoing violent, even in retreat.