

The Circus in the Square



Dave Ward

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*

roll up roll up
the circus is in town
roll up roll up
and see the circus people
yawning and smiling, dancing
and bawling, standing still and
scurrying round

there's all the fun of the fair
there's all the fun of the fair
the circus is here all day in the square

the ringmaster's late
but we don't have to wait
put on your top hat
your long red coat
and then the show is away -
you can be ringmaster
just for today

*

the strong man stands
by the hot dog stand
his mouth is drooling at the smell
but with his teeth bent and broken
from bending iron bars
and his gums worn sore
he daren't risk gnawing
through one sagging sausage
or sucking a soggy bread roll

even a squirt of the bright yellow mustard
that oozes from the nozzle of the plastic bottle
is too strong for the strong man now

*

the fire-eater stops everyone who passes
and asks them for a light

tugging at their draughty coatsleeves
he whispers hotly in their ears
but the swirling wind and the sullen rain
are more than a match for any match

and they leave the fire-eater
spitting out his unlit dogend
begging anyone who'll listen
for the price of a pint to quench his thirst

*

the dancing dog holds out his paw
his days are over
he doesn't dance anymore

but just lolls in the sun
watching the children
dance rings around him instead

and when they're completely exhausted
they still all clap the dog
as he hauls himself onto his haunches
and proudly offers his paw

*

the clowns are not really happy
the clowns are not really sad
they just make mistakes
like me and you
maybe they didn't mean to be clowns
it was all just a big mistake

it's their mistakes that make us laugh
mistakes don't really make us happy
mistakes don't really make us sad
we laugh because we know
we make the same mistakes too

we're laughing at our own mistakes
we're laughing while we sit and watch
someone else making our mistakes instead

we're laughing because we dream in bed
one night we'll make the same mistake
and wake up in the morning to find
we've all turned into clowns

*

the tight-rope walkers
balanced on time
wrap their lives
around the line

the crowd clutch the pulse of the drum
and imagine
that they can imagine
every moment stretched out on the wire

the tight-rope walkers
never look down
and never begin to realise
how lonely it must be
to be only a face in the crowd

*

punch and judy never cry now
they've been at it far too long
cursing and kissing in front of them all
while everyone just looks on
pretending they don't all do the same
at home with the curtains drawn

punch and judy never laugh now
they just go out by themselves
and sit with the people on empty benches
who look the same if they're sober or drunk
waiting for someone to crack the first joke
some other judy to throw the first punch

*

the juggler moves so slick
no-one can see what he throws
knives and hoops are too easy now
he juggles
lives and dreams
and for his final encore
he can make the world stand still
before the roar of applause

*

the medicine man
sells coloured water
in bottles with different names
claiming everyone of them contains
the elixir that will
restore your hair
bring back your sight
ease your cough right through the night

the medicine man
chokes on every word
as he drags his carcass
around the circus
sick with each and every illness
he swears his potions can cure

*

the frail flower lady
would tell your fortune for you
if only she could remember
what it was

but instead she sells red roses
to take home to your sweetheart
who will count the blushing petals
and tell the future for you both

*

the candy floss stall
is loaded with sweets
crazy shaped craving
so delicious to eat

but listen well
to the candy floss man
and do just as he tells you
do not buy your sweets from him
and give them away to strangers

*

the performing birds scramble
up and down their perches
as we scramble sideways
screeching to get the best seat
till they sit stiff-necked
watching us
as we sit straight-backed
watching them
trying not to fall off
and wondering why we bother
when we know there's nothing these jailbirds
have been trained to perform in cages
that wild birds can't do
anywhere in the world

it is only when we go home
and lock our doors behind us
and bolt and bar our windows
we know
why it is we are captured
by the performance
of the performing birds

*

a circus isn't a circus
unless it has a tiger
a yellow shadow travelling
in her own private trailer

when we hold our breath
for the high wire dancers
we're afraid our faith will hesitate
we're afraid we'll let them down

but when we watch the tiger
powerful with silence
we're afraid
we're afraid
it's our own fear
that might break loose from the cage
and rampage around the circus
with no-one to stand up and stop it

and then we know we're afraid
we're afraid
we're afraid
of ourselves

*

the elephants and monkeys
the lions, snakes and donkeys
all left long ago

the circus couldn't feed them
on jeers and cheers
bouquets and fears
a carrot and a stick
so it offered them their freedom
though they didn't want to go

they swore they'd stay
as they backed away
one by one
stealing through the rip
in the patch on the flap
of the big top sagging
in the sad night air

to put their own show on the road
a mad menagerie
dressed as TV personalities
go-go dancers and three-card tricksters
used car dealers and out-of-work
prime ministers
sugarlump smiles smeared across their faces
throttled by tight collars
and lop-sided dickiebows.

MERSEYSIDE POETRY MINIBOOKS SERIES

DAVE WARD lives in Halewood. He has been involved in the public promotion of poetry since the age of sixteen.

Previous publications include *When The Slow Rain Comes* (Toulouse Press) and *Jambo* (Windows/Riot Stories Ltd) which was reprinted in the anthology *In Touch* (Hodder & Stoughton).

Dave Ward has written a series of *Jambo* filmscripts for BBC TV's *Oxford Road Show*, and compiles a poetry round-up for the *New Musical Express*.

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