

Martha Deed

Dancing

White and black, the spotted dog of modest ancestry runs atop the blue spinning ball under the Big Tent (but in one of the smaller rings under twirling acrobats) and keeps its balance while considering far-off thoughts carefully curated for the occasion – digging for cannonballs in an ancient battlefield slows his steps but keeps him upright as he considers whose side that cannonball was on, but he does not think about death itself, because the present is too real and so he does not think of Ukraine or Hong Kong or even his own demise as he dances – crypto-currency throws him into mad hip-hopping but the gold standard turns hazardous as well – disease and falling 401Ks raise gaseous emissions that he must overcome with bobbing and weaving. And then a passing clown waves the morning paper in his face with headlines exploding like shingles ripped off houses in an atmospheric river of wind and menacing waters – until he remembers to listen to the calliope, smoothe his step and roll with the ball, spinning through the crowd and out an open door into the meadow to hear the Carolina Wren still chanting in the spruce as he dances around it and howls to the moon before the sun has set.

## Circus Life Attracts Her

*Veteran Manager's Daughter, Agnes Robinson,  
Marries a Performer Against Her Parents' Wishes*  
– New York Times. Dec 5 1899

How do you run away to the circus  
if you are already in the circus?

It is an age-old problem  
The small child gathers a cookie,  
a pail and shovel  
prepares to head for the beach  
maybe stay there a day or two  
but stops at the curb  
because he knows  
he's not allowed to cross the street

The husband with the disaffected wife  
hesitates – stares over a cliff of litigation:  
his lover does not cook as well as his dull wife  
and has crooked teeth

The college freshman is bored and unprepared  
longs for the university of his dreams  
where papers write themselves and professors  
smile at his clichéd excuses

The primary care provider would like  
to run away to a place where she can be a physician  
leave her loans behind  
have time to learn from her patients  
laugh at least once a day  
and pay her bills

The child of circus performers  
kept away from the ring  
“brought up amid refining influences,  
educated as carefully as we knew how,”  
shouts back as she disappears down the road,  
“I shall learn to ride. . . and some day I will be  
as great a rider as my mother or grandmother has been.”\*

\*Quotes are from the newspaper story.

## Digging for Dirt

Do not whine, old niece, that your life is hard  
that Summer is not a time of dreaming for you.  
Truth is very hard as well. I should know.  
I was fishing (some said) food for the table  
in Huntington Bay when I was come upon  
by that wily pirate Capt Kidd who presented me  
with a moral argument that I could scarcely  
evade in the hot sun of the bay: Fish with Kidd  
or Feed the fish. A quandary easily settled. They  
said I was “impressed” into his service, and others  
said I was no better than Kidd, which, had I known,  
would have given me a hard heart indeed, but as it  
was, I was merely pissed off at missing supper  
for the provisions on that ship left much to be desired  
and Capt. K was often out of sorts. Food was not  
as important to him as it was to me. So I was glad –  
when his hull grew overly full of plunder – Capt.  
put me off to bury treasure on Long Island’s shore –  
the booty to stay in the dirt until his return.  
Now I am a moral man who helped to build  
a great church in these parts. (Though I hadn't  
done that yet). It was a hot day for digging,  
so I considered it better to preserve the spoils  
above the earth rather than to risk rot or theft  
below, should I be seen in the digging. Better  
to let the 2,792 acres I bought with this treasure  
serve as ample fulfillment of my duty. Had  
Kidd returned, I would have dueled him  
for the treasure of this land. Do not be distracted  
by historians troubled by this tale. Vindication  
is my middle name, the motto of my descendants.  
We uphold our truth. We call 'em as we see 'em.

History does not disturb us. And when they  
write falsely of our times, we say,  
*The statements of most writers are based more  
on their imagination than on the real facts of the matter.\**

\*J[oseph] I[n]glis Conklin. Letter to the editor. Brooklyn Daily Eagle. 20 Jun 1907. p 7.

## Even the Coyotes are Depressed

One Saturday afternoon in recent memory  
a pelican and a cormorant were deep in conversation.

“This has been a terrible day,” the pelican said,  
“and I am full of woe.” “Oh, but I am certain,”  
the cormorant responded, resplendent in his black  
and double-crested coat, “my boat has taken  
on more water today than yours in many years.

The world has fallen apart, the customer service agents  
have all drowned in the seas of hard times, and the fish  
grow smaller with each passing season. Even the coyotes  
are depressed.” “But I haven't told you yet,” the pelican cried,  
“the sorrow that has befallen me. My beak is cracked  
with tears, and I have been rejected even by my lessers.”

“These are times that test birds' brains,” the cormorant  
replied sounding a bit more sympathetic. “When you see  
your dinner swimming beneath you and the sea recedes  
as you dive, the sands turn white and hard, the foxes flee  
from your wrath lest you settle upon them for dessert,  
you cannot win for losing, and you are exceedingly hungry  
for ill-gotten gains with a little oil to aid the digestion, then it  
is beyond argument that the life of a pelican has gone to hell  
in a pouch.” “Thank you so much for the wisdom  
of your understanding,” the pelican sighed. “Though you  
feather your nest with the body parts and possessions  
of dead birds, I have to admit that you have saved  
my day, and I will give thanks to the clouds that rain  
in the sky, whose waters never touch the earth, and I  
will starve on your empty promises before I die.

Surely the politicians who live long among the snakes  
and slugs and whales they endanger, will chew on the bones  
of their debates and live happily ever after.”

For Poets Reaching 80

The light is fading on the eve of the poet's 80th birthday  
It is a certainty

The older husband waking up on his day  
never again the man he was the night before  
feet shuffling in his new slippers with the slip-free soles  
uncertain and off-kilter  
and suspecting – well – the worst

Eighty is old enough to know who you are  
if such knowledge would ever be possible for you  
to know what to write (if you dare)  
in the dusk

But light can fade also in a younger poet  
who worked unknowingly in a dangerous place  
perhaps on unremediated poison ground  
or maybe ate unwisely  
or harbored malicious dna which made changes  
or a pandemic  
now lying in wait

The fact is  
we are born with dawn light glowing  
and in some, the urge to brighten that light  
frightens us into poetry  
which can go on for some time

Only the old  
bathed in dusk  
can know for sure  
the end is coming soon

even if  
they don't know when

For the 80 year-old poet  
the only certainty  
is death