

Allan Johnston

Clowns of South Carolina

First there are these clown suits
one has been accused of hiding
in the Carolina woods
like so many mercenary
caches of supplies
just in case the circus comes
or a horror show arises
from the nearby graves.

There remains, as Bréton has it,
all the madness one locks up
in the image of the dance
or the circus promontory
turned somehow into plot points
on the navigator's map
off the pirate's prow, to waters
still too deep to fathom.

I would be careful not to apply
any discipline of the wood
beyond a plank—I walk up
as if so many occupations
would destroy the luxury class
in the head of the plastic surgeon
or whoever takes notes
on the impossible riddle of loss.

Clowns have been reported
in shopping malls wielding squirt guns
and large bell-mouthed
blunderbusses of balloons,
eating burgers in drive-in joints
without cars to drive through in,
engaging in hijinks
no doctor would recommend,

clowning on as per the code
of the monster mash of time

Grandmother's Song

The windows in the oblong den
let through the light
of the lush green shrubbery

as rain fell in contrast to
the tartan-patterned blankets

and the greying face, thinness eating it,
budding its knowing
of its slowly erasing
pain. The hole slowly growing.

Grandmother—passing, solid as any
ruler brought down on the hand,
as any leg of a journey
she saw into
as she sang her ditty:

*Looking through the knothole
in grandpa's wooden leg,*

*who will wind the clock
when I am gone?*

*Quick get the axe,
there's a hair on baby's chin,*

*and a boy's best friend
is his mother.*

Quickened with her own skein of wit,
she graced us those last days
with her song,
as if to say,
do what you can—

know the familiar;

baby's fate
is bound
to the passing
of the last refrain;

sometimes past hair splitting.

Herb and Jeanne Foxtrot to Basie's "Night Train"

Like an old movie
but mostly it's just
the two of them
older now
as Basie syncopates
down rhythm to beats
of the slow night train
and Herb steps out

in this living room
sofa and table
next to the chairs
each pop and crack
from the old Hi-Fi
and the vinyl cleans
the way we dream

wild runs into excess
they are cutting a rug,
hand in hand
turning sideways and cracking
back with the whack
of saxophone backup
adding umph
after so many years

after a youth
we keep forgetting
as Herb and Jeanne dance
for their children
and grandchildren
just as once
absorbed in each other
and now again

how years move on
no more words

or bars and nights
spent searching, then
the hospital calls
the ambulance leaves
night sirens lonely
a long train whistle

Proteus

He comes back as cool coyote,
smoking Camels; He comes back
as Michael Jackson:
Wanna dance, change sex, smash cars? Move.

Can you spare a dime?
A hand springs out of an old coat.
Rain clouds linger. He buggers his way
into the Men's Room

through plumbing, then engenders five screaming
children in pink dresses
anywhere, everywhere. Novice, compiler,
constipator, Green House effect

burns into a quick rain
drifting quietly out of the sky
grey green with bird shit
and the sound of Julie Andrews

singing Christmas hymns
plays everywhere as stores burn
and he lets it all go,
links down to a period—

end of poem. He laughs.
Turns into a hipster.

Another Country

The porcelain boats pass under the arched
blue and white bridge on the bowl
Into a landscape of willows hanging
over a pond. On the bridge,
three men with conical hats
carry poles with baskets hung
on each end. They go to the fields
as slowly as the herons
posed over the water move
as they eye the shimmers of fish
between reeds in countries where
people are never departing to find
another place; they live
the continuous routines
that have nestled in over centuries
in a way that recalls the return
of birds that fly between
instances or seasons of heat
or cold, and lead to the birth
of more and more calls and echoes
out of some book or story.
The workers never tire
of the continuous harvesting,
or if they do, they do not know
or show that they have always known
the harvest to be what it is
and has been. They wear robes
of blue or white with blue
fleur de lis or other designs
painted on the china. This
recalls all the traces left
by the dragons they use
to explain whatever strikes them
as different In the fields
they enter. So if a row
of rice plants were flattened, or
the places where a tractor might crawl

were in some other land
seen as changed in some small way,
they might exclaim a saying
about the dragon's tail
dragging across the crop, blocking
the trench. And if the thought
had come that another
country's army might ride in,
crazed, on horses, thirsting for blood,
or their own nobility
might turn rampant from a lack
of understanding how the crop
is grown and brought before them,
and first rights to every bride
among the peasants weren't enough
privilege to justify
a sudden ennui brought on
by life, the peasants might
understand the frustration
and describe the dragon's will
enforced by those who juggle
law and write the policies
governing permitted commerce.
Then they would know something
had released the idle thought
they cling to, just as if
their baskets carried thoughts
instead of rice, and every chance
proclaimed would now sink
in the soft mud of the land,
the clay they use to make these bowls
with glazed forms in blue and white
showing peasants crossing bridges
with rice baskets while the boats
continue down the river
out to sea, so that these countries
might seem forever distant
because they only come to us
as memories we carry,
they only live because someone

painted china blue and white,
 made up this strange land
 where bowls can bridge hopes
 and mark the distances
 between the seen and the unseen.