

PAUL MULDOON

POEMS 1968-1998

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX NEW YORK

QUOOF

How often have I carried our family word
for the hot water bottle
to a strange bed,
as my father would juggle a red-hot half-brick
in an old sock
to his childhood settle.
I have taken it into so many lovely heads
or laid it between us like a sword.

A hotel room in New York City
with a girl who spoke hardly any English,
my hand on her breast
like the smouldering one-off spoor of the yeti
or some other shy beast
that has yet to enter the language.

BIG FOOT

Comes, if he comes at all, among sumach
and birches, stops half-
way across the clearing . . . Wood-smoke,
the cabin where you mourn your wife,

where, darkening the tiny window,
is the fur coat
you promised her when she was twenty
or twenty-one, you forget.

BEAVER

Let yourself in by the leaf-yellow door.
Go right up the stairs.

Along the way you may stumble upon
one girl in a dress

of flour-bag white, the turkey-red
of another's apron.

Give it no more thought
than you would a tree felled across a stream

in the Ozarks or the Adirondacks.
Step over her as you would across

a beaver dam.
And try to follow that stream back

to the top of the stairs,
to your new room with its leaf-yellow floor.

MARY FARL POWERS: PINK SPOTTED TORSO

I

She turns from the sink
potato in hand. A Kerr's Pink,
its water-dark
port-wine birthmark
that will answer her knife
with a hieroglyph.

Imagine my delight
when we cut the outboard motor
and I recognize the strains
of *The Lass of Aughrim*.

'He hopes,' Jesus explains,
'to charm
fish from the water

on what was the tibia
of a priest
from a long-abandoned Mission.'

MEETING THE BRITISH

We met the British in the dead of winter.
The sky was lavender

and the snow lavender-blue.
I could hear, far below,

the sound of two streams coming together
(both were frozen over)

and, no less strange,
myself calling out in French

across that forest-
clearing. Neither General Jeffrey Amherst

nor Colonel Henry Bouquet
could stomach our willow-tobacco.

As for the unusual
scent when the Colonel shook out his hand-

kerchief: *C'est la lavande,
une fleur mauve comme le ciel.*

They gave us six fishhooks
and two blankets embroidered with smallpox.

CROSSING THE LINE

A windswept gallery. With its telephones
down and the jiggery-pokery
of *Quântel*
dissolving in the monitors.

Two rival commanders
are dining by candle-
light on medallions of young peccary.

Like synchronized dolphins,
their flunkys
hand each a napkin
torn from the script of a seven-part series
based on the *Mabinogion*.

Where Pryderi's gifts of hounds and horses
turn out to have been fungus.

THE PANTHER

For what it's worth, the last panther in Massachusetts
was brought to justice
in the woods beyond these meadows
and hung by its heels from a meat-hook
in what is now our kitchen.

(The house itself is something of a conundrum,
built as it was by an Ephraim Cowan from Antrim.)

I look in one evening while Jean
is jelly-making. She has rendered down pounds of grapes
and crab-apples
to a single jar
at once impenetrable and clear:
'Something's missing. This simply won't take.'

The air directly under the meat-hook—
it quakes, it quickens;
on a flagstone, the smudge of the tippy-tip of its nose.

CAULIFLOWERS

*Plants that glow in the dark have been developed through gene-splicing, in which
light-producing bacteria from the mouths of fish are introduced to cabbage, carrots
and potatoes.*

—THE NATIONAL ENQUIRER

More often than not he stops at the headrig to light
his pipe
and try to regain
his composure. The price of cauliflowers
has gone down
two weeks in a row on the Belfast market.

From here we can just make out
a platoon of Light
Infantry going down
the road to the accompaniment of a pipe-
band. The sun glints on their silver-
buttoned jerkins.

My uncle, Patrick Regan,
has been leaning against the mud-guard
of the lorry. He levers
open the bonnet and tinkers with a light
wrench at the hose-pipe
that's always going down.

Then he himself goes down
to bleed oil into a jerry-can.
My father slips the pipe
into his scorch-marked
breast pocket and again makes light
of the trepanned cauliflowers.

All this as I listened to lovers
repeatedly going down
on each other in the next room . . . 'light
of my life . . .' in a motel in Oregon.
All this. Magritte's
pipe

and the pipe-
bomb. White Annetts. Gillyflowers.
Margaret,
are you grieving? My father going down
the primrose path with Patrick Regan.
All gone out of the world of light.

All gone down
the original pipe. And the cauliflowers
in an unmarked pit, that were harvested by their own light.

An abstract graphic design featuring a thick vertical line that runs down the center of the page. To the right of this line, two thin, curved lines diverge from the vertical line, starting near the bottom and extending upwards and outwards towards the right edge of the page. The overall composition is minimalist and geometric.

HORSE LATITUDES

PAUL MULDOON

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX

NEW YORK

IN MEMORY OF
MAUREEN MULDOON

1953-2005

FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX
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AS YOUR HUSBAND LOOKS UP TO OUR WINDOW

The man who's unwinding the red-and-white-striped awning
of the *boucherie* across the street takes in not the wide-screen Sensurround
on which it might be just now dawning

but the letter box between ham and hock. A reputation for
simultaneously fawning
upon and fanging the clientele is one of many that hound
the man who's unwinding the red-and-white-striped awning,

his great-grandfather having opened this very store only a year after
impawning
was banned by the Commune on the grounds there are no grounds
on which it's just. Now dawning

in a home theater near you is the sequel-spawning
realization that *mont-de-piété* signifies not "piety-mound"
to the man who's unwinding the red-and-white-striped awning

but the methodical deboning and debrowning
of a pig in a poke that's been crowned not once but triple-crowned.
It's just now dawning

on you, as your husband looks up to our window, half-yearning, half-
yawning,
having at long, long last unwound
the red-and-white-striped awning,
that on him, too, it's just now dawning.

THE PROCEDURE

I

One still wore a wristband from the disco
where we'd flattered each other through the strobe
long before she was of an age to boast
as many tongues as many-tongued Rumor.

II

It dawned as it dawns on San Francisco
on another who rummaged in her robe
and varied the standard-issue tea and toast
with a grapefruit the size of a tumor.

III

Both came to mind last evening when I set
my wedding ring on top of the nightstand
as if I might once again be making

it clear to the pale beauty I was yet
to meet in Madigan's or the Four in Hand
that I was free and ready for taking.

THE OLD COUNTRY

I

Where every town was a tidy town
and every garden a hanging garden.
A half could be had for half a crown.
Every major artery would harden

since every meal was a square meal.
Every clothesline showed a line of undies
yet no house was in dishabille.
Every Sunday took a month of Sundays

till everyone got it off by heart
every start was a bad start
since all conclusions were foregone.

Every wood had its twist of woodbine.
Every cliff its herd of fatalistic swine.
Every runnel was a Rubicon.

II

Every runnel was a Rubicon
and every annual a hardy annual
applying itself like linen to a lawn.
Every glove compartment held a manual

and a map of the roads, major and minor.
Every major road had major roadworks.
Every wishy-washy water diviner
had stood like a bulwark

against something worth standing against.
The smell of incense left us incensed
at the firing of the fort.

Every heron was a presager
of some disaster after which, we'd wager,
every resort was a last resort.

III

Every resort was a last resort
with a harbor that harbored an old grudge.
Every sale was a selling short.
There were those who simply wouldn't budge

from the *Dandy* to the *Rover*.
That shouting was the shouting
but for which it was all over—
the weekend, I mean, we set off on an outing

with the weekday train timetable.
Every tower was a tower of Babel
that graced each corner of a bawn

where every lookout was a poor lookout.
Every rill had its unflashy trout.
Every runnel was a Rubicon.

IV

Every runnel was a Rubicon
 where every ditch was a last ditch.
 Every man was "a grand wee mon"
 whose every pitch was another sales pitch

now every boat was a burned boat.
 Every cap was a cap in hand.
 Every coat a traile'd coat.
 Every band was a gallant band

across the broken bridge
 and broken ridge after broken ridge
 where you couldn't beat a stick with a big stick.

Every straight road was a straight up speed trap.
 Every decision was a snap.
 Every cut was a cut to the quick.

V

Every cut was a cut to the quick
 when the weasel's twist met the weasel's tooth
 and Christ was somewhat impolitic
 in branding as "weasels fighting in a hole," forsooth,

the petrol smugglers back on the old sod
 when a vendor of red diesel
 for whom every rod was a green rod
 reminded one and all that the weasel

was nowhere to be found in that same quarter.
 No mere mortar could withstand a ten-inch mortar.
 Every hope was a forlorn hope.

So it was that the defenders
 were taken in by their own blood splendour.
 Every slope was a slippery slope.

VI

Every slope was a slippery slope
 where every shave was a very close shave
 and money was money for old rope
 where every grave was a watery grave

now every boat was, again, a burned boat.
 Every dime-a-dozen rat a dime-a-dozen drowned rat
 except for the whitrack, or stoat,
 which the very Norsemen had down pat

as a weasel-word
 though we know their speech was rather slurred.
 Every time was time in the nick

just as every nick was a nick in time.
 Every unsheathed sword was somehow sheathed in rime.
 Every cut was a cut to the quick.

VII

Every cut was a cut to the quick
what with every feather a feather to ruffle.
Every whitrack was a whitterick.
Everyone was in a right kerfuffle

when from his hob some hobbledehoy
would venture the whitterick was a curlew.
Every wall was a wall of Troy
and every hunt a hunt in the purlieu

of a demesne so out of bounds
every hound might have been a hellhound.
At every lane end stood a milk churn

whose every dent was a sign of indenture
to some pig wormer or cattle drencher.
Every point was a point of no return.

VIII

Every point was a point of no return
for those who had signed the Covenant in blood.
Every fern was a maidenhair fern
that gave every eye an eyeful of mud

ere it was plucked out and cast into the flame.
Every rowan was a mountain ash.
Every swath-swathed mower made of his graft a game
and the hay sash

went to the kemper best fit to kemp.
Every secretary was a temp
who could shift shape

like the river goddesses Banna and Boann.
Every two-a-penny maze was, at its heart, Minoan.
Every escape was a narrow escape.

IX

Every escape was a narrow escape
where every stroke was a broad stroke
of an ax on a pig nape.
Every pig was a pig in a poke

though it scooted once through the Diamond
so unfalt—so unfalteringly.
The threshold of pain was outlimened
by the bar raised at high tea

now every scone was a drop scone.
Every ass had an ass's jawbone
that might itself drop from grin to girm.

Every malt was a single malt.
Every pillar was a pillar of salt.
Every point was a point of no return.

Every point was a point of no return
 where to make a mark was to overstep the mark.
 Every brae had its own braw burn.
 Every meadow had its meadowlark

that stood in for the laverock.
 Those Norse had tried fjord after fjord
 to find a tight wee place to dock.
 When he made a scourge of small whin cords,

Christ drove out the moneylenders
 and all the other bitter-enders
 when the thing to have done was take up the slack.

Whin was to furze as furze was to gorse.
 Every hobbledehoy had his hobbledyobbyhorse.
 Every track was an inside track.

XI

Every track was an inside track
 where every horse had the horse sense
 to know it was only a glorified hack.
 Every graineen of gratitude was immense

and every platitude a familiar platitude.
 Every kemple of hay was a kemple tossed in the air
 by a haymaker in a hay feud.
 Every chair at the barn dance a musical chair

given how every paltry poltroon
 and his paltry dog could carry a tune
 yet no one would carry the can

any more than Samson would carry the temple.
 Every spinal column was a collapsing stemple.
 Every flash was a flash in the pan.

XII

Every flash was a flash in the pan
 and every border a herbaceous border
 unless it happened to be *an*
 herbaceous border as observed by the *Recorder*

or recorded by the *Observer*.
 Every widdie stemmed from a willow bole.
 Every fervor was a religious fervor
 by which we'd fly the godforsaken hole

into which we'd been flung by it.
 Every pit was a bottomless pit
 out of which every pig needed a piggyback.

Every cow had subsided in its subsidy.
 Biddy winked at Paddy and Paddy winked at Biddy.
 Every track was an inside track.

XIII

Every track was an inside track
and every job an inside job.
Every whitterick had been a whittrack
until, from his hobbledehob,

that hobbledehobbledehoy
had insisted the whitterick was a curlew.
But every boy was still "one of the boys"
and every girl "ye girl ye"

for whom every dance was a last dance
and every chance a last chance
and every letdown a terrible letdown

from the days when every list was a laundry list
in that old country where, we reminisced,
every town was a tidy town.

THE OUTLIER

I

In Armagh or Tyrone
I fell between two stones.

In Armagh or Tyrone
on a morning in June
I fell between two stones.

In Armagh or Tyrone
on a morning in June
in 1951
I fell between two stones.

In Armagh or Tyrone
on a morning in June
in 1951
I fell between two stones
that raised me as their own.

II

I had one eye, just one,
they prised and propped open.

I had one eye, just one,
they prised and propped open
like a Fomorian's.

I had one eye, just one,
they prised and propped open
like a Fomorian's
with a fire-toughened pine.

I had one eye, just one,
they prised and propped open
like a Fomorian's
so all I looked upon
would itself turn to stone.

IT IS WHAT IT IS

It is what it is, the popping underfoot of the Bubble Wrap
in which Asher's new toy came,
popping like bladder wrack on the foreshore
of a country toward which I've been rowing
for fifty years, my peeping from behind a tamarind
at the peeping ox and ass, the flyer for a pantomime,
the inlaid cigarette box, the shamrock-painted jug,
the New Testament bound in red leather
lying open, Lordie, on her lap
while I mull over the rules of this imperspicuous game
that seems to be missing one piece, if not more.
Her voice at the gridiron coming and going
as if snatched by a sea wind.
My mother. Shipping out for good. For good this time.
The game. The plaything spread on the rug.
The fifty years I've spent trying to put it together.

RIDDLE

My first may be found, if found it ever is, quite firmly embedded in grime
but not in rime,
despite the fact that I'm
cold as well as dirty, what with being stowed away almost all the time.

My second sounds doubly in roar
and singly in oar.
When the buccaneers put ashore
and set fire to our little craft, my spirit would sink, then soar

when I thought of my third, found in the ideal
but not in the raw deal
I got from them. Just because I've a heart of steel
doesn't mean I don't *feel*.

My fourth is in Drake
but not in rake.
They'd rake the coals they'd make me walk. My last request was for a
steak
followed by something like a piece of cake.

My fifth is in drum
but not in rum.
The drunken buccaneers offered me a lump of dough if I'd keep mum.
A lump in my throat. My lump sum.

My sixth is in leaves
but not in eaves.
I overheard them laughing about "honour among thieves"
when they left me stranded here with the dry heaves.

My last heaves to, as it were, twice in event
but once only in vent.

I'm still wearing that old stovepipe hat. I've made scarcely a dent
in that lump of dough I was given, or lent,

by the buccaneers from whom I still take my cue.
A barb of smoke from the barbecue
brings a blush to the cheek of the cockatoo
who'll wait as long for a word from me as I'll wait for a word from you.

TURKEY BUZZARDS

They've been so long above it all,
those two petals
so steeped in style they seem to stall
in the kettle

simmering over the town dump
or, better still,
the neon-flashed, X-rated rump
of fresh roadkill

courtesy of the interstate
that Eisenhower
would overtake in the home straight
by one horsepower,

the kettle where it all boils down
to the thick scent
of death, a scent of such renown
it's given vent

to the idea buzzards can spot
a deer carcass
a mile away, smelling the rot
as, once, Marcus

Aurelius wrinkled his nose
at a gas leak
from the Great Sewer that ran through Rome
to the Tiber

then went searching out, through the gloam,
one subscriber

to the other view that the rose,
full-blown, antique,

its no-frills ruff, the six-foot shrug
of its swing-wings,
the theologian's and the thug's
twin triumphings

in a buzzard's shaved head and snood,
buzz-buzz-buzzy,
its logic in all likelihood
somewhat fuzzy,

would ever come into focus,
it ever deign
to dispense its hocus-pocus
in that same vein

as runs along an inner thigh
to where, too right,
the buzzard vouchsafes not to shy
away from shite,

its mission not to give a miss
to a bête noire,
all roly-poly, full of piss
and vinegar,

trying rather to get to grips
with the grommet
of the gut, setting its tinsnips
to that grommet

in the spray-painted hind's hindgut
and making a
sweeping, too right, a sweeping cut
that's so blasé

it's hard to imagine, dear Sis,
why others shrink
from this sight of a soul in bliss,
so in the pink

from another month in the red
of the shambles,
like a rose in over its head
among brambles,

unflappable in its belief
it's Ararat
on which the Ark would come to grief,
abjuring that

Marcus Aurelius humbug
about what springs
from earth succumbing to the tug
at its heartstrings,

reported to live past fifty,
as you yet may,
dear Sis, perhaps growing your hair
in requital,

though briefly, of whatever tears
at your vitals,

learning, perhaps, from the nifty,
nay *thrifty*, way

these buzzards are given to stoop
and take their ease
by letting their time-chastened poop
fall to their knees

till they're almost as bright with lime
as their night roost,
their poop containing an enzyme
that's known to boost

their immune systems, should they prong
themselves on small
bones in a cerebral cortex,
at no small cost

to their well-being, sinking fast
in a deer crypt,
buzzards getting the hang at last
of being stripped

of their command of the vortex
while having lost
their common touch, they've been so long
above it all.

you and I've faced off across a ditch
and the raid on the redoubt
only one of the issues on which
the mountain is holding out.

MEDLEY FOR MORIN KHUR

I

The sound box is made of a horse's head.
The resonator is horse skin.
The strings and bow are of horsehair.

II

The morin khur is the thoroughbred
of Mongolian violins.
Its call is the call of the stallion to the mare.

III

A call which may no more be gainsaid
than that of jinn to jinn
through jasmine-weighted air.

IV

A call that may no more be gainsaid
than that of blood kin to kin
through a body-strewn central square.

v

A square in which they'll heap the horses' heads
by the heaps of horse skin
and the heaps of horsehair.

GLAUCUS

It went without saying that a king of Corinth
should keep his prize fillies out of the fray
and, rather than have them enmesh
themselves in horse toils, horse tattle,

set them up, each on a plinth,
and fillet their manes with knots and nosegays
and feed them the choicest human flesh
to give them a taste for battle.

It went without saying that after he lost control
of his chariot team at Pelias, and made a hames
of setting them all square,

Glaucus was still on such a roll
it was lost on him that the high point of the games
was his being eaten now by his own mares.

HEDGE SCHOOL

Not only those rainy mornings our great-great-grandmother was posted at
a gate
with a rush mat
over her shoulders, a mat that flashed
Papish like a heliograph, but those rainy mornings when my daughter and
the rest

of her all-American Latin class may yet be forced to conjugate
Guantánamo, amas, amat
and learn with Luciana how "headstrong liberty is lash'd
with woe"—all past and future mornings were impressed

on me just now, dear Sis,
as I sheltered in a doorway on Church Street in St. Andrews
(where, in 673, another Maelduin was bishop),

and tried to come up with a ruse
for unsealing the *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* back in that corner
shop
and tracing the root of *metastasis*.

SILLYHOW STRIDE

In memory of Warren Zevon

I

I want you to tell me if, on Grammy night, you didn't get one hell of a
kick
out of all those bling-it-ons in their bulletproof broughams,
all those line managers who couldn't manage a line of coke,

all those Barmecides offering beakers of barm—
if you didn't get a kick out of being as incongruous
there as John Donne at a junior prom.

Two graves must hide, Warren, thine and mine corse
who, on the day we met, happened
also to meet an individual dragging a full-length cross

along 42nd Street and kept mum, each earning extra Brownie points
for letting that cup pass. The alcoholic
knows that to enter in these bonds

is to be free, yeah right. The young John Donne who sets a Glock
on his dish in the cafeteria
knows that, even as he plots to clean some A & R man's clock,

his muse on dromedary
trots to the Indias of spice and mine
and the Parsi Towers of Silence, even as he buses his tray

with its half-eaten dish of beef chow mein
to the bus station, he's already gone halfway to meet the Space Lab.
The *Space* Lab (*italics mine*),

ALSO BY PAUL MULDOON

New Weather 1973

Mules 1977

Why Brownlee Left 1980

Quoof 1983

Meeting the British 1987

Selected Poems 1968–1986 1987

Madoc: A Mystery 1990

The Annals of Chile 1994

Hay 1998

Poems 1968–1998 2001

Moy Sand and Gravel 2002

Horse Latitudes 2006

The End of the Poem:

Oxford Lectures 2006

MAGGOT FORMS BY

PAUL MULDOON

ANNAN SCHAUER DESIGN

NEW YORK

A SECOND HUMMINGBIRD

Yet another money man
with a finger in the till
at Flavor & Fragrance, my own
not standing still

no less a stance
than his, the only grounds
for his existence
now being to make such rounds

and roundelays as mine, to touch
what I've come to see
as the raw nerve

in each of us, each
doomed to think himself ever so
slightly behind some curve.

THE SIDE PROJECT

I

Forty years of Jumbo doing a one-handed handstand while some
geek

simultaneously bites the head off a Wyandotte cock
and the band plays a Hungarian dance by Brahms
doesn't mean we're all on the same page. No Human Skeleton or

Bearded Lady will primp
less for a small show than a great. A unicorn may graze
the dunes in all their vagaries
and never quite grasp the point
its horn is secured by Bondo.

Though a Norwegian bareback artiste may extend her liking for
mere glogg

to mulled wines in general, a curl of the upper lip is a sign of colic
fairly specific to horses. Our impulse to give anything a try
takes in both sudatory

and Psalter, don't you know? I know from your well-documented
propensity to moan

that your page would be very far from mine
even in the first of those *Syllabi*

Errorum Pope Pius IX, poor slob,

one-handedly set down in 1864, the very year Forepaugh first put
a unicorn in clover

and Sherman's march to the sea meant the Civil War was pretty
much over.

II

Forty years since we set up winter quarters in Florida and the
 hay bale
 first tumbled into the economy of scale,
 what with the cost
 per unit going down as surely as an elephant will be gussied
 up for the "come in." Arachne swallowing a sword all the way to
 the hilt
 as the crowd inches into the tent. The frost now having taken
 such a hold
 the citrus crop is under threat. Each orange and lemon moving
 in its own sphere.
 As for the ignominies suffered by Lucifer,
 a four-horned goat
 who found himself frozen out by the big cat
 contingent from their big car, they stab me in the heart.
 Who hasn't woken up screaming in a four-poster elephant herd?
 When we fell in love, the consequences for the Human Skeleton
 and the Bearded Lady who operates a printers' guillotine
 were simply dire.
 Now Arachne is wearing what looks like ecclesiastical attire.
 She hauls herself up through the rigging while the big cats
 adjourn
 to their big caravan to ponder the laws of exponential decay and
 exponential return.

III

Forty years ago we realized that our impulse to be open
 to pretty much anything may not run to the Feejee Mermaid
 (half-guppy, half-gibbon)
 any more than a dead saint who may still sweat
 the Precious Blood so beloved of Pius IX, poor sod.
 I imagine Barnum taking umbrage
 at the suggestion he'd staged Sherman's march
 as a diversionary tactic. The unicorn Forepaugh turned out has
 the clover slobbers.
 The umbrella-mouth gulper
 is an eel that can take in damn nearly an entire clover field
 but, like yourself, probably doesn't perform fellatio
 and probably isn't impressed by an unbitten
 Wyandotte's felt head with its eye still bright as a button
 the geek holds up to the incoming crowd. That same
 Hungarian dance music
 by Brahms. It's pretty clear Sherman was heading for Moscow
 the way he eased his way with pig grease
 even before the carpetbaggers
 would reveal themselves most by what they most revile.
 At least everyone in a circus crowd accepts he's no more than
 part of the rank and file.

IV

Forty years from the first time we heard the strains of that
 Hungarian
 dance by Brahms and did our best not to picture Jumbo hit by
 an unscheduled freight train
 in a marshalling yard in Ontario, Arachne was making straight
 the path
 over a mud bath
 while Sherman gathered his unruly
 troops with a drumroll
 usually associated with a firing squad. You and I had hardly gone
 beyond our first peck
 at a Coney Island frankfurter stand when I spotted the
 Norwegian bareback
 artiste with one foot on the unicorn sire
 and one on Barnum, as we'd come to know the chief impresario.
 While the spotlight would ballyhoo
 in a figure eight over an elephant folio
 poster announcing General Tom Thumb and Jenny Lind, the
 Swedish Nightingale,
 the Bearded Lady never lost her cool.
 Arachne's insistence that an aerialist is not an acrobat

but a fallen angel serves only to perpetuate
 your idea that manna from heaven
 may be found to an unprecedented degree in Gray's Papaya at
 Eighth Avenue and West Thirty-seventh.

Forty years to the day when a trawl through Jumbo's stomach
 would have brought up keys,
 nuts, screws, washers, bolts, brass tacks, geegaws,
 a bag of coins with which Judas Iscariot
 had been bought off for his part in the papal masquerade
 by that poor sod Barnum, or Dan Rice,
 complete with performing pig. You and I know what it is to have
 a protective layer of ice
 to stave off that greater freeze, know that it's not an out-and-out
 hoax
 when the Bearded Lady enters the blade box
 to be sawn in half. That may not be a spurt
 of blood as such but we know this is no less a blood sport
 than when Arachne ran into a little impediment as the crowd
 inched into the tent.
 Our impulse to apply yellow Centaur Liniment
 to Jumbo or his cousin, 'Toung
 Taloung, was ill-founded, a wrinkling of the nose coupled with
 a looseness of the dung
 being a sign of croup in the mahout. It was strictly of her own
 accord

the Bearded Lady was cut into quarto
 and bound in stillborn calf hide
 like your run-of-the-mill Feegee Mermaid or Pickled Punk
 malformed in his formaldehyde.

VI

Forty years of Barnum trying to establish the cost per unit of
 promoting Commodore Nutt
 as the new Tom Thumb, of Arachne working without a safety net
 at any moment likely to foreground the rot
 in erotica. What must have made Arachne finally see red
 was the realization that, at the 1846 Papal Conclave,
 Pius IX had overseen the Bearded Lady being sawn in half
 by the moderate and conservative factions. For it would surely not
 be lost
 on Pius IX that an aerialist
 is no mere acrobat, given his powers
 of infallibility, don't you know? Forty years of Jumbo showing
 his prowess
 in the one-handed handstand
 while some geek simultaneously decapitates a rooster. The tune
 that will come to haunt
 me as Lucifer leads the "come in" and the geek spits the head
 into the front stalls
 will rise above the big cat calls.
 It's that same old Hungarian dance tune
 played on a cornet from a unicorn that once grazed the dunes
 in all their vagaries. We took it as a signal for Frog Boy and the
 Human Chimera to wreak
 vengeance on Barnum for being such an out-and-out control freak.

VII

Forty years to the day since Sherman set off from Atlanta for
 Savannah with his big caravan
 of big cats, top dogs, a performing pig named Lord Byron and,
 no less proven
 in battle, the Missing Link, Frog Boy,
 the Human Chimera and the Human Alligator. Barnum still
 insisting this isn't a decoy
 to distract us from some main event. Your insisting, meanwhile,
 this was chalk
 from Arachne's hands on my pants. Some days it looked as if
 Lucifer might stalk
 a raggedy-ass lion
 to pull down the news from behind the headline.
 It was 1867 when the frankfurter trend
 took off on Coney Island and it must indeed have marked the end
 of an era to a goat with four horns,
 never mind the first unicorn
 Forepaugh had turned out under the unicorn nomenclature.
 The Missing Link and the Human Alligator
 now found themselves going off behind the generator truck
 to work up their new trick
 while I found myself checking for symptoms of croup
 in both the Norwegian bareback artiste and Arachne, then the
 new girl in the trapeze troupe.

VIII

Forty years of Forepaugh or Dan Rice or Barnum IX heaping
 ignominy
 upon ignominy really doesn't mean
 we're all of a like mind as to how to deal with the rash
 of pickpockets at a matinee, never mind the crash
 in the marshalling yard in Ontario that thrust my little side
 project front and center.
 Jumbo would no more truly benefit from Centaur
 Liniment than, in the Civil War, Barnum truly brought cheer
 to the country with a Pickled Punk in a Mason jar.
 It was in Ontario the Norwegian bareback artiste's triumphing
 over Arachne
 as she might over an unbroken
 Appaloosa came to a sudden halt. Now the Missing Link
 prevailed over *Dictatus Papae*
 in the way Gray's Papaya
 has prevailed over Papaya King.
 I know your propensity for believing Barnum was no more
 subsumed by Ringling
 than Lee was routed by Sherman's Savannah campaign
 but you've got to admit the "come in"
 is an effective way of consigning a crowd to the peripheries.
 It was in Ontario you and I would first find a way of staving off
 that even greater freeze.

IX

Forty years after I stumbled upon the Norwegian bareback
 artiste, herself without a stitch,
 helping Barnum to make a pitch
 for the upcoming gigs at Gethsemane and Golgotha, I found
 Arachne forcing mere
 glogg down the Good Thief's throat. Forepaugh, meanwhile,
 in an unpublished memoir,
 would admit to having hired the gang of pickpockets
 that fleeced the matinee crowd. I imagine you as a mahout lying
 under a spigot
 in Coney Island and wrinkling your nose
 as you pull down the news
 behind the headline that you've finally had your first peck of a
 frankfurter.
 Forty years since we set up winter quarters
 in Florida and the Bearded Lady was cut into duodecimo,
 not even the elephant folio could subsume
 Tom Thumb and Jenny Lind the way Sherman took in Atlanta.
 What you found on my pants on Coney Island
 wasn't chalk but rosin, don't you know? I suppose that, prior to
 the St. Louis hippodrome,

the hope had been that Arachne's spiking her red wine with equal
parts rum
and potato akvavit
might allow her to bounce off the Appaloosa's rosin-dappled
safety net and land on her feet.

x

Forty years since Sherman was attacked by Confederate guerillas
from the rear
and you and I first settled into our starring roles in our own little
raree
show cum snake-oil
circus it's pretty clear we've found a way to foil
most guerilla attacks by making a preemptive strike on the
"citrus crop."
I'm no more interested in an Arachne showing me the ropes
than in a Norwegian bareback artiste and her umbrella-mouth
gulper eel.
I imagine a Norwegian bareback artiste, as recently as 1864,
setting the papal seal
on a Mason jar in which is suspended the first (and last) *Syllabus*
Errorum.
Who hasn't woken up screaming in a forest of four-poster
pachyderms
where thin-skinned mahouts from their howdahs
incite us to winter in Florida?
The joint funeral of the Norwegian bareback artiste trampled by
her Appaloosa
and Arachne, who fell to her death in a hippodrome in St. Louis,

reminds us no Bearded Lady nor Human Skeleton will prink
less than the Human Alligator or Missing Link
for if Jumbo succumbing to a rogue train in a marshalling yard
truly marks the end of an era
it also truly allows us to remake ourselves as Frog Boy and the
Human Chimera.

THE SOD FARM

Her car must have caught fire
when she missed a turn
or blew a tire,
the girl with third-degree burns

who slammed into a tree
by the mist-shrouded sod farm.
40%. Third degree.
Her gauze-wrapped arms

now taking in unending variations
and surprises: temples, grottoes,
waterfalls, ruins, leafy glades

with sculpture, and such features
as would set off the imagination
on journeys in time as well as space.