

"Words' Worth" Poetry Readings

Poets at the Culture, Arts, and Parks Committee of the Seattle City Council.

Highwire by Paul Hunter

Reminds me of the worst circus I ever saw
the Bigeloni in Saint Louis
with only a couple talents in the show
to spin dishes juggle sway on the trapeze
and dash backstage to change their names and clothes
while the mushmouth ringmaster blathers
and one thin clown squirts us and pops balloons
and my kids hatch some monster bellyaches
on cotton candy peanuts and the like
and start pulling big stage yawns
at which point it's way past time to go

when there's a fanfare and out stumbles
this pudgy little guy
in a red cape and tight tights
and a couple days' growth a whisker
looking a bit irate
like he just woke up with a porcupine
and none too pleased at the thin crowd
as he climbs to the highwire
through a brassy offkey flourish

and who knows what he's thinking
maybe about his shrunken underwear
but the spotlight wobbles up
and steadies and he's on

and the kids stop groaning a minute
as he fires up a motorcycle
that smokes and stutters badly
painted all the same red as his clothes
and I think there's nothing to this
fool running rims on a tightrope
and instead of handlebars
a twenty-five foot balance pole
and I'm tired as he is calling this a show

when he shoves off
and gets halfway out there
and the stuttering little red thing up and dies

and there he is
sixty feet off a cement floor
with a flimsy little net
he could break right through
with all this extra weight

astraddle the problem

in a skintight devil suit
onstage and no getting back
out where it's put up or shut up

at first they try to bluff it through
the band gives him a ragged buildup
and all three spotlights search him out

until we see the seat begin to pop
as he fiddles with the gas and choke
and finally waves them off

and my palms are itching and burning
my throat becomes dry
as he rises on his toes
and swings his weight down
to kickstart it
and it sulks and coughs
and the pole wows like a monster bowtie
and he wobbles and practically dives off
this teeny thing he never gave a damn about

and twice it catches twice it dies
in dead silence
even the peanut vendors still for once
then his face lets go the anger
and gets wondering and round
as he puzzles through it
and on the third try coaxes
it to hang on for a minute

and as he revs and warms it
in no hurry now
he scans us all from way up there
and so help me I can see
the scowl climb back aboard him

and burn the clutch
and ride the twenty feet or so

then slide down the rope exhausted
and stomp off not even bowing
to our feverish applause

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