

Tightrope

by Emily Smith-Miller

It's always dark. You catch me by the wrist just as the ferris wheel starts up again and pull my shoulder out of its socket towards you. I resist, feigning hatred and pain, but I don't feel anything except your hand on my arm hot and scalding lighting my skin, a brand I'm sure. I know they all look at me like I'm branded. But it's dark under the ferris wheel, behind the back of a side-show tent. Wet grass climbs my bare calves. I tell you I'll scream, but you know I won't. They sit in their buckets rocking back and forth at the top looking down. Oh so scary.

We're at the top of something, something much more terrifying and I know how high I am, and how far the ground is from my curled toes. The toes I use to pick up pencils with: alien toes, monkey feet, *that toe* my grandfather would say. You and your granddaughter have got *those toes*, he would shout at my grandmother, while she smiled at me comparing feet as I snuggled next to her in the patchwork armchair. My toes couldn't grip terrestrial ground now, teetering so far above substantiality, tethered only by your damn hand. Lanky arm, clutching me closer to the black abysmal ethereally that consumes you when gravity fails.

"Fuck you."

I pull away. But you are attached. The ferris wheel starts up, you follow me to the back of the tent and lift my skirt despite the resistance of sweat and feeble arms.

"How did you know?" I ask.

I was a tightrope walker back then. I walked fine lines with perfect monkey feet. I walked breaking tree branches balancing jugs of water on my head. And then I slipped. All you wanted was a specimen I thought when you ripped that sheer fabric. The sweat made you difficult. My shoulder ached. Those toes. Why couldn't they grasp anything, and why was I falling when I could balance on Niagara Falls holding an umbrella? That was me floating away a ballerina in the mist soaring at the behest of flitting umbrella over

the falls to doomed reverie. Chiffon blouse. Ferris wheel spin. Tent shakes. Toe step. Damp reeds plastered like headlines against my thighs. You were here breaking my toes, and the night wolf was howling to support the home team scoring on its visitors, while the black bird sang in agony against defeat. But, its melancholy was somehow bittersweet as each piece of clothing tattered beneath the pine boughs and my legs shook as they spread with vehemence.

"I love you," I say, almost whisper, and you smack me.

"Dammit Lauren. You know I can't come when you talk to me like that."

"I'm sorry, I thought since we'd already gone this far it wouldn't matter."

" Well it does matter."

You pull up your pants and stalk away. I guess tomorrow night I'll pretend to be a snake charmer or a fire-eater, maybe the girl who rides the ponies backwards. Whoever I am, I won't be a tight rope walker, I won't be Lauren.

