The Clown Show

by Robert Kloss

Before the letter, this funeral. Always a funeral with clowns, always a clown show with mutes in white face and polka dots, with men banished beneath the ruffles and the soundless gestures of mimes. Now this gaggle of Pierrots emerged from a single station wagon, pink tongues extended and lace collars pulled, a hundredfold human luggage untangled onto the final lawn, where they milled and mulled like philosophers the gravity of a world so easily fled and where jugglers plucked and tossed femurs and jaw bones from the loose soil. Soon, all gathered and leaned and, below, under his pine timber and dirt, lay Pierrot, the man, lay Pierrot, something less than man, and as the soil settled, these honks into handkerchiefs, these painted on tears and these true tears, bleeding.

After the funeral, this letter in a child's hand, this letter immersed in the stray stories of those long dead, the remembrances of mothers and grandmothers, gone to dust. The exploits of Pierrot, long ago under the big top, the lashing of Pierrot's whip and “the animals you thrilled us with.” Ah, the remembrance and how those days have faded. For so long now no animals but what animals Pierrot crafted from the shadows, lions and hounds gnashing and dancing on walls. For so long now no big top overhead but the sky, the plaster ceiling, the pipes and cobwebs. For so long Pierrot, gesturing only to Pierrot, who mirrored his gestures in return. For so long, Pierrot yet something less than Pierrot.

Now, long days along the roads, back roads and highways, roads of dust and concrete, roads bent and vibrating in the heat and the letter taped to the windshield, a membrane browning in the sun. Long days tangled in the station wagon, legs and heads flopped from windows, the back window kicked out and exploded into dust for the bulges and ruffles of a hundred Pierrots, their long red shoes and polka dots. Long days now hurtling along, lost in the vibrations of

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gestures, lost within the vibration of minds. These days hurtling along roads in an endless gesture, the only gesture Pierrot once knew. The gesture Pierrot never forgot.

Now long nights around campfires, long nights in the shadows of flames and against the heat of flames, white face paint dripping from chins and lips, beaded on noses. Long nights around campfires and the gestures of Pierrot to Pierrot, the language of soundless articulations, of words born of cotton glove and shadows thrown across a clearing, of fingers deformed into brown bears. Long nights of Pierrot locked inside invisible boxes, trapped and wailing soundlessly, of Pierrot suspended from invisible trees by invisible ropes, of Pierrot ascending stairs and descending stairs, of Pierrot gesturing the gristly aftermath of a death by Russian Roulette. Long nights of Pierrot laughing soundlessly, of Pierrot flickering in the shadows, the turmoil of the fires.

And the air spoke with vibrations: *How she said the sky opened—the rain of tickertape—*

Long nights now camped in clearings, long nights recollecting the company of animals, the snores and howling of brown bears and basset hounds, caged and shackled, leashed and sedated. The warmth of animals. The brilliance. Animals fed on bloody steaks and animals trained with whips. How those nights smelled of the hoops they burned and the fur they scorched. Now, long nights amidst the black juts of vacant forests and no animals but the animals of Pierrot's minds. Now no howling but the howling behind his eyes.

And the air curled into his words: *Ah, if I could but once smell the smell of popcorn, cotton candy—.*

Long days along the roads and no animals but those found mounded and fly-swaddled, those does and dogs tossed and

sweltering in ravines and ditches. No animals now but those of bleached bones. Those half consumed and mashed. Long days Pierrot spent shooing flies with white gloved hands, lifting and dropping limp limbs and paws. Long days spent cradling skulls, rocking back and forth heaps of ragged meat and fur, long nights moaning and weeping and gnashing. Long days training the untrainable, tossing decayed coyotes underhand through blazing hoops, whipping and chastising does, beetle fat and bulged on the road. And everywhere the wild buzz of horse flies, ascending.

How she said—oh, how I've dreamed—ruffles and polka dots.

In the hum of flies recall now those tigers and elephants, last seen within the mind of Pierrot, last seen on tin types and daguerreotypes. Recall now those parades through the heart of small towns, ticker tape and Main Street crowded with families, applauding, whistling, and boys on fathers' shoulders, mother and her flowered hat. Recall those towns last known within the shallows of Pierrot's mind, those towns lost long ago. Those towns found only beneath skins of dust and within canisters, newsreels and microfilm spools.

Now—the dead—

Long nights on the road and into the ravines, wondering wordlessly how far they had traveled and where they were going, wondering and forgetting and consulting again the map, although they now travelled those forests beyond the forests on maps, the forests inferred alone by the absence of lines and words. Now those forests where mounds of bones lay bleached, within the ink juts of pines, the echoed moans and yowls of mountain lions and cougars, brown bears and black bears, and how their shadows and sounds expanded and deformed within Pierrot's mind. The whipping gestures Pierrot made in the listening as he squirmed and writhed,

the hoops he doused with lighter fluid and the blue flames that gleamed in his wide exhilarated eyes.

Pierrot—mother—our grandmothers—

Under the pitch atmosphere and how Pierrot crept into the forest with a frying pan and a potato sack, the snores of Pierrots whistling in his wake. How he hurried on tip toes to the howling of bears within the forest, the faded crackle of deadened fires at his ruffled back. How brown bears stood on the threshold of the forest, sneering on hind legs, yellowed teeth and fur sheen'd as if silver beneath the opened membrane of the night. How these bears clubbed him with paws and how Pierrot spoke aloud. How these bears opened his throat, his stomach, and the noises Pierrot made. Ah, Pierrot, long silent when they found him covered in sticks and leaves, the dried blood and the flies. Thereafter, hours spent in the dumb show of their grieving, mulling and chin stroking. Thereafter, days wandering from forest to forest without thought. Long days and their numbers dwindling in the nights. Long days of polka dotted search parties edging the forests, the mounds of sticks and leaves just across the threshold, white gloves smeared with red, the buzzing of flies.

Pierrot—mother—Pierrot—Your songs—Pierrot—your joy—your wide—Pierrot—your animals—

Long days and Pierrot, hunched and digging in the dust of fields for bones, sparrow bones, gopher bones, skulls or femurs—How Pierrot threw the half skulls of finches through hoops. How Pierrot whipped and punished a rotten branch he insisted was a rib. How Pierrot dashed, dusted and bloodied, across the tilled and silent earth of ravaged cornfields. How he yearned to know the clucking of hens and the mooing of cows. To understand and train the emaciated and ancient faces of goats. How those Pierrots faded into

the clots and clouds of dirt. How these Pierrots were never seen again.

So much dust—our mothers—dust—our—gr—

Long days and Pierrots dust masked and dwindled to a half dozen. Training the remains of field mice and birch trees shaped as bones. No more forests but the yellow glow of the swamps. No more moaning life but the croaking and hissing of an alien species. They, into the ragged forests of the swamps, the rank and dying vegetation they wandered. No more the glow of the firelight, the glistening firmament of the opened sky. Now, the only illume from the yellow eyes of alligators, the ghost wane of gases and thereafter, the last sounds of Pierrots echoed throughout the valleys.

—of dust—

Now, one Pierrot and he continued in the station wagon until the station wagon collapsed into rust and coagulated oil. One Pierrot and he continued on foot, his boots worn through and his belly caved in for hunger, until he boiled his boots, nibbled the limp leather and drank the brown brine. The rotted laces swirled and swallowed as if the finest spaghetti. How he slept in meadows under the open membrane of the night while over him stooped the silent apparitions of a hundred dead brothers, those bloodshot eyes and glistening cavities of Pierrots, how they gestured the funerals they never had, the languages they never spoke, the animals they long ago knew and trained and fought and died beneath and were digested within.

How mother saw—from our balcony I would wait—from our balcony I would imagine—

How he staggered along highways and dirt roads, lost beneath the yellowed membrane, lost in the silence of his gestures, of his

wheezing. How he staggered along until the roads sweltered with the buzz and hum of speakers situated in trees, arranged on poles along concrete roads; spoken by speakers propped on low lying sandstone and speakers covered with the vacant nests of birds and speakers where chameleons lay sunning; speakers worn and spitting dead wires and wires sparking. Speakers along the road issuing the language of static, and now, a voice deep and lost and taut and frayed. A voice beneath all static, “Where are you, in the memories of mother, where are you long off in the voice of bears, of tigers, of lions, of dogs in ruffles? Where are you with your white strong eyes—”

—our animals and how we have trained them.

Into the city now, a city deteriorated into bricks and dust and shards of glass. A city of flat-bed trucks rusted and a city of speakers, towered and humming. A city of windows punched out and fire escapes rusted, a city of smeared and inarticulate graffiti and of buildings boarded over with long ago rotten planks, a city whose proudest buildings are those we would call burned out husks; a city of speakers towered and swaying like trees in a tempest; speakers spilled open and speakers humming an eternal language of white static—

I see you in my nights. In my days that are ever nights, with your smiles, your lips, the animals you—

A city of flatbed trucks brimming with the skins and skulls of alligators, with the black and green and brown figures of leather and flies. Flatbed trucks overstuffed with the carcasses of alligators shot through the back of the heads or brimmed with those skins of what were once alligators, now the figments of shoes and boots and briefcases and the homes of rats and the nests of birds. How Pierrot passed along these trucks, and how he did not attempt to train the

long-ago-monsters within, the bleached white jawbones, the teeth long and glinting as if Bowie knives.

—the skins of your big top—your hoops and the—

Lost now within a city of dense and white sound, crackling and humming. A city once of wide avenues filled with families smiling, little boys on their father's shoulders, while mother quiet in her flowered hat. A city once of tickertape and confetti. How the streets trembled against the march of elephants— How Pierrot juggled bowling pins and cue balls and mimed a thousand spectacles along these avenues, gone to dust and busted brick, gone to broken wine bottles and rusted trucks—These streets haunted alone by the apparitions within Pierrot's mind.

Lost—

Lost now and wandering into the fallen apart doors of apartment buildings and malt shops, the bones of rats in the moss'd and torn stools. Into those houses not collapsed, the cobwebbed bedrooms of children long ago grown and died, the dens where the jackets and the leather bound volumes and pipes of fathers lay covered in dust. Pierrot, lost now and napping on dusted davenports and Pierrot lost and expanding shadowed puppets against the water stained wallpapers and those wallpapers bulged with the husks of beetles and mice.

Pierrot lost along corridors and within the shadows and water smears of wilted walls. Lost and yet how the vibrations of a long ago voice pulled him along. Lost now until this bedroom—This room of shadows and ammonia. This room of humming and voices. This bedroom that rocks against strong winds, this bedroom with windows bricked over. This room of respirators and radios towered and blipping and hissing. This room of a man skeletal and attached to respirators. A portrait of a woman on his night stand, an etching

of hues pink and brown. Her lips as if blossoms. Her petal'd hair. This room of a man and his wool blanket covered by the vestments of time: dust, flaked plaster, shed skin, rat droppings. His yellow beard and sunken eyes. This man and the microphone he clasped and spoke into these centuries: *“our nights until she was gone, my mother never—”* How the city of speakers vibrated with his words and how the streets and alleyways hummed with their meaning.

Now from Pierrot's pocket the last shreds and tatters of the letter. How they fell into yellowed dust as Pierrot placed the scraps unto the man. His wheeze as he felt the last of this crumbling membrane, “Oh,” he said, “I was… she was alive yet—she sat before me, and she said—” and the man asked, “When will you? The lights, your music—” and Pierrot gestured that he already had and the man asked, “Was it beautiful? Did you stack yourselves a hundred high? Were their elephants and lions?” and Pierrot gestured these animals and he gestured the tigers, the brown bears and basset hounds, pink skirted and leaping through blazing hoops. He gestured the lashing of whips, those languages eternal. How the man saw them alive and snarling in the shadows of the walls and how Pierrot expanded these into the recollections of mother in her flowered hat, into the little boy upon his father's shoulders, the showering of confetti, the pomp of the brass band, the twirling of batons—. The man laughed, he wept, “How did you see, how have you known—” and Pierrot showed the man the knowledge held within his gestures, and the man said, “Do this—for those men out there, these men who toil and pave and build our city,” and Pierrot articulated with his hands, bare and torn, “But I have” and the man said, “Show me” and so Pierrot articulated a world so long unseen, his eyes, the shadows of the wall and the static within the air, and this man, the last man, gone and forever lost now within the forest of Pierrot's gestures, lost within the minds of a mime.