8-15-2018

Straw Men

C. R. Resetarits

Abstract

The strong man sits at the window of his trailer.

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/westview

Part of the Fiction Commons, Nonfiction Commons, Photography Commons, and the Poetry Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol34/iss1/3
The strong man sits at the window of his trailer. The big top poles are set, canvas laid out. Smaller tents at the rim of dust and prairie grasses are already up and flapping for attention. Breezes blow high and low, differently. He hears them playing through cottonwoods lining a gulch at the farthest edge of the fairground. The sound falling through trees, rustling up from field grasses—symphonic, layered—is almost enough to soothe the beast. Almost.

How’d he let it happen? How’d he come to this moment, sitting idle, watching the day? He has a dreadful thought: what if he comes to like it, this idiot trance? What if the strength of rage and spite and a daily bottle of whisky ebb away or change direction like the wind? He reaches for the bottle beside him and drinks to test that the effects of whiskey, at least, are still true. Yes indeed, and so back to the window his eyes drift.

A man on horseback rides in among the bones of the big top, handing out smiles and thumbs up like a pixie scattering dust.

The strong man turns more fully to the window, resting his chin on its sill. Why’d it hurt so much to lose to a small-time, crippled circus owner? One step, one leg-dragging step, from ordinary carnie crap. Not even a worthy foe. Pathetic. How’d he let it happen?

The man on horseback swings off, body moving like some smooth elegant bird of prey, arms spread, perfect balance. His landing is art, the grace of God, but then the man hobbles over the earth like a broken sparrow.

What sort of witch would choose a hobbled fool? Look at him. Look.

BERNARDO’S FALL FROM HIGH WIRE. Maybe he didn’t fall, probably jumped. Could have. Saw the others go, thought he’d catch hell, took a dive. The only thing is, after that, he ought to stay low, hell-bent, crippled in and out, nasty, mean as a long no-net fall. But the
ninny can’t manage that.
“I’d rather have died clean out,” the strong man mumbles.

He grabs for something to throw. It’s a stool this time: the one that had been holding his bottle. He grabs the bottle with one hand and hurls the stool with the other, across the tiny trailer, bang against the dented far wall. Then he sucks on his gold elixir until he grows numb and nearsighted.

Outside, the hobbling man hears the bang and turns toward it. The crew, as usual, follow his lead. At the other end of the field, one of the male lions lets out a wail. The crew joke and make rude comparisons.

The crippled man smiles, shakes his head.
“Let me know if you have any trouble with the set up.”

“Sure thing, boss,” the men answer in chorus.

“Don’t you worry any, Mr. Bernardo,” one man offers, as the others nod. “We won’t let Sammy near you or Gina. Got the cat gun on him most of the time.”

“Not worried.”

Bernardo smiles gently. He hobbles back to his horse. Hands on horn, his arms and good leg launch him into the air, where he hangs, body shimmering, for a second or two longer than expected. He drops into his saddle and rides off.

The crew turn again toward the trailer, which is silent now, and joke amongst themselves, ‘cause neither Sammy nor Bernardo have noticed yet that the crew has been slowly parking Sammy’s trailer farther and farther from the mess tent. Each move, each new town, each old 4H field. Just a foot farther away. Bernardo won’t think it’s funny when he finally figures it out. Sammy will roar. And the collective crew will laugh until their collective balls hurt.

***

Lec, the youngest and brightest of Calder’s Laundry Deluxe delivery men, picked up the circus laundry two days before down around Lebanon. The manager wants delivery at their next stop, the county fairgrounds. It’s a rush job and a lot of laundry for lots of different
names. Foreign-sounding names. Circus folk. They promise another world, a better way. Lec believes there are many better ways.

Lec spots the big top, striped red and blue, and above it ribbon flags of purple and orange, whipped up in the air by the wind. Scattered to the side and behind the big tent sit the reds and yellows of the circus wagons and the blue and orange striped awnings of the concession stands; underneath it all, the greening prairie rolls, big hurt-blue sky overhead.

Late spring seems a good time for the circus, Lec figures, as long as it don’t rain too hard. Better than county fair time, dead-dry August, the prairie packed down to nothing after a summer full of 4H camps and barrel-racing events and hog shows and car shows and every odd show under the sun. By August, the yellow dust is flying in dull whirls, and the heat is flying in slow, oppressive waves. No time for a circus. You want your circus sharp and fast and bursting with color and noise. The way you want your life. Early June, end of May, busting green, not worn down and August yellow-brown. Nope. Not for him. Lec is busting with color and noise, just busting. He feels good, although maybe a little too tight around the edges, a little too much friction, maybe the threat of the fire in his belly breaking through and consuming the air all around him, but that can’t be helped, that’s part of his landscape too, lots of deadwood scattered among the green, ready to go.

Lec thinks sometimes about joining the circus; that is, he thinks
about running away from home. And if you need to run, then why
not someplace marvelous: carnie folk, world-wonders, animals,
clowns, tricksters, acrobats, daredevils, and contortionists. A
world all rightly odd, fluid and flourishing, on the move. It’s good
to be on the move. Much better to be unusual and moving than
stagnant and stuck like his old momma. Oh, she’s a case alright,
floundering, laying in beds of pee and howling like a snap-trapped
fox, walloping, rotting, sucking everybody in, like a sink hole, a bog,
a run of stinking swamp. He shakes these thoughts off. Maybe it
ain’t her fault she’s crazy as a loon. Maybe. But it sure feels like
she’s damn guilty of something.

The circus though, how very different it is! The circus is all about
air and shimmer. What he admires most about the circus is how it
swings for the sky, half of the acts up in the air, the others too quick
to pin down. Circus people move through rarified spaces, and then
they pick up and move on altogether. Progress. That’s how Lec sees
it. Of course, he’s on the move too. Moving up in the world. Old
Calder himself is barking for Lec to be taken off the delivery route
soon as possible. Needs him as an assistant, another set of eyes.
Lec’s going to be his right-hand man. So Lec is, on this crisp, sweet-
smelling morning, especially thankful to be making this delivery,
maybe his last, right into the heart of the one world, one way, that
truly mirrors his heart and his appreciation of things that soar and
shimmer and live to move.

Lec stops at the circus manager’s trailer. The manager’s wife tells him
to drive the truck down to the dining tent. There’s a large, cleared
circle of trampled ground in front. Beyond the clearing, trailers
radiate back into the tall grass. A team of jugglers is practicing in
the area, but they move to the side as soon as they spot the truck.
Lec parks and gives the jugglers a big grin.

“Here with your laundry,” he announces, waving a generous hand
at the words “Calder’s Laundry Express” painted on the side of the
truck. The jugglers nod and disappear between trailers just as the
manager’s wife reappears.

“Here’s my ticket, kid, and money.”

Lec finds her shirts right away thanks to the alphabetized, box-and-
rubber-band system he’s concocted. Nothing quite as comforting as a well-ordered delivery. Only thing he might like better is the simplicity of a white cotton shirt, crisply folded and pinned onto a stiff rectangle of cardboard. Oh, Lec longs for order, loves straight lines, gentle curves, beautiful patterns. The circus grounds are full of these, and Lec’s feeling mighty fine.

“Laundry up,” the manager’s wife speaks into the bullhorn. “Laundry up.” She tugs a rope hung just outside the dining tent, and a bell peals.

“Listen, kid,” she says over the waning ring, “anything that’s not come for just shove in the door back of my trailer, and I’ll take care of it.” Then she gives Lec a wink and a gentle pat on the arm before disappearing into the wave of circus folk heading down the trailer lanes.

Quite a crowd, although remarkably quiet and slow. They line up without fuss, money and tickets in hand. Lec marvels at the diversity, at the trim athletic bodies. And all acting so natural and unconcerned. The way people ought.

The line goes quickly. Easy change. Patient tempers. Most smile a flat, mute smile and turn away.
Sammy follows the crowd. He’s still numb and myopic. He looks around for her. She’d be keen, no doubt, on getting his shirts now. The crowd around him is a bit of a rush, as much a terror. He notes the way they steer clear, the way they watch him from the corners of their eyes. He hasn’t been out among them in years. Every morning, he works out alone with weights behind his trailer. Afternoons, he works on his acts. He is base-man for two, the acrobatic Franco brothers—a trio of cousins, half-breed gypsies, stinking idiots—and the contortionists, May and Linn Sue—silent, judging sorceresses. Beyond them, Gina has been his link to the outside world. Gina stood in line for his shirts and brought trays of food, kept him supplied with the workaday details of circus life. He’d never listened, never said thank you. Beat the hell out of her more than once, winced and roared at her mentions of marriage and children. Drank. Drank some more. And then she moved out, as if something had changed, as if some line had been crossed. He’d like to know what, where. He’d like to know what the hell happened.

There’s a crowd at the mess. There stands the delivery truck with a young buck in uniform handing out orders. Sammy walks straight for the head of the line and steps in.

With only a fourth of the line left to go, a large, muscular man wanders into the clearing. He seems older than most, although his body is bulky and fit and tight. He wears a black cotton t-shirt stretched over his bulging frame and black sweatpants, bare feet. His skin, where visible, is rubbery, tanned, damp. His hair is black, unconvincing so, like a poorly polished shoe. His face is too taut, the eyes squinting disdain, the mouth a permanent sneer. The bulky man walks to the head of the line and steps in between two dirty looks: “Stop it, Sammy,” the one in front says, “Get to the back,” whines the other. Sammy says nothing. Adjusts his stance a little, claiming more ground.

Lec doesn’t want to hassle but gives Sammy a disapproving frown and asks for his ticket.
Sammy doesn’t particularly care for the frown the delivery kid is giving him. Uppity.


“Five dollars even,” the kid says crisply, holding the bundle out.

Sammy reaches for it, but the kid weaves it through his hands and away.

“Sorry, sir. Payment first.”

“Payment? Well, hell, I don’t have any money on me.”

Damn that woman. Making a spectacle of him still. How was he to know to bring money?

“Give me the shirts, and I’ll go get some.”

The kid turns and puts the shirts on a table behind him.

Sammy can hear the silence of those behind him loving this scenario. Sammy getting his, once again. What to do with more anger, though? The night she left, he tore a hole in a nearby town. Feeling the fool. Overnight in jail. Bernardo there with bail in the morning.

“If you’re not ready, sir, please step aside.”

Night she and Bernardo married, he began punching holes in the circus trailers, peeling tin peeling hands. Hours at some local clinic. Following week kind of tricky holding on to those wiggling twins and twits with his fingers all bandaged. Forced to concentrate, to forget. Now there seems a need for another hole in the world.

“Jackass,” Sammy mutters, and then he reaches up in a flurry, grabs Lec’s shirt, and rips it clear.

The quiet line behind Sammy releases one long unified groan, then backs away and begins a round of condemnations, albeit in soft, wind-chime tones.

“There’s collateral for ya, lover boy,” Sammy says with a laugh, waving the front of Lec’s tattered shirt.
Lec stands a moment dumbfounded. The hem of his short sleeves still ring his lean, muscular arms, and the back of the shirt remains stuck like glue to his sweating back. Down the front of him, though, it had been torn clean away, revealing the muscled chest, rippled abdomen of a boy gone man who’s been digging ditches and hauling other people’s crap since he was twelve. If Lec were inclined to notice, he would see the glimmer of appreciation for a body well-formed in the eyes of those lined up back of Sammy. The physical is, after all, their livelihood. Aesthetically, empathetically, reactively, the crowd is appreciating Lec something fierce, wondering just how the boy will handle the situation.

Lec doesn’t wonder, though. There isn’t much left in him for wonder. Nothing much that isn’t already fueling the fire of his indignation. Old man Calder has showed him respect. Calder has, and Calder’s a hell of a lot more important than this dumb ox in front of him now. Lec’s tired of taking shit from people, tired of their inability to see his sincerity, his promise. Calder’s care has shown him a better way. Maybe it’s time he showed a few of the world’s losers a better way
too.

“Asshole punk,” Sammy slurs and then swings one of his giant-size fists.

Lec ducks, steps in, still bent, and then comes up quick right under Sammy’s jaw, comes up hard with his fist and the whole of his young body, comes up springing from thighs wound up as tight and tenacious as a new run of climbing peas. Up Lec goes and up goes Sammy’s jaw, pressing in pieces for a moment up against his cheekbone.

Sammy stumbles back, sprouting blood, falls almost into the crowd but then rights himself and makes a jagged run for Lec. Sammy drives forward, straight back into the judgment of Lec’s second swing, which comes from the side, shooting like a comet born from some busted up galaxy. The comet hits, and Sammy’s head goes right on into orbit, his big bulky body trailing after. He falls to the ground, still for a moment or two, then damn if he doesn’t crawl to all fours, back up to two.

***

Sammy crawls up from worm to rat to wavering man. Stands. Stumbles toward the kid again, swinging weakly, almost giddy, at the swarm of black moths hovering around the kid’s head.

The kid steps clear. Sammy feels the dull pull in his bruised body as his empty swing hurls through air, willing, pensive. The kid steps in again—pound, pound, pound—body blows. The kid is laughing now, pumped up, ready to go. Sammy stumbles for him, falling, but the kid pulls clear again, or nearly. The kid is stepping away but not quick enough. Sammy grabs his leg and starts to roll, twist, taking the kid with him. Then the kid does an amazing thing. Sammy marvels at it. The kid heaves his shoulders and body into an airborne dive, pulling the leg free, rolling away over the gravel, out
of Sammy’s reach.
The boy’s not laughing anymore. He’s crying, burning with rage. He thought he was invincible, but, for a second there, with Sammy wrapped round his leg, the kid panicked, felt fear. Sammy understands that he wants to run, wants out, but Sammy can’t let him go. Needs to make him stay and give him, give them both, a new way. There’s no going back.

Sammy pulls up once more to knuckles and knees and a swaying stand. The kid keeps circling, holding his stomach, gasping for air.
The circus owner Bernardo finally comes hobbling over from the mess tent to see what all the racket is about.
“Motherlovin’, sisterbuggin’, dunce,” Sammy sings out as he sways.

***

Lec’s had enough. Just wants to get on with it. Score’s settled, damage done. Enough. Doesn’t anyone know when to stop? Makes him sick to his stomach. So Lec lets go. Pounds, punches, rages blind. Isn’t any sort of fun. Just dumb, undammed mayhem. Not easily begun, hard to stop. Four guys in overalls and Bernardo finally pull Lec off. They sit him down at the edge of the clearing. Bernardo slowly talks him down, calming hands on head or neck while the boy exhales what remains of his rage and then heaves and gasps for air.

Poignant, pathetic, and a bit of a marvel, too, or so it seems to play across Sammy’s swelling face as he lies quietly, hugging grass. His softened glaze is focused on the boy and Bernardo for a while, but then the wind picks up, drawing his eyes to the cottonwoods, and the shadow of a smile drifts across his face.

***