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At the Cirque Fernando: The Ringmaster, 1888

Nadine Meyer

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AT THE CIRQUE FERNANDO: THE RINGMASTER, 1888

After Henri Toulouse-Lautrec

It is the horse's ass that catches your eye,
enormous beneath the tail, brushed like a girl's,
to a platinum shine. But the girl on this
circus pony is a red head; her ass,
perched side-saddle on the horse's flank,
and the sash at her waist, knotted
in glimmering wings, promises flight.
Next you notice the Ringmaster, his eyes
trained on the girl, her eyes on his, the rope
of their gazes more palpable than
the whip powering the pony's stride.
He, in his double breasted suit,
will conduct her flight, her explosion
from the horse's heft, her body tearing
through the clown's papered hoola-hoop.
The horse, its charged cargo on its back,
races in a hectic arc, where
a clown atop a painted stool raises
a new full moon each time the velum O
is ruptured, as though each time were her first,
and the men who squat in stadium seating
see her, again and again, in her first throws,
like the girls who dance at the Moulin Rouge
where Lautrec learned illusion, the clamshell
under-side of skirts, the way they'd
dance and twist, frenzied as a pony.
He painted them with wild energy
in their skirts, though their faces were
composed as stone, their eyes detached: a blouse
like any aristocrat's, a hat with plume,
but legs you couldn't focus on and, beneath,
the purple snatches of their under things.
She's like, too, the *femmes de maison*
who each time they'd take him in, would arch

and tense as though he were the first. But painter
of lightning skirts and bombed-out eyes, he must
have known each time the woman swayed and groaned
she disappeared through the darkness at the center
of her mind. Each time she breaks the barrier,
Fernando's girl lands with ease on the horse's
rolling muscle. The clowns, with sleight of hand,
swiftly dispose of all those rings, but in
the circus memory, in the sphere's stale air
there hangs the absence of a girl, her shadow space,
her body's tear in each discarded moon.