

## Ken Meisel – Two Poems

### American Carnival

I am the transient mania  
that comes to town in the springtime  
when the trees offer to the gloomy world  
their whorls of sap green leaves,  
and the small, orphaned plants,  
rising from the wet, mottled soil,  
split their fingerling leaves  
through the dense wet mud like the tendrils  
of angels, escaping their dungeons.  
Some caprice of stillness insists me here.  
Something of me protests the perishing world.  
I set in space my picnic table of Ferris wheels  
and merry-go-rounds and circus tents  
in the parking lots of the churches,  
while surrounding me, the lots of cars  
with their catfish faces and their pike tailfins  
sit still, like schools of two-toned fish.  
I offer the world its strange heights.  
I bring the world the tilt-a-whirl  
and the floral caricature of carousals and twists,  
and bumper cars and giant spinning tea cups  
where the unimagined world exists again.  
Something of me comes from nightmare,  
something from the snippets of dreams  
forgotten, in the glare and glaze of waking.  
The animals along the fence line  
recognize me as the floating signatures  
of the world's broken fragments –  
coming back to life force again –  
like grotesque pieces of the world's disarray.  
Even the policemen, like blue bishops,  
their billy sticks at hip, stand still,  
and they allow the sky above them  
to break open with the strange  
bellowing glow of shrieks and lights.  
Watch, if you can, the little girls  
in their pink dresses,  
gathering together like honeysuckle  
to climb up onto the Ferris wheel  
for their lift off to heaven.  
Notice the way that their mothers  
fidget their slender fingers

into their small, irritated purses  
for cigarettes, and do observe  
the style that they employ  
as they hover intimately together  
like lacquered white swans,  
chattering in groups. Watch as the boys  
in their fringe coats and their coonskin hats  
nudge up close to the gun gallery,  
rifles in hand, to shoot at the small,  
sanguine faces of the tin clowns –  
moving up and down like convicts  
in a frozen, drunken laughter –  
and notice the rows of stuffed animals  
lined up like rewards on the shelf behind,  
like a strange, lonesome zoo  
waiting to be taken. Catch the Carney  
with his missing front tooth hawking  
out the tickets for the bang-a-gong.  
Notice as the fathers, like hydraulic pipes,  
strengthen themselves with fat cigars  
and brown bottles of beer as they,  
themselves, line up and take turns  
with the large red and silver hammer  
to bang the bell as hard as their mighty  
might can take them – so that the ball,  
like a mercury sun, can rise up  
again to smash the uppermost top  
of something imperishable –  
and listen to the world's echo chamber  
like a conundrum, banging on,  
as the ball, hitting the bell, rings.

### **The River Variation # 1**

Thorough and immanent,  
translucent and misted,

the river follows its lulling.  
So full of transport pearls,

bubbles, gross hermitage,  
pieces of scatter and tithing

complete with mirrors  
and falsifications, it flows

and follows concourse; it  
picks up bleedings and stitches;

shorn pieces of fabric, lost  
earrings and gold tints;

it captures love letters and old  
microscopic finger nails;

all the remaining after-shot  
of a man's unrecognized

shirt, and the body of one  
whose secret, kept inside skin,

no longer holds any verbal  
council; floats aimless, away –

just a corpse drifting careless  
and relaxed as any other thing;

and the river gathers and dumps  
like a feral shaped she-tramp,

an ogre; this river changing  
its consent and consequence

in one tidal whirl and swirl  
against limit, wave over wave

into plateau and empty zone –  
like a nomadic History, a *Koan*.

And it seeks as it saddens; it  
interrupts as it quiets and it

wanders, an ogre, a dervish,  
a microcosm of collected wind;

and it changes shape again to begin:  
now a June bride, scintillated

with striated hair and wet curls  
made of tincture and lather;

with arms amorphous, ill-fitting,  
and a dress somnambulant

and accidental; with a character  
exchanging itself at whim:

now it's romantic and selected,  
edging and flirting with moss-

drawn pilings; someone's cast-  
off fishing line made of algae; and

it makes whole curlicues against  
the cement water wall; it joins

the hard edge of the wall and it  
makes a baby of algae and grit;

the father made of rock ledge  
and hard root scabble. And

the river like a soft cosmic ray  
mirrored with the sky's stars

holds Life and Death in it,  
simultaneous: just like any

mother of time and irrefutability;  
like any blood platelet matter.

**Ken Meisel** is a poet and psychotherapist, a 2012 Kresge Arts Literary Fellow, a Pushcart Prize nominee and the author of eight books of poetry. His most recent books are: *Our Common Souls: New & Selected Poems of Detroit* (Blue Horse Press: 2020) and *Mortal Lullabies* (FutureCycle Press: 2018). Meisel has recent work in *Concho River Review*, *I-70 Review*, *San Pedro River Review* and *Rabid Oak*.