

*James Harms*

## When the Circus Comes

She liked my circus poem best,  
 though she could never remember the title.  
 She once held an early draft up to the window  
 as if examining a palimpsest; I think she'd noticed  
 the line of hers I'd pinched. She leaned back  
 in her chair and said, "Harmsy, this is good."  
 Another time, after I'd fallen asleep on a front lawn  
 the night before, I called and she said,  
 "Just drink some O.J. and have a shower. Then wait.  
 You'll feel better by dinner. I should know."  
 My favorite circus poem is Kenneth Koch's second one,  
 especially the part where he mentions his first one,  
 which I've never read. What I mean is he has two poems  
 called "The Circus," and talks about the one in the other.  
 Mine is not called "The Circus," though she called it  
 my circus poem. Los Lobos have a terrific song on *Kiko* that goes,  
 "That day I'll burn this whole place down,  
 when the circus comes to town." But someone's  
 leaving in that song — I guess someone's always leaving —  
 and the circus is about arrival. It's like a rip at the knee  
 of your blue jeans: when you start out for work in the morning  
 it's a slight tear — a few pegs scattered around, rope and canvas in  
 piles —  
 but by evening there's a yawning mouth the size of your knee, the  
 bigtop  
 filling the vacant lot next to the Texaco. And if  
 you go or if you don't, if you buy the ticket  
 from the wheel or stay home, the elephants sound the same;  
 they sound better than they look, to be honest.  
 There's nothing sadder than a small time pachyderm  
 Like a traveling salesman's scarred valise, you wince a little

watching it bob down the street toward you;  
you know you're going to be asked to see it for what  
it isn't: exotic and wild, filled with cures and dreams and wishes.  
And the stakes being pulled from the ground, they woosh  
like a screen door settling shut. The llama nips  
the camel's tail as it follows him up the ramp into the truck.  
The key is to leave before you're missed, to leave in darkness.  
She left town, left the road, left me wondering what to call it  
when the circus leaves too early.