

LEON STOKESBURY

Midway

That last night of the Southeast Texas State Fair
your father refused
to go in to see the freaks, but
waited outside the sideshow tent
while you wandered in alone
to be amazed, startled, stunned
by Abdulla, The Assyrian Swordswallower,
and then by The 800 Pound Man,
and then by Melvin The Mule-Faced Boy.
But when the time came for the grand finale,
the star attraction,
The Three-legged Man With Four Feet,
some guy came over and grabbed
your arm; said
the show was over; dragged you
to the exit and pushed you back outside.

Outside, in tears, you told your father,
and he, provoked, aroused, incensed,
enraged and staunch defender,
took you over to the ticket seller
and demanded they send you back in.

Back on the front row, you beheld
the three-legged man shuffle out on stage
trailing clouds of glory,
sit down and begin to explain
the natural nature of things.
He wore a gray special-made suit
with an extra-wide third pants leg,

and then, when he pulled that pants leg up
dangling worthlessly out
and seemingly joined
to the base of his spine
was the thinnest third leg in the world—
him rapidly wriggling its toes
to reveal just how real.
Amid much applause

he pulled the pants leg up further, up
over his knee, and then
the entire tent went still.

Coming out of his knee
where the kneecap should be
hung the fourth foot,
six inches long, worm-like
and white, hairless
and limp, with a hole at its end.

Outside again, at the edge
of the dark, the thick sweet reek
of old hamburger grease floated in the air.
And there, across the midway
the nonstop barker of The Totally Nude Review
had ceased his babble and blab.
At the edge of the night,
uncostumed men in denim
disassembled the Tilt-a-Whirl,
while a web of wrist-thick electric cables
crisscrossed the ground everywhere.

How quiet it seemed then.
Even today, you still can remember
how nothing was making a sound.
And when you looked up, you still
can recall, you saw no stars in the sky.