

LAURIE KRUK

Vaudevillians of Time

“The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper’d pantaloon....”
—Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

All right: it’s been said—
something about the seven ages of humanity
and the riddle of the Sphinx—
better in blank verse, Sophocles’ chorus,
than bitten-off chuckles
of family jokes-cum-anecdotes,
delivered with axiomatic laughter.

But there’s the moment when his father,
recovered, much smaller,
from five weeks denied his wife’s baking,
pricked and prodded in hospital,
stopped after *Horton’s*
to unlock the mailbox
and his pants fell down.
Fumbled to drag up his respectability
—just after the neighbour’s friendly honk, and wave—
hide the yellowing shorts
the Missus nagged him to throw out,
while standing at the door, she yodelled
“Y’ remember the milk, Hon?”

Or the moment when his mother
a month after knee surgery,
put on her husband's old Sorels
and staggered through February snow to retrieve
a wind-blown blue-box. Dragging it,
slipped, fell down:
turtled in the foot-deep snow,
her new metal knees locked
so that she cursed and sputtered
and morning commuters whizzed by
a foot from her self-dug hollow
until the neighbour's dog sniffed over
let her drag herself up
on his dirty yellow fur, soaked and growling.

And her mother
who volunteered to take the six-year-old
through the Carnival Funhouse, declaiming
before the bored lineup:
"She shouldn't have to go by HERSELF!"
Once shut up in the dark corridor
the floor split into panels, lifting, then dropping,
mocking her steps, causing breath
to stick in her mouth, and legs
to separate: one above, one below, clinging to the life-raft
she could neither get on nor climb off—
granddaughter skipping ahead, while half-falling, she calls to no-one
"Turn it off, please—I'm stuck!"
A shadow appears beside her
seizes a lever, bangs it down, so all is still
except for the disappointed wail of children,
and he drags her out, like a citizen's arrest,
never letting go her trembling wrist.
"Can we do it again, Grandma?" someone shouts
far below
as the world spins around her, grinning.

Or even: *me*
 beginning the historic fire tower climb
 all four of us,
 bringing the three-year-old along
 with a firm grip on her hand, saying
 “One step at a time—don’t rush—Mom’s got you”
 And at the third landing
 where it begins to climb
 in an inverted gyre
 wind lifts the girl’s summer dress
 hats are threatened
 and more and more of the forest below peeks through,
 glimmer of lakes, shining, vertigo
 and the child says,
 “Just a little further Mom,”
 pulling her up—
 and there is only trust
 as they reach the top
 and Mom wipes her neck,
 crouching under the lookout
 while the kids jump up to see
 the parking lot, their green van,
 beckoning like a lake.

What is this seltzer in the face,
 finger in the eye,
 the clown’s endless slide toward ignominy
 on a giant banana peel
 done without laugh track or applause?
 The Sphinx has been answered
 Oedipus is blind
 and given enough time,
 we are the punch-line.