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AT THE CIRCUS OF THE DEAD

Jack Ridl

The lion tamer laughs while the big cats yawn and swipe the air; his whip ripples in front of their ancient jaws. Above him, on the high wire, the spangled walker drops her pole, sits dead center, and reads *The Brothers Karamazov*. All we can do is watch her turn the pages. The blue stars across the top of the tent are fading. There are no safety nets or roustabouts. The clowns are in their trailers taking off their makeup and dressing in black tie and ball gown. In top hat and tails, the ringmaster announces,

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are here for one day and one day only, your only chance to feast your eyes, ears, and hearts on the wonders before you!” High above the outside rings, The Flying Alhambra Family sparkle in their tights and steady themselves before performing “the only triple attempted by eight members of a single family, each crossing each in the emptiness of mid-air!” Everything is happening at once, the big cats, wire walker, aerialists, all gathered in one whirl. Enter the jugglers. They stand in

their nonchalance and fling across the ring knives, hats, silver globes, while the Tumbling Barzonis bounce, spin, and somersault over one another, the trampoline sending them high as the lights.

Surrounding the whole mad extravaganza
the elephants and Lipizzaner stallions weave
within one another's walk and trot, their white-
tightened riders standing and waving to us as we
hold our breath and try to take in everything,
knowing we can't, knowing we will have to leave,
knowing they will have to load their monstrous
wagons and find their way to another ragged town.