After the Circus

(from *The Apocryphal Life and Impossible Times of Nicholas R. Crunkt*)

Michael Brennan

What sun will set here, over sweet-wrappers and ticket stubs littering back-lots where they upped stumps, the ground compacted by slavish tread, here and back, back and here, looking for brighter boisterous light not this, the incomplete darkness you called half-light. You trip over a tent peg and the fat clerk of your big toe turns black with the morning. The candy glow, fairy lights hoisted over shooting galleries, lights you as you linger, absorbed by laughing clowns, heads turning this way then that, watching noisome crowds diminish and disappear, you feed them mercilessly, eyes on the main bet, the big prize stuffed with cotton waste, their mechanics secreted away under chipped paint like the skin of the strongman’s tattooed arms, where an anchor drops into a tide that rises and falls on muscle below. You, Crunkt, slovenly kin of the carnival, watcher, gaper, groper, stay-at-home, yours the slow snarl of dismay drawn by lights and organ racket grinding truths, thick canvas beneath which, mesmerised by tumblers, contortionists, by the mad jumping monkey dressed as Napoleon riding a mule’s back, you listen to the three-fingered violinist fumble notes, a crippled crab scuttling the fingerboard that bursts in music, hollowed and thrown out. When asked, you touch the hilt the sword-swallower offers and feel his heart beating along a line of steel slid cleanly from throat to chest, so close to muted and caged pounding dreams. Drums and klaxons of the clowns’ impossibly small car, the retinue seems endless, well tried, falling out of the car’s doors, the boot, a tired hilarity dashing the front rows in buckets of confetti and water, fire jumping from the tip of a finger into the air, juggled amid knives, noise and darkness, the bearded lady sings an aria, a rake of a man walks over broken glass, suspends a dwarf from his testicles by silk chains, another slips skewers through cheek and tongue, his eyes zeroed into a horizon, you watch sequined tops stuffed with breasts, feathers tickling the air so that the crowd gasps, wheezes and giggles and you hold your breath waiting for the truth to sink in. Huddled between trailers, your drunk tongue forces its way between words, your costumes fall away, as the Chinese fortune teller’s wet lips part, and you draw on the strange language of your future. Behind it all, the generators’ whirr and always the crowd, laughing, belching, heaving up clouds of sticky sweetness and smoke, sweat pouring out of the light, and the sun rising to an empty lot now where all you remember slips away except the crooked beak of the ring-master, its roman angles strung-out in limelight, and the steady gaze of the knife-thrower suspended here in the mid-air of afterward, a dim forgetting you press against, as you trundle broken-toed up that road.