

## *Freak Show*

The bearded lady, the swallower of swords,  
the boy who breathed fire but slept underwater.  
In peeling posters from Depression era sideshows  
no one is ever smiling, not even the hucksters  
whose words worked crowds with something worse than slight of  
hand.  
Gnawing the heads off live chickens can't compare  
to swallowing bits of blood and flesh  
coughed up from lungs laced with ten years' worth of dust.  
Who was fooling whom? Poverty and coal eat anything.  
It's all a matter of putting one's self on display,  
the effort it takes to get through a single morning  
without sliding the car across a rain slick highway  
and into the guardrail overlooking the river  
or crawling so calmly into cool earth that no canary's breath  
could ever lure the soul into the warm trap of waking.  
Step right up. Get in line out on the edge of the midway.  
See the worker who works for free with no hands.