

## Home Video of the Tiger Swallowing

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Erin Gay

In the home video of the circus, the clowns file up the stepladder to the tiger's open mouth. Spotted tent shirts, bully-flattened shoes, even the hula hoop that held up their pants swallowed; until all that is left is the empty plate of the circus ring, the tiger having accepted his role of playing the grave.

What I remember most is my grandfather—not a ringmaster but simply a ticket holder in his one expensive suit—reaching into the spotlight to wave. His famous wave.

1967: every photograph of New York was partially eclipsed by his hand.

His tinnitus was the sound of the subway escalator, the clip of the taxi passing over the Brooklyn Bridge, the frizz of a hallway lightbulb.

In a dream of the home video, we are accordions together wheezing out the dance steps to a tango. We are talking about how we have always been unable to turn left as we danced towards the wall. Stubborn shoes, heels worn down on the instep. If caught in the long line of apologies, we would explain that we were always ashamed that our knees turned inward.

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Like a discovered lie, the accordion will continue to play.

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Years of waiting for the clowns to step backwards out of the tiger's mouth, I found a photo of my grandfather's grave. The engraved dates were the only proof that he was ever old. That and the yellowing of the film reel.

The only one who kept a photo of him was the son he abandoned, the son from his first wife.

They say once the liver is preserved, the veins fill with blue plastic and you will look youthful forever. They say if you are bitten by the ghost snake, the two holes it leaves will swell until the broken capillaries embroider the image of your lost happiness.

That old elephant standing right in front of us on one leg.

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The man with the whip keeps extras from walking in front of the video camera. We called the lashes *snake burns*, those snakes so hot from lounging on the rocks all day. The girls were the quickest to jump back because they did not have enough skirt to hide the marks. Fizzing sting, coal-walk trance. We all wanted his love.

Even I. Years, years after the circus became more about acrobatics and the clowns sprayed themselves with glitter paint and became street mimes.

That was the one truth in this story. My grandfather's hand over the lens, eclipsing my mother in the yard with the garden hose spraying the baby, and the gum pop, and the parrot flying overhead towards the library, and the rain-gutter waterfall where the peacocks dunk each other, and the sequined tightrope walker dunking her toe into the church's holy water, waiting in line behind the plate spinner and midget to be blessed.

To taste this want, touch your tongue to the tiger's tongue.

To hear my grandfather's dream, put your ear to the guitar's mouth. Make sure all the strings are broken.

When you try to sleep, the windows will rattle with the clicking of the reel. You will need to make a list of all the scenes you must film to compose a true story about home. Only when the chronology is correct will you be able to walk without curling your toes. This is what is behind the tiger's teeth.