

# THE CIRCUS



*The Circus* is Ken Bolton's fourth book with Wakefield Press.

Michael Fitzjames shows with Australian Galleries, Sydney.





# THE CIRCUS

KEN BOLTON

MICHAEL FITZJAMES  
PICTURES



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*for my friend Craig Tidswell  
&  
in memory of Alessandro Cogolo*



THE CIRCUS FOREMAN sends off for another peg. How many pegs  
Are there? Are there ever enough? There are  
More than enough, many more. But ... a peg too far?  
They are short one peg.

The Master of Ceremonies wanders in small aimless circles,  
Consults his list.  
He cracks his whip at an imaginary clown—  
And reads through the full program for the ring the following evening.

*The Zanardi Circus Orchestra! Monkeys, the Strong Man! Acrobats!*  
The list goes on, but, knowing it by heart,  
He loses concentration. His Magician  
Will be the only notable absence.

Some plastic bunting has already gone up,  
Establishing the assorted trucks and tents  
As 'a site of interest'. A group of children gathers at the perimeter,  
Motorists look as they pass.

This tent peg, under the foreman's boot,  
Is now firmly in the mud—and destined to stay there, stay  
Perhaps till after the circus has left.  
The assistant has his own stash. Returning, he says—brightly—he has  
*found one* 'by a fluke'.

Thank God for the illicit stash, the foreman thinks.  
(He would have one himself—if it did not break all the rules. His own  
rules.  
Do people eat them? or throw them away?  
They are not useful for anything else. That is what the foreman thinks.)

Two young men throw juggling pins to each other  
Outside their caravan, one backing away from the other.  
The correct distance established,  
One marks the ground.

This is where they will practise.  
The other has gone for their swing, returns:  
They tie it to the tree branch opposite,  
Give it a testing tug.

Ulysse wonders again about his name.  
Is it only suitable for wrestlers, Greek, or Baltic,  
And strong men like him? Otherwise,  
Who?

Ulysses S. Grant?—a *book*?—  
Maybe Gary U.S. Bonds.  
Thoughtfully he works two pegs  
Into a handy plant-holder.

The site looks bleak when you first move in,  
César thinks.  
In a day or two that will be gone.  
In a week it will be home.

Some trailers look presentable, others, though,  
Look much less so.  
Then, after a time, like old clothes, furniture,  
They are invisible.



A brother's cheeks begin to smoulder at his sister's remarks.  
It is alright for her, she can do the things his father approves.  
To be called "waster" is not unamusing; the more prosaic "no good"  
Finds its mark. The great Tertullio, unfortunately, has expectations  
only of his son. Unfortunate for both his children.

With a series of small clicks Claudio ignites the flames  
Beneath his hot plate. He sets up his equipment  
(Spatulas, scraper, a pizza cutter), dices onion  
And is ready to serve. Someone, soon, will want breakfast. Little cups,  
for coffee, stand by.

The cat is no part of the circus.  
It comes from a nearby service station.  
And is here to observe.  
Birds ascend and descend regularly, bob and weave on the ground.

Here comes Franco Muritti. The foreman,  
Is usually Claudio's first customer.  
"Claudio," says Franco, by way of greeting.  
Claudio hands him an *espresso*.

Pigeons, sparrows and other birds, pick at scraps cast  
From *The Seven Parrots'* cage.  
*Two* cages, in fact. *Eight*  
Birds.

One is rather old.  
The parrots.  
*Nearer* to death  
Is a dove the cat scrutinizes.



Olivia and Regina, the ballerinas, sit after rehearsal. Olivia's eyes are closed.

Regina leans, legs splayed, her back against their trailer, examining Her small, relatively recent tummy. How recent? But relatively small.

In

Any case her bum is larger too—she checked—so, all in proportion.

A lithe young man is whistling gaily,

Hammering, fixing a tarpaulin over a cage.

A teenage girl, his sister, hands pegs to him.

She is smiling.

From the ticket box Arturo watches the ballerinas resting

After riding the horses. One sleeps. (The other appears to be

Examining her navel.) No ticket sales are likely this first morning—  
though he is on duty.

He fiddles with the transistor's tuning. His afternoon, however, will be free.

Giorgio and Andrea, the acrobats, load ten kilogram

Bags of pet food, from a pallet,

Into a nondescript trailer.

Where they have spilled, a small dog sniffs curiously.

A pigeon makes a rapid ascent.

Arturo watches as the dancer approaches the bird cages,

Rubbing her bum.

She shoos a cat away.

In their cages the parrots—

both old and young—

ruffle their feathers.

The girl casts them a glance and walks away.

There is the sound of scraping  
And a loud bang.  
A woman's voice  
Carries briefly on the breeze.

The cat's ears  
Turn on its head, its coat  
Twitches or shrugs.  
Sudden silence, sun.

Ennio seems to be selling hard drugs  
To his counterpart among the de Pisis.  
Enterprising? Yet he does not charge very much.  
Early days perhaps.

Mildly melancholy, mildly elated, then tearful almost  
But close to laughing,  
Paolo leans against the soccer goal the kids have erected,  
The afternoon a sky of beautiful clouds.

A curiously abstracted looking figure,  
Boucheressas, the impressionist,  
Steps down from his trailer.  
His face affronted—or disconcerted—by surprise.

But he is not surprised. He is  
Bringing in some clothes that have dried.  
They are flapping in the last light of the sun, in a light breeze—  
Shirts, socks, underwear, the spotted cravats he wears.

If some dumb bastard has given me AIDS, says the elephant  
Wiggling his foot ... if I can even *get* AIDS ... The hypodermic  
Drops off ... He finishes his sentence happily, I'll be upset alright.  
This elephant has a lot to live for.

*Well there they go, in their joy:  
She's a lucky girl, he's a very lucky boy, Here am I,  
I, I, I, I—brokenhearted.  
Here am I, Broooo - oken-hearted, he sings.*

The elephant chooses the feeling  
Of resignation,  
Over deprivation.  
In fact, chooses, for preference, *Noble Sacrifice*.

The elephant enters his own hay-baled area, approaches his water  
trough.  
He likes sometimes to cast himself  
As the great singer Joe Turner. "Part of my analysis of the feeling,  
'bushwhacked',"  
He says. "My distillation of it, rather."

The elephant likes the antipodean phrase,  
Its melancholy and sense of wrong.  
Does he resemble Zero Mostel, the elephant wonders—or Rumpole  
Of the Bailey?

He hums the great Dion di Mucci tune,  
*The Wanderer*,  
Thinks of Christopher Brennan, a man killed by a tram on his way  
home.  
Rummages in his straw.

He raises his foot,  
Looks for the syringe.  
But cannot find it.  
Good.

The tiny village of Piazza al Serchio.



Next stop after Lucca. Too small really.  
They set just one tent up.  
The elephant strolls about.

Also,  
Much unemployment here in Livingagno.  
Can you make a living living in Livingagno?  
He wonders, broodingly.

The elephant sings to himself  
“Catch my pony, saddle up  
My black mare ...” A small crowd is gathering about—  
Watching the elephant shift its feet, the tent connected to power.

A small crowd gathers—in the square,  
Outside the co-op and the bar of Piazza al Serchio, in Livingagno.  
A little money to make. The people seem prepared to marvel.  
The elephant chews quietly.

Parrots, horses and monkeys—  
Together Nana and Anna Maria handle them. The parrots  
Grip tight to the horses’ head gear, do their lap,  
And are taken down.

Replaced by green and gold coloured plumes—which resemble  
them—

The birds ride again, clutching the monkeys' backs

(Which they far prefer).

(The monkeys hold the saddle's pommel, crouch, leap off—leap off as  
though relieved.)

On the ground the monkeys shuffle quickly to the girls

Who lift off the birds and cage them. The monkeys wander to their  
cages

On their own, climb in, spin around to look out. Often they close the  
door.

Anna Maria locks it.

César notes the paint on his own caravan—

Which is parked behind another, that of Mrs Lautone.

It is inherited, and he retouched

The faintly 'gypsy' looking paint job very hastily.

A year or so has passed.

So he might get out that paint again.

Might.

Might not.

The foreman, and side-kick Attila, are wrestling some washing  
machines into place.

César wanders over to add a final shove.

Busy time for them.

He won't worry them about the paint just now.

César goes to his trailer and gets together a load of clothes.

First in.

When he returns to the machine Attila is standing beside it—

Listening to it fill and begin to throb.

This is a problem. César stands uncertainly.  
The second machine is free though, as Attila indicates.  
César thanks him  
And stuffs his washing in.

From behind the spoked wheel of a carriage  
The cat is eyeing another pigeon—  
Which takes flight  
As two people enter the clearing—

Moving in different directions,  
Talking on mobile phones. Heads down, gesticulating.  
They pass.  
One nods slightly to the other.

The horses go through their routine  
For an hour or two most days. The Parrots are attached  
And made ride, usually, once a day.  
They don't like it and it's not clear how much they learn.

They learn to hang on and be less nervous—or take less fright.  
The old bird will die soon. It fusses least.  
In permanent shock? Mourning for its imminent end?  
(‘I-will-miss-all-this’, sort of thing?)

In his ticket box Arturo has tuned his radio successfully  
But does not attend. He considers for a moment the circus life.  
Does it make you hard and cynical? Does it breed ‘a fierce loyalty’  
Between circus families? Is he a carny—yet? at all? in some respects?