Dark Ride: A Novel in Verse

THESIS

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By

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Abstract

This novel in verse, titled *Dark Ride*, is a coming-of-age story set in and around Gibsonton, Florida, a city established in 1949 as a winter home for carnival and circus showpeople. The collection engages with disability studies through the lens of the protagonist—a young woman named Emanuela—and highlights themes of inward and outward gaze, the development of emotional and sexual identity, and the human and the animal. Individual poems describe Emanuela’s life in Gibsonton (“Gibtown”) and her position with a travelling carnival.
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Vita

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Miami, Florida: 1985
It never gets cold here,

Grainne says, fingers tracing lines
made of sweat on the old gray’s back.
Colder. Not cold, though.

I’ve always lived here, Emanuela says,
on the gulf. We slept in hammocks,
sometimes, when it was too hot to sleep at all.

Grainne’s eyes are on her—she knows it
like she knows the voice, the brown stick fingers—
looking for her eyes back. She doesn’t turn.

Did you grow up here? In Miami?

Gibtown.

I’ve never heard of it, says Grainne,
and for some reason that makes Emanuela
laugh like a cough, like a cry.

I’ve never known anyone who didn’t.

Retirement and wintering home to thousands of carnival and circus show people, established 1949
This is seeing, Mother says.

They sit at the picnic table.
Her hand rests on Emanuela's neck.
The concrete surface ripples

and writhes, the ants crawl
between stone curves. Emanuela thinks,
These are their arches. The entrance and exit.

Mother's hand presses down
like a stone. Emanuela's eyes widen,
start to tear. The ants turn at angles

and touch their concrete floor softly.
Mother lifts her hand
and Emanuela looks up.

There will be a great deal of looking, says Mother.
But we know better than that.
Always the same dream.

At the zoo, Emanuela thinks, Clouds.
The hippopotamus winking to the surface,
almost flat, almost round.

The float, float of the bonobo. And the elephant—
nothing like a cloud.
Emanuela touches the thickness of its gray

with her eyes, the rubble of its skin.
It lifts its trunk, tosses an arc of hay.
Emanuela watches it lift and fall. Thinks, Clouds.
At the bait shop

Emanuela lifts buckets and lids.
In one, a puddle of flies. Another,
a tangle of lures, wisp-short.

Mother takes notice
when Grady opens the door.
The building ring of bells.

Mother's mouth softens. Her eyes
stay thin and on the ground.
Emanuela knows him: his crutch,
his thick flat hands (almost her own),
the way his knees bend in as he walks.
For years she'd thought each step a break.

He lays his hands on the counter like a gift.
The fingers are all grown into one,
only the thumb loose and wobbling

like a searchlight.
Does it hurt? Emanuela had asked her mother.
He was born that way, Mother had said. Like you.

He doesn't know any other kind of hands.
Emanuela had meant the steps,
the silent popping of his knees.

His thumbs feel out
like sweet turtle beaks.
His hands are curious about her.
Miami, Florida: 1985
They are there

a month. The trailers make half-moons
in a wide asphalt lot that trails
into green water, knifed through

with cypress knees. The clouds are heavy-
lidded, flat at the bottom like the deep pan
Sang lines with strips of pig fat-and-skin,

white pepper. Some nights Emanuela climbs
to the top of the motionless Dark Ride
and Grainne follows her.

They touch fingers to hair, to mouths.
They sit speechless
as the wind breaks the humid air.
Out: Early 1983
I can see better in the dark,

Emanuela says. Than pretty much everyone.
She’d meant to save it,
to let them figure it out on their own.

She hadn’t thought of how she’d make her way.
Maybe I can help with the animals at night. I can —
see how they’re feeling. If they’re —

The showrunner shakes his head.
Cleaning, then, after the place clears out.
That’s the darkest it gets. You can stay

with the animals during the day, if you like.
Before the shows.
Laufey’s girl, she thinks. A kindness.

She chooses the horses
during the day, their sweat-milk-soap smell
drenching her skin, and digs out a skinny hole

for herself between the hay
and hot metal trailer walls. The carnival calls them
Lipizzaner stallions. Emanuela sees up close
that they’re mottled-white mares.
She finds a curry brush in a bin
outside the trailer. She fits her hand
in its strap and brushes them all afternoon.
In her hands, the brushes are small
and fragile; her skin in almost the color
of the horses. The air in the trailer
feels heavy in her mouth and lungs
and before it cools, someone comes
to get the horses. *For the show*, the man says, tall,
stilt-like. *They—have to practice*. She can’t tell
if he’s staring or looking her in the eye.
Gibtown, Florida: 1970
Emanuela learns late

there are some things her mother
can't fix. The tire
on Emanuela's bicycle is slit
down the middle and curled at the edges—
a hot dog butterflied
and slapped on a frying pan.

Emanuela traces the edge with her fingers;
dust emerges in the grooves of her skin.
Where did it start—the tire's core?

Her skin? Her eyes?
Mother does not notice Emanuela's dirty hands
until they are outside the store.

They have never been here before.
Dammit, Mother says,
lifting Emanuela's hand and dropping it.

In the store, Mother moves like water.
She lifts a tire more lightly
than Emanuela’s hand.

She takes the tire to the counter.
She keeps her eyes down. The soft pink man—
larger than Mother, whose skin is bluer than seawater,

especially when she’s angry, which is now—
looks without blinking until he sees Emanuela
and then he drops his eyes. Mother takes the fat

wiggling tire from his hand. She shutters in.
Emanuela has never gone out of Gibtown before now.
She hasn’t known about the eyes.

She looks at her hands, which are not pink, or blue
like her mother’s long fingers. They are black
with rubber grit and beneath that gray,

as rippled as a tire.
There is one discussion about school.

Emanuela is not in it. She sits in the kitchen
moving her index finger from the scarred
black vinyl squares to the raised stalks

of the carpet. In between is a tiny,
almost invisible row of nails.
Don’t you think it might do her good, Laufey?

Emanuela cannot see Percilla,
but knows her voice, the wetness everywhere on her.
I don’t. I don’t. A whole fistful of eyes.

How will she learn?

We’ll teach her what she needs.

But people, I mean. And how they’ll be—around her.

Emanuela rubs her palm over the nails.
There is no pooling of red between the gray.
She can feel her skin pulling apart at its thick seams.
Emanuela watches her mother

fix the skylight. With a knife,
she scores the Plexiglass.
A half-dozen small screams.

She cracks the glass
along the table's edge.
She holds the rectangle to the ceiling's metal frame.

In the sun, the hairs on her arms rise.
Mother's skin the color of the sky,
the whites of her eyes

the ceiling around the frame.
She holds the glass at an angle, slips it home.
The sun shines whiter on the floor.
Out: Early 1983
Orlando

meant five hours by bus.
Like packing, that was easy enough.
Harder was buying the ticket. She almost

looked behind her when the lady at the window gasped.
She hadn’t expected how soon
she’d hear her mother’s voice in her head.

A great deal of looking. A fistful of eyes.
Her own head wobbled on her neck
like a doll. She dropped a handful

of dollar bills. The woman counted them out for her.
Emanuela balled the ticket and change
in her fist. When coins ping-ed on the floor,

she pretended she had not heard them and kept walking.
Mother is cool on the phone.

Emanuela had not expected anger.

With the carnival, Mother says. I see.

She is not sure how to say it.

I knew they would take me. I am—backstage. Mother.

Mother says nothing for a long while.

Then: What are you looking for there.

I’m not.

You won’t find it. You won’t be the one looking for long.

When they hang up, Emanuela practices
pinching the comb between her fingers.
She tries lifting it to her hair.
Virgie

lives with her brother on the beach.
Their house is small and settling
slowly into the dune, grass

springing up between the boards.
From the sand, Emanuela watches Virgie
hang the laundry.

When Virgie is alone, she plays at bending
her body—her toes curling near her ear,
her arms wrapping backward around her waist.

It takes longer to do everything, but
Emanuela laughs near-silently,
and she keeps at it. Her hair is white,

but Emanuela can tell that she is young.
Her lips laugh as she folds in half,
backward, like a straw.
Presenting complaint:

Limited dexterity, not improving with adolescence.

Past medical history:

Hyperkeratoses found on all exposed skin. Little change over time.

Examination:

Decreased sensation at joints. Minimal reflexive response.
Emanuela watches for Virgie’s brother
to cross the front window.
He goes to the grocery often,
brings back soft cheese to eat with the sour kumquats
that grow behind the dune-grass house.
When he’s passed, Emanuela runs down to the sand.
She is barefoot, and the sand settles
into the cracks of her feet and ankles.
When she arrives, Virgie looks unsurprised,
and Emanuela feels warm, like baking.

Come, Virgie says, and gestures to the sink.
Wash your hands. I’ve made cafecitos.
Emanuela goes slowly to the metal basin.

Virgie stands next to her.
Here, she says, is the milkiest soap. Like a baby’s skin,
this smell. She places the cake between Emanuela’s palms,

covers them with her own. She holds their hands
together under the running water,
Emanuela doesn’t breathe. They stand until

the cake of soap is almost nothing,
a white dime against Emanuela’s gray palms.
Emanuela begins to try

small things. She turns the knob
on the stove back and forth. The blue flame
pops off and on. She holds her hand close enough
to feel the heat. Not to burn.
When the water on the beach comes in,
she touches the wet sand and then the dry.
She thinks she can feel the difference.
The wet sand is heavy,
which makes her uncertain. She lets the sand
dribble between her fingers into a tall column
that ripples and grooves. She doesn’t knock it down.
The water pools around it
and makes it smooth, pools and erodes
until the column staggers back into the sand.
Emanuela overhears.

To sea? Mother says,
and Emanuela thinks she means to see at first
until she says: rip current, then. No body?

All in Emanuela is quiet.
Mother hangs up the phone. An accident,
her brother said—

Emanuela hears nothing
but the sound of water
pouring from a faucet. Popping like rain

in the metal sink.
Out: Early 1983
When they realize who she is

—the old carnies, the ones
from Al and Jeannie’s stories—
there are always questions. Laufey’s girl,
says the showrunner. I’d never have guessed it.
You’re what she was fat with
is how the old lion-man says it. Emanuela nods.

And how is your beautiful mother.
Still skinny as a fencepost. Still blue.

Dumb luck, she said
when the showrunner asked
how she’d found them.

It had been, and it hadn’t. In Gibtown,
someone was always talking of the carnival:
where it was. Who was doing the show.

After the funeral, they’d all crowded
into the beach house. Virgie’s brother
sat loosely at the table as talk streamed around him.
Playbills. Virgie’s moon face on a sign.

Orlando, Grady said. That’s where they are now.

You think she’d go back if she could—
Miami, Florida: 1985
Grainne braids Emanuela’s hair

which has grown to the small of her back
and looks pink in the sun, the red
whipcorded with white. So long,

she says, and Emanuela thinks the warp
and weft of her hair has prickled with nerves.
She thinks for a moment Grainne is saying

goodbye. The hair in the braid is too clean,
it falls out as fast as Grainne pulls it tight.
She twists like she is carving a twig into a bird.
Out: 1983
She sleeps in a truck bed,

thick Gulf dark a blanket,
gray legs kneading the metal,
until someone finds her—

the old lion-man, eyes winking
in the still-mostly-dark—and takes her
to the showrunner. They call him

Long Perales, his whole name each time.
Long Perales, says the lion-man,
I found her sleeping in Emory’s truck.

Thank you, Teo, says Long Perales.
Emanuela looks all around her:
the metal stands, spidered with electrical cords,

the broken sawhorses holding up
banners, faces, animals on signs.
Emanuela, he says, and she has to look

at him, then. His face gleams with sweat,
shining like a coin in the light filtering
above the horizon, beneath

the white lines of trailers. *Find another place
to sleep.* She nods. *You can go.*

She turns to go and her stomach twists with it:

Long Perales, Long’s Travelling Extravaganza,
Long’s Carnival Show—she—
Emanuela walks back to the horses.

She is going to stay here. She is going to find
another place to sleep. She is no one’s girl.
She chooses the parking lot to clean

one night. It’s still half-full—
mostly trailers and trucks with wide ball-hitches
bigger than both of her fists together.

Emanuela picks up a red-striped popcorn box
with a stick. She imagines the child
who dropped it, a mother looking away,

her older daughter blinking and flirting up ahead.
A father already in the car.
No one even saw the popcorn box.

The mother will wipe liquid butter
off the child’s fingers and think of it later, shrug.
They say you’re Laufey’s girl,

he says, but I’ll tell you I don’t know who that is.
It is the man who’d come for the horses,
the boy with the elbows. Emanuela says her name.

Olin, he says and puts out his hand.
Emanuela meets it, pressing as lightly
as she can. She pictures the plastic comb.

Your mother was with the carnival, then?
Back in its prime?

Back in her prime, she says, and the words pop
in her ears. Olin laughs
a loud red coughing laugh. I getcha.

What are you doing here?
Emanuela finds that she has asked the question,
not been asked. Olin twitches a shrug,

shoulderblades wings. I jumped on
in Vancouver, two years now. I ferry.
Ferry?

I make things get where they need to be.

Emanuela thinks of the trailers,  
the rows of trucks and vans.  
He will help me go with them,

she thinks, and feels a curl of shame.  
Olin, she says, what is it like in Vancouver.  
Her voice dips like water, like her mother’s.
Miami, Florida: 1985

Grainne
Hurry now

I say and feel her hands
the sweet ridges pressing red lines
into the width of my hips

the little trailer shrinking to a pea
a star wavering like a new wing
love I say and look at her red

hair gray skin the hard bones
of her cheeks nudging corners
into her face and I look at the shadows

the yellow walls make beneath her eyes
until it is dark and I
only feel only look with my fingertips
Out: 1984
Olin brings her a soft golden egg.

Cake, he says. Sang made it. It’s Vietnamese. It fits in her palm, but her fingers twitch and it cracks. She cries out

and silvery shame twists in her for the breaking, for the sound like an unfamiliar bird.

It’s supposed to do that, he says, and she sees the inside is white as an eye and crumbling into her palm.

Eat it, Olin says, so I can tell Sang you did. She holds the eggshell up to her mouth, and her tongue finds the asphalt

of her hand. She licks the milky sugar out of the grooves, and when she drops her palm, some white flecks stay behind like salt.
Emanuela is scrubbing sweat from cloth

when she finds she has more questions
than she knew. What did my mother do here?
she says. There is only Teo,

and he grits out a laugh. It was different then.
People didn’t have to do like now.
Emanuela turns her head so the water

from her face falls away from the blanket.
She must have done something. She wouldn’t
have stayed on Long Perales’ goodwill.

She held very still, says Teo. She held
so still people thought she was a statue
painted that color. And then, hours later,

she walked around. They always
wanted her to touch them.
She can picture it: the reach,

and then the fine shudder, like a moth.
When they move,

they move all day, and night, and day.
Emanuela sits bootlegged across the gearbox
in the truck that pulls the horses.

The gray mares lip, fingerlike,
at the straws she pushes between the slats
when they stop for gas and piss,

and chew slowly, like cows.
There is no need for her to brush them
because no one is looking just now;

her hands, their coats—all drenched
in pink-clay grit. They are all languid
as the pines along the highway

that wear sweet green kudzu
like a coat-of-arms.
Emanuela watches the thick leaves

flap against the wind. They arrive in Valdosta
and soon Olin comes with blankets,
with buckets of dust-smelling feed.

*Smells off,* she says, and he says,

*no one eats good till we work again.*
Long Perales walks the carnival

blindfolded. He’s showing off,
they say under their breaths,
but Emanuela sees pride burn

on their faces. Their man. Their
show. He nods at Sang, who hums out
a sound of surprise as his hands trace

knots of dough on his plasterboard.
Long Perales coughs a laugh. Smelled you,
he says, burned butter, pan-sugar. Rind.

He walks like a stream to Emanuela,
the horses. He says nothing as he passes, but lets
his hand trace the old mare’s side.

Long Perales straightens a peach basket.
He touches two metal tracks, calls for grease.
Olin runs to him with something that sprays.

He knew when the pig had pups, Teo says in her ear,
and Ora’s kids tried to hide them in their truck.
He had us kill them. They whinnied like your mares—

Emanuela wants not to know, wants nothing
of the smoky pigfat she can almost smell,
that the children had watched hiss on their mother’s stove.

*Fall comes on, and winter*

and Emanuela feels for the first time
cold in her voice, cold mucking out
her lungs like a month-old stall.

She finds she can close the trailer latch
no worse than anyone else now,
the ice-locked metal the same to her gray fingers

it’s always been. She carries things all night:
gas cans, metal sheets and steps, the snow
blinking off the dark siding like birds.
Still, Emanuela watches

from the dark. Oralee: raw red-colored hair,
chapped fingers, each long and broad.
Her children, dark, one thickly-built

and short, hair a birth of animals,
one tall, dirty, white-toothed at the table
where they eat spattering hot dogs

fried on the square trailer stove.
The small one holds two forks,
saws and plucks. Oralee doles out sour suckers

that make the children pinch and gasp.
Emanuela can see their faces. The trash bag
she’d been holding puddles on the ground.
Emanuela thinks of the bait shop

as she dresses the horses: the tended rows
of tackle, live worms. Someone’s hand had lined the boxes,
turned their pictures like faces to the sun.

She’s snuck grease from Sang’s truck and so
she oils the saddles and bridles. Later on,
when the big pole-lights dip, she will make ready:

walk the rides, scrub plastic seats, pierce trash held by hands
she hasn’t seen. The purple and electric green
of The Afterburner will reflect on her skin,

and she will hold her arms in front of her,
see them striped like a gift
until the light rises and the reflection goes out suddenly

like clear water cut off at the tap.
We didn’t have mirrors,

she tells him. They are not looking
at each other: Emanuela rolling blankets,
Olin pulling salt-water toffee by hand,

a hard ball lengthening like thread from a spindle.

*In your house, you mean?*

Yes. *I didn’t know for years that people kept them*

*at home like that. In the bedroom, in the hall.*

*I had a pocket mirror I stole from the drugstore—*

*I used to look at myself for hours in it nights.*

Olin, she sees, is nodding like a buoy.

*You should, he said. See yourself. I mean.*

Emanuela feels a pressure at her ribs,

each long bone beating like a wing.
Teo finds Emanuela in the snail trailer

hitched to the horses. She is sleeping until
his flat hand slaps the trailer’s door,
and she wakes to his silhouette large

on the yellow plastic dome. We need another ferry
he says Olin’s got a fire in the lot some engine block
cracked like a bottle

get up girl! She is on her knees, bracing
against the wide-open door of the trailer
before she stops. Now,

she says, not a question, not a plea—not
to Teo, not—Now, he says, and there is
enough kindness in his voice

that she feels the pulse
in her throat beat hard with anger.
Where?

Get the old girls ready, bring them —
can you get them both? —dammit —
to the stadium circle. It’s their show in ten.

Emanuela is out from the trailer now,
her hands thrust between the mares’ blankets
and white-furred skin. Slept in today,

she says to the young mare. Lazy thing,
she says to the old mare, and then they are saddled,
girths notched tight into their bellies, bits laid
to their haired lips. When she walks them
out of the trailer, she feels the horses lengthen and rock,
necks curling. The sun touches her face

like cool metal, an anvil.
She walks with her eyes unfocused and listens
to the breathing of the horses who step quick,

who step quicker than she can follow.
Night:

Emanuela’s fingers tight on a metal rake
so cold even her rippled nailbeds feel it,
the straw like waves pressing across the ring,

like gold that stinks of dust. *I was here,*
she thinks. The bleachers had been
quarter-full, if that, but she can see the people

who hadn’t been there: how they
press against the metal barrier, arms
pressed plump and flat against other arms,

leaning over the railing. A child is on its father’s shoulders
but crying as it looks not at the horses,
who are spinning like waltzers,

but at Emanuela, who is as large as a Lipizzaner,
whose hands are as dark and heavy as hooves,
who sucks light into her skin and makes the ring go dark.
She doesn’t know he’s heard of it

until Long Perales calls her to him
at dinner. Olin finds her where she sits
hunched and scrubbing at a metal basin
coated with rank grease, specks of meat
red on gray. He wants you. Now, I guess.
Emanuela lifts her head heavily. She doesn’t ask
what for and Olin doesn’t shrug—just leads her
birdlike, almost lightly, to Long Perales.
In his trailer, he sits at a white Formica table
thick with food. Grease touches Emanuela’s nose
and her stomach burns. Her mouth
is wet; she wants to spit. She turns her head around
stiffly, and sees that Olin has gone.
You were out, he says. Helped ferry.
I hear you’re good with the horses.

Emanuela nods. There is no telling if she’ll
be able to speak. I hear someone found you
in the ring, hay half-swept, horseshit still piled
in the corner. She thinks of the hard cold
clumps of it in the gray morning, Oralee’s hands
light on her shoulders, steering her
to the yellow trailer like a rider.
I was sick, she says. I—will do better.
Long Perales shakes his head fast, like a cough.

You’re a good worker. Be more—like her.
Laufey’s girl. The fistfuls of eyes.
She would always let them touch her.

The kids, they’d rub her hands and face,
trying to make the paint come off.
They’d spit in their hands and squeeze her fingers

in theirs. She never hid anything. Never said—
she says. Olin’s face on a thin neck. 
His eyes like stones. I won’t be her. 
You don’t have to stand around like a game, 

he says. Just don’t be so afraid of 
it. The sun. The people. 
Emanuela can almost touch her mother. 

They stand in the bike shop. The pink-faced man 
behind the counter stares and then doesn’t look 
at all. Her mother holds the tire like a child. 

Like her. You don’t any of you know her. 
She wouldn’t have—let that happen—she 
would have said no. She would have hated. 

Emanuela feels her tongue fat in her mouth, 
thick and wrong as her fingers. Gray rods. 
She feels. Olin’s hands press down on her shoulders 

like Oralee’s. Like a bit and bridle. Like 
her mother’s hand on her neck, holding her eyes
to the ants. *I'm angry*, he says, and his voice is soft as bees. *Look at me.* His hands are pushing her face up to his eyes. *Emanuela.* She can feel her mouth twisting and she pulls at him, pulls away. *Stop it,* she says. His hands are pressing her skin and she feels it in the muscles.

It hurts. *Stop,* she says. *I don't.* He drops his hands and her face is rushed by wind.
Emanuela calls her mother.

I want to know, she says, what you did for the carnival. Her mother is quick, quick to reply.

Let them stare at me. I was a sideshow.
Her mother’s voice is slippery and cool, embroidery floss sliding through metal.

I stood in the corners, at dusk. They would—stop. And turn around. They wanted to see if I was real.
They didn’t believe, and then they did: the lights Long bought shone on my face and arms.

The way their hands darkened bluer bruises. The proof of her blood, beautiful and strange.
They move

and Emanuela sees the carnival
as if at dawn: her own nighttime
dropping away like sawdust
captured by a flame, its bright edge
testing and then taking hold.
Miami, Florida: 1985
and Emanuela is outside—she
warms her shoulders in the beginning
melt of dusk. She hears a little liquid humming,
a fluorescent sun. She has dared it—out—more
and more, hated the fierce pride that stings her mouth
when the families look at her
and she looks back or sometimes does not.
Now she turns without thinking—in her mind
she is in Gibtown, sun like water on her hair—
and there are eyes like bowls watching her,
black bowls, full of ink—
*Girl*, the woman says, and her voice is
just a voice, not liquid-black, not notched
with wordless things, *I made you this.*
*Just now.* Emanuela doesn’t move to take
the little thing from her hand, the little something
(a cake like an egg? a dime of soap?)
and the woman lets it fall.

*Take it, she says, or not.*
Emanuela waits until the sun has died

and the woman is gone ten times
and everything is cleaned, cleaned.
A piece of wood whittled into a deer.

A fawn, Emanuela thinks, and sees the freckles
on its hindquarters the size of salt.
She picks it up with two fingers;

it does not break in her hand.
She comes back.

The carnival has slowed; it has been
summer and winter again before they came back
to the Everglades. The days end early.

When the woman returns, the carnival hasn’t
opened at all. Emanuela is putting Ora’s child
in a saddle, the squat one with the hair

like feathers—moulting—and she lifts
the child easily now. Strong, she thinks,
surprised. You look happy, the woman says,

and Emanuela turns, knowing already
the not-ink voice, the eyes. The woman
is wearing a dress with a dozen thin straps

painting her shoulders and back. Emanuela can see
her chest, her right arm and neck are tattooed
in threads of black. Thank you for the deer.

You got it then? The woman’s face lifts all over,
her black eyebrows coming up in points.
It was lovely. So small.

And strong, the woman says. I’m Grainne.

Emanuela. She turns back to the child on the horse.
She dreams.

The zoo: palms dripping gull shit and salt, the arc of the sawdust thrown by an elephant’s tusk. The spider monkey liquid, loose. She is happy. The animals float like feathers; the wind moves them.

They cannot move themselves, she sees, and then something is wrong, this is not Gibtown, she has gone outside, the animals are stuffed and move on strings, their eyes alive and searching for her own.
It feels precisely like sleep.

There is no distinction to be made—
her limbs moving as if through water,
her thoughts certain and also

like someone else’s thoughts shoved into her mind,
strange and predetermined.
Grainne’s hard skinny fingers—like wood,

like a woodcarver—are on her face,
smoothing her like an edge.
Emanuela lifts her hands slowly,

puts them both in Grainne’s black hair.
She can feel everything. Each hair,
a thousand thousand, curls like barbed-wire

around her gray skin.
Soft, she says, too loudly.
Grainne laughs and laughs

and keeps touching Emanuela’s face.
What she gives

she receives many a thousand, many
a hundred. The body of the other
otter-dark, turned to face her,

turned away so her hair grasps
at the jam-stickiness of her back,
holds her, holds onto her, fits

them both like water
fitting the cup that holds it,
She gives and takes between her teeth,

precise as blades. She gives and takes
heart. They wear white sheets
around their bodies as if their bellies

were thrones and the sheets queens
in salt and white yarrow, red hairs
and black ones twisted into crowns.
It is Olin

who tells them the carnival is leaving.
Days, he says, not weeks.
He is looking Emanuela in the face

but not the eyes and she wants
to bring her hands to her cheeks
but does not. His skinny bird shoulders

flinch at her. We’re getting a camel,
he says, and she almost laughs.
We’re meeting it at the port in Canaveral.

We need you. Something falls
in her like sawdust twisting in an arc.
The zoo. The animals on strings.
I will ask him if you can come,

Emanuela tells her. It is night,
and Grainne is helping her
pack curry brushes, her fingers
quick as drippings. Long Perales.
He’ll say yes. He’ll find you work—
with wood—something you will like—
gifts, maybe. For the children.
Grainne is looking at her,
frozen ponds of eyes. Go with you?

I—have orders for half a dozen
dining room chairs.
Emanuela packs things

that fit in her hands like toys,
that melt like soap
under running water.

She has nothing to say.
Emanuela dreams.

Her mother stands on a circle
made of wood. Her skin is blue
as an egg—she is surrounded by blue
eggs the size of gulls.
There is a sharp smell, like grease
on fire. When they crowd her,
she looks past and past,
hers eyes blind-open,
a salesman with a dark hat
pushing through the crowd
and away. Then everyone in the circle
is a child. Then everyone
has gray skin and red hair
and shrieks like a little bird,
like something without a voice.
What will follow is a camel.

What will follow is a fence Emanuela makes out of metal in the shape of a ring. Come on, baby, she will say, for the camel is afraid of the sawdust coating the asphalt. What will follow is a day that sweats through a braid. She will smell hot grease like a burn, say Sang to herself, say Olin and find his round-eyed face near her. Say Long Perales and hear nothing but her voice and animal breathing, feel the hard pull of the sun. She will turn her gray face to the flank of gray mare. She will not look. She will not mind looking.