

Hartford Circus Fire (1944)

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All we were told was that the animals
were saved and the children died;
the elephants strolled to safety, nose to tail,
while mothers ran in terrified circles
and clawed each other to death.

And the thing was we were supposed to go:
drive up the turnpike, find our way to Main Street,
pass the Polish Home and the department stores,
sensing all the while that the river was somewhere
in the distance, alive and flashing in the sun.

And the circus would never come to town again.
Fine with us. We didn't want to go anyway.
We already knew how quickly paraffin burns
and how to slit canvas and, hand to hand,
pull each other into the light like babies born of fire.

And no couple claimed the little girl as theirs.
She was buried without a name or story
and every July the police put flowers on her grave.
We used to see her face everywhere and feel
the wound of someone else's silence and remorse.

And now the elephants are too sad to look at,
graceless and misshapen, making everyone think
no life is without prodding and invective.
If they were made of salt our tears
would have washed them away long ago.