

SKELETON KEYS

He came to town cloaked, carrying the tools of his trade:
card decks, hollowed-out top hats, in a suitcase he hid behind his bed.

Yes, since you'll ask—he bound me to his bed
with one of those silly strings of scarves

that comes in a rainbow, blue yellow red,
and I lay there laughing, laughing.

He said he could juggle stuff on fire, slip out of any jail
the ringmaster built: cement cells, water tanks

if just given a second behind a screen.
Once, he left me (accidentally, I imagined)

handcuffed to a chair for an hour—
he walked to the Winn-Dixie and, distracted,

let me linger in my lingerie.
I panicked: strained against the steel until

he came back, two ham sandwiches in hand,
sheepish. I asked, “Don't you fear

that once you're in these things
you're permanently pinned, freedom lost forever

like a scarf in the wind?”

“I’m sorry

to have given you a scare, my lovely girl,
but you must know it’s mad to fear

a thing while your lungs still heave.”
I insisted, then, that he bring me to his show.

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He hung over the pool of water,
with two alligators languishing

Six minutes through, Sasha, his assistant/stage wife,
walked up to give him a “kiss.” He jerked

until the second the screen fell, violins swelled,
breath caught in my throat.

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After that I’d always ask—what was his secret?
If he’d share it with the slim and sequined Sasha, shouldn’t I know?

I got him groceries, cleaned the rabbit cage,
wore his top-hat when asked and often the bow tie.

It wasn’t enough, each night that crowd: he wouldn’t take the risk
for anyone without a contract.

When he caught me searching his coat pockets,
reading his mail, he took me by the hand, told me this:

he wouldn't keep a woman wracked
by his necessary silence, the trick of the trade,

someone sobbing over each fact undisclosed.
The secret, though, was simple:

one can't escape alone.
Each night, his assistant hid

a key between her lacquered lips,
then slipped it into his.