

Kim Stafford

Zena the Snake Charmer, Free Woman

When Professor Miller's circus came up along the coast
in creaking wagons from Bandon and Coos Bay to Tillamook,
and roustabouts drove iron pegs into the sand with cursing shouts
to raise their tent, with all the hurly-burly of old lion and sad clown
and dancing horses cantering in their circle of lantern magic,
shadows playing on the canvas overhead, the scent of sweat

and sawdust fresh from the mill dismembering ancient trees,
and when at dawn she stood in his balloon cast off to climb the sky,
Grace, age 17, felt the pang of charm for J. W. the balloon boy
with his ropes and fire, his slender bravado and parachute,
looking down on the ant people swirling beside the sea.
So when the circus pulled up stakes, she cast off
all ties of her own and drifted with them north to Seaside,
then east to Portland, where in 1909 she had her photo taken
with the lips of a snake at her neck, a serpent as long as she stood tall.
By then she was no longer Grace, but Zena the Snake Girl, set loose
to be a woman traveling through danger and exhilaration.

Inside the photo tent, Zena held her lizard rope, and charmed J. W.
until he proposed, they had a plan, and the circus headed east
for Idaho. And when the snake climbed to her neck at Weiser,
and the balloon rose into the sky, all the children knew another life
was possible—not grubbing in the dust for wheat and potatoes,
or shoveling manure at the livery, or dressing in their best
each Sunday, or saying yes to every shabby expectation
of their elders, for their eyes shone and their hands
trembled to see Zena hold the snake and whisper secrets
to the flickering red-thread tongue held close.

But then the balloon failed, the parachute ropes clenched
his neck like snakes, and Zena's fiancée drowned in the Snake River,
his body tumbling downstream to be found at Huntington. They
brought
her news, she paled, she cut all ties, went to a dance, then returned to
her room
at the Iberia Hotel in White City, considered her options,
drank chloroform, and died.

By then, Prof. Miller told the newsmen, she was down to one
grandmother
and 22 snakes, and the circus had to find a new girl to charm
both serpents and men, to lure children to give up dimes
from sweaty palms, then gasp to see snakes
held to the neck of a new young beauty with shining eyes.

When the stone-cutter asked the grandmother for a name—
should it be Grace, or Zena—the old woman paused
and recalled her own long life of obedience and decorum,
knew that Grace had died in Tillamook, Zena was born
in Seaside, and what she was by now, no one could say.