

The Book of the Tales of Circus Zimba

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Blackbird: The Magician's Tale

Dead Mule School of Southern Literature: Here Begins the Book of the Tales of Circus Zimba

Dead Mule School of Southern Literature: The Human Blockhead's Tale

No Tell Motel: The Groundskeeper's Tale

Out & About Nashville: Zebra' Man's Tale

Split Shot: The Manic Taxidermist's Tale

This book is dedicated to: the corner of Inkster and Joy Roads in Dearborn Heights, Michigan.



## Here Begins the Book of the Tales of Circus Zimba

In April, when flowers should have nodded,  
And farmer's draft horses should have plodded  
Through fields agreeen with rows of growing grain,  
The dust bowl came and blew it all away.  
I was a writer for the local press.  
The paper failed, and though I did my best  
To track down work so I could earn my pay,  
No luck. So I joined WPA.  
And that Summer I met up with the Fair  
To interview the tribe who traveled there.  
To faraway places (some known, some not)  
We journeyed jolly -- a motley lot.  
America in the 1930's  
Was a place to embrace one's destinies  
So the 18 freaks who became my friends  
Shared with this writer their lives and legends.  
We left from Cheatham County, Tennessee,  
to start life as one in the heart of Dixie.  
I have your ear, so I will take my chance  
To share the sideshow's tales of happenstance,  
And how the freaks and I are all akin. . . .  
So, with a magician, I begin.

The Magician's Tale  
For Vanteen The Magician

I. The Early Years

A carnival came to town the same week  
I graduated from high school. I told  
my mother I was going. The head geek  
gave me a midway job. I'd watch the old  
magician's melodic hands. (A penny  
dose of spectacle for all the farm sons  
and housewives.) Then came the Army  
and Uncle Sam. The war called the Great One. . . .  
I'd hone my ethereal fingerings  
off duty with cards or a billiard ball.  
Back in the States, I had to pull some strings,  
but got through the College of Manual  
Dexterity and Prestidigitation.  
Poof! I became ZAMTEEN: The Magician.

## II. The Circus of the Fantastic Begins

Torchy Rae and I lived in Echo Park.  
We purchased old show equipment. I drove  
a Yellow taxicab. One day I parked  
the cab for good and hit the road. We roved  
California with our very own show!  
Our act was Super-X, Shrunken Head and  
the Blade Box. For a "donation" we showed  
all the crowd how it was done. Rae handled  
snakes, and was Atomic Girl. I would light  
bright torches from her fingertips or tongue.  
Alone, onstage, wrapped in fiery slight  
of hand, we were voltaic. And hard stung  
by love, I guess you could say. That's the way  
I remember her today: young, aflame.

## The Sword Swallower's Tale

This is the real thing, not just sleight of hand.  
I swallow steel. It's not some sideshow trick.  
There are no damn mirrors or magic wand.  
I pick up a sharp sword and then I stick  
it down my throat, down into my stomach.  
People die all the time; there is no schtick  
in this. It takes years. You start out cheesy—  
small things like fingers. You make yourself sick,  
all the time, until you don't get queasy  
when you stick your fist down your throat. Easy.  
Then you are ready to take on some swords.  
Run some up and down, then join a sleazy  
sideshow and entertain the unwashed hordes  
waiting for an accident in action.  
Crowds just want to see a crucifixion.

## Zebra Man's Tale

*For Horace Ridler*

### I. The Early Years of Omi

Fought against the Kaiser for my High King--  
I was an officer by rank and class.  
Of my time spent there I won't be speaking.  
Not of the trenches, the shells, nor the gas.  
Enough's been said about those things that broke  
apart the light inside the men who lived.  
In England I was just another bloke.  
I looked for work. My wife and I survived  
day to day with any job I could find.  
Then I read a book about Captain Cook  
and saw the decorated natives lined  
with inks upon their skin. I found my hook.  
That's when I opted for the tattoos.  
There was not very much I had to lose.

## II. A Modern Primitive

Found an old Chinaman with a machine  
to make the outré that would always stay.  
An ancient gesture: skin and inks and line.  
Underlaid the hieroglyphs of the day...  
the Union Jack, naked women, a rose.  
Piece by piece I became more primitive.  
Well, on the outside at least, where it shows.  
Become a spectacle--my choice. To live  
outside the lines. With every burning weal,  
with every needle's buzz, I shod my shell.  
My place within this savage race. I feel  
I'd seen enough horror to know that well.  
Man to "savage:" my grand transformation.  
Tattoos: my sharp, guilt, emancipation.

### III. Barbaric Beauty

I drifted with small shows, but needed more.  
I did not earn enough to make ends meet.  
So the late June of 1934  
began my complete inking from head to feet.  
Early that same year, I devised a shrewd  
scheme to become A Wonder. My tall task:  
scrap my skin for a zebra suit. My crude  
tattoos took George Burchett six months to mask.  
He worked from breaking day to waning dusk.  
My skin was scribed with stripes wide and wild  
and I pierced my nose with an ivory tusk.  
Into sharpest fangs my teeth were filed.  
Jeweled robes and fine boots richened my plan.  
I became *The Great Omi: Zebra Man*.

#### IV. World Of Tomorrow

The New York World's Fair was in '39.  
Me. The Odditorium. On display.  
Millions, they gazed on this fine face of mine.  
The spiel I gave of how I got this way  
was this: deep in Papua New Guinea,  
stranded, captured by barbaric natives,  
they tattooed my whole body, forcibly.  
And pierced my nose and ears with their sharp knives.  
I smiled inside, telling this tall tale  
of woe. I laughed out loud, to the bank  
and back. My often scoffed plan did not fail--  
I'd come a long way from medals and rank.  
Now I'm my own man inside my own skin  
and you won't believe the fame I bask in.

## The Pickpocket's Tale

Basically whenever there's a large crowd  
you find me there. I travel with the fair  
and when the nighttime is busy and loud --  
I disappear into the sugared air.  
I'm subtle and silent when I have found  
my mark. A farmhand who just got his pay.  
Maybe a kid who's just hanging around.  
A fat billfold will always make my day  
and he won't even know that it happened.  
I'm already on to the next pigeon.  
It's a job I heartily recommend—  
you wouldn't believe what I can take in.  
The sideshow acts take the crowd's attention.  
Lifting their money is my intention.

## The Stripper's Tale

### I. The Early Years

I quit school. Took off with my boyfriend  
and didn't even send a postcard home.  
But he turned out to be a first rate louse—  
no good tomcat always prowling for some  
tail. I came home, changed the locks on the house,  
and I turned Miss Bessie Smith way up high.  
Dumped his stuff on the street one rainy day  
and fixed myself a drink. How to get by  
without that creep? I had to find a way.  
Well, I had my figure; that's no small thing.  
Decided to give the show bar a ring.

## II. Headliner

It was burlesque. Those men got a whole show.  
Pasties, tassels, some feathers, a fur stole—  
girly tools to make the titillation.  
The rapid pulse and little beads of sweat.  
You tease time—it's slow anticipation.  
You have to know when to turn up the heat.  
Honey, I knew how. Went from chorus line  
to a featured spot in no time at all.  
This was the spring of 1929,  
headlining two shows at the China Doll,  
I was making good dough. Couldn't complain.  
That's how I turned into Lucky Lane.

## The Cootchie Show Bandleader's Tale

We play behind the girls, but bass and drums are important too.  
Drums and hips just go together. *You can't screw without rhythm*,  
I say. We play behind the stage while the girls dance. Natch. Bass. Sax.  
The orchestra's musical foreplay spiffs the tent with romance.  
There's nothing like music to create a mood, and that's the truth.  
We make the ear candy. A nice tune when she's getting all nude.  
And that loud crowd they get so randy. We're in the background  
but we set up the scenes for all of the ladies' stripper routines.

## The Sideshow Geek's Tale

Everyone wants some horror now and then,  
and I'm just the man to give it to them.  
I put on makeup and dress in skins  
then I go into the cage in chains.  
Then I go crazy and bite chickens.  
Alive squawking chickens. I make bloodstains  
on my face for the crowd. Am I insane?  
I suppose. But I get all the booze  
I can drink after the show. Can't complain.  
It's a job I would not want to lose  
with benefits like that. I am the geek.  
I'll tell you what I'll swallow. Feathers, raw  
liver—anything, including the beak.  
The crowds never can believe what they saw.

The Original Human Blockhead's Tale  
for Melvin Burkhart

I. What I had

I lived inside that square of mat and ropes.  
I was a kid. It was my life for a while.  
Thought I had what it takes. I had big hopes,  
had big dreams of the top of the pile.  
Muscle, gloves, the fast fist inside—had it.  
Legs that held my bob and weave—had those too.  
Had a crunch punch like lickety-split  
so in time my amateur days were through.  
It was ready! set! go! for the pro ring—  
bigger crowds, more money, and my big chance.  
I sparred and trained and did everything  
I could to get ready for the big dance.  
Next I'll say how it turned out I suppose.  
It has to do with my magical nose.

## II. The Cutman Was My Friend

In all, I had 6 professional bouts.  
So that was my entire pro career.  
Had a winning record—or thereabouts  
(I like to keep that a little unclear!)  
So back to my nose. It was busted. Bad.  
The doctors took lots of pieces of bone  
out of my nose. And they told me I had  
to quit boxing—but I'd already known.  
I made up a crazy vaudeville skit  
that I clowned whenever they came to town.  
Did a muscle act that was a big hit;  
at the same time I could smile and frown.  
So I decided to join the sideshow.  
Thanks to boxing I had a new status quo.

### III. The Anatomical Blunder

I joined the sideshow in 1930.  
And I plan to be here for many years.  
I've always been a ham. What you can see  
onstage. There is the woman with 3 ears.  
And Bill Durks, the man that has 2 noses.  
I got him together with the woman  
with alligator skin. I sent roses  
for their wedding. Then there was the Dog Man  
and a lot of other acts. I did 5  
myself. The Human Skeleton for one.  
It's my nose that made them say Why? Alive?  
on the sign outside though. That sure was fun.  
I'll tell you of my most famous of acts  
and I'll try to stick to all of the facts.

#### IV. Hammer and Nail

So you need a big 5-inch roofing nail  
and an appropriately impressive  
hammer. It's got to be big too. You wail  
on that nail—bang bang bang—you have to drive  
it up your nostril! Did I mention that?  
That's how I became the Human Blockhead.  
Had 2 wives and I fed my family fat.  
It is like what the 3-legged man once said:  
beats jobbery and robbery haha.  
I don't plan to retire 'til 94,  
then I will have fun being a grandpa.  
I sure do like the sound of that encore.  
I've made my life with a hammer and nail  
and a busted nose that I do impale.

## The Groundskeeper's Tale

I pick up people's dreams of a fun day.  
The corndog stick, a ticket stub. A cup.  
Didn't want this job. Why? Happened this way:  
went downhill after my marriage broke up.  
Felt used up. I like to keep moving  
from place to place. It's very cut and dried.  
So here I am at the fair, removing  
some kid's warm puke from the damn Tea Cup ride.  
Hosing down people's dreams of a fun time.  
At least the pickpocket leaves me alone  
and I haven't turned to a life of crime.  
Yet. Life is not gonna throw me a bone.  
Didn't want this job. Just happened this way.  
I pick up people's dreams of a fun day.

## The Manic Taxidermist's Tale

You need a 5-legged goat? I'm the guy.  
Or a cross between a pig and a cow?  
I can make you a bull with one eye—  
just perfect for your ten-in-one grind show.  
I gut, stuff, and sew spectacular gaffs  
to fool the folks. Specialize in livestock.  
These are brand new—they are 2-headed calfs.  
Chickens with 2-heads—I have a whole flock.  
But this Fee-Jee Mermaid—that is the tops.  
You know that monkey heads sure don't come cheap.  
I cut off that fish's head and I swap  
it with the monkey's head. Beauty's skin deep.  
Yeah, monkeys and fishes make strange duets.  
You're sure to make money with one of my pets.

## The Strongman's Tale

I'm a powerhouse in my own skin. My  
Muscles articulate so strong and sleek  
Though 20 years ago I once was thin.  
Hardly was big enough to pip a squeak.  
Everyone said I'd amount to nothing  
So I purchased the Charles Atlas plan.  
The things people do to change anything.  
Romantic, really. I am every man.  
Only need a work ethic and hard work,  
Nothing else is needed. So then when I  
Go onstage in chains and go berserk,  
My hours of training help me defy.  
Also, I can bite an iron nail in two.  
Never think lightly of what you can do.