

Balancing Act

Chinese Acrobats and Topophilia

By Hal Herring, 4-06-06

Chinese acrobats! The call came from friends in Ovando. They were going to Great Falls to see a group of Chinese acrobats called the Golden Dragons and we were invited. I could not tell right away whether this was a good thing or not. Very few acrobats of any nationality visit Great Falls, and it seemed crazy to miss them. And yet... We would have to leave early on a Saturday to eat dinner and catch the show at the Civic Center -- a civilized place where beers are pointedly not served. I thought of reasons to escape the trip. The early spring world is lit with possibility. What if I wanted to fish the newly ice-free reservoir until dark? What if a call came in for some end-of-season skiing? Little gophers were popping out everywhere on the prairie like a whack-a-mole game and my rifle was sighted in for 200 yards. Schedules were bad enough in winter, in spring they were torturous. So were my family's questions. Yes, I wanted my children to see Chinese acrobats and no, I had no idea when the chance would come again. No, I did not imagine that we would be on a long hike and look into a coulee and see acrobats cavorting among the chokecherries. We would see them cavorting in the Civic Center or not at all. Yes. I guess.

I should note that after finding a fly in my coffee, put there by my son as an April Fool's trick, I'd made up a few small squares of soap covered with chocolate and presented them to my children in a like spirit. My six-year-old son was cautious and took only a couple of bites, but my almost three year old daughter tossed them into her mouth, utterly trusting, and ran off into the living room, chomping away. Fairly dramatic puking and retching ensued. My name was mud. My bargaining ability regarding the acrobats was almost nil.

I drove straight through Great Falls to Morony Dam on the Missouri River before dinner, just to get in some time outside. Morony is the last dam between Great Falls and Fort Peck reservoir -- hundreds of miles of big, free-running river away. I have never been there before, but have imagined that every wandering fish in those hundreds of miles must visit here at least once in their lives, just to make sure there is no further point that can be reached, that no potential freedom is missing from their lives. In my mind I saw a boiling of ancient sturgeon and pike, walleye and smallmouth bass pursuing goldeyes, a

monster catfish lolling deep, galumphing down the shards of baitfish cut apart by the pike. Galumphing down the baits that I would someday soon bounce into their paths.

The reality of Morony Dam is some different, though not much. The water is a deep green as it pours from beneath the dam's turbines, and though nothing was in evidence, it looks almighty likely. The few anglers already there seemed glum, and rooted to the buckets they sat on. I asked if they were catching anything, on fire with curiosity and feeling increasingly bereft without tackle of my own. A red-faced young man stood up and stared grimly at me. "Bolongulugg....." he said, scowling, then dismissing me, "thweeeeffft....." His twelve pack of Natural Ice was almost empty. Something struck on one of the rods that were jammed into the fence above the swirling tail water, unnoticed, and the line went slack. A man who could have been the red-faced man's father missed it too. He said, "All he's doing is breakin off sinkers."

We took the high ground, my wife and son and daughter and I, and walked to the lookout that faces down river, over the spectacular broken prairie country and the hiking trails that follow the yucca and prickly pear covered heights over the river. A sign described the trail to Sulfur Springs, where Meriwether Lewis ran to fetch the water that healed Sacagawea, who was too sick to make the trip herself and lay, near death, in a cave nearby with her infant. The stinking waters did the job, apparently. The coulee that held the springs was just visible on the near horizon. Across the river from it, a rush of white water into the green Missouri marked the mouth of Belt Creek, born in the heights of the Highwoods, which we could see as a formidable mountain range rising from the wheat fields like a snow-shrouded mirage, just to the east of the city. My tendencies to extreme topophilia aside, there is not much finer country than this anywhere on the planet. And of course we had to leave. Acrobats!

The friends we were meeting tend to be averse to crowds, especially waiting in crowds at the Mackenzie River Pizza in Great Falls. Luckily, the many children that came with them are as yet immune to misanthropy and were keeping the mood high. Two of them had just finished hunter education, and the eldest had passed the final exams that very day. They had gone with others to Freezeout to celebrate by looking at the waterfowl, which had amassed, many and raucous and varied. As we waited in the restaurant for a table for twelve, a competition was raging between two of the boys as to who could identify the most ducks and geese from a bird book, with the names covered. I joined in and was quickly revealed as an idiot; identifying a brightly colored duck as a harlequin. One of the children hooted with joyous scorn. "You are sitting on its name!" he said. "Wood duck!" I yelled "Wood duck!" But it was too late for me.

Beer eventually arrived. The table hummed with a New West-kind of conversation. Jobs at the Nature Conservancy were discussed, as well as the business of wetlands restoration and elk hunting, the strangely staggered arrival of the tundra swans at Freezeout, backcountry skiing prospects for spring, and last fall's duck hunting. Certain topics, like the exploding human population of the Bitterroot Valley were, for the moment, carefully avoided. The children muttered peacefully among themselves, gorging on dough concoctions called "lodgepoles" that the waiter kept bringing, hoping to head off trouble from them.

We found ourselves in the balcony of the Civic Center.

The boy who scorned me over the wood duck yelled in pure delight, but I could barely hear it because I and everybody else was yelling, too. The Golden Dragons were insane. The power of the troupe seemed to be hardly contained upon the stage there in that fine but staid hall. Later one of the boys with us would say it was like watching the movie the Matrix, but in real life. We were all transfixed, eyes popped out as each new physical improbability escalated to sheer impossibility. The men and women of the Golden Dragons, fiercely strong, balanced and bendy beyond belief, roared through the show. The music was, I think, Chinese hip hop, and the speakers were almost exactly across from our seats in the balcony. At times it was like being in crashing surf while listening to a Chinese lady singer hitting all the high notes just right. Like the waters of that Sulfur Spring on the river, it would cure whatever malaise that the previous winter had spattered you with. My son had been battling the flu all day, a fever tugging at him, but between that music, the acrobats below, and a bag of Sugar Babies, you'd have never known there was anything wrong with him.

There is no substitute for walking in to place without expectation and have something like the Golden Dragons unfurl in their glory before you.

The show was a like a roller-coaster ride. At one point the entire troupe was dancing while spinning what I think was six or more plates on rods held in each hand. My son at first did not believe that such thing was possible, and insisted that the plates were connected to the rods. I told him no, but of course I was already lost in the idea -- keeping all those plates spinning, like trying to do all these jobs I've been doing, trying to make a living -- see, life was worming it's way back into my consciousness through the wondrous forgetting inspired by the Golden Dragons. Suddenly it stuck me! If a woman can stand on one leg on a tiny promontory juggling rings while working a giant hula hoop, if a beautiful woman can rise from absolute prone to standing while balancing what looks like a chandelier full of little glasses, all of them filled with water, on her very forehead, without ever using hands or moving her feet, can rise like a lazily self-confident cobra, well then I should be able to a make a few writing deadlines and break

ground for a garden. I remembered that the tight-wire walker Karl Wallenda once said, "Life is being on the wire, everything else is just waiting." Did that have any relevance for any of us there? I still don't know.

As we walked out, there was a rain falling. My son said, "Hey we haven't smelled rain like that in a long time!" He was right. It had been snow or cold rain ever since November, this was warm rain falling on dirt and grass and trees that were waking up, unlocking, a totally different thing. A coal train shuddered and thundered between us and the river. One of our friends asked me if I thought the acrobats' otherworldly flexibility was the result of genetics, acrobats marrying acrobats for generations. We pondered that. And all of us adults must have had the same thought -- I ain't never been that bendy, and now I never will be, genetics or not. The children turned cartwheels on the dark sidewalk. The adults trudged forward in the rain, suddenly like a band of creaky tin woodmen who are never going to find the damn oil.

Our friends were staying at the O'Haire Motor Inn, and we had it on good authority that the Golden Dragons were staying there too, somewhere in the maze-like bowels of the place. We headed for the Sip 'n' Dip, the O'Haire's lounge, that features a huge tank behind the bar where pretty women in mermaid tails swim about and wow the crowd, communicating with facial expressions and a few water-proof notecards. The Sip 'n' Dip also serves a "fishbowl" -- following the same kind of theme. It's an enormous multi-shot share drink, fluorescent-colored, and served in a kind of super-sized brandy snifter -- a fishbowl. I searched in vain for at least one Chinese acrobat in the melee. The bar was packed with pubcrawlers -- wearing identical pubcrawler T-shirts listing every bar in downtown Great Falls, where a crawler must have at least one drink to stay in the game. Somehow a merman got into the tank behind the bar -- he may have been a pubcrawler that borrowed a tail, I don't know. But at some point he whipped down the mer-tail and mooned the crowd through the glass, which resulted in his expulsion from the pool, and maybe the bar. The mooning was a grand success though, and the crowds at the little Tiki Bar annex, where a woman who looked to be in her sixties was rocking away on a kind of piano-organ belting out "Ring of Fire" with style and enthusiasm -- went wild.

By midnight, we began to understand that that the acrobats would not -- would never -- appear in the smoky Tiki Bar to slosh down a fishbowl and wink at the mermaids. The children were safely in a room somewhere in the hotel with at least one of the other adults, who, we hoped, had survived the experience of caring for them. On the long drive home, the rain changed abruptly to a whiteout blizzard, the snow falling so thick that we were in four-wheel drive just to push forward on the highway, stopping to clear off mile-marker signs just to see if we were making any progress. The elusive and feckless springtime had written a big check that it didn't have near the funds to cash. My white-knuckled designated driver-wife was paying the price for tee totaling. She looked out upon the hallucinatory patterns of the snow through the windshield -- it was like being under a cosmic dump truck unloading

snow directly down upon us. “That light, is that the Northwest energy tower?” she asked, “If that’s the Northwest Energy tower, we can make it, the road drops elevation from there.” The children slept on, unaware.

We made it. In the morning, almost all the snow was melting, sliding with thumps and slams off the roof, piling up on the north side of the house. By noon it was already gone, the blizzard like a dream. The hot April sun fell everywhere.

The Golden Dragons are touring out there somewhere, just as they have been, in various forms, for almost thirty years. Last I heard, they were (really) heading for Ohio. Catch them if you can.