

Without a Net
By Ana Maria Shua
Translated by Steven J Stewart
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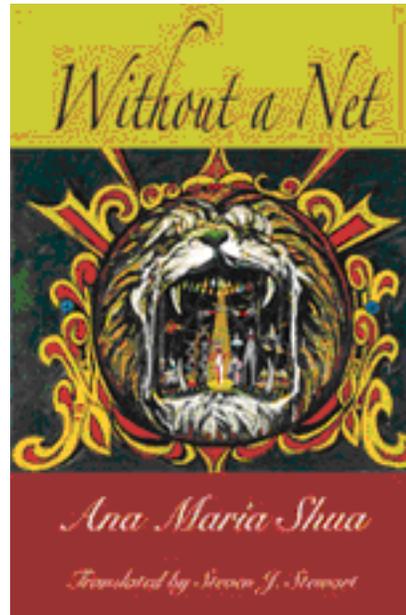
Review By Dennis Daly

These uncaged micro-fictions claw at their cream-colored context, crouch on the page, oozing hostility, catlike, and insatiably curious, waiting for the next reader, the next fearless trainer to breathe them into existential space and coax them through art's flaming hoops.

Ana Maria Shua, via the crisp translations of Steven J. Stewart, unleashes her circus fictions on us with dreamtime logic and dangerous humor. Beware of the clowns; some of them are dead men. Distrust the trapeze artists; they somersault from one universe to another. And for God's sake stay clear of the magician; he'll plunder your dreams to intercept and terminate your most secret wishes. One more thing: read Shua's history pieces with a jaundiced eye. I don't believe for a moment that William F. Cody was a happy man. But it would appear that Diane Arbus, before her suicide, was a happy woman.

The Secret Wish, which serves as the book's prologue, strikes me as blood-curdling and sociologically accurate. Shua walks us into the heart of darkness of the circus goers. They wish, says Shua, "to see the trapeze artist fall, to see him smash his bones against the ground, spill his dark blood on the sand... to see the lions fight over the tamer's remains...{and}to see the horse drag the rider around by her foot caught in the stirrup, striking her head in rhythm against the edge of the ring. But even havoc like this can become tiresome. That's when" the audience's desires shift: sick of disasters and failures they begin to wish that the trapeze artist's hands reach it in time, that the tamer keep lions under control, {and} that the rider makes it back to the saddle." How nice that civilization has progressed! But Shua's not done. The circus goers now become prideful of their humanity and aware of what a "decent, sensitive, and well-intentioned people" they are. We know where this leads.

One of my favorite pieces in this big top collection Shua entitles Immortal. The poem drubs poets and other artists who seek fame believing it the logical end to their creation-quest. The narrator, who sews sequins on circus costumes, believes that immortality is the key to becoming a great trapeze artist or acrobat. However two hundred years later, having escaped mortality, he is still sewing sequins and explains that the means to his artistic glorification has now become the end. He confesses to his "always new," friends: "I don't want to die." Most artists realize that art without danger, without some imaginative risk loses its definition and dims away.



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The fiction *Magician and Saw* captures you with its irony and, finally, with its all-out black humor. Shua takes the usual magic trick of sawing a woman in half and, uncomfortably for us, turns it on its head. The audience for this classic circus act has evolved. It no longer needs proof that the woman assistant is still intact. The audience applauds the whole bloody event wildly. The author then leaves us with this cautionary ending: "Now everything is easier. Except, of course, finding assistants."

Many of Shua's micro-fictions resemble the pieces of Jorge Luis Borges. They aren't as dense as Borges, but the tone and logical leaps are at times quite similar. Years ago, when I first read him, Borges sent me over and over to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* to see whether I was dealing with a fictional construct or something with an historical, biological or geographical reality. Shua's piece *The Liger* sent me to *Goggle*. And there it was. A liger turns out to be the product of mating between a male lion and a female tiger. According to Shua, "Bigger than its mother and father, a liger can grow to more than 13 feet long and weigh up to 900 pounds. As the gene that limits growth is transmitted maternally in lions and paternally in tigers, the liger doesn't inherit it and thus never stops growing its whole life." Shua's imagination takes off at this point and she places the universe and its long history within the liger's enormous mouth. In fact the cover of this book specifically places her metaphorical circus inside the gullet of a liger.

In *Buffalo Bill*, the character of William F. Cody comes across as a modern day Borges. After a lifetime of killing Shua makes him into an omnivorous reader and in the piece *Diane Arbus* she brings to life the famous photographer of freaks and monsters, portraying her as childlike in her curiosity and suggests that she joined the ranks of her subjects by her suicide.

But perhaps Shua's most thoughtful story, doubling as a cautionary tale is called *The Bearded Woman*. The author begins and ends her fiction with this sentence: Some stories don't even give your imagination a chance. Shua sets the story in Mexico in 1854. A circus promoter finds and falls in love (maybe) with a bearded lady. He exhibits her all over the world. Now it gets dicey. The woman becomes pregnant and gives birth to a little daughter who has the same odd characteristics as her mother. Both die during birth or shortly after. The husband embalms both and winds up exhibiting them throughout the world. Charmingly the husband then remarries—another bearded lady, and dies insane. I'm shocked! No not at the story's details as much as my own reaction to them. That's what this writer, Ana Maria Shua, does. And she does it well.