



A circus train crashes in the desert.

The animals are on their own.

The sun is hot.

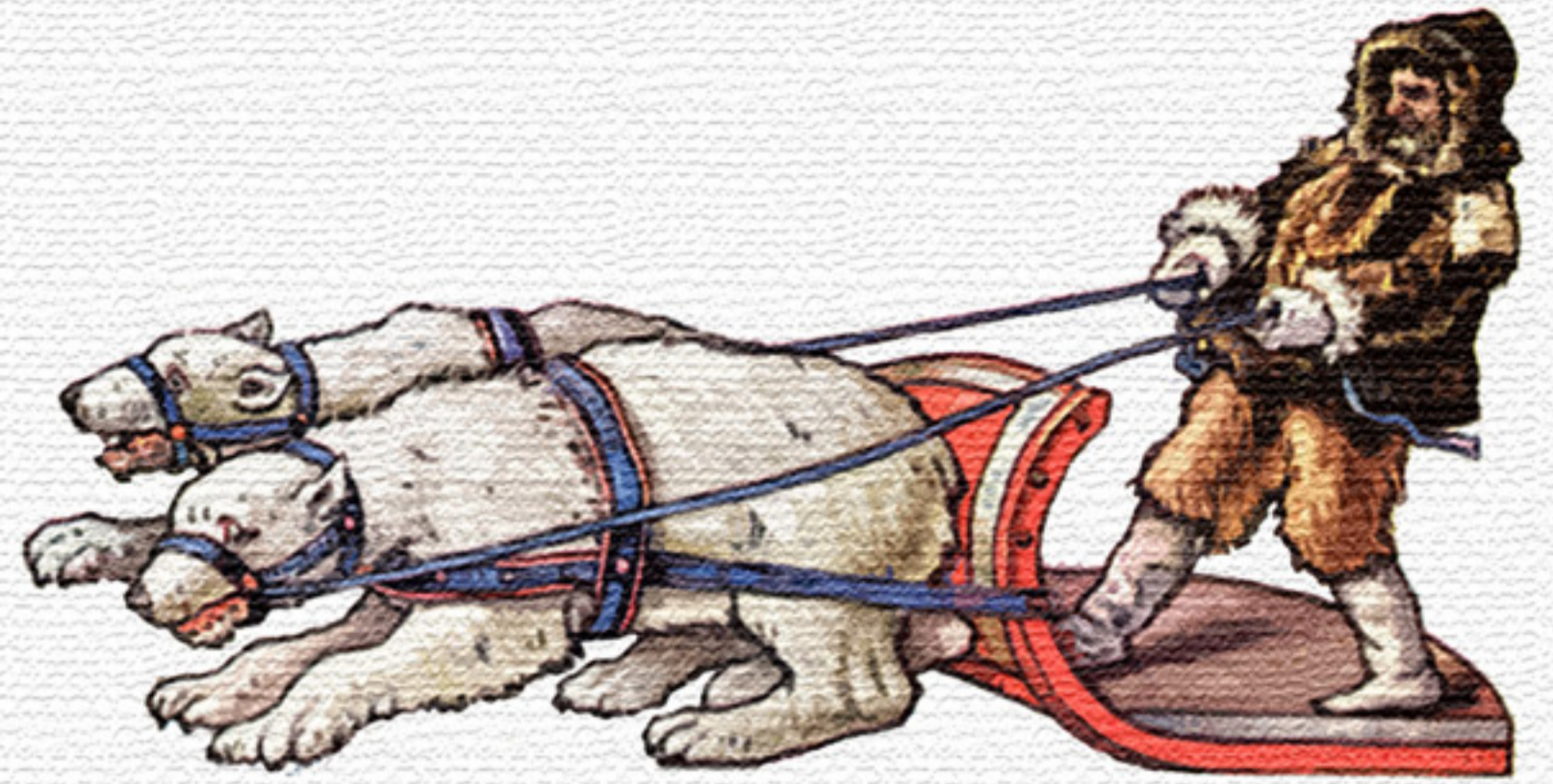
Food is scarce.

This is *Top of the Heap*.

TOP OF THE HEAP



KEITH McCLEARY





TOP OF THE HEAP

AN ANIMAL STORY

by Keith McCleary

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Any resemblance to real persons (or animals), living or dead, is purely coincidental. Re-
production strictly prohibited except for review purposes.
No animals were harmed in the making of this book.
We make no such promises about the clowns.

The ringmaster

and the
acrobats

served as food

for the
first three days.




The clowns
were next.



But no sooner did the hunters have their fill
than they were chased off their prize

by scavengers in turn
beset by scavengers





and no respite
from their hunger

could be found in
conventional prey

while Old Ironsides kept
a watchful eye.



With their remaining options
expired

or impenetrable

the search for water,
at least, bore fruit.

And food sources
heretofore
unconsidered
proved
suddenly
worthwhile.



But the good times

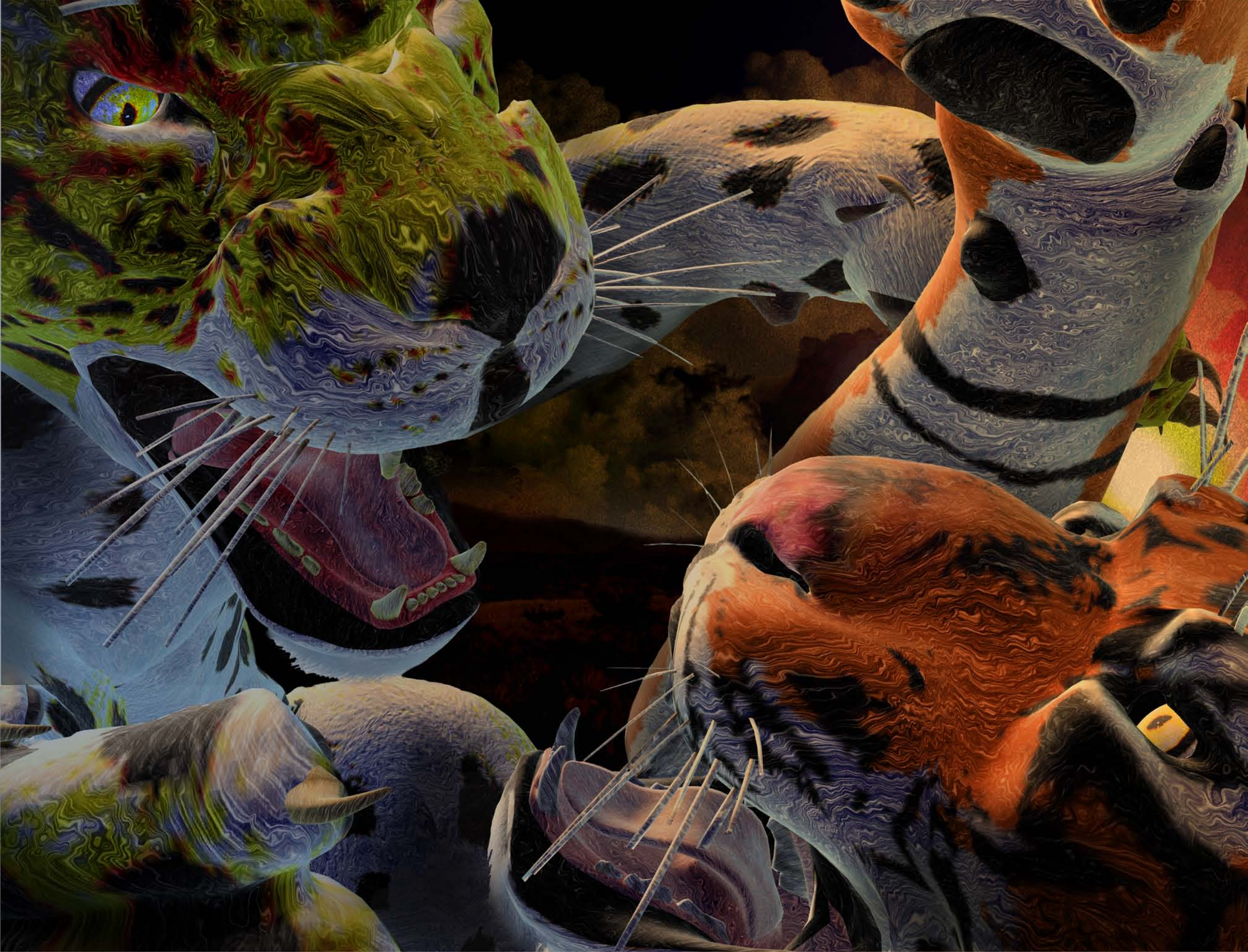
did not last





and
factions

fractioned.



In the
ensuing silence





as a passing storm withered
and withdrew

Old Ironsides arose
to follow his growing thirst
toward deeper waters.

Deciding, he headed westward

through darkness and mist



only to find more evidence
that the past
had been forgotten




lost to drinking
in the moonlight of the desert.

He could not tell if they even remembered him
or that they had once trotted in circles under canopies
and worn feathered hats and tassels



and he chased them away,
and would not share the drying stream.



But his solitude did not last

as terrified cries

echoed

across the valley.



He could no more keep his hooves
from cracking the ground

than could the night air alone
fill the empty stomach
of even the smallest of its inhabitants



but Ironsides

aimed true.

And then, exhausted

having heard not a word of thanks

but expecting none

he stumbled back
to familiar territory

for a flat and empty sleep.





He awoke
when the sun
was high

and hot



but he'd had his fill
of high hot heat
that rendered time
unsalvagable

so he began to walk.

Behind him, sounds

of ill fortune



faded
into
the
landscape.

And he waited
for the sound of a train whistle to guide him



and wondered whether he would head toward it

or away



when it finally echoed
across the prairie.





But he soon tired of waiting.



Instead

he found a place

that was cool and quiet

that cut its own path
through the desert plain.

And he looked to where

it met the horizon

and saw the world spread wide
before him.

the end



