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CROSSING

At the mouth of a staircase, the sidewalk shadowed by the structure itself, by the cloistered dark of the 4 a.m. city. Just enough light for a patterning gleam from the starry mica at the soles of our feet. A siren, fire engine, Doppler arc, towards and then away, away, away. A dog’s bark, a starburst ring of breaking glass.

By Erica Wagner          Shoreditch, UK           18 June 2019

BROOKLYN BRIDGE
Why did we wake? The deep chamber of sleep released us together, and in silence we rose from our damp sheets. I watched you walk naked to the cramped little bathroom, heard the stream of you in the bowl. Why did we wake? Not to kiss, not to touch, but to come here, through the quiet streets of the Heights with their fruit-sweet names: Cranberry, Orange, Pineapple. White clapboard, old brick along Hicks, a turn east towards Cadman Plaza, the traffic lights clicking through their rhythms for the broad and empty avenue.

Along through the scrabbed grass of the little park and then down again, under the approach, a roof of steel over your heads. You could almost miss the cut through which the steps rise, not least in this dark but we know where we are, where we are going, why. Your shoulder brushes mine as you turn, and I turn too, the stairs and into the Bridge.

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“The contemplated Work, when constructed in accordance with my design, will not only be the greatest Bridge in existence, but it will be the great Engineering Work of this Continent & of the Age.

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Why cross a bridge? One answer, the most obvious one, is that you need to get from here to there. From east to west or west to east, you have a destination in mind, an appointment to keep. “Crows of men and women attired in the usual costume of curiosities, you are in me!” It is a quintessential miracle, this ability to walk on water, to follow a path where once there had been no path, where once there had been only green river—not a river, in fact, but a fast flowing tidal strait, the Sound River, as in once called, the old name pouring the rush of water down from Long Island Sound through Hell Gate—Hell Gate! —and towards the bay where the North Atlantic waves.

This “provisional” city, Henry James called it. He was dismayed at the brie- fle of Manhattan’s rising towers just after the turn of the last century, the city’s constant remaking an emblem of “the universal will to move—to move, move, move, as an end in itself, an appetite, at any price.” From Brooklyn to Manhattan and Manhattan to Brooklyn, the first great bridge was flung across the river as an engine of commerce, a money-making machine of stone and steel wire. On its opening day, 24 May 1883, they poured across it, a first time for everything: “the first biggar, the first drunkard man, the first bagpiper, the first pair of lovers”—and so the ceaseless flood be gan, travellers shuttling back and forth as the wires of the bridge itself had been shifted, over and back, to weave the great cables in the sky. By the time James looked over the river in 1896, Brooklyn Bridge had been joined by a companion, the Williamsburg Bridge, completed a few years before. “The immemorial bridges are but as the horizontal sheaths of pines, white parapet, granite and limestone, their veins. The tower soaring, higher in those early days than anything anywhere—pinnacle, beacon, its cathedral arches setting their gaze on what was called “the New World.”

And so we continue onward, to the centre of the span.

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“Rebuild the bridge? Why rebuild it? It is already carrying six times as much traffic as was planned in 1870. Its height and width are more than adequate for the amount of traffic that it carries. The bridge is not overloaded, and there is no need to rebuild it.”

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It had been years, you told me, since you had come to the Bridge. You had no special reason to cross, you said; anyway, it was easier to take the sub way. The 2 train from Clark Street; sometimes you got your hair cut, you said, in the barber’s by the station. Or the C train from High Street. I told you I liked that station because the black letters on the white tiles spelt out HIGH. HIGH HIG. But still, I would walk whenever I could, even through the crowds in high summer; you don’t like that, to feel yourself surrounded by the press of bodies, milling strangers. It brings it all back to me, you said once; what it was, what all was, I didn’t have to ask.

Now the sun spreads its light over the river, shimmering towards the west. And just then—just here—you lift your joined hands and set them around a slender vertical suspender, a twisted rope of wire just an inch or so in diameter. Its slender line falls from the main cable, makes a web with the diagonal stays as comforting as an arbor. And we are rocked in wire, for my palm against the slim steel strand feels the heartbeat of the Bridge, the whole structure moving under its load, “instinct with motion,” just as alive as we are.

High above the water, between two cities, we are, like the Bridge, perfect in this moment, requiring nothing else. We are here and nowhere, in this place that is not a place, that seems “a motionless mass of masonry and metal” but is anything but. “At dawn, the world opens and2 opens, allows for the silence before speech, allows time to exist in the layers of a palimpsest, from the vanished forms of Hokusai towards the looming future.

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“Faith—is the Pierless Bridge
Supporting what We see
Unto the Scene that We do not—
Too slender for the eye”

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Faith in this balanced present over river, in air, under sun; faith in your hand over mine on the wire; faith in the knowledge that we need not go anywhere, not forward, not back, that we are, ourselves, the Bridge. Here we are, in our crossing, in the light.

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Erica Wagner’s most recent book is Chief Engineer: Washington Roebling, the Man Who Built the Brooklyn Bridge (Bloomsbury).

www.ericawagner.co.uk

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John A. Roebling to New York Bridge Company, 1 September 1867, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute Archives and Special Collections.

James, The American Scene.


Report of John A. Roebling, C.E., to the President and Directors of the New York Bridge Company of the Proposed East River Bridge, Brooklyn Eagle, 10 September 1867.

Whitman, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.”


Hewitt, Address.

Dickinson, “Faith—is the Pierless Bridge.”

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