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
Why did we walk? 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 walk? 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 scabbed 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 knew where we are, where we are going, why. Your shoulder brushes mine as you turn, and I turn too, up the stairs and into the Bridge.

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*The contemplated Work, when constructed in accordance with my designs, 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 east, you have a destination in mind, an appointment to keep. ‘Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes how curious you are to me!’ It is a quintessential moment, this ability to walk on water, to follow a path where once there had been no path, where once there had been only greenwater river—not a river, in fact, but a fast flowing tidal strait, the Sound River, as it once was called, the old name pouring the water of down from Long Island Sound through Hell Gate—Hell Gate!—and towards the bay where the North Atlantic waits.

This ‘provisional’ city, Henry James called it. He was dismayed at the bristling 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, it was called, the old name pouring the water of down from Long Island Sound through Hell Gate—Hell Gate!—and towards the bay where the North Atlantic waits.

Moving towards the four main cables as they rise from the anchorage, you are ready to be plucked in a net of wire. Wire powerful, ductile, flexible, unspooled for mile upon mile in cables, stays, and suspenders; the cables themselves just as they were on that opening day, uncharged and unprepared, so that to touch their cool curved surface is to travel in time. And now, as we walk hand in hand into the wire’s welcome, we ascend—the tower reaching out past Ireland, to England, to Lombardy and Liguria, Saxony and Prussia, Siberia and Ukraine, supported on the backs of those who toiled in the hot thick air, blood gone tight in 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.

"Rebuild the bridge? Why rebuild it? It is already carrying six to eight times the amount of traffic of its early days. It is carrying elevated lines and a lot of other things that it did not carry in the beginning. There is no necessity to rebuild. It will last 100 to 200 years. Isn't that long enough?"

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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 subway. Two trains from Clark Street; sometimes you got your hair cut, you said, in the barbers 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 HIGH. 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 our 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 any cradle. And we are rocked in wire, for my palm against the thin 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 breathes and opens, allows for the silence before speech, allows time to exist in the layers of a palimpsest, from the vanished forests of Mississaugua towards the oncoming 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 on 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, on this 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