

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.

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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 scrubbed grass of the little park and then down again, under the approach, a roof of steel over our heads. You could almost miss the cut through which the steps rise, not least in this dawn dark. But we know 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.

*‘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.’*¹

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. ‘Crowds of men and women attired in the usual costumes! how curious you are to me!’² It is a quotidian miracle, this ability to walk on water, to follow a path where once there had been no path, where once there had been only greensilver river—not a river, in fact, but a fast-flowing tidal strait, the Sound River,³ as it once was 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 waits.

This ‘provisional’ city, Henry James called it. He was dismayed at the bristle of Manhattan’s rising towers just after the turn of the last century, the city’s constant remaking an embodiment of ‘the universal will to move—to move, move, move, as an end in itself, an appetite, at any price.’⁴ 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 beggar, the first drunken man, the first bag-piper, the first pair of lovers’⁵—and so the ceaseless flow began, travellers shuttling back and forth as the wires of the bridge themselves had been shuttled, over and back, to weave the great cables in the sky. By the time James looked over the river in 1906, Brooklyn Bridge had been joined by a companion, the Williamsburg Bridge, completed a few years before. ‘The immeasurable bridges are but as the horizontal sheaths of pistons working at high pressure, day and night, and subject, one apprehends, with perhaps inconsistent gloom, to certain, to fantastic, to merciless multiplication.’⁶

*‘It bears the Soul as bold
As it were rocked in Steel
With Arms of Steel at either side—
It joins—behind the Vail.’*⁷

You and I have a different aim in mind for our crossing. You take my hand as we slip up the narrow staircase, hemmed by the weight of wall. A blush of still-blue light as we emerge onto the promenade, a walkway raised above the traffic, which, even at this small hour, pours beneath our feet. Along the length of my spine, the pressure of the sun, now seeking the horizon—the glass towers ahead waiting to be lit along their lengths in gold. Which of us takes the first step, rising up over the land and to the river? *Breukelen* beneath us, that old land, renamed, colonised, brutalised, tamed to well-mannered farm and ferry-slip shore, those centuries dropping away behind our heels.

Moving towards the four main cables as they rise from the anchorage, we are ready to be held 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, unchanged and unrepai- red, 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 trussed floor of the Bridge breaching between land, river, and sky to carry itself over and across. We catch the scent of the river’s breath. Now the sun begins to pick out warm rose in the stone towers, granite and limestone, igneous, sedimentary, the deep stuff of the Earth itself, element in element. Do you turn to kiss me, or do you not? Keep walking. On we go.

*‘The central or fifth division of the bridge floor I call the Elevated Promenade, because its principal use will be to allow people of leisure and old and young invalids, to promenade over the bridge on fine days, in order to enjoy the beautiful views and the fine air. I need not state that in a crowded commercial city, such a promenade will be of incalculable value.’*⁸

The first lovers—no, of course we are not the first, nor will we be the last. But love dissolves here into something wider, richer—‘myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated, yet part of the scheme’⁹—as we move towards the tower now, the first tower, the Brooklyn tower, bedded deep beneath the river’s mud and down to the dark rock, its hidden foundation reaching out to the deep pine forest of Georgia that rendered its timber, thick with pitch, to be hewn and buried there underwater, a wooden roof to support the tons of stone upon its back. The tower reaching out too to 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?’*¹⁰

It had been years, you told me, since you had come to the Bridge. You had no especial reason to cross, you said; anyway, it was easier to take the subway. 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 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 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.¹¹

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.¹² 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 *Manahatta* towards the onrushing future.

*‘Faith—is the Pierless Bridge
Supporting what We see
Unto the Scene that We do not—
Too slender for the eye’*¹³

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, on this crossing, in the light.

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

fin.

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

²Walt Whitman, ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,’ <https://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1860/whole.html>.

³John Montrésor and Peter Andrews, ‘A plan of the city of New-York & its environs to Greenwich, on the North or Hudsons River, and to Crown Point, on the East or Sound River, shewing the several streets, publick buildings, docks, fort & battery, with the true form & course of the commanding grounds, with and without the town,’ <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g3804n.ar110401?r=-0.025,0.594,0.898,0.47,0>.

⁴Henry James, *The American Scene* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1907).

⁵*New York Times*, 25 May 1883.

⁶James, *The American Scene*.

⁷Emily Dickinson, ‘Faith—is the Pierless Bridge,’ https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/236388.

⁸Report 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.

⁹Whitman, ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.’

¹⁰Washington A. Roebling, *New York Times*, 29 July 1922.

¹¹Abram S. Hewitt, *Address Delivered on the Opening of the New York and Brooklyn Bridge* (New York: John Polhemus, 1883).

¹²Hewitt, *Address*.

¹³Dickinson, ‘Faith—is the Pierless Bridge.’