

## THOMAS FORTENBERRY

### People Crossing an Arched Bridge

Something came together  
inside the first time I saw  
Ariwara no Narihira, or People  
Crossing an Arched Bridge,  
that nineteenth-century woodblock  
explanation of a poem.

Look at the backwards glance of a woman  
perched at the centre of the bow  
bridge with her companion like dual arrows  
ready to shoot into heaven.  
Where is she  
going? To what  
is she pointing? Down  
goes the path, or up  
froths the water, or dry  
float the miraculous leaves?

Look at that laughing fan  
flapping the forward-leaning fun  
of two fast friends facing each other  
with their burden firmly between  
their ascension assured.  
It is the spontaneous release after death  
has been faced; I know. Wordsworth  
be damned, I have witnessed it  
in the duality of their swords.

Look at the two fishing  
in the rapids of life  
beneath the bridge so high.  
Or has the one already fallen  
in and is just now scrambling  
his way back onto the bank

while the other attempts to fish  
his lost belonging out of the water?

Look at the two opposite  
everyone else approaching:  
their burdens are tremendous  
and they are hugging  
personal demons; bundled  
within may be doubts and fears,  
the past pulled forward  
like a load of straw into their future.  
Or was it merely the chill  
of winter's approach, the invisible  
wind undrawn upon the canvas?

Look at the perfect arch  
of the bridge, cat-like  
it stretches across the middle  
of this quietly painted world,  
connecting home to the wild  
undergrowth of the side lost  
to view. Where is it  
located? What river flows  
beneath it? What roads  
and lands and people does it connect?

I wonder at the golden leaves  
swirling like fallen stars flowing  
down the rapidly running river  
and glance back towards its source,  
only to discover the poem  
hanging in the corner of the sky  
as radiant as the sun.

Note: the Japanese print "People Crossing An Arched Bridge" in the woodblock *ukiyo-e* style is in the James A. Michener Collection at the Honolulu Academy of Arts. It illustrates a poem by the ninth-century poet Ariwara no Narihira, and is from the nineteenth-century series "One Hundred Poems Explained by the Nurse." Michener discusses *ukiyo-e* art in his book *The Floating World* (1953).