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).