

THE BRIDGE



ALSO BY MARY AUSTIN SPEAKER

Ceremony

20 Love Poems for 10 Months

THE BRIDGE



Mary Austin Speaker

SHEARSMAN BOOKS

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wrote this book in the months preceding my departure from New York after many years of living in that city. Each of the poems was composed on the subway while riding over the Manhattan Bridge. Because I worked in Manhattan and lived in Brooklyn, I rode across the bridge twice a day. I wrote a poem each time I crossed it for several months. This book represents a selection of those poems.

Women on trains
have a life that is
exactly livable
the precision of days flashing past
no intervention allowed
shapes of each season
relentlessly carved in the land.

AUDRE LORDE

And so
of cities you bespeak
subways, rivered under streets
and rivers. . . . In the car
the overtone of motion
underground, the monotone
of motion is the sound
of other faces, also underground—

HART CRANE

The bridge *gathers*

MARTIN HEIDEGGER

for the train riders

THE BRIDGE

every morning going over the bridge
everybody going in to work
and me as well and me as well
as watching the lit up rocket
take off in the subway
someone named Bill left it there
so we could see what it would be like
to be that rocket
a cartoon is a drawing of an idea
on the bridge I have one foot
in Brooklyn the other in the city
it's the only time I can see for miles
all rippled by some sleeper's head grease
through this window on exhaustion
there are women on bicycles
with helmets protecting
their delicate heads
the train stalls
and we are at the edge
of the city of tomorrow
and now we are driving right in
to the city of right now
the paint on the bridge
is the blue white of milk
at 8:40 AM

there is a woman in a trench coat
whose collar wraps gently around her
shoulders she is gasping
having been told a word or two
I thought they were speaking German
but they are only
speaking English
and the signs in Chinatown are all Chinese
except the numbers
I have projected again
these person-sized places
under the bridge as though
I could sleep there
everybody going over the bridge
everybody going into work
and me as well and me as well

all land is no man's land
all bridges are erected
Miami is the color orange
therefore all cities
look like Miami sometimes
the warm body
of the polish *pani*
chatting with her husband
on the subway
is secretly comforting
the way the red clouds
at 6:38 PM are uncomfortable
we never want
the same thing twice
because we are never
the same thing twice
symmetry is a pattern
more alien than
the sci-fi heads of ferns
alien forms are the oldest ones
trilobites shrimp
all ocean creatures
defeathered birds
transparent bodies
we have gotten more other

as we paled and colored
and multiplied in Miami
prehistoric ferns grow
beside lagoons with honest
to god dinosaurs
let's start with a simple fear
and stay there
what keeps me up
is the horror of being
human mistakes the way
time won't stop moving
control power removed
from our bodies
all land is no man's land
all bridges are erected

motion is never only in one direction
we roll in limbs flashing
static lighting up our dust mites
if ascent is only a way
toward another opening
then I am ascending
to my desk and burrowing
through the pages in a fluid motion
being a machine is exhausting
spending all the fuel each day
on the B train a woman
whose head is bent toward the ground
eats an apple and threatens
anyone between her body and the door
you must not be behind me, she says,
or maybe you'll lose your life
I do not own anything
but I hold everything I have
loss is sublime in its twin-faced
pleasure and pain
pure blank of scarcity
or the always almost last
lifting of the body
out of the warm salt bath of death
oblivion quiet as a snowstorm

or a night full of rain
snow drifts up rain bounces back
motion is never only in one direction

every evening all the people
going home from work
the light having run
a fuller race from
the day before
there is a grace
to evening's
colored ends
a settling down
as though we are watching
the dust settle on the day
which I have chewed up like a pill
at 6:37 PM
the watchtower's glass eyes
on the lookout for a final end
so there will be one
to the story she tells
to her millions of people
she is looking at the city
with thousands of eyes
waiting for the clouds to break
like an egg
full of blood
and the rivers to roil
beneath the bridge

its rivulets colder
than the day before
the fish put on their clothes
the people are dressed
in darkness by seven
every evening all the people
going home from work

to awaken to astonishing
geometry is to pull
our bodies from the bed
and from horizon roll
into anarchic day
bouquet of noise
and substance radiating out
our temperatures and breath
each temporary guess
the beautiful woman driving
the sanitation department truck
files her nails at a stoplight
files her nails in a ray of morning
sun the honey-scented flowers
are dying on their vine
and yesterday
the rain came down so hard
the streets were green for hours
the leaves so flat and wet
that we awoke
to an astonishing geometry
to pull our bodies from the bed

rain on the spiny architecture
of the bridge I trust
more than the blur-edged sunset
garish as a painted backdrop
today it took four minutes
red minutes left
unspooling over and overspent
to be carried over a bridge at 8:41 PM
into the shiny inviolate rain
is to sail on a manageable ocean
is an effortless walk in a quarry of salt
what happened today?
to ride across a wet black bridge
is to forget each item of news
and replace each one
with the spiny architecture
of the bridge