

SAMPLER

The Bridge at Uji

ALSO BY TOM LOWENSTEIN

POETRY

PROSE

An asterisk denotes a Shearsman title.

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Tom Lowenstein

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Preface

Uji is now a suburb to the south of Kyoto and its bridge over the river was first constructed in the 10th century. At one end sits a modern representation of Murasaki who introduced the bridge into the last chapters of her novel, translated by Arthur Waley as *The Tale of Genji*.

I sat by the bridge for half a day some years back watching the water flow in one direction while foot passengers and traffic moved across at right angles.

On return to London, the physicality of the bridge returned qua metaphor, both as expressed by that particular bridge passage and as suggested by all modes of transition – though these might shift. In the poems that follow that metaphorical gesture repeats and may be interpreted idiosyncratically by separate readers.

The writer plays viola in a string quartet.

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1.

Of all the directions in which
the bridge could lead us
there is just one which has been built in,
offering the illusion of simplicity.
So gratefully, we'll take this.

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2.

On the far side of the bridge
lodges the caretaker and guide.
But you must surrender to the unknown
before arriving at your question.

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3.

Yes, I shouted in the direction
of her cubicle and have glimpsed
fugitive proposals for a reply.
It was then I understood that she too
was uncertain of my purpose
and was herself hanging on in confusion.

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4.

Some people I know cross lightheartedly
and disdain to make a fuss. There are others
for whom a direct line to the other side
represents the ultimate labyrinth.

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5.

In which connection there can only
be a shameful solitude. Nobody is
going to empathise with a trajectory
which appears so fatuously simple
but which opens an almighty gulf.

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6.

There are certain damselflies whose
wing pattern you absorb only once
they have emerged from the shadow
of the arches where they'd sheltered.

They are weak but valiant creatures.
And I identify with them thus
without their acknowledgement.

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7.

I am haunted by the Pali term
pabbajati, 'he/she goes forth'.

I.e from domestic security
to fill space
with the constituent of the body and coming
to the bridge like any
phenomenon of the constructed world
which must be encountered
for what surely it must be
in some kind of reality.

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8.

Shakespeare, given that it is a
projection of the imagination,
has traversed the bridge.

Metaphorically at least.

This is where fools all caper with their songs.

And dispense crazy

wisdom to the earnest.

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9.

It's deep, this Nothing.
But it doesn't take much
to convince me that on
the whole it's a waste of time.

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10.

The man lying in his urine
the young Buddha saw was
a concoction of the deities
he didn't anyway believe in.
And there are people, these days,
who still lie in urine or that of others.
Humanity has invented hygiene
for the privileged few – and where is the virtue in searching
further?

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11.

For those already half-way across
and who halt their steps in panic,
it is a benign disillusion and most
great art you have studied
on the near side represents
a serene contemplation of
that inevitable oscillation.

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12.

'The floating bridge of dreams'
is what Murasaki called it.

Perhaps
on the one hand the bridge is part
of the river. On the other, among several,
to speak of this and that side represents
a comfortable illusion.

Never fear.
We must make the attempt anyway.
Or perhaps she was writing
about an underside reflection
that amalgamated one illusion with another.

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