Over troubled waters

Lara Hazelton

Halifax has two bridges. Known as the old bridge and the new bridge, they span the harbour at midpoint, flanks open over the dark waters, untended sides beckoning. These bridges formed in me an early impression of the distance between two places, the journey that links them, the potential for things to go wrong.

I remember driving across the bridge from Dartmouth as a child. There were some days when the fog would roll up the harbour and the far shore would disappear, so that the bridge seemed to be arching off into oblivion. I would recall a scene from a film I had once seen: a suspension bridge in an American city waving like a flag, cars struggling to balance on the span until they reached the other side. With bridges, always, there is the chance of falling.

In school, our teachers would ask: If all your friends jumped off the bridge, would you do it too? So I knew, from an early age, that people sometimes hurled themselves over the side.

The old bridge is accessible to pedestrian traffic and is located only a short distance from the poorest area of town — easy walking distance from the bars, the crack houses. When I was a university student, home for the summer, I might come down Brunswick Street in the early hours of the morning and find the bridge closed. It doesn’t get reported how many people jump off the bridges, just as larger cities don’t publicize the number of people who jump in...
The edge of a bridge is one of the few easily accessed places where you can look down from a height instead of up toward it. The feeling is different, less grounded. When you look down, you grow larger, just as everything below you becomes smaller.

It must go against everything body and mind tells you to climb over that rail and jump. I am not the type of person who skydives or hang-glides. I don’t crave speed. I don’t tempt fate. So I can’t imagine that I would enjoy the rush of neurochemicals in the few seconds before hitting the water. Of course, I know that is not what draws people to do it. At least, not entirely.

I spent a recent trip through the Rockies contemplating distances up and down. Up to the turrets on top of the Banff Springs Hotel. Down from the face of Sulphur Mountain. Into the churning waters of Hell's Gate. Wondering how many people have died leaping from these places, and if the psychiatrists who work there have the same worries that I do when I drive home at 3 am, wondering if I should swing by the bridge just to see if anyone I know is out there.

In a lot of children’s films, villains fall to their deaths: Snow White, The Lion King, Tarzan, Beauty and the Beast — these are only a few of the movies in which children see evil falling away, its outstretched hand growing smaller and smaller. No one else can be blamed for these deaths. It is the fault of the one wrong step they took, their own error, the dangerous high place they got themselves into.

After the initial loss of balance, falling becomes a passive thing, the killing left up to the combined forces of gravity and water. It can almost seem like an accident, an injury done by the laws of physics. A space forms between the aggression and its object. I wonder if, in the last seconds, those who jump find a relief in thinking that forces beyond their control are at work. Or whether, in that moment, they believe they can fly. Like Icarus, until their wings melt and the feathers come off.

I have moved across the bridge from Dartmouth, where I grew up, to Halifax, where I live now. Like everyone else, I pay my toll as I go across to visit my mother or to shop, and I wonder if it would be more efficient to buy one of those new computerized passes. I have opinions about the recent upgrades, the addition of an extra lane. I cast an eye out toward the mouth of the harbour to see what ships are out there. But maybe more than the other commuters, I am conscious of the ghosts that stalk the span, and of the danger lying at the point where the bridge ends and thin air begins. There is a story that the bridge is cursed, that someone died while it was being built, that it is destined to be the site of tragedy and disaster. It is the kind of local myth that can spring up around any significant edifice. It is tempting to anthropomorphize the bridge, to give it a narrative of its own. But, like distance or time, any life the structure has is formed by us as we move along it. The bridge is only a neutral object, set in an unnatural place high up between water and sky.

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