Threshold of the Prophet

Roger Zelazny

“Why did you do that?” he asked.

“It was getting to be an eyesore,” answered the goggled man, switching off his slice-unit. “It was no good anymore. Would have fallen in a couple years.”

“How will people cross the river now?”

The man eyed the brick-red face before him⁠—the coils of seaweed caught in stark hair... He pressed a stud at his belt and rose above the ground.

“Same as always,” he stated. “Personal flight unit, or car.”

Crane rose into the air and drifted beside him. Slow moving vehicles crossed the sky overhead. People, all in gray, passed at lower heights. The prospect resembled the teeth of an enormous comb: rank upon rank, the dark buildings filed beneath them; an occasional antenna, like a caught strand of hair, quivered above the skyline; there was no grass nor bare earth visible. His companion was as gray as the city.

“Where are the colors? New York was always colors.”

“You’re a real throwback, that’s what you are. Doesn’t that horrible sky hurt your eyes?”

He looked up.

“Same blue it’s always been.”

“Well, as soon as the Council passes a resolution, Weather Control will make it a lot easier to look at.”

“What do you mean?”

“Damping units. We’ll kill the glare, the color.”

“Take the blue out of the sky?”

“Exactly.”

Crane looked back at the muddy snake of the East River.

“What about the bridge? Won’t it be a hazard for boats?”

“Boats? Where are you from, anyhow? The last boat was dismantled two hundred years ago⁠—after people decided it wasn’t worth half a credit to ride to Staten Island when they could fly it for nothing⁠—and in less time.”

“And you’ll just leave the bridge where it fell?”

“Time and the river will take care of it,” laughed the man. “Why? You want it?”

“I’ll take it, if no one else does.”

“Go ahead. It belongs to anyone who cares to haul it away. ⁠—The scrap won’t be worth much.”

He studied the man gliding abreast of him.

“You must have an awfully compact flying unit. I’ve been trying to guess where you’re wearing it.”

“Keep guessing.”

“...And those clothes, and the way you talk. Where are you from?”

“I’ve been on a voyage.”

“Oh⁠—the outer planets. Ever been on Earth before?”

“Not this world.”

“Well, get a good eyeful. It’s worth the trip.”

Crane nodded.

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“A man once wrote a poem about that bridge.” He nodded toward it.

“Can’t prove it by me. Do they still read poetry on the outworlds?”

“I’d like to think so. Aren’t there any poets here?”

“Why? Metaphor is an awfully crude manner of description. It’s pleasant to think most people have passed beyond the stage where everything is like something else. An object is itself. Why complicate matters? Life is mathematics.”

“That’s nice to know. ⁠—But what of the dark places, where there is no mathematic? The open end of the human equation...?”

The gray man winced.

“Don’t talk about death or insanity! We’ll beat them yet!” He clenched his fist. “Don’t they teach you politeness on the outworlds? Some things are not fit subjects for conversation.”

“But what do you do about them?”

The gray man looked down at the gray city.

“We are shedding light in every dark place in the universe⁠—that is the new poetry! Everything will be explained sooner or later. We are conquering every natural phenomenon with reason.”

“Can you explain this?” asked Crane, seizing his wrist. He held the protesting hand against his chest.

The man’s face sagged.

“You have no heartbeat!”

“That,” said Crane, “is as accurate a statement as science can manage. Good day.”

He vanished.

The man changed his course. He hurried toward the Institute of Mental Health.

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“Hello, mister.”

The old man removed his pipe from between his teeth and nodded.

“H’lo.”

Crane leaned against the rail of the porch.

“I see you have grass up here, and a couple trees.” He looked over the sparse lawn and past the two maples that guarded a twisted path by the river.

“Yep.” The man scratched his nose with the pipestem. “Kinda like ’em. Don’t see any in town anymore. ’T’s why I moved up here.”

“The air seems cleaner too.”

“Yep. And they won’t dampen the sky this far north, by ga’!”

“That’s true. I’ve been through this part of the country before. ⁠—That’s a nice little piece of river you’ve got going by.”

“Pretty, all right.”

The man regarded him with curiosity.

“Sort of odd look you’ve got about you, fella. Where you from?”

“The outer worlds.”

“Oh yeah. Been out there twict, m’self. Not much to see.”

Crane shrugged.

“Every place has its own style in beauty, I guess.”

“S’pose so,” he acknowledged.

“Look,” Crane began, “I had a reason for stopping here. I wanted to find someone older, who might remember a little about the way things used to be.”

“I can remember back a hundred-forty, hundred-fifty year, mebbe...”

“Good. I’ve got a deal to offer you.”

The old eyes squinted through the old glasses.

“What kinda deal?”

“Want to buy the Brooklyn Bridge?”

“Haw! Haw! Haw!” The man shook, slapping his thigh. Tears ran down his cheeks.

“It’s been a hundred year since I heerd that one! Didn’t know anyone else remembered it. You’re a card, sonny!”

“I’m serious,” said Crane. “I’ll bring it here and put it right across the river for you. I can do it. It’s mine now.”

The man twisted his head to one side and studied his face.

“By ga’! You’re not kiddin’!”

“No. I’m dead serious.”

“What would I want with the Brooklyn Bridge across my river?”

“It meant something once,” said Crane. “It was a symbol in the old days, of everything man was, crossing over, always crossing over, into something greater and better. I think it ought to be preserved⁠—as a monument.”

“Sonny, the future’s already here. And man doesn’t have to cross on to anything better or greater. He’s pretty great and pretty good right now.”

“I’d expect that from a New Englander,” smiled Crane, sadly, “but you live right outside New York, and you’re old⁠—you remember other days. If I could find someone to whom the bridge meant something, I might preserve it. I’ll give it to you for a dollar⁠—I mean, a credit.”

“I wouldn’t give you anything for it, sonny. I moved out here to get away from all that hardware, and people think I’m odd enough as it is. I don’t think you could sell it to any man alive.”

Crane nodded.

“That’s what I figured.”

“Come and set a spell anyhow, boy. I’ve got some cold synthocider here.” The man turned.

“Thanks, but I have to be going. I only drink the real thing, anyhow.”

The man started.

“There ain’t been no real cider since I was a boy,” he said. “There ain’t been no apple trees for two hundred years!”

But there was no one standing there to hear him.

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“All right,” he said, soaring. “All right, you prosaic-minded goggle-wearers. You’ve had it! Knock down my bridge? Empty the sky of blue? Erase the bright burden of the rose and the apple? You want to shed light in every dark place in the universe, huh? Step right up, kiddies, I’m going to give you something to think about!”

And he raised the bridge, as delicately as a cat lifts her kitten.

“ ‘O harp and altar, of the fury fused...’ ”

He aligned the cables and erased the rust spots. He grew new metal where there had been holes.

“ ‘Terrific threshold of the prophet’s pledge...’ ”

He arced the gleaming span across the river once more, from where the gray man had toppled it that morning.

“ ‘Prayer of pariah, and the lover’s cry...’ ”

And in the middle, in the middle of the bridge, he built an opaque arch, where every color of the banished rainbow shimmered and danced.

“Come all ye faithful!” his voice boomed, like the ghost of all the gone foghorns. “Step right up, ladies and gentlemen!”

He mounted to the highest point of the span and looked down and around. He reached behind space and tied an interdimensional knot. He twisted the fabric of the continuum, joining remoteness with nearness.

“Half a credit!” he called out. “Half a credit for the most amazing sight of all! No crowding, please! Just step right up!”

People darkened the sky, driven by their desire to know, to explain. They adjusted their goggles and hovered above the circle of color. One man stared up at him. He recognized the bridge-killer.

“Did you put it back?” asked the man. “Are you responsible for the light phenomenon?”

“You gave it to me, didn’t you?” he answered. “Now I’m giving it back to you⁠—with improvements and additions.”

“What is that?”

The man pointed at the glowing portal.

“Step through it and take a look.”

He did.

There was a long, neck-tingling silence.

A car pushed through the crowd of hoverers.

“What is that thing?” the uniformed driver asked him.

“Go through it and see for yourself.”

The car nosed ahead and vanished.

Three of the airborne crowd pushed through the veils of color in speedy succession.

No one emerged.

“ ‘O brilliant kids,’ ” Crane recited, “ ‘fondle your shells and sticks, bleached by time and the elements...’ ”

He descended slowly, like the ghost of all his dead seagulls.

“ ‘...But there is a line you must not cross nor ever trust beyond it spry cordage of your bodies...’ ”

He hovered a moment in their midst, smiling, then stepped through the crown of light. They did not hear his last words, bubbling on the other side:

“ ‘The bottom of the sea is cruel...’ ”

Notes

The protagonist Hart Crane was the poet whom Zelazny most admired. The first three quotations of poetry within this story are from Crane’s poem “Brooklyn Bridge,” while the excerpts in the last several paragraphs are from his poem “Voyages.”