## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fullerton Avenue Bridge</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author Notes</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fullerton Avenue Bridge

_Bridge Out_ the sign says, though it’s clearly in service, cars passing, slowly, one lane open while construction continues, over the narrow water where the black-capped night herons have already left their fishing, already found their own way out before the long dark arrives for the rest of us—for the fish that haven’t been caught, the geese that have forgotten to leave, for ourselves who might have remembered there are other bridges, might have exited early and found a way around this slow meditation of moving and not moving; the barricade set aside to let us through, but the sign left standing.
Author Notes


About the Work

When I tried to remember the process of writing “Fullerton Avenue Bridge,” it felt as if I had written it a long time ago. I had only a blurry memory of being stuck in traffic on the way to the farmers market, maybe in October. It turned out to be November 2012—not so very long ago! I was able to find most of the drafts between my notebooks and electronic files, along with the feedback I received from friends who live and write at a distance from my Chicago. One of the virtues of an online writing community is that the feedback lives on in our hard drives and email inboxes, unlike our discussions in coffee houses and friends’ living rooms, however fruitful those were at the time.

Rereading everything I found, I am struck by how little I was writing that fall. I had started a new job that I wanted to love, but it was swallowing me whole without giving me much in return. In addition, or maybe as a result, I was more than usually troubled by the seasonal diminishment of light. That November Saturday, I was indeed stuck in traffic on the bridge over the harbor, where the city had (as usual) neglected to remove construction signs and barriers though the project was complete. I wrote a quick note, which led to an assignment. Assignments are not usually part of my process, but they can help when I have trouble getting started. I decided that I would begin with the sign announcing that the bridge was out when it wasn’t—that failure of communication—and then write the poem in one sentence, ending with a quotation. I had been impressed with someone’s poem that did something similar. I wish I could remember whose poem, but the only one that seems relevant of the poems tucked or copied into my notebook is Gerald Stern’s “Day of Grief” ([http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/day-grief](http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/day-grief)). He has the one sentence and the sense of a coming “cold and dark,” but not the insertion of another poet’s words, which was an important part of my initial idea. I hesitated among several evocations of herons before settling on a line from “In a Dark Time” by Roethke ([http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172120](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/172120)) for my first complete draft. It was a mess, but by the end of the month, I had a smoother draft of the same idea, and I needed to hear from readers. I took it to a writing circle here in Chicago and emailed it to my online group:
11/29/12

Bridge Out,

the sign says, though the bridge is clearly in
service, cars passing, slowly, one lane open
while construction continues, over the narrow
water where the black-capped night herons
have already left their fishing, already found
their own way out before the long dark
arrives for the rest of us—even the fish
that haven’t been caught, the geese that have
forgotten to leave, ourselves who might
have remembered there are several bridges
to choose from, might have exited early
and found a way around this slow meditation
of moving and not moving, of living
as Roethke says, *between the heron and the wren.*

The comments were astoundingly consistent: while my readers were engaged by the
images, no one wanted me to end with Roethke’s words. They accused me of name-dropping, said
Roethke was a distraction, said his line was confusing. Despite the unanimity, it took me more than
another month and innumerable drafts before I found another way out of the poem, as well as a
new title. I tried holding onto Roethke in an epigraph but eventually recognized the truth of what
my writer friends had been telling me—my poem was better off without him. You can lead a horse
to water, as they say, but you can’t make her see her own reflection clearly.

The other concern I was struggling with in the fall of 2012 was the scope of my work. I had
written bigger poems over the summer when I wasn’t working full time, and I was measuring
success against those big, ambitious pieces. “Fullerton Avenue Bridge” is not big, though it gestures
toward the larger issues of time and language, as all my writing did during that fall toward
darkness. Just as it now seems obvious to me that I needed to break free of Roethke, it also seems
self-evident that poems don’t need to be big in order to be worthwhile. But maybe the simplest
lessons are the hardest to learn. The essential truths can be captured in a short lyric as effectively as
in a big sprawling epic, as Roethke and Stern should have taught me.

Susanna Lang on the Web

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