

Timothy Walsh

The Bridges and Tunnels of New York

Every weekend, sure as Sunday Mass, we'd drive to either
our Polish grandmother in Brooklyn
or our Irish grandmother in Queens, the journey made epic
by crossing over the George Washington Bridge
arching high above the wide river,
our grade-school eyes peering down god-like
at the tugs and barges below.

Then came an endless progression of bridges and tunnels
as we traversed the city's water-laced immensity,
our father at the wheel reciting the names of each—
Whitestone, Throg's Neck, Brooklyn Battery—
himself a connoisseur of suspension bridges,
exhorting us to *look! look!* at the graceful spans,
the mighty towers,
the bewildering maze of cable work.

In Brooklyn, there'd be stuffed peppers, kielbasa
with horseradish,
games of penny-ante pinochle round the big table
in the garage,
all the Polish relatives pulling golden bottles of pilsner
from the big steel tub piled high with ice,
massive as a glacier,
telling stories of the old days in Poland before the war—
of Grandma's father, a gamekeeper on a big estate near Posnan
who married a gypsy girl—*tzigane!*—a gypsy girl
with raven-black eyes and raven-black hair.

In Queens, the Irish relatives would all converge
on my aunt's or uncle's house,
a hundred-thousand cousins, second cousins, great-aunts,
and a few black sheep.
Here, the beer was black stouts and porters
with rivers of whiskey lubricating the hinges of talk,
smoothing away wrinkles and worries,
the bellowing laughter bounding through us kids
as we tore around the yard
playing games of tag and hide-and-seek,
dodging the legs and girth of big people.

In Brooklyn, there were conversations in Polish,
the syllables sounding harsh,

alien as pumpernickel in a white bread world,
smelling of cabbage and cigars.

In Queens, there were phrases in Irish, the syllables
soft as rain, mellifluous as a lullaby,
our own plain English rendered drab by comparison.

We memorized Polish words, delivered by our mother
as a robin feeds worms to hungry nestlings—
our own mother, who spoke only Polish until she was ten
growing up right there in Greenpoint—
or we ran to our Irish grandmother and begged
phrases of Irish,
carrying them away like spoonfuls of honey,
repeating the syllables softly, spells to beguile
our tongues.

Journeys across oceans to lost continents—
that is how those weekend drives seemed—
the towering steel-span bridges and dark tunnels
linking the boroughs of New York,
linking us to our loved ones and lost languages.

The Throg's Neck Bridge, Whitestone Bridge, Brooklyn Bridge,
George Washington, Verrazano-Narrows, and Tappan Zee,
the Holland Tunnel, Lincoln Tunnel, and Brooklyn Battery—
I cross them still in my dreams,
the bridges lit up like chandeliers, suturing together
our frail human outposts
against the encroaching dark.