Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge  (From The Bridge)

How many dawns, chill from his rippling rest
The seagull’s wings shall dip and pivot him,
Shedding white rings of tumult, building high
Over the chained bay waters Liberty—

Then, with inviolate curve, forsake our eyes
As apparitional as sails that cross
Some page of figures to be filed away;
—Till elevators drop us from our day . . .

I think of cinemas, panoramic sleights
With multitudes bent toward some flashing scene
Never disclosed, but hastened to again,
Foretold to other eyes on the same screen;

And Thee, across the harbor, silver-paced
As though the sun took step of thee, yet left
Some motion ever unspent in thy stride,—
Implicitly thy freedom staying thee!

Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft
A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,
Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt balloon ing,
A jest falls from the speechless caravan.

Down Wall, from girder into street noon leaks,
A rip-tooth of the sky’s acetylene;
All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks turn . . .
Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still.

And obscure as that heaven of the Jews,
Thy guerdon . . . Accolade thou dost bestow
Of anonymity time cannot raise:
Vibrant reprieve and pardon thou dost show.

O harp and altar, of the fury fused,
(How could mere toil align thy choiring strings!)  
Terrific threshold of the prophet’s pledge,
Prayer of pariah, and the lover’s cry,—

Again the traffic lights that skim thy swift
Unfractioned idiom, immaculate sigh of stars,
Beading thy path—condense eternity:
And we have seen night lifted in thine arms.
Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;  
Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.  
The City's fiery parcels all undone,  
Already snow submerges an iron year . . .  

O Sleepless as the river under thee,  
Vaulting the sea, the prairies' dreaming sod,  
Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend  
And of the curveship lend a myth to God.

[1930]

Notes on “Proem: To Brooklyn Bridge”

proem: introductory poem (“To Brooklyn Bridge” is the introductory poem to Crane’s long poem The Bridge)  
pivot: to cause to turn; to turn (around something)  
Liberty: (among other things, the Statue of Liberty)  
tumult: loud noise, commotion, agitation  
forsake: abandon, go away from  
apparitional: ghost-like, seeming to appear  
inviolate: intact, not violate or profaned  
panoramic: comprising a wide view  
sleights: as in “sleight of hand”; pun on “slight” and “sight”  
And Thee: The Brooklyn Bridge  
bedlamite: madman  
Down Wall: (1) Wall Street, (2) wall of a building  
rip-tooth: the tooth of a rip saw. A rip saw is a hand saw that cuts wood with the wood grain. Rip saw teeth are chisel-shaped, and the teeth spread slightly outward.  
acetylene: as in “acetylene torch,” a welder’s tool  
derrick: large crane for hoisting and moving heavy objects; tall framework over an oil well or hole  
obscure as the heaven of the Jews: heaven is a vaguer notion in the Jewish tradition than in the Christian  
guerdon: reward  
accolade: award  
terrific: terrifying  
pariah: an outcast  
unfractioned: continuous, unbroken  
immaculate: unspotted, pure, clean  
parcels: tied packages  
curveship: pun on “worship” and “ship” and the curve of a ship (and the bridge).