

# The River, The Bridge

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**Content note:** *This essay contains frank discussion of depression and suicide.*

I.

The main reason, I suppose, why I opted against the bridge and the river was to spare my family the ordeal of having to identify my bloated, rotting, waterlogged corpse. There would've been literary precedent, though. A lovely suicide set in my hometown, Nijmegen, in the very final paragraphs of 'The Freeloader', a famous novella from 1911 by Dutch author Nescio:

At half past four one summer morning, during a majestic sunrise, he stepped off the bridge over the Waal. The watchman saw him too late. 'Don't worry, old boy,' Japi had said, then he stepped off the bridge, his face to the northeast. You couldn't call it a jump, the watchman had said, he stepped off.

They found a walking stick in his room that had belonged to Bavink, and six notes on the wall saying 'Dammit' and one with 'All right then.'

The river has kept flowing west since then and people have kept on worrying. The sun still rises too, and Japi's parents still get their *Daily News* every evening.

His trip to Friesland remains a mystery to this day.<sup>1</sup>

In my more romantic moments at the bottom of the pit I'd imagine that I might mimic Japi, leaving no suicide note but only my copy of Nescio's *Verzameld Proza en Nagelaten Werk* with a bookmark indicating this episode. Or just six Post-its (pink ones) with 'Dammit' and one with 'All right then.' But common sense, or what passes as such when you're deeply suicidal, prevailed, and I eventually settled upon a less gruesome – if slightly more onerous – mode of killing myself.

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<sup>1</sup> Nescio, 'The Freeloader', in *Amsterdam Stories*, trans. Damion Searls (New York: NYRB Classics, 2012), 33.

My depression was typified by constant toing and froing between crippling despair and moments of seeming rationality. During the latter, I'd researched the safest and least impactful methods of committing suicide, and had decided to employ an 'exit bag' and helium to asphyxiate myself without jeopardizing others or leaving a ghastly mess.

But I simply didn't have the energy to arrange what was necessary. By this stage, getting out of bed was a bridge too far on most days, never mind ordering the required equipment online and setting it up. Effectively, I was too downbeat and exhausted to be able to kill myself humanely.

To counteract this lethargy, I'd figured out alternative escape routes, in case my suffering really became too acute. (Yet why did I wait? I don't even think it was hope. Just a lack of gumption and an animal instinct for survival.) The Waal bridge, yes, but also a yellow tie-down strap I'd used when moving to my current flat. Towards the end of the year, my sister also moved house, and remembering the strap she asked if she could borrow it.

'Absolutely,' I said, 'but I'll need it back. Otherwise I'll have nothing to hang myself with.'

She went spare.

I was joking, of course, but I was also dead serious. By that stage, the strap was my main backup plan, that and a hook in my bathroom ceiling. I could overdose on my meds if I wanted, but the margin for error was too big, and the stakes (permanent organ damage, seizures, unseemly frothing at the gob) too high if my attempt were to fail.

II.

Depression, like love, is a condition of platitudes. I try to aestheticize it, render my boring emotions into art, but it's all so very banal. I don't think there's a poem in them. Every time I try I simply revert to the idiolect of the self-proclaimed intellectual.

Partly at the behest of my therapist and partly because I was drunk a lot, I kept a diary which I filled with hokey screeds. Always late at night. Not every day, but only when my emotions became particularly frustrating or overwhelming. After all, as the Bard has it, 'Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak/ Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break.' Etc.

Often, my handwriting becomes progressively worse over the course of an entry.

The diary confirms my idea that there's very little new to be said about depression, or rather that I, for one, am not up to the task. It's all so maudlin, even as it's fully sincere. Why am I so unlovable? When will it all stop? But the universe *qua* universe, how do you feel about that? Entry for entry, the mournful violins are swelling, my mascara's running, and I'm clutching a half-drunk glass of plonk as I'm sobbing into the void. Or my chiselled features remain stoic, my hand steady as I light my cigarette, yet as the camera rotates around my face there's a faint sheen of tears in my eyes. Again, the violins. And it's raining.

In a few entries I express frustration at my inability to say something original, something worthwhile, despite the fact that the writing was meant solely to be purgative, not creative. April 17th, 2014: 'And even the heartfelt blablabla is full of boring cliché.' I suppose that at the end of the day, even writing not meant for anyone else is inherently performative. I wasn't writing for others and will probably never allow anybody to read the diary, but still I wanted my thoughts to be well written. At the very least I wanted to be able to derive some literary gratification from my hardship. A sliver of silver lining. But no. Mired in that shit for years, and not a single aperçu to show for it.

III.

Eventually, I tried nine different drugs in different combinations. Citalopram, olanzapine, temazepam, nitrazepam, trazodone, clomipramine, mirtazapine, quetiapine, bupropion. A jaunty ditty from a musical. All those leftover letters from years of Boxing Day Scrabble games.

My first combination, citalopram and olanzapine, worked fairly well. The olanzapine in particular helped tremendously during this first major suicidal crisis. My mental state itself didn't improve much initially, even if my obsessive racing thoughts had gone from fifth to third on 10mg. Importantly, though, for the first few days I could barely stand. Olanzapine knocked me out completely when my crisis was at its most severe, and as such I was in no state to commit suicide. Which was something, at least.

I wasn't supposed to remain on olanzapine, so once I'd stabilized somewhat I stopped taking it. Subsequently I couldn't sleep at all. Within two weeks I'd crashed and burned again, despite continuing the citalopram. In fact, I discovered I couldn't sleep on any of the ADs I tried. So I had to work my way through the alphabet soup to find a combo that brought both relief and kip. Clomipramine and quetiapine did the trick, more or less,

but god – those side effects. Terrible memory. Gastrointestinal pandemonium. Orthostatic hypotension. And sweat. So, so much sweat.

In the end, counterintuitively (the first's a dopamine reuptake inhibitor, the second a dopamine antagonist), my shrink and I alighted on bupropion for depression with, oh alright then, some olanzapine for sleep. This worked quite well indeed, and I quickly improved. I also started practically inhaling junk food, and duly gained twenty-five kilos in eighteen months. I couldn't wear my favourite clothes anymore. My blood pressure skyrocketed. I started waddling.

Turns out rapid, intractable weight gain and its concomitant ills (metabolic syndrome, diabetes) are a major side effect of olanzapine, one which was strongly downplayed by manufacturers Eli Lilly for years. The company has since settled for over a billion US dollars with patients who developed health problems as a result of this drug. When I first started taking it, I didn't know this. I now say I probably would've refused it, but know full well that I was desperate to find something – anything – that worked. So I simply popped any pill the white coats threw at me.

All the same, the first time I was on olanzapine I was fine in terms of weight gain, so I was hoping everything would be hunky-dory when I reintroduced it. And it really was the only thing that would grant me regular sleep. But the apocalyptic weight gain wasn't ideal, so once I felt stable enough, I decided I needed to get off my meds.

Every reduction brought its own special range of complications, including insomnia, increased anxiety, and irritability (*do not even fucking BREATHE in my vicinity*). I'm finally clean now, but it's taken me a year to get off that crap, and though I've shed a fair bit of weight through diet and exercise I've no doubt it will take me another twelve to eighteen months to return to my lissom self. There's only so much you can do with courgetti.

IV.

My most inane, if also surprisingly successful, attempt at self-care was my decision to try Tinder. I was still depressed, I was still on sick leave, and due to the tricyclic antidepressant I was taking my brain felt like it had been filled with spray foam. Meeting people still rated high on my anxiety scale. But despite my cognitive impairment I'd recovered some of my wit and I still had some nice shirts and ties I could wear, *Kummerspeck* notwithstanding. Dating seemed like a good way to coax me out into the open again. It would also allow me to establish to what extent I remained marketable.

Moreover, while I was cooped up at my parents' and then at home, my suicidal lethargy had gradually declined to ennui and then to common or garden boredom. I still didn't feel like doing anything whatsoever, but wanted to do nothing least of all. Boredom is generally a good sign as it signals the return of affect, but it's also a special kind of hell in itself, particularly if concurrently even popping out for a coffee still feels like a Sisyphean challenge.

The app was a safe space to start flirting again, and it was a welcome distraction during those long empty days. I swiped, I matched, I chatted; after a while I started going on dates. I performed well, people seemed to be enjoying themselves, and they did not pick up on my existential despair. I wasn't initially too successful in strictly romantic terms, but I did make some new friends.

The only risk was that I might fall in love, and that, to be frank, was something I wasn't ready for. But it duly happened. Twice. A German psychologist, an Italian philosopher. This brought fresh agonies. Although by this stage I was certainly not suicidal anymore, I still suffered from a severe lack of self-confidence. Moreover, I could barely take care of myself, so how would I be able to give anyone else their due? What could I offer a potential partner beyond a ringside seat as I was mud wrestling my demons? Self-consciousness was early that year.

In both cases, it eventually ended in heartbreak, albeit after a few reboots. One of them has remained a friend, the other has moved on to greener pastures without leaving a forwarding address. I wrote the first one a poem, the second one a letter, in both cases before the sequel. These helped, both us and me. They turned my feelings into a private literary performance, a paradigm more suited to me than spontaneous PDAs.

Heartbreak's pretty useless, particularly when you're depressed. But multiple heartbreak is lethal. You're the only common denominator. No matter the reason, no matter the degree of chance, of fate, the only factor that might have made the difference is you. From my letter: 'Self-sabotage is indeed my major talent.' Sure, there was some perspective, but I don't know where it went.

So as I was questing for love misery piled upon misery, though all the while I was looking for redemption. Rejection hurts, and it hurt even more in these conditions. Granted, I was nobody's dream scenario in that state, but surely, statistically, I must be *somebody's* 'well, hello there' at least? But I was relentless in my self-disavowal, and the chips I played were my own every time. No loans, just payback.

Still, despite severe losses, my gambles ultimately resulted in a net gain. I'd also written something else in my billet-doux to the Italian philosopher. 'But emotion is seldom about proportion.' Even as I was fighting severe depression, I realized that being in love is not much different in terms of how debilitating, how utterly incapacitating it is, particularly if the love is unrequited or subject to exhausting conditions such as mental health issues.

Depression, like love, is an extreme emotion. Grief, I suppose, is another one. There's a sense of poetry in the observation of death. But in the end neither's as seemingly affirming as romance. Even as it made me feel miserable, falling in love at this stage of my, uh, *journey* helped as I was trying to parse my emotions, and the negative outcome was (somehow) crucial in this sense.

In the moment, there's little difference between being lovelorn and being depressed, even if the causes and processes can be wildly different. Being miserable due to infatuation felt scarcely different from being miserable because I was miserable. It's an emotion. If I'm emoting, I must be sentient; if I'm sentient, I must be alive. And as such, over the course of two failed attempts at romance, a compilation of anguish, I got back in tune with my own emotions.

I've since been in love with others, but love tends to involve a lot of *for-heaven's-sake*, regardless of outcome. Seriously. But we'll get there. These initial two post-suicidal ones, though, were only ever primal, essential. The love was occasioned by others, but all the same I remained utterly focused on myself. There was a lesson to be learned. It wasn't really about them, in the final reckoning. It was, ultimately, merely about my own feelings. My despair. My depression. My self-reclamation. I was in love with them, but I don't think there was ever a reality exceeding the sum total. It never was us. Just me. As required, and as given.

V.

I still occasionally have bad days. Don't we all. But though they're intrinsic to the human condition, my past renders them ominous. Even if I feel generally splendid – the weather's lovely, the birds are singing, I've nothing planned but boozy picnics for the next fortnight – sometimes the memory prevails. After all, a bad day might turn worse, misery might become despair, despair emptiness. And then where will it all end.

It's the latency of the threat that haunts me most. Given the trajectory and longevity of my condition, the statistics are not on my side. So each time I'm a tad down in the dumps, I fear it's Fate again, looking at me with those come-hither eyes.

For all that, I'm not really afraid. Where once there was nothing, there is now the semblance of hope. I've got through it before, and might manage again. Been there, done that, got the T-rex. And if all else fails, there'll always be the bridge or the bag or the yellow tie-down strap. They're not exactly beckoning – but, you know, it's a comfort to know they're there. If only to show that technically no suffering's definitive per se.

This is the worst-case scenario, sure, but it's actually liberating to have no inkling of what will happen, even if it includes options this grim. Because what I missed most in the abyss was perspective, a sense of variance, the belief that there might be something, no matter what, beyond the void. Faith in mutability is the precondition for hope.

And through it all, hope has finally started manifesting positively. Whatever happens, however inexorably, there might always be some saving grace. Not god; god no. But family, friends. A new poem, a new book. Kittens. And who knows, there might be some new token of love, of a future brightening.

A smile, a benediction, a fucking kiss.