

VLADIMIR MAYAKOVSKY

The Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893–1930) wrote this poem on the Brooklyn Bridge during a three-month stay in the United States in 1925. Mayakovsky, who promoted the legend of himself as a larger-than-life Bolshevik dynamo, salutes the bridge as one outsized force to another.

BROOKLYN BRIDGE

Give, Coolidge,
a shout of joy!
I too will spare no words
about good things.
Blush
at my praise,
go red as our flag,
however
united-states
-of
-america you may be.
As a crazed believer
enters
a church,
retreats
into a monastery cell,
austere and plain;
so I,
in graying evening
haze,
humbly set foot
on Brooklyn Bridge.
As a conqueror presses
into a city
all shattered,

BROOKLYN BRIDGE

like dishes
 being cleared into a cupboard.
While
 a shopkeeper fetched sugar
from a mill
 that seemed to project
 out of the water—
the masts
 passing under the bridge
looked
 no larger than pins.
I am proud
 of just this
 mile of steel;
upon it,
 my visions come to life, erect—
here's a fight
 for construction
 instead of style,
an austere disposition
 of bolts
 and steel.
If
 the end of the world
 befall—
and chaos
 smash our planet
 to bits,
and what remains
 will be
 this
bridge, rearing above the dust of destruction;
then,
 as huge ancient lizards
 are rebuilt

V L A D I M I R M A Y A K O V S K Y

from bones
finer than needles,
to tower in museums,
so,
from this bridge,
a geologist of the centuries
will succeed
in recreating
our contemporary world.
He will say:
—Yonder paw
of steel
once joined
the seas and the prairies;
from this spot,
Europe
rushed to the West,
scattering
to the wind
Indian feathers.
This rib
reminds us
of a machine—
just imagine,
would there be hands enough,
after planting
a steel foot
in Manhattan,
to yank
Brooklyn to oneself
by the lip?
By the cables
of electric strands,
I recognize
the era succeeding
the steam age—

BROOKLYN BRIDGE

here
men
had ranted
on radio.

Here
men
had ascended
in planes.

For some,
life
here
had no worries;

for others,
it was a prolonged
and hungry howl.

From this spot,
jobless men
leapt
headlong
into the Hudson.

Now
my canvas
is unobstructed
as it stretches on cables of string
to the feet of the stars.

I see:
here
stood Mayakovsky,
stood,
composing verse, syllable by syllable.

I stare
as an Eskimo gapes at a train,
I seize on it
as a tick fastens to an ear.

V L A D I M I R M A Y A K O V S K Y

Brooklyn Bridge—

yes . . .

That's quite a thing!

1925