Steel

By Joseph Bruchac

for Rick Hill and in memory of Buster Mitchell

I
Steel arches up
past the customs sheds,
the bridge to a place
named Canada,
thrust into Mohawk land.

A dull rainbow
arcing over
the new school,
designed to fan
out like the tail
of the drumming Partridge—
dark feathers of the old way’s pride
mixed in with blessed Kateri’s
pale dreams of sacred water.

II
When that first span
fell in 1907
cantilevered shapes collapsed,
gave like an old man’s
arthritic back.

The tide was out,
the injured lay trapped like game in a deadfall
all through that day
until the evening.
Then, as tide came in,
the priest crawled
through the wreckage,
giving last rites
to the drowning.

III
Loading on,
the cable lifts.
Girders swing
and sing in sun.
Tacked to the sky,
reflecting wind,
long knife-blade mirrors
they fall like jackstraws
when they hit the top
of the big boom’s run.
The cable looped,  
the buzzer man  
pushes a button  
red as sunset.  
The mosquito whine  
of the motor whirs  
bare bones up to  
the men who stand  
an edge defined  
on either side  
by a long way down.

IV
Those who hold papers  
claim to have ownership  
of buildings and land.  
They do not see the hands  
which placed each rivet.  
They do not hear the feet  
walking each hidden beam.  
They do not hear the whisper  
of strong clan names.  
They do not see the faces  
of men who remain  
unseen as those girders  
which strengthen and shape.


Source: Sing: Poetry from the Indigenous Americas (University of Arizona Press, 2011)