

Swinging Bridges: The Poetry of Awiakta

by Shirley Lumpkin

Frequently photographed in the twentieth century, the walking or footwalking or “swinging” bridge is a signature image of transportation in rural and mountainous Appalachia. These handmade bridges, the result of a need to cross a river or stream and connect the family and homeplace to other families and sources of worship, food and schooling or to allow movement through the mountains, were not only central to the Appalachian transportation system, but also an expression of central values in mountain culture. Without government funding (or government interest in funding) and with limited resources, Appalachian self-reliance and ingenuity (“to make do or do without”) resulted in the hemp, wooden, vine or wire railed swinging bridge assuming a central place in a transportation system dependent in part on foot. These bridges both adapted to the environment and created survival skills in those who used them.

Dangerous because the hemp and wood could rot from moisture, while looking safe; because the streams and rivers the bridges crossed could become raging torrents in flash flooding and wash walkers off; and because the swaying bridges required skill to walk and walkers could topple off into the chasm beneath, the swinging bridges provided not only necessary connections to the world beyond the homeplace, but also education in mental and physical skills and opportunities to develop virtues. A swinging bridge walker had to be an intelligent reader of the natural and man-made world, able to discern the condition of the bridge, the nature of river, stream or gorge beneath, the weather conditions (rain, wind, water), the “sway” of the bridge, distance, his or her own physical abilities, in order to walk across safely. The swinging bridge walker had to have the skill to match rhythms with the bridge’s movements and walk across using the hemp, vine, wire or wooden railings and base in harmony with his or her steps, to “feel” with the feet and hands. The swinging bridge walker had to have courage, the ability to recognize and face his or her fear, and the discipline to look across to the other bank and walk deliberately in rhythm with the bridge, remembering how he or she had been taught to cross.

Currently disappearing from the landscape or having natural materials replaced by plastic fiber (like the new River Pedestrian Bridge) or being maintained as tourist attractions in resorts, like many artifacts resonating with the heart of Appalachian culture, these bridges have been subject to the “peculiar” or “odd” or “quaint and folksy” interpretation, even though photographers like Earl Palmer and the ones I have represented (Laura Moul and Sandee Lloyd)¹ have tried to preserve the bridges as the important and disappearing cultural artifacts they are.

To Marilou Awiakta, the swinging bridge is a memory of a real experience, a central component of Appalachian mountain culture, and an encounter with an embodiment of truths about the Law, the pattern of how the world works reflected in the Cherokee stories of Selu, Kanati, and Little Deer; the Cherokee image of the web and art of double-woven basket-making; and atomic physics. This pattern is the same one that Diane Ackerman describes in *An Alchemy of Mind*: “On the subatomic level, we share our basics with matter throughout the universe, with star hatcheries and space ‘foam.’” (25) (By the way, there is what is referred to as a “swinging bridge” mode of electron transfer through conical intersections, a highly efficient pathway, that the chemists described through naming the process metaphorically as a “swinging bridge.”) Since all life shares the same pattern, the Appalachian swinging bridge not only reveals that pattern (if one can see it) but also reveals how to live wisely within that pattern (if one can read the metaphor). I would also argue that Awiakta’s poems themselves are swinging bridges, in the aesthetic of their making and use and in our reading.

So, how can a poem be like a swinging bridge? What is the swinging bridge aesthetic? That is when the poem is the result of close and feeling observation and study of the self, the natural world, the Cherokee and Appalachian heritage, and the “actual things,” like swinging bridges, that embody the Law of the natural world and the values of the heritage. That is when the poem is a solution of a problem of transportation, of movement from one “bank” or place in a text to another, using a handcrafted bridge of words that “fronts a fear,” recognizes a disconnection that is life-threatening, and creates re-connection. That is when the poem has been tested and revised, to make sure the weaving is strong enough to bear the writer (and the reader) across the void or danger beneath. That is when the poem’s author remembers the poem’s readings, the ways she and others have walked the poem. That is when the poem gives the gift

from *Song of the Swinging Bridge*

Mind your step.
Blend your rhythm with mine
so I can bear you safely
through the void.

from “Sex Education
at Hearth Level”

“....a swinging bridge
strung across a river that
was rushing and tumbling
down the mountain over
big boulders.”

from
“Virtual Valarie”
and Indian
“Love Secrets”

“...relationships with
real people take time
and care.”



The dangerous river of disrespect.
(The AIDS virus, etc.)

of a path, a way (not *the* way), and the poem moves, is embedded and re-embedded in the appropriate context, to offer the hope of a way.

I have selected three poems to demonstrate this aesthetic, and I discuss them in the order they appear in *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother's Wisdom*, although their publication histories differ: "Star Vision," (p. 65 in "Weaving I: A Path to Selu, Section II: Killing Our Own Seed," the "wounds" rib direction); "An Indian Walks in Me" (p. 189, "Weaving I: A Path to Selu, Section IV: Our Courage is Our Memory," the "healing" rib direction; and "Song of the Swinging Bridge," the most explicit in embodying the swinging bridge aesthetic (p. 257-8, "Weaving II, Selu, Spirit of Survival").

The first two poems appear in *Abiding Appalachia, Where Mountain and Atom Meet*, as well as in *Selu*, being swinging bridges in different places with similar connective functions. Each poem, whether in *Abiding Appalachia* or *Selu*, has been carefully placed in a pattern (in *Abiding* the spiral pattern of the ancient Indian ceremonial grounds at Old Stone Fort, Tennessee and in *Selu*, the double-woven basket journey to Selu's wisdom), and where the poem is in the pattern indicates its swinging bridge function: what two points the path of words is connecting and the way that is offered.

So, now, visualize a swinging bridge and how it works in the world. See "Star Vision" as a swinging bridge. In *Abiding Appalachia*, "Star Vision" connects Awiakta's initial separation from the atom that had been split and the language of division (fission) to the realization that the X-10 Graphite reactor that split the atom embodied the womanly and Awi Usdi (Little Deer) wisdom of her gender, Cherokee, and Appalachian heritage, because the atom is in her (as in Ackerman's star foam) if she imagines it: "... I could see / each atom's tiny star— / minute millions so far-flung / so bright they swept me up with earth and sky / in one vast expanse of light" (56). While this moment passed, the sense of connection remained. The distance had been bridged.

In *Selu*, the poem has moved into the wounds section, "Killing Our Own Seed." Here the poem connects the stories of the death and removal of Cherokee people in the Trail of Tears and its postmodern equivalent, the Tellico Dam project, the wound of attempted erasure, to the danger and hope of the atom. Literally, the poem connects Awiakta's conversation with Alice Walker about a "quest for an upward path" as a woman and writer given the wounds of her heritage, resulting in a combination of hope and warning, a sense of singing that one could follow East. Setting forth in the Easterly direction of the sound, "with a hoe," Awiakta places "Star Vision" in *Selu* to walk on its rhythms and images from the quest to the question: "What is the atom, Mother, Will it hurt us?" (66) she asked as a child and answered as an adult looking back, seeing both the nurturing and destructive potential of the atom. The words to walk were the images of the poem, the "atom's tiny stars in her blood and bone." These words became a literal swinging bridge over the void of despair, fear, and death when Awiakta herself chanted the poem, envisioning the radiation entering her body as thousands of tiny stars, as she underwent radiation therapy for breast cancer in a linear accelerator. The poem's words function as a way to take into one's being the truths of the atom's connection of all, while acknowledging the atom's ability to erase all. Death from fission, splitting of self from the world, splitting the high tech world from one's heritage, erasing the Cherokee way from the U.S. way, lies beneath this bridge of words; but the words, the imagined image so true to science, calls forth the nurturing potential and readers (including Awiakta herself) can walk the bridge of hope and unity.

Another example of the swinging bridge poem is "An Indian Walks in Me." In *Abiding Appalachia*, this poem is the swinging bridge into the book, the verbal connection between Einstein's atomic world of science and mystery (the opening Einstein

quote) and Awi Usdi's wisdom, the white light. Situated between the mystery of the mountains, which includes the atomic city of Oak Ridge, the splitting of the atom, and Awi Usdi, and the "prayer of the poet-hunter," looking for a path, the poem lays down the words that allow the writer to weave together the "speakings" of mountains, the Cherokee, the family, and the atom because "long before I learned the / universal turn of atoms, I heard / the Spirit's song that binds us / all as one." (*Abiding* 14) This recognition leads to action, to blending with the rhythms of this truth, walking this truth, having steady and firm conviction followed by firm action: "...And no more / will I follow any rule / that splits my soul" (14). This line of words carries the writer over to the other side, gives the writer the power to seek the path of Little Deer in the atomic mountains and to write bridging poems.

In *Selu*, this poem "An Indian Walks in Me" moves to another location (189), crossing a different chasm: the void which rushes below is the brokenness of a compartmentalized world, a world that wants to erase respect for women and indigenous cultures, if not to erase them literally to erase them, through a form of disdain for the quaintness, the irrelevance of these "old fashioned, out-moded ways" (like swinging bridges), that Awiakta names the Disdain Virus, an infectious agent as powerful as the AIDS virus. Placing this poem in "Section IV, Our Courage is Our Memory", the healing section of "Weaving I: A Path to Selu," Awiakta uses "An Indian Walks in Me" to connect the necessity to cure the depression and despair killing her woman's spirit with re-centering herself, having her bare feet on her home ground. Walking the words of this poem in this place, Awiakta writes, safely on the other bank:

One quiet line marked the beginning of my healing: "No more will I follow any rule that splits my soul." Not for society or for government or for education or for any power whatsoever would I depart from the traditional teaching of my elders: "All of creation is one family. We are all interconnected, sacred." With this poem as the center of my life-web, I began to retrieve other broken strands from their boxes....[and gradually found] a way to take the positive aspects of my Cherokee/Appalachian heritage and of the high-tech world and weave them into a new harmony. (*Selu* 190)

This poem, like "Star Vision," became a word bridge of healing, connecting what had previously been split and separated, creating a way. Writing the poem's words and walking them, brought Awiakta the ability to spot the earliest signs of the "disdain virus" and to trust her own thinking as a woman, a Cherokee, and an Appalachian. Walking the words and noting their position in the text can do the same for a reader.

The poem "Song of the Swinging Bridge" is placed in the outside of the double-woven basket of *Selu*, the section "Weaving II: Selu, Spirit of Survival." This verbal swinging bridge connects the sections "Sex Education at the Hearth Level" with "Virtual Valerie" and Indian "Love Secrets." The first bank, or section of words titled "Sex Education," is about two memories. The first is the teaching Awiakta received from her mother about the sacred power—and danger—of the energy of sex and the need to keep that energy in balance by the law of respect. The second memory is her experience with her father and a hemp-woven swinging bridge, describing what that swinging bridge was, how it worked, and how her father taught her to walk it. Her father's teaching was based on the mountain ways, "fronting your fear" and "never take a step you haven't tried or can't take back," and mountain practices of careful observation and walking in rhythm with the movement of the bridge, listening with

the “feet” (*Selu* 257). Awiakta writes of walking this bridge—finally—successfully as she implies she later walked the path of dealing with her sexual energy successfully. Not afraid of either, she said: “When I reached the other bank, I was no longer afraid of the swinging bridge. But my respect for it was profound and would last my life long. Four decades later, I see the bridge as an entwinement of the life force and the law—and the result of disrespect as a fall that will hurt, or more likely kill, especially with the AIDS virus rushing below” (*Selu* 257).

That statement makes explicit what the poem and the purpose of the swinging bridge aesthetic show: a reminder that humans need to respect the reality of the laws of living, since the consequences of forgetting are all too real. As Awiakta wrote, as a child she had the “reality check” of life, in this case the walking of a hemp swinging bridge and the teachings of both her father and her mother, and “for youth today, it’s much more confusing to know what is real and what isn’t” (*Selu* 256). The voice Awiakta crafted in the swinging bridge poem is rhythmical and womanly, singing images, to the walkers/readers, of the power and deep pleasure of sex from a woman’s perspective: “Sunwarm / yet damp and pliant / in my deepest fiber. I vibrate to your touch / curve to your shape / undulate, sigh beneath / your weight” (*Selu* 258). However, with a single word, on a single line “But...,” the voice’s song changes to a set of warnings, those of any swinging bridge: “Stomp me—I fling you up. / Yank me—I break your

stride. / Shake me—I swing you / in an arc of fear” (*Selu* 258). Below this voice, this swinging bridge, is the reality of the dangers of the rushing river, the dangers of “sex in the box,” the Virtual Valerie kind of sex where sex is disconnected from its power, split from its natural and human connection: unplanned pregnancy, disease, death from AIDS and/or the psychological effects of disconnected sex. If the reader follows the lines of the words, “Mind your step. / Blend your rhythm with mine / so I can bear you safely / through the void,” the reader moves to “solid ground,” the words of the Indian love secret in the next section that “The sex act is but a minute part of the overall act of love” (*Selu* 261) based on respect for women, for sex, and for love. The words in the



Swinging Bridge

Photo courtesy of Laura Maul



Walking the Swinging Bridge

Photo courtesy of Laura Maul

bridge poem, swinging between these two “banks” of words and spanning the dangers rushing beneath the sex act, ask the walkers to “remember,” to think, to observe, to use the metaphor of the swinging bridge to put back together what has been disconnected from sex, a mental and emotional act that can transport the readers to survival wisdom and the possibilities of deep pleasure.

If Awiakta’s poems are modes of transportation, ways to move on words from one kind of situation and thinking to another, swinging bridges to walk, then how does this mode of making encourage readers to read? The swinging bridge poems say both literally and figuratively, “Mind your step. / I’m alive! / Not steel or concrete—musky sinew” (*Selu* 258). The poems need close observation, careful attention paid to each word and to the words those words connect and to the dangers beneath the surface the words address. The poems ask the reader to walk carefully, blending the rhythms of their experiences, their cultural heritages and knowledge, with the words, listening for parallels. When the reader has finished, the poem invites the reader to look back, assess the journey, consider the resonating (or in terms of the metaphor swaying) implications of the words and think again. These kinds of reading actions are in harmony with Cherokee and Appalachian wisdom and ways found embedded in stories, songs, and swinging bridges. These kinds of reading actions are not in harmony with high-tech, boxed, virtual culture, speed driven and oriented toward quick, constantly changing surface pleasures. Ironically, therefore, Awiakta’s poems can “throw” readers off, without the readers even knowing it. Readers can read the seemingly “simple” words quickly, can believe they “got” it all and need to move on, not remembering, not connecting, not contemplating, not considering all the possibilities, not examining what sections of words the poems connect and how, not meditating (or “stump-settin’” as Appalachians call it) on the metaphorical implications. Thus readers forget, or just fail to see, the reality that Ackerman and Awiakta see: we are all made of the

same material and our actions are webbed into one whole, creating consequences for the whole. Awiakta, however, using her swinging bridge knowledge, has a vision of our forgetting or failure to see:

I see people crowded on the swinging bridge, respectful and disrespectful alike caught in the heaving, swaying cross-rhythm. Bodies are falling into the torrent below—men, women, children, the unborn . . . In my own community, they are falling all around me. Straight people, gay people, the old, the young. A pediatric researcher who specializes in newborns who are HIV positive tells me that American society is sitting on a time bomb the likes of which we can't even imagine. "Think of these children growing up and becoming sexually active—the proliferation of the virus." What about my children, your children, our grandchildren? What about you? What about me? The future for us all? Many people already have seen loved ones swept away. The "downward pull is so strong, the torrent beneath so swift . . ." (*Selu* 260)

To counter this downward pull, the danger of being erased, drowned, by the destructive consequences of our actions, Awiakta writes swinging bridge poems, using the principles of the Appalachian swinging bridge in her verbal constructions. Her poems can give us a way to think and be that will bear us across the danger, allow us to re-weave vital connections that can save us, if we choose to follow the reading procedures for walking this bridge of words. Then, we readers can look back, having been transported to a safe bank, at the resonating words we have crossed and remember how to live in balance and how to hope "that if justice and reverence prevail, in the fullness of time, sorrow may be erased, wounds may be healed" (*Selu* 110). Then, like Awiakta, we can go on.

Endnote

1. The pictures shown were by Laura Moul and Sandee Lloyd are pictures of swinging bridges in the countryside around Huntington, West Virginia. Pictures of and the history of the new River Pedestrian Bridge can be found at <http://www.paintsville.org/Tourism/riverbridge.htm>. While some in the Appalachian Studies Association audience have seen and walked swinging bridges, many/most? of today's folks have not.

Works Cited

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