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Carnegie Bridge

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Platt: Carnegie Bridge

CARNEGIE BRIDGE

Julie Platt

They came from all countries just to stand
on it, and when exam week blunted their necks
like a coal shovel, they fell as through a dream
of a forgiveness, a tea-warm
sea. Train tracks cackled, catching
them in a blood-black trench
near the mill. This Indian boy drank
a half-gallon of whiskey, wiped his mouth
on his sleeve and followed his piss
into the snow. His gray face told
the evening news how sheer was his desire
to mime the white boys' brays, to grasp
the shiny shoulders of girls who flipped
their tits for drinks while hooting back
his broken English. My mother said this
is what's wrong with America and turned
the sputter of the screen to black in our wide
kitchen, and I almost remembered the smell of dried
cod skulking from the back room of the 7-11,
how sharply she gagged on it and rushed
me past the blank-eyed clerk. One night, she told me
that my doctor's eldest son died in the garage
with the car running, scratching "I'm sorry"
on the back of an envelope. There must be crueler
ways to measure lives, but the tests hadn't yet
been scored when four engineering students
from Indonesia leapt past the barriers
and one poured gasoline on a sheet, cocooned
himself, and struck a match. My own life
shrinks back from its outlines, the swath

cut so generously between the road and the ledge.
What a coward I am at night, walking, putting
one foot in front of the other like a drunk,
trying not to touch anything.