Get in your car, start your engine (combustion or electric),
Fill up on coffee, and find your way to Rt.128 (bad traffic),
And then to Rt.93 into New Hampshire,
living free, not dying,
Past Manchester and Concord,
Watch as the trees in all their brilliant color begin to climb
Up the ever steeper hills,
Watch as the hills turn into the low, at first, White Mountains,
And then higher and higher and taller and taller;
The fur trees now outnumbering the other kinds of trees and the cars
And the people as you drive through one valley after another,
Feeling so small, so insignificant against the stone and earth
That have been here for thousands of autumns just like this.

Hundreds of miles south of you
someone is standing behind a podium in Washington DC
To complain about who exactly is to blame for this week’s
Government shutdown.
“This isn’t some ‘bleepin’ game!’” shouts Rep. John Boehner, in response
To a White House official who claims they are winning.
“What we have here,” shouts Sen. Harry Reid, “is a bunch of banana Republicans;
Anarchists are what they are.”
Echoes of the back and forth compel you to push down harder on the accelerator,
Because you can’t get away fast enough,
The engine revving you up through Plymouth and Campton
And the little town of Lincoln
That sits on the rim of Franconia Notch State Park,
That majestic and wild place in the middle of New Hampshire
That draws to it all those city people and suburbanites,
Especially those who claim to be spiritual and not religious,
Because, they claim, if the spirit is anywhere it is here.
Clearly, you’re thinking, they have never been there in winter.

As the odometer flips over to show that you have traveled 162 miles
Since leaving home 2 and half hours ago,
You take a slight bend onto Styles Bridge Highway
And there, on your right, is your destination –
The place that was formed 200 million years ago in Jurassic times
(imagine!)
When Conway granite and small dikes of basalt
Were forced up from somewhere deep in the earth
And then cooled, creating a deepening valley through
Which, after the Ice Age, rushing flumes of water began to flow,
The Conway Granite rising on either side to a height of 90ft,
And that stood there unseen and unknown for millions of years
Until the year 1808 when 93-year-old when Aunt Jess Guernsey
Went fishing and discovered it with her own two eyes,
Naming it Flume Gorge, which it still goes by today.

Courage is one of those words, isn’t it, that gets bandied so much
That we can lose its meaning –
As in, *Tom Brady showed real courage in the pocket against The Falcon defense!*

Or *I love Mel Gibson in Braveheart! Such courage!*

Or how the conservative Heritage Foundation applauds those politicians
Who don’t compromise by saying: *they have the courage of their convictions!*

But still, that is first word that comes to mind
As you find yourself at the spot at the top of the gorge,
The one you weren’t quite expecting,
That you come across after you have climbed hundreds of stairs
Up the side of the Conway granite,
Hundreds (did I say hundreds?)
And you thought wrongly that all you had to do was turn around and go
Back down,
But oh no, it seemed Aunt Jess had other ideas,
Because stretching out before you and the more
Gentle descent through the autumn woods
Is the four-foot-wide and 50yards long
Two planks just wide enough for your feet,
Lattice railings,
Built to the then modern engineering standards of 1886,
Wooded covered kissing bridge – ‘kissing’ the sign says,
because of the darkness and privacy it provided,
but kissing, you’re thinking, is not what you’re in the mood for
as you listen more closely to the roar of water that is filling your ears,
the roar of water that is the Pemigewasset River
flowing hundreds of feet beneath the bridge
with nothing but air and light between.

Now seems like a good time to mention the following fact:
You are very afraid of heights; very afraid.
Even the height of pulpits scare you.
And so, naturally, as you stand there at the threshold
Of the Pemigewasset River Covered Kissing Bridge, circa 1886
you are thinking of courage,
A word that comes from the French and before it came
To be applied to actors and athletes and political postures
Was a word that meant simply this: heart,
As in: a strong heart, a good heart, a loving heart, an open, ordinary heart.
Or in this case – beating heart, beating so fast
Because you are so very, very scared.

“Fear,” says BB Taylor, “is a small cell with no air in it
And no light; it is suffocating and dark,
There is no room to turn around inside.
When you are locked up like this,
Tomorrow is as far away as the moon.”
She describes it perfectly, doesn’t she?

But this is the world we seem to live in now.
Fear is commonplace. The threat of terror is commonplace.
Malls are battlegrounds. Disgruntled, psychotic employees
Show up at work with guns.
A woman unraveling from postpartum depression
Screams down Pennsylvania Avenue trying to ram her Lexus
Into the White House and the Capitol
While police yell out to tourists and furloughed government workers
And the politicians in mid-press conference: Shelter in Place! Shelter Place!

You’re thinking: at least when many of us were kids fear had a name
– Cold War, Nuclear War, and we practiced what to do in case the worse might happen,
Tucking ourselves under desks during drills
Or against the cinder block walls in the basement cafeteria.
Now it seems that all we have to tell ourselves is:
Don’t move. Freeze. Shelter in Place.
“Mom, Dad,” say our children,
“Why does the TV say breaking news? Has there been another shooting?
Do we need to ‘Shelter in Place’ too?”

It’s exhausting. Depressing too. Fear is both.
Nathan, says the family, don’t rant this week. Keep it light.
Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly.
Yes indeed.
Which is why you go up to places like the Flume Gorge, right,
To get away, to gain perspective, to take a breath?

“Okay,” you say, “as long as I don’t look down,
As long as I keep my eyes on the other side and my hands
On the railings, I’ll be fine.
It’s only 50 yards. It’s been here 127 years.
Aunt Jess Guernsey was 93 years old when she came up here.
What’s your problem? Where’s your courage? Where’s your heart?

In times like these it’s helpful to have other people’s stories:

Extraordinarily crazy stories, like when Nik Wallenda of the Flying Wallendas
Fame this June walked on a tightrope across part of the Grand Canyon with nothing
By jeans and a t-shirt and a balance beam, nothing between him and the ground
But 1500 ft. of air.
Crazy, but courage.

Relevant stories, like of Senator Richard Lugar, who after being defeated
By a Tea Party orthodox candidate last year,
Wrote a letter to the Republican party affirming his continued loyalty
Before ending with this line: “Legislators should have an ideological grounding and strong beliefs…but ideology cannot be a substitute for a determination to think for yourself,
A willingness to study an issue objectively,
And for the courage to sometimes disagree with your party or even your constituents.”
Sen. Lugar we need you now! Courage.
Historic stories of moral courage, like of 47-year-old Paul Gruninger, Who in 1939 was a middle-level police official in the Austrian border Whose job it was to fill out reports and arrange security details for visiting Dignitaries. Or so it seemed.

In April 1939 Gruninger’s way to work was blocked by a uniformed officer, Who told him he no longer had a job and was under arrest.

An investigation revealed that Gruninger was secretly altering documents of Jews Fleeing Austria for the safety of Switzerland.

Non-Aryan refugees were not allowed to leave Austria, but with a few strokes Of his pen on a passport, Gruninger saved hundreds of lives.

Courage.

With stories like that, surely you can cross this little covered kissing bridge. Surely!

All it takes is a little ordinary courage, right?

But then there is nothing ordinary about facing your fears.

Nothing ordinary.

“Courage,” says BBT, is not what some would have us believe. It is not a well-fluffed nest, or a well-defended castle High up on the hill.

It is more like a rope bridge over a scenic gorge,

Sturdy but swinging back and forth,

With plenty of light and plenty of air but precious little To hang onto except the stories you have heard.
All you have to do is believe in the bridge more
Than you believe in the gorge.
Do you hear that? Did it sink in?
All you have to do is believe in the bridge more
Than you believe in the gorge.

Because the truth is this: you are so tired of feeling fear, so tired.
  Fear of heights (that’s mine)
  Fear of being too busy that your kids or spouse won’t recognize you or you them.
  Fear of doing work that is too small for your soul.
  Fear for the parents who are ill and not able to care for themselves
  Fear of furlough or not enough money
  or what happens if that bond investment tanks.
  Fear of how fiscal cliffs and unlifted debt ceilings will impact my IRA.
  Fear that I can’t get on the Obamacare website to sign up for healthcare,
  It telling me to ‘please wait’ but who can I wait when my plan runs out in January
  And I need my meds?
  Fear for the kid off at college who doesn’t return your texts.
  Fear of the doctor results coming Tuesday.
  For the pessimists out there, fear that things are going too well in your life,
  The weather has been too good – oh God, what’s coming next?
Any of this sound familiar?

Of course it does. And you are tired of the fear,
Yes the drive up to the gorge was long.
Yes there were many steps. Yes the journey can be hard.
But you have come too far,
You can’t go back down the way you have come,
And you have sheltered in place too long.
No more standing still. It is time to move.
You leave the edge and step onto the bridge.
One foot in front of the other. One step at a time.

Can you believe in the bridge more than the gorge?
Can you believe that there are people who believe in you
More than you sometimes believe in yourself?
Can you lean in friends in times of need?
Can you ask for help?
Can you look out for signs of start-up in the midst of this shut-down world?
Can you let go of any of your ambivalence about religion and come
To see your church and our faith as your bridge?
Can you engage these important issues of our time without becoming
Enraged, righteous, or depressed?
Can you put keep your eyes forward?
Can you avoid the death spiral of asking what if and what then and what now?
Can you resist negative thinking?
Can you put one foot in front of the other?
Can you can you have a little heart?
Can you notice in yourself and someone else a little courage?

My friends, yes you can. There are friends waiting for you on the other side. They have crossed the bridge ahead of you And are waiting on the other side. You can talk to them if you like, as you step Onto the air, putting one foot in front of the other, Just one step at a time. That is what courage is like.

Can you believe in the bridge more than the gorge? If you say yes say Amen. Can you believe in the bridge more than the gorge? If you say yes say Amen. Can you believe in the bridge more than the gorge? If you say yes say Amen.