Albert’s Bridge
by Tom Stoppard

The Play: This one-act stage play/radio play centers on Albert, a philosophy graduate, and bridge painter who succeeds in replacing all of the other painters and making the bridge his. Eventually a would-be suicide and fourteen other painters interfere with his life.

Time and Place: A big girded railway bridge. The present.

The Scene: Albert paints, observes, and comments on his world.

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Dip-brush-slap-slide-slick, and once again, dip, brush, slap—oh, it goes on so nicely... tickle it into the corner, there, behind the rivet... No one will see that from the ground; I could cheat up here. But I'd know; so dip, brush, slap, slide and once again for the last time till the next time—every surface sleek, renewed—dip, brush, slap, slick, tickle, and wipe—right in there with the old rustproof rust-brown—all glossed and even, end to end—the last touch—perfection!

Simplicity—so... contained; neat; your bargain with the world, your wages, your time, your energy, your property; everything you took out and everything you put in; the bargain that has carried you this far—all contained there in ten layers of paint, accounted for. Now that's something; to keep track of everything you put into the kitty, to have it lie there, under your eye, fixed and immediate—there are no consequences to a coat of paint. That's more than you can say for a factory man; his bits and pieces scatter, grow wheels, disintegrate, change colour, join up in new forms, which he doesn't know anything about. In short, he doesn't know what he's done, to whom.

One bridge—freshly painted—a million tons of iron thrown across the bay—rust-brown and even to the last lick—spick and span, rustproofed, weather-resistant—perfect!

Dip brush, dip brush without end, come rain or shine;
A fine way to spend my time.

My life is set out for me,
the future traced in brown,
my past measured in silver;
how absurd, how sublime (don't look down)
to climb and clamber in a giant frame;
dip brush, dip brush, slick, slide wipe and again.

(Painting stops.)

I straddle a sort of overflowing gutter on which bathtub boats push up and down... The banks are littered with various bricks, kiddiblocks with windows; dinky toys move through the gaps, dodged by moving dots that have no colour; under my feet the Triang train thunders across the Meccano, and the minibrick estates straggle up over the hill in neat rows with paintbox gardens. It's the most expensive toy-town in the store—the detail is remarkable. But fragile. I tremble for it, half expecting some petulant pampered child to step over the hill and kick the whole thing to bits with her Startrite sandals.

(Painting.)

Don't look down,
the dots are looking up.
Don't wave, don't fall, tumbling down a telescope, diminishing to a dot.

In eight years who will I be?
Not me.

I'll be assimilated then,
the honest working man, father of three—you've seen him around,
content in his obscurity, come to terms with public truths,
digging the garden of a council house
in what is now my Sunday suit.
I'm okay for fifty years, with any luck;
I can see my climb
up a silver bridge to paint it for the seventh time,
keeping track of my life spent in painting in the colour of my track:
above it all.
How sublime
(Dip brush, dip brush.) Silvering the brown.
Which dot is mine?
Don't wave, don't look down.
Don't fall.

Progress. Two lines of silver meeting in an angle bracket—and
tickle in there behind the rivet—slip slop and wipe and
on we go up the slope. Does the town look up? Do they all
gawp and say to each other, look at him! How ridiculous he
looks up there, so small, how laughably inadequate. Or do they say, How brave! One man against the elements! Pitted
against so much! The lone explorer feeling his way between
the iron crevasses, tacked against the sky by his boots and fingers. Dots, bricks, and beetles. I could drown them in my spit.

Listen...
The hot sun makes you think of insects,
but this insect hum is the whole city
captured in a seashell...
All conversation is hidden there,
among motors, coughing fits, applause,
screams. Laughter, feet on the stairs,
secretaries typing to dictation,
radios delivering the cricket scores,
tapes running, wheels turning, mills grinding,
chips frying, lavatories flushing, lovers sighing,
the mayor blowing his nose.
All audible life in the vibration

of a hairdryer in the room below.
(Painting.)
Dip brush, slide, stroke,
it goes on as smooth and shiny
as my sweat. I itch.
Paint on my arm,
silver paint on my brown arm;
it could be part of the bridge.
(Painting stops.)
Listen. The note of Clifton is B flat.
The whole world could be the same.
Look down. Is it a fact
that all the dots have names?