

# The Aqueduct, Ray Bradbury

## The Aqueduct

It leapt over the country in great stone arches. It was empty now, with the wind blowing in its sluicings; it took a year to build, from the land in the North to the land in the South.

'Soon,' said mothers to their children, 'soon now the Aqueduct will be finished. Then they will open the gates a thousand miles North and cool water will flow to us, for our crops, our flowers, our baths, and our tables.'

The children watched the Aqueduct being built stone on solid stone. It towered thirty feet in the sky, with great gargoyle spouts every hundred yards which would drop tiny streams down into yard reservoirs.

In the North there was not only one country, but two. They had rattled their sabers and clashed their shields for many years.

Now, in the Year of the Finishing of the Aqueduct, the two Northern countries shot a million arrows at each other and raised a million shields, like numerous suns, flashing. There was a cry like an ocean on a distant shore.

At the year's end the Aqueduct stood finished. The people of the Hot South, waiting, asked, 'When will the water come? With war in the North, will we starve for water, will our crops die?'

A courier came racing. 'The war is terrible,' he said. 'There is a slaughtering that is unbelievable. More than one hundred million people have been slain.'

'For what?'

'They disagreed, those two Northern countries.

'That's all we know. They disagreed.'

The people gathered all along the stone Aqueduct. Messengers ran along the empty sluiceways with yellow streamers, crying. 'Bring vases and bowls, ready your fields and plows, open your baths, fetch water glasses!'

A thousand miles of filling Aqueduct and the slap of naked courier feet in the channel, running ahead. The people gathered by the tens of millions from the boiling countryside, the sluiceways open, waiting, their crocks, urns, jugs, held up toward the gargoyle spouts where the wind whistled empty.

'It's coming!' The word passed from person to person down the one thousand miles.

And from a great distance, there was the sound of rushing and running, the sound that liquid makes in a stone channel. It flowed slowly at first and then faster, and then very fast down into the Southern land, under the hot sun.

'It's here! Any second now. Listen!' said the people. They raised their glasses into the air.

Liquid poured from the sluiceways down the land, out of gargoyle mouths, into the stone baths, into the glasses, into the fields. The fields were made rich for the harvest. People bathed. There was a singing you could hear from one field to one town to another.

'But, Mother!' A child held up his glass and shook it, the liquid whirled slowly. 'This isn't water!'

'Hush!' said the mother.

'It's red,' said the child. 'And it's thick.'

‘Here’s the soap, wash yourself, don’t ask questions, shut up,’ she said.  
‘Hurry into the field, open the sluiceways, plant the rice!’

In the fields, the father and his two sons laughed into one another’s faces. ‘If this keeps up, we’ve a great life ahead. A full silo and a clean body.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said the two sons. ‘The President is sending a representative North to make certain that the two countries there continue to disagree.’

‘Who knows, it might be a fifty-year war!’

They sang and smiled.

And at night they all lay happily, listening to the good sound of the Aqueduct, full and rich, like a river, rushing through their land toward the morning.

The end