

# Out of the Fog

Ron Sakolsky

2025

On Jan. 1, 2024, the city of San Francisco sent New Year's greetings to its beleaguered citizens with the cheery news that a suicide net had been installed under the Golden Gate Bridge thanks to funding from the California Mental Health Services Act.

Heralded as a "suicide deterrent system," the supposedly solid rationale behind this marine grade stainless steel safety net, upon closer examination, turns out to be not so surprisingly full of holes. The erstwhile proponents of this costly \$217 million bridge boondoggle have simplistically argued that if access to the material means of suicide are reduced, then deaths can be prevented. Just put up a net under the bridge to catch would-be suicides...presto, problem solved!

The underlying impetus for this precautionary measure seems to have been that such unsightly suicides must at all costs be kept out of public view because they might be upsetting to the more squeamish conventional users of the bridge. After all, those passersby with delicate sensibilities might even get triggered into feeling that something was dreadfully wrong in society at large.

Now we can't have that, can we? Of course, there are some potential jumpers who look favorably on the idea of committing suicide by poetically descending to their death on a foggy night, and are determined to use the iconic bridge as a mortal coil toward that end. Such impassioned jumpers might consider such a watery scenario to be a very romantic way of checking out. However, to the very unromantic politicians and bureaucrats in charge of policing the contours of miserabilist reality on behalf of bourgeois morality, such a cavalier attitude toward death cannot be tolerated, even as a final self-determining gesture of autonomous defiance.

Most suicides do not have such a bohemian pedigree. Yet, even when judged by mainstream do-gooder standards, it's hard to think of a more egregious example of the dead-end (so to speak) policies of liberal reformism than the San Francisco suicide nets. Constructing such nets under the Golden Gate Bridge offers little more than a whack-a-mole non-solution to what is largely the individual result of the myriad socio-political problems endemic to urban life amidst the growing devastation of too-late capitalism.

Instead of addressing the deeply embedded roots of the problem, the city's superficially-minded "golden-gatekeepers" seem to have been hoping to proactively avoid having to constantly deal with the ongoing suicidal deluge by preventing jumper access in the first place. Just take the lethal launching pad of the bridge away and the problem disappears, right? As if a reliance on such a short-sighted technical solution which mistakenly treats symptom as cause was not enough to make you want to pull out your hair in frustration or roll on the floor in convulsive laughter, even more ludicrous is their argument that such a cosmetic safety net strategy will lower the number of future suicides in San Francisco as a whole. Alas, it is far more likely that those who once contemplated suicide by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge will now do the suicidal deed at some other location and/or in some other way.

Actually, there are not now, and never can be, unimpeachable statistics that would prove the safety net advocates' wishful theoretical speculations on this matter. One thing is clear: verifiable cause and effect statistics in relation to those refraining from suicide now that bridge-leaping access has disappeared can never be found. Aside

from the posthumous discovery of a random suicide note, the unearthing of a handwritten journal entry or finding the occasional personal online post to that contraceptive effect dated prior to taking one's own life, there is no way of objectively uncovering the pre-suicide choice process in most cases. As the saying goes, "dead men tell no tales."

Those physically caught in the act can be counted, but, even if they remain alive, their preliminary calculations in choosing to commit suicide at one locale rather than another are not always forthcoming or reliable. Consequently, the case for safety nets can never be statistically proven one way or another because of the inevitable lack of hard data. Indeed, the most likely "net" result of such a "catch-as-catch-can" bridge safety program in relation to overall suicide prevention will be to privatize the act or to move it to another less publicly monitored location rather than to actually prevent it from taking place at all. Much like the unsettling evidence of the daily carnage on our highways that is immediately cleaned up so as to officially project a deceptive "nothing to see here, folks" impression on rubbernecking drivers; the name of the game is out of sight, out of mind.

One wonders further if the vaunted San Francisco suicide management plan was designed to take advantage of the survivor's guilt experienced by certain friends and relatives of jumpers under the pretext of humanitarian policy-making, while offering the politicians that have funded it a chance to make some easy virtue-signaling points with prospective voters over the dead bodies of their constituents without actually having to change anything of substance.

Even as the degree of societally normalized alienation and spiritual emptiness reaches staggering new heights of existential malaise, Rimbaud's call to "change life" still lamentably remains unheeded for the most part.

In the context of the current war on the imagination, we are expected to acquiescently adjust to a toxic reality where the natural world of which we are a part is being crushed before our eyes and the civilized world is becoming ever more unnatural as the carceral forces of instrumental reason virtually invade and surveil every nook and cranny of not only our dreams and ultimately our deaths.

Of course, there is no guarantee in advance that even if the present order was magically transformed along anarchist lines that an individual wanting to plummet to their death by plunging into the murky waters of the San Francisco Bay would necessarily change their mind. However, I'm willing to wager that the collective impact of moving in such an anarchic direction would be vastly more life-affirming than putting up a leaky safety net under the Golden Gate Bridge to discourage potential suicides.

In comparison, the latter net-building strategy makes about as much sense as putting old fashioned cowcatchers on the front-end of trains in the New York City subway system to prevent the many suicides each year resulting from people jumping onto the tracks from station platforms as the trains come roaring into each stop.

In a coldly disenchanted techno-capitalist world where despair can be an omnipresent companion, suicide inevitably looms up as the last refuge of refusal. Is it any wonder that, when faced with a life of constant emotional pain, some of the most sensitive among us will find the finality of suicide inviting?

Under such circumstances, the beckoning appeal of suicide is not likely to disappear, or to be disappeared, in the name of civic responsibility. The last thing we need is another plea, petition, or demand that encourages grandstanding government intervention or "responsible" corporate citizenship.

Instead of trying to architecturally discourage despondent jumpers from doing a swan dive off the Golden Gate Bridge, we might do better to radically re-imagine both jumpers and jumping in the context of our most impossible abolitionist dreams. Bring on the subversive visions of an ungovernable world where thousands of suicidal real estate speculators and stock market wheeler/dealers do the rest of us a big favor by jumping out of office building windows with no safety net to catch them, where the rapidly spreading tendrils of utopian gardens riotously strangle the noxious weeds of colonialism, and where wildly imaginative poets have a last laugh in the face of death!

And, yes, that last laugh might be a suicidal one in some cases. In the words of the late Salt Spring Island poet Phyllis Webb in her "To Friends Who Have Also Considered Suicide" poem,

"to consider the numerous methods of killing oneself,

"that is surely the finest exercise of the imagination"

Webb, who herself chose to die with medical assistance at 94, always had a soft spot in her heart for the insurrectionary anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti and for the anarchist prince, Peter Kropotkin.

In her poem, “Kropotkin”, she eulogizes,

“his white beard,

“where the morning stars

“sang...”

Of his older brother Alexander, who committed suicide in Siberian exile, she notes in “The Kropotkin Poems,”

“He cut his own vein

“stateless in grace”

Contemporary Vancouver anarchist poet Stephen Collis has long revered Webb. In his most recent prose volume of the two that he has written about her, entitled *Almost Islands: Phyliss Webb and the Pursuit of the Unwritten*, he meditates on his relationship with her as both an anarchist-oriented poet and personal friend.

In doing so, he wisely reminds us of the anarchic qualities of the death-defying trapeze act that is the unbridgeable poetic adventure: “Poetry and anarchy. Windows we sometimes need to leap from. Names for our unnamable desires.”

And when, as Webb put it, “words no longer came” to her, she decidedly committed what Collis has called “literary suicide” by abdicating the writing of poetry altogether. Instead, she became an abstract painter who favored the anarchist-inflected notions of spontaneity and autonomy as reflected in the black mirror light of an oneiric creative process which drew upon the “pure psychic automatism” of surrealism as refracted in the “splendid anarchy” and “total refusal” of the Montréal *Automatistes*.

Ron Sakolsky lives on Denman Island, BC. He is a writer whose prose and poetry traces the confluence of anarchy and surrealism. His latest book is *Surrealism and the Anarchist Imagination* published by Eberhardt Press, 2024.

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2025

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Fifth Estate #416, Spring 2025

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