

There they stood, ranged along the hillsides, met
To view the last of me, a living frame
For one more picture! In a sheet of flame
I saw them and I knew them all. And yet
Dauntless, the slug-horn to my lips I set
And blew: "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came."

The Temple of Anonymity

I was only introduced to the Gano Street Bridge last semester, but it has made a considerable impression on me. I feel an almost religious respect for that cathedral of rust even just in speaking its name, and it has often been my escape when I needed to cast off my own humanity. I wanted to know more about it, and I still do, but it was in the course of researching this essay that I came to understand how. I thought that background research on the history of the bridge would be a good place to start, so I went around Gano Street and Pitman Street into different stores and offices to see what people knew and remembered. After a while I realised that, as with any figure that has taken on a mythological

significance purely in your own mind, there was a lot I didn't want to know. I was happy, then, to find out that I hadn't really found out anything.

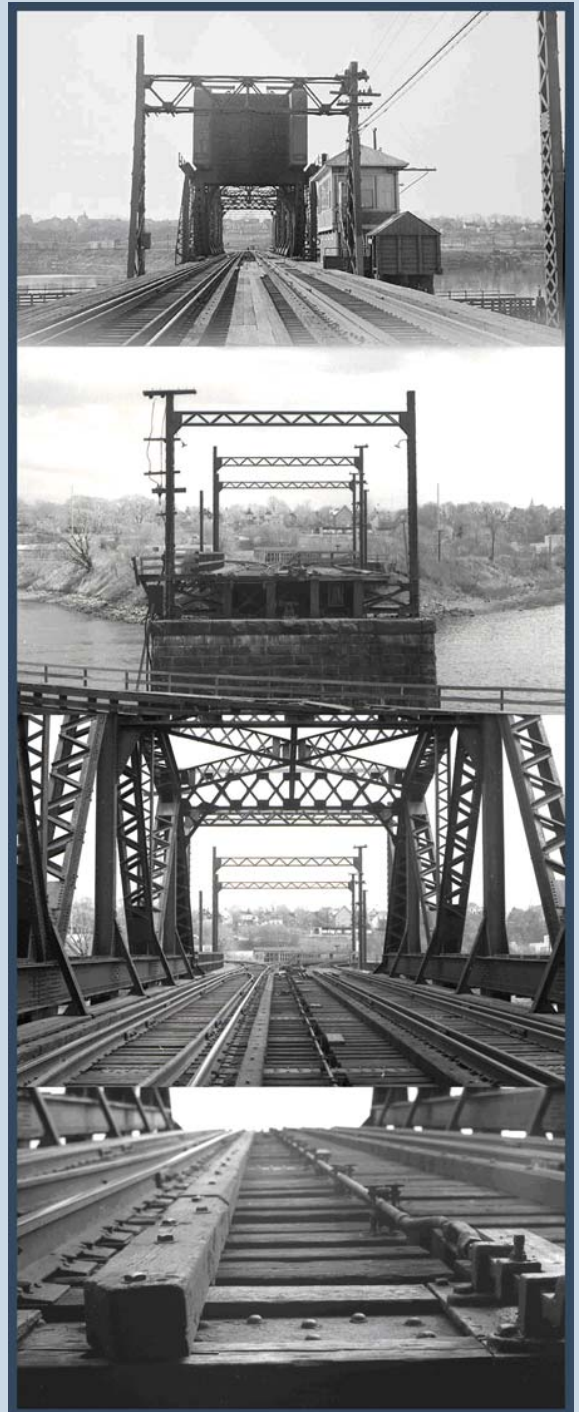
The main problem with asking about the bridge was in the name. *Art in Ruins* says "The bridge opened with the name 'Crook Point Bascule Bridge' . . . the DoT knows the bridge as the Seekonk River Drawbridge S.S. K-315; most [people] call it the Drawbridge, or the Seekonk River Bridge, or the Stuck-Up Bridge, or simply the Up Bridge." How am I supposed to refer to something which doesn't really have a name? I found out a lot of information on a lot of different bridges. When I realised that I had mistaken one bridge for another and corrected myself, people usually didn't have a lot to say on the old drawbridge, rusting up into the sky. For some reason the other bridges, with their short, functional lives, could always elicit more.

I'm honestly glad about that. Research became a divided issue in my mind. While people who grew up with it and live their lives skirting around the base of this monolith might have no set name for it, and the people who built it and own it might refer to it by a series of numbers, among my friends it is known as the Gano Street Bridge. These naming conventions seem to characterise the different natures of the bridge for me: On one hand there are other people's perceptions – the historical figure; the utilitarian work of engineering, S.S. K-315 – and on the

other there is that secluded monument, the Gano Street Bridge. One is factual, one cold and unimportant, and the other very personal. So while I was interested to learn more about its history, I grew afraid that knowing too much would detract from the hundred and thirty-five foot high leviathan of my imagination.

At this point I've managed to piece together some of its history from different sources, but I'll keep it brief. It was built to carry PW&B (Philadelphia, Wilmington and Baltimore Railroad) trains between Union Station and East Junction through the East Side Tunnel that runs from the Seekonk west to Main Street, which is a little over five thousand feet long (and runs underneath Brown's

campus). They were both opened in 1908 and fell into disuse around 1978 when the line was relocated. Apparently the bridge's full potential was never realised. Mark Richmond, formerly of Brown's engineering department and now working



in the technological centre on Gulf Avenue, told me that the Core of Engineers would like to tear it down for the scrap steel, but couldn't come up with the money. He said they'd prefer for a movie team to blow it up so that they would cover the costs. The CoE tried to do the same thing with the old Jamestown bridge. He, meanwhile, would prefer to see it repaired and functional again, and he's not alone. Others who grew up with it remember it the way it was and have their own ideas about how it could serve the community once more. Here again are three different beings: the work of engineering which should be torn down for scrap, the historical presence which should be made to run again, and, in the opinions of us who have come to it more recently, the abandoned shrine which should be left the way it is.

It's all we've ever known, of course: a rusted tower, in the midst of everything and yet deserted, barely acknowledged. It calls out to something wild in people. One of my friends told me about one of his favourite places in the nooks under the tracks. "Mine, or what I like to call, 'mine'," he told me, "Is a good length down the bridge, and faces south, where the sunlight can hit it from the sky and be reflected off the water at full force. I know that other people know about these nooks, but have never seen anyone else there. Mine is always deserted, and there, in the summer, I can read, sunbathe, and listen to the waves . . . It's used by

the public, but just by showing up, I feel I've made it my own." It can be private in a way that truly public space can't, and a wilderness where deeper parts of people come through, unfettered by social order. *Dark Passage* claims that "because of the attraction it holds for climbers, suicides, and (according to the Providence Journal) at least one escaped naked mental patient, the bridge has been referred to as a 'magnet for the deranged and the deluded'," and the ProJo itself says that "the drawbridge, owned by a semiautonomous state corporation, has been attracting daredevils, troublemakers and the suicidal for years."

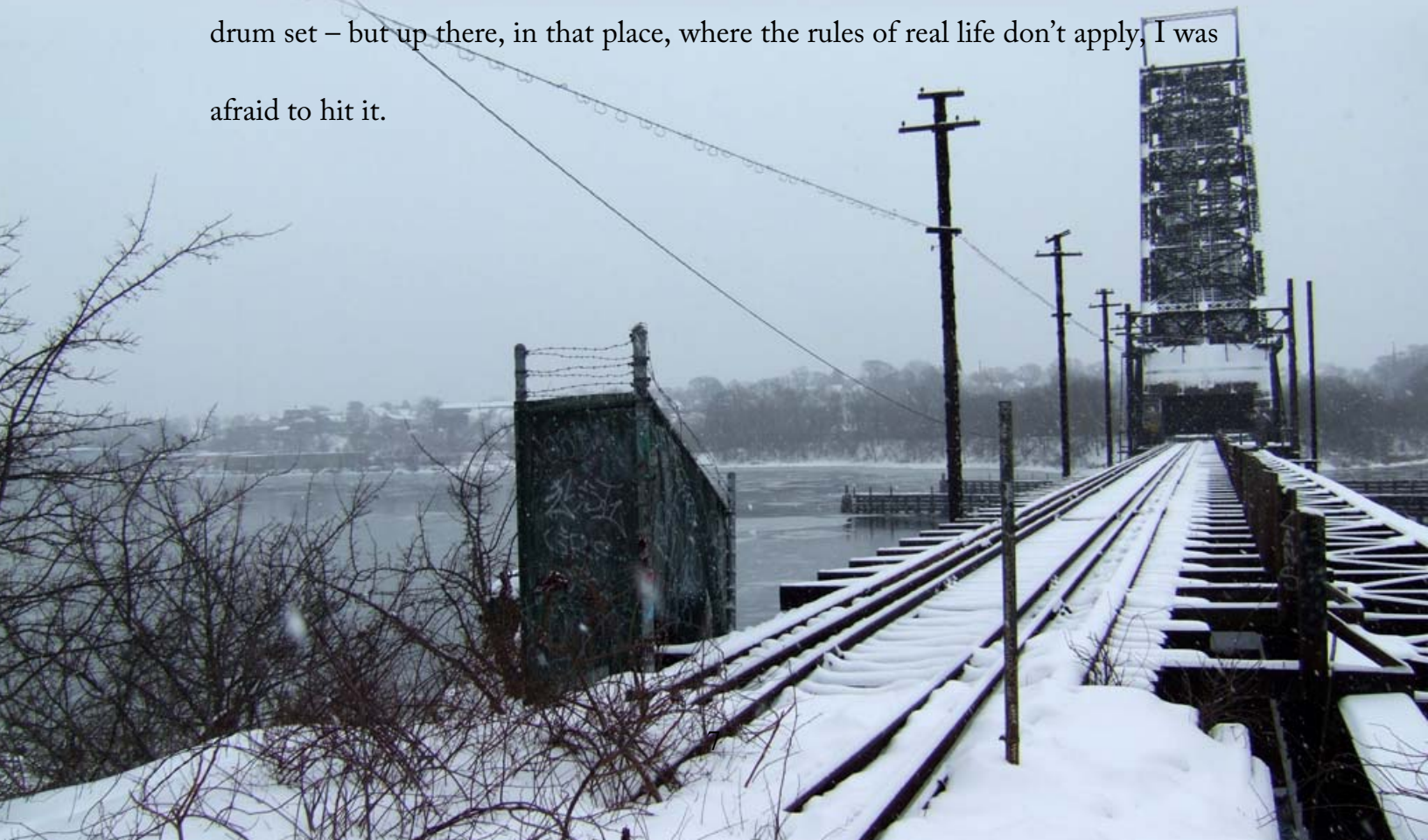
There is something sacred in the freedom to be however mad you might be. My friends have frequently (and independently) talked about it like a place of worship, but one outside of any accepted norms or establishment. "I tend to see the bridge as a strange temple. I've mostly been there at night or at sunset, and there seems to be something removed and holy about it. When you climb it, it offers a view of the city and of East Providence that gives me a feeling of being atop a mountain or a palace. It is a temple, but an unknown one: It shows up in no guide books, and to discover it requires a special kind of knowledge, a knowledge mostly conveyed in informal social interactions." I've spent a long time just writing out my own feelings towards it, and one phrase I came up with which describes it well in my mind is a temple of anonymity – fitting, too, that the bridge itself

shouldn't have a real name. Even the graffiti running up the entire length is a testament to a part of people that wants something anonymously, wants to leave a mark beyond any rules or social order. It, too, is a part of that eerie magic. "The graffiti [is] a testament to the hidden or almost esoteric nature of the bridge."

Another friend described it as "an unintentional temple, a sacred monument of a past culture, once utilitarian, now simply vast – like Stonehenge." This struck a cord with me, since I frequently miss Britain's ruins. Having forgotten relics of architecture dot the landscape, just waiting for you to find them, gives the Old World a sense of incredible wealth for me. In thinking about the Gano Street Bridge, I came to realise that it held that same feeling – an ancient monument which has gradually lost all function, and then all original significance, until all that remains is an empty place, a blank canvas not trying to be anything more than what it physically is. My friend described it as "a liminal space", and this reminded me of the dolmens of Europe, archways of stone where the boundaries between this world and the Otherworld are thin. I believe that the Gano Street Bridge is also a place of crossing over, where the faces that we put on for humanity can be removed, and parts in each of us that were hidden come to the fore. What was once a bridge for the body has become, in its uselessness, a bridge for the soul.

This twisted logic rings out in its transformation. It is a physical crossing turned into a barrier, a horizontal structure become vertical. The bridge has a reciprocal effect: It has been discarded by civilisation, and so it turns its back on everything; even rising straight out of the city, it is distinctly separate. Likewise it is a temple for when people want to turn their own back on society and exist, however briefly, in a void. It's a place of perversion, where something unnecessary which should have fallen into oblivion instead chose to face its exile standing up and became a lighthouse, a beacon to guide the outcast in so many.

More than any of these speculations, I believe it is a place of power. When I first climbed it to the very top I was met with a drum, nestled in the girders. On its own, the drum was nothing out of the ordinary – just the low drum from a drum set – but up there, in that place, where the rules of real life don't apply, I was afraid to hit it.



Interviews conducted with John Ballantine, Mark Richmond, Dan Byers, Al Carter and Alex Feldman. Top three pictures, p.3, by John Ballantine, 1976. Bottom picture, p. 3, by Leo King, 1954. Other pictures by the author. Thanks to Al at East Side Marketplace and Eileen at A New Leaf.

Sources -

<http://www.artinruins.com/arch/?id=decay&pr=seekonkbridge>

<http://open.salon.com/content.php?cid=8079>

<http://www.darkpassage.com/postmortems/providence.htm>

http://www.projo.com/ri/eastgreenwich/content/EB_MC_Jumper_10-25-07_TN7JL3M_v10.359b911.html

For more tributes to the Gano Street Bridge, go to

<http://worldwidepanorama.org/worldwidepanorama/wwp906/html/DietrichNeumann.html>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cCghav8NQpw&feature=channel_page

Opening passage from "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" by Robert Browning.