

GARY GEDDES / Bridging the Narrows: Notes on Falsework

On June 17, 1958, the Second Narrows Bridge collapsed during construction, taking the lives of eighteen workers and, later, a diver. At the time, I was working on the waterfront at BC Sugar Refinery loading boxcars with 100-pound sacks of white sugar, so the news did not take long to reach me.

. . . God, it was blue, the sky

a currency even the poor could bank
on. We'd ordered our usual, eggs
over-easy, with an extra side of toast,
when the first of five ambulances

shrieked past. It was difficult to imagine
disaster on such a day, the birds
singing hallelulia on the wires, clouds
on strike, growing things amazed

by their own virtuosity, operatic,
playing the clown. The radio, having
kept its counsel, suddenly belted out
the news, interrupting a ballad

by Crosby, something about dreams
dancing. We piled into the street
and moved en masse to the waterfront,
holding our breath, daring our eyes.

I learned later that my father, a former navy diver, had been called out to search for bodies in the wreckage. For decades, I carried the image of him dangling from an umbilical cord of oxygen in that cauldron of swirling water and twisted metal. I recall the shock and disbelief I felt as I ran towards the pier at Buckerfield Seeds to see for myself the collapsed bridge. The huge girders that moments before had pushed out boldly across Burrard Inlet were now mangled and sloped down

into the water. A flotilla of small boats was converging on the spot to pick up bodies and survivors. There was nothing I could do, so I returned to my job and the mountain of sugar sacks at the refinery. But I would never again look at a new building, a bridge, or an overpass under construction without that almost imperceptible catch in the breathing that playwrights identify in their scripts as “a beat.”

Years later, in 1998, I had just moved back to the west coast from Montreal, and I was able to visit the scene of the disaster, to drive and walk across the bridge, and to consider how I might write about the disaster. Four years later I read a review of Tom Berger’s memoir, *One Man’s Justice: A Life in the Law*, which mentions his defence of the ironworkers who had brought the rebuilt Second Narrows Bridge almost to completion before taking legal strike action. The strike was declared illegal. They had the choice of going back to work or facing contempt of court charges. This was a part of the bridge story I did not know. I purchased a copy and quickly located the chapter entitled “A Bridge Too Far.”

This proved to be a turning-point in my research. I read Berger’s account of defending the striking ironworkers under impossible circumstances, a neophyte lawyer facing a crusty old judge with a reputation for being short-tempered and hardly sympathetic to union members. Justice Manson was patronizing in the extreme, dismissing the young whippersnapper defending the worker’s right to strike. Manson wanted them back on the job, claiming that the bridge was dangerous in its present condition. Doubtless, he was concerned about the interests of his cronies at Dominion Bridge and Swan Wooster & Associates, the consulting engineers. Berger politely pointed out that if the bridge was unsafe for the citizens of Vancouver, it would be equally unsafe for the workers returning to the job. After all, your honour, it had already collapsed once.

I met Tom Berger for lunch. He was still working, long after official retirement, and had offices in the Marine Building, one of my favourite structures in the city, an art deco affair with a fringe of icing around the roof that looks like snow. Berger, lively and gracious, insisted on buying me lunch and offered to lend me his personal copy of the court proceedings, which arrived at my house at French Beach a day later by priority post, with the note: “Return this when you’re finished. All of my stuff goes to the archives at UBC, in due course.” Although the court case had taken place more than a year after the bridge collapse, it presented

me with evidence of a continuing saga and, most importantly, the names and recorded comments (angry, ironic, deliberately uncooperative) of some of the surviving ironworkers.

Berger's enthusiasm for the project gave me the nudge I needed to make contact with the surviving ironworkers, but this might not have happened so quickly without the intervention of Tom Evans, a filmmaker and social activist. Tom had interviewed Berger a few weeks after I did. When I called him from a cell phone at Ogden Point and asked if we could meet, he inquired, "Where are you?" "I'm on the beach at Kits," I said, adding that I was not far from the Maritime Museum. "I'll meet you at the dock there in ten minutes." As I stood on the dock checking out the antique vessels, I heard my name shouted. Gliding between the breakwater and the float was a small fibreglass sloop with two figures in the stern, both waving. I grabbed a line amidships, stepped aboard and we were off again, introductions made over the noise of the outboard motor.

Tom Evans invited me to accompany him to the annual memorial service on June 17, 2005, where I met retired bridge foreman Lou Lessard, who gave a rousing speech to the assembled group; Donnie Geisser, whose father Charley had been operating the crane when the bridge collapsed; Charlie Guttmann, the son of Erich Guttmann who was arrested and jailed briefly during the subsequent strike; and Barrie Doyle, brought down from a job in Kelowna to help dismantle the bridge, and who would become the unofficial archivist of the disaster. After the speeches and the laying of wreaths at the memorial—a cement and marble monument carrying the names of those killed on the bridge—several of us went for beers to a familiar hangout on Hastings Street. These introductions were exactly what I needed.

Although I tape-recorded my interviews with ironworkers, engineers, lawyers and union employees, I never had to go back and listen to them. The rhythms of their speech remained fixed in my mind. Some of the stories required less tinkering than others. Many of the men experienced similar feelings as they fell, so I had to push them a little to elicit the less rehearsed details. But after several months there were still large gaps in the narrative, and at that point, fictional voices began to enter: a Vancouver lawyer whose father was killed on the bridge, an injured ironworker with a very different kind of story to tell, a woman trying to deal with her resentment at being widowed, a returning veteran who would

have preferred the study of mushrooms, but took up ironwork instead. In several cases, the manufactured “voice” felt more real, more authentic, to me than the ones I’d recorded, perhaps because I was not inhibited by fact or by a sense of responsibility to the individual I’d interviewed.

By the time of writing, I’d read enough poetry, including Hart Crane’s “The Bridge” and Adrienne Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck,” to be alerted to the welter of symbols in the swirling waters of the Second Narrows and to sense in that partially submerged memory more than a faint hint of possibility. Writing, too, I had to admit, is a form of *falsework*, a temporary support structure like that used to build bridges, something we depend on to take us part way towards the truth.

The process had its surprises, especially as the role of my father began to surface at regular intervals. His involvement with the bridge disaster had been useful in introducing me to ironworkers, but no one I interviewed, including divers, remembered him or could verify his presence at the bridge on June 17, 1958 or any day thereafter. Had my father really been involved or had he cooked up the story? As I restructured *Falsework*, my father and the notion of

fathering assumed a larger significance, to the point where the manuscript ended with a meditation about truth and reliability, in art as in life, and with a very personal account of my father’s death.

It was not an ending I could have anticipated when I began writing *Falsework*, but it seemed to shift the question of responsibility—for safety, for honesty, for caring, for meticulous recording—from the anonymous institutions of government and corporations, back to the individuals who do the dirty work and who sign off on documents, including works of imagination.

