

## Unveiling

Long considered a triumph of architecture, the Bloor Street Viaduct has been transformed into a monument to despair.

The barrier that now sleeves the bridge is known as the 'Luminous Veil'. From virtually any angle – crossing the bridge by foot or car, standing far beneath it in the valley below – one can't help but look at the bridge's angled braces and think of crucifixes teetering on an edge. These nameless crosses remind me of the tombstones of fallen soldiers that stud the war cemeteries of France. But on the viaduct, the battles waged are largely unknown. The victims took their stories with them as they tumbled off the bridge to the road or river or tracks below.

The viaduct has always claimed lives. Before it was even completed, overworked, underpaid immigrants died in construction accidents while building the bridge. Toronto author Michael Ondaatje chronicled these workers' sweat-coated, tar-stained journeys in his novel, *In the Skin of a Lion*. Ondaatje writes of the night before the ceremonies to christen the viaduct, when workers brushed away city officials as they carried "their candles for the bridge dead", looking like "a net of summer insects over the valley."

One of the novel's heroes is Nicholas Temelcoff. He's a Balkans-born worker who becomes known as a "daredevil" because of his willingness to take on all the difficult jobs that building the bridge demands. Ondaatje tells us that Temelcoff "descends into the air with no fear." It is while standing in the air, tethered by rope to the bridge above, that he grabs "a black-garbed bird" out of the sky. The black bird is a nun. Temelcoff catches her in mid-flight after she is thrown off the bridge by an unforgiving wind.

The deaths of the bridge workers in 1919 were accidents. More recently, a spate of highly-publicized suicides fuelled the drive to redesign the bridge. The city commissioned Dereck Revington to create the suicide barrier.

The architect cited Ondaatje's novel as a source of inspiration. "The character of Temelcoff became a kind of icon for me, the way he scoops the black bird out of the sky," says Revington. "A barrier needs the same kind of elegance and grace as Temelcoff."

As with all works of fiction that stand the test of time, *In the Skin of a Lion* can be reread and reinterpreted, in the same way that the bridge whose birth it chronicles is refitted. "In certain weather," writes Ondaatje, "when fog fills the valley, the men stay close to each other. They arrive for work and walk onto a path that disappears into whiteness. What country exists on the other side?"

It's a question those of us who have never stood on the brink of a bridge might have posed to those who have. "What country exists on the other side?" What lines the lightless tunnel that has brought hundreds "onto a path that disappears into whiteness"?

If only Temelcoff had been there to pluck the fallen. "He hangs under the spine of the bridge", Ondaatje writes. The Luminous Veil that now lines the Bloor Street Viaduct suggests that there's no need for a Temelcoff. Still, we need novels like *In the Skin of a Lion*, to remind us that behind every bridge and every human being there is a story.

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