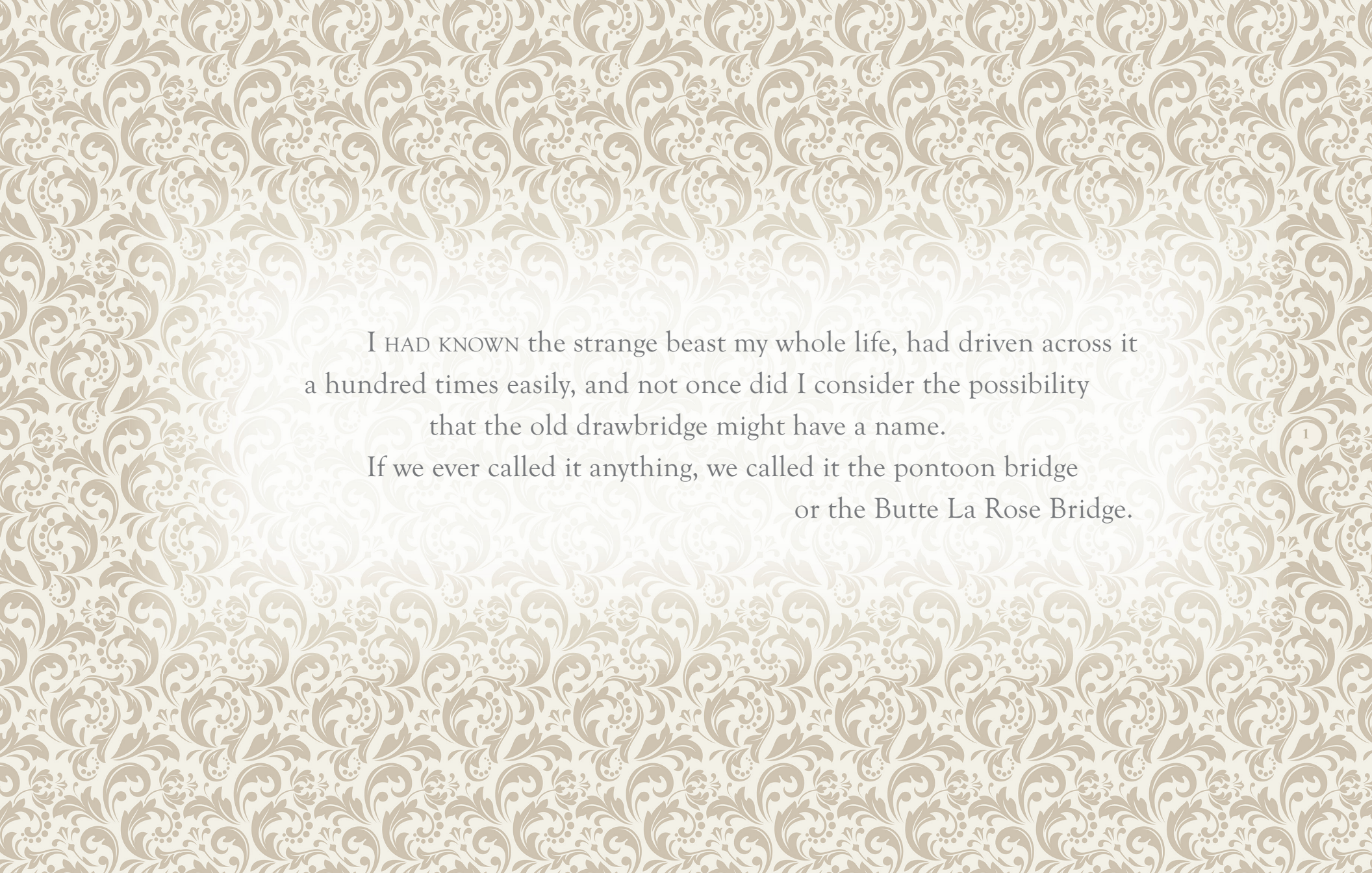




the Drawbridge





I HAD KNOWN the strange beast my whole life, had driven across it
a hundred times easily, and not once did I consider the possibility
that the old drawbridge might have a name.

If we ever called it anything, we called it the pontoon bridge
or the Butte La Rose Bridge.



Mostly we just drove across it in a state of quiet awe.

Cars would wait their turn, crossing one at a time, and the only sound of traffic was the clacking of the roadway and the odd croaks and groans as we seemed to float across it.

The Brooklyn Bridge has a name, London Bridge has one too, but bridges around here, they did what they were built to do, and they didn't make a big to-do about it. They got us across a bayou.

Drew open when we asked them to.

You don't need a name to do that.

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The day before it was permanently closed to traffic, I drove to Butte La Rose to see it one last time. I had never thought of the old bridge as a tourist attraction before, which is so wild to me, looking back and knowing what I know now. Driving through a rural part of South America, I would *beg* the driver of my taxi-cab to pull over and let me photograph such a unique steampunk drawbridge.

Yet the as-exotic drawbridge five miles from home had escaped my full attention for almost fifty years. But isn't that how it always goes? So, on the morning of February 10, 2022, I loaded my kayak into the bed of my truck, and I drove to Butte La Rose.

Up the gravel ramp I went, over the crest of the levee, down the other side, and where the ramp funnels traffic onto the roadway of the drawbridge, I pulled over instead and parked diagonally along the slope. Popped open the tailgate, dragged my kayak to the bayou, and near the neatly-angled pilings set out gliding on the water.

I saw the sign as soon as I pushed off.

You'd never notice it if you were driving across the drawbridge in a car or a truck, but it's obvious when you're in a boat and you're about to pass under it. I took in the sign as a whole, all at once, then I read it more slowly word by word.

The old drawbridge not only had a name, it had a *startling* name. Imagine curtains drawing open to reveal the secret title of a movie, and you didn't even know that you were watching a movie.

I paddled closer and read the sign a third time as one question turned into another. The Crocodile Bayou Pontoon Bridge? Really? Was there really such a place? Why had I never heard of it?

Was Crocodile Bayou the bayou I was floating? I wondered. Was this area of Butte La Rose called Crocodile Bayou? And why in the world was anywhere in Louisiana called Crocodile anything anyway, when crocodiles don't even live here?

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I didn't learn the answers to those questions that morning. In fact, my curiosity only deepened as I came to understand that, as far as I could tell, *no one* knew the reason for the name.

For three-and-a-half years I would toy at the riddle, driving to New Orleans to look for clues on old maps, flying a drone twice over the Catahoula Swamp, poring over dusty archaeological reports, until eventually I managed to wrestle it into the pages of this crocodile-shaped book. But I didn't know any of that then.

That morning was all about floating.

All about seeing it with my own eyes while I still could. I had never given much thought to how the drawbridge did what it did, and when I paddled to the other side of it, the sun, as if on cue, climbed higher in the sky to show me. I took pictures from every angle.

I studied the lucid pulleys, tracing the logic of the cables. Clearly it was a working bridge, not a come-take-a-picture-of-me bridge, and it wore its functions transparently, without ornament or embellishment. The rusty old creature wasn't trying to be beautiful, which only made it more beautiful to me.



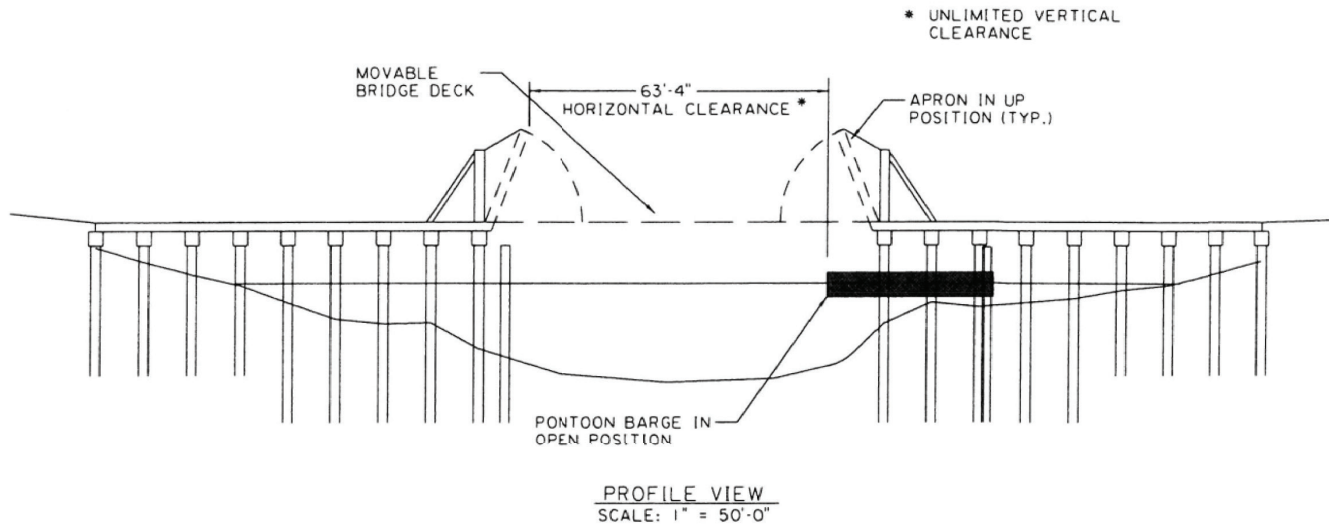


And more mysterious. Seeing the drawbridge up close, I realized in retrospect that driving across it had always felt like solving a strange kind of puzzle. Some bridges you can drive across without thinking about it. This one, with its narrow roadway and its bouncing-up-and-down parts, was something you had to carefully navigate.

The drawbridge was a rare type of bridge called a swing pontoon bridge. Swung closed, it provided passage for cars and trucks into Butte La Rose; swung open, it allowed marine traffic through. The concrete pillars used to build the Basin Bridge, for example, came up from the Gulf of Mexico through here.

Like a Transformers robot, the drawbridge could draw open and closed. A fifty-foot steel pontoon—the solid black rectangle on this diagram—was a hollow barge supporting a section of roadway at the center of the structure. By pivoting ninety degrees counterclockwise, the pontoon, with the roadway still attached, could be floated into open position, and the two aprons could be drawn up.

Then to close the drawbridge the pontoon could be pivoted back to the center of the structure, the aprons could be drawn down, and road traffic across the drawbridge could resume.



BUTTE LAROSE PONTOON BRIDGE
CROCODILE BAYOU



And the drawbridge could transform in another way. At each end of the pontoon one long tubular counterweight hung suspended from three steel cables looped around three giant pulleys mounted to the tops of columns, and by threading steel pins through holes in those columns, the roadway could be raised or lowered.

The floating section of roadway *had* to be vertically adjustable because the depth of that particular bayou was prone to fluctuation, and not just a little. It could vary by as much as ten feet from season to season. That bayou was unusually fluid, in other words, and the pontoon was unusually accommodating.

The cantankerous contraption offered no easy silhouette, its parts pulled into service not for what they looked like, but only for what they did. Pulleys. Cables. Pilings. Counterweights. Fenders. The famous pontoon. What you saw was exactly what you got.

I'm told that its appearance actually frightened some visitors to Butte La Rose—the circus-like pieces seemingly welded together as a series of corrective afterthoughts—but paddling into the belly of the beast and seeing its ribcage up close, all that concrete, wood and steel, it struck me as exactly *the opposite* of precarious, and I wondered how anyone would ever be able to tear that monster down.





I gave my full attention to the
sound of a yellow pickup truck approaching from the levee.

The roller-coaster clatter as it bounced onto the apron,
the low booming thrumming as it hummed along
the roadway. The current kept dragging me downstream,
downstream, and finally I let it.

I floated, floating backward until the animal's entire skeleton fit lengthwise in the frame of my camera, then I floated backward some more. I had never seen the drawbridge from the bayou like that before. You could even say I had never really seen it. I wish I had taken more pictures.

