

Senior Division, Nonfiction

Sara Swain, St. John's

Palimpsest (an excerpt)

The last time it housed animals was 1961. That is the same year my grandfather died, abruptly at 50, his life only half-lived. In the years after he passed, my father and my uncles made efforts to maintain the structure. [...]

The rhythm of care for the old building inevitably slowed down as time wore on. People were busy with other things. The elements stripped the wood of its skin. Without a protective barrier, the stable aged, grayed, and wrinkled in all the ways my grandfather never got the chance.

Elsewhere it might be called “demolition by neglect” but the intention wasn't demolition. Though it wasn't explicit, the intention was to allow the stable to hold on for as long as it wanted. This way, no one had to bear the burden of intervening, but also, no one had to be responsible for letting it go. Instead, everyone watched time carry it forward without ever being asked. Their gaze initiated a process of transubstantiation. By making their grief manifest, the stable gave it a place to rest.

The building may have been physically neglected, but it was well-looked after. I know my eyes never stopped tending to it. My family's stories couldn't stay away from it. The story of my grandfather is the story of the stable, and the story of the stable is the story of the land and all the lives it ushered in. Whenever I look up at it, I remember my grandfather—a man I loved, but never met. Like a talisman, a time capsule, a playback machine, it's a storehouse of live-action vignettes.

Here he is traipsing across the meadow in the late-afternoon sun, chewing on a toothpick, a cat draped around his neck. Here he is, flashlight in hand, rushing up the hill in the middle of the night to welcome a lamb into the fold. Here he is filling in the manger, stopping to take a wayward spider out of his hair, moving it to the safety of the window sill. Here he is, the day before he died, breathless and winded after driving the sheep into the woods for the summer, his heart working harder than he could know.