

# The Medium of the Archive

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## I.

At the Cenotaph, an old man with a thin wisp of a voice clutches his cap against the wind and looks around at the small collection of people who still think about the war. His words are completely drowned out by the ear-splitting chop of a passing motorcycle. I look beyond him and down the hill. Behind the sharp whip of the wind, the lake is a warm autumn sapphire. I step closer to the small staging area at the foot of the Cenotaph where the other old men in military uniforms stand as close to attention as their sagging bodies will allow, waiting their turn to summon their ghosts.

I hear fragments now.  
'...heroes'  
'...sacrifice'

The poetry of Czesław Miłosz skitters across my mind –

*We, saved by our own cunning and knowledge  
By sending others to the more exposed positions  
Urging them loudly to fight on  
Ourselves withdrawing in certainty of the cause lost...*

Blessed are those that survive.  
That is the first anti-beatitude.



Walking up the uneven brick path to my crumbling house, I feel its embrace. When it comes into full view, my heart leaps as it has only ever done for people—for my sons, for example, or their father. I love the watery stain of its porch lights, the warm glow of its lead glass, the carpet of sugar maple leaves littering its crooked fall garden.

When I saw it for the first time, I thought it too big and dark—a bulky brick Victorian with a closed layout that didn't let enough light into its honey-toned rooms. But even the realtor marvelled at the stained-glass transoms over the bedroom doors—each one a pair of fleurs-de-lis in lead-lined fields of pale pink, violet, and cerulean. It was hard to admit to myself that the reason I wanted the house was because of its stained-glass transoms, so I seized on the idea that its walking-distance proximity to the planned Allandale Waterfront commuter station was the reason I should buy it. It would be an investment. And, I could take the train to the university where I work. But it was the transoms that lured my attention away from all the problems with the house that were plainly apparent—like the fact that it had broken windows, a cracked concrete porch, and a woefully outdated electrical panel. Those things should have brought me to my senses. But, instead, I lay awake at night listening to the sharp sounds of mid-town Toronto, and the expansive house an hour's drive north would creep into my thoughts. I couldn't shake my feeling of desire.

Considering all the things that were obviously in need of repair and having no idea how much any of it would cost, I offered forty thousand dollars less than the asking price and the house was mine. It didn't take long to regret it. Slowly but surely, the deep damage of time and neglect began to reveal itself. It was

worse than I had imagined. None of the outlets were grounded; the windows—even the ones that weren't broken—were drafty in winter; the eavestroughs were failing; the subfloor in the downstairs bathroom smelled of mould; the waste stack was cast iron; the sewer was clay; the water line servicing the house from the street was galvanized steel. When I took down the haphazard panels of drywall in the basement, I saw that the block foundation was crumbly on the south-facing side, where the water sits and freezes and expands.

I can never pay for all of these things, so I manage the catastrophes one at a time, and the balance on my line of credit ticks up another two thousand dollars, or another three. I service the debt, and so grow accustomed to living in this precariousness. It is tempting to think about selling it. After the Allandale station is built and the commuter trains are running, I start to get fliers in the mailbox from developers and brokerages.

*We buy houses!*

I can call this number. They'll pay me cash. But every time I contemplate it, I look at the stained-glass transoms, and I withdraw to hope for another year without a disaster. Sometimes I keep these fliers for a while—like parachute cords—but I always throw them away. I line the modest parlour with books on war and ethics. I light the woodstove and I think about the long history of shelter this house has provided for its generations of people. I grew up in a house older than this one. In the attic, along the oak beam that ran the length of the roof peak, people had carved their initials.

*You will outlive me,* say these engravings to the house.

At night, I stare into the glow of the firebox and I feel the temporariness of it—the fragility of my life's configuration—health, hot water, economic and polit-

ical security, juridical peace.



The house offers up its first artifact in July, right after I move in. The toilet leaks in the tiny bathroom under the stairs and destroys the subfloor. The water also wicks up the hundred-year-old plaster, and the walls have to be torn out. In the quiet heat of the early afternoon, while cracking out chalky chunks of horse-hair-reinforced plaster, I find, stuffed in an electrical box wedged inside a hole in the lathe, a half sheet of folded yellow newspaper. The corner is torn and the date is missing, but I know it's from 1945 because the photograph is iconic—The Big Three: Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin—plus Molotov, at Yalta. I smooth it out on the floor with my plaster-dusted hands. It has the smell of the university's library, the smell of disintegrating paper and thirst.



I consider these global architects. They look smug. Remorseless. There is no trace of the sixty million dead that made their world possible.



The projector reel that begins to roll in my mind is the only medium of the war's archive for me. My access to it is limited to this. Piles of skeleton-bodies, the forest of dead at Katyń, the siege of Stalingrad, gas chambers, ovens, the barracks at Auschwitz and Dachau, the firebombing of Dresden and Tokyo. Our perverse inheritance, rippling out into oblivion as it is absorbed and diffused by generations concerned with newer crimes. I think of the fragment of the Gospel of John that sits on display in a climate controlled chamber at the University of Manchester. It is the earliest known piece of that Gospel—the evenly spaced, wide Greek letters set out on a scrap of tea-colored papyrus just large enough to offer this:

*And Pilate said to them, 'take him yourselves, and judge him by your own law.'*



I used to visit that tiny Greek fragment when I was a lecturer there at the Centre for International Politics. It sits inside its airless chamber, an emissary from another world. I don't know how to think about what that fragment offers us—a splintered admonition? a blueprint for a way of life? an instrument of war? I know that

history is not linear, but I don't know how to think about it in a different way. I teach these things to students without understanding them myself. My mind folds up like a paper accordion trying to think about it.

I frame the fragment of the Gospel of Yalta and prop it up on the narrow table in the front hall.

The rhythm of academic life rises and falls in semesters: fall and winter; fall and winter; fall and winter, punctured by the occasional summer course or sabbatical. From the peaks and troughs of this life, I research and teach and try to write for my field's professional journals and presses.

In summer, I wake in the morning to water the lace-cap hydrangeas that I keep wishing I hadn't planted. I planted them because they remind me of my mother, but they're not native here, and they struggle in winter. I wanted them to remind me of the things she loved—the nodding towers of huge-headed blue hydrangeas on the oceanfront in our small town where we used to hold hands and walk at night—the smell of the salt on the east wind. Sometimes I get homesick for her, and sometimes this affects my judgment. So, I keep watering them with my critical eye, wishing they were blue instead of pink and hoping in a funny way that they'll just die so I can move on.

I'm standing among these hydrangeas when the guy from the city's Heritage Committee appears from around the corner. He stops to say that that he's walking around the neighbourhood, encouraging people to put their homes on the municipal heritage registry. "The first block of homes near the new station has already been bought up by a developer," he says. "They're going to be tearing them down to build condos and commercial space," he says. It is part of what the city Planning Department calls the 'intensification of the Essa Road corridor.'

Our red brick century homes fan out in blast-radius fashion from the old Canadian National station lands where Allandale Waterfront stands today—the station that justified the purchase of the house as an investment rather than a moment of madness. The station itself is meticulously reconstructed to its original appearance, an imposing building with long,

lead-lined windows and an Austrian looking watch-tower that makes me think of concentration camps.



The huddle of smaller homes of the yardmen, firemen, and conductors gives way, up the hill and past the churches, to a second line of bigger, brick vernacular Victorians and Gothic revivals, the homes of locomotive engineers and supervisors. Their class divide—evident in their size and ornamentation—nonwithstanding, the mortar lines on the brickwork bear the imprint of the same pointer's tool.

"Put your house on the heritage registry," he says. "Protect it. It means any developer you sell it to has to wait 60 days instead of 30 to demolish it."

I want to laugh.

"I'll look into it," I promise. But I didn't think I would.

As he leaves, he turns and says, "Did you know there was a pilot that lived in your house?"



On teaching days, I slip out the front door and walk the short distance to the train. The new station glows

radiant against the bay in the rising sun. Southward toward Toronto, the forests on the Metrolinx line are stained November ochre. The sun rises in spectacular shades of pink and purple, dappled with streaks of glowing silver clouds. Fallow fields are being leveled for housing developments. From the train window, in the ruins of a clear-cut forest, I see a turtle picking its way across the destruction. Month after month, through the window of the train, I watch the landscape change. I watch fields and forests being cleared and foundations being poured. A little while later, I see the matchstick pressed-wood frames, the Tyvek insulation wrap flapping in the wind. I watch the traffic congestion and the commuter platforms grow and swell. The two tall apartment towers in the distance in Vaughan become three, and then five. I start to look more closely at the houses along the line that look like mine; red brick turn-of-the-century Victorians standing like orphans amid huge industrial zones full of derelict vending machines, dumpsters, and shipping containers. The house I love best stands like a sentinel between two container yards at Highway 7, its tight lawn and neatly stacked firewood like a rebuke from a stubborn past.



The idea of the pilot keeps returning to me. After a while, I go to the place where academics go when they're bothered by ghosts, the archive. I find his father first, John Randolph Patton, and the house, in the municipal tax records of February 1909. I find his obituary. Born in Fergus, Ontario, in 1872, John had loved gardening and poetry and his wide circle of friends. The archivist locates a photograph of him with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers at the Allandale train yards in 1919, the year that Canadian National took over the prosperous line. John stands

third from the left in the back row. He retired in 1937, the year that some say was the last chance to avoid the war in Europe, without ever having had an accident on the job. I extrapolate from this that he was a meticulous person. But maybe he was just lucky. I frame the photo of the Brotherhood standing together in front of the old Allandale station and I put it with the Gospel of Yalta.

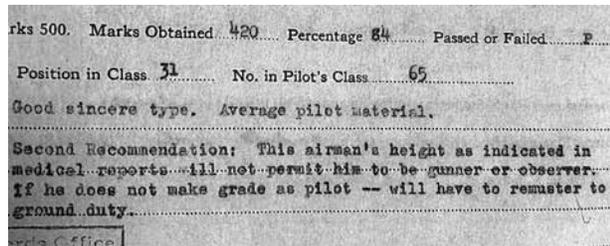


What is at stake in how we tell a story? Everything. Everything is at stake.



Archives lead to more archives when the generations being logged are the sons of Empire. So, of course, I find the pilot—Jack Patton: J-15106—in the digitized archives of the Royal Canadian Air Force and, later, in the UK National Archives. At the recruitment intake in Toronto, in August 1940, he was described as a ‘Good, sincere type. Average pilot material.’ In November, the remark: ‘Tries hard, no outstanding strengths or weaknesses’. At Uplands, in Ottawa, a glimpse of his

embodiment in the notation: ‘This airman’s height as indicated in medical reports will not permit him to be gunner or observer. If he does not make grade as pilot -- will have to remuster to ground duty.’



When he volunteered himself to the RCAF in 1940, he was a grocer’s clerk on Essa Road, the same road at the center of the city’s intensification project. Every day, from our house, he would have walked to that job. Every day, from our porch, he would have looked down the street toward the CN yards where his father had spent his career, first as a fireman and then as an engineer. There’s no point in speculating about why he volunteered to fly fighter planes. Maybe that was its own explanation: flying fighter planes. The archive offers up an aerial photograph of a crowd at the Cenotaph in 1939. A bi-wing WWI plane is parked there. I will learn only later that the RCAF sold itself to worried parents as a much safer service option than infantry. But it turned out that the average life expectancy for a fighter pilot was 30 days, the same measure of time the developer has to wait before tearing down that pilot’s home.

I call my insurance provider to ask about putting Patton’s house on the municipal heritage registry. They respond that our relationship will be severed. They don’t offer a ‘heritage product.’ I argue for a few fruitless moments and then give up. So, I apply to put it on the ‘non-designated’ list, which does not provide the extra thirty days’ protection from the developer.

Thirty days is semantics, anyway. I go to the Heritage Committee meeting with a PowerPoint presentation—photos of the baseboards, the rosette window, the old-growth pine pocket doors, and, of course, the transoms.

My application is approved, and the city dispatches a photographer from *Barrie Today* to take a picture of the house. When he comes to the door with his big camera, I start telling him about the pilot. He stays to write a story on the house.



The story is broadcast, and it seems the house uses it to begin gathering its things back to itself. It’s like something has broken down between our worlds, like a crack in a pane of frosted glass. Things come rushing in, beginning over the course of a three-day rainstorm.

I open the door to a woman standing on the porch, the rain teeming down off the balcony behind her. She looks nervous.

“I saw your story,” she says. “I lived here. I lived in this house.”

She peers beyond my shoulder into the house and then looks back at me. She seems like she is not sure why she has come.

“Would you like to come in?”

She seems anxious, but she agrees. We move slowly through the rooms, and I fill the nervous silence with talking, about the little flooded bathroom under the stairs, the wood stove, the drafty windows. We walk up the creaky stairwell to the landing on the second floor and she lingers there for a moment, looking at the balcony door. Suddenly, she turns to me.

“Do you find the house to be haunted?”

My heart pops up in my chest. “What do you mean?”

“Up here. On the landing. I had a daybed. Whenever

I would sleep out here, I would sort of see her, or feel her. A woman..." She trails off, shaking her head.

"That's why I left. My daughters couldn't stand it." She doesn't stay long, but she leaves that behind.



The very next day, an artifact arrives. It comes wrapped in newspaper in the arms of a man who says he is the grandson of Jack Patton's cousin, Dorothy. Her younger sister, Kae, had—like Jack—been born in 1916. I will see a grainy snapshot of Jack and Kae together on a beach in North Bay cottage country only later, their arms slung around each other's shoulders at the water's edge.

Now, on the threshold of Patton House, Kae's grandnephew stands holding an official framed RCAF portrait of the twenty-four-year-old Jack. His silk wings are affixed to his lapel, his cap peak pitched at a formal angle that makes a pale-haired child look more like a man.

"My mother read your story," he said. "She thought you might want this. It's been in her basement for seventy years."



He reaches into a cloth bag and pulls out a folded newspaper. It is the same ancient color as the Gospels of Yalta and John.



Looking at these artifacts, I wonder about how the edges of time must come up against themselves, and about how they must sometimes fold over, creating creases that were not there before, thresholds that allow connections to be made between otherwise incongruous times and spaces. I start to dream that I am living in such a crease, and that the house is a boundary between these edges of time. But I cannot see across it. I can't see that other world.

I think the Pattons must be on their side of the crease, reaching for us, too, and that this might be what the woman who said the house was haunted had heard.

I hang the portrait of Jack with the Gospel of Yalta and the photograph of the Loyal Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers. Looking at the photographs together, I start to think about the role of the house, of the position it holds in space and time, it is here and now, but also somehow not; it is also somehow with another time, with other people; it is *otherwise* across dimensions. I start to think of the house as an archive.



“Someone brought these while you were away!”

The girl next door who feeds my cats when I’m away comes flying across the front gardens clutching a stuffed manila package to her chest.

“They came from British Columbia!” she says breathlessly as she speeds up the cedar steps. She stops short and offers me the package solemnly, with both hands. “British Columbia,” she repeats.

I don’t know anyone in British Columbia. I went there once, when my grandmother died. She died unexpectedly, on her way to the opera. By the time I arrived, she was curled up like a tiny desiccated mummy in a hospital bed.

I reach out and take the envelope. “I don’t know anyone in British Columbia...” I murmur. But she is already gone, whirled on her feet and down the steps and back across the garden.

Inside the manila envelope is a portrait of Jack more informal than the one his cousin had brought.



And there is a smaller portrait, a family portrait, the first photo I ever see of his mother, Jessie, and sister, Mary. Jack is in his mother’s arms, an infant in a white lace gown. Maybe it’s his baptism photo. Despite the formality of the portrait, Jessie looks to me like she wants to smile. John stands beside them with Jack’s five-year-old sister, Mary, on his other side. She wears a gold bracelet on her wrist and a chain with a locket around her neck; signs of working class wealth—like the stained glass in the transoms and over the picture window.



The third photo is a portrait of the house itself with what looks like a wedding party on the porch. It is undated, but the gardens at the base of the porch look like new plantings, suggesting it is from around the time the house was built, maybe even its very first summer, in 1908, which was also the summer that John and Jessie married at the Burton Avenue United Church.



I frame these things. The hallway fills with the portraits and artifacts of a family that is not mine.

In the amber light of the hanging lantern, I stand and stare at them, straining to find them in my own inheritance, in the peace that I only know how to teach as an absence of war, in the children I am raising toward an equivalent destruction, in the edgelessness of the grief that underpins the post-Yalta world. We set people in the firmament as examples of something else. We reduce them to the instruments of freedom and necessity. We repeat their crimes and the crimes committed against them, unaware of the simulation. The Yaltas do not end. And the ritual resurrection of the dead that takes place at the Cenotaph stitches them all into the service of war's necessity. Just before Remembrance Day the following year, the guy from the Heritage Committee stops to ask if I can share the RCAF portrait with the city so that they can place it, along with the portraits of dozens of other people who didn't come home, on a banner on the lakeshore. He will become an adornment on a windswept corner,

an ornament of the state. But he is not merely these things. His mother makes that clear as she holds him in her arms with her quiet, content smile. He is not a hero or a sacrifice.

He is her afterlife, extinguished.

I try to imagine how it could have been worth it for her.

## II.

"My father named one of his horses Biggin Hill, after their RAF station." The wing commander's daughter serves tea from a china pot in her living room in Waterloo. I have driven across the Creemore highlands to see her. She has seen the photographer's article in *Barrie Today*, and she writes to say she has a silk handkerchief and a locket that Jack sent to Mary for Christmas in 1940. 'With Love & Best Wishes.'



He was still in Canada then, at the Elementary Flying Training School #13 in St. Eugene, Québec. She lets me photograph the locket and the velvet box with his handwriting inside. She lets me touch his silk RCAF wings.



She shows me a portrait of her father. I recognize him from the squadron photos, from before he was its commander, and I can see him in the features of her own elegant face. She shows me a photograph: Men running across a snow-dusted field, their breath coming in fine clouds.

“This moment,” she says, “is an exclamation point in what is otherwise an orthography of waiting. It is punctured by reading. Playing chess. Writing letters. Getting drunk. My father never talked about the war,” she says. “But he screamed at night in his sleep.”

She takes out a locket from a thin cardboard box and carefully opens it. There is nothing inside.



“Jack sent this to his sister,” she says. “And she didn’t ever put a photo of him in it. Why?”

It’s a helpless question. But there is something about the image, a pink Spitfire that seems to be plummeting into the sea, that makes me wonder whether the locket might have taken on an unbearable quality for her after his death.



In a certain way, memory is erased when stories are told. How can the wobbly fragments of broken memory, how can disconnected artifacts and grainy photos, compete with the seduction of a plot-driven narrative? And that war story, told often enough, becomes cliché. In a war with sixty million dead, cliché is maybe all that is possible. But here, in the pilot’s house, through the medium of its archive, I can hear other things, the flow of rain from the roof, the creak of the floorboards, the quiet of the house without him. At the bottom of the stairs is a massive oak finial crowning the top of the ornate post. The wood has the silken sheen of a hundred years’ worth of passing hands rounding the corner, Jack’s hands and Mary’s, Jessie’s and John’s.

I rearrange the photographs. I strain myself toward them. I feel the fullness of their lives, their desire to be something more than what I am able to say of them.

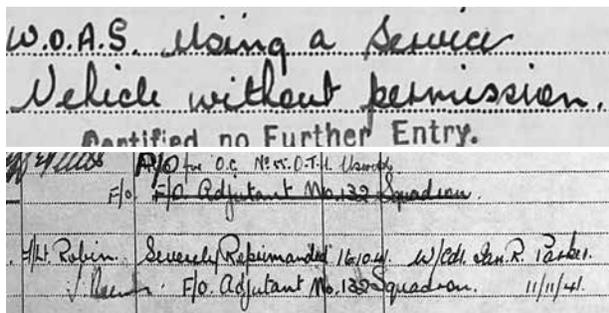


On Remembrance Day, the city sets Jack Patton’s portrait on a nine-meter banner near the foot of the lakeshore in old Allandale. When I see him for the first time, the wind is whipping up a stinging rain and I feel a shrinking in my heart. It bothers me that he’s out there in the cold like that, people driving past, not knowing who he is. I don’t want him to be an example of his fate, but I also don’t know how to make the long

filaments of his silence mean something more.

How does the past live in us, even without our knowing it? This thing the old men at the Cenotaph call a sacrifice, what is it, really? They gave up more than just their lives. They think that sacrifice lies in the past, and that we should remember it so that their deaths will have been justified. As Empire builders know well, the martyr's death is a powerful weapon. But that loss goes on and on, made partly in the silence of the generations that will never be born; generations that will never exist. We have never seen them, even though they live with us. They are our ghosts.

In my file folders and drawers, and hanging on the walls of Patton House are only snippets of paper, photos and annals that resist anything but the most fragmented of interpretations: 'severely reprimanded' at RAF Peterhead in October 1941 for 'using a service vehicle without permission'.

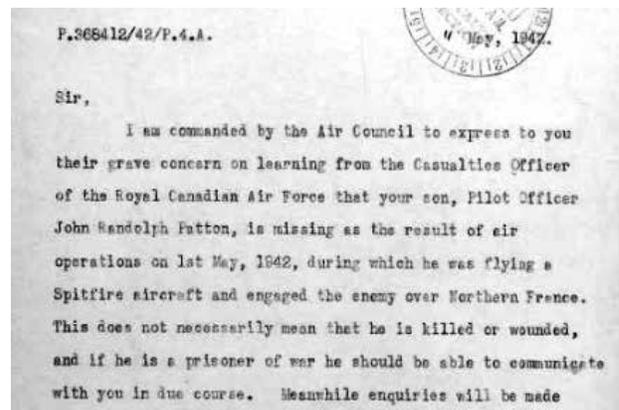


A letter to his parents, dated April 1, 1942, is addressed to our house on William Street. Part of it was published in the *Barrie Examiner*. He wrote that

he's 'tired,' but that it 'won't do to just lay about. One must stay active.'

I try to think about why.

I think about the telegram carrier coming up the walk—coming up my walk—with his terrible errand, an errand that announced the destruction of the future to the woman who opened the door on that May morning in 1942. Her garden would just have been coming up, the irises and early tulips. I know more about what happened to him on that day than she did. His own mother, opening the door—*that door*—the door that I unlock and open every morning, that I close and lock every night. In a single exhale, in a telegram, it all falls down.



It stretches my mind beyond its boundaries to reflect on this telegram. There is something unapproachable in it. The past for me is as opaque as the future. I can't grasp it. The doorbell rings. The world ends.



Jack Patton died in a Supermarine Mark V Spitfire, registration number AD-134, just before 4:00 pm on May 1, 1942. He was twenty-five years old. The wing

commander whose daughter served me tea reported seeing his aircraft strike the Channel. He did not bail. Perhaps he was killed before his plane hit the water. Or perhaps he could not bail because of his height.

I know this: the weather had been bad. On three separate occasions on May 1, they had been sent up and then brought back because of weather. He had been up all of the early morning and afternoon. The weather cleared and then closed in; cleared and then closed in. He must have been very tired when they finally took off from Gravesend at 3:00pm. He must have been.

*Very, very tired.*

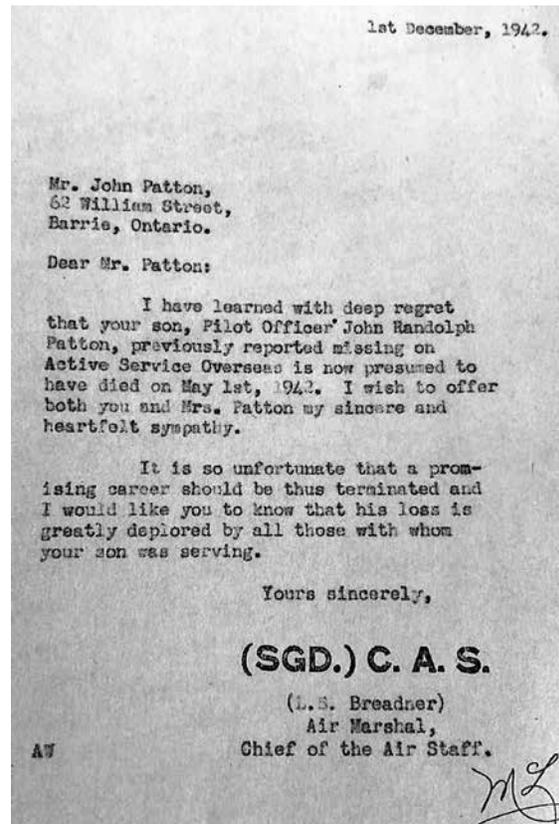
The knowable death defines everything. But what does this clinical achievement, this ability to know his fate precisely, amplify? He becomes a representation of himself through these facts. And the silences and quiet spaces where he was and where he might have been are erased. The hope of encountering him as something else is erased. I'm trying to build a different archive in the front hallway of John and Jessie Patton's house, but I don't know how to do it. My neighbours call it a shrine. That's how I know I am failing.



The train moves through Allandale. Allandale looks beautiful in the dusk, warm lights behind stained glass, recent renovations, paint jobs, new porches, mowed lawns. It's on the brink of its mandated gentrification, again because of the rail line, this time not for the movement of freight in an industrial society, but for the movement of people going to Toronto to sell their labor in the global flows of postwar capitalism. The gentrification is coming, but it's not here yet. House after red brick house slides past the window. I think about the village it might have been, with its homes huddled together for warmth in winter, a modest beacon set beside the deep fold of Kempenfelt Bay. I think about

how he would have watched this little railway village slide by and out of his vision for the last time. I wonder if he had a crashing moment of clarity, the sudden certitude that you would never come back, even though you can't quite contemplate it; even though you can't quite believe it possible. Even as it's sliding by, it stands solid there, feeling eternal, feeling like it will always be the same. Warm lamplight glows behind stained glass. Fleurs-de-lis, geometries, gothic rosettes.

No bombs can fall on it. No mortar rounds can destroy it. It is already gone.



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