

As with so many things, it begins and ends in fire.

A pair of settlers travel empty roads and open land, archetypal characters from a distant echo of history that is blurred beyond recall, a dream that fades upon waking.

The wind is constant, its sound seemingly eternal, pushing past and through them - relentless.

Their tasks are simple, and seem somehow tied to survival, to progress, but they are abstracted and strange, a performance of utility, a pantomime.

Clad in wool, with hat and thick boots, he walks through snow blued by the sky on a pair of wood-hewn stilts, to where we don't know, at a task that seems absurd but also of existential, desperate importance.

In a room full of branches, bottles and aged, collected ephemera, she melts paraffin and creates a tincture from crushed seeds, like an apothecary. Food, or medicine, perhaps. Something that nourishes survival.

Boards creak under her bird's weight as she rocks, knitting a blue blanket.

*...here is a little flower seed of pretty flowers, ... it is not so much the peculiarity of (them) but it grows so many little flowers and each (one) blooms but for a day... (1)*

*Today, people ate here in my house celebrating my good health and happiness. (2)*

A house. To them both, it holds an essential purpose, a coming together, a greater thing. Simple and solid, at times at a scale like a doll's house, she peers in. Elsewhere the house expands, a tenuous framework built on the prairie.

It can't be seen, not entirely. In trying to reclaim the past, an ancestral tether, it becomes clear that this is unreachable, never to be. A hallway with stained wallpaper and sconces reveals portraits in frames, but the angle is wrong. There is no way to view them, no way to enter, to confront or know these figures. They are lost to us, hidden within a house on an ever distant horizon. Like describing a story to a stranger, it loses sharp edges and detail. Things are far from us - it would be a long walk.

The wind is blowing again. Stronger, it bends and shakes the endless prairie grass. He builds, his pack animal balking and braying in protest. He'll be lucky to finish with sufficient light. The wooden frame of a house emerges in a slow, vertical slant from the grass. He stops to smoke as the red sun sinks. He seems to struggle, to find footing, pausing a task that may be doomed from the start. A moment's repose; peace, or simply acceptance.

Fire. The prairie is burning now. He watches, studying, renewal and ruin happening simultaneously. When the wind dies, he sees that the framework remains. He begins to hoe the

ground and stirs up ash into the air. Later, she arrives. In the midst of the burnt plain, she finds previously hidden, dormant seeds. She rifles through the brittle, burnt plants and blackened stumps to collect what might be of value.

Or is it the other way? He has also tried to destroy it, and with it vestiges of shame, of doubt. But the house is resilient. It keeps returning, despite the wind and fire. In a blackened shroud, the house, the past, ourselves, unknowable and yet unshakeable at the same time. We are surrounded by wounded wood. It stands with us, we look within and without at the same glance, an eternal we.

The frame of the house remains unfinished, burnt but still standing. It silhouettes itself against the now new sky.

*...if we shall see each other no more on this side of the grave then may it be on the other...* (3)

It is like this. Fire, and what remains after fire.

-Rafael Francisco Salas  
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1. *Gerard and Catherine Brandt Letters, 1850-1860,*  
*The University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries*
2. *John Archiquette diary, 1868-1874, The University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries*
3. *Gerard and Catherine Brandt Letters, 1850-1860,*  
*The University of Wisconsin Madison Libraries*