

A CHANGING LANDSCAPE

An essay by Patrick Flanery

The image of a person unwilling to abandon a home in which lingers the memory of family now lost has been with me since I was a child. In the early 1960s, following the death of her husband, my paternal grandmother went bankrupt and lost her house. Understandably, she did not want to leave; after moving she returned in secret and had to be forced out a second time. During America's recent foreclosure crisis, with families across the country losing houses that were not just homes but repositories of memory, the specter of my late grandmother returned in force. Like her, many resisted or refused to give up. That such trauma has transpired against the backdrop of what seems like an ever-widening ideological divide in the country makes the tragedy of the situation even more acute.

I grew up in Omaha, Nebraska, in a neighborhood built in the 1930s, one that was once suburban but is now more than a hundred blocks from the city's newest suburbs, many of them carved out of cornfields or razed woodland. Returning to Omaha in 2010, after a thirteen-year absence, I was struck by the extent and character of the sprawl, the weird juxtaposition of agricultural land and McMansions standing uncomfortably alongside one another, small towns once remote from my childhood's

known world now no more than other neighborhoods in the city's expanding metropolitan area.

At the far western edge of this sprawl, I stumbled across a nineteenth-century farmhouse and barn still standing, flanked by vast homes of stucco and vinyl siding with artificial stone or prefabricated brick façades. The only trees were newly planted, replacing whatever shelterbelt there might have been, or simply occupying the space of land that once produced corn and now demands a different concentration of irrigation to nourish lawn and flowerbed in a part of the country routinely beset by drought.

As *Fallen Land* developed over the course of 2011 and 2012, I began to recognize that this novel about people clinging to houses that were no longer theirs was engaged in a much broader conversation about the state of America today, concerned with its deepening divisions, the pace of technological and environmental change, the staggering inequalities of income and education, and the way that racism and other hatreds continue to infect so much of the national dialogue, fueling our epidemic of senseless violence—not only against the land or the trees or our sense of our own history, but against ourselves.

FALLEN LAND

August 2013