ANYONE WHO HAS EVER SPENT THAT WEEK ALONE KNOWS THE AIR OF UNREALITY THAT SETTLES ON A TOWN ON THE 24TH OF DECEMBER AFTER THE SHOPS HAVE SHUT AND THE BUSES STOPPED RUNNING THE EMPTY STREETS UNDER THE LURID STAGE LIGHTING OF A LONG WINTER EVENING LOOK LIKE A THEATRE STAGE ABANDONED BY ITS ACTORS.

IT WAS ON SUCH AN EVENING WHILE SETTLING IN FOR A LONG WAIT DUE TO A SLIPPAGE ALONG THE TRAIN TRACK THAT I FELL INTO CONVERSATION WITH AN OLD SURVEYOR IN AN INN ON THE SOUTHMINSTER ROAD.

WE WERE IN THE BAR, WATCHING THE FIRST SNOW IN ALMOST A DECADE FALL ON TO THE DARKENING ROAD OUTSIDE.
CAME YEARS PREVIOUSLY SHE TOLD ME SHE HAD BEEN
SECONDED AT VERY SHORT NOTICE TO A MATERIAL
RECOVERY POSTING IN THE EXTREME PART
OF THE EASTERN REACHES NOW LARGELY DEPOPULATED
AFTER THE INUNDATIONS OF THE PREVIOUS DECADE.

THE PREVIOUS SURVEYOR OVER TWO DECADES IN THE
POST HAD BEEN TAKEN SUDDENLY AND WITHOUT
WARNING IN ONE OF THOSE CATACLYSMS WITH WHICH
THOSE YEARS WERE LITTERED
AND THE AFFAIRS OF THE
PROJECT—ALREADY SOME YEARS
OVERDUE—STOOD IN NEED OF
COMPLETE REORGANISATION.

IT IS NO SMALL THING THEN AS NOW TO REACH THE AREA SHE TOLD ME
RECALLING TRAVELLING FOR HOURS THROUGH AN ABANDONED AND CHEERLESS LAND
REVERTING WITH EVIDENT BAD GRACE TO MARSH AND WILDERNESS.

THE PREVIOUS SURVEYOR HAD NOT IT SEEMED BEEN ONE OF THOSE WHO
CONTEMPLATES OFTEN OR WITH CIRCUMSPECTION
THE POSSIBILITY OF HIS OWN REMOVAL FROM THE
PROJECTS IN WHICH HE WAS ENGAGED AND THE
RECORDS OF THE ENTERPRISE WERE
THOUGHT TO BE AT BEST PARTIAL.

THIS LAST ASSESSMENT SHE TOLD ME TOOK OUT TO BE
QUITE WRONG.

THE RECORDS WERE
COMPENDIOUS.

BUT ALMOST ENTIRELY
USELESS.

THE PROCESS OF SUCH
RECOVERY PROGRAMS
WERE
IN THEORY
SIMPLE

OF COURSE WHERE THE ENTHUSIASM
OF A PREVIOUS GENERATION FOR A GIVEN
PRINTED OR NON-WOVEN
FAUX-WOOD POLYMER
FLORAL TILE HOUSE WRAP
MIGHT EXCEED BY A
FACTOR OF A THOUSAND
A SUBSEQUENT GENERATION’S MOTIVATION OR
CAPACITY TO REUSE IT
A SIGNIFICANT
SURPLUS WAS
INEVITABLE.

HERE—OUT ON THE
ABSOLUTE MARGIN

THE PILES GREW
VAST

ALTHOUGH THE ORGANISATION WAS SCRUPULOUS
THE LABELLING WAS
FANTASTICALLY AND
BIZARRELY EXACT

AND

ATA CERTAIN POINT
THE OLD MAN HAD BEEN SEIZED BY A
KIND OF MANIA THAT COULD ONLY BE
DESCRIBED AS
AESTHETIC
WE'VE LOST THE CAKE - AND THE MUSA. NOT THAT THEY HAD FOUND THE FIRST OF THE STRUCTURES. EACH WAS CAREFULLY SITED — A COUPLE WERE CONSPICUOUSLY DISPLAYED, PERCHED ON TOP OF A STACK OR AT THE TERMINATION OF A MAJOR AXIS — BUT MOST WERE NESTLED IN SPACES WHICH COULD ONLY BE REACHED BY SOME TWISTING AND DELICATE MOVEMENT BETWEEN PILES. FOUND: BURIED CHAMBER UNDER CABIN 6 INSCRIBED: "Another summer at unreasonably as the last."

FOUND: SECTOR 10 INSCRIBED: "The first time I was truly happy here."

FOUND: S1D17 INSCRIBED: "Departure of my limb assistant."

FOUND: TOP OF LEDGER + BATTENED DOOR STACK INSCRIBED: "The time for three years docks + childless."

S3D29 INSCRIBED: "Everything before was a venturing out — everything to come a journey back."

IT WAS ALL GONE. SIX WEEKS LATER — TO BE THE DISCOVERER AND ONLY WITNESS TO THOSE CRAZED AND EVANESCENT WORKS WEIGHED ON HER EVEN NOW — SHE TOLD ME IN AN AGE WHEN SO MUCH ELSE WAS LOST,

SO MANY MISTAKES BECAME RETRIEVABLE. THEY TOOK EVERYTHING AWAY.

300 LOADS

A TOWN BECAME A KIT OF PARTS, THEN FOR A WHILE A MEMORIAL TO SOMETHING SOME DEAD POET'S CRYPTIC SEMAPHORE THEN GONE CYCLING ONWARD A MILLION PIECES EDDYING ACROSS HISTORY'S SURFACE.

WAS IT WORSE — SHE ASKED ME — PRESSING HER DRAWINGS OF THE STRUCTURES IN MY HAND TO IMAGINE THE MATERIALS AS THE REVERBERATION OF EVERY INCACIOUS DECISION EVERY IMPULSE PURCHASE AN INDENBLE MARK OR WAS IT THE VANISHING THE DISSOLUTION THE FORGETFULNESS DRIFTING OVER LIKE A FOG BANK — THAT WAS THE REAL PUZZLE.