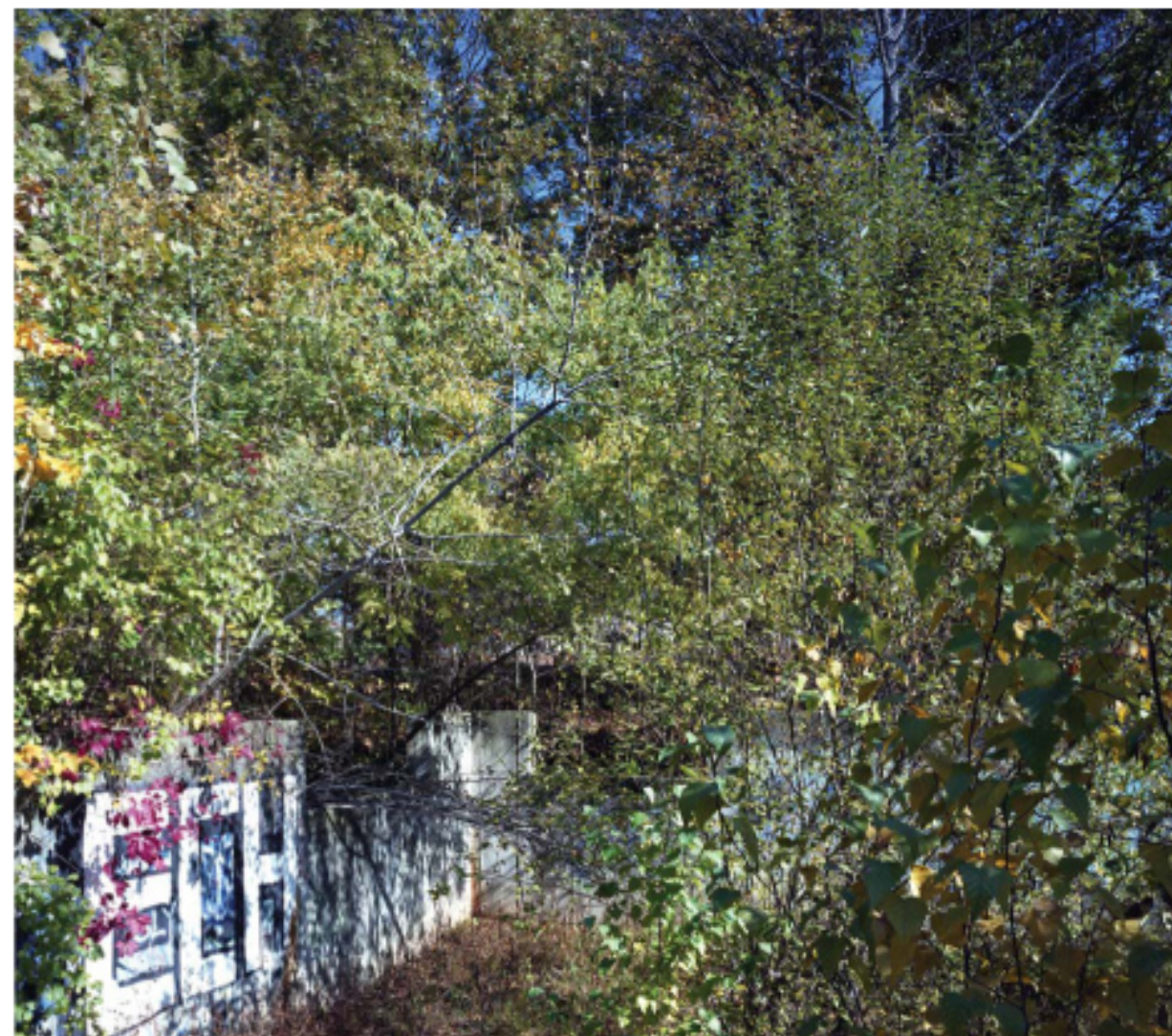




FIFTY YEARS LATER, the ground two steps from Mr. Hunter's gravestone looked the same as everywhere else: compacted and dry. There was no sign of him there. Beyond the fence, the soft ground collapsed into a low wasteland, dense with tall weeds. Above their heads, saplings stretched black fingers at the winter sky. Lurid colors flashed in the winter pallor, graffiti so unexpected in this little wilderness that at first my eyes failed to register the concrete walls that supported it. I left the graveyard and wriggled through a rusty tear in the vacant lot's fence, entering a strange country that has drawn me back again and again.

At first, all I could see were the weeds, swaying under dried seed heads, withered mesmerists. The snow began again. My eyes adjusted to the flat light, and I saw walls, dozens of them, waist-high and gray. Rebar juts up from the tops of some, while others are jagged with what looks like Styrofoam. They meet to form twelve boxes, gaping at the air like open coffins, extending deep into the ground. I have come to call these boxes the houses, though they are only basements, poured a decade ago and abandoned after the developers lost their permit. The ground here is loose with water. The sandy soil cannot hold it, and so most of the houses



have flooded. Muskrats build nests in a few of them; in the spring, bullfrog tadpoles roam through others, nibbling the algae that grow on the submerged frames of child-size bicycles. The bicycles' owners likely live in the army of houses surrounding this lot. Those finished houses stand so near these drowned ones, but in all my visits here, no one has ever called out from a window or stepped off a postage-stamp lawn to question my trespassing. I feel invisible here, as ghostly as the unbuilt houses themselves.

Walking here feels like being alone in a museum, free to look without being watched. Like the best art, the houses have a self-contained completeness. The longer I spend with them, the more there is to see. In the winter, flaxen pampas grass leans in blue-white ice with the botanical formalism of papyrus stalks at the edges of Egyptian paintings. Spring approaches. Pussy willows brush concrete walls, gray against streaked gray. Narrow leaves unfurl later, brilliant green tongues lapping the air. Clear water over rippled sand reflects the graffiti on the walls and the branches overhead with the everyday surreality of Escher's puddles and ponds, where multiple universes meet in a single plane. Cottonwood seeds fog the air in summer. The messy verticals of cattails and young trees play counterpoint to the crisp horizontal lines of walls and water, like the rough brushstrokes that give breath to Rothko's color fields.

Not all of the houses are so elegantly empty. Some bristle with trash, as idiosyncratic and alive as Joseph Cornell's box sculptures. ICE TRAPS FLOATING SHOES AND A HALF-SUNK VACUUM CLEANER AND A BRASS BOOKSHELF THAT LOOKS LIKE A CAGE. A TODDLER-SIZE LIFE VEST RESTS AGAINST A PAINT BUCKET BESIDE A TIKI STATUE LYING FACE-DOWN ON PLYWOOD STUDDED WITH RUSTY NAILS. PLASTIC UTENSILS AWAIT HUNDREDS OF PICNICKERS BESIDE A SPLINTERED WICKER CHEST OF DRAWERS, A CHILD'S BIKE HELMET, AND AN UPTURNED WOODEN STAIRCASE. A SPEED LIMIT SIGN LIES IN DEEP WATER, HALF-COVERED IN SILT. MADE TO CATCH EVEN DISTANT HEADLIGHTS, IT GLITTERS LIKE A FISH. FRONT DOORS AND SCREEN DOORS AND HALF-SUBMERGED ATTIC DOORS WARP. ATHLETIC SHOES FLOAT. VENETIAN BLINDS, CHILDREN'S COAT HANGERS, AND FOR SALE SIGNS SHARE SPACE WITH SPRAY PAINT CANS AND AN ORANGE TRAFFIC BOLLARD. A muskrat dives under a bloated teddy bear and does not emerge.

On my first visits here, I cataloged the garbage, arranging it into poems of every day, but the more I come, the more grim this trash seems. These collections are not Rauschenberg studies, curated collages to be murmured over in spacious galleries, but a record of conspicuous consumption. Time and water has given the empty houses an alien allure, but the junk holds them fast to the wasteful human world.

