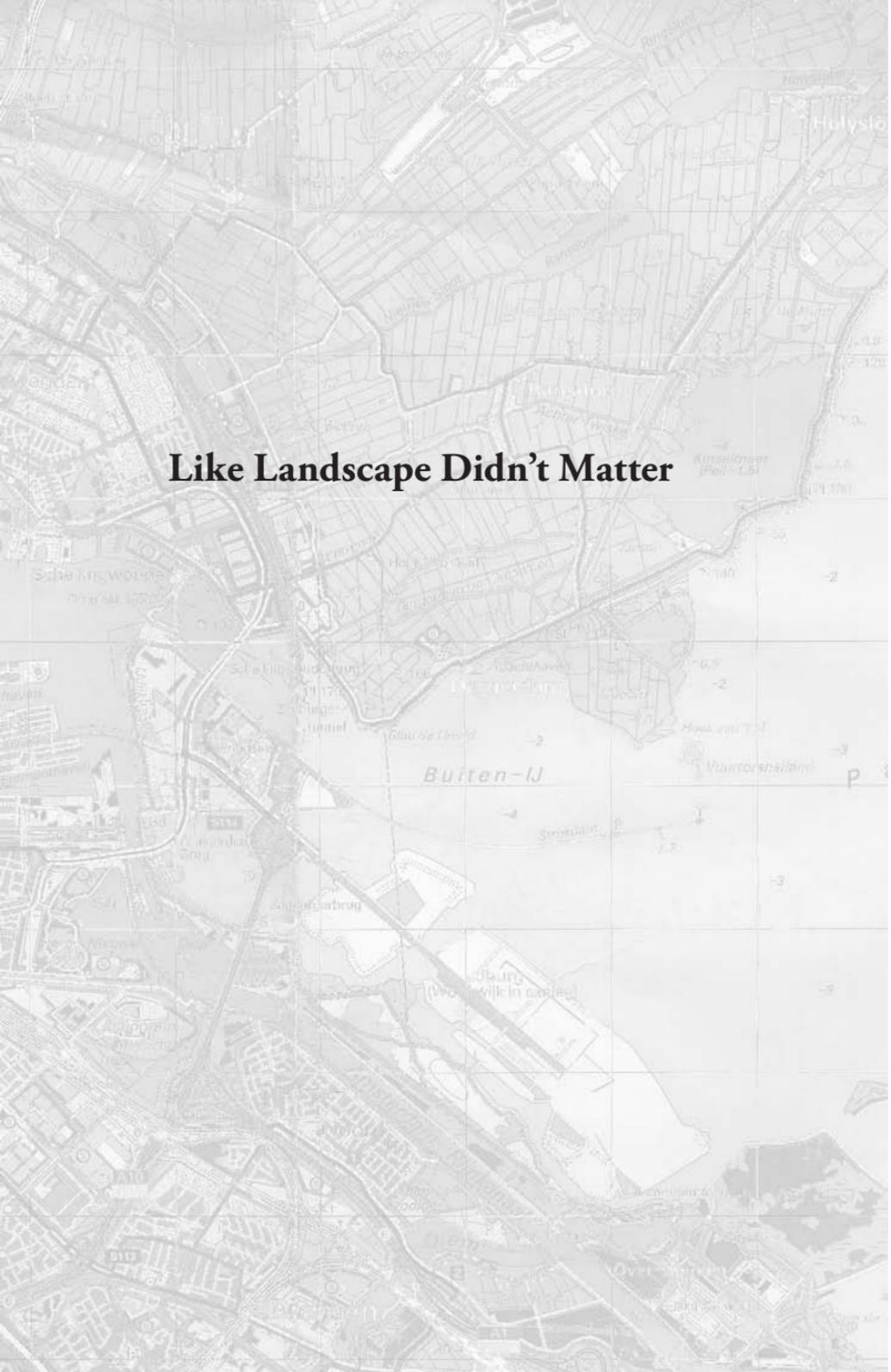


'Anik See's *Saudade* is often disturbingly brilliant. It reassures me that much of our experience of the world is still undescribed. *Saudade* is fresh and utterly original.'

— Jim Harrison

# saudade

THE POSSIBILITIES OF PLACE



# Like Landscape Didn't Matter

Buiten-IJ

*'It is a terrible thing to be free. Nations know this; churches know this. People, however, seek to skirt the knowledge. They elevate freedom to a Holy Grail, disregarding the truth that constraints are what define us, in life and in language alike: we yearn to be sentenced.'*

– Claire Messud, *The Last Life*

THERE'S A STRONG WIND BLOWING in Amsterdam this morning, strong enough that the streets are empty of even the most committed cyclists, which is saying a lot. There hasn't been a frost yet this winter, and it might be easy to extrapolate that this wind is part of the global warming trend, but the fact is Dutch winters are unruly at best, so it's hard to say.

I'm biking over a bridge that parallels the ring road, the A2 highway, which is gridlocked. I once heard ring roads described as modern versions of Dante's nine circles of Hell, each designed to torture the greedy consumers in its own way, a description that's hard not to smile at. Even though it's difficult to say what's the result of global warming and what isn't, it always amazes me that a wind like this isn't enough to get us to think twice about how we live our lives – but then, if history is an indicator, money and self-interest always win. I look at that jammed highway and a scene in *The Magnificent Ambersons* comes to mind, the one where Joseph Cotton says, 'Automobiles have come, and almost all outward things are going to be different because of what they bring. They're going to alter war, and they're going to alter peace. And I think men's minds are going to be changed in subtle ways because of automobiles,' and how nuts everyone he was sitting with thought he was.

## *Saudade*

I'm heading to my least favourite part of Amsterdam, a place called IJburg. It's a new suburb built on water – landfill that creeps into a large inland lake called the IJsselmeer. The IJsselmeer itself was once part of the North Sea before the Dutch blocked it off with a thirty-kilometre-long dike after an enormous flood in 1916. It's a strange place, this IJburg, and while I hate it, I also find it fascinating. But then, I've been reading a lot of Jim Harrison lately to allay the kind of homesickness that tends to set in after a year or so in a densely populated place – a homesickness not for a specific place, but merely for a wide open space (which, ironically, is what IJburg once was). I usually go for rides down the Amstel River where, ten minutes from Amsterdam's core, a countryside that seems unchanged since Rembrandt's time reveals itself. Going to IJburg is sure to make my homesickness worse, but things like that tend to help me find my character again, make me realize what I love and can connect to, and there's a comfort in that sort of mild masochism.

IJburg is a suburb being built on seven manmade islands to house, eventually, 45 000 people. Its completion date is 2012, and I count thirty-three cranes across the skyline of the three islands that have been built so far. It's accessible only by bridge, and somehow that seems appropriate: a neighbourhood so progressive and modern, without a shred of history, must remain separate from the completely opposite stereotype of the city that spawned it.

If you look across the water from that main bridge, you see a row of old, tilted houses that were built on a fifteenth-century dike. A stumpy clock tower struggles to be the

*Like Landscape Didn't Matter*

tallest building, its polished weathervane glinting, an indication of care. Countless masts of ancient sloops rise against the shore, boats like this one that used to carry cargo to places isolated by water – before roads, trains, highways, trucks, cars, before gridlock. When you look at that town, Durgerdam, from a distance, you're not sure whether you're looking at something that exists now or a ghost of 200 years ago. If you pan to the right, though, a tall sleek white windmill – the kind used on wind farms today – spinning furiously in this morning's wind, brings you back to the present day, and the noise from the ring road fills your ears again. But at first glance, nothing could be more opposite from IJburg than Durgerdam. Across the bay, sleepy smoke rises from chimneys; the sun, you imagine, passes through infinite dust particles before hitting the old wooden floorboards of kitchens and of the local coffeeshop, where the aroma of bread rises and steam curls upward from cups held by hands made cold by the damp.

Over in IJburg, no one is around. The place is still under construction, but people started moving in nearly five years ago, their presence indicated only by bicycles locked outside entranceways or the occasional abandoned toy truck in front of a ground-floor window. Slabs of concrete stand bare, abstract, surrounded by makeshift fences made from spare rebar or scaffolding. All-glass offices stand empty, a single piece of drywall unpainted among pillars and an unfinished concrete floor, a screwdriver forgotten by the door. There are plenty of cars, parked and driving around, but no humans; apparently 5,000 people live here now. You wouldn't know

## *Saudade*

it. I moved here from a Canadian town, population 800, spread out over a few kilometres. It was easier to see humans there – people who were self-described hermits. The only sign of life here, on a Monday morning at 11, is a small group of kids playing in the concrete yard of a school that sits in the middle of a construction zone. The school is perfect, finished within its fences and walls, with chaos – a mud pit, piles of landfill – surrounding it, as though the school were an oasis of perfection, or at least completion. An alarm sounds somewhere in a faraway underground parking lot, echoing, it seems, through the whole suburb. No one tending to it.

The whole place feels like a shiny new ghetto. Oddly enough, though, there is one of those ancient sloops – the kind that populate historic villages like Durgerdam – docked in front of a newly inhabited condo building, and it doesn't look strange with all IJburg's cranes rising high behind it. Maybe because it's the one thing that provides a sort of humanness that I desperately want to see.

While I'm staring at the sloop – a *tjalk*, in Dutch – two construction workers, harnessed, because of the wind, to the scaffolding five storeys above me, wave and yell at me to fix my hair. Ha ha. Soon after, a pounding starts, the kind a migraine would feel like – but this one is exterior, and felt through the feet. An enormous piledriver jams away close by, the sound so loud it forces me to blink with the force of each pounding.

The manmade beach at IJburg is called Blijburg. *Blij* in Dutch means happy, and, standing on the beach, I'm not certain whether it was named with tongue in cheek, or in

*Like Landscape Didn't Matter*



a state of hopefulness or optimism. I have to walk through a construction zone to get there, and the beach itself is small and dirty, its outer perimeter, where one would want to wander out to its natural end, blocked off by an eight-foot-high chain-link fence that extends into the water.

## *Saudade*

There's a sign in the middle of the beach, precisely at the shore's edge: No Swimming Allowed.

Despite this, two women have found a spot on a concrete breakwater at Blijburg's edge and are having a picnic amid the rubble, noise and wind. Two more *tjalks*, moving in the distance under reefed sails, skitter across the horizon, and Durgerdam shimmers in a flash of sun breaking through fast-moving clouds.

After a while, the noise stops. The wind whistles through all the blank but semi-occupied streets in a way that can only be apocalyptic. On the main strip, an LCD board promises that the LRT from Centraal Station will be here in eleven minutes. I look around and see no indication that this could be true. The tram lines don't hum, no one is waiting patiently at its stops. Why would it come? But it will. In ten minutes now.

~

I used to think that I could bear any kind of loss – a limb, sight, the love of my life – but memory. That kind of loss leaves you with nothing but starting over, which seems like an insult. I'm now at an age where I'm noticing that my memory is not what it used to be. You think memory is like anything else, that it gets better with practice, and it can, but it's a bit strange. We tend to think of it as either a straight line or bubbles of past experience that touch nothing else unless something forces us to connect them. I think it's more like that stone wall that the sculptor Andy Goldsworthy built, the one that starts at a four-lane

*Like Landscape Didn't Matter*

highway and runs straight, straight, directly away from it, bolting across a huge empty field. It only begins to twist and turn, like a river, when it enters a forest, which is where it starts to form itself to the landscape, to the obstacles in its path. On the inside we shape our memory wherever it'll fit. On the outside it's the shortest line between two points. Maybe when I was younger I was on the outside. Maybe I'm on the inside now. Funny thing is, I've discovered that I don't mind losing memory as much as I always thought I would. I think it's hugely important, but it can also wind up being a bit masturbatory. Maybe it's enough to remember why it's important. Like landscape.

~

On my way back into Amsterdam, church bells are ringing somewhere in the centre at one of the big churches. A bright orange easyJet plane flies overhead, north to London, maybe. An enormous container barge glides through the Rhine Canal, heading southeast toward Germany. Smoke continues to rise from the houses on the dike of Durgerdam, and the pounding has begun in IJburg again. The collision of all these things is too much to analyze in this brief moment – they merely exist simultaneously, side by side. But I'm reminded of something Simon Schama said in his book *Landscape and Memory*, that 'to see the ghostly outline of an old landscape beneath the superficial covering of the contemporary is to be made vividly aware of the endurance of core myths.' Durgerdam, IJburg. Fifteenth century, twenty-first. Memory and myth versus

## *Saudade*

a blank slate. Something discardable versus something embraceable.

I used to be obsessed with the illogical or anachronistic in places like India, where modernity frequently skips decades of development that the Western world has endured. From candlelight to high-speed internet overnight, for instance, or mule travel to a surge in low-cost jet travel. In post-Soviet Georgia, progress was at a standstill, and decay, while far from charming, coated everything, but things were still used despite their condition because they were all anyone had. Nothing was abandoned, though everything had an abandoned feel. When I look at IJburg, I see the same tinges of abandonment, even decay, though none of the dedication to utility. A phrase of Harrison's that I read the other day pops into mind: 'People make terrible messes pretending they're perfect.' Faced with the most extreme examples, it's now easier for me to see the subtle signs of progress in the West. They're there, just as in India or Georgia, but easier to ignore.

I often have the unsettling feeling that we harness ourselves to the future, to prospects and the machinery we invent to propel and keep us there. The car, for instance, or telecommunication. There's no doubt that these things make our lives easier, but I question their now-unquestionable necessity. 'For if,' Schama says, 'the entire history of landscape in the West is indeed just a mindless race toward a machine-driven universe, uncomplicated by myth, metaphor and allegory, where measurement, not memory, is the absolute arbiter of value, where our ingenuity is our tragedy, then we are indeed trapped in the engine of our self-destruction.'

*Like Landscape Didn't Matter*



A friend asked recently if I'd ever been to Vegas, and I confessed that it is one of the few places in the world I feel I can miss, but that my dad had recently sold our family boat to invest in a house there, though he was lost without water and disliked gambling. His compulsions lie

## *Saudade*

elsewhere, I said, and it's a relief to know that. My friend asked if I would go and visit him there and I said I wasn't sure. It's difficult to ignore my disdain for a place built on excess, I said. He asked if maybe I was afraid of a place where discretion was optional. I shook my head. The hope that things will change can be more damaging than the compulsions (the harmful ones) themselves, and Vegas seems to me to be derivative of that kind of hope.

But there's hope and then there's hope. IJburg's is of a different kind. The point was to build a place where community rules, where the negative aspects of human nature are ignored or very deliberately not taken into account, where bikes can be left outside overnight, unlocked, for days without worry. IJburg is full of vision, a product of the Dutch tendency toward a kind of human engineering beyond North American comprehension, where human behaviour is largely thought to be controllable by idealism. But at the same time it's a vision that, for me, at least, has a blank, concrete stare. It teases at progressiveness, yet is austere. Empty. Waiting. Piles are being deafeningly pounded, pounded, pounded into manmade land reclaimed from the lake that was reclaimed from the sea. *Dunk dunk dunk*, so loud it prevents one from thinking. Bright construction lights on cranes keep the place under inadvertent surveillance twenty-four hours a day. At the moment (and for the last four years), IJburg is an industrial park aspiring to peaceful, fulfilling modern living, but that aspiration gets lost in the blankness.

*Like Landscape Didn't Matter*

Back in the city, on the street I'm riding along, there's a row of attached, condemned houses. It takes up the whole block and all the doors have been removed and the windows taken out so you can see its insides without obstruction or glare - revealing a sort of privacy of a person's recent past, without the person. Like going into someone's room after they've died and not being able to ask them why they thought purple would look good.



There must be fifty or sixty houses on the block, each with three storeys, each storey a different apartment. Every hold shows something different: a yellow bathroom with a large unpainted square above the floor where the cupboard and sink used to be; a living room wall painted with the handprints of children – at least three different sizes, fingers

## *Saudade*

outspreed, lifelines betrayed to strangers and voyeurs; a tiled kitchen with an old photo of Mao still tacked to the wall; a bedroom with a cross burned into its back wall, the one that would have overlooked the courtyard that was once there.

It's eerie and exciting at the same time – the kind of thing you want to consider only during the daytime. The kind of thing you want to rush past at night. A friend of mine who has spent his whole life in crowded European cities told me he drove across Canada once – the idea was to take it easy, do it at a leisurely pace, but the first time he drove off the road and stopped in the middle of nothing to see what the middle of nothing would be like, it (a l l t h a t s p a c e) terrified him so much that he ran back to the car and drove for three and a half days without rest, stopping for fuel only at gas stations with a lineup of people. I never understood his feeling until I passed this row of abandoned houses in the middle of the night. The whole block was cast in darkness, which would have been fine in the middle of nothing on the prairie, but here it felt like a place that was unsure of its next incarnation: a dangerous sort of purgatory. A place suspended between the past and the future, the indelible and the temporary, but numb to the present. I think that's what my friend felt in the vast landscape of Canada, somewhere near Wawa. A numbness. Not in himself, but in the land. He encountered, perhaps, 'a point in our identity that would require a much deeper delving and a more radical return.'

*Like Landscape Didn't Matter*

The row of houses is being torn down. An excavator with an extra-long arm is going at them one by one with its shovel, crushing and crumbling the brick, the wallpaper, the parquet floors, the graffiti painted on walls while they stood abandoned.

A few of us have stopped on the road, relinquishing time for fascination, to watch the excavator work. It seems so brutish, like an elk ramming a tree to get its rack off its head. But the operator occasionally stops his grand, storey-crumbling sweeps, opens the mouth of the shovel a tiny bit, swivels it ninety degrees like a carnival-goer operating one of those machines where you try to pick up a stuffed animal in a glass case, and moves it toward a single floorboard, or a piece of wire or rebar. Then he closes the shovel around it delicately and pulls, and swivels the whole excavator around to gently place this small thing of value on a separate pile behind him. Then he goes back to ramming and smashing.

The excavator is taking down about four units a day. Every time I pass by, different wallpaper is exposed, a different bathroom is crumbling, tiles slipping soundlessly to the ground beneath the excavator's roar. The surprising vertical arc of a staircase visible, excavated now, where brick once met a plaster wall.

By now, the people who live on that street are used to it. They're tired of seeing anonymous histories exposed – they've had enough reminders of the collisions of our tendencies toward both individuality and the generic. They've stopped wondering where all of these people have dispersed to, whether they live in a similar place now,

## *Saudade*



laid out in the same way as the old one, or (a depressing thought) that even if they don't, they still probably live generically in a house with a bed, a fridge with milk in it, a stove that needs cleaning, a table and four chairs, a television. Newspapers stacked somewhere. Too many bills. Maybe even in IJburg. As though the crumbling befits the numbness, making it obvious that the only way to reconstruct involves that radical return of sorts – to a past that never quite existed for them (the residents), or us (the observers). Something that is approachable only as an impossible thing.

*Like Landscape Didn't Matter*

The wind is really strong now. I mean something you can attach a force number to. I lived in the foothills of the Rockies for a while, near Bragg Creek, where wind that makes it difficult just to stand can come off the mountains for ten days straight, but that has nothing on this. I'm struggling to get home on my bike and trees are coming down all around, hitting ground so sodden it receives them with a loud slap rather than a thump or vibration. Tarps ripped from construction scaffolding are filling the air with reverberating loud snaps the sound of inflicted pain, like rattling machine gun fire. But everyone's still driving. I suppose it's safer in a car than out on the street, until I see the largest tree on the block come down on one waiting at a traffic light.



## *Saudade*

Roof crushed to the level of the door handles. Driver somehow alive and unhurt. No one abandons their cars. The trees keep coming down. Clay tiles are being flung off roofs everywhere, smashing onto sidewalks, pavements, cars. I wonder what the wind is like in IJburg, which is much more exposed than the centre of Amsterdam. I wonder what it's doing to all that new construction, all that torn-up ground. The uncontrollable in the controlled.

~

The other day I passed an old warehouse – it had been abandoned some time ago, but suddenly there were cars and small trucks parked in a semi-circle around one of its back entrances, and people moving in and out. I stopped and asked someone what was going on. It was an anti-alternative art fair, he said, and they were setting up. I went inside: the space had been divided into convention-like booths, and pieces were being hung or constructed in their spaces. Off in the corner, there was a curtained-off area; I stepped inside and was slowly, eerily surrounded by a diaphanous cloud of coloured fog. Most of it hung near the feet, but even so, the two other people walking around the room were barely visible. Their forms were dark against the fog, as though they had no colour themselves, or what colour they'd had bled into the air, which was first flesh-coloured, then shifted to green, then brown.

The space reminded me of the surprises in Amsterdam, and I liked it. I'm talking about the surprises in its urban landscape, like the nineteenth-century village on the dike,

*Like Landscape Didn't Matter*

the voyeurism of abandoned buildings. I'm not speaking metaphorically – I mean the struggle between personal expression and commercial imperatives that cities have to deal with all the time.



Amsterdam is a city that loves text. Its buildings are inscribed with it, from a short poem by Emily Dickinson on the side of a small hotel to wartime epitaphs and tenant-installed graphic design on canal houses. Poetry is by far the most prevalent, though it's done subtly enough that it often takes passing by a building a few times to notice it. I've taken to standing in front of buildings, old and new, that seem worthy of a carved verse, and then looking for

## *Saudade*

it. I find it more often than not. That's the kind of surprise I'm talking about.

Or the surprises you find in changes of light. It's true what they say about Dutch light. I've never been in a place where shadow or brightness can change a landscape so much. In *Holland*. Flat and green is flat and green, you say, but on the right day... Sure the mountains in B.C. and Alberta look different in first snow, or after a warm, dry spring. But in a mesmerizing way. You expect them to look different, so you look for the differences, the subtleties. And they still hold their shape. In pancake fields you expect nothing to change. But it does – with a certain amount of shadow and sunlight, suddenly you see all the undulations in that flat land, just like you begin to see the subtleties of progress after being in its opposite extreme.

~

The storm is over now, the city scattered with trees, roof tiles, ruined cars, detritus. A friend emailed the other day about the new, alarming and frequent phenomenon of thunder-snowstorms, about how unnatural they feel. That's how this wind felt too. In Bragg Creek, in the foothills, the wind reaches hurricane force several times a year, but you almost don't feel it. Yes, it's hard to stand in it, but the wind has room to disperse, and while certainly humbling, it isn't terrifying like in a city, where hubris takes precedence over natural phenomenon. Where we have to be careful because what we have done might just kill us.

Now, Amsterdam has a reputation for über-tolerance, and there is a certain laissez-faire attitude here, but its urban identity has had a commercial imperative. For nearly half a millennium, all that mattered was making money, in a way that made Amsterdam and the Dutch famous for their frugality. But lately, personal expression has seeped in – in pot bars, in legalized prostitution, yes, yes, but other things too. I see it as a natural reaction to Dutch conservatism (for in Holland, Amsterdam is a bit of a wild child) and, I think, so do the Dutch, and that's why they allow it. They know they have a fascination with control, and under Nazi occupation they saw the limit, so personal expression acts as a sort of pressure valve, and it works, so nobody complains.

IJburg was supposed to be a neighbourhood where personal expression ruled. It didn't want to be like the rest of Amsterdam, where, no matter what the ideal, the result always wound up being the same: a place with little community and human interaction where people kept to themselves because it felt safer. Not bad, but not the original vision.

There was an article in the newspaper a couple of days ago about how IJburg had already failed. Cars were being broken into, bikes were being stolen and 'suspicious' characters (one of whom was the superintendent of IJburg, who didn't actually live or have an office there yet) were lurking about. The 5,000 residents of IJburg have had to start locking their bikes before the place is even close to completion.

## *Saudade*

They seemed annoyed to discover that human nature has prevailed again over the ideal, and they've responded with predictable human – or at least Amsterdam-like – nature: friendly on the street, but keep to yourself, lock the door and don't do anything about it. Just like in the rest of Amsterdam. Problem is, there just aren't that many people out on the street. If there had been, maybe IJburg would have stood a chance.

And maybe it still does. Maybe it'll find its own unique form of personal expression, of carving poetry into its buildings or, for the next few years, its scaffolding. Maybe it'll find its own way to respond to and embrace the decay that is already in action. Maybe the outward look, over the water, toward Durgerdam, is the answer. Maybe they'll find the answer without, in landscape, and not within, among the high-rise condo buildings. After all, as Schama says, 'it is our shaping perception that makes the difference between raw matter and landscape,' and 'memory may help to redress the balance ... the cultural habits of humanity have always made room for the sacredness of nature.' I hope so, but I'm not so sure. We *are* masters of melding as a means toward progress, and landscape's where I'd look. And I'll tell you why. Because I was on the train the other day, and there was a sundog hovering in the sky, to the left. It's the kind of thing I expected to disappear as the train's angle to the sun changed, refracting the light, dissolving the optical illusion, but it stayed there, to the left, for a really long time. We must have been travelling in a perfectly straight line across those perfectly flat fields, or following the arc of the sun. We passed through a

*Like Landscape Didn't Matter*

wind field, blades sweeping through the air, and I thought of that industry art fair I had seen. I thought of all the artists sitting on the black-felt platform in the warehouse, canvasses in the form of flat screens of all sizes behind them bearing images of real things, the artists with their backs turned to their work, sipping from bottles of beer set among the cables running from the screens and stringing all over the floor like consequence; and in a cornfield the sundog disappeared and we passed through the landscape like it didn't matter.

