DETROIT ARCADIA

Exploring the post-American landscape

By Rebecca Solnit

Until recently there was a frieze around the lobby of the Hotel Pontchartrain in downtown Detroit, a naively charming painting of a forested lakefront landscape with Indians peeping out from behind the trees. The hotel was built on the site of Fort Pontchartrain du Détroit, the old French garrison that three hundred years ago held a hundred or so pioneer families inside its walls while several thousand Ottawas and Hurons and Potawatomis went about their business outside, but the frieze evoked an era before even that rude structure was built in the lush woodlands of the place that was not yet Michigan or the United States. Scraped clear by glaciers during the last ice age, the landscape the French invaded was young, soggy, and densely forested. The river frontage that would become Detroit was probably mostly sugar maple and beech forest, with black ash or mixed hardwood swamps, a few patches of conifers, and the occasional expanse of what naturalists like to call wet prairie—grasslands you might not want to walk on. The Indians killed the trees by girdling them and planted corn in the clearings, but the wild rice they gathered and the fish and game they hunted were also important parts of their diet. One pioneer counted badger, bear, fisher, fox, mink, muskrat, porcupine, rabbit, raccoon, weasel, wildcat, wolf, and woodchuck among the local species, and cougar and deer could have been added to the list.

The French would later recruit the Indians to trap beaver, which were plentiful in those once-riverine territories—*détroit* means "strait" or "narrows," but in its thirty-two-mile journey from Lake St. Clair to Lake Erie, the Detroit River also had several tributaries, including Parent's Creek, which was later named Bloody Run after some newly arrived English soldiers managed to lose a fight they picked with the local Ottawas.

Fort Pontchartrain was never meant to be the center of a broad European settlement. It was a trading post, a garrison, and a strategic site in the scramble between the British and the French to dominate the North American interior. Cadillac, the ambitious Frenchman who established the fort in 1701, invited members of several Indian nations to surround the fort in order to facilitate more frequent trading, but this led to clashes not just between nations but between races. Unknown Indians set fire to Fort Pontchartrain in 1703, and the Fox skirmished there in 1712. After the English took over in 1760, deteriorating relations with the local tribes culminated in the three-year-long, nearly successful Ottawa uprising known as Pontiac's Rebellion.

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Photographs from Detroit by Misty Keasler

This is all ancient history, but it does foreshadow the racial conflicts that never went away in Detroit, though now white people constitute the majority who surround and resent the 83 percent black city. It's as if the fort had been turned inside out—and, in fact, in the 1940s a six-foot-tall concrete wall was built along Eight Mile Road, which traces Detroit's northern limits, to contain the growing African-American population. And this inversion exposes another paradox. North of Eight Mile, the mostly white suburbs seem conventional, and they may face the same doom as much of conventional suburban America if sprawl and auto-based civilization die off with oil shortages and economic decline. South of Eight Mile, though, Detroit is racing to a far less predictable future.

It is a remarkable city now, one in which the clock seems to be running backward as its buildings disappear and its population and economy decline. The second time I visited Detroit I tried to stay at the Pontchartrain, but the lobby was bisected by drywall, the mural seemed doomed, and the whole place was under some form of remodeling that resembled ruin, with puddles in the lobby and holes in the walls, few staff people, fewer guests, and strange grinding noises at odd hours. I checked out after one night because of the cold water coming out of the hot-water tap and the generally spooky feeling generated by trying to sleep in a 413-room high-rise hotel with almost no other guests. I was sad to see the frieze on its way out, but—still—as I have explored this city over the last few years, I have seen an oddly heartening new version of the landscape it portrays, a landscape that is not quite post-apocalyptic but that is strangely—and sometime even beautifully—post-American.

This continent has not seen a transformation like Detroit's since the last days of the Maya. The city, once the fourth largest in the country, is now so depopulated that some stretches resemble the outlying farmland and others are altogether wild. Downtown still looks like a downtown, and all of those high-rise buildings still make an impressive skyline, but when you look closely at some of them, you can see trees growing out of the ledges and crevices, an invasive species from China known variously as the ghetto palm and the tree of heaven. Local wisdom has it that whenever a new building goes up, an older one will simply be abandoned, and the same rule applies to the blocks of new condos that have been dropped here and there among the ruins: why they were built in the first place in a city full of handsome old houses going to ruin has everything to do with the momentary whims of the real estate trade and nothing to do with the long-term survival of cities.

The transformation of the residential neighborhoods is more dramatic. On so many streets in so many neighborhoods, you see a house, a little shabby but well built and beautiful. Then another house. Then a few houses are missing, so thoroughly missing that no trace of foundation remains. Grass grows lushly, as though nothing had ever disturbed the pastoral verdure. Then there's a house that's charred and shattered, then a beautiful house, with gables and dormers and a porch, the kind of house a lot of Americans fantasize about owning. Then more green. This irregular pattern occurs mile after mile, through much of Detroit. You could be traveling down Wabash Street on the west side of town or Pennsylvania or Fairview on the east side of town or around just about any part of the State Fair neighborhood on the city's northern border. Between the half-erased neighborhoods are ruined factories, boarded-up warehouses, rows of storefronts bearing the traces of failed enterprise, and occasional solid blocks of new town houses that look as though they had been dropped in by helicopter. In the bereft zones, solitary figures wander slowly, as though in no hurry to get from one abandoned zone to the next. Some areas have been stripped entirely, and a weedy version of nature is returning. Just about a third of Detroit, some forty square miles, has

An abandoned factory

evolved past decrepitude into vacancy and prairie—an urban void nearly the size of San Francisco.

It was tales of these ruins that originally drew me to the city a few years ago. My first visit began somberly enough, as I contemplated the great neoclassical edifice of the train station, designed by the same architects and completed the same year as Grand Central station in Manhattan. Grand Central thrives; this broken building stands alone just beyond the grim silence of Michigan Avenue and only half a mile from the abandoned Tiger Stadium. Rings of cyclone fence forbid exploration. The last train left on January 5, 1988—the day before Epiphany. The building has been so thoroughly gutted that on sunny days the light seems to come through the upper stories as though through a cheese grater; there is little left but concrete and stone. All the windows are smashed out. The copper pipes and wires, I was told, were torn out by the scavengers who harvest material from abandoned buildings around the city and hasten their decay.

On another visit, I took a long walk down a sunken railroad spur that, in more prosperous times, had been used to move goods from one factory to another. A lot of effort had gone into making the long channel of brick and concrete about twenty feet below the gently undulating surface of Detroit, and it had been abandoned a long time. Lush greenery grew along the tracks and up the walls, which were like a museum of spray-can art from the 1980s and 1990s. The weeds and beer cans and strangely apposite graffiti decrying the 1993 passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement seemed to go on forever.

I took many pictures on my visits to Detroit, but back home they just looked like snapshots of abandoned Nebraska farmhouses or small towns farther west on the Great Plains. Sometimes a burned-out house would stand next to a carefully tended twin, a monument to random fate; sometimes the rectilinear nature of city planning was barely perceptible, just the slightest traces of a grid fading into grassy fields accented

with the occasional fire hydrant. One day after a brief thunderstorm, when the rain had cleared away and chunky white clouds dotted the sky, I wandered into a neighborhood, or rather a former neighborhood, of at least a dozen square blocks where trees of heaven waved their branches in the balmy air. Approximately one tattered charred house still stood per block. I could hear the buzzing of crickets or cicadas, and I felt as if I had traveled a thousand years into the future.

To say that much of Detroit is ruins is, of course, to say that some of it isn't. There are stretches of Detroit that look like anywhere in the U.S.A.—blocks of town houses and new condos, a flush of gentility spreading around the Detroit Institute of Arts, a few older neighborhoods where everything is fine. If Detroit has become a fortress of urban poverty surrounded by suburban affluence, the city's waterfront downtown has become something of a fortress within a fortress, with a convention center, a new ballpark, a new headquarters for General Motors, and a handful of casinos that were supposed to be the city's economic salvation when they were built a decade ago. But that garrison will likely fend off time no better than Fort Detroit or the Hotel Pontchartrain.

Detroit is wildly outdated, but it is not very old. It was a medium-size city that boomed in the first quarter of the twentieth century, became the "arsenal of democracy" in the second, spent the third in increasingly less gentle decline, and by the last quarter was a byword for urban decay, having made a complete arc in a single century. In 1900, Detroit had a quarter of a million people. By midcentury the population had reached nearly 2 million. In recent years, though, it has fallen below 900,000. Detroit is a cautionary tale about one-industry towns: it shrank the way the old boomtowns of the gold and silver rushes did, as though it had been mining automobiles and the veins ran dry, but most

An abandoned house in the western part of Detroit

of those mining towns were meant to be ephemeral. People thought Detroit would go on forever.

Coleman Young, Detroit's first African-American mayor, reigned from 1974 to 1993, the years that the change became irreversible and impossible to ignore, and in his autobiography he sounds like he is still in shock:

> It's mind-boggling to think that at mid-century Detroit was a city of close to two million and nearly everything beyond was covered with corn and cow patties. Forty years later, damn near every last white person in the city had moved to the old fields and pastures—1.4 frigging million of them. Think about that. There were 1,600,000 whites in Detroit after the war, and 1,400,000 of them left. By 1990, the city was just over a million, nearly eighty percent of it was black, and the suburbs had surpassed Detroit not only in population but in wealth, in commerce—even in basketball, for God's sake.

The Detroit Pistons are now based in Auburn Hills. According to the 2000 census, another 112,357 whites left the city in the 1990s, and 10,000 more people a year continue to leave. Even three hundred bodies a year are exhumed from the cemeteries and moved because some of the people who were once Detroiters or the children of Detroiters don't think the city is good enough for their dead. Ford and General Motors, or what remains of them—most of the jobs were dispatched to other towns and nations long ago—are in trouble, too. Interestingly, in this city whose name is synonymous with the auto industry, more than a fifth of households have no cars.

"Detroit's Future Is Looking Brighter," said a headline in the *Detroit Free Press*, not long after another article outlined the catastrophes afflicting the whole state. In recent years, Michigan's household income has dropped more than that of any other state, and more and more of its citizens are slipping below the poverty line. David Littmann, a senior economist for the Michigan think tank the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, told the paper, "As the economy slows nationally, we're going to sink much farther relative to the other states. We've only just begun. We're going to see Michigan sink to levels that no one has ever seen."

In another sense, the worst is over in Detroit. In the 1980s and 1990s, the city was falling apart, spectacularly and violently. Back then the annual pre-Halloween arson festival known as Devil's Night finished off a lot of the abandoned buildings; it peaked in 1984 with 810 fires in the last three days of October. Some of the arson, a daughter of Detroit's black bourgeoisie told me, was constructive—crackhouses being burned down by the neighbors; her own respectable aunt had torched one. Between 1978 and 1998, the city issued 9,000 building permits for new homes and 108,000 demolition permits, and quite a lot of structures were annihilated without official sanction.

Even Ford's old Highland Park headquarters, where the Model T was born, is now just a shuttered series of dusty warehouses with tape on the windows and cyclone fences around the cracked pavement. Once upon a time, the plant was one of the wonders of the world—on a single day in 1925 it cranked out 9,000 cars, according to a sign I saw under a tree next to the empty buildings. Detroit once made most of the cars on earth; now the entire United States makes not even one in ten. The new Model T Ford Plaza next door struck my traveling companion—who, like so many white people born in Detroit after the war, had mostly been raised elsewhere—as auspicious. But the mall was fronted by a mostly empty parking lot and anchored by a Payless ShoeSource, which to my mind did not portend an especially bright future.

When I came back, a year after my first tour, I stopped at the Detroit Institute of Arts to see the Diego Rivera mural commissioned in 1932 by Henry Ford's son, Edsel. The museum is a vast Beaux-Arts ware-

The old Ford headquarters in Highland Park

house—"the fifth-largest fine arts museum in the United States," according to its promotional literature—and the fresco covered all four walls of the museum's central courtyard. Rivera is said to have considered it his finest work.

It's an odd masterpiece, a celebration of the River Rouge auto plant, which had succeeded the Highland Park factory as Ford's industrial headquarters, painted by a Communist for the son of one of the richest capitalists in the world. The north and south walls are devoted to nearly life-size scenes in which the plant's gray gears, belts, racks, and workbenches surge and swarm like some vast intestinal apparatus. The workers within might be subsidiary organs or might be lunch, as the whole churns to excrete a stream of black Fords.

Rivera created this vision when the city was reveling in the newfound supremacy of its megafactories, but Detroit had already reached its apex. Indeed, the River Rouge plant—then the largest factory complex in the world, employing more than 100,000 workers on a site two and a half times the size of New York City's Central Park—was itself built in suburban Dearborn. In 1932, though, capitalists and Communists alike shared a belief that the most desirable form of human organization—indeed, the inevitable form—was not just industrial but *this* kind of industrial: a Fordist system of "rational" labor, of centralized production in blue-collar cities, of eternal prosperity in a stern gray land. Even the young Soviet Union looked up to Henry Ford.

But Detroit was building the machine that would help destroy not just this city but urban industrialism across the continent. Rivera painted, in a subsidiary all-gray panel in the lower right corner of the south wall, a line of slumped working men and women exiting the factory into what appears to be an endless parking lot full of Ford cars. It may not have looked that way in 1932, but a lot of the gray workers were going to buy those gray cars and drive right out of the gray city. The city-hating Ford said that he wanted every family in the world to have a Ford, and he priced them so that more and more families could. He also fantasized about a post-urban world in which workers would also farm, seasonally or part-time, but he did less to realize that vision. Private automobile ownership was a double blow against the density that is crucial to cities and urbanism and against the Fordist model of concentrated large-scale manufacture. Ford was sabotaging Detroit and then Fordism almost from the beginning; the city had blown up rapidly and would spend the next several decades simply disintegrating.

Detroit was always a rough town. When Rivera painted his fresco, the Depression had hit Detroit as hard as or harder than anywhere, and the unemployed were famished and desperate, desperate enough to march on the Ford Motor Company in the spring of 1932. It's hard to say whether ferocity or desperation made the marchers fight their way through police with tear-gas guns and firemen with hoses going full bore the last stretch of the way to the River Rouge plant. Harry Bennett, the thug who ran Ford more or less the way Stalin was running the Soviet Union, arrived, and though he was immediately knocked out by a flying rock, the police began firing on the crowd, injuring dozens and killing five. The battle of the Hunger March or the huge public funeral afterward would've made a good mural.

No, it wasn't cars alone that ruined Detroit. It was the whole improbable equation of the city in the first place, the "inherent contradictions." The city was done in by deindustrialization, decentralization, the post–World War II spread of highways and freeways, government incentives to homeowners, and disinvestment in cities that aided and abetted large-scale white flight into the burgeoning suburbs of those years. Chunks of downtown Detroit were sacrificed early, in the postwar years, so that broad arterial freeways—the Edsel Freeway, the Chrysler Freeway—could bring commuters in from beyond city limits.

A panel of Diego Rivera's mural at The Detroit Institute of Arts

All of this was happening everywhere else too, of course. The manufacturing belt became the rust belt. Cleveland, Toledo, Buffalo, and other cities clustered around the Great Lakes were hit hard, and the shrinking stretched down to St. Louis and across to Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Newark. Now that it has entered a second gilded age, no one seems to remember that New York was a snowballing disaster forty or fifty years ago. The old textile district south of Houston Street had emptied out so completely that in 1962 the City Club of New York published a report on it and other former commercial areas titled "The Wastelands of New York City." San Francisco went the same way. It was a blue-collar port city until the waterfront dried up and the longshoremen faded away.

Then came the renaissance, but only for those cities reborn into more dematerialized economies. Vacant lots were filled in, old warehouses were turned into lofts or offices or replaced, downtowns became upscale chain outlets, janitors and cops became people who commuted in from downscale suburbs, and the children of that white flight came back to cities that were not exactly cities in the old sense. The new American cities trade in information, entertainment, tourism, software, finance. They are abstract. Even the souvenirs in these new economies often come from a sweatshop in China. The United States can be mapped as two zones now, a high-pressure zone of economic boom times and escalating real estate prices, and a low-pressure zone, where housing might be the only thing that's easy to come by.

This pattern will change, though. The forces that produced Detroit—the combination of bitter racism and single-industry failure—are anomalous, but the general recipe of deindustrialization, depopulation, and resource depletion will likely touch almost all the regions of the global north in the next century or two. Dresden was rebuilt, and so was Hiroshima, and so were the cities destroyed by natural forces—San Francisco and Mexico City and Tangshan—but Detroit will never be rebuilt as it was. It will be the first of many cities forced to become altogether something else.

The Detroit Institute of Arts is in one of those flourishing parts of Detroit; it is expanding its 1927 building, and when I said goodbye to the Rivera mural and stepped outside into the autumn sunshine, workmen were installing slabs of marble on the building's new facade. I noticed an apparently homeless dog sleeping below the scaffolding, and as I walked past, three plump white women teetered up to me hastily, all attention focused on the dog. "Do you have a cell phone?" the one topped by a froth of yellow hair shrilled. "Call the Humane Society!" I suggested that the dog was breathing fine and therefore was probably okay, and she looked at me as though I were a total idiot. "This is downtown *Detroit*," she said, in a tone that made it clear the dog was in imminent peril from unspeakable forces, and that perhaps she was, I was, we all were.

I had been exploring an architectural-salvage shop near Rosa Parks Boulevard earlier that day, and when I asked the potbellied and weathered white man working there for his thoughts on the city, the tirade that followed was similarly vehement: Detroit, he insisted, had been wonderful—people used to dress up to go downtown, it had been the Paris of the Midwest!—and then it all went to hell. *Those people* destroyed it. My traveling companion suggested that maybe larger forces of deindustrialization might have had something to do with what happened to the city, but the man blankly rejected this analysis and continued on a tirade about "them" that wasn't very careful about not being racist.

On the Web you can find a site, Stormfront White Nationalist Community, that is even more comfortable with this version of what happened to the city, and even less interested in macroeconomic forces like deindustrialization and globalization: "A huge non-White population, combined with annual arson attacks, bankruptcy, crime, and decay, have combined to make Detroit—once the USA's leading automotive industrial center—into a ruin comparable with those of

Abandoned storefronts and houses near Michigan Central Station

the ancient civilizations—with the cause being identical: the replacement of the White population who built the city, with a new non-White population." It could have been different. "In more civilized environs, these facilities might have easily been transformed into a manufacturing and assembly center for any number of industrial enterprises," writes the anonymous author.

A few months before the diatribe in the salvage yard, I'd met a long-haired counterculture guy who also told me he was from Detroit, by which he, like so many others I've met, meant the suburbs of Detroit. When I asked him about the actual city, though, his face clenched like a fist. He recited the terrible things *they* would do to you if you ventured into the city, that they would tear you apart on the streets. He spoke not with the voice of a witness but with the authority of tradition handed down from an unknown and irrefutable source. The city was the infernal realm, the burning lands, the dragon's lair at the center of a vast and protective suburban sprawl.

The most prominent piece of public art in Detroit is the giant blackened bronze arm and fist that serve as a monument to heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis, who grew up there. If it were vertical it would look like a Black Power fist, but it's slung from cables like some medieval battering ram waiting to be dragged up to the city walls.

Deindustrialization dealt Detroit a sucker punch, but the knockout may have been white flight—at least economically. Socially, it was a little more complex. One African-American woman who grew up there told me that white people seemed to think they were a great loss to the city they abandoned, "but we were glad to see them go and waved bye-bye." She lived in Ann Arbor—the departure of the black middle class being yet another wrinkle in the racial narrative—but she was thinking of moving back, she said. If she had kids, raising them in a city where they wouldn't be a minority had real appeal.

The fall of the paradise that was Detroit is often pinned on the riots of July 1967, what some there still refer to as the Detroit Uprising. But Detroit had a long history of race riots—there were vicious white-on-black riots in 1833, 1863, 1925, and 1943. And the idyll itself was unraveling long before 1967. Local 600 of the United Auto Workers broke with the union mainstream in 1951, sixteen years before the riots, to sue Ford over decentralization efforts already under way. They realized that their jobs were literally going south, to states and nations where labor wasn't so organized and wages weren't so high, back in the prehistoric era of "globalization."

The popular story wasn't about the caprices of capital, though; it was about the barbarism of blacks. In 1900, Detroit had an African-American population of 4,111. Then came the great migration, when masses of southern blacks traded Jim Crow for the industrialized promised land of the North. Conditions might have been better here than in the South, but Detroit was still a segregated city with a violently racist police department and a lot of white people ready to work hard to keep black people out of their neighborhoods. They failed in this attempt at segregation, and then they left. This is what created the blackest city in the United States, and figures from Joe Louis and Malcolm X to Rosa Parks and the bold left-wing Congressman John Conyers—who has represented much of the city since 1964—have made Detroit a center of activism and independent leadership for African Americans. It's a black city, but it's surrounded.

Surrounded, but inside that stockade of racial divide and urban decay are visionaries, and their visions are tender, hopeful, and green. Grace Lee Boggs, at ninety-one, has been politically active in the city for more than half a century. Born in Providence to Chinese immigrant parents, she got a Ph.D. in philosophy from Bryn Mawr in 1940 and was a classical Marxist when she married the labor organizer Jimmy Boggs, in 1953. That an Asian woman married to a black man could become a powerful force was just another wrinkle in the racial politics of Detroit. (They were together until Jimmy's death, in 1993.) Indeed, her thinking evolved along with the radical politics of the city itself. During the 1960s, the Boggses were dismissive of Martin Luther King Jr. and ardent about Black

Power, but as Grace acknowledged when we sat down together in her big shady house in the central city, "The Black Power movement, which was very powerful here, concentrated *only* on power and had no concept of the challenges that would face a black-powered administration." When Coleman Young took over city hall, she said, he could start fixing racism in the police department and the fire department, "but when it came time to do something about Henry Ford and General Motors, he was helpless. We thought that all we had to do was transform the system, that all the problems were on the other side."

As the years went by, the Boggses began to focus less on putting new people into existing power structures and more on redefining or dismantling the structures altogether. When she and Jimmy crusaded against Young's plans to rebuild the city around casinos, they realized they had to come up with real alternatives, and they began to think about what a local, sustainable economy would look like. They had already begun to realize that Detroit's lack of participation in the mainstream offered an opportunity to do everything differently—that instead of retreating back to a better relationship to capitalism, to industry, to the mainstream, the city could move forward, turn its liabilities into assets, and create an economy entirely apart from the transnational webs of corporations and petroleum. Jimmy Boggs described his alternative vision in a 1988 speech at the First Unitarian-Universalist Church of Detroit. "We have to get rid of the myth that there is something sacred about large-scale production for the national and international market," he said. "We have to begin thinking of creating small enterprises which produce food, goods, and services for the local market, that is, for our communities and for our city.... In order to create these new enterprises, we need a view of our city which takes into consideration both the natural resources of our area and the existing and potential skills and talents of Detroiters."

A subdivision in the eastern part of Detroit

That was the vision, and it is only just starting to become a reality. "Now a lot of what you see is vacant lots," Grace told me. "Most people see only disaster and the end of the world. On the other hand, artists in particular see the *potential*, the possibility of bringing the country back into the city, which is what we really need." After all, the city is rich in open space and—with an official unemployment rate in the mid-teens—people with time on their hands. The land is fertile, too, and the visionaries are there.

In traversing Detroit, I saw a lot of signs that a greening was well under way, a sort of urban husbandry of the city's already occurring return to nature. I heard the story of one old woman who had been the first African-American person on her block and is now, with her grandson, very nearly the last person of any race on that block. Having a city grow up around you is not an uncommon American experience, but having the countryside return is an eerier one. She made the best of it, though. The city sold her the surrounding lots for next to nothing, and she now raises much of her own food on them.

I also saw the lush three-acre Earth Works Garden, launched by Capuchin monks in 1999 and now growing organic produce for a local soup kitchen. I saw a 4-H garden in a fairly ravaged east-side neighborhood, and amid the utter abandonment of the west side, I saw the handsome tiled buildings of the Catherine Ferguson Academy for Young Women, a school for teenage mothers that opens on to a working farm, complete with apple orchard, horses, ducks, long rows of cauliflower and broccoli, and a red barn the girls built themselves. I met Ashley Atkinson, the young project manager for The Greening of Detroit, and heard about the hundred community gardens they support, and the thousands more food gardens that are not part of any network. The food they produce, Atkinson told me, provides food security for many Detroiters. "Urban farming, dollar for dollar, is the most effective change agent you can ever have in a community," she said. Everywhere I went, I saw the rich soil of Detroit and the hard work of the gardeners bringing

forth an abundant harvest any organic farmer would envy.

Everyone talks about green cities now, but the concrete results in affluent cities mostly involve curbside composting and tacking solar panels onto rooftops while residents continue to drive, to shop, to eat organic pears flown in from Argentina, to be part of the big machine of consumption and climate change. The free-range chickens and Priuses are great, but they alone aren't adequate tools for creating a truly different society and ecology. The future, at least the sustainable one, the one in which we will survive, isn't going to be invented by people who are happily surrendering selective bits and pieces of environmentally unsound privilege. It's going to be made by those who had all that taken away from them or never had it in the first place.

After the Panic of 1893, Detroit's left-wing Republican mayor encouraged his hungry citizens to plant vegetables in the city's vacant lots and went down in history as Potato Patch Pingree. Something similar happened in Cuba when the Soviet Union collapsed and the island lost its subsidized oil and thereby its mechanized agriculture; through garden-scale semi-organic agriculture, Cubans clawed their way back to food security and got better food in the bargain. Nobody wants to live through a depression, and it is unfair, or at least deeply ironic, that black people in Detroit are being forced to undertake an experiment in utopian post-urbanism that appears to be uncomfortably similar to the sharecropping past their parents and grandparents sought to escape. There is no moral reason why they should do and be better than the rest of us—but there is a practical one. They have to. Detroit is where change is most urgent and therefore most viable. The rest of us will get there later, when necessity drives us too, and by that time Detroit may be the shining example we can look to, the post-industrial green city that was once the steel-gray capital of Fordist manufacturing.

Detroit is still beautiful, both in its stately decay and in its growing natural abundance. Indeed, one of the finest sights I saw on my walks around the city combined the two. It was a sudden flash on an already bright autumn day—a pair of wild pheasants, bursting from a lush row of vegetables and flying over a cyclone fence toward a burned-out building across the street. It was an improbable flight in many ways. Those pheasants, after all, were no more native to Detroit than are the trees of heaven growing in the skyscrapers downtown. And yet it is here, where European settlement began in the region, that we may be seeing the first signs of an unsettling of the very premises of colonial expansion, an unsettling that may bring a complex new human and natural ecology into being.

This is the most extreme and long-term hope Detroit offers us: the hope that we can reclaim what we paved over and poisoned, that nature will not punish us, that it will welcome us home—not with the landscape that was here when we arrived, perhaps, but with land that is alive, lush, and varied all the same. "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!" was Shelley's pivotal command in his portrait of magnificent ruins, but Detroit is far from a "shattered visage." It is a harsh place of poverty, deprivation, and a fair amount of crime, but it is also a stronghold of possibility.

That Rivera mural, for instance. In 1932 the soil, the country, the wilderness, and agriculture represented the past; they should have appeared, if at all, below or behind the symbols of industry and urbanism, a prehistory from which the gleaming machine future emerged. But the big panels of workers inside the gray chasms of the River Rouge plant have above them huge nude figures—black, white, red, yellow, lounging on the bare earth. Rivera meant these figures to be emblematic of the North American races and meant their fistfuls of coal, sand, iron ore, and limestone to be the raw stuff of industrialism. To my eye, though, they look like deities waiting to reclaim the world, insistent on sensual contact with the land and confident of their triumph over and after the factory that lies below them like an inferno. ■

The Catherine Ferguson Academy for Young Women