

ISLANDS

 of 

ABANDONMENT

*Nature Rebounding in the Post-Human Landscape*

Cal Flyn

VIKING

VIKING

An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC  
penguinrandomhouse.com

First published in hardcover in Great Britain by William Collins, an imprint  
of HarperCollins Publishers, London, in 2021.

First American edition published by Viking.

Copyright © 2021 by Cal Flynn

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages  
diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture.

Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying  
with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it  
in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing  
Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

Grateful acknowledgment is made for permission  
to reprint the following images:

Page 14 The Five Sisters bing. Copyright © 1975 by Dave Henniker.

Page 37 Copyright © Royal Commission on the Ancient  
and Historical Monuments of Scotland

Page 74 produced by Dr. Glenn Matlock, Associate Professor, Environmental  
and Plant Biology Department, Ohio University, based on data from: Greeley,  
William B. 1925, "The Relation of Geography to Timber Supply," *Economic  
Geography* 1: 1-11; Williams, Michael, 1989, *Americans and Their Forests*,  
Cambridge University Press, pp. 436-437; "Proportion of Land that is  
Forested," US Forest Service Forest Inventory Analysis, 2007.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Flynn, Cal, author.

Title: Islands of abandonment : nature rebounding in  
the post-human landscape / Cal Flynn.

Description: New York : Viking, [2021] | Includes  
bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020041722 (print) | LCCN 2020041723 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781984878199 (hardcover) | ISBN 9781984878205 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Restoration ecology. | Resilience (Ecology) | Environmental  
disasters. | Ecosystem health. | Landscape changes. |

Nature—Effect of human beings on.

Classification: LCC QH541.15.R45 F59 2021 (print) | LCC QH541.15.R45  
(ebook) | DDC 333.73/153—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020041722>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020041723>

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Designed by Alexis Farabaugh

For Rich,

Who makes me so very happy



## THE BLIGHT

*Detroit, Michigan, United States*

The church is redbrick, solidly built and comforting, with an ornamental flair under the rake of the roof and in the arches over the windows. The exterior is neat, the guttering and roof tiles done out smartly in scarlet. But the sign that should show the times of service has come away from the wall. Leafed limbs of various autumnal hues have come to rest shyly against the brickwork, or prostrate themselves across the stone steps that lead up to heavy wooden doors.

That's all that gives it away. After a while, you don't need much. To the discriminating eye, you may as well spray-paint it across the facade: GONE TO SHIT, COME ON IN. Some places they do, I guess. Not in so many words.

Anyway, it's true. Round back, through a weed-choked courtyard, the door is wide open.

Is it possible to enter a church—however desecrated the space, however long since you last raised your voice in prayer—and not feel the cold firm presence of the sublime? Here it is: streaming in through the windows as clean, clear shafts of light; suffused in the gray and dappled stucco; in the talc of dove-gray plaster that dusts the burned and broken detritus on the floor.

The ceiling is huge and curved, banded like the interior of an enormous barrel. But at its edges, the upper reaches of the walls are bare brick and red, or charred charcoal where a fire has, in the past, taken hold before dying away.

I tack a bridal course down the aisle, passing between heavy pews that sit at odd angles. Some have collapsed, as if exhausted, on the tiles. To my right, the ragged red velvet of the confessional sags from its rod, tide-lined where filthy rainwater has soaked upward from the floor.

You can feel it in the air: the emotional trace of past epiphanies, crises of faith. Funerals and christenings, confirmations, the comings of age. Sheet music that served as the soundtrack to it all has fluttered to the ground and lies damply in clumps, like leaves. The grand piano beached on its side on the floor is missing its lid, soundboard, and all of its strings. Most of the white keys are gone too, and the black hang askew, their long wooden action bared, which gives them the spent look of burned matches.

The curved apse, high above, is a rich cream, rimmed in verdi-

gris where the paint has flaked away. At its center, a dove surrounded by a huge, sun-like halo has been picked out in gold. A small, circular hole through the roof lets the sunlight in, which shines as a spotlight upon the floor by the altar. I step into its stream, let myself be anointed.

In the old Catholic school across the yard, I pass down dark corridors crisscrossed with shadow and light. Doors open onto classrooms on either side: on one, they are high-ceilinged and peaceful, empty and washed with a blur of light through vines, which shift outside on the breeze like the ocean. On the other, chaos. Ceiling tiles drift knee-high upon the floor, their warped struts swinging dangerously low, eye-level.

A blackboard in a downstairs room bears instructions for a final class, chalked in stylish cursive. A date: November, 1983. *Always set your margin before you type.* It's a desolate scene. But not an uncommon one, here, in Detroit.

Detroit is a city shrunk from its shell; too big for the people that live in it. Once America's fourth-largest city, it has been in terminal decline for seventy years, its population reduced by almost two-thirds.

What that means, in practice, is that to drive through the city is to spin through streets and sometimes whole neighborhoods in a state of what looks like decomposition. Tens of thousands of houses stand empty and falling apart, shingles melting from roofs like hot icing, brick-effect tiles sliding from alignment, sharp-edged gaps where rotten buildings have been pulled like teeth.

Where this decay begins and ends seems clearly delineated. Here, one neighborhood is clean and well-tended; aspirational. There, only a few blocks away, one passes through a cumulus of steam rising from a grate in the road to emerge into what feels a nightmarish inversion. The air seems wetter, the sky darker, the buildings somehow haunted. Roofs sag, hollow-backed, and walls slump against one another. Plants force their way through cracks in the boards, press their leaves against the glass from the inside. Broken chairs and old strollers block pathways through overgrown lawns. It is not there, and then it is. Here, it has a name: the blight.

Blight: an almost poetic evocation of the literal decay manifesting in the derelict houses that line the streets in certain parts of the city. Houses secured against intruders wear boards over windows and doors, giving them a disturbing appearance, as if their eyes are covered. Some buildings, on otherwise respectable streets, stand wrapped in vines, shrouded. In all, more than eighty thousand properties—mainly houses—are thought to lie vacant in Detroit. Some are boarded up, some open to the elements, others semi-inhabited by squatters who camp inside without power or running water.

Yet more—nineteen thousand in five years—have been demolished, razed to the ground by the city, the only evidence of their existence the foundations that track the empty lots, floorplans from a forgotten blueprint. Now, whole streets stretch on, block after block empty. Places where people raised their families, where infants were born and took their first steps, where pensioners passed humid summer evenings on the porch—gone. All that is

left are the empty lots, sometimes dozens of them in contiguous blocks. Acres of what has come to be called “urban prairie.”

To pass through one is to travel along an unmarked road, often buckled or hatched with the craquelure of porcelain, through what seems like fields gone fallow, a flat plain thigh-high in golden grasses. The past is there as an underlay: ornamental trees and shrubs—ghosts of gardens past—stand in tight huddles, tiny oases in vast wastes. Fire hydrants pop up unexpectedly in remote parts; solitary streetlamps stand alone in silent vigil. Here and there, an occasional house stands alone and windswept—a tract home or sometimes a semi-detached, cut from its twin. The little house on an urban prairie.

In all, upward of twenty-four of Detroit’s one hundred and thirty-nine square miles lie vacant—an area larger than Manhattan. Some say as many as forty.

The city is a rough-stitched patchwork of all kinds of cloth, some rough weave and some bejeweled. Here: skyscrapers, galleries, a busy park. Then you turn a corner and narrow town houses press tightly together, holding one another upright, porches sliding adrift. Broken cars on bricks and landlocked boats with holes in their prows. Soft fall light comes tinkling through the leaves, which lie gathered in a soft carpet whose color fades in and out according to the trees’ various states of erubescence. Maples burn like flaming torches against velvet-skinned planes. Golden-leafed aspens stand shivering, lighting up the empty lots.

Drive past an empty house and then another—blackened and burned out—and see a flashlight moving inside it.

For this is not an empty city, although it is one deeply marked by abandonment. Blight, of the kind that they talk about in Detroit, is a phenomenon not wholly physical: it is a shorthand for a pattern that unfolds in abandoned places, one that drives their progression. Blight is broken windows, listing porches, fallen beams. It too is a distillation of the ways in which abandonment affects the psyche of the humans left behind, as an insidious force that pushes them from their homes—a psychological current that they must struggle against, else lose their grip.

In Detroit, in “blighted” neighborhoods, the advance of abandonment takes corporeal form in the decay of the buildings, and its encroachment brings a chill to the streets. But the process is not linear. Abandonment advances and retreats; as one building falls vacant, another may be revived. Where the infrastructure of the community has begun to erode—physically, socially—efforts by those who live there fend off its approach. Ultimate victory is not yet assured.

The full details of Detroit’s meteoric rise and painful collapse are complex—the waves of desertion, the ripples of resurgence—but an overall shape can be sketched out quickly in bare figures. In 1900, a year after the city’s first car manufacturing plant opened, the population rested at 285,000. By 1950, with the automotive industry in full flight, that figure had rocketed to 1.85 million. Then came the slide.

As the wave of industry broke and drew back, major car manufacturers shifted from centralized plants into smaller, out-of-town factories, and then overseas, and with them the workers and the money. A single-industry city can deflate fast. From its 1950s peak, the Detroit population has fallen, fallen, fallen—from 1.85 million to 1.5 million, then to just over a million, and to 713,000. At the last census, in 2019, the population skimmed 670,000. What haven’t left are the houses they lived in, the churches they worshipped in, the schools they educated their children in, the factories they worked in.

The hulking shell of the Packard Automotive Plant—all 3.5 million square feet of it—runs for a half-mile off East Grand Boulevard, a honeycombed mass rising to five stories in places, utterly gutted. I find myself inside it, on a wet October afternoon, in the company of two investigators from the Michigan Humane Society, on a search for stray dogs. We enter as everyone does: through a hole in the cinderblock walls, and find ourselves in a labyrinth of dimly lit halls and tunnels, a warren where water seeps across the floors in mirrored expanses.

Elise and Dave are all business, dressed in black and wearing bulletproof vests; I step warily behind them into a courtyard where seedlings of all shades find purchase on joists and sills and in the piles of fallen masonry, twisting between the steel rebars that jut from lumps of concrete. We pass loading bays filled like swimming pools with trash—broken crates and empty bottles and scraps of tinsel and plastic tubs and old blankets, just about anything you can think of—and into a dark gallery loud with the dripping of water. Dave’s flashlight beam arcs through the mist,

leaving a trace on my retinas as we step gingerly through a grit of broken glass, shattered into sugar granules.

Once the most advanced car factory in the world, the Packard Plant once employed forty thousand people, but was shuttered in 1958, and now stands as a ruined city within a city; concrete columns sheared and fallen like the monuments of antiquity. Outside, the lanes between the various annexes lie deserted and lifeless, like a parody of a streetscape of another era.

Eight miles to the west, the former American Motor Company headquarters lies in a similar state. Around half the size of the Packard Plant, it is still a massive edifice, a three-story complex fronted by elegant, yellow-brick offices and an art deco tower.

Entry is totally unpoliced. I climb the marble steps and pass through carved stone arches into executive offices. The wainscoting is coming loose, curling like paper at the corners; wood-paneled ceilings shed petal-sized flakes of varnish onto boards. Elevator shafts yawn dangerously at every turn.

A long corridor leads to the old assembly halls, which are utterly ravaged. They have the look of cheap sci-fi horror: flexible foil ducting spilling from the ceiling; orange tubing snaking across ceilings, miles of it; scraps of what looks like cotton candy—asbestos insulation—litter the floor. Everything seems shredded, ripped into tiny pieces and scattered on the ground.

The complex was owned for a time by a local scrap merchant, who claimed he was going to turn it into a home for children; the whole time, he was stripping it for parts. (He was later imprisoned for environmental offenses related to the asbestos.) Scrapping is

maybe the most important element of Detroit's ecosystem of abandonment. When a building falls vacant, you usually have about twenty-four hours before the scrappers get in and start fileting it of anything of value.

Once, on an island in the archipelago where I live, I was walking along a remote single-track road when I stumbled upon the freshly crushed body of a rabbit. Its eyes were still bright, its fur soft and dry. Two ravens examining its corpse warned me off with irritable croaks before setting about the body: beaks like penknives, slicing flesh with neat little snips from the bone. Two hours later, the ravens were gone, the remains inherited by hooded crows. They fluttered up like butterflies to reveal clean bones, only the tiniest remnants of meat remaining, a skeletal form lying prone where earlier had been a still-warm creature. Next would come a closer shave—the carrion beetles, the fly larvae—before finally bacteria would fizz away even those pale traces.

This is what I think about, when I walk the corridors of the AMC headquarters. And this word: *domicology*, the study of the life cycle of buildings. To become a domicologist, one must recognize, first of all, that there is one. Wrote Webster:

But all things have their end:

Churches and Cities, which have diseases like to men,

Must have like death that we have.

These buildings were scrapped in more organized style than most, but the pattern will unfold ten thousand times over in this

city. Even as I depart the old building, I hear the voices of others—strangers—echoing down the halls. The fine grain go-over; the scavengers moving in, come to pick over the scraps of the scraps. They are motivated, organized, mobile, hungry. They move mainly by night, transporting their wares by supermarket carts. If you ever find yourself in an abandoned building in Detroit, they will always—always—have gotten there first.

Oftentimes homeless themselves, or close to it, the scrappers—like the carrion crows—depend upon building-death for their subsistence, and in this way accelerate a process of decay that in less populated areas might take months or even years. First go the furnaces and heaters and water tanks and the wiring and the plumbing. Later, the aluminum panels that waterproof gable ends. Soon, the buildings have slipped beyond repair, and their bodies returned—via a roundabout route—into the cycle of resources, for \$0.45 a pound.

But even after the scrappers have taken their fill, the bones of these superstructures remain, juggernauts on the city skyline. These are just two of Detroit's white elephants, which lie falsely in wait for a fresh purpose that may never come, their ribs picked clean. Now crumbling and collapsing. Perhaps past saving.

In Detroit, one becomes attuned to the various flavors of abandonment, in the way one might come to recognize the different species of trees in a forest. What distinguishes an empty property

from an occupied one: a lifeless look about a house's face, a certain stillness of the air inside. And then, what marks the empty property from the abandoned one: the drawn curtains, the tottering pile of mail upon the porch (the lower strata in slow disintegration), the thin overlay of grime upon the windows and doors and steps—all are features common to both kinds. But in the abandoned, there too is a terminal look—a sense of sagging, of rigid spars gone soft. Of rising damp, encroaching rot. The pallor of the undead.

It is instructive, I feel, to consider the question of abandonment in the context of a city. To zero in on what, exactly, marks a property as abandoned, even when simultaneously surrounded by—even occupied by—people. The city of Detroit has had to develop its own definition, for administrative reasons: to be classified as abandoned, it must be both *vacant* and to display what they describe as “outwards signs of blight.”

Blight, as a synonym for urban decay, emerged from the work of the Chicago School of Sociology, whose influential approach in the early twentieth century leaned heavily upon ecological models. Cities, the thinking held, functioned like any collection of living organisms. They too had a life cycle, and would evolve over time in certain predictable ways. The researchers turned ecological terms to new effects: neighborhoods experienced *succession* (as incomers displaced existing residents), for example, and *invasions* (as various cultural groups displaced one another).

A city experiencing sudden, negative demographic changes might be characterized in epidemiological or even pathological terms:

as if a kind of contagion, a social disease, was taking hold, leading to withering and degradation. "Blight," an agricultural term dating from the sixteenth century, when it served as a catchall for sudden and devastating crop death ("any baleful influence of atmospheric or invisible origin," as the *Oxford English Dictionary* has it, "that suddenly blasts, nips or destroys plants"), became the favored descriptor. It's a vivid image, one that grows increasingly lurid the longer you think of it: blight like a mildew, a fungus, a black pox spoiling green and glossy foliage; blight like necrosis tearing through the fields, rotting potatoes where they lie in the ground, turning them corky and ruptured, riddled with holes and dark growths, rendering the worst a putrid, liquid mess.

To talk of urban blight, therefore, is to talk of a socioeconomic malaise drifting through the streets like a miasma, slipping in through the windows or the gaps under the doors. Ripping through neighborhoods like influenza. In some places, like the plague.

And with this image implanted in one's mind, it's hard not to interpret the worst of Detroit in that way: seeing blight where the roofs collapse inward, in the charred and blackened beams and the puddling of the rain upon the floor. It makes one uneasy to step into those dark, diseased buildings, whose chimney stacks slide from the vertical, their broken panes unattended. The thought of blight adds a new layer of perceived peril—not only from the physical danger of the derelict buildings, or the imagined ne'er-do-wells lurking inside, but the *baleful influence* that might spring from them, as if we carry the blight home in the fibers of our clothes.

What is true is that research has shown "blight" to be more than just metaphor. Urban abandonment *is* contagious, in as much as the dereliction of one house on a street makes it more likely that its neighbors will become abandoned themselves. Only a small increase in vacancies precipitates a huge drop in house prices; beyond a certain point, it stops making economic sense for owners to sink money into maintaining a property that will not hold its value—and housing in the area begins to degrade. Vacant properties—and those within a radius of one hundred yards—are also more at risk of fire.

And, just as vacancy attracts scrappers who accelerate the decay, the decay itself attracts crime. This is not just true of Detroit. Studies of Philadelphia and Austin have found that crime rates spike on blocks with vacant buildings, specifically violent assaults. An empty house makes the perfect shelter for fugitives, or those taking drugs, or for prostitution, and myriad other crimes. Detroit, which has the highest vacancy rate in the United States, is also the country's most violent city, according to the FBI. Dead bodies are discovered in abandoned houses in Detroit at a rate of around one a month; corpses are found hidden in bins, or burned in arsons; victims are shot, strangled, or tortured.

In Detroit—where the number of vacant buildings doubled between 2000 and 2010; where tumbledown clapboard houses are grown over by the feather-leafed ailanthus, the "ghetto palm"; where foxes, pheasants, and opossums have set up home in the thigh-high grasses of the urban prairie; where falcons nest on the roofs of abandoned skyscrapers and beavers reclaim the river

bank; where coyotes howl at night in the city's west side—there has been a rewilding in both senses of the word.

This word, *blight*, billows up in conversation wherever I go. Blight slips between us constantly: unseen, and yet all-pervading. It takes hold of the mind and grips it. I had never heard the word in this context before—its usage is an American invention—yet I too begin to see it: slipping as a specter between houses. Locals speak of blight the way one might speak of a malevolent spirit that stalks the halls at night. It felt at once inarguable and indecent; fitting metaphor, and yet, when applied to a living community, almost impossibly provocative. Though many voiced its name, I found myself unable to do so in company.

What came to mind, whenever I heard the word, was a conversation I had once, at home in Scotland, with a researcher of public health. I met him in a hotel bar—a polished, empty space, quiet but for the clinking of glasses—to interview him on his work on urban decay and its insidious effects. I never wrote the article, but I still think about it—what he had found, what he had to say. The fact was this: they die younger in Glasgow than they do in other cities. They die younger in Glasgow than in Liverpool or Manchester or Belfast—all deindustrialized British cities, with similar histories and demographics and patterns of deprivation. They die younger, in all social classes, and younger than expected even when adjusting for unhealthy behaviors. They die younger in

Glasgow, and no one really knows why. This “excess mortality” as the researcher defined it, was more generally known as “the Glasgow Effect.”

“It is as if,” one writer ventured in 2012, “a malign vapor rises from the [River] Clyde at night and settles in the lungs of sleeping Glaswegians.” A *baleful influence*, in other words, of *atmospheric or invisible origin*. But if blight really should be a disease—a disease at the level of the city—then perhaps there might be a cure.

In 2014, a presidential task force chaired by three prominent local leaders in Detroit declared: “Just like removing only part of a malignant cancerous tumor is no real solution, removing only part or incremental amounts of blight from neighborhoods and the city as a whole is also no real solution. Because, like cancer, unless you remove the entire tumor, blight grows back.” They published a detailed inventory of Detroit properties, its neighborhoods analyzed “block by block, parcel by parcel,” alongside a call to demolish forty thousand derelict or dilapidated buildings. The instructions were clear and practical: identify the blight and eliminate the sources of infection.

In this way, the city might hope to tear out the diseased parts of itself, as a gardener might prune a tree or a shrub, and hope that by cutting it hard back for the winter it might prompt a flush of fresh, sweet growth come spring.

Targeted action was important, the task force underlined. Resources were limited, and the problem deeply rooted. They reiterated a point I had often heard voiced in the context of Detroit: streets and neighborhoods might pass a “tipping point” after which

it might become too blighted, to spoiled to save. It could only be cut off, amputated, pulled out by the roots so as to halt the spread, and save the crop. Tough decisions. But the results would be worth it. They quoted Socrates: "We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light."

And in a sense, they were only extrapolating from, making official, folk wisdom that had percolated through the city for years. In the years preceding the city's bankruptcy in 2013, when the streets had gone unswept and streetlamps unlit, local initiatives had sprung up in the void. John George, a former insurance salesman, turned activist in 1988 when an abandoned house behind his own turned into a crack den. He organized a group of neighbors and together they boarded up the place. From such beginnings his organization, the Detroit Blight Busters, grew, and over three decades they have demolished over nine hundred derelict houses (in areas including the notorious Brightmoor neighborhood, where John was born) and boarded up or repainted hundreds more.

Tom Nardone, a charismatic local entrepreneur, became incensed by reports that the bankrupt administration would close city parks to save money, and decided to take matters into his own hands. "It didn't make sense," he tells me over tacos in Mexican-town. "All it meant was they would stop cutting the grass and picking up the trash. I passed a small park every day on my drive home, and I thought, shit, I could mow that myself. So I bought a lawn tractor."

He and a group of "middle-aged petrolheads," as he affectionately

describes his volunteers, formed the Detroit Mower Gang, and have tended not only to parks, but sports fields and playgrounds in abandoned schools all over the city, and various vacant plots and derelict sites. It was impossible not to be swept along by his passion, his scrappy vigor, his get-up-and-go.

After lunch, Tom drove me to a concrete velodrome built in the 1960s. It had become overgrown, but a few months before they had cleared it again for use by the community. He led me around the track proudly, showed me pictures from social media of kids on bikes, racing and doing wheelies. It felt, I thought, normal. Like any sports field in any city. But that was the achievement. In a city of derelict lots and urban prairie, the neat green lawn is the universal signifier of order.

What Tom learned: mow any type of vegetation three times, and it will turn into grass. "It looks," he said proudly, "like we planted it that way." Succession in reverse. The Chicago School would find a message in that.

Constance M. King has lived almost her whole life in this pretty, primrose-yellow clapboard house in Detroit's North End. This was the house her parents took her home to after she was born—born, as she says, "in Detroit, Michigan, 1949."

It was a good neighborhood then. There were shops running all the way up Oakland Avenue, "good black-owned businesses." There was a drugstore, a grocer, a fish market, a poultry house, a

shoe store. A Saks Fifth Avenue. Apex Bar, where John Lee Hooker played his first gig in 1943. And the Phelps Lounge, once host to James Brown, B. B. King, Etta James. Constance's street was an unbroken line of houses. Working families, raising their children, keeping their lawns manicured.

Except, she says, it went to pot. Families moved out, short-term renters came in. Houses fell into disrepair; sometimes they were destroyed by their own tenants. "A lot of the schools got torn down. There weren't many children left." There were a lot of drugs around, and those who took them. It stopped feeling safe to walk around the neighborhood.

Constance got married, and left the area. But the marriage didn't stick, and she soon came home to a neighborhood locked in steep decline. Her mother died, and then her brother was shot, just a few streets from the family home. Still, though, she couldn't bear to leave. "After my brother got killed"—she pauses—"I felt I had to start watching myself." She stopped shopping in the neighborhood, didn't walk to the shop or get out of her car. Not that there were so many businesses left to visit anymore.

But, this was home. For a time a local church was offering families a few thousand dollars for their homes; trade them in, and start again. But Constance found she couldn't bring herself to do it. "You see your family working—my mom working after my dad passed—to keep their property up, a roof over your head . . . you don't let it go down like that unless you really can't help yourself."

Plus, she knew her neighbors. They took care of her. Shoveled her drive in winter as she got older. Not that there were many

neighbors, either. Steadily the street was emptying out. A neighbor on one side left in the 1990s. But Constance faithfully tended to the property, keeping the grass cut and the porch looking neat, "maybe some curtains or rags up in the window, where if somebody passed, they thought somebody lived there." Keeping it, in other words, merely vacant. Not abandoned.

Then one day someone got in there and realized it was empty. "I started hearing noises and: *bam bam bam!* They were tearing out the walls." Now it's just an empty lot.

Her house stands as one of four, which huddle together as if from rising waters. They are edged on either side by stretches of open grassland. A little way to the north, three matching houses stand shoulder to shoulder, the outer pair neat, their lawns filled with children's toys, their middle sister a warped and blackened shell with its lower windows boarded. At the end of the road, two wooden houses stand enveloped by trees, and peer between branches as if lost in a forest.

From Constance's perspective, blight seems less a disease than an all-powerful, indiscriminating force of destruction. A tsunami in slow motion. Or flood that must be fought, fended off. "How would I describe blight in my neighborhood?" she says, "I would describe the blight as unwanted. I would say, blight is just everything being destroyed."

Every day, she tends to her home, keeps the blight at bay. She tended next door too, until it washed away. But lately, she says, street sweepers started coming through again. They hadn't done that in years, not since she was a teenager. The North End is on

the up, as she always knew it would be. "I'm just waiting for it to all come back."

The tide came in. In the end, she reasons, it must once more go out.

Later, before I leave Detroit, I climb back in the car and drive aimlessly through the city.

Streets scroll by the window: busy then quiet; high-rise buildings, then that rackety, rural air of the urban prairie. I cross the interstate, pass through a row of industrial warehouses, and find myself in Delray, west of the city center.

I feel a flare of recognition. Tom took me here earlier, to see a park he used to mow. But when we'd arrived it was gone. In fact, almost the whole neighborhood had gone—houses, parks, the lot, all cleared—ready for redevelopment as the foot of a new bridge to Canada and the plaza that will surround it. I trawl the roads that slice what is now an overgrown wasteland into squares, where tiny seedling birches raise their hands plaintively from between the bentgrass and wild rye. Haggard power lines sag and bow, some half-strangled by vines.

I turn down a side road, where the paving is cracked and crazed, greenery coming through like kintsugi. It's been abandoned longer here: full-grown trees have sprung up on either side, crowding the obsolete utility poles. The vegetation is thick and dense, crowding the track and coming close along the sides of the car. I

see that, up ahead, a pleasure boat has been dumped or pulled across the road, blocking my way. I feel a shiver of unease and stop the car, reverse back the way I came, leave as fast as I can.

I drive on. I come to a row of buildings, rumpled and neglected, and halt next to an intersection. To my left, a huge square building stands alone, backing onto the river, which appears an eerie, artificial cyan. Beyond it rises the dark, dystopian shape of Zug Island, the realm of heavy industry—gas flare burning, tall chimneys belching fumes, coal heaps high as hillocks. The driveway is blocked, first by a bashed-up truck, polythene taped over its broken windows, and then by warped orange netting and a sheet with DO NOT ENTER—CRIME SCENE spray-painted across it in the color of blood.

The whole tableau—that mad-handed scrawl, the Mordorian backdrop, the glaring absence of police—sets my heart thudding. *Blight*, I think, feeling the word slide deliciously into place for the first time. I feel its presence pressing in on all sides. I want to leave.

I wonder this: Why would anyone stay here? Yet people do. ("It's nothing like it used to be," one resident told a local reporter. "But it is home. This is home.")

When researchers published the first paper on the Glasgow Effect, the unsolved mystery seized the public imagination. To the chagrin of the researchers, this unknown factor soon took on an agency of its own, a causative power to which premature deaths in the city—30 percent higher than might be expected—could be directly attributed. It was, as I told the researcher, a fascinating enigma.

I could see from his expression that he found my enthusiasm distasteful. Mystery achieved nothing for the city, he rebuked me. In any case, a new paper, soon to be published, now largely accounted for the deaths. One factor was proximity to abandoned and derelict land, which they linked to violence, contamination, and mental ill health. Another was more difficult to define.

It was this: Glasgow suffered greatly from invasive slum clearance and "urban renewal projects" during the twentieth century. Inspired by the theories of Le Corbusier and his utopian ideals, Glasgow bulldozed tenements in favor of tower blocks, and packed off the young and the fit to experimental satellite "new towns." All this, said the researchers, had ruptured the "social fabric" of the city: the matrix that supported the residents, held them steady. Morale fell. Health suffered. In came "diseases of despair."

The tearing out of "bad" areas in the name of progress had, in the end, torn the city apart.

In the United States too, anti-blight projects have a long and troubled history. Modernist architecture was rooted in the idea that if an environment was new and orderly, the community living in it would become so too. This needed a grand visionary at its head. ("The design of cities," as Le Corbusier wrote, "was too important to be left to the citizens.")

But so often grand visions come to fruition at the expense of the poorest, the most vulnerable. And, in Detroit, African Americans. It was overwhelmingly they who, in the 1950s and 1960s, were displaced from "blighted" homes in places like Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, and rehoused in high-rise, sharp-edged "projects." Whole

neighborhoods were scrubbed away to make space for concrete estates, but though the buildings were new, the old problems remained. Redoubled, even. ("Poor creatures!" one critic wrote of Le Corbusier's future citizens. "What will they become in the midst of all this dreadful speed, this organization, this terrible uniformity? . . . here is enough to disgust one forever with 'standardization' and to make one long for disorder.") Henry Ford said that he wouldn't give a nickel for all the history in the world. But there is much that his generation taught us. If the goal of modernism was social revival, then it failed. In the tower blocks it became obvious that something deep and intangible and profound had been lost, something that had been there all along. It sounded like this: the rending of clothes, the tearing of cloth. Beware amputation. Beware the pulling out by the roots.

I think of Constance, smiling, hanging rags in the windows of her departed neighbors' homes. I think of John, boarding up the house behind his own. I think of Tom, tending to the grass in the parks. I pass community gardens, grown in empty lots. Murals of every color blooming across the sides of empty buildings. And in all these, the unspoken refrain: this is home, this is home, this is home.

If there is a cure for blight, this is it right here. Twice more, it will turn into grass.