

A photograph of a large, abandoned industrial building. The floor is covered in rubble, including broken bricks and debris. Several concrete pillars support the ceiling. The walls are made of brick and have large windows. The overall atmosphere is one of decay and abandonment.

THE LAST DAYS OF DETROIT

LIFE AND DEATH OF AN
AMERICAN GIANT

MARK BINELLI

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About the Book

By the end of the nineteenth century, Detroit, founded by the French as a fur-trading post, was thriving. In 1913 Henry Ford began mass-producing cars at his Model T plant, transforming the area into the Silicon Valley of its day. By 1920 it was the fourth largest city in America and by the mid-1950s General Motors had become the single biggest employer on earth. Here indeed was 'the most modern city in the world, the city of tomorrow'.

But by the time Berry Gordy founded Motown Records in 1960 - thereby creating twentieth-century Detroit's other great assembly line - the cracks were already beginning to show: big industry was looking elsewhere for cheaper sites, cheaper labour and better tax breaks; urban planning was in meltdown; corruption was rife; racial tensions were running high. The 1967 riots - at the time the worst in US history - left 43 dead, more than 7,000 arrested and 3,000 buildings destroyed. Detroit, a former beacon of the capitalist dream, had degenerated into an urban wilderness where unemployment ran at 50 per cent. With more guns in the city than people, the murder rate was the highest in America - three times that of New York.

Mark Binelli returned to live in his native Detroit after a break of many years. He tells the story of the boom and the bust - and of the new society to be found emerging from the debris: Detroit with its urban farms and vibrant arts scene; Detroit as a laboratory for the post-industrial, post-recession world. Here's what an iconic rust-belt city now

looks like and how it might transform and regenerate itself in the twenty-first century.

About the Author

Mark Binelli grew up in Detroit. He graduated from the University of Michigan and received an MFA from Columbia University. He writes for *Rolling Stone* magazine. He is the author of the novel *Sacco and Vanzetti Must Die!*

Also by Mark Binelli

Sacco and Vanzetti Must Die!

DETROIT



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SPIRIT OF DETROIT

NOT TO SCALE UPPER LEGEND: NEIGHBORHOODS LOWER LEGEND: -- POINTS OF INTEREST MAP BY: RODGER BINTONE (PEACEFUL TRAVELER / WICKED WANDERER) 2010

For Lydia and Evan, with much love

THE LAST DAYS OF DETROIT

Motor Cars, Motown and
the Collapse of an Industrial Giant

Mark Binelli



THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON

“And Marco answered: ‘While, at a sign from you, sire, the unique and final city raises its stainless walls, I am collecting the ashes of the other possible cities that vanish to make room for it, cities that can never be rebuilt or remembered. When you know at last the residue of unhappiness for which no precious stone can compensate, you will be able to calculate the exact number of carats toward which that final diamond must strive. Otherwise, your calculations will be mistaken from the very start.’ ”

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

INTRODUCTION

BACK WHEN I was a boy, growing up just outside of Detroit, my friends and I beheld any mention of the city in popular culture with a special thrill. We loved how Detroit was deemed terrifying enough to be chosen as the dystopian locale of *RoboCop*, the science fiction film set in a coyly undated “near future,” when Detroit had become so dangerous that the outsourcing of law enforcement to an armored, heavily weaponized cyborg would seem a prudent and necessary move. And when the producers of *Beverly Hills Cop* decided to make the hometown of Eddie Murphy’s fish-out-of-water detective our own—because, after all, what could be more antipodal to Rodeo Drive than Woodward Avenue, what more alien presence to the Beverly Palms Hotel than a black dude from Detroit in a Mumford High T-shirt?—we delighted in that, too. We certainly tested the speakers of our American-made Dodge hatchbacks whenever a Detroit song found itself played on one of the competing local rock stations. Who would be churlish enough to flag these songs as relics of an earlier era or point out how the lyrics pivoted off the city’s reputation for chaos, riotousness, destruction to such a degree the very *titles*—“Panic in Detroit” (Bowie, 1973), “Detroit Breakdown” (J. Geils Band, 1974), “Motor City Madhouse” (Nugent, 1975)—could be mistaken for headlines from July 1967? To this day, when the plangent opening piano chords of Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believin’ ” blare from a dive bar jukebox, who among us begrudges even this most overplayed of power ballads a respectful

split-second cock of the head and perhaps a secret inner smile as well, all because the protagonist of the song was “born and raised in South Detroit”—no matter that there wasn’t really a neighborhood called South Detroit or that the person living there wanted so badly to get the hell out he took a midnight train goin’ anywhere.

My parents subscribed to *Time*, and I can remember excitedly reading a story, at the height of the tension between Ronald Reagan and the Soviet Union, detailing the effects of a single nuclear bomb dropped on a major American city. This city, the editors explained, had been chosen entirely at random—but of course it was Detroit, a choice that by 1982 probably came across to most locals as an ungallant case of piling on. Still, at twelve years old, I devoured the shout-out as if the city had won some national lottery.

The article began, “Say it is late April, a cloudless Thursday evening in Detroit. Assume further that there is no advance warning.”

Beginning at ground zero of the blast and expanding concentrically, the story proceeded to describe, in gruesome detail, the fate of Detroit and its residents. If you happened to be watching a baseball game at the old Tiger Stadium, for example, you would immediately go blind. Then you would burst into flame. “But,” the writer continued, unhelpfully, “the pain ends quickly: the explosion’s blast wave, like a super-hardened wall of air moving faster than sound, crushes the stands and the spectators into a heap of rubble.”

Skyscrapers topple. Commuters melt inside their cars. Even Canadians in neighboring Windsor—this I found particularly satisfying—would be fatally pelted with fragments of the Renaissance Center, “hurled across the river by 160-m.p.h. winds.” Following the geography of the article to my family’s own suburb, I learned that, only a minute after the blast, fires would be already raging and

“tens of thousands” of people dying, survivors “crawl[ing] from wrecked homes” to see an eight-mile-high mushroom cloud in the distance.

But—survivors! *See*, I pointed out to my little brother, even at that early age displaying the hopeful spirit that all Detroit-area natives learn by necessity to cultivate like a rare breed of flower. *One of us might live!*

* * *

Detroit used to be the greatest working-class city in the most prosperous country in the world. With the explosion of the auto industry, it had become the Silicon Valley of the Jazz Age, a capitalist dream town of unrivaled innovation and bountiful reward. My family came from Italy, our neighbor from Tennessee, my dad’s friends were from Poland, Lebanon, Mexico. All had been drawn to Detroit, if not explicitly for the auto industry—my father sharpened knives and sold restaurant equipment—then because of what the auto industry had come to represent. The cars rolling off the assembly lines existed as tangible manifestations of the American Dream, the factories themselves a glimpse of the birth of modernity, in which mass production would beget mass employment and, in turn, mass consumption. Workers, eager to claim their share of the unprecedentedly high wages on offer, migrated to the city in droves, doubling Detroit’s population in a single decade, from 465,000 to nearly a million, making the city, by 1920, the fourth largest in the nation. The art deco skyscrapers bursting from the downtown streets like rockets must have seemed like monuments to Fordism’s manifest destiny. Everything pointed up.

Often, people incorrectly isolate the 1967 riot as the pivotal Detroit-gone-wrong moment, after which nothing ever went right. In fact, the auto industry had been in a serious economic slump for at least a decade prior, with

tension in the black community festering for even longer and the axial shift of jobs and white residents from city proper to suburbs solidly under way. What the civic unrest, aside from hastening the process, did permanently change was the national story line about the city. If, once, Detroit had stood for the purest fulfillment of U.S. industry, it now represented America's most epic urban failure, the apotheosis of the new inner-city mayhem sweeping the nation like LSD and unflattering muttonchop sideburns. The fires of the rebellion launched a long-running narrative, one that persists today, of Detroit as a hopelessly failed state, a terrifying place of violent crime and general lawlessness. As John Lee Hooker, who had come north to work on the assembly line at Ford and later made his name as a bluesman in the juke joints of Detroit's Hastings Street, sang in "Motor City Is Burning":

My hometown burnin' down to the ground
Worsen than Vietnam ...

That, for as long as I can remember, might as well have been the unofficial slogan of the city. WELCOME TO DETROIT: WORSER THAN VIETNAM.

Things proceeded apace—that is to say, horribly—despite a brief lull of hope offered by the election, in 1974, of Coleman Young, the city's first black mayor. With the emergence of crack, drug violence bloodied the city, while Devil's Night, the night before Halloween, traditionally a time for relatively harmless pranks involving toilet-papered trees and soaped car windows, turned into an annual city-wide arson festival, peaking in 1984 with an estimated eight hundred fires. As a media event, Devil's Night proved irresistibly photogenic, the smoke hanging over the city seeming to taunt its distant twin in 1967. Rather than two lit ends of a time line, the fires came to feel like a single conflagration, one that had never been extinguished, the

time line itself—the entirety of the seventies—merely a long, slow-burning fuse.

* * *

Detroit has long been a city observers find endlessly fascinating, often to the irritation of people who actually live in Detroit—the kind of place easily conscripted for overblown metaphorical theses or described as being a “symptom” of something bigger. Whenever I told people I’d grown up in metropolitan Detroit, they expressed a morbid curiosity, as if I’d revealed having been raised the next town over from Chernobyl or in the same apartment building as Jeffrey Dahmer. Other urban centers face very similar problems, but none have plummeted from the same heights as Detroit. The story of the city, of its meteoric rise and stunning fall, possesses the sort of narrative arc to which people seem hardwired to respond. It’s an almost classically structured tale of humble origins transcended by entrepreneurial moxie and much diligent toil, all eventually brought low by tragic flaws (hubris, greed, long-simmering prejudices come home to roost).

Of course, on a basic level of storytelling, people also love tales of Detroit because there’s just something inherently pleasing about having one’s plot expectations so consistently fulfilled. When the chief of police takes to Facebook to warn Christmas shoppers in Detroit not to carry cash (because of the high probability of being mugged) or when, over the course of a single fiery afternoon, eighty homes in the middle of the city go up like trees in an old-growth forest, it does not disrupt the equilibrium of the world. In fact, such events reinforce existing ideas in a way that’s perversely reassuring. These are the sorts of stories people want to read about when they read about Detroit—especially, perhaps, at times of economic instability, when a reminder of the existence of a

place so much more profoundly screwed than your own offers a cruel comfort, one which, thanks to the moral aspect of the city's downfall, viz. the aforementioned hubris, greed, and prejudice, can be indulged more or less guilt-free, even with a dash of schadenfreude.

And yet Detroit's almost mythic allure isn't solely about misery. People have been drawn to The City Where Life Is Worth Living (an actual non-ironical historical nickname¹) since the golden age of the automobile. To commemorate the 1927 rollout of the Model A, for example, the modernist photographer and painter Charles Sheeler was hired by an advertising firm to spend six weeks at Ford's gargantuan River Rouge plant, the largest factory in the world, with ninety-three buildings, sixteen million square feet of floor space, and 120 miles—miles!—of conveyor belt. Sheeler shot the plant the way an eighteenth-century painter might have depicted the interior of a cathedral, the elemental, almost sanctified vastness a seemingly intentional reminder of man's insignificance in the presence of God—or, in this case, Mr. Ford. "Our factories," Sheeler later wrote, "are our substitute for religious expression."² While touring America in 1935, Le Corbusier also stopped in Detroit, requesting immediately upon his arrival his own tour of the Rouge. In his book *Cathedrals*, he wrote of being "plunged in a kind of stupor" after leaving the plant. He was convinced Detroit's factories would be where his mass-produced "homes of the future" might one day be built.

On the opposite end of the reactive spectrum, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, then a young doctor working for the League of Nations, visited Detroit in 1927 to report on the health conditions of workers at Ford's factories. Appalled by what he witnessed, Céline recorded the degradations of the assembly line in his report and, subsequently, in his novel *Journey to the End of the Night*. The book's protagonist, Ferdinand, describes the factories where he seeks work as resembling "enormous dollhouses, inside

which you could see men moving, but hardly moving, as if they were struggling against something impossible. ... And then all around me and above me as far as the sky, the heavy, composite, muffled roar of torrents of machines, hard wheels obstinately turning, grinding, groaning, always on the point of breaking down but never breaking down." Later, while receiving a medical examination preliminary to being hired, Ferdinand informs the doctor that he, too, is an educated man. "Your studies won't do you a bit of good around here, son," the doctor says, shooting him a dirty look. "We don't need imaginative types in our factory. What we need is chimpanzees. ... Let me give you a piece of advice. Never mention your intelligence again!"

In 1929, the New York monthly *Outlook* sent the poet and journalist Matthew Josephson to cover the auto show. A leftist intellectual (and a fierce critic of Henry Ford) who had just published a biography of Zola, Josephson writes of the city with scorn and condescension, but also with undeniable awe, in the same manner one might marvel at the aesthetics and scale of, say, an SS rally as filmed by Leni Riefenstahl. After noting Detroit's unlikely possession of one of the original castings of *The Thinker*, which still glowers distractedly from the steps of the Detroit Institute of Arts, Josephson proceeds to frolic in the irony of Rodin's masterpiece brooding at the heart of a city in which thought, to Josephson's mind, "has somehow been circumvented": "Something that was automatic, something that ran by an internal combustion engine had taken its place. In fact a new word was needed to express the trance, the fearful concentration with which all men awaited the approaching Automobile Show. ... No one thought of the human body, or the body politic. All minds were bent wholeheartedly upon the new Fisher or Chrysler bodies."

And yet, unhappily, Josephson also recognizes the brute power of a metropolis that he says has "no past ... no

history.” He calls Detroit “the most modern city in the world, the city of tomorrow.” This is not meant as a compliment.

* * *

In January 2009, precisely eighty years after Josephson’s hysterical dispatch, I returned to Detroit on an identical assignment, to cover the approaching Automobile Show—and, more broadly, the collapse of the domestic auto industry—for *Rolling Stone*. My family still lived in the suburbs, so even though I’d moved away in 1993, I had continued to visit regularly. All the while, Detroit had remained Detroit, a grim national punch line. In the eight decades since Josephson’s account of the city’s vulgar ascendance, my hometown had gone from being a place with “no past ... no history” to becoming one that barely possessed a present and certainly had no future. At least not the version of the city Josephson witnessed, that city having become *entirely* history by this late date, the very word *Detroit* threatening to turn into one of those place-names that no longer immediately signifies place but rather, like Pompeii, Hiroshima, or Dresden, the traumatic end of one.

When Josephson reported his own story, in January 1929, the stock market crash was nine months away. Detroit’s fortunes plummeted during the Great Depression, and it required nothing less than the outbreak of World War II, when the car factories were retooled as tank and aircraft plants and Detroit became known as “the Arsenal of Democracy,” for the city to recover. In the case of my visit to the auto show, on the other hand, the economic free fall had been occurring in real time since the preceding summer. I arrived on the week of Barack Obama’s inauguration, an incautiously hopeful moment, despite the seismic tremors of financial uncertainty. In Detroit, though,

all minds were bent wholeheartedly not upon the new Fisher or Chrysler bodies—Chrysler, in fact, debuted no new models at the 2009 auto show and would declare bankruptcy three months later, with GM to follow shortly thereafter—but upon questions of basic survival, as the city faced its worst crisis in decades.

For Detroit, this was saying something. Where to begin? The most recent mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick, had just begun serving a three-month jail sentence, having resigned in disgrace following a sex and corruption scandal. Meanwhile, the heads of the Big Three automakers, just weeks earlier, had appeared before Congress to publicly grovel for a financial lifeline—this after personally making the nine-hour drive from Detroit to Washington in hybrid cars, atonement for flying to the initial hearing on corporate jets. (All the humiliating stunt lacked was Burt Reynolds racing them in a souped-up Prius and they might have pulled in some extra cash with a reality TV pilot.) At just over 15 percent, Michigan would have the highest unemployment rate in the nation by the end of the year; in the city, where half of all children lived in poverty and one study identified nearly half of all adults as functionally illiterate, officials estimated the true unemployment figure at closer to 50 percent. The national housing-market collapse felt like old news in Detroit by January 2009, when the *Detroit Free Press* ran a story about a street on the city's northeast side on which sixty of sixty-six houses had been foreclosed on or abandoned.

The school system remained the worst in the country, its administrators astoundingly corrupt. Crime had also shot back up: Detroit had the highest murder rate in the country (40.7 homicides per 100,000 residents in 2008) and was ranked by *Forbes* as the most dangerous U.S. city overall (based in part on a stunning 1,220 violent crimes per 100,000 residents). Yet the police department's entire crime lab had been shut down the previous fall, after a

state audit found egregious levels of systemic error. Though the Devil's Night fires that plagued the city in the eighties had tapered off,³ Detroit still reported 90,000 fires in 2008, double the number of New York, a city eleven times as populous. A deep racial animus continued to pit Detroit's suburbs against the city (the most segregated major metropolitan area in the country)—this despite the fact that the suburban sprawl largely invented by Detroit automakers had begun evincing a structural failure of its own, with foreclosure rates in once-model suburbs like Warren actually higher than Detroit's.

Detroit's own population had plummeted from a high of two million to 713,000, with an estimated 90,000 buildings left abandoned. Indeed, huge swaths of the city's 140 square miles were poised on the cusp of returning to nature. Along with the empty skyscrapers and block-long factories fallen into ruin, entire residential streets, once densely populated, resembled fields in rural Arkansas after most of the houses had either burned to the ground or ended up demolished. A friend's mother said she now carried pepper spray on her daily walks—not for protection from potential muggers, but from the packs of wild dogs she'd been seeing in the neighborhood. A coyote had just been spotted near downtown.

* * *

One afternoon, to get a better sense of the state of the city beyond the confines of the auto show, I met up with John Carlisle, the proprietor of the marvelous *Detroitblog*, on which he filed dispatches from some of the least-visited corners of the city. By day, Carlisle edited a weekly suburban newspaper, but online, writing as Detroitblogger John, he'd become the Joseph Mitchell of the postindustrial Midwest, ferreting out stories about vigilante ex-cops, whites-only hillbilly bars, and an old blues singer doing a

healthy side business selling raccoon meat. That afternoon, we drove alongside snow-covered plains where houses once stood, what locals had begun calling the “urban prairie,” and crept around the perimeter of General Motors’ immense Fisher Body Plant, closed since 1984, its six floors of broken windows—hundreds of them, *entire blocks* of them—giving the place an odd beauty, like a dried-out beehive. At the vacant lot where Motown’s headquarters had been left abandoned for years, we observed a moment of silent contemplation, Carlisle recalling the time before the demolition when he’d snuck inside and stumbled across Marvin Gaye’s old desk, with love notes to Gaye’s wife still in one of the drawers.

Finally, back downtown, we parked in front of the Metropolitan Building, a fifteen-story, neo-Gothic office tower opened in 1924. It was a weekday afternoon, but the street was completely deserted. A block away, I could see Woodward Avenue, Detroit’s main thoroughfare.

The Metropolitan, once the center of the jewelry trade in Detroit, housed a number of jewelry manufacturers and wholesalers, but it had been empty since 1977. Someone had painted a garish football mural on the ground floor, and a filthy brown teddy bear had been tied to a street sign. “Memorial,” Carlisle said. “Someone was shot here.” Walking quickly to one of the building’s doors, Carlisle turned the knob and was surprised to find it unlocked. Then he noticed a woman behind the counter at a carry-out place across the street, eyeing us. “Here, pretend I’m taking your picture,” he said, posing me next to the memorial bear. He snapped a few shots until the woman turned away. Then we slipped inside the building and Carlisle switched on his flashlight.

The room had been completely gutted. Shards of plaster and glass covered the floor, and an icy draft blew through all of the broken windows. Carlisle splashed the walls with beams of light. Other than a single, cryptic graffiti tag,

scrawled in Day-Glo orange, even the defaceable surfaces were barren. We began climbing the stairs. It was dark, and the wires dangling from the ceiling looked eerie and weblike. On one of the doors, someone had written, “If You Want 2 Die—” I paused and tried to make out the rest of the sentence, but it was illegible. Carlisle stopped on the flight above me and hissed, “What’s wrong? You hear someone?”

Eventually we made it to the top floor. A couple of rusty radiators had been dragged to the center of the room and abandoned. “Crack-heads always try to take them for scrap, but then realize they’re too heavy,” Carlisle said. He led me out to the snow-covered roof. We blinked in the bright daylight, staring up at what we’d come to see: the building’s beautiful stone facade, a carved knight’s helmet topping a coat of arms and ornate fleur-de-lis garlanding each window. Carlisle snapped a few pictures. He had started photographing Detroit’s ruins several years earlier. In his explorations, he had come across homeless encampments, drug addicts getting high, a couple having sex. In another building, eight cops showed up with their guns drawn. After realizing Carlisle had only a camera, they let him go. There was nothing for him to steal, anyway, even if he had been a thief.

“This city is like a living museum,” Carlisle said. “A museum of neglect.”

We moved over to the parapet of the roof, crenelated like the top of some fortress, and gazed out at the city skyline. “That building is empty,” Carlisle said, pointing to the nearest skyscraper. He shifted his finger to the left. “So is that one.” Then, sounding surprised—and the hitch in his voice reminded me that he was not a professional guide, that he didn’t do this every day—he pointed to the next building over and said, “And that one, too.”

In 1995, a Chilean photographer, Camilo José Vergara, had cheekily proposed allowing a cluster of buildings in downtown Detroit to molder and become “an American

Acropolis.” Dismissed by many locals as a smirking Ivory Tower provocateur, Vergara turns out to have been a prophet. I hadn’t brought a camera, but I could have been a tourist in the off-season at a scenic overlook.

And yet, standing in calf-deep snow, my hands thrust deep in my coat pockets, staring out at this wintry scene of ruin, I had to admit I didn’t really feel sadness, or anger, or much of anything. Depressingly, perhaps, it all just felt normal. For people of my generation and younger, growing up in the Detroit area meant growing up with a constant reminder of the best having ended a long time ago. We held no other concept of Detroit *but* as a shell of its former self. Our parents could mourn what it used to be and tell us stories about the wonderful downtown department stores and the heyday of Motown and muscle cars. But for us, those stories existed as pure fable. It was like being told about an uncle who died before you were born, what a terrific guy he’d been, if only you’d had the chance to meet him, see how handsome he looks in these old pictures ...

Would my kids one day grow up thinking the same thoughts about America as a whole, about my ponderous tales of cold war victories and dot-com booms? It was easy to let your imagination drift in melodramatic courses. A malaise spreading through the rest of the country—a creeping sense of dread that, after spending the past eight years doing absolutely everything wrong, this time we really had reached the inevitable end of our particular empire—all of this had the effect of making Detroit, for the first time in my life, feel less like a crazy anomaly and more like a leading indicator. The mood of hopelessness had become palpable. I found myself fleetingly wondering if Detroit, in the end, might reclaim its old title after all—not the Motor City but the city of tomorrow.

John said we should go. I squinted out over the ledge one last time. The icy wind was almost harsh enough to

make you cry, and Detroit, from up here, looked like it went on forever.

* * *

The story of Detroit has long functioned as a cautionary tale, as much a memento mori as one of those Roman catacombs lined with the skulls of dead monks. *What you are now, we once were; what we are now, you will become.* For this reason, observers have a tendency to approach Detroit as a forensic investigation, a sort of murder mystery. They examine the body, poke their gloved digits into the wounds, dust the crime scene for prints. Whom you ended up fingering in the drawing room could often say as much about your own biases as about the city itself. For instance, when people place all of the blame for the demise of Detroit on the riots, or white flight, or “political corruption,” there’s an implicit racial—sometimes racist—element to the critique, as Detroit, post-1967, would become a black city, still 85 percent African American today, run entirely by a black political elite, which lends the nostalgia for the “old” Detroit expressed by so many white suburbanites of a certain age an occasionally disquieting subtext.

Unsurprisingly, black Detroiters of a similar age can offer up a wholly different reading of these events, one in which the word *uprising* replaces *riot*, and in which the destructive fallout, while not celebrated, is contextually understood as a reaction to years of workplace discrimination, redlining, slum housing, and abuse at the hands of goon-squad cops. As for the city’s subsequent decline, well, an observer sympathetic to this point of view might note that *of course* the oppressors would not simply flee, not without sacking the joint on the way out the door and doing everything possible once they’d gone (top-down disinvestment, supporting lopsided suburb-favoring land

use and tax structures, dismantling public transportation, more redlining) to ensure the failure of, and effectively place sanctions upon, the hostile regime left behind.

Some blame the unions for their unchecked power and excessive demands, making Michigan an impossible place to do business; others, the Big Three automakers, for selling out the working class by moving factories abroad and to southern “right to work” states and for so badly bungling their own business model with chronic shortsightedness and an inability to adapt to a world involving actual competition with high-quality foreign product. Environmentalists might see the combustion engine as Culprit Zero; urbanophiles, the metastasizing suburbs; leftist European academics, the rot of capitalism and the long-fated unraveling of our great Yankee folly.

But I wasn’t really interested in any of that. Detroit-as-whodunit had been done, ad nauseam. Rather than relitigate the sins of the past, I hoped to discover something new about the city—specifically, what happens to a once-great place after it has been used up and discarded? Who sticks around and tries to make things work again? And what sorts of newcomers are drawn to the place for similar reasons? These questions seemed particularly pertinent now that Detroit was no longer such a freakish outlier. Cities in Florida and California, in the Rust Belt and the Sun Belt, in England and the Mediterranean and who knew where next, they’d all woken up to the same problems that have been pummeling Detroit for decades, including but not limited to structural bankruptcy, unsustainable city services and public obligations, chronic unemployment, vacant and increasingly worthless real estate, and the disappearance of a workable tax base. Left unchecked, Detroit levels of crime, political instability, and blight would certainly follow.

I wanted to think about how Detroiters struggled mightily to solve these problems—historically, yes, but

more importantly right now.

* * *

I wasn't alone. In the waning months of the Bush administration, a curious thing happened, as Michigan experienced a small but significant uptick in one very specific sector of its tourism economy: journalists started showing up. It turned out that explaining the origins of the financial crisis in any detail required elaborate definitions of complex and stupefyingly boring financial terms like *credit default swap* and *collateralized debt obligation*. But with the potential bankruptcy of General Motors, you had something tangible and wholly understandable to a layperson. We'd all at least *ridden* in an American car at some point, just as we all possessed opinions on various ways in which they sucked. Even better, Detroit provided the sort of breathtaking visual backdrop that shots of anxious-looking Wall Street floor traders or the exterior of Bernie Madoff's condo simply could not compete with. As the hurricane approaches landfall, journalistic convention dictates a live report from the field, wherein the correspondent must don a rain poncho and shout into a microphone while being buffeted by the elements, palm trees flailing wildly on the deserted beach in the background. A visit to the ruins of the old Packard plant or a "ghost street" of abandoned houses became the financial-collapse equivalent. It had taken the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression to do the unthinkable: Detroit had suddenly become trendy.

And so we all came. Reporters from *Fortune*, the *Guardian*, CNN, the *Economist*, *Vice*, from Tokyo and Paris, Sydney and Los Angeles. While attempting to get footage of the Packard plant, a Dutch film crew was carjacked, which itself became a news event, adding to the "Detroit so crazy!" story line in a satisfying, metanarrative kind of way.

At a public school rally, I nearly bumped into Dan Rather. Was Dan Rather even *on television* anymore? Had he just turned up on his own dime, drawn by an old man's vampirish sixth sense to the most swollen vein in the circulatory system of the present news cycle?

Time also turned its gaze back to Detroit in 2009. This time around, the magazine had come not to engage in speculative nuclear annihilation but rather to launch Assignment Detroit, a project being billed as a bold new journalistic experiment—a team of reporters would cover the city over the course of a year, living in a company-purchased home in Indian Village, one of the last remaining swank neighborhoods in the city proper. Not coincidentally, one of the first stories produced by Assignment Detroit was about how residents of such besieged neighborhoods had taken to hiring private security details to patrol their blocks. The previous fall, around the time of the auto bailout hearings, a photo essay of ruined Detroit buildings on *Time's* website titled “Detroit’s Beautiful, Horrible Decline” had been a big hit, despite the unfortunate ordering of adjectives. The tagline of Assignment Detroit’s new blog, “One year, one city, endless opportunities,” also hinted, inadvertently, at the magazine’s own opportunistic appropriation of Detroit’s sudden chicness.

The new obsession with Detroit did not end with journalists, at least not according to the journalists themselves, who reported on how artists were also colonizing the city. Could this be a first wave of bohemian gentrification? Was Detroit the next Williamsburg? One young couple from Chicago had bought a home in Detroit for a hundred bucks. Brooklyn artists came and froze another house in a block of ice. Thanks to a nearly 50 percent tax incentive being offered by the state, Hollywood film crews also arrived, along with actors like George Clooney and Richard Gere. A glossy French fashion magazine even produced a special “Detroit issue” featuring

shots of models in ruined industrial backdrops. The magazine cost twenty dollars in the United States—or, in local terms, one-fifth of the price of a home in Detroit.

Land speculators made the scene, too, as the new mayor, former Detroit Pistons basketball star Dave Bing, began to publicly acknowledge the need for the city to both shrink and radically reinvent itself, a pledge that urban-theorists, who had long regarded Detroit as the unsolvable math problem of their field, found tantalizing. And so they came, too, along with the Scandinavian academics, the neopastoralian agriculturalists, the deep-pocketed philanthropical organizations and the free-market ideologues and the fringe-left utopianists—they all came. For the most idealistic of these pioneers, which is how many of the newcomers self-identified, Detroit might very well be the city of tomorrow, but of a wholly different sort than described above. They'd come to see the place as a blank slate, so debased and forgotten it could be remade. The irony was almost too perfect: Detroit, having done more than any other city to promote the sprawl and suburbanization that had so despoiled the past century, could now become a model green city for the new century, with bike paths and urban farms and grass-roots sustainability nudging aside planned obsolescence.

So I joined the wagon train, alongside the hustlers and the do-gooders, the preachers and the criminals, the big dreamers looking to make names for themselves and the heavily armed zealots awaiting the end of the world. They—we!—came like pilgrims, to witness, to profit from, to somehow influence the story of the century. It might very well turn out to be the story of the *last* century, the death rattle of the twentieth-century definition of the American Dream. But there could also be another story emerging, the story of the first great postindustrial city of our new century. Who knows? Crazier things have happened in Detroit. It's a place so unspooled, one's wildest

experiments, ideas that would never be seriously considered in a functioning city, might actually have a shot here. Nothing else had worked, and so everything was permitted. The ongoing catastrophes had, in a strange way, bequeathed the place an unexpected asset, something few other cities of its size possessed: a unique sense of possibility. On a psychological level, this played out as one of those instances when a hoary cliché (or, in this case, a Kris Kristofferson lyric) is basically true: having nothing left to lose really *did* open the mind to an otherwise tricky-to-come-by sense of freedom.

After I moved back to the city, people I met in dozens of different contexts described Detroit as “the Wild West.” Meaning, it’s basically lawless. Meaning, land is plentiful and cheap. Meaning, now, as the frontier quite literally returns to the city—trees growing out of tops of abandoned buildings! wild pheasants circling the empty lots!—so, too, has the metaphorical frontier, along with the notion of “frontier spirit.” All possibly offensive notions to the people who’d never left, for reasons of choice or circumstance. But it’s undeniable that Detroit feels like an extraordinary place, and at the same time, just as Greenland might be called ground zero of the broader climate crisis, Detroit feels like ground zero for ... what, exactly? The end of the American way of life? Or the beginning of something else?

Either way, that is why so many divergent interests are converging here right now. Who doesn’t want to see the future?

¹ See, for example, Newsreel LIX, of John Dos Passos’s *The Big Money*: “the stranger first coming to Detroit if he be interested in the busy, economic side of modern life will find a marvelous industrial beehive ... ‘DETROIT THE CITY WHERE LIFE IS WORTH LIVING.’”

² The most famous shot in Sheeler’s series, *Criss-Crossed Conveyors*, evokes neither grit nor noise but instead an almost tabernacular grace. The smokestacks in the background look like the pipes of a massive church organ, the titular conveyor belts forming the shape of what is unmistakably a giant cross. The photograph was originally published in a 1928 issue of *Vanity Fair*,

where the caption read, "In a landscape where size, quantity and speed are the cardinal virtues, it is natural that the largest factory, turning out the most cars in the least time, should come to have the quality of America's Mecca."

[3](#) Surprisingly, Detroit city officials managed to successfully rebrand the night before Halloween "Angel's Night" in 1995. Thousands of volunteers enlist each year to help patrol their neighborhoods during the last days of October severely curbing the outbreaks of arson.