

Love Letter to an Empty Lot

Rachel Reed

There's a curious thing about Detroit. Actually, there are many curious things about Detroit, but what still strikes me most, after more than a decade here, are its abandoned lots.

Abandoned, of course, is relative.

Our home sits on a plot surrounded by vacant fields, which are largely neglected but occasionally mown by the city or the handyman for some far-away land speculator. It would be fair to say that most of our neighbors are at best apathetic to these lots, strewn as they are with fast food wrappers and bottles and dumped tires. Indeed, at first glance, it is hard to see much of any value in these long-forgotten parcels, pieces of the earth that used to support homes or businesses, schools or churches. For many, this emptiness is a monument to racism, to disinvestment, to blight and decline, and they are justified in feeling this way.

And yet.

And yet, can you see that violet shyly pushing upward, its face an early shock of color among the pale yellows and greens of spring? Do you see the humble chicory, with its pale lavender flowers, and the honey bee who returns to it time and again with the loyalty of a zealot? When the wind blows just right, can you detect the onion grass, smelling as it does of hot soup or Cool Ranch Doritos?

And what of that strangely beautiful transplant, the urban pheasant, which makes this glorious chaos its home? I have borne witness to entire life cycles of these giant birds, who live among the detritus, sleeping on power lines and making nests in the alley underbrush. Pheasants who strut about with gleaming emerald collars and blood-red masks, crowing for mates in the spring and pecking frantically at the sad, frozen earth in the winter.

Or take our grand old apple tree, which, for one fleeting week a year is afire with honey-scented blossoms, a layover for migrating birds who carouse on its branches on their way to everywhere else. Orioles, with their hot orange breasts, mingle with hummingbirds, like tiny jewels, wings fluttering so fast I must blink to see them. A bonded pair of cardinals quarrel, make up, rejoice on the tree, on chain-link fences, on utility poles.

Below the earth, a mysterious underworld rarely thought of except when basements flood or water pipes burst, too, teems with unseen life: roots, grubs, worms, and other creepy crawlies busy performing the ecosystem's gruntwork. Networks of fungi snake out through layers of soil like swollen veins. As proof, morel mushrooms, caps like honeycomb on acid, arrive and disappear in early spring, making a mockery of our inability to find them in the wild.

As night falls, swifts make good on their name, frantically chasing one another across the softening sorbet sky. Soon, droning cicadas will compete with speeding cars to be heard, and crickets will resign themselves to the lulls in between. Young rabbits go back to their timeshare in the brambles, evicting the opossums who head out on their nightly forage.

About that word: abandoned. Could something so full of life truly be “abandoned”? To me, it is some comfort to know that life continues in these open spaces, despite—even because of—human indifference. That this life can not only add richness to our experience on earth—but also sustain us. That with every milkweed, every cottonwood, every monarch comes promise. A future.

Nature cannot be the opposite of the city, indeed it never was. Detroit, a city of contradictions, where anguish and endurance commingle, where roads and parks and neighborhoods were made by automobiles, for automobiles, might seem like an unlikely place to find proof of this.

And yet.