

THE DESERTED CITY

Sunk are thy bowers in shapeless ruin all,
And the long grass o'ertops the mouldering
wall;
And, trembling, shrinking from the spoiler's
hand,
Far, far away thy children leave the land.

— OLIVER GOLDSMITH
"The Deserted Village"

Four weeks ago my daughter, Vanessa, and I drove across the United States on I-80/90 in her 1977 white Chevy Nova jammed tightly with all of her belongings, including her futon and dish drainer. She drove up from Oakland where she had been union organizing and was headed for Pittsburg and another union campaign. She asked if I would go as far as Detroit and fly back from there. It's an opportunity to see a real post-industrial city, she offered.

We left Portland after spending \$750 to get the car running and drove, taking turns at the wheel, across Oregon, down through Idaho to Salt Lake City. We drove all night and the next day, ending up in Rawlins, Wyoming, a largely boarded-up town that was once rich with copper mining and the railroad. Now it is a dusty motel strip for truckers. The only attractive sight was the Ferris Mansion, built in 1903, which to our good fortune is also a bed & breakfast. Exhausted, we luxuriated in the comfort of a house restored completely to its original grandeur by loving hands and hard work.

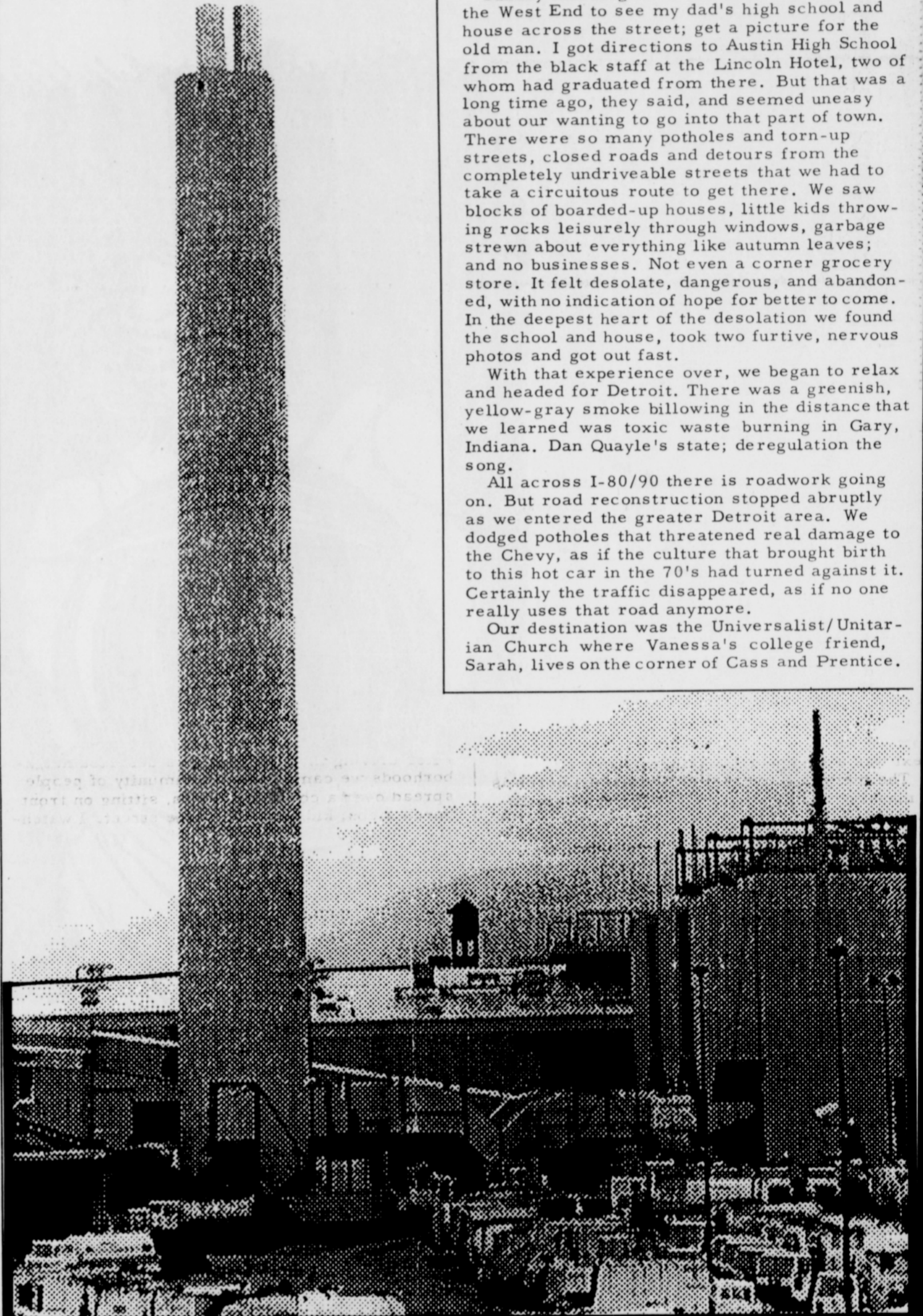
From Rawlins we drove to Cheyenne through the Rocky Mountains and some gorgeous country, then crossed Nebraska (eternity) and finally stopped at 11:30 p.m. in Anita, Iowa, the heartland of America. The motel keeper directed us to the Green Door Cafe & Bakery the next morning for breakfast, the center of town Saturday morning for all the locals. Eating our American Fries and Eggs, we felt so safe and cushioned in the heartland of rolling hills and agriculture.

We were directed to the backroad to see the historical marker, and this area's claim to fame. At the side of the road in Adair was a shrine to the bandit Jesse James whose gang committed the first train robbery at this spot, and killed two innocent working men, the engineer and his fireman. The information board at the site also describes the destruction of the once fertile prairies in just the past thirty years through over cultivation. A local gardening group had restored about an acre of prairie with its original mix of grasses as a sort of example of what was there for millions of years, destroyed in a generation.

Throughout Iowa and Illinois people worried about the dry but cold Spring that kept the crops from growing. We got our information from gas station attendants and local headlines in the newstands. We passed through cities where GM plants were cutting back hours; everyone nervous about drought and closures.

We passed miles of public assistance housing projects driving into Chicago, heavy traffic on the freeway into town and the Loop, and after locating the Opera House where my dad ushered during high school, we landed at the Lincoln Hotel, across from Lincoln Park and Lake Michigan with a view of the city in three directions from the 11th floor. Old Town. Good Italian food, coffee, unlimited gentrification. Young and white; students, doing well, having a good time. Music

BY KAREN MELLIN



in the streets and lots of lights. Coice of restaurants, taxis to Blues joints certainly not located in this district.

Sunday morning we drove out North Street to the West End to see my dad's high school and house across the street; get a picture for the old man. I got directions to Austin High School from the black staff at the Lincoln Hotel, two of whom had graduated from there. But that was a long time ago, they said, and seemed uneasy about our wanting to go into that part of town. There were so many potholes and torn-up streets, closed roads and detours from the completely undriveable streets that we had to take a circuitous route to get there. We saw blocks of boarded-up houses, little kids throwing rocks leisurely through windows, garbage strewn about everything like autumn leaves; and no businesses. Not even a corner grocery store. It felt desolate, dangerous, and abandoned, with no indication of hope for better to come. In the deepest heart of the desolation we found the school and house, took two furtive, nervous photos and got out fast.

With that experience over, we began to relax and headed for Detroit. There was a greenish, yellow-gray smoke billowing in the distance that we learned was toxic waste burning in Gary, Indiana. Dan Quayle's state; deregulation the song.

All across I-80/90 there is roadwork going on. But road reconstruction stopped abruptly as we entered the greater Detroit area. We dodged potholes that threatened real damage to the Chevy, as if the culture that brought birth to this hot car in the 70's had turned against it. Certainly the traffic disappeared, as if no one really uses that road anymore.

Our destination was the Universalist/Unitarian Church where Vanessa's college friend, Sarah, lives on the corner of Cass and Prentice.

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