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Sarah wrote this essay in John Bradley’s English 105 course.
Eyewitness. Eyes watch me as the car crawls down the Eight Mile. The only occupants of the street are ghosts, ghosts of the people who came before. In the afternoon sunlight, time stands still; nothing moves, nothing exists. Only memories and sorrow remain. Tears spring to my eyes as I imagine how they once looked—lush, clean-cut yards, shiny automobiles parked in the garages, and all the little details that transform a house into a home. Reality yanks me back to the present. I can’t take my eyes off of them. The yards are dense jungles now. Where windows and doors once stood are gaping, black holes showing the burnt, rotten inside of the structure. Because that is what it is now: a structure. Any reminiscences of a home disappeared when the roof caved in, when vandals used fire to leave ebony scars, when love and happiness were replaced with abandonment and violence, “I’m from Detroit; I never smile.”

The assembly line forms. It snakes through the unkempt lawn from the abandoned building to the moving van. One by one the tires are detached from the pile. It’s one big game of Jenga. Careful, don’t make the pile fall over. Grab a different one; this one is stuck. Once freed, the tires roll from person to person, always kept in motion. The journey ends at the van. Hands pick up the tire and lob it into the back of the vehicle. Slowly the pile in the yard diminishes. All that remains is the grass, once choked by rubber, now free to grow again. Back into the cars, drive, and search; it’s a game of hide and seek. Eureka! The assembly line forms. This process is repeated and repeated and repeated. The van returns home with a trunk full of rubber.

Gather together the supplies—rubber, wire, dividers. I follow the pattern. Lay a rubber strip through the wire. Add dividers. Lay another piece of rubber. Add dividers. “Buzz.” The saw is a constant hum in the background, cutting the old tires into long workable strips of rubber. “Zing.” The drill adds its input to the conversation, punching holes in the rubber so the wire can be threaded through. There are ten other work benches like mine set up around the garage. Men of all races and religions stand at the tables working with different sizes of rubber and wire. It all
depends on the order that was placed. A customer picks the dimensions they want and the color of the dividers. Old, forgotten tires are recycled into something useful and durable: door mats. Throughout the building, a transformation occurs. A pollutant is collected and reused; Detroit is gradually reclaimed.

“I would like to share something with you,” the director said. The room fills with silence as my friends and I listen. “Do you guys realize what you have accomplished today?” he asks the room.


“I’m talking about the tires. Yes, you cleaned up the city, but it was more than that,” he says seriously as he looks around the room. “You guys helped save a life. Behind those piles of tires, horrible things happen. Girls are raped, people murdered; today you made a difference.”

I look to my left; I look to my right. Chain link fence as far as the eye can see. Rusty bolts, chains and locks on the gates, barbed wire to prevent unwanted guests, the place is a ghost town. A gigantic building, surrounded by acres of open, empty space and the fence, stands in front of me. The concrete parking lots, once filled to maximum capacity, now have a population of zero. As I gaze at the heart-wrenching sight in front of me, the silence fills me. I am overcome by what once was. I see workers, dozens and dozens of workers, all doing their own jobs, each and every one a valued part of a well-oiled machine. I see smoke billowing out of the smoke stacks, day and night, never stopping. I see people’s lives, hopes, and dreams.

Silence shatters the window into the past. I am back in the present with the ghosts, the ghosts of the factory, the workers, the city. Once proud and regal, the factory lays abandoned, untouched. The ex-workers live in poverty or have left the city in hopes of a better life. The city is falling apart at the seams. Crime and violence fill the streets. Detroit, once a beautiful, successful city, has taken a turn for the worse.

The Cass Community Social Services (CCSS) website explains who and what CCSS is. The CCSS “is dedicated to making a profound difference in the diverse populations it serves by providing for basic needs, including affordable housing, promoting self-reliance and encouraging community inclusion and improvement.” I stand in a small hallway crowded with people. Small children run up and down the hallway doing what little kids are best at, having fun. My group and I are ushered into an office. We wait and we wait and we wait. “Creak.” The old door opens and in walks a woman. She greets us and then continues on with the introduction. Her
name is Karen. She is the director of the CCSS, and this is her story. Karen is well educated. She attended college, and after many years of hard work she earned a degree in law. Her career as a lawyer was her life. Karen came to CCSS as a volunteer. “I couldn’t stop coming back,” Karen says as she talks about her first experiences at Cass. She spent more and more time working at Cass. One day, Karen “came to Cass, picked up a clipboard and asked for a job.” And they gave her one. As a newcomer, she had to start at the bottom of the totem pole and work her way up. She did her time, and it paid off; she now runs CCSS. “I went from a high-paying job that I didn’t love to a job where I get paid considerably less to help people, and I love it,” she says. As I sit in the office and listen, I am inspired. I believe in a brighter future because of people like Karen, people who put the needs of others before their own needs.

I counted them. One, drive down another block, two, as we passed more, my mental tally kept adding up. It was in the double digits now. They were all different shapes and sizes but they had one common characteristic, emptiness. No big, yellow buses transporting the children to and fro. No kids playing on the monkey bars, the slide, the swings. No teachers teaching; no students learning. Block upon block upon block was school-less. Detroit was a city built for more than two million people. The current population was under 715,000. With a dwindling population, the citizens cannot support a city that costs three times more than what they can afford. With no money for funding and few to no students within the districts, schools were shut down. Children were expected to attend schools five to ten miles away, with no form of transportation. Education, the building block of a positive future, was taken away from the people who needed it most.

We’re stuck in traffic. I stare out the window at the world that goes creeping by. My head fills with the sights I’ve seen; my heart is heavy. A sign slowly enters my line of vision. It is posted next to the entrance to a park. The park is surrounded by small, up-kept homes. The sign reads:

“Warning! Change is inevitable
We’re planting the roots of a community
to revitalize Detroit.”