Life on the Mississippi:
East St. Louis, Illinois

by Jonathan Kozol

East of anywhere," writes a reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, "often evokes the other side of the tracks. But, for a first-time visitor suddenly deposited on its eerily empty streets, East St. Louis might suggest another world." The city, which is 98 percent black, has no obstetric services, no regular trash collection, and few jobs. Nearly a third of its families live on less than $7,500 a year; 75 percent of its population lives on welfare of some form. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development describes it as "the most distressed small city in America."

Only three of the 13 buildings on Missouri Avenue, one of the city's major thoroughfares, are occupied. A 13-story office building, tallest in the city, has been boarded up. Out side, on the sidewalk, a pile of garbage fills a ten-foot crater.

The city, which by night and day is clouded by the fumes that pour from vents and smokestacks at the Pfizer and Monsanto chemical plants, has one of the highest rates of child asthma in America.

It is, according to a teacher at the University of Southern Illinois, "a repository for a nonwhite population that is now regarded as expendable." The Post-Dispatch describes it as "America's Soweto."

Fiscal shortages have forced the layoff of 1,170 of the city's 1,400 employees in the past 12 years. The city, which is often unable to buy heating fuel or toilet paper for the city hall, recently announced that it might have to cashier all but 10 percent of the remaining work force of 230. In 1989 the mayor announced that he might need to sell the city hall and all six fire stations to raise needed cash. Last year the plan had to be scrapped after the city lost its city hall in a court judgment to a creditor. East St. Louis is mortgaged into the next century but has the highest property-tax rate in the state. Since October 1987, when the city's garbage pickups ceased, the backyards of residents have been employed as dump sites. In the spring of 1988 a policeman tells a visitor that 40 plastic bags of trash are waiting for removal from the backyard of his mother's house. Public health officials are concerned the garbage will attract a plague of flies and rodents in the summer. The policeman speaks of "rats as big as puppies" in his mother's yard. They are known to the residents, he says, as "bull rats." Many people have no cars or funds to cart the trash and simply burn it in their yards. The odor of smoke from burning garbage, says the Post Dispatch, "has become one of the scents of spring" in East St. Louis.

Railroad tracks still used to transport hazardous chemicals run through the city. "Always present," says the Post Dispatch, "is the threat of chemical spills.... The wail of sirens warning residents to evacuate after a spill is common." The most recent spill, the paper says, "was at the Monsanto Company plant.... Nearly 300 gallons of phosphorous trichloride spilled when a railroad tank was overfilled. About 450 residents were taken to St. Mary's Hospital.... The frequency of the emergencies has caused Monsanto to have a 'standing account' at St. Mary's."

In March of 1989, a task force appointed by Governor James Thompson noted that the city was in debt by more than $40 million, and proposed emergency state loans to pay for garbage collection and to keep police and fire depart ments in continued operation. The governor, however, blamed the mayor and his administrators, almost all of whom were black, and refused to grant the loans unless the mayor resigned. Thompson's response, said a Republican state leg islator, "made my heart feel good.... It's unfortunate, but the essence of the problem in East St. Louis is the people" who are running things.

Residents of Illinois do not need to breathe the garbage smoke and chemicals of East St. Louis. With the interstate highways, says a supervisor of the Illinois Power Company, "you can ride around the place and just keep going...."

East St. Louis lies in the heart of the American Bottoms -the flood plain on the east side of the Mississippi River opposite St. Louis. To the east of the city lie the Illinois Bluffs, which surround the flood plain in a semicircle. Towns on the Bluffs are predominantly white and do not welcome visitors from East St. Louis.

"The two tiers-Bluffs and Bottoms-" writes James Nowlan, a professor of public policy at Knox College, "have long represented . . . different worlds." Their physical separation, he believes, "helps rationalize the psychological and cultural distance that those on the Bluffs have clearly tried to maintain." People on the Bluffs, says Nowlan, "overwhelmingly want this separation to continue." Towns on the Bluffs, according to Nowlan, do not pay taxes to address flood problems in the Bottoms, "even though these problems are generated in large part by the water that drains from the Bluffs." East St. Louis lacks the funds to cope with flooding problems on its own, or to reconstruct its sewer system, which, according to local experts, is "irreparable." The problem is all the worse because the chemical plants in East St. Louis and adjacent towns have for decades been releasing toxins into the sewer system.

The pattern of concentrating black communities in easily flooded lowland areas is not unusual in the United States. Farther down the river, for example, in the Delta town of Tunica, Mississippi, people in the black community of Sugar Ditch live in shacks by open sewers that are commonly believed to be responsible for the high incidence of liver tumors and abscesses found in children there. Metaphors of caste like these are everywhere in the United States. Sadly, although dirt and water flow downhill, money and services do not.

The dangers of exposure to raw sewage, which backs up repeatedly into the homes of residents in East St. Louis, were first noticed, in the spring of 1989, at a public housing project, Villa Griffin. Raw sewage, says the Post-Dispatch, over flowed into a playground just behind the housing project, which is home to 187 children, "forming an oozing lake of . . . tainted water." Two schoolgirls, we are told, "experienced hair loss since raw sewage flowed into their homes."

While local physicians are not certain whether loss of hair is caused by the raw sewage, they have issued warnings that exposure to raw sewage can provoke a cholera or hepatitis outbreak. A St. Louis health official voices her dismay that children live with waste in their backyards. "The development of working sewage systems made cities livable a hundred years ago," she notes. "Sewage systems separate us from the Third World."

"It's a terrible way to live," says a mother at the Villa Griffin homes, as she bails raw sewage from her sink. Health officials warn again of cholera-and, this time, of typhoid also.

The sewage, which is flowing from collapsed pipes and dysfunctional pumping stations, has also flooded basements all over the city. The city's vacuum truck, which uses water and suction to unclog the city's sewers, cannot be used be cause it needs $5,000 in repairs. Even when it works, it some times can't be used because there isn't money to hire drivers. A single engineer now does the work that 14 others did before they were laid off. By April the pool of overflow be hind the Villa Griffin project has expanded into a lagoon of sewage. Two million gallons of raw sewage lie outside the children's homes.

In May, another health emergency develops. Soil samples tested at residential sites in East St. Louis turn up disturbing quantities of arsenic, mercury and lead-as well as steroids dumped in previous years by stockyards in the area. Lead levels found in the soil around one family's home, ac cording to lead-poison experts, measure "an astronomical 10,000 parts per million." Five of the children in the building have been poisoned. Although children rarely die of poisoning by lead, health experts note, its effects tend to be subtle and insidious. By the time the poisoning becomes apparent in a child's sleep disorders, stomach pains and hyperactive behavior, says a health official, "it is too late to undo the permanent brain damage." The poison, she says, "is chipping away at the learning potential of kids whose potential has already been chipped away by their environment."

The budget of the city's department of lead-poison control, however, has been slashed, and one person now does the work once done by six.

Lead poisoning in most cities comes from lead-based paint in housing, which has been illegal in most states for decades but which poisons children still because most cities, Boston and New York among them, rarely penalize offending landlords. In East St. Louis, however, there is a second source of lead. Health inspectors think it is

another residue of manufacturing-including smelting-in the factories and mills whose plants surround the city. "Some of the factories are gone," a parent organizer says, "but they have left their poison in the soil where our children play." In one apartment complex where particularly high quantities of lead have been detected in the soil, 32 children with high levels in their blood have been identified.

"I anticipate finding the whole city contaminated," says a health examiner.

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In the night, the sky above the East St. Louis area is brownish yellow. Illuminated by the glare from the Monsanto installation, the smoke is vented from four massive columns rising about 400 feet above the plant. The garish light and tubular structures lend the sky a strange, nightmarish look. Safir Ahmed, a young reporter who has covered East St. Louis for the Post-Dispatch for several years, drives with me through the rutted streets close to the plant and points out blocks of wooden houses without plumbing. Straggling black children walk along a road that has no sidewalks. "The soil is all contaminated here," he says.

Almost directly over our heads the plant is puffing out a cloud of brownish smoke that rises above the girders of the plant within a glow of reddish-gold illumination.

Two auto bridges cross the Mississippi River to St. Louis. To the south is the Poplar Street Bridge. The bridge to the north is named for Martin Luther King. "It takes three minutes to cross the bridge," says Ahmed. "For white people in St. Louis, it could be a thousand miles long."

On the southern edge of East St. Louis, tiny shack like houses stand along a lightless street. Immediately be hind these houses are the giant buildings of Monsanto, Big River Zinc, Cerro Copper, the American Bottoms Sew age Plant and Trade Waste Incineration-one of the largest hazardous-waste-incineration companies in the United States.

"The entire city lies downwind of this. When the plant gives off emissions that are viewed as toxic, an alarm goes off. People who have breathed the smoke are given a cash payment of $400 in exchange for a release from liability....

"The decimation of the men within the population is quite nearly total. Four of five births in East St. Louis are to single mothers. Where do the men go? Some to prison. Some to the military. Many to an early death. Dozens of men are living in the streets or sleeping in small, isolated camps be hind the burnt-out buildings. There are several of these camps out in the muddy stretch there to the left.

"The nicest buildings in the city are the Federal Court House and the City Hall-which also holds the jail-the National Guard headquarters, and some funeral establishments. There are a few nice houses and a couple of high-rise homes for senior citizens. One of the nicest buildings is the whorehouse. There's also a branch of the University of Southern Illinois, but it no longer offers classes; it's a social welfare complex now.

"The chemical plants do not pay taxes here. They have created small incorporated towns which are self-governed and exempt therefore from supervision by health agencies in East St. Louis. Aluminum Ore created a separate town called Alorton. Monsanto, Cerro Copper and Big River Zinc are all in Sauget. National Stock Yards has its own incorporated town as well. Basically there's no one living in some of these so-called towns. Alorton is a sizable town. Sauget, on the other hand, isn't much more than a legal fiction. It provides tax shelter and immunity from jurisdiction of authorities in East St. Louis."

The town of Sauget claims a population of about 200 people. Its major industries, other than Monsanto and the other plants, are topless joints and an outlet for the lottery. Two of the largest strip clubs face each other on a side street that is perpendicular to the main highway. One is named Oz and that is for white people. The other strip club, which is known as Wiz, is for black people. The lottery office, which is frequented primarily by black people, is the largest in the state of Illinois. "The lottery advertises mostly in black publications," Ahmed says. "So people who have nothing to start with waste their money on a place that sells them dreams. Lottery proceeds in Illinois allegedly go into education; in reality they go into state revenues and they add nothing to the education fund. So it is a total loss. Affluent people do not play the lottery. The state is in the business here of selling hopes to people who have none. The city itself is full of bars and liquor stores and lots of ads for cigarettes that feature pictures of black people. Assemble all the worst things in America-gambling, liquor, cigarettes and toxic fumes, sewage, waste disposal, prostitution-put it all together. Then you dump it on black people."

East St. Louis begins at the Monsanto fence. Rain starts falling as we cross the railroad tracks, and then another set of tracks, and pass a series of dirt streets with houses that are mostly burnt-out shells, the lots between them piled with garbage bags and thousands of abandoned auto tires. The city is almost totally flat and lies below the Mississippi's flood line, protected by a levee. In 1986 a floodgate broke and filled part of the city. Houses on Bond Avenue filled up with sewage to their second floors.

The waste water emitted from the sewage plant, according to a recent Greenpeace study, "varies in color from yellow-orange to green." The toxic substances that it contains become embedded in the soil and the marshland in which children play. Dead Creek, for example, a creekbed that received discharges from the chemical and metal plants in previous years, is now a place where kids from East St. Louis ride their bikes. The creek, which smokes by day and glows on moonless nights, has

gained some notoriety in recent years for instances of spontaneous combustion. The Illinois EPA believes that the combustion starts when children ride their bikes across the creek bed, "creating friction which be gins the smoldering process."

"Nobody in East St. Louis," Ahmed says, "has ever had the clout to raise a protest. Why Americans permit this is so hard for somebody like me, who grew up in the real Third World, to understand....

"I'm from India. In Calcutta this would be explicable, perhaps. I keep thinking to myself, 'My God! This is the United States!' "

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East St. Louis-which the local press refers to as "an inner city without an outer city"-has some of the sickest children in America. Of 66 cities in Illinois, East St. Louis ranks first in fetal death, first in premature birth, and third in infant death. Among the negative factors listed by the city's health director are the sewage running in the streets, air that has been fouled by the local plants, the high lead levels noted in the soil, poverty, lack of education, crime, dilapidated housing, insufficient health care, unemployment. Hospital care is deficient too. There is no place to have a baby in East St. Louis. The maternity ward at the city's Catholic hospital, a l00-year-old structure, was shut down some years ago. The only other hospital in town was forced by lack of funds to close in 1990. The closest obstetrics service open to the women here is seven miles away. The infant death rate is still rising.

As in New York City's poorest neighborhoods, dental problems also plague the children here. Although dental problems don't command the instant fears associated with low birth weight, fetal death or cholera, they do have the consequence of wearing down the stamina of children and defeating their ambitions. Bleeding gums, impacted teeth and rotting teeth are routine matters for the children I have interviewed in the South Bronx. Children get used to feeling constant pain. They go to sleep with it. They go to school with it. Sometimes their teachers are alarmed and try to get them to a clinic. But it's all so slow and heavily encumbered with red tape and waiting lists and missing, lost or canceled welfare cards, that dental care is often long delayed. Children live for months with pain that grown-ups would find unendurable. The gradual attrition of accepted pain erodes their energy and aspiration. I have seen children in New York with teeth that look like brownish, broken sticks. I have also seen teen-agers who were missing half their teeth. But, to me, most shocking is to see a child with an abscess that has been inflamed for weeks and that he has simply lived with and accepts as part of the routine of life. Many teachers in the urban schools have seen this. It is almost commonplace.

Compounding these problems is the Door nutrition of the children here-average daily food expenditure in East St. Louis is $2.40 for one child-and the under immunization of young children. Of every l00 children recently surveyed in East St. Louis, 55 were incompletely immunized for polio, diphtheria, measles and whooping cough. In this context, health officials look with all the more uneasiness at those lagoons of sewage outside public housing.

On top of all else is the very high risk of death by homicide in East St. Louis. In a recent year in which three cities in the state of roughly the same size as East St. Louis had an average of four homicides apiece, there were 54 homicides in East St. Louis. But it is the heat of summer that officials here particularly dread. The heat that breeds the insects bearing polio or hepatitis in raw sewage also heightens asthma and frustration and reduces patience. "The heat," says a man in public housing, "can bring out the beast...."

The fear of violence is very real in East St. Louis. The CEO of one of the large companies out on the edge of town has developed an "evacuation plan" for his employees. State troopers are routinely sent to East St. Louis to put down disturbances that the police cannot control. If the misery of this community explodes someday in a real riot (it has happened in the past, residents believe that state and federal law-enforcement agencies will have no hesitation in applying massive force to keep the violence contained.

As we have seen, it is believed by people here that white developers regard the land beside the river and adjacent sections of the city as particularly attractive sites for condominiums and luxury hotels. It is the fear of violence, people believe, and the proximity of the black population that have, up to now, prevented plans like these from taking shape. Some residents are convinced, therefore, that they will some day be displaced. "It's happened in other cities," says a social worker who has lived here for ten years. "East St. Louis is a good location, after all."

This eventuality, however, is not viewed as very likely or not for a long, long time. The soil would have to be de leaded first. The mercury and arsenic would have to be dealt with. The chemical plants would have to be shut down or modified before the area could be regarded as attractive to developers. For now, the people of East St. Louis probably can rest assured that nobody much covets what is theirs.

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The problems of the streets in urban areas, as teachers often note, frequently spill over into public schools. In the public schools of East St. Louis this is literally the case.

"Martin Luther King Junior High School," notes the Post-Dispatch in a story published in the early spring of 1989, "was evacuated Friday afternoon after sewage flowed into the kitchen.... The kitchen was closed and students were sent home." On Monday, the paper continues, "East St. Louis Senior High School was awash in sewage for the second time this year." The school had to be shut because of "fumes and backed-up toilets." Sewage flowed into the basement, through the floor, then up into the kitchen and the students' bathrooms. The backup, we read, "occurred in the food preparation areas."

School is resumed the following morning at the high school, but a few days later the overflow recurs. This time the entire system is affected, since the meals distributed to every student in the city are prepared in the two schools that have been flooded. School is called off for all 16,500 students in the district. The sewage backup, caused by the failure of two pumping stations, forces officials at the high school to shut down the furnaces.

At Martin Luther King, the parking lot and gym are also flooded. "It's a disaster," says a legislator. "The streets are underwater; gaseous fumes are being emitted from the pipes under the schools," she says, "making people ill."

In the same week, the schools announce the layoff of 280 teachers, 166 cooks and cafeteria workers, 25 teacher aides, 16 custodians and 18 painters, electricians, engineers and plumbers. The president of the teachers' union says the cuts, which will bring the size of kindergarten and primary classes up to 30 students, and the size of fourth to twelfth grade classes up to 35, will have "an unimaginable impact" on the students. "If you have a high school teacher with five classes each day and between 150 and 175 students . . ., it's going to have a devastating effect." The school system, it is also noted, has been using more than 70 "permanent substitute teachers," who are paid only $10,000 yearly, as a way of saving money.

Governor Thompson, however, tells the press that he will not pour money into East St. Louis to solve long-term problems. East St. Louis residents, he says, must help them selves. "There is money in the community," the governor insists. "It's just not being spent for what it should be spent for."

The governor, while acknowledging that East St. Louis faces economic problems, nonetheless refers dismissively to those who live in East St. Louis. "What in the community," he asks, "is being done right?" He takes the opportunity of a visit to the area to announce a fiscal grant for sewer improvement to a relatively wealthy town nearby.

In East St. Louis, meanwhile, teachers are running out of chalk and paper, and their paychecks are arriving two weeks late. The city warns its teachers to expect a cut of half their pay until the fiscal crisis has been eased.

The threatened teacher layoffs are mandated by the Illinois Board of Education, which, because of the city's fiscal crisis, has been given supervisory control of the school bud get. Two weeks later the state superintendent partially relents. In a tone very different from that of the governor, he notes that East St. Louis does not have the means to solve its education problems on its own. "There is no natural way," he says, that "East St. Louis can bring itself out of this situation." Several cuts will be required in any case-one quarter of the system's teachers, 75 teacher aides, and several dozen others will be given notice-but, the state board notes, sports and music programs will not be affected.

East St. Louis, says the chairman of the state board, "is simply the worst possible place I can imagine to have a child brought up.... The community is in desperate circumstances." Sports and music, he observes, are, for many children here, "the only avenues of success." Sadly enough, no matter how it ratifies the stereotype, this is the truth; and there is a poignant aspect to the fact that, even with class size soaring and one quarter of the system's teachers being given their dismissal, the state board of education demonstrates its genuine but skewed compassion by attempting to leave sports and music untouched by the overall austerity.

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Teachers like Mr. Solomon, working in low-income districts such as East St. Louis, often tell me that they feel cut off from educational developments in modern public schools. "Well, it's amazing," Solomon says. "I have done without so much so long that, if I were assigned to a suburban school, I'm not sure I'd recognize what they are doing. We are utterly cut off."

Of 3 children who begin the history classes in the standard track, he says, more than a quarter have dropped out by spring semester. "Maybe 24 are left by June. Mind you, this is in the junior year. We're speaking of the children who survived. Ninth and tenth grades are the more horrendous years for leaving school.

"I have four girls right now in my senior home room who are pregnant or have just had babies. When I ask them why this happens, I am told, 'Well, there's no reason not to have a baby. There's not much for me in public school.' The truth is, that's a pretty honest answer. A diploma from a ghetto high school doesn't count for much in the United States today. So, if this is really the last education that a person's going to get, she's probably perceptive in that statement. Ah, there's so much bitterness-unfairness-there, you know. Most of these pregnant girls are not the ones who have much self-esteem.... "

"Very little education in the school would be considered academic in the suburbs. Maybe 10 to 15 percent of students are in truly academic programs. Of the 55 percent who graduate, 20 percent may go to four-year colleges: something like 10 percent of any entering class. Another 10 to 20 percent may get some other kind of higher education. An equal number join the military....

A girl in a white jersey with the message DO THE RIGHT THING on the front raises her hand. "You visit other schools," she says. "Do you think the children in this school are getting what we'd get in a nice section of St. Louis?" I note that we are in a different state and city. "Aren't we citizens of East St. Louis or America?" she asks. A tall girl named Samantha interrupts. "I have a comment that I want to make." She then relates the following incident: "Fairview Heights is a mainly white community. A friend of mine and I went up there once to buy some books. We walked into the store. Everybody lookin' at us, you know, and somebody says, 'What do you want?' And lookin' at each other like, 'What are these black girls doin' here in Fairview Heights?' I just said, 'I want to buy a book!' It's like they're scared we're goin' to rob them. Take away a privilege that's theirs by rights. Well, that goes for school as well.

"My mother wanted me to go to school there and she tried to have me transferred. It didn't work. The reason, she was told, is that we're in a different 'jurisdiction.' If you don't live up there in the hills, or further back, you can't attend their schools. That, at least, is what they told my mother."

"Is that a matter of race?" I ask. "Or money?"

"Well," she says, choosing her words with care, "the two things, race and money, go so close together-what's the difference? I live here, they live there, and they don't want me in their school."

A boy named Luther speaks about the chemical pollution. "It's like this," he says. "On one side of us you have two chemical corporations. One is Pfizer-that's out there. They make paint and pigments. The other is Monsanto. On the other side are companies incinerating toxic waste. So the trash is comin' at us this direction. The chemicals is comin' from the other. We right in the middle."

Despite these feelings, many of the children voice a curiously resilient faith in racial integration. "If the government would put a huge amount of money into East St. Louis, so that this could be a modern, well-equipped and top-rate school," I ask, "with everything that you could ever want for education, would you say that racial segregation was no longer of importance?"

Without exception, the children answer, "No."

"Going to a school with all the races," Luther says, "is more important than a modern school."

"They still believe in that dream," their teacher says. "They have no reason to do so. That is what I find so wonderful and ... ah, so moving.... These kids are the only reason I get up each day."

I ask the students, "What would happen if the government decided that the students in a nearby town like Fair view Heights and the students here in East St. Louis had to go to school together next September?"

Samantha: "The buses going to Fairview Heights would all be full. The buses coming to East St. Louis would be empty."

"What if East St. Louis had the very best computer classes in the state-and if there were no computer classes in the school of Fairview Heights?"

"The buses coming here," she says, "would still be empty."

When I ask her why, she answers in these quiet words: "I don't know why."

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Clark Junior High School is regarded as the top school in the city. I visit, in part, at the request of school officials, who would like me to see education in the city at its very best. Even here, however, there is a disturbing sense that one has entered a backwater of America.

"We spend the entire eighth grade year preparing for the state exams," a teacher tells me in a top-ranked English class. The teacher seems devoted to the children, but three students sitting near me sleep through the entire period. The teacher rouses one of them, a girl in the seat next to me, but the student promptly lays her head back on her crossed arms and is soon asleep again. Four of the 14 ceiling lights are broken. The corridor outside the room is filled with voices. Outside the window, where I see no schoolyard, is an empty lot.

In a mathematics class of 30 children packed into a space that might be adequate for 15 kids, there is one white student. The first white student I have seen in East St. Louis, she is polishing her nails with bright red polish. A tiny black girl next to her is writing with a one-inch pencil stub.

In a seventh grade social studies class, the only book that bears some relevance to black concerns-its title is The American Negro-bears a publication date of 1967. The teacher invites me to ask the class some questions. Uncertain where to start, I ask the students what they've learned about the civil rights campaigns of recent decades.

A 14-year-old girl with short black curly hair says this: "Every year in February we are told to read the same old speech of Martin Luther King. We read it every year. 'I have a dream....' It does begin to seem-what is the word?" She hesitates and then she finds the word: "perfunctory." I ask her what she means.

"We have a school in East St. Louis named for Dr. King," she says. "The school is full of sewer water and the doors are locked with chains. Every student in that school is black. It's like a terrible joke on history."

It startles me to hear her words, but I am startled even more to think how seldom any press reporter has observed the irony of naming segregated schools for Martin Luther King. Children reach the heart of these hypocrisies much quicker than the grown-ups and the experts do.

"I would like to comment on that," says another 14-year old student, named Shalika. "I have had to deal with this all of my life. I started school in Fairview Heights. My mother pushes me and she had wanted me to get a chance at better education. Only one other student in my class was black. I was in the fifth grade, and at that age you don't understand the ugliness in people's hearts. They wouldn't play with me. I couldn't understand it. During recess I would stand there by myself beside the fence. Then one day I got a note: 'Go back to Africa.'

"To tell the truth, it left a sadness in my heart. Now you hear them sayin' on TV, 'What's the matter with these colored people? Don't they care about their children's educa tion?' But my mother did the best for me she knew. It was not my mother's fault that I was not accepted by those people."

"It does not take long," says Christopher, a light-skinned boy with a faint mustache and a somewhat heated and perspiring look, "for little kids to learn they are not wanted."

Shalika is small and looks quite young for junior high. In each ear she wears a small enameled pin of Mickey Mouse. "To some degree I do believe," she says, "that this is caused by press reports. You see a lot about the crimes committed here in East St. Louis when you turn on the TV. Do they show the crimes committed by the government that puts black people here? Why are all the dirty businesses like chemicals and waste disposal here? This is a big country. "Couldn't they find another place to put their poison?"

"Shalika," the teacher tells me afterward, "will go to college."

"Why is it this way?" asks Shalika in a softer voice again. But she doesn't ask the question as if she is waiting for an answer.

"Is it 'separate but equal,' then?" I ask. "Have we gone back a hundred years?"

"It is separate. That's for sure," the teacher says. She is a short and stocky middle-aged black woman. "Would you want to tell the children it is equal?"

Christopher approaches me at the end of class. The room is too hot. His skin looks warm and his black hair is damp. "Write this down. You asked a question about Martin Luther King. I'm going to say something. All that stuff about 'the dream' means nothing to the kids I know in East St. Louis. So far as they're concerned, he died in vain. He was famous and he lived and gave his speeches and he died and now he's gone. But we're still here. Don't tell students in this school about 'the dream.' Go and look into a toilet here if you would like to know what life is like for students in this city." Before I leave, I do as Christopher asked and enter a boy's bathroom. Four of the six toilets do not work. The toilets stalls, which are eaten away by red and brown corrosion, have no doors. The toilets have no seats. One has a rotted wooden stump. There are no paper towels and no soap. Near the door there is a loop of wire with an empty toilet-paper roll.
"This," says Sister Julia, "is the best school that we have in East St. Louis."

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In East St. Louis, as in every city that I visit, I am forced to ask myself if what I've seen may be atypical. One would like to think that this might be the case in East St. Louis, but it would not be the truth.

At Landsdowne Junior High School, the St. Louis Sun reports, "there are scores of window frames without glass, like sockets without eyes." Hallways in many schools are dark, with light bulbs missing or burnt out. One walks into a school, a member of the city's board of education notes, "and you can smell the urinals a hundred feet away...."

A teacher at an elementary school in East St. Louis has only one full-color workbook for her class. She photocopies workbook pages for her children, but the copies can't be made in color and the lessons call for color recognition by the children.

A history teacher at the Martin Luther King School has 110 students in four classes-but only 26 books. Some of the books are missing the first hundred pages.

Each year, Solomon observes of East St. Louis High, "there's one more toilet that doesn't flush, one more drinking fountain that doesn't work, one more classroom without texts.... Certain classrooms are so cold in winter that the students have to wear their coats to class, while children in other classrooms swelter in a suffocating heat that cannot be turned down."

Critics in the press routinely note that education spending in the district is a trifle more than in surrounding districts. They also note that public schools in East St. Louis represent the largest source of paid employment in the city, and this point is often used to argue that the schools are overstaffed. The implication of both statements is that East St. Louis spends excessively on education. One could as easily conclude, however, that the conditions of existence here call for even larger school expenditures to draw and to retain more gifted staff and to offer all those extra services so desperately needed in a poor community. What such critics also fail to note, as Solomon and principal Sam Morgan have observed, is that the crumbling infrastructure uses up a great deal more of the per-pupil budget than would be the case in districts with updated buildings that cost less to operate. Critics also willfully ignore the health conditions and the psychological disarray of children growing up in burnt-out housing, playing on contaminated land, and walking past acres of smoldering garbage on their way to school. They also ignore the vast expense entailed in trying to make up for the debilitated skills of many parents who were prior victims of these segregated schools or those of Mississippi, in which many of the older residents of East St. Louis led their early lives. In view of the extraordinary miseries of life for children in the district, East St. Louis should be spending far more than is spent in wealthy suburbs. As things stand, the city spends approximately half as much each year on every pupil as the state's top-spending districts.

It is also forgotten that dramatic cuts in personnel within the East St. Louis schools-for example, of 250 teachers and 250 nonprofessional employees, as demanded recently by state officials-would propel 500 families with perhaps 2,000 children and dependents to the welfare lists and deny the city the stability afforded by a good chunk of its rapidly diminished lower middle class. Nothing, in short, that the East St. Louis school board does within the context of its penury can benefit one interest in the city without damaging another.

It is accurate to note that certain of the choices and priorities established by the East St. Louis school board do at times strike an observer as misguided, and state politicians are not hesitant to emphasize this point. The mayor of the city for many years, a controversial young man named Carl Officer, was frequently attacked by the same critics for what sometimes was alleged to be his lack of probity and of far sighted planning. There may have been some real truth to these charges. But the diligence of critics in observing the supposed irregularities of his behavior stands in stunning contrast to their virtual refusal to address the governing realities of destitution and near-total segregation and the willingness of private industry to flee a population it once courted and enticed to East St. Louis but now finds expendable.

In very few cases, in discussing the immiseration of this city, do Illinois officials openly address the central fact, the basic evil, of its racial isolation. With more efficient local governance, East St. Louis might become a better-managed ghetto, a less ravaged racial settlement, but the soil would remain contaminated and the schools would still resemble relics of the South post-Reconstruction. They might be

a trifle cleaner and they might perhaps provide their children with a dozen more computers or typewriters, better stoves for cooking classes, or a better shop for training future gas station mechanics; but the children would still be poisoned in their bodies and disfigured in their spirits.

Now and then the possibility is raised by somebody in East St. Louis that the state may someday try to end the isolation of the city as an all-black entity. This is something, however, that no one with power in the state has ever contemplated. Certainly, no one in government proposes busing 16,000 children from this city to the nearby schools of Bellevue, Fairview Heights or Collinsville; and no one in tends to force these towns to open up their neighborhoods to racially desegregated and low-income housing. So there is, in fact, no exit for these children. East St. Louis will likely be left just as it is for a good many years to come: a scar of sorts, an ugly metaphor of filth and overspill and chemical effusions, a place for blacks to live and die within, a place for other people to avoid when they are heading for St. Louis.

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