

Warren and Conner, Eastside, Detroit, Michigan, USA

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Detroit's Warren Conner Shopping Center has been sold in a deal worth an estimated \$10 million to \$12 million, a plane, an office, no taxes for a century, underground tunnels, full length minks, no wait permits, no tickets, no blight problems, no look passes, quarterly glowing articles and access to a boat at the marina that has clearance to cross international waters. In gratitude, the new owners plan to make improvements. They will hurl paint, they will nail signs, they will choose neon or flashing lights. They will hire a company to pile salt in the center of the lot in the event of snow. They will hire a company to sit a 2002 Chrysler 200 with yellow flashing lights in the corner—a nod to public safety. A glorious banner announcing new ownership will be unveiled across the front and side so every passerby can shiver in anticipation of the great change before them. New York City-based Ore Equities purchased the center at Warren and Conner from Los Angeles-based Whitley Management Corp., an affiliate of the Clifton Group, based in Montreal. Ore Equities said it is renaming the 146,000-square-foot center the "Gallery at Warren Conner." But everybody calls it Warren AND Conner. Imagine, not knowing that we are all of someplace and some other place. Hell, you can call it the moon. But it's Warren and Conner and everybody knows it. Better parking, better lighting, same bad meat. Better signage, better lighting to see where the money goes when it leaves here. The company said it will work to attract national apparel stores typically found in malls. The company says this is what Detroit needs, a hundred deals like these. The ribbon cutting was hosted by the assistant associate of the ombudsman of Detroit's greater business region. As they cut the ribbon in front of Citi Trends they changed, "A hundred strip malls like these! A hundred parking lots! A hundred new management signs! A hundred more lease-by-the-foot signs!" The dream, the assistant associate remarked. Who wants to come to the east side? Ore has been on an acquisitions streak, acquiring retail, office and residential properties in New York; Chicago; New Orleans; Atlanta; and Norfolk, Va. The Warren Conner property is its first Detroit acquisition. The proud pioneers hope to bring fellow investors on board. A thousand intersections are waiting, Howard Benz Commercial Real Estate L.L.C. kept repeating. He was the broker on the Warren Conner deal. Benz said the parties will not release full terms—it feels better that way.

Benz said the new ownership is an encouraging sign for the area. "Anytime you get fresh owners in, it's always a plus for the neighborhood," he said. "People love it," he said. "People get excited by the same thing. We are familiar. This purchase is an emblem. "What they want more than anything," he said, is to stand stock still."

2. The Parking Lot (as re-told by a one, Mr. Pierre Brown), March 2011

Whole shit looked wild, man. Friday? Saturday? Sheeyt. Lit up. You know, I don't know where them people went who took over this strip but they been gone. Bought it and left--or really, way it work now, prolly never wasn't here to begin with. You know they buy it sight unseen around here. Scoop it up. All that damn money. So, that's one.

Wherever it is they went to, I know we thought they wasn't comin back, or we ain't give a shit if I'm honest. Not the way we was in there posted up, grillin' and shit. Drinks. I mean, damn, I'm laughing cause, you'da thought we at the club. Bottles. Next day glass be shining on the pavement like a sea of silver.

Don't it smell so good over here? Bobby that's the plug, man. He got oils, incense, African shit--soaps or whatever they got. But he keep it smellin so good. Almost like you someplace different. I went over an' asked 'eem, I said, 'Bobby what's that you got burnin'? He gon say its his mix. His mix. All private and shit. I said, the hell is that? You ain't gon tell me? He said if I buy enough he'll tell me. Man, nobody don't need a thousand of them oils, shit be too strong. He keep it goin like a camp fire too, smell it from Mack sometime. Try burn that inside fuck around and die.

But yea, I take my lil lady up here do her rippin and runnin'. Go into Foreman Mills. I tell her, take them kids in wichoo, you know I ain't sittin out here with they bad asses all damn day, being loud. And you know she gon take her time anyway. I'ma go on over there to Popeyes, get me a two piece, come back, roll up and wait. Prolly gon see somebody come through here. Same shit. We all on the same shit. She in there, getting whatever she gettin--you know they got them a deal or two in there--you gotta look--so I know for a fact she takin' all day. Then she gon call me, tell me to meet her at the beauty supply. All the same shit to me, it's all right here--whole lil universe.

Butcheah, I ain't gon bullshit you, we wore this lot out that summer. I don't know what it was, somethin', spirit of a celebration came down. We all caught it. They shut down that other lil shop around then too, the one with them clothes--you know? For dancers and strippers and whatnot. So then they popped that lock and had a whole lil dispensary going, if you will. Lights worked, everything. That got shut down quick.

Wasn't no real parking spots neither, just wide open. No paint, no lines. I mean, cars pullin in zig zag. You know, pull that thang in, throw it in park. Make it work. Don't pull up with nothin nice and leave yo car neither. You know you can't do that no more anyways. I mean, don't matter if you run this whole mess. If you leave your car loose, that's on you. They hungry out here. I seen ole boy with the Caddy last week, finally got that fixed up. I think he painted it too. He pulled in here that summer and got that shit busted OPEN. Three windows gone. I mean got they got up in the trunk with a hanger, the whole nine. They waited til they seen the bus coming, got his ass, hopped on and rolled away. I ain't seen shit. He ain't said a word when he came out the shop. Just got in and drove it back home. Now you know wasn't no papers on that 'lac. That's when I said, 'hell naw, they ain't playin over here'. I kept my van at home. They can't get nowhere with this Malibu, they know that.

When that sun start goin down? Bout 10? That's it, my baby. Liquor start goin', no tellin. I seen fights, I seen a proposal one time, 'bout ten years back. Personally, I don't see the romance around here but she damn sure ain't care though. She did her lil 'I'm surprised' crying and carrying on. You know how they get. Ain't catchin Pierre, though, no sir. I did that one time, lasted bout long as a square. Had to let that go. Bitch was wild. But we took shots with em, I think that's when they had the picture wall set up on the other side too. Different owners then. I think the concrete was a little better, butchea. Seen all types of shit. The ribs over there good too--but don't get none of them sides. I don't know what pissy ass vinegar they put on they stuff but it tore me up boy. Cain't do that no more. But them ribs got a good smoke to 'em.

You come in here, you better come prepared. Looked like they came in here with a jackhammer, fucked it all up and sped off. Like they did that 'lac. That's how the summer started, okay? No lines, no paint neither, just a whole big mess of space. Sheeyt, give

me the shit, let me own it, I-ah clean it up. Hubcaps lined up by the fence, probably find you anything you be here long enough.

They shoulda just gone and open a auto shop over on that other side, cause they fix cars all day over there anyway. And that church--I ain't never seen that one open--you know they set up churches sometimes just for the taxes and shit. And they just leave em there in case they check on it. But who checkin churches? Jesus? Over on that corner by that church they do a moonbounce every weekend damn near. I think I knew that girl who did it too--her and her mama. \$5 all day. That's why I told ole girl, take them kids inside the damn store, I ain't finna pay no \$20 so they can jump around and then one wanna start crying, one get hurt, one gotta pee--nuh-uh. I'm pullin in, cuttin that engine off, saving me some gas. Go get me a little two piece and relax.

But you know, money. That summer ended. They came back in the fall time and painted it, smoothed it. Seem like they smoothed the people with it--ain't been the same since. Police come now and again. Now, you pull in, regular like, into a space. I think they own the gas station over there too, yup. The one with the Subway.

3. The Oil Man is a Liar. (circa 2014)

OBAMA, Black Ice, Sex, Wet Pu\$\$y, Strawberry Blonde, Calvin Klein type, Egyptian Musk, White Diamond type, Good Luck, Poison, Cherry Pie, Tom Ford type, Cucumber Melon, Midnight, Night Queen, Bob Marley, Ocean, Perry Ellis type, Sean John type, Louis V, Gucci type, Back to Africa, Passionfruit, Pear, Chanel type, Cotton Candy, Rosé, Hot Sex, Kardsashian Type, Strawberries & Champagne, Baby Powder, Black Power, Paris Hilton type, Tommy Hilfiger type, Sweet Pea, Escada type, Good Luck, Thug Passion, Ocean Fresh, Michael Jordan type, Coach Type (Woman), Coach Type (Man), Pretty Feet, Africa, Vanilla, Black Love, Issey Miyake type, Dior Type, Cool Water type, Peace, Burberry Type, Brown Sugar, Money.

He stood there, rubbed his neck, stared at my breasts and swore up and down that he'd never cheated on his wife, not once. 20 years of marriage. His gloat curled his upper lip into a snarl. The bed of his pickup truck pushed up industrial plumes of thick, sweet smoke. From inside an old Folgers can, licks of flame popped and faded into low hanging clouds of sizzling perfume. Its scent and sky work converted the uninterested

into the curious. Who could resist the way the smoked twisted and offered such scented delight. Two and three people from the bus stop, from the chicken and fish shop, from the parking lot followed the trail—sniffed the air, smelled it all, synthetic, foreign, and familiar. Greasy old jars and soaps and incense sticks and more and more and more.

A scent, he challenged, looking around at his congregation. Any one. Arden? Easy. He motioned across his kingdom—two collapsible tables underneath printed old wax cloth.

I was, like the rest of us, just there. Everyone's eyes crossed paths on the table, scanning each bottle, trying to mentally place each sweet molecule. We all knew these decorations of air, covers of the old smoke, the grease, the soap, the time. Each whiff took us into our own places, on our own streets, into our old lover's homes, pews, foyers, whosoever the scent belonged to, it lived. He stood and watched as we waded through a slick paradise of memory.

The oil man was moving in the spirit of divination. He danced around his table, took a bottle of lime colored syrup and touched it to an older woman's wrist. She smiled. Kiwi Love. He knew. The can on his truck bed bubbled and he plucked up a dusty bottle of something maroon and squeezed it gently under the nose of a man in a matching plaid short set with shoes from the store across the way. The man sniffed. He sniffed again.

"Almost," the man said, looking a shade disappointed. The oil man snapped his fingers and picked again. Liquid the same color, but this potion shook like water. He squeezed. The man adjusted his pants and gave a hard nod. The oil man smiled and dropped the redemption bottle back into its place.

“24 karat gold,” the oil man said. “I like that one too. \$5 small, \$10 big, \$20 huge. Talk to me.”

The wind knew to blow. The clouds came over and parted, giving sun. He looked at the woman behind me.

“What you need, some soap?”

The group snickered. He pointed at his pile of chunky, raw soaps, wrapped in warped plastic. His intentions flew by and she scoffed, startled by his insult, pumping it full of life. “No,” he said. “Come on now. Come on now,” he pointed behind my shoulder and called her back up.

She hesitated but came towards his open hand.

“I got the best soap, right now. In all of Detroit. That’s a fact. East, West, the whole damn thing.” The man in plaid, 24 karat gold, laughed a full sound. “Come on now,” the oil man flattened the laughter in his own voice.

The woman sucked in her teeth, adjusted her tank top and vanished. The rest of us exhaled tiny giggles. The incense at the end of his table flickered.

“Now y’all know...” the oil man brushed off and restacked his soap pile--black soap, white soap, green tea soap, cinnamon soap, shea butter soap. Dove.



The last woman walked away talking loudly into her phone, “One thing ‘bout them oils, they burn good,” she said to the listener. “Yup, over by the Citi Trends.” Her body disappeared into the perfumed fog. A car door opened and music fell out, spreading across the concrete. He pointed at me. Couldn’t I see the way the smoke disperses gently above the cars? How it hovers and sweetens the lot, the traffic, the bus stop? Want to know what it can cover? Stand there, with the competition of food, fuel, life—and watch how his oils envelope the sky.

I am searching for a memory.

One scent that I wore one time. The one woman I loved most smelled me and smiled. But the oil man is a diviner and senses my pull toward something unbecoming of the way he looks me from forehead to nipple and back up. “You have a pretty face,” he says. “I know what you like.” The oil man pulls the hottest pink bottle, the newest one and takes my wrist. I take it back. “Just smell,” he says. “I know.”

I know.

I keep my wrist and oblige him with my nose. I know that the limit of his imagination has clipped his powers and led him backwards, from underneath the cover of knowing into a flagrant darkness. I am smelling the woman who I once loved more than myself. Her home was immaculate and her neck tasted like the oil man’s offering. It was as it was, too sweet. Generically robust. A long shot. The oil man is a diviner and knows, even if his lust dampens his impeccable aim. His eyes keep falling and bouncing up and he keeps telling me that his wife is his wife and I wait for him to close the bottle

of hot pink perfume oil. It smells like his fantasy, I imagine. I am wearing shorts and a top in the same way he is. Loose, the outline of our tank tops underneath light cotton shirts making a neat curve around the neck, lightly interrupted by a thread of hanging gold. My father's profile. Damn near a uniform. But my chest are breasts and his are pecks and even though they are old and he is unabashedly peeling my dignity back in layers and licking his mustache with spit and desire, I cannot move. Another way to look at it: I am dressed like his son and I am looking for a scent that becomes me. It's time to go but the weight of his scents make bricks of my feet.

I am so still that not even anger sees me standing there. I am fossilizing under the gaze of an old man intent on disappearing my gait, my fade, my disposition. The flame from the can in his truck bed is dying and a thick cloud of smoke threatens the end in big puffs. The orange and black smoke pushes across the pavement, past the exhaust of the idled buses, past the smell of every one's personal business pouring out of their windows and car doors. The others have gone. The oil man walked over to his truck whistling and squirted more scent and little water, kicked it again. A small burst of oak and leather smell—the smell I wanted erupted into the sky.

“What's that?” I asked him.

“What?”

“That smell, the one you just put in?”

“Oh, no that one was a mix. A lil mix I put together. But you'll like this one, here.”

The oil man recklessly pulled another oil shook it to life. “This one,” he said, “is soft.”

A diviner in denial is a liar.

He reached out, offering me his redirection. I declined.

“I know,” he said. “Smell it. I know.”

“I know you know,” I said.

“You got a pretty face,” he curled his tongue over his upper lip.

“What’s that smell?” I asked again, pointing to the contained trail of smoke curling from his truck bed.

“Why you want that one for?”

“I know you know.” And even that, what was that? I have become a riddle, in the presence of my deniers. I am floating and forgot how to say, “I am.” Instead, I smile.

The oil man squints.

“I got one more for you,” he said, reaching this time for a bloody red bottle. “I know,” he said.

And the flame on his truck bed licked high and fell quietly, with ashes popping onto the cracked cement.

I am still standing, burning, scentless and unangry. My face is vacuous. I am gone. I am following the trail of smell into the air, above the truck bed and the parking lot and the eastside and the oil man and the oils and the table and the black soap and the glass vials and the matches and the coconut oil and the foil wrapped incense and the faded pan african patterned table cloth--the whole thing is beneath me. I am a body of no scent, no ground, no wall to lean on. The oil man hears me wrap my fingers around the keys in my pocket (if i had a pocket, if i had a hand or a body) and the flurry of metal pings like a missed sale.

“I mean,” he says. “There are these.” He points to the cluster of peppery, dark colored bottles as if he is tasting defeat. The leftovers of my body, my breasts, my shorts, my keys, insist on staying there. They want to smell every single one. They want to drip drops onto my elbow and neck, until I smell like *his* daddy. Covered. I want them to but I am not there. My keys are out. My car is on, I am driving down the street. I am passing other smoke, new smoke. My nose is an archive of confused scents. My body stays away for months like this. Years, even. Perhaps it will return at the next light, outside of my door. Perhaps the jingle of keys will again remind me that there is something else. I am always floating away.

4. Universal Health Care, Bundles (walking from Warren and Conner’s bus stop to 555 Conner), Yesterday afternoon.

I think they thought I didn’t realize Lithium was an element. But I knew. No one looked at my report cards, I don’t believe. When they take a health history down at Warman Clinic it sounds like this:

Insurance? Name age time you hurt? where? violent? clean dirty? drugs? regular sex? gay sex? how many how much who your momma? Daddy? No, yes, no, yes, no. So they prolly like that at this one too. We ah see. What time is it? I think I left my lil’ appointment paper on the bus. You got a lighter?

Nobody prolly looked at my report cards from fifth grade. That was my best year. I was smart as a whip, boy. I used to sneak away to the library—it was like 3 of em near me. I ain’t tell nobody. I just scooted in. Sixth grade, middle school—they started serving out my favorite one, shit man. I was over it. That ain’t me boss. Plus that’s when they stopped really paying attention, cause back then I was just doin’, whatever. Downtown, Rosa Parks. Took the 40 bus over to Poletown and was wandering so they say and my cousin Bella seen me on her way to work, called my mama—why, I don’t know. Mama told her just put me in the car for her shift. So I’m in this old ass dirty blue Fiesta and fell asleep and woke up sweating and so I just went on and got out and left the plant parking lot through the bushes and took the bus home and it was good too cause Bella fucked around and forgot about me and told them people she could stay on an extra shift. I found that out after I got to Granny’s cause she called to say she went on break

and remembered but she lost me. Fake crying ass, Granny cussed her ass the fuck out real good. That's who I learnt it from, that's what she told me. I was 11. After that I think they even stopped sending report cards home. Or if they did, I don't know where they got sent to. Probably dumped in the river over by the canals. That's where they put the shit. You won't believe it right now, if you keep going down Conner, that other, new warehouse that shit used to be a dump and people used to be out there walking through mounds, lookin—doing treasure hunts. And then there was a elementary school right next door. I'm going to Warman, that's where you goin? I found it online when I went to a different library this time. Ay, hold up—you knew the internet was invented in the early nineties by the CIA? They said they tested it on us, here in Detroit early—that's why we know so much.

I think I caught a different wave storm that came from all that shit though. My mama was pregnant with me or my sister, one of us. Prolly me. The plants, connections—lotta shit started going down. I started crying a lot later, when I was 14, 15, 16—kept crying and kept crying and I was mad about it, so like any man anywhere who is mad about the way things are going—I learned it in history—like any man, I was just as manly about it. I started wars. Little wars. Big wars. Busted windows and shit. One time I tried to fight the doctor—he wouldn't listen. He got mad because I said to him, I said, well first I called him a nurse, which burned him up. His eyes lit up like fury clouds. I read that somewhere, clouds of fury. And I said, Mr. Nurse—he said 'Doctor', mind you, I was a bonafide warrior at that point. But I was strapped down. They had strapped me down. Look, here go the line from the cut on my wrist from it, look. So I was like, 'Okay, doctor. Am I dangerous?' and he looked at me—hard, he looked at me hard—he said, 'You could be if we don't step in now.' I didn't care what he was saying or that he was a doctor. Doctors ain't shit. Couldn't save Granny. So, basically I broke down the whole situation to him—the whole thing. Who I was. What I could do. Who was watching me. I remember it because after that I took Lithium and I knew I shouldn't have.

So I went to my research and shit. I skipped YouTube because last time they told me some foul shit about a couple things so I went back to the library and took it back to the basics. Fact is scientifically, it reacted poorly with me on the inside because you just can't give people a part of the core of this earth if they ain't had it before. Even if it's a teeny, tiny bit. That's what I learned, even though them tears dried right up. This face here? This me all the time, unless I run out. That's why I'm on the way over there. Sometimes, you caught me on a good day, sometimes I can't remember my last name. I remember it today, but I won't tell it to you. That's not how we bout to do it. You cool and all but life taught me a few things.

I was 17. 23 now. I remember I said to that old one, the old doctor. I was like, "Lithium, trying to get me to Nirvana." That was cause of the music.

I was a different kind of kid. I don't think he got it. Just looked at me.

I thought he would get it. I guess ole boy wasn't a fan of rock and roll. It's bout to be 3 o'clock already, I'ma be late as shit. My paper said 12:30 but look, if you—you think you got a dollar for my bus ride back?