

## HEARNE PARDEE

*Garden Grid, 2016*  
Acrylic and collage on paper, 50 x 38 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## KATHLEEN DE AZEVEDO

### Bad and Beautiful

#### The transformation of John McClaren Park in San Francisco

**O**n my daily run through John McLaren Park, I pass the sign that reads: *No Dumping, Punishable by \$1,000 Fine*. One day, I continue uphill past a broken easy chair, the next day, it's a microwave and a purple toy helicopter, then it's a couple of empty boxes of Thug Life firecrackers and a plaster statue of three cherubs, one missing a head. I climb to the top of the hill, where coyotes poised on the road give me their bitch face before ducking into the trees.

Finally I arrive at an overgrown section with knee-high wild oats, rattlesnake grass, and wild mustard—the neglected part of the park. I take the trail that runs down, down, past a man pushing an old bicycle through the tall grass, through a dark tunnel of cedars, and along a backyard fence belonging to several houses. A yellow-and-orange mural with black letters painted along the fence reads: *Art comes from ur soul but most importantly ur heart. Art gave me birth. I am a cultural activist, who Is here to explain and help. Because 2 make a change I can't do it myself. George Hurtado, RIP. Class of 2007. JJSE.*

I don't know when the mural was painted, but eighteen-year-old Mr. Hurtado was killed just before his second semester at college, a targeted assassination by a gang member. JJSE, or June Jordan School for Equity, is a nearby alternative high school. Hurtado was a poet. His artist friends, the ones who knew he spoke out against the gang lifestyle, brought some paint and brushes to pay homage. Perhaps some of the artists worked for Precita Eyes, a program getting otherwise graffiti-prone kids to fill dim city walls with colorful murals telling their stories. An artist first created a grid and sketched the design on paper then transferred the design to the fence. Hurtado's friends may have asked permission of the property owners or not. If the owners had lived here for ages and saw the artists painting away, they probably thought: "What a great idea! Anything to brighten up the area." If the residents worked long hours, they may have not been aware of the youthful chatter on the other side of their property. Yet Hurtado's friends had worked reverently, even though this mural would not be seen by many people because it is hidden within the park. McLaren Park, a sprawling 312 acres of hilly open space, lies in southernmost San Francisco, among working-class and immigrant neighborhoods. Until a few years ago, city maps of San Francisco

*Open spaces near urban areas have a bigger variety of invasives than rural areas because heavier populations are more likely to introduce foreign plants onto their properties.*

left out this portion of the city, including my street. We had literally dropped off the earth.

When I began jogging in John McLaren Park, people warned me about the dead bodies. The park and its weed-covered hills was to San Francisco what the East River was to Al Capone in hiding murderous deeds. There is some truth to the dead body rumor. In 2016, police found the dead body of a thirty-two-year-old woman and are still looking for her two-year-old daughter. In 1983 the body of a gay man was dumped in the park; the murder remained a cold case until 2017. The other day, a woman walking her dog told me her neighbor once found a dead body half-buried in weeds and had to testify in court. A 2008 Yelp review of the park reads:

DEAD BODIES  
MUGGINGS  
GANGSTERS  
AL QUAIDA SATAN  
DOG SHIT

*I hope I scared away all the FOCALS (fake locals)  
This is a 5 Star park*

*The second largest park in The City, one of the best places for dogs, hoops courts, diamonds for softball/baseball*

*practice, tennis courts, walking/biking trails, BBQ/picnic areas, a kids playground and a golf course.*

*If your from here you know whats up if your not keep being scared and stay away*

For many years, we of the grass-choked spaces poured our resentment into the landscape. Besides the household and body dumping, playgrounds were silent. Aggressive dogs chased after the few humans who traversed the park's trails. Abandoned cats fought with raccoons. Since weeds dominated the scene, I got to thinking of the role weeds play in neighborhood self-respect. Obviously, we had work to do. We couldn't just depend on local government. We needed to see ourselves in a better light. We needed to embrace our inner weed.

Author Sally Roth, in her book *Weeds: Friends or Foe?*, writes that "the word *weed* is an epithet of purely human invention; in the botanical world it simply does not exist," meaning a plant is called a weed when it becomes intrusive and undesirable in the landscape. In fact, botanists replace the word *weed* with *invasive species*. Nick Graver, an Invasive Plant Early Detection Program team leader at the San Francisco Bay Area Inventory and Monitoring Network, part of the National Park Service, explains the conundrum, "A lot of weeds are not weeds, they are just natural plants that have grown in this area for thousands of years. But I think *invasive species* is not such a good term either. Yet I haven't heard of a better one." Invasive plants do have features in common. They produce seeds, and lots of them. The seeds don't all germinate at once but are perfectly happily waiting underground for the right conditions to emerge. Poppies can lie dormant for eighty years. The roots of invasives are overly ambitious. Plants with stolons, or runners, sprout above ground first, and then send down roots as they go. This is why the blackberry bramble can take down a backyard fence. Rhizomes grow underground stems that bud, even if a section is cut. This is how nettles thrive to chemically burn our fingers. The horizontal roots of the bindweeds (like morning glory) form a network similar to a street grid. Taproots can grow deep, so forget about permanently digging up dandelions unless you have a backhoe. Plus weeds can really get around town via animal fur. Shit. Shoes. White parachutes.

One could see the behavior of invasive plants as stereotypes of the marginalized, which in our neighborhood

includes immigrants and people of color. In fact, my neighborhood has a higher percentage of foreign-born people than any other part of the city. This includes me. I am an immigrant from Brazil, as was my mother. My paternal grandparents were from Russia. British nature writer Richard Mabey, in his book *Weeds: In Defense of Nature's Most Unloved Plants*, claims that our attitude about weeds, or invasive plants, "stems from a kind of botanical xenophobia." Mabey continues that "the archetypal weed is the mistrusted intruder," part of "the great unwashed." Weeds have traveled so much in our history that all areas have foreign nationals. They survive wars and sprout in the cracks of destruction. Weeds do not care how long natives have been around. They want to belong. Because they come from far away, they are more resistant than native plants. In other words, sometimes, the weakened health of blue bloods gives way to healthy immigrant stock. Open spaces near urban areas have a bigger variety of invasives than rural areas because heavier populations are more likely to introduce foreign plants onto their properties. Pampas grass, a thick ornamental with white plumage from Argentina, was the darling of many gardeners until it took over the hills of the Bay Area. Now we can't get rid of these interlopers.

\* \* \*

I wanted to know a thing or two about weeds. I was tired of blaming them for our urban lack of love. I drove to the Marin Headlands, part of the Golden Gate Recreational Area on the Marin County side of the Golden Gate Bridge, to work on a weed control project. I waited in the parking lot for other volunteers to arrive. The Marin Headlands hugs a small bit of coast just north of the San Francisco Bay. The pounding ocean carves out peaks and broken fingers and sea tunnels from the jutting cliffs. Fog buries the tops of dry rolling hills. Here in the parking lot, the few empty cars probably belonged to those trotting their dogs on the trail. An alto squawk of a raven and the soprano twitter of birds were broken by a hidden human voice gushing, "I've never seen so many rabbits!"

The goal of this mission was to eliminate the oxeye daisy. Maria Alvarez, environmental biologist for the National Park Service and head of this invasive weed patrol, showed me the mug shot on a weed identification form.

*The park and its weed-covered hills was to San Francisco what the East River was to Al Capone in hiding murderous deeds.*

The oxeye daisy, or *Leucanthemum vulgare*. The daisy? The daisy of the daisy chain, of bridesmaid bouquets? But oxeye daisies are ambitious; these perennials can remain viable in the soil for thirty-nine years and replace fifty percent of the grass in a pasture. They can choke out the silver lupine, the host plant where the endangered mission blue butterfly lays its eggs. A fence surrounds Hawk Hill, a mission blue sanctuary and part of the site where we were working. Maria pointed to a patch of low-growing lupine looking like a green toupee. Underneath the leaves, Maria said, were bunches of molted caterpillar skins.

I grabbed a plastic bag to collect the oxeye. If the blossoms were old, if the yellow center was rimmed with black, I was to slip my index and middle finger just under the blossom and pluck. Sure enough, seeds from the older flowers exploded into my work glove like aphids.

Then, I took a small grub hoe, followed the daisy's stem down to its feet nestled in the weeds, and chopped the whole thing up. Then, I mulched the bare spot with straw. However, I did this process only about a dozen times. To my untrained eye, the surrounding hills seem devoid of the oxeye, because other volunteers had scoured the place. But Maria knew that one couldn't be too complacent. Her ranger fedora exuded toughness yet its broad curved brim reminded me of kindly Forest Service guys coming into my kindergarten class and doling out Smokey Bear coloring books. In her official park jacket, Maria looked like my athletically inclined sister, the shot-putter and butterfly stroke

*Observer Pro allows the user to draw a red polygon perimeter around a group of invasives, then sends the information to Calflora, a massive online resource on California wild plants.*

swimming champ. Maria turned to the hills and rattled off the names of weeds as if taking potshots at them. I followed her as she jaunted up the trail looking as cool as I hope I do when I hike. Her footsteps ate up the hill. Suddenly she turned from the trail and disappeared among poison oak and bull thistle. A half an hour later, she emerged again with her bag bulging with loot: not just daisies but other offenders like Harding grass. She extolled the cleanliness of the hills, “Can you imagine how ugly the hills would be if they were covered in daisies?” She stood with arms akimbo like Wonder Woman seeing the ruins of her vanquished bad guy. “If it weren’t for you volunteers, the hills would be a mess.” But her voice softened at the sight of far-off coffeeberry shrubs. “Look at those babies,” she cooed, though for me, they were lost in the riot of plants.

Only a portion of weed management involves mechanical removal, like plucking, digging, burning, and spraying. Another portion involves knowing where every plant lives. In another invasive patrol foray, I took the Matt Davis Trail at Stinson Beach with Nick Graver, the Invasive Plant Early Detection Program team leader. The invasive plant mapping was done on his smartphone, through an app called Observer Pro. Nick turned on the GPS, which located our

position down to the longitude and latitude. Observer Pro allows the user to draw a red polygon perimeter around a group of invasives, then sends the information to Calflora, a massive online resource on California wild plants. Within the polygon’s border, invasives are tagged with dots from Priority #1, the really prolific plants that need to be eliminated, up to Priority #4, for plants that don’t need immediate attention. I followed Nick with my low-tech clipboard and invasive plant list, marking the species we’d spotted along the way.

Nick is lean like a dancer and his golden ponytail, rolled into one obedient curl, hangs down his back. He paced up and down the trail, because lately he’d been finding a lot of invasive *Ageratina adenophora*, a brush with furry white flowers. At one point, he went off the trail, heading toward a white bush, possibly *Ageratina*, with me close behind, sloshing through fallen branches and tangled foliage. Meanwhile a host of tanned joggers pranced past us. A woman whispered reverently to her two kids, “Look! Rangers!” Our off-trail find ended up being the licorice plant, or *Helichrysum petiolare*, the prettiest thing I’d ever seen. The leaves and stem are covered with silvery down, and the small leaves sprouting from the whorls belong on a baby’s christening gown. But Nick would tell me later, “I think that we ascribe beauty based on whether we think it is a weed or not.” So right then, to me, the licorice plant was not a weed. But further up the trail, the mass of yellowish silver plant had absolutely choked the hill. Still Nick’s affection for these miscreants came through. On our way down the trail, Nick walked quickly ahead as the two interns working on the Dipsea Trail were having trouble with Observer Pro on their electronic pad. But he stopped and looked up at the carpet of English ivy covering the ground and encasing the trees, and burst out, almost in song: “I know they are invasive species, but I marvel at the crazy things they do.”

I wondered how limiting plant species could connect with making a place more diverse. In human terms, different ethnic groups contribute to the richness of society. However, it does make sense if you think of what would happen if only one ethnic group were allowed to thrive. Stephen Meyer, in his book *The End of the Wild*, warns that when weeds adapt and take over, they create a monoculture. Nick reminded me, “You get a picture in this

part of an ecosystem that if you left it alone, it would not return to nature, it would get further from nature than what it used to be. So you have these heavily managed ecosystems that are closest to achieving something which is *natural*. Which is not natural anyway. A lot of the times I try to get away from what is natural at the time and think of what would maximize diversity with these plants.” In other words, the logic is this: controlling populations artificially gives us a wider assortment of plants. And this does make sense, really.

William Shakespeare’s play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* follows two couples who run off to the woods to escape their stultifying Athenian society of arranged marriages and powerful dukes. In other words, a social monoculture. They become disoriented in the world controlled by spirits who have humanlike fits of pride and malice. The young Athenians become the invasive species, disoriented in a world of sprites and weeds. Oberon, the king of the fairies, instructs Puck, his apprentice, to look where the snake throws her enameled skin, Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in.

And with the juice of this I’ll streak her eyes  
And make her full of hateful fantasies. (II.1.263–66)

With this weed, Oberon puts Titania, his lover and queen of the fairies, into an unfamiliar world, where she falls in love with the first thing she sees: a man wearing a donkey head. Thanks to the same plant, the young men and women pursue the wrong partner. Lust becomes raw and passionate. Only through the help of an antidote, another plant “whose liquor hath this virtuous property” (III.2.388), is all made right again. At the end of the play, all lovers—human and fairy—unite in one big wedding scene and inadvertently break apart the monoculture of Shakespearean Athens by introducing to the population a host of magical beings with an amazing knowledge of weeds.

\* \* \*

Eventually things started to change in McLaren Park. In 2012, San Francisco voters approved the Clean and Safe Neighborhood Parks Bond to repair citywide park infrastructure. The restoration has taken a long time. A few years ago, I could start to see the improvement. Now

I realize that the weeds are still there but are managed to show off their diversity.

A few months ago, Ellen, a retired groundskeeper of McLaren Park, hopped out of her pickup, the back loaded with chopped-up branches and general plant flotsam. I remembered her from way back when she tended different areas with her “park dog,” which would sniff at my heels. She was heading toward the park operations facility, a small green house tucked into a grove of Monterey cypress and white pine, to join her peeps for a day of work. She had thrown on her canvas bucket hat and oversize cloth jacket. Ellen loved the outdoors and this morning was no exception. Pleased at my compliments that the park had cleaned up its act somewhat, she peered through her oversize glasses and explained yes, the bond measure had helped, but credit went to the neighbors, fed up with being San Francisco’s neglected orphans living next to the notorious “dead body park.” They say “you can’t beat city hall,” but they don’t know the tough nuts from this area. The residents spoke out and the city supervisors listened. Even I complained about the runaway dogs and suggested a dog run. As a result, the city hired garbage collectors and plumbers, leaving the gardeners to the “yard work” as Ellen calls it. And yes, dogs have their own play area now.

McLaren’s reputation hasn’t completely diminished, which is why the dumping still persists, but Ellen insists that most of the dumpers are a few repeat offenders. These guys, hired to clean basements, instead of taking the garbage to the dump, which is part of the cost, do a night run up the park’s John F. Shelley Drive and push the stuff onto the road. I beg to differ: a lot of slobes are still out there. A groundskeeper complained that after one picnic, they hauled off two truckloads of garbage that had been tossed in flimsy bags and broken open by crows. That being said, the groundskeepers and gardeners have been caring more about the park and work to keep it clean since the passage of the bond. The result: we care more too, about our space and about ourselves.

Tangled grass, reddish-brown curled dock, and pimply-leaf oxtongue cover much of the park. But vegetation is cut to a bristle in the more well-used areas like the new toddlers’ playground with its bumblebee spring riders and mini playground set. Alongside a section of John D. Shelley Drive, tamed pampas grass flutters from winds coming

off the bay. Tall flatsedge, yellow primrose, and wild sweet pea—normally invasives—behave themselves in a cultivated patch alongside a rain ditch. Traffic control bulb-outs serve as mini gardens for the medicinal-smelling mugwort and sea-urchin-like spiny rush. For the first time, I walked along the high ridge, the “unkempt” end of the park that slopes down to Visitacion Valley, a neighborhood of modest homes and government housing projects. From a distance, I could see the nine-hole Gleneagles golf course, which a friend told me is one of the most challenging in the city as the green was built on a slope. As I descended the hill into the valley and walked along the street, a woman sitting in a car opened her window and shouted, “Are you lost?” a bit concerned, I think, with suspicious characters, but when I answered, “No I’m from the other side of the hill,” she smiled. We were neighbors after all. I had just checked out the community garden coming off McLaren Ridge, a garden it turns out, that her husband had cultivated for years. The weeds looked pretty dismal, snarling up the broken-down planter boxes, but the zucchini flowers optimistically blossomed in splashes of yellow, waiting for the garden’s slated renovation.

\* \* \*

Now they all come. The hipsters in their tie-dyed T-shirts for the Jerry Day concert, the early-morning walkers who clap their hands to get the blood flowing, the tai chi group who sweep over the tennis courts with long swords, the dog people who rescue the strays dumped in the park, the exhausted Asian parents with their two autistic sons holding small radios to their ears, listening to Latin music sung in Chinese. Blue herons, no longer skittish, wait patiently for me to jog past. The Canada geese break into the mallards’ pond home, eat, poop, and move on to the next migratory party scene. It’s true most who traverse this part of the city don’t directly appreciate the ingenuity of invasives. I was one of those people, until I met those who knew the virtues and faults of these botanical wonders. Now I see open spaces, especially McLaren, as a reflection of those of us who walk along the untamed paths.

**Kathleen de Azevedo**’s nonfiction has appeared in many publications including the *Los Angeles Times*, *Américas*, *Urban Mozaik*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Under the Sun*, and *Broad Street*. Her fiction has been published in magazines such as *Gettysburg Review* and *Boston Review*. Her novel of Brazilian immigrants in the United States, *Samba Dreamers*, won the 2006 Pen Oakland Josephine Miles Award, given to work exploring diversity and human rights issues.

## HEARNE PARDEE

*Corner*, 2016

Acrylic and collage on paper, 19 x 25 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST