

ode to an alley

by arwulf arwulf

West of Ann Arbor I ride Zeeb Road wondering what comes next. Landscape recognition: there was a time when Wagner between Jackson and Liberty was not inhabited by nationally famous polluters. Dolph Lake unsullied, wells not potential pits of toxic terror. Recognize our land? Whose land? The land belongs to herself. Change is change. Everything is change. Earth is changing every moment. Reckless, stupid change, however, tears it. Unforgivable.

Driving to the Community Organic Farm, there to visit the cows, feed catnip to the goats, a cornmeal muffin to the chickens, take Scio Church Road. It's very pretty that way. Urban expansion, though, not so pretty. Ellsworth Road has been getting manhandled. Farmland replaced by ugly-assed new pasteboard housing, overpriced yet built so cheap you can sense it will fall down ahead of schedule. Where's your fourth-dimensional sensibilities? The run-down projects of tomorrow are the 350 grand condos of today.

Wasn't there a ballot proposal to limit the spread of this vandalism? Why was it voted down? The slogan they used was: *don't tax our farmers*. Seems to have worked. Standard flim flam again. Go for it, folks. Wetlands drained for golf practice. Contractors and developers laying money away for later. Land ho. Deer running along a newly gouged drainage ditch looking confused. Scared. *Where's the water? How do I get to it without being killed? Where is food?* Serious case of the blues over here. Everything, and nothing, is sacred.

Heading into town at liberty. Give me Liberty or give me South University. Seeing what they've done to South U., I'll wander Liberty instead. It's Liberty Road in the sticks, becoming Liberty Street in the scheme of things. You can feel the schemes being schemed, smell it in the polluted rush hour air. What is "Liberty"? What does it mean beyond the street sign? Proceed. Follow Liberty from cornfields all the way in to the State Theatre. Or only as far in as Ashley Street where the people hang out at the Fleetwood Diner trying to get nourished. Ashley Street miracles are forever; across from Jewel Heart there's the Bird of Paradise, in front of which I will always see veteran alto saxophonist Lou Donaldson standing impeccably dressed holding a small ice cream cone. Forever and ever.

On Main Street itself Elmo sells polar fleece garments as the wind kicks up freezing; you gonna need something insulated. Elmo himself is warm. Elmo's family is warm. Good people. I used to write my columns for AGENDA using Elmo's computer while listening to the busy swirl of music and chatter which drifted on back from Main Street News. Occasionally, Kay's laughter would surface in bold response to someone's wisecrack. I will, for the rest of my natural life, miss her gutsy ha-ha-ha. In some ways it became inseparable, I thought, from my column writing process. The defiant outburst of a strong woman who worked herself hard running the best news stand this funky town has ever seen. The toxins in the periodicals, the poisons in the ink, the chemicals in the paper, she braved them all as she braved the odds on Main Street itself, teeming with people largely from out of town who'd been drinking rather heavily, eating expensive meats.

Creme de Bloomfield Hills come strolling through one stretch of downtown poking around in the shops, insulting the retail workers, bursting out with brilliantly phrased three-martini comments, buying nothing they couldn't flaunt or

preferably *swallow*. These creatures often convinced me to stay off of Main Street Proper and opt instead for the Alley in back of our operation. You see, entering through the front door next to the Karate School there was Main Street News, back of which was Elmo's T-shirt silk-screening shop, and way in the verymost back existed a tiny office fulla subversives making AGENDA happen every month, hell or high water. And out through a couple of back doors there was this beautiful old fashioned Alley.

Me and the Alleys go way back. As a boy newly arrived in town during the late Sixties I ran them like a black kitty cat lookin for fish heads; at liberty to wander I swarmed the Alleys and tarred rooftops of Ann Arbor. Some of these are still pleasantly antiquated and trippy in their red brick magnificence. Red Alley bricks without mortar, and some with. Red Alley bricks speak to me still, even from miles away. Alley across from West Side Books, beautiful tome shop visible from the shadows. Adjacent Alley behind the ghosts of Mr. Flood's Party. Red Alley bricks, magnificent. Take a break from writing and realize I'm bookless. Traipse across Liberty to the grand old bookstore, purchase for cheap a Modern Library edition of John Milton: "*Com, and trip it as you go, On the light fantastick toe, And in thy right hand lead with thee, The Mountain Nymph sweet Liberty.*"

And I'm back in the alley with Milton.

A year ago I'd be out there puffing a maduro cigar priced cheap. Kay decided to sell them just like a traditional news stand used to and still should: affordable cigars. She'd peddle me a handful and I'd be back there in the glory of garbage cans and deadbolt back doors, gnawing the leaf, pacing around reading a rough draft. Sometimes Ted Sylvester (who with Laurie Wechter started AGENDA years ago), would join me while he did a cigarette. Maybe Maxine, taking a break from editorial duties, would appear with her own smokes. The Alley always listened while we discussed life and its turns, back in the shadows behind Main Street.

Alleys usually have a labor thing going: UPS drivers work like racehorses, maximizing every minute, achieving superhuman feats of strength and velocity. Kitchen and retail staff post themselves at the back doors of shops and restaurants, coping a smoke or just watching the birds. Occasionally there's an individual who stands with old bread or some other cast-off goodies, administering to the sparrows and pigeons. Or the Alley might only appear to be a site for murals, seriously inspired graffiti, artistic license when nobody's looking. Check the passageway behind SKR and the Michigan Theatre. This is largely for passing through; cutting across from Washington to Liberty, a sort of obverse reality which doesn't conform to what's expected of streets and boulevards.

They've got Alleys in the Burns Park neighborhood. This is what Alleys look like in their early evolution; the Alley Primeval, back between houses, and most of these houses date from the 1920s or earlier. The Alley behind the Friends' Center between Lincoln and Olivia is a lovely example of a space not yet frozen into callous downtown business district rigidity. As an acid-gobbling teenager I found great solace in both sorts of Alley, whether benign and still cradled by trees, or paved and bricked and oily round the storm grates.

Now that I'm writing AGENDA columns from a different geographical perspective, I really must visit the Alley behind Elmo's from time to time. Start on Washington Street at Cafe Zola, named for author of *J'Accuse*. Authentic cafe: hot tea, pastry or rice pudding, fruit salad. But get the tea to go. Take it to the Alley, go roost in the shadows. Metaphor, as throughout my life here, for an underground, alternative viewpoint. Me and the funky foundations of old buildings. Modern Library edition of Milton, poetry spraypainted over the bricks, restaurant grease, garbage and shit. Honest to goodness. ☑

