

DOGGED BY MEMORIES, A QUEST ENSUES



## Coney Island Dreams

By Michael Nagrant

I CRIED WATCHING KID ROCK ON VH1 STORYTELLERS THE OTHER DAY. It wasn't a watershed, rather more of a single rolling tear. That a greasy-haired-beer-guzzling-tattooed-fedora-wearing-skuzzy-facially-haired-dude who used to cavort with a profane dwarf named Joe C and who by his own admission is "straight out the trailer" moved me, was a surprise.

But, that's hometown pride.

For decades, outsiders have been slagging on my dingy beacon on the river, Detroit. For almost as long, they never got it right. For every wolf cry about Detroit as flaking rust belt, there were still millions of blue-collar assembly liners rolling off their shifts in chrome-trimmed Cadillacs. For every crumbling rough-patinaed high rise, there was a shiny silver recently hoisted Red Wings Stanley Cup.

For every hellfire and ash-pile of a former building shown from a helicopter camera angle on Devil's Night, or every reported carjacking or murder, there was a kid reveling, though shivering in his moonboots, on Woodward Avenue across from the old Vernor's factory watching a Thanksgiving parade more glorious and real than that fairy-dusted televised production dream from Macy's in New York.

Now, though, Detroit is truly busted. The Big 3 have cut to the bone and laid off too many. You hear of foreclosures in Chicago, but in Detroit you see them in crumbling realtor signs, creeping prairie grasses and cracked porches choked with weeds.

And yet, despite the resignation, the recession of a great city, Detroit is still majestic. Even in her decay, the swaying shuttered skyscrapers and the moaning busted cavernous old train station, there lies the first great American ruin on par with the Roman Colosseum or Grecian amphitheatres.

I weep for Kid Rock, because, Pam Anderson relationship aside, he is still the proud embodiment of the Motor City's continual cultural imprint on the world. Motown may have moved to LA, but Kid is the direct progeny of Detroit's rich punk and rock history (MC5, Iggy Pop, Bob Seger, Kiss, White Stripes). And, no matter how many times he murders his ex-wife in song, Eminem, Eight Mile represent, still has the greatest flow in the rap game.

I also write about food in no small part because of Detroit staples like the chrusciki, the flaky confectioner sugar-dusted pastry from New Palace Bakery in Hamtramck or the Sicilian-style pizza pies from Buddy's on six mile and Conant I ate as a kid.

Despite my constant ardor, by living in Chicago, I feel I've somehow betrayed Detroit. My son's middle name is Detroit which is as much a guilt-assuaging tribute as it is a pre-destination that he will undoubtedly grow up to be a super-hipster.

Still, I love Chicago as much as Detroit (and thus believe ABC's "The Bachelor" when he says he's in love with two women). I've built a life here, will likely die here, and so I must instead find ways to mitigate the homesickness I feel.

Revisiting memories through food is one way to do that. Problem is, though many former Detroiters have settled into Chicago for jobs, the infrastructure of good Michigan delicacies hasn't quite followed. Steve's Deli came here last year, only to disappoint with a corned beef that couldn't hold Manny's Coffee Shop and Deli's jock.

That wasn't too devastating, as I'm a Catholic boy anyway, and I didn't have very entrenched deli memories. Styrofoam clamshells stuffed with steaming Greek-chili-slathered snappy-natural-casing hot dogs from Detroit's 93-year-old Lafayette Coney Island that my father brought us after a shift at his tool and die job... well, that's another story.

My Coney Island Hot Dog loyalties were so locked in, for thirty years I never set foot in the American Coney Island next door. The only time I did, last year, was out of professional courtesy to compare dogs side by side once and for all. Though that blind taste test was likely more excruciating than an Elin Woods nine iron to the head, Lafayette thankfully came out on top.

And so, though it was no Lafayette, I was psyched when I heard Leo's Coney Island, (Detroit's Coney Island-selling diner-like version of our Golden Nugget Pancake House), was coming to the corner of Southport and Cornelia. As such, I lined up last week, the second day after it opened, and did my due diligence.

Unfortunately, nostalgia can only take you so far, and while the snappy sputter and sizzle of the Koegel's hot dog was as good as the Kowalski sausages I was raised on, the runny, bland chili sunk the whole thing.

At first, I thought about washing the disappointment out of my mouth with a run to Cinner's in Lincoln Square, which makes good Cincy (Greek-style) chili dogs, but instead headed to my favorite chili parlor on the South Side, the Ramova Grill. Once there, fully ensconced behind the plate glass, which steams up something fierce from the nearby flat-top, I ordered a hot dog topped with their signature chocolatey, cinnamon and all-spice-tinged brew, mustard and raw onion. Halfway through the dog, I'd realized I'd found Chicago's true version of the Detroit Coney Island, and, for a few minutes anyway, I was home again.

Leo's Coney Island, 3455 North Southport, (773)281-5367; Cinner's, 4757 North Talman, (773)654-1624; Ramova Grill, 3510 South Halsted, (773)847-9058.

TIP OF THE WEEK  
KATE ZAMBRENO



A suburban housewife, a mother and grandmother, trapped in her own vision of stable

Midwestern existence. Her estranged daughter, a victim to her own mind, who looks for compassion in faceless sex, who saves prescription meds to eventually

kill herself. A mysterious street prophet who warns. Triptych: Mommy, Maggie, Malachi. Author and former Newcity staffer Kate

Zambreno's indictment of the modern-day American family, "O Fallen Angel," is a portrait of damage, rough and haunting, yet at

moments terrifically cutting and funny as well. Zambreno's experimental prose balances streaming and choppy poetics with shocking

rawness, and the effective use of pop-culture references—a boy, trouble, is referred to as Marlon Brando, a dog is named after Scott Peterson's murdered wife—helps

create a chilling quasi-reality. Strip malls, SUVs, fat asses, television and a long list of psychological disorders. America, our home. America the beautiful. (Tom Lynch)

Kate Zambreno reads from "O Fallen Angel" March 2 as part of the Parlor Series, 1511 North Milwaukee, 2nd Floor. 7pm.

→ =RECOMMENDED

All events are free unless otherwise noted.

FRI/26

**Zindaba Nyirenda**

The author discusses her memoir, "Ta-lakata: The Tears of Africa." Barbara's Bookstore, 1218 S. Halsted, (312)413-2665. 7pm.

TUE/2

**Jeff Garlin**

The actor and comedian signs copies of his memoir, "My Footprint: Saving the Planet One Pound at a Time." Borders, 150 N. State, (312)606-0750. 12:30pm.

→ **Kate Zambreno**

The author and former Newcity staffer reads from "O Fallen Angel" as part of the Parlor Series. See Tip of the Week. 1511 N. Milwaukee, 2nd Floor. 7pm.

**Roger Thurow, Scott Kilman**

The authors discuss their "Enough: Why the World's Poorest Starve in an Age of Plenty" as part of the "World Beyond the Headlines" series. International House, 1414 E. 59th. 6pm.

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