

## I (WANT TO) LOVE YOU, BALTIMORE

Four pieces by Amy L. Bernstein

### City of Crumbs

The city is a layer cake  
baking in thousands of ovens  
set to varying temperatures  
by bakers—alchemists all—  
guarding family secrets scrawled  
on batter-splattered index cards,

sacred texts for whipping up  
a house, a home,  
embroidered cushions on couches,  
twin beds pushed against a window,  
yards hosting splintered picnic tables  
where cats spend their days mousing  
while rainwater dribbles from a spout  
into barrels feeding the garden

and families sit on front stoops  
or lawn chairs splayed on sidewalks  
waiting for the timer bell to ding

ding, ding, ding ding—  
the tinny alarms echoing east, west,  
north, south,  
ricocheting off skyscraper walls...

Done!

And suddenly everyone in the city  
is eating cake  
at the same moment,  
by the handful, the forkful,  
lips and tongues all sugared up,

scent memories wafting along the avenues,  
butter, sugar, cinnamon, chocolate, spices—  
recipes like roadmaps to the future  
of this layer cake city.

## Nighttime Snapshot, with Jazz

Down at the Keystone a trio of cool horns warms the room lit with soft red lights, though the room is already warm because everybody who's there wants to be there and nothing compares with the small emotional miracle of happiness that flares in your chest when the jazz is flowing and heads are nodding to the backbeat and you and everyone around you can't stop smiling because the music feels so damn good. Is good. And that makes everything else a little bit better, at least for a moment.

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The family of turtles living at the canal's dead-end a few blocks from the Keystone doesn't have a feel for jazz but they do love to soak in the sun on their makeshift perch of a cage rocking atop the trash-infested ripples, the stone-enclosed remnant of old waterways and wharves that once jutted from the jam-end of petered-out streets, everybody bustling, heading somewhere by land or by sea, except the turtles, which show up with the season and don't have a mind to go anywhere except to the end of their natural little hard-shelled lives.

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The girls in their slip dresses, goose-pimpled in the harbor-infused night air that's cooler than you'd hoped, those girls don't know about the turtles but it's not their fault, they only come out after dark for negronis and espresso martinis at the so-called beach bar, which is really just a state of mind, and where the thumping metal bass beat would compete with the Keystone if they were a block closer together. The girls laugh and toss their hair and shift their weight from one stiletto sandal to the other, wondering if maybe later they'll get pizza in Fells Point.

\*

The pack of teen boys in loose pants piloting scooters like bullet trains along the boardwalk are beneath the older girls' notice and the boys are concentrating on maximum warp, anyway, knowing the scooters aren't all that cool, but they're pretty cool when you really get going, when you get that weave and dip flowing, expertly grazing the air inches from a pedestrian sneaker, an old woman's handbag. Going fast in the night, that's the cool part, and maybe terrorizing all the slow people a little, that's cool too. And so is owning this piece of your city like a top racecar driver owns the track at Daytona. You get a little of your own back, each time you come out here.

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Round about midnight, the blue notes of the final trumpet solo slip out the door of the Keystone, on their way to flavor the harbor, caress the ears of couples slow-walking arm-in-arm to a nightcap or maybe to bed. White fiberglass motorboats with silly names emblazoned on the side—the *Tia Maria*, the *Aqua Vita*—bob on black waves, waiting for the fun to start up again. The scooter boys are long gone, dispersed to neighborhoods far from the water's reach, while the girls in slip dresses reapply a final swipe of lipstick after the last bite of pepperoni-mushroom-with-extra-mozzarella before tottering out into the cooling night, still open to possibilities.

## Choosing Home

You might ask me  
where I went to high school  
or where I grew up,

and I'll reply, not here.

You might ask me who I root for—the Orioles, the Ravens, the Blast,  
and I'll reply, none of the above.

You might ask me if I drink Natty Boh,  
crunch Utz potato chips, and  
lick the frosting off Berger's cookies

and you won't like my answer.

You might ask about  
my favorite spot to crack crabs  
slathered in Old Bay

and I'll tell you about the time I got  
Old Bay in my eye.

You might ask me why the heck  
I'm living in Baltimore, anyway?

And I'll climb up to the roof  
and yell until I croak:

Because of the way the sun glints on the Inner Harbor at dusk as sailboats  
make a lazy U, dodging kayaks.

Because of the way Cherry Hill is taking back its *own* serpentine waterfront  
along the Patapsco, one clump of weeds at a time.

Because of the way the old docks loom over the horizon as you reach the  
top of Chester Street – ever a surprise.

The way the cherry blossoms explode in April on street corners  
that were cold and forlorn five minutes earlier.

The way the old cobblestones bulge on the lanes of Fells Point,  
tripping the tipsy girls in heels.

The way a tiny rock-music palace sits next to an old dry cleaner's.

[Choosing Home / cont.]

Because of the way theaters take root in tired old warehouses,  
the old warehouses brought back to life by brilliant entrepreneurs in Pigtown

The way the high school marching bands file along Pratt Street,  
teenagers holding pom-poms doing back flips in the road  
while some little thing bangs a big drum.

The way the hordes of marathon runners take over the streets,  
rendering cars useless, horns blaring, feet stomping.

The way Druid Hill Park rolls up over the city  
with a big fat reservoir in the middle.

The way the city is filled with quiet pockets of old woods and stone bridges,  
if you know where to look.

Because of the way people tore down the enslavers' statues  
in a righteous fit of justice.

The way all the community gardens carved from fallow lots  
yield up tomatoes, lettuce, and squash in the heat of summer

while the farmers' markets do the rest, people shoulder to shoulder  
picking over greens, standing in line for pickles and peas.

The way people in this city insist on living out loud in the present  
with their Sunday finery and backyard bull roasts and rib feasts

while still grappling with a past that never leaves their side. Our side.

I'll stand up here on the roof and tell you why I'm here  
until the moon rises full, shedding her white light over the city  
like a summer blanket.

You asked me so I'll tell you.

Baltimore is my home.  
I have no other,  
and cannot fathom why I should.

## Full Spaces, Empty

My white body walks overtop atrocity's memory  
again and again—

less than five minutes from  
the pillow that cradles my head

stand the ghosts of slave pens  
holding men, women, children  
sold to the South

suspended until morning when they  
are chain-marched down to the  
brigs, barks, and schooners with names like  
*Hyperion* and *Intelligence*

pushed or pulled along streets named  
for the most celebrated overlords—

the slave-owning John Eager Howard of  
Howard Street, for one;

twenty years ago the City Diary column  
in the local paper—  
*a forum for examining issues of concern*  
devotes several column inches  
to recounting Baltimore's slave past,

naming names and places

how real this pain  
yet how provisional—  
unmarked, unsigned, twenty years on from the "news"

too easily un-remarked, still

my path not sufficiently disturbed,

my way devoid of obstacles  
so that

I may go on examining *issues of concern*,  
stepping overtop atrocity's memory,

unmolested. This—should—be—harder.

