

## BAKER ARTIST PORTFOLIO Poetry Sample

### Each Terminus a Beginning

Each terminus its own beginning  
This line a purple shawl draped  
Over cold capital shoulders  
Ready to enfold *nuevas almas*

Walk the dirt trail where fur and tobacco and lives were  
Traded between native Piscatawa and white settlers  
Now a major artery that moves cars like blood from Bethesda  
Toward a pool that washes away illness to restore health

Weathered wooden planks worried from here to hope  
Across a small splintered bridge above railroad ties  
To a time when we were welcomed to clean houses  
But not dwell within them for preservation's sake

Believers fell the hickory trees to build a holy house  
Until trolley tracks laid shockingly close forced a move  
Up the pike hauled by method of harnessed draft horses  
To a place where spirits congregate to serve the masses

Time has past swiftly since Lincoln played town ball beside mica-chipped springs  
That sprung into American suburbs that morphed  
Into world headquarters that Zippy the Pinhead  
Discovered while eating chipped-beef on toast in a diner that slowly crawled away

Life began when she got a library card  
Raised on words spoon-fed line by line  
Borrowing and sharing unencumbered  
Slowly learning to know the word "no"

Reminder of home for immigrants toiling along the C&O  
Sligo's surface mirrors emerald green of leaves above  
Long ago it churned grist mills and quenched thirsts  
Its ripple still tries to wash away deep creek blues

Green space brings green peace to a forest of high-rises  
Nature's beauty muscles against man-made artifice  
Engines muffle the creek's eternal voice but listen  
Close to the call to retreat from it all and hit the trail

I drop from the edge of a single sycamore leaf  
Into a tranquil branch that meanders to a creek  
That feeds a river that joins another toward a bay  
I grow mightier with others on my current journey

Cook an Americana stew in a large community melting pot  
Brown halal chicken in a pool of palm nut oil and kosher salt  
Take stock and add cowpeas mungbeans kumara and gai lan  
Ladle over cassava bread and share with all who are hungry

Where are these tracks taking you?  
Is your station elevated or underground?  
At this juncture are you halfway there  
halfway home or having to veer off?

The shortest route around the world is along the International Corridor  
And through stomachs that fill themselves on the global grain of rice  
Bún Chả Bibimbap Biryani Kabuli Pulao Tahdig Chelo Mansaf  
Majadra Plov Paella Jollof Casamiento Coconut Rice & Peas

Rub Testudo's bronze nose to a fiercely turtled shine  
Bathe in red and white raise high the black and gold  
Pump fists into victory's air first right then "Lefty"  
Shout together M-A-R-Y-L-A-N-D WILL WIN!

On granted land sown with bones and tear-watered  
Charles Calvert's seed of an agricultural college  
Cultivates educators from the ashes of a devastating fire  
To gather thinkers harvest knowledge reap empathy

Miss Bettie did not notice me admiring her in the mirror  
As she arranged sweet magnolias in a blue porcelain vase  
And swayed in her long yellow dress to the Rebel's fiddle  
When I turned she was gone and no music could be heard

In a station of the Metro  
Our faces glow like ghosts  
Illuminated violet by devices  
Uniquely indistinguishable

Geniuses must be in the zone  
To make discoveries every day  
They visualize a climate of change  
Hatched from the germ of an idea

Everlasting rest of the founding Calverts' name  
Between river branches Anacostans left pure  
Where counter culture meets higher educators  
And old-timers elongate their accented O's

Go tell it on the mountain said the scribe  
This veteran community above the parkways  
With so many crowns paid for by ancestors  
For future generations to wear upright with pride

Deplete our State armories of their artillery  
To defend the most dangerous places on the  
Annapolis road for now the honor of the country  
Depends upon keeping this communication open

Remember Carroll's sacred trust signed on the  
Dotted-dashed-dotted line declared a contradiction  
Remember when purple night breaks orange  
That our termini are merely new beginnings

## NOTES

“Each Terminus a Beginning” was crafted for an RFP issued by the Maryland Transit Administration to 14 finalists as part of an art installation project for the 21-station Purple Line lightrail to run across the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. Each of the poem’s 21 quatrains reflects upon the history, people, or environment of that particular station’s place.

Although the MTA scrapped the project, the poem stands as representative snapshots of a rapidly growing and diversely populated swath of land with both a rich history and checkered past. My notes below correspond with the stanzas above and are labeled by each station’s planned location.

### BETHESDA

The poem’s over-riding theme of hope is conveyed in the metaphor of a shawl on the back of a 250-year-old country that still welcomes immigrants. The notion of “quilted” suggests the stitched together tapestry of American people. The image is also meant to echo the Purple Line’s curved route beneath the beltway’s “cloak” and across the “shoulders” of D.C.’s borders against the two Maryland counties.

### CONNECTICUT AVENUE

In the 1600s, Connecticut Avenue was a Native American trail where Englishman Henry Fleet traded with the Piscataway people (the word *waappayu* is Algonquin for “white”). I could not work Bethesda into the opening stanza, so I reference it in connection with the biblical site that translates as “house of mercy” because its ritual pool was used for healing ceremonies (a nod to the NIH headquartered in Bethesda).

### LYTTONSVILLE

The bridge is not only worn by traffic but by the back-and-forth lives of African Americans aspiring for true equality while dealing with daily reality. Play on the word “ties” that serves the wooden rail supports as well as links to the past. “Preservation” also plays on preserving a way of life (perhaps not always a “good” thing) and historic preservation of an important artifact (like a bridge).

### WOODSIDE/16<sup>TH</sup>

Based on the story of the Sligo Village Methodist Church that was rolled up Georgia Avenue by a team of horses in 1897 after tracks for the Forest Glen Trolley were laid too close to the original building. Hauled “by method” is a nod to how Methodists acquired their name. The congregation evolved into Silver Spring UMC.

## **SILVER SPRING TRANSIT CENTER**

Transition/progress occurs rapidly. Lincoln played town ball (precursor of baseball) on the lawn of Francis Preston Blair's estate at Silver Spring, so named for the silvery flakes of mica in the springs. Silver Spring became a blueprint for the quintessential American suburb, then headquarters for corporations. Discovery purchased land on which the Tastee Diner (known for its chipped beef) was located. Cartoonist Bill Griffith commented on the diner's relocation in his syndicated "Zippy the Pinhead" strip.

## **SILVER SPRING LIBRARY**

Best-selling author Rita Mae Brown, who earned her doctorate and organized activists in Washington during the 1970s, once said, "When I got my library card, that was when my life began." Coming of age when she did and working for civil, women's, and LGBT rights, I imagine she had frequent encounters with being denied access (someone saying "no" to her) and refusing to be subjugated (not taking "no" for an answer).

## **DALE DRIVE**

Irish immigrants working the C&O Canal likely named the creek after Sligo County, Ireland ("emerald green"). The creek was once used to power mills and supply water. Food and drink also point to comforting immigrants, those who thirst for freedom and opportunity even when down on their luck. The last line is a nod to Takoma Park guitarist John Fahey's song, "Sligo River Blues."

## **MANCHESTER PLACE**

Inspired by the Sligo Creek Trail in the middle of a densely populated area. I imagine it is literally a lifesaver for residents.

## **LONG BRANCH**

This quatrain follows a single droplet through the system of watershed tributaries—Long Branch, Sligo Creek, Anacostia River, and Potomac River—as it grows increasingly stronger. It's a metaphor for commuting as one leaves a singular house, joins the rush with others on the Purple Line, and empties out into a huge office building. The word "current" works as meaning "now," meaning "water flow," and as a homophone for "currant" (which is colored purple!).

## **PINEY BRANCH ROAD**

Riff on the "Great American Melting Pot" adage that imagines a stew made with international ingredients possibly available at the popular Americana Grocery on

Piney Branch Road. The phrase “take stock” means both to assess a situation and to add broth. Again, there’s a message of providing for those who are in need.

### **TAKOMA/LANGLEY TRANSIT CENTER**

Station #11 represents the mid-point of the Purple Line and the middle of the poem. It is a time to pause, reflect, and assess. I differentiated it as the only quatrain that uses an interrogative structure, asking questions directly to the rider. The stanza uses sound-play with “halfway” and “having.”

### **RIGGS ROAD**

This swath of land that stretches west from Riggs Road along the southern edge of Langley Park represents what makes this entire area of Maryland truly rich: its ethnic diversity. Using food as a common bond, and given that most cultures feature some sort of typical rice dish, I included here Donburi (Japanese), Bún Chả (Vietnamese), Bibimbap (Korean), Biryani (South Asian), Kabuli Pulao (Afghan), Tahdig (Iranian), Chelo (Persian), Mansaf (Jordanian), Majadra (Israeli), Plov (Uzbek), Paella (Valencian), Thieboudienne (Senegalese), Jollof (West African), Casamiento (El Salvadoran), Coconut Rice & Peas (Jamaican).

### **ADELPHI ROAD/WEST CAMPUS**

Tribute to University of Maryland athletics as part of a five-stanza set devoted to the institution and its history. That said, I wanted to make each stanza distinct in tone and topic, so it unfolds west-to-east as sports, history, lore, commuting, and knowledge/research. The third line here is a wink to longtime men’s basketball coach Charles “Lefty” Driesell, likely the most memorable character across all Terps sports.

### **CAMPUS CENTER**

The University of Maryland is the state’s “land grant” college originally chartered as the Maryland Agricultural College and further established, through purchase of the Riverdale Plantation, by Charles Benedict Calvert (descendant of George Calvert, first Lord Baltimore). As such, this land has roots in slavery. A devastating fire in 1912 destroyed every building on campus (except Morrill Hall) and all institutional records. From these ashes rose the Maryland State College and eventually the University of Maryland of present-day.

### **EAST CAMPUS**

The haunted Rossborough Inn on Route 1 (completed 1812) has served as tavern, farmhouse, faculty residence, and—for a brief period—a Confederate headquarters. Rumor has it that Henry Onderdonk (president of the Maryland Agricultural College) threw an “Old South Ball” in honor of General Bradley

Johnson and his Confederate troops, who temporarily camped on college grounds. The most frequently spotted specter is Miss Beattie who tended to the tavern during the Civil War period.

## **COLLEGE PARK METRO**

This metro stop is rather unremarkable and set apart from campus, so I borrowed the first line from Ezra Pound's short poem "In a station of the Metro." He likened faces in the crowd to apparitions. I simply modernized it by having their ghostly faces glow purple because their heads are buried in electronic devices.

## **M SQUARE**

This part of campus—rebranded as the "Discovery District"—is an epicenter of research and technology, innovation spaces, and start-up incubators. It was hard to boil all that activity down, but I started with the notion of being "in the zone" (which doubles for being "focused" and literally in the "district"). The "Discovery District" is all about progress, so I played with "climate of change" (advancement) and "climate change" (science), as well as with the idea of an "incubator" as a place where something is hatched.

## **RIVERDALE PARK**

This stanza travels through time, too, by referencing the historic Calvert Cemetery, the troubled Anacostia River that indigenous people kept clean, site of a mish-mash of hippies and intellectuals during the 1960s, and where in some parts older residents still have the unique Marylander accent (similar to, but not as exaggerated as, the Baltimorean accent).

## **BEACON HEIGHTS**

Beacon Heights, a historic African-American community that no doubt wishes to retain its identity in changing times, sits on a steep hill (a mini-mountain) overlooking B/W Parkway and Veterans Parkway. I thought of James Baldwin, novelist, social critic, and author of *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. Baldwin said, "Our crown has already been bought and paid for. All we have to do is wear it," meaning African Americans' ancestors (through slavery, the fight for civil rights, sacrifice of all sorts) suffered for their descendants' advantages (crown). The obligation then, Baldwin thought, falls to future generations to wear the crown (live) responsibly.

## **ANNAPOLIS ROAD/GLENRIDGE**

These lines are lift directly from an anonymous *New York Times* editorial published in the spring of 1861, just a week after the Pratt Street Riots, when it was still unclear whether Maryland would side with the Union or the

Confederacy. The pro-Union writer recommends that the entire Pennsylvania corps be sent to Maryland to threaten Baltimore, establish a telegraph between Annapolis and Washington, and keep lines of communication open in defense of the Capital.

## **NEW CARROLLTON**

“Remember Carroll’s sacred trust” is pulled from the controversial anti-Union state song, *Maryland, My Maryland*. Charles Carroll of Carrollton (for whom New Carrollton was named) was Maryland’s signatory of the Declaration of Independence. Although Carroll questioned the evil practice of slavery, he did not free his own slaves; hence, the contradiction mentioned in the stanza (that, and the fact that “all men are created equal” was in fact hyperbole). The dotted-dashed-dotted line echoes Morse code for “emergency” that perhaps the Declaration’s tenets should be applied more justly. However—even today, given this history—there’s still reason for hope, just as after every tumultuous night there breaks new light (also plays with Purple Line/Orange Line colors).

Note also that the poem’s first and last lines bracket the whole piece but are written in the singular then the third-person plural so that the central idea of endings and beginnings can have individual or collective significance.