

Letter from America Summer 2015

People worry about us here in Baltimore. Images from HBO's *The Wire* and now from the CNN coverage of the recent riots suggest city-wide siege. Before the TV cameras packed up and left, I received polite messages from family and friends. "Are you okay? Is the wedding still on?" We assured people that we were fine and that our wedding would happen as planned in one month's time. But this answer masked a great many things.

Some of the looting and arrests happened less than a mile from our house, not far away, as many friends and family assumed when we said we were safe. It would be difficult to explain to an outsider that different worlds exist here side-by-side. Extreme poverty and great wealth can be, quite literally, next door to one another. We live in a neighborhood that reflects a socio-economic status that's in between. Perhaps the relative stability of our area discouraged the unrest from travelling.

We were glad about this, of course, but we also felt heartsick about it. Why should some of us be so confident that we were safe that we could declare the inevitability of our wedding taking place, while others lived in war-like conditions just down the road, unsure if their houses would be standing in the morning? In this sense, we were not "fine." We didn't feel like this was fine at all.

When our guests arrived to beautiful weather on Memorial Day Weekend, they were surprised, I think, to find themselves in a vibrant place – full of shops, restaurants, museums, leafy parks, and stretches of blue waterfront. Locals bought beers for one UK friend, who was so taken with the friendliness and variety of "Charm City" that he seriously began to consider relocating here. The temptation, for our guests, might be to swing to the other extreme, to say, "The news media got it all wrong."

Anyone who lives here knows that this is a great city with great problems. Anyone who lives here knows that things may have settled down, but the underlying issues have not been addressed. These issues are what the TV news and social media chatter are particularly ineffective at discussing. There's a tendency for pundits to reduce the problems and their solutions to a single issue. *People can't get jobs. Or There are too many/too few government programmes. Or (the Fox News favourite) Parents need to step up. Or The police need more guns/less guns.* And so on and so on. These pundits argue with each other as if it is impossible for more than one thing to be true. If the problems were as simple and easy-to-address as these discussions suggest, surely someone would have fixed them long ago. Who wouldn't want to be that mayor?

During this past semester, one of my teaching assistants, a student who is majoring in both Creative Writing and Education, accompanied me on a recruiting visit to a local, expensive private high school. We met with a Creative Writing class that had read one of my stories, and we both found the students eager to engage and thoughtful in their comments. The teaching assistant, who aspires to teach English, had been recently interning at a city school, as well. Over coffee after the session with the private school students, we spent an hour processing the differences she'd seen in the physical accommodation. The private school students sat in large leather executive chairs in a light, airy room. There was carpet on the floor that made the

chairs' wheels silent. At the city school, the desks and chairs squeaked so much that it was impossible to hear the teacher.

This is one small problem. But when it's combined with many others, they create a complex web. There's not just poverty, but also institutional racism, some of which is hard to see, even by the people perpetrating it. The loan officer who rejects applications from African American families at a higher rate than white families may not be aware of the bias. But the result could be fewer African American homeowners and thus fewer stakeholders in communities and thus squeakier desks for their kids. Even this, of course, is a gross oversimplification of the myriad interrelated problems. The TV news does not find it sexy to help us unpack much of it.

The one act that middle-income people in Baltimore seem to feel has an impact is to live in the city, and thus to pay (very high) property taxes. It's a way of contributing to city schools and programmes. Sometimes, however, these same people leave the city when their own children reach four or five years old. Private schools are expensive, and there are highly rated public ones in the suburbs. For this reason, a question like "Where do you live?" can be really loaded, especially coming from someone like me who doesn't have kids and lives in the city. People who have moved ten minutes away, over the county line, suddenly become sheepish, nervous. They have the urge to explain their finances. "I moved," they say. "I didn't like it, but I did it." It is like they're admitting to a failed marriage, to having walked away from something. Ultimately, they don't want their kids at those squeaky desks, but they also don't make enough to afford the leather executive chairs. What they can afford is the choice of a third option, and they often take it, but feel bad about it – about all of it.

If they're anything like me, they also feel bad when someone far away spends time worrying about them. There are people in the city for which the only choice is a) the din of squeaky desks or b) the silence of no school at all. My teaching assistant tells me that, during her semester at the city school, many teachers there made a choice, too. They quit to take jobs at places with smaller class sizes and at least one working printer.

As for us, we got married on a blue-sky day in late May, the bridal procession arriving via an old Baltimore streetcar with a clanking bell. The guests let out a happy cheer when the trolley car pulled up, and it was as if we were in a different Baltimore than the one that appeared on TV. That place could have been on the other side of the moon.

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