

Postcard from the End of America: Washington D.C.

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For nearly four years, I lived just 20 miles from Washington, in Annandale, VA, and I worked in D.C. for 9 months. From my home in Philadelphia, I've also gone down to Washington at least a hundred times, so this metropolis should not be alien to me, and yet no American city is more off putting, more unwelcome, more impenetrable, and this, in spite of its obvious physical attractiveness, and here, I'm talking mostly about its Northwest quadrant, the only part visitors are familiar with, and where commuters from Virginia and Maryland arrive daily to work.

Even though it's the world's foremost generator of mayhem, Washington is supremely tranquil and orderly. With its wide streets, unusually wide sidewalks, many leafy squares and the vast, magnificent Mall, D.C. is the ultimate garden city. It's greener than Portland, Oregon. It's also a showcase for culture. All of its publicly owned museums don't charge admissions, a unique arrangement not just in the United States but likely worldwide, thus the unwashed masses can stream into the National Gallery to admire the only da Vinci in the Americas, 15 Rembrandts, 12 Titians, four Vermeers and two Albert Pinkham Ryders. A laid off factory worker or brain damaged war veteran can stuff his face with Bonnards, Degas, Canalettos and Morandis, then pick his crooked teeth with a Renoir or Cassatt. If still not sated, he can hobble over to the Hirshhorn, Freer or National Museum of American Arts for more artistic nourishment to heft up his mind and bevel down his rough edges.

Washington museums feature almost no local artists, however, for this is a profoundly uncultured place, paradoxically. Nothing germinates here but power. (The only D.C. artists I can think of are Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis, two innocuous painters whose canvases are designed for corporate lobbies.) Unlike in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco or even Philadelphia, there are no first rate galleries of contemporary arts here. The politicians, lawyers, lobbyists, military types and spooks who dominate D.C. have loads of money, but they are all culturally conservative. Elites everywhere tend to be that way, sure, but D.C. is a magnet nonpareil for those who crave power and can think of nothing else. They are here to gain and barter influence, not to be distracted or pestered by arts that haven't been curated, many times over, to be palatable to the status quo. Even arts from many decades ago can threaten and disturb, and that's why the caustic social commentaries of Max Beckmann or Otto Dix, for example, are safely kept in storage and rarely dragged out for public contemplation. As this nation normalizes legal sadism, Leon Golub's images of torture will not be on display. Here, why don't you ogle these colorful blobs of nothing by some garbage painter!

Other capital cities have rich artistic heritages, but not Washington, for it was conceived only to be a center of power. Built up almost entirely from scratch, it's the ideal American city, literally, with just about every aspect of it carefully calibrated, and almost nothing that's organic or spontaneous. Its oldest section, Georgetown, was a major slave trading

center, as was Alexandria, just across the Potomac. Providing quaintness, fine dining and shopping, Georgetown and Alexandria give tourists a much needed breather from the oppressive monumentalism of downtown D.C.

After its founding, Washington itself became a major slave trading center, and one must remember that Washington, the president, inherited ten slaves at age eleven, had 50 slaves before he married Martha, and owned 123 slaves when he died. (Martha and her children from another marriage had 195 more slaves.) Ben Franklin, by contrast, never owned more than a handful, so it was much less painful for him to release his two slaves, and he only did this at age 79, three years before his death. For much of his life, Franklin only objected to slavery because it was bad, well, for white people, for it made them arrogant and lazy, he claimed. Plus, it wasn't too wise an investment, and to bring resentful blacks into your household is a pretty stupid idea, Franklin pointed out, and here he was thinking of the domestic slaves common in the North, not the platoons of field hands that an oligarch like George Washington could whip into inhuman productivity in the South.

In 1987, I worked as a looseleaf filer in Washington. I had just quit college and was sleeping on my aunt's living room's floor in Annandale. My daily task was to file thousands of pages into binders in law libraries. With a coworker, I would walk from law firm to law firm, and sometimes take the Metro to go as far out as Bethesda, Maryland. Before this job, I didn't even know that many of these 13-story buildings in downtown were law offices. Since no building in Washington can be higher than the Capitol, the tallest all have 13 floors. Due to superstition, however, many elevators display a "14" button after "12." Washington Circle, Dupont Plaza, Logan Circle, Mount Vernon Square and the White House do make an inverted pentagram, but that evilness, if you believe in such things, was part of the original plan, and has long been enshrined by concrete, asphalt and tradition.

My job was very low paying yet exact, and we had to work at breakneck speed. Wearing rubber finger grips, we had to zero in on thousands of tiny numbers to make sure no page was inserted wrongly. Rushing, I ran into a glass partition once, but the secretaries, paralegals and lawyers near me did not laugh. For months, a law librarian kept calling me "Kim," and I never bothered to correct him. I had no time to lose. It didn't matter. We were just rushing in and out and not a part of any firm. Though at the very bottom of the legal hierarchy, looseleaf filers still had to look somewhat professional, and so I bought five polyester dress shirts and four pairs of old man's pants from Sym's, the discount clothing store.

Hard as I tried, though, mistakes were inevitable, for no man is a machine. After one screw up, my supervisor enunciated to me, "Here at Bartleby Temp, we don't tolerate mediocrity," and she said the last word so carefully, drawing out each syllable, one might think she had just learnt it herself. The name of the agency is made up, by the way, for I can no longer remember it. What I do recall, however, is a coworker's dazed face as he emerged from a book stack. Of course, I had to be equally stultified. Our eyes had to be equally glazed.

After work, I socialized with a couple of guys, but there was no place for us to go, really, not on our budget. Unlike in Philadelphia, there were no corner bars where regular joes in goofy T-shirts and worn baseball caps could whoop it up. In downtown D.C., the only taverns catered to the executive types, and the city has become even more exclusive since. With a more bloated federal government, Washington is even richer now, even as the rest of the country become destitute. Just about every expensive house, car, tie, loafer, call girl, gigolo and martini in D.C. is being paid for, one way or another, by joe sixpacks from across this

nation. Elected officials come here to feast on illicit money, for you must be daft to assume American graft is limited to campaign contributions. They legalize some corruption to trick you into thinking that's all there is. In any case, the only other American oasis that's similarly thriving is Manhattan, for that's where our [banksters](#) and prostitutes dwell. Everybody else is going to hell.

As a looseleaf filer, I belonged to that servant class in D.C. that helped it to function without knowing hardly anything about it, and there was absolutely no hobnobbing with the higher ups, for with their conservative haircut, perfect teeth, gym finessed body and expensive, carefully coordinated outfits, not to mention a confident, upright bearing and honking voice, I'm not kidding, they knew exactly who they were and who they cared to associate with.

One of my coworkers was a tall, black guy who was having the time of his life, however. During lunch, I asked Bill what he did that weekend, and the mellow, soft spoken man closed his eyes and sighed, "I had sex. Lots of it. There are so many good looking guys here. They must be busing them in. I've never had so much sex in my life. I'm getting a little tired of it, actually." Hearing that, I felt anguished and embarrassed, for I had gotten nothing in months, but looking defeated is no way to hook up with any woman, and I had never felt worse in my life. I was socially displaced. Once, a female coworker, a native of Ethiopia, freaked out at a reception desk because she felt disrespected, but I was right there and saw nothing. I don't blame her, though, not at all, for it was all too easy to feel intimidated or paranoid. Like much of Northwest D.C., these swank law firms are designed to exude authority.

Earlier this month, I was in D.C. for a day and decided to check out Arlington, just across the Potomac from Georgetown. As a teenager, I had gone there to watch kung fu movies, and during my filing clerk days, I'd eaten at a Vietnamese restaurant near the courthouse. It was a rather seedy, five table affair at the back of a grocery store. Its wallpaper showed a snow-capped mountain and waterfall. Pointing to it, a middle-aged white guy shouted, "Don't drink the water!" He looked as if he was about to sob. The other eaters ignored him. Smiling, the waiter informed me in Vietnamese, "He comes here all the time. He fought."

Arlington used to have these rather grim apartment buildings, cheap motels and the businesses that catered to such residents, but now it is all spiffed up and gentrified. All the tacky shops on Wilson Boulevard are gone. Its funk purged away, Arlington has become as sterile as downtown D.C. The same process has been repeated all over the area. The smug bubble has enlarged itself. In downtown, there was Scholl's Colonial Cafeteria at 20th and K, and in the 80's I'd go there for its cheap prices and humble atmosphere. Once I even took Bill, the sex machine. At Scholl's, the emphasis was on comfort food, with meat loafs, breaded fish, overcooked spaghetti, soft green beans, soft carrots and mushy spinach, and an assortment of pies, that kind of stuff. With its many elderly diners, Scholl's had to be mindful of their false teeth and receding gums, not too mention their mournful and exhausted jaws. Anything too hard, such as fresh piece of celery, might just lay them out on the floor. Scholl's was so cheap, even the homeless ate there. At each table, there was a prayer card and on the walls, framed photos of the Pope. Most of the servers appeared to be immigrants from Central America. In the 40's, Scholl's was one of the first D.C. eateries to serve whites and blacks equally. Alas, Scholl's is no more, and it was finally put of business by the dip in tourism after September 11th of 2001. Even without that incident, I don't think it would survive to this day anyway.

Seeing next to nothing in Arlington, I got on the Metro and headed to Southeast Washington. Crossing the Anacostia River, you enter another D.C. altogether. Almost everyone here is black, and Washington itself is still half black. Just a few decades ago, it was 70% black, however. Back then, Washington had the highest murder rate in the entire country, and its basketball team was called, appropriately enough, The Bullets. D.C. hoopsters have been rechristened The Wizards, but a more appropriate name would be The Missiles or The Drones, methinks.

Frederick Douglass spent 18 years in [Anacostia](#), and this was also where disgruntled WWI veterans and their families set up a shanty town as they demanded to be paid, early, their promised bonuses. This was during the height of the Depression and they were starving. Responding to their pitiful pleas, the federal government sent in General McArthur with troops, cops and six tanks to chase them all out and burn down their encampment. During various clashes around D.C., four protesters were killed and over a thousand wounded. On the government side, 69 cops were hurt.

One must remember that Washington itself was founded after the U.S. government had stiffed its own soldiers even before the War of Independence, its very first war, was over. In 1783, roughly 500 troops besieged Congress, then based in Philadelphia, to demand to be paid. A bunch of weasels even then, the Congressmen delegated youngish Alexander Hamilton to schmooze and jive with the angry soldiers. Just give us some time to hash this out, he begged them, but these Congressmen then tried to arrange for troops to come in to snuff out the mutiny. Had they succeeded, you would have American soldiers firing on American soldiers, which was exactly what happened later in D.C. Leery of more incidents like this, the weasels slithered South to erect their ideal city.

I walked a couple miles through Anacostia and saw a handful of take out eateries selling Chinese, chicken or fried fish. One was named "Chicken, Beans [and Bones](#)." Geez, I wonder how much they charge for a whole skeleton? I poked my head into a Korean-owned [dry cleaner](#) and noticed the bulletproof plexiglass had vertical slits just wide enough for articles of clothing to be handed in or out. I passed Union Town Tavern, which looked surprisingly chichi for this rather dismal hood. It turns out they have new owners, for the previous is in the slammer for possessing 65 kilograms of cocaine. That's enough to coat several Christmas plays! Enterprising Natasha Dasher was just 36 at the time of her arrest. Though Anacostia has more than 50,000 people, Union Town is its only full service restaurant or sit down bar. Folks here just go to the liquor store for a tall can or 40-ounce bottle.

Many of the businesses on Martin Luther King Boulevard, Anacostia's main drag, had small posters commemorating the late [Marion Barry](#), a popular black mayor who was busted for smoking crack. Jailed for just six months, Barry still managed to make the news when he was charged with having a woman sucking him in the prison waiting room. After release, Barry was elected to City Council, then became mayor again. A folk hero, at least to D.C.'s black community, Barry is the only Washington mayor to serve four terms, or 16 years, doubling his nearest rivals, so he must have done some things right.

Historically, blacks gravitated towards Washington because federal hiring practices were much less discriminatory than in the private sector, then when Affirmative Action kicked in, blacks became favored in getting not just government jobs, but contracts, and there are more of those in D.C. than anywhere else. (A side consequence of such wrong headed racial redress is that a recently arrived tycoon from Nigeria or, hell, even China, can now be certified as a minority contractor, and the requirement that one must be at least 25% non-

white also sends many whites to dig up their Cherokee, Sioux or Navajo ancestors.) With number came political power, but local politics or demographics have no influence on what really runs D.C., for here is the dark, evil heart of an empire with an unprecedented global reach. In spite of our current, half-black President, blacks are the tiniest cogs of this sinister machinery, but so are most of us. Blacks may be hired as cops and firemen, but they can't touch the biggest criminals and pyromaniacs that huddle daily on Capitol Hill.

In any case, the black underclass that perform menial tasks downtown live in neighborhoods like Anacostia. They don't drink in downtown bars either, and I doubt many of them go to the museums, not unless they work there. In 1990, there was an Albert Pinkham Ryder retrospective at the National Museum of American Arts, which is off the Mall and not often visited. Having all of these galleries practically to myself, I kept studying a magnificent Ryder that had not just one but four cows. Squinting, I kept moving closer, then back, closer, then back, and often I had to tilt my head a certain way to avoid the glint off Ryder's thickly layered linseed oil. After nearly a century, hairline cracks spider webbed across the canvas. If man could live off minutely modulated ultramarine blue, burnt sienna and olive green, I'd have ballooned to about 600 pounds, but that was then. I've stopped going to museums. Everywhere I go now, I simply roam the streets.

"Why are you taking so long to look at that?"

It was the security guard, a smiling black lady of about 32.

"Um, it's very rare to see all of this guy's paintings in one place. I may never get a chance to look at this painting again. I came all the way down from Philadelphia to see this."

"That's a painting?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said painting. That's a painting?"

"Uh, yes, it's an oil painting."

"I thought it was just some picture."

"No, no, this is an oil painting, and it's old too. There's only one of this."

"Really?!"

"Yeah, and this guy is good. He's a very good artist."

"Listen, come here,"

and she led me to a small fountain that had been set up just for this exhibit. In the small pool were four fish.

"See that one,"

she continued.

"Can you see that his colors are slightly different than the others?"

"Now that you've said it, yeah, I do see it. He looks a little bit different than the other three fish."

"You damn right he does!"

she laughed,

"and those fish know it too, and that's why they've been attacking him all day long."

"Oh, man."

"Yeah, I have to do something about this. Soon as my shift is over, I'll tell them to get that fish out of here. I don't want to see him dead."

"It's great you noticed that."

"How can I not notice it? I stand right here all day!"

Indifferent to pictures on walls, that lady was sensitive to many other things and realms, and the fish drama she saw was, to her, an all-too-familiar allegory. Most of us, though, can only bend our neck a certain way, so will only notice what we're determined to see.

It was dark by the time I headed to Union Station, but on the way there, I happened to catch a group of [people](#), mostly [Jews](#), [protesting Netanyahu](#). [Bibi](#) was inside the Convention Center to give a speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee. Though he was scheduled to address Congress the next day, many of our Senators and Congressmen also showed up for this event to earn extra asskissing points.

Protesters are a regular feature of D.C. and the locals barely see them. In front of the White House, sometimes you see two unrelated protests marching within sight of each other. Oddballs also appear, such as a man who protested supermarket coupons. D.C.'s most unusual protester, however, is Concepcion [Picciotto](#), for she's been living in a tiny [tent](#), directly across from the White House, for 34 years now. Born in 1945, this diminutive native of Spain's main targets are the innumerable war crimes of the United States and Israel, which she calls Israhell. Picciotto is the first, last and ultimate Occupier.

A much more recent addition to the streetscape just outside 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue is Yusef, a beefy, red bearded Muslim with "NO GOD EXCEPT ALLAH MUHAMMED A MESSENGER ALLAH" [painted in white](#) on the back of his black polyester coat. In [2011](#), I had seen him in a sort of [flasher's overcoat](#) and no visible pants, but earlier this day, he had on a beige pair, though with the legs cut off to expose his ankles.

Yusef isn't objecting to American atrocities against Muslims, but the various deviations, according to him, from true Islam. Thus, his denunciations of vaccines, tunnels (because they block sunlight), movies, television, "picture makers" (which I take to mean painters and photographers) and even electricity. This didn't prevent him from asking me, in accented English, what time it was. As we talked, a middle-aged, female tourist pushing a stroller glared at him, but when I inquired if people had given him trouble, Yusef merely said, "I'd rather not talk about it."

Even more than Concepcion Picciotto, Washington's many homeless are its most damning and enduring protesters against this city's parasitic affluence, smug criminality and vapid culture of faux refinement. Numbering more than 7,000 as of May 2014, very few beg openly, thanks to D.C.'s severe law against panhandling, but they are [visible enough](#) even during [the day](#). To escape the cold wind, some sit or sleep, all wrapped up, in the entrance of the McPherson Square Metro Station, just three blocks from the White House. Keeping reasonably inconspicuous, they rest at the many [squares](#) and [parks](#).

At night, though, when the daytripping tourists and commuting workers are all gone, they [emerge](#) to claim their [sleeping spots](#) all over downtown, including up and down Pennsylvania [Avenue](#), the capital's grand boulevard. They lie on church steps, grass strips, in doorways and behind hedges, some with crutches or a wheelchair next to them. Rolled up in whatever will hold body heat, including gray packing blankets, they curl up within sight of the Smithsonian [museums](#) and the [Capitol](#). Inside the National Gallery, there's Hieronymus Bosch. Outside, there's this!

At Union Station, this nation's most regal train and bus depot, they lie on the circular stone bench around the handsome [fountain](#) outside, while during the day, they wander in to embarrass travelers with their grimy, smelly clothes and sometimes delirious monologs. They don't pull wheeled luggage but, limping in, cradle trash bags with both arms. Like zombies, hoboes or war refugees, they peer into shops with names like Jois Fragrance, L'Occitane en Provence and Oynce. Signs on Union Station's large, platform like seats, "THANK YOU FOR NOT RECLINING."

Wearing a leopard print dress, with much of her face covered by a cappuccino-colored shawl, a slim black woman in her late 40's rocked back and forth as she unleashed an incontinent stream of invectives against unseen foes. Her hands could not be more beautiful. She reeked of urine.

"You betrayed me, you betrayed God, you betrayed this government. That's not the right protocol! You can't treat people like that. Turn in your badge, you're a threat to national security! I'm going to have a heart attack if you don't do so by morning. The heart has to be right place for socialism! You think you can just kill everybody but you yourself will be bombed! You're nothing but a traitorous person. There's no effort or sincerity, there's just treason! You're all bad people here. You ain't got no evidence. You can't do that to me! It's perjury you committed. I command you to turn in your badge. We're going to meet in court!"

Every five or ten seconds, she punctuated her litany with a five-note riff of scatting, "Toot too too too too."

Washington was designed to be a perfect square, and it was until Alexandria broke away. When the Interstates were built, "The Beltway" was added to encircle D.C. What you have, then, is a broken square surrounded by a near perfect circle. Flying in, most visitors land at Dulles or Ronald Reagan airports, so from their rented car or hotel shuttle, all they will see coming in is an elegantly manicured, dignified and affluent landscape. In D.C. itself, they will be lavished with magnificent monuments and arts, much of it free of charge, and just about every turn of the neck is rewarded with a grand vista. If this is their only exposure to the United States, then this country is truly a utopia of handsome, well-dressed people who cherish arts, fine dining and well made cocktails. The grit, squalor and menace of

Washington are well off the beaten tracks and hardly exist, really, compared to other American cities, and even during its bloodiest years, the bullets didn't fly in downtown D.C. As for the homeless, they're shooed away from tourist attractions and don't really assert their presence until nightfall.

All capitals strive to be showcases, sure, but very few, or perhaps none, is as successful at blocking out its nation's true ugliness and failures. This sleight of hand, though, also works on many of the residents of this near perfect square inside a near perfect circle. The hell they've created keeps seeping in, however, and soon enough, it will overwhelm, if not explode, this Potemkin village of a city. This smug bubble will burst.

Addendum: Returning from D.C. a week ago, I meant to start this Postcard right away, but couldn't, since my computer was struck by a bunch of very nasty viruses, and this happened as I was in the middle of uploading photos of [AIPAC members leaving](#) the Convention Center after Netanyahu's speech. While wasting five days trying to fix my computer, and it's only half functional as of this writing, I processed and posted photos from my laptop, but this too was struck with a virus. This second attack was quickly neutralized, however. In all my years of using computers, I've never had two infected with viruses within the same week, and I don't claim to know what happened exactly, but it was surely a reminder that I, like everybody else these days, am completely dependent on various systems that can be cut off at any time, for any reason. Each of us can have our computer, phone, bank card or even car shut down at any moment, and don't think it won't happen to at least some of us in the future. What if, suddenly, you won't be able to withdraw any money, or email or call anyone? Very meekly, we've already accepted that we can be prevented from flying without any explanation. As for viruses, these aren't just used by governments as weapons against each other, but also as a way to punish, or at least warn, individuals.

Linh Dinh is tracking our deteriorating social scape through his frequently updated photo blog, [Postcards from the End of America](#).

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