



A VIEW OF WOODBERRY AND
THE JONES FALLS VALLEY IN
1867. (CHAP)

These Were Not Fancy Houses; The Rest Remains: A Short Creative Non-Fiction Essay

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Larry Jennings walked into the room straight out of central casting. Tall and confident, he had an actor's posture and a voice for radio. As the evil developer, we'd all been waiting for him to show his face again since he quit coming to our community meetings, trying to buy us off with catered charcuterie from Woodberry Kitchen while his spokesperson, the Baltimore version of Sarah Huckabee Sanders smiled, saying through a microphone in front of a slick presentation of renderings made by expensive consultants that their development would transform Clipper Mill into a state of the art, high density mecca of shiny prosperity that only sacrificed a few parking spots. I wonder how those engineers and architects that accompanied him to the conference room are sleeping these days. I'm sure Larry doesn't toss and turn.

While I do miss the snacks, I miss the stone houses more. Farm to table French Breakfast radishes and chicken liver pate aren't quite as palatable when served over rubble. Not just the demolition of pre-Civil war structures, but also the aftertaste of the lawsuit - in which Larry sued the community for having an opinion that was contrary to his empire - left a sourness in many mouths. Victory unfortunately hits the tongue like the lead and asbestos-filled dust cloud that blew over Clipper Road from the stone houses, from the Schenuit building - the dust cloud that settled on our tomatoes, our dog-walks, our collective understanding of character and stability and world we came here to live in - a world that is now partially surrounded by a chain-link fence. Don DeLillo's "toxic airborne event"¹ is in our back and front yards, except we didn't evacuate. We lived and continue to live here.

The two stone houses were part of dozen or so, nestled between the river and the mill buildings. They weren't extravagant. Nothing here is except for the bar tabs and the rising rental rates or home prices. Dave is British-born, in his 70's, he says it reminds him of Surry. The village was designed and built as such - by working masons to attract working masons to the mills. This is not a fancy place. These were not fancy houses. They were, in fact perhaps the most plain, and therefore the most vital to the collective whole. The rest remains, as does the river. Flowers bloom in the gardens where pavement or grass hasn't prevailed, the sun beats on concrete sidewalks where dirt and typhoid used to trickle into the Jones Falls before the miracle of indoor plumbing and modern medicine discovered bacteria. The river shaped things here, shaped this place before we took it: when the Susquehanna called this home, before it was a white land, before the quarries, the factories, before the village. The City was even a late adopter of this land. After the river was annexed, they buried it, channeled it into culverts underground in the early 20th century, and topped it in the 1950's by a highway. Through a tunnel, the Jones Falls still kisses the open harbor where they meet, and it still rages - overtaking its banks once, every 100 years, now, every few months.

We sneak through the fence to grab the stones that once made homes, so we can put them in a garden, build a wall, prop up books on a shelf, hold open a door. Something - anything - to keep a piece or a peace of what was. These homophones suggest the sound of consistency, and though it's been a year or more, we are still collapsed, imploded like these houses. We won so much as constituents, and lost so much as a community. We look to the past - recent and decent - to re-understand and rediscover what our here might continue to mean.

"Your dream of a little village is over," Larry said to the crowd gathered on Zoom later in the hearing process. At that first meeting, when we could still be in those rooms in Baltimore's Benton Building - the civic battlefields where neighbourhood Daves fight Goliaths together - as she would again and again, Tracy Brown got up to testify.

"Clipper Mill - those stone houses - our vista - the Jones Falls River - it is our Inner Harbour! It is the crown jewel of our neighbourhood and of our neighbourhood's history! When I moved here, I moved here because of it," Tracy says.

And we clap, and the Commissioners nod.

Larry was unfazed.

Larry owned the land, and lots of it. Sometimes via surrogates. He still wants to tear things down because he has the money to rebuild without subsidy, and all the permissions granted by UDAPP and neoliberalism. Tracy is my neighbour. We are the peasantry. We don't own much. But we brought our pitchforks to the 8th Floor of East Fayette Street.

On a sunny morning in May, the screaming started. About to leave for the office, I ran down, key cards fluttering around my neck. Jill was almost louder than the Caterpillar front-loader that was chomping away at what minutes before had been a pair of houses in a pre-Civil war valley – one of the most intact on the East Coast. Nathan Dennies and all his preservationist buddies say that “Woodberry is to Baltimore what Lowell is to Massachusetts!” whenever they are trying to say why Woodberry is special. I try to tell them that that means nothing to anyone other than preservationists when I somehow get invited to their fundraisers. Woodberry is special because it is what it is, and it's dirtier and poorer, and industrial and feral. And hey, we have the highway they built over the river where so many people crash cars next to the Pepsi sign every time it rains, really good beer, and artist studios. Isn't this landscape enough? Does it really have to be like other places to be understandable, legible, valuable? They just look at their shoes and sigh.

Some one – maybe it was Sheri – maybe it was the cops – got the Councilman to show up on the scene of the demolition. He was off that day, and arrived in sweats. Demolition isn't the suit-work of the funeral, it's the messy gore of the crime scene. We spent all day on that sidewalk, even though the houses were gone within minutes.

Costumed in my nonprofit office outfit, with the Councilman, with Jill, with Sheri, with my husband, who came down – who later on thought he looked portly in the press photographs, so took up running - we tried to fight a bulldozer, dried the tears of neighbors, redirected traffic, spoke to reporters, and used every curse word in the book. We watched the buildings leveled. We watched as the river kept flowing through its concrete corral underneath the highway, the roses in Ms. Christine's garden nodded in the breeze of the dust cloud, the light rail ding-ding-dinged its passengers to their destinies, or at least to their Monday routines. On a high contrast morning like this one, the light casts sculptural shadows almost as far as Druid Park Drive from the 41st Street overpass. The highway hums when there's not an accident, and a woman from Park Heights pulls up to tell us that we have a bigger responsibility than to our



CREWS RIP DOWN HISTORIC STONE HOUSES IN BALTIMORE'S WOODBERRY NEIGHBORHOOD. (FRED SCHARMEN)

local tears, because illegal demolition is everywhere, but no one is listening to black Baltimore.

“You’ve got to make it better for you because it needs to be better for us,” she says, and I hear her, and I tell the Councilman, and he hears her too. Larry Jennings never showed up on the sidewalk that day, but we all see what he had done. In the dust cloud, those of us in the street conceded it was an unseasonably beautiful day for the end of a world.



EXCAVATOR TEARING DOWN
35TH CLIPPER ROAD.
(MARK REUTTER)