



THE BALTIMORE BANNER

One Baltimore resident's love for Druid Hill Park, flaws and all

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I see they're soon going to throw a bunch of money at it, which is great and overdue. But for now, Druid Hill Park is perfect — if you'll allow that perfect here in Baltimore does not mean without flaw, but rather befitting the city surrounding it.

Twice a week, three or four if there's a pandemic, I bike through. From Remington, it's a 12-mile loop, 14 if I go up to Cold Spring Lane and back. On great days, everyone waves, nods or says hi — the families with the little kids walking around the reservoir, the people on \$4,000 road bikes, cool kids on fixies, the joggers with the pain on their faces, sometimes even the older guys washing their cars, speakers blasting R&B.

The park's easy to love on these days when you're biking through, a free agent with a job, your health, a wife who loves you and hot wind down the front of your shirt.

Everywhere you look it's basketball, swimming, tennis, pickleball and disc golf and, once, a kid up in a tree with a bow and arrow. Druid Hill is families singing "Happy Birthday" beneath Parkie Lakeside Pavilion. It's Orthodox Jewish kids flirting from far ends of a bench. It's guys on three-wheeled motorcycles trailing exhaust and weed smoke, men in and out of a strip of pine called the Grove, looking for attention. It's people in a park, using it, even if it's not always how it was designed to be used, which could be another of the ways of describing this human life.

Druid Hill is famous around here for its deer, but some days, I-83 roaring just to the east, you hit the wildlife Yahtzee: the watchful auburn does and their nervous fawns, but also the old-man-grumpy groundhogs jiggling from there to here like loaves of rye, skinny foxes off along a left-field fence, hawks in a pine's low branches watching the squirrels. Some days, from the poplars and oaks big around as cars, come the calls of barred owls.

Behind the pool, for two weeks in June, you can fill a helmet with wineberries the color of rubies. There's also a whole zoo, of course. From outside the fences, in front of the city police's canine building, you can see an elephant swaying its trunk and the top halves of giraffes like elegant telephone poles, all of it feeling like a moment you shouldn't be allowed to have. The city around it is like that, too. Baltimore can function, can delight. I swear it can.

But beyond the vibrant — if you pull aside the kudzu, the English ivy, the Asian bittersweet — there's the fading, the once important but now almost forgotten, the falling-down, the rubbed-out-by-rain. Anne Draddy in "Druid Hill Park: The Heart of Historic Baltimore," calls them "hidden historic structures."

There are the Three Sisters ponds, now long dry but in which sea lions used to live and on which Baltimoreans used to ice skate. There are at least two cemeteries. There's the beautiful peeling strangeness of Safety City near the baseball fields, the miniature downtown where kids used to learn how to not get hit by cars with its working traffic lights and all, the painted-blue harbor on one side, adorable skyscrapers on the other.

There's a lot of used-to. There's the Jim Crow-era Blacks-only pool behind Safety City that artist Joyce J. Scott filled in with soil, and which the park keeps mowed. Just as in Baltimore — or any city, any town — there are the spots in Druid Hill that can remind you of pencil on a sheet of paper that's been erased, but not all the way. Just as they are anywhere, forgetting and remembering are cousins.

My guess is that most cities are a little broken. It's their natural state. There are too many man-made gears and levers and pulleys for all of them to work all the time. Baltimore is probably a little more broken than your average American town. And it's true that, on some days, the thing you love will pop you in the jaw.

Because, some days, Druid Hill Park is the pothole barely avoided for the hundredth time. Some days, it's a big bottle of Gain detergent tipped over, a trail of soap slick on

the asphalt. Some days, it's diapers in the zoo parking lot, the mound of horse manure by the Moorish Tower that you remember, weeks earlier, as a tight pyramid. It's a picnic table without seats, a half of a mattress where a Little League home plate ought to be, another police helicopter overhead.

Some days, when no one's waving back, all I can see is the old water fountain by the tennis courts that worked fine until someone backed a car into it three years ago. It's the guys drinking beneath the roof of the curved stone pavilion built to remember a family's son who was killed in the last days of World War I. It's the railings along the switchback part of the trail crushed by falling trees and left there, like rusting wounds. All of us, the families, the road bikers, the joggers, we just pass on by, every day. In this way, is Druid Hill Park not like Baltimore, which has not, and some days it seems cannot, begin to address that which ails it? You feel the despair, some days.

But still you fight against it, because you can't get yourself not to care. Because on most days, Druid Hill is all of it, the beauty and the broken, and isn't that a town, a city, a life, these things of a hundred thousand moving parts. I hear they're about to throw some money at it, and that's great, but before they do, Druid Hill is this.

It's three guys taking turns on the chin-up bar next to the reservoir. There used to be a rowing machine, some other kind of gadget there, too, but they're long broken, long gone. A park, a city makes do. A love makes do.

Some days, most days, it's easy to love that which is without flaw. It's harder to love the thing that's often broken a little, sometimes a lot, but that's the love that's my kind of love, and maybe it's yours, too.

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