Barack Obama, microphone in hand, stares off into the distance of a nearly empty room, a bemused grin on his face that seems to say, "Where is everybody?" Suddenly, a woman breezes to the president, climbs to join him on his platform - there's no security around to stop her - and leans in for a kiss. The guy she's with laughs and says, "Don't mess up his face!" before snapping a picture. I'm at the National Great Blacks in Wax Museum in Baltimore, where Obama recently joined figures like Colin Powell, Zora Neale Hurston and Malcolm X, amid three floors of displays.

This is something of a homecoming for me. I lived here in the early 1990s, when I came to take a job at City Paper, the local alternative weekly. Even then, Baltimore had a reputation for intractable urban blight, but I cherished the city for its unexpected gems, like the George Peabody Library, known for having one of the most spectacular interiors of any library in the world, where I spent countless hours immersed in century-old volumes.

If you tuned into David Simon's television triumph "The Wire," which portrayed this city as a violent, impoverished hellhole, then it's almost impossible to imagine that Baltimore was once one of the nation's most prosperous centers of commerce. But in the process of becoming a sort of second city to the new capital in the early 1800s (Washington, D.C., is just 40 miles away), its legacy became muddled. I don't think I ever fully understood this town during the time I lived here.

Within hours of being back in town, determined to discover the Baltimore that slipped past me, I'm already a bit choked up. But it has nothing to do with nostalgia. The wax museum is located on North Avenue, and I find that the street is still bracketed with boarded-up row houses. Once a vibrant thoroughfare, it never quite recovered from the riots of '68 in the wake of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, and various exhibits at the museum (including a graphic history of lynching in the basement) only serve as reminders of still-raw civic and national wounds.

But just a mile west of the museum, I stumble upon Station North, an emerging district of galleries, theaters and artist studios. Cultural attractions - including the Charles (an art-house cinema that started out in 1939 as an all-newsreel movie house) and the galleries at the nearby Maryland Institute College of Art (Jeff Koons is a graduate) - have dotted the area for decades. But lately it has gained critical mass with the addition of newer places like the four-year-old Load of Fun.

**Sidewalk stories**

Clockwise from top left: the American Visionary Art Museum; Faidley Seafood at the Lexington Market; small shops in the Hampden neighborhood; the George Peabody Library.
If you tuned into 'The Wire,' then its ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO IMAGINE that Baltimore was once one of the nation's most prosperous centers of commerce.

Studios (an exhibition/performance space in a reclaimed office furniture warehouse) and the three-year-old Single Carrot Theatre. In '92, I was mugged near this area, and it's inspiring to see Baltimore healing itself in a way that feels grass-roots — unlike its famously developer-revived Inner Harbor neighborhood.

Godforsaken tourist trap! That's what I thought of the Inner Harbor when I lived here. Such was my aversion to one of its main draws, the Harborplace mall, a "festival marketplace" dating back to 1980. A generic, cookie-cutter mall seemed to me an affront to a city that I appreciated for its pronounced misfit vibe.

But my hotel is near the harbor, so I'm heading there nonetheless. On the way, I stop at the Brewer's Art, a local landmark of a bar in a beautifully preserved row house in the historic Mount Vernon neighborhood. I grab an Ozzy, a Belgian-style ale brewed on site. ("Have you had an Ozzy before? Brace yourself, it's fast-acting," my bartender says, pointing out its high alcohol content.) Slightly buzzed and determined not to eat crab cakes at an Inner Harbor restaurant, I grab dinner at the Helmand, a popular Afghan restaurant owned by Qayum Karzai, a brother of the Afghan president Hamid Karzai. (The kaddu borani — fried and baked pumpkin with a yogurt garlic sauce — is exquisite.)

And then, just a few blocks farther south, in a small park surrounding the Washington Monument (which predated D.C.'s by 55 years), I take in an impromptu classical concert.

Lured by what sounded like a string quartet, I thought I might be hearing a performance at the august recital hall of the Peabody Institute conservatory, where Stravinsky and Emerson lectured. But then I find the actual source: an open window on an upper floor of an adjacent building that directly overlooks the Naiad, a bronze statue of a nymph frolicking in a fountain. It's a ridiculously civilized, serene moment — completely at odds with the rough, troubled Baltimore of popular imagination. I'm almost relieved when other musicians, presumably in another rehearsal room, noisily overlay their own discordant performance on top of the string quartet. Back to reality.

WHEN I LIVED HERE, I WAS A REGULAR AT the Baltimore Museum of Art, with its sizable collection of Post-Impressionist masterpieces, including the largest trove of Matisses in the United States, as well as the Walters Art Museum, known for its Egyptian, Greek and Roman antiquities. But the American Visionary Art Museum, dedicated to the work of self-taught artists, opened after I left. And so the next day, after a morning jog around the periphery of the Inner Harbor — I feel stupidly surprised to discover that Baltimoreans use it as an urban park, even as tourists cluelessly descend on the mall — I make my way to the AVAM in nearby Federal Hill, for centuries a neighborhood of shipyard workers, now increasingly gentrified.

The museum offers a generous nod to local icons, including a giant sculpture of Divine, the drag queen made famous by John Waters, Baltimore's favorite son, as well as to outsider artists from around the world. (A current exhibition features the works of Iroquois Indians, Holocaust survivors and the great-
ESSENTIALS • BALTIMORE

HOTELS
Hilton Garden Inn Baltimore Inner Harbor A deluxe waterfront hotel that houses the Maryland Athletic Club. 625 South President Street. (410) 234-0065; hiltongardeninn.hilton.com; doubles from $119. Hotel Monaco Baltimore This boutique-style hotel occupies the beautifully renovated landmark Baltimore & Ohio Railroad headquarters. 2 North Charles Street; (410) 692-6700; monaco-baltimore.com; doubles from $159.

RESTAURANTS AND BARS
The Brewer’s Art Write selection of ales and an ambitious gastropub menu. 1106 North Charles Street; (410) 547-6926; thebrewersart.com; entrees $19 to $27. The Helmdorf. Afghan specialties include chopan, a half rack of lamb, and kaddo borani, a sweetened pumpkin dish. 808 North Charles Street; (410) 752-0211; helmdorf.com; entrees $13 to $22. Lexington Market. In operation since 1782, this is a good lunch option for soul food and traditional crab cakes. 400 West Lexington Street; (410) 377-8700; lexingtonmarket.com. Metropolitan Coffeehouse & Wine Bar Eclectic menu with everything from shish kebabs to stuffed shrimp. 902 South Charles Street; (410) 334-0335; metropolitanbaltimore.com; entrees $14 to $19. Woodberry Kitchen Casual upscale farm-to-table restaurant in a former iron foundry. 2010 Clipper Park Road, No. 126; (410) 464-8000; woodberrykitchen.com; entrees $16 to $31.

CULTURE
American Visionary Art Museum Dedicated to self-taught and outsider artists. 800 Key Highway; (410) 244-1800; avam.org. The Baltimore Museum of Art Features works by Degas, Matisse, Picasso and van Gogh, as well as an impressive collection of African art. 19 North Charles Street; (443) 328-7777; baltimoreartmuseum.org. George Peabody Library This grand space, part of Johns Hopkins University, holds more than 300,000 volumes. 17 East Mount Vernon Place; (410) 659-6175; guides.library.jhu.edu/areabooks. Load of Fun Studies A community-based gallery. 120 West North Avenue; loadoffun.net. The National Great Blacks in Wax Museum More than 100 figures as well as special exhibitions like the Underground Railroad and Islamic Africa. 1601-03 East North Avenue; (410) 563-3404; ngbwm.org. The Peabody Institute of the Johns Hopkins University The music conservatory offers various workshops and concerts. 17 East Mount Vernon Place; (410) 234-4500; www.peabody.jhu.edu. Single Carrot Theater A popular venue for experimental plays. 120 West North Avenue; (410) 844-9253; singlecarrot.com. The Walters Art Museum Works ranging from ancient Egypt to the 20th century. 600 North Charles Street; (410) 349-3900; Waltersart.org.

NIGHT LIFE
An Die Musik An 80-seat classical and jazz club that occupies a parlor room in a Mount Vernon town house and has an excellent record store. 409 North Charles Street; (410) 385-2638, andemusiklive.com. The Talking Head Club. The place to catch local and emerging bands. Next door is Sonar, a warehouse-size space that books touring rock and indie acts. (Listings for both are at sonarbaltimore.com.) 407 East Saratoga Street; (410) 783-7888.

Standing tall: From left, a view of Baltimore's Inner Harbor; one of the many vintage shops in Hampden.