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Being White in Philly

Whites, race, class, and the things that never get said.

By Robert Huber
March 2013

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My younger son goes to Temple, where he's a sophomore. This year he's living in an apartment with two friends at 19th and Diamond, just a few blocks from campus. It's a dangerous neighborhood. Whenever I go see Nick, I get antsy and wonder what I was thinking, allowing him to rent there.

One day, before I pick him up for lunch, I stop to talk to a cop who's parked a block away from Nick's apartment.

"Is he already enrolled for classes?" the cop says when I point out where my son lives.

Well, given that it's December, I think so. But his message is clear: Bad idea, this neighborhood. A lot of burglaries and robberies. Temple students are prime prey, the cop says.

Later, driving up Broad Street as I head home to Mount Airy, I stop at a light just north of Lycoming and look over at some rowhouses. One has a padlocked front door. A torn sheet covering the window in that door looks like it might be stained with sewage. I imagine not a crackhouse, but a child, maybe several children, living on the other side of that stained sheet. Plenty of children in Philadelphia live in places like that. Plenty live on Diamond, where my son rents, where there always seem to be a lot of men milling around doing absolutely nothing, where it's clearly not a safe place to be.

I've shared my view of North Broad Street with people—white friends and colleagues—who see something else there: New buildings. Progress. Gentrification. They're sunny about the area around Temple. I think they're blind, that they've stopped looking. Indeed, I've begun to think that most white people stopped looking around at large segments of our city, at our poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods, a long time ago. One of the reasons, plainly put, is queasiness over race. Many of those neighborhoods are predominantly African-American. And if you're white, you don't merely avoid them—you do your best to erase them from your thoughts.

At the same time, white Philadelphians think a great deal about race. Begin to talk to people, and it's clear it's a dominant motif in and around our city. Everyone seems to have a story, often an uncomfortable story, about how white and black people relate.

Take a young woman I'll call Susan, whom I met recently. She lost her BlackBerry in a biology lab at Villanova

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and Facebooked all the class members she could find, "wondering if you happened to pick it up or know who did." No one had it. There was one black student in the class, whom I'll call Carol, who responded: "Why would I just happen to pick up a BlackBerry and if this is a personal message I'm offended!"

Susan assured her that she had Facebooked the whole class. Carol wrote: "Next time be careful what type of messages you send around and what you say in them."

After that, when their paths crossed at school, Carol would avoid eye contact with Susan, wordless. *What did I do?* Susan wondered. The only explanation she could think of was *Vanilla-nova*—the old joke about the school's distinct lack of color, its perceived lack of welcome to African-Americans. Susan started making an effort to say hello when she saw Carol, and eventually they acted as if nothing had happened. The BlackBerry incident—it probably goes without saying—was never discussed.

Another story: Dennis, 26, teaches math in a Kensington school. His first year there, fresh out of college, one of his students, an unruly eighth grader, got into a fight with a girl. Dennis told him to stop, he got into Dennis's face, and in the heat of the moment Dennis called the student, an African-American, "boy."

The student went home and told his stepfather. The stepfather demanded a meeting with the principal and Dennis, and accused Dennis of being racist; the principal defended his teacher. Dennis apologized, knowing how loaded the term "boy" was and regretting that he'd used it, though he was thinking, *Why would I be teaching in an inner-city school if I'm a racist?* The stepfather calmed down, and that would have been the end of it, except for one thing: The student's behavior got worse. Because now he knew that no one at the school could do anything, no matter how badly he behaved.

Confusion, misread intentions, bruised feelings—everyone has not only a race story, but a thousand examples of trying to sort through our uneasiness on levels large and trivial. I do, too. My rowhouse in Mount Airy is on a mostly African-American block; it's middle-class and friendly—in fact, it's the friendliest street my family has ever lived on, with block parties and a spirit of watching out for each other. Whether a neighbor is black or white seems to be of no consequence whatsoever.

Yet there's a dance I do when I go to the Wawa on Germantown Avenue. I find myself being overly polite. Each time I hold the door a little too long for a person of color, I laugh at myself, both for being so self-consciously courteous and for knowing that I'm measuring the thank-you's. A friend who walks to his car parked on Front Street downtown early each morning has a similar running joke with himself. As he walks, my friend says hello and makes eye contact with whoever crosses his path. If the person is white, he's bestowing a tiny bump of friendliness. If the person is black, it's friendliness and a bit more: He's doing something positive for race relations.

On one level, such self-consciousness and hypersensitivity can be seen as progress when it comes to race, a sign of how much attitudes have shifted for the better, a symbol of our desire for things to *be* better. And yet, lately I've come to fear that the opposite might also be true: that our carefulness is, in fact, at the heart of the problem.

Fifty years after the height of the civil rights movement, more than 25 years after electing its first African-American mayor, Philadelphia remains a largely segregated city, with uneasy boundaries in culture and understanding. And also in well-being. There is a black middle class, certainly, and blacks are well-represented in our power structure, but there remains a vast and seemingly permanent black underclass. Thirty-one percent of Philadelphia's more than 600,000 black residents live below the poverty line. Blacks are more likely than whites to be victims of a crime or commit one, to drop out of school and to be unemployed.

What gets examined publicly about race is generally one-dimensional, looked at almost exclusively from the perspective of people of color. Of course, it is black people who have faced generations of discrimination and who deal with it still. But our public discourse ignores the fact that race—particularly in a place like Philadelphia—is also an issue for white people. Though white people never talk about it.

Everyone might have a race story, but few whites risk the third-rail danger of speaking publicly about race, given the long, troubled history of race relations in this country and even more so in this city. Race is only talked about in a sanitized form, when it's talked about at all, with actual thoughts and feelings buried, which only ups the ante. Race remains the elephant in the room, even on the absurd level of who holds the door to enter a convenience store.

A few months ago I began spending time in Fairmount, just north of the Art Museum. Formerly a working-class enclave of rowhomes, it's now a gentrifying neighborhood with middle-class cachet and good restaurants. I went to the northern edge, close to Girard Avenue, generally considered the dividing line from North Philly, and began asking the mostly middle-class white people who live there, for whom race is an everyday issue, how it affects them.

Strangely enough, a number of them answered. Their stories bring home just how complicated white people's

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negotiation with race and class is in this city, and how varied: Everyone does have a race story, it turns out, and every story is utterly unique.

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Early on, during my walks around northern Fairmount, I'm surprised by a couple of things. One is the international flavor. On a warm Sunday in October, I buttonhole a woman I'll call Anna, a tall, slim, dark-haired beauty from Moscow getting out of her BMW on an alley just south of Girard College. Anna goes to a local law school, works downtown at a law firm, and proceeds to let me have it when we start talking about race in her neighborhood.

"I've been here for two years, I'm almost done," she says. "Blacks use skin color as an excuse. Discrimination is an excuse, instead of moving forward. … It's a shame—you pay taxes, they're not doing anything except sitting on porches smoking pot … Why do you support them when they won't work, just make babies and smoking pot? I walk to work in Center City, black guys make compliments, 'Hey beautiful. Hey sweetie.' White people look but don't make comments. … "

That's the other surprise: If you're not an American, the absence of a historical filter results in a raw view focused strictly on the here and now. I meet a contractor from Maine named Adrian, who brought his Panamanian wife to live here, at 19th and Girard, where she saw fighting and drug deals and general bad behavior at the edge of Brewerytown. It all had her co-nvinced there is a "moral poverty" among inner-city blacks.

American whites I talk to in Fairmount have a decidedly different take. Our racial history, as horrible and daunting as it is, has created a certain tolerance of how things operate in the neighborhood, an acceptance of an edgy status quo.

One Fairmounter blames herself for her grill being stolen from her backyard, because if you don't fence it in, she tells me, you're asking for it. A pumpkin gets lifted from her front stoop in the fall, she buys another. That one gets stolen, she gets one more. It's called city living. Flowerpots, even trash cans—they don't stick around. Porch chairs have to be chained together. Your car window is likely to get smashed every now and then.

The danger can be a little steeper. One afternoon, at Krupa's Tavern at 27th and Brown, a guy named Bob tells me about working in the mailroom at *Rolling Stone* magazine years ago and shows me an anthology of Beat-era writers he's reading. I can't resist asking him about his wire-rim glasses, which are way down on his nose and twisted at an absurd angle—there's no way he can see out of them.

"Oh," he says, smiling, "I went home one night from the bar and two guys smashed my face into the cement steps of my house"—that's what messed up his glasses. "A few days later I got my wallet back in the mail—they had thrown it in somebody's mailbox."

He acknowledges that his assailants were black. "Not that that matters," he says.

Not all the crime in Fairmount, of course, is perpetrated by black guys from Brewerytown, the neighborhood north of Girard. But that's the perception, and it's generally correct: Another day, I chat with two cops sitting in their car outside Henneberry's, a drugstore on 24th Street, and ask them who commits crimes here, large and small. Mostly, they say, black guys from North Philly.

One early evening, just as light is fading, I chat for half an hour with a short, middle-aged woman named Claire who's walking two terri-poos at 26th and Poplar. She's a blunt-speaking widow who's lived a couple blocks south for 30 years. I ask Claire if racial dynamics have changed over time. "It's mostly white people," she says, "so there's no dynamic to change." I motion Claire down 26th a few doors, out of earshot of a black guy standing at

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the corner, to ask:

"Do you find that you need to treat African-Americans any differently, to tread lightly, to worry about what you might say?"

"No," she says. "There's no need to be careful if you treat people as human beings." A black woman comes out of the rowhouse behind us, and Claire adds, certainly loud enough for the woman to hear, and probably the guy on the corner, too, "As long as you don't have a gun in your hand, I'm okay with you."

As Claire heads home with her terri-poos, I sit on a stoop for a minute to consider her. Three decades on these streets have given her a level of comfort—Claire is not afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. Though that stance has certain limits; she doesn't venture above Girard with the terri-poos.

The same Sunday morning I talk to Anna, I move half a block up the alley and get a decidedly different perspective.

Paul is working on his Yamaha—it's got a balky carburetor. He's 29, a chunky, pleasant guy with a short goatee and black-frame glasses. When we met, Paul was renting a house with three buddies. He studied architecture at Temple, but he's bounced around, rehabbing houses, waiting on tables, getting freelance design jobs here and there. It's a tough economy for architects, though he recently latched on at a firm in the city.

The morning after he moved in three and a half years ago, Paul says, he came out to the alley, and a young black kid—12 or 13—was standing there.

"Hey, what's up?" the kid said, like they were friends. "You go to college?"

"No, I graduated."

"Still have some friends in college?"

"A few."

"You want some OCs?" Oxycontin. "Your friends want some?"

Paul told him no. The kid moved on down the alley.

I ask Paul if that gave him pause, whether he thought he'd moved to the wrong neighborhood.

"No," he says. "I got laid off in October '08 and was out of work for six months. I had to find money—it gave me a different perspective. And it seemed this kid was just trying to make money. He was just trying to get by. I come from a different world—I don't think I'll ever have to sell drugs. I did have to beg for a job as a waiter at 25—that's as low as it would go for me."

A man of perspective, Paul, a very evenhanded guy. But that night, something dawns on me: Confronted with a drug dealer in his new neighborhood, Paul understood that the guy had to find a way to get by. That he was struggling. That he had made an economic decision. But the "guy" who wanted to sell Oxycontin to Paul was a *child*—one probably in seventh grade.

What's his life like? Who's he working for? A few weeks later, I have dinner with Paul in South Philly and ask him if he's ever thought more about the kid who offered him Oxycontin.

"No," Paul says. "It's easier to put it out of your mind and not think about it. The truth is kind of a dark thing."

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In 1950, Philadelphia was a predominantly white city, with blacks comprising about 20 percent of the population. A decade later, that number had risen closer to 30 percent, and four years after that—in the summer of 1964—racial unrest flared in North Philadelphia, largely over brutality against blacks by white cops. Hundreds were injured or arrested, and more than 200 stores in North Philly were damaged or destroyed in three days of rioting, with many never reopening. White flight only accelerated in the next decade, and today blacks make up 44 percent of the city's population, and non-Hispanic whites 37 percent.

John, who lives on Woodstock, a leafy side street between Poplar and the northern stone wall of Eastern State Penitentiary, has seen the city's demographics shift firsthand. He's 87, and has lived on this block since he was five. Since 1930.

It was a different place then, before the war. You could walk home from the Blue Jay restaurant, at 29th and Girard, at any hour. Or up to Ridge to the Amish Market.

John worked in the offices of local long-distance haulers. He's small, with a bowling-ball potbelly and macular degeneration; his right eye is closed and sightless. He chain-smokes Virginia Slims as we sit in his enclosed front porch and he describes his neighborhood, back when he was a boy.

Milk and bread and ice delivered to your door. A city worker coming by every evening to climb a ladder to light the gas lamps that cast a beautiful glow. There were four nearby houses of prostitution, and tailors and drugstores, a butcher, barbers, a candy store—a self-contained world. Everybody had a laundry tree in the alley out back, and every Monday there'd be a snow of white—until shirts and towels and sheets began disappearing, right after the Second World War.

That's when blacks from the South, with chips on their shoulders, John says, moved North. They moved into great brownstones above Girard and trashed them, using banisters and doors to stoke their furnaces instead of buying coal. Before long, it looked like Berlin after the war. Whites moved out.

I ask John when he was last above Girard Avenue. He thinks for a moment. "To a football game," he says. When? "In 1942."

Over the years he's been mugged twice, once for a hundred bucks, once for the bottle of liquor he'd just bought. His house was once broken into, and he lost coats and money and Christmas presents and his father's gold watch. A steel-tipped arrow once shot through his rear kitchen window, impaling a chair just after his nephew had gotten out of it. He watched as four or five black men appeared on the block one afternoon and tried to break into his brand-new Chrysler Imperial. John stood at his door—they walked away when they saw him. Last summer he was sitting on his stoop in a lounge chair and went in to use the bathroom, and when he returned, there was no chair—a neighbor watched a black kid on a bike zero in to lift it.

There's more. But John doesn't express sweeping bitterness or anger. "Oh, I have no problems with blacks," he says. He was once quite friendly with black neighbors on Poplar, whose alley garages he can see from his porch. "They were working people, nice people, lovely people. I hated to see them move."

Given the monumental changes he's seen and his declining health, John no longer risks venturing alone beyond his block. There is a monumental spread, too, in his thinking, when he considers the range of black people who have entered his neighborhood.

He tells me about the time, a Saturday afternoon more than 10 years ago, when he came downstairs to his living

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room to find a stranger had come in through his front door—"It was a nigger boy, a big tall kid. He wanted money."

It's a strange moment, not only because of the ugly word, but because of John's calm in delivering it, as if it is merely fact, one that explains the vast changes in his world.

Fairmount is now a destination of choicefor a certain breed of young professional. And among them I discover a tried-and-true test of racial comfort.

Jen lives on Mount Vernon with her husband, an architect, and two children, eight and six; she's been in Philly since she came to Drexel from Egg Harbor Township on a basketball scholarship two decades ago. Four years ago, Jen began looking into where Sebastian, now in third grade, would start school.

There's a very good elementary school in Rittenhouse: Greenfield. And that's the school the parents in Fairmount —the white, middle-class parents, which *is* Fairmount—shoot for if they're going public.

Jen took a look at Bache-Martin, the public school four blocks from her house and 74 percent black: Teachers engaged. Kids well-behaved. Small classes. Plus a gym and an auditorium and a cafeteria, a garden, a computer lab. She enrolled her kids there.

Jen was not in the majority. Other mothers told her, "There is a lot of Greenfield pressure." That pressure is from fellow Fairmounters: pressure to send their kids, collectively, to the *right* school. Greenfield test scores are a bit higher. It's also not nearly so black.

Another mother told Jen: "I didn't want to be the first"—in other words, the first to make the leap to Bache-Martin. "It takes a special person to be first." Another told her: "Not everybody is as confident as you."

Sipping tea in Mugshots on Fairmount Avenue, Jen rolls her eyes over the nut of the problem: Unfounded fear. Groupthink. A judgment on a school without even setting foot in it. "I wouldn't like to imply that it's about anything else," Jen says, but of course it is: race.

There are ways around it, however. Jen became a kindergarten parent. She'd open the doors and get parents in there. Movie nights. Soccer and dance and art programs. Hip-hop dance instruction. A playgroup two mornings a week for toddlers. Local landscapers giving free mulch and leftover shrubs. She'd sell the school.

Even with all that, though, parents who'd check out Bache-Martin on open-house night still weren't enrolling their kids. "I'm not sure who else is going there," one mother told Jen. Same old fear.

Jen's next step: a mixer at the Urban Saloon on Fairmount. The kindergarten teachers came, and parents brought kids. Jen laughs at herself, given the bald simplicity: Get the parents together having drinks and talking with the teachers and each other, then watch what happens. Get them nodding that if Bache-Martin is good enough for Marc Vetri's kid—the restaurateur is a Fairmounter—then maybe … And sure enough, something shifted. Some 10 of the 15 families who showed up enrolled their kids. A new groupthink was forming. These home-and-school meetings over Saloon drinks happen two or three times a year now.

It helps that Greenfield is getting crowded and that the city is naturally expanding outward. "People in the neighborhood are now getting nervous whether there's a spot for them here," Jen says.

Nobody, through all this, said a word about race. At least not publicly.

I meet another urban pioneer of a different stripe.

Ben, 38, grew up on Madison Avenue in New York and went to Vassar. He came to Philly 13 years ago for a teaching job in Logan, and worked for Sister Mary Scullion's Project H.O.M.E. for a couple of years. Then he got into rehabbing houses.

Seven and a half years ago, he bought a rowhouse a couple blocks north of Girard. He thought the neighborhood —rundown, not integrated—was about to change. For a couple years, Ben was pretty much the only white guy there, though he was comfortable. Ben roams all over Philly—I catch up with him one day for lunch at Syrenka in Port Richmond, where he's building sets for the TV show *Do No Harm.*

His rowhouse is on a corner, where kids hang out; he got to know them. There's "tons of great neighbors," Ben says, from folks who work three jobs to welfare recipients, often subsidized by the local drug trade.

He's rehabbed three houses nearby; one had been a crackhouse where squatters got sent to jail, leaving behind 15 gallons of urine in various cups and bottles. "I don't know why," Ben shrugs. "But crackheads can sometimes be meticulous."

Then things turned on him. A middle-aged black guy who'd been in the neighborhood drug trade for a couple decades was friendly at first. The guy went to prison on drug charges for a bit. When he came back a couple years ago, he started running drugs next door to Ben's workshop. The dealer was different now. It was dick-

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swinging time.

He and his henchmen started parking in front of Ben's shop, blocking his access. Ben asked them to move, but they would give him a hard time. The dealer started bad-mouthing Ben to the neighborhood, talking about what was going to happen to this encroaching white guy. "He got two strikes, third strike he's done," the guy told people. "If he survives, if he makes it out of the neighborhood … We kill motherfuckers around here."

Ben had hired Thomas, a recovering addict from the halfway house across the street from the shop. Thomas told him not to freak out—the dealer would screw up. So Ben waited.

One day about a year ago, Ben was in his shop when the FBI rolled up in two black SUVs and kicked in the door of the dealer's building. The dealer wasn't there, but his sister was out on the street. "Where is he?" the cops demanded. She got him on the phone. He's now doing 10 years on an Oxycontin prescription scam.

What, I ask Ben over split-pea soup at Syrenka, would have happened to him if the cops hadn't zeroed in?

"I don't *know*," he laughs, though it's not a happy, or cocky, laugh. He remains in his house on Thompson, with no particular desire to move. As a boy, Ben took the neighborhoods of New York by storm, and that's his method in this city: He wants all of it. Fairmount, he says, is too homogeneous for him. He's a man on the outer limits of engagement—even at the expense of his own well-being.

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Most Fairmounters, of course, aren't trying to push up into Brewerytown, and their concerns are a little more pedestrian. In early December, I go to a civic-association meeting. On the agenda: the upcoming house tour, the winter social, patio planter boxes to help lessen rainwater in the sewers, and the neighborhood scourge: parking! I talk with Eileen and Bruce, who's the association's head, in the cozy glass-enclosed back room of their rowhouse on 25th Street. They're both retired Philadelphia schoolteachers; we discuss neighborhoods.

Brewerytown residents tend to stay above Girard, they tell me. "At Halloween," Eileen says, "that's the only time we see them. Lot of little kids from the other side of the tracks—African-American kids. People still give them candy."

"People get upset," Bruce says. "We used to have a parade on Sunday afternoon, kids would get nicely dressed up, and kids from up there"—he points north—"would come barely dressed up."

Eileen says, "People say—"

"At least dress up," Bruce says. "Unless they're working here, most of them don't come in this direction. They seem happy to stay in their little lot, as it were."

In a way, that sounds an awful lot like the Philadelphia of half a century ago. Before the race riots of that era, before Frank Rizzo, before race relations became openly tense and violent, the old rules applied. Black people *knew their place*. The difference now is that white people seem to know their place as well—white people stay in their little lot, too.

Jen tells me a lovely story: She discovered a public pool at 26th and Master in Brewerytown two summers ago. A beautiful pool, with cool slides. There were maybe 60 kids there—black kids—on the day Jen took her young daughter; the kids ranged in age from about five to 12, and there was only one other pa-rent around. Jen stood in the pool holding her hands out, teaching her daughter to swim. Eight or 10 girls surrounded Jen—they all wanted to show her how good they were. One said, "I am the luckiest girl in the world." And why was that? "Because I live across from the pool." She pointed to her house. It was a beaten-down row.

"These kids were so happy and sweet," Jen tells me.

She is warning me, with this story. I'd told her about driving up North Broad Street and how miserable I believed living there must be. There's a certain arrogance in my judgment, Jen is telling me. I might not know what people are truly experiencing.

As she was leaving the pool that summer day, Jen saw three or four older girls modeling her, with their hands out, teaching the younger ones to swim.

Engage, Jen is saying-—engage people, connect with them, without assuming what their lives are like, or judging them. It's good advice. Because she's right—the gulf is so wide that there's much we don't know about each other.

But we do know some things. To cite just one daunting fact among many: 50 percent of the kids in Philadelphia public schools don't graduate from high school. What chance does a child have, not even getting a diploma? There's a great deal of suffering—and disconnection—in facts like that, facts that align with what I see when I drive to visit my son in North Philly.

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The problems seem intractable. In so many quarters, simply discussing race is seen as racist. And so white people are stuck, dishonest by default, as we take a pass on the state of this city's largely black inner city and settle for politely opening doors at Wawa, before we slip back to our own lives.

We're stuck in another way, too. Our troubled black communities create in us a tangle of feelings, including this one: a desire for things to be better. But for that sentiment to come true—for it to mean anything, even—I've come to believe that white people have to risk being much more open. It's impossible to know how that might change the racial dynamics in Philadelphia, or the plight of the inner city. But as things stand, our cautiousness and fear mean that nothing changes in how blacks and whites relate, and most of us lose out on the possibility of what Jen has found: real connection.

What, I wonder, would that look like? Claire, the widow I talked to in Fairmount who was walking her terri-poos, doesn't worry about saying the wrong thing in her neighborhood, about offending her black neighbors, because she's confident of her own feelings when it comes to matters of race. But like many people, I yearn for much more: that I could feel the freedom to speak to my African-American neighbors about, say, not only my concerns for my son's safety living around Temple, but how the inner city needs to get its act together. That I could take the leap of talking about something that might seem to be *about* race with black people.

I wouldn't do that, though, because it feels too risky. In fact, I would no more go there than I would stand out on the sidewalk some Saturday and ask a neighbor how much money he has in the bank.

But this is how I see it: We need to bridge the conversational divide so that there are no longer two private dialogues in Philadelphia—white people talking to other whites, and black people to blacks—but a city in which it is okay to speak openly about race. That feels like a lot to ask, a leap of faith for everyone. It also seems like the only place to go, the necessary next step.

Meanwhile, when I drive through North Philly to visit my son, I continue to feel both profoundly sad and a blind desire to escape.

Though I wonder: Am I allowed to say even that?