

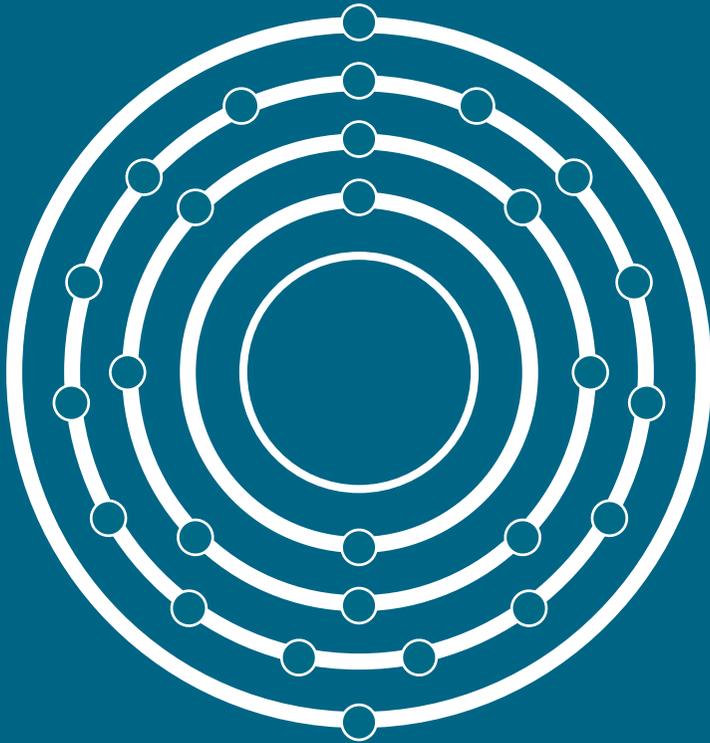
COBALT REVIEW

BASEBALL



2018

COBALT



2018 Baseball Issue

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2018 Earl Weaver Prize

Each of the authors included in this issue was selected as a semifinalist for the fifth annual Earl Weaver Baseball Writing Prize (our fourth baseball prize, overall). This year's winner is Buffy Shutt, for her poem "Pop of the Mitt." Finalists, in no particular order, are listed below. This year's issue features a special finalist—11-year-old poet Ammon Wilken—and Cobalt's first one-act play.

Sandra Marchetti, "Twilight"

Aaron Fischman, "The Gaijin Reliever: Tony Barnette Takes Tokyo"

Josh Sippie, "The Jersey I'll Never Fit Into"

Ammon Wilken, "The Final Pitch"

JJ Steinfeld, "Ball Caps: A One-Act Play"

Congratulations to the Buffy, our finalists and semifinalists, and thank you to all who have submitted to this baseball issue and supported the Cobalt writing prizes since 2011. The special anthology, with a working title of *A Quality Start: The First Six Innings*, will be published in the spring of 2019 and include all works from the first six years of Cobalt's baseball issue.

Submissions for the 2019 Earl Weaver Prize will open in February.

Sincerely,

Andrew Keating
Chief Baseball Officer
Cobalt Review/Cobalt Press

Buffy Shutt

Pop of the Mitt

Lots to drag us down. These days.
Crack. The ball is causing more blisters
This year.
Stolen bases puts a thrill in us
We are stretched out, freed of today.
Crack. The ball so close to netted fans.
Double play ballet.
Crack. The catcher flips himself over into the stands.
Won't stop. Won't stop.
Baseball is keeping us afloat.

The Big Time

I haven't been to
The Big Time or
The Show or
Broadway or
College that might have sped me
To one job instead of three.

On this small patch of
Indebted grass
If we lie head to head
Stretch our toes taut our arms long
We can almost
Touch both our neighbors' property lines.
We hear cars honk like they do for the Dodgers,
Others accelerate fast past, ignoring
The starfish on the lawn.

When we are upstairs and
I am no longer on deck
And you rock and deal and
I am lifted yard to
The Big Time.

Aaron Fischman

The Gaijin Reliever: Tony Barnette Takes Tokyo

The last time Tony Barnette ever started was March 8, 2011. It was a spring training game against the Chunichi Dragons three days before the tsunami hit. That day, he was experimenting with a new pitch, a cutter. He gripped the ball the same as he would his four-seam fastball before “turning it just a hair” in his right throwing hand. He also slightly adjusted his arm position in the hopes of increasing the pitch’s movement. With those two minor tweaks, Tony had stumbled upon something special. “All of a sudden, I just have this pitch coming out of my arm that was just an ‘Invisiball,’” said Tony. “It was awesome. I hope almost every pitcher along the way—I’m pretty sure every big leaguer does at some point—they have this moment where they’re standing up there [and] they’re like, ‘This thing’s magic. This thing’s awesome.’”

The Chunichi power hitters’ inability to make solid contact on the cutter quickly became quite evident to Tony. Manager Junji Ogawa and pitching coach Daisuke Araki noticed precisely the same thing. They pulled their American pitcher aside after the game but took their time getting to the point of the meeting. They were gauging how he would feel about a potential change in role, a shift from starting pitcher to reliever. The team needed bullpen help, so the coaches finally got to it and asked Tony how he’d feel about becoming a relief pitcher.

Growing up, Tony would always tell his dad, Phil, “A reliever’s nothing more than a failed starter.” As he ascended through the Diamondbacks’ minor league system, he started all but one of the ninety-seven games in which he appeared over four seasons. Naturally, he viewed himself as a starting pitcher. In 2010, his first year in Nippon Professional Baseball, Tony pitched as a reliever just once. “It’s a blow to your ego,” said Phil, describing how he remembered his son initially feeling about his coaches’ request. “I don’t care how good you think you are.”

Deep down, at twenty-seven, Tony may have still subscribed to the “failed starter” theory. The thought of no longer starting probably perturbed him on some level. Even so, that day on the field, standing next to Ogawa and Araki, he didn’t raise any misgivings. At this critical juncture in his career, ego was taking a backseat to pragmatism and survival. According to Tony, he didn’t need much convincing to switch to a relief role with the Swallows, especially after his mighty struggles as a starter the previous season. “I’ll try anything now,” Tony thought. “I couldn’t have cared less where they put me as long as I was pitching.” Hillary, Tony’s fiancé at the time, added, “When they moved him into the bullpen, I didn’t think much of it. At the time, he was kind of at their mercy. He didn’t have a good first year [and] they gave him a second chance. I don’t think he was in a position to really say much about it. He kind of just went with the flow.”

Tony’s shift to the bullpen wasn’t the only noticeable change ahead of the 2011 campaign. Prior to the season, the twenty-seven-year-old jumped at the opportunity to switch uniform numbers from sixty-four to thirty-four. Although he suffered through an admittedly difficult rookie season in Japan, there was much more to his new choice than

merely signaling a fresh start or new beginning.

“Sixty-four, that’s an absolute terrible number,” Tony said years later, recalling his thought process. “I hated it from the get-go. No offense, but it’s very offensive lineman.” Growing up, he always wore a single-digit number. He was, however, one of those fans who associated different numbers with the all-time greats who wore them.

When presented with a couple options, thirty-four was the obvious choice. Tony instantly thought of players he idolized from various pro sports: Hall of Fame pitcher Nolan Ryan, legendary Lakers center Shaquille O’ Neal, and Raiders running back Bo Jackson, who also played pro baseball but did not don number thirty-four on an MLB diamond. “Thirty-four was way more of a Showtime number,” he concluded.

A day after getting shellacked by their crosstown rivals, 9-2, in the teams’ tsunami-delayed season opener, the Yakult Swallows are again playing at the Tokyo Dome. On this Wednesday night, the Yomiuri Giants utilize back-to-back solo home runs by a pair of aging (both thirty-six) but still dangerous sluggers in Alex Ramirez and the left-handed Yoshinobu Takahashi. Through six and a half innings, the Swallows trail 3-0. It’s finally time for Tony’s first appearance in his new role out of the bullpen. With the exception of an extra-inning relief outing the previous May, the occasion marks Tony’s first time coming out of the bullpen since four years earlier as a member of the Diamondbacks’ Single-A South Bend Silver Hawks. Dating back to his 2006 Rookie Ball season in Missoula, Tony has served as a starter in 111 of his 113 regular-season games as a professional.

And now, suddenly, he finds himself trotting out of the bullpen with six and a half innings already in the books. No longer a starter, Tony reasoned that “In Bloom” had to be replaced. He has chosen ZZ Top’s “Sharp Dressed Man” as his new entrance song¹, although he’ll have to wait for a home game to hear it roar through Jingu Stadium’s speakers.

As luck would have it, Yomiuri’s light-hitting pitcher Tetsuya Utsumi² is the first batter number thirty-four will be facing. Utsumi, who has collected a total of nineteen hits over the past four seasons, unsurprisingly strikes out looking. Tony then retires leadoff batter Hayato Sakamoto on a pop up to short. Here, he gets into some trouble, walking the following batter on five pitches. The next Giants hitter promptly jumps on Tony’s first offering, singling to left field.

The cleanup-hitting Ramirez steps back to the plate, this time with runners on first and second. Just over eleven months earlier, May 5, 2010, Ramirez victimized Tony’s pitching with a three-run, first-inning home run. In all, Tony allowed nine runs that game, including five in the opening inning. He remembers what happened. This time, however, he trusts his new cutter on a 1-1 count as a jammed Ramirez rolls the ball back to him. Crisis averted in Tony’s first appearance as a middle reliever. He’s done for the day with his spotless ERA preserved. In the scoreless inning, five of the new reliever’s sixteen pitches are cutters, a pitch he threw just 1.5 percent of the time in 2010 and only began developing in spring training. Even more impressive, Tony’s cutter induced a pop fly and a ground out. It is surely a pitch Tony will feature more moving forward.

Tony has begun the season as a middle-inning reliever, typically pitching in the sixth or

¹ The single debuted in 1983, the year of Tony’s birth.

² As the Giants’ perennial ace, the left-handed Utsumi’s poor hitting could be tolerated. In 2011 and ’12, he would go on to win thirty-three games, sporting a sub-2.00 ERA each season.

seventh inning. On April 23 in Hiroshima, Swallows starter Shun Takaichi cannot get out of the third frame, allowing six earned runs before he's replaced.³ Although the Swallows trail 6-1 at the time of the starter's departure, they score four times over the next couple innings to pull within one. Still trailing 6-5 in the ninth, Gaijin newcomer Wladimir "Coco" Balentien drills a solo home run off Hiroshima closer Dennis Sarfate⁴ to even the score. After Swallows closer Chang-Yong Lim holds the Carp scoreless in the bottom half of the ninth, the game ends in a tie, given the new post-tsunami energy-saving rules that impose a three and a half-hour limit before going to extra innings. The impressive collective effort from the bullpen looms largely in the improbable tie, with Tony playing a notable role, tossing a scoreless sixth and seventh inning.

The Swallows are building momentum, as is their newly converted reliever. Later that week, they are scheduled to host the Giants, but the three-game series is moved 100 miles southwest to Shizuoka Kusanagi Baseball Stadium in order to boost attendance. With night games outlawed for April, team and league officials worry that Jingu Stadium's crowd will be sparsely populated for the Tuesday-Thursday series. The home-away-from-home setup is not a problem for the Swallows, who sweep their rivals with Tony pitching, and pitching well, in the first two games of the series.

In the second game, Tony preserves a 4-1 lead by striking out the side in a scoreless seventh. Although two batters reach base on a single and an error, Tony coolly strikes out Yomiuri's third batter, Michihiro Ogasawara, for the final out as Alex Ramirez is stranded on deck. That day, power-hitting Curaçaoan outfielder Balentien adds two more home runs to his growing total in his first season in Japan. The burly, six-foot-two slugger came over from the States, where he most recently played 116 games for the Cincinnati Reds' Triple-A affiliate in 2010. Prior to that, Balentien played parts of three seasons with the major league Mariners and Reds between 2007 and 2009. Although he compiled fifteen home runs during that stretch, he also struck out more than a quarter of his plate appearances (26.6 percent, to be exact) and batted a lowly .221.

After delivering another bomb in the series finale, Balentien has produced six home runs in his first fourteen NPB games. Meanwhile, Tony is also on a roll. Following the Yomiuri sweep, Tony adds another scoreless inning at Hanshin, bringing his early season numbers to eight innings pitched, ten strikeouts, and still not a single run allowed. Canadian scribe Rob Smaal writes a column for the *Asahi Shimbun* in which he dubs Balentien and Barnette the Swallows' "Killer B's."

The Swallows' typical Monday off cannot cool them down. The next night, the red-hot Swallows win again in gritty fashion. Tasked with holding a 3-2 lead in the seventh inning, Tony fails for the first time all season. Had he and the rest of the bullpen maintained the lead, veteran Masanori Ishikawa would have secured his 100th career win. The five-foot-six southpaw, according to Tony, was effectively a leader by example for much of the team: "Even though he's a small in statute kind of guy, I think guys just naturally followed him in the way that he worked and showed up and did his job day to day." The diminutive pitcher also liked to learn about American culture and occasionally use the acquired

³ This would be struggling Takaichi's final NPB appearance at the age of twenty-six. Following the 2011 season, the Ham Fighters hired him as a batting practice pitcher.

⁴ Playing his first season in Japan, the large American right-hander most recently spent 2010 as the closer for the Baltimore Orioles' Triple-A affiliate in Norfolk, Virginia.

knowledge to mess with the foreign guys, said Tony. Ironically, the blown Ishikawa win results in Tony's first individual win of 2011 after the offense comes up with a pair of runs in the bottom of the same inning.

In the win over Hanshin, big bad Balentien comes through with yet another home run. Through May 3, he leads the Central League in home runs (nine), total bases (fifty), walks (thirteen), and slugging (.877), with a ridiculous 1.349 OPS (on-base plus slugging percentage). The Swallows are undeniably happy to have him. More broadly, they are pleased with their current 11-5-2 record, which includes eleven wins and one tie over their past fourteen games, and is good for first place in their league. Team pitching is doing its part too. During that stretch, the Swallows have given up a mere two runs per game. For one, Tony is fitting in nicely as a relief pitcher.

"Just immediately [since Tony moved to the bullpen]," Hillary noticed, "he seemed like a totally different person on the mound." Years later, Tony believes many around the team were responsible for his smooth transition to the bullpen. While he credits pitching coach Daisuke Araki, among others, he argues it was bullpen coach Tomohito Ito, a former Swallows pitcher in his own right, for most critically preparing him for the new role. According to Tony, Araki would most commonly delegate assignments to Ito, who would in turn work one-on-one with various pitchers.

Ito took a particular interest in Tony early on during spring training, playing catch with him every day. After they were done throwing the ball each time, they would discuss what they were working on and how Tony could improve. "So whether it's mechanically or finger positions on balls—it didn't matter what it was—he always had something to talk about and something to challenge me for the next day or the next time out," Tony said of Ito. "He was always challenging me, and I loved it. I just ate it up, and I kept going out there and trying to perform these challenges that we would talk about. I started seeing results and success in the bullpen because of it."

Ito implored Tony to look into adding a splitfinger to his pitch repertoire. Additionally, he placed an emphasis on adjusting the pitcher's mindset, given Tony's new responsibilities this season. Ito astutely highlighted the differing approaches between starters and relievers. Starters are expected to pitch deep into games and thus tend to bring with them a unique set of motivations. No longer a starter, Tony would have to adapt to a new approach.

"Early on," Tony explained, "he was really getting on me to basically just go all out on every single pitch, leave nothing in the tank, just try to get away from the mindset of pacing yourself throughout a start and reminding me to basically throw as hard as possible. I'm only gonna be out there for roughly ten to fifteen pitches at most; might as well just let it rip."

"When I went to the bullpen, I changed everything about the way I played baseball. They always say, 'Don't try to reinvent the wheel.' I went back, and I reinvented the wheel with myself. I knew that I had to do something drastically different with the way that I approached the Japanese game, because it just wasn't working."

Certainly aiding in Tony's improvement, he developed new pitches and built the confidence to throw them. In 2010, according to *NPBTracker.com*, Tony threw a fastball on 42.5 percent of his pitches. He went with a slider or a changeup an additional 37.9 percent of the time, and those were two pitches Tony and his coaches did not believe had been very effective for him. He went the entire season without throwing a splitter and used his cutter just 1.5 percent of the time.

Throughout the 2011 season, Tony would flip the above percentages on their head, reducing his fastball rate to below 30 percent and, more dramatically and crucially, throwing a changeup or slider only a tad over 10 percent of the time. This creates the room for Tony to use his devastating new cutter on a whopping 35.0 percent of his pitches, while employing a new splitter 7.6 percent of the time⁵.

	Fastball	Curve	Slider	Changeup	Cutter	Shuuto	Forkball	Splitter
2010	42.5%	9.0%	20.8%	17.1%	1.5%	9.0%	0.0%	0.0%
2011	29.8%	9.6%	6.9%	3.4%	35.0%	6.5%	1.3%	7.6%

*TB's Pitch Distribution (Data and graph courtesy of *NPBTracker.com*)

At some point during the 2011 season, or probably more gradually throughout, Tokyo becomes home for Tony Barnette and Hillary Jones. Gone are the nagging feelings of isolation. Granted, both occasionally miss the U.S., especially their friends and family, but Tokyo no longer feels foreign. For them, the city transforms from merely the location of Tony's workplace into a culturally rich area where they are fortunate to live eight months of the year (nine for Tony, who spends Februaries in Okinawa).

"Obviously Tony was doing better the second year, and so in terms of a routine, he and I were having a lot more fun exploring the city," said Hillary, fondly looking back at a particularly special time of her life. "After his games, that's when we would go." The two would take off on their bikes around 11 or midnight and ride around Tokyo. "It was super-quiet," said Hillary, "and nobody was out really. It was awesome."

While Tony's improved play allowed for much more exploration, these late-night bike rides also helped the couple get their exercise in a fun and educational way. And for Tony, specifically, it provided a golden opportunity to decompress from the ordinary stress that comes with participating in a professional sporting event. For many pro athletes, it's not as simple as playing a game with high intensity before then flipping a switch to return to normal life.

"Everybody does it differently," explained Tony. "Some guys internalize it, go home, shut everything down. I don't know. You see it in sports. Some guys drink. Some guys go out to nightclubs. Everybody does it differently. [You've] just got to find what works for you, and that year, that started working."

"If I didn't lift at the field after the game, if I hadn't lifted, or if I'd thrown for three days in a row and hadn't got a lift in or something like that, it was a great way for me to get out and get some low-impact exercise. You know, to flush. And it was a good way for us to see the city in the meantime."

The historic Imperial Palace, located in Chiyoda, Tokyo, was one of Tony's favorite spots to visit on these bicycle trips. Even in rainy weather, they'd excitedly peruse the exterior of Emperor Akihito's⁶ primary residence. In addition to the private living quarters of the Imperial Family, the grounds also contain the main palace, an archive, museums,

⁵ It won't be until Tony's 2012 season that he'll much more frequently use the splitter he's still perfecting.

⁶ Akihito took over the throne when his father, Emperor Hirohito, died in early 1989. He is set to abdicate the Chrysanthemum throne on April 30, 2019, stepping aside for his eldest son to take his place.

and administrative offices. The beautiful palace, which was built on the site of the old Edo Castle (in use from 1457 to 1873), is a grand testament to the world's oldest reigning dynasty, a fact not lost on a marveling Tony Barnette: "We don't have these things that are so old and so enshrined in history like Japan does, like a lot of the places throughout the world. It's fun to see where people came from, where cultures derived from, and how they used to be ruled. It's history."

Tony and Hillary had such rich history accessible to them, a quick bike ride away, a reality neither claims to have taken for granted after 2010. Even so, their appreciation for Tokyo's hidden historical gems only grew over time. Tony remembered a specific discovery he made while not on his bike: "[There are] little temples that are throughout the city that you don't even see. You're just walking down the road and you turn. 'Oh God. There's a temple right there just kind of tucked away in the corner.' All these tall buildings and then there's just this little wooden temple in between them all."

In their quest to grow better acquainted with their new home, they liked to experiment with different routes. They aspired to travel down every single Tokyo street, a lofty and admittedly unrealistic goal—there are far too many across the sprawling city—but temporarily forgetting their location became part of the fun, according to Tony and Hillary. "It was easy to get lost," said Tony, "but it was also easy to find yourself again." When the two would inevitably lose their place, all they had to do was find a nearby main street, stop by its train station, and pick up a map. They didn't view getting lost as a problem. It was always much more of an adventure. "It seems like it's an endless puzzle of streets on streets," he added. "Every time you turn down a new one, you're gonna see ten more new ones. That's why I always thought the delivery services were so impressive there."

Late at night, the typically busy streets of Tokyo were fairly empty. With fewer cars and people around, they didn't have to carefully navigate their way through traffic in a chaotic metropolis. At this hour, some people were around, but not very many. These impromptu excursions were rarely rushed—Tony would not have to report for work until early that afternoon—which contributed to their laidback quality. "We got free rein," said Tony. "It's cool when you're in a big city like that, and you kind of feel like you have it all to yourself."

Whichever route they biked, Aoyama Cemetery was on the way more times than not. "It was always on our route, because we would always detour to it," said Tony with a laugh. "Hey, you want to ride through the cemetery? We're like, 'Yeah, OK.'" The sixty-five-acre cemetery's beauty thoroughly captivated them. Riveting cherry blossom trees line the streets winding through the grounds. During springtime, primarily between late March and early May⁷, cherry blossoms are everywhere. In daytime, many people are inside, visiting loved ones' graves, walking their dogs, going for a bike ride, or embarking on any number of outdoor activities.

At night, however, the cemetery feels more, well, like a cemetery. Hillary would sometimes find herself getting lost, imagining, "Who are these people?" and "What kind of lives did they lead?" The centuries-old gravestones particularly intrigued Hillary, as did graves honoring Gaijin, like one of the first American doctors to work in Tokyo. "It was kind of dark I guess, but it was really pretty," Hillary said of her and Tony's morbid hang-out spot.

During the day, every once in a while, Hillary loved taking the train from Shibuya to the Kamakura Station, an hour south. From there, she'd rent a bicycle and ride along the

⁷ Cherry blossoms typically start appearing at the beginning of February.

beach, noticing local fishermen trying their luck.

During her first two years in Japan, Hillary did not own a cell phone. “It was kind of liberating,” she said. Early on, Tony bought her a pink compass necklace to make sure she always, at least in a broad sense, knew where she was in Japan. Along with her apartment key, often on the same necklace, Hillary wore the compass out of necessity every day. But over time, the necklace became much more than a security blanket. It became Hillary’s most cherished possession from her time in the country and is, to this day, kept in a jewelry box in her top drawer.

Cell phone-free liberation can come with a price, though. On one occasion, Hillary lost track of time and nearly got stranded in the city of Nikko, a small town in the Tochigi Prefecture. She had taken the train north to go hiking and see waterfalls in Nikko. Trails off the main street led to waterfalls, and as one approached each waterfall, wild monkeys started appearing in large numbers. Eschewing the largest, most popular waterfalls, Hillary opted to visit the more secluded ones, moving farther and farther from the train station as the day progressed. Suddenly, she realized, it was getting late and she would have to sprint a mile back to the station to catch the last train of the day.

“I was just kind of on my own,” she recounts the close call. “The sun was going down, and there were wild monkeys all around. ‘Oh my God. I have to start running.’ There’s nothing else. There’s no taxis, no buses. So I ran [to the train station], but I got there in time. It worked out. I remember thinking, ‘I don’t know Tony’s cell phone number; it’s a Japanese cell phone number.’ I don’t even know what I would’ve done. Even if I used a payphone, I wouldn’t have known really who to call. I probably would have just stayed in a hotel, but honestly I don’t know, because Tony would have freaked out if I was in a hotel and I had never called him and I never came home.”

A notable family development further enabled Tokyo to start feeling like home. In 2011, Tony’s stepbrother, Jesse, the son of Phil’s second wife, Susanna, moved to Japan, about an hour north of Tony and Hillary’s apartment, to teach English full-time. “Me being there had no bearing on him going,” swears Tony, but the brothers did take advantage of their newfound proximity to each other. As a boy in Federal Way, Washington⁸, Jesse had many Asian-American friends and very much enjoyed various Japanese cultural imports, even though he didn’t realize their origin until later. Naturally, he jumped at the chance to live and work in Japan. Upon moving to the area, Jesse occasionally stops by Jingu Stadium or his brother’s apartment for a meal and a hello.

One of Tony’s most dominant performances of the season comes on August 3 against the Dragons. While the Swallows don’t grab the win—the game finished in a tie—Tony strikes out all three batters he faces, utilizing his increasingly feared cutter on eight of twelve pitches, including all three Ks.

In twenty-two appearances between June 9 and August 3, Tony pitched twenty-two scoreless innings. Over that stretch, he enjoyed a 0.77 WHIP (derived from walks plus hits divided by innings pitched) with twenty-six strikeouts. The nearly two-month period lowered the first-time NPB reliever’s season ERA from an already strong 1.93 to a virtually unhittable 0.75. During those twenty-two innings, opponents failed to muster

⁸ The state of Washington trails only California when it comes to number of sister cities with a Japanese counterpart. In 1993, Federal Way became sister cities with Hachinohe of the Aomori Prefecture.

even one extra-base hit. Tony believed he had approached his change in role with a hard-working, open-minded attitude. After he put in the requisite work and was seeing validation every step of the way, his confidence grew and success begot more success.

“Hitters [on your own team] are standing into your bullpen and they’re giving you feedback on what it looks like, and then you take that into live batting practice where you’re telling the guys what’s coming and they’re still taking swings at it [and missing]. Then you put it into a game situation and you see it. You see what I’m getting at here. When something that you work on works at every single stage and you start to find success with it, of course it’s gonna bring confidence with it.”

Narrowing the peak of Tony’s 2011 dominance even further, he flat-out eviscerated opposing batters during his eleven appearances between July 5 and August 3. Over that stretch, Tony struck out nineteen men and allowed just five hits, all of them singles.

Complementing the increased confidence, Tony developed what he called a “sixth sense” when it came to his new routine as a reliever, between and during games: “Oh, man. The difference is huge, because when you’re not pitching every single day, as a starter, then OK, you get ready for that start and then you started that game, but then you’ve got six days in between to prepare for the next game, so the focus is different. But when you’re getting ready to go every single day, the routine gets to be so repetitive and like a sixth sense. You just wake up, and you do it. You don’t even have to think about doing it anymore. One moment I’m sitting at my locker, and then the next moment I close my eyes and next thing you know, I’m already on the table getting stretched out. And [then] you don’t even realize you went in there.

“So it becomes a pattern. I like it. I like being ready every single day. I like having to be alert and having to be tuned into every single minute of the game. Sitting around [between starts], watching the game happen all the time and not being a part of it, it gets boring. It gets, for me, lazy, and it’s easy to lose focus that way, whereas for a guy like me, having to be ready almost every second of the day is a lot better for my personality. It keeps me in tune. It makes me discipline myself on making sure I’m at the right place, at the right time and not screwing around and letting my mind wander.”

Leading up to the stretch run, in an effort to rest Tony, now the team’s prized setup man, Ogawa holds him out of the next five games, including a couple that are separated by a single run. Rather than benefit from the respite, Tony proceeds to fall into his only real pitching slump of the season, as he allows five earned runs and twelve base runners over his following three appearances. In two of those, he doesn’t even last a full inning. Meanwhile, a 7-15-3 August threatens to compromise the team’s sizable first-place lead.

Tony bounces back by mid-August, pitching well over his next seven appearances. Ironically enough, number thirty-four’s worst individual outing of the season arrives against the Giants, a team whose bats he silenced every other encounter of 2011. To be exact, he came into the appearance holding the Giants to zero runs through ten appearances, ranging from April to July. On September 3, however, the Giants tee off on Tony’s pitching, clubbing two doubles, a home run, and a single. He’s replaced with two outs in the inning and ultimately charged with allowing four earned runs.

The dreadful showing is an exception to Tony’s 2011 rule of brilliance, a minor blemish on an otherwise masterpiece of a season for a pitcher who ended the previous year nearly out of baseball entirely. Much more costly than the poor performance itself, it’s quickly determined that Tony hurt his right wrist during the game. He knew something was off. His wrist wasn’t exactly sore, but “something just didn’t feel right” when he delivered

itches that evening. He tried to power through. After the game, X-rays revealed a tiny fracture in the wrist, which would keep him out virtually the rest of the regular season.

By October 7, the Swallows are in the doldrums and the Dragons have overtaken them for first place in the Central League for the first time since May 30. After the lowly Carp come to town for three games, the Swallows will square off with the Dragons in a four-game set (October 10-13) at Nagoya Dome before meeting one final time on October 19. Just ahead of the critical four-game series, the Dragons lead the Swallows by half a game. Clearly, either team can separate itself from the other with a dominant showing in Nagoya.

The series with Chunichi comes toward the end of a twelve-games-in-twelve-days stretch for the Swallows. For professional baseball players, playing virtually every day comes with the job. But at this time, the Swallows could use a day off, given their seriously sputtering offense and thin, overworked bullpen (Tony is still out, as is lefty specialist Kentaro Kyuko who has similarly been terrific all season).

Chunichi starts the series strong with three consecutive wins: 3-0, 3-1, and 4-3. The Swallows' bats have failed them yet again, as they fall to three and a half games behind the Dragons. With one more game in Nagoya, they must dig deep. A loss would drop the Swallows to four and a half games behind Chunichi with only five games remaining. On the flip side, a win would keep some hope alive for a shot at first place. Prominently standing in the Swallows' way? Kazuki Yoshimi.

The five-foot-nine Chunichi right-hander is turning in a career year⁹, and the Swallows are the latest team to try to disrupt it. They're unable, as Yoshimi goes the distance to secure a four-game sweep of the Swallows. In the masterpiece performance, Yoshimi's seventeenth win of the season, he allows three Yakult hits and not a single walk. During the series, the Swallows manage a total of four runs. For all intents and purposes, a Central League regular-season title is out of the cards for the Swallows.

On the bright side, barring disaster, they appear headed for a top-three finish, which would ensure a playoff berth. After going 3-9 over the grueling twelve-day stretch, the Swallows catch a break in the schedule, only needing to play three games over the season's final ten days. They take advantage, winning two of three, a finish good enough to stave off the Giants for second place and earn the right to host their crosstown rivals in the postseason's opening round.

To provide him game action before the playoffs begin, the Swallows activate Tony for an otherwise meaningless season finale against the Carp on October 25. He allows two hits and a run, returning for the first time since September 3. Similarly, a just-activated Josh Whitesell, who last appeared for the ichi-gun squad two and a half weeks earlier, receives two plate appearances, pinch-hitting in the sixth before remaining in the game at first base.

Shortly, Jingu Stadium will host the Climax Series' best-of-three opening stage. If the Swallows are able to get by the Giants, they will once again find the Chunichi Dragons

⁹ Yoshimi narrowly missed winning the 2011 Eiji Sawamura Award, which went to Rakuten's Masahiro Tanaka. Established in 1947, nine years before the Cy Young Award in the States, it honors the top NPB pitcher each year and is named after Sawamura, a dominant Yomiuri Giants (then the Tokyo Kyojin) right-hander who was killed in combat during World War II. Unlike the major leagues, there is not a separate award for each league, but rather one for the entire NPB.

standing in their way of advancing. Through much of the season, the Swallows had no issues dispatching the Dragons, starting 9-3-3 against them. But the Dragons then reeled off eight wins in the teams' final nine head-to-head meetings of the regular season.

It was a pretty standard January day back in early 2011, a couple weeks before Tony would be leaving for spring training in Okinawa. Tony and Hillary had just returned from having dinner with her parents who'd already gone home. They were going about their normal routine in their new house...or so it seemed. Actually, Tony was finally ready to do something that had been in the works for some time. For about a month, he had been waiting for the right moment to ask Hillary to marry him.

"I'd been thinking about that next step and all that, and Hillary more or less kinda gave me an ultimatum," said Tony. "She was right on when she said it. After that first year in Japan, she basically told me...She was like, 'If we're not going anywhere, I'm not going anywhere.' And she kind of basically said, 'I'm not gonna go chasing you around the world if we're not serious about this.'" After Hillary's reality check, Tony knew what he had to do, but he wanted to catch her off guard. On this January night, he felt, it was time to pose the age-old question.

Tony started dancing in the living room, and Hillary followed suit. A completely normal behavior for them, Hillary didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. With Matthew Barber's soft, acoustic "You and Me" playing in the background, suddenly, "he stopped dancing, and he asked me to marry him," said Hillary. "It was simple and lovely." Hillary did not expect it, at least not then. Upon hearing the question, she covered her mouth with both hands, tears welling up in her eyes. The answer was obviously yes, which she conveyed after gathering herself.

Spring camp in Okinawa is essentially only for the players, with wives and children all but prohibited from attending. Thus, Hillary would begin her first full Japanese season in early March, allowing her an additional five weeks after Tony's departure to tie up loose ends in Arizona and prepare the house to be unoccupied for the entirety of the baseball season. She would also use the time to begin planning the wedding. November 11, 2011, 11-11-11, they decided, would be a memorable date for their wedding, and it would allow Tony enough time to return from Japan.¹⁰ So November 11 it was once they secured the venue, the picturesque Boulders Resort in Scottsdale, Arizona. Save-the-Date notices were sent to about seventy-five of the couple's closest family and friends.

Not long after, the devastating earthquake-tsunami hit on March 11. The regular season was delayed by two weeks, and suddenly a November 11, 2011, wedding no longer seemed like such a good idea. With the season pushed back, there was no way of knowing if the Swallows would still be alive in postseason play as of November 11, or if they'd even make the playoffs at all. Unwilling to risk a wedding without the groom, they moved the ceremony back to December 3 and mailed new Save-the-Dates.

On Saturday, October 29, Game 1 of the Climax Series' opening stage is a close one. With the Giants and Swallows tied at one run apiece through five and a half innings, the Swallows pull ahead with two sixth-inning runs courtesy of a Shinya Miyamoto sacrifice fly and an RBI bloop single from Balentien. A half inning earlier, the manager, Junji Ogawa, had brought in left-hander Kyohei Muranaka. Typically a starter—he started all fifteen

¹⁰ The Japan Series typically finishes by the first week of November.

games in which he appeared during the regular season—Muranaka is assigned long relief work. The brevity of the opening round allows starting pitchers like Muranaka to come out of the pen; for now, only three starters are needed in the rotation. Therefore, the skipper went into the postseason believing Yakult had enough arms to get past the Giants and opted to let Tony rest his wrist for another week. While Tony is with the team at Jingu, he doesn't suit up for any of its games this series.

With Muranaka retiring one Giant after another, inning after inning, Ogawa plans on letting him finish the game to rest the bullpen. Specifically, Ogawa would really like to preserve the closer, Chang-Yong Lim, for the rest of the series. With two outs in the ninth, a solo home run changes the calculus as the lead is trimmed to a single run. Fortunately for the Swallows, all Lim needs is one pitch in order to secure the Game 1 victory. 3-2, the Swallows win. Due to NPB postseason rules, Yakult will advance to the Climax Series' final stage with a Game 2 win or even a tie.

The next night, Game 2 is also a tight affair. The Giants cling to a 2-1 lead from the fifth inning onward, until the game opens up in the ninth inning. Facing a shortage of available relief pitchers, Ogawa goes with his closer for the second straight night, and it does not go well. A bases-clearing double by Yoshinobu Takahashi causes the bulk of the damage, with a fourth run being charged to Lim after he's replaced. In the bottom half of the ninth, in his first appearance of the postseason and third plate appearance in three weeks, Josh Whitesell comes through with a two-out RBI double, but the Swallows never draw closer than that, falling 6-2. A decisive Game 3 will be played the following night on Halloween.¹¹ The game's loser will be haunted for much of the offseason, while the winner will travel to Nagoya to face the Dragons in a best-of-seven series for a shot at a Japan Series berth.

Twenty-one-year-old southpaw Katsuki Akagawa is tasked with starting the all-important third game for the Swallows. In his first career postseason start, which happens to unfold in front of 31,687 energetic fans, Akagawa does his job. Although it's rarely pretty—except for the 1-2-3 innings he achieves in the first and second—Akagawa extricates his team from jam after jam and ends up pitching six and two-thirds innings of scoreless baseball. Most notably, the young lefty strands Yomiuri runners on first and second in the fourth inning and runners on the corners in the fifth.

Whitesell, too, earns a Game 3 start. Hitting third and manning first base, the American records a first-inning infield single before striking out in the third. He bats 1-for-2 before Ogawa makes a defensive upgrade, sending Whitesell to the bench, which, in turn, moves Kazuhiro Hatakeyama from left field to first and brings Kazuki Fukuchi into the game to cover left field.

The Swallows get on the board with a Ryoji Aikawa solo home run to lead off the bottom of the third. They later add a pair of insurance runs in the seventh and eighth innings to take a 3-0 lead. Muranaka, the starter-turned-playoff reliever who pitched so well two nights earlier, comes in again. This time, he's asked to pitch the eighth and ninth, with Ogawa avoiding the use of Lim, who got racked in Game 2. After a perfect eighth, Muranaka and company are three outs away from reaching the Climax Series' final stage.

¹¹ Although Halloween is traditionally a Western holiday, the Japanese have increasingly embraced it in recent years. Trick or treating never caught on, but many like to wear costumes on the streets and at parties.

Alex Ramirez starts the ninth going down on strikes. One out. Muranaka then falls behind Michihiro Ogasawara, 2-0, and grooves a fastball down the middle. The Giants first baseman does not miss, vaulting the pitch into the right-field seats, where the Swallows cheering section is centered. Suddenly, the score is 3-1, but Ogawa sticks with Muranaka on the mound. The next man grounds out to third. Two outs.

When Muranaka falls behind in the count, 2-1, *TokyoSwallows.com* co-founder David Watkins and his friends in the right field cheering section start a rare chant for the pitcher, encouraging him as he battles the hero of the night before, Takahashi. The support for the pitcher is contagious. “The Oendan looked at us,” said Watkins, “and they joined in and then all of the right field and the whole of the Swallows section were then led by us essentially in chanting for the pitcher, which is the first time I can remember that happening.” Traditionally, regardless of the venue, NPB fans alternatively cheer loudly for the offense and remain fairly silent while their team is in the field. In the game recap on *TokyoSwallows.com*, Kozo Ota wrote, “The sight of half the stadium chanting for Muranaka and drowning out the Giants cheers was moving and can’t be adequately described in words.”

With the crowd audibly behind him, Muranaka delivers. First, Takahashi fouls one off to even the count at 2-2. On the very next pitch, Takahashi swings hard and whiffs, allowing the Swallows faithful to exhale. The Swallows are moving on to the next round. Yakult’s series win snaps a four-year streak (2007-10) of no Central team other than the Dragons and Giants meeting in the Climax Series’ final stage. Bring on the Chunichi Dragons.

As dictated by NPB postseason rules, the Dragons, by virtue of winning the regular-season Central League crown, begin with a 1-0 series lead before any games are played. A fully healthy Tony Barnette will be available to pitch against Chunichi. In fact, Tony is called upon early after Yakult’s starter fails to get through the third inning. In his playoff debut with the Swallows, Tony pitches an inning and two-thirds, allowing no hits and one walk. Whitesell, who didn’t start, grounds out to third to end the game, the tying run stranded in scoring position. With the 2-1 win, Chunichi takes a 2-0 series lead. Dragons ace, and Swallows arch-nemesis, Kazuki Yoshimi throws 112 pitches of one-run ball.

Desperately needing a win, Ogawa decides to promote nineteen-year-old Tetsuto Yamada and place him in the leadoff spot.¹² Both teams struggle mightily to generate offense. Then, possibly the most unlikely player, Yakult’s Yasushi Iihara, who hit zero home runs in 122 plate appearances that season with a .126 average, breaks the scoreless tie with a solo home run in the eighth. Coming off the bench after a poor previous series, Hatakeyama produces a crucial two-run ninth-inning single, and the Swallows win, their pitching staff surrendering a mere two hits.

The following night, the Swallows grab their second win in a row, evening the series at two games apiece with a narrow 2-1 victory. In the contest, Tony appears early yet again and goes on to pitch two and one-third innings out of the pen. When Tony is inserted into the game, Yakult leads 1-0, but the Giants have the bases loaded with one out. After he allows one of the inherited runners to score on a single, he buckles down and gets a strikeout and ground out to minimize the damage. A Nori Aoki RBI single the next inning gives the Swallows a lead they will never relinquish, as Tony picks up the win.

But the celebration is short-lived after they drop the next game, 5-1. During the loss,

¹² Prior to that game, the teenage second baseman had never played at the *ichi-gun* level.

Yamada picks up his first *ichi-gun* hit and RBI, but he also strikes out with runners on second and third in a critical fifth-inning opportunity. Trailing three games to two, the Swallows literally must win or they will see their season end. Again, the Dragons' Yoshimi is standing in their way.

A scoreless pitcher's duel is disrupted in the fifth inning when light-hitting Dragons second baseman Hirokazu Iбата—he hit one home run all season—connects for a two-run home run. The ninth inning represents Yakult's last chance. Until this point, only one Swallows runner had reached scoring position. Pinch hitter Ryohei Kawamoto quickly changes that by doubling to begin the inning. Two successive strikeouts put the comeback in doubt, but Aoki singles to center, trimming the deficit to a run. The Swallows are still alive. Unfortunately, Hatakeyama proceeds to foul out to third, thus ending the Swallows' 2011 campaign and sending the Dragons to the Japan Series.

Yakult's least favorite pitcher, Yoshimi, delivers another gem, throwing eight shutout innings in which the Swallows can muster only three hits and no runs. Fittingly, he is the one to end the Swallows' otherwise robust season. As if Yoshimi's 1.22 ERA against the Swallows in thirty-seven innings that season was not dominant enough, the Dragons ace stepped up his Swallows mastery to an even higher level in the postseason. Starting Games 1 and 5 just four nights apart, Yoshimi defeated Yakult twice, pitching fifteen and one-third innings during which he gave up one solitary run and eight hits to go along with thirteen strikeouts.

Whitesell does not start or even play in any of the final three games of the series, likely signaling that the team will not retain him after the season. On the positive side, Tony finishes the season, his first as a reliever, fairly strong, and the Swallows have played the furthest into the postseason since their 2001 Japan Series berth ten years earlier. On the field, there's plenty to build upon for Tony and the Swallows. Plus, in less than a month, it will be time for the skilled setup man to get married back in Arizona.

“Two days, and you're out. It's that quick,” said Hillary of the typical turnaround time between the end of Tony's season and his departure from Tokyo. In 2011, Hillary had already returned to Arizona a little earlier to prepare for the December wedding. For Tony's part, his flight left Tokyo on November 9, his twenty-eighth birthday, just three days after Yakult was eliminated from postseason play.

Tony and Hillary lived in the same team-supplied, one-bedroom apartment each of the first two seasons, but that was more the exception than the rule, with returning players usually moving to a new apartment within the same complex each season. According to Hillary, the team doesn't set a specific move-out date, although because the Swallows are paying for the apartments, it is made clear that the Gaijin residents will not be allowed to remain year-round.¹³ Hillary and Tony would often depart from Tokyo in the late afternoon or early evening. On the morning of the departure, whoever was last to leave—Tony in 2010 and 2011—would welcome someone from the complex for an apartment inspection. That person would look around and let Tony and/or Hillary know if they would be losing any of their security deposit or owing any additional fees. Then, the translator, Go Fujisawa, would come over to help, loading a team van with Tony and Hillary's belongings before taking Tony to the airport for his flight.

¹³ Few Gaijin would want to stay all year anyway. To many of them, the importance of returning home to friends and family cannot be overstated.

The Gaijin player and family apartments come fully furnished, making move-out much easier than it otherwise would be. In other words, they don't have to move heavy furniture. Even so, the process could sometimes be a little challenging, said Hillary. For items that were difficult to send back to the States, like, a blender, for instance, the Swallows would accommodate their Gaijin families by allowing them to store a few boxes at the field.

Factoring in the time change—Arizona is sixteen hours earlier than Japan—Tony's twenty-eighth birthday, he joked to Hillary, lasted much longer than normal birthdays. He left Tokyo around 4 p.m. on that Wednesday, flew approximately twelve hours to LAX, and then finally boarded his connecting flight to Phoenix. Upon landing, it was still his birthday with ample time remaining for an authentic birthday dinner.

The next month, Hillary and Tony got married on one of the coldest days of the year at Boulders Resort & Spa in Scottsdale, Arizona. It even snowed later that night, but the prospect of rain was the bigger concern. As Hillary and her bridesmaids got dressed in a hotel room, they could hear the rain hitting the skylight above the bathroom. The rain continued the entire time they were getting ready. "They kept asking me," said Hillary, "Do you want to move it inside? Do you want to move it inside?" And I was like, 'No, the pictures aren't gonna look good inside. I want it to be outside.'"

Fortunately, the weather cooperated, allowing the wedding group an hour break in the downpour to take care of business. The overcast weather even had an aesthetic benefit for Hillary, providing the couple and their guests "some pretty cool clouds for a pretty sunset in Arizona." And the view was already impeccable—the ceremony was held on a golf course looking south over hills made of giant boulders.

Hillary looked stunning in a white tube top strapless dress, although she was not well covered, and neither were her bridesmaids, who could be seen shivering during the ceremony. "It was freezing," said Hillary. "I think I could hear my sister's teeth chattering while we were taking photos." Added Hillary, "We were already gonna keep it short, but we kept it even shorter. We did it quickly to try to get everybody back inside because it was so cold. And after that, we just ate and partied. It was fun."

Tony was much warmer in a black suit with a cornflower blue tie and a white dress shirt underneath. "It was a pretty dressed-down occasion," Tony said, years later. "I think looking back on it, maybe I'd go tuxedo if I had to do it over again, but it worked perfectly. The guys and the girls looked good. Everything looked great, and we all had a good time." His dad, Phil, coordinated a ceremony during which he asked Hillary and Tony to face each other and hold hands. He then read about loyalty, reliability, and mutual love from a script he found online. At the reception, the newly married duo danced to Chris LeDoux's 1995 cover of "Tougher Than the Rest," a Bruce Springsteen original.

The small wedding—approximately fifty guests were on hand—primarily consisted of relatives, with a few friends among the group. Lacking a particular theme, the ceremony focused on the ecstatic couple and the beauty of their burgeoning love for each other and the scenery at Boulders Resort. Hillary's freezing sister served as her maid of honor, while Jason Urquidez,¹⁴ a former teammate from Central Arizona College, Arizona State, and the Diamondbacks organization, acted as best man. Swallows teammates Aaron Guiel and Josh Whitesell could not partake, with the former recovering in Canada and the lat-

¹⁴ Urquidez, a right-handed pitcher, never appeared in the majors, but he did make it as high as Triple-A and most recently closed games for Tijuana in the Mexican League.

ter in California figuring out his next career move.

College roommate Drew Bowman attended the festivities, as did Ike Davis, who, like Tony and Drew, was a member of the 2006 Sun Devils baseball team.¹⁵ For nearly a decade following college, Tony and Davis, also a professional baseball player, worked out together every offseason at Fischer Sports in Arizona. Naturally, Tony enjoyed having his baseball buddies with him on his special day.

For Tony, the “biggest controversy of the entire wedding” was a mix-up by resort staff that resulted in Tony’s parents and their friends receiving special gifts meant for the freshly married couple. Phil and his wife, Susanna, had driven down from Washington with some friends Tony grew up knowing. For the occasion, the group shared a suite. Only, after the wedding, when they returned to their room, they found chocolate-covered strawberries and a bottle of champagne waiting for them, among other desserts. Phil and company enjoyed their good fortune, making sure to send Tony a picture of the gift basket the next morning, along with a tongue-in-cheek thank you. At breakfast, “Everyone’s got their sunglasses on, working on like four hours of sleep,” said Tony. “It was awesome.”

By the following Monday, Hillary and Tony were already in Maui for their ten-day honeymoon. As far as they can remember, they golfed twice, snorkeled, ziplined, and even played tennis one day. For what it’s worth, Hillary says she and Tony are pretty evenly matched on a golf course although they are both inconsistent because neither likes to practice.

Just as Tony’s pitching performance improved from 2010 to 2011, pitchers across the Pacific and Central Leagues generally enjoyed better results too. Naturally, hitters had a tougher time. Statistically, NPB offensive run production during the 2011 season decreased by 25.5 percent from 2010 levels, with the average team’s runs scored per game dropping from 4.40 to 3.28. In the Central League specifically, home runs declined by 43.8 percent, while the league batting average fell by a much more modest, but still noticeable, 5.6 percent.

Fairly quickly into the 2011 season, it appeared obvious to most analysts and statisticians that such large drops could not simply be attributed to some type of fluke or natural fluctuation. Something had to be up. At the same time, the pitchers distinctly noticed a change in their feel and pitch mastery. Golden Eagles starting pitcher Hisashi Iwakuma¹⁶ told the *New York Times* in Japanese, “It breaks better, moves more advantageously. Whether you throw a fork or a curve or a slider, the break is bigger. Even your fastball doesn’t have to be perfectly straight, [and] you can make it miss the sweet spot of the bat.”

Ahead of the 2011 season, NPB commissioner Ryozo Kato¹⁷ announced that for the

¹⁵ In 2008, after three impactful collegiate seasons as a power hitter, including a strong junior year in the bullpen as well, the Mets made Davis a first-round draft pick. He skyrocketed through the Mets organization, debuting in mid-April 2010 and keeping the everyday first base job the remainder of that season.

¹⁶ Hisashi Iwakuma debuted in the major leagues in 2012 at thirty-one and served as a reliable starting pitcher for the Mariners through 2016. Due to shoulder issues, he rarely appeared for Seattle in 2017 and sat out the entire 2018 season. In 2019, he will attempt to return to the field in Japan.

¹⁷ Before being named league commissioner, Ryozo Kato served as the Japanese ambassador to the United States, beginning in 2001.

first time in his league's sixty-one year history, every team would be using the same supplier for its baseballs. Mizuno won the contract and developed a uniform ball that had wider seams than the previous NPB balls, with the "cork core of the ball wrapped with a low-resilience rubber," according to the *Bangkok Post*. Prior to 2011, NPB teams always had the option to use whichever manufacturer they preferred; certain seasons saw as many as nine manufacturers used across the twelve teams.

The move to a new, uniform ball, the commissioner argued, was in large part inspired by the 2009 World Baseball Classic in which he saw first-hand the Japanese pitchers struggling to adapt to the ball the tournament employed. So, Kato's directive to Mizuno was to craft a ball much more similar to the MLB ball. At the same time, at the preseason press conference, he boasted that the new Japanese ball was "of a higher quality than the one used in the American major leagues." According to *FanGraphs'* Stephanie Springer's reporting, pitchers and scouts familiar with NPB agree that a Japanese baseball is smaller than an MLB baseball and possesses a stickier texture.¹⁸

Particularly noteworthy to someone like Tony who struggled mightily against Hanshin and Yomiuri in 2010, those teams' offensive production dropped dramatically in 2011 when the Tigers and Giants combined to score 6.62 runs per game, down from 10.80 per game in 2010. Even so, among Central League teams, they managed to finish second and third, respectively, in scoring offense in 2011; that's how much offenses declined, with the newly designed baseball the primary culprit. In 2010, four qualifying Central League hitters batted .339 or better. In 2011, the CL batting champion finished with a .316 average. In 2010, seven Central League sluggers topped thirty home runs, as Alex Ramirez led the way with forty-nine. One season later, the Swallows' Balentien was the only CL hitter to top twenty-three with thirty-one home runs.

Scoring, batting average, and power numbers all remained low during the 2012 season as well. It was not until 2013 that run production rose dramatically, although not quite reaching 2010 levels. The league, however, for months denied any change in the specifications of the baseball. In June, NPB officials finally admitted to asking Mizuno to adjust the ball to increase its jump off the bat, while simultaneously asking the company not to speak publicly about the ordered change. "Our understanding was that it would be a matter of fine-tuning," said NPB secretary general Kunio Shimoda. "We thought it would create confusion if we let it be known."

The day after the revelations were made, Kato apologized for "causing such confusion as this," but continued to deny ever possessing knowledge of the latest ball adjustment. The league's effort at damage control largely fell flat, as the commissioner quickly drew the ire of Japanese media for his denials and suspected cover-up. Momentum was building for Kato to resign his post, which he had held for five and a half seasons or nearly three terms. Even the players union called for his resignation. Three months later, at an owners' meeting, Kato announced he would be stepping down. Who knew tweaking the design of a baseball could have such far-reaching consequences? For good measure, the following April, Mizuno's president issued his own apology for the 2014 balls being too lively, promising to rectify the situation by early May.

Major league baseball had opened its 2000, 2004, and 2008 seasons in Tokyo, but the 2012

¹⁸ It is believed the stickiness makes the Japanese ball easier to grip, control, and manipulate than the American ball.

visit would take on added significance, occurring less than thirteen months after the devastating earthquake and tsunami. More than the typical opportunity to foster goodwill, it would provide the league the chance to assist, in some small way, with the recovery and healing process.

The 2012 major league baseball season opens in Tokyo to great fanfare with the Seattle Mariners and Oakland A's playing a pair. For the opener on March 28, the Tokyo Dome welcomes a capacity crowd of 44,227. A video honoring the victims and survivors of the March 11, 2011, nightmare is shown. Cal Ripken Jr., Derek Jeter, and new Red Sox manager Bobby Valentine, who had twice previously managed the Chiba Lotte Marines, narrate the video.

The game gets underway. Former Japanese legend Ichiro Suzuki adds four hits to his total, as he closes in on 2,500 for his MLB career, and the Mariners win, 3-1, in eleven innings. Seattle starter Felix Hernandez receives a no-decision, but pitches masterfully, allowing one run in eight innings. Dustin Ackley drives in two critical runs. Following the win, the future Hall of Fame outfielder who spent nine years with the Orix Blue Wave said, "It was very special to open in Japan. I wanted to have fun and give the fans something at this special time and wanted to share a special moment with them." Suzuki's last NPB season came in 2000 when he was just twenty-six.

The day before, a collection of eight players and coaches visited the northeastern coastal city of Ishinomaki, where they took a bus tour of the disaster zone before conducting a baseball clinic with students from the area. More than a year after the catastrophic event, much of the city was still in ruins. The disaster killed more than 3,500 of its residents, destroyed or damaged at least 50,000 buildings, and produced waves as high as sixty-six feet. Surveying the wreckage that Tuesday in 2012, Mariners manager Eric Wedge felt the gravity of the day, noting, "There is an air of silence you have in the car when you drive through it and see it. You picture that times 150 miles, and it's just pure devastation." According to the government's Ministry of the Environment, after the tsunami receded, Ishinomaki City had to contend with 6.16 million tons of disaster waste.

Mariners rookie Hisashi Iwakuma was also on hand for the bus trip and baseball clinic, having played the previous season in Sendai, the NPB city closest to the disaster zone. "Meeting Iwakuma was awesome," said one eleven-year-old boy. Another eleven-year-old, Ryuto Abe, was there too. He had lost his mother in the tsunami but smiled widely given the chance to forget about everyday life for a moment. He said through a translator, "These players are in existence only on TV, so we are really happy they are here with us." Regarding his ongoing efforts to return to some semblance of normalcy, he said, "I lost my mother, and things did change a lot. I return to regular life with baseball."

Ishinomaki Municipal Stadium hosted the clinic. Although the stadium survived the earthquake intact, it served as a staging area during recovery efforts, which badly damaged the field. MLB, in conjunction with the Players Association, the U.S.-Japan Council, and the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California, donated \$1 million to help repair the facility. In addition, the league donated \$500,000 to the city as it continues to rebuild.

On Thursday night, Oakland wins the second and final game of the Tokyo series, 4-1, behind an eight-inning, three-hit gem thrown by Bartolo Colon, who like Suzuki, is thirty-eight years old and playing at a high level. Because of the sixteen-hour time difference between Japan and the West Coast, the Wednesday and Thursday games were played at 3:09 a.m. and 2:04 a.m. PDT, respectively. They were not aired live in the United States

outside of the Seattle market (the A's broadcast partner didn't carry the game), however the *MLB Network* did air them on tape delay later both mornings. Many felt the broadcast arrangements could have been handled better. Some also wondered why the rest of the major league season did not commence until April 4 or why the Mariners played exhibition games once they returned to the States.

On Friday night, Tokyo Dome hosts a third straight night of baseball, this time pitting the Yomiuri Giants against the visiting Yakult Swallows. Around the league, the remaining ten teams are opening their seasons as well. Back in the dome, Swallows lefty Masanori Ishikawa begins the season in memorable fashion. Through six innings, the veteran has not allowed a hit. After he retires the side in order in each of the next two innings, he finds himself three outs away from completing the no-hitter. Unfortunately, after Ishikawa induces a fly out to left, Giants leadoff man Hayato Sakamoto drives the ball off Swallows third baseman Shinya Miyamoto's glove for Yomiuri's first hit of the game. Another hit follows, sending Ishikawa, who's fighting cramps in his left leg, to the bench.

In comes Tony Barnette, who collects a strikeout and ground out to secure the 4-0 win in eight pitches. Tony is officially credited with the save, because he came into the game with two runners on, and thus the tying run in the on-deck circle. Not a bad way to start the season.

Sean Nevin

Losing Solomon

We estimate a man by how much he remembers.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Things seem to take on a sudden shimmer before vanishing: the polished black loafers he wore yesterday, the reason for climbing the stairs, even the names of his own children are swallowed like spent stars against the dark vault of memory. Today the toaster gives up its silver purpose in his hands, becomes a radio, an old Philco blaring a ball game from the '40s with Jackie Robinson squaring up to the plate. For now, it's simple; he thinks he is young again, maybe nineteen, alone in a kitchen. He is staring through his own reflection in the luster and hoping against hope that Robinson will clear the bases with a ball knocked so far over the stadium wall it becomes a pigeon winging up into the brilliance. And perhaps, in one last act of alchemy, as Jackie sails around third, he will transform everything, even the strange and forgotten face glaring back from the chrome, into something familiar, something Solomon could know as his own.

Mitchell Nobis

Thank God for Ozzie Smith

When Dad chastised my brother & me for watching TV
on those gorgeous summer Saturdays,
I couldn't disagree, but
baseball beckoned
and any chance to watch our Tigers
 or This Week in Baseball
was too much to pass up.
It added up, those hours of
Willie Stargell homers, Pete Rose dives, Nolan Ryan no-hitters, and
Ozzie Smith back flips. It filled our mental record, and

it paid off.

When my two-year-old son ran
too hastily
to the top of the stairs and
tumbled head-first,
I laid out like Ozzie—
a dive so true I
paused
horizontal to the floor just long enough to realize I was horizontal to the floor
with outstretched arms, and
I caught his right ankle
and held my grasp.

Ozzie, at that point, would pop to his feet
& zip a bullet to first or flip a popcorn
kernel into the mouth of the second baseman's glove
for a double play,
but I pulled in my catch,
held this bawling boy in the acreage of my palm,
rubbed his head,
and muttered love, love, love.

The inning over, I set him down to
toddle off with tentative steps,
and my heart & soul
did a standing back flip in celebration
of the golden magic of perfect movement,
a thank you
to grace.

Christopher Duggan

The Release Point

This one September night when I was 11 years old, I got to stay up later than I ever had before, including New Year's. It was a night of baseball that went on and on, and I swear just about my whole family was there. It was also, maybe, the last really great time for all of us. Anyway, I can't recall another one after that.

It was a Wednesday in 1974, two months or so after my grandfather came to live with us. Grandma had died a few years earlier, and he was taking turns living with his five kids—a year here and a year there. It was our turn, Dad said, so Grandpa got my room and I had to move in with my older sister Nancy across the hall, which I can tell you she loved. Dad promised us it was just for a while. All things considered, it was still a great time for us kids. Our house was fun because of my parents; my friends all wanted to come over and hang out. My mom and dad were always goofing off—jumping out from behind corners, trying to scare each other and sometimes me and Nancy, too. In the mornings, when he left for work, they would grab each other in the kitchen and kiss dramatically, like in the movies.

My mother looked like a film star with her dark hair and petite figure. Dad was a half a foot taller than her and had a boxer's build, thick brown Irish hair, and a perpetual case of 5 o'clock shadow, even right after he shaved.

He had a good job at the beer distributor, into which he worked his way from the warehouse, and the fridge in the garage was always filled top to bottom with row upon row of red and white cans. Probably for that reason, my aunts and uncles often gathered at our house on the weekends and sometimes on weeknights, too. We would sit around, the adults and kids alike, tell jokes, and play games—20 Questions, Charades, and the Nose Game, which for all I knew was unique to our family. The rules were simple. The trick was that you never knew when it was going to happen, so the game never actually ended.

At some point, you would notice that someone in the room had placed his finger alongside his nose. You would do it, too, and, eventually, everyone would be doing it. The idea was to not be the last person to do it. It taught us to be observant; that's for certain. You didn't get anything for winning or lose anything for losing, but it was still a blast. We usually didn't play the nose game when Grandpa was around, because he was always last, if he did it at all. It kind of took the fun out of it. It was one of the small ways in which Grandpa's arrival seemed to disrupt slightly the delicate balance we had been maintaining.

Dad's grin fell when Grandpa walked into the room, and they couldn't go 10 minutes without bickering about something. That year, their favorite topic was Watergate.

"Nixon was set up," Grandpa insisted. "No way he was that stupid."

"Yeah, he was," Dad countered. "He's a bum. A dishonest bum. They should lock him up."

When I was little, Grandpa's voice used to scare me, but I got used to it. Years of smoking and whisky had wrung all the softness from his vocal chords until they were chipped and broken like ancient ruins; his words came out in a growl.

He drank constantly with a break in the early morning, preferring the hard stuff to Dad's bottomless supply of St. Louis' favorite Pilsner. He would pour himself a shot, drink it in one gulp and dance around in a little circle on the kitchen linoleum, chanting like an Indian. Once, he poured one all the way to the rim of the glass, looked furtively out past the dinette into the living room, and implored me to take a sip.

"Go ahead, Danny, it won't kill you," he snarled.

The fumes ignited my nostrils before it ever touched my lips, and it felt like I'd swallowed one of the hot coals from the grill out back. He rasped out a laugh, took the glass back, and tossed the rest of it against the back of his throat. Even after brushing my teeth three times, I was worried the rest of the day that my parents would be able to smell it on my breath.

I liked his stories. He'd fought off a mountain lion in the wilds of Arizona with his bare hands, parachuted behind enemy lines to rescue his commanding officer in World War I, took part in a plot to assassinate Hitler in 1937, and once saw a flying saucer from his radio post on a B-17 on the way back from a bombing mission in France. In reality, he was an infantryman who sweated and bled his way through both world wars while his friends were being blasted to bits all around him, but the truth was never quite good enough for him.

Baseball was big in our family. The Cardinals were almost as big a religion for us as Catholicism was. I couldn't play worth a damn, though. Couldn't throw, hit, catch. I was fast, but that was about it. Grandpa claimed to have known the Dean brothers and Pepper Martin from the Gashouse Gang.

"You know why I love baseball?" he asked me in the backyard one Saturday as we tossed the ball back and forth. "You gotta get 27 outs to win. You can't tie, and you can't run out the clock, like football."

He snorted with disgust at the mere mention of the word as he chucked the ball back to me.

"Football. Bunch of fuckin' barbarians running into each other."

We were out working on my throwing. After watching my most recent game, when I missed the cutoff man from right field by 50 feet, he said he could maybe show me a thing or two. He had his shirt off—his typical custom in the warm weather. He was just over 80, but he looked 10 years older at least. His pitted, leathery skin was stretched over his ribcage, like a picture I saw in school of a survivor of one of the Nazi concentration camps. What hair he had left was unruly and rebellious, gray with patches of white mixed in. Even so, every one of his throws hit my glove right in front of my chest with an authoritative pop.

"It's all in your release point," he told me. "You got a fine arm, but you're letting it go wrong. Bring your arm straight back past your head, lead with your elbow, loosen your wrist and let it go right out in front of you. That's it. Again, now."

That September evening, Nancy and I didn't even know anyone was coming over, but after work, my uncle Bill walked in the front door without knocking with a huge glass bowl of German potato salad balancing on his right hand. He was still wearing his blue work shirt from the garage with his name over the pocket. He looked like a carbon copy of my dad, except with a mustache and he smelled, perpetually, like motor oil and tires. Uncle Rob and his wife, Aunt Pauline, drove up next with a pot of beans. Finally, my Aunt Jeanne came in with a great big salad—my dad out back on the patio lighting the grill with a big whoosh, trips by the adults out to the garage, returning with cans of Budweiser,

Nancy and me finishing up our homework on the picnic table.

Dad put some pork steaks on the grill, the meat hissing while Rob and Bill played a game of lawn darts. The Cardinals were set to play the Mets at Shea Stadium, and Jack Buck was laying out the line-ups on the old Philco as it crackled and hummed on the little table next to the sliding glass door. Everyone gathered on the patio—my dad vigilant over the meat at the grill, Rob, Pauline, and Jeanne on the lawn chairs, and my mom and Bill sitting on the step in front of the sliding glass. It felt like a Saturday. That's the way it was in those days.

I looked up at the radio from my last couple math problems to listen to the batting order: Brock leading off, as usual, then Sizemore, Reggie Smith, Torre, Simmons, McBride, Reitz, Tyson—Forsch on the mound. The Cards had a good team and were chasing the Pirates, 2½ games out of first in the East with three weeks left in the season. Every game felt like the playoffs.

Conversation paused on the patio as Buck called out the first pitches, expectation hanging in the air. Bill turned and said something into my mom's ear and she laughed.

Brock lined out to the shortstop, but Smith and Sizemore both walked and Torre drove in a run with a single. We all exhaled at that all-important first run and Dad turned his attention back to the meat, scooting it out toward the edges of the grill and closing the lid. The Mets got the run right back in the bottom of the first with two outs after an error and a wild pitch and a double.

"Jesus Christ, they're kicking it around out there," Rob shouted, standing up for a second before settling back into the nylon basket weave of his chair seat. Rob didn't resemble his brothers in the least. The oldest, he sported 50 or so more pounds than they did and carried a full beard that was showing flecks of gray around the chin.

Both pitchers settled in after that and the score stayed 1-1 as the game became background noise to a discussion about how Ford shouldn't have pardoned Nixon and the sun tilted down below the green rooftops of the bungalows and ranch homes.

"He should go to jail for what he did; that's all there is to it," Dad said, waving his tongs for emphasis.

Grandpa appeared in the door behind Mom and Bill, a tall glass of some amber-colored concoction in his hand, condensation dripping from his fingertips.

"Dinner ready yet?"

"Yeah, just," Dad replied, beginning to pile the meat onto a platter.

"I'll take it in my room if you don't mind."

Mom spoke up, "I'll bring it to you, Robert."

Without another word, the door slid shut and he was gone.

Dad, Rob, and Jeanne exchanged a look as everyone rose to load up their paper plates from the containers that now filled the picnic table. Suddenly, Buck's voice went up an octave, signaling something had happened—a two-run homer in the Mets' half of the fifth. This set Rob off again.

"God damn it, Forsch!" he shouted, nearly flipping his food across the yard. Through dinner, the Cards had just two base runners on in the next three innings, and that two-run deficit started to feel more like 10. Over the next four innings, the inertia of our gathering built toward its disappointing conclusion and my aunts began to gather up their purses—my parents collecting the soiled paper plates and empty beer cans.

Sure enough, Torre struck out to start the ninth. Simmons got on with an infield hit, then McBride struck out looking, everyone standing, ready to head for cars and bed. "Be

sure to tell Dad goodbye before you go.”

Then, you could hear the sound of the ball on Reitz’s bat all the way across the yard and Buck’s voice rose again—a two-run homer, tied game, hugs all around, and, through a silent understanding, the group of us settled back onto our various perches. Hrabosky came in and pitched a scoreless ninth, tenth, and eleventh and two things happened: Mom said it was past time for Nancy and me to go to bed and Pauline, who Rob always said was cold-blooded, asked if we could move inside.

Nancy was a straight-A student and not near the baseball fan I was. She headed for our room without a word, but I was not ready to go quietly. I barely got the protest out of my mouth when Dad spoke up.

“Let him stay out a bit longer,” he said calmly. “It won’t hurt him.”

Mom shot him a stern look but said nothing, and with that, we unplugged the Philco and spread out in the living room on the couch and chairs. I sat on the piano bench as the adults made another trip out to the garage.

By the 12th, Folkers was pitching for the Cards and Grandpa came shuffling in from the hall.

“What’s going on in here? Shouldn’t the game be over by now?”

“Extra innings,” Dad explained. “They’re in the 12th.”

Grandpa snorted, half stumbling over to sit by me on the piano bench, the smell of whisky oozing from his pores.

“That’s nothing,” he said. “I once played in a game that lasted three days.”

“Oh, here we go,” Rob said, rolling his eyes. “Was this during your time with the Yankees or the Giants?”

“It was 1915,” he said, undeterred. “You had town teams back then, before the major leagues were so damn big. I played shortstop for the South City Cyclones. It was the end of September and the Alton River Stars, our rivals, came in to play on our field. I’ll tell you, there was no love lost between us, and we were pretty sure we wouldn’t make it through nine innings without a fight breaking out.”

Even I was not in the mood for another wild tale with the Cards game on, but once he got going there was no stopping him. We tried our best to hear the play-by-play on the radio over his story, Bill tweaking the volume knob clockwise. Occasionally, we interrupted him when a scoring chance arose, which was not often.

“It was a Friday evening start,” he said. “We would do that occasionally. There weren’t any lights back then, but without all the commercials in between innings, you could get in nine in a couple hours or less. There was a big crowd, because everyone knew about our bad blood and if there was going to be fists flying they wanted to see it.”

I glanced over at Bill in the easy chair; he had his finger against the side of his nose and a grin under that mustache of his, and I followed suit. Next came my mom, then Dad, Pauline, Rob, and Jeanne, who had been watching the radio intently. As usual, Grandpa either didn’t notice the nose game or didn’t care, which was weird because I understood he invented it when his kids were young.

In Grandpa’s story, they played 15 innings with the sun setting, tied at three runs each.

“It was getting too dark to play, and we all knew it, but the umpire told us to take the field anyway,” he said. “We argued, but it didn’t do any good. Walton, our pitcher, went through his wind-up and whipped his arm toward the plate but never let go of the ball. Fowler, the catcher, pounded his fist into his mitt, timing it perfect, and the umpire called, ‘strike one.’ After Walton showed him he still had the ball, the ump agreed it was too dark

and announced we would reconvene at noon on Saturday to finish the game.”

By this time, the Cards had something going in the 16th with a leadoff single, but they didn't do anything with it.

“OK, wait a minute,” Rob said, leaning forward from his spot on the couch.

“Are you saying this Walton character pitched 14 innings?”

“Of course not,” Grandpa replied. “He started the game behind the plate with Fowler pitching. They switched after nine, and it was 15 innings, not 14. Pay attention.”

“Why didn't they just go to the bullpen?” Dad said, holding his Bud between his fingers like a chalice.

“We didn't have a bullpen, son,” Grandpa retorted. “For that matter, we only had nine guys playing because Williams was getting married on Saturday and Scanlon was sick. All of us could pitch, except for Ferguson, who had a jelly arm. Whoever felt good enough to pitch would come in to the mound when the pitcher wore out and the rest of us would shift around in the field. The River Stars had to do the same thing.”

That second day, there were even more people there, Grandpa said. Word had got out around the city that the Cyclones and the River Stars had a marathon barnburner going on and they came to the park to see for themselves.

“It was a grind,” Grandpa said. “Hunching forward on the bench as if he were feeling the fatigue from those endless innings all over again. “Never saw so many groundouts and pop-ups in your life. Everyone was trying to hit it deep. They'd get a run, and we'd get it right back.”

His story of false hope and missed opportunity wore on, with the Cards and Mets sparring in the background. I had one ear on the radio and the other on Grandpa, whose story had taken on a sort of gravitational pull, all of us leaning toward him, even as the Cards led off the 19th with another single, only to have Brock strike out and Sizemore hit into a double play.

The big starburst clock on the wall showed it was near midnight; no one seemed to notice, and I sure wasn't going to tell them. Mom leaned over and put her head on Dad's shoulder, and he put his arm around her. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bill staring at them, but when I looked directly at him, he shifted his gaze to Grandpa, who was still going strong.

“We were getting on toward dusk again, and I was behind the plate. Jack Billings, their best player, was batting with a guy on second. Everyone said Billings would end up in the majors, and he went on to play semi-pro ball, but in the war he took shrapnel in both legs and was never quite the same.

“I called for a fastball high and inside, right above his wheelhouse; I knew he'd try to hit it. We were all jumping at anything. Sure enough, he popped it foul to the first base side and I dashed over there and caught it waist-high.

“That's when I saw her.”

Grace was her name, and Grandpa had been trying to catch her eye for two years. They had danced for five minutes at a tent party the prior fall, but she had resisted his many attempts to talk to her since then.

“We had our bats in the bottom of the inning and didn't do squat. The ump didn't want to be embarrassed again, so he halted play for the night. He met with the team captains and announced to the crowd that we would start again at 1:00 p.m. the next day so everyone would have time to go to church. You never heard a cheer so loud.”

Reitz led off the 21st for the Cardinals with an infield single but was forced at second

and that was it for the inning. Osteen pitched the bottom half by going through the Mets' seventh, eighth, and ninth hitters, one-two-three.

"Holy cow, is this game ever going to end?" Jeanne exclaimed.

Everyone laughed, because it was the closest anyone had ever heard her come to swearing. With a wispy, insignificant build, she was far and away the quietest person I ever knew. She was married once but lived by herself now in a little apartment off Rock Hill. I never knew what happened to her husband—it was before I was born—and no one in the family ever talked about it, at least not when the kids were around.

We turned our heads back toward Grandpa.

"At church, I'm sure a lot of the congregation was praying for a victory by the Cyclones that day; father even worked it into his sermon, comparing home plate to the kingdom of God. I wasn't even thinking about baseball; I was praying for Grace to just notice me. She didn't have to fall in love with me; that would have been asking too much."

He told how the players warmed up their aching throwing arms while he scanned the crowd, most of them still in their good Sunday clothes, but Grace wasn't there. Sure enough, the River Stars scored two runs in the top of the first inning, but Ferguson drove in Grandpa and Fowler with a line drive that hissed like an angry cat as it shot through the infield.

The afternoon wore on, and the Cyclones answered the Stars with two other score--tying innings, but they weren't able to push across the winning runs.

"Finally, I saw her at a little before 7:00. She was on the first base side in a blue dress with a hat that matched, sitting with her father. I wondered if somehow she'd been there all along."

A few more innings and it was getting on toward dusk again. The ump looked nervously up at the sky; Grandpa looked up at the ceiling to demonstrate. The Stars came to bat and made two quick outs—grounders to second and short, where grandpa was playing.

"Then, sure as hell, they get a guy on with a Texas leaguer right over the infield. Wilkins, our usual right fielder, was sweating on the mound and walked the next guy to bring up Billings. I came in and told Wilkins to pitch him high and inside. He nodded, because he trusted me. He placed it perfectly, and Billings popped it straight up on the infield. I called for it and trotted back a few steps onto the grass. It was so high it disappeared into the twilight. I wondered if it was ever going to come down, but it did, sinking fast a bit to the right of where I'd set up. I scooted over and reached out and it went off the heel of my glove and skittered over toward third. I ran after it, but it didn't matter. The runners were going on contact and both of them scored before the ball even hit the ground."

We all gasped, and I looked over at Rob, who looked stricken again.

"In our half of the inning, I was due up fourth. The first two guys flied out to left. The next grounded out to first, and all I could do was sit there on the bench, choking the life out of my bat."

We could almost see the crowd as they brushed the dust from their Sunday finery and dispersed into the cool evening, the Stars celebrating in slow motion on the infield, slapping Billings on the back. A few of the guys touched Grandpa on the shoulder as they walked past, but he didn't look up at them. Even after they were all gone, he kept his place on the bench as if waiting for the chance he knew would never come.

"I don't know how long I had been sitting there, looking at the dirt in front of me, when I saw the hem of that blue dress cover it up. I looked up and she told me the game was exciting and that she enjoyed watching me play. I asked her if she wanted to take a walk with me and she said yes."

We almost didn't notice when McBride came all the way around from first on an errant pick-off throw to put the Cards up by a run. The Mets made two quick outs in their half of the 25th, then got a single before Sonny Siebert struck out Milner to end the game. We all jumped up, shouted and hugged. I looked again at the clock—1:13 a.m. Grandpa was still on the piano bench, looking at the floor. Our cheers died down and it got really quiet.

“So, what happened to Grace?” Pauline asked.

“We courted for the better part of two years, but then I went off to Europe to fight in the war. Grace died in the flu epidemic in 1918, one month before the Armistice,” he said, looking again at the space between his feet, slowly shaking his head. “I found out about it in a letter from my mother.”

“Jesus, Dad,” Rob said. “How come you’ve never told me that?”

Grandpa didn't answer, his eyes watery behind his glasses.

The Cardinals missed the playoffs that year, just a game and a half behind the Pirates at the end of the season. It was as close as they would get to the postseason in the next eight years. That winter, my parents nearly got divorced. They spent every night for a month shouting at each other after we went to bed, as if they thought our room was soundproof, and Dad went to live at a hotel for about a week.

They eventually fought it out, I guess, and he moved back in, but they didn't jump out from behind corners to scare each other anymore, and Uncle Bill never came to our house again. We asked about him once, but they just pretended they didn't hear us and we knew not to ask again.

In the spring, Grandpa went to live with Aunt Jeanne. She called us early on a Sunday three and a half weeks later and told Dad that she found him dead in his bed. I remember hearing the phone ring and Dad's voice answering tentatively from their bedroom, indistinct before it came blasting through the closed door.

“What? Call the... Call an ambulance.”

Dad came to each of our rooms and told Nancy and me. His voice was all husky and I thought he was going to cry, but he didn't. I heard him hurriedly getting ready to leave, then his footsteps out to the garage and the car starting and driving away. I thought I should be doing something, but I had no idea what. No one I'd known had ever died before.

I still like to think about that night when we listened to that long game, how my aunts and uncles and Mom and Dad hugged Grandpa and everyone said goodbye for the night. I remember thinking that those two marathon baseball games we had shared made us even closer. My parents walked off to their room together; they didn't seem to notice I was still there. Grandpa and I followed them down the hall and stood there for a moment before he turned to his door and I went in mine. I wanted to tell him that I was sorry about Grace, but I wasn't sure how to say it.

Then, he reached out and gripped my shoulder and I noticed for the first time that I was almost as tall as he was. He smiled with those big yellow teeth, winked, and tapped the side of his nose with his index finger before turning into his room and closing the door, and as much as I thought I should be sad, I just couldn't be.

Sandra Marchetti

Twilight

Some young men play catch
in a field, call each other
on balls and strikes. How
can they possibly know? Dancing
through the grass, one high,
then low, and up again—
just outside! The seams slap
old leather. How can we know
where the strike zone is—imaginary
cube, filament I could not hold
in my hand? I asked, “How can
you tell?” and my father said,
“Watch—you’ll learn. You’ll know.”
They play, rhythmic and swift,
until the young men are gone.

Baseball Dad

The first time I threw a softball was on an unusually warm Easter. I was 10 and on my grandparents' farm near Johnstown, Pennsylvania, 100 rolling acres of corn fields and cow pasture. I had been watching my cousins from the dining room window tossing a softball back and forth. These were my athletic cousins, all of them of sturdy German stock. I asked if I could join, and they handed me a mitt that nearly fell off my hand with each catch.

"I want to play softball," I said to my dad. He had never pressured me to play, but I felt his enthusiasm, like a moment he'd always wanted but never expected to happen had happened. Like many American boys born in the 1950s, my father loves baseball. He had been a baseball player, as had his father. In my dad's living room are two pictures taken probably 40 years apart—a color shot of my father on the field in his uniform, hands on hips. Next to it is a black and white photo of his father striking the exact same pose in his uniform. The two never met—my grandfather died of a heart attack just four days before my father was born. But those photos seem to testify that some things are truly genetic.

"We'll sign you up," my dad said. "But you can't quit."

When you are raised by a single dad, you learn a lot about sports. But when you are raised by a baseball dad? That's when you fall in love with the game.

That next summer, I was on my first team, and my dad was my coach. As with most things in my life, he never cut me slack for being his daughter, nor gave me special treatment. Maybe because I'm also his only child. Of course, my dad grew up on the working farm of his stepfather, a kind but quiet man who worked the land all day and expected—needed—everyone in the household to do the same. By that standard, I was probably spoiled rotten.

For a while, life with Coach Dad looked a little like this: Games several nights a week. Batting practice after the games to work on my form. Catch anywhere at any time. Scraped knees, stitches and broken windows. Phrases like, "Throw it harder next time. I want to see if I can catch it," to "Why can't I run as fast as the other girls?"

We'd go to Pittsburgh Pirates games no matter how bad they were—and they had 17 losing seasons in a row, a major-league record. We'd sing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" and watch people dressed as pierogis run the bases.

There were night games, too, but those were for my dad. Under the bright lights at Falcon Field, I would huddle in the dugout keeping score for his softball team. I grew to love the uniformity of keeping book. I'd fill the diamond with runs scored, my perfect pencil strokes. I always drew an arrow over to the next inning, a trick my dad taught me so you never lose track.

The guys on my dad's team could be a bit rough. That's not unusual in an area defined by industrial and agricultural labor, but my dad stood out. He's talkative and jovial, always laughing and telling stories. He's a clean-cut guy who always goes to church. He

enjoys a beer now and then, but never to excess. In other words, he's not super macho. He has a natural confidence—he knows who he is—and that extended to the field. Build-wise, you'd think he'd be an average kind of player; he's a stocky guy around five-foot-ten. But he had this way of running the bases with grace. He stood behind the plate with a kind of elegance, hands choked up on the bat and a "5" emblazoned on his back. He was the player I wanted to be.

Like him, I've never been a natural athlete. But my dad taught me how to make up for what I lacked physically by knowing the rules, learning the tricks and working harder than anyone else. "That's what grinders do," he'd say. This applied both on and off the field.

I didn't realize until much later that my dad had a baseball life before me. But his was entirely self-made. He never experienced playing catch with a baseball dad. His stepfather, Pap, as he came to be called by everyone, had little appreciation for sports. "You can try out for baseball when the farm work is finished," he told my dad. If you've ever lived on a farm, you know the job is never done.

As an adult, my dad made up for the years he didn't get to spend with baseball. And, along the way, he collected other baseball dads. There was Uncle Herbie, who took my dad to games and always had a cigar hanging out of the side of his mouth. There was Gary, my dad's fast-pitch softball coach, a heavy smoker with a gray mustache who batted my dad second in the lineup because of his dependability. After my dad stopped playing, he paid it forward by taking his godson Eli to games.

Of course, he got to be my baseball dad. Today, we might not play catch as much and the Pirates games are less frequent, but the good old days aren't always gone—sometimes they just change. We still play the game and revel in it together. In New Jersey, I play summer league softball for Princeton's Ice Cold Pitchers. Down south, my father's career has experienced a revival since he retired to Florida. It wasn't long before he was back at home plate, choking up on the bat.

And I never did quit, just as he said I couldn't. When I take the field, a 5 on my back, my mind is flooded with his teachings. Miles apart, we run the bases with the same swift strides. We cover our gloves with the other hand, just in case. We lean back and wait for the perfect pitch.

Years ago, a third photo was put next to those of my dad and grandfather. It's of me in high school, and I'm standing in my uniform, smiling with my hands on my hips. Like it's the most natural thing in the world.

Ron Wallace

Mickey Mantle and Chinaberry Trees

As October descends
 like a feathering of dust
in an empty room,
the color of fireflies fades
 from my summer nights
beneath a moon, white as polished bone.

This cooling of air
 this shortening of the sun
has always bothered me.

I remember when I was twelve,
sitting in the shade of a chinaberry tree
 grown to the fence
next to where my grandmother's house had stood
before she was gone
 rubbing neatsfoot oil
into the laces, the palm and pocket
of my Rawlings glove.

The golden tan darkened
around the X's
that stitched the fingers together
 connecting pocket to thumb
weaving a web of leather
designed to take a baseball from midair.

I can still see
the practiced cursive of Mickey Mantle
 branded in the palm
as my fingers measured the oil
to apply on the leather where it was stamped.

If I try
 really hard
half a century flown
like a great horned owl in the night,
I can still smell the leather
as I work the oil
 meant for Dad's saddle
into the folds and crevices of the glove,
knowing I am soon to surrender it
to the coming of winter.

Long before I understood metaphor
and simile,
 somehow
 even as a boy,
I knew this season of beauty,
this time of turning leaves
marked endings I did not wish to see,
as I leaned back
against that Chinaberry,
felt the rough bark through my tee shirt
 and sensed a sadness
I could not explain,
watching two kids across the street
throw a football back and forth.

Ron Wallace

Learning to Speak Choctaw

He rose like smoke from high grass
and weeds that had taken the alley
east of the Katy tracks
and shuffled across the gravel road
 black hair, black eyes,
a hundred creases in a dark brown face.

A brown hand lifted
as he saw my father bent under the hood
of his red Chevy.

“Halito, Leonard Wallace, chim achukma?”

His long sleeves pulled his hands inside
khaki pockets.

Dad’s head remained in the motor
 “Hello, Earl,
I’m fine. Need a ride to town?”

“Jus’ walkin’, Captain.
Headed for Red’s, get me a hamburger
 if you spot me a quarter
‘til I mow some lawns.”

I stopped bouncing the rubber ball
off the shed,
eyed the worn brogans on his feet,
and glanced at Dad still buried in his Chevy.

He looked at me and my beat up ball glove.

 “Halito, Little Wallace,
you the next, Allie Reynolds?”
I shrugged
 he grinned.

“Keep throwing that ball; you be
another Super Chief.”

Dad pulled a handful of coins
from his pockets
 selected a silver quarter
and flipped it to the old Choctaw.

“Yoko, my policeman friend.
I owe you four quarters now; I know.
 I go eat now.”

He moved like tall grass in an easy wind
up the gravel road
to the railroad track and out of sight
 my eyes following in his wake.

“War and wine,
goddamned war and wine,”
 Dad melted back
into the Chevy’s engine;
“Throw the ball, Son,
 just keep throwin’ the ball.”

Matt Muilenburg

Chicken Men

My father has always preferred menthol cigarettes, from his first preteen puff on a Kool to the cherry he smoldered atop his Camel this morning. When I was a kid, rival brands jealous of his allegiance tried wooing him with paraphernalia: hand towels, pocketknives, frisbees, beer koozies. Once, Newport cigarettes mailed my father a t-shirt one size too small. It was destined for the Salvation Army until I smuggled it into my room like I was sneaking in Marlboros. I tried it on—Newport fit me well. My parents allowed me to wear the t-shirt on one condition: I could never be seen in public with it on. Imagine what the nuns or my Little League coach or the D.A.R.E. officer would say had they seen me pimping menthols. So I gamed the system and wore it beneath my other tees and my Catholic school uniform, ripping the sleeves off when another growth spurt threatened to turn it into a hand-me-down.

One summer night, I wore the Newport shirt beneath my Little League jersey. We won that game via walk-off homerun, smashed off of a schoolmate of mine, J.A. Happ, who would go on to pitch in Major League Baseball and make millions. I was the winning pitcher that night, outdueling the future pro, and scored the game-tying run ahead of my best friend, Joe, who'd poked the dinger. After that night, I refused to play in anything else the rest of the season. Newport became my superstition long after the company failed to recruit my father's lungs.

Superstition is as much a part of baseball as the Seventh Inning Stretch. Players have sold their cars to snap cold streaks at the plate and on the mound, brushed their teeth between innings, yelled at the baseball. They've worn the same cup since high school, slept with their bats, and cinched bags of minerals around their necks. An outfielder who once played for the Cubs, my favorite team, urinated on his hands because he thought it toughened them up. Superstition, however, is hardly monopolized by the professionals. In high school, I played with a guy who fondled himself in front of everyone while lying on the bench press because it supposedly gave him extra strength. After the Newport shirt went into the trash with barely a thread left to it, I claimed new superstitions. In high school, I refused to touch the baseline on my way to and from the mound. During my sophomore year of college, I wrote a stanza full of lyrics from Metallica's "Enter Sandman" on the underside of the brim of my hat because it was the last song I'd heard before a game in which I threw a no-hitter. Baseball is the rabbit's foot of the sports world. The rosin bag pitchers use to dry their hands might as well be a voodoo doll.

Wade Boggs, a Hall of Fame third baseman known mostly for his time with the Boston Red Sox, was one of the more superstitious players in baseball history. He drew the Hebrew word *chai* in the dirt before every at-bat, fielded exactly one-hundred-fifty grounders during pregame, and would only take batting practice at 5:17. Later, he ran wind sprints at precisely 7:17. Boggs also ate fried chicken before each game, earning him the nickname of Chicken Man.

When I was a kid, Boggs was my American League mistress, my favoritism for the

third baseman trumped only by a quartet of Cubs, including my all-time favorite player, Ryne Sandberg. Any Boggs that I pulled from packs of baseball cards went directly into protective cases. When my friends and I played sandlot, I tabbed Boggs, a redhead like myself, as my third baseman. I even tried to hit left-handed when his turn came up in my lineup. One Sunday night in the early '90s, as I lied on the floor watching television, Boggs appeared on my favorite show, *The Simpsons*, in one of the series' more iconic episodes, "Homer at the Bat." My fandom deepened.

But here's the thing about sport, baseball or otherwise: it shows fans the most superficial version of who a player truly is. As a kid growing up in the '80s and '90s, I knew nothing about the players outside of what I could glean from box scores. Boggs' legend grows the further one gets away from the ballfield. Mr. Perfect, a professional wrestler, once saved his life and Boggs snagged himself on barbed wire on a hunting trip and nearly died. Boggs once drank sixty-four beers on a cross-country team flight, with rumors upping the count to one-hundred plus. He stole a pair of Kirstie Alley's panties after appearing on *Cheers*, and former teammate Oil Can Boyd once called Boggs a racist, an accusation which he denies. Most famously, Boggs enlisted the help of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the late '80s to assist him in breaking up with mistress Margo Adams, who was later featured as both an interviewee and centerfold in *Penthouse*. Much of the Adams drama played out in 1988, a year in which Boggs led the American League in nine offensive categories. Those stats I knew. Here's what I didn't know: during their time together, Boggs liked Adams to slip into stockings and a garter belt and serve him anchovy pizzas.

I was blind to all of this as a kid, but eventually came to learn that peripheries exist in baseball players' lives, too. I learned that Mark Grace spent many of his waking hours steeping his liver in barley and hops, that Daryl Strawberry enjoyed cocaine, that Mel Hall raped minors, that Albert Belle stalked an escort, and that Lenny Dykstra once paid *his* escort with a check—and that check bounced. The backs of baseball cards are not police blotters; they only showcase numbers of achievement. Not .093, Tony LaRussa's B.A.C. when he was arrested for a D.U.I. after falling asleep at a stoplight. Not 160,000, the number of dollars allegedly paid to Denny McClain for his help in smuggling a fugitive out of the country. Not 1, the number of humidifiers that Chuck Knoblauch, who couldn't manage the throw from second base to first base late in his career due to a mental hiccup, hurled at his wife. Not 6, the counts of criminal sexual conduct that lawyers slapped on Chad Curtis for inappropriately touching female students during his tenure as a high school coach. Not 25,000, the amount MLB fined former Reds owner Marge Schott for her racist, anti-Semitic comments and alleged glorification of Hitler's early days. Not 2,005, the year in which Ugueth Urbina was accused of attacking a group of workers on his ranch. First with machetes. Then gasoline.

Wade Boggs stepped out on his wife like he was stepping out of the batter's box to adjust his cup, a shameful, prideful act, but not one so heinous that I could forgo years and years of perceived infallibility when, in 2012, I received the opportunity to interview him. That fall, Boggs signed on as an investor for a baseball complex proposed to be built at the *Field of Dreams* movie site. At the time, I served as editor for the paper in Dyersville, Iowa, where the Field is located. To garner goodwill in the community, the CEO of the development company gave us Boggs' first interview following the announcement. She called me at night on my cell phone to share the good news, having no idea how much Boggs had meant to me as a kid. When I hung up, I hurried into the bathroom so my wife

and sons wouldn't see the tears in my eyes.

When I told my uncle about the interview, he joked that I should ask Boggs about the Adams affair. That was the first time I'd heard Margo Adams's name, and at first I didn't believe him, the naivety of my childhood adulation stretching all the way into my early-thirties, an umbilicus made of leather and stitches and a Wonder Years pressure to find a mortal god worth idolizing. A quick internet search confirmed the story.

The following morning, of course, I didn't mention Adams or anchovy pizzas or Kirstie Alley's panties when I interviewed Boggs over the phone. For ten minutes, I lobbed him softball after softball like I was throwing batting practice, and he responded with what could have been scripted answers. Near the end of our conversation, I thanked Wade for speaking with me and confessed to him that he'd been my American League Ryne Sandberg, a comment at which he snickered. When we finished, I waited until he hung up before doing so, too.

Later that night, the story written, my skin still goosefleshing each time I thought about typing the words *Boggs said*, I bucket-listed myself a celebratory beer, an act Boggs surely would've approved of. Then, a few weeks later, as my initial giddiness waned, the development company CEO surprised me once more: Boggs was travelling to the Field for what amounted to a meet-and-greet. She informed me that media were welcome to attend. I would've called in sick if we were not.

The night before Boggs' arrival in town, I went into my basement and took out the couple hundred baseball cards that I'd kept from childhood. Gone were the Kelly Grubers, John Jahas, Gary Gaettis, and Paul Assenmachers. Seven Boggs endured, however, in the thick plastic cases in which I'd placed them decades earlier. I took them out of the cases and tucked them safely into the back of my reporter's notebook.

The next morning, I stood behind home plate at the Field of Dreams, my internal nostalgia as thick and sticky as pine tar. A crowd larger than any I'd seen at the Field had gathered, most of those in attendance there for festivity, not fandom. They didn't know that Boggs won eight Silver Slugger Awards and made twelve All-Star teams. They didn't know he had his number retired by two organizations. They'd never read the back of his baseball card. But I had—as a ten-year-old in '92 and as a thirty-year-old in 2012. I was ready.

But I had to wait my turn.

Boggs was ushered to the center of the crowd and spoke for several minutes, his words repetitious of what he'd told me over the phone weeks earlier. "Don't tell me it can't be done," Boggs said at one point, referencing the development, which had become a point of contention in the community. "Because they told me I'll never make it to the Hall of Fame, I'll never make it to the Bigs. Proved them wrong. Don't tell me this can't be done."

I felt like he was speaking to me.

Afterwards, Boggs posed for pictures with fans and local government officials. I loitered on the periphery, trying to beat down my fandom, trying to drown out that little root-root-rooter inside of me who wanted to do nothing more than fawn over and flatter a ballplayer he worshipped. This was no easy chore, but by the time most of the gathered had dispersed, I had tamped down enough of my nervousness to approach Boggs, a man who I had quite literally pretended to be at times as a child. I reintroduced myself, feeling half his size despite being three inches taller. "Good to talk to you again," Boggs said and shook my hand, his grip fierce and brawny, mine wet.

After asking a few easy questions, I turned off the voice recorder and Boggs started to

leave. “Wait,” I said and stopped him so quickly that the ten-year-old inside me pissed himself. “Do you think you could sign this?” I asked, pulling out a copy of the article I’d written about his investment in the Field. “My publisher would like it for the office,” I said. Boggs signed the paper *Wade Boggs, HOF ’05*. Hall of Famers frequently include the *HOF* and the year they were inducted when they autograph paraphernalia. It’s both a conceit and a kindness: autographs are worth more money when accompanied by *HOF*.

Boggs handed me back the paper and the marker and went to leave once more. Again, I stopped him. “Think you could sign these, too?” I asked and pulled out the seven baseball cards I’d tucked into the back of my notebook the night before.

Now, one of the most important rules of journalism is to keep oneself out of the discussion, to report within context but remove oneself from that context. The military has conscientious objectors; journalism has conscientious observers. I tried to follow that idea as a journalist and succeeded for the most part—but not with Boggs. He stared at the cards for a moment, assessing whether to grant my request. I tried to remain as cool as a Newport, but felt only shame. Shame at seeking his autograph while I was on the clock. Shame for asking him not just for one, but for seven. Shame for offering him no recompense: later that September, I attended an event at the Field where long-retired ballplayers, Boggs included, played in a shits-and-giggles softball game. Afterward, those players, most of them legends, were available for autographs at a local casino, selling their John Hancocks at triple-digit prices. And here I was asking Boggs for half a dozen—plus one—on the house.

I half-expected Boggs to chastise me for asking in the first place, for my unprofessionalism and for my greed. He had no way of knowing that I was only keeping one autograph for myself, the other six going to family and friends across the country who love baseball as much as I. But he didn’t shame me. He just dropped his eyes and stuck out that powerful right hand. Boggs signed each card then left before I could thank him. There was no second handshake.

I waited until I got back to the car to look at the cards. I tossed my notebook and voice recorder into the passenger seat, the camera with which I’d recorded video still dangling from my neck, and flipped over the first card. He’d signed it thusly: *Wade Boggs*.

No *HOF*.

No ‘05.

Just: *Wade Boggs*.

It was the same for the other six cards. I unfolded the paper to double-check his signature: *Wade Boggs HOF ’05*. It was no accident: he’d intentionally slighted me, devaluing my cards even though they would never be for sale. Nostalgia doesn’t work like that.

Twenty-five years after praying for a Boggs each time I ripped open a pack of cards, I met the man. We shook hands, mine sweaty, his calloused from all those base hits and batting titles, all those nights he spent running his fingertips over Margo Adams’ body while his wife slept back at home. I witnessed the 2-D player posing on my ’92 Topps step into 3-D reality, and I genuflected at an altar that I created alongside thousands of others who grew up during his prime. Then, when I folded my hands to worship, Boggs flicked my fingers. He didn’t belittle me or call me unprofessional. He didn’t ask the FBI to help break off our short relationship or scold me for failing to show up in a garter belt. He just failed to meet my expectations.

I set the cards in my cup holder and left the Field of Dreams.

Robert Bensen

Is It Over Yet?

For Paul Lamar

Take me Out to the Seventh Inning Stretch

Mets-Cubs at Wrigley: what could be better than the matchup Syndergaard v. Lester—the latter who, by inning two, has proven wild and walked the Nordic hurler, now on third (after two singles), now not (a pop third out). But no smile traced Lester's face, who strode back to the dugout to gird his wrists as batter. Three-one, Mets. I'd been rashly goaded to bet Lamar the mighty sonneteer, that whose team lost owed a sonnet (though I proposed beer) to the other. Before I hit SEND he'd written three! Or so he said. So I switched channels—can Cubbies lose?—to catch Trump's impeachable debacles—then turned back to see Lester single, bases loaded! Four-three Cubs! And the president in shackles!

Extra Innings

Mets tie it in the ninth! Forebodings of extra-inning woe. I confess: to forego the stress of baseball, I watched the second half of *Key Largo*, hoping to catch Edward G. Robinson fall under a hail of Bogey's bullets, then best of all the last shots of Katharine Hepburn, 1949, getting the news on the phone from her tall soldier's lips, that all were dead, and he was fine and coming home to her. She never spoke. Didn't have to. Her dewy-eyed face said it all. So would mine, teared-up from the smoke of my Cubs' jersey I torched for you, dear Paul. Unless, hint-hint, for my birthday, some kind soul gets Me another, I'll grit my teeth and wear Da Mets'.

Robert Paul Moreira

You'll Hit It Over Anzalduas Bridge

The Anzalduas International Bridge opened for traffic at 6:00 a.m. on Tuesday, Dec. 15, 2009. It serves as the most direct and efficient route between the Rio Grande Valley and Mexican cities such as Monterrey and Mexico City.

The bridge spans 3.2 miles.

—City of McAllen, Texas, website

I am not afraid.

—Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*

You'll slap it. Shock it. Pop it. Rock it. Smooth. Yeah, smooth. And then CRACK! And you'll make it go arriba a little and into the sky, up and over the parking lot, and watch it land close to where the pochos and Mexes and Winter Texans all slouch in line and the BPs stare like Oakleyed hawks and carry black, shiny guns. You'll duck down when all those heads turn to see where the failed meteor came from, and so will Chuy and the rest of the gang behind you. Next to Julia, rubbing a shoulder against hers, pretending not to look into her cotton-white, teenie face, you'll giggle too, act suave beside the daughter of Teresa, your next door neighbor, and Clifford, the ex-cop from Boston who RVED down one winter and slumped in your barrio with Julia's mom and liked it so much he decided to stay. Caught up connecting her cute freckles you'll think about the next time you'll burn hacia adentro when you go over to her house to see Julia and how Clifford'll be there. And it's not so much his eyes you'll hate when you walk in again, his eyes that you know have always fixed on your tits that you once tried to wrap tight like Gwyneth Paltrow did in Shakespeare in Love in front of your mirror a few times, that pinche mirror that shows you to you with fury, but then it all turned out as useless as pushing Mayan pyramids into sacred ground, so since then you conceded defeat and let them hang loose, no bra, freer than freer than free, just to make a statement, until Julia told you that other fine day that she did the same thing too, and sealed it with a kiss.

Nah. Not that. You'll think of that other power Clifford's got over you. His poder when he speaks. You'll think of asking Is Julie home?, clear and proper, followed by Clifford's owning of your body with his eyes again, and his answer back in Spanish that you won't understand in its entirety: Julia esta en su cuarto, machorra. And then his laugh. His long laugh that seems to go on forever like the Palm Sunday Mass you always hate attending with your mother, the Palmview saint, who never fails to tell God and then you cambia... please change. But even Clifford's laugh never bites as hard as knowing his words have eyes that look down on you, talk down to you, and that even if you were to respond with a Kiss my ass! or Fuck you, you white piece of shit!, it wouldn't matter. It wouldn't matter. You'll wish you knew Spanish good enough to tell him something fierce like that, and you'll blame your mother for failing to give you her native tongue because it was her fault for not showing you, the curse words at the very least, but then

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all those thoughts will disappear. Julie's in her room, Clifford'll say, as nice as he's always been bad from the beginning, and you'll watch the skin around his eyes sag so that if he laughed at that instant you'd know, you'd know deep down that he'd crumble like a dried up castle in South Padre sand. He'll move to the side, forget you're even there, and finally you'll walk in.

In her bedroom, you'll thank los santos and santas that Julia always makes up for everything you go through before getting there. You'll think of how she's mostly English too, speaks but a speck of Spanish, and is much lighter in skin tone than you, like you're the burned part of the tortilla while she's the inside; and how getting close to her is also a language, your language with her, a language of love, where the both of you can communicate without any interference from the outside world. You'll smile when you see yourself in her mirror because it's always much more polite than yours, and the crazy thought of undressing in front of it and taking in the sights of all that God gave you, really taking them in and being proud of the whorls of flesh that make up your body, all of that will cross your mind. Unbuttoning your shirt you'll look over at Julia, feet crossed with her cute pink toenails and staring up at you from the comfort of her bed, and you'll reconsider. Not yet, you'll say to yourself. Not yet. You'll cuddle up next to her and watch TV instead. You'll hold her hand and let the sweat build in between. She will too. The world will turn slowly with both of you on it, but you won't even know it's there.

In the present, you'll look up to make sure the coast is clear, and the others will follow your example. Chuy'll play the role of your biggest fan at the moment, and he'll praise you with a flurry of words packed into a sentence and followed by the word *buey*, and you'll use the word too, not worried about what it means because you've never heard Clifford use it, but you'll remember your Tío Armando who said that word all the time too, your tío with the cleft lip and missing his uvula from birth so that when he spoke it seemed as if God had assigned him a personal demon to eternally pinch his nose. You could talk to him about demons, you'll think, then smile. What's booeey? Julia will ask, and everyone will laugh until you wave your bat at them, and then Chuy will tell her it's the same as "dude" or "bro" when speaking in Mexicano. Booeey! Julia will say again, cute, and this time no one will laugh. After a wink she'll stand there tall, like a wall you'll want to climb over, but you'll hold yourself back, feeling like a million bucks and twice that in pesos. You'll tell Chuy it's time for the next one, and he'll nod, and the rest of the guys will back away. A kiss for Julia, and then you'll pat her on the ass, MLB-style, for everyone to see, and see they will, and you'll watch her join the guys a few feet away. You'll feel a strength in your soul, *hacia adentro*, inside your body and in your arms like never before, and the expanse of silky blue sky above you will seem conquerable all of a sudden, and the moment made just for you. You'll yell out in confidence *You see the sky?* and the guys and Julia will say *Yeah! Yeah!* You'll go on: *See the clouds? See the space between them? Those holes in the firmament of el cielo? They'll nod and agree saying ¡Sí! Yes! ¡Sí!* and at that moment you'll know. You'll finally know. You'll know it as deep as your blood inside you. Chuy'll swing his arm back and toss that hard piece of caliche your way and you'll time it, bring around your *bate* and smack it and get this one good, as good as ever, all sweet spot, *cabrona*, and you'll hit this one far, farther than ever, and it'll fly up and *arriba* like an ancestral spirit on fire and set free, over everyone, over everything, over men and women and *pocho*, Mex, and border-patrolled flesh and occupied earth and polluted water. On a heavenly arc. High. Up and over that brilliant bridge. And you'll imagine the rock finally falling on the other side and rolling, tumbling on its belly across the unpaved Reynosa

streets to the feet of hungry children selling gum for five pesos or ¡Alarma! magazines with full-color photos of their fathers' severed heads stuffed tight in Igloo coolers bought in the E.E.U.U. You'll feel like a crumpled dollar smoothed out as best as possible for the Coke machine, but still rejected. Still rejected.

Then everyone around you will cheer.

Then a silence. Julia will come close. You'll stand there with her, with everyone else around you, like in a ceremony, watching, praying, hoping. Waiting for that special someone on the other side who'll take the chance and hit it back.

The Jersey I'll Never Fit Into

Being born into a baseball family, I was acquainted with the sport from the moment my cognitive thought kicked in. I played my first tee-ball game when I was three years old and memorably ran down the third base line after hitting the ball off the tee. My third base coach/uncle had to pick me up and put me on the right path, the same path I would run down hundreds of times across the next couple decades.

It was always a part of my life, handed down from my grandpa on my mother's side, who always insisted on watching the St. Louis Cardinals rather than my grandma's choice of sci-fi movie(s) for the day (Tommyknockers still haunts me). My dad, who was a constant presence in my baseball "career" as a coach and a fan, was no different. Baseball was the thread that wove everything together.

I started to idolize professional players the more I understood the game. Craig Biggio, Jeff Bagwell and the Houston Astros took center stage, but for whatever reason, I grew attached to Frank Thomas, A.K.A. the Big Hurt. I still don't know what it was that drew me towards him, but on my sixth or seventh birthday, I was given a Frank Thomas jersey, courtesy of my grandpa. It was my first ever jersey - jet black, sleek, and way cool.

The problem was that I was a child, and it was an adult large jersey.

I stared at it, craved for it, tried it on and let it drape past my knees, more likely to work as a tent than a garment. Still, I wanted to wear it more than anything. I wanted to pretend like I was Frank Thomas out in the backyard, playing catch with my dad and doing my best not to break any windows with my often-erratic pitching.

I'd get there eventually. Everyone grows, right? In the meantime, I had so many other jerseys to fit into—the green of St. Jude's, the blue of All Souls, the grey of a team called the Starz (with a Z), the pinstripes of the Dawgz (also with a Z) and the maroon and gold of my high school team.

My position changed - third base, first base, pitcher. My number changed—11, 9, 6. All the while, Frank Thomas sat, nestled in my closet, waiting for me to grow into it. And my grandpa always sat in the stands at my games, my dad in the dugout or on the base paths, coaching; all of us watching and *being* the game we were born and raised with. It wasn't just America's past time, it was our past time too.

There are times I remember looking up into the stands and seeing my grandpa watching and wanting to do better than my best. Not just for him, but so that I could fit into that Frank Thomas jersey one day. Maybe even have my own mass-produced jersey that kids could grow into.

The jersey passed in and out of my mind throughout the years. Sometimes I'd forget and stumble across it when digging through my closet for something completely unrelated. Number 35, the Big Hurt. First baseman, just like I was (for awhile, at least). Still too big.

When my grandpa passed away in 2012, I still hadn't gotten the chance to properly wear the jersey he got me over a decade prior. I wondered if he still remembered it from time to

time, like I did. Maybe on the rare occasions that the Cardinals played the White Sox.

I wore it for the first time in the summer of 2013. 17 or so years after it was given to me. It was still kind of big, but I didn't care anymore. I wore it on the North Side of Chicago, in and around Wrigley Field. Cubs fans were just enamored with the idea of a White Sox jersey in their presence. I even got helped across the street by one gentleman who thought it'd be funny to pretend like I had a mental illness given the jersey I was wearing.

I have no love for the Chicago White Sox. I don't think I ever did. I don't like wearing black anymore either, for what that's worth. But this isn't just a black White Sox jersey of Frank Thomas anymore. It's more than that. It's a jersey of my grandpa and a jersey of a game that played such a massive part of my life. And you're damn right I'll wear that with pride. Even if it is still a bit baggie. But maybe that was the point. Maybe he got me an adult large so that I'd never grow out of it, even if I never really grew into it.

Jon Obermeyer

The Gloves

The leather mitts
on the wall
of the Double Play bar
in San Francisco
are a pantheon of second outs,
of crisp throws from short
that sting the palm of your hand,
beneath the leather;

a trophy case
of almost-outs,
of line drives
that bounce off the glove
or tear through the webbing,
rabbiting further
into deep right.

Willie Mays
once took batting practice
at Seals Stadium
across the street. He's wearing
his new Giant's jersey
over a dress shirt.
He's in dress slacks
and wearing a wristwatch
you would never show

if you were facing
a Don Drysdale
or a Bob Gibson,
or a decade
about to bear down
on you with stuff
like you ever seen
anywhere before.

Ammon Wilcken

The Final Pitch

One young pitcher who dreamed of glory.
He sweat, he worked, he grew.
The seasons, games, and victories passed.
He sweat, he worked, he grew.
But the crowd rejoiced in other names.
He sweat, he worked, he grew.
Last game, final pitch. Memories of how
He'd sweat, he'd worked, he'd grew
Had he failed despite how
He'd sweat, worked and grew?
No. He had become something more.
He prayed, he looked, he threw
This last pitch was the beginning of a new dream
Strike.

JJ Steinfeld

Ball Caps: A One-Act Play

Ball Caps was first produced by Howling Moon Cab Company as part of the Brooklyn Plays Festival, January 26 to February 4, 2006.

Directed by Jonathan Wallace

CAST

EBBY: Brad Wind

JAYSON: Julio Peña

BARTENDER: Roxanne Seunarine

CHARACTERS

EBBY: late thirties, fan of the old Brooklyn Dodgers.

JAYSON: late thirties, New York Yankees fan whose wife is a Toronto Blue Jays fan.

BARTENDER: late twenties, a female graduate student working part-time in a bar.

SETTING: A bar in Brooklyn.

TIME: Around 5:30 p.m. of an unspecified day during the 2005 baseball season.

EBBY, late thirties, wearing an old Brooklyn Dodgers cap, is sitting at a bar, drinking beer from a glass. JAYSON, also late thirties, wearing a Toronto Blue Jays cap, holding a beer bottle, is standing off to left, looking at EBBY, sizing him up. JAYSON adjusts his cap, takes a sip of beer, and moves next to EBBY. BARTENDER, woman in her late twenties, whistling, wiping the counter.

JAYSON: Let me buy you a drink, Ebbets.

EBBY: You want to buy me a drink? And everyone calls me Ebby.

JAYSON: Well, Ebby, two if you're real thirsty. (Signaling to the BARTENDER to bring another beer for EBBY.)

EBBY: I don't think we've met.

JAYSON: Not directly. I'm Jayson. J-A-Y-S-O-N.

EBBY: You always spell your name out when you meet someone?

JAYSON: Most people assume it's spelled J-a-s-o-n, and I'm a stickler for accuracy.

EBBY: You careful about your punctuation also?

JAYSON: One should never mix up exclamation marks and question marks, should one, Ebby?

EBBY: Especially not with someone you never met before.

JAYSON: Not directly, I said.

EBBY: But indirectly?

JAYSON: That's one way to characterize it. In-di-rect-ly.

(BARTENDER places another bottle of beer in front of EBBY, and leaves the two men.)

EBBY: Thanks... (Looking at the Blue Jays cap) You visiting?

JAYSON: I've lived in Brooklyn all my life.

EBBY: (Pointing to the Blue Jays cap, as if it might be an animal about to lunge) That's one hideous ball cap.

JAYSON: (Takes off his cap and looks admiringly at it) Oh, how can you say that? A work of art. (Puts his ball cap back on.)

EBBY: Major League baseball in Canada never seemed natural to me. Bet you're sad the Expos went to Washington.

JAYSON: I wasn't pleased. But the Blue Jays are still solidly perched in Toronto.

EBBY: They might get a notion to fly to Brooklyn.

JAYSON: Not within the realm of possibility.

EBBY: You live here, come to my bar, and wear a Blue Jays cap. I think you might be missing home plate.

JAYSON: My wife is Canadian. Even after close to five years in Brooklyn, she is still an enormous Toronto Blue Jays fan.

EBBY: My sympathies. (To the BARTENDER) We get all kinds...

JAYSON: She got this lovely ball cap from her former father-in-law, who bought it during the 1993 World Series, when the Blue Jays won it all...for the second year in a row. After her marriage broke up she moved here, we met, and she gave me the ball cap when we got engaged. One year married next week. It's my good-luck ball cap.

EBBY: (Touching the rim of his ball cap) My grandfather's Brooklyn Dodgers cap. He was at the last game at Ebbets Field, with my father, who was just a boy then. My grandfather gave it to my father, who gave it to me.

JAYSON: That's a moving story, Ebby. I know it well.

EBBY: I've never told it to you.

JAYSON: My grandfather told me. He heard it from your grandmother.

EBBY: If you say so. My father said he would wear it until the Dodgers came back to Brooklyn, but he passed on. Now I wear it until dem glorious Bums return, as my grandfather and father used to say. Dem glorious Bums...

JAYSON: Quite the superstition you have there, Ebby. Safe to say that wearing your well-worn Brooklyn Dodgers cap is not working any magnetic luckiness.

EBBY: It might happen one of these days. In a perfect world, it would happen. I would never take it off while I'm in this bar. My father wore in here and my grandfather before him. You might call it a good-luck drinking cap.

JAYSON: We both have lucky ball caps. Let me try yours on.

EBBY: Are you crazy?

JAYSON: You think that will break your luck? The Dodgers are in LA and that's where they are staying...forever.

EBBY: Well, we all have our beliefs and convictions.

JAYSON: And reasons for living... I really should tell you... I've been meaning to tell since we first spoke...

EBBY: Tell me what?

JAYSON: My grandfather slept with your grandmother.

EBBY: What in the world are you talking about?

JAYSON: Don't get all panicky. I'm not a jealous, revenge-seeking sort of guy. Besides, I'm not a believer in the sins of the father...or of the grandfather...

EBBY: I think you have your Blue Jays cap on too tight...way too tight.

JAYSON: No need to be sarcastic about my cap.

EBBY: My grandparents were happily married for every single day of their lives together. And I'm happily married to a fantastic woman, who happens to be both a Mets and a Yankees fan. She doesn't quite comprehend the Brooklyn Dodgers, but I don't hold that against her.

JAYSON: There were no Mets when the Dodgers were in Brooklyn...and no Blue Jays in Toronto.

EBBY: Thanks for the baseball-history lesson, Jayson.

JAYSON: If you want, you can call me Jay.

EBBY: (Pause) That's a joke, right?

JAYSON: Why would I joke about the diminutive of my name? A few people, like my wife, call me Jay.

EBBY: Jay the Blue Jays fan. Friggin' weird.

JAYSON: I told you, Ebby, my wife is the Blue Jays fan. The Yankees are my team. I wear the ball cap for love and good luck. As long as I wear this ball cap, true love enfolds me lovingly.

EBBY: And you accuse me of being superstitious about my Dodgers cap.

JAYSON: There are all kinds of superstitions in this world. Wearing my ball cap is a reminder of my wife's love. Wearing your old Brooklyn Dodgers ball cap isn't going to bring the Dodgers one inch closer to Brooklyn. Our superstitions, for want of a better word, are as unrelated as a grand slam homer is to a called strike three with the bases empty.

EBBY: That's a distortion if I ever heard one, Jayson the friggin' weird Blue Jays ball cap-wearing guy named after a team named after a little bird. Tweet, Jayson, tweet...

JAYSON: Your name is Ebbets, isn't it?

EBBY: That's different.

JAYSON: Precisely the same. Ebbets the Dodgers fan. How many people on the planet are named after a baseball stadium?

EBBY: The baseball stadium was named after a person...Charles Ebbets.

JAYSON: Were you named after Charles Ebbets or Ebbets Field?

EBBY: I told you I go by Ebby. That's the name I've used since I was a little kid.

JAYSON: So, everything is cool. I'm Jayson and/or Jay and you're Ebby and/or Ebbets,

and here we are having a nice, friendly drink together, and there's a Yankees game tonight, and I have...(takes out the tickets) two superb box seats to tonight's game for you. (Tosses the tickets onto the bar counter in front of EBBY.)

EBBY: (Cautiously picking up the tickets) You said your grandfather slept with my grandmother.

JAYSON: Take your wife, and pretend you're watching the old Brooklyn Dodgers. I told you, it's no big deal. That was in 1957. Ancient history.

EBBY: (Putting the tickets back on the bar counter) 1957 was an awfully momentous year.

JAYSON: The good old days.

EBBY: 1957 wasn't my grandfather's favorite year.

JAYSON: The whole year, Ebby?

EBBY: More like September 24, 1957. Maybe bittersweet is a better way to describe that day.

JAYSON: That's when my grandfather slept with your grandmother. September twenty-fourth. Neither one of us were born.

EBBY: My grandmother slept with no one's husband, except her own, in September 1957, or any other time.

JAYSON: It was specifically on September twenty-fourth.

EBBY: My grandmother was at home, waiting for her husband to get back from the Dodgers' last home game in Brooklyn, which they won, 2-0. She wasn't a baseball fan whatsoever. In fact, I always suspected she didn't like baseball, but my grandfather was such a huge Dodgers fan that she kept it to herself.

JAYSON: My grandfather, who was a New York Giants fan, stopped over just in time for the first pitch of the Brooklyn Dodgers last home game, and had his own little amorous ballgame. He told me about that rendezvous with your grandmother before he died—a confession of sorts.

EBBY: You are crazy!

JAYSON: My dear romantic wife. She likes me wearing my Blue Jays cap when we make love. You don't keep your old Dodgers cap on, do you?

EBBY: I appreciate the beer, but I think I need some quality time alone now.

JAYSON: Tell me, do you wear your Brooklyn Dodgers cap? Please, Ebby, I need to know.

EBBY: (To the BARTENDER) I think your patron here is having a mental breakdown. (BARTENDER walks to the bar counter, opposite from the two men.) JAYSON
What would you give to get the Dodgers back to Brooklyn?

BARTENDER: I'm not much of a baseball fan.

JAYSON: A bartender not a baseball fan? That stretches credulity.

EBBY: Aren't you dealing in stereotypes?

JAYSON: Take a scientific survey of all the bartenders, female and male, in Brooklyn... make it all of New York...the entire United States...all of North America...throw in Japan—and I bet you the majority, the vast majority, would be baseball fans, to one degree or another.

BARTENDER: I'm not the regular bartender.

EBBY: She's a graduate student.

BARTENDER: In theatre...theatre history.

JAYSON: That makes it a bit of a small world. Both of us being connected to the theatre, that it. I'm an actor.

BARTENDER: Next to baseball fans who wear their caps in here, I think demographically actors are my number-two customer. Have I seen your name in lights lately?

JAYSON: A bit of a lackluster career, but I keep busy.

EBBY: Movie actor?

JAYSON: Stage, Ebby. I'm a stage actor.

EBBY: What have you been in?

JAYSON: Most recently, and coincidentally, I was in a revival of *Damn Yankees*.

EBBY: I've never seen that play.

JAYSON: It's a movie also.

EBBY: I haven't seen the movie either.

JAYSON: Your Dodgers won the World Series from the damn Yankees the year the play premiered on Broadway, 1955, but they were ensconced in L.A. the year the movie came out in 1958.

EBBY: I wouldn't mind visiting 1955, or 1956, or 1957, and erasing all the years after the Dodgers left.

JAYSON: The Washington Nationals aren't exactly the reincarnation of the old Senators. Maybe we should update the play.

BARTENDER: I have a hard time seeing you as Joe Hardy...or Mr. Applegate.

EBBY: Who are they?

BARTENDER: Well, Mr. Applegate is...the Devil.

EBBY: (Shaking mockingly) Oooooooo, the Devil...

BARTENDER: And Joe Boyd, who is transformed into Joe Hardy in the play, makes a deal with the Devil so he can help the Washington Senators beat the New York Yankees.

EBBY: The damn Yankees, right?

JAYSON: I was Lola.

BARTENDER: I think I'm going to have to cut you off. (Smiling) For overacting...

JAYSON: Whatever Lola wants...

EBBY: Your wife like when you play a gal, Jayson?

JAYSON: I could do something for you, Ebby. If you could change anything in your life?...

EBBY: My life's okay as it is.

JAYSON: If I could bring the Dodgers back to Brooklyn, would you give up something of significance?

EBBY: I never saw the Brooklyn Dodgers play.

JAYSON: A simple transaction, Ebby.

EBBY: The way my grandfather and father talk about the Brooklyn Dodgers, you'd think it was yesterday.

JAYSON: I'll see what I can do about it, Ebby. You'll have to give me a little something of yours, just so we can call it a fair transaction.

EBBY: Whatever you want, Lo-la.

JAYSON: Excellent, Ebby, truly excellent. Let's say, your soul for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1957.

EBBY: Take it. It's yours. Would you like two or three souls. How about a three-two count in the bottom of the ninth worth of my souls?

JAYSON: One soul is more than sufficient, Ebby. (Pulls a baseball out of his pocket and hands it to EBBY) A peace offering. A way of making our deal official. (Pushing the baseball tickets toward EBBY) Please don't forget your tickets. Try getting better seats than these.

EBBY: You are awfully generous, Jayson. My wife and I will be thinking of you during the game, even if it isn't the Dodgers of old. (Looking at the baseball) This is a lovely gift...

JAYSON: Yes, whatever Lola wants... (Hands the BARTENDER two twenty-dollar bills) This should cover my and Ebby's imbibing. Whatever Lola wants... (Exits.)

EBBY: That was one strange person.

BARTENDER: A good tipper...

EBBY: Who was this Lola?

BARTENDER: The incredibly sexy, seductive Devil's helper in Damn Yankees.

EBBY: That crazy Jayson guy wasn't sexy...

BARTENDER: "Whatever Lola Wants" is the most scintillating song in Damn Yankees. Gwen Verdon played Lola on Broadway, and in the film, and Ray Walston was Mr. Applegate in both versions also.

EBBY: You sure know your stuff.

BARTENDER: Show business trivia, that's all. Damn Yankees is one of the all-time greatest Broadway musicals.

EBBY: I'll be seeing the Yankees tonight, whether they're damned or not. (Picking up the two tickets from the bar counter and giving them a quick kiss) That Jayson did give me a pair of expensive tickets.

BARTENDER: Look at all the printing on the baseball he left.

EBBY: (Reading the baseball) Baseball...is...a...meta-phor...for...existence... (Holds the ball close to his eyes) Hard to read the small print.

BARTENDER: Let me see.

EBBY: (Tries to hand the baseball to the BARTENDER) It's gluey. I can't let go of it.

BARTENDER: Quite the mischievous prank.

EBBY: This is not funny.

BARTENDER: I hope it's not an industrial-strength glue.

EBBY: This is ridiculous.

BARTENDER: Try throwing the ball away.

EBBY: (Trying to throw the baseball, but it is stuck to his hand) I can't throw it...

JAYSON: (From offstage. Like a radio sportscaster) ...And taking the field for the hometown Dodgers, managed by Walter Alston, are Gil Hodges at first, Junior Gilliam at second, Charlie Neal at short, Pee Wee Reese playing more and more at third these days...in the outfield, Gino Cimoli in left, Duke Snider in center, and Carl Furillo in right. Today's battery for the Dodgers are Don Newcombe on the mound and Roy Campanella behind the plate... Looks to be a nice crowd in attendance and the sun couldn't be shining brighter... Leading off for the New York Giants, managed by Bill Rigney, is...

EBBY: (Starting to relax; digesting what is being "broadcast") I can't believe it... Yes... (Becoming blissful) Yes, the way it should have been... (Completely in a blissful state, but he still cannot remove the baseball from his hand) The Dodgers are back in Brooklyn... Dem Bums have finally come home...