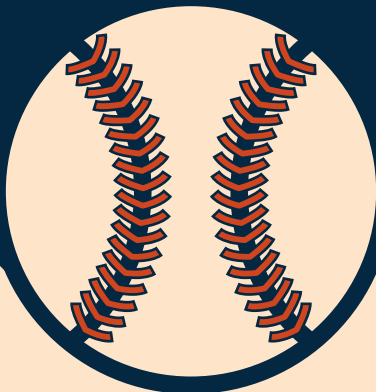




2017 COBALT REVIEW

# BASEBALL



# COBALT



2017 Baseball Issue

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# 2017 Earl Weaver Prize

Each of the authors included in this issue was selected as a semifinalist for the fourth annual Earl Weaver Baseball Prize (our fifth baseball prize). Below are the winner and finalist selections. Finalists are listed in alphabetical order.

Winner: Kyle Hays, “Sit Still”

Finalist: Matt Pasca, “The Strawman & Doctor K”

Finalist: Kelly Smith, “A Game of Inches”

Finalist: Mark Stevick, “Pictures from a Baseball Nation”

Congratulations to the winner, finalists, and semifinalists, and thank you to all who have submitted to this baseball issue and supported the Cobalt writing prizes these past six years.

Submissions for the 2017 Earl Weaver Prize will open in February.

A “five years of Cobalt baseball writing” anthology is in the works and will be available at the start of the 2018 season.

Sincerely,

Andrew Keating  
Chief Baseball Officer  
Cobalt Review | Cobalt Press

Kelly Smith

## A Game of Inches

A love letter to the Cleveland Indians from a girl and her dad

“Baseball is a game of inches,” Dad would always tell me.

He’d repeat this nugget of wisdom often, usually while we played catch on the strip of grass at the edge of our front yard between the sidewalk and the street. He’d have on his trusty old catcher’s mitt, the kind that made the street echo with the best *smack* sound in the world if you hit it just right.

On that strip of grass, Dad taught me how to throw. From the first snow thaw in the spring until the last leaves had dropped in the fall, we’d be out there after school playing catch. He taught me how to field, slinging grounders and tossing pop flies my way. He even taught me to pitch—I was terrible. Still, he dutifully showed me the windup (step back, pivot, leg up, stride, release) and would crouch at the very edge of that sliver of grass to catch for me—perfect little league pitching distance.

552 inches.

Whenever I got that *smack* sound he’d shake his wrist in mock pain. “*Ouch!*” he’d exclaim loudly, and even though I knew he was faking, I wouldn’t be able to wipe a stupid grin off my face.

Dad grew up in the small town of Warren, Pennsylvania, where everybody knew everybody, and where his mom, Grandma Smith, was famous for delivering her legendary apple pie to every new neighbor. The fourth of six children, his childhood was filled with love, laughter, and that delicious pie. It was also filled with competition. From a young age, he loved sports, and he played a lot of them—wrestling, basketball, and of course, baseball. He would turn anything from free throw shooting to Scrabble into an intense competition.

Both of Dad’s parents were from Ohio. His dad was raised in Ashtabula, and his mom grew up in a Slovenian neighborhood on E. 64th Street in Cleveland—she didn’t know English until she went to kindergarten, and she was the first person from her neighborhood to go to college. As it stood, my dad didn’t have much of a choice but to be a Cleveland Indians fan—it was in his blood. He would tell us stories of going to games as a child, where giveaways such as *I Hate the Yankees Hankies* solidified his disdain for the Pinstripes. When we dug up my dad’s old baseball card collection a few years back, the Indians pile was the highest—filled with (mostly worthless) cards from the 1960s teams. “I traded away all the Yankees for Indians players!” he told us, not a hint of regret in his voice at the loss

of Mickey Mantles or Yogi Berras.

He attended games at the old Municipal Stadium with his father and grandfather when he was a kid. On August 25, 1963, he caught a foul ball and an usher had him fill out a form with his name and address. A week later he received an Honorary Contract signed by GM Gabe Paul naming him a “fan for life”—and he truly was. He stuck by his Tribe even when, for a stretch of 33 years (1960-1993), they weren’t within ten games of first place in the month of September. We still have that framed contract on a mantel in our house.

After a brief stint in the Peace Corps post-college at Ohio University, Dad moved to Rochester, New York for work. There, he met and married my mom and settled down. He said he wanted four kids, she said two. Before long, they had six—as he would say, it worked out perfectly. I was number five (four daughters, two sons), and all us were indoctrinated quickly as Cleveland fans. Some of the first professional photos of my oldest sister feature her in a toddler-sized Indians uniform, ball and bat in hand. I was born in October of 1995—a great season for the Tribe—the same day Kenny Lofton scored from second on a passed ball in Game 6 of the ALCS. My dad always told me I would have been named *Kenny Lofton Smith* if I were a boy.

It was impossible not to be a Tribe fan in my house. I was a total tomboy, and all those games of catch solidified baseball as my “thing” with Dad. It was what we had most in common—we loved sports, we loved competition, and we were baseball nuts. I played baseball up through middle school before switching to softball, and I followed the Indians religiously. Sometime around the age of 11 or 12 I remember asking for a radio for my bedroom so I could listen to games. My dad taught me early that Indians radio announcer Tom “Hammy” Hamilton was the best in the business, and boy was he right. I’d have to twiddle the dial just right to pull the games from *The Jake* all the way to my bedroom, and on rainy nights I’d just hear static, not even Hammy’s booming home run calls able to cross that distance.

16,378,560 inches.

Dad was always on the lookout for ways to get us to Indians games. I remember when he surprised us with opening day tickets for my first-ever game. We drove the four hours from Rochester and sat way up in the right field nosebleeds—I was (and am) terrified of heights and could barely look down. Dad pointed out Indians legend John Adams to me across the field up in the bleachers, faithfully banging his drum. I was hooked. We went to more games over the years, making the trek to Cleveland whenever we could. Once, Dad bought about 30 tickets in the left field bleachers and we took most of the neighborhood with us (a majority of them Yankee faithful). He was always trying to convert new fans.

After graduating high school, I ended up in Indiana at the University of Notre Dame— good thing Cleveland was a perfect halfway point for the drive to and from school. My freshman year (2013) was a fun year for baseball. I remember listening to the Jason Giambi walk-off home run that kept the Indians’ pennant dreams alive in late September. I was in my dorm room, and the first thing I did was run out into the hallway and call my dad in excitement.

A few months into that first semester, my world changed. Dad was diagnosed with stage IV bladder cancer, with a timeline of one to two years left to live. The distance from school to home felt impossibly far. 32,522,688 inches.

Dad was nothing if not a fighter—like I said, he had a competitive spirit. Through all the pain, he fought. He was a healthy guy (he worked out every day before work) and he was determined to beat this new challenge. He never got down. Every time I talked to him, he was planning a new trip out to visit me for a football game or reminding me to tell my mom how great she was (and she *is* great). Inevitably, every conversation we had would turn to the Tribe—how their pitching was looking this year, injury reports, trade rumors... the conversations were endless.

Of course, we made it to some games together. My junior year, a rescheduled Cubs game in Chicago lined up perfectly with my college move in, and so Dad once again went crazy buying tickets. It turned into a *de facto* family reunion with aunts, uncles, cousins, and most of my roommates coming along for the ride, some flying in from as far as New Jersey for Dad’s first trip to Wrigley. The Indians lost on a walkoff home run, but it was just about as close to perfect as a day can be.

Then the 2016 season rolled around. Last year was, simply put, magical. Dad and I were both equally enamored with Francisco Lindor, Jason Kipnis, Jose Ramirez, Corey Kluber, and the other stars of the team. They were *fun*, and they were *good*. I studied abroad in London in the spring, but I still found ways to follow my Indians. If there was a day game, I’d listen to it on my walk back from class, Hammy in my ears, drowning out the city chatter or the rattling of the Tube, bringing a little bit of home to life abroad. I remember sending Dad a photo of myself from the bridge by my flat: headphones in, Tribe game on, Big Ben in the background, with a caption of *nothing’s changed*, even thousands of miles from home.

221,696,640 inches, to be exact.

When I came home for the summer, Indians games on the radio were a constant—and they were *winning*. The spirit was infectious: more so than ever before, there was the feeling that *this was the year*. My dad would often go to bed early, falling asleep listening to the games. First thing in the morning he’d greet me with “So how ‘bout those Indians?” and we’d talk about that great play Frankie made, or J-Ram’s clutch hit, or Carlos Carrasco’s latest gem. For a few weeks from June to July, they

just couldn't lose. Every game, the team found another way to win—to Dad's and my delight. As they neared the franchise win streak record, we toyed with the idea of driving 3 hours north to Toronto to see them potentially break it. Ultimately, Dad decided it would be too difficult. Instead, we listened from home as they went a marathon 19 innings against the Blue Jays to win their fourteenth straight. The streak was two weeks of pure magic, and some of the best time I shared with Dad.

As fall arrived and I left for my senior year of college, Dad's health started to decline more. Cancer is unforgiving, and it doesn't care if your favorite baseball team is having a season for the ages. Still, Dad and I always found time to talk the Tribe whenever I called home. It was easier than talking about scarier things, and it was something we both loved.

When the playoffs started up, I was lucky enough to make it to Game 2 of the ALDS against the Red Sox. I remember talking with my dad on the phone about my reservations at the cost of the ticket. "This is once in a lifetime," he assured me. After I eventually bit the bullet and purchased the cheapest seat I could find, he shot me a text. He had transferred me enough money for the ticket, plus a few bucks. "Buy a hot dog at the game, on me," he told me. "Don't forget to get the Stadium Mustard." I even celebrated my twenty-first birthday in Cleveland, outfitting all my roommates in Indians gear so we could hang out on E. 4th street and watch the Trevor Bauer Bloody Finger Game. When the Indians won the Pennant, I was on fall break in a cabin in Tennessee. I popped some champagne and called Dad.

48,502,080 inches between us.

Within an hour, I had a text message from a family friend of ours, Mike. He wanted to try to get tickets to the World Series to take my dad. Was I available? I don't think I've ever responded to a text as fast as I did then.

Sometimes I still can't believe I got to attend a Cleveland World Series game, let alone with my Dad, the biggest Indians fan I know. My attendance was supposed to be a surprise for him—Mike had gotten a few tickets for my mom, my dad, and another friend. There was one extra, and he vaguely told Dad he'd find someone else to take it. They were watching a football game together when Dad turned to Mike and sheepishly asked, "Hey, if no one steps up for that extra ticket, what would you think about my daughter, Kelly, coming along?" Mike cracked up. "She's already coming," he told my dad. He made Mike say it three times before believing him.

I drove to Cleveland from school the night before Game 1 and met my parents, who happened to be celebrating thirty years of marriage, the aptly nicknamed "Diamond" Anniversary. The next day, we watched Corey Kluber blank the Cubs in a brilliant 6-0 victory. My dad spent way too much money buying me a souvenir cup of beer, the first and only drink he ever bought me. Roberto Perez



hit two home runs. I was on top of the world—and I got to share that experience with Dad.

Just a few inches apart.

Game 7. My friends and I watched the game at my off-campus house. I am a bit— okay, *very*— superstitious, so when the Indians started losing I decided I shouldn't be watching on TV anymore. I took my friend Claire—a Clevelander and fellow Indians fan—and we went to my bedroom to listen to the WTAM feed. I'll never forget jumping up and down on my bed with her when Rajai Davis hit the home run. After the initial celebration, the first thing I did was call Dad. "I think this might be it," I told him. We were inches from victory.

That game, of course, didn't end how we wanted it to. I think I cried for about two hours that night, but it wasn't just about losing. I knew, in the back of my mind, that this was my dad's last chance to see his Indians win the World Series.

Still, last season gave me immeasurable happiness throughout the year. Through the joy and elation of the 2016 season, I always had something to talk to Dad about, and something we could celebrate together without fail.

If I had the chance to trade away a year of shared excitement and happiness with Dad for an Indians World Series title, I'd take that year every single time. "There's always next year," as Indians fans know well. The joy that Dad and I got out of the 2016 season can never be replaced.

Dad took a major turn for the worse in May. He wasn't able to make it to my graduation, and I rushed home immediately afterward to be there with my family. We spent the final weeks of his life together in our house, and, of course, we didn't miss any of those Indians games. In one of his last days, my aunt told him he could call in a few favors once he got to heaven. She suggested that this might be the year the Indians finally win the World Series, and he excitedly responded, "I can ask for that?" Knowing Dad, he's already pulling strings with the Big Man to try to get the Tribe back to the playoffs this year. I sat with him and held his hand many times in his final days, cherishing the moments I had to be near him.

0 inches apart.

Dad passed away on June 4. The Indians won that day. He was a fan his entire life, through the ups and the downs, and he passed that on to all his kids. He never saw a World Series brought to Cleveland, but I think the Indians gave him some of his greatest happiness, and some of his greatest bonds with his kids. He was buried, of course, with a Tribe hat—always their biggest fan.

I want to say a heartfelt thank you to the Cleveland Indians. Thank you to the players and the organization that brought me closer to my dad than anything else.

Thank you for making the miles between us feel like inches.

Kristi Arth

# Glove

In the bottom panel of my abandoned gym bag,  
in some darkened corner, lies the tough and waiting leather.  
In the fold of my old glove is cradled a round and yellowed ball  
inducing the mud crusted glove to hold its shape—  
In that A. I haven't used it in years.  
In that B. It probably misses the bruise of the ball.  
In that C. It misses the feel of my left hand.  
In that D. I left it zipped up and lonely  
in the duress of a final loss.

In all these circumstances, I offer my defense.  
Intending to take it out and play catch in college,  
in finding that pitch and toss didn't match the old glory,  
instead I kept it dormant and forever forming the pocket  
in which lies its perfect, spherical partner.

In that I miss the slap of the ball, hardest on my forefinger,  
in the section where my glove has worn away  
in the midst of twenty-thousand plays and pop flies.  
Indeed, I was always best at defense.  
In that I was little and never hit home runs.  
In that my glove and I made catches concomitant with the  
intake of breath from the crowd.  
In that most saw me as  
innocuous until I slid that Wilson glove on,  
intimating the way to wield such an instrument was  
ingrained upon my left-hand muscles.

Insomuch that I have left it neglected, I pay it tribute  
in these lines where, I will, if I may,  
inculcate the complete importance of an athlete's tools.  
In that I may never step foot on another field.

In that this information is irrelevant, for my glove will remain  
inside that gym bag just  
in case I need to take it out and slide my fingers  
into the dank interstices,  
in between the webbing and  
incite my cracking, geriatric glove to its  
innate actions—the opening and the  
intense and unremitting closing.

Brent Newsom

# What Joe Morgan Meant When He Said Outfielders Are Poets in Motion

they wait:  
watch the pitches  
and wait:  
scratch the itches  
and wait:  
lean in keen-eared: listen  
for the bat's quick diction  
(clunk for a blooper,  
crack for a blister)  
to fracture the plastic-cupped,  
foamy-beered bluster  
of sun-soaked home crowd  
cheap seat jeers: break  
for the ball at sound's first sign:  
raise shaded eyes, read  
the red threads: trace  
the orb's arc, the flight's  
line: race across  
green checkerboard grass:  
squint through sun blaze,  
lose the ball's gaze  
in the blinding sky  
but let cleat-shod feet  
still glide: dead sprint  
till, from the corners  
of sight come warning track,

wall: then work by feel:  
leap light: keep hope  
the sphere will appear  
from the sheer  
white glint-  
bright glare:  
glove stretched  
to await  
its weight

Mark Stevick

# Pictures from a Baseball Nation

The Dominican Hero Journey

## 1. For a Different Life: The Shoeshine Boys of Santo Domingo

We are on the Calle de Conde in the old city of Santo Domingo. It's just after five in the morning. The streetlamps draw out the planes of tables stacked against a white stone wall. There's the sound of an automobile, a few streets over, with a hole in its exhaust. We look closer. The street seems to be white stone, too, and there are benches, and touches of wrought iron. The air is warm; the tables are uncluttered completely, draped with blue tarps. We are waiting. Air moves; the tarps move. The tarps move; and then one bulges and a dark figure slides from underneath. The yellow light picks at his eyes and his tank top. This is Joél, bony and very black, rubbing his face then looking our way. He's fourteen. He knows who we are, but he's just woken up, and while he's aligning his thoughts, the tarp kicks again and Reimond is out. He is rounder than the other boy, a little younger, and looks at us quickly, a low emotion rising to his eyebrows.

There are a few things to be done before the day sidles into the old city, before the boys can begin making their unremarkable rounds to the places where food can be had. But they pause, awkward. Then they talk to us. This is where they sleep, on cardboard, they tell us. They get up before the night is gone so the tourist police don't harass them again. They don't really have families. Joél, the bony one, had a family in Haiti, but he lost them during the big hurricane, Hurricane Georges. His eyes keep roving as he talks, and his hand touches his shoulders, his cheekbones. Reimond takes over, tells us his mother lives nearby, but she beats him, so he left. He is quiet. I would do anything for a different life, he says. Joél's eyes keep traveling, but Reimond looks at us.

These are the *limpiabotas*, the shoe cleaners, whose lives and hopes are so emblematic of Dominican paradoxes. In a glistening Spanish city with its savory foods, ubiquitous merengue and architectural splendors, in a country Christopher Columbus called paradise, the *limpiabotas* buff for pesos enough to buy maybe one meal a day. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of them in the city—and thousands of *ex-limpiabotas*, too, men who remember the tang of polish along their nails as they pause for a shine in the plaza. A shine they don't really need, but a shine their country needs.

The Dominican Republic is the poorest Latin country in the western hemisphere, and shining shoes is a *barrio* industry here. It's also a rite of passage, and every shoe shiner knows that even the Great One did his time with a box, brush and rag. Even Sammy Sosa was a *limpiabota*.

It's afternoon: the Caribbean sun is a lazy bully, bossing people into the shade. We're in the Plaza de Colón, where small boys frighten coveys of doves from the fountains. It is populous and peaceful. Beneath one of the monuments Joél watches Reimond work the shoes of a compact man in a short-sleeved, collared shirt. The man keeps checking his heavy Casio watch, and seems about to burst into flight like one of the doves. But the talk is friendly, punchy, and Joél, standing by, is smothering his grins. "What else do you do?" says the man. "Play baseball," says Reimond. "Baseball? You like it?" "Sí, I used to play all the time. I want to be David Ortiz." This is said like a joke, and the others laugh, but it feels true, too. The man says, "My name is Eduardo Nicasio. I run an academy at the Centro Olímpico. You know where that is?" Reimond nods, buffs, his rag snapping. Joél is holding onto his arms. "You could come over, play some ball." Reimond nods. He keeps working. This is good news.

## 2. El Play and El Taxi: Day and Night with Eduardo Nicasio

Eduardo Nicasio does run an academy at the Centro Olímpico, which everyone calls *el play*. Go anywhere in the Dominican Republic, village or city, ask the first *vieja* you see, "Where's *el play*?"—she'll always know. And in Santo Domingo, that's where you'll find Eduardo. Mornings he trains the little kids, afternoons the older boys, the ones scouts come to watch. Today it's morning, and there are 75 uniformed dynamos peppering baseballs around. They're everywhere, chopping balls and gloving grounders, drilling. Shouts, the ring of bats, throws stinging into the screen—it's a cacophony, a delirium of baseball. But it's also an ordered chaos; the boys take their turns and shuttle around proficiently. And in the middle of it all, like a sneakered general on a tiny battlefield, stands a lone man: Eduardo Nicasio.

Actually, he's not alone, and he's not standing still either; he's on the move, pointing and gesturing, exhorting. Boys crowd him constantly, trail him like gulls. He keeps patience. For us he shakes free, puts down his clipboard to lay out some numbers. "I work here eight hours a day, six days a week. Charge the kids \$3 a month to train. That's a good price, includes uniforms, renting the fields, everything." Enough to make a living? "Not really, not for me. I have five kids and a wife. So I drive a taxi, too, at night."

In the afternoon a scout from the Giants shows up and attracts the local scouts, the *buscones*. The Giants' man is crisply dressed, displays a studied languor, and the *buscones* play to him. The concrete

bleachers where he sits are active; there's merengue and fresh-squeezed orange juice in Styrofoam. People call out admonishments. On the field the pitches crack into the glove like hits. When Eduardo Nicasio comes over to chat with the scout, people stop watching the game. It is exciting: earlier this week a couple of Nicasio's boys got signed, for \$40,000—great money for a Dominican prospect. That's why everyone's here, and why the pitches crack like that.

We follow Eduardo home. It takes an hour. He eats a quick dinner, messes with his kids, checks in with his wife. At 7:00 we're back in his car—a taxi now—blasting through traffic. Over *bachata* he debates with his rides about *beisbol*, and tells us how he worries. “I can't just be making great baseball players. I did that I wouldn't be doing anything. I need to make great people.” He jams his horn and switches lanes again. “I mean, a 19-year-old kid could throw a 90 mile-an-hour fastball, if he hurts his shoulder he has nothing left unless he's learned more than baseball. That's why it's important to train good people as well as good pitchers.”

We leave him long before he finishes at 3:00 a.m., after seven hours in *el taxi*. He'll be at *el play* again by 9:00.

### **3. Bright Dirt Diamonds: Jorge's Tryout with Enrique Soto**

We're searching for Soto—Enrique Soto, trainer, entrepreneur, agent, ex-pro ballplayer. Famous in this place.

Here in Baní the walls of *el play* are a deep, deep blue, but again today the sun has sinister designs. Just across the street the building is a drained green; inside in a smoldering room seamstresses are cutting fabric into uniforms and pennants. Through a breach in the blue we duck with a 20-year-old shortstop named Jorge Tejada. He's here for a tryout after failing with the Arizona Diamondbacks, and this is probably his last shot. His sinews are pronounced; he keeps licking his lips and pounding his glove. Thrilling sounds come at us: someone is cracking hit after hit—each crack sampled from a highlight film. The field shows through the concrete grandstand; guarded rituals of training are under way. Jorge pauses and peers into the bright dirt diamond. Batting practice: pitcher and catcher, lines of fidgeting batsmen, everyone colorfully uniformed and efficient. Soto is not in sight. But he is clearly here.

Out near first base, after a nervous wait, Jorge meets Soto. He is the only man in the stadium who's not wearing color: he's in black and white. There's no time to consider what this means. Soto is impressive: he might be in his mid-40s with the forearms of a power hitter and the bearing of a CEO. You sense right away that he's always a couple drills ahead. Today's tryout is a kink in the routine, but



sometimes these things pay off. Soto greets Jorge with a brief handshake and a bit of talk. “Need to dress? Under the stands there’s a room. Stretch out, warm up, take some cuts.” Jorge nods and hustles off.

Soto’s enterprise in Baní is like many in this country: one man with connections in American baseball can cash in on his countrymen’s dreams. Baseball academies are conducted in all manner of vacant lots, dried riverbeds, construction sites—and in baseball fields, some financed by moneyed sources. The Dominican government sponsors some, and Major League Baseball runs its own network of camps here. Soto’s is arguably the best of the private camps; the stadium is regulation size and in good shape. More importantly, Soto knows American baseball and how to translate it to young Dominican players. Over the last decade he has mentored and promoted dozens of major league ballplayers from this dusty field. Until recently he was best known in the States for having developed Miguel Tejada. Now he’s also known for taking huge cuts from his prospects’ signing bonuses.

While Jorge stretches we chat with Soto. He admits he’s tough on his recruits, but he’s got to prepare them for the discipline expected in the American leagues. “In the U.S.,” he tells us, “the symbol is the eagle. Here it is the mother.” But when Jorge steps to the plate there’s not a maternal impulse in the stadium. More likely the regulars are thinking, *You had your shot, take a seat and quit holding me back*. And it’s like an eagle that Soto watches the first pitch. Jorge’s wrists are quick but he’s a little low; he lifts a fly to shallow center. Right now this kid is more alone than you could imagine, the target of a hundred eyes. The pitcher jerks again, and Jorge shifts a thousand hours of practice through his frame: the ball cries sweetly off the bat, speeds up and leaps the gorgeous blue wall of *el play*—gone, gone utterly.

#### **4. Getting Busy: Manny Mota and Los Campos de Sueños**

The dirt streets of El Tamarindo are dusty with walkers. El Tamarindo is a village that was blown here a not so long ago by Hurricane Georges. Tens of thousands on Hispaniola lost everything. Many ended up in this *barrio*.

We are dusty, too, with walking. Shacks crowd the road; we glance into doorways and people trot out to join us. At the end of the lane there appears a green cinderblock wall which the dirt road divides widely. This is El Campo de Sueños, The Field of Dreams. We pass through—to a sprawl of ball diamonds opening out toward distant fences, their backstops rising like totems. It is slightly surreal: so much groomed grass might just be dream fields. Our group is large now, mostly women with children, their clothing colorful, their smiles shy. We approach a swing set where kids clamber

noisily, then arrive at a grand pavilion. And here is what's going on today.

Hundreds have traveled the lanes to line up by this pavilion. Babies and toddlers are everywhere in arms, small girls sit on the low walls. There's good will in the air; it feels like a social event, a dance or a cock fight. Inside, beneath the high tin roof a table of chatty nurses receives a line of mothers with much note-taking and laughter and commiseration. Beyond them a great sussing of health is under way. Smart young doctors in white are listening to chests, peering into eyes, tapping and squeezing and prescribing. A shirtless boy leans forward and coughs energetically while his friends smirk; nearby a young woman sits, her hands mild in her lap, as a dentist plies the steely implements. Some soldiers in camouflage cheerfully wave in the next group of patients. Gradually the procedure becomes clear. This is one of the frequent medical service days held at El Campo de Sueños, when residents of nearby towns come for free health care. They bring their aches and pains, and receive expert treatment—and prescriptions that get filled just over at the next building.

While this is going on, down the slope at a small baseball field newly cut into the scrub, two teams of seven-year-olds are squaring off. Their blaring jerseys are tucked into their baggy trousers, and they shuttle on and off the field with gusto. A golf cart purrs up and a handsome gentleman with blazing teeth hops out and shouts some orders. It's Manny Mota, engine of all the activity in this place. A white bucket appears beside him, and he commences pitching underhand, a few feet from the plate. The helmeted batters swing lustily, and he corrects and commends them with sage humor. This Manny Mota is the holder of the major league record for career pinch hits, and a .306 lifetime batting average. The Campo is where he puts up newer numbers. For the last half-decade he's been building this complex. Hundreds of El Tamarindo villagers get their water from the wells he dug a few years back. It saves them hours of walking each day. Mornings he serves up 150 breakfasts, and some days lunches, too. And every day there's baseball—on five sprawling fields.

The sky piles its clouds far beyond the fences, and a big rain blasts down. Kids dash laughing under the pavilion roof, where operations are winding up. Drying off, Manny Mota talks about this place, his eyes on the kids. "My wife and I used to feed people in our home. One day she said, 'You know, we could make a life out of doing this.' So that's how we started. After the hurricane, when the government moved the people here, you know, I guess we got pretty busy."

Candice Kelsey

## Big Sexy

I'd like to pitch  
to Bartolo Colón  
for like ten minutes  
during batting practice  
me with my embarrassing aim  
him with his ill-fitting helmet  
a pair of outcasts  
in that zone  
of ball, bat, and glove  
smiling  
like it used to be  
in the suburbs of Ohio  
when I was a girl in the yard  
with my dad  
before dinner each night  
like it used to be  
in the bean fields of the Dominican  
when Bartolo was a boy  
rags for a baseball  
milk carton glove  
before his major league debut  
just two kids  
nothing even close to big or sexy  
just happy  
to have this simple poetry

Christine Vovakes

## To Richard, My Fifth Grade Hero

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We grew up in that small town, twenty of us  
romping through the early days of grammar school.  
Not the brightest pupil, you wreaked havoc  
with Sr. Anne's straight lines and strict rules.  
What the classroom confined the diamond freed;  
no one came close to you on the baseball field.  
Idolizing Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle  
you dreamed of matching their swing  
and making the majors. I believed you would.

I grew up, lost track of childhood friends,  
until my mother's visit brought startling news.  
Married and the father of three,  
you repaired air-conditioners,  
giant machines on top of corporate buildings.  
Tools in hand, you were wedged tight  
in a labyrinth tunnel when someone carelessly  
pumped in lethal gas instead of oxygen.

I can't imagine you trapped in that place,  
how you felt when the dark air closed in  
chaining your freewheeling boyhood dreams  
to a man's fate. Richard, I won't think  
of you caught that way. I remember  
you still, hero of my eleventh year,  
shagging flies in center field,  
or rounding third with a triumphant grin,  
kicking up dust and racing for home.

## Sit Still

This part of life should get to be longer. This day, on your eighth birthday, getting to go to your first professional baseball game with your father, is already streaking by with a tangent of minutes. Your father is letting you skip summer school today. As he starts the car, your father mentions something about both of you taking a little hiatus from home. This is your happiest experience so far in such a young life.

Maybe those past seven years, ones you can remember, were good to you—though there's no real objective image of what a *good* first seven years should be like, but you were more or less happy, so to speak. But so this last year, your eighth year, piled miracles on you: (1) Fear incited by your Babe Ruth lamp's fluorescent quivers, propped next to the bed, lessened. (2) Something your mother called, in soft mutterings not meant for you to hear, her *diagnosis*. (3) Living or having lived next to a busy residential intersection, an ambulance carried away—on a crowded street—a man who had crashed into a telephone pole, hanging waist out from his car. Taking care of oneself is a value, or so said your father. (4) Those drives to the hospital—with you in the front seat, next to your father, catching glimpses of your mother's head against the rear window through the immaterial and hazy distance of the passenger side mirror—were spiritual exercises in physical form and movement. (5) After the funeral, your father asked if you were going to be okay, and you asked him if *he* was going to be okay. You both said “yes,” but still you didn't understand honesty, because, like your father, you told no-one anything, separating yourself from experiences.

And words. New and difficult words creeped into your lexicon, never really knowing how they were used in everyday speech: *Malignant*. *Chemotherapy*. *Immediate Extension of Outflow Datum*. *Gamma Wave Inactivity*. Some words can kill you with their consistent echo, lodging themselves into your underdeveloped heart to pleat infinitely.

The stadium is, when it comes into view after the car divides away from traffic towards the green STADIUM EXIT sign, a static object against a system of movement. Cars twist and meander between municipal-orange traffic cones. Your father is several steps ahead, ignoring unauthorized street ven-

dors in the parking lot who are trying to sell him overpriced bottles of water, lugging their ice chests behind them. ROW Q-6. Your ballcap is too tight around your head. Birds pick up and discard dropped cigarettes and stale food. Shuttle buses pass and you wave at those who paid a little more for comfort. Look above. Clouds lose their color to match the sky, casting rolling shadows over the various and calculated foliage that leads away from the parking lot. Even the sun shifts the landscape behind waves that are only exclusive in this kind of summer heat. But only the stadium, as you move closer, swells to encompass the horizon. A kind of preoccupied singularity in a space surrounded by steel and pavement. The stadium's shadow glides to your waist. Gravity seems to get heavier with every step, and it outweighs the knowledge of knowing where you are. Every crack in the soft-red brick of the stadium is so much clearer than what you've seen on television. Everything is still moving.

For me, walking into the player's entrance masks all aspects of metropolitan nearness. Walking through the tunnel to the locker room, most players are slightly aware how each previous game fades so rapidly from memory, all of it so vivid each night we play but fades with each established rhythm of professional routine—every overhead lamp's bright and tense light concentrates the confines of remembrance. There are a dozen photographers and journalists in the press room waiting for some comments on the trade deadline. Each one barks questions as the coach steps out of his office. We don't make eye contact when he passes. Such tremendous pressure is on the front office to make some moves. You'll never see this aspect of the game.

Outside the stadium, you can only see the brightness the game has to offer. Everything around the stadium is enormously lighthearted as only a carnival or fair could do: eighteen-inch corndogs sold with lemonade, over-priced stuffed toys, every leg khakied, every waist fanny-packed, a child riding on a parent's shoulders. Your father rubs sunscreen on your face, the cold and oily cream a relief from the blistering and rosy-skinned heat. He places a heavy dollop of the cream under his nose and twists his face to make you laugh. He's trying to read your reaction. Living in that instant, you feel yourself above all others.

Now, from the twenty-five-dollar-a-spot parking lot with faded, white lines and glimmering cars, you're waiting within the serpentine line of ticket holders. There are others around your age—some older, some younger—standing in this same line, all surrounded by adult discourse and argument, a kinetic impulse of the spectators' spirit. And you grip your father's hand as you volley complaints about the achingly slow march into the stadium, all the while being restless, displaying almost infantile outbursts, never understanding there's a presiding metaphor for a dutiful and respected economy. "Stand still," he says, your father.

And it's the waiting that gives everything a flat regularity—where all time and all motion funnels

towards the gates. The ticket-taker, not caring, who doesn't pay any attention to all those passing him by, takes your ticket—which your father let you hold—with a slender and impeccable personal smoothness and rips it. As you move through the entranceway, the rhythms of the stadium grounds catch you on the entry: the clank and click of ticket gates, revolving. Other people nudge and brush past—the forking V towards either direction with every person moving with a well-mannered precision. Trash cans already overflowing. An elderly lady, with an overly cautious effort, tries to dip her pretzel in liquid yellow cheese and still drops all of it on the ground. Employees in neon yellow shirts with *STAFF* block-lettered on the back hand out promotional bobbleheads for the first fifteen-thousand lucky fans, which you were one. And although you wanted the bobblehead of David Gonzalez—your favorite player—you got me instead. Everything seemingly predetermined. Like a stage. Like a clock. Behind *It's A Hot Dawg!* there's the insectile hiss of toilets flushing with an industrial-grade strength. As you wait for your father to pass through the gates, you notice almost every head is ballcapped and every face streaked white with sunscreen, including your father's.

Since moving schools, friends have been hard to come by. At your age, friends are determined more by proximity than actual choosing. The newly built apartment building's tenants are professional looking and always nod to you in the hallways as they pass with a bustling and lonely resilience to wherever they sell their specialized services. Though there's a playground next to the pool, no kids—from what you've gathered—have ever played on it. But still there did spring something resembling hope when your father asked if you wanted to have a party with some of the local kids, but it's in the way he asked, a kind of irrelevance, a rigidity that hoped not to intrude, that made you say “No.” Somehow you knew he couldn't handle a party without seeing your mother bring out the cake. Did it start then? Did it start at that moment or was it earlier when he sectioned off his room in your original house and he slept on the floor? Did it start when he wore sunglasses at the funeral? What was the moment you understood your father's limits for the first time? All children reach that point sometime in their lives. And there, as you stared at him, was a collision of emotions and thoughts that wore across his face: a nature of the recent history involved with the embarrassing irrevocability of parental love. “Okay,” he said. It's impossible to look at what we love without failure.

And that is why, with your father's hand on your back, guiding you towards your seats, it is so important for you to show your father you are grateful. Wear a smile like how hot winds smother summer afternoons. Look up. Make sure he sees you smiling. You accidentally run into the ass of an elderly lady, though not the same lady who dropped the pretzel. Apologize. You are polite, or so says your father—you like the way he takes pride in your politeness. The tunnel leading you to your seats is crowded and dark, and you don't think he's seen you smile yet, but when you finally reach the end

of the tunnel, the air seems to open with an unmatched clarity you didn't know could exist. Birds scissor past. A lone paper airplane, thrown from the stands above, dives below and out of view. The buttery whiff of popcorn. Wind threatens to push you back into the tunnel. Listen. Only half-filled, the stadium still produces a never-ending roar as if it's waiting to come back in on itself. Scan across. The whole inner bowl of the stadium is in a constant, unnerving pulse—of people looking for their seats—like a deep and difficult swallow. All this movement excludes order. And the degree to which you are involved keeps you apart from the pageantry of being in a crowd. Look down. The concentric and obtusely angled rows and sections of stadium seating stretch to a narrow point where muralled, Krylon numbers give notice to where you are, where you're supposed to be. By the left-field wall, stadium maintenance inserts new bulbs for the sterile red lights of the pitch count. A carpet of green grass expands towards dead center and the ragged, steel edge of the city around you. All this, here, in the southwest corner of Dallas.

People turn their heads as you shout whoa and wow” with a genuine excitement. It surprises you how there's a real assurance of sanctity in sincerity. And now you're caught between the fissure of authentic and insincere facial expressions. You over correct. It's impossible for someone to actually be this excited. Tone it down. Just carry on this gentle smile until your face begins to hurt.

Take each step down the steep staircase carefully. Concentrate. The sun burns through the roars around you. Hold on tight to the railing. The metal railing is hot as you slide your hand down it. Each rail is smooth on the surface, perfectly angled, like each exists in its own time and runs parallel to establish a rhythm of steps in regard to body. You pass other people already in their seats. Some are taking pictures of the stadium. More are applying too much sunscreen to their children or taking sips from their over-sized souvenir cups. A young girl is resting her head against her mother's shoulder, already bored.

Your seat is on the first row of the balcony over the visitor's team dugout. As of right now, no one else is in your row, except your father. Push the foldable seat down. Feel the warmth of stadium seating plastic beneath you. The cement below your feet is grey like these last few clouds over the city. Your father sits next to you and comments on the view. Keep smiling. Tell him “Thank you.” He looks over and gives you a nod that he recognizes your appreciation, but you still notice the distance in his face that's been present for most of this past year. Climb up to the protective railing. Look over. The whole platform overhangs the seats below, and everything, from this angle, feels still and quiet. Wind thickens around your head—time, too. Above the balcony's slanting shadow, time doesn't pass at all. Every heartbeat is felt in your head as blood rushes towards it. The ballcap's pressure amplifies this feeling. Below. Rows of people produce a mass of activity and motion that constricts your chest. If



you wanted, you could watch what happens below you forever.

“Sit back,” says your father.

You ask again what time the game will start, and your father points to the corner of the scoreboard. Some of those section’s bulbs are out, making it look like the starting time is at 04:00. Your father asks if you want a soda, and you say “Yes, sir.” As he leaves for the concession stand, you watch the few players still warming up on the field. Playing catch. Running along the divide of outfield grass and the red dirt of the warning track. Seeing the players on the field seems limited at this distance. Perception, from here, diminishes the balletic and frenetic motion of what happens on the field. Every ball thrown or hit loses its bend through time and space, and you get to watch only the speed of the ball as if everything else is encased in glass and the ball is the only thing illuminated.

There’s some bickering about the blue alternate home jerseys we’re wearing today. We haven’t won a game in them all season. Down below the stands, under the home team dugout, there’s the spicy scent of cheap body deodorant and mentholated, pain-relieving rubs. Coach stands there, taking in each complaint, too preoccupied with other cares, waiting for us to end our gripes, and mumbles some words about not confusing black miracles with mental mistakes. Each of us believes the whole game boils down to sacrifice and superstitions. Like a Greek temple. Like a Catholic mass. But then, even deeper down—where we all know but don’t ever say it out loud—we’re wrong; we’re all just stunningly mediocre. The analysts say so. Our nine-game losing streak is definitely some sort of commentary. But we still put on our jerseys, which always have a surprising polyester weight to them—much different from the three-button athletic shirts your pee-wee team wears with *Rico’s Taco Palace’s HOT TAMALES* screen-printed on the front—and head towards the player’s tunnel.

The national anthem is a slight but traditional pause within the starting mechanism of the game, a kind of starting gun allowing the crowd’s reaction to focus away from individual interactions and coalesce to a point until the whole stadium joins in the same, well-intentioned but poor acapella. Hum along. Your ballcap is over your heart. Everyone with a ballcap is in the same pose as you. No one explained why this gesture is so important, what it signifies. And after the song finishes and after some local celebrity throws the ceremonial first pitch wildly high, we take the field to start the game. Jogging to left field always feels lonely to me, even though thirty-thousand people are circled around, watching. The odors of the stadium are lost on this level. For the crowd, the culture of the stadium is in the fragrances. For the player, the odors of the game are vague and fleeting, entirely abstract and disloyal.

Under my cleats, the grass is soft, matted. Under your feet, there are peanut shells from yesterday's crowd that weren't properly swept away. Starting lineups are announced by the garish boom of the announcer's voice. The crowd is always in a frenzy when the game first starts. Some are already faltering in their enthusiasm due to the heat. You don't mind the heat so much. Not here to come and to see, you want to be hooked in the innocent combination of spectacle and gritty enchantment that the game offers, and, as the umpire announces it's time to *play ball*, you climb up to the protective railing to watch. The game moves with a speed and precision you can't believe—more uniform and intentional than your peewee leagues. From this distance, the ball blurs from the pitcher's mound to home plate. Up here, you're not even sure the pitcher is throwing anything at all. The only way you know is the confirmatory pop of the catcher's glove.

First pitch of the game is a ball. Your father cups his hands around his mouth and boos, and you imitate him. You try to lean against the railing again, but your hands slightly slip. Your father grabs you, and says something concerning danger. You can tell he is both worried and angry. The only noise you can hear is the background noise of people talking.

You both fall back into your seats, and your father's posture is more or less the same as yours: slightly forward, elbows on the knees, but he is not resting his face in his hands like you currently are. His hands are out in front of him—causing a right angle of sorts—where both hands' thumbs and forefingers are touching, creating a diamond shape space between them. In this position, he switches from staring at the action happening on the field in an aloof, hazy way to looking down at the space between his hands with concern.

Without even having to look up, you can tell the sun's position in the sky just by where it's hottest on your skin. "It's hot," you say. This is a safe thing to say. All through this whole last black year, you've found a few stock phrases that would lead to cautious, low-risk conversations with your father. These were so obviously forced that you felt even more distance between the two of you than before the words took hold in the world, because these conversations didn't ease any kind of burden or erase any kind of grief: they simply reminded you two of what wasn't there anymore. Both of you feel as if you're withering in place, atrophy taking hold in the structure of familial complexity and comfort. Your father responds with a John Wayne impression, and you laugh, even though I know you don't know who John Wayne is, and you feel there's a particular response required of you, but you're not sure what.

Everyone watches as Kastl bounces two more in the dirt, and on the next pitch as Dixson, too eager, flies out to center. Washington hits a chopper to third, easy out. Kenn is rung up on three pitches to end the top half of the first on a strikeout. A backwards "K" is shown on the scoreboard—one of the

lights struggles to come on, stunting the bottom leg of the letter—and the crowd leaps into noise and joy as the catcher’s mitt pops, but they just as quickly fall back into a dense murmur.

Not bringing your glove with you blemishes the day. Every prospect of taking home a foul ball, those rare and sought after souvenirs, diminishes every time you feel the wind across your ungloved hand. Turning towards your father, you ask him if he’ll catch the ball if it comes near you. Though hot dog vendors are everywhere, your father is too busy trying to get the attention of one to hear you. There’s some awkward apologizing as your father steps into another person’s footpath. You, reluctantly, let the subject go. Television has ruined your sense of the game. You don’t believe foul balls could ever reach this high, anyway. One-hundred-nineteen baseballs are used on average per game. This is a statistic you don’t know. It’s unlikely one will reach up here, you think. Signs are posted every fifteen feet along the rail concerning the dangers of flying objects, but these only obstruct the view. Many foul balls end up amongst the crowd but are rarely shown going into the stands. For most of the time, the gaze of the camera isn’t interested in happenings outside the lines of the game.

During the middle of the second inning, the mascots take the field to race around the bases. “Your mother’s favorite part of the game were the mascots,” says your father. This is also something you didn’t know. You get the urge to bring out the photo of your mother you keep within your plastic, Velcro wallet, but you notice a beginning arc of a smile on your father’s face as the mascots start running the bases, and the rarity of seeing your father smile makes your heart droop like a dying toy. Your father reminds you of something evaporating. Like steam. Like something elusively simmering and vaporous.

Time feels compressed during the first three innings of any game, folds every action and reaction up, and when you think the game will simply blink by, time unfolds and it feels as if these middle innings have taken weeks—every game folding and unfolding like a hospital bed.

Now, in the bottom of the fifth, when David comes up for his second plate appearance—with one double already roped to left-center—there’s talk in the dugout about the trade deadline coming up. None of this matters to you. All you can remember is the double David legged out in the first inning, a body-memory that can still feel where your father’s hand was while you both jumped up and down while everyone watched and cheered in the stadium as David and ball reached second base at the same time. David slid in head-first. Kenn got the ball and slapped it down for the tag. The umpire waited a second, letting the crowd create its own drama, and swung both arms out to his side. Safe. Now, the other team is trying to pitch around David, but when the ball is hit, the pressure of bat on

ball spills out over into the stadium, sounding as if the atmosphere ripped open, finally giving way. And as the ball dive-bombs over the fence, the thundering judgement of the umpire transcends the rising noise of the stadium every time.

This is where you want to tell your father, “I love you.” The need to say this makes your legs shake involuntarily: a soft flutter that strangles your stomach and spine. Notice that you now have cotton mouth. Notice your palms are slightly clammy and feel muculent. This is what is meant by “sick with happiness” or maybe it’s the cost of being aware that this is “as good as it gets” or maybe this is the commentary to which you submit for a moment of affirmation—a moment of quiet magnificence in a lonely and wrung out year. At this point, everything is suspended: time, the celebratory firework caught in the still moment before it blasts into color, the homerun sign popping on, nothing is wanted but to let your father hear the hysterical and impulsive phrase that’s endured absence this last year. But you don’t say anything. Too embarrassed to be exposed, too aware of the embarrassment of clichés—the form of played-out emotion in yourself and others—and it’s not the fear of him not saying those words back to you that prevents any utterance, but fear that the response won’t be felt as deeply as you would want it to be.

You are conscious, mostly, of your inadequacies as a child within a family experienced with loss, the dread of not knowing if what you say will make it worse or not, the lie of trying not to be scared, because you are a child. Plain and simple. Or not. It’s complicated. Even at this age, the awareness of raw and vulnerable interactions isn’t lost on you. Just enjoy his hand on your shoulder, tightening more and more as David rounds the bases. Like a handshake. Like a vice. You feel there is no need to complicate this moment. When you would ask how long your mother’s treatment was at the hospital, your father would tell you that there’s a virtue in waiting. And this is your fatal mindset: you would rather wait. Neither of you understand how the two of you could have saved each other.

Look up. We’re winning.

But the other team’s momentum can be felt, each pitch thrown from their pitcher has spark and heart, and the infielders jump in place, anticipating whatever will come their way. By the start of the eighth inning, we are losing; it’s not even close. A person can’t help but feel helpless when they’re rooting and playing for the wrong team. And now, behind you, the sun is leaning on the rim of the stadium like a child’s head on a mother’s shoulder. This is a time in the game when the theatrical suspense present or lack thereof reminds you of the inevitability of the game ending. The stadium is slowly emptying out—strokes of color against the blooming grey palette of the stadium. Concession stands have closed their gates. Vendors call out for last chance treats.

And you turn and mention to your father that you could leave if he was ready.

“We have to see it through ‘til the end,” he says. “Plus, I need you to look at the scoreboard.”

There it is in big, mustard-yellow incandescence, the words *HAPPY BIRTHDAY* plus your name right below it. The whole scoreboard announcing it’s your special day against the city’s expiring day. And here is where there is laughter and surprise and you hugging your father and people around telling you “happy birthday.” You are going to tell your father that you love him, but first he wants to take your picture. You’re holding the bobblehead that looks like me.

Somewhere, mixed in with it all, I meant to get to the fact that this late summer baseball game, like all late summer baseball games for teams in last place, doesn’t matter—at least from the perspective of the player. While you stand in front of your father with no attention paid to the rest of the stadium, unintentionally spilling your perspiring Pepsi cup that rests on the ground, you’ll never know how the game rewards the whole picture and not the accumulation of small details. For me, this game is already lost, I’ve already stopped looking for a way around it. We’ll always sacrifice the quality of today for the quantity of tomorrows. This should be the moment where I discuss the arc of fate or how lives cross. Do you have any idea the number of people who sat in that same seat? I won’t go into it. For a little boy trying to have a nice day with his father, today’s game probably meant everything: win or lose. That’s something I’ll have to keep in mind. Forever.

But now I have to get to the part where you and your father aren’t paying attention, him trying to take your picture with the scoreboard in the background, and I am up to bat and anticipate something hard, something fast. My bat speed is not where it was when the season started—fatigue, the dispassionate and waning confidence of being in a slump, but I’m fooled and overanxious and I swing a split-second too early at a slider spinning lyrically in the air, and the trajectory of the ball slices and curves and bends the air around it toward you.

And when it arrives, there’s the deadened thud and the collective gasp and then your father cradling your head like a newborn. He is calling for help. No one does anything but stare. The words you hear are formless and dull, not one echoes within your heart. Look at you. This is the tangible pain of hard violence. This is the end of waiting. Soon your face is warm in a strange, vague way like how your mother’s shoulder used to feel. Let go. You feel a small vibration at the small of your back, trying to hold you in place. Sit still. Let the vibration run its course until it stops. Even an un-strummed chord has the potential for sounding beautiful.

There’s now a floating away to a place where you are overhead and the stadium looks like an open mouth gasping for air, a place where the two circumscribed notions of loss and loneliness don’t matter anymore, where you can ask whatever you want to ask and say whatever it is you need to say

without having to assert or pretend that your silence is somehow a strength, where you can just let go and be exposed, where you are a child surrounded once again by something deep and warm you don't quite understand.

And while all the stadium watches, there's the long delay, the interruption in time as a few people clasp their mouths to prevent any sound coming from their deep reaches, the bundled link of awe and morbid reality. Everywhere a soliloquy of ceaseless movement, interrupted only by the announcer's still active mic.

"Holy shit," says the announcer.

Stadium personnel are scrambling to remove the replay on the scoreboard. Your afterimage, cycling through the infinite loop of your eventual end, moves its video through me again and again. Reliving every brash impatience to play ball, futureless in stride, tomorrow that seat may be filled with someone new, someone who never noticed the blue dense clouds above the city around them. Somehow we'll get on with the game.

Midge Goldberg

## The Faithful

You'd think they're Jesuits, the way  
they cross themselves at every turn.  
I wonder what it is they pray  
about: to get a hit, to earn  
a run, to knock one past the fence?  
But I'm off base. They exercise  
their faith—they know, those supplicants,  
you don't trade prayers for RBI's.

That's more than me. Battered, I'd try  
that hurried gesture as a call  
to be delivered, slow and high,  
a pitch to send out toward the wall.  
I'd ask for that one RBI  
and wonder at its rise and fall.

Julie Whitehead

## Terms of the Trade

Ten pounds of catfish, a player to be named later, and a fistful of cash,  
Traded from the Pacific Suns to the Greenville Bluesmen,  
From sunny California to the heat of Mississippi,  
“Mad” wasn’t the right word to describe Krahenbhul’s mood.  
The word didn’t exist yet.  
But he was working on recombining all the profanity he knew into one that would be appropriate.  
But he had a game to play that afternoon against the Dillos.  
So he went and pitched.  
Right-hander.  
Switch-hitter.  
Tommy John surgery at 18.  
Close enough to the Chicago Cubs training camp for a whiff of the Show  
Asked for the trade from the Suns for another chance, another place to play.  
The story, by the way, is true.  
You won’t believe me, though, because of what he did that night.  
A perfect game.  
No runs.  
No hits.  
No men on base.  
He stuck it to the Suns, all right.  
The Bluesmen couldn’t believe it.  
Nobody could believe it.  
Not the papers who called.  
Not the Suns.  
Not anybody who heard that story back in 1998.  
You still don’t believe me.  
That’s okay.  
You can look it up.



Matt Pasca

# The Strawman & Doctor K

1.  
1986 was better than '85 or '7.  
A machine washed Dad's kidneys.  
The Mets took 1<sup>st</sup> place. He felt better.

Maybe he'd get a transplant. Maybe he'd stop  
smoking and yelling and tending his vile  
disrepair. Maybe he'd be a dad.

Those Mets had young phenoms Darryl and Doc,  
vets like Keith and The Kid. Baseball is  
cold come New York autumn but

this-won't-happen-again urgency  
dropped us in Game 2 upper deck nosebleeds  
vs. the Sox. To a 12-year-old boy,

Flushing was Nazareth when Jesus rode in  
from the desert, Mecca when Muhammad limped  
from his cave, Sinai when Moses finally wandered

down from the mountain, hair aflame.  
Darryl was John the Baptist, Doc a messiah  
of oak tag and red marker—K's like prayer

flags pinned to Himalayan stadium facades  
Darryl's drives had dented. That October night,  
two feet from the moon, I soared

through searing Queens air, past the RC  
Cola sign, Manufacturers Hanover scoreboard,  
over the Whitestone Bridge, city skyline and

jets—all engine and blinking red hearts—  
rising from LaGuardia runways. My late  
night bladder said pee but I stuck to my

hard red seat, watched Roger the Rocket  
take the mound, ant-sized cobra hissing  
at salt and shutting us down, down there

on the manicured grass. His venom smacked  
dust from the catcher's mitt, stung us good.  
My bed filled with mustard that night.

2.

October 26<sup>th</sup>. Rain knocked the final  
leaves to our wild lawn, rusted porch  
rails. My father sighed. Down 3 games to 2  
and 2 runs in the 10<sup>th</sup>, he drooled

into his beard, wiped snot on the chair.  
My mother soaped dishes, brother stomped,  
dad's blood swirling in space through plastic  
tubes. *Guess it wasn't meant to be*, he said.

Boston's first championship in 68 years.  
One more out. My frame was breaking—I'd  
thought Straw's moonshots and Doc's 12 to 6  
Uncle Charlies would deliver us from the Cold

War, Reagan's trickle-down, just-say-no,  
round-em-up-by-color fascism, my mother  
from martyrdom, brother from violence, father  
from certain death. Darryl and Doc—twin saviors

over my blue bed, icons in a house where shame  
gathered in pews. I had spent the summer  
on my knees, rocking in tongues of what-could-be.  
Then Gary Carter singled. Kevin Mitchell

singled. Mom said *Take out the garbage.*  
I left in underwear and a t-shirt, ran to  
return. Ray Knight singled. Down by one.  
Bob Stanley's eighth pitch bounced

to the backstop. Tie game. Mookie's slow  
grounder rolled, then, somehow, under Buckner's glove—  
Bill Buckner—ankles rife with arthritis, who'd  
be tied to this miscue like Hoover to the Depression,

Seward to Alaska's sale. Knight scored.  
Dad raised his gaunt arms, needles wobbling  
from his flesh. The champagne chilling  
in Boston's clubhouse was rushed away,

the MVP changed, *Saturday Night Live*  
canceled for the very first time. Game 7  
the Mets won, too, and the hospital called  
about a transplant. It was all Darryl and Doc.

3.

1988—an even better Mets team succumbed  
to Orel Hershiser in the playoffs. In '89

my father died, and the Strawman and Dr. K  
stood in orange jumpsuits and handcuffs, regaled

with jail time and epithets unhurled at teammates  
who'd snorted more coke and made more mistakes

but weren't black or from Tampa and Compton.  
I packed away my altars and cleats, until '96,

when Darryl and Doc phoenixed in Yankee pin-  
stripes, crushing three bombs in a game and no-

hitting Seattle, their glory made the greater  
for having hit bottom—worse, somehow,

in America, than dying young like Jimi  
or Kurt, Janis or my dad. My two heroes

would fall again, and again, crucified on crosses  
America builds for imperfect black men.

*What could have been* critics wondered.  
*What could I have done*, I wondered,

for these two men I'd loved at least  
as much as my father. Years later,

Darryl visited my school, spoke his humble  
truth and Doc chatted affably with me and

my wife on an airport queue one night.  
They were so tall and kind: two prophets

of holy comeback, autographing  
each breath with redemption.

Dan Murphy

## Singles

Eating aspirin with coffee and grapefruit  
Father turns the front-page Metro section  
like a coverlet on a wedding bed. Do not disturb  
him, we all know. Mother forking strips of bacon  
from the skillet, laying their wrinkled bodies  
on a paper towel. The bubbles' silent popping.  
Mother not speaking saying shush.  
I'm sprawled in the shag with the Sports section. It's early  
summer. The AC is broken, the curtains are closed,  
and we hope it stays under 100 today. Don Sutton  
won another game, 7-0 so far, but it's early  
and they don't have much hitting. *Like a bar*  
says Dad, *a bunch of singles standing around*  
*never getting in.* Mother's eyes: *Tsk.*

Frank Morelli

## These Are the Times

These are the times that make men. The times that summon the gnashing of teeth and the biting of tongues and the clenching of fists. The times that simmer in stomachs and decimate antacid supplies on a global scale.

This is the bottom of the ninth. With the bases loaded, one out, and the pitcher's spot due up. There's nothing but goose eggs on the scoreboard. Not a single ass touches a single seat in any single section of the stadium.

These are the times, my friends. The times that separate the nimble from the nameless rabble of ticket-buying peasants.

"Get me Crumpet," he says. Old Tip McGrue. Never managed a team besides the Homesteaders in a fifty year career, and never lost an argument either. When it comes to anything from a blown call to a bag of sunflower seeds, he doesn't linger on the figurative.

"You mean Wally Crumpet?" Young Charlie Gillis, McGrue's intern of a bench coach, whose opinions are like mosquitoes in that they're annoying and McGrue is known to swat at them.

"Yes, Wally Crumpet. You know another one?"

"No. But do you think Crumpet's the man for this spot? I mean, he kind of overthinks things."

"What are you talking about? Who cares about thinking? The kid can hit."

"Then why do you make him sit every game?"

"Because he's a pain in the ass. Now go get him."

Gillis scribbles a few notes on his scorecard. "Crumpet!" At the far end of the bench, all the way down by the water cooler and the tobacco puddles, a lanky hayseed with a tangle of sweat-soaked, blonde hair springs to life. His spikes scuttle across the cement steps until he stands at attention in front of Gillis.

"Yes, sir?"

"Grab a bat. You're up." Crumpet's whole face goes flush. He stands motionless with his shoulders slumped forward. "You alright, kid?" Crumpet nods and lumbers over to the rack to grab a stick. He stuffs the curly mop inside a batting helmet and begins his ascent up the dugout steps. The stadium

erupts the moment he steps on the turf. But then he feels a hand on his shoulder. He stops. Turns around. McGrue stares at him with the eyes of a bloodhound.

“You know what we want up there?” McGrue asks.

Crumpet stares down at his bat. A crease forms between his eyebrows. “Not really...I guess...hit the ball?”

McGrue takes a deep breath. “No, Crumpet. I don’t want you to hit the ball.”

“So, go up there and swing and miss? Got it.” Crumpet turns and heads for the plate. McGrue grabs him by the shoulder.

“No, Crumpet. I don’t want you to swing and miss, you moron.”

“So just stand there?”

McGrue rips the ball cap off his head and grabs a fistful of gray hair. He takes another deep breath. “Listen close, Crumpet. I want you to go up there and bunt. The suicide is on.”

Crumpet’s face goes limp. He looks down at the ground and kicks a clump of orange dirt through the grass. “Look, Coach. I care about this team and all...but suicide? Don’t you think we’re taking this too far?”

McGrue slaps Crumpet across the face with his hat. “You idiot! I mean the squeeze play. We’re pulling the squeeze play.”

“Look, you gotta be more clear. Are we pulling or squeezing, Coach?”

“Just get up there!”

“And you still want me to swing and miss? And then squeeze, push, and pull? Do I have that right?”

The home plate umpire approaches, a squat mound of a man that one might mistake for a potbelly stove. “Look, I’m gonna need a batter,” he says, and McGrue grunts something under his breath and nods.

“Crumpet, if you don’t go up there and bunt the ball, they’re gonna have to take you outta here on a stretcher. Mark my words, son.”

“So now you want me to stretch, too? Sir, I don’t know how you expect me to stretch, squeeze, push, pull, swing, and miss all in one at-bat. Would it be too much trouble to ask for a clearer explanation so I could—”

“I’ll give you an explanation!” McGrue lifts a portly leg and kicks Crumpet right in the ass, and the pinch hitter wobbles in the direction of home plate. “Just bunt the Goddam ball, Crumpet! Bunt it, you sonuvabitch! The squeeze is on!!! The squeeze is *on!* You got that?!”

If Crumpet did not get the message, at least McGrue could rest easy knowing the opposing manager, their catcher, pitcher, entire starting lineup, half of their bench players, and at least the first



twenty rows of spectators behind the backstop had all received it.

Then good, old Wally Crumpet digs his spikes into the batter's box. He glances down at the Home-steader runner bouncing off of third base. He locks eyes with the stubble-faced pitcher.

And then the windup.

And the pitch.

And, just as McGrue had so artfully explained, Crumpet pivots his feet. He holds the bat out in front of the plate and hides one hand behind the barrel. He feels the ground rumble under him as a teammate gallops down the baseline. He follows the spinning red twine as it circles closer and closer and closer.

Then he stretches and squeezes and pushes and pulls. He reaches far across the plate for the ball. He reaches and he reaches and he reaches.

But it all amounts to one thing: a swing and a miss.

A pitch out.

Disaster.

The runner breaks stride in front of the catcher like a lame horse. The mitt taps against his chest and the potbelly stove of an umpire shouts, "You're out!!" Then thousands and thousands of ticket-buying peasants go silent all at once and place their asses in seats in every single section of the stadium.

These are the times that try men's souls. The times that devour. Digest. The times that make men mute to reason and deaf to logic. The times that challenge all there is and all we think we know. These are the times that castigate the nimble and multiply the peasantry.

This is the time to take the bat off your shoulder.

Meghan Harrison

# After the Boys of Summer Were Gone

*“There’s a whole lot of baseball players on the field in this series.”*

*—Buck Martinez, Toronto Blue Jays play-by-play announcer, Aug. 3, 2015*

No one thought they’d miss the half-summer without baseball players except the wall-eyed suits in the 100 level who got to punch other men on television for the first time, loafers sticky with spilled children’s drinks. But admittedly the catalog of ineptitudes was intoxicating, and until the smoke detector went off, there was something beautiful in the way a season’s worth of trashed projections curled as they burned.

The intercounty juicers were quickly disqualified, retreating to greater acclaim in the ballparks of their bedroom communities and free haircuts. Carnies recruited on either side of their traveling exhibitions contagiously blackened themselves with pine tar, whooping down the tunnel upon their ejections. Tourists plucked from the hotel rooms whose windows crowned the outfield in a dull tiara of 1980s opportunism staggered antler-weighted under the lights hours later. Women signed baseballs with obscenities and threw them at their hecklers, which the bullpen cop didn’t take seriously until one broke a man’s nose, shards of his sunglasses now black fins floating in two beers. Cities memorizing the infield fly rule as choirs, in a round, while batters spun and stumbled to their knees like novice ballroom dancers whose partners released their hands too early or too late. Every position player a pitcher, every pitcher

a bowels-churning Buddha learning the elasticity of time and tendons. Outfield routes like the whole body speaking in tongues. The seagulls became critically emboldened in the emptying stands, a fifth of the vendors granted compassionate leave.

Before what would have been the All-Star break, they found the baseball players—some snow-bound in Boston all year after a performance-enhancing necklace convention, others delirious renaming lakes in Manitoba or shooting rap videos in public libraries with cellphone cameras. At first, many only had the muscle memory of their old lives, but by August, they were all there along the baselines:

the fat catchers who hit for average, the twitching base-stealers, the high hard asses of the home run princes, the long-legged center fielders, the goddamn good-faced Americans, the experimentally goateed relievers.

And it could have been the just-perceptible dilution of the late summer light on the condos as construction paused, or the professional gleam of the anthem singer's teeth, but all at once it seemed unconvincing as the turf. Hideously overgrown, the baseball players took the field and went around the horn, belted trousers full of an exceptionalism we'd forgotten how to venerate in those months when a car door closing in any parking garage became the underwater echo of a bat on a ball. The most falsely modest of us imagining kissing a corner with a slider down and away while sprawled naked in bed, not moving, but experiencing the pure temporal velocity of total self-belief. "At least the high 70s, right?" you say, and the person or space next to you doesn't answer. The announcer letting everyone at home just hear the crowd.