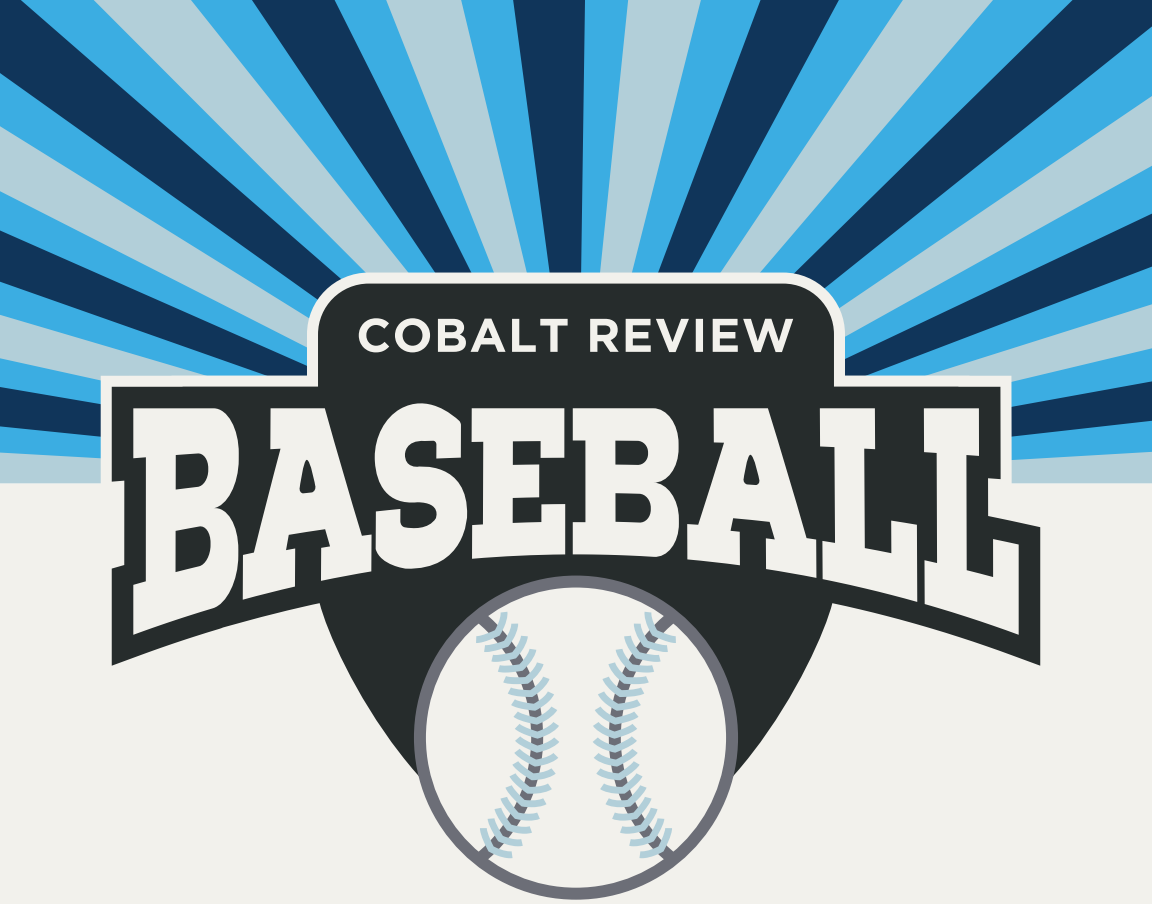

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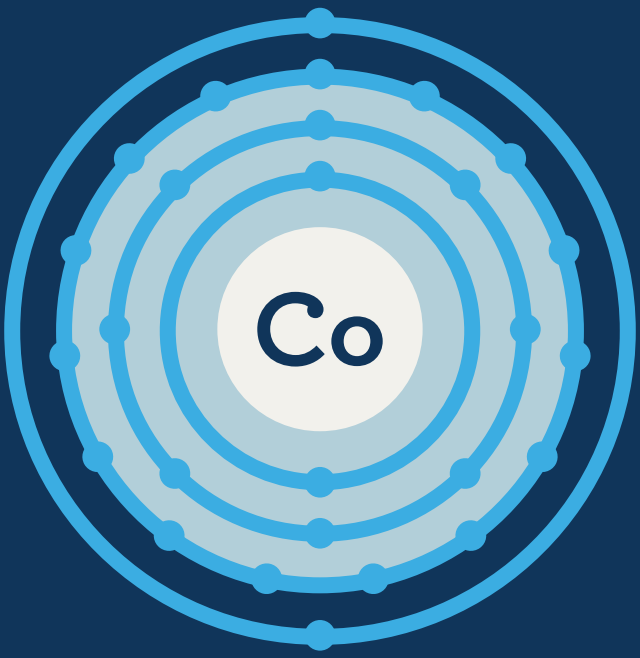

2019 Baseball Issue

COBALT

2019 Baseball Issue

Contents

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2019 Earl Weaver Prize

Each of the authors included in this issue was selected as a semifinalist for the sixth annual Earl Weaver Baseball Writing Prize (our seventh baseball prize, overall). This year's winner is Magda Montiel Davis, for "Ashes Over Havana." Finalists, in no particular order, are listed below.

Jacob Boyd, "A TD Ameritrade Call to the Pen"
Cece Peri, "Trouble Down the Road"
William Snyder, three poems

Congratulations to Magda, our finalists and semifinalists, and thank you to all who have submitted to this baseball issue and supported the Cobalt writing prizes since 2011.

Submissions for the 2020 Earl Weaver Prize will open in February.

Sincerely,

Andrew Keating
Chief Baseball Officer

Magda Montiel Davis

Ashes Over Havana

The author's father, José Ramón "Bebo" Montiel (second from left) with Camilo Cienfuegos, a hero of the Cuban Revolution, at the famous exhibition game of July 24, 1959, between the Havana Sugar Kings and the Rochester Red Wings in which Fidel pitched two innings and, it is said, got two strikeouts.

My father is flying to Havana with me.

This is not my father's first Miami-to-Havana flight. There were many before, in the fifties, when he and my mother would leave my sister and me in the loving care of my grandparents and return to the island bearing gifts: a Sears tabletop record player that folded like a suitcase and played "Take Me Out To The Ballgame," Thumbelina dolls with that happy, vinyl, new-doll smell, and other American things. But that was before 1959, when Fidel and his army of long-haired men and long-rifled women marched down the Sierra Maestra Mountains to the cheers of crowds at El Malecón, Havana's pulsing seawall. The triumph of the Revolution, of free education, health care and social justice for all. Color-blindness. Two years later, I followed my parents out of the homeland. I was eight. I had no choice. My father is flying to Havana with me one more time, fifty years after our emigration, and fifteen years after the last time he set eyes on his country. But this trip is different. My father is inside my carry-on. I am carrying my father's ashes back to Havana.

My father's body had lain in the hospital morgue for ten days because his third wife, to whom he had remained married for thirty-seven years, had insisted on a Catholic burial, which is what she claimed he wanted even though she is a Jew-ban, as Cuban Jews like to call themselves in the United States. A Catholic funeral is what she said he wanted even though she had hardly seen him during the last two years of his life. And she refused to pay for either the burial or the cemetery plot in Miami's Little Havana.

I had buried my mom seven years before and I knew I could not bury another parent—the morbidity of it, the closing of the coffin, the sliding of the corpse into a row of drawers, a wall of the dead. Besides, after two years of taking care of my father, I was broke. Broke and beaten. I could do a lot of things, just not bury my father. This much I knew.

The empathetic social worker at Mercy Hospital, who had shared with me her grief at losing her own father, began leaving me daily voice-mails on the fourth day following my father's death: We really need your father's body out of the hospital morgue. By the seventh day: We have no space for the others. Where would you like us to put the other dead bodies? On top of your father? By the ninth day: Remove your father's corpse from the hospital morgue, or else. The county morgue and a pauper's grave. After ten days, my father's third wife, who had denied him the right to live out his final years in the marital home and had vehemently fought his living with me, signed papers turning over the body to me.

I asked my sister to pick up my father's ashes at the funeral home, ten minutes from her house and an hour from mine. At least that. My father's remains remained at the funeral home longer than his body had remained at the hospital morgue. My sister will pick up the ashes, I reassured the funeral director each time he called. Busy, my sister would say, just as she had every time I asked her if she could she fill in for me for a few hours, with Dad. Once, I had to catch an early-morning flight with my daughter for her semester of study in Lyon; just a three- day trip to get her settled. My father was due to be released from the hospital after another bout of MRSA pneumonia, but no, my sister could not fill in for me, she could not be there the morning of his discharge to talk to his urologist and pulmonologist and infectious-disease specialist and physical and occupational therapist and take careful notes of the nurses' discharge instructions regarding his Albuterol and Plavix and Prednisone and Lorazepam. My sister was busy, working, running her day spa. I am alone, she would say, with no help from anyone. Her high school-

sweetheart-turned-husband had left her after twenty-five years. That was seven years ago, I reminded her, and did you forget that I was alone too, for eight years? I had left Paul, my high-school-sweetheart-turned-husband, a few short years into the marriage when my youngest was thirteen months old. I was alone for eight years, supporting our mother, our grandmother (my father's stepmother) and my three girls with no help from anyone, not even—especially not—from Dad. This last part I wouldn't actually say, but I thought it. Dad with his-and-hers Mercedes, *tin marin de dos pingüey*, one Mercedes for him, one Mercedes for his wife. But could you visit, I asked my sister? He was asking for her. He was more than asking for her. He was saying *Tu hermana no se ocupa de mí*. Your sister does not look out for me. This, I wouldn't tell her. She has problems at work, I'd tell my father. The economy, Dad, you know. The Republicans, they left a mess.

I wouldn't tell him I had stopped practicing law after thirty-three years of fighting for foreign nationals fleeing persecution to be granted asylum. Work had already taken precedence over everything else—over my five children; three with Paul, two with my second husband, Ira. I could not continue to manage my law practice and take care of my father, so I made a choice.

When I told my sister *this*, she was silent. Then she said, He wasn't much of a father. Or a grandfather, either. So what? I said. He was our father. When I complained to my husband about her, he said quietly, Your father made choices in life. I said, not quietly, And what? He made his bed, now lie in it? And let Bertha—the wife of thirty-seven years—drop him on the doorstep of some nursing home? The Jewish Home for the Aged?

My father was a proud man. He was especially proud that in *el exilio*, he had worked his way up from errand-runner at the Jacksonville Suns Baseball Stadium in upstate Florida to Senior Vice-President of a major bank in Miami. With insider information regarding homes that families lost through foreclosure, he bought properties dirt-cheap and resold them at top dollar.

He also left my mother after a tumor in her pituitary gland made her face, hands, her entire self grow to monstrous proportions. Along with my mother, he left my sister and me. Soon thereafter, we learned of the existence, of a second wife—via a legal publication. That marriage short-lived; my sister and I never met her. But Bertha was different—she pulled him toward her children and grandchildren and away from my sister and me and his grandchildren and he let her. And then he lost his fortune and tried to put a bullet to his brain.

For hours, I waited outside his room at St. Francis Hospital's mental ward until he was finished with his shock treatments. Or rather, they finished with him. *Papín*, I would say, what I called him back in Havana. *Papín*, he would say and shake his head, Your *Papín* is no more. And I would feel the physical sensation of my heart cracking in two. Then he was discharged and he and Bertha went back to driving the streets of Miami Beach in his-and-hers Mercedes.

Both in Cuba and in the U.S., my father's heart was in what he loved most—baseball. So it seemed appropriate that we should spread his ashes at the baseball field in Miami. I told my sister, Bring Dad's ashes when you come to Max's—my fifth grandson's—first birthday party and we'll spread them at the Bobby Maduro Stadium. By then, my father had been riding in the back seat of my sister's Mercedes for over a month. He liked riding in the Mercedes, she said, and where have you been? The Bobby Maduro Stadium was demol-

ished years ago. Bobby Maduro had been my father's boss at El Gran Estadio—the *Great* Stadium—de La Habana, the home of the Havana Sugar Kings.

The new stadium is all the way up in Miami Gardens, *en casa del carajo*—in the middle of nowhere—my sister said, and it's not even finished yet. Then we'll spread his ashes on the construction site, I told her. And if they don't let us in? she said. Then we'll rent a helicopter, for chrissakes, and let him sail on down. Again, she said, He wasn't much of a father, you know.

Again, I said, So what? He was our father. This time, she added, *¡Ay!* And I could see her throw her hands in the air. That's what you say about Cuba: *It's my country*. Here she mimicked what she presumed she heard in my voice every time we got on the subject of Cuba. My sister didn't come to Max's first-birthday party.

The last time I visited Havana with my father, fifteen years earlier, we stayed at Hotel Naciónal, an historical landmark that sits atop a small cliff facing El Malecón with its crashing ten-foot waves. Built by the Americans in the thirties, the hotel is emblematic of *Cubanidad*. Glossy black-and-white photos of Fidel and Hemingway, Mafia kingpins and movie starlets from the forties adorn its Hall of Memories in the basement. It was my father's first and only trip after Fidel. We took pictures on the breezy garden terrace: rolling hills of translucent green and curlicued walkways and Moorish-tiled fountains overlooking the Malecón blue. We sat on the edge of the small cliff, our feet up, freshly squeezed mango juice in hand as El Cañonazo de las Nueve, the centuries-old cannon that at 9 p.m. is fired to commemorate the closing of the city walls—nothing barring it, not Cuba's War of Independence, nor *coup d'etats*, nor revolution.

Some things never change, I said as my father looked at the pretty girls on the seawall below us. Now I can die happy, he said. When we returned to Miami, he called. Bertha was gone. It wasn't just that he had traveled to Cuba, viewed by many of my Cuban-American compatriots as a betrayal to the exile cause; it was that he had gone with me. But all I said was: *¿Y eso?* and all he said was: *Boberias*. Silliness. I didn't hear from him for a while. But I heard Bertha was back.

Flying time Miami-to-Havana: forty-two minutes. No sooner are you up than you're down. I below me and there she is. Havana. The red earth, the royal palms. On my last family trip here, my grandson said the royal palms looked like birthday-cake sparklers. But I don't know if anything sparkles for me anymore.

During the descent everything rattles, food trays clang, the plane shakes, but the landing itself is smooth and met, as always, with a burst of applause. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to José Martí International. But you can hardly hear the flight attendant over the clapping, like tapped drumbeats on the beautifully glossed body of a *guajiro's* guitar.

Whoops of *¡Al fin!* and *¡Bendito sea Dios!* fill the air. A woman hollers, *¡Viva Cuba!* I lean forward in my seat to see who she is. She looks back at me. *Nadie sabe lo que tiene hasta que lo pierde*. Don't know what you got till you lose it, she says. She dabs dry her eyes and reaches under her seat for her bag. I reach under my seat for my father. The plane taxis toward the terminal. Everyone stands. I remain seated. The flight attendant says, Ladies and gentlemen, please remain seated until the plane has come to a complete stop. I want to pull the Viva-Cuba woman to me and cry with her. Passengers swarm the aisle, bang open the overhead bins. The flight attendant is losing her cool: Ladies and gentlemen, please *stay seated*. We'll have you there in just a minute.

Together, my father and I deplane and walk the hot, asphalted runway toward the Ha-

vana terminal. I walk, he rolls. Together, we sail through Immigration, then Customs. No, not through Customs. The young olive-clad officer asks me what is in the box. My father, I say. My father is in the box. He takes the box out of the shopping bag with its imprint of the funeral's logo, a tree of life. I haven't opened it, I say. The box is little and black. It is cute. It is the first time I have seen it. Do I have documents? he asks. Yes, I say and I do not lie. I do have documents but I left them in Miami. Why, I do not know. I had opened the envelope, unfolded the Certificate of Cremation and set it aside. A supervisor approaches, an older woman. She sees my face. When she asks me when my father died, *tu papá*, I let out a wailing cry. Not a choked-up cry; a child's I've-hurt-myself-badly cry that surprises me. *Ay mi'ja, she says, es lo que Dios manda*. What God sends our way. And the documents? asks the young fellow. No documents, she says, and sends me and my father on our way.

My skin sizzles. It is supposed to be an air-conditioned room here at El Hotel Naciónal and the Turistaxi ride in from the airport was air-conditioned but still, my skin sizzles. I call Ive— Ivelise, but since we were three, *mataperreando* on the pretty new sidewalks of our Havana neighborhood, she's been Ive (*Ee-veh*) to me. I needn't look up her telephone number on Avenida Parque. Same house, same hill, same number. Unlike the jabberwocky in exile circles, Cubans who stayed in Cuba did not lose their homes. As for those of us who left, whoever lived in the home at the time, *la criada*, for example, the help, was granted ownership of the home.

I tell Ive that Dad is with me. I laugh, a forced laugh. I needn't say *his ashes*; she gets it. I needn't ask her to go with me. I needn't even say where it is that we will spread his ashes. The stadium, she says, pick me up in ten minutes. And I needn't say I cannot do this alone.

I can't go anywhere, I tell Ive as I bolt through her front door, till I've had a *merienda*. I throw myself on her living-room couch, splay open my legs, fan myself with my skirt. I am hot and I am carsick. A fan, I say, bring me a fan. She will make me a mango shake, she says. You're lucky it's mango season and that I have a mango tree. The lights flicker overhead and *¡Le zumba la berenjena!* Ive says. *Se jodió el batido*, her son Victor Manuel says. Another *apagón*, another power outage. No mango shake for me.

I take out the box with my father's ashes from the pretty shopping bag with the pretty tree of life. Finally, I touch it. Victor Manuel, I yell, come open the box. Neither your mom nor I can find our glasses. We did find our glasses; we just can't read what the box says. I touch the box, its surface black, smooth, a corner of it Braille-like. It has instructions here, I say. He peers at the box. Made of recyclable material, Victor Manuel says. *Caballero*, Ive says, *tanta lucha—la vida—para termimar es esa cajita*. So much struggle—life—only to end up in that little box.

She lays the box atop the living-room console, a mosaic of tiny mirrors. As a child, I marveled at the vast number of images of myself dancing and leaping before it. I sit unmoving and stare at the mosaic of mirrors, its reflection dull, its edges black.

El Gran Estadio de La Habana, my dad liked to say, had a playing field and state-of-the-art lighting comparable to—no, better than—major-league stadiums. In 1947, a year after it opened, the Brooklyn Dodgers chose it as their spring training site, as did the Pittsburgh Pirates in 1953, the year I was born. But in 1961, American baseball in Cuba

stopped and the Great Stadium of Havana was renamed El Estadio Latinoamericano. That was the year I followed my parents out of the homeland, one small suitcase in hand, my Thumbelina doll in the other.

Standing before us, the stadium slouches like an old movie star, a flicker of what once was. Wait for us here, I tell the cabbie. Ten minutes. He can't, he says. He has to drive clear across town to meet his last customers, who promised to pay his fare if he came back. You're going to leave us here? I say. *¿En casa del carajo?* In the middle of nowhere? On the street, women wear *pantunflas*, rickety bedroom slippers and fluorescent spandex mini-skirts; butts protruding like backwards *C*s. *Mi amiga* here thinks we're going to get assaulted, Ive tells the cabbie, like in the United States. She turns to me. It's not that, *monga*. Dummie. It's that the only way we'll get back to the city is, *mira*—she whistles—*así*. She moves her thumb back and forth in hitchhike-mode.

The cabbie circles the stadium. When he starts circling again, Ive says, You think if you go in circles long enough you're going to *resolver*? We laugh, the three of us. I'll give you your customers' fare, I say, if you wait for us. Double the fare. In American dollars. *No, mi'jita*, he says, no need. He'll wait.

Out of the cab, Ive calls out to me, Where are you going? Already I am mid-street, crossing to the other side. Two rifled young men stand guarding the stadium entrance. To ask them to let us in, I say. *¿Tu estas loca?* she asks. Things aren't done this way *en este país*. In this country. They're going to think we're doing *contra-revolución*, spreading white powder like that. So we walk the perimeter of the closed stadium in the gray of dusk. She takes the plastic bag and spreads the first fistful of ashes and I am grateful for that. I look at her, so far removed from the bouncing, sun-streaked ponytailed girl of years past, her dry, over-processed hair now cropped closely to her scalp, her weather-beaten skin giving her a worn-out, hardened look. So far removed from the ballerina leaping across the terrazzo of her living-room floor doing arabesques and grand jetés before her mirrored console, her sequined costumes leaving swirls of pink and blues and greens behind her. And I wonder, when she looks at me, does she see my purple Nikes and cool asymmetrical haircut? The suitcases I bring full of little-worn clothes that my children discard, that her children greedily don? Or does she see the sunken flesh under my eyes, the hard lines around my mouth? A wrung-out lawyer staggering under the weight of financial struggles, *glob glob*, a ship's anchor around my neck. A not-so-good mother begrudging all she gave up, time with her children. Like my father.

But my father never came to that realization.

After a while, I say, *Coño*, Ive, at least spread him on the grass. Even if it is littered with cans, newspapers and cigarette butts. Not on the sidewalk, with its big cracks and raised slabs. It is when we turn the corner that I trip. One foot then the other, moving quickly forward. The fall is fast but slow. But I do not finish the fall because Ive swoops a quick, strong arm my way and lifts me. In two years we'll be like Mr. Magoo, she says, the near-sighted old man navigating his way through calamity after calamity. I didn't know they watched Mr. Magoo cartoons here. Now she laughs, a laugh of long ago.

We save some ashes for El Hotel Naciónal. Let's go to the long-stemmed flowers at the entrance, I tell Ive. I grab a fistful of my father. We spread. We have gotten good at this. And then: El Malecón, I say. As we descend our way to the sea, Ive says, We buried my

dad in pantyhose. I say, What? Pantyhose, she says. Three years after burial, the family receives a call: Remove the corpse to make space for others. And Cubans found a nifty trick: Bury your dead in pantyhose so the bones stay inside the pantyhose. Easier to scoop out the bones, Ive says. She holds up an imaginary bag, dangles it before me. And you did that? I ask. She couldn't, she says. Her son said, *Mami, I'll do it for you, I'll dig up Abuelo*. But when he arrived at the cemetery, he was told four corpses were in the grave, and was handed a bucket. His grandfather he easily recognized; his long, loose locks were still attached to his skull. Plus he recognized the suit. The suit you brought for him from Miami, Ive says. But as to the other three corpses, Victor Manuel couldn't figure out which bones belonged to whom. So he laid them out in separate piles and went *tin marin de dos pingüey*—Ive pokes her finger at the air, eenie meenie miney mo—to decide which bones he would put where, she says.

Together, we cross Avenida Malecón to the seawall. Ive switches the bag of ashes to her outside hand. In case you start to fall again, she says and puts her arm through mine, like she did in those days of long ago. She tells me the problem is that I don't look down when I walk. In this country, she says, you always have to look down. One, so you don't fall. Two, in case you find ten *fulas*, American dollars.

She finds a small opening at the seawall and that is no easy feat, to find space among swarms of fathers fishing with sons and young *enamorados* kissing and rubbing. I try to climb the seawall but can't. I am stuck, neither here nor there. I think I am limber, with my daily bouts of hot yoga back in Miami, but I am not. Ive, I say, between uncontained laughter, when was the last time you peed your pants? Like those days of long ago when we hid in her dad's study and looked at pictures of naked people in his medical journals. Just now, she says. Me too, I say. I told you, she says, Mr. Magoo. In two years. Less than two years.

She stand on the seawall, the Malecón waters a silvery black. I take the final handful of ashes. They are chalky and after each throw, some stay on me. The hard particles are bone shards, I know, maybe slivers of the pacemaker that was supposed to have been removed before his body was slid into the oven. But I think of them as sea shells. I throw my father's ashes at the sea wind and at the waters that connect Havana to Miami. But the ashes don't fly in the direction I throw them. The ashes fly back inland, toward a pretty girl with brown skin kissing her boyfriend, a pretty brown girl now covered with my father's ashes. Ive and I stare at each other. *Ay*, I say to the pretty brown girl's boyfriend, as he wipes the white off her face, her hair, her blouse, *perdon*. It's OK, he says, pronounced *O-kah*, the *anti-imperialista*, Revolutionary way. If they only knew, Ive whispers as we cross Avenida Malecón, the slow groan of its ten-foot waves behind us. That's OK, I say. *OK*. Dad's happy, going home with her tonight. He always did like brown-skinned girls best.

Jacob Boyd

A TD Ameritrade Call to the Pen

There he is in aqua-green light, one lost
spring, dreaming,
working the dream, splashing a tennis ball
at the garage door's face—

those handle-lidded eyes, that concrete's lolled
tongue. The house mask.
Voodoo catcher. Invisible mitt I've long since
curled up in. His innings

dissolved in my head. All that practiced accuracy.
We are locked in this

body with sixty-some feet between us
and a fickle umpire.
We abide the multi-colored path. Whatever that
means. We throw strikes.
I'm carrying my body like I'm burying a horse.

Our arms and legs are
swinging like we're digging up a corpse.

To the kid holding
a ghosty close, checking the mailbox over
his shoulder then
going into his windup at memory's end:
this—though not
the one imagined—is the call.

Robert Busby

Ode to a Failed Inside-the-Park Home Run

Baseball marries ambition and restraint
like that July when I didn't watch the first pitch
but swung for the fence. The fastball slid into the bat

and clapped like abrupt thunder off hollow aluminum,
spinning laces ripped from their trajectory
along the outside corner of the plate. The ball roped

to right-center, a dull echo off the wood fence.
I swung wide at first, metal cleats punching the bag
and me into a vacuum where screaming fans

and the noise of summer romance, fighting parents,
bagging groceries disperse into the tenuous plasma
of all other matter outside this base path leading me

to second,
then third,
until the momentum

of ambition, the elusive inside-the-park homer,
and the lure of a place to call home
all prove too much for any restraint

or some catcher
squared up down there
with the ball.

Jeff Fleischer

Granddad's Ballgame

When my Granddad was just a boy, to hear him tell it, there were only three things he ever wanted to do in his life.

One was to get the girl who lived on the farm catty corner to take a shine to him. Another was to see the world, or at least some part of the world outside central Indiana. The third was to make a ballplayer out of himself.

Now by the time he left school, truth be told, he hadn't made a whole lot of progress. The neighbor girl, Katie Lee, had taken to a chaste courtship with an older man, though Granddad reckoned that arrangement would prove temporary, on account of the wife everyone knew the man had back in town. The farthest Granddad had yet ventured was down to Bean Blossom for a couple of FFA get-togethers, which showed him so little of the world he deemed it statistically insignificant.

Baseball, though, that was going right nicely. He was no bona fide professional, but he could swing a bat as well as any of the boys on his local team, and played the infield a fair bit better than that. The way he figured, a baseball career could give him a leg up on his other two goals.

His own daddy felt otherwise, and used to tell him that the world needed ditch diggers too, and that there weren't anything wrong with that honest profession. Granddad didn't have much choice but to listen while under that roof, but once the consumption took his parents in the spring of forty-one, they didn't have much say in the matter, and the last ditch Granddad dug was to bury his folks on the family plot out back of the farmhouse.

Now in those days, to hear Granddad tell it, the only way to get a tryout with a real ballclub was to get your reputation known. Even bona fide professionals didn't make all that much money back then, not like it is these days. Baseball was more like a good summer job, but you still had to make your wages in the offseason. Men came home and pumped gas, worked the farm. Pick the right day, you could buy a soda from a fella who spent the summer in the big leagues. The team bosses were making their money, but...

Sorry, where was I? So Granddad was no dummy. He knew he had the talent to stick, but every town for miles had a half dozen players as good or almost there.

Lucky for him, that winter Japan sent a mess of planes out over Pearl Harbor, and the country reacted right quick. Men his age from all over were finding themselves sent off to fight, but Granddad was four-eff on account of a fallen arch in his right foot. The country reckoned he was better used getting paid not to grow corn on the family plot, so as to keep prices from cratering, giving him plenty of time to try to practice his swing. He made a point of playing on every team that would give him a fair shake, switching teams when he had to so he could play every day, just so he might catch the eye of traveling scouts fixing to replace all the ballplayers called up to active duty. He did a lot of talking too, spreading a few tall tales among the other players, hoping something might be memorable enough to stick.

First published by the *Saturday Evening Post.*

Before he could consider himself a real ballplayer, he felt like he needed a real ballplayer nickname. To Granddad, there was something romantic in the notion that a man could play one game without footwear and be known as "Shoeless Joe" for generations to come. He thought names like "Pie" Traynor or "Hippo" Vaughn were memorable enough, but he had a tiny bit of spare tire about his belly and didn't want anything that might draw questions about his figure. He liked the ring of something like Mordecai "Three-Finger" Brown, but felt a nickname that literal required a degree of sacrifice to which he couldn't quite cotton.

He told my Daddy years later that he would have liked something along the lines of old "Vinegar Bend" Mizell, if he'd been around then, until Granddad learned its origin was nothing more exciting than the name of an Alabama town near where Wilmer Mizell came into the world, and Granddad hailed from the less colorfully monikered locality of Franklin, which was his Christian name already and seemed rather redundant. Pardon me, I'm digressing rather a bit.

Anyhow, Granddad rightly subscribed to the notion that a man can't well give himself a nickname, but he saw no reason why a man couldn't try to get one from others. So he tried his hand at leading his teammates in the direction of something suitable, trying to earn one with, what's the word, affectations. No matter how well he played, his teammates never suggested "One Sock" Wilson, or "Sleeveless Frank" Wilson, and his attempt to earn the "Eye Patch" Wilson moniker earned him nothing but a welt from an inside fastball he didn't see coming.

All through the summer of forty-two, Granddad hit like one of them metronomes, steady as they come. Teams come through town on barnstorming tours, and teams gone home talking about the shortstop from down in Franklin County. Not much power, but the man could get on base and range like a jackrabbit, though he was developing a bit of a reputation as a colorful character on account of his affectations.

Now as Granddad always told it, the first weekend in August the whole county had itself a big tournament to show off the local boys for a mess of big league scouts who were trying to fill up their minor league farm teams with some young players, on account of how many regular players were off playing on Uncle Sam's team. Mostly the whole county turned out too, and Granddad had never played ball in front of so many folks. He spied that Katie Lee was there with her daddy instead of her beau, tipped his cap to her and winked as he sprinted out to the field, but he lost her when the park kept on filling.

They didn't play the national anthem at ballgames in those days, so the crowd never really stood still while they was waiting for the game to start. By the time it did, there was so many curious folks they had to line up around the edge of the field. Granddad's squad even paid the players a little taste of the gate, on account of the bigger crowd, which in his eyes counted as making him a bona fide professional for a change.

Good thing he crossed that off his list, he used to say, as once the game against the boys from Brookville got underway, Granddad wasn't having himself much luck. Whether it were the sight of the neighbor girl, or knowing all them scouts were there, or the flashbulbs from the local news reporters, he couldn't focus himself. He wasn't alone neither; the umpire lost track of the count Granddad's first time up, but it just let him badly miss at four pitches instead of three. Next time up, he tried to pull back his swing too late and sent the ball just a few feet straight up into the air and straight back down again into the catcher's mitt.

The other players on his team fared a bit better, so Granddad looked all the worse by comparison, but the team was winning. Granddad liked to win as much as anybody, but he was no dummy, and he knew the rest of the boys looking good when he didn't wasn't going to be much use to him. Their pitcher, Lefty McCullough, was striking out so many Brookvillers that Granddad hadn't even got a chance to make a play at short.

Come the ninth inning, the fellas from Franklin was up by just one run, and McCullough's arm was starting to tire. He hit one batter, then gave up a roper put men at the corners with two out, and the biggest farmboy in Brookline at the plate, swinging the biggest bat most folks in the county had ever seen.

That boy hit the ball hard but low, what Granddad used to call a wormburner, a situation shouldn't have given him much trouble. Wouldn't you know it, the ball found a pebble on its way to see Granddad, and hopped up like a grasshopper. He had to stretch to his left to corral it, and it spun him halfway round before he could make the throw to first off his back foot.

Now, any man watching would have called it a bad throw, seeing as it sailed so wide off first that old Tommy Bennett could have grown eight feet high and still not been able to reach far enough. Granddad was rightly mortified, even more when he saw the ball heading toward the crowd, and spied a spectator moving right into its path.

Those folks who didn't see the man get hit sure did get to hear it, seeing as the ball smacked the side of his skull and knocked him straight over like a tenpin.

The crowd, as you might expect, flocked to the spot to see just what happened, and check if the man could get his wits back about him. Even the umpire called time once there was enough commotion that the players couldn't fairly concentrate.

Now what Granddad had no way of knowing at the time was that the man he'd nearly sent to old St. Peter's doorstep was in the process of absconding with a pile of purses he'd unhelpfully collected from women as he worked his way through the stands, using a penknife to cut them straps and carefully removing the rest. When the crowd figured out the thief's plan, largely on account of the dozen handbags that fell when he did, Granddad found himself treated to proper round of applause.

To be fair, he never actually claimed he meant to hit that man and save several ladies from difficult circumstances; he just didn't see any reason to disabuse anyone of that notion. Especially when people saw fit to rush the field and lift him up on their shoulders, or when the future Katie Lee Wilson gave him a peck on the cheek on account of his rescuing her pocketbook.

They finished the game as a formality a few hours later, but mostly people forget the result. They remembered "Bullseye" Wilson, and people told the story of that perfectly timed throw round these parts for a long, long while.

Figuring the publicity might draw a few fans, the St. Louis Browns gave Granddad a spot on one of their farm teams, and gave him his chance to see more of America, seeing as the war kept better players otherwise occupied for a few years. As good a hitter as he was for a boy from Franklin County, he never quite measured up to the bona fide professionals, and spent most of his two summers as a ballplayer sitting on the bench. After his deal with the government as concerned his farm, Granddad had gotten right used to drawing some money without having to do much for it, and always said he got paid to watch games from the best seats.

Now he's gone, I have to tell I never quite knew how much of Granddad's stories were monkeyshines, or how many really were truthful. To hear him tell it though, he sure did hit the bullseye on life, and there ain't no denying that.

William Snyder

How We Wish to Use Our Fists: A Villanelle

2013 World Series
Eighth inning, game two

We see Martinez pounding his mitt with a fist, his face
pumped and angry, the tight, corded muscle and skin
adamant—he's popped up Napoli, ending the Boston eighth.

We follow Napoli's dugout jog, then Martinez' tight gait,
his walk off the mound. He does not smirk, or grin—
he pounds his mitt, a ballgame metonym of hate.

Martinez, twenty-two, a rookie, the Cardinal's ace,
struck out Victorino, then Pedroia—his fastball spins—
and he's popped up Napoli. Boston deflates

in its dugout, glumly prays for hits, runners on base
in the ninth. But the Cardinals grin, as one, having pinned
their inning on Martinez—in his pounded mitt, their faith

rewarded. But what does it mean, this pounding, this great
flare of aggression Martinez displays? Examine it's origin:
Tsunami-tattooed, he's popped out Napoli; but is it fate,

or are his fists and hardassed struts and pumps straight
forward genes? Regardless—we love the passion:
his mitt-pounding shouts, his fist and face delineating
our desire to pop our bosses, our leaders, our gods, our fate.

William Snyder

Babe Ruth: First Long Night

Brother Matthias, crucifix hard and silver
around his neck, waits for us
to climb the dormitory steps, for Poppa
to give me over. We make a cold walk around,
Brother laying down the law, spelling out
the Order's better graces. And after potatoes
and stew, I'm shown the long rows of iron beds,
opened down and ready, the dark green blankets
lumping, the windows above, painted black.

Still awake, I flex my mitt, jam the soft,
leather fingers, punch the pocket, mold it
with my fist, wait for tomorrow—the books
I'll hate, the canvas and the shop room clatter,
the steel machinery I could learn to like—
pleasure in the rough and heavy.

Later, with sewing done, with fingers
needle-stuck and shaking, I'll find
the diamond—the green, half-blades of grass,
the white stripes of lime, the boys in red and gray
and their shouts, their shimmies at the plate,
their slaps and groans. I'll stand on
the pebble-pocked mound, lean in, stare down
at the catcher's squat, his fingers flicking signs
for speed or twist or drop and I'll see the future—
my strikes and clout—and feel my cheeks,
my thighs, my crotch swelling.

Dull farts, thin snores, a small boy's pee-drip
tapping on the wooden floor; the first night done.
And out the chow hall door an orange sky,
its sun a dull, red sucker rising through
the eastside smoke, the smells of the cow yards
already. Behind a pile of schoolhouse bricks,
Mrs. Neally stirs the linens in copper tubs. I grab
a heavy pile, plunge it in up to my elbows,
thrash it against the sides, suds breezing out
to the puddly ground like slippery ghosts.
"Babe," she says, "you're the babe!"

William Snyder

The Babe: The B&O Drags Me Up

We jostle over switching frogs
through Bowling Green
on the all-night limited out of Baltimore—
bats, cleats, neat's-foot oil in steel containers,
and rosin bags stowed
in the baggage car, clean and safe.
And here, safe, in this tiny compartment,
beneath this stiff, white, railroad pillow,
my Yankee blouse, its Three
and its dark blue stripes
steaming up through linen and feathers,
burning my cheeks.

Speed now, and twisting north. First light
slips between the Pullman shade
and the stainless frame. Then breakfast.
The conductor's grovel, the steward's grin,
all the fanfare—the adoration,
the writers bawling down the aisles,
their brown fedoras slack with sweat—
chuck me up, tempt these hands,
knuckles hard like chestnut halves,
butcher's knuckles, but made to grip a bat—
the narrow shaft, the knob, my name
burnt black on the clubbing end.

Tomorrow, Detroit, and the chaw-stained
dugout dirt, the sweat, the hack,
a bloody sausage mashed red
across the bench. Footlong wrappers
will spiral up from the third base side,
blue and gold, but white in the lights
like apparitions of slips, and float and fall
before the long, steady rains, before
the dark, before the next iron train
to Cleveland, the sleeper car again,
and the holding on, the holding tight.

Kenneth Jakubas

Baseball Soliloquy at Dawn

Where in this did I get pulled from the world?
When I enter my driveway, there are fawns,
apples in the lawn, their beds a circle
of bent grass. What was said in the conversation
I was having with myself vanished brightly
in the mirror. *Came out of nowhere*, we say
of the spectacular. And I believe
I came from no place but the dirt, raised
from the seeds of a sunflower's mother seed,
the juice of nicotine, sweat. No *place* for dirt:
our codes trace us to organisms that pooped
from their mouths, and creation's wild
pitch raises the same. Even the skin
from range cattle are the gloves
you wear to work. Driveways,
they pull me into their hurricanes.
Then I am asleep before others' wheels
and the cocoon of a wild pulse.
Nights I am like a child watching the first leaf
fall outside, getting into that leaf—
a seeming guide to its arrival: first I am here,
talking fractions with important people,
then there's chalk, tests, the euphoria
of a many frantic erasers. Minutes later
I will recast a game I've played in my sleep
for years, lost loved ones my foes,
a glove as my face, a piece of dirt locked in my eye.
It clocks in at such a speed.
A slider buckles the earth into teeth.
The Boom of postgame fireworks
that shock me awake—
the militarization of baseball?
The militarization of the sky.
Sound a woke god shattering a barrier:
crack of the bat, fist of a crowd.
A timer drops my pencil like a struck body,
and the bones under the earth curve into smiles.

Maureen Mancini Amaturo

The Field

Just ahead is the familiar field, a diamond with rounded corners. I walk up with head down, anticipating that time will drag its feet while I sit and wish I could be attending to other things. But I'll sit on the aluminum bleachers, surrounded by mosquitoes, gymnastic squirrels, and people's dogs. I'm here for my son. My son, who is at his designated spot on the field, crouching behind home plate, wiggling fingers, giving signs to the pitcher, his very handsome face protected by a caged mask. My son, the only baby boy ever born. He is why *s-u-n* and *s-o-n* are homonyms.

On arrival, I greet other parents, other fans, address the social niceties, then I dissolve into the book I've brought. Some comment that they don't usually see someone bring a book to a game. But I always do, so the regulars are not surprised. I remember bringing a copy of *Widow for a Year* by John Irving to Madison Square Garden. The Rangers were playing. While hockey fans bounced in their seats and waved team towels, I focused on my pages until my husband tapped me on the shoulder to stand for the national anthem.

To be honest, I'm not interested in the sport, not interested in the team. Don't even care who is playing. Cannot pretend to root for someone else's son. I'll look up when my son is at bat, and I might glance to watch him walk to his position when the innings change. I arrive at the baseball field after the national anthem this evening. I sit between the third corner and home, turning pages, moving through chapters, absorbed in Dan Brown's words at this game. I have no idea what the score is. I don't know what team my son's team is playing. I don't know the inning is over until my husband says, "Michael is up."

I hold my page with my finger and look at my son, his familiar batting stance. The intensity on his face. I say the "Our Father." I imagine that Jesus Christ Himself is standing beside my son, and I say, "Jesus, please swing the bat with him." The image of Jesus in flowing robes and billowing sleeves standing beside the batter's box at Disbrow Park at dinnertime does not seem at all strange to me. I imagine that every time my son is up. I have complete faith that Jesus' robes won't get in the way of his swing. I say again, "Jesus, please swing the bat with him." I know there are cancers to cure, crime and carnage to correct, and at this moment, I don't care. I don't care that people in countries with names I can't spell don't have clean drinking water. My son is up. This moment is important to my son, so it is important to me. My heart pounds. My teeth clench. I grip my book more tightly. I am praying in a loop. Jesus is used to hearing from me. I've asked Him for many things, big things. I assume many people have. A hit is such a small request. I imagine He shrugs and is amused. I'm still asking, "Jesus, please swing the bat with him." As a mother, I can't bear to see either of my children have anything less than a perfect experience. "Jesus, please swing the bat with him."

I pray. I pray. I pray.

I close my book and focus on my son, praying, meditating to manifest an outcome. In my mind's eye, I see my son getting a hit. I conjure images of my son's bat connecting with the ball. I envision him surrounded in white light, picture Jesus with arms outstretched

as if He is sending divine power, like a laser, straight to my son. The emotional effort is almost painful. The intense concentration gives me a headache. I feel his hits and misses to my very core. My soul vibrates with worry—no, unmeasurable love.

I hear the ching of the aluminum bat. It's a double. I watch my son leave home and round the corners, stopping at second. I wish it were a triple, so he'd be standing on the third corner, closer to where I'm sitting, where I could see him better. I tell Jesus, "Thank you." I can breathe again. I go back to my book. And in each inning when my son is at bat, my interest will go from flatline to spike.

After the game, my son asks, "Did you see how hard I hit that? It was a bomb, right in the gap."

I say, "No, I was watching you, not the ball."

"Why would you watch me run? You're supposed to watch the ball." He tries to explain why I was watching the wrong thing, but I know I saw exactly what I wanted to see.

Cece Peri

Trouble Down the Road

At the flat top grill, he was all business,
flung raw eggs dead center into the corned beef
hash like a strapping southpaw.

In the alley, with me, he was all ideas.
Said he'd be leaving soon, had a shot back east—
a tryout for the big leagues.

Said his sister would loan him a Buick convertible,
and he'd fill it with malt beer and tuna.
All he needed was a woman to hold

his cat while he drove.
I like animals, I told him. Then I dropped
my cigarette into the dusty clay,

ground it out, slow,
felt the road under my foot.