

A sunburst pattern of blue and dark blue rays radiating from the top center.

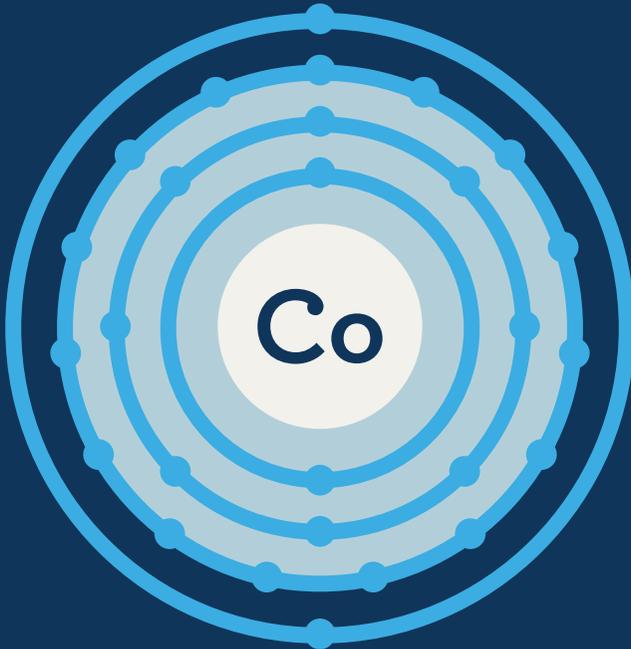
COBALT REVIEW

BASEBALL



2020

COBALT



2020 Baseball Issue

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Contents

Danny Rosen	Watching Baseball
Jeff Tigchelaar	After I Wrote This Poem I Pounded My Chest and Pointed to the Skies
J.S. Kierland	Tuba City
Reuven Goldfarb	Cheering Gino Cimoli
Kevin Clark	Cut-Two
Heidi Seaborn	On the Occasion of an Outfielder's Wedding
Holly M. Wendt	Asking for Nothing
Avery Gregurich	Taking the Field



2020 Earl Weaver Prize

Each of the authors included in this issue was selected as a semifinalist for the eighth annual Baseball Writing Prize. This year's winner is J.S. Kierland for "Tuba City."

Finalists for this year's prize are Reuven Goldfarb for "Cheering Gino Cimoli" and Holly M. Wendt, "On the Occasion of an Outfielder's Wedding."

Congratulations to J.S., our finalists and semifinalists, and thank you to all who have submitted to this baseball issue and supported Cobalt review since 2011.

Submissions for the 2021 Earl Weaver Baseball Writing Prize are now open.

Sincerely,

Andrew Keating
Chief Baseball Officer

Danny Rosen

Watching Baseball

'...imaginary gardens with real toads in them...'
—Marianne Moore

Watching baseball...
with contempt for it, its simple contrivances,
the way it's designed for another commercial break
every half-inning, the control freak agents, managers, players
constant rancor at the umpires, the ceaseless announcers
like house flies when the cows are close, all the scores
from around the league, contempt for the season's length,
the whole country caught up in the Thing. The thing:
like watching paint dry, say those who describe It as,
dull inaction of half-athletes—whose exploits are always
about average.

And yet, growing up with it, one finds between the lines
in Baseball, something genuine: the old man, his cigar,
history, strategy, order, symmetry, 'ladies and gentlemen,
please rise and sing...' stretch, have a dog and a beer,
spill your pop going for a foul, stand up and yell out loud
at the damned bums and give praise

to the natural human animal in action: hale young bipeds
performing at their peak, grown men in costumes willing
to run through walls, spending the energy
of any young warrior, battling with no killing, usually
no blood.

Tonight, the guy pitching is the pitcher who threw a pitch
behind the head of the batter at the plate—six years ago:
big brouhaha, the benches cleared, a punch was thrown,
couple of ejections. In the booth, in the stands for all
the hanky-waving fans anticipation settles over the field
where no love is lost and there could be a fight!

The world is not perfect, but a 5-4-3 double play
is a beautiful thing to see. The image at once held
forever in the mind, conjured up at abrupt times,
times that defy time like a humpback line drive...

The Pitcher

goes into his wind-up, looks the runners back, lifts,
twists, pauses on one leg, stretches back, exhales big,
uncorks at once. His arm bends (on the tube in slo-mo)
sickeningly back, as if to snap. He throws a curve.

The Batter

speaks with his bat, adjusts his nuts so nonchalant, spits,
rubs on the tar, crosses himself up to God, wraps the straps
of his gloves tight, digs in, takes a few swings, looks up: sees...

the trajectory of a white ball arc out into the black night.

He bangs his bat on the plate, two on, one out,
top of the ninth, down a run. He takes his stance
(radio dreams of kids in bed half asleep across the land)
the brute grips and tenses, breathes and releases,
whips his club around, grabs his woman by the hair,
lines one down the third base line.

The Third Baseman,

stalwart at the hot corner, ambushed by that shot
can only react, knowing yet he lunges, snags, leaps
to his feet throwing and around the horn they go:
third to second to first. Game over!

The announcer grabs his heart leapt out his mouth,
stuffs it back down, keeps talking.

The hawkers of beer fold up their carts.

The drunks stumble off to other fights.

A blind man in the stands, stands, can almost see
the old home team run off the field so diamond green.

Jeff Tigchelaar

After I Wrote This Poem I Pounded My Chest and Pointed to the Skies

because baseball players do it all the time
after home runs, and home runs
aren't even that big a deal—
baseball players hit homers, and hit homers
far more often than I write poems, especially
good poems, and I'm not saying this one's
a grand slam or anything but
I think I at least believe in it, I think I can
get behind it like a 3-1 fastball pipelined
right to the wheelhouse,
 and hopefully it'll go,
 I've got this feeling,
so why can't I just jubilate
like Pujols after yet another dinger—
why can't *I* raise a grateful finger
straight up to heaven or a dear departed loved one
as I cross my proverbial plate?

Tuba City

The road into the Navajo Nation runs circular through harsh open range. I'd been headed that way for hours, past clusters of mobile homes and modest ranch houses that dotted the wide, stark landscape of chaparral and tumbleweed. Signs of the modern world popped into view like rising bubbles. A McDonald's appeared, and then a Taco Bell, and I could see a Wells Fargo Bank tucked in among the large mounds of earth that stood like secluded sentinels on either side of the two lane blacktop. A hand-painted sign appeared advertising DINOSAUR TRACKS, and leaned precariously against the burned out shell of an old Ford pickup. Further on, a smaller sign read, "GO WARRIORS," and then finally a highway sign came into view saying, Tuba City. A pale horse hung his head solemnly over an old wooden fence and stared out at me as I slowed down to let a pickup truck, filled with firewood, make a wide turn up a dirt road. The horse's eyes stayed with me, and as I passed his steady gaze made me feel like an intruder that hadn't earned the right to see these simple things.

Usually these side trips of mine ended with little accomplished except having done a favor for an old friend. The friend in this case happened to be a man named Teddy Nighthorse who I'd met in Tucson years ago. I associated Teddy with spring training and our love for baseball. We'd gotten into the habit of meeting in Tucson, at the end of a long winter, and making the rounds together. Usually, we'd run into each other at one of the morning batting practices and lean against the mesh fence to watch the warm-weather ritual of men stepping into a crudely marked box to try and smash a speeding ball with one inch of a round bat.

As a scout for the Arizona Diamondbacks my territory included southern California and an occasional trip up the coast to spy on the Giants. But there were months to go before spring training began so Teddy's sudden phone call surprised me. He'd asked me to come up and take a peek at a young pitcher, something he'd never done before, so I reluctantly agreed.

Looking at young prospects usually took place in the formal setting of a high school or college game. Baseball scouts showed up to study particular players in the faint hope that they'd be good enough to recruit. There'd be pages of statistics to go through before you arrived. Then you'd have to deal with the particular expectations of the young player and his coach. Isolated cases like Tuba City were less formal and usually you just encouraged the young player and then turned around and went home. So when I made the left on Moenave Street I had the feeling it would be just another turn around day.

I saw Teddy standing under the trees in the middle of the street. He waved me toward a dirt driveway and pointed to a parking place directly in front of a battered dumpster. I began apologizing for being nearly an hour late but Teddy just smiled and said, "Did you bring the equipment?"

"Sure did," I said and opened the trunk to show him. The air had gotten colder, and the first thing I took out was my heavy leather jacket. A group of Navajo boys

surrounded us and stared into the trunk at my array of professional baseball equipment.

“This is just what we need,” Teddy said as he picked up the catcher’s equipment and opened a fresh box of baseballs. I reached in and grabbed one of the lighter bats and took my speed gun out of its leather case.

By the time I turned around Teddy had already started for the makeshift ball field behind us. I noticed how fit he looked for an older man. His straight white hair and leathery skin gave certain clues to his being somewhere in his sixties or early seventies. He moved slow and easy like an old cat and had probably been an athlete at one time. In all the years I’d known him we had never met outside a ballpark or talked about our past. I came out of the sandlots in the Bronx and Teddy had spent his life on an Indian reservation. That was all we knew about each other. We only talked about big league baseball and the approaching season. In fact, this was the first time I had ever ventured into what we both laughingly referred to as Teddy Country.

The group of nine-year-olds hung in close to us like a flock of colorful birds and helped Teddy carry the catcher’s equipment to the broken-down backstop. On a signal from the old man one of the boys took off across Moenave Street and disappeared into a faded white building with a hand-painted sign over its front door that read First Presbyterian Church. I didn’t know what the procedure would be but Teddy seemed to have everything under control.

“You did say the kid is left-handed...didn’t you?” I asked, while Teddy strapped on the chest protector and shin guards.

“Yeah, he’s a southpaw and I’m waiting to see what he registers on that speed gun you brought,” he said, punching the catcher’s mitt.

I held out a shiny white baseball to see which dark-haired little kid would step up and throw the ball at him but they just giggled and backed away.

“I sent one of the kids across the street to get him,” Teddy said and I nodded as two of the boys picked up the box of baseballs and carried them out to the recently graded pitcher’s mound. Teddy waddled over to the backstop to brush off home plate and fill in the rain-rutted area around the batter’s box with his cowboy boots. He seemed nervous and I could hear him telling the boys to stay out of the way.

I looked around at the few rows of stands, in need of paint, that ran the edge of the field along the baselines. I walked slowly across the infield and noticed a large patch of crab grass and weeds had been recently dug out and reseeded. I stepped around it, took out my measuring tape, and waved to one of the little boys to come over and hold the end of it at the top of the pitcher’s mound while I unraveled sixty and a half feet to the plate. I smiled at Teddy working on the batter’s box and said, “This field may not look like much but it’s got perfect distance from the mound to home plate.”

“I didn’t want the kid throwing the wrong distance so I measured and readjusted the whole thing,” he said. “The height of the mound was a little tricky but I think we got that about right, too.”

I rolled up the tape and glanced out at the school building behind the dumpsters. For the first time I noticed the windows were jammed with people. The left-handed kid had fans. The faces in the windows suddenly turned in unison to look at something through the leafless trees along Moenave Street. That was when I first saw him.

Large, lumbering, and a bit overweight, he had a strong determination in his step as he headed directly for the backstop. His high cheekbones made his round face look even bigger, and a shock of black hair hung straight to his shoulders. He had on a bright

red sweatshirt, blue jeans, and torn sneakers that were actually held together with pieces of string. Under his arm he carried an old, flat baseball glove that looked homemade and, as he went past the stands, he playfully rubbed each boy's head with it for good luck.

"This is Nick Costa. The man I told you about," Teddy said. When the kid extended his hand I could hardly grasp it all in mine. His handshake was gentle, almost weak, but his smile was big and strong. "This is Harold Bromley, the kid I wanted you to look at," Teddy said, from behind the catcher's mask.

"Everyone here just calls me, Shoe," the kid said.

"That's short for Big Shoe," Teddy added.

"Shoe. That's just fine."

"I've already warmed up."

"Great. Let's get started," I said, and Teddy squatted down behind the plate.

"How old are you?" I asked the kid as we walked out to the mound.

"Almost eighteen," he answered and bent over to take one of the new baseballs out of the box. I watched his every move to see if he had any kind of an injury or handicap, or might be physically compensating for anything, but he moved smoothly around the mound. He flipped the ball to the plate in an easy warm-up motion and when Teddy threw the ball back he caught it as if he'd been doing it his whole life. He threw in another pitch a little faster, and I watched his arm motion to see where he released the ball and where he ended up on the mound after his delivery.

"You gonna put the gun on my fast ball?" he asked with a smile.

"Ever have that done before?"

"No," he said. "Should be fun."

I'd never heard anyone refer to the speed gun as fun before. Usually you tried to hide the gun from a young kid or even a professional when their speed began to drop late in a game. The big league ballparks had even begun to display the speed of a pitch on the scoreboards. That put more pressure on the pitcher and the batters. But this kid looked at the speed gun as fun. I liked his attitude.

It felt like a storm rolling in and I glanced up at the school building. The lights had been turned on making it easier to see the people watching us from the windows.

"Whenever you're ready just let me know," I said, pulling up the collar on my leather jacket.

"Guess I'm ready," the big kid said.

"Just relax and give me a straight fast ball."

"Want me to hit the corner?" he said.

"Why not?" I said, and set the speed gun.

The kid nodded at Teddy crouched behind the plate, and he gave him a target on the inside corner for a left-handed batter. The kid went into a short windup and came down hard off the mound. His arm came across his body like a whip, and I heard him grunt as he released the ball and it slammed into the catcher's mitt. When I looked down the gun read ninety-eight miles an hour. I got a chill just calculating what the kid might do with a good pair of shoes.

"What'd it read?" the kid asked.

"Oh, 'round ninety," I said.

"Did I really hit ninety?"

"Yeah, but you always want to be careful where you throw the ball. That's the

important thing. You hung that one a little too far over the plate. You've got natural speed so you want to think about where you're throwing the ball rather than how fast."

The kid nodded, and said, "I been working on location with Teddy. It helps if I have a batter there."

The kid definitely had the speed so I put down the gun. "I'll get up there for you," I said.

"Thanks," he said.

I walked slowly back down to where Teddy stood with the catcher's mitt and picked up a bat. "How fast did it read, Nick?" he asked.

"Ninety-eight miles an hour," I said.

"I knew it," he replied in a whisper.

I stood at the plate with the bat on my left shoulder and stared out at the kid. He looked big and impressive on the mound. I could feel Teddy crouch down along the inside corner just behind me. The big kid went into his windup and then exploded out of it. I picked up the ball about halfway down the chute and heard it smaaaack into the catcher's mitt. The pitch had good lateral movement on it and slammed in right under my hands across the inside corner.

Teddy flipped the ball back out to the kid and said, "That felt faster than the last one."

"How tall is he?" I asked.

"Almost six-five," Teddy said.

"And his weight?"

"That's a problem. Kid needs structure. A program. I can only do so much. Getting him to lay off the Big Macs and bend over and touch his toes is something else."

I nodded my understanding and looked out at the overweight kid on the mound in the red sweatshirt. Even with what I had just seen he'd be considered for some kind of a contract because we always looked for left-handers with speed. Throwing from the left side is preferred in the big leagues because the right field fences are usually shorter. With good speed and control it's that much harder for a left-handed batter to get around on the ball and pull it down the right field line into the stands. The left-handed pitcher also has the advantage of facing first base and keeping a runner close to the bag. That makes it harder to steal or even get a good lead. It means fewer stolen bases, more double plays, and fewer runs scored by the opposing team. The advantage of having a good left-handed pitcher out on the mound is enormous to a big league team.

"Now I want you to throw the ball on the inside corner about knee-high with the same speed that you just gave me with the last one," I yelled out to him. Whether Shoe knew it or not I had asked for the pitch that either made the major league left-hander or broke him. The kid just smiled, went into his windup, and I tried to concentrate on when and where he released the ball. I only saw the ball when it got close and cut in at knee level along the inside corner, and heard the BAAAAMMM when it hit the catcher's mitt.

"What kind of pitch did he just throw?" I asked.

"A splitter."

"He got anything else?"

"I got him working a fork ball but it's not ready."

"What about a change-up?"

"He's got one but it needs work. He doesn't throw it with the same exact motion that he uses with the fast ball so a good hitter could read it and know it's coming."

"I'd still like to see it."

“Get ready,” he said.

Shoe took the sign from Teddy, and I watched him go into his windup. He came out of it with a slight hitch so I adjusted my swing and hit a screaming line drive down the right field line. He looked stunned when the ball caromed off the building out in right field. Three of the younger kids ran out to retrieve it.

“He’s just got a different direction in his windup when he throws his change-up. He comes into it from further out on the mound,” I said. “Have him work on keeping his arm motion in tight and it’ll make all the difference especially if he uses it with the splitter.”

Teddy smiled and said, “Check.”

“I can get one of the coaches to work with him. Show him how to throw different change-ups.”

“That’ll help,” Teddy said.

“I’d like to see how he looks with a right-handed batter in there,” I said. “Sometimes that kind of thing can be an enormous problem. I’ve even seen it break a good left-hander.”

“This kid doesn’t have that kind of problem,” he muttered. I stepped over home plate and put the bat up on my right shoulder to see how he’d deal with me from the other side. He leaned forward and I could feel Teddy go into a crouch behind me. Then the kid did something I had never seen in all my years in baseball. He flipped that weird homemade baseball glove onto his left hand and went into his windup from the other side. Before I realized what had happened he fired a knee-high pitch straight down the middle at about ninety-five miles an hour with his right arm.

“What the hell did that kid just do?” I asked.

“I wanted you to see it rather than try and explain it,” Teddy said, flipping the ball back out to the mound.

“Does he have the same control from both sides?”

“Yeah, but I think he’s faster from the left.”

“Let’s see his splitter from the right side,” I said in quiet shock. Teddy knelt down. The kid took the sign, went into his windup, and spun out of it in a red blur. I picked up the ball somewhere near home plate and watched it hook sharply in under the narrow part of the bat and slaaaam into the catcher’s mitt. The row of dark-haired kids in the stands cheered wildly.

“Put a jacket on him. We’re finished for now.”

“Sure you’ve seen enough?”

“It’s getting cold. I don’t want him to tighten up. Besides, what else is there?”

“He’s a good fielder. Ain’t a bad hitter either.”

I held up my hands, smiled numbly at him, and he trotted out to tell the kid that he could go and get a hamburger or just head home. The tryout had ended. What I’d just seen could turn the game of baseball upside down and inside out. Take it up another notch. A pitcher like that could double his output of pitches per game simply by being able to throw the ball over ninety miles an hour with either arm, and also have an advantage over the switch-hitters. I didn’t think there were any rules in the book to cover it and I didn’t care.

I could see Teddy talking with him out on the mound before they headed towards me. The kid stuck out his hand and I took it. “Thanks for coming, Mr. Costa,” he said. “Nice meeting you.”

"I'll be in touch," I said, "but you'll probably have to come down to Phoenix for a few days."

The kid didn't answer but Teddy nodded and said, "I made appointments with some other scouts, Nick." I must've looked surprised because he followed up quickly with, "I didn't know whether the powers down in Phoenix were open for a new pitcher like Shoe here."

"They're always open for left-handers with speed," I said, not mentioning the incredible fact that the kid threw from both sides.

"There's a storm coming in. You better put your jacket on before you tighten up," Teddy said, and the kid threw a halfhearted wave to the both of us and headed back across the street to the church.

"What scouts did you make appointments with?" I asked, and tried not to sound annoyed.

"Tom Purvis and Steve Merton," Teddy said, and looked away. Then he handed me back the catcher's mask and said, "The kid doesn't think he did very well."

"He did fine. Better than fine."

"That line drive you hit made him think he failed the tryout."

"Did you tell him I knew his change-up was coming?"

"Yeah, but he didn't believe me."

"The young ones are like that," I said, and tried to change the subject. "How big a foot does he really have?"

"Twelve...twelve and a half wide and still growing."

Teddy started to take off the catcher's gear and I said, "Tell him I'll set up a tryout for him down in Phoenix right away. I'm not sure the pitching coach is in town but I could get the owner to come out and look."

Teddy didn't answer. When he finished taking off the shin guards we started back across the infield together. I had never talked business with Teddy before and I felt uncomfortable. Things weren't the same in Tuba City as they were in Tucson. I didn't know what to say. Teddy's silence seemed to make the situation clear and I couldn't help feeling betrayed by what I'd thought was a friend.

"I think this kid should be on the Arizona team," I said as casually as I could. "It's where he belongs."

"Because he's an Indian?" Teddy said.

I hesitated and said, "No, because he's Navajo."

Teddy smiled and looked at me with the same kind of suspicious stare that the pale horse had given me on the way in. I felt even more like the intruding outsider as I waited for his answer.

"I've got to do what's right for the kid," he said.

I had to be careful of what I came up with here. The tryout had been the shortest and fastest I'd ever conducted. Something told me that Teddy knew it'd go that way even before I arrived. He'd dragged me all the way up to Tuba City just to put me into a bidding situation with the competition.

I opened the trunk of the car in silence. Teddy dropped in the catcher's equipment while one of the boys put back the box of baseballs. I repacked the speed gun, slid in the bat, and stood there for a long, uncertain moment in front of the open trunk. Teddy didn't look at me. When he started to close the trunk I stopped him and took out my checkbook. "The kid deserves a deal," I said, and quickly wrote out my personal check

to Harold “Big Shoe” Bromley for two thousand dollars. On the back of the check I wrote, “I knew your change-up was coming otherwise I wouldn’t have gotten near it.”

I handed the check to Teddy and said, “Cancel those appointments you have with Tom and Steve. I’ll set up the Phoenix tryout as fast as I can.”

Teddy looked at my personal check and smiled at what I had written on the back. “I really never made those appointments with Tom and Steve,” he said, but didn’t crack his usual smile.

“Then why did you tell me you did?” I asked.

“I needed to give the kid something,” he said, staring down at the check. “Something real. Something of value.” He stopped talking and looked up at me. “This kid needs that,” he said. “All these kids need that.”

I began to understand what had just happened. I might be an outsider in Tuba City but Teddy was an outsider too. He’d always been an outsider. And for the first time I knew that was the look I’d seen in his eyes before. “Make sure the kid gets a new pair of shoes and a baseball glove with some of that money,” I said. “But don’t cash it until Thursday.”

He laughed and seemed to relax. Then he waved my check in the air and said, “This’ll make the kid happy. He can call himself a pro now.”

“It’ll make me happy too,” I said and handed the Navajo kids the box of baseballs they had just put back into the trunk.

“You don’t have to do that,” Teddy said.

I gave the kids a couple of bats to go with the balls, and said, “Let’s just say it’s an investment for the future and leave it at that.” The row of dark-haired boys looked up expectantly for Teddy’s approval.

“I’m going to need your help with this kid,” I said.

“I’m glad you understand that,” he answered.

I started to get into the car but then extended my hand, and it surprised Teddy because in all the years we had known each other we never shook hands. The big Navajo smile came across his chiseled face and he opened his arms and embraced me. For the first time since we’d met I felt close to him. A friend.

“We’ll see you in Phoenix,” he said.

I started the car and the kids ran down Moenave Street, waving their new bats and balls. I made the turn, headed out past the burned out pickup, and the “GO WARRIORS” sign while the pale horse nibbled contentedly on the sagebrush. If my luck held I’d make the low desert before the storm hit.

Reuven Goldfarb

Cheering Gino Cimoli (1929 – 2011) Brooklyn, 1956

It was your name, Gino — euphonious —
and we were bored.
You didn't get a hit for us,
but we screamed our guts out,
even when you struck out or caught a routine fly.

That's when you acknowledged us,
tipping your cap, your first time, maybe,
to our motiveless persistence.

The next day, in the Post, a columnist noted,
“One pleasant development was the reaction
accorded Gino Cimoli by many of the fans.”

It was only us in the left field grandstand,
four schoolboys inciting the crowd
to cheer the rookie in the outfield.

We did a job, but you didn't stick.
(The Dodgers always had trouble with left field.)
After a year in LA, they sent you
to the Cards in a trade for Wally Moon,
whose “Moon Shots” over the screen in left
propelled the Dodgers to the flag. The next year,
with Pittsburgh, you started the rally
in the eighth that put your team ahead
and kept them in the game till Mazeroski
hit his winner in the bottom of the ninth.

Yet you, still a journeyman, went on
to other teams — the Braves, the A's, the O's,
the Angels — until your tenth in the bigs,
and that was it! You left with your head high,
a modest pension, a stat in the record books,
and a presence in the memories
of your once young fans, who now read the obits
and see your name, and look you up
and realize they'd only had a fleeting glimpse
of the man and the player you once were.

You scored the final run at Ebbets Field,
in '57, but I missed that game,
when the Dodgers beat the Pirates,
2 to zip. The next season, you led off
in the first ever West Coast big league game,
a loss against the Giants, 8 to naught,
at old Seals Stadium. In '62
& 3, a Kansas City A, starting
every day, you put up numbers like those
of '57, your break-through All-Star year,
and led the league with 15 triples.

Life after baseball: As a retiree,
you became a driver for UPS.
You were 60 years old, and still working
for the company, when they honored you
— acclaimed the Lou Gehrig of UPS! —
for never having had an accident
in all your 21 years on the job.

We still remember. You were a graceful ball-hawk.
You were handsome, dark in the Ebbets Field sun.
We would have made you a good fan club,
bewildering even ourselves by our partisanship.

Cut-Two

for Ken

I can see you slumped outside, shadowed beneath the shrouds of Spanish moss
as if you're about to say Kaddish
for a parent who's not yet gone. I push eight hours north toward you
through a daze of horse country
while the best plays of the Men's Senior Hardball Tournament

dazzle again in high-def memory: my rocket to right, then the backhand scoop
at first, then the one-hop liner
past the gimpy shortstop pulled in tight against the man on third, the dugout
whooping as the insurance ribbie
limped home, all replayed up the two-lane, white fences riding

the undulant hills, so many horses flicking their tails in the white noise
of my draft, each good play returned
as if all of it were there to make me happy as a singing boy,
and that's what I wanted—to coast in the carefree velocity of the post-game road
—only in my grandiose replays

I filtered out that eighth inning ground ball slipping beneath my glove, vanishing
the very moment you were sitting phone-side, waiting
for the doctor to call you
to your mother's side, and by the fourth hour every time I touched the brakes
my rogue right knee played

its orthopedic elegies, and late afternoon sent out its vines of shadows from cattle
and pine, while I denied
every bad play and tried to float in the pastoral breeze, all these rolling outfields
of north Florida, even the shallow parabola
of the double to the fence recalling that recent book on the new physics,

how every act is not a finite event but an ever and always recurrence, the dream
again, the white ball
ever and always compressing, the maple bat bent from its true line, before both
snap, are snapping
back into form, and then all the other instances in their dance, a gray

and an old palomino ambling toward the wind, the round short stop
singing in a smoker's alto
Cut-two! Cut-two!
as I crunch right leg beneath left, my foot sliding beneath the tag
just as my father—dead for decades—taught me

in the post-war suburban dusk. And so the innings flip down like runs
on the old green scoreboard, until
the game's over, ankles untaped,
shoulders iced, and we're all drinking beer with the other team in the steam
of the motel's outdoor spa, each story a casual lifeline

lingering in the dusk, the post game chatter fading in road blare, the little towns—
Bronson and Boyd, then Waukeena and Caps—
streaming back
into the night's recurrences, where beneath the wide windows
you've waited in moonlight, now holding a bottle out for me as I step

from the car to the porch, telling me your mother's taken the turn,
the promised two weeks
likely cut in half, and right then I can hear the lilting rabbinical tenderness
of her voice pouring up
into the present moment as once more I give in to the ancient recurring hope—

your mother and my father always and ever alive—
but, caught as we are in our own time, the dim, waving shadows
of branch and moss crossing your face, I say nothing,
the two of us
right now reaching for a drink always and ever vanishing beneath our grasp.

Heidi Seaborn

On the Occasion of an Outfielder's Wedding

My great-grandparents, Frances and Patrick (Cozy) Dolan married on August 24, 1902 between games at a double-header played by Chicago and Brooklyn.

Frances was all that mattered.
Her eyes clear as Lake Michigan,
set off against the white lace
dress and hat. She removed her calfskin glove,
with little tugs at the fingertips, exposing
her firm left hand. He palmed it
like a baseball, slipping on the slender gold ring.

The ump looked almost church official
without his pads and faceguard.
He'd finger combed his hair into place, dusted
his pant legs. Cozy'd done the same, knowing
when he first courted Frances, he'd caught
a long fly ball that was destined for the fence.

Now, on the pitcher's mound, clouds
shifting across the sky, surrounded
by her family, his teammates, the opposing team
(who'd shown up badly in the first game)
and fans waving pennants,
he leaned in to kiss his bride.

The crowd cheered, tossed straw boaters,
as he escorted Frances back to the stands.
Ump strapped on his pads, catcher too.
Cozy picked up his glove, nearly skipped
to the outfield where he could just
make out his wife's profile,
her graceful neck.

Asking for Nothing

Vermont's Gihon River flows past the studio that is my home this month, where I am finishing a draft of a project I have lived with for nearly a decade. In this small room overlooking this small river, I write and revise. When the trickle of words dries up for the day, I drink from other writers' wells. Yesterday, in Louise Erdrich's *Baptism of Desire*, in the long poem "Saint Claire," I read, "It is almost / impossible to ask for nothing. / I have spent my whole life trying.

When you're working on a novel, you simultaneously ask for nothing and also everything. Everything makes up a draft; nothing offers any certainty. When something arrives—an image, a phrase, a scene—it requires accepting that you're not sure which it is just yet, that you can't possibly know whether it's nothing or something, eventual jetsam or the keystone that will make this little triumph stand.

Back in March, I made a kind of wish: 90 wins for the Phillies. Despite the context, I don't think I would call the figure a prediction. Prediction is too ordered a word for what I felt as I wrote it, just days after the Phillies signed Jake Arrieta and signaled a definitive attempt to move away from the nothingness that comprised the previous several seasons. 90 wins was a fleeting fancy, a wild hare of the spring that hadn't yet arrived, and a strange one because in March, despite the optimism of the number, I felt closest to wanting nothing. I mostly wanted baseball. Not good baseball. Not great baseball. Just baseball, which was less of a something than a simple inevitability.

Yet, as of the moment I'm writing this, the Philadelphia Phillies are in first place in the NL East. As of the moment I'm writing this, I am exhilarated and terrified of what that might mean because it is also July and teams are maneuvering and Manny Machado has moved in and out of the conversation like the breeze at my window, to alight, finally, in Los Angeles. To want Manny Machado or anyone like him—a free agent at the season's end, a passing stranger—is a clear mark of wanting everything, wanting it right now.

In my studio, I disable the Wi-Fi, turn off my data, try to be distracted by nothing. But the Phillies are in first place. A red-painted mill sits square in my sight when I'm writing. Its wheel is gone, nothing left to turn, but I can imagine one, all of fortune turning with it. In the mid-season light, all that fortune is dressed up like the 1980 Phillies, daring me to envision anything at its top.

The 6th century Roman philosopher Boethius constructs the conceit of Fortune's Wheel in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. Fortune, personified, stands by her wheel, and men and women climb upon it. The wheel turns and they rise, but we all know how this goes. There is no glorious plateau atop the wheel, no state of constant bliss. Boethius writes the inevitable conclusion: Fortune "[n]ow tramples mighty kings beneath her feet; / Now sets the conquered in the victor's seat." If you squint, it's sort of hopeful—there's no plateau at the bottom of the wheel, either—but the price of rising is always falling.

Boethius's metaphor critiques the vanity of mortal success and its transitory nature. Baseball is nothing if not emblematic of mortality: No one stays at the top of their game—the game—forever. Careers end. Records break. Even at the practical level, fortune nearly always has a price, measurable in tendons and ligaments, prospects and cash considerations. In other respects, the price is moral, spiritual: what else has been abandoned for this pursuit? The same is true in the macro and micro level of baseball; the fortune of Major League Baseball has everything to do with the state of minor league contracts, with adolescents abandoning the varied pleasures of childhood to specialization earlier and earlier, with expensive traveling showcase leagues that shut out less fortunate hopefuls. In nearly all cases, the choice to devote one's life to sport means giving up something else. Sacrifice is the nature of devotion. Here at the trade deadline, time and season factor in: try to win now, or try to win later? Climb the wheel, hand over hand—install Manny Machado for half a season and postseason hopes (and perhaps a better shot at signing him long-term)—or wait for its turning and Yusniel Diaz's anticipated flourishing?

But it's more complicated than that. Wait and see means aging a few more players. Wait and see means more miles on Clayton Kershaw's back. Wait and see means, potentially, missing that one big chance. In Boethius's metaphor, Fortune's Wheel is a relatively simple round, easy to understand. In trade season, there are dozens of wheels, all turning in different directions, all at varying speeds. It's not enough to reach a single apex, but to time them all.

What is Fortune's Wheel to the unpublished novelist? A ferris wheel, the kind at the state fair that might, at any time, reverse its course, stutter, stop—and there you sit, three baskets from the ground.

The night of the All-Star Game, when reports rolled in that Manny Machado would join the Dodgers, I got the news via text. I wrote back, "Is it weird to feel relieved? I feel relieved!"

Hadn't I so recently declared that hope for 90 wins? Relief is a strange thing to feel upon learning the Phillies didn't get the kind of player about whom "game-changer" is an accurate epithet. But beyond my own assessment of what the Phillies might need to make a run this year (a little help on the mound, a better bat for right field), the real source of my feeling is another hope, the allure of an uncertain maybe. The glimmer in the distance always has the potential to become something better than whatever is in hand.

That glimmer is why I write; the capacity of the idea, the character, is what seduces, the dogged faith in what it all might become. It smacks of Plato, those early project dreams: the ideal form that might exist if everything goes right, if the brain and the fingertips are blessed with particular grace and I am willing to show up long enough, often enough, to see the moment when all the wheels spinning in the air align. And the novel, as an art form, offers such glorious distance: there may be literal years between conception and the fourth-fifth-sixth-draft scouting report that something is working. Don't call it a failure yet; the manuscript's only just now earned the call-up to double-A.

But there's no escaping philosophy or the rate of wash-out. The best player we know—the best we've seen, personally, devastatingly, at the rubber's distance, as Seth Sawyers writes—might never enjoy so much as a cup of coffee. Maybe they make a 40-man roster, but their cleats never touch the Skydome turf. Maybe the journey ends after six seasons in high-A. Maybe sooner. I have two complete manuscripts that will never see the outside of

their drawer, two more abandoned two-thirds through. Their raw stuff was never going to do so much as cast a lumpen shadow on that cave wall.

The mill I've spent so many days looking at and being in, the one where the resident artists take their meals and pick up their mail and browse the art library, once converted grain to flour and livestock feed. Its wheel, now absent, functioned as a result of manipulating the river, diverting the stream to an end beyond nature's oxbowed, mutable beauty.

All across baseball, teams are deciding how to direct the season's water, and some riverbeds we know are going to be parched. If the wheel is going to turn, it's going to have to wait for spring—maybe not even the next—and what's released during the thaw. The truth of a trade deadline is not beauty but production: all of it is grist, what can be made into legacies and long stretches of contending, or, barring that, a single championship.

A novel is not a championship, and as a writer not yet forty who hasn't published a book, I don't have the audacity to think about legacy or contending with anything except this manuscript and my own process. I think about getting this draft done, taking it one page at a time in the novel's long season, but that has required shifting my river, affecting my own prospects: I go away from my family and home—missing a reunion, my grandfather's birthday, the garden's ripening—to devote my whole brain to the task; I skip a lot of things that happen in the evening—movie nights, the places conversations go when they've really warmed up, eighth and ninth innings, and everything that happens on the west coast—so I can wake early and work at my best time, all while knowing there are no guarantees. I can only trade toward this chance, against what this wild hope might become.

Avery Gregurich

Taking the Field

for my brother

what have you got there? i lost my last
pair of cleats in the move, but I've still got
my glove tucked behind my driver's seat. can
you bring that aluminum bat you bought
at the salvation for protection when you first
moved to east nashville? we'll play long ball like
we did behind the church in des moines, curl-hopping
to break stained glass. on the way, one of us will
have to find rosin, big league chew, someone to
sing the seventh inning stretch, maybe a
sports drink to split after base-running. my
parents sold the house but kept our baseball
cards, the crawlspace full of familiar faces enough
to cover the seats as silent audience. we'll take turns
standing in the on-deck circle, timing our
swings to imagined pitches, shadows sketched by
only fathers' words: now, son, keep your eye on
the ball.