COBALT REVIEW
BASEBALL

# THE NINTH

# COBALT

2021/2022 Baseball Issue

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## 2021/2022 Baseball Issue

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# 2021/2022 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 Kristin Sanders, for her poem "Snapshots of a Life with Baseball Boys."

Finalists for this year's prize are Garin Cycholl for "Daguerreotypes" and Alex Shapiro for "A Fable About Streaks."

Congratulations to Kristin, as well as our finalists and semifinalists. A big thank you to all who have submitted to this baseball issue and supported Cobalt review since 2011.

We plan to take the rest of the 2022 season off. Nine issues (innings?) feels like a good wrap-up point, but we really want to bring this thing into extras. So watch for our tenth and final prize during the 2023 season.

Sincerely,

Andrew Keating
Publisher & Chief Baseball Officer

### Alex Shapiro

# A Fable About Streaks

During the hotter half of the year when
healthy enough to play, we watch Aaron
Judge's truck axel arms dwarf and lever

a bat, proportions stark enough to distinguish
peripherally from the kitchen while
I smoke and burn rice hand fanning fumes

in belabored flaps at the window to
distinguish among the pinstripes thru mom's
sight clouding in and out her nervous

system snapping at scars left by a truck
driver sleep fallen mid route swerving into
our passenger side door and spinning us off

the interstate smacking into a snow
bank packed dense like drying concrete to
distinguish on a shoddy hospital

desktop monitor tv thru static
bleeding onto walls gowns curtains bedding
the sterile white and metal my sunken pale

dad's jaundice complexions cast alike as
in health while he waits for the dead to leave
a liver he won't take from us living

to distinguish a looping pitch snapping
a syrupy angled slice hundreds of
feet the opposite way to distinguish

thick piled muscle propelling his action
from the frailty of his mortal structure,
skeletal and tendinous connections

*First appeared in *The Under Review*

unable to compensate for the force
he generates.

MORAL:
We text commemoration for any
hit, lucky or driven, recognizing
a fit, utile body as fallible.

## Alex Shapiro

# A Fable About Reflexes

My neighbor slaps a grounder off a tree stump that skids along the curb and ricochets up the walkway. I recall drinking Dr. Pepper one evening as Scott Brosius charged across the foul line, snared the ball barehanded before it could twist foul, and tossed it offbalance but nonchalant for an out. With instinctive steam and a late start I rush downhill at the low skipping ball, opening my barehand (tips nibbled raw) and reaching (knuckles kissing pavement), as it darts sharp at me. My pinky cannot corral the ball independently—

MORAL: is driven back immature bones jammed into each other's fronts and ends like a miniature stoplight car crash. I stumble downhill, pinching my glove at the ball rolling.

## Richard Moriarty

# The Player to Be Named Later

Nate's favorite part about flying from St. Louis to Kansas City: the last twenty minutes. Was it odd, he thought, to split the flight into parts? A trip that was done in less than an hour? In an hour, he could exhaust himself with a run around his neighborhood. In an hour, he could complete a scouting report after covering another stretch of highway (or in this case, sky) across Missouri to see another pitcher, catcher, or outfielder. But he rarely removed his laptop from his bag during these flights: these hours were sacred time.

There were plenty of flights where he didn't move at all. He'd sit down, close his eyes, and wake up when the pilot was announcing their descent. That was when the good part began. Wherever he was flying—especially across Missouri—he pre-paid extra for a window seat so he could continue a long-standing ritual. Something to do as he stared out across browned grasses, muddy rivers, and a smattering of lights emitted not from vibrant bars and restaurants but from meat packing plants and sheet metal factories. He wasn't sure how to explain it, not even to his wife; she'd never lived outside of Southern California until they moved to Missouri when Nate got a job as a regional scout, his first job for a pro team.

The ritual: every descent, count the ballfields visible from the window. He preferred flying during the day, so he wouldn't miss one. The ritual was something Nate and his father never skipped when they used to fly together: they counted ballfields on the way home from a weeklong trip with the pro team his father had played for—it coincided with Nate's sixth grade spring break. They counted ballfields coming back from California, where Nate's father introduced him to college coaches, arranged workouts for Nate so they could watch him play. Nate's father had played with most of these coaches; Nate didn't have to wonder if he would have gotten the chance to play for one of them if Nate's father wasn't Nathan Piscatelli, former two-time All-Star—it was doubtful the coach would've taken a chance on a Missouri kid who had maybe half the arm his dad once had. Even so, half the arm was enough for him to make the team.

A decade passed; Nate's playing career ended and he began a new one as a scout. In the offseason, Nate and his father counted ballfields before touching down in North Carolina for a week of fishing in the Outer Banks, one of their only trips together that wasn't baseball-related. Two months later, Nate's father was diagnosed with a brain tumor. They counted ballfields before landing in Minnesota, looking also for a second opinion, which only confirmed what little time they had left. The flight back home would be his last.

In his father's absence, Nate carried on tradition. He was on his way back from scouting a few games at a college near St. Louis, where he found a couple of prospects worth looking into—one a tall left-handed pitcher with average control but a fastball in the mid-nineties; Nate thought it could be worth trying to lure the kid away from his fourth year of college ball in exchange for the prestige of a high draft pick (and the bonus money that came with it). Nate had spent the night in the city, in a hotel that looked out toward the river and the Gateway Arch. He had his nightly routine on the road: hole himself up in his room, mindlessly watch any sport on TV after a room service dinner, make his way through half a bottle of Sonoma County red his wife insisted he drink rather than one of the sweet Missouri wines she couldn't stand. This time, though, he skipped his routine and went out with some of the other scouts. Huddling up at a cigar bar, drinking whiskey, talking about their own playing days. Everything rose-tinted: the wallpaper, the drinks, the way they viewed their playing careers in hindsight.

That was how it always went: if they weren't watching players play, they were talking about playing. Nate had a respectable college career as a pitcher—he went from a preferred walk-on his freshman year to the second starter in the pitching rotation his senior year on a team that ended up one win shy of a trip to the College World Series—but he never caught on in the pros, and after two years of bouncing back and forth between the lower levels of the minor leagues, he retired early. And now at age thirty, he'd learned to view the trajectory of his playing career not as a failure but simply the way it was meant to be.

These men were different: hardened by years of clawing their way through junior college ball to four-year schools to a pro contract with a signing bonus. It was real money to play a kid's game, and they'd signed away their twenties—and in some cases much of their thirties, too—to become little more than a pro team's bargaining chip. Somewhere down the line, they would be traded for more valuable players, along with cash considerations. In the news of one of these exchanges flashing across the bottoms of TV screens, they'd be listed as the player to be named later. Then, they would serve their clubs in any way they were asked: take a pay cut, play a position you only played in high school, ride the bench to make way for the latest prospect. And when the clubs finally had no more use for them, these men asked themselves, What do I do with my life now? The best opportunities, and often the only ones, were still with their teams. As coaches, scouts, special advisors, to continue serving the game they still loved unconditionally. They were and would remain pawns in the club's game, but their love for baseball either blinded them to the fact or made it meaningless.

These were men who'd been taught to win at all costs; in anything they did, every effort was geared toward the win. Yes, Nate had always thought of himself as competitive, but he worked with men whose sacrament was competition: they needed to compete as much as they needed lunch after a morning of physical work. In short, being around them—even in casual settings—was exhausting. So, a couple of hours before last call, when the group would stumble back to their hotel rooms, Nate paid his tab and walked home early. His return flight was one of the first out of Lambert International the following morning.

In his room, he hardly slept—he laid in bed until 1:30, when he gave up on sleep completely and called a ride to the airport, then sat half-dazed in the terminal until 5:30, when it was time to board.

On the plane, he fell half-asleep; when he opened his eyes, the captain was announcing their descent, and somehow Nate felt the refreshment of several hours' worth of sleep. The sun was now visible from his window. He pulled out his phone and typed a few notes about a player he'd watched the day before—*G. Jackson, plus actions at short, arm better suited for 2B, could grow into some power at the plate over time.* He would have to sell the scouting director on the kid—he was five-foot-eight and as a fifth-year college senior he wasn't expecting a growth spurt anytime soon—but the comparisons always helped with that: he wasn't going to be a guy like Altuve in Houston, but maybe a Madrigal in Chicago, or Wong who'd just moved to Milwaukee from St. Louis. The comps gave some structure by way of historical precedent to a process that was educated guessing as an art form. They were trying to identify the one player in a sea of a thousand kids who would succeed as a pro. It was at its best an elevated form of gambling, and it was hoping to win just often enough to keep some chips in front of you, keep you in the game. Nobody truly knew who was going to make it; there was too much luck involved, too much depended simply on timing. The player to be named later in a trade—his skills on the field interchangeable with those of a dozen others within his organization alone—could wind up an All-Star. It was similar to actually playing baseball for a living in that the scouts who figured out how to fail the least number of times were the ones who kept their jobs.

And there was plenty Nate had grown tired of about the job: late nights followed by early mornings; hanging around with the same assholes he'd played with and against his whole life; traveling around the region every week and having to leave his wife and their newborn daughter at home, which only became more difficult with repetition. Of course, there were things he still liked about the job, and maybe these were enough to keep him invested in it. The pay was good, for one—better than many other jobs he could find after spending the first thirty years of his life within baseball's little bubble. If he were to go looking for another job, he needed to know someone, and it seemed that everyone he knew––at least well enough to ask for a job—was as wrapped up in the game of baseball as he was. He thought the role of scout suited him well; he was someone who'd always slightly preferred watching the game over playing it. When he played, there was always too much to think about and concentrate on for there to be any room left for enjoyment, but from a comfortable distance, he could marvel in the choreography of nine players moving toward a single goal, and absorb baseball's beauty.

Gliding over his home state, he could gaze down at the ballfields and think of them as nothing more than well-manicured patches of earth, diamond rings of dirt, and he could wonder if his father was up above him somewhere, looking down at the same fields, the ones they'd both played on. And he wondered if his old man would waste his time in heaven on more baseball; he'd already given one life to the sport, after all.

Nate knew he would keep the fields etched in his mind: for himself, and for the part of his father that lived on through him. The plane touched down; Nate gripped the armrests firmly as always; his mind gradually shifted back to the present. He needed to call for a ride to the stadium, where he had a meeting about a player.

## Cyrus Stuvland

# Asking to Return

When the Nationals made it to the playoffs in 2019 I hadn't cared about baseball in years. But that fall, I got caught up in the hype again. I started going down the block to a neighborhood bar for almost all of the playoff games, hat on backwards, waiting. Aren't we all susceptible, at that time of year, to a suspension of reason, to extreme hope? Our hearts stop as we watch a ball leave a hand, a glove snag a ball, hands encircle a bat. It is an October feeling, a frenetic belief—maybe something will change, at the last minute.

At the bar, I watched as Howie Kendrick came up to the plate with the bases loaded and no outs. It was the tenth inning of the fifth game of the National League Championship Series. The Dodgers had had to pull one of their best pitchers, Clayton Kershaw, earlier and his replacement, Joe Kelly was not looking great. I felt the nervous energy in LA, even through the screen. A drunk Nats' fan at the bar next to me pointed at Kelly and proclaimed that piss was "practically running down his legs!" I chuckled, but was not that hopeful—the Nats have a reputation for last minute heartbreak.

Howie went after the first pitch, a changeup, fouling it off. He's always been a solid batter but no Soto. He wears his pants at his knees, showing off his red socks, and his stance is textbook: legs a little more than shoulder width apart, solid, left leg back slightly, knees bent, hands cocked behind his ear. That night he looked hungry and I feared he'd get out in front of something offspeed, feared he'd overswing. But at the next pitch, Kelly's 97 mph fastball was not inside enough and Howie sent it over the centerfield fence with a flash of his bat. The whole bar jumped up screaming and before I knew what was happening, I was hugging and high fiving strangers and someone was passing around shots.

In his 1975 piece, "Agincourt and After," famed baseball writer Roger Angell admits that it's "foolish and childish" to allow ourselves, as sports fans, to get so caught up in a game. He says he understands "the amused superiority and icy scorn" that people who are not fans have for sports fans and fandoms. I understand this too—that same scorn comes over me at times. After all, it's just a game. And yet, I have never completely let go of it. As Angell argues, at least we care about *something*. What the non fans ignore, he continues "is the business of caring—caring deeply and passionately, really caring - which is a capacity or an emotion that has almost gone out of our lives."

I was the youngest of four in a baseball family. I grew up running after foul balls, playing in the bleachers. I watched my brothers throw no hitters and my sister rip doubles down the line. Our name was synonymous with baseball in our small town by the time I came around, nine years younger than my sister. My early memories mostly take place either at church or the baseball fields or at home, playing baseball. I prayed before my peewee and little league games and filled notebooks with batting averages and lineups. I can't remember any part of my childhood when I didn't take the game seriously. I'm not even smiling in my very first tee ball picture, just staring straight ahead in that stoic way a pitcher is supposed to, whether their infield is falling apart or they've retired the side.

After Howie's homer and the ensuing bar celebration, my siblings and I called each other, trying to figure out ways we might attend the World Series. We grew up Seattle Mariners fans, but my sister Dawn moved to DC right after college and has been a Nats' fan since their very first season. We all gradually adopted them and my brother Aaron and I ended up moving to DC too, cementing our family's new team. Eventually Dawn found some connection through a friend and suddenly we could get tickets for a reasonable price. My brother Tim almost flew out from Washington state, but got food poisoning at the last minute. Aaron was living in New Haven and just didn't think he could swing the trip down. But I lived on the green line, a straight stretch to the stadium, and I was starting to care again.

So there I was, at Nats' Park, standing for the first inning of the fifth game of the World Series. It was like a late night youth group event, the air abuzz. Dawn stood next to me, both of us clad in red Nats' gear, even though the team had been wearing their dark blue jerseys that postseason. We'd been discussing this, and our own clothing choices. Should she have worn her Zimmerman jersey? Was my Senators' hat still good luck, even though we lost the day before? We laughed about it, but I kept taking the hat off, turning it around, putting it back on. Dawn said she hadn't been able to focus all day. The nerves. After detailing all the things that could go right or wrong for the Nats against the Astros, Thomas Boswell said, in his World Series column: "See, the World Series makes you crazy—but in wonderful ways."

I'd been spending much of my time that fall watching the tree outside my bedroom, which was goldening right—its leaves shaking free, brightening the wet sidewalk. I'd catch my cat staring at it and then I'd stare too, without knowing or thinking really. I spent entire afternoons like that - staring into leaves, feeling the light slowly leave, not caring. Why not care about a game? It seemed about as good as anything else and hey, the Nats had made a comeback.

"FUCK," Dawn said, suddenly, looking up from her phone. "Scherzer has a neck injury? They're going to start Joe Ross?!" I don't even know who Ross is, which was the kind of fan I was. I hadn't been paying attention.

Dawn played softball all through college, even after she broke 17 bones and had to learn to walk again. Her kids have played since they could walk. I told them when I stopped after my first semester it was because I wanted more time to study, to read. Which was partly true I guess, but it also had to do with shifting family dynamics, my own shifting identity. And after I quit, it became too painful to follow the sport too closely. In a journal somewhere I scrawled, crying, "softball was my first love." I guess I'd needed some space.

"No, no, no, not Ross," Dawn moaned. She put her head in her hands, sighing nervously, then picked up her phone to read more about it. "Ugh, I hate this! We need Scherzer."

Angell argues that because this kind of caring is rare, we shouldn't worry too much about what we care about. "It no longer matters how frail or foolish is the object of that concern," he says, "as long as the feeling itself can be saved."

I think that in a way, he's right. Caring can have a positive kind of power over us. Out in the right field seats that night, I almost forgot about Trump except to boo him when they showed him on the screen. I finally stopped obsessing over my students' mental health crises, the refugee crisis, the climate crisis, the world in crisis. I remember feeling like that night someone might get saved. Baseball isn't America's pastime—it's America's religion—and the World Series, in our nation's capital after so many years. It was a revival.

What I remember most about revivals, all those years ago sitting for hours in scratchy pews, was feeling part of something bigger—getting swept up in an overwhelming energy, eyes closed and hands up. But I was often half floating above that pew, looking down at the spectacle of myself, of everyone else, unable to let go. Afraid of not coming back.

Baseball was my family's way of accessing a world beyond the walls of our trailer, beyond the pews of our church. We were one of the only homeschooled families in our small rural area who played sports and as the youngest, I was especially isolated. There were a number of years I didn't really have friends. I read Russian literature and the Bible, both too seriously for a 14-year-old. But, as awkward as I was, my team respected me because I was good and I knew the game. My coach would ask me who I wanted to play shortstop, who should bat cleanup. My teammates asked me for help with their swing. Suddenly, I belonged.

A couple summers ago I rediscovered an old home video that was hours of my siblings and I taking turns recording each other playing baseball in the backyard. Occasionally my dad would walk by, a freshly butchered chicken in each hand, to say something like, "follow through." In one shot he stops, blood all down the front of his jeans, to throw a couple pitches. Later I can make out my mother delivering the cleaned and wrapped chickens to our cellar as Dawn tells Aaron to "choke up." I fast forward for long stretches and the dates change, but we stay there, in the yard, playing baseball, for the entire length of the VHS tape.

When my parents finally moved out of our childhood home, five or six years after the last of us kids had left, there were still bare spots, scars in the yard from where our batter's box and mound had been. The broken board that was our pitching rubber had long since disappeared, but I like to think the ground remembered us.

Many people who are not baseball fans complain that it is a long and boring game. Maybe they haven't watched or played a game when everything erupted in that final inning, so they don't experience the rest of it with the same suspense as those of us who, beginning in October, live in ninth inning time. In the playoffs, baseball fans are stuck in the finality of a single moment—everything is fast and slow and dripping with significance. This is ninth inning time.

We were still standing, in the second inning. There was constant, anxious cheering. I dissolved, my body nothing but a prayer. We held our collective breath at each pitch. And then Alvarez ripped a slider on the outside corner just over the fence in left-center field and the stadium groaned in unison. A two run homer.

But still we stood, ready to erupt, ready to fling ourselves onto each other, screaming. As if it was us, as if it was our prayer that made the slider drop off like that, our rally caps that served up that belt high fastball, and ours to celebrate if it did. I hadn't felt that way in years. I thought vaguely of the people I'd been dating, the woman who'd just broken things off with me. Did I even care?

And yet the top of the order came and went without cause for celebration.

Angell goes on: "Naïveté—the infantile and ignoble joy that sends a grown man or woman to dancing and shouting with joy in the middle of the night over the haphazardous flight of a distant ball—seems a small price to pay for such a gift." There is something beautiful about that joy, yes, but what about the pouting, crying, and rioting that happens after a loss or sometimes a win?

Angell wrote this four years after the last Washington Senators baseball game, which ended in a forfeit to the Yankees because Senators fans rushed the field in the ninth inning. We were up by two runs with two outs, when according to the Washington Post, "youths" came running onto the field, ripped up grass, and ran off with first base. Interestingly enough, caring comes up in the Post article: "No one on the field cared," observed Myra McPherson and Tom Huth, "nor did those fans who watched smilingly from their seats. The huge banks of lights dimmed out one by one."

Recently my friend got called a faggot at a Nats' game. He was talking quietly during the national anthem, not standing, and someone wanted him to "show the flag some respect!" He says he almost threw some punches, up there in the nosebleeds, and I don't blame him. I suppose it was this culture that I was trying to leave behind when I quit—the unthinking patriotism, the ways it is so enmeshed, at least in my family, with right wing American evangelical identity. Now that I think about it, I realize that I quit softball my first year of college and I quit Christianity the next.

Back at Nats' park, Ross was pitching beautifully. I'd always loved watching the lines a pitcher's body makes—the stillness of neck and shoulder floating impossibly straight as a front leg kicks high and out, toe pointed. A full windup is an unnatural movement, a thing of mechanical precision, and I imagine all the hours Ross has been practicing it. But there's even more grace, I think, in the pause that a pitcher takes in the stretch—that moment of intense focus and balance before such a sudden, powerful snap. It's a dance that requires improvisation, quick decisions. Will he try to throw out the runner or catch the batter off guard with a changeup?

Shortly after I made the transition from baseball to softball, I began taking pitching lessons from a man named Ted who had coached softball somewhere in California. Every Tuesday for months I'd finish my school work early and drive with my mom forty-five minutes to an abandoned strip mall in a nearby town where he'd set up a little practice spot. Often I wouldn't even have a ball in my hands as I went through the motions of throwing a fastball, dropball, or changeup. I was working on memorizing the correct form, the right release point. Ted would scrutinize me and offer suggestions; eventually, once my shoulders were opening or closing right, once my weight transfer was better, I'd finally get to grab a ball and throw into a target he kept on the wall. Even now, if I begin to step a certain way, my body starts going through the motions of my windup before my brain can stop it, before it can remind me that we are no longer on the mound.

At some point during the game the light changed and I realized how much time had passed or gone over me. Perhaps it was I who moved through it. I don't know, but we need new verbs for time. I do not think it so passive as to pass, do not much like spending it or taking it or being in it or out of it. I watched the tree and time obscured; I watched the game and time constricted.

But that's wrong too. No, I think time for me is a constant returning, or longing to return to some place-time I never quite was—and, if I think too hard about it, I don't know if it ever existed. But it seems best to have one foot out the door, in case it does.

Part of me is always in October, I'm realizing, looking at my cat, looking out the window. I could just watch the dying of the light for the next month. And lately, walking slowly down the street, I'm struck by how similar this light is to the partial solar eclipse a few years ago—the cold white of it, distant and wavering. That eerie way you can't tell if it's coming or going. I can't help but think that we are living now in Joan Didion's Blue Nights—a beautiful, fragile, gloaming world. The thing about the blue nights is that they are always ending but I can never tell when they are finally over. I just realize, a few days or weeks later, that they've gone.

We sat, finally, after the Astros scored two more in the fourth inning. I kept stealing glances at my sister—her fingertips were pressed together in front of her, a worried stare directed at home plate. Nothing was going our way, but the same nervous energy remained. We waited and waited, but nothing happened.

October forces us to make choices, to return, turn inward, take inventory.

Dawn and I started drinking our second round of tall boys, joking about drowning our sorrows as the Astros scored more runs and the Nats failed to hit and the umpires, goddamnit, refused to give us anything. But I looked around and sighed - it was a perfect night in the stands: a crisp and still 60 or so degrees, a packed house of Nats' fans. The beer was piney and cold and we all booed at the umpires together, exchanging knowing glances.

In a continuation of our priorities—Jesus and baseball—all of my siblings eventually attended and played ball at Northwest Nazarene University, until there was a Stuvland legacy awaiting me there as well. In time, first Dawn, then Aaron got as good as they would ever get, which wasn't good enough to keep going. They graduated and had to move on, putting their hopes into Tim, who started at NNU a few years later. When my time came, I picked a different school, a Quaker school in Oregon where I could still play softball but where no one knew my last name. I wanted something new, a fresh start. I'd been the littlest Stuvland for too long.

I was back in the stands about a year after I quit to watch Tim pitch in the NAIA World Series. It still felt too raw to be there, but I had to be. He'd turned down a draft from the Texas Rangers the year prior, thinking maybe he could get signed this year. He had a fastball in the 90s and had been a strong reliever all year. Our family flew in from various places and gathered there behind home plate, eyes on the bullpen, hoping we'd see him warming up.

The rest of us were bookish, got good grades, had various interests. For Tim, it was really just baseball. But about two weeks earlier, he'd dislocated some ribs. It was still hurting him to pitch, so when the coach did put him in during that series, he couldn't quite achieve a straight back without a full body wince. He was still so elegant though, and in his element—high kicking in a clean blue uniform under those dramatic lights. I took it all in: the flat bill of his cap as he shook off signs, the flush of his cheeks and tight line of his mouth, the flick of his elbow, the smell of the grass and hotdogs, the yells of peanut vendors, the cool night air—electric. I teared up, thinking this might be my last time watching him. It was.

Years later, I asked him if he'd considered coaching. "Naw," he said. "It hurts too much, man. I can barely drive past a field without fucking crying." I thought of being in the stands that night. "Yeah," I said. "I think I get it."

§

When I finally got home from game five, I couldn't sleep, my body still containing the bottled up emotions of thousands of fans, my own bottled up memories. I stayed up late, trying to calm down, thinking about how every year it gets harder and harder to calm down. Was it because I cared? Or because I couldn't? Maybe after the World Series, after October, I could breathe out, I could be alone, I thought. Maybe we all could. If time worked like that - if baseball worked like that.

I somehow barely remember games 6 and 7. They were in Houston and I had a big deadline coming up, so I must have watched at home as I tried to get work done. I do know that I cried in bed after game 7 ended - in turn overjoyed, relieved, and empty. We finally had something to cheer for—why did it feel like a loss? "Having experienced both," says Mary Ruefle, "I don't know which is worse: intense feeling or the absence of it." October would end, after all this time.

I read something recently that said autumn was a season when everyone we've ever loved might show up on our doorstep in a wool sweater, asking to be let in. That's ninth inning time. The possibility, the threat, of October. Suddenly we wake up and we care, if only for this one terrible moment. We are struck with the thought of what might happen in the nick of time, before the light leaves, before we are left standing in the yard in our slippers, longing to leave, to follow the sun down the street to someone's house, to show up on the porch in a sweater, asking to be let back in, asking to return.

## Garin Cycholl

# Daguerreotypes

*BROCK*
first step to second
then an explosion or
glove folded over hip,
alone in left field
against a steel
assassin's note
in the stretch

*GIBSON*
first the Mets walked
Maxvill, just to get to him—
"sacks jammed" and walk
to the plate, gripping a bat,
the stiff practice swings and
the ball dropping into the
left field loge; on the mound
snapping his glove like he
couldn't get the ball fast enough

*ALLEN*
gray border along
logoless red cap,
bat shouldered,
RITCHIE; the inevitable
card to be named
later

*CLEMENTE*
legs alive as rainsticks,
pistons cocked in a first-
to-third pop-up slide or
tumbling into a throw
to third: steel city rival

*WYNN*
far from toy
cannon

## Rodney Torreson

# Two Years Retired, Bobby Murcer Makes a Comeback Bid, 1985

*"The life of a soul on earth lasts longer than his departure."*

*Outfielder Murcer, quoting philosopher-poet Angelo Patri at Thurman Munson's funeral, 1979*

After your ascent into the
broadcast booth, then higher
into the rites
of the front office,
your soul still roams the field,
combs it for hits
that never got through.
Your ear cocks
for that song: the body
raining hard on the base path.

In Florida, when you pick up a bat,
the deep woods stir.
A practice swing and the river
jumps into your wrists.
You make good contact
with the world
you've seen from the moon.
As if the Yankees remember
your words, "A man lives on
in the life of others,"
they hand you a miracle; you sign.

What is lonely as one hit
in twelve at-bats?
Call it a rain dance
in the season of old bones,
your playing four games
while the trees grow back,
your fist, stone,
as you dream back your speed,
run faster than you can run.

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## Ken Hogarty

# Baseball and Tech: A Lost Frontier?

America's frontier experience succumbed to technological advances which initially expanded its horizons. Unsurprisingly, because baseball links American life to the frontier romance it keeps alive, it too finds itself threatened by technology's once promising boundless opportunity

Agricultural technology, epitomized by the spread of barbed wire, commandeered the need for cattle drives. Innovative firearms, such as the Colt revolver, enabled settlers to tame nature and Native Americans in their path. Mobility and communication too—technologically manifest in stagecoaches, the railroad and telegraph—made Western expansion viable, hastening the frontier's demise.

Baseball, birthed in a frontier experience, evolved into America's national pastime because of the telegraph and railroad. Though other sports, especially football, found a better marriage with technology, the telegraph bequeathed radio and television, and rail travel bequeathed air travel to usher in baseball's Golden Age.

Baseball reenacted the epic life of the West—a shifting concept throughout America's expansion—and provided what Henry James called a "continuity of things." Hawthorne's New England Puritans, Melville's whalers, Twain's Mississippi raftsmen, and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County denizens fictionalized particularized myths embodying essentials about the frontier experience.

Baseball does so through a democratic, national drama, at once realistic, romantic and accessible. Donald Hall claimed, "Baseball is a place where memory gathers." The memory of the revelatory frontier myth it perpetuates makes abstractions in the American experience concrete.

Modern technology, robbing us of reflection and anticipation essential to play and watch baseball, points it toward a trajectory mirroring the fate of the Western experience it kept alive. Jacques Barzun said, "Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball." Is that true today?

Baseball emerged as the national game when the frontier became myth or morality tale, the staple of dime novels and romantic narratives. *The Growth of the American Republic* asserted, "The cowboys and their liege lords developed a unique culture, folklore and society, and then passed away forever." Baseball, however, evolved to perpetuate Western characteristics and values, most significantly defining heroes as rugged individualists acting for communal good.

Baseball's setting, objective, play, rhythm, characters and history reveal its cultural derivation connecting Americans to a frontier past, real and romanticized, that molded national character.

Ballparks' traditional sights, sounds, and smells conjure what Eric Solomon called "pastoral familiarity," in opposition to urban reality. Thomas Wolfe noted wooden bats, leather balls and gloves, and an expanse of grass spoke to a shared experience with the land.

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Not always a pastoral idyll, the West became backdrop for dangerous clashes with hostile forces. American character sustained such opposition through acceptance of diversity and endurance of underlying tension, hallmarks of baseball.

Contradictions in the game's layout also emphasize opposition. The outfield—a sparsely populated wilderness—contrasts with the inner diamond—compact, regularized and densely populated—where the community's main business unfolds. This fulcrum of action, with rigid dimensions, sits in a corner of the playing surface. Like Western settlements, land spreads from it to a remote frontier.

Idiosyncratic outfield diameters and shapes flout restrictions, just as varying Western locales bred peculiarities while promulgating common habits and values. In baseball, diverse venues dictate specific action, though within a general pattern.

Frontier success meant territorial possession. In baseball, action emerges from the duel to control a nebulous territory, the strike zone. What reenactment replicates the scenario of high noon duels better than baseball's hitter/pitcher confrontation? Mark Kram noted that territory, at the core of many games, is never so maddingly understated as in the "gamesmanship of this conflict." In the West, duelists also fought over psychic as well as physical territory.

Geoffrey C. Ward said "at the heart of the game lie mythic contradictions [and] tensions. It is about time and timelessness, speed and grace, failure and loss, imperishable hope—and coming home." So too, the frontier experience.

Frontiersmen pursued dreams, new homes and better lives as productive adults. A batter too starts at home but seeks a different home, rewarded for his mobility. Blair Fuller emphasized this significance: "[Returning home when scoring a run] is the second, creative home of man, the home that he establishes for himself. This is the story Americans love best, ...our preoccupation due to the pioneer experience." Despite Thomas Wolfe's assertion "you can't go home again," batters aim to do so.

The aggressor suddenly becomes the defender or vice versa in baseball. Players change sides every half inning. After facing the other team alone when batting, players work with teammates on defense, though the designated hitter rule subverts this to an extent.

Western expansion surged as pioneers followed trailblazers, akin to baseball's lead-off men. Thus, Western experience featured a rhythm of stops and starts. Though today's sluggers strive to launch homers to return home immediately, teams historically advanced runners in stops and starts. Roger Kahn wrote, "Baseball's inherent rhythm, minutes and minutes of passivity erupting into seconds of frenzied action, matches an attribute of the American character." Traditional baseball reenacts the rhythm of frontier expansion.

Action in baseball, not clock-driven, often takes place in the imagination. Conversely, time, for us speeded-up in a complex society, manifested itself on the frontier in a lazy, seasonal rhythm, romanticized in a cattle-drive. In baseball, a game theoretically could, before recent rule implementations, last forever.

Baseball also replicates the seasonal Western notion of time. During spring training, players band together like hopeful wagon train settlers. The dog days of summer test ballplayers, just as long drives did cowboys. Baseball's winter "hot-stove season," rebirthing expectations, calls to mind frontiersmen hunkered down in log cabins. The mandated offseason inaction of both promotes storytelling and tall tales.

Baseball players, like cowboy-heroes, enjoy instant resolution and gain accomplishment based on action. Players get rewarded or dinged statistically, not only in comparison with peers, but also predecessors, legendary and mythic. When no longer productive, they get sent packing like non-producing cowboys.

The cowboy-hero, defined by skills and adaptability, belonged to a male cult with its unwritten code of honor. Baseball heroes similarly cite an unwritten code to condone beanballs, hard slides, and charging the mound. The frontier's pragmatic, violent nature, even muted by civilizing society's encroachment, perpetuated a survival-of-the-fittest ethos. Beneath a surface gentility, baseball ritualizes pragmatic actions, bent rules, and violent reactions. The batter charging the mound followed by his posse epitomizes vigilante justice.

Historically, frontiersmen argued with power. Baseball extended a similar democratic resistance to authority. Bruce Catton observed, "One of the stock tableaux in American sports history is the aggrieved baseball player jawing with the umpire." The rugged individualist sees himself as the ultimate authority, and fans often follow in concert. "Kill the Ump" echoed in stadiums when umpires had the last word before instant replay.

Merritt Clifton noted that baseball has always appealed to immigrants, in part because many came to America in rebellion against authority: "They could identify with the ambitious batsman/gunslinger who takes 'em all on. And, as they gradually gained property and responsibilities, they could identify with the home-team defense, too… [not wanting] to be outcasts forever."

People who play, watch and manipulate baseball mirror stock Western characters. Baseball phenoms replicate gunslingers, while managers playing hunches are "riverboat gamblers." Pitchers taunting batters with off-speed stuff, or fielders "in the neighborhood" on tags, act like Western con-men.

Effete Easterners morphed into early baseball's few college-educated players. Recently, they become Sabermetrics adherents, taking over front offices. Conversely, old-school managers and coaches perpetuate caricatures of crusty Western characters.

As in any romance, stories of the Old West defined villains as totally evil. They wore black to contrast with the "good guys." Reaffirming this, baseball traditionally garbed home teams in white and visitors in grey.

Opponents using corked bats or pitchers throwing spitballs typify outlaws. Western saloon keepers become baseball clubhouse overseers. Ranchers? Farm system development personnel or the groundskeepers? Batboys serve like youngsters fawning over Western heroes. The umpire, the sheriff/deputy/marshal of baseball, upholds the law with his crew, his posse. Drifters in the West become multi-traded MLB veterans, deadline signees to win a pennant. And, the Hatfields and McCoys had nothing on the Red Sox/Yankees and Giants/Dodgers, baseball's feuding families.

Baseball even had its own hanging judge, the Commissioner, made legendary in the person of Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis who rode to the rescue after the Black Sox scandal, but also blocked integration.

Novelists and poets, like the Zane Greys who commemorated the West, celebrate baseball. A plethora of storytellers, from writers to announcers and colorful characters within the game. emulate Western myth-making tradition. Vin Scully, waxing poetic, might have been telling tales around a campfire. Moreover, dime novels that kept the West alive morphed into sports stories, with baseball heroes such as Frank Merriwell, Chip Hilton and the aptly named Bronc Burnett. Baseball, like the West, invites narrative, poetic Homers.

Roger Kahn noted, "There is action for perhaps fifteen minutes of the time [in baseball]. The rest is either inaction or suspense, depending on imagination and point-of-view." The pauses invite personal interaction, paralleling porch gatherings in Western communities, with other fans, in the stands or in front of a TV, more than other sports. Baseball exchanges can also echo Western one-upmanship within a saloon camaraderie, mimicked in contemporary sports talk shows.

Just as baseball attracts many female fans, numerous unchronicled women civilized the West. Often emerging as hero-worshipping groupies in baseball or frontier romances (*Bull Durham*'s Annie, *The Natural's Memo Paris*, or Miss Kitty from *Gunsmoke*), women have historically been relegated to "a league of their own," until recent progress on and off the field.

Baseball's owner/manipulators, motivated by money, power, or promises of legitimacy, simultaneously act as competitors and partners. The blatant anti-monopoly status ceded in 1922 to baseball's owners granted them a similar status as Western cattle, land and railroad barons.

The fifty years after baseball obtained its Anti-Trust Exemption found the sport replicating the country's earlier push to new frontiers during "Baseball's Golden Age." Regardless, owners held players as property "on the hoof." Curt Flood's 1972 Supreme Court challenge paved the way for player salary arbitration and free agency, analogous among owners to the worst cattle stampede.

History justifiably acclaims baseball's role integrating American society. Jackie Robinson breaking baseball's color barrier tells a quintessential American story. Still, baseball outlawed players of "Black African descent" from the high minors and major leagues from 1887 for sixty years. In the interim, some players ironically "passed as Indian." Many historians consider subjugation of Native Americans on the frontier genocide. The exclusion of African Americans in baseball similarly exterminated hope for oppressed people.

The game's manipulators historically include gamblers, administrators, businessmen, advertisers, agents, media honchos, politicians. Similar character types, personified by Eastern speculators, contributed to the ruination of the frontier, even while paving the way for the emerging civilization. On both the frontier and in baseball, profiteers often have used technology to gain advantage.

Train travel and radio spread the sport's hold before yielding to air travel and television as baseball cultivated national audiences. Television, squelching the expanse of the game and stressing big-event viewing rather than seasonal narrative, most augurs a fall. The building of modern stadiums, the uniform stitching of baseballs, the crafting of bats, and recent innovations such as instant replay and analytics promised innovation. But, at what price? Recent technology has also birthed burgeoning gambling, gaming, and fantasy sports industries that promote entrée to a new demographic, but a demographic completely adrift from the frontier experience baseball recreates.

Baseball players, like Westerners, pragmatically seek an edge. Baseball's most recent cheating scandal, however, crossed a line BECAUSE it, even with drumbeating garbage cans, was technologically driven. Baseball has reacted by implementing changes that, sadly, often bury its frontier roots.

In the movie *Bang the Drum Slowly*, the appropriately named Piney Woods sang about a dying teammate. Woods lamented, "I'm just a young cowboy, and know I done wrong." Baseball can't get its reaction to its recent scandals wrong by looking toward tech solutions that bury the lost frontier it so long reanimated.

### Kristin Sanders

# Snapshots of a Life with Baseball Boys

In high school, I draped myself across the laps of baseball boys
and offered anything. I photographed the baseball boys
in profile leaning against a chain link fence for the yearbook page,
their bodies dirt-daubed and resplendent in the trembling lens.
Dazzled, I bundled beneath layers of wool, cupping
a thermos of hot chocolate to mitten-clap and hoot
the baseball boys to victory. I upended myself
for baseball boys, changed plans for baseball boys,
and once I even loved one.
Just think, those slimming monochrome suits!
Those dark eyes shadowed beneath brims!
The raspberry danger of sliding, nestled against
the hard safety of protective gear!
What tireless paradox, O baseball boys.
And when all of my dedicated draping failed,
I remembered that, first, there had been a time
when I was only a girl whose father brought home
a bat, a glove, and a ball, and we went outside
so he could show me how to try to win.

### Reagan M. Sova

# A Ghost Ship Uniting with the Moon

I had been on the run with peasant mentality, living with Haskel Montefalco in his basement. He could turn the biggest worrywart into a party animal. He was born without a right hand but lucked out as a lefty, an ace pitcher. Coach Honeycutt summoned us - right field was my Garden of Eden - the only two freshmen on the varsity squad that year. Haskel and I had been training on the secret burial grounds of the monastery. We did one-arm pushups in the moonlight with candles burning beneath our bellies.

Haskel's father evicted us from the basement. "My great Aunt Anna is coming to live with us. Like you Walter, she has nowhere else to go."

He asked us to gather some bedrolls and moved us to the barn. Haskel was elated. That way we could sneak out and feed Farmer Harrington's horses. Some nights Haskel and I would don claw hammer tuxedos and feed them tulips off the flat palm. We passed sacred wordless moments with the beasts and the moon, making silent confession, like old warlocks crying without tears, crying for lost pigs, the death of the human race.

When Aunt Anna arrived, we sat with her in the dim basement. Her old olive skin was like an alligator's. She was a 100. She asked us to go get her some PayDays. We did and nibbled them with her. Anna, spying our smears of eye black, said, "So are you boys ball players?"

Haskel said, "Sure are."

"Do you swing the bat one-handed Haskel?"

Grinning, Haskel said, "I bunt."

He did not even mention that the day before he had become the only pitcher in state history to have thrown a no-no on his birthday. He said, "Do you like to party, Aunt Anna?"

"Oh, I adore parties. Do you boys know what gravy is?"

We laughed. I said, "Like biscuits and gravy?"

"No, I mean gravy like something good you were not expecting. A bonus. Because I have partied with ladies in a hallway river of gravy."

She swallowed the rest of her PayDay and belched. We all laughed. Haskel said, "I could tell you had some party animal in you."

"That is not even the half of it. In the tiny Italian village where I was born with the caul, where they eat the bull's eye, I have been a blinking mule in a sandstorm."

I said, "Holy smokes. Now this I would like to hear about."

"Well, when I was a prostitute, I greased myself with a hidden ointment that made it so when I went out, the body remained while my spirit went forth. I inhabited animals: mules, cats, the smallest mice, the grandest horses. I did battle with evildoers seeking to scotch our crops. I was victorious with the power of the wayfaring tree behind the cross."

§

Haskel and I rested our heads in the barn that night, and in my sleep, I dreamed Aunt Anna above me beating a drum. My spirit left my body as a falcon, flying to Farmer Harrington's where someone had lit one of his horses afire. No flesh left upon the beast's body, dried and withered, smoke rising from muscle and bone. The assailant peeled off in a black Cadillac; he had a smile like a horrific deity rolling back onto the pages of the Tibetan book of the dead.

I startled awake with Haskel jolting to life across the way. We had had the same vision. I busted into the house commandeering the kitchen fire extinguisher. Haskel revved his 3-wheeler. I hopped on, and we thundered up to Farmer Harrington's right as a man was drizzling a jar of kerosene upon our favorite mare, Sweetpea. The rotting wood fence posed almost no barrier with our high hurdling.

"No you bastard!" I yelled as he struck a match cold blooded and tossed it upon her.

I hosed the beast for dear life, with great risk to my head, dodging her bucking, but I hit her good enough to snuff the flames after one, maybe two seconds of combustion. Haskel had caught the man—a little bearded feller, not taller than 4 foot 7—and popped him in the nose. I charged them, and the man pulled a pistol, freezing us in the moonlit field.

"I will kill you cocksuckers if you come any closer."

He slowly stepped backward. I said, "Why did you do it?"

"In the new Bible, all this has been foretold."

He backed away, keeping us in his sights all the way to the getaway car, the black Cadillac. We roused Farmer Harrington and led him to Sweetpea lying in the field, periodically groaning in pain. We told him about the gun, the car, and the strange, small man. Kneeling by the horse, Farmer Harrington said, "I know who did this. His name is Melvin. He is a FBI agent. He was a special friend of mine until he went crazy. Even started celebrating Christmas on September 29th— his own birthday."

The vet arrived with the lotion. Lathering Sweetpea, he predicted she would recover.

When we returned home, sun creeping over the hill, we told Anna of the strange happenings, the dream, the mare afire. Anna said, "Melvin has answered the call of the evildoers who have come up from hell. In my time, I have had a few pissing in my wine. You must fight them in the night, especially on Thursdays. If you are victorious, your fields will flourish. When they win, famine follows."

Anna struck a match, lit a candle. It wobbled faintly as we repeated her words with a hand upon the testicles: "Through the perilous passage of time, the diabolical dreams, the sacred exodus, the open road, and the pilgrim's return, I shall defend these fields and animals before I go. I shall guard the secrets of man, should they arrive from friend or foe."

We swaggered through our schedule, red hot, undefeated into the state tournament. Haskel tossed another no hitter; my on-base percentage hovered near .450. All the bats in our lineup were cranking hits, nary a runner stranded. The night before the state championship game, I again dreamed Anna above me beating that drum, and again, my soul flew from my body. This time I inhabited a lynx, prowling Farmer Harrington's fields. I caught Melvin sneaking into the cellar to piss in Farmer Harrington's wine. Pecker in his hand, nearing the deed, I backed him off with a hiss. Farmer Harrington came down with a lantern and locked the cellar with chains. When I awoke, Haskel was mumbling in his sleep about a bear trap. I shook him.

"Haskel!"

He flopped and flailed, eventually stirring awake. “I was dreaming Melvin was trying to set a bear trap in Coach Honeycutt’s yard. But I was a wolf. I ran him off.”

We got dressed in our tuxedos with the grand occasion, the championship, slated for that evening. We greeted Sweetpea and the others with apples, carrots, a few jelly beans, not too many. Farmer Harrington appeared with the early morning sun, his eyes cracked red, a shotgun slung over his shoulder.

“Confession time, boys. I am a homosexual. Melvin was my lover. Guilt has gnawed his brain to mincemeat. And now I cannot escape the terror hanging over me, the thought of his return.”

Haskel sheepishly rubbed his wrist nub.

“Ah, well, sorry to hear you been having a tough time of it. Just know... you’re not alone. We swore an oath to defend these fields, the animals. Whatever comes your way, you can count on us. And it don’t matter if you’re homosexual. Ain’t that right, Walter?”

I had done so many things better not to tell, so I was in no place to cast judgement.

“You’re still a-ok with me, Farmer Harrington.”

Farmer Harrington’s voice wobbled: “You’re the only ones I trusted, and I was damn right. I know you boys have weathered some hardships, Walter, with your folks, and Haskel, missing a hand and all, but you’ve taken those misfortunes and become better men. I swear it. Only thing I ask is, can we keep what I said, about my preference of company, just between us?”

I said, “Our oath has us guarding the secrets of men.”

Something like relief washed upon him.

“I will never forget how you boys saved Sweetpea. My heroes. Now you go get ‘em tonight, alright!”

He blasted the shotgun skyward; we three laughed and whooped.

We rode the team bus to meet our rivals a few towns over. The crowd grew large. A couple thousand packed the stands. It was the ballpark where the flagship university of our state played. There were newspapermen and field lights. The opposing team, Santa Maria della Bella High School, arrived in black cloaks and never spoke. They had white powder on their faces.

During our warm up, Haskel beckoned me to the infield and spoke with his glove concealing his mouth. “Guess who the hell they got over there.”

I discreetly scanned around their dugout. It was Melvin. He appeared to be their pitching coach.

“You gotta be shittin’ me.”

Our three senior aces had been spent on the two previous games, both settled via long, extra-inning dogfights. Coach Honeycutt had no choice but to start the freshman, albeit one who had had a sterling season. Haskel stepped to the mound. I punched my glove in right field.

“Here we go Haskel! Strike him out!”

Haskel delivered the first pitch: *crack*! The ball sailed over my head.

“Goddamn,” I muttered to myself as the kid’s leadoff home run smacked the scoreboard.

“Tough break Haskel! You got the next one!”

But they loaded the bases. And their shortstop with the amethyst amulet blasted a grand slam. Their fans, many sporting ominous bowlcuts, gyrated. Two more runs leaked in. Haskel was getting murdered. Coach Honeycutt spit his chaw and came to the mound to chat. Haskel then caught his rhythm it seemed, got a couple outs. But they started up again, and we surrendered three more to end the inning practically buried, 10 to 0.

Duke Hogwood, our first baseman, spiked his mitt on the floor of our dugout.

"I'm sorry, Coach, but I can pitch a helluva lot better than what he's doing!"

Haskel, rattled, pale, spit seeds from the bench. I didn't like Duke talking as if Haskel wasn't within earshot. Coach Honeycutt said, "I see why you've been having trouble, Haskel."

He pointed out Melvin in their dugout.

"See that lil' bearded guy? He was imitating you the whole time but throwing really stupid."

"Like he was making fun of him?" Duke said.

"Naw. I think he was hexing him."

Duke said, "Aw c'mon, Honeycutt."

Haskel said, "I think I know what to do. Switch my delivery, so he can't mirror me."

Honeycutt said, "Ok, I'll give you a try with it. But one more run, and I'm gonna have to sit you down. Ok?"

Haskel eyed the mound.

"I understand, coach."

"Alright. Now let's go boys. We got a mountain to climb. Walter, leadoff man. Let's get a hit!"

I took a few practice cuts before stepping to the plate. Popped a flyout to left on the first pitch. Walking back, I glanced Haskel's father next to Anna in the crowd. Anna's eyes rolled back into the head like her throat had been slit. She fell into Haskel's father's arms. A buzz of commotion swirled around those nearby. I bounded into the stands, helping Haskel's father bring Anna to the reclined passenger's seat of their car. Her head flopped over, tongue hanging out.

"Is she gonna be alright, Mr. Montefalco?"

"Oh yeah. She's been known to do this. You can even elbow her pretty vigorously, but it's like she's just dead to the world."

Haskel's spikes back upon the pitcher's plate, he delivered his first volley with a high leg kick. Strike one.

"There you go Haskel!"

Burned in another for strike two. Haskel's leg was kicking so high that Melvin couldn't properly imitate the windup. He wasn't that limber. The third pitch, a screwball, had the burly umpire yelling above the statue-still centerfielder with the bat on his shoulder: "Steeeerike three!"

After the disastrous start, Haskel went the distance without giving up another run. But we couldn't get any offense going. The score remained 10-zip through six and a half innings. Goats grazed the outfield after we had trotted off for our turn to bat. Last chance.

Benson, our third baseman, earned himself a leadoff walk, followed by Glacier and Alonzo flashing enough lumber to load the bases. I hit a grand slam to put us on the board 4 to 10. Melvin vomited next to their dugout as I rounded third. After I had touched home, I dashed out to the parking lot to check on Anna. She was splayed on the front seat looking like a sweet, lifeless bag of bones. Her spirit had departed, I was sure of it. She had gathered all her gravy time to fight with us.

A couple groundouts slowed our rally, but the bloop singles continued, scoring us three more runs. 7 to 10. And our left fielder, Oglethorpe, got beaned in the head, which put him on first with Apollo camped at second. Rusty, our designated hitter, sliced the bat through the warm evening air, ready to make history or die trying. Coach Honeycutt called time.

"Haskel, I believe you can outrun this catcher. I want you to lay one down for me. Load 'em up for Walter and the heart of the order."

Rusty swayed like he might faint. Duke shook the dugout railing in fury.

"Coach! That's... That's insane!"

"I know Duke. But when your ass is in the jackpot, sometimes you gotta deal a wild card off the bottom of the deck."

Their players, dead eyed and quiet up until then, went giddy exchanging sneering whispers as Haskel took his one-arm practice cuts. Their cluster of fans tucked their right hands into their sleeves and grunted mockingly. Mean ass bastards. Haskel had watched three pitches come in when he laid a beauty of a bunt down the third base line. The catcher flipped his mask off, sprung toward the ball, but bobbled it and skipped the throw. It's debatable in baseball, and physics, if a runner and a ball can truly "tie," arriving at the same precise moment. Haskel's hard-charging bunt was the closest I ever saw, and the ump was on top of it, flinging his arms: "Safe! Safe!"

The bases jammed, all runners holding, pandemonium erupted in the stands. The Santa Maria coach, the only white man I had ever seen with a fu manchu, came roaring out of the dugout, breathing fire. "Billy, are you blind? He was out by a mile!"

They jawed heated for a bit, until the ump swung his fist. "You're outta here!"

Once he got tossed, that's when their coach got his money's worth.

"You *stupid* motherfucker!"

The cop on duty ushered him off the field. Melvin took the reins; he would be their head coach for the duration, state championship or bust. I stepped to the plate. Melvin called time. He walked out to the mound with stalks of sorghum, brushing them all over the pitcher, who had laid on his side and was grabbing fistfuls of dirt and rubbing them on himself. Their students were vocalizing a strange incantation with their throats. The umps were milling around. A couple infield players joined Melvin and the pitcher. They got down on their knees and folded their hands. I approached them after a minute.

"What the hell Melvin?"

He swung the sorghum stalk like he was a batter.

"This is you in the near future. Swing and a miss. Swing and a miss. Swing and a--"

"No chance! You can't stop this comeback."

"The only comeback happening is the one you see before you. I had thought I was the last believer, before I put my mouth to the ear of this generation."

"You think you're Jesus Christ?"

The players around Melvin all rose menacingly, as he gritted his sharp teeth.

"I will sit upon the throne one day. Like death, I am the demon you cannot banish."

With the bat, I knocked some dirt off my spikes, sprinkling the earth.

"Well that's fine for me," I told him, "because I do not banish demons. I summon them, and submit them to my will."

I returned to home plate as Melvin snarled some final word to the pitcher. The catcher, Ozuma, a stout Dominican they had smuggled back on one of their “mission trips,” punched his mitt.

“This fastball coming to kill you.”

I crouched in my stance and let a beauty breeze by. Strike one. I knew all the good cuss words but kept my mouth shut, examining my grip, taking a couple cuts. Back in the batter’s box, a nasty one curved in for strike two. The crowd thundered with a mix of ecstatic zeal and lamentations. Our baserunners barked encouragement tinged with desperation. Honeycutt cupped over his mouth.

“Eye on the ball, Walter! Just make contact!”

All our teammates were on their feet leaning over the dugout rail. They had been planting a sunflower garden, nervously spitting all those seeds, rally caps on upside down and inside out. I dug my spikes into the box, but I was trembling, uncomposed. The pitcher took his sign and stood ready to deliver. But some small scurrying thing drew my attention. I called time. Amid the booing from their side, a tiny rodent crawled out of the grass. It motored through the dirt, onto my cleat, sniffing, eyeing me down there. One glance, I knew whose spirit was dwelling within. The catcher smacked his glove overtop, trapping the tiny beast. I had to restrain myself from knocking his head off.

“Let that mouse go, Ozuna.”

“Or what?”

He glared at me through his mask, before yanking his hand away.

“Ow! Stupid thing bit my wrist.”

The creature zipped behind us and disappeared under the backstop. The wheels were about to fly off Melvin’s Cadillac of death. I had my sign.

The pitcher catapulted some serious heat just off the edge of the plate, but with shamanic magic, swamp hog fury, I transformed that ball into a ghost ship uniting with the moon. A crush for the ages. I rounded first, the only player in state history to have hit two grand slams in one inning. This one a walk-off to clinch the championship, a title to eclipse all others. We jam-piled in brotherhood, then shook the hands of our rivals. When we came to Melvin at the end of the line, I said, “This was only a small taste of what we can visit upon you.”

Haskel said, “Yeah, consider this a few drops of rain. If you come near Farmer Harrington or the animals again, it will be the whole fucking flood.”

Haskel and I awoke the next morning in a field, each surrounded by two lovely imprints. Zelma the state honey queen and her three friends had vanished in the night. We rode the 3-wheeler back to his house, and upstairs, Haskel’s father said, “You boys look so dapper in those tuxedos. Why don’t you see if Aunt Anna is up, get a picture with her before you change.”

In the basement, we found her lying on the couch with a PayDay wrapper under her hand.

“Aunt Anna.”

Haskel nudged her shoulder, and a mouse crawled out of her mouth. She was dead. We set the creature upon Sweetpea’s scarred back; they galloped off together. Haskel’s father said, “I am seeing the body back to Italy, but we unfortunately do not have the money for you boys to come so you will have to hold down the fort.”

In their absence, Haskel and I conducted a ceremony with Zelma and her best friend

Natalia, the Belizian painter who swept me up in a riot of colors. Candles dancing, oaths spoken, poems for Anna, PayDays for all. Melvin never troubled Farmer Harrington again. The crops grew good, the horses in peace. Following the ceremony, with dozens of others, a party. We tore the roof off so that the dead were free to go.

### Katherine Kincer

# In My Neighborhood

The big boys never let girls play stickball
during the day. Only sometimes, at night,

when they wanted to rack up runs. We'd whoosh
that broom handle past pitches all night, if they let us,

but never won. Even tired, their muscled bodies
connected what seemed like every time, the ball

arcing beyond the streetlight's haze into the dark.

Ed Wade

# Not Your Father's Baseball

His game was pastoral, passed down
from his father, and his before him,
like the hymns he whistled
in the sweet smell of WD-40
and sawdust.

He inherited a game of speculation
and contemplative spit, measured
in inches, balanced on a scale
against peanut shells,

where amateur statisticians rolled
programs in the stands, batting
them into their salty palms

while child-idolaters imagined
themselves kissing gold crosses,
and tucking them into their jerseys
before stepping into the box.

For years, the warning track
told us there's a wall separating
the field of play from an empty place
where the diamond turns to dirt.
And we hit that wall in full stride.

There were no corn stalks
to absorb the momentum, no ghost
of Casey to ease us into his glove
like a lazy flyout.

The organ player—he still plays
out there in foul territory,
where noses once bled. But the choir
is gone. The chorus, just a hum
of floodlights illuminating plagues
of circling gnats.

Every cardinal-breasted fight song
blowing through the pipes is a dirge.
Every game is a funeral attended
by one.

AT Hincapie

# Rangers Foul Ball

*(for Shannon Stone, Arlington, 2011)*

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