Aethlon: THE JOURNAL OF SPORT LITERATURE

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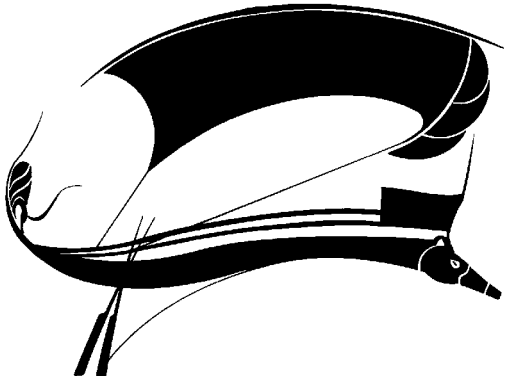
Aethlon (*ăth*-l*ŏn*): the original form of the Greek word meaning "prize of the contest; reward, recompense." We like to think of it as also including the notion of the contest or struggle itself (*aethlos*), and skill or excellence (*arete*) that wins the prize.

Aethlon



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Aethlon: The First Forty Years

When we have witnessed many other small literary journals and specialized groups fade away, it is difficult to believe this is our fortieth journal issue and our forty-first year as an Association. What that means is that we must be doing something right and, I suspect, that *something* is offering intriguing, relevant, exceptional writing as well as a sense of family among our members.

These issues do not arrive in your mail or email by chance. They represent hours of labor, supplied first by our incredible authors and followed closely by our long-suffering and somewhat amazing group of editors.

Because forty is a milestone for persons, it should also be a point of celebration for a journal. Thus, the first issue in this combined volume features past work from SLA members, many of whom we have, unfortunately, lost over the years. This fortieth issue of *Aethlon* is dedicated to those persons who have produced stellar work and assured our longevity.

Joyce Duncan, Managing Editor, Sport Literature Association

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Contents

Wrestling John Irving

Don Morrow

The publication of John Irving's *The Imaginary Girlfriend: A Memoir* (1996) confirmed a long-standing perception that a wrestling motif underpins most, if not all of John Irving's novels. Of those eight novels published between 1968 and 1994, all make at least some mention of wrestling; several of them rely on wrestling as a dominant part of the story and as a significant and pervasive metaphor. For example, in *The World According to Garp* (hereafter, *Garp*), by far his most popular novel with millions of copies sold, wrestling activity, wrestling terminology, wrestling rooms infuse and inform Garp's character. What provokes the discerning imagination is the very fact that wrestling could be made to work in good literature. After all, in wrestling, we have the most elemental of physical contests, the most classic (and Classical) of sports, this strigil-scraping, palaestra-centred, sand-rolling, and so basically sweaty sport from ancient Greece and from the oldest literature known to western civilization (Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*) and even from eastern cultures predating those epic works. And yet wrestling, true wrestling is only popular in western culture in selected countries or in pockets of interest areas. In North America, so-called "professional" wrestling, choreographed, faked, hyped, and staged, has supplanted public interest in and public knowledge about true wrestling. Therefore, it seems logical to conclude that it would take considerable skill on Irving's part to make wrestling work for a relatively naive audience. Whereas wrestling is used so subtly in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love,* the sport looms within and is central to Irving's novels. In a 1979 issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine, the author himself stated:

> Surely much more important to my life than it ever was to Garp's was the wrestling....My wrestling coach really got me through the place.

> Wrestling became more and more important—metaphorically too. I was not a very good wrestler, but I did well: that is, I beat a lot of people who were better than I was.

Indeed, Irving makes a decalaration near the very end of what is less a "memoir" than a book about the significance of wrestling in his personal life, *The Imaginary Girlfriend:*

> I want you [the reader] to understand that the distance between my writing and my wrestling is never great. (138, brackets mine)

In fact, after a relatively unheralded high school wrestling career, Irving attended several American universities (and one European university) whereat he feels he "learned more from wrestling than from Creative Writing classes" (128). He opines:

> ... good writing means rewriting and good wrestling is a matter of redoing—repetition without cease is obligatory, until the moves become second nature What I am is a good rewriter; I never got anything right the first time—I just know how to revise and revise. (128)

And even more pointed toward the intersection of wrestling and writing:

> (My life in wrestling was one-eighth talent and seven-eighths discipline. I believe that my life as a writer consists of one-eighth talent and seven-eighths discipline too). (126)

These inferences about the parallels between *WR-estl/it-ING* were not apparent to Irving as a university student when he felt the two mixed about as well as the proverbial oil and water. Yet his passion for the sport resulted in a coaching career in that it lasted until he was 47—he is 53 at the time of writing this paper—and in his election to the National Wrestling Hall of Fame, albeit by the "back door," as he confesses in *The Imaginary Girlfriend* (136). One of Irving's sons, Brendan won the New England Class 'A' wrestling title, an achievement about which John Irving gushes, "It was the happiest night of my life" *(The Imaginary Girlfriend*, 115).

Irving is equally sentimental in his writing and he feels it is a novelist's primary responsibility to tell a story well. In that regard, he was heavily influenced by Dickens' "feast of language" and story-telling skills along with those of Kurt Vonnegut with whom he studied for his Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of Iowa. Primarily, Irving's art of writing is engagement; he engages his reader just as one engages an opponent in wrestling. To "wrestle" John Irving is to grapple with his balance of building imaginative constructs on top of a groundwork use of autobiography and history. Irving takes real stories, real incidents and makes them better with his fictional adroitness. The key to engaging Irving, in turn, is to realize that the characters are enmeshed in themselves and the reader is drawn into them and their stories.

One critic has written that Irving's universe is largely governed by mishap, violence and the irrational and his readers have to learn to deal with the chaos of those elements combined (the penis bite or the Under Toad in *Garp* or "Sorrow Floats" in *The Hotel New Hampshire,* for example). The lure to Irving is to witness how his characters combat the chaos by the assertion of self—they leam to *grapple* with mishap, violence, evil and the irrational. Fathoming John Irving is not like peeling back layers of onion skin to reveal meaning and significance; rather, it's more like unravelling some kind of literary DNA only to discover circles within circles or double helixes of meaning. The "baroque" aspect of his novels is overwhelming in that they truly are fantastically overdecorated, gaudily ornate in detail with curved lines of plot and character development. The intent in this paper is to examine how that richness is derived from the wrestling motif in what critics suggest is his "darkest" novel, *The 158-Pound Marriage.*[1]

First, it is important to look at the structural elements in this novel. The title itself alludes to a middleweight weight class and to the central issue in the novel, the morality of mate-swapping intra-and extra-maritally. Chapter titles are important:

1. The Angel Called "The Smile of Reims"
2. Scouting Reports: Edith [126-pound Class]
3. Scouting Reports: Utch [134-pound Class]
4. Scouting Reports: Severin [158-pound Class]
5. Preliminary Positions
6. Who's on Top? Where's the Bottom?
7. Carnival's Quarrel with Lent
8. The Wrestling-Room Lover
9. The Runner-Up Syndrome
10. Back to Vienna

Sandwiched thickly between the first and last chapter titles are eight chapters with direct or indirect implications from wrestling to sexuality to marriage, even chapter 7, although it is not readily apparent from the title. Three of the four main characters form the subjects of three of the early chapters, Edith, Utch, and Severin, a college wrestling coach. The fourth character, the Narrator is one whose name we never leam and who tells the whole story from his singular and biased perspective. The "158-Pound" component of the book's title refers to Severin's weight class when he was a university-level wrestler as well as to his star athlete, George James *Bender* (note the name, a double entendre for wrestling and sexuality, as this paper reveals). Bender is an odds-on favourite for

a national wrestling title. How "Marriage," in the title, is in a 158-pound weight class is the central question of the novel and, in certain respects, this paper.

The structural perspective of the novel is quite simple: the Narrator is the sole voice of the book. All viewpoints come through him; we are left to filter any truth and meaning. The Narrator is husband to Utch(ka), father to their two sons and an academic who is a writer of historical novels. His position on sport is made explicitly clear early in the novel: "Every one says the academic life is one long prayer to detail, but it's hard to match athletics for a life of endless, boring statistics" (27). Both frustrating and alluring is the fact that the Narrator's lens is *the* lens of the whole novel: it's as though he drops in on some particular situation for one or all of the characters and unravels a bit of their social-DNA, as he perceives it/them, and then moves on to some other strand of social behaviour or character study. All we know about him physically is: "I am tall and thin; even my beard is narrow" and "I was never an athlete" (87).

His favourite word, he says, is *yield* (189) something antithetical, for the most part, to wrestling or even to asserting something of himself. For John Irving, having this Narrator-character who is so oblivious to the world of sport is a clever strategy. The Narrator becomes Irving's devil's advocate in that he is the opposite of Irving's personal perspective on living, on growing and, in this case, on wrestling. To make the novel work, the reader almost has to dismiss the Narrator's self-centred and biased viewpoints. And it does work. Neither critics of the novel or its readers like the Narrator—he has no redeeming qualities and he learns nothing from the experimental foursome and its aftermath.

For the purpose of this analysis, the Narrator is critical to the significance of this book with respect to wrestling as a backdrop and metaphor. For one reason, Irving has to work hard to convince us how obtuse the Narrator is without going overboard. More fundamental to the structure of the novel—and this is something I found critics/analysts have missed about this piece of literature—the Narrator fantasizes constantly about writing a novel to be called *The Quarrel Between Carnival and Lent*. This explains the title of chapter seven; however, it also forces us to look at the thematic repercussions of the Narrator's fantasy-allusion to Pieter Bruegel's 1559 painting, "The Fight Between Carnival and Lent." Irving's use of this painting is extremely clever and very apropos of the wrestling backdrop to the novel.

Bruegel's painting is a collage depicting conflicting values associated with the period in the Christian religion known as Shrovetide, the 3 days of celebration and excess culminating in Ash Wednesday which, in turn, precedes Lent or 40 weekdays of self-denial leading up to Easter.

Camaval is personified as a gluttonous male; he is lusty, with full codpiece and rides astride a barrel followed out of the Blue Ship tavern by his retinue revelling in weird foods such as pancakes, waffles, sausages, and eggs often decorating their costumes. Camaval carries a *lance* of a suckling pig. Carnival's counterpart is the haggard, female embodiment of Lent whom he faces in joust-

like preparation. Lent is austere, gaunt, unhappy and streams with her followers out of the church at the right of the painting. Her *lance* is a baker's paddle with two herrings on it (the Christian symbolism is blatant) and her followers carry much simpler foods like pretzels, mussels, fish and figs. What we have in the painting is a confrontation of values—excess versus moral-physical-spiritual purity; they are extreme values and the painting, it is important to notice, is frozen in that the "quarrel" between Carnival and Lent is not resolved. Instead, we are left to consider the extremes and ponder the folly of either end of the spectrum. In parallel, Irving uses wrestling terms and confrontations as his *painting* to force us to look at the moral issue of the 1960s and 1970s, sexual excess, in this case mate-swapping.

The two female characters in the novel, Utch and Edith are, in many respects, Carnival- and Lent-like in body type and in personality. Utch is five feet, six inches tall and "rounded, full-hipped, full-breasted, with a curve at her belly and muscular legs... [and she] had a rump a child could sit on when she was standing up, but she had no fat on her" (29). By contrast, Edith Fuller, daughter of the very wealthy "New York Fullers," was, says the Narrator, "the classiest woman I've ever known ... [a] relaxed, tall, graceful woman with a sensuous mouth and the most convincing, mature movements in her boyish hips and long-fingered hands; she had slim, silky legs and was as small- and high-breasted as a young girl, and as careless with her hair" (24). Where Edith was prep-school privileged, Utch was lower class, European stock, live-stock in fact, when we consider the details of her "second birth." When Utch was seven and living in Austria, the Russians invaded the country raping and killing almost at will. In fear for her daughter, Utch's mother took her to a cow-barn and slit the throat of the largest cow still in its milking hitch. When it was dead, she rolled the cow on its side, cut open its belly, pulled out the intestines and carved out the anus. Then she told Utch to lie down in the cavity between the cow's ribs and stuffed as much of the cow's innards around her daughter; the rest she put outside to attract flies. Closing the belly flaps around Utch, she told her daughter to breathe through the cow's anus and gave her a long, slim wine bottle filled with camomile tea and honey to drink with a straw. Wrapping the rest of the fly-infested intestines around the cow's head gave the animal the appearance of being dead a long time and the mother left her daughter with instructions, communicated through the rectum of the cow, not to move until someone found her. Irving is literally visceral in his extended description of this event (see pages 11-13) and it is reflective of the whole novel's tone of bittersweet irony that the person who finds and 'delivers' Utch—her real name is Anna, but Utch is Russian for calf—is a Russian man, Kudashui/i. How much more viscerally ironic could 'villi' be!

Utch is as earthy and as lusty as any of Carnival's followers in Bruegel's painting. She "has sex," she does not make love and her ideal revenge when finally rejected by Severin (with whom she thinks she has fallen in love) in the mate-swapping is to rape him in his motel room at the national wrestling

championships. Over-riding her vengeance and a constant quest for her throughout her adult life is to "have orgasm." As the Narrator informs us, "When she was cross, Utch was fond of reducing the world to an orgasm" (23). Her first quest following the break-up of the foursome is to cure her main problem—"I can't come"—a deficiency she rectifies by taking her husband to Severin's wrestling room and forcing him to have sex with her. Utch adores wrestlers, particularly wrestlers' bodies; the body of one black wrestler, Tyrone Williams, a 134-pound student in the same weight class as her own, is one about which she fantasizes almost constantly. Thus, Utch is bawdy, lusty, Camival-like. And hers is the character critics of this novel single out as vacuous, unbelievable and undeveloped by the author. Perhaps, but I think that Irving uses her just as both the Narrator and Severin use her—for sex—and I think that she foreshadows some of Irving's more well-developed female characters in his later works. At the end of this novel, Utch alone takes steps to heal herself and her life.

Edith is more refined, more in the tradition of Lent. She is a would-be writer who is really a well-trained art historian. She too liked wrestlers' bodies especially those "with no asses, with small legs. Severin was like that" (87). Independent and very intelligent, she is the perfect foil for Severin and she is very drawn to the Narrator, the successful novelist. Where Severin and Utch dive into unbridled sexual encounters in the tradition of Shrovetide excess, Edith and the Narrator spend hours talking about writing either before or instead of having sex. It is Edith who recognizes that this level of intimacy is "the worst kind of infidelity" (195), much more so than mere sexual trysts. In point of fact in the novel, the whole sexual-marital experiment of mate-swapping is engineered by Edith and willingly supported by Severin. The latter had an earlier intimate affair with a dancer, one Audrey Cannon and it is that betrayal of excess that leads to Edith's edict to Severin, "I'm going to get a lover" (204) and her pronouncement, "But now I've got this *leverage* on you" (204, italics mine). Revenge she gets when at the end of the novel, Edith tries to seduce George James Bender, Severin's star wrestler at the nationals; however, Bender cannot achieve an erection and Severin walks in on them trying to solve that problem. Out of apparent humiliation and remorse, Bender loses the final match the next day and Severin resigns from coaching. Where Severin languished in his affair with the literally-crippled Audrey Cannon (she ran over her own foot with her own lawnmower), Edith figuratively cripples Severin's best wrestler ever and his greatest chance of winning a national championship. She tells her husband: "Now we're even, if you still think being even matters" (228). The irony is that Severin only went along with the mate-swapping in the false hope that this would allow Edith to get even for his affair. Such one-up-personship is fitting in his wrestling world.

Edith then, is less the pure lenten embodiment of austerity than Utch is of Carnival. It is as though there is something in Edith that wants out, as though Irving cannot accept the excess of Lent or pure restraint. Edith, comparable to Utch, is not very well developed in the novel. Her husband, Severin, by contrast

is fully characterized by Irving. In fact, it is Severin who is the linchpin to the whole novel and its wrestling motif.

An associate professor of German, Severin continually defines himself with lines like, "Yes, I coach wrestling." A runner-up in the 157-pound weight class in The Big-10 wrestling championships at Michigan State, he more or less inherited his college coaching position after the untimely death of his predecessor. Like Irving, Severin beat wrestlers much better than himself because, as his former coach stated: "... he was one of those who kept coming. He just kept coming at you, if you know what I mean" (19). And the sexual connotations of the word, "coming" are not lost on readers. Severin is a source of both revulsion and attraction for the Narrator who gives Severin the most thorough description of anyone, even more than Edith whom the Narrator adores:

> [Severin was] a man whose shortness stunned you because of his width, or whose width stunned you because of his shortness. He was five feet eight inches tall and maybe twenty pounds over his old 157-pound class. The muscles in his chest seemed to be layered in slabs. His upper arms seemed thicker than Edith's lovely thighs. His neck was a strain on the best-made shirt in the world. He fought against a small, almost inconspicuous belly, which I liked to poke him in because he was so conscious of it…
>
> …He had a massive, helmet-shaped head with a thick, dark-brown rug of hair which sat on top of his head like a skier's knit hat and spilled like a cropped mane over his ears. One ear was cauliflowered and he liked to hide it. (25)

Severin is an enigma to the Narrator who could make little sense of a man divided between wearing headphones to learn German in a language lab and ear-guards to spar on a wrestling mat.

Severin is rest-less, a rest-less wrest-ler, sometimes inflicted with insomnia. He even moved "restlessly . . . with the grace and spring of a bizarrely muscled deer" (43) and he behaved and looked more like a friendly animal, a "baby bear" (said Edith) who could not keep his hands off anyone with whom he talked; he mauled people in conversation, men and women without any apparent sexual intention. Utterly unlike the Narrator, "Severin Winter would not yield to anything" (189). Instead, he confronted, he fought always needing to be the "driver" (as in drive to the mat), the controller in any activity. As Irving states in *The Imaginary Girlfriend:*

> "Wrestling is not about knocking a man down—it's about controlling him." (13)

Severin then, must be in control. Cocky, aggressive, egocentric—"a wrestler's ego seems to stay in shape long after he's out of his weight class" (19 *Marriage*)—and explosive were the adjectives used to describe Severin by the Narrator. But when

Edith catches Severin frolicking in the pool with Audrey Cannon late at night (200), she notes that Severin and Audrey were "graceful and playful as seals," a side of Severin and of wrestling she and the Narrator do not know. Severin's verbal refrain echoes throughout the novel, "I have to go to the wrestling room" and he is the "mother" in nurturing and caring for their two daughters. The Narrator can never quite resolve the paradox of Severin's "thunkish aesthetics" and he keeps trying to jock-stereotype Severin with observations such as, "For a wrestler, Severin had a very weak handshake, as if he were trying to impress you with how gentle he was" (230). Of the four characters, Severin is least at quarrel between the Carnival and Lent qualities in himself; he seems comfortable both at revelling in sexual and physical excesses and in abstaining, at least on his terms (control), especially if he could bring sex and life into the wrestling room.

All character development and the whole moral issue Irving forces us to confront centres on wrestling themes, metaphors, locations, expressions, and words. In the latter regard, the words "pinned" and "decision" reverberate throughout the novel in reference to wrestling, to sex, and to moral decision making. Utch keeps reminding herself to have patience in the early *rounds* of her *bout* with learning the English language. We are constantly reminded of the tag-team-like exchanges in the couple *matche*s/matching. Severin labels everything by weight class; for example, a "118-pound novel" is only a mildly successful novel, not one of significant weight. When the Narrator chides, "it must be nice, Severin, to involve yourself in a field that's changed one pound in ten years" (157 to 158), Severin quickly retorts, "What about history? How many pounds has civilization changed? I'd guess about four ounces since Jesus, about half an ounce since Marx" (27). These allusions to and metaphors about wrestling seem more an undercurrent than overdone, more like subliminal advertising continually carrying the plot and character development. So too the sexual-wrestling imagery where couples are described as "going to the mat together" (150). When Severin wrestles with himself about entering the wrestling building to make love with Audrey Cannon, the Narrator describes him outside the edifice where "he circled ... he stood ... he crouched" just as a wrestler might in stalking and measuring his opponent.

Not only does Irving himself love wrestling, his characters underscore his love for the whole process and ambiance of wrestlers and wrestling. Odious to the Narrator, Irving is graphic in his descriptions about the sport. In reference to one "leg wrestler" from Ohio State, we are told:

> he was a black with a knuckle-hard head, bruise-blue palms and a pair of knees like mahogany doorknobs….When he rode you with a cross-body ride—your near leg scissored, your far arm hooked—Severin said Jones cut off your circulation somewhere near your spine. (18)

The Narrator himself could encapsulate half-truths about the physical appearance of wrestlers:

> I recognized their hipless, assless, bowlegged walk, and their shoulders crouched awkwardly alongside their ears like yokes on oxen. (209)

Wrestlers were "funny, stumpy-looking figures" and "when they finished exercising they'd make for the weight room, turn up the thermostat and roll around" (187). To the uninitiated, wrestlers are virtually impossible to comprehend; they defy convention and definition. To Edith:

> How crazily committed all Severin's wrestlers looked to her. They seemed hypnotized by themselves, drugged in ego, which unleashed the moment their physical frenzy was peaking. It was too loud, too serious, too intense. It was also more struggle than grace; though Severin insisted it was more like a dance than a fight, to her it was a fight. (87)

Irving is tender in getting to the heart and the heat of wrestling. He has his Narrator describe wrestlers' early season workouts:

> They lumbered and rolled and carried each other around in an almost elderly fashion. Some of them, tired from running in the woods or straining against the weightlifting contraptions, actually slept. They came to this hot-house wearing double layers of sweatshirts with towels around their heads, and even as they slept they kept a sweat running. Tight against the wall and in the comers of the room where they would not accidentally be rolled on, they lay in mounds like bears. (180)

Severin declares that he *loves* the wrestling room, one of only three times that I could find the word, "love" actually used in the novel. His was a room "glaringly lit with long fluorescent bulbs" with "two roaring blow-heaters and its own thermostat... walls padded in crimson matting and from wall to wall it was carpeted with crimson and white wrestling mats" (75). And how Carnival-Lent-like was Severin's wrestlers' procession ritual through a long tunnel to the wrestling area for a meet. Severin

> would take his wrestlers through the long connecting tunnel to the new gym.... Everything echoed in the tunnel. Winter would kill the lights as he went. An occasional squash player would holler, "Hey, what the fuck!?" and open his cell. The effect of the wrestlers in single file, solemn in their robes and hoods (Winter's choice), was quieting. Timidly, the squash and handball players often came out of their cells and followed the procession. It was a rite. (76-77)

At the end of the dark tunnel procession, the coach threw open the doors to the bright light and yelling fans. Critics have labelled the whole thing more trite than rite given its re-birthing connotations; however, it seems more in keeping with the camivalesque procession from Bruegel's painting and more an echo of that aspect of the novel than it does any re-birthing ritual. And the same echo reverberates later in the story when Severin leads Utch lustily through the same tunnel:

> It was midnight when he led her through the dark corridors; he knew every turn. They dressed in clean wrestling robes, the crimson ones with the ominous hood. Like monks engaged in some midnight rite, they walked through the fabulous tunnel; he kissed her; he felt her under her robe. (76)

There follows three pages of description of their love-making all in wrestling terminology and even in match-format that is indeed erotic in effect.

Unaccustomed to the conventions of wrestling but still a mirror of the wrestling undercurrent, Edith and the Narrator are uncomfortable with having sex prone so Irving describes their sex in upright wrestling format in the shower, often culminating in a free-fall ending on the shower floor. And the wrestling-sexual encounters draw us back into the Carnival-Lent confrontation with the swapped partners' food of choice: the Lenten-like Edith/ Narrator include only wine and cigarettes in their austere rituals whereas Utch/Severin leave trails of apple cores, spines of pears, cheese rinds, salami skins, grape stems and empty beer bottles more emblematic of the hedonism of Carnival.

Ultimately, each person in the quaternion wrestles with him-or herself with respect to the moral issue of mate-swapping, just as Irving forces each reader to debate its morality as the novel proceeds (the same technique Bruegel uses in his famous painting). The 158-pound marriage among the four people never works because there is no relationship among the four people. "It was often awkward when all four of us tried to have a conversation," the Narrator states. Thus, unlike wrestlers, they never really engage, they just kind of couple off in sexual-spar. If anything, they cop out of facing the morality of the issue and just verbally spar in pale reflection of September wrestlers. The four are really indulgers in a rare pentathlon of Carnival excess—"cooking, eating, drinking, wrestling and fucking" (105). It was tag-team sex and very much like tag-team wrestling, it was devoid of substance, faked for presumed entertainment value. Irving leaves the reader to ponder the healing process, postseason, from the 158-pound marriage: Utch achieves some measure of self-realization and takes her children back to Vienna to recoup; the Narrator tries to get Bender to tell all about Edith as "the best-looking piece of ass in all of Vienna"; Edith and Severin also return to their meeting place, Vienna, to establish, presumably, some kind of order in their lives. All the while, Irving has placed dark contrasts to the physicality of wrestling and love-making with two sinister gangsters in

Utch's childhood retinue (along with a mysterious man with a gaping hole in his cheek). Severin was tutored in his childhood by two old "knights," both Olympic wrestlers from the 1936 Games and he had a mother who posed nude in postures of masturbation for art-works which were later hung by Severin over his and Edith's bed. The four children remain background figures like the children in Bruegel's painting until two of them are seriously injured when the shower door—the same door of Edith's and the Narrator's "wet love-nest"—shatters while the children are bathing and shards of glass are embedded in their skins. This we take to be Irving's sharp reminder to shake the foursome back into some level of responsible morality. And finally, Bruegel's cripples (in the painting) are invoked by Irving in a cider-press amputee who hobbles toward Utch in Vienna at the end of the novel like "a stumped puppet, an amputated acrobat," a grim reminder of life's less camivalesque possibilities.

The wrestling motif, the images, metaphors, analogies and allusions work very well but not outside the context of Bruegel's painting. All of Irving's first four novels contain these common elements: Vienna, a small New England college town, bears, marital infidelity, the protection of children, violence, death, and wrestling. Of these common elements, wrestling is the least explored and least appreciated for what it reveals about human nature and for what Irving unravels about wrestling-as-sport and wrestling-as-life-affirming.

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Big Apple

From our vantage point as seventh-graders,
looking up and dreaming, you had it all:
the prettiest girl in the entire school,
hero status as the starting tailback,
a swaggering, confident manner that made
everyone, even the adults who should
have known better, believe in your invincibility.
And that most fascinating of all nicknames
which, even years later when I heard it
applied to New York, still retained
that boyhood association with you.

Friday nights, huddled under blankets
in rickety wooden bleachers on the home side
of the field, we waited, adoring, faithful devotees,
for that supreme moment when you would take
the handoff, almost disappear in a crowd of linemen,
then, springing free of their clutches, miraculously
and joyfully explode into the secondary, racing
past linebackers and defensive backs, coasting
on the wave of our fanatical cheering
the last few strides into the endzone.

But then your life stopped like a blocked punt,
as frame-frozen as those grainy films coaches
endlessly review to try to figure out why
the game plan broke down. You didn't marry the girl,
you didn't get the college scholarship, you didn't,
so far as we knew, even find a regular job.
By the time I became a senior, and number two
center, you were just another washed-up jock,
as forgotten as last year's sports page.
Sometimes we'd see you in the crowd,
never cheering, just watching, brooding,
more often than not disapprovingly,
even contemptuously, as the underclassmen,

one of them wearing your old number,
now claimed the field, the fans, the game.

I never knew about the drinking
until I read about your death in the paper:
an event even stranger, more mysterious,
than your nickname or those Friday night moves.
Nobody learned what started the fire,
or where the night watchman had been,
only that you, drunk again, had been arrested
and thrown into the town jail, its only prisoner
that fateful night, and that you died of suffocation
before the firemen could extinguish the blaze.
When they found your body it was still
lying on the cot, limp as a dressing room in defeat,
emptied of all that former speed and energy
and grace, and locked in a grasp heavier,
and more certain, than any linebacker's or safety's,
Life and Death being the only opponents
you couldn't duck, stiffarm, or juke.

Robert Hamblin

The Female Athlete as Protagonist: From Cynisca to Butcher

Susan J. Bandy

The increasing popularity of sport for females has prompted many questions concerning the nature and significance of sport, just as it has spurred debates on such topics as societal roles for women, changing attitudes regarding femininity and masculinity, and contemporary gender relations in sport. As a result, the female athlete has been the subject of much physiological, sociological, psychological, and historical inquiry during the last thirty years. With some notable exceptions, however, literary analyses, which pertain to the female athlete, remain virtually non-existent even though such literature exists.[1] The paucity of research can be attributed, in large measure, to the fact that this literature has been ignored and silenced by the dominant male voice. Anthologies devoted to sport, even those purported to be general and inclusive, continue to exclude women's writings. Anthologies devoted exclusively to women's writings rarely include works devoted to sport. Those works of this nature which have been published remain on the periphery in obscure journals and magazines. Consequently, very little is known about the meaning and significance of sport[2] in women's lives, and even less is known about the very real differences that exist between the female and male experiences in sport.

As it has come to be regarded, sport is a physical contest, one that requires mastery and demonstration of superior skills in competition against rather than with another. It has developed in such a way as to demand, value, and reward so-termed masculine qualities such as physicality, aggression, domination, and competition. As such, it has been considered antithetical to the socially-sanctioned and accepted views of femininity which demand compliance, cooperation, and subservience, as Gerber and others have noted.[3] In many

contemporary cultures, sport has taken on a utilitarian purpose; it has become a rite of masculine passage. It continues to be viewed as an activity of men, a male preserve. For some, it is a particularly powerful setting for the construction of an ideology of male dominance, natural gender differences, and female inferiority. As a symbolic space of patriarchal hegemony, it serves as a site for the reproduction of gender relations that privilege men over women.

These views of sport have made the experience of the female athlete considerably different from that of her male counterpart; her "journey" in sport and his journey are quite antithetical. While the male passes along a well-traveled, clearly marked path toward a confirmation or reaffirmation of his masculinity, the female athlete has no clearly marked path to confirm or reaffirm her social self. She enters a world that affirms what she is not, a male. Sport can therefore not be used as a vehicle to affirm her femininity. If anything, it has been a challenge to or even denial of her femininity and her femaleness. In a metaphorical sense, for the male athlete, sport is like cruising in a motorboat down an often-traveled, river with his friends; the banks of the river where the cheering audience stands clearly mark his passage to a familiar and comfortable place. The female athlete has cast herself, for the first time, upon a stormy sea in a sailboat without a compass, map, or companion. A few onlookers watch, some proudly, some anxiously, some condescendingly as she journeys, little by little toward a distant, unfamiliar, and perhaps hostile destination.

In spite of such views and experiences, or perhaps because of them, female authors have found sport fertile ground for examining issues which are of much consequence and significance to women. And the complexity of these issues has been examined in an extensive body of literature (poetry, short stories, novels, prose memoirs, drama, and journalism) devoted to the female experience in sport which spans many centuries and was created in many cultures, crossing the boundaries of time and space.

In this literature, the gradual evolution of women's roles in sport from spectators, to recreational athletes, and more recently to transnational heroes, idols without borders, can be traced. This literature reveals as well a parallel evolution in literature as women's roles changed from that of muse to chronicler and more recently to that of author.

The first of this literature provides the view of the outsider, often including commentary on exclusion. The earliest example was written in the 4th century B.C. when Cynisca laid claim to her status as the first female victor in the Ancient Olympic Games. The following, inscribed on the base of a monument at Olympia, commemorates Cynisca's second victory in the quadriga race (a race for a four horse chariot) in 396 B.C.

> I, Cynisca, who descend from Spartan Kings,
> Place this stone myself to mark
> The race I won with my quick-footed steeds
> The only woman in all of Greece to win.[4]

Of noble birth and privilege, Cynisca could own, train, and enter horses in public festivals using substitute male drivers.[5] However, she, like all other females was barred from attending and competing in any of the Panhellenic festivals of ancient Greece. Her victory, then, was from a distance, from the outside—the win of the owner, not the jockey. Cynisca's experience as an outsider, not a participant, foreshadowed the role of spectator that women were to play for centuries in sport. They were cheerleaders, not athletes. The case was the same in literature, women were muses, not writers.[6]

As women began to write in later centuries, their exclusion from sport, or the notion of being outside sport, continued to be reflected in their literature as authors used sport to chronicle the important events of their culture or to provide social commentary of their day. Lady Murasaki's *The Tale of Genji*, the first novel ever written, portrays life in 11th century Heian Japan where the Royal Body Guard engages in races, polo, and football while the ladies of the court watch. These ladies "… although they had a very imperfect understanding of what was going on, were at least capable of deriving a great deal of pleasure from the sight of so many young men in elegant riding-jackets hurling themselves with desperate recklessness into the fray."[7]

A somewhat similar perspective is offered by British writers of the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries who continued the tradition of observing and chronicling the sporting pastimes of the aristocratic male. In the poetry of Katherine Philips, Dame Juliana Berners, and Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, the subject is hunting. Philips' "The Irish Greyhound"[8] and Cavendish's "Hunting of the Hare"[9] provide a rather critical view of hunting, one which would reappear in women's literature centuries later.[10] This tradition of these early chroniclers who provided the view from outside of sport is continued in the eighteenth century when the short story became the popular genre for Mary Russell Mitford, an Englishwoman who writes about the English view of the amateur in her "Village Cricket"[11] and of the importance of cricket to the English in "A Country Cricket Match."[12] Her compatriot, Mary Johnston, writes about another English pastime, in "A Game of Bowls."[13] Well into twentieth century, France's Colette, a horsewoman herself, describes the experiences of male athletes at the end of the Tour de France in *Dans la Foule* and of the boxers at the circus in *La Paix Chez les Betes.*[14]

The perspective of this literature begins to change in the late 19th and early 20th century, however, as women began to enter the sporting arena and as the number of female authors increased. Unlike their predecessors of earlier centuries, female authors began to create female protagonists who were athletes, not on-lookers in the sporting arena. Basketball players were the protagonists in the novels of Jessie Graham Flower, Gertrude Morrison, and Edith Bancroft in the United States.[15] In the French novels of Docteur Marthe Bertheaume, Suzanne Lenglen, and Guillemette de Beauville, tennis is the sport. One can only suppose that such literature exists in many other countries.

And poets, too, began to write about sport from the "inside." In the early 1900's, Amy Lowell became one of the first poets to express the joys of sport from a personal perspective rather than from the view of the outsider. In contrast to the swooning, anemic Victorian maiden of the time, Lowell reveled in her own vitality. In her poem, "A Winter Ride," she writes, "strong with the strength of my horse as we run … with the vigorous earth I am one."[16] Ethel le Roy de Koven writes of experiences in "Basket-ball at Bryn Mawr"[17] while Isabella Campbell bemoans her lack of athletic talent in "The Lament of the Unathletic Maiden[18] in which she claims that she was a female who was born a century late and out of her sphere, acknowledging the appearance of sport in the lives of upper class women.

During the last several decades, the tradition of these earlier writers has continued, and an abundance of sport literature has been written by females. And the treatment of sport has become more sophisticated and varied and the meanings of sport more subtle, rich, complex, and powerful. Sport has been used in the novels of the last several decades in the works of France's Joelle Wintrebert, England's Liza Cody, and Jenifer Levin of the U.S., to name just a few. In the short story, such notable writers as Germany's Marielieuse Fleisser, Iceland's Svava Jakobsdottir, Hungary's Margit Kaffka, Britain's Doris Lessing, North American Joyce Carol Oates, Uruguay's Christina Perio Rossi, and France's Francoise Sagan have found sport to be fertile ground for exploring women's lives. The subject of sport and the female athlete has also engaged some of the world's most accomplished and well-known poets throughout the twentieth century who have followed in the poetic footsteps of Bemers, Philips, Cavendish, and Lowell. Among the more noteworthy of these are: Wendy Cope of England; Diane Ackerman, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich of the United States; Renee Vivien and Simonne Jacquemard of France; Judith Wright of Australia; Use Aichinger of Austria; and Helga Novak and Ingeborg Bachmann of Germany. More recently the female athlete has become the subject of sport journalism[19] as well as drama.[20]

In addition to these well-known authors, countless others have written about sport. A cursory look at some of the titles suggests the extensive variety of these works and provides as well a view of the female protagonists in sport. In these works, the voice of the athletic protagonist is often shrill, angular, raging, and knowing, like the titles of the works themselves: "Ice Biting Inward," "Muscle Like Metaphor Pulls Thin and Tough," "Between Hard Rocks and Savage Winds, I Try," "Hooked," and "In the Locker Room They Unhooked Their Bras," "On Murdering Eels and Laundering Swine," "Stalking," and "The Night Danny Was Raped." At the same time, her voice can be soft, melodic, peaceful, and yearning: "Hooking the Rainbow," "She Dreamed of Sailing," "Swimming the Body's Water," "Loving and Drowning," "Remembering You," "Fishing Calamari By Moon," "Escaping the Turquoise Sky," "Fishing in Air," "Sailing to Aphinar," "Stalking the Light," "In Yellow Grass," and "Sliding Home."

The diversity and variety of these works are extensive, yet within them is one unifying theme—the quest for autonomous self-definition, to define one's self as authentically as possible from within. According to Alicia Suskin Ostriker, this quest is at the core of the women's poetry movement in America as women have reacted to being defined by the "world" of masculine culture. Ostriker maintains that there are four elements in this poetry which seem to be .. original, important, and organically connected with one another."[21] These include the quest for autonomous self-definition, the intimate treatment of the body, the release of anger and passion, and the contact imperative. The latter of these stems from intense cravings for unity and reveals a search for mutuality, continuity, connections, identification, and touch which, according to Ostriker, allow an escape from the vertical grid of dominance and submission.[22] These themes in women's poetry are also found throughout all genres of sport literature which have been written by women. In addition, as an examination of some of this literature will suggest, the themes of freedom and identity are also found in this literature, especially in the most recent literature.

Noted scholars who have studied women's lives, cultures, and artistic creations suggest that there is a circularity to these creations. According to French feminists, *Vecriture feminine* is resistant to hierarchies and is made through the body.[23] Camille Paglia suggests that feminine (eastern) cultures create works that are typically circular in nature.[24] And lastly, Maureen Murdock's concept of *The Heroine's Journey* is circular in nature unlike the linear journey of the male hero.[25]

This concept of circularity provides a structure within which to view the "journey" of female athletes and the literature which has been written about them. These sporting protagonists were initially excluded from sport with only a view from the outside. When they first entered sport, they experienced a divided or split self. As Ostriker suggests "… to be a creative woman in a gender polarized culture is to be a divided self."[26] In sport, such a division was labeled role-conflict for the female athletes who enter the male world of sport. Once inside sport, their reactions to this world from which they are still excluded, even though they are participants, have often been emotional displays of anger and rage or sheer silence. Eventually female protagonists have begun to claim the world of sport as their own, however, and have made connections to this world and connections within it: with other athletes, with other women who are not athletes, with their bodies, and ultimately with themselves as athletes. As women have made these connections, most particularly with their own bodies and themselves as athletes, they have experienced a freedom from societal constraint and have begun to define themselves and to describe their own experiences in sport. The sport literature, which has been written by women, reveals this journey of the female athlete.

When the female athlete enters sport, she begins a journey into a world which some argue is in a constant state of adversity, even a hostile world. If not adverse and hostile, it is certainly one of challenge, risk, and uncertainty, which

requires physicality, power, mastery, and aggression. The demands of such a world conflict with her role outside of sport and societal expectations of feminine behavior. In sport, she seeks a physical affirmation of self and experiences of physicality, strength, power, and accomplishment, yet outside of sport she must conform to other requirements and expectations. In a way, she lives in neither world; she experiences a divided self as she must first differentiate herself from the feminine, or from her "femaleness" if she is to be an athlete. Her earliest perceptions of sport, from the inside, have been, at best, disconcerting. Cynthia Macdonald's "Lady Pitcher" depicts the conflicts for the female athlete.[27] The protagonist is a relief pitcher. "It is the last of the ninth, two down, bases loaded, seventh / Game of the series …" Responding to "… the old familiar cry, 'Show them you got balls, Millie'," she strikes out the last batter and is covered with champagne in the locker room celebration. Yet, "In the off season she dreams of victories and marriage, / knowing she will have them and probably not it."[28]

Often this world of sport is filled with conflict and ambiguity for the athlete who, on many occasions, is filled with anger and rage. In many works, she rebels against societal norms, expectations, and constraints. Often these are stories of rebellion in which a young girl is excluded from participation and seeks revenge in some form. And frequently these stories are told in a humorous[29] way. Two of the more well-known of these stories are Ellen Gilchrist's "Revenge" and Nancy Boutilier's "Hot Shot." In "Revenge," Rhoda's words about Dudley, her thirteen year-old brother, and her cousins who have excluded her from their track and field activities, are filled with anger and rage. When she is later ostracized at the dinner table by the boys, she began to pray that the Japs would win the war and come and take her brother and cousins as prisoners.

> They would be outside, tied up with wire. There would be Dudley, begging for mercy. What good to him now his loyal gang, his photographic memory, his trick magnet dogs, his perfect pitch, his camp shorts, his Baby Brownie camera. … I prayed that they would get polio, would be consigned forever to iron lungs. I put myself to sleep at night imagining their labored breathing, their five little wheelchairs lined up by the store as I drove by in my father's Packard, my arm around the jacket of his blue uniform, on my way to Hollywood for my screen test.

Her full revenge comes when she pole vaults in her bridesmaid dress while others are at the wedding reception. It is a short-lived revenge, however, as she herself concludes at the end of the story. "Sometimes I think whatever has happened since has been of no real interest to me."[30]

Boutilier's character is a five-foot-eight-inch fifth grader who can beat all the boys in basketball. When forced to wear a dress to school by her teacher, she slam dunks her underwear down the toilet bowl. Later when knocked down on the court, her classmates discover that she is wearing no underwear. As one of

her buddies said, "You ask Angie to wear a dress and you gotta expect something crazy." Tiger, as her father called her, was never forced to wear a dress to school again.[31]

The most conspicuous rebellion of the sporting protagonist appears, however, with regard to her sexuality. For homosexual women, who no longer need men for sexual and emotional fulfillment, males become unnecessary. The sporting woman who is also homosexual is especially threatening, and attempts have been made to discredit all women in sport by labeling female athletes as lesbians, dykes—non-women. In this way, males can assure that their territory is not being invaded by "real" women. In Barbara Lamblin's poem "First Peace," written in 1974, the first whispers of homophobia are heard in sport literature. She was "the all american girl, the winner, the champion, / the swell kid, good gal, national swimmer," … she "was also a jock, dyke, stupid dumb blond / frigid, castrating, domineering bitch." At 31, she still suffers from comments, stares, and insults about her muscles and about "the fears, the nameless fears / about my undiscovered womanhood / disturbing unknown femininity, / femaleness / feminine power."[32]

Women have not ignored such accusations concerning their sexuality. If anything, they have created a small collection of works in recent years which does, as Martina Navratilova has done in actuality, openly and valiantly confront societal accusations concerning homosexuality. In addition to non-fictional accounts in Yvonne Zipter's *Diamonds Are a Dyke's Best Friend* and autobiographical accounts in Susan Fox Roger's *Sports Dykes: Stories From On and Off the Field*, fictional accounts of sport with overtly lesbian themes have been published. The first openly lesbian story, Sara Maitland's 'The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner," was published in 1980. And several novels and Lucy Jane Bledsoe's collection of short stories, *Sweat*, have recently provided fictional portrayals of lesbian's sport experiences. In Jenifer Levin's "Her Marathon," sporting and lesbian themes are blended in a most accomplished way. Celia, the protagonist changes her life by becoming a runner. In contrast to many stories with a sporting theme in which the protagonist is lesbian, Celia's sexuality, although important to the story, is not central to it. The story's focus is on her running and the impact that it has had upon her life and the life of those around her. After finishing the race and while lying between her lover, Needa, and her "kid," Celia closes her eyes and "fell down into the deepest, blasted-off piece of me that had come apart and wedged down inside with the explosion of the starting gun, that would never ever be the same."[33]

Nor have heterosexual women failed to celebrate relationships with other women as they have sought connections with them in the sporting arena. In a way, they come to sport to be with other women as Anita Skeen's "Soccer by Moonlight" reveals. These women come after work to a special place "… forgetting / patients, clients, students, and columns / of figures dead on the page." Under moonlight, "Trees still argue with stubborn leaves. Grass creeps

back / into the earth for warmth." And on this mid-November night, the legs of these athletes tangle, the ball loops, scurries, and skids into the goal. And "… The moon, buoyant overhead, lights / the night as the women embrace."[34] And from these connections the protagonist often learns from other women about competition, as Marian Burton Nelson suggests in "Competition," which offers, as does Dorey Thomas in Jenifer Levin's *Water Dancer,* a new vision of competition in which one becomes one with either the competitor or, in the case of Dorey Thomas, with the ocean. It is an alternative view of competition, which recognizes the necessity of and union with a competitor. Burton Nelson writes about this need" … swimming next to you I swim / faster / shed more layers of skin / learn your rhythms / as well as my own /—You can tell by my stroke / that I need you / … that to be my best I need you / swimming beside me"35 36

Connections with other women in sport can also be from a distance. Female athletes often satisfy the need for female heroes as well. They achieve what others can not do and through them females are connected with the impossible in some vicarious way. In this literature, some of the heroes are Martha Graham, Joan Benoit, Nadia Comaneci, Janet Gutherie, and Heather Farr. Nancy Carter's "Wings," written to the women of the 1984 Summer Olympic Games, shows this connection that women seek with great athletes.[37] She writes about her body, about finding her body, finding ways "… to explain why I wish to be last in line." Apparently the women of the 1984 Olympic Games inspired her: "But now it is out. No one can / explain me back to what I was, from / what I have become. / I preen tonight … "[38] As female athletes distinguish themselves in sport, the whole of the female world is thereby distinguished.

When the writer's voice is most personal or perhaps autobiographical in these works, the athletic protagonist is often seen as someone who is different. A surprising similarity exists between Diane Wakoski's "Red Runner"[39] and Adrienne Rich's "Transit."[40] In both poems there is a sense of movement, of a runner and a female skier passing a "non-mover." For Wakoski, the runner is like a firecracker, a bottle of Tobasco in Adidas who reminds her of a Carmen Miranda movie. She is "this runner, young woman, / product of the 20th century" who "ran past me, / like firecrackers." Rich's skier "is always / walking, skis and poles shouldered, toward the mountain / free-swinging in worn boots … her fifty-year old, strong, impatient body / dressed for cold and speed." Both poets are reminded of a certain difference between themselves and these athletes. The Red Runner "reminder that I live / if not / in another time, / another world, / one where a flame is not easy to coax into life, / one where I am outdated, / or under water; / certainly no location for a flame." Rich wonders "… what we have in common / where our minds converge / for we do not pass each other, she passes me / as I halt beside the fence tangled in snow, / She passes me as I shall never pass her / in this life."

As she seeks a freely-moving strong, capable body, the sporting protagonist contradicts long-prevailing notions of passivity and stasis as she continues to claim physical space in gyms, pools, arenas, courts, and pool rooms. As a deliberately muscular woman, she continues as well to disturb dominant notions of femininity, gender, and sexuality. An enormous amount of literature about the body reflects its importance as the instrument of creation in sport as well as its importance to females in general. Some of this literature reflects typically feminist views of the body which have long been obsessed with wresting control of their bodies from men. These views have developed as a reaction against exploitation and control of women's bodies and, according to these views, the body becomes a tool for wielding social and political power as well as power of a more personal nature. Monica Wood's short story, "Disappearing," depicts an obese woman's daring attempt to take control of her life through swimming. The protagonist who is nameless tries to take control of her life from her male partner who tells her that swimming makes no difference, that she looks the same. To which she responds:

> But I am not the same. I can hold myself up in deep water. I can move my arms and feet and the water goes behind me, the wall comes closer. I can look down twelve feet to a cold slab of tile and not be afraid. It makes a difference I tell him. Better believe it mister.

There is no end to her attempt to gain control of her life until it becomes an obsession, which leads to an anorexic death.[41]

Control of another sort is understood by Jewelle L. Gomez whose prose memoir, "A Swimming Lesson," tells the story of a young black girl whose grandmother, unable to swim herself, taught her granddaughter many lessons. She writes:

> In teaching me to swim, my grandmother took away my fear. I began to understand something outside myself—the sea—and consequently something about myself as well. I was no longer simply a fat little girl: Mybody had become a sea vesselsturdy, enduring, graceful. I had the means to be safe …. And it was more than just swimming. It was the ability to stand on any beach anywhere and be proud of my large body, my African hair. It was not fearing the strong muscles in my own back; it was gaining control over my own life."[42]

Most of the protagonists, however, come to understand what many feminists have failed to recognize. The body is not a device for gaining control nor an object; it is what one is. Movement and sport become the medium through which the protagonist experiences her body from the inside out, recognizing that the body is part of who she is. Even the lesser-skilled "movers" with larger

bodies gain a different sense of themselves and come to accept their bodies as theirs as Marge Piercy's "Morning Athletes" imply. Piercy's athletes meet most mornings to "… go running side by side / two women in mid-lives jogging, awkward / in our baggy improvisations, two / bundles of rejects from the thrift shop." Both are "fleshy … with full breasts carefully /confined. We are rich earthy cooks / both of us and the flesh we are working / off was put on with grave pleasure."[43]

These bodily experiences in sport also yield feelings of personal power, control, and physical strength for the female athlete. Maxine Silverman's "Hard Hitting Woman: Winning the Serve" best illustrates what many female athletes come to know about their bodies—that they are strong, powerful, selfdefined, and personally known, a knowledge about the body that is gained through sport. She writes: "Whereas before the body was useful for conveying one / through town, or for lying down beside another one, / I have found a new use for mine. / … Volleyball. / Still, no one was more surprised / at the strength pounding my powerline arm, / the ball blasted over the net."[44] This intimate connection with the body is perhaps most profound and disconcerting for the aging athlete as Judith Hougen reveals in '"Muscles' Hougen Comes Out of Softball Retirement." Through her body, a retrospective is revealed to this athlete. "Years ago, I was so lovely / at second, diving for the fly in the ninth / kneecaps pounding packed infield in a hard / tumble, raising a pregnant glove above / my grimed-out body." After coming out of retirement, the nights become long ones filled with hot baths and liniment, "with my knees two small slosing buckets / of pain." Yet the athlete, forever longing and striving for perfection, stretches "for the grass-streaked splendor of the ball" and the "chance for one thick / leather hand to reach into that much beauty."[45]

This intimate and personal experience of the body yields more subjective perceptions of the body and ultimately transcendent ones, which have allowed female athletes to move beyond the constraints of a socially-defined self. As more and more female athletes write about their experiences in sport, the themes which resonate through these works pertain to freedom and identity—freedom from the societal constraints of gender and the ascribed role of spectator and freedom for autonomous self-definition and identity as athletes. Curiously it is running which has inspired some of the most compelling works on these themes. Even Molly Dong, a tenth grader, understands the freedom found in running:

> stretch
>
> run
>
> breathing hard
>
> sweating

muscles tighten

kick

second wind

free at last …[46]

Stephanie Plotin's "Marathoner" and Devon Skye's "Women Who Run" more fully explore the relation between running and freedom. Plotin's "Marathoner" speaks to the liberating possibilities of sport. Realizing that her high-heeled shoes "gnawed at her toes" and that "her skirt was a hobble," she begins her journey on bleached sidewalks. Soon she is running up the office stairs, trotting to the Xerox machine, discovering grass, and exploring forest trails. Not surprisingly the marathon is not her final destination: "Twenty six miles soon / wasn't enough for her—/ one hundred almost satisfied her; / she was nearly getting somewhere." In the end," … her legs were / too strong / to be tied now / and no one can catch her," not even her partner who told her to "dress Respectably."[47] Skye's women run in the early morning, in the mountains, in the summer—"heels tense, ready to let feet fly. / these free spirits / have found a common foothold / in womankind / because they run; / yes they do, they run. / freely and forever."[48]

Identity follows freedom as athletic protagonists begin to perceive themselves as athletes and sport as theirs. The theme of identity runs throughout many literary works about the female experience in sport. Finnish writer, Ulla Kosonen begins her prose memoir, "A Running Girl: Fragments of My Body History," with the following: "I have always had an identity of a runner."[49] She continues with recollections of her life as a runner and discussions of how she felt about her body, concluding that sport was a revolt against the restrictions and standards imposed on women's bodies.

The theme of identity is perhaps most apparent in the poetry of Grace Butcher, both an accomplished runner and poet. In these works, Butcher is often an observer of others who are participants as seen in her poems, "Pole Vault" and "Javelin." In her writings about her own participation, however, it is evident that Butcher is more than just an observer. Whether she is "Training (in the Woods)," "Training (on the Track)," "Runner at Twilight," or "Runner Hurt," Butcher is an athlete and her identity is defined, in part, by running. In her poem "Runner Resumes Training After an Injury," a sense of self reappears: "When I run, my body / draws in upon itself, / hones down. / My bones are within reach; / old rhythms restore themselves. / Harmonies reappear. / … I am inside this fine body, / … Nothing is more right than this: "[50] As Butcher says: "The running, for me, is the poetry my body makes as it moves … The poetry and the running blend my body and all that is my *self* together."[51]

Women's writings about sport reveal a similar quest for autonomy and self-definition that pervades women's writings in general. Because sport continues to

be largely regarded as a male domain, however, this quest has been exceptionally difficult and the challenges within it have yielded a literature that is rich, varied, and provocative. Women have rebelled against those who refused them full entry into sport, often expressing rage and anger and challenging societal views of female athletes and sport. As the participation of women in sport has increased, however, they have begun to connect to sport, to other women both inside and outside of the sporting arena, to their bodies, and ultimately to themselves. They have begun to say what sport is, to re-define it according to their own experiences and to say who they are, to establish their own identity, as athletes. In so doing, these sporting protagonists have begun to deconstruct our perceptions of sport and have chiseled away at our notions about gender and femininity. Like all artists, they are in the act of re-creation, or, if you will, of reconstructing our notions of gender, femininity, and possibly our notions of sport. For females, sport has become like writing. As Cixous argued in "The Laugh of the Medusa," it is "… precisely *the very possibility of change,* the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural thought."[52]

Notes

1. The earliest of these analyses include: Messenger, Christian K. "The Inscription of Women in American Sports Fictional Narrative," in Fischer, Nanda, ed. *Sport and Literatur.* Munchen: Feldafing bei Munchen, 1989, pp. 70-89; Carson, Sharon G. and Horvath, Brooke, K. "Running in Place: The Lines and Miles of Grace Butcher's Life and Work," *Aethlon*, VIII: 1, Fall, 1990, pp. 119-130.; Horvath, Brooke K. and Carson G. "Women's Sports Poetry: Some Observations and Representative Texts," in Umphlett, Wiley Lee, ed. *The Achievement of American Sport Literature: A Critical Appraisal*. London: Associated University Press, 1991, pp. 116-131.; and Carson, Sharon and Horvath, Brooke. "Sea Changes: Jennifer Levin's *Water Dancer* and the Sodobiology of Gender." *Aethlon*, IX: 1, Fall, 1991, pp. 37-48.

2. The term "sport" is used throughout the paper to designate other forms of physical activity such as dance and exercise in which both recreational and elite athletes participate.

3. Gerber, Ellen, et al. *The American Woman in Sport*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1974.

4. Translated by Tom Dodge in Dodge, Tom. *A Literature of Sports*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1980.

5. According to Joachim Ebert, *Grieschischen und Hippischen Agonen* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1972, pp. 110-111), it was Cy niska who commissioned, and perhaps wrote what Appeleas, an artist, inscribed on the monument. Ebert writes that, according to Pausanias, Cyniska and her brother, Agesilaos, wanted to show the citizens of Sparta that women could own, breed, and train horses. The equestrian events displayed as well the wealth of families (Pausanias, Book III, 8,1).

6. Of notable exception in literature is Sappho, Cyniska's literary counterpart, who was the first lyric poet.

7. Lady Murasaki. *The Tale of Genji*. Arthur Waley, trans. Cambridge: The Riverside Press, Date of Publication Unknown, p. 496.

8. In Saintsbury, George, ed. *Minor Poets of the Caroline Period*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905, p. 577.

9. In Greer, Germaine, et al. *Kissing the Rod: An Anthology of Seventeenth Century Women's Verse*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988, pp. 168-170.

10. A wide range of perspectives on hunting is included in Pam Houston's *Women on Hunting* (Hopewell, NJ: Ecco Press, 1995).

11. In Scannell, Vernon. *Sporting Literature: An Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 230-231.

12. In David, Michael and Davie, Simon. *The Faber Book of Cricket*. Boston: Faber and Faber, 1987, pp. 72-79.

13. In Moult, Thomas, ed. *Great Stories in Sport*. London: Stein, 1931, pp. 241-245.

14. In Prouteau, Gilbert. *L'Equipe de France Anthologie des Textes Sportifs de la Litterature Francaise*. City of publication unknown: Plon, 1972, pp. 154-158.

15. A discussion of these is included in Michael Oriard's essay, "From Jane Allen to *Water Dancer*. A Brief History of the Feminist (?) Sports Novel." *Modem Fiction Studies*, 33,1, Spring, 1987, pp. 9-20.

16. Lowell, Amy. "A Winter Ride," in Haynes, Williams and Harrison, Joseph LeRoy. *Winter Sports Verse*. New York: Duffield and Company, 1919, p. 16.

17. In Rice, Wallace. *The Athlete's Garland: A Collection of Verse in Sport and Pastimes*. Chicago: A. C. McClurg and Company, 1905, pp. 32-33.

18. *Ibid*, p. 214.

19. Refer to Rapoport, Ron, ed. *A Kind of Grace: A Treasury of Sportswriting by Women*. Berkeley: Zenobia Press, 1994.

20. Recent plays which include female athletes are: Cynthia Cooper's "How She Played the Game," Janis Bodis' "Heart for the Future," and Suzanne Spinner's "Running up Your Dress."

21. Ostriker, Alicia. "In Mind: The Divided Self in Women's Poetry," in Mariani, Paul and Murphy, George, comp. *Poetics: Essayson the Art of Poetry*, a Special Issue of *Tendril Magazine*, p. 114.

22. Ostriker, Alicia Suskin. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1986, p. 123.

23. Jones, Ann Rosalind. "Writing the Body: toward an understanding of *I'ecriture feminine*," in Warhol, Robyn R. and Herndl, Diane Price. *An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1991, pp. 357-370.

24. Paglia, Camille. *Sex, Art, and American Culture*. New York: Random House, 1992.

25. Murdock, Maureen. *The Heroine's Journey*. Boston: Shambala Publications, Inc., 1998.

26. Ostriker, *Stealing*, p. 60.

27. In Diane Ackerman's poem "Pumping Iron" (in Knudson, R. R. and Swenson, May. *American Sports Poems*, New York: Orchard Books, 1988, p. 155) the subject is also the conflicts which the female athlete, or even a female who lifts weights, often experiences.

28. In Janeczko, Paul B. *Poetspeak: In their work, about their work*. Scarsdale, New York: Bradbury Press, 1983, pp. 91-92.

29. The treatment of these stories in a humorous way is curious. Ostriker notes in her analyses of women's poetry that humor comes from a deep core of pain.

30. In Schinto, Jeanne, ed. *Show Me a Hero: Great Contemporary Stories about Sports*. New York: Persea Books, 1995, pp. 179-191.

31. In Boutilier, Nancy. *According to Her Contours*. Santa Rosa, Ca.: Black Sparrow Press, 1989, pp. 78-92.

32. In Lamblin, Barbara. *My Skin Barely Covers Me*. Perris, Ca.: Uncle John's Sports Art, 1975, no page.

33. In Rogers, Sally Fox. *Sportsdykes: Stories from On and Off the Field*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994, pp. 145-159.

34. In Martz, Sandra, ed. *More Golden Apples*. Manhattan Beach, Ca.: Papier Mache Press, 1986, p. 23.

35. In Martz, Sandra, ed. *Atlanta*. Los Angeles: Papier Mache Press, 1984, p. 34.

36. Burton Nelson's forthcoming book, *Embracing Victory: Life Lessons in Competition and Compassion* (William Morris, 1998) examines ideas about competition as well.

37. Hyacinth Hill's "To the Olympians" (Martz, *Atalanta*, p. 12) provides as well a view of the connections women make to female athletes.

38. In Martz, *Atalanta*, p. 2.

39. Wakoski, Diane. *Emerald Ice. Selected Poems, 1962-1987*. Santa Rosa,CA.: BlackSparrow Press, 1990, pp. 256-258.

40. Rich, Adrienne. *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1981, pp. 19-20.

41. Wood, Monica, "Disappearing," in Schinto, *Show Me a Hero*, pp. 166-169.

42. Gomez, Jewell L. "A Swimming Lesson," in Busby, Margaret, ed. *Daughters of Africa: An International Anthology of Words and Writings by Women of African Descent: From the Ancient Egyptian to the Present*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992, page number unknown.

43. In Linthwaite, Illona, ed. *Ain't l a Woman! A Book of Women's Poetry from Around the World*. New York: Peter Bedrick Books, 1988, pp. 168-169.

44. In Martz, *Atalanta*, p. 28.

45. In Janecko, Paul B. *Poetspeak: In Their Work, about their work*. Scarsdale, N.Y.: Bradbury Press, 1983, pp. 91-92.

46. Dong, Molly. "Running," in Peterson, Mary Ellis, ed. *The Message in the Mirror; Writing by Students on the Brink of the New Age*. Dayton, Mn: Balance Beam Press, 1983, p. 50.

47. In *Hanging Loose*, 54,1989, pp. 59-60.

48. In Martz, *Atalanta*, p. 4.

49. In Laine, Leena, ed. *On the Fringes of Sport*. Germany: Academia Verlag, 1993, pp. 16-25.

50. In Hargitai Peter and Kuby, Lolette, eds. *Forum Ten Poets of the Western Reserve*. Mentor, Ohio: The Poetry Forum Program, 1971, p. 41.

51. *Rumors of Ecstasy … Rumors of Death*. Daleville: Barnwood Press, 1981, Back Cover, as cited in Carson and Horvath, "Running in Place," pp. 119-120.

52 In Warhol and Herndel, *An Anthology*, p. 337.

Night Gone The Shadow Of God

When Mark turned grey at eleven o'clock
on the dressing room bench
his skin lamping out
like an autumn chameleon
next to a stone in the rain
we knew his distress
and I saw of a sudden
that these were good men
"lie down,"
one said with a knowing concern
"take off your shoes–
are you sick?"
and they gathered around
one rubbing his legs like a lover laughing
a little, one feeling the blue dab of his pulse
for slow sewing
watching his face
for poor maps of the heart
and the room
went round in well-meant jests
as a few of us stood
in the ill and feckless
circles of seen light
regarding his fear
"is he dying–I've seen men die
like that …
last year we lost a few"
the ice man says
and he breathes from the sad
deep wells of himself
to recall.
Only half-of-an-hour before
we'd been skating
trying our luck
with a thrill
to score and have scored

we played well
yet here we were now
with night gone the shadow of God
and Mark on the bench
lying down
his eyelids like weeds in the wind
"I can't feel myself," he says
seeing something other than us.

John B. Lee

"Glory, Glory to the Black and Orange!": Princeton, the Ivy League Football Hero, and the Fiction of F. Scott Fitzgerald

Julian Meldon D'arcy

As many of his biographers have noted, F. Scott Fitzgerald had a lifelong interest in football, both as a player and a fan. Several scholars have also duly noted in books or individual articles how this interest is reflected in his work, especially in two or three of his short stories, the Princeton scenes in *This Side of Paradise*, and most notably in the character of Tom Buchanan in his most famous work, *The Great Gatsby*. Indeed, there are passing football references in every one of his major novels and in many of his short stories. Nonetheless, apart from Christian Messenger's review of Fitzgerald's football fiction (in his essay "The Demise of the Ivy League Athletic Hero," 1974, and the chapter in his *Sport and the Spirit of Play in American Fiction: Hawthorne to Faulkner* (1981), and Jarom McDonald's more recent article on Fitzgerald's football rhetoric in his short stories (*FSF Review*, 2003), no scholar seems to have made an inclusive study of Fitzgerald's love of football and its role in his fiction as a whole. Moreover, both Messenger's and McDonald's appraisals are selective and thematic in their assessments rather than comprehensive. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to coordinate and expand their research, for it is my belief that such a detailed study will reveal that Fitzgerald has made an underestimated but interesting contribution to the development of the college football hero in twentieth-century American fiction.

Fitzgerald's interest in football began as a child in Buffalo where, as Arthur Mizener reports, he persuaded his parents to turn the attic of their home into a gymnasium and to "give him a football outfit, complete with shinguards" (12). He played on the Highland Corner neighborhood team called The Young

Americans, and although he was "fast and fairly strong," according to his biographer Andrew Turnbull, "he was small and not too well coordinated" (21). Moreover, as he played guard or tackle he ruefully admitted he was "usually scared silly" (Mizener 14; Turnbull 15). On returning to Minnesota at twelve years of age, Fitzgerald entered St. Paul's Academy and continued to play football, even though his size was increasingly against him. He was frequently knocked down and once suffered a broken rib. But he always "tried hard and could force himself to be brave," Turnbull remarks, and, indeed, Fitzgerald's most "memorable feat" was a heroic tackle (in which he injured himself) of Central High's captain, "the biggest player on the field," as the latter crashed through the special team returning a kick-off (Turnbull 21).

At Newman College, his prep school in Hackensack, New Jersey, Fitzgerald made the scrub team as the second-string quarterback. During the spring he set up a tackling dummy in his back yard, and the following fall he made occasional appearances for the first team where he "played with fanatical intensity" and "a desperate, bent-forward, short-legged, scuttling way of running," as a contemporary schoolmate once described him (Turnbull 38). He had at least one exceptionally good game against Kingsley, for which the *Newman News* praised his "fine running with the ball" as a contributory factor to the school's winning touchdown (Mizener 28; Brucolli 32; Turnbull 38). Nonetheless, despite his efforts and enthusiasm, most of his contemporaries did not consider him a good player, especially as he was too "erratic, impetuous, self-willed" (Turnbull 38-39), and, some brave interference notwithstanding, he was accused by both Coach O'Flaherty and the team captain, Sap Donahue, of being a coward and of shirking tackles (Turnbull 36; Mizener 28). Nonetheless, he "stuck grimly to his job on the scrub football team," as Mizener notes (26), for he had already realized that success on the football field was the surest way to recognition, acceptance, and popularity among his peers. Moreover, he now had a new ambition: inspired by seeing Sanford White's 95-yard dash to score the winning touchdown for Princeton against Harvard after a blocked field-goal attempt, his choice of university had been decided (Turnbull 36), and Fitzgerald was determined to make a name for himself in the black and orange of the Tigers. Indeed, having passed the Princeton entrance examination in September 1913, Fitzgerald made his priorities abundantly clear in the telegram he sent home: "ADMITTED SEND FOOTBALL PADS AND SHOES IMMEDIATELY" (Mizener 32).

Sadly, however, Fitzgerald's size (five foot seven and one hundred and thirty-eight pounds; Brucolli 42) finally told against him in the serious world of college football. He turned out excitedly for freshman practice only to see his dreams turn to ashes. As Turnbull relates:

> A classmate remembers him catching punts in his black Newman jersey with the white-ringed sleeves—an eager, striving youth with lots of blond hair flying about. Somewhere Fitzgerald has written of 'the shoulder pads worn for one day on the Princeton

> freshman football field,' but he told the present writer that he stuck it out for three days and withdrew semi-honorably with an ankle injury. (44)

As his biographers have frequently noted, his failure to make the Princeton Tigers was something Fitzgerald infinitely regretted (Turnbull 44), and for the rest of his life he had daydreams of being called in to quarterback Princeton to victory against Yale (Mizener 43-44; "Sleeping and Waking" 66). Despite this heart-breaking setback, he shrugged off his disappointment and became an ardent Tiger supporter instead, conscientiously watching the games and cheering for his side. Or, in the words of André Le Vot: "Although he failed to enter the priesthood in the cult, he nonetheless remained an attentive and enthusiastic worshiper" (45). Some of his university contemporaries and his biographers, and even Fitzgerald himself, have reported his almost childish adulation of Tiger players, especially such team members as George Phillips (Mizener 43), Buzz Law ("Princeton" 94), and the captain and charismatic all-round athlete, Hobey Baker (Le Vot 45), whose middle-name, Amory, he borrowed for his hero in *This Side of Paradise*. More practically, he actually won a contest for a new fight-song for the team, "A Cheer for Princeton" (whose first line "Glory, Glory to the Black and Orange" provides the title of this paper).

Fitzgerald's enthusiasm for football is much less in evidence after he left Princeton in 1917 and throughout the early 1920s. This is partly due to his long absences from direct contact with the game during military training and, later, while wooing Zelda Sayre from Alabama and establishing a career for himself as a novelist. Once married to Zelda, he also often spent considerable periods of time abroad in Europe, though he still attended Princeton games whenever possible (e.g. the Yale game in 1922; Turnbull 134), and football provided him with important motifs in his fiction at this time, as we shall see.

In 1927, however, the journal *College Humor* commissioned Fitzgerald to write a piece on Princeton and he made a very nostalgic return to his alma mater. While staying there, and needing color for a story, "he stopped off several times in September to watch football practice, and his passion for the game flared up anew. For the rest of his life he would be an ardent fan and football analyst" (Turnbull 174). Renting a house in Maryland from 1932 until 1933, his renewed interest in the game also helped cement a friendship with eleven-year old Andrew Turnbull, the son of Fitzgerald's neighbor and landlord, and later one of his important biographers. The young Turnbull was also, in his own words, "a student of the game" (Turnbull 212) and shared his passion with Fitzgerald, as he recalls:

> [Fitzgerald] bought a football which he tossed around the lawn when he was feeling athletic … he was going to make a passer out of me … . He gave me a book by Barry Wood called *What Price Football?* and introduced me to the *Football Annual*, a marvelous publication full of swollen rhetoric and grimacing All-Americans. (Turnbull 212)

Moreover, Fitzgerald took Turnbull to football games, and at the Princeton-Navy encounter Turnbull was struck by Fitzgerald's "uncanny familiarity with the Princeton team. He knew so many details about each player that I suspected him of having memorized the programs of previous contests" (Turnbull 212).

It was also in the 1930s that Fitzgerald began to write letters or make phone calls (usually when drunk) to Asa Bushnell, the Princeton athletics manager, and Fritz Crisler, the Princeton coach, with ideas for plays for the team. Indeed, Turnbull makes much of Fitzgerald's suggestion of strategically alternating squads within a game. "The idea," argues Turnbull, "was less fantastic than it seemed, and when two-platoon football became universal in the forties, Crisler, as chairman of the NCAA Football Rules Committee, played an important role in its development" (Turnbull 237). Turnbull's earnest insinuation that Fitzgerald had some real influence on the development of football strategy is loyal and touching, but most certainly inaccurate, for Fitzgerald (and Turnbull, it seems) had overlooked (or ignored) Knute Rockne's innovative use of reserve units in what was, in effect, a two-platoon system, which had made Notre Dame the dominant college football team in the late 1920s (see Robinson 147; Sperber 248-49), and had provided an obvious inspiration for football teams of the future.

Finally, and perhaps most famously, of course, Fitzgerald's love of football was sadly underlined by the circumstances of his death in December 1940, for he died suddenly of a heart attack while quite literally reading about, and scribbling comments on, the following year's Tigers' roster in the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*. Apart from dying on the field, clad in black and orange while scoring a winning touchdown against Harvard or Yale, it is hard to imagine a more symbolic or poignant way for Fitzgerald to leave this world.

These are the basic facts of Fitzgerald's passion for the game, but on their own they make little more than an interesting footnote to the author's short but vibrant biography. The more important aspect of this passion is just how exactly it is reflected in his work, how it influenced the way he presented and utilized college football and football players in his poetry, songs, plays, and especially, his fiction.

Let us first look at Fitzgerald's juvenile pieces which portray a simple, passionate enthusiasm for the sheer physicality of the game, a purely existential experience of football. His poem "Football," published in the 1911 *Newman News*, is written in the present tense with several present participles all expressing immediate if not violent action: "charging," "plunging," "bucking," as it relates how an end in a school game receives a pass and outruns or stiff-arms the defense on his way to scoring a touchdown. The pure excitement of the piece is almost palpable; moreover, although there is a reference to "Oh! you, Newman, 1911" (30), there is absolutely no other contextual information: who was playing, where, what the score was, or whether the end's touchdown had any real effect on the final result. The poem simply recreates the sheer *joie de vivre* of scoring a touchdown. Which is pretty much exactly what his first published story does:

"Reade, Substitute Right-Half." Again we are plunged into the action in *medias res*, though at least this time we do have two team names, Warrentown and Hilton, and references to their colors as "blue" and "crimson," obvious allusions to Yale and Harvard. Reade, a reserve end for Warrentown (in Harvard crimson), is sent into the game when a player is injured and surprisingly turns in a stunning performance: he tackles for a loss, recovers a Hilton fumble, gains yards on his runs, and finally intercepts a Hilton pass and returns it for a touchdown, once again outrunning or stiff-arming the Hilton secondary (32-33). And once more we are not informed as to the final outcome, or the relevance of this individual score. We can easily suppose this is the winning touchdown, but this is an emotional response, not a textual certainty. Being on the field, playing, excelling, scoring, is all that counts here.

Jarom McDonald has argued that much of Fitzgerald's football descriptions are in fact the first examples of his attempt at "'telling about it' as substitute for tangible athletic action" (134) and sees them as portraying football "not as an athletic competition but as a staged performance, a play in which actors take on roles that bring them romantic and monetary accolades" (136-7). My feeling, however, is that the sheer exuberance of these pieces simply suggests true individual experience, a rendering of pure athletic excitement and adventure. Indeed, Fitzgerald did have some experience of this kind when his running with the ball contributed to Newman's defeat of Kingsley, as noted above.

On entering Princeton, Fitzgerald's football writing became notably more restrained in terms of on the field action, perhaps reflecting the simple fact that he failed to make the Tigers' roster and never played competitive football again. His prize-winning fight song "A Cheer for Princeton" is curiously equivocal. It is clearly aimed chiefly at Yale as the refrain "Eli, Eli, all your hopes are dead" implies, but the second stanza has the rather surprising lines: "Strong and steady, Ever ready, For defeat or victory" (38). As Matthew Brucolli rather drily, but correctly, observes, "'A Cheer for Princeton' seems unique in its genre for anticipating defeat—which may be why it never caught on" (59).

Fitzgerald's greatest evocation of Princeton football, however, is through the character of Amory Blaine in *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald's breakthrough best-seller. As with his literary predecessor, Reade, Blaine had once been "an eternal hero" (35), who scored a winning touchdown for his school, in this case St. Regis, against Groton. Fired up by his reading of Ralph Henry Barbour's books, Gilbert Patten's Frank Merriwell stories, and the classic college football novel, Owen Johnson's *Stover at Yale*, Blaine has high hopes of football glory with the Tigers, but these are soon dashed:

> Having decided to be one of the gods of the class, he reported for freshman football practice, but in the second week, playing quarterback, already paragraphed in corners of the *Princetonian*, he wrenched his knee seriously enough to put him out for the rest of the season. (49)

He never attempts to play football again. Nonetheless, this does not seem to affect Blaine's love of football or his fervent support of the Princeton eleven. He has a photograph of his old school team above his desk (106) and he admires the photographs of the university's athletic heroes in a store window, especially a large one of the football captain, Allenby (43), whom he imagines introducing to his partner at the prom dance; indeed, Blaine is rather impressed with his girlfriend Isabelle simply because some of her ex-beaus "bore athletic names" (76-77). A climactic scene revealing Blaine's virtual adoration of footballers occurs when a group of seniors march through the Princeton campus in the twilight singing the Princeton song: "[Blaine] sighed eagerly. There at the head of the white platoon marched Allenby, the football captain, slim and defiant, as if aware that this year the hopes of the college rested on him, that his hundred-and-sixty pounds were expected to dodge to victory through the heavy blue and crimson lines" (48). André Le Vot has described this scene as portraying "a phalanx of demi-gods descended among mortals" (44). Christian Messenger, too, has noted that "Fitzgerald used the romantic, fleeting image of the football captain more persuasively than any other American author" (SSP 187).

Some of the sense of adulation and awe both Fitzgerald and his fictional character felt regarding football heroes can be discerned years later in his 1927 article on his alma mater in which Fitzgerald argues that football at Princeton had "become a symbol" of something "essential and beautiful … the most intense and dramatic spectacle since the Olympic games" ("Princeton" 94). In the same paragraph Fitzgerald also reveals just how captivating these early experiences of football at Princeton had been:

A year ago in the Champs Elysées I passed a slender dark-haired young man with an indolent characteristic walk. Something stopped inside me; I turned and looked after him. It was the romantic Buzz Law whom I had last seen one cold fall twilight in 1915, kicking from behind his goal line with a bloody bandage round his head. (94-95)

This mythical, symbolical element of football is actually present near the end of *This Side of Paradise* as Amory Blaine links, both emotionally and visually, his great game at St. Regis school with the battlefield of World War I:

> Frost and the promise of winter thrilled him now, made him think of a wild battle between St. Regis and Groton, ages ago, seven years ago—and of an autumn day in France twelve months before when he had lain in tall grass, his platoon flattened down close around him, waiting to tap the shoulders of a Lewis gunner. He saw the two pictures together with somewhat the same primitive exaltation—two games he had played, differing in quality of acerbity. (318-9)

Indeed, the perhaps by now rather trite analogy of life as football, football as life, becomes Blaine's consolationary vision of a post-war world gone dramati-

cally wrong as a new generation had grown up to find "all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken" (321), or, as Blaine perhaps prefers to see it: "Life was a damned muddle … a football game with every one off-side and the referee gotten rid of—every one claiming the referee would have been on his side." (301). Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* thus presents us with an evocative and poignant portrait of the footballer as a romantic, perhaps even naïve, but somehow tragic hero (cf. the death of Fitzgerald's real-life Princeton hero, Hobey Baker, in France, in 1918).

Fitzgerald's next major football character in *The Great Gatsby* must therefore come as something of a shock to most readers. As the crude, philandering, ostentatiously rich but intellectually limited former end of New Haven (read Yale) and husband of Daisy (the object of Gatsby's infatuation), Tom Buchanan is a far cry from Amory Blaine. Robert Roulston has described him as "a bigot, a bully and an ignoramus" (101), Michael Oriard sees him portrayed as "a monster or oaf" (SWG 417), and many other critics have similar opinions of him. Nonetheless, Andrew Hook still sees him "as one of Fitzgerald's most brilliant creations" (56) and, indeed, Tom Buchanan must be one of the more memorable if infamous characters in twentieth-century American fiction.

Buchanan's football skills on the field are not presented in the story, naturally, but there are frequent references to his athletic background, especially his sheer physical presence as he leans "aggressively forward" with "enormous power," for "you could see a great pack of muscle shifting when his shoulder moved under his thin coat. It was a body capable of enormous leverage—a cruel body" (7). We see this power in action too, as he twice physically shoves the narrator Nick Carraway around, once across a room, once out of a train (11, 24), and then, most notoriously of all perhaps, when we see him break his mistress Myrtle Wilson's nose "with a short deft movement … with his open hand," clearly a football maneuver, a stiff-arm (37). Leverett T. Smith has argued that the "special villainy" of Buchanan's violence is a direct result of the position he played in the New Haven team, for as an end in the predominantly punting game of early twentieth-century Ivy League football he would have to have been especially physical and assertive (Smith 79). Indeed, our last view of him is walking down Fifth Avenue "in his alert, aggressive way, his hands out a little from his body as if to fight off interference, his head moving sharply here and there, adapting itself to his restless eyes." (GG 178). Buchanan's suppressed violence and frustration seems well summed up in Nick Carraway's description of him as "forever seeking … the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game" (6).

Scholars have come up with many reasons for the despicable nature of Buchanan's character: his portrayal is an attack on early twentieth-century upper classes (Lena); he represents an ex-Princetonian's hostility towards an ancient and usually successful football rival, Yale (Blann); he represents Fitzgerald's bitterness at not being able to make the Princeton team himself (Roulston); he represents Fitzgerald's spiteful revenge against Ginevra King, the girl who jilted him, and

whose banker father had been ex-Yale (Messenger, SSP 191). Christian Messenger, however, also has perhaps the most comprehensive and far-reaching explanation: "The movement in Fitzgerald's fiction from awe at Merriwell surrogates in *This Side of Paradise* to total disillusion with Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* can be well documented" ("Ivy League" 405), he claims, and this in fact represents the demise of what Messenger has defined as the School Sports Hero. "In just five years the slim Allenby leading his sturdy men had been reduced to a brute of lurching physicality whose body almost vibrated with repressed violence and power" (SSP 191), states Messenger, and indeed, "a generation of American rhetoric about the School Sports Hero was reversed in Tom Buchanan" (SSP 195). This infamous character in *The Great Gatsby* thus represents "a major breakdown between the nominal heroism of the School Sports Hero and his embodiment of society's values" (SSP 180). Above all, Messenger argues, it is Buchanan's "shallowness, his lack of purpose, and his militant nativism" ("Ivy League" 403), which reveal that "Fitzgerald showed Buchanan with no role to play in post World War I American society. The convention of schoolboy preparation for maturity is proved false. Buchanan escapes with Daisy into money and privilege but has been judged deficient in every test of character" (SSP 224). "The fall of the Ivy League athletic hero from Fitzgerald's point of view," concludes Messenger, "is really the story of an American loss of innocence and a decline in a belief in social privilege and an ideal of responsibility" ("Ivy League" 403), and this paved the way for the more realistic, literary, sporting characters of Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner.

As attractive and convincing as this theory sounds, it does have some weaknesses. In the first place one must question the context of Messenger's book, for it has as its thesis the development of three kinds of sporting heroes, the Ritual Hero, the School Sports Hero, and finally the Popular Sports Hero, and so Fitzgerald's football characters must ultimately be made to fit into this pattern. Jarom McDonald has recently drawn attention to this, arguing that while writing about football stars in his earlier fiction, trying to debunk their social status by revealing their moral shortcomings, "more often than not, Fitzgerald's stories deal with football heroes in their moments of glory rather than after them, complicating the thesis that Fitzgerald's goal was to criticize the 'unethical' college football star" (135-36). In the case of *The Great Gatsby* this is not quite pertinent, as we do not see Buchanan in action on the field, but nonetheless I believe McDonald's main point is essentially correct, that Messenger "is interested in how Fitzgerald's major texts fit into a larger framework of American literature, not in Fitzgerald's own anxieties, in his own probings, or in his own goals in dissecting football heroes" (138). Indeed, McDonald goes on to maintain that "there is a rhetorical subtext to Fitzgerald's use of football in his fiction" concerning role playing and social accolades which we will consider shortly (138).

Secondly, one must ask the question, is Tom's status as ex-football hero well-enough established to judge his character within the context of the New York/

East Egg society? Buchanan may just as well be seen as reprehensible because of his failure, as a mid-Westerner, to impress his east coast peers. It must be borne in mind here that although Messenger refers to Buchanan as an All-American (SSP 192, 208), presumably to boost his status as a School Sports Hero and a popular cultural symbol of accomplishment and status, the fact is that, apart from Carraway's remark that Tom was a "national figure in a way" (GG 12), there is no specific textual confirmation of such an honor in *The Great Gatsby*. Moreover, although in the same senior society (fraternity?) as Nick Carraway (the narrator and another mid-Westerner) in his senior year, Buchanan was clearly never "tapped" for any elite club at Yale (e.g. Skull and Bones; cf. Dink Stover), at least if he had been this would surely have been mentioned. Finally, "there were men at New Haven who had hated his guts" (GG 7), a singularly telling comment, given the usual adulation of college football players in the early twentieth century, as Fitzgerald himself has demonstrated, both at Princeton and in his fiction.* Was Buchanan thus a true representative of the Ivy League gentleman and sportsman? Finally, there are the short stories "The Bowl" (1928), and three or four pieces relating the story of Basil Lee (1928-29), all with football material, and all of which would seem to disprove Messenger's own thesis as they clearly utilize romantic football-hero type characters, as we shall see.

Fitzgerald's football story "The Bowl," from 1928, presents us with a Princeton footballer, Dolly Harlan, who achieves a brief moment of stardom when scoring the tying touchdown against a much-stronger Yale. The story does not fit into Messenger's scheme of things, for as Jarom McDonald so rightly argues, we do not find another depiction of a degenerated footballer like Buchanan: "If Fitzgerald had been so committed to critiquing the former school sports hero, he would have given us another Tom; he would have written the story of football glory turned ethically sour. But this is not Tom; nor is it simply a return to the idealistic vision of football" (148). Indeed, it is not. In fact, Harlan is nothing more than a reliable but rather mediocre player who actually hates much of what surrounds football, the long hours of training, demands on his time, physical contact, nervous tension before and during games. When he meets and falls in love with Vienna Thorne, he deliberately breaks his ankle playing tennis in the summer so as to avoid the football season in his junior year as Vienna has demanded of him. Her brother had been killed in an accident on the field, and she thus abhors the game, and Harlan's non-participation in the sport during his junior year is a condition of their relationship.

However, as the season progresses and Princeton starts losing, Harlan becomes increasingly morose, sleepless and plagued by guilt and remorse. After a humiliating defeat by Navy (at which Harlan sheds tears), he ignores Vienna's threats and rejoins his team, even though he is not yet fully fit. He meets at this point in time a young actress, Daisy Cary, who encourages and sympathises with him as she had once forced herself to act a scene in an open-air lagoon while suffering from a fever, for "the show must go on." In the final confrontation with Yale, Harlan has

a relatively poor game, his ankle sore and stiff, but he nonetheless catches a pass not actually intended for him and scores the tying touchdown. For the next few hours he is the toast of Princeton and after a final dramatic meeting with Vienna he goes to visit Daisy at her hotel. He is challenged by some of her other admirers in the lobby, but on proudly giving them his name, he is allowed through to visit her and, by implication, to claim her as his reward. Thus, McDonald argues:

> Dolly, acting like a star on the field despite his own trepidation, disgust, or the fact that he is really just a fair-to-middling athlete, is a star in the minds of the audience because of a single performance they have seen—and they grant him social power accordingly. (146)

He goes on to argue that Fitzgerald sees footballers as simply just "'players' performing in a show and asking for applause. Dolly decides he would rather have the social status than Vienna" (147). I am not totally convinced by this, for throughout the story Harlan has seemed unimpressed by public attention, never actively seeking it; the only approbation he wants is Daisy's because she seems to have understood his real need to play, even though he is injured and dislikes the sport, in order to satisfy his sense of honor and identity with the team. As Bryant Mangum has persuasivley suggested, "redemption of some sort hangs in the balance of what occurs that day" (114), and indeed Harlan regains his sense of commitment and belonging, his self-respect, and, most importantly perhaps, "the moral courage that Vienna had taken from him" (Mangum 113).

Much of the above seems reminiscent of some of the values of Messenger's School Sports Hero, but Messenger has already rather awkwardly penned the latter's obituary. Nonetheless, though performing in true Merriwellian style (last minute touchdown on a gammy leg), it must be remembered that Harlan did not win the game. Moreover, he lost one girl as a result of his actions, and may have gained another, but for how long? And he's still an average player who dislikes the sport—his heroism and fame must surely be of short duration and with no promise for the future.

In Fitzgerald's Basil Duke Lee pieces (collected in *The Basil and Josephine Stories*), we meet a young mid-Western boy who dreams of going to Yale and being tapped for the Skull and Bones Club. We see him reading Ralph Henry Barbour's football novel *The Crimson Sweater* and at St. Regis prep school he daydreams of being called off the bench to score a winning touchdown for Yale. In reality he is not a very good player and is actually yelled at by the team captain for being yellow (clearly autobiographical). Nonetheless, he does have one moment of glory at school when he scores a 60-yard touchdown against Exeter, only for it to be called back on a penalty. St. Regis goes on to lose to the much more renowned school, but Lee basks in the praise of the Exeter coach. Similarly, at Yale, although playing football was the "greatest ambition" of Lee's life (BJS 169), he is not even a regular in the first team but does have his moment of glory against Princeton.

There are two football events which are significant to Basil. The first takes place when he is visiting New York from his prep school and he sights his great idol in a restaurant, the Yale captain and football star Ted Fay. He overhears his conversation with an actress, who, although declaring her love for Fay, insists she must marry her director for the sake of her career. Fay must sacrifice his love and return to lead his college on the sports field (BJS 107-8). James Nagel suggests that "the incident is important in that it reveals to Basil the fact that even the most celebrated person he has observed faces personal difficulties" (278-79). Furthermore, Messenger claims that Basil is duly impressed by this for "if Ted Fay can deal with such pain and complexity in personal relationships, then so can he" (SSP 195). But I feel that both Nagel and Messenger, like Basil perhaps, are really missing the ironic point here: actresses may like to be seen with and go out with athletic heroes, but they are not necessarily going to marry them. Fay's fame on the college football field has no clout in the harshly competitive world of the theater. Moreover, the scene is really foreshadowing Basil's own future, for his moment of glory also fails to win him the girl he wants.

This moment is in the game against Princeton when injuries on the field result in Basil's being called off the bench, not only to lead the team against the archrival, Princeton, but also to defeat his rival in love, the southerner Littleboy Le Moyne, who has apparently stolen his love, Erminie Bibble, from him.** Basil mercilessly engineers plays straight through Le Moyne, who becomes increasingly exhausted, and he ultimately throws the winning touchdown pass over Le Moyne's head to claim both victory and revenge (BJS 215-17). His triumph is tempered, however, by the dawning realization that neither the girl nor the revenge were particularly worth it. Erminie had not even attended the game, and had previously overthrown Le Moyne in any case. The latter then drunkenly disgraces himself at the evening ball and has to be ejected (BJS 218, 221). Messenger thus claims that "Basil has both won and lost as a participant in the contest and knows how to tell the difference," and that the final closure, as Basil philosophically contemplates the stars in the sky ["The scene was of an unparalleled brightness and magnificence, and only the practiced eye of the commander saw that one star was no longer there." BJS 222], is "one of the most beautiful endings in all of Fitzgerald's short fiction"; its last sentence deftly combining "both the promise and loss while sustaining the level of lyricism in sad wisdom" (SSP 197). Messenger even compares Basil's reverie with Amory Blaine's contemplation of the Princetion football team in the gloaming. As this would seem to contradict his own thesis concerning the demise of the football hero, he is forced to state that these final stories are really manifestations of Fitzgerald's "primary love of football" and are only based on "the larger action of the sport itself, its rhythms and rewards" so that their results "were different from his portrayal of football's force in romantic projection" (196). Or, in other words, these stories had little relation to the social status and meaning of the football hero himself. Messenger is thus driven to the rather unsatisfactory conclusion that "Ultimately, it appears

that the image of the football hero split in two for Fitzgerald" (SSP 197), and that he was thus "capable of looking at Buchanan as a new American reality while still keeping his double image of the golden boy intact" (SSP 198). I would argue that a study of these shorter stories reveals a simpler and more convincing answer which can synthesise the Merriwell and Buchanan-type of hero without any recourse to literary schizophrenia.

But first we must have one brief, final look at Fitzgerald's very last football player in his fiction, the twenty-year old Rickey in his 1936 Esquire short story "Send Me In, Coach!".*** Ostensibly a one-act play about a group of boys at summer camp rehearsing a play on college baseball, dealing with problems of accepting financial aid and maintaining eligibility, the piece has a few lines when Rickey, one of the camp's trainers, confronts the Old Man, Coach, about the deal which will see him go with Coach up to the State University on a football scholarship. Far from grateful, Rickey is resentful, as he has heard of other boys gaining up to five thousand dollars for doing the same thing and he demands to know what he's going to get in addition to board and tuition. We get no answers to Rickey's questions as they are irrelevant to the main, rather inconsequential, plot, but these few lines are nonetheless interesting as Fitzgerald's first comments on college football since the 1929 Carnegie Foundation's report on corruption in university athletic programs, especially colleges' recruiting methods, sidestepping of eligibility rules, and use of illegal payments, and the exchange between Coach and Rickey seems to indicate that Fitzgerald is bitterly disappointed in, and critical of, the venal attitude of Rickey. The honor of representing their university that Dink Stover, Amory Blaine and Basil Lee dreamed about or experienced now seems to have become, by the mid-1930s, more a matter of gain and greed than sacrifice and glory. Fitzgerald makes no suggestions as to how to address this problem, however (cf. Francis Wallace's journalism and "Notre Dame" novels of the 1930s which urge official recognition of fair, reasonable, and accountable athletic grants; see Oriard, *King Football* 111-15).

But even this late and seemingly disillusioned view of college football does not diminish what I consider to be Fitzgerald's ultimate achievement. For, surely, if one looks closer at Fitzgerald's main football heroes, there is one common factor among all of them: none of them are outright failures, or successes. They may be mediocre, or afraid, or hate the game, or are disliked, but they all have at least one moment of triumph, either on or off the field, at school or college, and all suffer some kind of defeat, either morally, physically or sexually. From Gilbert Patten's one dimensional Frank Merriwell and Owen Johnson's two-dimensional Dink Stover, we have now come to Fitzgerald's three-dimensional Amory Blaine, Tom Buchanan, Dolly Harlan, Ted Fay, and Basil Duke Lee. Far from marking the demise of the fictional Ivy League footballer, Scott Fitzgerald has turned him into a fully-rounded, credible, interesting, sometimes repulsive and sometimes appealing character. Or, in other words, a true representative of world-wise, fallible humanity. This I believe is Fitzgerald's real triumph. Instead

of writing the School Sports Hero's epitaph, he has called him off the bench of mediocre stereotypicality, and put him into play on the field of real, effective art.

Notes

*Indeed, the very nature of Tom Buchanan's football reputation is a moot point, as the actual results of the contemporary Yale football team reveal a somewhat different story. According to the novel's internal evidence (GG 3), Buchanan was a contemporary of Nick Carraway's and therefore at "New Haven" (i.e. Yale) from 1911 to 1915. As a freshman, it was unlikely that Buchanan would have been on the varsity team as NCAA rules restricted this at that time (Bernstein 86; Watterson 91). Moreover, although the Yale teams of 1912-14 always had winning seasons, they never won a championship, only once beat Princeton, and never defeated Harvard, the only games that truly mattered among "The Big Three" (cf. Coach Tad Jones' exhortation to his Yale team of 1916: "You are about to play a game of football against Harvard. Never again will you do anything so important." Quoted in Bernstein 74). Indeed, Buchanan's three Harvard games ended 0-20, 5-15, and 0-36. Had he remained an extra year (not impossible) and played in 1915, he would have been on the "New Haven" team that not only lost to Harvard 0-41, but was also the first ever losing team in Yale history, 4-5 (see Quirk 312 and Sorensen, web site). All in all, perhaps Buchanan's sense of frustration, and resentment is not the result of being a successful footballer who cannot assimilate into post-war society, but rather a consequence of his failing to attain any real acknowledgement or success on the gridiron, the only place where he might have expected to gain personal achievement and status as "one of the most powerful ends that ever played at New Haven" (GG 6). Noting also Carraway's reference to his "limited excellence" in football (GG 6), the reader must begin to wonder at the aptness or validity of Messenger attributing Tom Buchanan with "Ivy League Hero" status in the first place, especially if it is just in order to demote him. This new interpretation of Buchanan does not make him any more sympathetic, but perhaps more understandable at least, for in spite of his enormous wealth and beautiful trophy wife, we can see an intensely thwarted and frustrated man who knew he had failed to reach his potential at the one thing he had a God-given body and talent for: football.

**Note the playful religious overtones of the names Le Moyne ("the monk") and Bibble. I am grateful to Professor Emeritus Bob Cook (Princeton alumnus) for drawing my attention to this, as well as for his commenting on and proofreading earlier drafts of this paper.

***I am grateful to Jarom McDonald for drawing my attention to the football content in this story.

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Running at Midnight

With each stride, cinders crunch underfoot
and the only other sound is of some night bird
calling. With earth and air cooled late
I can run farther, faster, longer
on this old school track,
the last cinder track in the city.
My mind focuses on the inner ring
of the oval circumscribing the football field.
I stay tight to the inside,
remember everything my high school coach
taught me about running—I keep my hands loose;
my arms pump with a steady rhythm.
Finishing a hard mile, my legs heavy, my mouth
filled with cotton, I sprint around the last turn,
pour it on down the straight and walk it off.
A voice calls out, breaking the spell, Good night for a run.
I search through the dark for that voice,
find a young woman standing on her front lawn
across the street; I try to catch my breath
to tell her how much easier it is to run
at night, in August, and how 1 do this
almost every night in summer
when the heat of the day, whatever I have to do,
drains energy like an overloaded circuit.
She walks across the narrow street
while 1 put on my sweats under the goal posts; 1 listen
as she talks about the quiet time of late summer
nights when she comes out to watch
and listen to the stars. There is a note of longing
in her voice, anticipation in the still air
that tells me what she looks for.
I draw further back into the shadows
back from the street lamp that might show her
I'm too old to run like this, too old to tell her
what she wants to hear, but it's only small talk after all,
something I've never been good at.

I refrain from telling her the few things 1 know,
that I've learned circling the track
one run after another, night after night,
season after season. She stands there
between the goal posts and the cinders,
her hands in her pockets, searching for words.
I wish her well, and jog back
to whatever awaits, slowing perceptibly,
leaving her beneath the circling summer stars,
all of us learning to pace ourselves
as best we can, searching, calling,
running through our nights. Some of the answers
swirl like insects around a street lamp,
some of them flare to ash in the light.

Dale Ritterbusch

Slow Dancing at the Sound of Speed

Dennis Gildea

We were dancing, swaying rhythmically, sweetly to the music, when she leaned closer to me, tilted her face towards mine, and said, "Sylvester Lovejoy is the fastest hundred-meter man in Jamaica."

I said, "I know."

I hoped she wouldn't say it again, but she did. "Sylvester Lovejoy," she said, this time digging her fingers into my shoulder, "is the fastest hundred-meter man in Jamaica."

I nodded, keeping time with the music, looking over her shoulder at the band on the small stage, glancing at the other dancing couples, wondering why she was saying it. It's true. I knew it was true. She didn't have to tell me. I'm on the team with Sylvester Lovejoy. I've seen him sprint to university records, to national titles, to the Jamaican Olympic team. I've read his times in *Track & Field News*, seen his name on the list of top hundred-meter times in the country, in the world.

"You're looking fetching tonight," I said, a line I picked up from an old Cary Grant movie.

She said, "Sylvester Lovejoy is the fastest hundred-meter man in all the colleges in the country."

"In the world, probably," I said.

"When he goes home to Jamaica, he sips frozen daiquiris with the prime minister."

I didn't say anything.

I was dancing with the white woman who lives with Sylvester Lovejoy, and I didn't want to talk about him. I didn't want to talk at all. I wanted to dance, to hold her close for the length of the song, to smell her hair, her skin, to breathe fleetingly the same air she breathed.

I'm on the university team with Sylvester Lovejoy, but I'm not a sprinter. I'm a distance runner, a steeplechaser. Three-thousand meters, seven-and-a-half laps, twenty-eight barriers to leap, seven times over and into the water jump. Track historians say the event started more than a century ago in England when racers—I imagine a pack of fair-skinned, whippet-like Englishmen, all grinning gleefully, sticking bone-sharp elbows into each other's ribs, my ancestors in the chase—would run across the countryside, starting at one church steeple in a village and finishing at the church steeple in another village. They ran over, not around, but over anything in their path. More natural than our contemporary romp round and round a track, no church steeple in sight, manmade barriers to hurdle, a faux pond to jump into. It was not all that long ago that the race was dominated by white Europeans. Now the Africans rule; Kenyans and Ethiopians, wiry hordes of them, reared on high-altitude trails, can just about break eight minutes for the distance. Me, if I break ten minutes, I'm having a good race. Sylvester Lovejoy sprints for ten seconds, and he always wins.

"Sylvester Lovejoy has a wall full of trophies and medals," she said. "And an armful of watches."

"He has," I said.

We were dancing, gliding gracefully, but an odd couple maybe, drawing some stares, some quizzical comments, a waltzing departure from the norm. Or was it just my imagination?

We were dancing at a wedding reception for the graduate assistant coach on our team, like me a distance man, pencil-thin, dedicated to the long haul, a fervent believer in the benefits of LSD, long, slow distance; the training begets talent program; someone more cerebral than visceral, I suppose. And now he's married. Married to an equally slim graduate student he met in his physiology class; married just hours ago in the university chapel, a quick weekend honeymoon before them.

The whole team was invited to the reception at the university's mountain lodge, a rambling, rustic post-and-beam building, the knots still visible in the pine beams cut from the surrounding woods. In the pre-season, weeding-out-the-wimps time, our coach called it, we used the lodge as our base for over-distance training.

And here I was dancing with the white woman who lives with Sylvester Lovejoy.

The band, four university friends, played, and a woman, a music major whom I've seen around campus, clutched the microphone and sang.

> "*I've been around the world in a plane,*
> *Settled revolutions in Spain,*
> *The North Pole I have charted,*
> *But I can't get started with you.*"

Someone had put a green filter on a spotlight on the wall, and the band was bathed in a lemony light. I was standing against the wall beyond the light when I saw Sylvester Lovejoy go outside, and when the band started again, I went over and asked her to dance. For an instant, did a slight grimace flash across her face, the kind of unpleasant look you make when the traffic light you're speeding for suddenly turns red? But no. She smiled and nodded. We danced.

It was early April, the start of outdoor track season, and we'd had a dual meet that afternoon. The team won; Sylvester Lovejoy won; I lost. I was leading the steeple on the last lap, but as I approached the water jump for the final time, I botched my steps, tripped over the barrier, and landed in the water. Almost everybody passed me. I finished seventh out of eight runners, out of the points. I was drenched and shivering and kneading the scrape on my shin where I hit the hurdle when the head coach, Coach Bullethead, I call him, but always behind his back, stuck his face inches from mine and said, "Pyrotechnics of power; pyrotechnics of power." He spit the words at me, as if I needed to be any wetter. "You must emanate pyrotechnics of power."

Pyrotechnics? Did it even make sense?

Emanate. He always stressed the *man*—em-MAN-ate.

He shook his head and walked away, staring at his stopwatch, the inescapable truth of the matter, the numbers that always make sense.

He stopped suddenly, turned, and I knew what was coming. "You were as competitive as a jerked-off dick."

It was one of his favorite lines.

Was she there? Probably.

Watching? Or watching Sylvester Lovejoy warm up for the sprints?

As we danced, I looked out the lodge's double doors, open to let in the night air, and saw Sylvester Lovejoy standing in a small circle of teammates, visible in the porch light. We were in the high mountains, and it was snowing, an early spring snow, the flakes heavy, bending the branches of the firs beyond the parking lot. Sylvester Lovejoy stood there, talking, grinning, the alien snow settling momentarily in his dreadlocks before melting. The weatherman on TV said the snow-rain line would be at 3,000 feet, and we were just above that. Down in the valley, it would be raining, and next morning when I would head out of the stadium to the hills and the woods beyond campus for a long, slow training run, the grass would still be fresh and damp, glistening when the sun hit it. And I could jog easily on the trail on the hill above the track and look down at Sylvester Lovejoy doing 40-meter sprints, his quads pumping powerfully, a dark figure moving over the red track so swiftly you'd think he'd incinerate the sinews of his body, emulsify, a wisp of steam drifting into the atmosphere. Energy expended. He'd sprint; he'd stop; then laugh with the other sprinters, talk with the coach, lift his arms piston-like up and down, and then sprint again and again. But by that time I'd be in the woods, putting in the miles.

"Sylvester Lovejoy," she said, "is capable of breaking the world record."

"Yes," I said.

That's what *Track & Field News* said; that's what the coach said. That's why he recruited him, the only foreign athlete on our team. Coach Bullethead had joined Sylvester Lovejoy and the others outside. I could see him talking, gesturing to the falling snow, laughing, and patting Sylvester Lovejoy on the back. When he laughed, I could see the gap in the center of the coach's teeth that he claimed all good distance runners had. The better to breathe in the air with, he said. Keep the blood oxygenated. He was wearing a school blazer, and the collar of his dress shirt seemed at least two sizes too large for him. I imagined snowflakes falling behind his collar and sliding down his back. A few Olympiads ago, he was a nationally ranked distance man, one familiar with pyrotechnics of power. His face was long and narrow, and I figured that those pyrotechnics had in an earlier age gathered on both sides of his ears and like Ice Age glaciers shaping the contours of the land, blasted his head into its craggy, pinnacled shape. He looked for all the world like a hard-ass Buster Keaton.

"When I was a kid …" I started to say to her, but I stopped.

She looked at me, waiting.

When I was a kid, but I didn't say it aloud, on Sunday mornings our whole family would go to church, and after church just my father and I would get in the car and visit Aunt Tess. That's what my father told me to call her, but she wasn't really my aunt. But I liked her. My father and Aunt Tess would sit and drink coffee and talk while I watched cartoons on TV. Bertie the Bunyip, I remember, and his arch-enemy Sir Guy D. Guy. Bertie always came out on top of Sir Guy D. Guy.

"When you were a kid?" she said.

I didn't tell her this, but one Sunday morning my father told Aunt Tess a story about a man in prison. The man was bald, and because he was in prison and had nothing better to do but kill time, he would sit on his cot and bend over so that his head was between his knees, and for hours he'd massage his head, come up for a rest, and go back to massaging his head, almost like one of those toy birds that bob endlessly up and down into a glass of water and can make you go nuts just looking at them.

And when he came out of prison four years later, he had a full head of hair. Massaged every day and re-grew his hair. My father was speaking to Aunt Tess, but I knew he was really speaking to me. He didn't look my way, but he didn't have to.

"I was just thinking about hair," I said.

"The musical?"

"And Bertie the Bunyip."

The song was over, our dance ended. But I kept my arm lightly around her waist even as she started to pull away.

"Just a second," I said. "Just a second—please."

She looked at me. I looked at the floor and her feet. She had the Olympic rings tattooed on her left ankle. Sylvester Lovejoy had them on his left bicep. I looked up the length of her body and into her eyes. Violet-blue. A tinge of eye shadow. But to me unreadable.

Another barrier to clear. Another leap to make.

"Would I make a fool of myself, would I ruin everything if I asked … if, you know, maybe we could, like …"

I didn't know how to finish.

Everything?

She grinned, looking like she never expected me to finish my sentence. She put her arms around my neck, pulled my face towards hers and, tongue in my ear, almost hissed, "Raw sex."

Not just sex, but raw sex. I could feel my face burn. I could feel the slight stirrings of an erection. I didn't say anything. I didn't try to dry the dampness she left in my ear. I kept my arm around her waist.

She had moved just a step or two back, still looking at me, still grinning. Then she looked away. I followed her glance. Sylvester Lovejoy was framed in the doorway, outlined against the porch light and the falling snow behind him, the snow heavy and wet, covering the cars, turning the ground white, bending the branches of the firs, a seasonal aberration. After a while, he saw us. Sylvester Lovejoy started across the dance floor, moving swiftly in our direction.

Playing The Blues At Schofield Barracks

Even two holes down, looking at a short
par four I could drive from the white tees
after grooving my last two shots to eagle
the par five, mid-backswing, shoulders turned,
weight already tipped toward the left side,
I stop when the howitzer fires, signaling
"Retreat." Traffic halts along the fence.
Soldiers in fatigues step out, salute.

Only the palm fronds move in trade winds
nothing stops but Kona weather. Taped
bugle music mutes the doves and mynahs
and my whole body turns ceremonial.

Yours would have ached to keep playing.
Swinging the driver, rocking back and forth
on the tee box to thwart stiffness, you would
joke about already serving your time, defending
the country playing third base in Japan
during the Korean War, a garrison jock
straight from a James Jones novel.

Is that why you thought Jones was first rate?
Or were you pushing, that first jab that twists
the teenager's shoulder, lifts one foot
off the dirt breaking his balance? You loved
to push, then lean back and listen. You claimed
Newt Gingrich would be president. The only
way to play real golf was from the blue tees.
Your timing, like your backswing, elegant.

Maybe Jones was good. But it's the film,
not the novel, that darkens this humid air,
and turns the grass I'm anchored in smoke gray.
The synthesized bugle fades, and I hear
Prewitt's sweet notes blown for his dead friend,
Maggio, not once, but twice, the second
more mournful than the first, so that his grief,
squeezed through a mouthpiece, silenced

the whole post. Behind me a car door clicks.
Sunlight gleams off white plumeria. When
I pick up my clubs and set up forty yards
further back, a stillness, challenging
the wind, broods above the dark blue tees.

(In Memory of Lyle Olsen)

Don Johnson

The Great Trade of '62

Richard Arlin Stull

Saturday afternoon. The espresso bar. My four-year-old son, John, is blowing bubbles into his hot chocolate. My baby daughter is propped up on the counter in her backpack. I look at the headline on the front page.

"Mickey's dead," I said.

"Mickey Mouse?" John said, face falling.

"Mickey Mantle."

"Who was Mickey Mantle?" John asks.

"Some say Mickey Mantle of the Yankees was the greatest center fielder ever." Ireply. "But I still think it was Willie Mays." I look around for my baby daughter's Mr. Potato Head toy."Put your cap on straight, little buddy," I say, grinning.

My son smiles back and his little brown eyes shine with the kind of love you get only from a four-year-old. And I remember my love for baseball, my best buddy Eliot, and the great trade of '62.

I grew up in a little house in the Berkeley hills where on a clear day you could see San Francisco, the Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate from our living room window. I remember the morning fog with the faint smell of the bay, and the aroma of burning eucalyptus leaves on weekends. My elementary school was a four-room kindergarten-through-third primary school about fifteen minutes' walk from my house. My best buddy, Eliot, lived just a block below the school.

Eliot was the smartest kid I ever knew. By third grade he already spoke French and Spanish, quoted Shakespeare, had memorized every dinosaur in the encyclopedia, and was an expert on The Untouchables, which in my home was an "unwatchable." When John Glenn became the first astronaut to orbit the earth, Eliot told me, "The space-race all comes down to power." Eliot understood everything about life. Eliot always wore the

same style argyle socks every day of the week, every week.

Eliot had this hamster named Plato. Plato was very friendly, had a little pink proboscis and his whiskers always trembled. One day while playing with Plato on the family room floor, Eliot and I made an amazing discovery. If you flipped Plato in the air, you would find this little poop pellet underneath him after landing. Every time. Like a little present. Eliot taught me the concept of experimental hypothesis. Suppose Plato did a double flip in the air? Would there be a pair of Plato's poops? I was fascinated. So, we launched Plato into a double flip. He landed perfectly on his belly with a thud. "Now this is science," Eliot said as we slowly lifted Plato up to check underneath. It was a miracle. A perfect little pair. "We've confirmed our hypothesis," he pronounced, arms folded. "But we need many repetitions to make it a law!"

Like everything else, from science to Shakespeare to the space-race, it was Eliot who introduced me to baseball and to the most exciting player in all of baseball, San Francisco Giants center fielder, Willie Mays. We copied all of Mays's mannerisms: the just-wider-than-shoulder-width stance, the tight bounce at the knees, and the bat cocked back towards the pitcher at 45 degrees. Then we'd imitate that whipsaw swing, imagining we were hitting line drive missiles into the vicious cross winds that blew off the bay into Candlestick Park.

Eliot and I both started collecting baseball cards in 1962, and he was the first kid in our school to get Mickey Mantle. He swore he'd never trade him. But no one had gotten Mays. And then one day, I tore open a pack, and the first card was Willie Mays. Eliot's eyes got large. He paused.

"This could be big, you know," said Eliot.

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Well," said Eliot. "I've got Mantle."

"We could make the trade of the century."

"You mean Mantle for Mays?" I said.

"Sure," said Eliot. "Be the biggest thing to hit our school. Think of it. We could promote it, get everyone there. Everyone. This thing is bigger than us," he said.

Friday. Eliot had promoted the trade around school like a heavyweight title fight. When the ten o'clock bell rang, Eliot told me we should stay inside the classroom a minute to build up the tension. "They do it in boxing all the time," he said. "We're gonna make history," he said, as we walked out and stared at the entire population of the school. All four primary teachers were there: third grade homeroom teacher Mrs. Collins, Mrs. Parish from second grade, first-grade teacher goddess, Miss Scott. Even Mrs. Johansen, the bigboned teacher from Iceland, came out trailing a covey of kindergartners.

Eliot walked to the center of the crowd, turned slowly around towards me, and stood, knees slightly bent with his hips thrust forward like Jack Palance in a gunfight scene.

"Where's your Mays?" Eliot said.

"Where's your Mantle?" I said.

And then we made the trade of the century.

A cheer went up. Everyone gathered around us, excited. It was a hard lesson, one I'd have to learn over and over, trading something sacred for sensation and spectacle.

The Giants went on to play the Yankees in the World Series in 1962, Mays against Mantle with the Yankees winning a thriller in the seventh game. Later that year president John Kennedy faced down the Russians in the Cuban missile crisis. The Nobel prize in literature went to John Steinbeck; in chemistry to Watson, Wilkins, and Crick for discovering the basic structure of DN A, the secret of life. In music, Peter, Paul, and Mary's "Blowin' in the Wind" was on every radio station.

1963 began with great hope and optimism. But later that year Kennedy was assassinated, my dad moved the family to the South Bay, and I went to a new school. And innocence and the great trade soon receded. The war in Vietnam, the Anti-war Movement, demonstrations on Sprowel Plaza, the Free Speech Movement, the WeatherUnderground, theBlackPanthers, the Woman's Movement and the political and social whirlwinds of the Sixties changed Berkeley and the country forever. It all became bigger than us.

"How much for the hot chocolate?" I say. "$2.46 with tax," the counter girl says, making faces at the baby. "Come on, John" I say. "We forgot to feed Socrates this morning. You're going to have to learn how to clean the hamster cage, little buddy," I said. "They poop. It's a natural law."

When we get home John says, "Let's hit a few, daddy." John runs up to our toy-strewn lawn, picks up the plastic home plate, places it on our front sidewalk, and then grabs the bat. I put the baby, now sleeping in the backpack, about fifteen feet behind the plate. I pick up the ball, and go out into the middle of the street. John squares up in his little stance. His feet are slightly more than shoulder width apart, his knees are springy, and the bat is cocked back towards me at 45 degrees. We lock eyes. I step forward with my left foot, lobbing the ball underhand. The ball reaches the apex of its arc and starts to drop. John starts to swing. And for a sacred instant, the earth stops spinning on its axis.

Away

"… echoes list to silence now where gods told lies of old."–AE Housman

We were talking the usual bull, beer
in hand, the air light, the light like air,
the river full of light, full of fish,
Don said, and I had said something
about teaching and Jack chuckled, "Yeah,
that's what Emerson said: The first job
of the teacher is to inspire." That was
Aw Shucks Jack, with his mountain
accent deeper than that river, warmer
than the East Tennessee breeze.

He hadn't played half-rubber with us
that day, the pastime I hauled up from
Savannah to inflict in an apple orchard
on those middle-aged boys from Wisconsin
and Pennsylvania and by God Maine, but I
reminded Jack of the softball game from
a decade before when he had rounded third
like a runaway freight, belly ballooning
from the turn, and scared the catcher away
from the plate he hit with a slide that took
all our breaths away.

Broom handle (wood),
solid rubber ball (baseball size, cut down
the middle), items just about impossible to find
in 21st century Johnson City. And I think now
Jack did play, had the surest hands of the lot,
a born half-rubber catcher right there
where the river moves almost silently past
the orchard and all around the mountains lean in,
lean in as the light seeps away and Jack claps
his palms together, grins, and holds up
between thumb and forefinger half a ball,
and the boy from Maine's still untwisting
himself to see if he really is out.

Ron Smith

[This tribute to Jack Higgs first appeared in *Now and Then*, a publication of the Appalachian Studies program at East Tennessee State University.]

Boys to Men or Boys to Boys? Biff Loman and Brick Pollitt: Surviving Football in *Death of a Salesman and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

David Vanderwerken

Robert Wilson, Ernest Hemingway's British safari guide in formerly British East Africa (Kenya today), reflects on the metamorphosis of his American client from coward to "fire eater" in a matter of hours, then generalizes about the immaturity of American men: "It's that some of them stay little boys so long, Wilson thought. Sometimes all their lives. Their figures stay boyish when they're fifty. The great American boy-men. Damned strange people. But he liked this Macomber now. Damned strange fellow" (150). The great white hunter lauds Francis Macomber's nascent masculinity and self-confidence, truly a man now who Wilson assumes "had probably been afraid all his life" (150). Witnessing men "come of age … had always moved" Robert Wilson (150). F. Scott Fitzgerald's narrator, Nick Carraway also takes note of the youthful appearances of his thirty-something acquaintances, Tom Buchanan and Jay Gatsby, and their chronic "restlessness," which Nick attributes to the "formless grace of our [American] nervous, sporadic games" (68). Sportsman Macomber, ex-Yale football star Buchanan, and the athletic Gatsby establish a mold for many literary athletes that follow them in American poetry, fiction, and drama in their narcissism, their vigorous resistance to growing into emotionally and psychologically healthy adults, and their clinging to their past sporting triumphs, whether fact or fantasy.

The pattern of developmental issues found in both literary and actual athletes has received ample scrutiny from literary critics, social commentators, and psychological researchers. Dr. Tom House, former Major League pitcher, pitching coach, and current sport psychologist, describes the athlete's condition colorfully in his 1989 book, *The Jock's Itch*, in which he coins the term "Terminal Adolescent Syndrome" to identify just what stimuli in the careers of professional athletes cause "[l]oving husbands and fathers [to] turn from Jekyll to Hyde in the blink of an eye, throwing sudden preadolescent temper tantrums or becoming hedonistic, narcissistic brats" (2); what makes "thirty-year-old men … act the same way they did when they were thirteen" (3). House's colloquial description of Terminal Athletic Syndrome fits almost all literary "jocks" in sport-centered short stories, novels, and plays as well as those athletes featured in the morning paper, sometimes in the sports section, sometimes on the front page. Having commented elsewhere (Vanderwerken, "Gavin Grey") on several texts featuring aging former athletes trapped in their own actual or self-perceived glorious pasts, I focus here on two famous dramas ordinarily not viewed as sport-centered literature and two cases in point—ex-football stars Biff Loman, from Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1947) and Brick Pollitt, from Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955; 1974), who both suffer from House's Syndrome. These two wildly popular dramas position these "has-beens" at the center of attention in dramatizing each play's several meanings.

Other than that both Loman and Pollitt are former football stars, Loman in a New York City high school and Pollitt in college and briefly as a professional in a minor league with a team he formed called the Dixie Stars, the two characters would seem more dissimilar than similar. Biff is 34, Brick 27; Biff is ostensibly straight, while Brick is deeply conflicted about his own sexual orientation, latently gay if not a practicing homosexual. Biff is essentially a penniless drifter, Brick potentially a wealthy man if he inherits Big Daddy's plantation. Biff drinks moderately, but Brick is seriously alcoholic. Biff is a scion of the very middle of the middle class, the Lomans living in their modest Brooklyn bungalow, while the Pollitts in their antebellum mansion are Mississippi "quality."

Yet, these surface features aside, Loman and Pollitt share crucial affinities: both were/are treated as gods, both have brothers but their parents only focus on their football stars, both live in the past, both are "weak, beautiful people" (Maggie, to Brick. Williams 173), both are "poets" and "idealist[s]" (Hap, to Biff. Miller 23), both feel sheepishly like boys, not men, and, finally, both are narcissistic divas that still crave the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday lights and TV highlights. Biff at 17 had the potential of an "Adonis" (33); in his full golden boy high school football uniform, Biff was "like a young god. Hercules—something like that" (68), and with the "sun, the sun all around him" (68), Biff resembled none other than Apollo in splendor. Likewise, Brick

was a "godlike being" (57), Maggie the Cat proclaims bitterly. Sister-in-law Mae sneeringly remarks, "Behold the conquering hero comes!" and brother Gooper jeers, "The fabulous Brick Pollitt! Remember him?—Who could forget him!" (157).

To their doting, worshipful fathers, Biff and Brick are their only true sons, understandable since Hap Loman and Gooper Pollitt have never been mistaken for gods. Hap notes that father Willy increasingly "talks to himself" and that "[m]ost of the time he's talking to [Biff]" (21). As teenagers, Hap simply cannot evade his older brother's shadow and receives scant attention from his father. At age 32, he is still competing with Biff for dad's—or his mom's—notice and still being ignored. When Hap dramatically announces, "I'm gonna get married, Mom. I wanted to tell you," Linda deflates him, "Go to sleep, dear" (68). As well, the sun only shines on Brick Pollitt, while his pedestrian older brother Gooper remains on the shadowy sidelines. Big Mama hollers, "*I want Brick! Where's Brick? Where is my only son?*" (147), a sentiment fiercely shared by Big Daddy. Both *Death* and *Cat* make clear the eclipsed brothers' resentment of their number two family status. Hap Loman and Gooper Pollitt are like Avis, always trying harder, but to no avail, in catching up to Hertz.

Obviously, Biff Loman and Brick Pollitt have never matured beyond their "past glory" at Ole Miss (Williams 155) or the "championship of the city" (Miller 68) played at Ebbets Field since their families provide them with continual nostalgic reminiscences. And both know it; neither is in denial. However, they do not know how to move forward in life, out of their time warps. Biff confesses to his brother: "I'm like a boy. I'm not married, I'm not in business, I just—I'm like a boy" (23); while Brick explains his drunken, ankle-breaking, 3:00 a.m. "one-man track meet on the Glorious Hill High School athletic field" (22) to his young niece's query why Uncle Brick was jumping hurdles: "Because I used to jump them, and people like to do what they used to do, even after they've stopped being able to do it". (62; Williams's ellipsis). And he admits to his father, "[T]ime just outran me, Big Daddy—got there first". (115; Williams's ellipsis). Unlike Biff, Brick is married and to a patient woman who is now and has been attempting to help her husband grow up, grow beyond the gridiron:

> Maggie declares that Skipper and I went into pro-football after we left "Ole Miss" because we were scared to grow up …—Wanted to—keep on tossing—those long, long, long!—high, high!—passes that—couldn't be intercepted except by time, the aerial attack that made us famous! And so we did, we did, we kept it up for one season, that aerial attack, we held it high!—Yeah, but—that summer, Maggie, she laid the law down to me, said, Now or never, and so I married Maggie. (124; Williams's ellipses)

Maggie is indeed a tenacious woman who will never give up on her boy-man "project" until she succeeds in eliminating the "boy" part. Big Mama places her faith in Maggie's ability to get "Brick straightened out," to assist him in his effort to "pull himself together and take hold of things" (152). However, Biff has no Maggie in his life. Willy Loman can only ponder "[w]hy didn't [Biff] ever catch on? … His life ended after that Ebbets Field game. From the age of seventeen nothing good ever happened to him" (92). Biff's problem, akin to Brick's, is that Biff has been seventeen now for an additional seventeen years. Maturation into adulthood never "happened" to Biff or Brick.

Their inability or refusal to mature into responsible men is typical of what psychologists call the narcissistic personality rather than existential *angst*. George W. Crandell's instructive "'Echo Spring': Reflecting the Gaze of Narcissus in Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*" proves just how perfectly Brick Pollitt could serve as exhibit A for narcissism in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (439). Certainly, Williams foregrounds the Narcissus myth in characterizing Brick's self-destructive history and his having "fallen in love with Echo Spring" (55), his Kentucky bourbon of choice to help him achieve the "click" (33, 100) of peace daily. Crandell demonstrates that Brick has all the associated symptoms of narcissistic personality disorder—detachment in relationships, elephantiasis of the ego, avoidance, a sense of entitlement, hypersensitivity (439), and most of all, a fixation on an ideal past: "Brick looks backward to a more glorious time in his own self-history, to a period when he was young and the center of attention" (436). A man in love with his own past reflection has little room in his psyche for anyone else. Wife Maggie, the most astute reader of her husband's interiority in *Cat*, knows only too well Brick's supernal aloofness, "you godlike being" (57):

> Of course, you always had that detached quality as if you were playing a game without much concern over whether you won or lost, and now that you've lost the game, not lost but just quit playing, you have that rare sort of charm that usually only happens in very old or hopelessly sick people, the charm of the defeated.—You look so cool, so cool, so enviably cool. (30)

Detached, yes, but also thin-skinned, easily wounded by criticism or mockery, much like Brick's literary double, Biff Loman, who would make an apt second example of narcissistic personality disorder.

When Linda Loman claims her son is "very lost," her baffled husband exclaims, "Biff Loman is lost. In the greatest country in the world a young man with such—personal attractiveness, gets lost" (16). Therein lies the problem. Like Narcissus, Biff has lost himself in himself, to the time when he "was young and the center of attention" like Brick. And like Brick, Biff is a loner and a brooder. He has no current friends, his ties to family are more psychological bonds than ones of love, and he was not "brought up to grub for money" (24)

since he was "brought up" by his father to assume that the world owed him a living because of his football talent. The best experiences of their young lives, their football glory years, were simultaneously the worst in that neither young man evolved beyond their hundred-yard worlds.

Yet just what role does/did football play in stunting/delaying/preventing of Biff's and Brick's growth and development into responsible maturity, their inability to "take hold" in life? Thousands of football coaches—as well as institutions, such as the NCAA and the NFL, have told American men that playing football is the best preparation for the "greater game of life," including military life and business life, that an adolescent male can possibly experience. Walter Camp, founding father of the NCAA, told NCAA conventioneers in December 1921 that competitive contact sports teach boys not to be "yellow or a quitter," instill a "fighting spirit" because "spirit is what you want" (176-77), certainly in young military officers. Ninety years later, Camp's rationale still rings culturally true. Football makes boys into men, and the gifted superstar becomes a man among men. Michael Oriard, America's most insightful analyst of actual football players in *The End of Autumn*, of literary football players in *Sporting with the Gods*, and of football propaganda performing its cultural work in *Reading Football*, cogently assesses how the historical cultural narratives of football over the last 130 years have celebrated ideals of hyper-masculinity for Christian men, businessmen, and upper class/privileged men: For the game's audience, rather than its players, the narratives of "Christianmanliness, managerial manliness, and patrician manliness provided alternative ways of reading football at a time of growing uncertainty about what it meant, most fundamentally, to be a man (*Reading Football*, 215-216).

Oriard's seminal studies raise the question of precisely how Brick Pollitt's football career has prepared him to oversee the operations of "twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile!" (Williams 88), but the answer, if any, is not at all clear. But popular cultural beliefs need not *be* clear.

Nor is it at all clear how Biff's high school glory days will magically prepare him for business stardom although his father has preached this dogma to his son apparently since birth. As he points to Biff, wearing his letterman's sweater with a block S, perhaps for Superman, Willy explains his core belief to his entrepreneurial, nineteenth-century Robber Baron-ish, and dead brother Ben:

> Look at this boy! Without a penny to his name, three great universities are begging for him, and from there the sky's the limit, because it's not what you do, Ben. It's who you know and the smile on your face! It's contacts, Ben, contacts! And Ben! when he walks into a business office his name will sound out like a bell and all the doors will open to him! (86)

Despite Willy's desperate effort by violence to yoke together football success and business success, the two are actually apples and oranges. As Frank W. Shelton has argued in "Sports and the Competitive Ethic: *Death of a Salesman* and *That Championship Season*," "Ideally the world of sports is a world set apart, independent and clearly structured … played according to rules … where one can succeed through sacrifice, hard work, and courage, a world of simple order offering the potential for heroic action" (17). Building upon Shelton, Frank Ardolino's "Like Father, Like Sons: Miller's Negative Use of Sports Imagery in *Death of a Salesman*" notes Willy's "belief in the power of athletic ability and recognition to create success in the business world … perverts the ethos and purpose of sports" (32), agreeing with Shelton that Willy's obsession with gaining some unethical advantage over the competition, violating the sports world "governed by rules of conduct," leads to "fraud, for competition leads to the subversion of those very rules in the sacred name of success" (Shelton 20; Ardolino 32).

Then, if football exists in a parallel universe from society and in fact does not transform boys into men, does football in fact preserve boys as boys? If so, is that not the greatest attraction of the game—the illusion of stopping time itself, freeze-framing the golden boy, Biff or Brick, at his acme of transcendent accomplishment? And if so, then football is divorced from the anti-climactic mundane endeavors of life, far better than owning a mega-plantation or becoming a *Fortune* 500 CEO. If we think more deeply about the plights of Biff and Brick, take as a given that football is "better" than life, we may see our own false notions that football "carries over" into our cultural institutions. There is no carryover. Football prepares a young man to play football. And perhaps we can learn that the truly valuable gifts of playing football are memories, but memories that must be placed in perspective, not dominating one's imagination or controlling one's behavior, character, or personality. The stories of Biff Loman and Brick Pollitt are cautionary tales; neither can let go of football because football holds each in an iron grip—truly "Fantasy Football" on a higher plane than what goes on in America's corporate cubicles.

In a poetic vein, James Dickey in his elegiac "For the Death of Vince Lombardi" poses hard and incisive questions to this American coaching icon firmly located in the Walter Camp tradition about the regressive nature of football for players and male fans, the football holding them in emotional and psychological bondage:

> You are holding us
> Millions together: those who played for you,
> And those who entered the bodies
> Of Bart Starr, Donny Anderson, Ray Nitschke, Jerry Kramer
> Through the snowing tube on Sunday afternoon. (lines 11-15)

> Coach, don't you know that some of us were ruined
> For life? Everybody can't win. What of almost all
> Of us, Vince? We lost.
> And our greatest loss was that we could not survive
> Football. (46-50)
>
> Into the weekly inescapable dance
> Of speed, deception, and pain
> You led us, and brought us here weeping,
> But as men. Or, you who created us as George
> Patton created armies, did you discover the
> Worst in us; aggression, meanness, deception, delight in giving
> Pain to others, for money? Did you make of us, indeed,
> Figments overspecialized, brutal ghosts
> Who could have been real
> Men in a better sense? Have you driven us mad
> Over nothing? Does your death set us free? (55-65)

Biff and Brick might indeed have been better men, better sons, better husbands, better brothers, men more outwardly directed, but neither could "survive" football, the alleged "character-building" sport that in Dickey's judgment is character-warping (Vanderwerken, "James").

The stories of Biff and Brick are stories of failed relationships on all levels. Both boy-men have lived in perpetual alienation from their fathers since their late teens, while at the same time chained emotionally to their fathers' agendas for their lives. Willy Loman remains delusional through his planning of his own suicide, disguised as an accident, so Biff will be the beneficiary of a double indemnity payout of $20,000, leapfrogging Biff "ahead of Bernard again" (135). Where this would leave his fiercely loyal Linda never crosses his mind. Obviously, we can infer from Requiem that Willy's suspicious life insurance company does not honor the death benefit since it has a history of evidence involving Willy's previous suicide attempts. Yet, Willy's death draws father and number one son closer together, all passion and bitterness having been cathartically dissipated in Act II and Requiem. Better off psychically than Willy, Big Daddy Pollitt is facing terminal stomach cancer, but the drama makes clear that Big Daddy sees his football star son as his legatee, primogeniture tradition be damned, if Brick will sober up and produce a male heir. They, too, reach an accommodation in Act II as they agree that the intrigue and chicanery of Gooper and Mae Pollitt has left a "powerful and obnoxious odor of mendacity in this room," as Big Daddy exclaims, and shortly thereafter says, "Brick agrees with me" (166). Only at the end of their lives are the fathers partially reconciled with their prodigal sons.

Likewise, the cold, barren, and nominal marriage of Brick and Margaret Pollitt seems unavoidably doomed until the last moments of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. As Philip C. Kolin wryly remarks in "Tennessee Williams and Sports," "Maggie learns in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* … that a football star does not always make a good husband" (18), something Maggie has learned all too well, yet Maggie the Cat claws and scratches tenaciously to continue loving this self-loving narcissist. About Brick and his literary peers in Williams's fiction and drama, Kolin makes a salient point concerning how "Williams represents sports dreams as foolhardy illusions, life lies, that young men tell themselves to face the future fortified with hope" (12). But Brick fortifies himself repeatedly in said future with Echo Spring bourbon. Yet, Williams layers in many signs at the end of *Cat* that Brick may be withdrawing his head from Echo Spring and re-engaging Maggie. One sign is Brick's thanking Maggie for saving his face during the family showdown earlier. Second, Maggie locks up the liquor cabinet until after Brick and she make love and perhaps conceive a child, making her earlier dramatic lie to her father-in-law into the truth. Brick meekly agrees, and Maggie utters the last line, to "gently with love hand [Brick's] life back to [him]" (173).

With their brothers, however, Biff and Brick achieve no reconciliations. All through *Death of a Salesman*, Miller makes clear Happy Loman's ill-concealed jealousy of older brother Biff's central position in the family. Behind his hero worship and adoring comments lie anger and resentment of major proportions. Their rift erupts to the surface in Requiem when Biff, who seems finally content with himself, invites Hap to return to the west with him, an invitation Hap rejects with exceptional vehemence: "I'm not licked that easily … "I'm gonna show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream … to come out number-one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him" (138-39). The delusion continues into the next generation. Biff can only give Hap a "hopeless glance" (139) as the brothers presumably part for good.

Nor will Brick and Gooper Pollitt come together. When it becomes clear that Big Daddy will leave his fortune to Brick, Gooper accepts the decision with more grace than we might expect. He even asks Brick if he might "possibly spare me one small shot of that liquor," to which request Brick amiably replies, "Why, help yourself, Gooper boy" (169). Gooper gently ushers his raging wife Mae out the door, "leaving these lovebirds together in their nest!" (171). Sic transit Gooper from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Gooper's utter humiliation and his younger brother's patronizing "Gooper boy" epithet does not bode well for these brothers' estrangement waning.

Of the many questions left unanswered at the end of both *Death of a Salesman* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, one is whether the final scenes infer that the two football players manqué will "survive" football, as Dickey put it, from now on. On this issue in general, Tom House essentially claims, "You may get

them out of the game, but you never get them *from* the game" (116; House's emphasis), or once an athlete, always an athlete:

> The truth is: no activity, no job, no pastime can ever be as intensely satisfying, fulfilling, and rewarding as an athlete's involvement in his sport. And you'd have to look far and wide to find an ex-player who wouldn't get back in uniform if he [were] asked. As one retired player put it, "I've got a great job and make good money, but I'd trade it all to be back in the Texas League on a dirty bus. (125-126)

Accepting the validity of House's point, readers and viewers can still legitimately speculate on the degree of maturation and self-acceptance—if any—reached by Biff Loman and Brick Pollitt.

Likely, Biff exceeds Brick dramatically in both maturing and self-accepting, which are not separate categories but mutually connected ones. When Biff tells his younger brother, over their father's grave, "I know who I am, kid" (138), positing Hap's immaturity and self-delusion, Biff accepts his earlier self-evaluation as "I'm a dime a dozen … I am not a leader of men … I'm not bringing home any prizes any more" (132), reaching a plateau of calmness, peace of mind and spirit, that promises a future of contentment, even joy. What those who would condemn as Biff's settling for a future of mediocrity, Arthur Miller champions as the remainder of a human life potentially well-lived outside the northeastern American rat race, even with Biff's late start at age 34. Welcome back to Texas, Biff Loman.

However, Brick Pollitt will not be relocating, soon to be inheriting a vast landed fortune in his native Mississippi Delta home ground. While Brick at 27 has not put football as far behind him as Biff, Tennessee Williams characterizes Brick as evolving toward putting his football star past in clearer perspective and taking responsibility for himself, his marriage, and his imminent wealth and power. In the final scene, Maggie locks the liquor cabinet, then hurls Brick's crutch over the gallery railing (172-73), but he throws no tantrum of protest as he had earlier in Act I (32-33) when Maggie first withholds his crutch. He tacitly agrees to make love with Maggie in attempting to make a "true lie" out of Maggie's earlier pregnancy claim to Big Daddy (167). While Brick may not be fully ready to embrace the messiness, unfairness, and ambiguity of reality, where "mendacity" rules—his memories of football's tidiness, orderliness, and clarity being yet fresh and strong—Tennessee Williams insinuates that Brick may well be advancing toward maturation and self-acceptance, thus following in Biff's now uncleated footsteps.

While unwilling to belabor or overstate this positive, hopeful reading since both young men's lives could relapse and spiral downward, I detect in each playwright's final inferences that psychic and emotional liberation from the bondage of football is distinctly possible for Biff Loman and Brick Pollitt, just as

their aging bodies disconnected them physically from the game. If they do not relapse, then Biff and Brick can live with dignity, integrity, and self-knowledge, no longer existing as boys in men's bodies, as Tom House proclaims, but as humane, less deluded, less selfish, and perhaps even wiser, adults.

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Love Reports: A Sequence

Bases Loaded, Bottom of the Ninth, the Catcher Visits the Mound:

Back in high school, I remember
when Junior Waters got hit
in the butt by their pitcher—a big
skinny kid with a fancy glove—and Junior
dragged himself
down to first in tears.
His father
—Henry Waters—walked across the field
(king's x)
toward his kid. Then Mr. Waters
dusted off old Junior's butt and cleaned his kid's glassesand all of us sat there busting up.
The Waterses were like that. A bunch
of big babies. God,
Junior Waters's butt was big enough
we coulda' used it as a chest protector—
thicker than this shit I got here.
And Junior Waters's
glasses were taped together with masking tape—that kind
we used to take
outta' the teacher's desk up at the Union School.
God
sometimes wouldn't you have just liked
to cream a kid like Junior? What a dope.
Like I really hated it
when he was out in right field. I'd rather of had Angie
Tourangeau out there with her dumb cigarette in one hand
and her brother's old glove on the other.
Sometimes
I could of left that place in a minute,
like my brother Roy did. He just hopped a freight
in St. Albans and left. But always he sent me
really neat stuff, like a matchbook
from some bar in San Diego or something

Sometime
we'll see that town. And sometimes the world
seems pretty fucking crazy. But you just
hang in there. This next guy
couldn't get a hold of a ball
in a whorehouse.

Love Travels to the Edge of the Earth

Traded. No trip back
to the minors, but traded
to the worst team
in any league, in
the entire universe and
beyond. Double A wouldn't
have been worse. But there was
a locker to empty, a bag to pack,
hand shakes and head shakes
and so-long-see-you-arounds
to endure. And Love endured
all of it, right down to the bat kid
who looked almost
about to cry when Love
tossed him a ball, gave him a thumb's up
and trotted over to the very same taxi
who'd brought Love here
in the first place.

7-4, Bottom of the Ninth, Love Comes in for the Save

Pillows loaded and Love
Doesn't have the energy
to lift the rosin. A jittery two-nine
leads off third, back and forth,
glaring over. Two quick balls
and it feels like the whole
stadium's sighing. But then

Love throws—ping, ping—two
fastballs and there's a hard grounder
to short who flips the pill to second
who catches another little
prick off balance then tosses over to—
that batter's gotta' be the slowest runner
in baseball—first.
Now Love's
feeling good, feeling almost
cocky, but shit, it's their
ReggieJacksonMickeyMantleHenryAaron
starring down Love from the plate.
TedWilliamsStanMusialSammySosa
Won't let this game
end with his bat on his shoulder and Love's
got only a half-assed curve and maybe two
sliders left and Jesus now
Love's next pitch sails into right …

Love In Short Relief

Can't explain it—but for some reason
Love was this kid's favorite, and the kid was
—well, a kid, didn't know much.
So when Craft brings in Love
to face the only lefty
still in their order, the kid starts
hooting and hollering, all excited.
Then it must have been
maybe three pitches for the out
and the kid's face changes to shocked, glaring
at the righty trotting in, glaring
at Craft. Then booming out of that kid's throat
just about the whole ballpark hears:
"Why don't'cha give Love a fucking chance, huh?
Just a fucking chance."

Love Rides the Pine

Benched and charting
pitches: "Next time you'll know
if you throw Number Nine
low and in, Number Nine
won't break a sweat
rounding the bases." Coach harps
like a realtor: "Location,
Location, Location!" And today
There's not even
a breeze, sun's roasting,
and the bottle flies
are swarming around me
like I'm dead meat.

Love Starts on Opening Day

It seemed like Love was always
card number six-fifty-nine in a Topps set
of six-sixty. Did anyone even think
of Love? Then two sore arms, a first
kid on the way and a funeral and suddenly
Love got the nod, first time
since short season A and shit
Love felt like a kid again. Even
Cleveland at the end of March
might feel like Arizona
in August. Love believed—
with the movement lately on the fastball—
it was the pitch to go with.
Give that rookie catcher a brand new glove
and people in the centerfield bleachers
would hear that ball pop.

Love Works on the Change

I watch towns turn to pastures, then
to cities and school yards, then back to pastures. I watch
cars and telephone poles
flick by in the windows of so many buses
and trains I can't remember who I am. Sometimes when
we're flying I follow
the shadows of clouds
and outfielders on miniature diamonds. But everything
passes by too quick. Brush the hair
off your forehead and your catcher's
gone up or down, or vanished completely
to a life of grocery stores and stacking
casegoods. Sometimes I glance up in the stands, think
for a minute: Did I know that redhead once? Is that
my father's voice? Will someone stop by after? Maybe
we could have a burger, a beer. Maybe
this is a different place—
the arm fresh as air
and everything all
so necessary.

Love's Cup of Coffee

Not long enough for a doughnut,
not long enough for a packet of sugar
or a dribble of cream, Love's cup of
coffee is only long enough to feel
the big leaguer uniforms and the warmth
of the bullpen, to leave
Love wishing those long ago
kid dreams again, whiffing
'roid loaded hitters with a curve
that drops right down
off that table.

Love's Own Baseball Card

The posing, Love remembered—
staring down the camera with
a menacing look. And Love remembered
thinking perfect games
were possible and the strike zone
would always be
wide as a summer sky.
Love remembered when packs
were only a quarter, the feel of
fresh cardboard in the palm, the smell
of bubblegum and even licking
the sugar dust
that coated the wax wrapper.

Pitchers and Catchers Report

In English, these
are the four most
beautiful words, days
like a curtain going up
on your whole life. The locker room—
bleach, floor wax and fresh paint, the
snap
and slap of towels, it's all there again.
And Love's there too, this time, the first
time, looking around, sizing up
the others, trying hard to act
nonchalant while
the old timers keep
glancing out at the Annies
already lining up, already
poking their pens
through the backstop.

The Final Pitch

You know,
It's not like they sit you down, tell you
They've been going over your records and then
"I'm sorry, Love, but at most you've got
4 2/3 innings left."
It's not like the righty's
warming up.
There's no warning,
no sign from the dugout: You're just finished.
And there's no one to tell you how to do it, what pitch
you ought to go out on. Shit,
if anyone can say what it feels like—
offer them the big money. But nothing takes away
the wondering:
What if I'm not there? Who'll pick up
the ball? Who'll finish
the inning? Would the game even
go on? And then I just
wish real hard
for some extra innings. Hell no,
a nice long
rain delay.

Linda Kittell

Closing Ceremonies

Neil D. Isaacs

I first noticed the car coining out of Tucumcari. It was that distinctive Honda green, a color unknown in nature but reminiscent of the pea-soup excrescence in Linda Blair's mouth in *The Exorcist* and next to the Corvette yellow the most easily recognizable tint in autopaintdom. It pulled out to pass me, headed east on 1-40, and as it drew alongside I looked over to see the blonde in the passenger seat give me a warm, friendly, pretty smile.

The car had Georgia plates (with almost matching green lettering) and a bumper sticker that I couldn't quite make out. They were making good, steady time, and I liked the way the driver signaled changing lanes, so I decided to follow. It was relatively late in the morning to be starting out on a long day's drive, and I thought I'd relax behind a lead car.

I was actually well ahead of schedule. I had left the Coliseum immediately after the finish of the last full day's track and field program Saturday night at about 7:30. I had found a good parking space an easy walk away on 68th, and by eight o'clock I was turning onto the freeway from Normandy. The traffic was moderate, as it had been throughout the Olympics, and by the time I stopped for supper in Barstow a couple of hours later, I had already decided to forget heading up 15 to Vegas and just drive east on 40. After all, Lucy was waiting for me and it had been almost a month since I'd left Washington on my sports fan's odyssey.

Through the night I drove, steadily and well, stopping every two or three hours for a snack or gas or a stretch or a piss-call, playing a few tapes but saving most of them for daytime because the radio reception is so good and varied at night. Starry, moonlit night, few trucks and fewer cars, smoothly across the desert and into Arizona. Then another hot, dry, shimmering day, stopping more

often to guard against fatigue, but making good time across the Grand Canyon State and into New Mexico.

By mid-morning I projected that I could comfortably make Tucumcari and check into a motel in time to watch the men's marathon on TV, and so I did, having time for a decent meal before the race started. I was elated by Carlos Lopes's win (he is almost exactly Lucy's age) and stirred by the race for silver and bronze—but not enough to stay awake for the Disneyland dazzle of the Closing Ceremonies. I do not love a parade no matter how many assembled Mormon Tabernacle and Hall Johnson Choirs belch out the Star-Spangled Banner.

Early up after a splendid sleep in New Mexico highland air, ran a very moderate and relaxed eight miles (having marked the course on my drive into town the day before), breakfasted heartily with the idea of skipping lunch, and was just getting up to cruising speed when the Honda with the blonda grabbed my attention.

I moved up behind them, close enough to read the bumper sticker. "HORSE RACING IN GEORGIA," it said, an idea that appealed to me, though I hadn't realized there was a campaign underway to make Peach State the thirty-fourth to legalize parimutuel betting. And then I noticed on the ledge in front of the rear window some souvenir banners, posters, and hats from the Olympics. I was so tickled by this, though it was hardly an unusual coincidence given the time and place and direction we were traveling, that I reached around into my back seat and dug out one of the souvenir sweatshirts I was taking home.

I pulled out into the passing lane and when I was even with them waved my sweatshirt. The driver never glanced over. Her head of short dark hair remained rigid, her eyes behind the Steinem glasses apparently fixed on the road. She reminded me a little of Honey in "Doonesbury," and I could see her saying something to the other one, probably, "What the hell's he doing?"

But even more clearly, because she was facing me and smiling, I saw the blonde say, "He's showing us he was at the Olympics too." She smiled her warmest smile at me and waved. I grinned, waved in return, and dropped back to follow them at a respectful distance, at their good and steady pace.

I knew I'd like to talk with them, but I knew I never would. Thoughts of Albert Finney in *Two for the Road* passed through my mind, but I couldn't see us all casually stopping at the same place for dinner and then sharing a room, especially since, when we got to Oklahoma City in a few hours, they'd continue east on 40 and I'd turn northeast on 44, heading for St. Louis.

But then I decided I might as well try something. What the hell. Gusto and all that. Just like the wonderful world and lifestyle we catch glimpses of in the commercials. And then I realized I had been thinking Atlanta but if they were headed for Columbus, say, or even Savannah, they might leave me at Amarillo to pick up 20 out of Dallas, bound for Monroe and Jackson, so I knew I had to act fast or not at all.

Curiosity and horniness being the step-parents of invention, I decided to sacrifice the back page of one of my souvenir editions of the LA Times' *brilliant coverage of the Olympics. In the glove compartment I had a black magic marker, and across the folded newspaper page I printed the single magic word: LUNCH?*

Again I pulled up parallel and held my sign high. The dark lady driver ignored me, but the fair smiler fairly bubbled with amusement as she relayed my proposition. After a brief discussion she beamed a nodded yes, and I gestured "after you" and dropped back again to await whatever lunch-break their timetable dictated.

Stuckey's is one of my favorite American institutions. Better by far and tackier by a ton than stodgy old Howard Johnson's, it is to our highways what ballparks are to our cities. It's where you get what you need and pick up what others want; and there's a characteristic sweetness about both that makes it all seem friendly and zestful and properly paced, while the other places are slow and grudging and somehow consistently disappointing. I was delighted that my rendezvous with my new friends of the road took place at a Stuckey's. It seemed perfect to meet them amid the pecan rolls and key chains.

"I wasn't being rude. I just have to concentrate on the road," Valerie said right after introductions, smiling for the first time, a shy smile that I recognized right away as a cover for rather intense, spontaneous sexual adventurism. There was that aura about her, with her small, slight frame, the smooth chunkiness of her thighs and buttocks as her shorts defined them, and the palpable intelligence of her eyes and mouth.

I laughed and said I admired her driving.

Terri laughed too. "Don't believe her, Jesse. It's just that if she sees an attractive man paying attention to her, she might go right out of control, especially after driving all night away *from all those surfers."*

This seemed characteristic of the banter between them. Valerie chuckled without embarrassment, Terri enjoying her friend's response and my amusement as much as her own fun. They were school-teachers from Augusta, had been planning this trip for two years and promised each other that no serious involvements with men would get in the way. And they were genuine, well-informed sports fans.

While I had stopped for the dog races in West Memphis and then for baseball games in Busch Stadium and Royals Stadium, then seen the Padres and Angels at home, they had left after a night game in Atlanta, toured the Super Dome, seen the Astros in Houston, bet the quarterhorses at Ruidoso Downs, and seen the glories of Dodger Stadium. And we had all faithfully kept up our running wherever we stopped.

I reminisced about my one trip to the Master's, Gay Brewer's year when Nicklaus failed to make the cut, and how I'd enjoyed a day at the hunt meet over in Aiken. Terri, especially, was enthusiastic about horses and active in the campaign to bring thoroughbred racing to Georgia. Up close, her beauty was even more impressive. From a distance, on the road, what I had seen was the radiance of an open, warm person; now I feasted on the fine features, the lithe, tall, graceful form, the broad, sloping shoulders, the willowy legs—a consensus all-America beauty.

We had already finished our cheeseburgers with everything (except hold the mayo on mine) and were slurping the dregs of the genuine malteds before we even started sharing our thrills from the Olympics. The low point for us all was Mary Decker's fall—on the track, and also from grace.

"From where I sat, she dropped in too soon, before she had a clear lead on Budd, but if she'd had more experience Zola could have avoided contact."

"If she wanted to," Valerie said grimly.

"Don't be bitter," Terri said. "She wouldn't have hurt her own chances that way."

"The saddest thing is that it didn't really matter. No one was going to beat the Rumanian that day anyway, but Decker might have pushed her to record time."

"What I really wish"—I thought I sensed some misting of Valerie's glasses—"was that the race had been stopped, that Zola Budd had cut across the infield to see what had happened to 'her idol,' that Wendy Sly had left the track after leading for a lap, to console her teammate and help out her rival, and that the rest of the women had just refused to finish."

"Athletes are trained to do their best, no matter what, Val," Terri said gently.

But I had tuned in to her friend's thinking. "I know what you mean. As Olympic athletes they could possibly be athletes second and world-class human beings first. I thought of the same kind of thing yesterday, in the men's marathon. What a statement it could have been if instead of going all out for the silver and bronze the Englishman and Irishman had joined hands and run together into the Coliseum and around the track."

During the pause that followed, Valerie looked long at me, longer at Terri—who nodded and smiled back—before she spoke.

"Where are you stopping tonight, Jesse?"

"I hadn't decided. I have friends in Tulsa, but I don't know."

"Why don't you stop at Oklahoma City, with us, and we'll have dinner, talk some more over a bottle of wine, maybe smoke a joint, and spend the night. With luck we might be able to find a place to share a hot tub."

1 thought about Lucy waiting for me, expecting me late Thursday or early Friday. I thought of my plan to surprise her Wednesday night, then that I was glad I had a day or so to spare and could still be on time.

"Td love to," I said.

"Ever had a threesome, Jesse?" Terri's smile was all-American allure now.

"No."

"Neither have we, but we've talked about it. And this seems like the time and the place and the man."

"Let's go for the gold," I said, as Val picked up the check and we headed out to the cars for what I hoped would be the shortest leg of the whole drive.

I decided to let fate play a part and wait to see if they stayed on 40 or turned southeast at Amarillo. They stayed, and I took that as a message that I was to make a move. I had about 250 miles to do it, so I sat back and tried to work out a likely scenario as I kept the Honda comfortably in sight, keeping that steady pace for me to follow.

Then suddenly, just out of Shamrock on the Texola side, they pulled off onto a side road. I was desolated. What did it mean? There were no gas stations in sight, no motels, no restaurants, just prairie and—oh, shit—a little sign for campgrounds. That was it. They had left LA after the marathon or maybe after the ceremonies, driven all night, and had reservations at this campsite. They were more than friends. No wonder the dark driver had so grimly ignored me.

Why did the blonde smile? Friendly, that's all, or amused, or bored, or a gay tease. Well, what does it matter anyway? Unless they weren't going to the campgrounds. One was a friend or rider or hitchhiker and was being dropped off somewhere. Maybe I should slow down and see. No, that's absurd. I had too far to go, was too eager to surprise Lucy on Wednesday.

I gassed up in Clinton and did some calculating. If I ate a healthy meal in Oklahoma City I wouldn't want to stop as early as I'd get to Tulsa. I might easily last as far as Springfield, especially if there was a ballgame on the radio to keep me awake. But I had no sooner gotten back on the road than here was the Honda green filling up my sense of vision in the rear-view mirror.

The blonde was driving, fast. Sitting behind the wheel she was obviously quite tall, too big for me. And she never looked my way. The other one was gone. So were the souvenirs from the ledge.

I urged my Stanza up to her speed and kept it there. She was a good driver too. I wondered what had become of the other one. I figured that I had been right—a passenger or hitchhiker from LA who'd been dropped off with her Olympic mementos. Then I realized that that too was a sign. I was supposed to make a move, after all.

And then the passenger seat popped up with the dark one in it. She had been sleeping, out of sight in the reclining position. And the stuff on the ledge? It had been put away so as not to attract unwanted attention. I had been right in the first place. They were gay. They had had words about Blondie's flirting, and now it was strictly business and getting on home for them.

But wait a minute. We'd hit Oklahoma City between 4:30 and 5 and they hadn't eaten since at least as early as I had. Why not give it a try anyway? The worst that could happen would be a turn-down. I could risk a little ridicule to take a chance on an interesting encounter: horse-loving lesbians from Georgia coming home from the XXIIIrd Olympiad.

Using four pages of my carefully saved Olympic sections of the LA Times, I *printed out my six-word message, Burma-shave style, with my trusty magic marker: DRINKS?-EAT?-TALK?-OR JUST MEET?*

It wasn't easy to match their speed long enough to flash my signs without other traffic interfering, but when the chance came I took it. It had the desired effects. As I dropped back behind them I could see that they were both laughing and talking. The little one made her own sign and held it up to the rear window with a single word: YES.

I followed them as they turned off at the Cowboy Hall of Fame and on up to a huge, sprawling inn on a sudden ridge just north of the highway. It took them a while to get out of their car, and I could see why when they did. They'd been putting on their boots. But I was cool. It took me just a few seconds to get my own from behind the seat, my authentic Luccheses direct from the factory in San Antonio.

Rolling like sailors we went single file up to the bar, and introductions waited till we'd ordered our Lone Stars. The little one was Trish, whose pretty, chiseled features gave her a China-doll look, except that she seemed rather tough than fragile. Still in her twenties, she had obviously gotten over being a cute girl many years ago. She had the durable quality of finely etched wrought iron.

Clarissa was older, maybe by a decade, softer and much ampler, yet gave the impression of considerable physical strength and youthfulness. Her green eyes shone with an affection that took in Trish and all the world around her. Her hair was a splendid natural mane. I'd have typed her as earth-sister.

"How long have you been together?" I asked after we'd taken our second beers over to a table. The conversation was going smoothly. I had accepted them without unnatural affectation, and so they had accepted me.

"Six years," Trish said, her smile flashing a mouthful of perfect white little teeth.

"I was living in Atlanta," Clarissa went on, "giving tennis lessons and stringing rackets, and here came this precocious woman down from Chattanooga with a useless degree and an urge to change her life. Well, she changed mine in a hurry." The blonde's smile was somehow more endearing for the irregular teeth in what was otherwise a Madonna face.

"You still live in Atlanta?"

"No, we're in Macon now."

"Why Macon?"

"It's the first and so far the only place that we could find work in our chosen profession."

This was said with a leading edge of irony, so that although I didn't know what to expect I knew there was a kicker coming. It was with a trace of hesitancy, then, that I asked, "What do you do?"

The reply came in unison: "Were firefighters."

I recovered quickly from my shock, asked the usual perfunctory questions about how and why and what it took, and over huge steaks and more beer the talk drifted to general matters—sports, Olympics (we all marveled at Joanie Benoit's marathon), politics, regionalism, cultural variables, and sexual preference—and then to personal matters—my life, theirs, tastes, fancies.

In less than two hours we had established a comfortable intimacy. I was so at ease with them that, at what I felt was a timely pause, I said, "You know, I have to confess something to you. For years I've been having a recurring fantasy about having sex with a woman firefighter. And now, for the first time, I've met, not one, but two, and I find myself powerfully attracted to both."

They both laughed in a way that said they were not offended but were at least halfway willing to take me seriously. Clarissa said, "But Jesse, why a firefighter?"

"First I get excited watching her slide down that pole, her bare legs wrapped around it, and it somehow seems to be greased. Then the idea of her approaching me, wearing just her hat and boots, blows me completely away—at which point she tosses me over her shoulder and carries me to the safety of a huge round waterbed."

They were laughing even more now, and yet seemed to get caught up in my images. Clarissa said, "The poles are things of the past, Jesse. I've never even seen one."

"But," Trish added, "we have hats and boots with us. Maybe we can make your daydreams come true tonight. Would you be willing to play by our rules?I gulped. I could hardly believe I was hearing this, and I practically stammered as I said, "I think so. What are the rules?"

Trish sat still, a half-smile frozen on her doll's face, and for the first time I could see the fragility beneath the enameled surface. It was Clarissa who explained, in her easy, casually embracing way. "Occasionally we take a man to bed with us, Jesse. He has to be a special kind of man. He has to understand that for the most part he will be a voyeur, not quite a passive observer but making relatively incidental contact with us as we do what we know pleases each other most and best.

"One thing we expect, though. Trish does not like to be penetrated—and you'd have to respect that—except in the rear—and that's where you come in. Would you do that for us? Would you be able to, while we were involved with each other in other ways?"

Without taking a breath I said, "That's just another one of my fantasies."

Trish was already on her feet. "What are we waiting for? These boots are made for walking, our others for other things."

Oklahoma City sprawls over a broad area east and west and almost as much more north and south. And yet it is not quite big enough to encompass one of its major crossroads. We were still several miles west of the city line when I left 1-40 to pick up the connector for 44 heading up through Missouri.

The Honda was still ahead of me. I signaled my turn for a long time, pulled up almost even with them at the ramp, and gave a feeble wave, but of course they ignored me. I stopped to eat at the far northeast corner of town and got almost to Springfield before the Cardinals game was over.

The next day was an easy shot over to New Castle, Indiana, home of Olympic point guard Steve Alford, and Wednesday almost as easy all the way to Lucy's. I had a good run both mornings. I must have listened to the Willie Nelson tape half a dozen times, paying particular attention to the lyric that says, "I'd have to be crazy, plumb out of my mind, to fall out of love with you."

And the only fond and wayward thought that slid into my mind was the line that a Walker Percy character keeps using—"Get me a wife and make me a life"—with the reverberating afterthought that there was a wealth of meaning in that final phrase for the writer, the dreamer, and the quester I imagine myself to be.

Ode to Husband as Fanatic

Praise
for the whole-
hearted and die-
hard, nit-picky
in passion, particular
in palm-waving for—
not music, but the ride 'em high
and low of jazz;
not baseball,
but the drive 'em long and far
and give up the field
for the Fenway Faithful;
not grilling,
but the turn 'em, the sauté
and never burn 'em—
steak and onions in heat wave;
shish-kabobs in blizzards;
asparagus wrapped tightly
in fresh during unexpected
April sleet.
And praise
for semi-secret societies
and secret-concoction salmon;
for the sacred and oft-venerated
grill covers, sweatshirts, coats,
mittens, blankets, pillows, light
switches, lamps, flags, signs,
ornaments, jewelry, keyboards, flash
drives, coffee cups, salt shakers,
shoelaces, socks of Red Sox
and Weber logos welcoming
each sunrise with aficionado
and bravo!
And, all hail
the well-lighted photo-shoot
of Thanksgiving turkey,

Christmas prime rib;
the smoky sanctity of beans,
but also the daily devotion to god-
forsaken grammar, to teaching,
to sound and sense and the recipe
of story served up as appetizer
or sit-down full course
as preparation for conversation:
baseball, grilling, God—
all serenaded by Thelonious.
O sing loud
the layered song of sentences
entwining tale and taste,
the last play and Last Supper,
smoky incense swirling up
toward the patron saint
of selective loyalty: you
who savor liturgy over
spontaneous prayer;
missal rhythms over
Xeroxed praise song,
your chant (acceptable
substitute for Coltrane)
always Gregorian.
So glory be
to God and hot coals,
to home runs, to late-night
jams, to Holy Days, to you
of the fierce beliefs,
who loves not every
song, team, grill,
ritual, person, just
one, just fan-of-you,
just me.

Marjorie Maddox

The Royal Purple

Glynn A. Leyshon

Shoulders slumped, hands dangling between his knees, he sat staring vacantly at the water trickling from the gutter. It came from the far reaches of the small, battered stadium behind him. The sun was out now, but he didn't notice.

"Hey, Goose. You coming?"

"Yeah. Might as well. I'm not solving the world's problems here."

"Come on. It wasn't that bad."

"You know, you're right. It wasn't that bad. Of course, neither was the game before, or the game against Waterloo. Or even last season, or the season before that. We've got to be thankful that we are working for a genius, a legend. It could be worse. We could be losing without a legend leading us to it."

"Hey, take it easy. Things will turn around. Just watch. You'll feel better after you eat."

In the dining hall, the coaches sat at the same table. Goose often wondered why. Their rehashing of events seemed only to reinforce their own biases. He stared at his food, and heard the conversation swirling about the group.

". . . was wide open. I coulda pissed a stream further than he threw the goddamn thing."

"Defensively sound. Sound as a dollar."

"Bet your ass it was. Wait'll you see the film …"

Goose began to eat mechanically. He didn't stop when the Bull banged the table with an ashtray. He'd heard it all before. At least he thought he had heard it all before. With the Bull one was never sure what one heard.

In a voice like pea-gravel in a chute, his false teeth clacking on certain consonants, he began speaking to the coaches.

"Hey. Ya goddamn guys listen in! We learned sumpin from this game. Yessireee. We learned sumpin. An we are gonna change are taxes for the next one." He paused to light a cigarette, puffing on it noisily with liquid sucking sounds.

"One thing. One thing that we gotta do is contain. The defense played good, but we dint contain enough. When they got to the outside we had problems. Not that many maybe that we coun'nt handle them bastids next time if they are lucky enough to last cause they sure as hell was lucky today luckier than most an some of that stuff with our defensive backs slippin in the mud an all an some good licks all a same but the bounces goin against us all a time when we could use a few breaks by those goddamn stripers where in the hell they came up with that call on Moffat God only knows but it cost us. Just when we was rollin and an injury when we dint need it the most a big thing in a game that they coun'nt afford to win against us so we put them with our backs to the wall but we'll show them bastids cause we got what it counts." He paused and glared around the table, nostrils flaring, excited by his own rhetoric.

The younger coaches nodded enthusiastically, caught up in the sound and intent if not the meaning.

Goose winked at Mike. "You get all that?" he whispered. "Secrets of the Universe. Up with the royal purple."

The room was filled with heavy, restless bodies. They waited impatiently for the Bull standing before the blank screen to light a cigarette. He finished, all eyes upon him, and dramatically turned his fat face to his audience.

"Aw right. Just shaddup and listen. With this fillum, I wanna jock yer memories about last Sattiday. It aint nice losin! Nobuddy likes losers but we aint losers if we win and we can turn this thing aroun now if ever buddy just hangs on to what he does best." Warming up to his topic, the Bull leaned over the small table squinting through his cigarette smoke. "An when ever one aint doin what they do their best at that's when what happens to us is what we don't want to happen if we can help it so that if I ever ketch enny buddy what is not doin what is the best then I'm gonna kick ass ya unnerstand?" Chin out-thrust, he moved his eyes across the room like a searchlight, seeking out any dark corners, shadows that contained something less than the best. The room was quiet.

"OK. Run the fillum."

In the darkness, Goose and Mike sat side-by-side, feet up on the backs of the classroom chairs in front of them.

"I don't know if I can handle this," said Goose. "It's too soon after eating."

A chair scraped, bodies shifted in the dark as the film wound through what appeared to be a close-up of a band-aid, the count-down clock and then burst onto a rainsoaked field.

"I hope nobody snores this time. His teeth almost dropped out he was so mad at Armstrong for sleeping. By the way, where is Army?" said Goose.

"Dunno," said Mike. "He was hurting. Maybe he's . . ."

"Shaddup that goddamn talking," shouted the Bull. "Pay tenshun to the goddamn fillum fer a change. Might learn sumpin."

"Ahh, the legend speaks. Hark to the oracle," whispered Goose.

"Goddamn! I'm gonna come up there an kick some un's ass in a minute if that talkin' don stop you candy-asses," shouted the Bull.

The film turned into the first quarter and they saw the blocked punt, the interception and runback of a punt for a score. All performed flawlessly—by the opposition.

Suddenly, the silence was shattered. "Wellington. Goddamn it! Why are ya playing so far off him for? Play that again, Fred. Look where you are Wellington. Hell, they shoulda charged you admission to get inta the game. You aint gonna do nothin back there. Hell you aint hardly in the fillum. See what I'm talking about Wellington?"

"Yeah coach," came a voice from the gloom.

"Is Wellington here?" whispered Goose.

"I think he's with Army," said Mike, "sshh."

More of the game unrolled. Then, as Goose knew it would, came a command to stop the film.

"Wellington?"

"Yeah, coach."

"What the hell are you playin' him so tight for?"

"Wellington boots another," whispered Goose.

"Ya hear me, Wellington. Goddamn it!" said the Bull.

"Yeah coach. Only before I thought you told me I was playing too loose. In the first quarter. I thought . . ."

"Goddamn it, Wellington you don't think. I do all the thinkin' necessary 'round here. That's the trouble. You call yourselves athaletes? Geez. Run the fillum."

The game ground on in its depressing review; the Bull, sensing the melancholy, looked for something positive to focus on. "Ok. Stop it there. Run that one again, Fred. We went 20 yards on this. Good blockin', men, nothin but purple out in front."

"Watch the guards on this," whispered Goose.

"Holy Christ. What are they doing?" said Mike.

"Crossing," said Goose. "It's a revolutionary concept that will change the face of football as we know it. The essence of simplicity. Just pull each guard and have them run in opposite directions behind the line. Provided they don't collide, they so confuse the opposition that the middle of the line opens up for the fullback. See. It's not very complicated."

"I'll be goddamned," said Mike.

"You won't be the only one," replied Goose.

The game film was finally finished after the requisite number of stops and starts. The focus, as usual, was on mistakes, and there were plenty of them. The players rose, thankful the ordeal was over. The room was redolent with cologne and after shave.

"Aw right, you candy-asses," growled the Bull, "tomorra we dig in hard. Be ready ta go."

"Right, coach," muttered a few close to the door, anxious to avoid prolonging the session. They nodded and edged toward the opening.

On game day, Goose arrived early. He checked the field, luxuriating in the feel of well-kept turf. Hands in his pockets, head down, he paced into the lush carpet of green. "Looking for money" was the way this ritual was described. Almost all of the coaches did it. Goose then headed for the spotter's booth, plodding up the crumbling concrete steps.

"How you doin', Mike," he greeted the coach. Mike sat arranging his paraphernalia, and smoking a cigar. "I think the weather is going to give us a break today. It's even warming up a little."

"Yeah," said Mike. "You can always tell. Lookit the flies." Fooled by the November sunshine, the houseflies which hibernated in the cracks of the old, wooden booth were buzzing excitedly all over the glass. "Ill get 'em, though." With that, he leaned forward, tracking a crawling fly with his lighted cigar. "Hah, Gotcha." With a sizzle the cremated fly dropped to the window sill.

"I admire a man who has a clear vision of things," said Goose. "The Bull say anything to you about today?"

"No. How about you?"

"Nope." Goose paused. "Whadda think? We gonna win this?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I think so. What do you think?"

"We've got the horses. If they make fewer mistakes than we do we got it. Anyway, I better get down there. Talk to you later. We'll await your pearls of wisdom; counsel from on high."

A sea of purple sweaters almost hid the Bull from view as the team gathered around him for a final exhortation. They bumped and bobbed impatient to get to the hitting; anxious and fearful and possessed. The Bull was wound up. His eyes were bright with excitement. He was infectious. "Let's get them bastids. I don't want to see a single son-of-a-bitch standin' on this kickoff. Yer wearin' the purple, and I don't want enny one to forget it." His voice rose. "We're gonna get 'em. We're gonna knock em on their ass. We're gonna win this game." He hit a crescendo. "Are ya with me in this? Are we gonna win this game?" He was answered by a tremendous, throaty, primitive roar of assent. He thrust out his fist and everyone attempted to put a hand on it.

"Let's go," they shouted in unison, and then broke apart, boiling with pent-up energy. They surged onto the field to receive the kick-off.

"Come on, you purple," shouted Goose. "Come on, take it all the way." The ground thundered beneath his feet and the fresh clean scent of crushed grass and turned earth filled his nostrils. Their first possession. He barked into the headset. "Mike. Mike. What are they in?" There was silence. The set was dead and he had only checked it just before the start. "Sheeit."

"Clayt. Clayt. This friggin' thing is dead again. Call the electrician." He thrust the headset impatiently into the attendant's hand without taking his eyes off the field. "Guess I'll have to play it by ear."

Incredibly, they scored on their first possession. Fired up by that, the defense held and the offense moved in to kick a field goal. Just before the half, they intercepted a pass and ran it in. The defense blanked the opposition. With that momentum, they won going away.

In the locker room, the players beamed at one another. They were reluctant to let the moment go, and sat in groups in their sweaty, stained equipment, cans of Coke nursed between their knees, and did post mortems significant to themselves. The coaches were all smiles. The media interviewed the Bull. Goose and Mike lounged against the wall nearby.

"I hate to say, 'I told you so,' " said Mike, "but . . ."

"I hesitate to think what you would look like if you liked something if this how you look when you hate something," said Goose, staring at the grinning Mike. "Just remember a single swallow does not a summer make."

"Christ. Why can't you enjoy it?" said Mike. "We don't win that often. Taste it while it's there."

The loud voice of the Bull being interviewed interrupted them. ". . . pacifically what we did was contain 'em. I changed are taxes from the last game an . . . hell, if I'm stricken into one area here it is difficult for me to be exack 'cause this is a compligated game, fellas, a compligated game I thought the whole thing through after I watched the fillum and I decided to make all the changes necessary which is how when ya know what yer doin it is like when most of you haven't been on the same shoes I've been in so these younger coaches can't realize how to handle an old dog like myself when you have all the studs you want but you don't have discipline you don't go anywhere but I don't wanna get inta that I prefer to let sleeping dogs die."

"So that's how it was done," said Goose. "I should have known it was simple. We're going to go right to the championship. It is clear to me now. Ahh, how sweet it is and will be." He raised one foot and braced it on the wall behind him and smiled resignedly.

Sugarloaf December

For Mike Twistle Entwistle

Alpenglow spilled on dimming day,
ineluctable wind across evening,
solstice moon turning toward winter.

Pack buckles singing, skis shouldered,
we trudge up the last hundred meters,
you humming Marley and Toots.

Hard-packed, ear-rasping snow,
creaking brittle under our boots,
wind-slung like darts into watery eyes.

Cold flows easily, artery and vein,
heart and spleen, kidney and lungs,
hallowed air and drifted ground.

In the lift shack at the top of Spillway,
our home for the short, bitter night,
the anemometer never dips below sixty.

Skies clear, temperature plummets,
portending flesh-devouring gales
in the weak, rose light of the dawn.

In the howl of midnight, a groomer
bursts in to record the wind speed,
astonished that we can sleep.

With first light splashing the summit,
twenty-two below bone zero,
we smile at our rare good fortune.

Our tracks will leave no trace in
the wind-burnished snow, polished
as white and bone-hard as an antler.

Clicked in, we slide down Narrow Gauge,
along the length of wind-savaged fences,
and radio that there will be no race today.

Bruce Pratt

Running Across Chase County, Kansas

Starting Line

Stretching beneath
The sign with two bullet holes,

I gauge the gray sky,
Pulsing veins of darkness.

Swimmer

Wind rushes in
To fill space

Where sea water once
Raced for shore.

Specimen

All afternoon, incredulous
Farmers in trucks

Slow to ask if I
Need a ride, son.

Flint Hills

At the ridge top
Semis swoop past

Honking great blasts
Of pterodactyl breath.

Race Official

Wind whistles
A break through

Windows of
An abandoned house.

Diner Lunch

When I tell the waitress
I'm running across the county,

She says she's running too,
Out the door at five o'clock.

Rain Shower

I'm now walking
With my head down

Rivulets
Pacing like blood.

Freedom

The old bull freed
From the broken pen

Jogs a bit as I pass,
Vanishing into the ravine.

Gas Station Window

Plastic bottle under
The outdoor tap,

I watch a waterbug dash
Across the mirrored plains.

Exhaustion

My breath becomes
Some panting beast

Running beside me
Barking into the wind.

Town

Suddenly land falls away
To reveal miles ahead

A ribbon of homes
With a sun shaft breaking through.

County Line

I lean against the sign
For fifteen minutes while

Storm clouds inside me
Veer away into the hills.

Thomas Reynolds

Assistant Coach

He turns his back, holds up
his wife's pearl mirror, glances
into the glass at the bald spot,
the size of a fifty-cent piece centered
in the back of his head. Then,
cleaning the anarchy of hair
from his comb, he thinks of when
he could run his fingers
through the thick black curls,
pull on a T-shirt, head for
the gym, glad to assist, sure
of building a winner all his own.

Jack R. Ridl

Aethlon: THE JOURNAL OF SPORT LITERATURE

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Ace in the Hole

Jim Waltzer

They loved him in the islands even more than in the big cities up north. The children followed him on the dirt streets past the turquoise-tiled plaza and the alabaster churches all the way to the sea-banked ballpark, where the fans were his compadres, roaring with every pitch. At the hotel, women in flowing dresses of dazzling color tugged him onto the dance floor for the merengue, then to soft canopied beds upstairs. Mariela, who favored canary-yellow, had boated over from Cuba and spoke fluid English in a musical voice that alternately soothed and aroused him. He had been granted the keys to the kingdom.

Staskin had sent him here with the blessing of Crawfords' owner Hollis Greenway and the promise of an astonishing sum of ten thousand dollars. Upon his return to the States, Clayton could expect a nationwide barnstorming tour with Dizzy Dean and, God willing, an eventual pathway to the Major Leagues. He trusted Staskin because the agent's word had been good.

Of course, he felt that he already *did* play in the Big Leagues. But that was true only on the field.

"That's more than he pays the rest of the team down there—I mean, all together," Staskin had said. "All you have to do is win the tournament."

"And if I don't?" Clayton had said. "Do I face a firing squad?"

"That's not in the contract. But if you don't win, you get a lot less dough."

"How much less?"

Staskin hesitated. "Why, all of it."

He never considered the prospect of losing. The morning of the deciding game, Clayton stood on the iron-railed balcony of his hotel room, puffed a Havana, and gazed at the limitless horizon. That afternoon, he kicked skyward and fired pellets as easily as he once threw stones at older boys gunning for his

hide, his lanky arm unerring, as free and snapping as a loose bicycle chain. A private detail of soldiers, uniforms bright red and bayonets glistening, flanked the generalissimo in the private boxes, as flags bearing his likeness rippled in the ocean breeze. Islanders filled the stadium with rabid allegiance, as Clayton whipcracked the strongman's team to the Championship of the Caribbean.

That night, an innocuous movement of his prized right arm plunged a knife into Clayton's shoulder. He yelled much louder than he ever had in triumph and immediately discovered that the slightest use of the arm triggered the same excruciating pain. He iced the shoulder and later smeared it with a salve he often used to relieve sore muscles, but after a night of fitful sleep, he found that he couldn't raise a comb to his head. The next three days brought little relief. His formerly unshakable self-confidence foundered. No doctor on the island seemed capable of treating him and, for the first time since those white boys had come after him a lifetime ago on the streets of Mobile, he felt panic spread through him like a fever. His right arm was not only his meal ticket, but his identity. He had been placing inordinate demands on it for more than a decade, pitching damn near every day at times, starting all those games and not leaving the mound until the final batter was retired, regardless of how many innings it took.

He knew he needed medical attention and fast. He would have to seek it on the mainland, cutting his island idyll short.

That was okay by Mariela, who had been staying with him since the first night he arrived at the hotel. She was tired of the chaos in her native country and sensed an opportunity to go to America. Clayton was a famous man, she had observed, and that suited her tastes. Baseball, a game she knew and liked, was a bonus. "I'll drive you," she said, standing by the open wardrobe, where she'd hung her flouncy yellow dress and other alluring garments. "You need somebody to drive, condition you're in, don't you?"

He eyed her as if she were a batter digging in at home plate. "Got to get to the car first, sweetcakes."

She gave him a sly look and ran the back of her hand down his unshaven cheek. "You already had that much figured out, didn't you?"

He promptly cabled Staskin for an advance and used most of it to charter a sailing yacht that took them to the Miami docks, where his automobile waited in the security lot, right where he'd left it 10 days earlier. His suitcase hung from his left hand, while his right arm hugged his side. Her olive skin and dancer's legs on display in short slacks, Mariela looked sleek in a sleeveless blouse and carried her own suitcases.

Now they find themselves in his custom silver Lincoln-Zephyr convertible, Mariela at the wheel, Clayton sprawled on the black leather of the passenger seat, his long legs wedged below the dash. The Lincoln grinds along a narrow two-lane road. Sand and gravel frost the dirt roadbed, which cuts a swath through endless stands of cypress and pine on either side.

"How far's Pittsburgh?" she says. They're headed to the city where Clayton's regular baseball team plays, and she knows it's way up north somewhere.

"Two days, if we drive straight through."

"You mean without stopping?"

"Well, we got to stop to get gas and eat and … ya know."

"Sleep?"

"That's right. Sleep. Just givin' you an idea, baby, if we don't do those things."

"I believe we will be doing those things."

"I'd say so."

"You sure this'll make it to Pittsburgh? Don't you want someone to look at it? You know, a mechanic."

He screws his features into a knot, as if smelling ripe garbage. "It got me all the way down here and didn't even breathe hard. This is a luxury automobile, girl."

"I know that. How did you come by it?" "Signin' bonus."

"What's that?"

"For signin' with the Craws. Mister Greenway had it made up special for me."

"Nice boss. Maybe he'll give me a job."

"The way you move around that dance floor, honey, you're a cinch."

She expertly pilots the Lincoln on the erratic roadway, undeterred by the intermittent ruts and road-spray. Most of the time, she keeps only her right hand on the steering wheel, gripping it lightly, the wrist flexing gracefully. Clayton can't take his eyes off of the golden armlet that clasps her bare upper arm, pinching ever so slightly.

"Where'd you learn to drive so good?"

"I worked the fields, ya know, the sugarcane. I was the oldest and, at harvest, Papi had me go with him to market. At first, it was just a cart pulled by a pair of oxen. Then we got a lopsided old truck. Never broke down, though. I drove."

"I was gonna ask you—you got a license or somethin'?"

"No."

He smiles his trademark sleepy smile and sinks a touch further into the cushioning. Her presence relaxes him and gives him the sense that he won't stay injured for long. She reaches over and affectionately scratches his left arm, leaving a momentary line on his ebony skin. Directly, that arm rises to the top of the sun-baked upholstery of the driver's seat and rests there a moment. His hand slides downward and its long slender fingers—like those of a concert pianist—crawl spider-like over Mariela's neck and bare shoulder.

"Are you practicing guitarra?"

He chuckles. "I want you to dance more flamenco."

"In private."

He stills the fingers but keeps his hand in place. "Sure it will," he says.

"Sure it will *what*?"

"Make it to Pittsburgh."

She turns to smile at him, and it is a smile that seems brighter than the sun climbing high now in a cloudless sky. "That means you believe in me," she says.

Clayton removes his hand from her shoulder and straightens a little. "I do. And in my automobile. The truth is, senorita, me and this machine have a kind of understanding 'bout each other. It's like we have the same brain." He taps the side of his head.

Mariela's eyes shine and her lips wriggle in amusement. "Does it know you're not driving right now?"

"Of course it does."

Mariela reaches down into her sandal to scratch the heel of her foot and sits up immediately. "Does it also know it's running low on gasoline?" She pecks a small circular dial low on the dashboard with her fingernail. The fuel needle hovers near empty. Clayton glances at it and says, "That don't worry me none. Never did work properly. 'Cording to my calculations, we have at least a quarter tank left … You hungry?"

"We haven't eaten since we left the hotel."

"We'll get somethin', soon as we get to Pittsburgh."

He jabs her to emphasize that he's teasing, and Mariela laughs in spite of herself. She could use some coffee and some fresh fruit, and some calamine lotion to put on a couple of bug bites she acquired almost as soon as they arrived in Florida.

Right at the base of her spine, some little bugger had penetrated. She changes hands on the steering wheel and reaches under the waistband of her shorts to relieve the itch.

"Keep scratchin'," Clayton says.

She removes her scratching hand and gives his cheek a light smack. He laughs and says, "You a dangerous woman."

"When I'm hungry."

"We'll find a place to feed ourselves before too long,"

Clayton says. "The car, too. I guarantee it."

But no such place is within view on the straightaway they travel and, for all they know, civilization could be a hundred miles away. The Lincoln surges and backfires.

"Well, don't go burnin' it up," he says.

"That wasn't me. That was your mindreader car all on its own."

"Tell you what, darlin', since you're so smart about cars, soon as we pull into a fillin' station, I'm gonna have you take a look under the hood for yourself. How's that?"

She concentrates on the flat roadway stretching without interruption beyond the chrome hood ornament glinting in the sun. Since he is not driving, he is free to look anywhere he pleases, and so he settles on the pleasing shape of her bent leg, its taut calf and shapely thigh below the white shorts. Her blouse billowed by the breeze streaming through the open convertible, her shock of black hair cut stylishly short. She dabs at beads of perspiration on the groove between her lips and nose, and wipes away forehead dampness with the blade of her hand, turning even these normally blunt little movements into bits of grace.

Supremely confident and unperturbed in all kinds of predicaments, Clayton Bean does not want to risk coming up empty in the middle of this No Man's Land. In truth, he's not all that certain about how much gas is left in the tank. He expects to see a filling station before the road exchanges its sand and gravel for macadam. He feels an urge to squint into the distance, though his eyesight is exceptional, better than what the docs call "perfect vision" in ordinary mortals. And now, finally, he picks it out way up ahead, at first just a tiny nub like a head on a stick figure drawn by a child, but very soon growing and sharpening, standing aside from the relentless trees at the side of the road, the circular Standard Oil sign atop a skinny stanchion.

"Thar, she blows," he says in his best Pirate and, for half a mile, Mariela pushes the Lincoln to squander the last of its reserves right before she glides it onto the sandy lot. A mess of buckets, watering cans, statuary, plants, and planters surrounds a guardhouse-like structure of white masonry stacked on a base of red brick, its roof extending to shelter the lone gas pump centered in front. Tucked away in the woods some twenty yards behind, a decaying wooden outhouse stands in a permanent leaning posture. Weeds climb its sides and there is no door, just a black rectangular mouth. Off to one side of the lot a chain-link fence encloses a compact repair-shop/junkyard, where a muscular young man coated in sweat and grease bangs a hammer against the bumper of a milk truck, the metallic ringing piercing the noon air. One other vehicle awaits rejuvenation, a devastated roadster up on blocks, no wheels.

"Pit stop, just like I promised," Clayton says. "Fixin' to get some snacks here, too." Mariela's expression says she wouldn't ordinarily be caught dead in such an establishment. "Oh, best watch what you say here," he says. "This ain't the islands."

The car door creaks after he reaches across his chest with his left hand to open it. He steps out and his body unfolds in sections. He had been keeping his injured wing all but pinioned to his side and, despite the uneven road surface, hadn't felt more than a twinge, but now as he rises and it comes loose, the pain stabs him. He clenches his jaw and doesn't make a sound. In one continuous motion Mariela exits the Lincoln on the driver's side, shuts the door gently, and strides around the front of the car. Clayton spots the hammerer beyond the fence and draws closer. "Need a full tank for this baby if you'd be good

enough," he says in a polite half-shout. The hammering stops. "Full tank, please," he repeats. "Thank you kindly."

The boy—because Clayton at first saw him as not much more than a boy, though now realizes that he's a full-grown man—rises from his crouch and swoops the bottom half of his sleeveless undershirt upward to wipe sweat off his forehead, spreading a smudge of grease in the bargain. His expression is somewhere between surprised and sour, but when he catches sight of the silver convertible, his lips move and something predatory comes into his eyes. Clayton is already away, his normal loping gait restricted as he moves toward the front door of the station-house. Mariela opens it and they step into a drab space of dusty shelves and sparse goods. Cans of soup and packages of noodles dare customers to remove them. A few wicker baskets on the floor contain oranges, apples, and bananas. He spots a Coca-Cola cooler behind the counter. "Want some soda pop?" he says to Mariela, standing next to him. "If it's cold," she says. He has already noticed the very short, feral-eyed woman behind the counter and the way she edged closer to the cash register the minute they came in. "We can get some candy bars, too," he says.

"It would be nice if they had some coffee," she says.

Clayton smiles thinly. "Grounds is all, I 'spect. This ain't no luncheonette."

They each take some fruit out of the floor baskets and put it on the front counter, Clayton using only one hand. He hears the door open behind him and someone new coming inside but doesn't bother turning around. Mariela does, however, and sees the newcomer, then turns away and draws closer to Clayton without saying anything. Behind the counter, the woman stands guard, her head below the top of the cash register, her eyes drawn into slits, her skin coloration only a shade paler than that of the two oranges that Clayton has just set onto the splintery planks in front of her. He plucks a Snickers and a Chunky from the meager sweets display below the counter and places the two bars on top to join the oranges, apples, and bananas. The woman watches his every move but doesn't budge. He looms over her.

"Hello, ma'am. Hot out there today, ain't it?"

She purses her lips. Not a flicker of life in her eyes.

"You got milk by any chance?"

Her face is as tight as a fiddle string. Without a word she bends down and disappears from view. The door of a hidden icebox whines open and then shuts. When she resurfaces, she places two small glass bottles of milk on the counter. Clayton can't resist winking at her.

"From your private stock, huh?"

"We got cigarettes." Her voice is crusty.

"Thank you, ma'am, we don't smoke."

A voice from behind Clayton and Mariela cuts in with suppressed menace. "Everything sittin' all right with you, May-Bell?"

Mariela glances back at him for just a second, then nudges Clayton, who doesn't react and continues to look friendly-like at May-Bell. "I think this'll do it, ma'am." He herds his fruit and candy with the milk and turns to Mariela. "This'll tide us over for a little while," he says. "Want anything else?" A quick shake of her head. He snatches a pack of Black Jack chewing gum, smiles at its illustration of a baseball pitcher, and adds it to the grouping.

The man has been making his way toward them, his heavy tread amplified the closer he gets. A jingling of keys and audible breathing through an open mouth as if fighting a head cold. Clayton ignores the unsubtle approach and, eyes fixed on May-Bell, simply reaches into his pocket and says, "How much I owe ya?"

"You lost, son?" the man says, a relaxed challenge short of a dare.

Now Clayton turns and faces him for the first time. Smiles politely at him. He's not a large man and the way he draws his shoulders upward with each labored breath seems an effort to look bigger. His too-large, khaki shirt boasts a shiny silver badge on one side of his chest, and a holstered gun is strapped around his waist. Not much older than me, Clayton estimates, the appellation "son" notwithstanding.

"Nope, we was on our way up north. Had to stop and feed ourselves and that crate out there I'm drivin'."

The newcomer jiggles his keys and looks like he might spit but lets loose a cynical chuckle instead. "Yeah, I seen it out there. Some *crate*, I'll say. Where'd you get 'er?"

"Up north," Clayton says but does not elaborate. He understands that this is a little duel between the two of them and its dimensions are as yet unknown. He's always had the ability to sense the degree of danger facing him, whether in the form of a youth mob, a hitter planting his spikes and waggling his bat, or an overzealous peace officer who might be inclined to come down hard on people he doesn't care for.

"*Where* up north?"

"Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania."

The man with the badge slithers his tongue across dry lips. "Long way."

"That it is."

"So, what're you doin' down here?"

Clayton wonders how far the man is prepared to take this roust. It feels like it's not about to end soon. "We was in the islands for a spell. Santa Domingo."

"Ya don't say. Doin' what?"

"Playin' baseball."

The lawman launches a laugh, exposing teeth too discolored for his age, and creasing his eyes into something much different from merriment. "Baseball? Long way to come just to play baseball."

Clayton nods in acknowledgment. "Ain't it, though." He wants him to feel that, like cops, ballplayers are working stiffs. He takes two steps toward him

and extends his left hand, fashions a sheepish expression. The man is startled both by the gesture and the bid for a left-hand shake. "Excuse this, my man," Clayton says. "I hurt the right, pitchin'. Clayton Bean's my name."

His hand hangs out there long enough for Clayton to think of something to say to minimize the insult, but then the man takes it. "Pitchin'," he says, as if prodding himself to determine exactly what that means. "You're a pitcher."

Now Mariela takes a step forward. "He's the best pitcher in the world. He's famous wherever you go." Except maybe some dirt-water filling stations, she is thinking.

Clayton smiles with appealing modesty. He planned to send that very message—the working stiff happens to be the greatest baseball player on the planet—and she has done it for him. And under pressure, too. This doll's a gamer.

"You play baseball, too, missy?" the man says with a thinly concealed smirk.

Even May-Bell attempts a laugh on that one, her mouth a tortured rictus. Mariela almost blurts out that, being from Cuba, she can swing a bat and catch a line drive, but quickly stops herself. "Only with my older brothers, growing up," she says.

"This is Mariela," Clayton says proudly, glancing back at May-Bell to include her in the formal introduction. "She's a dancer in Pittsburgh's finest nightclub."

"Dancer," the lawman says.

"Dance any dance that's been invented," Clayton says. "Hollis Greenway's club. He owns the baseball team, too. Bet you heard o' *him*."

The man suddenly looks like he's felt the first prick of indigestion. The name rattles him. "I think I may've."

Clayton is relying on his instincts, just like he does on the pitcher's mound. Instincts and legerdemain. A sixth sense about what kind of pitch to throw and where to put it. He's compiled his unrivaled record not on the back of pure velocity but through the art of crafty movement, varying speeds and location, mixing rising fastballs with sweeping curveballs and those that break sharply or dive just before reaching home plate. He uses the same strategy to neutralize confrontations off the playing field. Keep them guessing; confuse and then defuse. He no longer tries to fell a band of charging bullies with stones perfectly thrown, David-like, to the forehead.

Mariela is at his shoulder and uncharacteristically fidgety. "I gotta go," she whispers.

"Go where?"

She points to the side where the outhouse stands. "The can," she says, no longer in a whisper.

May-Bell has overheard and her face sours even further. "Can't," she says.

Mariela whirls toward her. "'Scuse me?"

"Can't use the shitter." Something in May-Bell's previously dead eyes announces that she's enjoying this.

"Why not?"

"My boy'll stop you."

"That him in the yard?" Clayton says. "That's right."

"Fine-lookin' boy." But now he stares coldly at her, though his voice remains sympathetic. "Why would he do that, ma'am?"

"We got rules here," May-Bell says. "Ain't that right, Tom?"

His badge drooping along with his pectorals, Tom takes a half-step toward them as if to underscore his point. "Yeah, I'm afraid that's right," he says to Clayton, then shifts his eyes to Mariela to confirm.

"Why does that make you *afraid*?" she says, her temper rising in her cheeks and eyes, her quip lost on him. Clayton holds out his arm as if to restrain her and says, "Look, Sheriff—"

"—*Deputy* Sheriff—"

"—I know you probably got local regulations and all, but just between us, that outhouse back there can tolerate a little more business, can't it?"

"I'm sorry, son. May-Bell's right. Rules is rules."

"How 'bout if she goes in the woods, then?"

"I'm not doing that," she says, realizing she may have to.

"Why not?" Clayton says softly. "It's probably an improvement."

"Now I'm here to tell you folks that would be purely illegal," Tom says with the certainty that the law is on his side. He hitches up his trousers, jostling the gun belt, and offers Clayton a bland smile.

Mariela starts a little jig of desperation that has none of her usual grace. May-Bell scans a forefinger over the bunched fruit, milk, candy, and gum that Clayton has set before her on the counter. "This here's two dollars and seventy-five cents. He'll be comin' in with what you owe for the gas in a …."

As if on cue, the door opens and the solidly built young man from the yard pauses in the threshold, a crowbar dangling from one hand, his shirt and pants and any exposed skin streaked with grease. "Tom," he calls out in greeting in a strong deep voice as he steps inside and walks toward the four of them, Clayton towering above the others. His blond hair in disarray on his scalp, he looks to be barely of drinking age, but he moves with the quiet authority of someone older. Still, his serious expression doesn't necessarily reflect comprehension.

Tom looks at him with paternal admiration. "You sure as shit worked up a lather out there, Andy."

"He's a hard-workin' boy," says May-Bell.

Clayton, of course, sees the crowbar—nothing escapes his notice—but he's already been discoursing with a man with a *gun*. But Mariela gasps at the sight of the hard black length of metal that somehow intimidates her more than the holstered handgun. Andy stops in the aisle as if to better appraise the situation. Veins stand out like colorless earthworms in his upper arms, and his

neck attaches well past the ears. A specimen, Clayton is thinking, but can he do more than just lug fenders and truck tires?

"You're all gassed up," Andy says, his words directed toward Clayton. "Three dollars, ten cents, mama."

"That's *all*?" May-Bell shouts, jerking her head toward Clayton and Mariela so that her son can appreciate the implication: *Jack it up by a few dollars, dummy.*

But if Andy gets her meaning, he doesn't let on. "Yep, that was it, mama. Took a little over eleven gallons, I b'lieve." He turns back to Clayton. "That's a beautiful automobile, mister … Don't see many of them around here. Where'd you get it?"

"He got it in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania," Tom says before Clayton can say a word, then turns to him, one hand creeping toward the holstered gun. "You got papers for that?"

"In the car."

"Well now, that's good to hear. Let's go out and have a look."

Clayton realizes this guy is proving to be a tougher out than he thought. Here's the spot, instinct tells him, to change speeds yet again. He pinches the Black Jack off the counter, tears it open, and collapses a stick into his mouth, quickly soaking it into a chaw. Ignoring Tom for the moment, he says to Andy, "I'm Clayton Bean. Ever hear o' me?"

"No, can't say I do."

"Are you a baseball fan?"

"Nope. Too busy."

"You know how the game's played, though."

"Yeah, I do, for the most part."

Clayton flashes a winning smile. "You look like you could be a pretty strong hitter to me."

Andy doesn't show much, but the remark is to his liking. "I'm a pitcher," Clayton continues. "The best there is. You can ask anybody who knows the game. And a lot o' people who *don't* know the game."

"Colored leagues," Andy says. "Up north."

All right, the boy knows there's a world out there beyond his scrapyard. "That's right," Clayton says. "So you *do* know somethin' 'bout it, after all."

Somehow, Tom has been reduced to a spectator, his neck grown bright red against his gray-brown collar. "Got to see them papers," he says. "You guys have done enough gabbin'."

Clayton's peripheral vision takes in everything, and he already saw the lawman getting itchy. He works the gum at a fast clip, but it doesn't make him seem cocky or alter his speech. "Could you hold on for just a moment more, Sheriff?" he says to Tom in as deferential a tone as he can muster. He extends his left arm halfway to underscore the request, causing the deputy to almost go for his gun. Clayton turns back to Andy, whose behavior so far has confirmed

what he suspected when he first laid eyes on him: The kid is not a bad sort. "How 'bout Hollis Greenway? Ever heard o' him?

Andy shakes his head.

"Tom knows who he is. Ain't that right, Tom?"

It's a little dig of familiarity and insight. A risky pitch, Clayton realizes; fastball, dead-center. But he reckons that he's got him off-balance.

Tom smolders, says nothing.

"Who is he?" says Andy.

"Owner of my baseball team. The Craws, they call 'em. He can be a very generous man but he's a, well, he's a *gangster*."

Andy looks stupefied, Tom like someone who's readied something important to say but has lost the chance to say it. May-Bell maintains her stony meanness as she struggles in vain to understand what the hell is going on.

"But a *good* gangster," Clayton adds, addressing Andy. "Takes care of people, know what I mean? Still, not someone you want to get on the wrong side of. I've learned that myself. But we're like brothers now, him and me. And I'm his biggest drawing card—don't forget, still hard times up there. We're gettin' up a barnstorming team with the best players there is to go travel 'round the country. Even comin' down here to Jacksonville. Maybe Miami, too. Be good for business … Andy, you look like a right-smart young businessman."

Andy's face transforms into something close to enlightenment, as if he has chanced upon a revelation decidedly in his favor. Clayton reaches over and taps him on the shoulder encouragingly, a movement that makes Tom flinch.

"And I tell you what, Sheriff," says Clayton, finally swinging his focus to appease Deputy Tom, "baseball fans is the best-behaved fans in the world. You can count on it."

He glances at May-Bell, then back to Andy. "Anyway, Mariela here"—he nods toward her—"has got a little emergency. You don't mind if she pays a quick visit out back, do ya?"

Andy processes the question and finally says, "Shit, no. I mean *yes*. I mean, sure, go on back there if you can stand it."

May-Bell fumes at him, but no one is looking at her. Tom exhales loudly in frustration and folds his arms across his chest. Andy just now remembers the crowbar and sets it down behind him on some empty shelf space. "Don't know why I brought this in here," he says. "Didn't even realize I had it."

"You're a man wrapped up in his work," Clayton says. "Like me."

He turns to Mariela and says, "Go on ahead, honey. I got tissues in the car." However, she has stopped her little two-step. "I'm fine," she says to Clayton, who looks at her with skepticism bordering on amusement. "Really," she assures him. "Things kind of ground to a halt."

"Don't say?" he drawls, then looks around at everybody and brews a slow smile. "Ain't nature fascinatin'?"

Pretty smart for a *nigger*, Tom is thinking. "I wanna see them papers right now," he says. "For that vee-hickel."

Clayton offers an obedient nod. The man still ain't quit. May have to use the brushback yet. "Yes sir," he says. "Soon as I pay Miss May-Bell for her trouble." He remembered her name and turned her into a young woman in the bargain.

Pumped up by his elevation in status, Andy extends his hand. "My name's Andy Hearn."

It hurts like hell, but Clayton forces himself to shake with his right. "Where you headed?" Andy says. "Pittsburgh?"

"That's it."

Andy whistles in awe, thinking how far that drive will be. Clayton turns to May-Bell, who has placed his items in a paper bag. "Two seventy-five, I believe you said, and another three and change for the gasoline, am I right?" He places a $10 bill on the counter, picks up the paper bag, and gives May-Bell a below-the-brow look.

"Keep it, ma'am. Little extra, case you wanna spruce up that shitter."

Resentfully, she snaps up the $10 bill and rings open the cash register drawer. Clayton steps away but instantly turns back.

"You a baseball fan, ma'am?"

Her eyes bore a hole in him.

"I could tell," he says.

Tom, pushing out his chest, sees an opening. "You oughta watch your language," he says to Clayton. But Andy jumps right in.

"Aw, we talk like that all the time, Tom. Hell, that's what we all call the damn thing, don't we?"

Tom concedes to himself that he's been outmaneuvered and that he's just about reached the end of his business at this stop. With a nod to May-Bell, Clayton clutches the package against his chest, takes Mariela's arm with his free hand, and walks out of the station-house. The pain in his right shoulder eases with every step.

Tom follows them outside, trailed by Andy. After handing Mariela the paper bag, Clayton reaches into the glove compartment and withdraws the Lincoln's registration document with the State of Pennsylvania. He hands it to Tom, who squints to peruse it at length. Clayton waits patiently for Tom to hand it back. "Don't go more than the posted speed limit."

"You bet. Only I didn't see nuthin' posted so far."

"Better go slow, then."

Tom's quick smile is a note of spite, as he pivots and walks to his unmarked car, which he rouses and pulls back onto the road, spraying sand and crunching gravel. Andy watches for a few seconds, then draws close to Clayton to see him off.

"What do you call this place?" Clayton says. "So I can send some tickets to you when we play down here."

"We don't really got a name for it, though I s'ppose mama's got it on the tax records. Just the fillin' station in Planters' Pines is all ever'body knows."

"Planters' Pines. I'll remember that. And I'll get them tickets to you."

Andy nods appreciatively. "Thanks."

"I think you rightly saved us … some money here today," Clayton says, his pause a touch of thoughtfulness and irony.

"I'm for fair and square," Andy says. They shake hands again and he walks back toward the fenced-in yard, where his work awaits in the hot sun.

Mariela stands aside, as Clayton keys open the Lincoln's sloping trunk. "What he really helped save was *el culo*," she says.

"What's that?" he says, peering inside.

She reaches behind her and smacks her backside with both hands. "Anyway, *you* were the one did the saving. You know, I went with Papi to the casino in Havana one time after we got paid for the harvest. He was smart enough not to lose all our money. But it seems like you're way past that. You always know just how to play the odds."

"*Instinct*, honey. It's the most precious thing we have. You got some of that yourself, girl."

He appraises the contents of the trunk. His leather rifle case and a small ammunition box lie between the suitcases. He lifts and pulls the case forward, unzips it, and removes the rifle, pulling back on the bolt to lock it into place. He takes a round out of the ammo box, loads it into the barrel chamber, and snaps the bolt closed, all the while leaning over and keeping the rifle submerged in the trunk. Mariela watches him intently.

"Looks like your arm is very much better."

"It's gettin' there."

"I didn't know you brought a shotgun along on the trip."

"Now we're locked and loaded, honey," he says. "Just in case the odds change."

He creates space for the bag of groceries and takes out a banana for each of them. "I'll find us a nice place for a steak dinner tonight. Promise. Got to put on some more miles first."

"Are you good with that thing?"

He glances back at the rifle case. "Yeah, I'd say I'm pretty handy with it. Grew up in the backwoods, ya know. Fact, they used to say I could pick a fly off a fence post at sixty paces."

She arches an eyebrow. He shuts the trunk.

"Bet your bottom dollar. That's how I got my control."

In a moment they're back on the road, the Lincoln with a full tank of gas, Clayton with the reserve he always carries in his. He drapes his left arm

across Mariela's shoulder blades, as she guides the silver convertible past the continuing blur of trees and soon past swampland, where neither is fazed by the occasional alligator that climbs toward the edge of the roadway.

An Athlete Not Dying Young

At St. Stephen's School our teams were the Martens,
after the timid nocturnal creatures that once roamed
the nearby scrubby hills and turbid backwaters
before being trapped for the fur trade.

The name was prescient. Perennially, we lingered
in the shadowy bottoms of our conference,
whatever the sport, mocked as the "Martyrs."
A bible-haunted boy, I saw this as sign and seal
that man was meant for sorrow.

Then one night I stood at the foul line for two shots,
half a second left, and the Martens down
just one to the mighty West Tech Wolves—
my chance to ease the enduring burden of loss.

I sank both and from my teammates' shoulders
heard the cheers. Unlike Housman's speedy runner,
though, I've lived long enough to have been spared
little that he evaded.

The Martens still lose more than they win,
the victories sweeter perhaps for being few;
but they are few, and, as the uneasy boy feared,
the traps set over time are many, and they snap
with a piercing clutch.

Allen Stein

"the injustice, the confusion, the sacrifice": Fictional Examinations of Sports-Heroes, Underdogs, and Developmental Athletes

Hannah Anderson

In the Canadian literary canon, the majority of sports novels "are exceptional in their attempts to foster a monolithic national identity and safeguard traditional masculinity," transforming male athletes into figures of legend that all athletes must measure up to (Buma 20). Existing literature "[celebrates] the traditional connection between masculinity and toughness" in male-dominated sports at elite Olympic and World Championship levels (Buma 22). Yet, female identified[1] athletes lack their own representation and role models. When women appear in sports stories, authors frequently limit their participation to "playing the male star's girlfriend, mother, or temptress" (Vincentelli). Writing back to these representations and erasures, my creative writing dissertation—a novel entitled *Bilateral*—opposes the domination of men in sports literature by tracking protagonist Camille Richard's fledgling career in competitive swimming. Examining the systemic and cultural issues hindering young female athletes from long term pursuit of competitive sport, this project highlights the implementation of high-performance culture and "sacrifice mentality" in teenage athletes. Centering the female identified body in athletics, *Bilateral* examines athletes' attitudes toward provincial, national, and international performance standards, the systems of coaching experienced by developing athletes, and the consequences of institutional regulation and bias—including chronic injury, athlete burnout, and rejection of sport. *Bilateral* expands upon my previous research in sports literature and creative writing to engage both critically and creatively with female developmental

sport. Incorporating the research collected in my SSHRC CGS-M creative writing thesis *Spatial* and my experiences as a former provincial swimmer and a current varsity rower, my novel will present a frank, specialized examination of Canadian sports systems by immersing readers in training and competition alongside female identified athletes. At the University of Calgary, I have the privilege of engaging with sports literature from a unique dual position; my roles as a competitor with University of Calgary Rowing and as a literary scholar enable me to use sensory imagery and an in-depth knowledge of team culture to immerse readers in sports, rather than limiting athletics to a mere backdrop.

One of the issues facing developing athletes in Canada is the cultural prevalence of the "Prodigy" and the "Sports Hero." Prodigies are simple figures—athletes with the distinct physical advantages that render them "perfect" specimens for their sports. The Sports Hero is a heroic "underdog who decides to go for it" (Abdou, "Introduction" 7): an athlete who struggles against circumstances, injuries, enemies, and themselves to claw their way to the top of the podium. These Underdogs, despite their struggles, reach the podium despite the odds stacked against them. They were born to do so. Despite the universal appeals of these figures in literature and society, the representation of these protagonists as not only always successful, but also as (nearly) exclusively male, undermines female identified athletes by setting specific and gendered parameters for success: sports hero stories "offer a kind of simplistic reassurance: by winning in the end, the hero (and the audience) can make sense of everything that came before—the suffering, the injustice, the confusion, the sacrifice. A victory makes it all right" (Abdou, "Introduction" 7). This "victory," however, has a fraught history for female identified athletes. When Pierre de Coubertin asserted his founding vision of the Olympic Games as "the solemn and periodic exaltation of male athleticism … with the applause of women as a reward," female athletic victory, by virtue of women's assigned position as awestruck spectators, was impossible to attain (qtd. in Schweinbenz 655). Though female athletes are no longer confined to the sidelines, athletic institutions inherently devalue the work of female athletes; in an attempt to battle this perception, existing female sport stories focus on reclaiming the male sports hero narrative. This initiative, however, only empowers female athletes who can adequately emulate this trope: prodigies who end their stories on the podium. Olympic autobiographies are frequently the most accessible sports works about female athletes—Missy Franklin's *Relentless Spirit,* Simone Biles's *Courage to Soar,* Silken Lauman's *Unsinkable,* and countless others tell heartfelt stories of adversity that conclude with the heroic achievement of Olympic dreams[2]. These athletes, however, are Prodigies: along with the advantages of their natural physiology, they possess the financial support and resources allowing them to train at elite levels, making the Olympic podium attainable. Though there is often emphasis on the sacrifices made, financial and

otherwise, to allow these internationally competitive athletes to achieve their goals, their success/breakthrough frequently coincides with resources being made available to them[3]. For the Sports-Hero, "sport rewards his efforts … we end with our hero on the podium, arms raised high" (Abdou, "Introduction" 7): the necessity of victory to be seen as "successful" invalidates the female athletes, not prodigies but no less heroic, who are unable to win and thus leave sport believing they have failed.

According to *Canadian Women & Sport*, one in four Canadian girls are not committed to returning to sport due to the continuing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic ("Covid Alert: Pandemic Impact on Girls in Sport"). Considering that the majority of Canadian adolescent girls abandon sport by junior high, this additional loss will have devastating impacts on women's sports. However, this lack of participation, pre- and post-pandemic, can be traced back to cultural perceptions of female athletes. Media and literature that focuses on female identified athletes almost exclusively focuses on those at the most elite levels of their sports—namely, the Olympic Games. Additionally, this coverage focuses on heroes: those who pushed through injury, trauma, and mental illness in order to compete. Coverage of the Tokyo 2021 Olympics frequently focused on the female Canadian athletes who competed—and, most importantly, performed exemplarily—despite incredibly serious injuries, such as Rosie MacLennan, Ellie Black, and Kasia Gruchalla-Wesierski. Though these stories are important and deserve attention, they send a specific message to young female athletes: by being exposed almost exclusively to stories that position overcoming catastrophic injury as an acceptable price for Olympic success, young female identified athletes are taught that not only is pushing through injuries a sign of heroism, but that athletes who do so are rewarded for their efforts. Such narratives encourage a "sacrifice mentality" in teenage athletes, and those unwilling or unable to go to such lengths to engage with high performance are perceived as being too weak to persevere. Though Olympic stories are admirable, they frequently perpetuate the need to disregard physical and mental health in order to reach the Olympic podium, resulting in chronic injury, athlete burnout, and rejection of competitive sport. One way to combat this is to increase the different types of sports stories in Canadian media.

Building sports literature's capacity for different types of stories requires addressing the significant absence of female athletes, particularly in Canadian national literature. Literary texts and "novels work to adjudicate identity in much the same way as actual referees officiate a game: subjectively, and on the basis of pre-existing rules, assumptions, and norms," and these representations are performed in texts and affirmed through their repetition (Buma 34). These representations and the manufactured visions of sport itself inform not only Canadian nationhood but individual and team identifies within different disciplines. The standard collective identities of the latter are, as indicated by

de Coubertin, masculine and white. Canada imagines its nationhood via "a project of literary, among other forms of cultural, endeavour […] the central organizing problematic of this endeavour has been the formulation and elaboration of a specific form of whiteness based on a British model of civility" (Coleman 5). Cultural endeavours like literature and sport support "protected visions of the emerging nation to inculcate and naturalize the values of British civility that came to define the particular ideals of Canadian whiteness" (Coleman 37). Because it "involves manners and behaviours that must be learned and performed," white civility's cultural projects train its citizens to perform ideals of civility, while simultaneously presenting it as something nationally ingrained (Coleman 21). Print literature disseminates narratives that provide "the collective imagination necessary for national consciousness" (Coleman 34). For instance, even if one is not individually aware that Pierre de Coubertin envisioned the Olympic Games as a voyeuristic showcase for white masculinity with awestruck female spectators, one is inundated with representations of sport and game as a purely masculine domain.

Sport traditionally operates as a means of performing and solidifying national identity, which is informed by myths of masculinity—sport and game as a performative act reasserts national identity and "[expresses] a version of masculinity that is contingent on physical toughness" (Buma 4). In *Refereeing Identity*, sport and the body are shown to be "inevitably cultural constructions," sites through which to perform national identity, civility, and toughness, and, alternatively, a site on which to project assumptions of national identity (Buma 11). Games also rehearse "success in the 'big game of life'" (Buma 169). Canada's most aggressive campaign for a nation-as-sport developed through hockey, which in turn evolved from Indigenous lacrosse: "[it] was the rugged masculinity-cum-nationalism of lacrosse, as well as the game's apparently 'natural' connection to the Canadian landscape, that initially infused hockey with its nationalistic overtones" (Buma 8). Simply, lacrosse as a cultural performance in an Indigenous context was appropriated to function as a performance of national identity that creates a "real and imagined" Canadian community (Buma 9). This imagining is culturally constructed and depends on the performance of

> the hockey myth's insistence on hockey-as-identity and masculinity-as-toughness. Even within the narrower field of Canadian sports novels and novels that make significant reference to sport, [hockey novels] are exceptional in their attempts to foster monolithic national identity and safeguard traditional masculinity. (Buma 20)

Performing and safeguarding national identity and national masculinity—or performing against them—requires a body to enact such performance, a standard to imitate or reject, and someone to assess whether that standard is

being met or undermined. The overwhelming focus of mainstream media on this traditional masculinity means that stories about female athletes depend on toughness to prove their legitimacy within the sports lit canon.

The performance and presence of the female identified body is fraught with expectations, stereotypes, and barriers. Elite athletics is no exception. In order to justify themselves within the world of their disciplines, female athletes have to perform in an exceptional fashion, and the most societally important place to be exceptional is the Olympic Games. Angie Abdou's novel *The Bone Cage* interrogates the perception of the Olympic Games as "The Show"—the highest level of sports performance, and the sole focus of athletes. Though the novel critiques the Olympic results-oriented focus of swimming as a sport, the trajectory of *The Bone Cage* as a sports narrative inadvertently pushes the original performative agenda of the Games—men as heroes, women as audience, and the Olympics as the stage. Sadie, the national champion of the 800m freestyle—the longest distance in Olympic swimming for women, as opposed to the 1500m for men—qualifies for the Canadian Olympic team. Though she struggles with training in the face of a personal tragedy following her qualification, Sadie's constant repetition within her discipline ensures she "belongs to the water. Only here, her body performs as trained" (Abdou, *Bone* 4). Digger, a wrestler, also qualifies for the Olympics as the national champion. Both of their lives revolve around performance through athletics. Lucinda, a former Olympic swimmer herself as well as Sadie's former teammate, warns Sadie that even at the Olympic level, "no one cares unless you get a medal" (Abdou, *Bone* 127):

> In 1996 I made it into the final for my eight hundred free. Top eight in the world—shot at a medal. Just before my swim, Marcus calls me over. He wasn't the Olympic team coach, but he'd been my college coach. I trusted him as much as anyone. […] He said—"You don't have a chance at a medal, go for a TV swim, put on a show, make it look like you could win, give folks back home a few minutes of thrill." […] Just know—it's not real. It's all spectacle. (Abdou, *Bone* 127-28)

Though the athletes call the Games "The Show" or "Disneyland," aware of the pressures accompanying being on TV, Sadie in particular expresses confusion at the idea that her future Olympic swim will be 'fake.' In contrast, Digger, whose Olympic medal chances as the Canadian national champion are not addressed in the narrative, is constantly associated with scenes that emphasize performativity—Olympic Trials are held at the CBC Studios in Toronto at the media's insistence for convenience; his TV spot emphasizes his underdog mentality and heroic status; and a broadcasted interview with other Olympians leaves him feeling overlooked. However, as the top *male* performer, the significance of Digger's Olympic matches is never explicitly called into

question the way that Sadie's are. "[Born] to be a wrestler," Digger's body is masculine and tough (Abdou, *Bone* 3). On the mat, his "body wants to go, to fight, to score, to wrestle," and his battles are individual and successful (Abdou 37). Digger knows he has to perform, and is exposed more frequently to media theatrics, but he remains violently serious about his sport. His journey through wrestling is devoid of both the warnings of the Olympics' lack of meaning and the struggles to recommit that plague Sadie's swimming career. Though Sadie is also built for her sport, Digger embodies innate masculinity-as-toughness and performs it naturally, where other members of his team, and even Sadie, struggle to persevere; "the qualities and characteristics necessary for successful athletic competition are still predominantly associated with men and masculinity" (Buma 226). Despite his embarrassment over his own cliches in his "Digumentary," Digger performs as the narrative requires (Abdou, *Bone* 91). Meanwhile, the narrative punishes Sadie for even attempting to perform—after a car accident, her Olympic dreams are shattered along with her l3 vertebra, separating her from her teammates and from Digger. Digger, involved in the same accident, pursues his dreams without a scratch. Though Sadie struggles to accept her new body, she accepts her separation from swimming and sends Digger off to the Olympic Games with a fragment of poetry and a promise to help him find his own way back to civilian life (Abdou, *Bone* 233). Sadie operates as the ultimate, dominant high performance athlete, but is inevitably reduced to an awed Olympic spectator, a reward for the sacrifice and future return of Digger as male hero. Though *The Bone Cage* seeks "to ask if the Olympic quest might be a misguided quest," it is a quest that Digger completes (Abdou, "Introduction" 7). Though it is technically true that Sadie does not end her narrative at the Olympics, Digger does, even if is outside the scope of the page. Despite the narrative's questioning, de Coubertin's vision of the "exaltation of male athleticism" plays out. Performing this specific, masculine vision of athletic success is what informs sports systems, from performing on the course, track, or field, to performing on the desired developmental pathway of the National Training Centres (NTCs), to performing on the international stage.

If, however, "the success of sport in Canada will depend on girls' engagement and contributions," reaffirming legitimacy through literary representation that does not depend on innate or embodied masculine toughness or national masculinity might lead to possibilities for "[rebuilding] sport with and for girls" ("Covid Alert"1). Arguably, sports lit itself also needs to be rebuilt with this audience in mind. Take *The Bone Cage,* for example. On one hand, *The Bone Cage* is "a sport novel that [does] not end on the podium," and focuses, in part, on a female athlete (Abdou, "Introduction" 7). On the other hand, Sadie, like Digger, is a Prodigy and an Olympian, and their narratives are consumed by the toughness and innate talent required to live up to these roles. Additionally, Sadie operates, at least in part, as a Lone Girl, which is a "common practice

of isolating female athletes through depicting them as either trying out for a boys' team or competing in individual sports" (Whiteside 420). Swimming is a highly individual sport, and Sadie, though training with a team, is both athletically and narratively isolated—women "receive a great deal more social acceptance for participating in individual sports because such participation keeps women segregated and undermines possibilities of group bonding" (Kane 236). Mary Kane, who labeled this trope, notes that

> In those few novels where young girls were on teams with other females, relationships typically focused on the female protagonist's connections with a male [athlete]. If there was a strong relationship between two teammates, it usually had to do with something outside of sport altogether. (Kane 256)

Sadie's relationship with Digger is prioritized throughout the novel, and her relationship with her younger teammate, Katie, is framed both by jealousy over male relationships and Sadie's mildly ironic fear of Katie's Prodigy status. Narratively, Sadie accepts a path outside of sport—and outside of victory—because she is unable to embody the tough, isolated image she has built for herself. Sadie's Olympic Prodigy narrative ultimately recreates the Lone Girl, and ultimately positions Sadie's athletic engagement as futile. To reaffirm athletic legitimacy in female sports stories, tropes like the Lone Girl need to be addressed, as do perceptions of masculine toughness, but need to be dissected in stories while working toward undermining these formulas.

Is it possible to write honestly and accurately about the challenges of individual—and team—sports without tumbling into literary traps like the Underdog and the Lone Girl? Creating solidarity between athletes in this sense depends, I argue, on asserting space by being clear about sports' impacts and barriers. In *Bilateral*, I plan to highlight how cultural issues in competitive swimming cause problems, both mentally and physically, for female identified athletes. Increasing numbers of female athletes speak more transparently about the mental, physical, and social challenges surrounding their sports. Katelyn Ohashi's comparisons between elite and collegiate gymnastics, Mattie Rogers's Instagram chronicles of USA Weightlifting's Olympic quad and its impact on her mental health, and Jenny Casson's pointedly slow rebuild into training with Rowing Canada following hip surgeries are three examples of athletes who, as Olympians or almost-Olympians, use their social media platforms to address issues within their sports to a wide audience. Though, again, important, I wonder if seeing and hearing peers, rather than just Olympians, struggle with and discuss the impacts of sports could offer other possibilities for not only other stories, but for other alternative systems through which to engage with sport.

The genesis of this project was originally part of my Master's thesis *Spatial*—a novel about protagonist Kara Sinclair's athletic development on a

relatively small and underfunded university rowing team. The novel covers three years of Kara's varsity rowing career and the lack of support for female athletes looking to develop in university sports, without having access or being invited to National Training Centre (NTC) programs. In writing about representing the challenges facing developmental athletes in varsity rowing, I sought to interrogate, among other things, how writing as an athlete changes the representation of these challenges. If "feminism is about its own history as much as its present and future," then writing back to one's own history and experience becomes a resistant act (Carrière 26). In considering how I write about the athletic gendered body, I am aware that my research practice ends up interrogating things that I hold in my body and that I've lived out as a female Métis athlete and literary scholar. Writing the body—the female, queer body—into my field of study acknowledges that athletics and scholarship, the mind and body, are intimately connected to gender and self-expression. Both my graduate level manuscripts—*Spatial* and *Bilateral*—originate from the need to write and articulate the specific challenges and experiences of existing in athletic systems as a female competitor. If the stories I'm told and the stories I read are physically embodied and re-enacted, then writing my own is a method by which to not quite prove, but certainly to reclaim, the perceptions of gender and sport that toxic masculine culture and narratives attempt to enact.

As a challenge to sports lit, *Spatial,* my MA thesis, explicitly focuses on experiences in varsity sport and the systemic challenges that plague the team. For *Bilateral,* my PhD thesis, I want to interrogate the way in which these systems are normalized in age group athletes. For swimming, which is traditionally an 'early entry' sport, physical, social, and systemic issues in sport become part of athletic culture in young children and adolescents particularly. Exposure to these components of sports at a young age, I argue, dramatically impacts athletic mentality and attitude toward sport. The disciplines that children might have wanted to pursue for the sake of it turn into dreams of 'making it,' which ultimately regress into pursuing the sport for mandated results, or abandoning it entirely. The main focus of my project as it currently stands will be about age group swimming, and Cami Richardson, the protagonist, develops bilateral rotator cuff injuries as she progresses through the sport. Swimming, like other disciplines, is incredibly aggressive in its search for Prodigies and for swimmers who fit the physical 'type' embodied by Olympic athletes. Cami, not a prodigy, will be a lower-case underdog, and the focus of her coaches on results, performance, fast return to sport, and upper-case Underdog mentality will have drastic impacts on her management of her injuries. Nevertheless, because her perceptions are informed by the overwhelming presence of the Olympics, she believes in an Underdog narrative that is unattainable. The internalization of Underdog, Prodigy, and Olympic narratives, though seemingly innocuous and often inspirational, have consequences beyond what mainstream society expects and encourages.

As indicated by 2020's *Athlete A*, as well as the whole host of external and internal investigations against national sports bodies across Canada and globally, athletic and coaching abuse allegations are rightfully gaining more traction and attention in sporting communities. Though currently highlighted in the national federations, the implementation of Safe Sport policies at age group and senior organizations is a welcome change. However, within sports lit itself—and, to be frank, certain sectors of sporting culture at large—sexual abuse, harassment, and coaching abuse are normalized. Abuse and the subsequent 'adversity' not only operate in these narratives as the warranted price for success, but for athletic and character development as female athletes. In these narratives, sexual and gendered abuse in particular is weaponized against Lone Girl athletes, ensuring that they are not only isolated within their traditionally 'masculine' sports, but assertively informed that should they remain in sport, violence is to be expected. The Sports Hero model—particularly as it pertains to female identified athletes—places emphasis on independence (but really on being alone), self-sufficiency, and strength that is dependent upon "proving she is just as tough as any of the guys" (Kane 244). By culturally equating isolation with strength, "solidarity among females, at least as teammates, could not, by definition, exist" (Kane 256). These narratives are not only damaging to young athletes, seemingly doomed to become Lone Girls, but are deeply destructive to the culture of sport. Many of these issues are so pervasive and ingrained that the only way to articulate them is to unpack the moments where these issues manifest. Through the project, I speculate whether writing a different kind of sports story can make young athletes more likely to stay in a sport or pursue another sport for sport's sake. Though the inspirational Olympic narrative depends on the idea of innate talent, perseverance through obstacles, and an underdog trajectory that ends in victory, these stories are marketed to a young athletic audience for whom these elements are not always possible. Instead of just seeing Olympians reach the podium, I wonder whether young female athletes, above all else, want to see *themselves* in sports literature.

In order for female identified athletes to remain in sport, they need to see themselves accurately depicted in literature and media; the current lack of representation not only dismisses them as valid subjects, but emphasizes specific societal definitions for their athletic "success." Young adult series, like *Play Tough* and *Dairy Queen*, have evolved to include sports stories that "present girls as tough and competent athletes," but the teenage protagonists frequently possess the distinct financial and physical advantages needed to succeed in their particular sports, and neglect to address the wide range of systemic barriers faced by female athletes (Heinecken 31). Novels like Ellen White's *A Season of Daring Greatly* and Robert Bausch's *The Legend of Jesse Smoke* place their athletic female Prodigies as lone representatives in exclusively male leagues, and emphasize the "opportunity … to prove one's own skill set and measure up to a (male) standard," positioning the protagonists as subversive

exceptions to—rather than proof of—their gender's athleticism (Whiteside 418). The protagonists in these novels overcome harassment, abuse, violence from male coaches and teammates, and frequent injuries, emphasizing that a "girl's ability to be taken seriously as an athlete [has] a great deal to do with her attitude toward, and acceptance of, pain and injury" (Kane 258). Though elite sports, by their very nature, necessitate the pain of intense physical effort, sports culture has instead indoctrinated female athletes to accept that systemic violence, both physical and emotional, is the heroic sacrifice necessary to engage in sports.

By culturally equating athletic success with a tangible Olympic gold, female athletes—already limited by institutional bias and systemic violence—are further limited by the belief that not achieving the literal gold standard equates to complete failure, and that engaging in sport is futile. Through analyzing the aforementioned novels and memoirs, "failure" narratives such as Abdou's *The Bone Cage*, Cara Hedley's *Twenty Miles*, and Chris Cleave's *Gold*, and sports literature critics such as Michael Buma, Joli Sandoz, and Mary Kane, *Bilateral* articulates the continued "discrepancy … between sports movies and sports lives," dissecting the prevalence of the Sports-Hero and its implications (Abdou, "Introduction" 7). By acknowledging this disconnect in sports stories, I enter into and engage with existent conversations around the representation of girls and women in Canadian sport, while pushing beyond these critical conversations to assert the necessity of making space for female authors and female athletes to develop their own sports narratives: not to delegitimize Olympic achievements, but to recognize that podium victories are not the only worthy narratives that exist. Through my research, writing, and lived practice, I challenge and reassess athletic culture's perception of failure. *Bilateral*, by empirically addressing swimming as the brutal sport it is from the perspective of simultaneously tough and "failing" athletes, readdresses cultural perception of athletic failure, studies barriers against female identified athletes, and acknowledges the legitimacy of athletes deemed unworthy by their sports.

Notes

1. Sports and sports literature are fraught spaces in terms of gender and sexuality. It stands to note that the male versus female binary inherent in sports discourse delegitimizes the sporting experiences of trans, nonbinary, womxn/femme, and gender queer athletes, about whom little sports literature and criticism exists. In this dissertation, I will be referring to female identified athletes with the understanding that the traditional discourse surrounding biology in sport still impacts athletes who do not fit this binary.

2. Events at recent international competitions, such as Simone Biles's withdrawal from her 2021 Olympic All-Around final due to developing the 'twisties,' trouble the perceived inevitability of these victory narratives. However, Olympic autobiographies have not – as of yet – reflected this shift. (It is interesting that Biles had a 'comeback' to win bronze in her balance beam final.)

3. Resource acquisition as a perk of being a Prodigy becomes complicated by the exploitation, exotification, subjection, and stereotyping of athletes of color as a resource in and of themselves. Black bodies in games (i.e., football, basketball, etc.) in particular exist in a space where they are developed in order to operate as an entertainment resource. Similarly, the stereotyping around prodigies of color in athletics frequently results in dialogues of unfairness. Prodigy characteristics lauded in white athletes become 'unfair advantages' in athletes of color. My research as it currently stands does not focus on the stereotyping of high-performance athletes and players of color. However, I look forward to exploring these possibilities as I work toward my dissertation.

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Diamond

Past the frog pond to the diamond's dirt and dead grass
behind my old elementary school. In the cold wind
everything's shrunken a hard brown like forgotten limes in the fridge.
The infield is in. The outfield fence has crept closer. Two aluminum benches
have supplanted splinters of wood in the dugouts.

The month of April and I'm thinking too much again,
leaning against the give of metal chain link fence on the third-base side,
tracing the symmetry of three canvas bags half-buried in dried
mud. Life's bases I yearned to steal; life's bases I seldom reached.

I can see my fellow outfielders, bored in their baggy uniforms,
shifting from leg to leg, squinting against the sun beneath
big-brimmed hats. One reaches down with his toothpick arm, plucks
a handful of grass, tosses it like Carl Yastrzemski to check the wind.

Through the tunnel of time, small voices:
Let's go, let's go, come on, he can't hit, come on,
let's go, swing, batter, SWING!
Taunts that bring back the pentagon of home plate, the bat handle—
thin, hard, slipping under palm sweat—the gravel of Coach Gill's
smoker's voice yelling from the dugout, *Choke up, son! Choke up!*
his plea punctuated by the fat, leathery finish of a baseball hitting
the darkest pocket of the catcher's mitt. After strikeouts, I walked
to the dugout holding the bat's barrel before my eyes, staring
at the "Louisville Slugger" logo, the burnt-in-wood misnomer
shielding me from my teammates.

Lying in bed nights, though, I recalled a different game entirely.
Baseballs driven off the bat's sweet spot, leather harvesting opponents'
line drives out of spring air. Lying in bed nights, I never made a last out.
TV announcers needed slow-motion replay to capture the miracles of bat and
glove. In the dark, thinking about the green sward and the home whites, the
sound
of cheers came like a blessing, like April wind to the winter of my ears.

Ken Craft

Swiftest

Eduardo Frajman

The computer's voice was calm, neutral.

"On your mark."

On his mark Marlon Tin was in standing start position, his dominant right leg in front, the left behind, body leaning its weight forward, knees flexed at sixty degrees, ankles dorsiflexed at twenty-five, the feet a shoulder's width apart from each other.

His eyes shifted to his right bicep where three names were tattooed—Lena, Hanni, Kiko—then up to take in the visual of the track ahead. Four lanes—his was Lane 2, in accordance to the TransWorld Athletics Association's (TWAA) parameters for world record attempts—sea-blue tongues of rubber-polyurethane-syntech encased in white stripes and embedded with invisible force and speed sensors that would transmit all capturable data to the observation box above.

Inside the box the mood was impatient.

"Any final questions?"

Unconsciously, Dr. Asch scratched at the side of his glass.

"Why doesn't he crouch to four-point position?" asked the tall man in jeans and sports coat. "I thought every second counts."

Dr. Asch had been trying to remember his name all day. He was a former football star and longtime coach, who was here now as the athletic consultant for Vertyx Innovation Trust (VIT).

"Every millisecond. But the intense stress of the four-point start on the musculoskeletal system wastes energy that is better used later in the race. It's a long-enough distance."

"Seems like a sprint the way your subject runs it."

Dr. Asch exchanged a worried glance with Dr. Hadir. The murmurings of their guests were growing ever thicker.

"Set."

Marlon's muscles tensed, expanding the flexion angles. His pelvis tilted posteriorly twelve degrees, six degrees rotated leftward. His fingers extended. He lowered his eyes. "Two eleven twenty-six," he whispered. "Two eleven twenty-six." As always at this moment of greatest tension he saw Lena's face, her worries, her fierce, determined love. It was for her. For them. "Two eleven twenty-six."

"In 1954," Dr. Hadir had told the guests earlier in the day—mid-level military brass, representatives from private foundations, research institutes, universities, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), a handful of media, along with officials from TWAA and adjudicators from Caddings World Records (CWR)—"Roger Bannister officially became the first human to run a mile in under four minutes."

"In the seventy-five years following that feat, the world record was lowered only by twenty seconds, significantly less than ten percent. The stubbornness of this, along with other athletic records, mocked us with the threat of unconquerable limitations to human capacities. Which is why my partner and I," she gestured toward Dr. Asch, who received some polite, halfhearted applause, "along with our colleagues and, why not say it?, competitors, some of whom are here with us today," a nod or two, the VIT man chuckled, "have taken up the challenge to improve physical performance to levels hitherto unimaginable."

"Go" was not the word "Go" but a tone, a buzzer for his neurons, trained to fire at its touch. They fired. The signals traveled through Marlon's nervous system, split their routes in their occult manner toward each appropriate destination.

One muscle, in the vastus lateralis of his right quadricep, say, was spurred into action by the signal. Calcium ions—stored in the sarcoplasmic reticula of the muscle cells within the sarcomeres which made up the myofibrils which made up the muscle fibers which made up the muscle—were released into the intracellular space, seeking the protein complex troponin, binding themselves to it, urging it to change the shape of tropomyosin proteins so that they exposed the binding sites of the actin proteins. Once the sites were accessible, the heads of myosin proteins linked themselves to them, forming the actin-myosin cross-bridges from which mechanical force inside the body is born. Attached to an actin site, each myosin protein received one molecule of adenosine triphosphate (ATP), which stimulated the head to detach from the actin, rotate, and attach itself to the next site. That rotation, the working stroke, the power stroke, was made possible by the chemical reaction that, by shedding one phosphate ion, turned ATP into adenosine diphosphate (ADP). Its effect was force, a handful of piconewtons of force, times three hundred

cross-bridges inside each sarcomere, times fifty thousand sarcomeres inside each myofibril, times two thousand myofibrils inside each muscle fiber, times two hundred thousand muscle fibers making up the vastus lateralis.

The force was expressed as movement, upward movement, forward movement. The vastus lateralis moved and the gluteus medius moved and the plantar flexors and the hamstrings and the abductors. They set to work.

"It has been long understood," Dr. Hadir had told the room, "that during concentric contractions sarcomeres inside the muscles shorten and produce less force, while during eccentric contractions they lengthen and the amount of force produced increases. That's why it's more tiring to walk up a hill than down, even though when you're walking downhill you still need to keep your body from falling forward.

"This is significant because it shows that muscle can be strengthened with the help of an external force. In lieu of mechanical assistance, the body would need to store the ADP that is released during the cross-bridge cycle inside the sarcomere, and replete it with phosphate so it becomes ATP again and can effect yet more cycles. This is what Wong, Takano, and Russe achieved in their pioneering research during the 2030s, and what we, and most of our colleagues and competitors, now routinely use as the first phase of subject preparation."

This prompted most of the congregated guests to peek down at Marlon, who at the time was warming up before the race.

"Every muscle in his body has been reconfigured."

"Not a pleasant process, I imagine," piped in a cross-eyed biochemist from Cornell.

"No," Dr. Asch said, "Neither easy nor pleasant."

"How long did it take, that first phase?"

Dr. Asch glared at Bianquina Zúñiga, the reporter from the lefty cable network, who was holding up her phone in that threatening way she had, and who knew the answer to her own question perfectly well.

"Just over half a year."

"Half a year of daily invasive medical procedures?"

"Not daily …."

Some groans from the other guests.

"Still …."

"Still," Dr. Hadir cut in, "after the Wong-Takano-Russe process was made available to researchers the world record for fastest mile came down by almost thirty percent to just under three minutes."

"But at what cost …?" Zúñiga tried again.

"At a cost you can easily access on that phone of yours. My partner and I have been nothing but transparent. Our research funding has been generously provided by many of the institutions represented here today. As for the inconveniences Mr. Tin has experienced, he was made aware of each at the appropriate time. He has been given the chance to refuse any and all

treatments. And he has been well compensated for his trouble, as you can see in our itemized report, which, again, we've taken pains to make easy for you to find."

0:01.00

Quadrillions of cross-bridge cycles in Marlon's vastus lateralis produced some four thousand newtons of force, which joined together with the rest of his muscular system to make his skeleton run.

First the push-off, the beginning of running.

Agonist and antagonist muscles pulled on his hips and his knees, on his elbows and fingers. But the brunt of the initial work was done by his ankle plantar flexors—the extensor digitorum longus, the fibularis brevis, the tibalis anterior, and, most especially, the soleus—and their tendons. Marlon tried to steer his mind away from the slashing pain, tried to think of Kiko falling down while learning to run, of his red face as he pushed himself up, of the moment his son was torn between crying at the pain or laughing, laughing at the end of pain, at the realization that even falling, even pain was bearable, and then choosing to laugh and keep running.

His center of gravity rose. The hamstrings fired up and the abductor magnus and the gluteus medius. Thus began Marlon's mile-long (1.609344 km) race.

0:01.39

His hips and knees extended further. His right foot pushed forward off the ground until his toes were no longer touching it. It swung back as the left swung forward. His body landed on its left heel. The foot pushed down, pushed at the ground, which pushed back with equal force, pushed up, and up Marlon went, up and forward.

"In order to apply force efficiently," Dr. Asch had explained, "muscles are attached at a distance from the joint, which allows for the muscle's mechanical advantage, the movement arm. The physics are simple. A longer distance between the muscle attachment site and the joint's rotation axis increases the movement arm. It was the team led by Mihaela Hristova that perfected the technique to safely elongate human bone in order to increase the distance … ."

"So you've also elongated each of this man's bones?" Zúñiga again, feigning shock.

"First of all, Ms. Zúñiga," snapped Dr. Hadir, "you know well that the procedure was performed on several other subjects, quite successfully, before it was on Mr. Tin."

Zúñiga opened her mouth to respond but stopped herself.

"Second of all," and this Dr. Hadir directed at all in the room, "some bones in fact need to be shortened. The ankle bone, which is so crucial for running, uses force more efficiently when it's ten, even fifteen percent shorter than a nonmodified top sprinter."

An HHS suit raised her hand.

"I'm having trouble understanding, doctor, how you can justify putting human beings through this level of physical trauma, simply to break some speed record."

"We work entirely within HHS parameters. The mile record dropped to two forty-six …."

"We can produce higher speeds with machines," piped in the VIT man.

"That's irrelevant, sir. We are working within the bounds of human physiology …."

"Nevertheless, doctor," continued the HHS woman, "there's a moral question here, regardless of the end-justifies-everything mentality our country has adopted under the current presidential administration …."

"For whom you work …."

"I work for the people of this country, doctor, and for the advancement of human knowledge. I don't subscribe to the nihilistic cynicism of our President, which you so clearly embrace. How much suffering has this man gone through?"

Dr. Asch felt his hands begin to shake. He forced them to stop by pushing the nails of the one into the back of the other. He noticed Bianquina Zúñiga and her despicable smartphone make her way toward the HHS suit.

"That's not a question," Dr. Hadir said to both of them, "to which I can provide an empirically measurable answer."

0:02.78

Now he was moving fast enough. The push-swing-land-push of the start was replaced by the push-swing-fly-land-push of the sprint, for sprinting is what Marlon's body was about to do for a mile. "Two eleven twenty-six," he hissed one last time before his body commandeered all the oxygen available for the sole purpose of running as fast—almost, almost as fast—as it could.

His hip muscles took over—iliacus, psoas, pectineus, rectus femoris—accelerating the back and forth swinging of his legs and, indirectly, his arms.

His limbs began to burn, as he knew they would, each scar left by the bone saws a singularity of pain. Hanni should be reading now. She was learning to read when he left. Lena wanted to buy books. Marlon said they could afford library books. "The studies say you have to have books in the house all the time," Lena insisted. "We barely have food in the house all the time," he told her, as if she didn't know.

"When advancing slower than seven meters per second or so," Dr. Asch had pushed on despite the increasingly acrimonious mood, "runners speed up primarily by generating greater ground reaction forces, by pushing harder against the ground. This increases the length of each stride and, as a function, the flight phase between strides. The ankle plantar flexors are most responsible for this. But as the runner speeds up even more, the plantar flexor muscles are tasked with generating ever more force in an ever-shorter span of time.

The only solution is to touch the ground more frequently, reducing the flight phase, which of course is the least energy-consuming.

"These are, therefore, at the macro level, the two most significant anatomical limitations to running speed: the maximum amount of force the plantar flexors can generate, and the speed at which the hip can rotate to allow for higher stride frequency.

"This is the innovation of the Hadir-Asch procedure: in combination with the Wong-Takano-Russe modifications, it allows the plantar flexors to exert up to eighteen percent more force than any human being on record. In addition, thanks to the Hristova team's advances, we can now alter the hip joints, and their connection to the appropriate muscles, so as to increase movement arm and thereby rotation speed.

"Our predecessors', and our competitors' test subjects, as you all know, have in recent years obliterated the mile record, bringing it down to under two minutes and twenty seconds, which would be inconceivable for an unmodified modern human."

"Two minutes, sixteen point eighteen seconds," blurted out the CWR adjudicator.

Dr. Asch nodded.

"Thanks to the Hadir-Asch procedure, we expect Mr. Tin to not only make mincemeat of this mark today, but also to break the next speed barrier and run the mile in under two minutes ten seconds!"

The crowd's disappointment hit like a bad smell.

"You're not breaking two minutes?" yelped a stumpy Marine officer in camo uniform. "I flew here from Washington for two ten?"

"Almost two years …."

"All that money …."

"Esteemed guests," Dr. Asch raised his hands. "I don't think you grasp what we've accomplished. Two ten has proven monumentally difficult. Consider …."

0:04.11

Eight meters per second.

"He won't accelerate as fast as the fastest sprinters."

0:07.20

Ten meters per second.

"But still much faster than any middle-distance runner ever."

0:09.94

Twelve meters per second. Twenty-eight miles per hour.

"He'll achieve an average speed of twelve-point-seven meters per second. Faster than any of our competitors' subjects."

0:11.16

There it was. The pace. The stride. The breathing, forcing Marlon's lungs to remain below their maximal oxygen uptake. His bones were killing him but his muscles, his muscles were now at peak performance. Here was the moment,

the one moment Marlon allowed himself to enjoy, the irrepressible potency of his body at this moment, the might of it, the might of him.

Dr. Hadir took note of Bianquina Zúñiga and the HHS woman watching the race side by side, exchanging the occasional word.

"Look at him."

The military officers and the white-coat researchers and the nonprofit technocrats shut their mouths all at once and leaned onto the window to watch Marlon run. Even after years of modified athletes in the research literature, then the news, then the popular imagination, it was still, for a person old enough to remember how it had been like before, when competitors relied perforce on their fortuitous genetic endowments and a lifetime of hard work to accomplish feats that today, next to a subject like Marlon Tin, were laughable, there was something unreal about seeing a human being run faster than a cheetah, faster than the fastest colt. He seemed from up above like a special effect, like a cartoon character whipping its feet so fast so as to make the air whistle and the ground vibrate.

"Look at him go."

0:46.56

Lena, of course, had told him not to do it. "The money's too good," Marlon told her, as if she didn't know. They'd let him call his family once a week, under supervision so he wouldn't divulge proprietary secrets.

"When Mr. Tin breaks two ten, and the mile record," Dr. Hadir had concluded earlier that day, "the Hadir-Asch procedure will be vindicated. The funds our generous partners—governmental, private, and nonprofit—have put into this project will be recouped as the procedure is adapted for routine physical improvements …."

"That could take years!"

"Decades!"

"What if he doesn't?" asked Zúñiga.

"Excuse me?"

"What if he doesn't break the record?"

Everyone in the room, and down on the track, knew that if Marlon didn't break the mile record Drs. Hadir and Asch were out of a job.

"He will," said Dr. Asch.

Zúñiga shot him a slashing glare.

"What if he doesn't break two ten?"

"We …."

"We hope," Dr. Hadir cut in, "that our extraordinarily generous, nay, visionary sponsors will have the patience and the foresight to allow us to continue …."

"Continue for how long?"

The HHS woman had now understood what Zúñiga was after.

"Yes. What's to keep you from inching ever closer to two ten but not actually reaching it?"

"Why would we do …?" Dr. Hadir blanched.

"To keep your project going, of course," said Zúñiga, "to keep the funding coming."

Dr. Asch wanted to throw something hard and/or sharp at the smirking faces of the suits and uniforms taking this all in. Their self-satisfied hypocrisy made him ill.

"You have to admit," added the HHS woman, "that Mr. Tin at least has an interest in the project continuing."

"No!" Dr. Hadir was almost yelling. "I mean, maybe he does, but he has no say in it. When he runs he'll be neurally constrained …"

"We follow HHS guidelines …." peeped Dr. Asch.

"The volitional part of his brain is temporarily disconnected. His body doesn't need, nor ask for permission."

1:22.65

He wanted to stop. He begged every muscle fiber to stop working. The burning. The pain. He would've screamed had his lungs had air to spare. He couldn't stop and this was as it should be. Lena would receive her check this month, and next month too. Next month too.

"I love my new books!" Hanni had squealed on the phone last week. "Mommy got them for me!"

"Come home already," Lena had begged. "We'll be fine. Just come home."

But how could he? How would they be fine?

"How did she do it?"

While most of the guests crowded around Dr. Hadir after the race was over, Bianquina Zúñiga and Sanai Jackson-Bowers, the HHS woman, came after Dr. Asch.

"I don't know what …." he muttered through trembling lips.

"Cut the crap," snapped Zúñiga. "You're in it up to your eyeballs."

"Better come clean now," coaxed Jackson-Bowers, "than during a Congressional hearing."

Dr. Asch looked up, looked to see if Dr. Hadir was watching.

"Later," he hissed. "Tonight. My office."

1:33.88

His muscles should've been spent, his energy used up. Twenty-eight miles per hour for ninety seconds. But they weren't, they kept going. There was more ATP to use, and more force exerted on his bones, and stronger ankles to elicit stronger ground forces to push him onward, and faster-swinging hips, and a brain that cared nothing for his agony or his doubt or his fear.

"Can he do it?"

The guests couldn't help but grow excited. There'd be talk about money later. About significance or lack thereof. There'd be panels and committees

and adjudication sessions, maybe even hearings and courtrooms in the distant future. But now there was only him, the running man, running faster than any person had a right to, running against time to accomplish a meaningless, completely arbitrary feat, yet one no one had ever, ever, accomplished. Two ten.

"Can he do it?"

1:56.90

"Was he really constrained?" Zúñiga placed her phone on Dr. Asch's desk, the recording light an accusatory red.

"Of course," Dr. Asch's jitters had gone. Now he felt pure exhaustion, as if he'd run the race himself. "You couldn't expect him to calculate his own speed to the second in real time."

"Then how?"

"I want guaranteed immunity," he said.

He looked back and forth between Zúñiga and Jackson-Bowers.

"Neither one of us is a lawyer, doctor. You tell us what you know, and we put in a good word, about your principled integrity and so on, when the time is right."

Dr. Asch nodded to himself. He opened the top drawer on his desk and pulled out a flash drive. It had orange lightning bolts painted on both ends.

"There's a range," he told the reporter and the government bureaucrat, thus beginning the killing of his and his partner's professional reputations. "Too far from the target and you risk losing the funding. But of course he couldn't break it. That would've meant the project had reached its end. It had to be close enough to two ten."

2:00.97

Inside the observation box the clock's numbers seemed to grow larger, redder.

"Go, kid," muttered a three-star Army general.

"Come on," whispered the CWR suit.

"Run, you little shit," breathed Dr. Hadir.

In a sea of pain, Marlon was beyond conscious thought. His eyes saw nothing but white, ice-sharp brilliance.

But his muscles kept working. His body kept running.

2:07.07

"How?" Zúñiga was waving the flash drive the way she usually waved her phone.

"His meals. It's all in there."

"Everyone pays attention to the flashy new procedure, the innovative training techniques. Nobody thinks about the basics. The caloric intake. She … they …."

"You mean Dr. Hadir and the subject?"

"Yes. He had to be in on it. Follow instructions precisely. The precise amount of anthocyanins, omega-3s, polyphenols, L-citrulline. You understand."

"And you?"

2:09.01

"I went along."

Marlon's face muscles had lost all definition. His tongue flailed out of his mouth as spittle flew about his head. His throat seized up as the oxygen ran out.

Thirteen point four meters per second, after having run a mile.

"You planned for him not to do it …."

"But get close enough …."

2:10.89

The VIT man slapped his thigh.

"Shit!"

The CWR suit turned off his notepad.

"So close!"

Marlon's neurons told his muscles to decelerate the instant the machine calmly, neutrally said "Finish" and displayed the final number—2:11.29—for all to see.

Marlon kept running, ever slower, until his brain let go of his mind and he dropped to the ground. He kissed his bicep. "We did it, love," he managed in between heaving breaths. "We did it, love."

Inside the observation box the mood flattened with the tension gone as everyone breathed out in relief.

"We did it," sighed Dr. Hadir before working up her disappointed face. "Next time. Next time we'll get it. We just need a few more months … a year at most …."

But Dr. Asch already knew that wouldn't happen, knew it from the salivating expressions on the reporter and the bureaucrat, who pounced on him like tigers, who smelled his fear and his misgivings, his disgust at himself and what he'd done.

He took a last look out the window down at Marlon Tin, who was being tended to by the medical staff. His screams were muffled by the glass, but not enough. Hopefully his wife had saved enough to keep the family afloat while he went to prison for conspiracy to commit fraud.

Dr. Asch promised himself he'd check up on them after it was all over.

"Later," he muttered. "Tonight. My office."

No Coin Toss

Rock Paper Scissors.
Grip the Ultimate disc like a gun,
thumb and index finger
pointing out. Snap your wrist.
Huck it is what Stick said.
If you think it's non-contact,
think again. I was more flub
than flick in my throws,
more flop than fling, but the zing
when he whipped it my way
and spun the wind, that saucer-
smooth spin that zipped downfield
and me with pancake hands
about to flap it just when the defender
snatched it, leaped like
like an egret. How to
lay out, hammer, hover
a whole life, be the hinge
of wind that whips a disc.
To be ultimate, become a magpie—
the Avian Mafia. Steal the disc
like it's an egg
and fly.

John Davis

High-Top Metaphysics

Kareem Tayyar

1. Origins

Begin with solitude, and a pair of sneakers. Find a park, or a school playground, or a church parking lot where the priest or the pastor or the reverend has put up a hoop, never mind the proximity to the cars of his parishioners. If it's summer, bring a bottle of water; if it's winter, a hooded sweatshirt.

Bring headphones. Or don't.

Imagine you are fifteen years old again. Or don't.

Remember that play is the body's version of prayer.

Don't worry about makes and misses.

Don't count the number of shots you take.

If it's sunset, take a break to watch the sky turn from blue to pink.

Pay attention to your footwork.

Check your follow-through.

Enjoy the sound of the ball falling through the net, or the chain.

Close your eyes every now and then as you dribble, just to remind yourself that the ball is a boomerang, or a homing pigeon.

If others arrive, remember that you are all members of the same congregation, one which knows that there are only two real sins in this life: to take the game too seriously; and to not take it seriously enough.

2. Magic Realism

Sometimes the ball becomes a comet. Other times a grail out of which all are welcome to drink. It's been known to rise from the dead, to grow wings (and then lose them), to speak in languages long believed to have gone extinct, to laugh wildly, to grow silent in monkish contemplation, to broker peace

accords between warring factions, to detonate like a grenade in the hands of one unused to holding a weapon.

3. Bodies of Water

The court is as much a river as the Mississippi was to Huck Finn, or the Bigfoot was to Norman Maclean. Sometimes the river speaks, as it does in *Siddhartha*. Other times it freezes, as it does in Joni Mitchell's "Blue." Once in a great while a woman rises from its depths, holding a sword. It is on these rare occasions that the player knows this will be a night where every shot he takes will find the net; where every pass he throws will safely arrive in a teammate's hands; where, no matter how hard he plays, and no matter how many overtimes the game might go into, his legs will never run out of strength, and his lungs will never run out of breath.

Does this mean that every player walks—no: *runs*—upon water every time he steps onto a court?

Or an even better question: does this make Jesus Christ the World's First Hooper?

The answer, to both questions, is yes.

4. Pacific Ocean Blue

It is 6 o'clock in the morning. The sky is a mixture of blue and pink. A handful of surfers are in the water, their dark wetsuits giving them the look of unarmed policemen. I am at my favorite outdoor court in the entire world, located just off Pacific Coast Highway at Main Beach in Laguna, California. The ball becomes a seagull every time it leaves my hands, calmly flapping its wings as it slowly makes its way toward the hoop.

I daydream about any number of subjects as I shoot.

Among them:

how the sunrise in Taos, New Mexico often looks like a shining, oversized grail;

how I've often wished I was born a century earlier just so I would have had the chance to court Ingrid Bergman;

how the guitar solo in the final minutes of "Purple Rain" is what I imagine Paradise sounds like.

It's early enough for the moon to still be awake, and every now and then I look up to see her trying not to admit that she's tired, even though she's having trouble keeping her eyes open.

"Get some sleep," I tell her. "I'll stand guard."

Sometimes she answers, other times she just blows me a kiss.

How many hours of my life, I wonder, have I spent just like this, alone on a court with only the moon and the birds for company?

Too many, I admit.

Not enough, I believe.

5. Faith

An unanswerable question: does the game make its participants religious? Or are those already spiritually-inclined drawn to the game in the first place?

See the man at the free-throw line, taking the exact same number of dribbles each time before he shoots, and tell me he isn't as devout as the priest standing above the bread and the wine and reciting the words: "This is my body," and "This is the blood of my blood."

See the player throwing chalk into the air before taking the court and tell me he isn't as devoted to ritual as the imam kneeling toward Mecca and whispering the words, "Allahu Akbar."

Or the coach who, certain that his team's winning streak is a result of a particular tie he's been wearing, wears it every game until—The Gods having tired of the tie—the streak is broken.

(Which immediately results in the coach burning the tie, as if the tie itself had been a Viking warrior deserving of a fiery sendoff.)

Or the fan, certain that his team's good fortunes are a result of a particular meal he eats before every home game.

Or another fan, certain that his team's terrible fortunes are a result of his having never told his father he loved him, or his mother the same.

Or this writer, who once tucked a folded, handwritten copy of the 23rd Psalm into his right sock before a game against a particularly fearsome team, certain that his opponent's full-court press was the closest thing this world possessed to the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

If it is unanswerable, you may ask, then why ask it in the first place?

To which I might say: because I didn't think this far ahead.

6. The Greatest Show in Town

Forget the acrobat, the lion-tamer, the tightrope-walker. Forget the bearded lady, the girls on the flying trapeze, the strongman in his loincloth. Forget the elephants standing on tiptoe, the cyclists leaping through ringed flames of fire, the Master of Ceremonies swearing you're about to see something you've never seen before (and will never see again). Forget the train, as long as a river in the Old Testament, rolling into an otherwise empty field on the edge of a nameless town only a few days after the arrival of spring.

Forget, too, the magician sawing a woman in half, or pulling a white rabbit from his well-worn top-hat. Forget the coffin with its secret compartment, the colored scarf that becomes a live bird, the Ace of Hearts that, no matter where you have placed it inside of the deck, always winds up at the very top.

Or try to.

Then try again.

And then, after a third failed attempt, accept that you cannot.

You cannot because, in fact, you do not want to.

Indeed, there are few pleasures in American life as enduring as those which involve the willing suspension of disbelief, especially when we are acutely aware that the answer, were it revealed to us, would seem so simple as to make us shake our heads in wonder at why we were unable to figure it out on our own.

Why this is, I don't know. But it certainly *is*.

Which explains why, when we see Julius Erving, wings suddenly having sprouted from his shoulders as he leaps from the foul-line, the ball held like an unlit torch above his head, begin to slowly ascend toward the basket, we don't question where the wings came from, or why it is that, for a few seconds, his head has vanished into clouds that have, when we weren't looking, appeared in the arena.

We know, certainly, there is some rational, or at least semi-rational, explanation for how it is that though his defenders have long since returned to earth, he continues to gain altitude. Of course there is. There must be. We are men and women of the Enlightenment, believers in science, in objectivity, in teleology. We know that wings do not suddenly sprout from the shoulders of men for no good reason; just as we know that the human body—ask Da Vinci, let alone the Wright Brothers—cannot fly without the aid of a complex, technologically-advanced contraption.

Yet why question such a marvel? The wings, however it has happened, are certainly, irrefutably *there*, as are the clouds, as is the man himself, miles from earth, moving inexorably toward the hoop with the grace of one of the angels in Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire*.

7. Golden Rules

1. The first great player you see as a child will forever remain the greatest player you have ever seen.
2. When you dream about playing, especially upon reaching middle-age, you will not only recover the first step that you long ago lost, but the second step, and sometimes the third.
3. There can never be too many overtimes.
4. There can certainly be too many three-point shots.
5. A son should never play for his father.
6. No city should have two professional teams.
7. There is no such thing as aging gracefully; there is only aging.
8. The above rule is true for players and non-players alike.
9. Always make the extra pass.

10. The greatest place to watch a basketball game isn't Madison Square Garden; it's Rucker Park.
11. Except when it's Venice Beach.
12. Wilt Chamberlain was wrong when he said that "nobody roots for Goliath." It's just that Goliath needs to give us a really good reason.

8. Magic Bus

It was on the bus rides home from rival schools whose names—Woodbridge, Centennial, Saddleback, Marina, Capistrano Valley, Santa Margarita—are as seared into my memory as those of Civil War battlefields to the 19th-century historian, where I first heard Richard Pryor's *Live on the Sunset Strip*, Deep Purple's *Smoke on the Water*, and the Grateful Dead's *American Beauty*, usually on a small stereo a teammate had secreted into his duffel bag, and always with several of us huddled around it like true believers who had traveled hundreds of miles to hear from St. John the Evangelist.

Once, while we listened to Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*, the bus's wheels took leave of the pavement and began to float several feet above the middle lane of the 405 Freeway, clearly buoyed by the extraterrestrial melodics of David Gilmour's guitar. While I cannot remember whether we had won or lost the game, I will never forget my teammates and me looking silently out the windows at the assorted electric signs of so many gas stations, fast food joints, used car lots, all-night liquor stores, and past-their-prime film marquees, aware, perhaps for the first time, that everything America had left to sell was not worth buying.

9. Faith, continued

When, in the final years of his life, dementia had come to inhabit the many rooms of the mansion that was my grandfather's memory, what remained to him were two things: the songs of his youth and his Catholic prayers. That the former would endure was no surprise; an entire field of study has been devoted to the myriad ways in which music is able to transcend the otherwise intractable rules governing memory. But the dogged persistence of the latter continues, to this very day, to fascinate, and to move me.

The Angelus; the Our Father; the Glory Be; the Guardian Angel; the Rosary; the Credo; the Holy Queen. We'd sit in his bedroom, or in the living room, or in whatever room at the hospital he happened to be occupying at the moment, and pray to St. Michael, to St. Anthony, to St. Catherine. Sometimes he needed me to start him off, but after the first few words he was more than capable of powering through to the end on his own. To this day, few things in my life have left me as awestruck by the potential beauty—and mystery—of religious faith as those hours with my grandfather, proof as they were that the soul is capable

of defending what it most values in the mind with a ferocity that would have made Beowulf shake his head in wonder.

Does this mean, then, that in the waning days of my life on this planet—should I be lucky enough to live, as my grandfather did, into his 90s—that, no longer able to remember the names of my wife, or my children, or the name of the city where I was born, I will still be able to call up the image of Magic Johnson leading a 3-on-2 fast-break? Or that, my hair gone cloud-white, my body as slight as the gentlest of Santa Ana breezes, I will have no trouble visualizing the lyric poetry of Dominique Wilkins leaping for a put-back dunk just before the final buzzer goes off?

Maybe.

Probably.

Certainly.

10. Excerpt from a Recent Conversation with a Friend

"Do you still dream about it?"

"What? Playing?"

"All the time."

"Me too. Especially these past few months. My girlfriend says it's proof I'm having a mid-life crisis."

"Well, it's better than buying a sports car."

"Cheaper, at least."

"I have one where the court is out in the middle of the sea, and the hoop keeps getting further and further away. Every time I leap toward the hoop to dunk the ball, it gets a little bit harder to do it."

"How does it end?"

"I don't know. It doesn't, I guess. The waves keep rising, but for some reason the court never gets wet."

"Maybe we both need therapy."

"I just need my knees back. And my twenties."

"That doesn't seem like too much to ask."

"That's exactly what I say to God every time I pray."

11. Sound Waves

It is a game better suited to radio than one might think. Especially if the announcer has a voice that sounds like he might sing bass in his off-hours for a Motown cover band, and the color commentator is an ex-player free of the resentments the retired athlete so often harbors.

Certainly, the speed of the game does not allow for the extended storytelling of a baseball broadcast, but this is made up for by the fact that the listener gets to imagine just how long Vince Carter hung in the air before his last dunk, or exactly how far behind the three-point line Damian Lillard's most recent jumper was shot from.

Is this further proof that your author is a romantic, one who still believes there is space for the imagination to exist in a world dominated by visual technologies?

Do you even need to ask?

12. Ecclesiastes

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven:

A time to run the fast break, and a time to milk the clock; a time to crash the offensive glass, and a time to get back on defense;

A time to go one-on-one, and a time to get your teammates involved; a time to switch on the pick-and-roll, and a time to fight through the screen;

A time to work the referees, and a time to leave them to their own devices; a time to celebrate a big play, and a time to act like you have been there before;

A time to double-team the post, and a time to play straight-up; a time to look for your own shot, and a time to hit the open man;

A time to guard the inbounds passer, and a time to lay off him; a time to call timeout, and a time to keep playing;

A time to take what the defense gives you, and a time to force the issue; a time to shade your man baseline, and a time to push him toward the middle;

A time to play man-to-man, and a time to play zone; a time of not paying attention to the noise of the crowd, and a time to let the crowd's noise lift you to even greater heights.

Light the Lamp

> You can't hear it from up here, glass and breath between us. They call it chirping: *Hey man is that your mom up there? She looked a lot different last night. Probably cuz I only saw the back of her head.*

My brother got busted saying that one. Nothing happened really. Ref said *B—, play nice.* From the stands: the ref grabbing his jersey, talking. B— nodding, then skating away.

B—says hockey is nothing like the movie *Goon*. Takes *cojones* to beat the crap outta someone like that. Guy can't skate for shit either. You'll be ridin' the pine if you don't do better. No complaining. It's a thing that requires repetition.

> *I've had chicks cry less when I stick it in their ass.*

Hockey boys are really worried about their hair. Call it lettuce: *noun* 1. a cultivated head of hair, *lactuca sativa* 2. salad 3. *see also: flow.*

They get hit in the head a lot. Torque. Twist. Swell. Frittering intuition. The bounce of curls. The beat of brain on board.

> *You're softer than ten-ply.*

Professional players won't say the word *depressed.* Say it's *not the same.* This one's concussion-made. Now they call it CTE. Only cause: repetitive blows to the head. Everyone cried when Montador *offed himself.* His son was born four days later.

One time B—and his team took a bus to Nashville. To compete in some big tournament. His coach spent the whole ride tossing back tequila shots. Started to cry about his ex-wife.

B—sat next to coach when asked. *Just wanted company, I think,* he said. Parents were pissed. Coach was fired the next day.

No other player would have checked-in to see if the coach was okay. I know my brother. Never says a bad thing about Coach.

He's a good man, good player, quick hands.

I was in the stands when B—was hit. So hard, his body went limp. Gasps of fright, then silence. Boys took a knee, sticks to ice, quiet, quiet. Couldn't get to him, still and staring. Heard the ref ask, *can you see me? What hurts?* Both teams waited until B—arose, then

applause. Praise to the busy body, the motion of a boy just-still.

I never asked. The gap grew. Hard to touch a moving thing. Hard to see his face. Helmet-cage, glass, blur of heat and puck.

I'll teach you, B—said when our nephews wanted to play. Joined the local team. Same age when he learned, same place. He explained,

To stop, use your inside edge. It will bite into the ice. Dust will fly. It's imperative you learn this skill. Back and forth down the rink. When you feel the speed, stop, stop.

My brother confides. Tells them about the violence of bodies on bodies. Organ music at games. Banging of sticks on the boards, a harrowing rhythm. Huddles of hot-breathed boys. The ache of age. B—forgetting how to lace a skate. The teaching, the passing-down-of.

Listen, this is how to be a good teammate: swallow the sad, any throb or twinge will go away. Pay attention here—leave it all on the ice, forget about the shadow creeping in, the ringing in your ears.

Em Bober

The Field

Maureen Mancini Amaturo

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

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

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

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

I pray. I pray. I pray.

I close my book and focus on my son, praying, meditating to manifest an outcome—the outcome that would make him happy—a double. In my mind's eye, I see my son getting a hit. I conjure images of my son's bat connecting with the ball. I envision him surrounded in white light, picture Jesus with arms outstretched as if He is sending divine power, like a laser, straight to my son. The emotional effort is almost painful. The intense concentration gives me a headache. I feel his hits and misses to my very core. My soul vibrates with worry. No, unmeasurable love. As a mother, I am an empath. And though I feel my son's tension, his grit, his strength, I have no control over the outcome. As a mother, that helpless state is agonizing.

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

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

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

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

Baseball: On the Insouciance of Catchers

Picture that blank, wordless moment
when a catcher is just standing there,
a couple of yards off home plate, holding
his face mask and looking away, after a player
on the opposing team has just hit a homerun
and is rounding the bases and coming home,
in no big hurry to cross the plate right in front of him.

What's in a catcher's head? I've always
wondered. He must be thinking *something.*

How about: *I just wanted a fastball*
down in the zone and it was up.

Or, I should've called *a slider anyway.*
Damn.

Or, *little Sally had her eye on that bike*
at Spokes'n Wheels the other day.
I'll pick it up for her on my way home
tonight. She'll be happy.

Meanwhile, the homer guy passes him—
maybe raising his head and one finger
heavenward to give thanks, taking his time
to cleanly touch the plate for the umpire's
strict eye, and all a catcher can do is keep on
standing there, looking insouciant—
the way it's done and always has been.

Dave Evans

Mile Run

Four laps,
each an ancient world
of force native
to the old gig of survival,
the work of living hard, of believing
Jim Ryun, the boy-miler lean as the Kansas plain
that bore him, who once claimed
he could do anything for four minutes.
I couldn't, it turns out,
and as a high-school miler,
I feared the first turn as I feared death,
had no speed to outlive
the late fade that follows a fast start,
so I'd come to the cinder track
near my house on Saturdays, off-season,
cold, no one there but me,
to practice dying in spikes
around an infield of killdeer at dawnlight.
I'd come alive there, bloom
a moment, and run to survive
all I knew would perish
lay by lap, minute by minute, a life
born to undo itself over time.
Sprinting half-laps, I kicked up birds
in sprays down the straightaway,
and knew as the seconds crawled
and the killdeer trilled
that soon the pace of this living
would settle softly, a fine ash,
or a dark cinder on the shoe,
anything would do, really,
to remind me how all this goes down,
how we're born to the surge
and lapse of our days.
The suck of air slowly
insufficient to fuel this campaign,

the blue soul that rode
my back, heavy to the last lap,
and that final bell, its toll,
but the great peace that came
of this pain, I felt that too:
all I can do in this world, I knew,
I have done … that peace exactly.
Like a mizzling rain,
it dropped on me as I saw the end
and my place in that ending.
Even young as I was
I saw a bigger thing too:
that we're all born to flight,
to hurt, and so now, older,
I still hear the killdeer,
turn to face their bright ascension
away from where I stand,
and having done the math,
hope I'll surprise
whatever waits with open arms
just beyond their chatter,
and pray I'll know its dirge,
hear its old blood-song
just before it stirs
and chalks my finish line.

Sidney Burris

Dharmaball

Bill Baynes

A woeful bunch. That was the sportscasters' consensus. A team prone to error, to lack of enthusiasm. Players who never got a break. The big fly fading foul. The pitch an inch off the corner. Bats exploding. Balls with eyes and gloves with holes.

Low morale? No morale. Esprit fleeing. Records falling. Wins become thin hopes. The Angels trapped in the season no one wanted to happen, the season from hell.

Then the Buddha took the field.

At first, nobody wanted to be around him. He was different, a weirdo. They didn't know what to make of him. He sat by himself in the clubhouse, stood alone at the rail in the dugout. No one talked to him. They resented the fact that he had been inserted onto the team. The manager made no explanation to the other players. He just put the Buddha's name on the roster.

***

He and I connected because I was the only other person on the team that no one wanted to hang with. No friends, no peers, I was relegated to the far side of the left field fence. I was the bullpen catcher.

It was my job to warm up pitchers before they went into the game. Sometimes I caught batting practice, as well. I did a little of everything. I helped to set up the post-game spread, picked up dirty laundry, swept up at the end of the night. Something between a bellhop and a backstop.

I wasn't a player under contract, and my pay reflected that. Undrafted, unagented, my salary safely in five figures, there were batboys who made as much as me. But I suited up for every game, and I traveled with the squad, even

though I had to carry my own luggage. I was never asked to join the players on their evening excursions. I would've given my left nut for that back then.

I had baseball skills. A standout in college, I could put a ball over the plate and I could certainly catch it. I longed to be a major-leaguer. That chance, long as the odds were, motivated my life.

I caught the starters on their off-day sessions. To do that, I had to know all about them—how they threw, their best pitches, where they had problems. Just like a real catcher. About six weeks ago, I came in early to work with Nate Burnam, our number two.

"G'mornin', Mr. B."

"How are ya, Johnny? Where's Biff?" The starting catcher.

"Asked me to fill in for him."

Pause. "I'm sure you'll do fine."

Subtle. A little crap from the stars came with the territory. I had to swallow it. At least, there was no one else in the clubhouse, except for Javey Santana, an outfielder, soaking his sore knee in the bubblejet.

"I wanna work on my sinker, Johnny," Burnam said as I settled behind the dish, "so it doesn't wind up in the middle of the plate." He'd gotten bombed on his last game because he left his signature pitch up in the zone.

A balmy day at Synchtech Stadium, a gentle breeze blew off the river. Burnam threw softly for a couple minutes, gradually increasing the speed until his fastball reached the low nineties. He was a veteran, thirty-one years old, which translated into slower throws. He made his living with pinpoint command.

You wouldn't know that from the way he struggled that morning. His first five balls went off the mark—high, low, outside, inside, very high.

"Mr. Hammer's a little rusty today," Burnam smiled.

Cute. He named his arm. Pitchers were peculiar people.

He figured out his release point and brought his next few tosses over the plate. Right over, thigh high.

"Won't do," he muttered.

He stood behind the mound and tinkered with his grip, then turned back and threw eight perfect sinkers in a row. The ball approached about knee-high, but plunged at the last moment, almost impossible to hit.

"There ya go!" I called. "No hit stuff."

"Changing the spin," he said. "That was the trick."

He brought a few straight fastballs, getting great movement from his two-seamer. Some changeups and a couple curves and he was done for the day.

"Thanks, Johnny. Couldn't have done it without you." Burnam laughed.

I was taking a break in the dugout, when Tito Alvarez, the owner, came up the ramp, leading his wife and a portly man in brown.

The owner's hair was always on end, giving him an aspect of perpetual surprise. He looked like a man in a what-have-you-got-to-lose situation. Pretty much true. He saw me and nodded. He didn't know my name.

"Johnny Gregorio." I offered my hand. He probably thought I was on the 25-man squad.

The group went onto the infield, Mrs. A doing most of the talking. I'd seen the tubby guy before at several games, sitting in the top row of the outfield stands behind a camera with a lens so long it needed a tripod. To my Anglo eyes, he had Asian features, but I couldn't pinpoint a specific country. When I asked him once, he said he was "Angelino," a lifelong L.A. resident.

He executed a slow 360, taking in the 69,000 seats. It certainly looked different from the field than it did from the stands. He wore a beatific expression on his face, cloth billowing around him like a sail. I thought it was a raincoat at first, which was strange because it wasn't raining, but I realized it was a robe.

Imagine trying to run to first in an outfit like that. Imagine trying to throw.

The next thing I knew the same guy was warming the bench, almost laughable in a tight, team uniform. The Buddha got his moniker from his shape. Not willowy Gautama with his serious, sublime expression, but the Laughing Buddha, round and jolly, built for loose clothing.

I never saw him take batting practice, though I heard he was wearing out the pitching machine under the stands. I never saw him take infield. No idea how he prepared for fielding. What had he said to Mrs. A to make her go to bat for him?

In the opinion of Timtim, the Korean with the killer slider: "Must be her guru or something."

"Sure ain't no wife-stealer," opined Fern Rodriguez, our right-handed curveball specialist.

***

It was the seventh inning of his fifth game, when the Buddha had his first at-bat. The Angels were hopelessly behind the Orioles. One on and two out when Manager Pat Riley put him in as a pinch hitter.

He stood at the plate, staring at the catcher, who waited until he turned away to give his hand signals to the pitcher. Basic etiquette, but the Buddha kept staring.

Finally the umpire intervened. "Face the field, batter."

The Buddha caught the pitcher's eye and held it. The pitcher froze, the ball in his glove at belt level. The Buddha seemed so serene. He swung his bat a couple times. He allowed a smile to enter his eyes, only his eyes. Did he wink at the pitcher? The pitcher nodded, then wound up and threw the ball precisely where the Buddha had been—and still was—swinging.

The ball went winging over the third baseman's outstretched glove, landed just inside the foul line and rolled to the outfield fence. The Buddha pulled

into second with a stand-up double. He scored on first baseman Robby Rudd's long single two batters later.

A couple teammates patted his back as the Buddha walked to his place on the bench.

On defense, he played shortstop. An unlikely position because most middle infielders were slender and limber. But he was an athlete, someone who liked to compete. Bouncy and strong, he threw his body after grounders, and hopped to his feet to sling to first. He stared into batters' eyes. Shot after shot to short and the Buddha flung across the turf for catch after unconscious catch. Bullet throws to first. Impressive.

Can a fielder attract balls?

***

Within a week, the Buddha became the hot topic in the bullpen. All six relievers lined up on the two-tier bench to watch the early innings. The crowd was on its feet after the Buddha gobbled another grounder and threw out the Red Sox runner at first.

"What's he done this time?" asked Jersey Jeffries, looking up from his phone. A corn-fed Minnesota fireballer, he was the Angels' setup man. He handled the eighth inning in close contests.

"I swear he went for that ball before it was hit," said Ron, the bullpen coach.

"Crazy mother." Detroit Lyons was the closer. He spat sunflower seeds through the mesh onto the outfield grass.

Guillermo pointed at the play and shoved Lexi's shoulder. Lexi, a wiry lefty, crossed himself and looked toward heaven. The pair spoke only Spanish and only to each other.

"He plays the game," Ron said.

"Pulls in the fans," Jeffries said.

Late in the next contest, the Sox player on first tried to steal second. The Buddha caught a perfect throw from the catcher and tagged him out. Then he bowed to the runner and offered him the ball. The Red Sox player, mystified, took it, and the Buddha bowed again.

A buzz from the stands, followed by laughter and light applause.

"Crazy mother," Detroit opined.

***

I got to know the Buddha after games. We'd sit in the same alcove at the post-game spread, watching the hotshots let loose. Later, as I cleaned up, the Buddha would putter around his locker. That first week he examined his uniform like he'd never seen one before. He was fascinated by the long socks, repeatedly trying them on inside and outside his pants.

"What do you think?" he asked me.

"A personal decision," I said. "Express yourself."

He decided to wear one sock outside and one inside, the first time I've ever seen them like that.

He took a long soak in the sauna—a round, brown man with wrinkly skin and a contented expression.

There were many meals on the road, when we spent time together. The Buddha didn't barhop, didn't hunt for women. He was good for long walks, often in the late hours, along the streets of some of our major cities. Long talks. He liked to play pepper with ideas. He also liked silence. Sometimes we wouldn't say a word for half an hour or more, completely comfortable in each other's company.

When he first began to follow baseball, he told me, he struggled with "You're out!" At first, he equated it with emptiness, nothingness, mu. Gradually, he began to understand it at a karmic level—"a return to the void to be reborn at the next at-bat."

I was never sure when he was kidding.

He never said he was the Buddha, but he answered to that name. When a reporter jokingly asked him a "spiritual" question, he answered in character.

"What happened to tranquility, to stillness?" Bob Dextrose was from the local TV station.

"Who said mindful meant slow?" the Buddha responded. "Some special benefits only occur at high speed." To the reporter's puzzled look, he added: "Besides, it's fun."

Another newsie pushed a mic in his face: "Are you a Buddhist?"

"How can I follow myself?" he replied.

In response to a similar query on another instance, he offered a more complete reply: "I am not the historic Buddha. I don't sit under a tree. I don't own a begging bowl. I play baseball."

***

More hits meant more team acceptance. Players invited the Buddha to supper. At the same time, the manager gave me more things to do to keep me busy in the clubhouse so I couldn't join them.

But the Buddha waited for me. He always came up with an excuse for not going out with the other guys—want Italian tonight, sorry we're headed in the other direction, or really beat tonight, thanks anyway. He preferred our after-dinner amblings across Philly, Milwaukee, Miami, L.A. Even when players included me, we didn't spend our off-hours with them. Neither of us could afford to keep up with the high rollers' spending.

Seventh inning against the Astros, the Buddha the runner on second, he took a small lead. The Astros pitcher whirled in the air and threw to second, a planned pick-off play. Not close. The Buddha got back easily and then collapsed

in laughter. Hands on his knees, eyes squinted shut, he howled as he sat on the bag. He looked up at a pitcher scowling and pacing the mound.

The Buddha rose to his feet, being careful to keep in contact with the base, and called time. A few deep breaths and he composed himself, returned to second and nodded to the umpire.

As the pitcher wound up, the Buddha edged a few steps toward third, then made a little hop and completely twirled around. He went back to the bag just before the second baseman tagged him and bent over again in hilarity.

He had so much fun, the Buddha. The more he enjoyed himself, the more the fans enjoyed him.

"Now batting …" the announcer gave his name, the one printed on his shirt, but the crowd's boos obscured it. When he switched to his exaggerated, stretched-out voice to finish—"The Buddhaaaaaa!!"—there were stomps, whistles and sustained applause.

In the newly christened monastery section of the bleachers, most of the fans wore flowing brown robes. To a person, they all performed gasshos, palms together in front of their chests as they bowed to the batter.

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For a person who had never played organized ball before, the Buddha's skills developed at an amazing rate. He had immense, intense powers of concentration. I believe he went into slow-mo on crucial plays. That's how he could reach the grounders jetting by on either side of him. At bat, I swear he saw a 95-mile-per-hour fastball at 59. The hits seemed to come whenever he wanted them. So much so that sometimes he made a joke of them.

Ground ball into the hole between first and second. The second baseman hurled his body at the ball, snared it, leapt to his feet and threw to first. The Buddha beat it out, but he missed the bag as he crossed it.

The ump made an emphatic "out" sign, pumping his right hand. A small smile from the Buddha. As he jogged toward the dugout, he touched his hat to Jeff Doggen, the opposing pitcher.

The manager accosted him. "How could did you miss the base?"

"Doggen needed it after that error last inning," the Buddha beamed. "We're way ahead anyway."

"You made an out on purpose?" Riley was dumbfounded.

Catcher Biff Pembroke suppressed a grin.

***

The Buddha seemed to make people around him relax—that aura of serenity and all. Good for his guys, not so much for opponents. They became prone to errors.

When the Angels were up, the Buddha would sit cross-legged in the lotus position on the bench, eyes closed, hands cupped in his lap with thumbs

touching. Others found his practice unnerving initially and gave him a wide berth. When they got used to it, the Buddha's meditation seemed to mellow his teammates.

On several occasions, Riley signaled for him to go to the mound and talk to a pitcher in trouble. The Buddha had a way of calming a person down with his tone of voice and gestures. He'd tell him to release the tension and focus on the next throw, waving his hands from the hurler's feet up to his gut and chest and out through the top of his head. The fans chuckled, but the pitcher felt better.

In the clubhouse, the Buddha basked in his teammate's growing approval—smiles, nods, an occasional pat on the butt. Right-fielder Jose Balarosa paid him the ultimate compliment. He camped under a routine fly ball and took a giant step to the left as the ball dropped to the turf, still in play. He picked it up and threw to the Buddha at second, holding the opposing hitter to a single.

The Buddha bowed to Balarosa. The crowd whooped.

***

Hand-printed signs appeared in the monastery section, held high by monk-like figures:

Awake and At Bat (a silhouette of the Buddha in his cap)
Compassion—after we win
Karma Mama

The feeling in SynchTech Stadium started to change.

The Angels began to win.

***

Sweet, that streak of victories.

A come-from-behind surprise, down 4-0 in the bottom of the ninth.

A hang-on 2-1 squeaker, complete with a high leaping snag, hand over the wall, denying the opponent's homer.

Last-strike heroics, a two-out, bottom-of-the-ninth blast into the bleachers to win the game.

The players began to believe in themselves.

A fastball slammed straight back at the pitcher, landing in his glove before he could react. Easy out.

A seeing-eye grounder just inside the line.

A liner a hair's breadth wider than the third-baseman's lunge.

All the breaks had halos. High-fives and fist bumps in the Angels' dugout. Hard, long laughter.

I was proud to wear the team uni. I stood in the pen, hands inside my chest protector, cap backward on my head, and watched the magic unfold on the field. Morale soared.

Through it all, the Buddha sat in full lotus while his teammates hit. On defense or at bat, he played with glee and abandon like a kid in a sandlot game.

Once he was running to second as the opposing shortstop grabbed the ball on one bounce, crossed the bag and cocked his arm to throw to first for the double play. But the Buddha didn't go down. Instead of a slide, he stopped and raised his arms, blocking the throwing lane. Did the shortstop throw anyway?

He did not. The Buddha bowed to him in thanks.

The shortstop bowed back.

The stands exploded with applause. The fan began to chant: "Buddha! Buddha! Buddha! Buddha!"

***

But nothing lasts in baseball. Failure is ordinary, excellence the exception. After every streak lurks a slump.

And so the sweetness soured. The new got old. The bats went cold and the attention did not hold. Arrogance crept in. Manager Riley ranted against a close call and was thrown out of the game.

Entitlement emerged. Penalized for a balk, Burnam threw two pitches directly at the umpire, earning a three-week suspension.

An inevitable letting up led to two losses in a row, to four, then seven.

That put pressure on the pen to rescue the Angels in the middle and late innings when games were on the line.

It'd been easy when the team was ahead. Three-run leads, the sun in batters' eyes, the Anaheim fans volcanic—it dispirited the opposition. The relievers had chattered among themselves like friends on a fishing trip.

Now the boys needed to bear down, to eat up innings and chalk up outs. When the call came and someone got up to get warm, everyone else clammed up out of respect for the man on the mound behind them. Comments hushed to soft imprecations, shared glances.

"Damn," complained Coach Ron. "Ump hasn't given that strike all day."

The relievers all wanted to throw. They dreamed of being starters, and they were convinced that their ticket would be their next appearance. I saw myself in them. It gave me pause.

Disputes flared in the clubhouse. Told-you-sos, tempers. Slammed lockers.

"Let's cut all this woo-woo," Javey said to the assembled clubhouse.

Wins blown. More losses.

Chasing a fly ball, Balarosa ran into the outfield wall and broke his hand. Out for the season.

Biff got his bell rung on a foul ball so hard his mask fell off. Concussion protocol—eight days down.

"Back to basics," said the manager. "Fielding drills. More time in the batting cage."

"Relax," the Buddha said. "What did you expect? It'll come back."

When Dextrose asked him what was going on with the Angels, the Buddha said, "We're trying too hard." He gently pushed the reporter's mic aside.

"Didn't you say it was about having fun?"

The Buddha laughed. "It's not always fun."

***

That laugh. I still hear it years later.

Shortly after that interview, the Angels began to win again. Moods cooled. Pride returned to the clubhouse. Confidence. A new streak started that would eventually take the team to the World Series.

But without the Buddha.

On a Saturday late in the season when the Angels were hosting a doubleheader against the Yanks, he came off the field midway through the second game after plating the winning run. He dropped his glove on the bench and went down the tunnel to the clubhouse, presumably to relieve himself.

He hasn't been seen since.

No note. No notice. No trace of where he went. No one inside or outside the stadium reported seeing him leave. No one anywhere has spotted him in the last decade.

He and I had had supper on Friday, the night before his departure. He was unusually talkative, holding forth about what he termed mindful baseball. For him it was a question of being alert and at ease.

"Put the bat on the ball," he said. "Relish the impact. Let the rest come to pass."

It wasn't going all out all the time or pushing personal limits. Poise or grace led to success, he felt, not intensity.

He considered baseball to be a cosmic puzzle. I recall one exchange in particular.

"I was up three times today, Johnny G, and I walked three times." The Buddha shook his head. "But walks don't count on your average, so officially I was never at bat."

That same laugh. I didn't realize until that moment.

"Yet I distinctly remember standing at the plate," he said, "not once, not twice, but three times. Where did they go, those appearances? Where did I go?"

"Your on-base percentage will go up," I said. "That's where the walks show."

"I suppose …"

"Zero for three—nothingness." I'd done some reading since we'd been hanging together. "Aren't you into that?" I grinned at my own lame joke. I was a happier person those days. Our friendship had softened me.

The Buddha's smile was inward.

The next day, I was watching from the bullpen when he smashed a double that bounced off the screen in front of my face. I flinched at the impact.

Santana stood in next and knocked a single down the right-field line. The Buddha wasn't a fast runner, but he was determined to score. As he rounded third and headed for home, Yankees catcher Alonso Capito—they called him El Jefe, The Chief—calmly flipped off his mask and gloved the throw from the outfield.

The Buddha skidded to a stop ten feet down the line. He could hear the third-baseman coming behind him. Capito charged, but the Buddha caught his eye and held it, then made a head-fake to his right. The defender lunged to his left and the ball squirted out of his fat mitt. As he stooped to pick it up, the Buddha threw himself past him, barely eluding Capito's swipe tag, and slid head-first across the plate.

He popped up, clapping and smiling at the ump, who instinctively spread his hands palms down in a safe sign.

The crowd roared.

I couldn't believe it. I rubbed my eyes.

"Did you see that?" Coach Ron was astounded.

"Milago! Milagro!" Guillermo pounded Lexi on the back, almost knocking over the smaller man. Tears in his eyes, Lexi crossed himself and appealed to heaven.

The Buddha trotted back to the bench, paused at the top step of the dugout, turned and looked directly at me in the bullpen. He made a small bow before he headed toward the lockers.

I knew then that something was up.

The Yankees manager held up his arm, signaling that he wanted a replay review. The ump contacted the major league offices in New York, then he and the other umps grouped on the sidelines, listening to their earphones and waiting while New York watched slow-mo video from various angles. When the decision came down, the umps removed their headsets and the home plate ump made the safe sign again.

The electronic scoreboard added a run for the Angels.

The hometown fans went nuts again.

Timtim shook his head. "What luck that Buddha got!"

Detroit nodded: "Crazy mother."

The stands quieted to an excited buzz, and the ump took his place behind the catcher. He adjusted his mask and crouched.

"Play Ball!"

The Boom in the Living Room

Small champ has the shape for it,
flexed traps on the bath lip,
babbling at the bathmat.
Showboating baby, fast feet,
bobs and weaves, ducks,
a feint in to fetch up a fistful of lentils,
some grace of young life.
I throw jab – cross, jab – cross, jab – cross
teaching thin air a tough lesson.
Rope-a-dope's Kansas City shuffle,
no blows, all traps and tricks defraud the dupe.
Double up the left hooks
to load up the right cross but I couldn't
tag a barn door. This palooka
can't parry the thunder love throws.
Borrow Ali's poetry to make it pretty.
Baby swings a left, Baby swings a right.
look at Baby carry the fight.
Tad keeps backing
but there's not enough room.
It's a matter of time,
then Baby lowers the boom.

Liam Ferney

Was it Walt Whitman

Or Frankie Frisch, the Fordham Flash
Who said baseball is poetry?

Look at the name Rocky Colavito
Or examine Sandy Valdespino

Norm Cash, Bobby Bonds, Wes Stock
Bob Moose, Rob Deer, Nelson Fox

Bud Black, Vida Blue, Dick Green
Duke Snider, Clyde King, Mel Queen

For every Coot Veal there's a Cot Deal
Every Bobby Wine an Al Kaline

Windy McAll, Storm Davis, J.T. Snow
Sonny Siebert, Kid Gleason, Schoolboy Rowe

Tell the truth, Babe Ruth, about the game
There's no poetry in baseball without the names

No Baseball's Sad Lexicon
Without Tinker to Evers to Chance

No joy bereft Mudville
Without mighty Casey in his stance

No Ogden Nash saying T is for Terry
The Giant from Memphis

His .400 average
You can't overemphis

No Polish pride gone wild in St. Louie
From Stan the Man Musial and Rip Repulski

A name's a poem that takes me back
To Satchel Paige and Connie Mack

Joltin' Joe DiMaggio
The immortal Dizzy Dean

There's poetry in baseball
And the names are time machines.

Jeff Munroe

Fuckit, He Said

Joel Peckham

Elbow half out the window of his dad's Charger, one of his dad's Marlboros pinched between his forefinger and thumb, the way you hold a loose and fast-burning joint. Cool. Even aspirational, considering how hard it was to score even an eighth of an ounce back then and even then you had to know someone and had to be careful it wasn't laced. And he was right. Fucked, it was. Prefucked, really. Though it almost took somebody saying so, to make you see it. And when you did, it was almost a relief. Resignation and acceptance and a cough of laughter. I liked Doug, Douggy, and liked being included in the group of eternally fucked and fucked-up kids he ran with. We were on our way home from Cranberry League ball, heading back from a game in Foxboro, driving slow down backroads in that part of the summer when it was still golden at 8 o'clock and the shadows were long and dark. We drank his dad's Budweisers, warm cans rolling around the floor, and mouthed the words to "Follow the Leader" by Erik B. and Rakim, bobbing our heads. We had gotten our asses handed to us. Douggy and I specifically. I was 20 and playing small college ball by then, spending the summers at home. And my father got me a spot on the Sharon Reds, a semi-pro squad of thirty and forty-somethings and couple of ringers who played for Boston College. Deal was, they would let me catch a few games if I could talk my friend Douggy into pitching. Which didn't surprise me at all. And which was easy because Douggy wasn't in college and had nothing else going on. And *I* was asking. We had played ball together on the same teams since we were seven all the way through high school. Douggy had plenty of confidence, curly blond hair, and a hell of a curveball, his "yellow hammer," but not much else. A 70-mile-an-hour fastball he could spot on the corners and a smile that said, "I've got you figured out." Which was to say, *I* did really.

Because I knew exactly what he was capable of and when and though I had only a decent arm I could catch or block anything headed toward the plate when he was on the mound, knowing by the angle of his arm, how tight he held the ball, or even just the look on his face, exactly where the ball would go before he released it. And if he hit a guy, Douggy knew I'd tackle him well before he charged the mound. He never shook me off and didn't have to think. Just rock and fire, rock and fire, all rhythm and grease, cocky and smiling all game long. Thing is, we weren't close. It's not like we hung out. I was the good boy with the good grades going to the fancy school up north and Douggy was just Douggy, coasting along through life on swagger and charm. The kind of a guy who'd start a bar fight but walk out laughing and unscathed before the chairs and bottles started flying around. I did my drinking in the woods or in the basement of my dorm. I was never the guy to carry or buy the pot. Just have a toke as it was passed around. I was careful and thought I was smart. I was his perfect receiver, like if he was lightning, I was always the tallest tree on the highest hill. Something like that. But on this day, nothing worked. The first two batters singled. Then a walk. We got our signals crossed and a ball bounced off my glove, scoring a run. It was five nothing in the top of the second when he got the hook. And when I struck out my first time up, fooled badly on a change, I was out as well. We spent the rest of the game on the bench staring at our cleats. *Fuck it, Fuck it, Fuck it, Fuck it,* he kept saying. And I knew he was done. And so was I, even though I'd ride the rest of the summer on the pine by myself. Maybe it was just bad luck. Baseball can be like that. You do everything right and it still goes wrong. It wasn't like he didn't have his stuff. I can still see the way his arm lengthened and warped, backlit by the sun, then whipped down and across his body, the ball seeming to hesitate, before dropping straight off the table of the horizon. I've heard it said, a curve is half physics half optical illusion which is to say it's magic. Maybe it was a failure of faith, the simple belief that the tricks we had relied on all our lives would work forever. Who knows. But once there was magic and the magic was gone.

Larry the Legend

Should we speak about his jump shot,
his body-be-damned hustle, his trash talk,
over-the-head blind pass to Reggie Lewis
breaking to the hoop while Larry backs his ass
into whomever has the duty to stop him?
Should we replay his behind-the-back pass
to McHale or Parrish as he drives
the lane, splits the defense like Moses
at the Red Sea, and I don't mean Malone,
for such an easy slam dunk Kevin
or Robert should name their son Larry
or Hick or Legend? Should we mimic
Johnny Most to recall Larry stealing
the inbounds pass from Isiah Thomas,
zipping it to Dennis Johnson for the layup
that won Game 5 and how DJ beckoned
him lovingly for that hug we all saw on
national TV that said I Love You, Man –
or Thank You, Larry – or Are you Freaking
Kidding Me? Or should we dwell on his
father's suicide, how Larry dropped out
of Indiana U, drove a garbage truck, got
divorced, ignored his biological daughter
and probably still does? Should we
watch YouTube video of Larry the Dad,
Larry the Doting Husband or him
shopping for shoes for his daughter's
high school prom? Yeah. I thought so.

Bill Garvey

Sturgeon Fishing

They said you died on the table.
Then months of doctors, tubes,
wires, pins, and sutures—
the drugged gloom of winter rooms,
before we got on the river again.

Anchored below the falls
amid cracked concrete
and rusty, twisted mill iron,
we drop big hooks baited
with freezer-burned shad

to gray leviathan lurching
between rock and ruin, shark-tailed,
armor-backed, snouting the river's
mossy grave of opportunity.

Eyeing the twitching tip,
you rise slow and stiff, ease the rod
from its holder, reel and arch back
into a high voltage charge
that shocks a monster to life.

Henry Hughes

Ice Fishing

We bust open the padlock on your shack,
drawing stares from an old man cleating home
against the bitter wind. Heater cranked, trap doors unstuck,
we augur holes and tip small red jigs
with waxy maggots, dropping and twitching
through the cyan glow. I pour whiskies,
and you talk about your divorce,
then a bite—*There, there it is*—and you reel up
a husky yellow perch, gold flanked and tiger striped
against the pale ice. For a while we're all about the fish,
then you start in again—the fights, the house, alimony—
and I pull in a decent walleye.
Go on, I say, skimming slush from the holes,
refilling our cups. But the lake won't keep still.
It's fish after fish, and you're smiling,
luck's bent key freeing a few joys
from the hard, cold vault
of winter.

Henry Hughes

Somewhere Between Denial and Acceptance

Mack Marovich

"It'll feel like a heavy loss," my aunt says as our paddles simultaneously disappear under the iridescence of the green-blue water of Lake Norris. "You'll definitely experience a real grieving period."

"I know," I nod slowly to assure her I hear her, though my focus is on balancing on the blown-up board so as to not join the paddle into the murky water.

"And I know you had a rough go of it, that right now it might seem like a relief to be almost over. But it was a part of your identity for a long time. When you grieve a sport you're also grieving a version of yourself that no longer exists."

The sun hides behind her head as I squint at her, taking in the weight of the words she has let float along the current between us, but quickly return my attention to the shaking board beneath my feet. There's a silence that sits among us, an understanding between two athletes: one who understands the challenge of transitioning out of an identity and one who has no idea what's ahead of her.

It's not that I don't understand. It's a story as old as time. A little girl dribbles a basketball and falls so deeply in love with the rhythm, craves worn down leather against her fingers, that she sacrifices, suffers, and bleeds for the sport. It consumes her life, the rhythm like a heartbeat, coursing through her veins—reminding her she's alive. Until, suddenly, without her realizing, the first game becomes the last. It's not that I don't understand, it's that I understand the very thin line between love and hate. Bracing my core, my feet gripping fiercely to

the rough texture of the board—I wonder if there's a moment when I crossed that line, and I wonder if I'll cross back before it's too late.

No, it's not that I don't understand it. It's that I've accepted it.

"Honestly, I think the hardest part for me that nobody tends to talk about is how slowly what you accomplished becomes forgotten by others. You're not special anymore." She sets the pace as we round the bend and head back toward the house.

As a former Paralympian, my aunt knows a thing or two about being special. She has inspired young athletes all over the world. She tackles obstacles, sets standards and subsequently shatters them. I want to tell her she's still special. That her career means something to me. That her existence in the sports world will never diminish. How she is bigger than the things she accomplished. I want to say how we had very different careers. How, maybe, you don't grieve a sport that turned its back on you.

I waver a little on the board and the water rushes over my feet. "I know," I say instead, because I can't bring myself to say anything else.

You always think you're ready. You think about how your knees creak when you run on the hardwood and how the freezing ice bath, which once made you feel like you were walking on a cloud, now only comes as a temporary relief. Or how what is holding your left anklebone together is dried out skin and a worn-out ankle brace and how it takes two hands to count how many times you've sprained it. You think about the number of hours of sleep you've lost and the exhaustion level that never goes away or the social life that has had to take the backseat. Because, when you commit to it, your sport is your life: Your whole life.

And what a life it was. Hidden behind the moments of pain and fatigue and anger is the memory of a carpeted gym on a frozen winter evening, Dad telling you to put your stocking cap on. It's spraypainted dots over the rugged concrete of your backyard and having to hit 10 shots from every spot before you can come inside. The long road trips and Saturday morning practices paired with a hearty lunch at the Old Country Buffet. The day you meet the people you will inevitably share a heartbeat with. Naps in the corner of convention centers turned AAU stadiums and bleacher picnics. Pre-game dance parties and concerts on bus rides that don't get you back home until 2 a.m. Sweaty knees brushing against each other in a tight huddle. The sensation of your teammates hand on your back, stabilizing you. The butterflies that create a storm in the pit of your stomach, keeping you on your toes. It's the hunger to win. The need to collapse in exhaustion, proving you've accomplished something big. Smiling at negative newspaper articles because the anger of others fuels you. It's the feeling of a community selling out a championship game and the same eyes on you as you ascend a ladder, cut down the final rung of the net as the rest falls effortlessly into your hand. How you lift it in the air with a rebel yell.

The truth is, it was never yours to begin with. Only for you to borrow.

I've been thinking a lot about that moment lately. The way the cool air created a thin fog that drifted along the still water. The sound of the people I love eating breakfast up on the deck. The birds singing the songs of those who can no longer sing. I wonder if, there, tucked in one of the myriad of canals, they were in fact singing my requiem; if that was the moment I became forgotten.

"I'm proud of you," I can still hear her voice on the days when I wake up and have to remind myself it's over.

"You can always talk to me if you need help," she had said.

"Thanks," I smiled, taking only a brief glance away from the board.

I should've looked her in the eyes. Maybe then I would've seen it coming. Then, perhaps, it wouldn't hurt so bad now. But I didn't. And it does. Instead, I spent too much time afraid of what I couldn't see under the water that I forgot to appreciate the view that was ahead of us.

Advice for My Friend Jared

No one takes a charge in pickup games, ok?

In pickup, what we want are good, clean,
straight-up fouls, no flopping.

You won't get any foul shots here.
Just the ball back. No one cares about your stats.

But we're still watching to see if you'll play defense
and body up the fat guy even when he's got his shirt off.

Basically, you're playing hard but without trying to kill
Just take a minute and think about that. Let

the old timer shoot occasionally, and the skinny
dude who chucks it over his head like

he's swinging an ax. Everybody gets a chance.
Sooner or later someone's going to sprain an ankle,

or blow a knee out, and that will be the end
for that poor sap. Could be me, could be you.

Could be a heart attack. The point is,
always assume the worst—because in all honesty,

on this court, it can't get much worse.

Dave Nielson

The Worst Ref in the Entire World

I can still remember the game in 4th grade
when Coach got tossed for two technical fouls,
then my dad—passionate assistant—one call later
thrown out for a couple of bullshits
of his own. Sullen march to the exit,
door beneath the hoop,
where our first coach had disappeared
not 90 seconds earlier.
more smoke than ghost, if you know what I mean.
Well, I don't remember
what happened after that,
just that my dad got chucked—
with no one else on the bench
to bitch at us. What were we going to do?
We pushed through, I guess.
Nowadays, at his grandkids'
games, Dad doesn't say much, just folds
his arms, clamps his mouth shut
hard like he's under water—foul by foul,
half by half, till it's over.
Every few games he takes me aside,
swears on everything holy
that it's the same damn prick
that reffed us thirty years ago,
still screwing us over
without remorse after all these years.
I look again, and you know what?
I actually think it is.

Dave Nielson

One Night Only

My son, 13-years-old, still plays
1-on-1 with me in the driveway,
on the seven-foot hoop

both of us can dunk on.
Now and then I wonder
how many games we have left—

young blood, old duffer—
Tonight I rebound one off the backboard,
pump fake, then go up strong,

like Coach taught me,
with everything I've got—
a good five, no six inches off the ground—

and he blocks me, the little punk.
Next thing I know he's throwing it down hard,
one-handed—right on my head.

And it goes on like that, blue evening—
into a new evening,
where for the first time in my life,

I don't mind so much
getting my ass whupped.

Dave Nielson

Old Man Basketball

We argue over the score
primarily out of habit—

to show we're invested,
that's all.

At last there is nothing to lose.
The most important thing

is the game, truly and sincerely.
Hitting the open man.

Calling out the switch.
Shooting a left-hand layup

with the actual left hand.
With defenders like this

you have time
to consider your options.

Just don't take all day about it.

Dave Nielson

Big Red

James Tackach

I first heard about Big Red during the summer of my sixteenth birthday. One early July morning, Gramps' fishing buddies were talking about a lunker rainbow trout while they milled around in the clearing that served as a parking area along the Wood River.

"I got him to come up and nose a Blue Quill once or twice, but he never took it," said Red Sox Ray. "Big beautiful rainbow. Maybe twenty-four, twenty-five inches long. Maybe bigger. Big red slash on his side." Red Sox Ray punctuated his cryptic sentences with sips from a Styrofoam coffee cup. "He's over in the Magic Pool. At least he was there a couple days ago."

Two other men—Big John and George Thorpe—were talking with Red Sox Ray while they assembled their rods when we arrived at the stream. These fishermen were Wood River regulars, retired men like Gramps who fished the stream two or three days per week throughout the trout fishing season. Before retirement, Gramps had taught in the biology department of the local state college. I don't know how the other men once made their livings; now they fished.

"If he stays in that Magic Pool all summer, you fellas will never catch him. That's for sure," Gramps said. Fifty yards upstream from the parking area, some slow-moving water flowed around a rocky bank and emptied into what everyone called the Magic Pool. The pool was open—no tree cover—and the water in the pool was very clear and almost still. Gramps did not fish the Magic Pool. He maintained that fishing the Magic Pool was nothing but a big tease. According to Gramps, trout holding in the Magic Pool could easily spot a fisherman and his line. He was probably right. Trout would be rising, and you'd lay out a perfect cast with perfect drift, but those fish wouldn't do more

than nose your fly and swirl away. Gramps contended that the trout in the Magic Pool knew the Wood River regulars by name. "Those Magic Pool trout even know the brands of our fly rods," he once told me. We fished two or three miles of the Wood River, but we did not usually cast into the Magic Pool.

I began fishing the Wood River with Gramps during the spring before my thirteenth birthday. I had been living with my grandparents since I was eight years old, but Gramps didn't judge me fit for fly fishing until five years later. Mom and I had moved into the protective cocoon of my grandparents' home a month after my father departed—he just didn't come home from work one winter evening, and I never saw him again. No one ever told me where he went; maybe no one knew, or they deemed me too young to digest that information. From the time we moved in with my grandparents, Grams and Mom pestered Gramps to take me fishing, but he adamantly refused until I reached what he considered the fishing age of reason. "He's not ready yet," Gramps would simply say when Grams and Mom suggested that I accompany him on one of his fishing excursions.

Gramps was a quiet man. I sometimes wondered how a man of so few words managed a thirty-year professorial teaching career. But when Gramps finally decided to teach me how to fly fish, I realized that he was a splendid instructor—very methodical, very detailed, very patient.

My fly fishing lessons began with knots—according to Gramps, the three essential knots of fly fishing: the loop knot for attaching the leader to the loop at the end of my line, the surgeon's knot for attaching tippet to tippet, and the cinch knot for attaching the tippet to a fly. For two weeks during February, I fumbled with those knots in Gramps' basement workroom. When Gramps was satisfied that I had mastered all three knots, he delivered a detailed lecture on the fly rod, reel, and line. He then presented the theory of the fly cast—sending the line backward, bringing it forward in a tight loop, and shooting the line and fly toward the target.

When the weather warmed in March, Gramps took me out to the backyard for casting lessons with the five-weight fly rod and reel that he had given me the previous Christmas. Predictably, I had difficulty with the cast. Gramps is right-handed, and I'm left-handed, so I could not quite imitate his motion. Too often I came sidearm with the cast and lost control of the line. But after two weeks of practice and Gramps' coaching, I was able to cast passably well.

"For the Wood River, you will not need long casts," Gramps insisted. "You will need very *accurate* casts." He would lay an old towel on the backyard lawn and make me cast to it. If I hit the towel three times in a row, he would move the towel five or six feet further away and make me hit it again. He moved the towel under the branches of the pear tree in the backyard and made me cast to the towel without tangling my line in the tree branches.

A week after opening day that spring, I found out what Gramps meant about accuracy. (Gramps never fished on opening day—too many amateurs,

he claimed.) The Wood River is narrow and lined with overhanging trees. You rarely need more than a twenty-foot cast, but the cast must be precise, or you'll spend the day trying to untangle your line from the branches guarding the riverbanks.

I caught nothing on that first fishing trip, but I hooked and landed a twelve-inch brown trout on my second venture to the Wood River, and Gramps was very pleased. He stood behind me offering directions and encouragement as I stabbed awkwardly with my net at the fish hooked at the end of my line. "Very nice," he said when I had netted the trout. "Nicely done." He reprimanded me gently for holding the trout too tightly as my nervous fingers fumbled with the task of hook removal.

"Remember this moment," Gramps said. "This is your first trout. Mark the time—10:25 a.m. Note the weather—sixty degrees, milky sunshine, no wind. What kind of fly did you use?"

"A Black Stimulator," I said.

"Remember that, too," he said. "Now release the fish back into the stream."

Of course, I wanted to keep the fish. "Can't I bring it home to show Mom and Grams?" I asked. But that was absolutely out of the question.

"We are catch-and-release fishermen," said Gramps. "We are here to catch the fish, not to kill them. That fish will be alive to give another fisherman that same joy that you just experienced. Under no circumstances should we keep a fish that we caught."

"But I want to show this fish to Mom and Grams," I said again.

"I will tell them all about it," Gramps said. "And the fish will live to bite another fisherman's line."

"The fish are for all of us," he explained in the car ride home on the day that I caught that first trout. "That fish that you released this morning might tug on your line again next week, and you'll be just as thrilled to catch him the second time." I understood.

All of the Wood River regulars were catch-and-release fly fishermen. Occasionally, someone would come down to our river with a spinning rod and a container of worms and remove a few trout, but not very often. Gramps was an unofficial steward of the river. If he saw a fisherman keeping a fish, he would politely tell the man that anglers who fished the Wood River released their catches. "No law against keeping a fish or two," my grandfather explained to a fisherman who emerged from the stream into the parking area with two rainbows attached to a gilling chain, "but it's just not done here. We would appreciate it if you newcomers would respect our local customs."

Most fishermen who received Gramps' lecture on catch-and-release fishing did not return to our stream, or they absorbed his message and released their catches. At least I rarely saw the same angler with fish twice. Once during my second summer on the Wood River, two guys in a canoe tied up by the parking area clearing while we were breaking down our rods at the end of the day.

When they emerged from the canoe, one of the guys asked us if we had caught any fish.

"Got a few," Gramps said. "Slow day, but we got a few." Gramps had netted two seventeen-inch browns on that day, but he never boasted about his results. He might describe his day's catch to one of the Wood River regulars, but he never offered details to strangers. Fishing secrets were restricted to the members of Gramps' inner circle—Red Sox Ray, Big John, George Thorpe, and two or three others.

"I got a big rainbow," the man said. "Take a look."

Gramps and I walked with the man to his canoe. Lying on the bottom of the canoe was a dead thirteen-inch rainbow trout. There is nothing uglier than a dead trout, Gramps always said, and, of course, he's right. Lifeless and almost colorless on the bottom of the canoe, the fish looked small and drab.

"We caught a few others, but we threw them back," the man said. He was obviously proud of his thirteen-inch rainbow. He was waiting for a compliment from Gramps.

"Those fish that you threw back, did they have any size to them?" Gramps asked. "Or were they like this one here?"

The man winced. I'd like to think that he got Gramps' message. We never saw those two men on the Wood River again.

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I made my first attempt at Big Red a few weeks after Red Sox Ray announced the big trout's presence. Gramps and I had fished all morning upstream from Magic Pool, and we were returning to the car for lunch. I had caught four trout to Gramps' two that morning, so I was feeling confident. As we walked past the Magic Pool, I asked Gramps if I could make a few casts.

"Cast anywhere on this river that you'd like," he said. "You know the river almost as well as I do. You don't need me now to tell you where to fish or where not to fish. Take a few casts; I'll meet you back at the car. I'll be eating my lunch."

Gramps walked away and left me on my own. It was the first time that I had really fished alone. Gramps had always been in view, or just around a bend. I entered the water at the top of Magic Pool and began making casts, drifting a caddis fly imitation along the bank.

I still remember this moment as the first time I sensed the beauty of the river to which Gramps had introduced me. Maybe you had to be fishing alone to notice it. The sun was out, and some faster water below the Magic Pool sparkled. A woodpecker pecked away somewhere in the woods to my left. Wild shrubbery was in bloom along the riverbanks. It was summertime, which meant no school, and a hundred sunny tomorrows stretched out before me.

No fish were surfacing, but a small brookie took a swipe at one of my drifts. As I started to strip in my line, a large swirl appeared near my fly. Maybe

it was Big Red, maybe not. I watched the surface of the Magic Pool for some evidence of feeding fish, but the water was perfectly still. Maybe the big swirl was just my imagination. I switched leaders and fastened a streamer at the end of my line. Perhaps Big Red was feeding just below the surface. But a dozen casts produced no results, and I departed to join Gramps for lunch.

"Did you catch Big Red?" Gramps asked.

"Didn't get anything," I said. "But I saw a big swirl."

"You had your chance. Now those Magic Pool trout know you *and* your rod. It's all over for you there."

"But it's a pretty place," I said, "even if you don't catch fish there."

"Yes, it is," Gramps said. "I'm glad that you've come to appreciate it."

For the rest of that summer, I always made a few obligatory casts into the Magic Pool before joining Gramps upstream or downstream. Occasionally I saw fish surface, but nothing resembling Big Red. I once hooked and almost landed a rainbow on a humid early-August morning at the Magic Pool, but that fish was too small to have been Big Red.

But Big Red was still there. The Wood River regulars reported sightings on a weekly basis. Big Red had become a common topic of streamside conversation. George Thorpe told us one morning that he had seen Big Red jump clear out of the water for a fly a few days before. "Must be twenty-five inches, at *least*," he said. "I couldn't get him to offer at anything I drifted downstream, but I saw him jump for something. It was Big Red, no doubt about that."

"You keep trying for your mystery fish," Gramps told George Thorpe. "I'll catch the real ones."

I fished the rest of that summer without seeing any evidence of Big Red. So I had little to add to the streamside lore. Gramps just smiled and shook his head when he heard a Big Red story.

"If there really is a Big Red, I just hope that no one ever catches him," Gramps said on our last trip to the Wood River that summer. "There's plenty of other trout in that river to go around and keep everyone happy."

***

I suppose that Big Red, if he actually existed, was a stocked fish that had held over for a couple of years. The Wood River did hold some native rainbows and brook trout, but they rarely grew more than eight or ten inches. They could not compete for food with the bigger stocked fish. Gramps said that several years ago one of his former colleagues, a fisheries biologist, had done a study of the Wood River trout and had found that some stocked fish survived the winter. So I hoped for another shot at Big Red the next season. But I would have to fish that summer alone, without Gramps.

During my four years of fishing with Gramps, I had watched him age. Having passed seventy, he walked more slowly and tired more quickly on the stream. Our fishing days had grown shorter. But I had not prepared myself for

the stroke that took his life during the winter following my sixteenth birthday. Perhaps I had thought that fishing at the Wood River with Gramps would last forever.

It took me until the end of the school year to get down to the Wood River to fish that next summer. I had to wait until I obtained my driver's license in mid-June before I could venture to the Wood River on my own. When I arrived there on a late-June morning, I saw Big John and George Thorpe standing by their trucks and drinking coffee. They were pleased to see me. They shook my hand and told me how much they missed Gramps.

"Any sign of Big Red?" I asked as our conversation ended.

"Nothing," said Big John. "Somebody caught a nineteen-inch rainbow last month downstream at the Pine Tree Pool and claimed it was Big Red, but Big Red was bigger than nineteen inches." Big John shook his head. "Couldn't have been Big Red."

That morning I fished upstream. I landed two browns and a couple small brookies. On my way downstream, I waded into the Magic Pool to make a few casts. A fish was surfacing, and I hooked him on a Black Stimulator. After releasing the fish, I blew on my fly to dry it off—Gramps never used chemical floatants. My back was turned toward the Magic Pool when I heard the splash. It seemed too big of a splash for a fish to make. I thought that something had fallen into the water—a tree branch perhaps. But the splash had come in the middle of the pool; no tree limbs hung overhead.

I immediately cast toward the middle of the Magic Pool, jerking my rod back just before my fly hit the water to cause some slack in the line. As the line straightened and my fly drifted, a fish rose toward it, changed its mind, and returned to the safety of the bottom of the pool. A swirl—a small whirlpool—appeared with my fly in its vortex. Ripples spread outward for several seconds; then the pool was still. It had to be Big Red.

I did not need to catch and land Big Red, I told myself; I just needed to hook him, to have his force at the end of my line for a minute or two. If he threw the hook or broke my tippet, I'd still be satisfied. I cast to the Magic Pool for another hour that day with no other sign of Big Red. I had had my chance.

When I returned to the car, I saw a man, a stranger, with a gilling chain and three trout attached. He was fixing to gut and clean the fish at streamside.

"Tonight's dinner," he said when I looked toward him. Perhaps he wanted to convince me that the trout would be put to good use and not end up in the bottom of a trash can. The man wore a black baseball cap with an "S" on it.

"I release my fish," I said. I broke down my rod, removed my waders, and drove off. With Gramps around, that guy wouldn't last one day on our river.

***

No one else reported seeing Big Red that summer, but I had one more shot at him. It was in mid-August, a cloudy, humid day. After I had fished upstream

for a couple of hours, it started to drizzle, and I headed downstream toward the parking area. I decided to make a few casts at the Magic Pool, then head home before the hard rain came. No fish were surfacing at the Magic Pool, so I aimlessly flipped a cast right toward the middle.

Big Red hit my fly before it struck the water. It was the first time that I had actually seen Big Red—I had witnessed only swirls and ripples and whirlpools before this. He was as large and as red as reported—at least twenty-five inches with a swath of crimson on his flanks. I set the hook as he headed toward the left bank. When I began to tug on the line, Big Red bolted across the pool toward the opposite bank.

The Magic Pool was a great place to fight a fish—open water, no weeds or logs to complicate the battle. Just the fisherman and the fish, one-on-one. I kept pressure on Big Red, but I had to let him run so that he would not snap my line. During one of his dashes across the Magic Pool, he left the water—jumped straight up and seemed to suspend himself in the air for a few seconds. When he hit the water, he was free, and my line was slack.

It was enough, more than enough. Shaking, I reeled in my line and fastened the hook of my fly on one of the guides on my rod. I breathed deeply and watched the water, peppered now with a light drizzle. "Hail, Big Red! Hail, Wood River! Hail, Magic Pool! Hail, Gramps, wherever you are!" I said aloud, and I left the water.

***

I saw Big Red once more, a few weeks later, on my final trip to the Wood River that summer. I had fished upstream and returned downstream, intending to make a few obligatory casts in the Magic Pool before ending the fishing season. As I approached the Magic Pool, I spotted a fisherman fighting a fish. The man wore a black baseball cap with an "S" on the front; he was fishing with a spinning rod. The fish jumped straight up out of the water. It was Big Red.

The fight lasted several minutes. Eventually the man coaxed Big Red into his net. "Got him!" he said. He had seen me; he knew that I had watched the fight. "I just caught a trophy trout." He seemed proud of his catch.

Before he removed the hook, the man looked at me. I had moved closer to him while he had fought the big trout. Now he stared hard into my seventeen-year-old face and then down at Big Red, still feisty in the net.

"Are you going to release the fish?" I asked the fisherman.

"I was planning to keep it and eat it," he replied.

"Why?" I asked. "You can buy a fish in the supermarket if you want fish for dinner." I was thinking of Gramps. What would he say to this fisherman to convince him to release Big Red?

"But there's a certain pleasure in eating a fish that you landed," he said.

I wished that Gramps were with me. I channeled Gramps as I tried to articulate the right words to convey to this fisherman. "There would be more pleasure to catch that trout again," I said. "That fish is a well-known character in this stream. He could be caught again and again if he were released. The joy is in catching him, not killing and eating him."

The man looked at me again, then perhaps sensing something—sensing a father's abandonment, sensing my pain over Gramps' death, sensing a million more disappointments to come my way over many, many years—he carefully removed the hook from Big Red's jaw and relinquished Big Red to the Magic Pool.

"Nice fight," I said.

"Beautiful fish," he said.

I tipped my hat to the stranger and headed toward the parking area. "I saved Big Red, Gramps," I said aloud as I walked toward my car. I was relieved, but if I were not close by when that man caught Big Red, he certainly would have kept and killed it. Who might save Big Red the next time he was caught?

***

My life took me elsewhere during the years that followed that episode. As it turned out, I fished the Wood River only once more—on a drizzly August morning the summer after my freshman year in college. I saw no one else fishing that morning. Just before I quit fishing for the day, I stopped at the Magic Pool. I stared at it for a long time, but I saw no sign of Big Red, so I moved on.

While I was at my car removing my waders, a truck pulled into the clearing. The man driving it was wearing a Red Sox cap. It was Red Sox Ray.

"Where you been?" he asked. "Haven't seen you all summer."

"Busy with other things, Ray. I'm in college now."

"No reason not to fish. The fishing's been great this year."

"Any sign of Big Red?" I asked.

"None whatsoever. Probably caught by now. Nothing lives forever."

"I guess not," I said. "But it's nice to think that Big Red is cruising some pool right now."

"Another Big Red will come along some day," Red Sox Ray said. "Come back and find him. Don't spend all your time in the books, college boy."

But I said good-bye to Ray, got in my car, and drove off. And I never went back.

Estuary

Like water over riverstone
their slight legs churn and chase
that undulant pebble roiling
among the froth and the foam.

Back and forth, forth and back
but rarely side-to-side they slide
as if attached to unseen rods
bidden by gravity's unyielding pull.

We cheer—or jeer—at the thing
that cannot otherwise be persuaded
to break this patterned pandemonium:
the tumult of a youth soccer match.

Matthew Schultz

Your Marathon Questions Answered

Run downhill the same way you run uphill.

Those people are pacers. They run carrying signs
with expected finish times. In any gathering of people,
someone will be carrying a sign. You can follow
the pacer and finish with the pacer. Or you can do
what you do, which is run the exact same race, except
you won't spend precious energy watching
the pacer and the sign.

The mile markers only tell how far you've run.
Save energy and stop subtracting the mile markers from 26.2.

There will be church choirs to revive the aspiration,
taiko drums to synchronize the feet,
rock guitars and raspy singers to validate the perspiration,
all within the first 10 kilometers.

There will be no performers in the final 10 kilometers,
just neighborhood people angry that their street is closed
and their cars are stuck in the driveway and that your long, long,
long run, which has nothing to do with them, is impeding
upon their Sunday morning.

Your final miles will be filled with sour stares.

You'll be angry with the neighbors in return, because
the mile markers continue to tell how far you've come, as if
coming so far is an end in itself. But you will finally understand:
there is no end in itself.

There is never anger at the beginning, because anyone can start anything.

Run the last mile the same way you ran the first.

They will give you a medal that says finisher,
but you will understand you were just a doer.

Steven Ray Smith

Coach Scott

Michael Copperman

John Scott had a way of making me feel seen. He revealed me, literally seized me with his own bare hands and declared me to the world. "Here's Iron Mike. He's going to be state champion this year," he would say, steering me forward by my shoulders to meet a college coach he felt ought to recruit me—back in my freshman year of high school. "Watch Copperman. He'll show you how it's done," he used to say to Jonathon, his nine-year-old son who'd come to practice sometimes, hoping to learn how to become tough. Coach Scott wasn't one for praise where it wasn't deserved—he preferred to bellow objections to what was going wrong, or to enthusiastically encourage what was going right, but he wasn't one to compliment mere competence. I appreciated this honesty—he wasn't trying to manipulate or coax, like so many adults who seemed to think they could coerce you to do their bidding by talking down to you. John let you know where you stood in his estimation, and if it wasn't high, at least you weren't confused about whether or not he was in your corner.

It is hard to say exactly how we were matched: me, a ninety-five pound light-weight only a hair over five feet tall, brown-skinned, slender (I would never grow tall, but freshman year hadn't even summoned enough testosterone to have muscles), and John Scott, perhaps six feet tall but somehow a large man with a tendency to take up space, thick and square in girth, almost Nordic in features, a shock of salted blond hair and a generous beard giving him the look of the mountain man he'd once been. John was big as two of me, and bigger still in personality—everything about him was loud, from his booming voice and belly laugh to the way he claimed your hand when he shook it, crushing and enveloping it as he drew you closer and (in my case) up so that you his electric blue eyes were inches from yours, his breath smelling always of

menthol mints blowing warm across your face. "Now you listen to me," he'd begin, preparing to launch into a monologue of some sort that had to do with your need to believe in yourself enough to live up to your limitless potential.

I don't know why John Scott was the man I needed—in many ways, he was flawed, so large in his appetites and flamboyant in his failures, and above all so dogged and stubborn and earnest that it bordered on absurdity. You did things John's way, period. That force of conviction, which in so many men derives from insecurity and is prosecuted by viciousness and violence, was in John a virtue, a bounty of good intentions. That he was right was not the point—the point was that what he thought you should do was so absolutely, hopelessly well-meant that you couldn't really argue it. You wanted to sit by yourself and sulk? John thought you should come have a talk, lighten up. You wanted to slack on sprints? John thought you should run ten more, toughen up. You wished to eat only a Powerbar after weighing in? John thought you needed a real meal—maybe a turkey sandwich at Elmer's. You didn't like a turkey sandwich? Who doesn't like a turkey sandwich? Try a bite—have a real meal before the meet, not that brown bar of shit. Not bad, see? See how you're trying to glare and chew and pretend you don't like it all at once? Now finish eating because we've got asses to kick and names to take, kid. Destiny ain't gonna wait on a turkey sandwich.

Everything with John was like that—pursued with relentless goodwill and vigor, rife with cliché rescued by pith and ambition, straightforward, honest, unopposable. John could be too much—I still remember a big Irish upperweight named Noble who used to stuff a pillow in his shirt and do a John Scott impression, bellowing about going harder and faster, bringing down the house talking about the primordial manliness of two sweaty apes, tangling it up in the jungle to decide who was king. Noble was funny, had most of us in stitches at the accuracy of his impression—it wasn't hard to send up Coach Scott, but we also weren't really laughing at him so much as we were laughing at ourselves for going along with the sermons. It didn't take long for the cool and lazy kids to get as far from John as they could manage—they kept John at arm's length because his sincerity was terrifying. He truly believed you were good, could be strong and worthy if you tried to be, which meant that if you fell short, quit on yourself, took the easy road and dropped out, you'd have to face those steady eyes, boring right into you.

Perhaps, to many young men who encountered him in the art room at South where he taught part-time, he was tiresome, square, a caricature—certainly, he was a character, though not so easily dismissed or mockable: he had a charisma and gravity, an honesty. It was true that he was always telling you, unsolicited, what to do or how to be, ready to share his own checkered past, the 'drinking and the drugging and the women' that saw him wrestle at two or three colleges, that slung him through a string of failed marriages and lost jobs and rehabs and casinos and gambling debts, through logging crews

and logging accidents that sent him to the hospital more than once before he found AA and got sober, became a counselor at the rehab center. To me, that he'd lived many lives and made so many mistakes made him an interesting storyteller—he'd lived the sort of life I'd been taught to avoid, a careless one whose consequences had caught up, and fate seemed, in his stories, to be close on his heels all the time. The man who'd done it all, and found a way through, returned to the only pure thing he'd ever loved. No, I did not find him tiresome—I'd listen to the same story three or four times if it meant I could commit it to memory, make it a part of me on which I might build something sturdy and worthwhile. I trusted in him, let him draw me close and preach the way of the warrior. Let his life flow into mine, that I might find direction and purpose.

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Coach asked that all of the high school athletes help out with the club practices in the Spring. Most of the guys were burnt out by March, but not me—I came to every session, not to train, since I mostly did that at the college room with the other elite athletes from all over the county, but just to get my dose of John. And so for months on end, all I'd do was help John coach young kids. He believed that kids should have fun rolling around and playing, that youth wrestling should be about the joy of movement, not an exercise in discipline. "The joy of play is the foundation of this sport," he often said, and the way he ran his kids' program was certainly a positive thing. We tumbled, turned cartwheels and rolls, played games, scrambled about, laughed, danced—we had fun. No kid in our Spring Club ever felt 'burned out' on wrestling like so many of the preschool phenoms who quit when they reached high school and threw their pee-wee trophies in the trash. Coach just wouldn't allow kids or their parents to get too serious too young. I can still see a scene from an all-comers tournament—a pair of tow-headed blond brothers, each under ten years old, being chased in heavy sweats around a wrestling mat by their bellowing father so that they would lose a pound of water weight and get to wrestle a lower weight class where they might win the tournament. I'd have quit too, if I were them.

What he taught the kids was the essence of what he taught his high school athletes—his system was nothing but hustle and attitude. "Always run back to the center every time you go out of bounds," he would say, his blocky arms pistoning in a cartoonish run. "You wait for your opponent to limp his way back, eyeing him as if you're bored, as if you're fresh and could go on all day." He'd pause, and if he was feeling particularly passionate, maybe take the nearest boy by the shoulders, pull him so close to him that his warm breath, smelling faintly of mint, would hit him in the face.

"You make your opponent know he's tired. You beat him with your joy. And you are better than him, because you're tougher, you've worked harder,

you've earned the right to be there. And if you do all that, it doesn't matter whether you win or lose, because you've given it everything you've got. You've left nothing on that mat, and you walk away carefree, knowing that you fought the good fight."

I must have heard that speech a thousand times, but it never failed to bring something wide and powerful bursting out of me: a feeling like I was standing on a cliff ready to jump, sure the glory of the fall would keep me from the ground.

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John had an idea that I shouldn't cut weight alone, and while during the season there was far too much to attend to with all the guys to manage, by the time we came to state, or to big tournaments like the Western Regional Freestyle and Greco Championships in Reno, there was nobody still competing except me. John liked to work out at the YMCA, and handball was his workout of choice—the last one-on-one physical competition that remained to him where he could break a sweat. I wanted to skip rope or run circles alone somewhere warm and solitary where if I let out little moans of pain and effort, nobody would hear, and perhaps sensing my desire to be weak and suffer pathetically, John insisted that I come play him on the courts at the Y, that it would take my mind off the last pounds. Because I could not say no to him, I went—but I refused to pretend I was having fun, because there is no such thing as fun when you are cutting weight. John found my exaggerated gloom—my glares, sighs, and simmering frustration—to be hilarious, as I was simply too nice to manage real anger. And so this was how the handball wars began—a battle in which John's goal was to defeat me on the court, and to defeat my self-seriousness by making me laugh.

Handball is not a game I particularly understand, or had played before (or have played since), but its rules are much like racquetball—a simpler racquetball, of less speed, amplitude and force. There was a sort of leather glove used to throw a rather heavy and less bouncy ball in a closed room with lines that have to be cleared on serve and on strike, and clear protective glasses for eye protection, to avoid taking a ball in the eye, like one wears in a woodshop. John would gear up—all two hundred and eighty pounds of him, a gray-haired, barrel-chested man in his late forties in purple South Eugene Wrestling sweatshorts a little too small pulled up to the bottom of his generous belly so that they fell just above his knobby knees, a polo-shirt tucked in, striped sweatsocks pulled up to the knees, high-top running shoes laced tight to support his bad ankles, a sweat-band, white and purple encircling his head above his goggles to try to keep the torrent of sweat from his eyes. He would do exaggerated jumping jacks and hip-thrusts to warm up, knowing I thought it all absurd, hamming it up, and then would sink into his handball stance, basically a modified wrestling stance, knees bent, butt out, right hand holding

the ball, and turn to me, his reluctant opponent, dancing from foot to foot trying to break a sweat and already ten pounds dehydrated and two days starved, swathed in plastics stuck to my skin, covered by three sweatshirts and a down winter coat with fur lining two pairs of sweatpants, wool socks laid over feet wrapped in plastic bags, two beanies wrapped about my head and the hood to my sweatsuit pulled down as low as I could without blocking the goggles, my death's head stare still evident. I was so bundled I could barely move—swinging my arms was ridiculous—and I'd have pulled the handball glove over the winter gloves I already wore.

"Game on—rally for serve!" he'd declare, smacking the ball toward the wall so that it hit on the far opposite side of the court, and I'd race to swing for it in all those layers, manage to return it to the wall, and John would race to meet it, intent on hitting it devilishly far from me, laughing at my awkward gait, whooping with his strikes, crowing in victory if he won the point, hands raised above his head, eyes shining. It occurs to me now that there were probably few opponents John could find with so acute a handicap as I played with—he had steel plates in his back, bone grinding bone in his knees, and all the food he'd ever denied himself in making weight had found its way into his stomach and then some. He was probably never so splendidly superior and spry on the court as when he played me. Soon he had worked up a sweat and was up by a half dozen points, and I'd begin gasping, the wind I already lacked gone, the heat rising beneath the layers, woozy, frustrated I couldn't beat an old man, angry at the ridiculous game, at his antics and unflagging good cheer and at having been forced to play at all.

We'd keep on until John had won—again—and then he'd make me shake on the match, and guide me out of the court to sit with the sweat broken, see how much we could get out of the match, and depending on how much I had left to cut, we'd return to play another game, likely shorter and more ragged on my part, John seeming to be everywhere now, a whirlwind of purple-clad white flesh who tossed bullets, the ball quicker and more elusive, the floor of the court shifting beneath my feet so that I would stagger after extended points, struggle to change directions. The rear of the court was windows, and I cannot imagine what we must have looked like—what the regulars at the Y must have thought. Finally, I would have had enough—would remove the glasses, strip the handball glove off, hold both out to John. "I quit this stupid game," I'd say.

And John would take the glove, and laugh, and say, "Good game. You can't quit, because you lost. To the better player."

I would give him a look I intended to be venomous, and he would begin to laugh and keep laughing from somewhere deep inside him, would keep on with me trying to stare him down until something in my anger betrayed me a little, and I saw myself in his eyes, all earnest petulance, when he was only playing to save me from myself, and for a moment I'd smile despite myself.

And then he would steady me with one of his big hands, lead me down the hall to lie on the floor of the locker room where now all I had to do was sweat until the cut was done, the hardest part already past.

***

Near the end of my senior year of high school, after the season was over, I received a book of photos in the mail. The front of it was decorated with stars—gold and blue, like the sort an elementary school teacher puts on a chart to mark a child's progress. "Four Years of Coach and Copperman," read blocky letters written in sharpie, and within was a plastic sheath containing a piece of notebook paper that said, "I follow wrestling in the state of Oregon and you two were special." Within were pages and pages of photographs of Coach Scott and me at different major meets over the years—the Coast Classic, the Rumble in Cottage Grove, the State tournament every year. Coach looming over my young boy body when my hair was still a mass of curls, his hand on my shoulder as I stared into his face, deadly serious; me wrestling, in the middle of a sprawl on his side of the mat while he rises from his chair in excitement, both hands outstretched as if miming what to do, which evidently was to fly; Coach with his arm draped over my shoulder from behind, my head bowed to my chest as he leaned in to comfort me after my last loss in the state finals when I was inconsolable, but still had to walk back out in front of the crowds and cameras to assume the second spot on the podium and put on a poker face in front of the world. Many days of my adult life, I've wished at moments of loss and error to hear again what he told me—that I'd given my all, had carried myself with honor, which was all that mattered.

I never learned who sent me the book of photos—there was no name, no return address. I suppose today, in the age of stalkers and abductions, there is an assumption of wrongdoing in unsolicited observation. I prefer to think that the watcher realized what the camera showed: that in our unlikely pair, there was a rare symmetry and reciprocity, a kinship. John needed me to believe in him as much as I needed to believe in myself.

***

I suppose from the very beginning I knew that I wouldn't betray John—I trusted him. Myself I didn't trust at all—but I never thought John would fail me, and he didn't. I took home silver medal after silver medal, failed to win one for the both of us, but I also kept the faith. Every damn match, I was out there on the edge of something, reaching further. And I never came so close to touching it as that year at the Western Regional Championships in Reno my junior year.

The eleven states in the Western region were some of the toughest wrestling states in the country. Washington and Oregon both contained vast stretches of wrestling country where the rural sport ran deep; Arizona and Utah had strong,

deep programs as well, and California was so vast and populous it boasted as many wrestlers as all the other states combined. Only the elite bothered to attend the Western Regional Championships—they flooded in, most in vans or cars from the bigger clubs, though the well-heeled flew. John and I drove in my parents' van they'd let him use—I think they were relieved not to have to travel for four days of wrestling tournament. I'd already cut down to weight and was in a bad way, twelve pounds down and hurting, throat parched, and so I can't say I was much in the way of company on the drive. We left at four in the morning and drove through the day, and most of the way John played the only music he'd brought along, "Bob Seger and his Silver Bullet Band: Greatest Hits," over and over again so that today, when a Bob Seger song comes on, I am struck with the sort of nostalgia most people of my generation reserve for Sir Mix-A-Lot or Guns and Roses. Bad Bob, as John liked to call him, working on the night moves, as the hills green with spring rolled along after the Oregon-California border as the sun finally came up, Shasta rising somewhere in the distance like a promise, John steering with one meat hand and singing along off-key. Then, in my memory almost immediately, the long featureless desert stretches into the blurred horizon as we make Nevada, the sun high in the depthless sky as the car floats over the thin snake of road and Bad Bob sings about how he *don't feel much like riding, just wishes the trip was through*, and John lifts a Diet Pepsi liter high to the ceiling of the van and says "Amen to THAT, brother," and laughs, and I am suffering but I laugh also, because it's so fucking awful that we are driving through the desert and I am choosing not to drink but being cheersed with cool liquid, and the joke is so bad and the music has played so many times it's as if John has played it these twelve hours just to make the joke, and it feels to me for a moment as if everything is a little like that: that the world has narrowed to this journey, to this place John is taking me that will be the promised land. And in my memory, because we made a hundred road trips together, and because John told the same stories over and over again, on that Vegas trip out he tells me all of them, starting in with his usual charm: "So what's the story there, Kid Silver?"

"No story," I reply, looking at my shoes bouncing with the thrum of the road under the Ford's laboring motor. "Do you think I should use an inside tie? Or only two on one?"

He does not answer me—only grins, knowing I am trying to change the subject. And then, all at once, he tells me the story of his childhood with his old man, or about the wild days of his youth when he sped like a train-wreck through a half-dozen different marriages logging and boozing. He filled the countless hours of black-topped highway going to and from tournaments in Idaho, Washington, and California with vivid pictures of his past, and I loved to hear him talk. In my memory of this trip, which is the memory of all stories on all trips, his showmanship is at a peak, and he clears his throat, shrugs

his shoulders as if readying himself for a match, begins in that slow, intent, drawling storyteller's voice:

"My old man was a strange son of a bitch. He thought that the only reason anyone ever got sick was that their bowels weren't in good order. He bought prunes by the bagful, always had a couple of pounds around. But maybe there was something to it, because I never once knew him to get sick. And he credited all to his ability to shit.

"We kept the paper in big bundles, and on those days he rested he'd sit there in the kitchen with the stacks of papers and go straight to the obituaries, reading them aloud in a deadpan tone: 'Jack Marshall, age sixty-seven, born in River County, Wisconsin, on such and such a day, was a veteran of World War II, a ranch hand by trade, survived by his widow Joan M. Marshall and daughter, Alyssa Jackson. Died of pancreatic cancer, on such and such day, Memorial services at such and such a time,' and then the old man would stop and look over at me until I met his rheumy blue eyes, and he'd wink, and then crow, in a low, conspiratorial tone, as if there was anyone to hear him being irreverent toward the dead out there in the middle of the countryside, 'Couldn't shit!' and of course, we'd both laugh until tears ran down the old man's cheeks and I thought my sides would split, and he'd move on to the next one. Every dead person in the county was a victory for the old man's theory."

And now Coach pauses for a second and looks over at me, deadpan, and says, "You done the number two yet, Kid Silver? You all stopped up with the cut?" and I grin despite myself, and maybe we enjoy the joke for a while, Bad Bob crooning about *twenty years I sit and wonder sometimes where they've gone*, and John starts into the stories about what he lost, which was damn near everything.

"I worked for one of the big outfits. I'd finished college, but hadn't really studied, just wrestled and drank mostly, and by that time none of the wrestling programs wanted me around because the drink had become the better part of me. I had outstayed my welcome everywhere else, so I went to the backcountry.

"I worked for years as a line rigger. It was hard, sweaty, backbreaking work, but I was young and felt my strength, and I thought I could do anything. It was dangerous. I found that out. I had gotten good and broken in, felt I was an old-timer, as if I had seen it all. On a steep slope, you have to have a way of getting the logs back up the mountain to the road. So they run what they call belay wires, lengths of metal cord about the thickness of three of your fingers, that runs just like a giant ski lift, motor driven of course, up and down the mountain dragging off the trees. Sometimes the trees get hung up, though, and a man has to follow each log to be sure that it doesn't stick and then to free them when it does. I was on crew one morning doing just that, running line, and everything seemed fine. But somewhere I couldn't see, the wire was frayed and had too much tension on it. That wire is strong as all hell, of course, so it had to be in terrible shape to be near breaking. I had no idea of the terrible

stress on that wire. I was hollering, joking, having a good time. And then it came.

"I never heard the warning yells, though the men swore that they were yelling, not that it would have helped anyway. There was no place to go. The wire snapped, and all of its length came shooting back down the slope at me. I thought I was done as they hauled me, torn and bleeding, up that mountain and along those back roads. All I could think of was that my old man was wrong. That this time, there wouldn't be no 'Couldn't shit.'"

And as John would do when he'd told a story that got to the salt and meat, he pauses, falls silent, and we sit and listen to Bad Bob working again on his Night Moves over the roar of the motor, the whistle and fush of the roadway. And then he says, "I'm sorry, Iron Mike. Didn't mean to lay such a downer. That was it, though—I never was going to wrestle again. But you—"

"I know," I say. "I still have the chance."

"One chance to lay it all out in big-time Reno, baby!" And then Coach gives a sly grin and says, "Best of the West. You're nobody here—you're not even supposed to get close to second place, so don't you worry. No silver medals in Reno!"

***

The promised land turned out to be an off-strip Motel 6 with two beds, sheets twisted in disarray, the toilet emitting the sharp smell of disinfectant, the half-sink buried under a dirty stack of plastic cups and plates. At the table where I was sitting, the round Formica surface was littered with the remains of Powerbars and Cliff Bars, pushed to the edge to reveal an open copy of the tournament bracket. I sat there, foot tapping the floor with nervous energy, my eyes straying to the bracket. By holding my leg with my hand I could stop the tapping, but there was no controlling my anticipation.

The bracket was filled with my name all the way through to Bronze medal match, and only one blank space remained; I didn't need to look at the sheet to know what it said under the empty line in the medal rounds, which I'd circled over and over so that the pencil had cut through the paper. I had lost my first match out of the gate—had drawn Ryan Lewis, last year's national champion, as my first match while I was still recovering from the cut, and though I'd pushed him, I'd lost and thought I was done. "It's double elimination, last time I checked," Coach told me. "And that was the best I've seen you compete—that guy is one of the best preps in the world."

I didn't care how good Lewis was—I was still starting in the loser's bracket, back against the wall in a tournament where every single competitor was the best in their state or region. My margin for error was zero. Desperation led me to defeat the state champion from Colorado I hit in the next match with three straight armspins—and then to whup the next kid, who'd been an All-American the year before, 9-5, and then to trounce Evan Larkin, who would

go on to be a national champion in college, 9-2, and suddenly I was picking up steam. It was Olympic wrestling, my style—all balance and upper-body and throws, and thanks to the forward drive that forced opponents to push back or be driven off the mat, my armspin was snapping. I beat another of last year's All-Americans, tech-falled the Washington state champion a weight above me who'd dropped down, and found myself here: from the bottom of the loser's bracket to the top. My foot resumed its tapping despite the pressure of my hand as I checked the clock for the tenth time in ten minutes. It was twelve in the afternoon, and the medals round didn't start for four hours. At the rate I was going, in four hours I'd be a raving lunatic.

Coach walked into the room to find me shadow wrestling an imaginary opponent in the narrow floor space between the stove and the table. I was winning, two to one in the waning seconds, and my gut-wrench was about to turn the imagined avatar of Joey Malia from Montana whom I'd face in the Bronze Medal match, but Coach didn't care much about my impending victory given the spectacle of my rolling on the dirty Motel 6 carpet. I stood sheepishly mumbling something about 'getting mentally prepared,' and he announced we were leaving to get some lunch.

It was no surprise that half the guests in the Silver Legacy dining room were coaches and their athletes. After all, the single most compelling reason to have the tournament in Reno was the all-you-can-eat buffets. As soon as weigh-ins were over the feasting began, and the celebration wasn't limited to the athletes who had starved and dehydrated themselves for days. Few people appreciate food as much as an old wrestling coach, and the evidence of that statement is no further than their bulging waistlines. Within an hour of the weigh-in the buffet lines teemed with mountainous coaches and hollow-cheeked wrestlers who hadn't eaten in days, laying savagely into piled plates. The wrestlers clutched their Gatorade bottles tightly as they stood in line, their eyes fixed firmly on the steaming food as they munched on the remains of the Powerbars and cookies that they had brought with them from the first ecstatic gorging that always followed success at the scale. Even by the last day of the tournament the buffet was still dominated by wrestlers and coaches piling their plates high, though most had exchanged their warm-ups for street clothes now that they were out of the tournament. They were still easy enough to pick out, the coaches surrounded by heaps of empty plates, and the wrestlers, many now moving gingerly, sporting bruises and black eyes, looking slightly dazed from the uncharacteristic indulgence. If the other patrons found the feasting of these men and boys strange, they didn't let on—nobody really looked anybody in the eye here, which I took as a sign of Reno's character, a self-involved privacy that seemed to have to do with looking out for the bottom line in a place where everyone seemed to be straining for status and grandeur they had no hope of realizing. Reno was a natural enough place for the Western Regional Wrestling Championships to be held: the poor man's Vegas, the city chock full of empty

convention centers eager to host some event other than a bridge tournament or a livestock competition. Reno took anything it could get.

Dizzied by the blinking lights and distant bells and clangs of the slots, gagged by the lingering smoke from the casino adjoining the buffet, I couldn't summon any appetite, was the clichéd small-town boy adrift in the unfamiliar city. Coach was still at the buffet, insisting the attendant get fresh crab legs—he was already on seconds, had cleaned out the pan. He'd been a gambler also, seemed comfortable here among the hustlers and strivers, the tacky shimmer and tawdry glow an old friend he was happy enough to visit, knowing he'd done better. I wanted to understand, but didn't—the glitter and grit of Reno was foreign, and though I could read the flashing signs, I could feel I was missing essences, deaf to the tinkle and plink, the dark lullabye of sin city. I had not failed enough to welcome the release of giving in.

I cut a piece of steak, dabbed it around in the mashed potatoes, and struggled to chew, mouth filling with the starchiness of the potatoes and the rich, oily gumminess of the meat. I barely gagged it down, drained half a glass of water washing the taste away. Coach watched with amusement, blue eyes shining with the lights of the casino as he shoveled cracked crab legs into his mouth.

"Go on, you're going to need your energy," he said, prodding me in the shoulder, but I couldn't bring myself to touch anything. I watched his thick, pockmarked hands as he ate, the knuckles covered in a light down of blond hair. He wielded his fork awkwardly, his whole hand wound tight around the handle like you might hold a hammer. Eventually, he cleaned my plate, too, to get me back to the room to rest.

"I can't rest." I was sulking, which is to say, fishing for sympathy.

"You'll rest, so help me!" Coach said, shaking his fist to show how little he respected whining about luxuries and choices.

I used to think Coach didn't understand the kind of fever pitch that I worked myself into before big matches. In my conception, he was a fearless juggernaut, a towering, expressionless gladiator who stepped confidently onto the mat and swept away the competition with ferocious ease. Now I realize that he understood me exactly—he never won as often as I did as a prep, was the dark horse his entire career. When I was a basket-case of nerves, he understood exactly what I wanted: to win once and for all, to no longer be on the outside looking in. And all the times I failed, he didn't fault me—perhaps he was secretly glad that I was still there with him battling the long odds for the imminent glory, always a hand short because the game didn't care for an uncorrupted heart.

***

My opponent in the Bronze Medal Match was the previous year's Western States champion, Joey Malia of Montana, and he leered at me from within

his black hoodie as we warmed up in the practice area before the match, in the holding pens of the indoor Rodeo center where the tournament was being held. It did not smell like cattle, but perhaps a little of hay, but I was thankful for the high walls of the pen, which kept me from seeing the boisterous crowd that had gathered about the four mats still active for the medal matches. Malia was big for the weight, had also beaten everyone except Lewis, whom he'd lost to by a single point in a match I'd watched—he was impressive, powerfully built with square shoulders and a deep chest, and explosive when he moved. Now he kept catching my eye and then grinning, as if he'd made a study on the intimidation tactics of bullies in earnest cinema. I nodded in response, refusing to react.

The call came for our match: "In the bronze medal bout at 105.5 pounds, from Bozeman, Montana, Joey Malia, and from Eugene, Oregon, Mike Copperman!"

Coach and I pushed out of the pens into the lights, the crowd noise suddenly washing over me, and made our way to the blue corner of the open mat. I stripped off my warm-ups as Coach massaged my shoulders to limber them. Coach noticed Malia staring me down over the shoulder of his coach, and steered me out of his line of sight. "Ignore that big ugly bastard," he said. "You're going to go out hard, and you're going to push him, and then when he starts to push back, you're going to throw him like you've thrown everybody else. This is your match, your time, Iron Mike. You got it?"

I nodded.

"You with me?"

"Yes sir."

"Go get him," Coach said, launching me toward the referee. I jogged to the center of the mat and stood next to the referee, showed him the white handkerchief that international style wrestling insisted athletes keep to mop up blood and sweat and then tucked it back into the side of my singlet, accepted a colored anklet and slipped it on. The crowd noise was not a roar but an electric wash of energy fluttering about me, and I felt light, untethered. Malia jogged out, and rather than staring him down I kept my eyes on the ground, danced from foot to foot.

The referee called us, and we faced off a few feet apart, shook hands almost combatively at the referee's prompt, each of us trying to crush the other's fingers. He grinned at me again, I raised my eyebrows in response, and then the starting whistle blew and the time for posturing and games was past, and all receded into motion and instinct. I surged forward, changed levels to get an undercling, circled to take a two on one, lost it as he snatched back but still drove forward, sinking my hands into his biceps as if to leave bruises, pressing. "Keep at him!" John hollered.

Malia was fast and strong. After being driven off the mat twice, though, he understood I was setting myself out to be the aggressor, shoved me after the

referee's whistle as I drove him out, setting off more whistles and a caution. I met John's eyes, and he nodded. As we started again in the center I stepped forward as if to come at him—and the moment I felt him lunge to meet me, I seized his arm and arced my body backward, my head passing straight toward the mat, so that I became a force and not a boy, a downward vector bearing his arm so that his body had to follow, head over heels, in a perfect flying mare. I didn't hold him, but he broke the plane as we came back to our feet, and I heard the savvy crowd respond—they loved a good throw.

He was angry, surged at me, pressing as we grappled for position, and he snapped my head hard, arm-dragged and spun quick and smooth, and had a takedown. I bellied out, but he was on me quick, hands about my waist like a vise—he was all iron and power, raised up and spun me over in a bodylift, and just like that he was in the lead. "Come on, Mike!" I heard Coach yell from off the mat.

Back on my feet, I surged at Malia again. The adrenaline was gone, and now we were in the dance of suffering, a battle of position and fatigue; again, I ran him off the mat, and then drove him toward the edge again, until his feet were just to the line and he couldn't help but be pressing back to stay in—and there it was, another armspin arc and throw, another three eliciting cheers from the crowd. And now I once again had enraged Malia, and he came at me hard, made me feel his size and speed—when he had the will to, he was simply superior in strength, too fast for me to stop. He hit me with a swing single, locked straight into a gut wrench and made the turn, again took back the momentum. The match was a single unbroken five-minute period, and time was running. Faking an upper body attack, he caught me off balance and got to my legs, and though I scrambled to recover, he was too quick and too smooth and he scored again, taking the lead by two. Back on his feet he took deep breaths—he was gassed, I could tell—and grew careful, circling, tying up without committing, dancing rather than wrestling. He was going to nurse the lead out. Then I heard Coach off the mat.

"Get after him! Now!"

And so I responded to his call as I always did, surging at Malia, snapping his head, feinting, driving, forcing him back. He went straight out of bounds twice, sustained a second caution. He took his time walking back, his chest heaving, and then he signaled a time out and sat on the mat. "Make him wrestle!" John bellowed, as Malia's coach walked out to him, bent over him as if he was injured and not just stalling to recover his wind. John beckoned me over with a crooked finger, scowling at the spectacle of Malia holding now what appeared to be his ankle or his arm—he wasn't doing a good job faking injury. John pulled me in close, massaged my arms to keep them warm. "Listen here," he said. "The kid is stalling because he has to stall. You've beaten him here"—he pounded a fist to his chest where his heart would be, "and now you've got to beat him on the scoreboard. You've got one minute to lay it all on

the line. He can't go there with you—he doesn't want it enough. You have to take him where he can't go. This is your time, Iron Mike. This is it!" He gave me a push back to the center, where the referee had returned.

Malia was slow to return to the center of the mat, his head down—I stood and waited by the referee, who looked impatient. The referee signaled, and I surged forward as Malia tried to circle, pressed and pushed as he retreated and backed away. I pushed harder, pulled him back and forth, shooting, faking, pushing him about now almost at will—Coach was right, he was not trying to wrestle anymore, but to nurse out his two-point lead. My arms felt dead, heavy and weak with exhaustion, and I could hear my breath coming in ragged jolts, or perhaps it was his breath I heard, as I could see him straining for breath, could feel as I touched him that he was movable. But time was my enemy now, was running out of the hourglass, and the crowd's roar was now a river whose current I was against, but I pressed harder, fought through it. My world had narrowed to the binary between the desire to quit and the will to go further, and I took on more pain, pressed into its ugly heart and found Malia faltering. "He's quit!" John yelled.

I heard the referee as if from a distance someone call "Fifteen seconds remaining," and knew it was time. I surged forward, snapped his head, dropped to my knees and plunged forward for his legs, reaching, grasping, got in elbow deep and then rose to my feet as he threw his legs backwards, fighting my arms with the power in his hips, which is to say, pushing back. And then I felt his wrist with my left hand, stepped forward and back-stepped and rotated and disappeared beneath him, his body arcing over me and then his heels slamming to the mat as the timekeeper threw the towel for the end of the match. The referee separated us and I could not hear the crowd for my gasping for breath, but when I looked at Coach, both his arms were raised toward the ceiling of the arena, hands clenched in fists, and I realized that I had thrown Malia in a third armspin for three last points—the score was 9-8, and I had finally managed to leave a tournament on a victory.

***

After the awards, with my bronze medal hanging around my neck, John led me out of the arena. I was dazed, exhausted, unsure what to do with the sensation of ending a tournament without disappointment. "Come on. Let's get out of here and hit the buffet to celebrate. I bet you can eat now."

"Ok," I said, feeling the rumbling of my stomach for the first time. "Yeah, I could eat."

We passed through the doors, the murmur of the crowd suddenly gone, and found ourselves under the haze of the steam and exhaust, the dirty glitter of the city flashing at the edge of our vision. "Hey, Coach," I started, though I had nothing to say. I had won for a change, and I didn't know what to do with victory any more than I knew what to do with loss. He turned toward me,

his grizzled face a dark silhouette against the sky. I must have looked pretty forlorn, because he grinned and took me by the shoulders, drawing me close like he did those boys in the club.

"You did good by Reno, Kid Silver. Maybe we'll start calling you Kid Bronze if you keep it up." I did not want an alchemy of nicknames, but maybe the magic in the way Coach's grip held me firm kept me grinning like a fool despite myself.

Side by side, smiling at nonsense in a half-empty parking lot amid the bustle and thrum of that foreign city, we were all that mattered in the world. The scene still shines vividly in my mind: Coach, broad-shouldered and barrel-bellied, blond hair graying along the edges, his heavy hands resting on my shoulders, and I, slim shouldered and lean, black hair drenched in sweat, sixteen years old, hardly even shaving yet. We couldn't have anticipated that this was the closest we'd come to gold—that we'd never win a championship together, nor would I ever wrestle as purely and beautifully again in high school or college as I did that weekend in Reno. We couldn't have imagined the future that would sweep us both away—that soon enough I'd leave on a wrestling scholarship to Stanford where I'd lose the meaning of wrestling, the beginning of two decades of folly and harm that would see me lose myself just as John had warned against; that before long John's ties to the high school and team would fray until he moved on, and finally stopped coaching altogether, a new marriage and financial bottom lines pushing him into a different life. We couldn't have known that Coach was never teaching me to win, but to bear losses and forgive, persist and laugh and rise back up even when everything seemed broken—that what he taught was how to survive.

Standing there, I knew nothing but the crisp night air, the black asphalt of the parking lot stretching off into the blurred casino lights, the steadying weight of Coach's arm across my shoulders. And in that moment, I was as happy as I would ever be again. We started across the parking lot toward the van, and we walked lightly, as if we had nothing to regret.

Triple

"It's a beautiful day for a home run,
But even a triple's okay."
Okay? Merely okay?

A home run is a thing of power,
A connect, a blast, a shot.
Lumber it out of the park,
Then lumber around the bases.
Hard wood, hard hit,
Hard to argue against,
A thing, oka-a-ay, prodigious, considerable,
Hitter bests pitcher,
Two can play this game,
A notch on the scoreboard,
Not brainless, no,
But common.

A triple, though,
A triple,
A thing of beauty, splendor,
Not just power,
Speed, too,
Lumber, but no lumbering allowed,
Hitter, pitcher, fielders aplenty,
More than two for this tango.
Nothing guaranteed,
But action, complication, complexity,
And more needed
To get even that one scoreboard notch.

A beautiful day for a triple,
But even a homer's
Okay.

Mark Noe

Epitaph for a Mediocre Writer

He knew early on
he'd never play in the bigs.
But he loved the game,
so continued to play on
in the low minors
with nearly-empty stands.
After a while
it didn't really matter.

What mattered
was the thrill of the grass,
the joy of the dirt
under his cleats,
smell of leather,
solid feel of bat on ball,
hard smack of the ball
into the glove.
Every day at the park
another game,
another challenge.

The competition
was always with himself.
He was the pitcher,
the batter, the runner,
the fielder,
the other players
mere ciphers
needed to fill a lineup.
The score wasn't important.
It was the game within the game.

Year after year he told himself
it was time to quit.
But he never could.

Robert Hamblin

The Last Train to Mountville

Erik Anderson

It's early June, and I'm at a game in Mountville, about ten miles out of town. Baseball is serious business here, I've been told. My neighbor, whose son is a year older than ours, reports that the teams practice five days a week. Our commitment, by contrast, is two or three days, including games, and it still feels like too much. The Mountville club fields two squads in our son's age group, and the team the boys are playing tonight has yet to lose a game. The other has lost only once, to us. It was probably the best our boys played all season. For them, it was a fluke.

Our home games are played in a local park—some scattered diamonds, a few soccer fields, a playground, a sprawling community garden. During the holidays, they sell Christmas trees in the gravel parking lot, and on a couple of early morning runs I've passed homeless men stumbling from their bivouacs in the woods. The diamonds don't have dugouts, per se, but a couple of worn wooden benches behind the fence. Families sit in lawn chairs in the grass along the first and third baselines. There's a small cinder block building with bathrooms and a concession stand, but the latter is rarely open and above the sink in the men's room someone has taped a sign warning that continued vandalism will result in permanent closure.

In Mountville, they have a booster program, and the fully fenced-in field is lined with advertisements: plumbers, restaurants, and—just a mile down the road—Rita's Italian Ice. There's a scoreboard and lights, banners that list the local teams' achievements. Whereas our concession stand, when it's open, offers homemade empanadas, here they're stocked with the more predictable hot dogs and mozzarella sticks. Blond moms and their daughters volunteer behind the counter, stepping out between customers to watch the game.

There are other differences too. Our team is predominantly Black and Brown. Theirs is entirely white. We live in the Democratic seat of a county that Donald Trump won by 20 points in 2016, which is only part of the reason why Susan can't shake the feeling that the other parents are looking at us funny. If you grew up in the area, as most of them did—it's that kind of place, the kind you don't leave—you think of what everyone here calls "the city" as the ghetto. They mean that it has pockets of deep poverty. They mean that about half of our residents are people of color. They mean that, when they were growing up in the seventies and eighties, the neoliberal economic policies that also decimated other urban centers turned Lancaster into a ghost town. I've heard locals say, in praising the city's resurgence, that there never used to be a reason to come downtown. I've heard the same people call the surrounding county god's country.

It's a beautiful night for a ball game, 78 and sunny. At the end of the first inning, we're losing four-zip.

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I used to think that, for my son, sports might have been avoidable, that with a different combination of neighbors and cousins and classmates he might have spent his afternoons drawing instead of shooting hoops in the alley. He had been such an *absorbed* drawer in his early life, rendering meticulously detailed scenes, but around the age of six or seven baseball began to captivate him, then basketball, then football, then soccer. You're not quitting the piano, we would tell him every time he asked; it was one of the only ways he partook in other strains of culture.

Because they tap into what he calls "the intuitive physical joys of childhood—run, leap, throw, tackle," sports, for Steve Almond, are more or less inevitable (8). To be a child, in his ableist formulation, is to be athletic, as if growth were inseparable from exertion, development from exercise. As if the body wants to keep busy, expending its resources, tiring itself out. It's true that children's energy is often inexhaustible, true that they sometimes seem to possess tiny nuclear reactors, but is vigor really as instinctive and automatic as Almond suggests?

Some kids like to play, as one *Saturday Night Live* skit tells it, while others just sort of wait for adulthood. The sketch is a mock-advertisement for a Fisher Price product called "Wells for Boys," and in it a moody, introverted child stares longingly into a toy wishing well while others play nearby with squirt guns or footballs. When another boy confronts the first, saying he doesn't get the point of the well, the first boy's mother steps in. That's because it's not for you, she chides. You have everything, she says—everything is for you. This one thing is for him.

Boys are socialized to be physical. We expect them to run and throw balls and maybe even break windows, and to a large degree we introduce them to

these activities by encouraging them to go outside and play, signing them up for camps and leagues, watching games with them on TV. And if a boy is looking to make male friends, the sanctioned avenue is sports. If you don't play, or don't play well, your options are limited. In our neighborhood, lousy with boys, a couple of kids don't seem to have any friends. And that's because their joys aren't physical. They may not be staring into a well, but they aren't running through the alley either.

I'll grant that there can be an exuberance to youth, and I'll also grant that kinethesia of all sorts can be delightful, but we privilege the movements of some bodies over others, and we prefer that certain bodies move in certain ways: boys in baseball, girls in ballet, and as for queer or disabled or gender-nonconforming kids, well, what does a childhood look like to someone excluded from our normative conceptions of it?

***

In Mountville, it doesn't take long for us to turn on the ump, whose strike zone is small when the other team is batting but elastic when our boys step to the plate. This ump is an older guy, crotchety and white. He hobbles around a little and is prone to calling out arbitrary and esoteric points of procedure. He scolds one of our kids for not waiting to be summoned into the batter's box, another for fiddling with his helmet. He throws one of our better pitchers off his rhythm by telling him to bring the ball and glove fully together during his windup. None of these things have been an issue for any of the umps over the past eleven games. None of his criticism is directed toward the other team.

As the late afternoon shadows spread across the field, tension settles in, much of it centered on the petty tyrant behind the plate.

"We're getting no help today," one of the dads says, standing at the backstop.

"When everything's a ball," another parent quips, complaining that the other team isn't swinging, "everything looks like a run."

Meanwhile, the Mountville lead increases. By the end of three innings, we're down eight to one. The same baby who's always screaming at our games is screaming now, and the ump—who hasn't acknowledged the comments at all—turns to her to say, gruffly, that she's louder than the parents. Then he takes his little brush from his ball bag and waddles over to the plate. It's maybe the tenth time he's swept it. He's meticulous, this guy. I'll give him that.

The top of the fourth means more of the same. (Are you bored yet, reader? Blame baseball, not me.) They're playing very well, and our kids are playing very poorly. When one of our best hitters puts it deep into left center, it looks like one, maybe two runs will score, but the outfielder miraculously chases it down and, at full extension, pulls the ball in. The runner nearing second is so surprised, he hesitates a moment before turning back to first, barely reaching the base in time. It's a deflating moment.

In the bottom of the inning, we miss an easy tag between bases. What appears to be a clear out at first is ruled safe by the infield ump, wearing a neon shirt and a Mountville cap. By the top of the fifth, they're up twelve to one, and no one, Susan says, is having any fun.

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I wish I could claim that, for our son, it started innocently enough, that the backyard baseball games, first played with a tee, were honest and pure. But his introduction to competition was rocky. He often came home in tears, frustrated that he wasn't as good as the others, ashamed that he couldn't shake it off. The games quickly became about proving who was best. The kids were establishing dominance, and in that some parents were more complicit than others. But even when we questioned how power was operating in our yards, we accepted the medium through which it was exercised. We checked out library books about famous players, bought cards with pictures on one side and stats on the other. We registered for peewee soccer, watched televised football, played video games like FIFA and Madden and the Show. One day I drove to Walmart for a sale on basketball hoops and spent that afternoon cursing the instructions in the alley. Six months later, with snow coming down, I was at Dick's shopping for a miniature version—much easier to assemble—to hang from our son's closet door. We bought a foosball table from Target, a bat from Play it Again. Now every shirt has a logo, and most look like jerseys.

A friend said to me the other day that he wasn't sure where his boys got the idea that the only way to dress was as a jock. Look around, I said. That's how they all dress. For years, our son balked every time he had to wear a shirt with buttons. He wouldn't endure jeans. None of it was natural, but it takes more than will to resist the currents that carry you. It takes a sense that something better is possible, and it takes imagination and courage to seek it.

But mostly it takes time.

When our son learned, as sons do, about guns, everything became one. We were aghast. We tried to stop it, tried to tell him that guns kill people, that killing people isn't good. You can imagine how that went. So we tried a different tack. We embraced it. We bought him toy guns, let him run around pretending to kill his enemies. It was all a form of make-believe, a kind of dress-up in which he could pretend to be what he wasn't: bigger, older, heroic. Then one day it just stopped. He wasn't interested anymore. And now we have bins in our garage full of plastic rifles and Nerf bullets, all of them idle. They're the same bins, curiously enough, that he uses to store his bats and balls.

I'm not necessarily implying that he'll outgrow sports, but rather that for a kid playing sports isn't, at its core, really any different than a Nerf gun. The kids are pretending to be athletes, recreating or reinterpreting the scenes they've witnessed on TV. I did the same in my childhood driveway. Susan did too, imagining herself as Steffi Graf and Chris Evert. But while many parents

would hate the idea of their kids conducting war games, or reenacting famous battles, especially if it happened several nights a week for months on end, when it comes to sports, we don't hesitate.

Sometimes I'm able to make it strange to myself, to focus on how cute they look in their costumes—their little bodies in tiny uniforms. Sometimes I'm able to see the games as the pageants they are. Sometimes, like when they comfort each other after striking out, when I see my son put his hand on a friend's back to cheer him up, I even see some exalting possibilities. Then I remember that line from Orwell about how your face can grow to fit the mask you wear, and I think about how preoccupied we are with sports, how continually and intrusively they press upon and fill our lives, distracting us from Things That Matter, like climate change and patriarchy and racism and malfeasance.

I try to remind myself that even though it's a game—"a defined activity with rules and a playing field and participants," as Stephen Nachmanovitch says—it's being pursued more broadly as play: "the free spirit of exploration, doing and being for its own pure joy" (43). I try to remind myself that there will be plenty of time in his life for Things That Matter, many of which matter to him already. That he's still a kid, if a big one. That his childhood won't last much longer. That when he's an adult he won't remember this as indoctrination, if he remembers it at all.

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In the bleachers, I feel what everyone feels. I say what everyone says, or nearly. *Good eye* or *nice cut*. I even say *you got this* without thinking twice about the verb. I won't say *keep battlin'* or *you gotta protect* or *be a hitter*, but I clap my hands at the appropriate moments. It's a pattern you learn to fall into. The crowd incorporates you, passes on its customs. The experience is shared in the sense that much moves through the group in an unconscious version of the wave. Which is why what happens at Veterans Park in Mountville both fascinates and disturbs me.

A night or two prior I'd been watching the fifth game of the NBA finals when all-star forward Kevin Durant went down with a grimace. He'd missed every game of the series with some lower calf stiffness, and now it seemed he would be out again. The crowd—mild-mannered Canadians, no less—started cheering, celebrating the future Hall of Famer's demise. It was only when the Raptors' point guard, Kyle Lowry, signaled to the arena to knock it off that the tone shifted. Schadenfreude toggled to respect, taunting to clapping.

That was the thing that surprised me: not, sadly, that people would celebrate another person's pain, but that the mood of tens of thousands of people could change jointly and instantaneously—at the suggestion of a single charismatic figure. I know it shouldn't have startled me, but seeing a demonstration unfold in real time suggested something about the unruly power of groups and the ways sports channel it, generally speaking, toward nondestructive ends. For

the Greeks, Nigel Spivey writes, "athletics served to commute, channel, and contain violence" (28). Sports, he says, were like tragedy: they were about catharsis, about purging your emotions. I'm more taken by the way, in a group, we can become passive, lose agency, failing to comprehend the process as it's happening.

The dad sitting next to me, one of my mild-mannered doctor-runners, is now talking directly to the ump, telling him he has to call at least a few strikes. There's a confrontational edge in his voice I haven't heard before. The talkative mother of two other players hasn't said a word in several innings. That night, I'll later learn, she will be so worked up she won't be able to sleep. As for Susan, she has walked away from the field and is now watching from a distance, standing along a railing at its periphery.

"It's just a game," I say, as much to myself as to the parents around me, but somehow it feels like a betrayal to say it, as though I've given up on our boys. I've misread the stakes, maybe, or misread the point of the exercise, which isn't to win exactly, and which isn't even to raise winners.

Nothing's just a game when everything's a game.

***

On the last day of school, our son's backpack is stuffed with papers that confirm my suspicions. Under "Three Adjectives to Describe Me," in a stapled booklet of "Fourth Grade Memories," he has written "Empathetic, Athletic, Energetic." Just below, as "The Important Thing About Me" he has written only "I'm athletic." His biggest wish, he says, is "to play in the MLB," and he says that when he grows up he wants to be an athlete.

I know better, or should. He wanted to be a Jedi at the end of second grade, and when he was a toddler he admired no one as much as the garbage men whose giant trucks he spent hours imitating, pushing miniaturized versions across the floor to pick up tiny piles of crumpled paper. Longstanding obsessions like Legos and Pokémon and even the Civil War have fizzled out, only to be replaced by new ones like Magic: The Gathering, Rick Riordan, and sports. This too shall pass, my mother likes to say, and perhaps it will, but there are few other activities that can become more structurally incorporated in a kid's life than sports. Only school is more integrated into our son's life outside of our home. Star Wars never had that kind of framework, and it wasn't like there was a garbage truck club we regularly took him to after preschool.

Sports formalize enthusiasm to a degree those other passions couldn't, which means we could be sitting in the stands for a long time to come. It also means that sports have the opportunity to influence him in profound and sustained ways. If, like me, you're troubled by the way sports can inculcate the centrality of competition, if you're troubled by the manifold dimensions in which gender and race and class play out on the field, the question is whether to resist, and how. Prohibiting toy guns only made the problem worse, after all.

Elsewhere, in a lone paragraph on a loose worksheet, he's written that kids should play team sports because they teach you how "to work together to achieve the team's goals." He writes that they show kids "how to respect each other" and that it's important to do "physical activities without electronics." His arguments intrigue me. I have nothing against working well with or respecting others, and I can see how, even within a competitive context, kids might learn to cooperate, and to appreciate respective strengths. I would only add that *who* you're respecting and cooperating with matters. If, as in Mountville, your team is made up of suburban white kids, you're only learning to work together with a small portion of the population. And at least in this league there are no girls on any of the teams.

As for goals, what are those, other than winning? To have fun and learn the game, I suppose, although I don't know that any of the boys would offer those unprompted. And what about those teams, and there are many, that rarely win? Would he agree that one of the goals of organized sports is to learn how to fail?

He's clearly absorbed the lessons that too much technology is bad, that electronic entertainments are decadent, and that physical exertion is healthy and virtuous. Maybe that's all true, but I'd hesitate to say that exercise is an unmitigated good, valuable at all times for all people. There are those for whom it's difficult or impossible, physically or culturally, and there's the question of who has access to facilities, leagues, parks, equipment, coaches. Are those unable to exercise, for whatever reason, less virtuous? I'm reminded of the recent trend wherein, pre-pandemic, wealthy private schools were shedding the iPads they only recently acquired while poorer public schools, like my son's, were just beginning to distribute tablets. I'm reminded of something my filmmaker friend Jeremy, a former high school swimmer, once told me: for him, even as an adult, the imaginative world of Zelda is a far richer source of pleasure than any game played with a ball.

But how have I missed the most important point? My son, a ten-year-old boy who dresses like a jock, listed empathy as one of his virtues.

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The game ends according to a mercy rule. In the parking lot, a startlingly handsome man named Ramón who helps coach my son's team rolls down his window to tell me that my son is improving. I think he might actually be confusing my kid with the other boy I'm taking home, but I thank him for the compliment, and for the unpaid work he's putting in with the team.

He's right, though. My son is a better baseball player now than he was at this time last year. He's not the best or most confident player on his team, but over the course of the season he has come up with some big hits and catches. Privately, he often says he isn't very good, and while I would rather he draw or read or practice the piano, it isn't my life he's living, and the social pressures he

faces are not my own. So I tell him he's a good player. I tell him I like watching him play. Both of which are basically true. I also tell him that his skills will be proportionate to his investment, and that if it matters to him to be great at baseball he can be great at baseball.

Because while I want him to feel what it means to improve, to work hard to overcome obstacles, I don't think he has to be good at everything. I don't want to see him fail any more than might be necessary, as a healthy part of development, but I do want him to learn how to prioritize the things he wants to improve, to discover what matters to him in himself and in the world. Maybe baseball will be one of those things, I tell him when he's feeling dejected. Maybe not. I'll think he's great either way.

Whenever he asks me, in the meantime, to play catch, I'll put on my shoes and grab my glove from one of those bins in the garage. Whatever else I think about masculinity and sports, about conformity and competition and power, I can't remember the last book I read to him, the last time I sang him a lullaby. He won't want to do this forever either.

There's mercy in that too.

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Mine

"Out!" and out again.
The boy sinks like sand downhill.
His defeat mine. Why?

David Layton

Baseball in a Time of Plague

2020: An abbreviated 60-Game schedule

They were what I would never be,
those major leaguers: strong, loose-limbed,
easy at the plate, in spite of pitchers
holding murder in their hands.

Every one a hero: the catcher
dressed for harm, the infielders
chatting and shuffling in the dirt,
the lonely outfielders, waiting
to solve complex parabolas of flight.

So let the games begin, although
the land is stunned, afraid,
the nation sickened. "PLAY BALL!" they'll say,
as if baseball was what they really meant.

Conrad Geller

Roller Skating

Roller skating, a school fundraiser, the girl I didn't like—
thin lips, wet palms—whisking me away. Without thinking,
John, my closest friend, the three of us leveling off, taking
to ourselves, and then slowly from one another, the aria of
sound, a deep tone I cannot remember. The girl with short
curly wet hair, working herself to betray no doubt, nothing
in the way of physical inducements, albeit, for my friend,
whom she tolerated like light to be grasped in the light of its
own evidence—the self not foregone but "partly within" and
"partly beyond"—for there is always something that goes un-
touched or that remains unopposed, which, come to think of
it, affectively establishes the domain, which says love is
thwarted by more as yet to be but just now told reasons.

James Lee

Back of the Bus: Season on the Brink, Life in the Sink (Part 2 of 2)

Mike Bruckner

Back of the Bus is a novella about traveling with one of the worst college basketball teams in America, a claim supported by the team's three consecutive four-win seasons at one point. Further, the school remains one of only a few teams playing since 1900 that has never made the NIT or the NCAA. The piece offers both humor and insight to the non-glitzy side of Division I basketball. Though based on real events, this is a work of fiction. This is the second half of the novella, beginning with Chapter 6. The first five chapters appeared in *Aethlon* 39:2.

CHAPTER SIX—TOURNAMENT TESTED

Brooks was relaxing and the food was being served. "We're in the air," said Brooks, "we're on our way to F-L-A." Brooks had just finished updating his game notes and checking the record books. The food was en route, so he folded down his tray and prepared for the meal.

Airplane food really did not bother Brooks. Not too many foods ever bothered Brooks. What he hated was being cramped. Elbows in, no room to spread, and the tray pushing against his ample protrusion, also known as his stomach. He always felt cramped.

The beverage cart went by and then a young flight attendant, quite attractive, came over to Brooks and said, "Mr. Brooks, Michael Brooks?"

Brooks looked up with surprise. A few cackles from the players in the row behind, as the attractive lady was leaning right over Brooks.

Sheepishly, Brooks responded "yes." The flight attendant said, "We received a phone call for you from a Mr. DeLong, he's stuck in Capital City."

"That can't be, he's on the plane." And Brooks looked to DeLong's seat, two rows behind, across the aisle. Empty.

Where the hell is Tim? thought Brooks. Brooks reviewed the actions at the gate. He was positive DeLong had been at the gate. He handed DeLong his ticket and WATCHED him as he went down the ramp. He had no tickets left. DeLong HAD to be on the plane.

But he wasn't. So, Brooks followed the flight attendant to the front of the plane. Again, oohs and aahs and heckling from the players. Brooks was used to the immaturity, but he actually liked the thought of following this voluptuous young woman to a small compartment behind a royal blue curtain.

There, Brooks saw the phone. He picked it up and said, "Tim, what's going on?" DeLong frustrated Brooks. Nothing DeLong did surprised Brooks. And Brooks knew that nothing was done with malice or intent, it was just that DeLong was very rarely focused and had the concentration span of a five-year-old.

Indeed, it was DeLong's voice on the other end of the phone.

"I'm in Capital City."

"What happened? I saw you get on the plane."

"I was on the plane, but I got off."

"Why did you get off?"

"I had to call the hotel to see if they had my uniform and bag."

"You left your bag at the hotel? How could you forget your bag?

"I don't know. I was carrying some stuff for some other guys and thought they had my bag, but they didn't. I went down the ramp and remembered that my bag was in the corner of the lobby, and all of the ones they were loading were right in the main area of the lobby. I called the hotel, and they said my bag was there. When I hung up, I came back to the ramp, and the plane was gone."

"So, you're still in Capital City?"

"I talked to the lady at the hotel, they're sending my bag on the van. And, the gate attendant says she can put me on a flight to Baltimore, and then to Tampa and I'd only get in two hours after you guys."

Is there anything scarier than Tim DeLong flying by himself? thought Brooks. Here's a guy who missed a team flight and now he's on his own.

"Tim, listen to me," said Brooks. "Do not miss the Baltimore flight and do not miss the Tampa flight. We are staying at the Ramada Inn near Busch Gardens East. Write that down. Ramada Inn near Busch Gardens East. There

are 10 Ramada Inns in Tampa, so you need to know it's BUSCH GARDENS EAST. Now listen, when you get to Tampa Airport, find a pay phone, and call me at the hotel. Get your bag and take a cab to the hotel. We'll pay for the cab, but I'll need to know that you're at the airport, so I can be out front waiting for you."

"I have $10, and I have a credit card too," said DeLong.

"Tim, it's like a $30 cab ride from the airport to the hotel. And you'll probably want to eat something. Most cabbies aren't taking credit cards. Use your credit card for food, but when you get here, call me at the hotel, and take a cab."

Brooks cringed, hung up the phone and went back to his seat. The nice "relaxing" leg of the trip, from Capital City to Charlotte, was just about over. Now, all he had to do was make sure everyone else made it from one gate to the other in 25 minutes, and the squad did not miss the connection to Tampa.

The connection went smoothly. Not a hitch. Everyone was at the gate on time and the tickets were passed out. Brooks checked each player and staff member as they went down the runway. He had only one ticket left in his hand—Tim DeLong's, and that was of no use to anyone anymore.

The plane arrived in Tampa on time and, other than losing one player, without incident. The team gathered around the baggage carousel. The black conveyor belt had a sign for the USAir flight, but it was not moving.

Buss took out a one-dollar bill and started the betting on which way the carousel would move, clockwise or counterclockwise. Buss thought clockwise and slapped the bill on the belt. Lowe took out a dollar bill and said the opposite way and the bet was on.

After about three minutes, a loud bell rang, a flashing light swirled, and the carousel moved. Buss won the bet and grabbed both dollar bills. The bags started coming out. As usual, a crowd two to three people deep waited along the carousel track. Then, Buss jumped on the carousel, laid himself prone on the conveyor belt and went around the baggage terminal.

Everyone thought he would stop before he hit the flap that went behind the terminal to where the baggage handlers are. But this was Jim Buss. He did not stop. About three minutes later, Buss came out a side door, red-faced.

Sheepishly, he said, "They weren't too happy. A couple of big guys were really pissed off. I thought they were going to hit me."

Jayner looked at Buss and thought, "Maybe they should have." Jayner liked Buss, but he was so immature. It was good to see him get put in his place. Buss was always looking for attention and being a wise guy. Jayner, one of the most reserved and laid-back athletic trainers in the world, didn't like loud, immature wise guys and Buss filled that description to a tee. The bags all came out, including one for DeLong. Okey grabbed DeLong's bag and informed Kerry and Brooks that he had it.

"Thanks, Trace," said Brooks. "You've now been responsible for exactly one more bag than Timmy has taken care the entire year."

Okey was a tough kid, but a kind soul. He had been one of the premier players in the state of Connecticut, but his playing time in Giles's conservative system had been reduced to garbage time. He knew he could play, and a lot of players on the team knew it. But a shooter needs to shoot and be allowed to go through streaks. Okey never got a chance. He'd miss the first shot or two and get yanked. After being yanked three or four times his freshman year, he was reduced to a reserve role. To a shooter, it was unfair.

Okey did not handle the limited playing time well during the first year. After that, he resigned himself to the role. He loved WMU, loved his teammates and knew he wanted to stay. He could have transferred and many schools would have been happy to have him. Still, he stayed. Basketball became a chore, rather than a love; however, he enjoyed the camaraderie and genuinely liked most of his teammates.

Brooks liked Okey and really wished he would get a fair shot. But that was not his call. Once they arrived at the hotel, everyone settled in for the night. Brooks waited for the call from DeLong, which came around 9 p.m. At 9:30, lo and behold, DeLong pulled up in a cab and Brooks was $35 lighter in the wallet. Brooks and DeLong just looked at each other. DeLong knew he screwed up, and Brooks knew it wouldn't be the last time either.

Practice would start at 8 a.m. at the arena. The tournament banquet would take place that night, and the games were Friday and Saturday night. Southern Florida University had a beautiful home arena. The Lions got the fourth best locker room, the fourth best practice time and the third best hotel, since the host team stayed in their own dorm rooms.

Wake up calls are at 7:15 and people roll out of bed, put their sweats and practice gear on and then jump on the bus. A small miracle, everyone was on time and ready to roll. Practice was an hour, and uneventful. Hancock, who had notoriously bad ankles and was supposed to be wearing high-top sneakers for ankle supports, was wearing low sneakers. Jayner, standing right near Giles, spotted the low-tops.

"Kev, what's with the low sneaks?"

"I didn't bring them this trip. I forgot them."

Giles chimed in. "Kevin, with your ankles, you forgot your high-tops? Lie to me, but don't tell me the truth."

Brooks was within earshot of that quote. He and Jayner looked at each other and caught each other's eye. Both thought, at the same time, "lie to me, but don't tell me the truth?"

Another Gilesism for the files.

Practice ended at 9 and the next team was stretching out as the Lions left the floor. For some reason, every player on the other team looked huge, like he was 6-7 or 6-8 and 250 pounds. And a couple of them looked like they

were 25 years old. WMU looked puny when they took the floor, and guys like Buss, Thompson, Plummer, Lowe, and Martin barely shaved. Plummer and Thompson had next to no muscle and each had ankles like pencils. And, when they didn't wear socks, their ankles looked even smaller.

The good news about the early practice is that the rest of the day was free time. The tournament gave Giles enough free passes to Busch Gardens for the entire team. If anybody didn't want to go, they could hang around the hotel pool. Everybody got $12 for meal money, too. The only stipulation was that the team would meet, dressed in jacket and tie, for the tournament banquet at 5 p.m.

Jayner and Brooks loaded up the van and took 12 of the 15 players to Busch Gardens. Giles and Kerry stayed back, and three players decided to go back to bed and spend time at the pool.

Busch Gardens was awesome, as usual. Buss was tremendously juvenile. He told Brooks he had never been on a roller coaster before. Brooks could not believe that. He thought Buss was kidding, since amusement parks seemed to be right up Buss's alley.

Brooks made a point of getting Buss and Jayner on the Phoenix. It's not a roller coaster, but a ride that goes back and forth, higher and higher each time. After about 10 times back and forth, it goes so high that it flips over due to centrifugal or centripetal force, or some other physics property that probably only Dale Martin understood. It went up and over two or three times and then returned to swaying back and forth with less height and less force each time, until it stopped.

Brooks succeeded in getting Buss and Jayner on the ride. After two sways and barely moving, Jayner looked green. He was not doing well. Buss was loving it. When the ride was at the apex and almost ready to flip, Jayner was white as a ghost. Buss, after laughing for the first few minutes, appeared to be quite scared. When it flipped, Brooks thought Jayner was going to lose his lunch. Buss's eyes were popping out and he had a look of stark terror on his face. As the ride slowed to a halt, Brooks was laughing, but had genuine concern for Jayner.

"Donny, are you okay? You don't look so good," said Brooks.

"Dude, I'm still spinning. Help me," said Jayner.

Brooks looked at Buss. He was trying to act cool, defying the look of fear Brooks had seen just seconds earlier. The bravado and machismo took over.

"Let's go again," yelled Buss. "That's awesome. It's nothing. Let's do it."

Jayner was having no part of a second ride. Not now, not today, not ever. Brooks helped Jayner to the railing outside the ride, half-laughing, half-worried. Jayner was not the same the rest of the day. He went on a few "baby rides," but would not get near a roller coaster or a spinning ride the rest of the day. In fact, he refused to even look at the Phoenix the rest of the day.

Brooks and Jayner lost Buss after the first ride. In fact, Busch Gardens is such a massive park, that with 10,000+ people in it, they saw very little of any of the Lions. They saw Okey eating a couple of times and caught some other players running for a ride, but mostly it was just the two of them. Relieved of their baby-sitting duties, the pair relaxed and had fun.

At the designated time of 3:45, everybody met at the gate and loaded up the van. Since DeLong was one of the ones staying back at the hotel, rounding everyone up went fairly smoothly. By 4 p.m., the van was loaded and the 10-minute trip back to the hotel began. After some quick showers, it was off to the tournament banquet.

Kenny "Goose" Plummer was decked out for the pre-tournament banquet. Suave was Kenny's middle name. Kenny was a good-looking African-American kid. Articulate, from a middle-class family. Book smart, but street-wise too. Not street smart like Joey Canfield, but smart enough to know everything that went on around him.

The team used to kid Plummer about his dress. Last year, until Giles put a stop to it, Plummer used to travel with a mini-ironing board and a travel iron. Whether Giles actually put a stop to it or a clumsy skycap banged up the ironing board so badly it was rendered useless is up for debate. But, Plummer, ever resourceful, figured out that hotels will deliver an iron to your room for free and all you have to do is tip them. Now, instead of lugging everything through airports, he could still look "fine" for the ladies and look even finer carrying just a garment bag. Kenny's suit, the shades, often a fedora and always the sweet shoes made him dapper. Carrying an ironing board often cramped his style. It's no great wonder he never picked up a woman in an airport.

Only Kenny Plummer could attend a basketball tournament banquet with four teams, traveling parties and about 150 men and 10 women and come away with a date. For Kenny, it didn't matter that it was one of the secretaries from one of the visiting teams, and she was 45-years-old. Imagine a team traveling with a secretary. The Lions were lucky if they were able to get all of the coaches, a trainer and an SID paid for. The secretary was a light-skinned African-American woman. She dressed nice, had a twinge of a southern accent and was tall, thin and, most importantly, free after the banquet.

Plummer made the hit during the pre-tournament "cocktail" reception. Giles forbids the players to drink (ha!) during the receptions, including those over 21. So, Plummer still made the hit with his glass of tonic and a lime. He arranged a meeting back at the team hotel for 10 p.m. And, Kenny wanted her to bring friends. Amazingly, rather than protect herself and surround herself with other women, the secretary said she'd rather come alone, since "it would be more fun."

For Plummer, life was good. Sure enough, at 10 p.m., Janice, the secretary, arrived in front of the hotel. She pulled up in a sleek, metallic blue convertible with the top down. She had ditched her dress and was now in a casual, navy

blue, tight polo shirt with white pants. The white pants, against the blue car and the blue shirt, accented Janice's long legs. From the back, she looked like a model. From the front, she was equally attractive. Only her neck and some crow's feet around her eyes gave away the fact that she was old enough to be Kenny's mother.

Two gin and tonics, perhaps three, would probably take the age factor right out of the equation. Plummer hopped in the car and the two went barhopping. The team played the late game the next day, 8 p.m. But Giles wanted a shoot-around and a walk-through practice at 10 a.m. The bus would leave at 9:30.

Plummer never returned to the hotel that night, and nobody ever did bed check. Plummer returned to the hotel around 8:30 in the morning and looked bedraggled. Brooks and Jayner were in the lobby reading a newspaper. Plummer was all smiles and Brooks and Jayner knew before he ever said anything what had occurred. Plummer was easy to read. He did not brag, and he was a gentleman, but the basics are that he and Janice stayed out until 1 a.m. and went back to her place. After a few screwing sessions, they slept. Janice awoke at 7:30, gave Plummer one last going away present and got ready for work. Plummer left at 8:15 and was turning the key to Room 214 at 8:30.

As he turned the key, he heard yelling from inside. It was his roommate, Joey Canfield. "Hey, hey, don't come in."

Plummer stepped back, and said, "it's me, Joe, let me in."

"Yo, yo, Goose, man, gimme a minute." Plummer walked down the hall. About two minutes later, a woman came out of Canfield's room. Tall, dark, lots of make-up. Pretty, but in a beat-up sort of way. Younger than Janice, but not nearly as fine. Plummer just shook his head as he watched the woman get on the elevator and disappear from sight.

"Joe, man, you hooked up last night?" said Plummer.

"Goose, man, she was a hooker, a hooker. She did me and Thompson for $20 apiece. In New York, you pay $100 for that stuff. We got it for $20."

Truth be told, Canfield said 'a hundrit dollah.' Canfield came from nothing. Welfare. Poverty. Yet, somehow, some way, the man always had money. It's anybody's guess how that money ended up in his pocket. Plummer cracked up. He should have known. Canfield was 6-5, 250-pounds and as ugly as the day is long. He looked like a black Herman Munster. Plummer should have known he could not snag a lady in one night without paying for it. Plummer went inside the hotel room and a pair of silk red panties was hanging over the desk table lamp. There was an odor in the room. A mixture of sweat and sex. Maybe the smell of burning nylon from the panties over the lamp too.

Plummer started cracking up. He just shook his head, took off his clothes and jumped in the shower to get ready for the shootaround.

The shootaround was uneventful. After emphasizing only two comments about Southern Florida, Giles managed a 20-minute speech on how to

penetrate the trapping press off the inbounds. The squad never practiced it, but the lecture probably sufficed.

The team went back to the hotel and basically slept until the 3:30 pre-game meal. Brooks and Jayner hung out at the pool, and several team members also came out for a while. Haltz, all 300-plus pounds of him, came rolling poolside. With a book in one hand, a safari hat in the other, Haltz pulled up a chaise lounge near Brooks and Jayner.

The duo just laughed. Haltz would never read a page of the book. When Bobby pulled up a chair, it was for conversation, not for reading. He probably just carried the book for effect. Or, maybe he carried it just in case there was nobody poolside to talk to. But, if there were people around, Haltz would be talking. More than likely, whether he knew the people or not, if Haltz was around, he was holding court. He was loud, with a booming voice. He enjoyed life and Brooks and Jayner enjoyed having him around. He livened the place up, knew basketball and kept Giles from going over the edge. As loud and talkative as he was, he was a calming influence to Giles, which meant he was a calming influence on the rest of the team.

As it closed in on 3:30, the group broke up to change for the pre-game meal. Discipline had broken down a bit. Jayner remembered the days when it was always jacket and tie. If nothing else, a WMU sweater or a WMU golf shirt. At worst, WMU-issued sweats for a pre-game meal. Not to be. This was Florida, and pretty much anything goes. Players were in just about everything, including shorts and boxers. Giles held the rule on t-shirts and demanded shirts with collars, but there were still some fairly ugly shirts with collars. Flip-flops and ratty sneakers also strolled into the dining room.

At some tournaments, the tournament provides team hosts. These are alumni or fans who love basketball. The individual, and often his family, is assigned one of the teams. The team host eats with the team, makes sure everything is satisfactory, helps with directions and even sits on the team bench during the game. Over the years, many team hosts became friendly with opposing coaches.

"Hoss" was the WMU host. He was about 6-2, 350-pounds. He was already on the bus, in the second seat, waiting for Giles and the squad. He was a terrific guy with a passion for college basketball, and the perfect host. He and Giles, the assistant coaches and Brooks hit it off right from the start. Basketball, food, and beer joints were the key topics of conversation, and Hoss knew a lot about all three.

Hoss took the Lions to a Texas steak joint about five minutes from the hotel. Good food and lots of it. Further, it certainly looked like Hoss knew what he was talking about when it came to food.

The pre-game meal was also fun, at least for WMU. A lot of Division I teams get too serious during the pre-game, and the meal becomes a chore. Coaches use the opportunity to lecture the team or run through last-minute

preparations. Not Giles. He just sat alone and got nervous. As always, Brooks was at his side, lurking and waiting for the second meal.

The salads were huge, and the rolls just kept coming. Probably a dozen baskets. Hoss was excited that the Lions loved it. He wanted to be a good host. The steaks were delivered, at least 20 ounces and grilled to perfection. A huge side dish of cole slaw and some small potatoes.

DeLong looked at his potatoes and was mystified. "Man, how come outside of New England, you can't get the big potatoes?"

Canfield piped up almost immediately, "That's because they don't have any cows down here."

DeLong accepted the answer. Giles, Haltz, Kerry, Jayner and Brooks, all within earshot, had their jaws open. None of them could figure out the comment. Jayner finally said, "Joey thinks that potatoes come from cows. For real, I think he thinks that." Kerry took a deep breath, sighed, and shook his head. Giles's mind wandered back to the familiar song, "Nobody knows the troubles I've seen…."

By 4:15, the meal was over and the bus rolled back to the hotel. The bus did not leave for the game until 6, and the arena was only 15 minutes away. The Lions were playing USF in the late game, 8 p.m. The first two teams squared off at 6, and, as always, Giles wanted everyone on the team to scout the possible opposition. Kerry and Haltz went to the arena early, scouting one team each. The team arrived at 6:15 and was escorted to the dressing room.

Guest Quote: As the players traveled through the salad bar at a local restaurant for a pre-game meal, the choices included Russian, Italian, French and Lo-Cal dressing. Joey Canfield asked, "What's this here local dressing? They make it right here in Tampa?"

CHAPTER SEVEN—A BAD WEEK CONTINUES

The game versus Southern Florida was pretty uneventful, at least as far as WMU games go. There were only a few memorable moments. USF led by five to seven through the first half. The Lions were down five and had a chance to cut the lead to three with seven seconds left. The last seven seconds of the half were a microcosm of the season. Thompson went in for a dunk and missed. A USF player rebounded the ball, threw it to half-court. That player tossed it into the corner. The USF player launched a ball from the deep corner. Swish, just as the horn was going off. Seven-point game. As the horn went off, the player who made the basket ran into the locker room, fists pumping and arms raised. The rest of his team chased him.

The Lions also ran to their locker room. As the teams left the floor, Giles shook his head, stood there for 10 seconds and kicked the chair, which had spun around during the commotion. Giles got his foot caught between the seat and the bottom support bar and started to lose his balance. He did a pirouette and managed to regain control before falling to the floor. Brooks was the only

one to see it, and he was in tears with laughter. Giles finally untangled himself from the chair, set it straight in a line with the other chairs, and made his way to the locker room.

USF came out hot in the second half and increased the lead quickly. The Bulls were ahead by about 15 most of the way. The Lions made a brief second half run. Cutting it to nine, Buss went in for a wide-open lay-up, which WOULD have cut the lead to seven. But Buss slipped in a wet spot and missed the lay-up and the Bulls went down the other way. That's bad enough. When the ball boys ran out to wipe off the floor, Buss made a terrific steal, put his head down, and bolted for the basket. He never looked up and charged into the ball boys. Towels, the ball boys, and Buss all went flying in separate directions. The ball trickled out of bounds and the referee, sheepishly, blew his whistle and pointed in the opposite direction.

Giles and Haltz just looked at each other. It was an incredible play. One that could only happen to WMU, yet seemingly the type of play that happened often.

The Lions dropped a 14-point decision to the hosts and returned for the 6 p.m. consolation game the next night against Jefferson University. The Tribe had a good team, but they had played a tough game last night and were mentally exhausted. The Lions sensed this and gave it everything they had. With two minutes to play, WMU held a one-point lead. But the Lions had nothing left in the tank. JU had been playing a lackluster game, but with two minutes to go, a few of the stars turned it up a notch and registered a five-point victory.

The trip home was relatively easy. At least the entire traveling party arrived intact. The plane was a few hours late, so Giles decided that once the bus landed in Boston, the group should stop for a "few minutes" to get a bite to eat.

Bad move. A few minutes turned into an hour. The bus pulled over between a McDonald's and sub/pizza joint. Half the group went to each restaurant. After about 45 minutes, Giles sent Haltz and Kerry in to gather the troops. After an hour, the bus started rolling. The bus ride from Boston to Chester is only an hour. The stop took longer than the ride.

Randy Thompson jumped on the bus last, holding his Army jacket tightly. Randy must have had 25 pockets, and he started pulling out fruit pies from every direction. "Who wants a blueberry pie? I got a cherry pie with your name on it. Apple? Who wants apple pie?"

Giles looked at Haltz and Kerry and said, dead serious, "Isn't it nice that Randy bought fruit pies for everyone?"

Brooks, Haltz and Kerry all looked at each other. They all knew that the famous Randy Thompson five-finger discount, borrowed from Joey Canfield, had been imposed; however, Giles was so naïve. He truly believed that Thompson spent his entire per diem, and then some, buying fruit pies for the rest of the team. Brooks made eye contact with Haltz as if to say, "Does he really believe that?"

And they both shook their heads.

The week that never should have been continued with home games against Northern Coastal and Sacred Cross. The Crusaders were quite good, sporting a 12-4 record. The Lions, at this point, were 1-9. But the Lions were in the midst of a 31-game home losing streak. That was believed to be the longest home losing streak in the country. Naturally, the NCAA does not recognize records like that, but Brooks confirmed it with a source at the NCAA. Not many people lose 31 in a row anywhere, but to lose that many on your own court is really quite a feat.

For the North Coastal game, the promotions department and Brooks concocted "Guaranteed Win Day." Pretty bold for a 1-9 team with a 31-game home losing streak. But what the heck. The Lions were averaging about 350 fans per game. So, Guaranteed Win Day it was. If WMU didn't win, the fans would "get their money back." In reality, they got a free ticket to another game. Any game of their choice. Easy to do, since there were plenty of tickets.

Brooks even had certificates made up. If the Lions broke the streak, people could present their ticket and buy t-shirts at the local sporting goods store that said, "I was there on 'Break the Streak' night."

This turned into an excellent promotion. The fact that North Coastal was a strong rivalry, and the streak had garnered some attention, and the promotion was just bizarre enough to attract curiosity seekers, nearly 3000 people showed up for the game. Nearly 10 times the average draw. It was a fun night.

However, North Coastal would not play along. The Lions played tough, intense ball all night. But the Bruins came from three points down with five minutes to go to pull out a 77-74 victory. Despite the loss, the Lions played well, and the crowd loved it and appreciated the effort.

Brooks always subscribed to the theory that "empty seats don't buy popcorn and they can't come back," so promotion was important. Seeing nearly 3000 people in the stands made everyone at WMU realize that the people in the area were starved for basketball. All they wanted was respectable basketball. If WMU could ever go .500 a few years in a row, the entire region, maybe even the entire state, would go crazy. The hockey team at WMU was a national contender. Every game was a sellout, and they were on TV all the time. Yet, the region was a basketball area and craved good, winning, Division I basketball.

Brooks actually wanted to hire a bus for the next home game. If they can't win at home, maybe it's something about the bus ride that makes the difference. He approached Giles in the hallway the next day.

"Frank. I've got an idea. We've lost 32 straight at home. Let's pile them in a bus, make them carry their uniforms," said Brooks. "We'll drive around for an hour, pull up in front of the gym and then go to the locker room."

Giles looked at Brooks as if he had two heads. "You're absolutely nuts. People think I'm nuts, but you're the one."

"Alright, Frank. How 'bout if we just wear away jerseys?"

"You're crazy. We'll get one soon, don't worry." And Giles walked away.

For Sacred Cross, the streak was downplayed slightly, even though it was up to 32 straight losses. The Lions jumped out to a 12-0 lead and SC called a timeout. Giles was so overcome with emotion that he forgot about the team huddle and jumped into the first row of the bleachers. Fists pumping and sport coat flying, Giles was encouraging the crowd. Some people thought it was great. Others, including Athletic Director Randy Garabedian and assistant AD Tootie LaRochelle, were not amused. They had grown tired of Giles's antics and thought a change was needed. They supported and liked Giles, but an AD and a Division I program could support a 4-22 coach for only so long.

The Lions went up 25-2 … another timeout and another Giles fist pumping, urging the crowd on. The streak was certainly going to end. As Lee Corso used to say on ESPN, "not so fast my friend." The Cross cut the lead to 12 at the half and with five minutes to go, a three-pointer knotted the score. Ouch. Yet, Ned Dolan put his head down and played the last five minutes like a man on a mission. As long as nobody fouled Ned, the Lions would be okay. He turned in a great defensive play, then had a terrific pass, which led to a Thompson lay-up. A big rebound by Dolan led to a Donnie Brown jumper from the corner. With 30 seconds to go, Thompson dribbled over half-court. A crazed Giles was yelling "Randy, Randy, how much time?"

Thompson pretended not to hear Giles. But, after about 10 "Randy, Randy, how much time?" comments, Thompson casually dribbled over near the bench and said, "Thirty seconds, coach," and calmly dribbled away.

With seven seconds to go, the Lions led by two. The Crusaders came down court and DeLong and Canfield went up to block a shot. Both got a piece of the ball. The horn sounded and there was silence. People were waiting for a whistle and a foul, but it never came. The silence lasted about three seconds until people figured out that the streak was over. The 32-game home losing streak was history.

DeLong and Martin grabbed Jayner's scissors and started cutting down the nets. Brown and Dolan, typically, headed for the liquid. They grabbed the Gatorade bucket and quickly doused Giles. Has to be the only 2-10 team ever to dump Gatorade on a coach.

Guest Quote(s): At major tournaments, it's customary for traveling parties to receive gifts. At one tournament, the team received mini-CD players. Mike Brooks, jokingly: "When they said we were getting CDs, I thought we were getting money markets." Joey Canfield, seriously: "Is that a good brand?"

CHAPTER EIGHT—THE STRETCH DRIVE

If 2-10 sounds ugly, tack on six more losses. The Lions were 2-16 heading to Green Mountain. Funny things happen when WMU and Green Mountain meet. First, they are almost invariably white knucklers. Down to the wire,

one- or two-point games. Somehow, WMU played well in GMU's gym and somehow, GMU played well on the Lions' home floor. The last eight meetings were decided by fewer than three points, and all were won by the visitors.

The GMU gym was dark and had a yellowish lighting tint to it. The floor, like WMU, was hard and pure. Other than the lighting, it was a shooter's gym. The ride to GMU took four hours, with a stop for dinner at the two-hour mark. An alumnus always provided the pre-game meal for the GMU trip. It was generally good, but somehow the quantity of food never matched that of a few of the other favorite eating spots. Come to think of it, maybe that's why the Lions played better at GMU than at Suburban State or other places. Maybe the quality of the opponent was less of a factor than the fact that the Lions could actually move after a meal. Maybe, but then again, maybe not.

This game was typical. It was a barn-burner—if you can call a Division I basketball game with 337 fans a barn-burner. Those in attendance were treated to an excellent game. Both teams played about as well as they can play. GMU was about the only team on the schedule where the Lions actually had an advantage in size and athleticism. Dolan took advantage and had a big game. Brown hit a few key jumpers and the score was knotted at 73 with a minute to go. You know things are going well when Dolan calmly sinks two free throws in the final minute. Add in a Brown jumper and a rebound and put back by Canfield, and the Lions escaped with a 79-77 victory.

Billy Rader, the sports editor for the student newspaper, was on the bus. He was pumped. "I got the dunk. I got the dunk. I got the winning basketball and the dunk." First off, a photo of a White Mountain player dunking is a rare photo. "Winning basket" photos are also rare. So, Billy was naturally excited.

About 15 minutes into the ride, Billy sheepishly came back to the card table. Brooks and Jayner were there playing cards. Billy said, "No film in the camera."

Rader was almost in tears. Very few people loved Lion basketball more than Rader. Like Brooks and Jayner, he had witnessed hundreds of losing games, and as a student, he was there for only four years. His excitement about the win was genuine. Capturing two fantastic moments in an otherwise dismal season was thrilling. However, in an instant, upon discovering he did not "get the pictures," he was crushed.

"How do you NOT have film in the camera?" asked Brooks.

"I had film in the camera, it just didn't click in right. It never wound around, so I got nothing."

These were the days before digital cameras. You actually had to load film into a camera and then roll it through. In those days, a roll of film only took 24 or 36 pictures, and you did not see the results for many hours, usually days.

For years, Brooks would tell this story, and every time he saw Rader he would joke with him. Right now, however, was not the time for joking. He knew Rader was heartbroken and even a little embarrassed.

For everyone else other than Rader, the ride home was fun. They were always in a good mood. For the first hour or two they talked and joked. Eventually, everyone except the card players would fall asleep.

Mark Lowe, Jayner, and Brooks set up shop at the table. Brown and Dolan were talking about the game with Thompson and Canfield. Giles sat up front re-playing the game from the opening tap. Kerry and Haltz lasted about two replays of the entire game. Haltz then went for a walk down the aisle and Kerry nodded off.

Lowe was normally low key and a terrific kid. You knew he was going to be successful. He played 10-12 minutes PER YEAR but loved to practice and never complained. His father owned a trophy and plaque company. He was talking about helping in the business and then talked about a new line of sportswear. And, then, Lowe got on a roll.

"I think I'm going to call it DNP fraternity sportswear. DNP as in DID NOT PLAY. Delta Nu Phi. It's for guys who don't play. It comes with sweat marks already under the arms, so it looks like you played. You can actually get padding built into the shorts, so your butt doesn't hurt when you are sitting the pines. DNP for black guys will come with an Afro-Sheen, so your hair glistens a little and it looks like you played."

"For short white guys," added Lowe, "it could come with a blow-up doll girlfriend too."

Lowe went on and others chirped in with suggestions. All part of the Frank Giles traveling circus. 3-16 never felt better.

Six more losses and things seemed to blend right in. About the only notable things that happened were the bus getting stuck at Bay State University and Giles taking a couple of technicals in a really close game at Western Falls.

When the bus pulled in to the Bay State gym (it was a gym then, not the beautiful arena they have now), there is a front entrance and a back entrance, where cars and vans can park. The bus driver decided that since the locker rooms were out back, he would pull the bus in. The bus barely got under a footbridge and even scraped the top of the bus along the bottom of the concrete bridge. When the team got out, so did about 8000 pounds of equipment and people. The bus rose ever so slightly. At that point, a Bay State security guard signaled the bus driver that he was not allowed to park in that lot. The driver went to move the bus and got to the bridge. But the bus was now 3-4 inches higher than when it was fully loaded. The top of the bus more than scraped the footbridge. The concrete dented the top of the bus. About one foot in, the drive realized it and tried to back up. That made it worse. Finally, the security guard, after several pleas from the driver, let him stay there. The bus stayed there the entire game. After the game, the team came out, looked at the bus and just shook their collective heads. Once the gear was loaded on, and the entire team was seated, the bus was able to move forward. It still scratched the top, but Jayner figured they were lucky they weren't riding home in a convertible.

Western Falls was a quick plane trip. Even DeLong made it this time. In the past, Jayner and Brooks led excursions to the actual scenic Western Falls just across the border into Canada, and other area sites. But after taking two foreign players across the border illegally last year and getting stuck in a blizzard that came out of nowhere, they decided to stay calm and hang around the hotel. In 10 trips to Western Falls, the Lions had been snowed in seven times. Ever wonder how come you never get snowed in Tampa or New Orleans, and it's always places with a frozen tundra like Western Falls?

Nonetheless, this trip did not bring snow. Buffalo and Western Falls had just finished a period of 40 straight days of some accumulation and about 63 inches of snow were on the ground. But the Lions were in town and it was sunny.

Western Falls's gym had about 1200 seats. The capacity was listed at 3500. Ridiculous. That night, there were about 3500 people—and 2300 of them were standing. When the sun went down, it was about eight degrees. Still, no snow. Half the front row had their shirts off, and the craziness set in. 1200 alumni and faculty and parents were in their seats and the other 2300, mostly students, were standing on top of each other. It was a zoo.

The best part of playing at Western Falls was that the benches were just folding chairs and they were as close to the out of bounds line as you could get. In fact, Martin and DeLong were sitting on the bench and their feet were in bounds. Actually in-bounds.

Western Falls had a terrific team and they were poised to clobber the Lions. But Canfield and Brown had the games of their lives. Canfield was devastating inside and Brown was 12 of 13 from long range. He was actually 13 of 14, but the ref called him out of bounds on one play. Brown eyed a long jumper from the corner. He dribbled and took a step back for the fade-away. Swish—except the ref ruled his foot was on the line. Out of bounds. Incredible.

The Lions played as well as they could play and then the roof fell in. And, it was Giles who collapsed the ceiling. It was 85-all with two minutes to play. Most people didn't think the Lions could score 85 points at all, never mind against a good team like Western Falls. With two minutes to go, the Eagles tossed an alley-oop. The player dunked it, hung on the rim and pumped his fist and his right arm, while still hanging on the rim.

The closeness of the game—the excitement in the gym and the fact that victory against a good team was possible—was all too much for Giles. As the player hung on the rim, igniting the crowd, Giles ran to the referee at mid-court. First off, he was on the court. Second, he was in a PINK three-piece suit. Third, as he approached the ref, he slid and wound up on his backside, still pleading his case.

"That's a technical, he can't do that," yelled Giles, while still flat on his back.

"Yes, it is, a technical, right there," claimed the ref.

Emphatically, he pointed at Giles and gave the T signal. From there, the game became a farce. The Eagles made both free throws, took the in-bounds pass and threw an alley-oop for a dunk. Then, they stole the in-bounds pass and went in for a lay-up. The final score, incredibly, was 105-87. That's 20-2 in the final two minutes. It was a sight that people who were there will never forget. Every time any of those in attendance see a technical, they'll think of Giles "doing the turtle," on his back in a pink three-piece suit at center court. Never again.

There was one more game before the end of the season. A home game against St. Nicholas. But, after the trip to Florida, Guaranteed Win Day, the streak-breaker, and a 3-20 record, it was anti-climactic. Except for one thing. Measles. A few schools in the conference had an outbreak of measles. It quickly became a health department issue and games involving Capital City, St. Nicholas, and Eastern Shore were quarantined. They could have games, but no fans. Every player had to get a measles shot. Anybody over 40 was exempt, but all other members of the traveling party—coaches, trainers, SIDs—had to get vaccinated. Quite an ordeal. For the three schools involved in the quarantine, the fans were banned from the final home games of the season. Naturally, WMU was hosting St. Nicholas, the league's top team, but also one of the "infected" schools. For many schools, having no fans would have meant a ton of revenue loss. For WMU, it probably meant a savings because you didn't have to pay the ticket takers or even open the concession stand, and you didn't have to pay a clean-up crew.

There was an eerie feeling in the gym. The scorer's table looked the same, the benches looked the same, but the entire stands were empty except for the St. Nicholas bus driver. Picture 100 rows of bleachers with one solitary figure sitting right in the middle. And, it was senior night and no parents were allowed. Very strange, very sad.

It had to be difficult for the players to concentrate. It was like a practice, but against an opponent with referees and something on the line.

True to form, St. Nicholas, the top-team in the conference, took it to the Lions right from the start. They were 24-3 for a reason and the Lions closed out the regular season 3-21 for a reason. It was 35-12 midway through the first half and 63-30 five minutes into the second half. It could have been a 40-point game, but the Indians (the school changed the name in later years) played their scrubs the final 15 minutes and Dolan, Brown, and Thompson got hot against the second team. WMU lost by 14. With no witnesses, there could be any number of spins imaginable on the contest and how close it was.

Guest Quote—Mike Brooks, before the St. Nicholas game: "It would take less time if we skipped the player introductions and just introduced the crowd."

CHAPTER NINE—THE END OF THE SEASON

The "measles" game ended the regular season and now it was time for the post-season tournament. Unlike most leagues, every team in the Oceanside Conference makes the tournament. For WMU, it meant a rematch with St. Nicholas. A 24-3 team versus a 3-21 club. Looked like an early exit for the Lions.

The tournament was played in Capital City. Good for one reason—a trip to the Italian restaurant. Unbelievably, the "measles" quarantine was still in effect. No fans would be allowed in the Capital City Civic Center unless they had proof of inoculation. Playing in front of 3500 empty seats at WMU is one thing, but in front of 16,000 empty seats was truly a sight to behold. ESU fans, all 10 of them, showed up with cardboard cutouts. The WMU fans were mostly parents. Coming to see a 40-point blowout in the first round of the tournament was generally not the ticket of choice for most people, unless you were a close friend or relative.

Brooks worked the press room and press row before the tournament game. A brownie, a Diet coke and a bag of chips disappeared quickly. He went to press row and was sitting with Rick Nova of the *Boston Globe* and Paul Swisher of the *Albany Times-Union*.

"You guys are going to laugh at me," said Brooks. "I've got a crazy feeling." They both laughed out loud and asked what the feeling was.

"I'm telling you, Frank is unbelievable. Whenever he plays a team a third time, we play well. I don't know if we can win, but I think we're going to play great and scare the crap out of them. Any time we play somebody three times in a season, we win. I'm telling you, he figures it out. I'm worried."

Worried was the truth. Brooks was slated to go to Florida with the baseball team on Saturday. There was no way the team could win two games and advance to the conference tournament finals on Saturday, so his airplane ticket appeared quite safe. Yet, Brooks had the hunch about the Lions tonight.

The teams went through the pre-game warm-ups. Brooks looked at the Saints and looked at the Lions. The Lions were loose, having fun and had a "we don't care about anything" attitude. The Saints looked cocky. The look that said, "We're here, so we've already won."

As the horn sounded to end the warm-ups, the teams lined up for the national anthem. Jayner strolled, slowly of course, out of the locker room and made his way to the bench. As usual, he coasted past the scorer's table and saw Brooks.

"I think we're good, brother," said Jayner. "I'm worried."

Worried in a good way. Jayner and Brooks were on the same page and both had the same feeling. Giles had one more surprise up his sleeve.

The Lions roared out of the gate. It was 12-0 and St. Nicholas had already used two timeouts. During the second timeout, Nova and Swisher were pointing at Brooks as if to say, "You called it."

Halftime came and the Lions led 43-28. Fifteen points. It was number eight versus number one. It might be the biggest upset in league history. Might be.

At halftime, the press was buzzing in the hospitality room. Brooks pocketed a cookie for Jayner, then grabbed a hot dog and a Diet Coke and sat down.

Nova came running up. "What did you know? You knew it. You called it."

Brooks said, "It ain't over. We've got a long way to go and we certainly are not used to having leads. We are not comfortable with prosperity. We can still blow it."

"What made you think they'd do it?"

"Every time we play somebody a third time, Giles figures it out somehow. I don't know, it's just a feeling."

Swisher came over and said, "You're kidding me. This is ridiculous. Can they keep this up?"

Brooks responded, "They are 3-21 for a reason. But they really are playing well."

The second half was like Sacred Cross all over again. The Saints played tight, but on sheer ability, they climbed back into the game. With six minutes to go, the Lions led by three. It certainly looked like they would be overtaken. The jig was up and most of the Lions knew it.

The Saints shut down Brown's outside shooting, handled Dolan inside and made Thompson and Okey non-factors. But somebody forget to tell Tim DeLong. The often overlooked, often lost, player responded. A terrific athlete, DeLong realized he might be playing his last collegiate game. St. Nicholas was about 10 minutes from his home and the Saints recruited him hard. His career had been up and down. His mind, his work ethic, and his results could be questioned, but his athletic ability was never in doubt. The last six minutes belonged to Tim DeLong.

He was a man possessed. He blocked a shot and started a fast break. He took a charge. He tapped in an offensive rebound. He was feeling it. His shooting range was about six feet, and that's on a good day. After grabbing a rebound, he passed to Thompson and bolted down the court, setting up shop on the wing. Thompson knew better than to give the ball to DeLong on the fly and 20-feet from the basket. But nobody else was open. Thompson faked left and tossed the ball to DeLong.

90 seconds to go, Lions up by three. "Hold the ball, slow down," yelled Giles. "Pull it out, relax."

Relax? This coming from a man whose coat is on the floor, whose shirt is untucked and whose tie is so loose it could double as a belt? Relax? This coming from a man who is sweating so profusely that his white dress shirt is stuck to his body and completely see-through despite the undershirt?

Yet, with 90 seconds to go, DeLong got the ball in the corner. He felt it. Whatever he felt, under normal circumstances, it was probably not good. But he was on fire. He got the ball and within a milli-second, he tossed an off-balance jumper toward the basket.

"No," yelled Giles. "Geez," screamed Kerry. "Holy crap," bellowed Haltz. Nothing but nylon. Swish. Up by five.

"Good shot," said Giles. Jayner put his head down and looked over to Brooks and both smiled. That shot was the dagger that put the Saints away. Had it missed, things might have been different. But DeLong's heroics carried the Lions to an 80-76 victory.

The crowd, all 200 plus cardboard cutouts, was behind the Lions. Nobody wanted the Saints to win. First, because they were the #1 team and everybody else wanted them out of the way. Second, because their coach was viewed as a renegade. Third, everybody wanted to see Giles enjoy just a smattering of success, particularly if it was at somebody else's expense.

Now, Brooks was worried. The semi-final game was Thursday and the finals were Saturday. What a crisis. If the Lions actually beat Western Falls on Thursday, it meant they'd play on Saturday. ESPN. The finals. A chance to make the NCAA. Brooks started dreaming about what it would be like. Imagine two more wins, a 6-21 record and a chance to get obliterated by Duke or Kansas. But, making the NCAAs, even just winning one more game and getting on ESPN, would be worth missing a trip to Florida. He loved the Lions, he loved the kids. He wanted them, for once, to taste what the big-time could be like.

Nowadays, at least for most college teams, getting on ESPN is not a big deal. Getting to the NCAAs or the NIT is not either. Yet, with more than 300 Division I teams, there are fewer than a handful who have NEVER played in the NIT or NCAA tournament. The Lions fit into that category. Ugh!

Brooks got to the Capital City Civic Center early. Having the tournament in the Civic Center was a waste. For the number of fans this was going to draw, given the measles issue, they could have played in any on-campus gym. The league would have saved a lot of money. And, for the players, playing in a cavernous, hollow arena with thousands of empty seats had to be disheartening.

As usual, Brooks' first stop was the media room. Western Falls and WMU were playing the first game. Eastern Shore and North Central were in the nightcap. Nova and Swisher were already in the press room, typing away on their laptops.

"Mike," yelled Nova, "so what are you predicting tonight?"

"No predictions. Just my luck, though. I'm supposed to leave for Florida Saturday morning and these guys will screw it up."

In point of fact, Brooks actually hoped they did screw it up, and he was able to stay in Capital City for the finals.

"I think we're either going to get tuned or we're going to take it right down to the wire. We may have shot our wad, but I think we might be riding high for a while."

The teams rolled out of the locker room. About 35 screaming fans and a handful of cardboard cutouts were on hand.

It ended up being a good game. Western Falls was loaded, but WMU was thinking about ESPN and television and the Big Dance. They probably thought way too much. Western Falls took a 13-4 lead out of the gate and Giles called a timeout.

"Guys, come on," implored Giles. "Slap yourself in the face. Regroup and we just gotta get it done. Two things. Get the ball to Joey inside. Watch your passes. Take care of the basketball. Let's play good defense too. Work hard. Let's go."

The Lions played inspired. By halftime, they cut the lead to 31-28. Canfield played hard inside. Despite his lack of cerebral ability, Canfield could put his head down and put a defender on his hip as well as anyone Giles had ever had. And, he did it consistently on this night.

The second half was talent versus intensity. Speed, quickness and athleticism against pure guts. Dolan was tough inside. Canfield had periods when he was unstoppable. Brown hit some outside jumpers. Yet, as hot as the Lions were, they remained behind on the scoreboard. They'd cut it to one, but then Western Falls would score three times in a row. Lack of speed on defense was a killer for WMU.

With two minutes to go, the Lions trailed by five. Brown nailed a 20-footer to cut the lead to three. A few foul shots and a Canfield, back-to-the-basket, backing in lay-up, and it was still a three-point game with 30 seconds to go. Giles inserted Thompson and Plummer on defense and the strategy worked. Thompson grabbed the ball and went coast-to-coast for the lay-up, trimming the margin to one with 18 seconds to go.

After a quick Western Falls time-out, the Lions were back on defense. Canfield stole the in-bounds pass and started to dribble. Big mistake. Big guys should not dribble, especially in traffic. The ball rolled to the ground and four or five bodies dove on the floor. Brown and Thompson were there for the Lions and several Eagle players started wrestling for the ball. The referee blew his whistle and declared a jump ball. The possession arrow, remarkably, with 11 seconds to go, pointed WMU's way. Down one, with the ball. Brooks was stressing. Florida or ESPN? Basket or miss? Baseball or home? He decided he wanted the kids to win it.

With no timeouts left, Giles was frantic. He was screaming at Plummer and Thompson. Brooks remembered him calling at least four plays. But, after receiving the inbounds pass, Thompson called "14" and seemingly everyone knew where to go. Plummer moved to the far-right corner. Goose was a great kid, but not a good shooter. Western Falls knew it. They packed the lane inside, figuring they'd stop Dolan and Canfield and keep Thompson from penetrating. If they played Brown for a long shot, they'd have to leave Plummer slightly open. So, with time winding down, Canfield and Dolan were

bottled up inside. Giles really didn't want Dolan to get the ball, because if he got fouled, there was no way he could hit two free throws. The best the Lions could hope for would be one, which would mean overtime. Brown was on the left and covered like a blanket. Thompson struggled to reach the top of the key. With four seconds left, he spotted Plummer on the right side. Fairly open. Plummer caught the ball and, seemingly without thinking, fired a shot toward the basket. Not even close. The ball nicked the rim, the buzzer sounded, and the Lions walked off the court. The Eagles were excited, jumping up and down, and they were headed for the finals and a date with ESPN. The season was over for the Lions. And, in the next 25 years, amazingly, the Lions never got closer to ESPN or an NCAA bid.

Guest Quote—Kenny "Goose" Plummer: "I had the ball and I had to shoot it. There was no time left, so I shot it. I knew it wasn't going in, but it almost did."

CHAPTER TEN—POST-SEASON FESTIVITIES

On the bus ride back to campus, Giles reminded every player that academics came first and how important it was to finish the semester strong.

"Have a great spring break but be sure that all of your academic responsibilities are taken care of," said Giles. "One last thing, we'll have a team meeting Tuesday at 4 o'clock after we get back. And, the team banquet will be Wednesday. And, don't forget to turn in your uniforms and clean out your lockers tonight or tomorrow, otherwise the equipment guys will do it for you. And, we'll start off-season lifting and conditioning the following Monday."

The end to the season, not unexpected, led to a scrambling by all of the team members. Most had planned to have a few days back on campus before heading off for the spring break. But the first-round upset threw things out of whack. Players were planning to bolt on Wednesday after a first-round loss. Now it was Friday before they could bug out of town. And that's unless they did something really stupid—like actually win another game.

After Plummer missed the shot, the team went to the locker room and prepped for the bus ride home. It was not as somber as most locker rooms are after a playoff loss. The following day, there was a mad dash to all parts of the east coast.

For Dolan and Brown, it was easy. They both grabbed a case (or ten) and hopped in a car and headed for Florida. Beaches, babes, beers. Life didn't get any better than that. No place to stay, but that never stopped them before.

Okey returned from spring break sporting an unbelievable tan. Giles knew Okey would head for a beach. He was a ladies' man and could never get enough. Okey stuck his head in Giles's office.

"Hey coach, how're you doing?" asked Okey.

"Hey, Tracy, buddy, I'm great. A little time off, a little recruiting, ready to go for next year. We lose a few guys, but I think we're going to be a lot better.

We've got what amounts to a good team if we can put all the pieces together. Hey, nice tan. Where'd you go, Fort Lauderdale?"

"No way, coach. Hawaii. Unbelievable. Babes everywhere. It was really hot. That's 'cause it's off the coast of Texas."

"Texas? Tracy, you need a geography lesson. Hawaii is an island in the Pacific Ocean. It's in the middle of nowhere. If anything, it's off the coast of California, but really it's just an island."

"No way, coach. It's off the coast of Texas. I'll show you. I've got some brochures and stuff."

"You do that, Trace. Don't forget, team meeting Tuesday, banquet Wednesday."

"All set," said Okey, as he jogged away bouncing his basketball. Giles just shook his head in amazement. The next day, Okey appeared at Giles's door again.

"Hey, coach, look. Remember what you said about Hawaii? Look at this, here's Hawaii, just off the coast of Texas."

Sure enough, as Giles sauntered over and looked at the map, there was Hawaii, part of an inset map, with a white border in the left-hand corner—just off the coast of Texas. Giles just shook his head. What could he say now.

"You're right Trace, right off the coast of Texas."

Okey bounced the basketball, flashed a huge grin, and said, "See you at the meeting," and dribbled away. Giles could only look at the ceiling and shake his head some more.

And after the banquet, knowing his playing days, and academic career, were over, Canfield rode out of town. Oh, there were a few stops along the way—a few shirts and a Members Only jacket at the local men's shop, a case of beer, and a nice poster he'd been eyeing for several months. All this courtesy of the Joey Canfield five-finger discount. And, just to leave his mark, one last unpaid parking ticket, running his total to 17, good for $400-plus in outstanding fines. The town of Chester will never be the same. The crime statistics shot up for one year and have been back to normal ever since. And, the local police still haven't figured it out.

Guest Quote—Frank Giles: "I want to say two words about Dale Martin, he's a hard worker, coachable, loyal and a great kid to have in your program."

Epilogue

Sports Illustrated did a story on Giles, tabbed "the lovable loser." Ironically, that story propelled Giles to a great start to his recruiting season. More parents were interested in sending their child to play for Giles. The articles highlighted how much Giles cared about his kids. Ironically, the WMU administration had different ideas.

After 20 years as a Division I basketball coach, Frank Giles resigned. In higher education and in the coaching profession, resigned is a nice way of saying "forced out" or fired. While Giles managed several good seasons and three of WMU's five winning seasons "since the war," he closed out his career with three straight four-win seasons. He was promised a job in fundraising and accepted a $10,000 raise to work in the development office.

Giles finished his career with one nine-month assistant and a volunteer (Bobby Haltz). Five WMU coaches later, the budget had increased 10-fold. The schedule had been watered down with Division III schools, some real easy schools, the new coaches negotiated for better offices, cars and three full-time assistants each. Fifteen years later, White Mountain University turned in a 4-22 record. Twenty five years later, the Lions had still not been to an NIT or NCAA tournament. The entire time since Giles's resignation, there were two winning seasons and both have asterisks. First, the AD became the basketball coach and watered down the schedule, and eventually was forced out due to alleged improprieties. Second, the roster included several transfers, including one who still has not graduated after seven years in various colleges. For that year, WMU prostituted itself and tarnished its stellar academic reputation.

As for some of the others involved … updates …

Haltz remained in town and eventually moved into a senior center. 25 years later Brooks moved on to marketing and communications jobs and eventually retired as a vice president of an elite college. Jayner remained at WMU for the duration of his career. Besides Joey Canfield, almost every other player who started under Giles earned a college degree and has gone on to a successful career. Engineers, sales professionals, and a few CEOs. College basketball may have had better teams and better coaches, but few teams had more fun, more mishaps and more post-career success than White Mountain University.

Contributors' Notes

Erik Anderson is the author of four books of nonfiction, most recently BIRD (Bloomsbury/Object Lessons 2020). He teaches creative writing at Franklin & Marshall College, where he helps direct the annual Emerging Writers Festival.

Hannah Anderson is Red River Métis and a citizen of the Métis Nation of Alberta. She is a PhD candidate in English Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Calgary, where her creative writing and sports fiction dissertation manuscript *Bilateral* is being funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Hannah lives, trains, and works on the unceded and traditional territory of the Kanai, Siksika, Piikani, Tsuut'ina, and Stoney Nakoda peoples, known in Blackfoot as Moh'kins'tsis and colonially as Calgary. She also competes nationally and internationally with the Calgary Rowing Club, and has raced for the University of Calgary Rowing Club and Alberta Rowing. A member of the Sport Literature Association, Hannah received the Lyle Olsen Graduate Student Essay Award in 2023.

Bill Baynes has released three works of fiction with three different Indie publishers: a young adult baseball novel, a historical novella, a middle-grade novel, as well as several short stores. Two other books in production will be released later this year.

Em Bober's poetry can be found in *ANGLES*, *Bindweed Magazine*, *After Hours*, *Porter Gulch Review*, and *American Academy of Poets*. Em currently lives in Missoula, Montana, with her partner Franz, and her dog, Casserole. She is an MFA candidate at University of Montana.

A native of New London, Connecticut, **Mike Bruckner** spent 39 years in higher education. After graduating from the University of Rhode Island, Bruckner worked 13 years in athletic administration, five years in higher education, media relations consulting in 21 years as a vice president at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, PA. He is a past president of ECACCOMM, has worked nine NCAA regional basketball tournaments and is currently retired and living in Haymarket, VA.

Sidney Burris is the author of three books of poems (*What Light He Saw I Cannot Say*, *Doing Lucretius*, *A Day at the Races*) and one book of literary criticism on the poetry of Seamus Heaney (*The Poetry of Resistance: Seamus Heaney and the Pastoral Tradition)*. His poems have appeared *The Atlantic*, *Poetry*, *Harvard Review, Shenandoah*, *American Journal of Poetry, Kenyon Review, Virginia Quarterly Review, Southern Review, Prairie Schooner,* and other journals and anthologies. Three of Sidney Burris's essays have been listed as "Notable" in *Best American Essays.* Three of Sidney Burris's essays have been listed as "Notable" in *Best American Essays* volumes, and one of his poems was selected by Adrienne Rich for *Best American Poetry, 1996*.

Aaron Calvin is a writer and award-winning journalist for several weekly newspapers in northern Vermont, where he lives with his partner, son and two cats.

Michael Copperman's prose has appeared in The Oxford-American, Guernica, The Sun, Creative Nonfiction (3x), Boston Review, Salon, Gulf Coast, Triquarterly, Kenyon Review and Copper Nickel, among many others, and has won awards and garnered fellowships from the Munster Literature Center, Breadloaf Writers Conference, Oregon Literary Arts, and the Oregon Arts Commission. His 2017 memoir, *TEACHER: Two Years in the Mississippi Delta* (UP of Mississippi), about the rural black public schools of the Mississippi Delta, was a finalist for the 2018 Oregon Book Award in CNF.

Maine poet **Ken Craft**'s work has appeared in *The Writer's Almanac, Spillway, Pedestal Magazine*, and numerous other journals and e-zines. He is the author of three collections of poetry, most recently *Reincarnation & Other Stimulants* (2021).

John Davis is a polio survivor and the author of *Gigs* and *The Reservist*. His work has appeared recently in *DMQ Review*, *Iron Horse Literary Review* and *Terrain.org*. He lives on an island in the Salish Sea.

David Evans taught for many years at South Dakota State University and was the poet laureate of South Dakota for 12 years. He lives in Valley Springs, SD.

Liam Ferney's most recent collection *Hot Take* (2018) was shortlisted for the Judith Wright Calanthe Award. His next book *The Darkest Timeline* is forthcoming from Hunter Publishing. He lives in Brisbane, Australia with his wife and daughters. He barracks for a bunch of teams, most of whom you've probably never heard of but he loves the Cleveland Guardians.

Eduardo Frajman grew up in San José, Costa Rica. He is a graduate of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and hold a PhD in political philosophy from the University of Maryland. He is the author of over two hundred publications, peer-reviewed articles, reviews, essays, and short stories, which have appeared in literary and academic journals, online and in print, in English and Spanish. He lives with his family in Evanston, IL.

Bill Garvey's poetry has been published in several journals across North America. His poetry collection, *The Basement on Biella*, will be published in fall of 2023 by DarkWinter Press. He grew up in Springfield, Massachusetts and currently lives in Canada with his wife, Jean. He enjoys riding the streetcars of Toronto.

Conrad Geller, a Bostonian by birth and preference, now lives in Northern Virginia.

Robert Hamblin is Emeritus Professor of English at Southeast Missouri State University. He is the author or editor of more than 50 books, among them a novella, *When You Can Throw from Deep Short*, and *Oldtimer's Game: Poems of Baseball and Memory*.

Henry Hughes's poetry has recently appeared in *Sewanee Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, and *North American Review*. He is the author of four collections of poetry, including *Men Holding Eggs*, which received the Oregon Book Award. Hughes edited the Everyman's Library anthologies, *The Art of Angling: Poems about Fishing*, *Fishing Stories*, and *River Poems*. He teaches at Western Oregon University.

David Layton is an adjunct professor of English and amateur tennis player. He has authored several stories and poems published in independent magazines and journals. He has also written scholarly and popular articles on modern fiction, science fiction, music, film, television, and higher education pedagogy. His book *The Humanism of Doctor Who: A Critical Study in Science Fiction and Philosophy* was published in 2012.

James Lee received an M.F.A. from the University of California, Irvine. His poems have appeared in *the minnesota review, Juked, Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment,* and *Christianity and Literature*. Duke University Press republished a section of his poem, "Bee Suit: Spring Chores with Grandfather," for National Poetry Month. A Visiting Lecturer in English at Anderson University, he is currently at work on a manuscript of poems tentatively titled *Cheating the House*.

Maureen Mancini Amaturo, New York based fashion/beauty writer with a Creative Writing MFA, teaches writing, leads Sound Shore Writers Group, which she founded in 2007, and produces literary and gallery events. Her fiction, creative non-fiction, essays, poetry, and comedy are widely published and appear in many magazines, journals, and anthologies. Once named "America's next Flannery O'Connor," Maureen later was nominated for the Bram Stoker Award and TDS Fiction Award and was awarded Honorable Mention and Certificate of Excellence in poetry from Havik Literary Journal. A handwriting analyst diagnosed her with an overdeveloped imagination. She's working to live up to that.

Mackenzie Marovich is entering her second year at Western Kentucky University, where she is pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing. A few of her other pieces have found a home in *Vantage Point*, the literary magazine at Centre College, where she received her BA. Originally from the Chicago area, Mackenzie played basketball from grade school through college.

A former student of Jack Ridl's, **Jeff Munroe** is the editor of the *Reformed Journal* and author of the book *Reading Buechner* and a lifelong baseball fan.

Dave Nielsen is the author of *Unfinished Figures*. He had a glorious basketball career in high school and thinks of it often. Recent poems have appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *The South Carolina Review*, and *Rattle*. He lives in Salt Lake City.

Mark D. Noe retired as a Professor of English at the Pennsylvania College of Technology. He also retired from the English Department at the United States Air Force Academy. Thanks to a multi-generational genetic (no doubt) predisposition, he has been a Cub fan for far longer than he has been alive.

Joel Peckham has published nine collections of poetry and nonfiction, including *Bone Music* (SFA) and *Body Memory* (New Rivers), and is co-editor of the anthology *Wild Gods: The Ecstatic in American Poetry and Prose*. Individual poems and essays have appeared in *Prairie Schooner, The Southern Review, The Sun*, and many others. In 2021 he was the winner of the Southern Review's Oran Robert Perry Burke Award for Poetry. That year *Bone Music* was named to Kirkus Review's list of best books and was the winner of the International Book Award in the general poetry category. His first Spoken Word LP, *Still Running: Words and Music by Joel Peckham*, appeared from EAT POEMS in the fall of 2022 and is now available at all major streaming platforms.

Matthew Schultz teaches creative writing and Irish Studies at Vassar College where he also directs the Writing Center. His recent poetry collections include *Icaros* (ELJ Editions), *Inflorescence* (Alien Buddha Press), and *Encomium: Cento Paradelles* (Beir Bua Press).

Steven Ray Smith is the author of *A Two Minute Forty Second Night* (FutureCycle Press, 2022). The book was shortlisted for the Steel Toe Book Award in 2020. His poetry has been published in *Verse Daily, The Yale Review, Southwest Review, The Kenyon Review, Slice, Barrow Street, Poet Lore, The Hollins Critic* and others. He is an assistant editor for *THINK: A Journal of Poetry, Fiction, and Essays*. More information about his work can be found at StevenRaySmith.com.

Allen Stein is Professor Emeritus at North Carolina State University. His poems and stories have appeared in numerous journals, among them *The Hudson Review* and *Poet Lore*. He is the author of the poetry collections, *Your Funeral is Very Important to Us* and *Unsettled Subjects*.

James Tackach is a Professor of English Literary Studies at Roger Williams University. His writings have appeared in academic journals, newspapers, and magazines, and he has authored and edited many books. His fiction has appeared in *Spitball: The Journal of Baseball Literature*, *Aethlon: The Journal of Sports Literature*, and *On the Water*.

Kareem Tayyar's work has appeared in *Poetry Magazine*, *Prairie Schooner*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *Brilliant Corners*. His most recent collection, *Keats in San Francisco & Other Poems*, was published in 2022 by Lily Poetry Review Books.