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THE TEMPLE OF BASEBALL

edited by

RICHARD GROSSINGER

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The Temple of Baseball

Jim Lefebvre, batting coach for the San Francisco Giants, is not a man you'd accuse of being a poet. He played his entire major league career for the Dodgers, was rookie of the year in 1965, once hit 24 home runs in a season, was part of the Dodgers all-switch hitting infield, played five years in Japan, has a square jaw and rough-hewn good looks, and once decked Dodger manager Tom Lasorda.

You expect a lot of things from Lefebvre. You just don't expect him to resort to poetry. But that's exactly what he did last week in the deserted dugout at Phoenix Stadium. He was a John Keats in baseball togs.

Lefebvre was telling a writer about the function of spring training, the usual rededication stuff, when all of a sudden, he was *overcome.* That's the only word for it.

"When I think of a stadium, it's like a temple," Lefebvre said. "It's religious. Sometimes I'd go into Dodger Stadium just to be alone. The game might start at 8 and I'd get there at 1 and sit in the stands and look at the field. It was that beautiful. No one would be there—only the birds chirping. And I'd see the sky and the grass. What a feeling!

"After a while, things began to happen. The vendors would come in slowly. The place was beginning to come alive. It was like it had a heart and it was beating slowly, softly—*Boom, boom.* (As he said this, Lefebvre began to pump his right hand—open, shut, open, shut—like a man preparing to give blood.)

"The fans started to arrive. The lights went on. *Boom, boom.* (Open, shut, open, shut.) The visiting team arrived. You could see them in their dugout and you'd look at them. *Boom, boom.* And the game was getting closer. And the heart was beating faster. (Open, shut, open, shut.) And the game started. BOOM, BOOM! It was loud now, crashing, beating wildly. (He was squeezing so fast the veins popped out in his arm.)

"And then it was over. Just like that. The vendors left. The visiting team was gone. The heart stopped.

"I think a baseball field must be the most beautiful thing in the world. It's so honest and precise. And we play on it. Every star gets humbled. Every mediocre player has a great moment.

"The field is beautiful in spring. I smell the grass again and remember how I loved the smell, the way it came into my nostrils and filled me up."

"Did artificial turf change that?" the writer asked.

"Artificial turf was a desecration," Lefebvre said. "It violated the temple."

"Which stadium is the most special?" the writer asked.

"Yankee Stadium," he said. "I was a Yankee fan until the day I signed with the Dodgers. I had always dreamed of playing there, but I was never in it until . . . (Lefebvre paused, did a quick calculation.) It was the World Series, just after Junior (Gilliam) died, 1978."

"What was it like when you were finally in Yankee Stadium?" the writer asked.

"I went in there and I almost cried," Lefebvre said. "It was very moving. My God, Ruth played there and Gehrig. They were heroes and they hit in the same box, ran the same bases. They left their spirits there. I know it."

Lefebvre paused, looked at the writer and blushed. He had been caught with his sensibility down.

"I hope I made myself clear," he said shyly. "I've never said those things before. I didn't know they were in me."

The Wrong Stuff (excerpts)

We were taught to fear sex as something that would rob us of our stamina. The word was, "Tiger, if you let women drain away your life's essence, you'll never be able to go nine." Some of that mythology has carried over to the pros. The Red Sox brass were always telling Sparky Lyle that if he kept screwing around he would lose his fastball. They claimed it would float right out of his dick. Later he told me they were right, but that they forgot to mention how it would add all sorts of movement to his slider and carry him to the Cy Young Award.

* * *

Strikeouts, from my perspective, are boring things. Nothing happens. They are fascist weapons. I prefer the groundball out and view it as the perfect symbol of democracy. It allows everybody a chance to get into the game, gives the crowds an opportunity to see some dazzling work in the infield, and has virtually the same effect as a strikeout. Only better. A groundball can be converted into a double play, my idea of the ultimate two-for-one sale. Groundouts also take less of a toll on the arm than strikeouts. It's a far, far better thing to get a batter out with one pitch instead of three. I'd never pay to see a big whiff artist like Nolan Ryan pitch. I'd much rather watch Larry Gura or Tommy John. Those guys are artists, like Catfish Hunter and Mike Cuellar were.

Cuellar was the closest thing I had to a pitching idol. He was the great lefthander who played on those championship Baltimore clubs in the late sixties and early seventies. They used to bring him out to the mound in a sanitation truck and drop him out of a Glad Bag, looking like an Apache Indian chief in a baseball uniform. He was amazing. Once the game started he would begin serving up his garbage: "Here's a grapefruit for strike one. Take a swing at this toilet seat." You ever try to hit an empty beer can for distance? That's what hitting his screwball was like. It was awesome. He'd win twenty games every year. Just when the batters figured they had his slow stuff timed, he'd rip a 90 mph fastball at them and it would finish them for the rest of the game. That's what I call pitching.

* * *

The key to pitching at Fenway, whether you are righthanded or lefthanded but especially if you're a lefty, is to keep the ball outside and away on righthanders and down and in on lefthanders. Make that ball sink to lefthanders. Your lefty hitter is going to try to shoot your pitch the other way so he can jack it against or over the wall. If he can't get the ball up he's going to hit a two-hopper to the second baseman. You can make the temptation of the wall work for you. The Monster giveth, but the Monster can also taketh away. You just have to know what to feed it. I had some success with it. When I started winning big for the Sox, the writers compared me to Mel Parnell, the lefty who pitched for Boston in the forties and fifties. I checked up on him and discovered that Parnell had a smashed middle finger that caused him to throw the ball off his index finger, making his pitches sink. That was interesting. I was always having the callouses shaved off my index finger. Obviously, we both threw off the same digit and were able to keep the ball on the ground, enabling us to win a lot of games in Boston.

* * *

Being on the mound puts me in a relaxed state of superconsciousness. The feeling is laid back, but still intense. Everything is slowed down, yet you are able to perceive things at an incredibly fast rate. Line drives shot up the middle may look hard to the observer in the stands, but they never seemed dangerous when they were hit back to me. They floated to the mound in slow motion. When your arm, mind, and body are in sync, you are able to work at peak performance level, while your brain remains relaxed. It's Zen-like when you're going good. You are the ball and the ball is you. It can do you no harm. A common bond forms between you and this white sphere, a bond based on mutual trust. The ball promises not to fly over too many walls after you have politely served it up to enemy hitters, and you assure it that you will not allow those same batters to treat the ball in a harsh or violent manner. Out of this trust comes a power that allows the pitcher to take control of what otherwise might be an uncontrollable situation. During those moments on the pitching rubber, when you have every pitch at your command working to its highest potential, you are your own universe. For hours after the game, this sense of completeness lingers. Then you sink back to what we humorously refer to as reality. Your body aches and your muscles cry out. You feel your mortality. That can be a difficult thing to handle. I believe pitchers come in touch with death a lot sooner

than other players. We are more aware of the subtle changes taking place in our body and are unable to overlook the tell-tale hints that we are not going to last on this planet forever. Every pitcher has to be a little bit in love with death. There's a subconscious fatalism there. All baseball players attempt to suspend time, and the bitch of it is we're only partially successful.

* * *

I didn't like pitching to Kaline. Nothing against Al. He was a hell of a guy. I just hated the way umpires gave him the benefit of the doubt on almost every close pitch late in his career. I once threw him five straight strikes and walked him. He took a three-and-two slider that started on the outside corner and finished down the middle of the plate. The ump gave it to him. As Kaline made his way to first, I yelled at him, "Swing the bat, for Christ's sake. You're not a statue until you have pigeon shit on your shoulders." Al laughed at me. After the game I complained about the call to the home-plate umpire. He said, "Son, Mr. Kaline will let you know it's a strike by doubling off the wall."

* * *

I tried to be a technician on the mound; Eckersley was more of a manic dancing master. He was a pitching Reggie Jackson, putting pressure on himself and then coming through. He would go nuts between the lines, yelling at hitters and challenging them to hit his fastball. He'd tell batters on their way up to the plate that there was no way they were going to hit him, and then he'd strike them out. It was as if Dizzy Dean had been reincarnated. Dennis lived on a diet of prime steaks and Jack Daniels, and he threw severe heat. While he was still an Indian, he pitched a no-hitter against the California Angels. He had two men out in the ninth and the last hitter was taking his time getting to the batter's box. Eck came halfway in from the mound and shouted, "Stalling won't help. There's one more out to go and you're it." Then he reared back and blew the sucker away. I loved that confidence of his.

Comments at Rhode Island College, Providence

On Cliff Johnson — As long as he keeps those little slits for eyes, a manager is never going to look in and see if he's gone.

On Carl Yastrzemski — He has lasted so long because he has a small center of gravity. He's compact, not real vulnerable. it could be the scotch, too. It numbs the pain.

On Pete Rose — He is like a terrier dog. He's going to get you, knock you down, bite you in the jugular and let you bleed to death.

On Reggie Jackson — Reggie went to an all-white high school in Philadelphia and has a terrible identity problem. That's forced him to be better than he might have been. We rode to the All-Star Game together in Kansas City in 1973. He talked for 42 minutes. It was awful.

On Dick Williams — He had a little streak of Napoleon in him. And when he drank that cognac, he thought he was King Kong. When he got ready to make a pitching change, he'd take off his glasses and stare at the lineup card. As soon as the glasses came off, you (the pitcher) knew you were gone.

The American League is garbage baseball with the designated hitter. Pitchers don't swing the bat. Managers just fill in the lineups. They don't know when to bunt. They don't know when to change pitchers. Baseball is superior in the National League.

I didn't vote for the strike. I voted for worse. I wanted the players to own the parks. I wanted to sell organic burgers, have rock concerts after the games and mini-marathons. I'd design the parks around the planet we live on.

Baseball in 20 years will be played in some arcade in Cape May, N.J. Everybody will have to bat against Nolan Ryan's 140-mile-per-hour fastball. You can't get out of the way. What are you going to do? It will be the ultimate video game.

A Kind of Love (excerpt)

Baseball is very literary. There are well known writings on baseball, from Dawson to Malamud's but there is something else. Both baseball and poetry begin in childhood. They are mirror mages in a way. Baseball is the active form and poetry the contemplative. Now a poet like Edgar Allan Poe, whose grave is on the way to Memorial Stadium in Baltimore, wouldn't have liked baseball. He was an aristocrat who hated the masses, he preferred the night to the day. He loved silence and despised crowds. Which is ironic, because Baltimore's rough democracy did him in. He was killed by vote salesmen, hoods hired by the local pols. On the other hand, it isn't entirely inappropriate for this city to love both their poet and their baseball. There is a lyrical link between the two. When the cheers of the crowd carry on the wind and wash over his grave, Poe can dream that the cloud is acclaiming him. He isn't entirely wrong. They are cheering a ball being set suddenly free, which is very much like a poem freeing the soul.

You will notice that Poe isn't the only marker on the way to Memorial Stadium. There is also the place, sacred to some, where Freud first came when he came to America. The occasion was the founding of the American Psychoanalytical Society here. This too is not unrelated. Freud, who said so much about everything, would have said wonderful things about baseball too. Speaking of Houdini, "the last great mother lover," E.L. Doctorow said that when Freud came to America, mother love died forever. I wonder if baseball, which is always mentioned in the same breath with mother and apple pie, could have withstood the force of Herr Doktor's critique. Would apple pie? Probably. Freud would have taken to baseball the way he took to cocaine. Mid-European intellectuals have an *organ* for baseball.

Before I saw baseball I never knew a sport where people didn't worry the ball all the time. In soccer there is constant competition for the ball—the identity of the player is defined by his possession of the ball. He *is* when he is touching the ball.

In baseball there is a different relation between ball and players, and consequently, between game and spectators. The ball is allowed more personality, it is permitted distance. It is stalked rather than

gang-raped. It is also a dance between two men—a Spanish dance. It is a corrida, a bullfight. The pitcher is a torreador—he stands and acts like one—the batter is the charging bull. The ball is the torreador's life—issuing out of him as an eternal tease to the brute power of the bat. It is a battle between spirit and flesh, between two different kinds of cunning, a cultivated one and a natural one, between civilisation and nature.

The Spanish connection meets the game's Aztec lineage to make it truly American. Other major sports were invented in America, volleyball and basketball for instance, but only baseball remains entirely American. It is not easy to adopt, it demands a whole different understanding of space and time. It is no accident that many major league players these days are Central Americans—they instinctively combine the style of the corrida with the existential seriousness of the Aztec game—the ceremonial ball game. In the Aztec game of *pelote* the winning team was put to death. It was a great honor to be made into an instant god. The game was played with hips and knees only, you were not allowed to use hands or feet. There were two stone bases or goal posts, a large stone horseshoe and a parrot with a small hole in it, called a *pama*. The hatcha or the court sloped down between stone walls. The spectators were arrayed along the top. The game had cosmic and ritual significance no doubt. In any case, it was serious, just as the corrida is serious. In modern baseball, that seriousness is a matter only of certain moments. The moment just before the pitch, for instance, when everything is in suspense. The world becomes very mysterious at that point.

I hear too that a ball pitched at a speed higher than fifty miles an hour cannot be seen. The last batter capable of seeing high speed balls was Ted Williams whose batting average was over .400. So it is a truly mystical game. The batter has to know somehow where the ball is, and hit it before it gets there. A good batter can bat with his eyes closed, using the mystical sense. The high rate of failure with the bat would be unallowable in any other sport. 7 out of 10! A basketball player with that kind of failure rate would be inconceivable. Baseball's high rate of failure makes it a game of extraordinary tolerance. What's more, the players are arranged according to what might happen in the field. *Anything* might happen, except what *does* happen. So in addition to great tolerance for failure, baseball is a game of possibilities. That's the American ideal par excellence, it says so on Miss Liberty. Send me your failures, I'll make them possible.

There is something in the game that goes with the American

landscape. Its essence is waiting not rushing. There is a streak of patience, almost stoicism in it. Likewise the great prairies, the Western ranges. People rush across these, of course, but they find themselves overwhelmed. Even the fiercest goldrushers soon found themselves stilled, overwhelmed by the land. America has not yet been made human. The land is still the true power. The geology. Space, as Olson said, is the central fact of man in North America. Baseball has an understanding of American space. The lulls in the action, when the spectators can eat hotdogs or sushi, drink beer and converse, are large reprieves, islands of wonder. The whole cosmos can bear down in the pauses between action, and does. When the end of the world comes, whole stadiums will be spirited straight into the sky in the space between two pitches somewhere around the 4th inning in a steady, even game.

The language of the game is interesting. You can think of the pauses as caesuras, breaks between lines. As a poem the game is composed of a number of short lines representing the pitches. The number of lines per batter form a stanza. Then there is a space. Sometimes the stanzas become breathless, rushing full paragraphs that build rapidly on each other until the poem-inning explodes. The poem lives for this sudden blossoming out of prosodic regularity. Should someone make a computer analysis of baseball prosody, I believe that they would come up with something close to the prosody of some great American lyrical epic, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, let's say, or Doc Williams' *Patterson*. Of course we could be surprised by its coming out like the *Popol Vuh*, the Mayan epic, or Bernal Diaz' *Conquest of Mexico*, or even *Don Quixote*. Prosody is funny. The game is definitely an epic though, formed of many lyrical moments dependent on silences for their effectiveness. An unfolding story punctuated by brief emotional swellings. Football is a pure narrative, a straight short story on the C&W theme of "How long can you hold on to something everyone wants?" Football is a linear short story that aims straight for narrative continuity and a thumping climax. Soccer is all lyricism without any relief from the intensity. The ball is oversexed, the players overexcited.

Baseball crowds are also different. They are summery, picknicky, beer-soaked, light. Those gruesome rushes of collective aggression in football are missing. I love to sit, slightly high in the stands, letting the mood of the crowd flow through me when the home team is winning. In Romania, I was not allowed any communion with the masses. There, the division between guys with glasses and guys with

muscles is unbreachable. There is nothing more terrifying than walking up the street as a post-game soccer crowd walks toward you when the home team lost the game. You have glasses, you are Jewish, you have on a lycee uniform, there is only one of you and the whole history of intellectual, class and racial persecution is about to bear down on you. The individual and the mass. All the alienated existentialism we provincial Eastern European Jews invented, along with modern literature, comes from that immense fear of seeing that crowd advance toward you. I realized that the reason I'd never gone to a baseball game before 1979 is that I abhor crowds. They scare me. When they stand up as one, tens of thousands of them, screaming, I thank God they are crying for a ball not for the blood of Jews. But the feeling is similar, and the adrenaline the same. What must it have been like to be a Jew disguised as a German at one of Hitler's rallies? I don't want to think about it. But my fears were allayed, if not totally put to rest. There were all kinds at the game: Jews, guys with glasses, housewives in shorts. Goodwill and hotdogs prevailed. Of course, there are war-like sections like the one Wild Bill Hagy used to sit in, but those beer-bellied brutes just don't like suits. There is a big difference between that and muddled politics. I don't like suits either. One might make a case for the innocence of American political conventions and the ignorance of the electorate as corollaries of baseball, but that would be stretching it. Baseball is cornball alright, but it is not simple.

Shoeless Joe Jackson Comes to Iowa

My father said he saw him years later playing in a tenth-rate commercial league in a textile town in Carolina, wearing shoes and an assumed name.

"He'd put on fifty pounds and the spring was gone from his step in the outfield, but he could still hit. Oh, how that man could hit. No one has ever been able to hit like Shoeless Joe."

Three years ago at dusk on a spring evening, when the sky was a robin's-egg blue and the wind as soft as a day-old chick, I was sitting on the verandah of my farm home in eastern Iowa when a voice very clearly said to me, "If you build it, he will come."

The voice was that of a ballpark announcer. As he spoke, I instantly envisioned the finished product I knew I was being asked to conceive. I could see the dark, squarish speakers, like ancient sailors' hats, attached to aluminum-painted light standards that glowed down into a baseball field, my present position being directly behind home plate.

In reality, all anyone else could see out there in front of me was a tattered lawn of mostly dandelions and quack grass that petered out at the edge of a cornfield perhaps fifty yards from the house.

Anyone else was my wife Annie, my daughter Karin, a corn-colored collie named Carmeletia Pope, and a cinnamon and white guinea pig named Junior who ate spaghetti and sang each time the fridge door opened. Karin and the dog were not quite two years old.

"If you build it, he will come," the announcer repeated in scratchy Middle American, as if his voice had been recorded on an old 78-r.p.m. record.

A three-hour lecture or a 500-page guide book could not have given me clearer directions: Dimensions of ballparks jumped over and around me like fleas, cost figures for light standards and floodlights whirled around my head like the moths that dusted against the porch light above me.

That was all the instruction I ever received: two announcements and a vision of a baseball field. I sat on the verandah until the satiny dark was complete. A few curdly clouds striped the moon, and it became so silent I could hear my eyes blink.

Our house is one of those massive old farm homes, square as

a biscuit box with a sagging verandah on three sides. The floor of the verandah slopes so that marbles, baseballs, tennis balls, and ball bearings all accumulate in a corner like a herd of cattle clustered with their backs to a storm. On the north verandah is a wooden porch swing where Annie and I sit on humid August nights, sip lemonade from teary glasses, and dream.

When I finally went to bed, and after Annie inched into my arms in that way she has, like a cat that you suddenly find sound asleep in your lap, I told her about the voice and I told her that I knew what it wanted me to do.

"Oh love," she said, "if it makes you happy you should do it," and she found my lips with hers. I shivered involuntarily as her tongue touched mine.

Annie: She has never once called me crazy. Just before I started the first landscape work, as I stood looking out at the lawn and the cornfield, wondering how it could look so different in daylight, considering the notion of accepting it all as a dream and abandoning it, Annie appeared at my side and her arm circled my waist. She leaned against me and looked up, cocking her head like one of the red squirrels that scamper along the power lines from the highway to the house. "Do it, love," she said as I looked down at her, that slip of a girl with hair the color of cayenne pepper and at least a million freckles on her face and arms, that girl who lives in blue jeans and T-shirts and at twenty-four could still pass for sixteen.

I thought back to when I first knew her. I came to Iowa to study. She was the child of my landlady. I heard her one afternoon outside my window as she told her girl friends, "When I grow up I'm going to marry . . ." and she named me. The others were going to be nurses, teachers, pilots, or movie stars, but Annie chose me as her occupation. Eight years later we were married. I chose willingly, lovingly, to stay in Iowa. Eventually I rented this farm, then bought it, operating it one inch from bankruptcy. I don't seem meant to farm, but I want to be close to this precious land, for Annie and me to be able to say, "This is ours."

Now I stand ready to cut into the cornfield, to chisel away a piece of our livelihood to use as dream currency, and Annie says, "Oh, love, if it makes you happy you should do it." I carry her words in the back of my mind, stored the way a maiden aunt might wrap a brooch, a remembrance of a long-lost love. I understand how hard that was for her to say and how it got harder as the project advanced. How she must have told her family not to ask me about the baseball

field I was building, because they stared at me dumb-eyed, a row of silent, thickset peasants with red faces. Not an imagination among them except to forecast the wrath of God that will fall on the heads of pagans such as I.

"If you build it, he will come."

He, of course, was Shoeless Joe Jackson.

Joseph Jefferson (Shoeless Joe) Jackson
Born: Brandon Mills, South Carolina, July 16, 1887.
Died: Greenville, South Carolina, December 5, 1951.

In April 1945, Ty Cobb picked Shoeless Joe as the best left fielder of all time. A famous sportswriter once called Joe's glove "the place where triples go to die." He never learned to read or write. He created legends with a bat and a glove.

Was it really a voice I heard? Or was it perhaps something inside me making a statement that I did not hear with my ears but with my heart? Why should I want to follow this command? But as I ask, I already know the answer. I count the loves in my life: Annie, Karin, Iowa, Baseball. The great god Baseball.

My birthstone is a diamond. When asked, I say my astrological sign is hit and run, which draws a lot of blank stares here in Iowa where 50,000 people go to see the University of Iowa Hawkeyes football team while 500 regulars, including me, watch the baseball team perform.

My father, I've been told, talked baseball statistics to my mother's belly while waiting for me to be born.

My father: born, Glen Ullin, North Dakota, April 14, 1896. Another diamond birthstone. Never saw a professional baseball game until 1919 when he came back from World War I where he had been gassed at Passchendaele. He settled in Chicago, inhabited a room above a bar across from Comiskey Park, and quickly learned to live and die with the White Sox. Died a little when, as prohibitive favorites, they lost the 1919 World Series to Cincinnati, died a lot the next summer when eight members of the team were accused of throwing that World Series.

Before I knew what baseball was, I knew of Connie Mack, John McGraw, Grover Cleveland Alexander, Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Tris Speaker, Tinker-to-Evers-to-Chance, and, of course, Shoeless Joe

Jackson. My father loved underdogs, cheered for the Brooklyn Dodgers and the hapless St. Louis Browns, loathed the Yankees—an inherited trait, I believe—and insisted that Shoeless Joe was innocent, a victim of big business and crooked gamblers.

That first night, immediately after the voice and the vision, I did nothing except sip my lemonade a little faster and rattle the ice cubes in my glass. The vision of the baseball park lingered—swimming, swaying, seeming to be made of red steam, though perhaps it was only the sunset. And there was a vision within the vision: one of Shoeless Joe Jackson playing left field. Shoeless Joe Jackson who last played major league baseball in 1920 and was suspended for life, along with seven of his compatriots, by Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis, for his part in throwing the 1919 World Series.

Instead of nursery rhymes, I was raised on the story of the Black Sox Scandal, and instead of Tom Thumb or Rumpelstiltskin, I grew up hearing of the eight disgraced ballplayers: Weaver, Cicotte, Risberg, Felsch, Gandil, Williams, McMullin, and, always, Shoeless Joe Jackson.

"He hit .375 against the Reds in the 1919 World Series and played errorless ball," my father would say, scratching his head in wonder. "Twelve hits in an eight-game series. And *they* suspended *him*," Father would cry. Shoeless Joe became a symbol of the tyranny of the powerful over the powerless. The name Kenesaw Mountain Landis became synonymous with the Devil.

Building a baseball field is more work than you might imagine. I laid out a whole field, but it was there in spirit only. It was really only left field that concerned me. Home plate was made from pieces of cracked two-by-four embedded in the earth. The pitcher's rubber rocked like a cradle when I stood on it. The bases were stray blocks of wood, unanchored. There was no backstop or grandstand, only one shaky bleacher beyond the left-field wall. There was a left-field wall, but only about fifty feet of it, twelve feet high, stained dark green and braced from the rear. And the left-field grass. My intuition told me that it was the grass that was important. It took me three seasons to hone that grass to its proper texture, to its proper color. I made trips to Minneapolis and one or two other cities where the stadiums still have natural-grass infields and outfields. I would arrive hours before a game and watch the groundskeepers groom the field like a prize animal, then stay after the game when in the cool of the night the same groundsmen appeared with hoses, hoes, and

rakes, and patched the grasses like medics attending to wounded soldiers.

I pretended to be building a Little League ballfield and asked their secrets and sometimes was told. I took interest in the total operation; they wouldn't understand if I told them I was building only a left field.

Three seasons I've spent seeding, watering, fussing, praying, coddling that field like a sick child. Now it glows parrot-green, cool as mint, soft as moss, lying there like a cashmere blanket. I've begun watching it in the evenings, sitting on the rickety bleacher just beyond the fence. A bleacher I constructed for an audience of one.

My father played some baseball, Class B teams in Florida and California. I found his statistics in a dusty minor-league record book. In Florida he played for a team called the Angels and, according to his records, was a better-than-average catcher. He claimed to have visited all forty-eight states and every major-league ballpark before, at forty, he married and settled down in Montana, a two-day drive from the nearest major-league team. I tried to play, but ground balls bounced off my chest and fly balls dropped between my hands. I might have been a fair designated hitter, but the rule was too late in coming.

There is the story of the urchin who, tugging at Shoeless Joe Jackson's sleeve as he emerged from a Chicago courthouse, said, "Say it ain't so, Joe."

Jackson's reply reportedly was, "I'm afraid it is, kid."

When he comes, I won't put him on the spot by asking. The less said the better. It is likely that he did accept money from gamblers. But throw the Series? Never! Shoeless Joe Jackson led both teams in hitting in that 1919 Series. It was the circumstances. The circumstances. The players were paid peasant salaries while the owners became rich. The infamous Ten Day Clause, which voided contracts, could end any player's career without compensation, pension, or even a ticket home.

The second spring, on a toothachy May evening, a covering of black clouds lumbered off westward like ghosts of buffalo, and the sky became the cold color of a silver coin. The forecast was for frost.

The left-field grass was like green angora, soft as a baby's cheek. In my mind I could see it dull and crisp, bleached by frost, and my chest tightened.

But I used a trick a groundskeeper in Minneapolis had taught me, saying he learned it from grape farmers in California. I carried

out a hose, and, making the spray so fine it was scarcely more than fog, I sprayed the soft, shaggy spring grass all that chilled night. My hands ached and my face became wet and cold, but, as I watched, the spray froze on the grass, enclosing each blade in a gossamer-crystal coating of ice. A covering that served like a coat of armor to dispel the real frost that was set like a weasel upon killing in the night. I seemed to stand taller than ever before as the sun rose, turning the ice to eye-dazzling droplets, each a prism, making the field an orgy of rainbows.

Annie and Karin were at breakfast when I came in, the bacon and coffee smells and their laughter pulling me like a magnet.

"Did it work, love?" Annie asked, and I knew she knew by the look on my face that it had. And Karin, clapping her hands and complaining of how cold my face was when she kissed me, loved every second of it.

"And how did he get a name like Shoeless Joe?" I would ask my father, knowing the story full well but wanting to hear it again. And no matter how many times I heard it, I would still picture a lithe ballplayer, his great bare feet white as baseballs sinking into the outfield grass as he sprinted for a line drive. Then, after the catch, his toes gripping the grass like claws, he would brace and throw to the infield.

"It wasn't the least bit romantic," my dad would say. "When he was still in the minor leagues he bought a new pair of spikes and they hurt his feet. About the sixth inning he took them off and played the outfield in just his socks. The other players kidded him, called him Shoeless Joe, and the name stuck for all time."

It was hard for me to imagine that a sore-footed young outfielder taking off his shoes one afternoon not long after the turn of the century could generate a legend.

I came to Iowa to study, one of the thousands of faceless students who pass through large universities, but I fell in love with the state. Fell in love with the land, the people, the sky, the cornfields, and Annie. Couldn't find work in my field, took what I could get. For years, I bathed each morning, frosted my cheeks with Aqua Velvet, donned a three-piece suit and snap-brim hat, and, feeling like Superman emerging from a telephone booth, set forth to save the world from a lack of life insurance. I loathed the job so much that I did it quickly, urgently, almost violently. It was Annie who got me to rent the farm. It was Annie who got me to buy it. I operate it the way a child fits together his first puzzle—awkwardly, slowly, but,

when a piece slips into the proper slot, with pride and relief and joy.

I built the field and waited, and waited, and waited.

"It will happen, honey," Annie would say when I stood shaking my head at my folly. People looked at me. I must have had a nickname in town. But I could feel the magic building like a gathering storm. It felt as if small animals were scurrying through my veins. I knew it was going to happen soon.

One night I watch Annie looking out the window. She is soft as a butterfly, Annie is, with an evil grin and a tongue that travels at the speed of light. Her jeans are painted to her body, and her pointy little nipples poke at the front of a black T-shirt that has the single word RAH! emblazoned in waspish yellow capitals. Her red hair is short and curly. She has the green eyes of a cat.

Annie understands, though it is me she understands and not always what is happening. She attends ballgames with me and squeezes my arm when there's a hit, but her heart isn't in it and she would just as soon be at home. She loses interest if the score isn't close, or the weather's not warm, or the pace isn't fast enough. To me it is baseball, and that is all that matters. It is the game that's important—the tension, the strategy, the ballet of the fielders, the angle of the bat.

"There's someone on your lawn," Annie says to me, staring out into the orange-tinted dusk. "I can't see him clearly, but I can tell someone is there." She was quite right, at least about it being *my* lawn, although it is not in the strictest sense of the word a lawn; it is a *left field.*

I have been more restless than usual this night. I have sensed the magic drawing closer, hovering somewhere out in the night like a zeppelin, silky and silent, floating like the moon until the time is right.

Annie peeks through the drapes. "There *is* a man out there; I can see his silhouette. He's wearing a baseball uniform, an old-fashioned one."

"It's Shoeless Joe Jackson," I say. My heart sounds like someone flicking a balloon with his index finger.

"Oh," she says. Annie stays very calm in emergencies. She Band-Aids bleeding fingers and toes, and patches the plumbing with gum and good wishes. Staying calm makes her able to live with me. The French have the right words for Annie—she has a good heart.

"Is he the Jackson on TV? The one you yell 'Drop it, Jackson' at?"

Annie's sense of baseball history is not highly developed.

"No, that's Reggie. This is Shoeless Joe Jackson. He hasn't played major-league baseball since 1920."

"Well, Ray, aren't you going to go out and chase him off your lawn, or something?"

Yes. What am I going to do? I wish someone else understood. Perhaps my daughter will. She has an evil grin and bewitching eyes and loves to climb into my lap and watch television baseball with me. There is a magic about her.

"I think I'll go upstairs and read for a while," Annie says. "Why don't you invite Shoeless Jack in for coffee?" I feel the greatest tenderness toward her then, something akin to the rush of love I felt the first time I held my daughter in my arms. Annie senses that magic is about to happen. She knows she is not part of it. My impulse is to pull her to me as she walks by, the denim of her thighs making a tiny music. But I don't. She will be waiting for me.

As I step out onto the verandah, I can hear the steady drone of the crowd, like bees humming on a white afternoon, and the voices of the vendors, like crows cawing.

A ground mist, like wisps of gauze, snakes in slow circular motions just above the grass.

"The grass is soft as a child's breath," I say to the moonlight. On the porch wall I find the switch, and the single battery of floodlights I have erected behind the left-field fence sputters to life. "I've tended it like I would my own baby. It has been powdered and lotioned and loved. It is ready."

Moonlight butters the whole Iowa night. Clover and corn smells are thick as syrup. I experience a tingling like the tiniest of electric wires touching the back of my neck, sending warm sensations through me. Then, as the lights flare, a scar against the blue-black sky, I see Shoeless Joe Jackson standing out in left field. His feet spread wide, body bent forward from the waist, hands on hips, he waits. I hear the sharp crack of the bat, and Shoeless Joe drifts effortlessly a few steps to his left, raises his right hand to signal for the ball, camps under it for a second or two, catches it, at the same time transferring it to his throwing hand, and fires it to the infield.

I make my way to left field, walking in the darkness far outside the third-base line, behind where the third-base stands would be. I climb up on the wobbly bleacher behind the fence. I can look right down on Shoeless Joe. He fields a single on one hop and pegs the ball to third.

"How does it play?" I holler down.

"The ball bounces true," he replies.

"I know." I am smiling with pride, and my heart thumps mightily against my ribs. "I've hit a thousand line drives and as many grounders. It's true as a felt-top table."

"It is," says Shoeless Joe. "It is true."

I lean back and watch the game. From where I sit the scene is as complete as in any of the major-league baseball parks I have ever visited: the two teams, the stands, the fans, the lights, the vendors, the scoreboard. The only difference is that I sit alone in the left-field bleacher and the only player who seems to have substance is Shoeless Joe Jackson. When Joe's team is at bat, the left fielder below me is transparent, as if he were made of vapor. He performs mechanically but seems not to have facial features. We do not converse.

A great amphitheater of grandstand looms dark against the sky, the park is surrounded by decks of floodlights making it brighter than day, the crowd buzzes, the vendors hawk their wares, and I cannot keep the promise I made myself not to ask Shoeless Joe Jackson about his suspension and what it means to him.

While the pitcher warms up for the third inning we talk.

"It must have been . . . It must have been like . . ." But I can't find the words.

"Like having a part of me amputated, slick and smooth and painless." Joe looks up at me and his dark eyes seem about to burst with the pain of it. "A friend of mine used to tell about the war, how him and a buddy was running across a field when a piece of shrapnel took his friend's head off, and how the friend ran, headless, for several strides before he fell. I'm told that old men wake in the night and scratch itchy legs that have been dust for fifty years. That was me. Years and years later, I'd wake in the night with the smell of the ballpark in my nose and the cool of the grass on my feet. The thrill of the grass . . ."

How I wish my father could be here with me. If he'd lasted just a few months longer, he could have watched our grainy black-and-white TV as Bill Mazeroski homered in the bottom of the ninth to beat the Yankees 10-9. We would have joined hands and danced around the kitchen like madmen. "The Yankees lose so seldom you have to celebrate every single time," he used to say. We were always going to go to a major-league baseball game, he and I. But the time was never right, the money always needed for something else. One of the last days of his life, late in the night while I sat with him because

the pain wouldn't let him sleep, the radio picked up a static-y station broadcasting a White Sox game. We hunched over the radio and cheered them on, but they lost. Dad told the story of the Black Sox Scandal for the last time. Told of seeing two of those World Series games, told of the way Shoeless Joe Jackson hit, told the dimensions of Comiskey Park, and how, during the series, the mobsters in striped suits sat in the box seats with their colorful women, watching the game and perhaps making plans to go out later and kill a rival.

"You must go," Dad said. "I've been in all the major-league parks. I want you to do it too. The summers belong to somebody else now, have for a long time." I nodded agreement.

"Hell, you know what I mean," he said, shaking his head.

I did indeed.

"I loved the game," Shoeless Joe went on. "I'd have played for food money. I'd have played free and worked for food. It was the game, the parks, the smells, the sounds. Have you ever held a bat or a baseball to your face? The varnish, the leather. And it was the crowd, the excitement of them rising as one when the ball was hit deep. The sound was like a chorus. Then there was the chug-a-lug of the tin lizzies in the parking lots, and the hotels with their brass spittoons in the lobbies and brass beds in the rooms. It makes me tingle all over like a kid on his way to his first double-header, just to talk about it."

The year after Annie and I were married, the year we first rented this farm, I dug Annie's garden for her; dug it by hand, stepping a spade into the soft black soil, ruining my salesman's hands. After I finished, it rained, an Iowa spring rain as soft as spray from a warm hose. The clods of earth I had dug seemed to melt until the garden leveled out, looking like a patch of black ocean. It was near noon on a gentle Sunday when I walked out to that garden. The soil was soft and my shoes disappeared as I plodded until I was near the center. There I knelt, the soil cool on my knees. I looked up at the low gray sky; the rain had stopped and the only sound was the surrounding trees dripping fragrantly. Suddenly I thrust my hands wrist-deep into the snuffy-black earth. The air was pure. All around me the clean smell of earth and water. Keeping my hands buried I stirred the earth with my fingers and I knew I loved Iowa as much as a man could love a piece of earth.

When I came back to the house Annie stopped me at the door, made me wait on the verandah and then hosed me down as if I were

a door with too many handprints on it, while I tried to explain my epiphany. It is very difficult to describe an experience of religious significance while you are being sprayed with a garden hose by a laughing, loving woman.

"What happened to the sun?" Shoeless Joe says to me, waving his hand toward the banks of floodlights that surround the park.

"Only stadium in the big leagues that doesn't have them is Wrigley Field," I say. "The owners found that more people could attend night games. They even play the World Series at night now."

Joe purses his lips, considering.

"It's harder to see the ball, especially at the plate."

"When there are breaks, they usually go against the ballplayers, right? But I notice you're three-for-three so far," I add, looking down at his uniform, the only identifying marks a large *S* with an *O* in the top crook, an *X* in the bottom, and an American flag with forty-eight stars on his left sleeve near the elbow.

Joe grins. "I'd play for the Devil's own team just for the touch of a baseball. Hell, I'd play in the dark if I had to."

I want to ask about that day in December 1951. If he'd lived another few years things might have been different. There was a move afoot to have his record cleared, but it died with him. I wanted to ask, but my instinct told me not to. There are things it is better not to know.

It is one of those nights when the sky is close enough to touch, so close that looking up is like seeing my own eyes reflected in a rain barrel. I sit in the bleacher just outside the left-field fence. I clutch in my hand a hot dog with mustard, onions, and green relish. The voice of the crowd roars in my ears. Chords of "The Star-Spangled Banner" and "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" float across the field. A Coke bottle is propped against my thigh, squat, greenish, the ice-cream-haired elf grinning conspiratorially from the cap.

Below me in left field, Shoeless Joe Jackson glides over the plush velvet grass, silent as a jungle cat. He prowls and paces, crouches ready to spring as, nearly 300 feet away, the ball is pitched. At the sound of the bat he wafts in whatever direction is required, as if he were on ball bearings.

Then the intrusive sound of a slamming screen door reaches me, and I blink and start. I recognize it as the sound of the door to my house, and, looking into the distance, I can see a shape that I know is my daughter, toddling down the back steps. Perhaps the lights or the crowd have awakened her and she has somehow eluded Annie.

I judge the distance to the steps. I am just to the inside of the foul pole, which is exactly 330 feet from home plate. I tense. Karin will surely be drawn to the lights and the emerald dazzle of the infield. If she touches anything, I fear it will all disappear, perhaps forever. Then, as if she senses my discomfort, she stumbles away from the lights, walking in the ragged fringe of darkness well outside the third-base line. She trails a blanket behind her, one tiny fist rubbing a sleepy eye. She is barefoot and wears a white flannelette nightgown covered in an explosion of daisies.

She climbs up the bleacher, alternating a knee and a foot on each step, and crawls into my lap silently, like a kitten. I hold her close and wrap the blanket around her feet. The play goes on; her innocence has not disturbed the balance. "What is it?" she says shyly, her eyes indicating she means all that she sees.

"Just watch the left fielder," I say. "He'll tell you all you ever need to know about a baseball game. Watch his feet as the pitcher accepts the sign and gets ready to pitch. A good left fielder knows what pitch is coming, and he can tell from the angle of the bat where the ball is going to be hit, and, if he's good, how hard."

I look down at Karin. She cocks one green eye at me, wrinkling her nose, then snuggles into my chest, the index finger of her right hand tracing tiny circles around her nose.

The crack of the bat is sharp as the yelp of a kicked cur. Shoeless Joe whirls, takes five loping strides directly toward us, turns again, reaches up, and the ball smacks into the glove. The final batter dawdles in the on-deck circle.

"Can I come back again?" Joe asks.

"I built this left field for you. It's yours anytime you want to use it. They play one hundred sixty-two games a season now."

"There are others," he says. "If you were to finish the infield, why, old Chick Gandil could play first base, and we'd have the Swede at shortstop and Buck Weaver at third." I can feel his excitement rising. "We could stick McMullin in at second, and Eddie Cicotte and Lefty Williams would like to pitch again. Do you think you could finish center field? It would mean a lot to Happy Felsch."

"Consider it done," I say, hardly thinking of the time, the money, the backbreaking labor it would entail. "Consider it done," I say again, then stop suddenly as an idea creeps into my brain like a runner inching off first base.

"I know a catcher," I say. "He never made the majors, but in his prime he was good. Really good. Played Class B ball in Florida

and California . . ."

"We could give him a try," says Shoeless Joe. "You give us a place to play and we'll look at your catcher."

I swear the stars have moved in close enough to eavesdrop as I sit in this single rickety bleacher that I built with my unskilled hands, looking down at Shoeless Joe Jackson. A breath of clover travels on the summer wind. Behind me, just yards away, brook water splashes softly in the darkness, a frog shrills, fireflies dazzle the night like red pepper. A petal falls.

"God what an outfield," he says. "What a left field." He looks up at me and I look down at him. "This must be heaven," he says.

"No. It's Iowa," I reply automatically. But then I feel the night rubbing softly against my face like cherry blossoms; look at the sleeping girl-child in my arms, her small hand curled around one of my fingers; think of the fierce warmth of the woman waiting for me in the house; inhale the fresh-cut grass smell that seems locked in the air like permanent incense; and listen to the drone of the crowd, as below me Shoeless Joe Jackson tenses, watching the angle of the distant bat for a clue as to where the ball will be hit.

"I think you're right, Joe," I say, but softly enough not to disturb his concentration.

Second Base & Other Situations

Baseball is a team game of individual achievement. For example, there are no other feet but yours in the batter's box, you've got the bat in hand. You're waving it, your feet are set. But the pitcher, he's got the ball, he starts it up, he can throw it where he wills. You must react, you must wait and see where it's going, can you hit it. From the bench you hear, "Good eye," & "Green light."

You're playing second, you make a diving catch of a one-hop grounder almost behind the bag, but you can't get your body and glove and arm back in position (sitting) quickly enough to make the short toss for the force out on the runner sliding into second. Sensation of the dream's slow-motion time, great stop goes for naught.

Men on first and second no outs, hard hit ball to shortstop, you notice the runner at second has had to wait until the ball passes him before advancing to third, you come across second for the flip from short for one out, then fire to *third base* yelling "Tag him!" your throw just misses runner's back, is caught, runner runs into the glove double play.

Line drive hit right at you, not a knuckler, it's got just a hint of top spin on it, you put glove up near chin, but top spin carries the ball down a hair, the drive bounces off the heel of your glove for an error. Next guy up drives in two runs.

A ball in the gap, fast runner on first, you go out to get the relay arms raised yelling "Hit me in the head" it's a one-hop peg from right center, shortstop's yelling "Home!" you turn no time to aim and fire in one motion to the plate, throw's a strike in the air catcher's so stunned he's not sure what's happened in the collision the runner's out, has held on.

Single to left past the shortstop in the hole on a damp night, the ball will be wet you round first notice left-fielder down on one knee just coming up with the ball, you turn it on for second, slide head first as ball comes in high and slightly to the left of the bag.

Last inning of first game of the year, you're up a run, men on first and second, one out, a hard hit ball to you at second, perfect game-ending double play ball hits pocket of glove and in that haste to turn it over get possession of the ball which bounces off fingers reaching for it, you scurry to get the force at second god-damn nerves!, you look at the pitcher, say nothing, next guy up doubles, both runners score, you lose.

A. You're going badly, nothing's dropping in, let's face it, you're swinging like a pre-schooler with a drumstick, so even when your team is winning, you have a hard time feeling it.

B. "My stats! My stats!" Secret pleasure in idle moments wondering what your average might be, because you went five for five hitting perfect shots to places where they *wasn't*. Team's under .500, but the wife looks great, kids're angels asleep.

You play in a local slow-pitch tournament, costs each player $5 to enter, double elimination, couple of guys don't show up, have to use a guy behind the plate who's never played, or rarely, lose two straight, not a single ground ball hit to you in 14 innings.

You don't slide because you're eager to get dirty, to skin your knee or decorate your butt, but because you've got to get to that base as fast as you can, and without running past it. You have no choice, whistle of ball in air at your ear.

Fielding grounders: as ball jumps off bat, *instant reading* by quick eye which sets body moving toward the ball in a rhythm that allows fielder maximum ease in stopping the ball and with feet gliding underneath body comes up from its crouch in one motion the ball in hand arm throwing hard to first.

A first baseman who scoops out your worst throws. Baseball is a team game of individual achievement. Single after single after single.

You boot an easy grounder (drop easy fly ball), look up at nearest team-mate, say something horrendously accurate about the nature of the universe, and god, propagation, motherhood, try and laugh it off, comes out putrid bile, you turn quickly inward, get head back in game, how many outs? spit in pocket, crouch for next pitch, pois-

ed, eager, unforgiven by contemptuous self but forgotten in surge of action, moving toward ball, or bag.

Popping up with men on base. Or a chance to win it, two outs, man on second, tie game, last of ninth, hit an unmitigated bullet right back at pitcher who sticks up his glove in self defense, ball sticks in pocket, you never get a foot out of the box. Extra innings. Shortstop flips you your glove.

Say it's raining slightly, your team is being crushed. Your outfield has misplayed or dropped outright FIVE balls, and like drunks your team has been struggling for purchase in the muddy batter's box. You might come away feeling terrible, be inclined to drink post-game draft beer to excess, out of anger, but you don't. A blow-out is a blow, but it's not even that. Nor is it the rain, which *is* dangerous. No. You're almost elated because of two great double plays, the second of which was pure accomplishment under the guise of routine execution. Three hop grounder to third playing fairly deep, fields it clean, throws a ball chest high to you coming across second for one, you get rid of the ball in a blink to first *with* something on it, beat runner by half-step, side retired, you're running in (light-headed) to take your turn at the plate. Wet softball, two good throws.

Pitcher backing up third prevents overthrow and a free base. Calls time.

Baseball puts you on the defensive. In the field, you don't know where the ball will be hit, or when. As a batter, you don't know exactly where the pitcher will throw it, or how fast, with what arc, two strikes on you. You may anticipate, you may guess, you may cheat a half step, you might squeeze 'em, but you *must* react, you *must* adjust to the ifs of velocity and direction. Readiness is half. Not knowing is what makes the game compelling. Those first few steps. Having thought it, before it happens. The edge, a foot either way. You're all attention, what to do, when to do it, this vividness alone, *per se*, for itself.

Dreaming of Three Rivers

"I don't like the roads or the potholes,"
Phil Garner said, "but the people are great;
The people make the town . . ."
Snow fell gently on McKee's Rocks as he talked,
Something we never see in the land of freeways
Where my next door neighbor's some guy I never met
And let's keep it that way.

"I too could grow to love the Iron City,"
I told Phil sincerely. "I could love the Ohio,
The Allegheny, even the dim Monongahela . . .
Especially if I had a big new house
In Fox Chapel, and played third for the Bucs—
Provided, that is, California would trade me at all."

The Last Baseball Samurai

In his final World Series, Pete Rose
wanted to get on base so bad,

he said, that he'd even stick his face
in front of a pitch

if he had to. And he did.
In came Sammy Stewart's hummer.

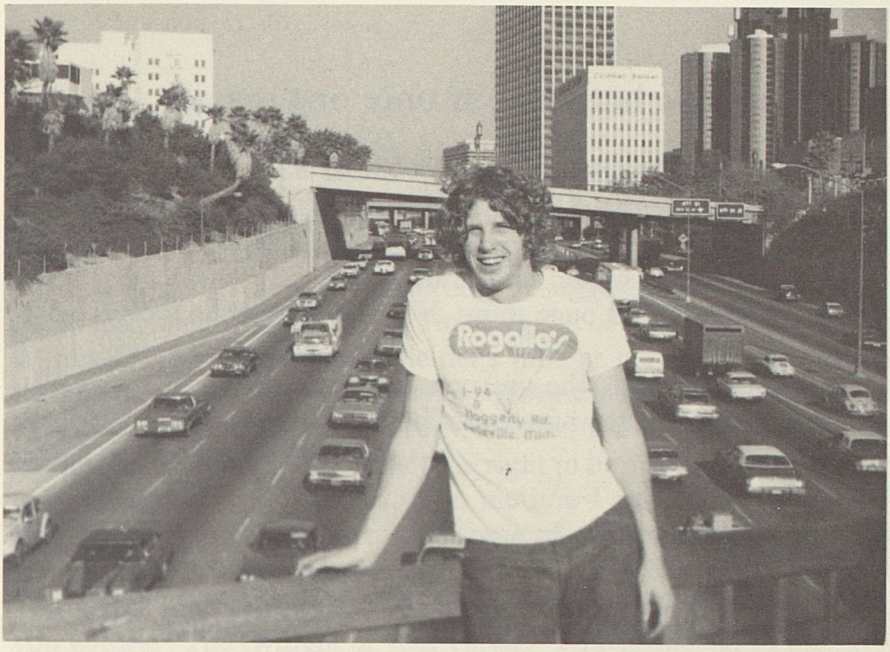
Out jutted Pete's ugly kisser,
daring the ball to shatter it

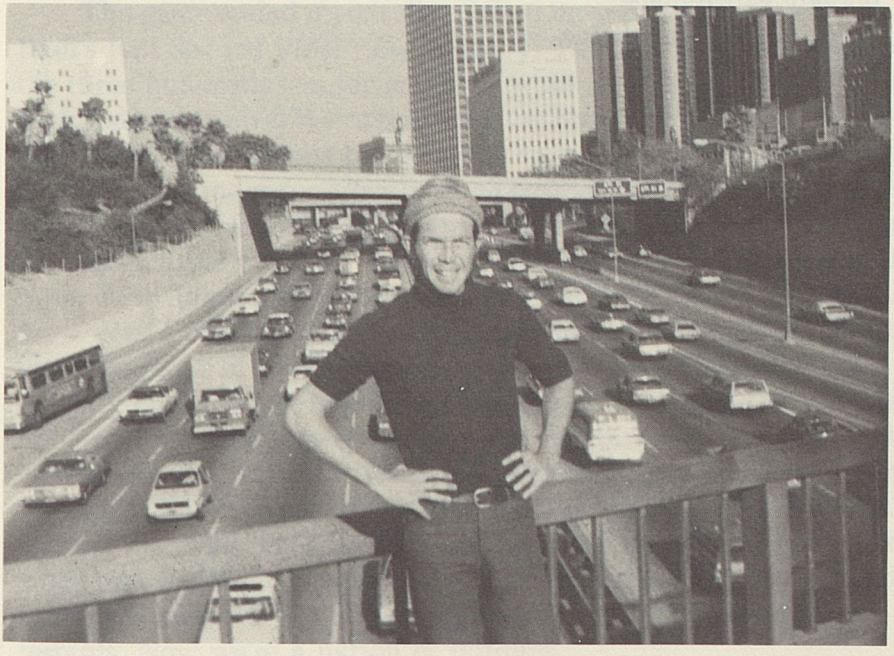
if it was capable.
And it was not.

Mark Fidrych

Nobody ever rode a higher wave or gave us more
back of what it taught
Or thought less of it,
Shrugging off the fame it
brought, calling it "no big deal"
And, once it was taken
away, refusing bitterness with such
Amazing grace.
Absence of damage limits one's perception
of existence.
Suffering, while not to be pursued,
Yields at least what Mark
termed "trains of thoughts,"
Those late, sad milk runs to Evansville
and Pawtucket
Which he viewed
not simply as pilgrimages
Of loss, but as interesting trips
In themselves—tickets to ride
that long dark tunnel through
Which everybody—even those less gifted—must sooner
Or later pass
Because, "hey, that's what you call life."

Mark Fidrych, *photo by Tom Clark*





Tom Clark, *photo by Mark Fidrych*

Time rotates but there is only one season

The October light falls cold, and number 53
Steps across the infield toward his destiny.

The April light is sullen, and number 54
Walks to the mound once more. Now he knows the score.

Out beyond the stars the universe watches,
Counting beats of strange hearts between pitches.

Reggie at 37

To know the feeling
of being the one
nobody can replace
is temporary knowledge
no matter how much
money you make a
day will come
when you can't buy a hit
and looking back
becomes a habit
there's always somebody
there behind you young
and waiting

Fidel's Last Pitch

from *A Totally Free Man*

This creeping decrepitude has no glory. Old age is one assassin even I cannot dodge. How can I "prevail" at first base?

I was moved there just yesterday. "A suggestion from the cadre," Pepin told me at the bat-rack. "For the good of the club." How could I protest? They shoved an infielder's mitt at me—it looked like a leather *tortilla*—and took away the glove that fit me so well, with the deep pocket made by so many catches. I was forced to give up the pitcher's mound, and with it the right to be at the center of every play. The right to set the *pelota* in motion. I tried not to grumble. It is imperative that I part with some of my responsibilities. It is instructional for the team to see El Jefe step aside. But first base! The initial stop on the express route to senility! From this station, you witness "The twilight of your career." That is one light I planned never to see.

The game ended mercifully. Called on account of a hurricane. Raúl's Red Sox led Fidel's *Barbudos*, 17-14. This would have been the three hundreth win for *los rojos*, while my squad has only two hundred and twelve. We've been keeping track of the series since we played those exhibitions games in the summer of '61. That was the first summer under socialism, the summer of the great harvest, the summer after we repulsed the Yankees at Playa Girón. Wasn't it also the first summer when we were forced to let the women play? They'd never been interested before but suddenly they were so insistent. Even you, Celia. Remember? I showed you how to "choke up." It was a summer of great patience and a summer of hope.

My *Barbudos* are hoping still. We might have rallied to win this one had it not been for the dispute over Ramiro's double. Play was held up for half an hour while the coaches argued about whether the ball had grazed some palm leaves along the rightfield foul line. I didn't interfere. These people don't shrink from a good fight—or a bad one. Sportsmanship becomes an impossibility when each man is his own judge. It was bad enough when we were a nation of contestants. Now we're a nation of umpires.

Finally, the parties appealed to me, as I knew they would. They complained about the condition of the field. But I'm no grounds-

keeper, no Colonel Ruppert or George Steinbrenner. I can't invest in grandstands or a green diamond—down here, the grass always bakes brown. I told my men they were getting spoiled.

"We're lucky to have a field, to have arms and legs to play with . . . ."

What if the super-powers had seen us? What if the C.I.A. had chosen this moment to make its move? Half the Central Committee was in on the argument, stomping on the bases, kicking up all the dust they could raise.

It's true, my *compañeros* and I often act like schoolboys. It's also deceptive. Even at play, we are meditating upon survival. We are priests with pistols: our life in this place is a curious blend of the athletic and the monastic. First we read, preferably from Marx or the latest bestseller about Watergate and other Yankee scandals. Next we hunt, substituting wild grouse for our real targets. Then we shadow box, to keep trim for that last round which never comes.

When yesterday's downpour came, making our game and its rulebook irrelevant, we scooped up our rifles and left the bats to warp at home plate. We zig-zagged like commandos to the main barracks' veranda. Raúl split open a melon for our midday meal. Though we all had official duties to perform, we loitered about until the storm had spent itself in the grooves of Italian tile over our wanted heads. Once more, we were an army. Once more, we had made an heroic escape: out of breath and on the run, with rain in our beards and mud in our sneakers. Once more, we could sniff one another's exertion and dampness and ardor.

Reminded of that best of times, when frustration was just another patrol we could skirt, I was nearly content. I only wish there had not been so many changes in my starting lineup. Where was my original "barnstorming" nine? If death played on our side, why didn't it take me, the captain, when I was so primed? Why do I have to be the one left to keep the game going?

Humanity's progress is ceaseless, and though it appears to move at a crawl, it is always too quick for its victims. Time is a poorly-trained servant: he tries to wait at attention, linen folded over one arm, but he grows restless, sneaks off, phones his girlfriend. Tonight, this morning, I have not been an "historic figure" reciting his memoirs. I have been a referee blowing his whistle and screaming, "Time out!" But who hears me? What contest do I control? Even in *el beisbol*, the sport with no clock, there has to be a last pitch.

Perhaps I should take this opportunity to dictate my will. I

remember the last time. I was hiding in the cushionless back seat of a Dodge sedan. It was taking me to the dock where the *Granma* was waiting to take me to my death. I used the back of a Mexican leaflet for my paper and a comrade's knee for my desk. I was my own probate. Though I anticipated imminent extinction, I could not list a legacy, I the great list maker! What was I leaving behind? Two pairs of shoes—and Fidelito. And I did not even have him! I specified only that I desired custody of the boy to be given to a childless Cuban widow who hid me when I arrived in Mexico.

This time I won't bequeath my son the least concern. He wouldn't take it anyway. This time I will not think only of lineage. I know now that the members of my family are the millions and millions of forward-looking people everywhere. I have brothers in Angola, sisters in Zimbabwe, children in Kuwait. The only true family is the family in arms. And I care no more for my blood relations—be it resentful Fidelito, spiteful Juana, or inspirational Raúl—than I do for my diplomatic relations. Truly, I care about them less. I have said goodbye, as all men must, to mother and sister and cousin, as we must one day say goodbye to our prized playthings and our esteemed pets and our treasured automobiles and our cherished tastes and our precious lusts and our chosen theories. The prospect of death dampens all grasping, cures all private fetishes. And the revolutionary must adhere to the perspective of death in life. So long, *hasta luego!* Stop grabbing and you will get everything.

No paltry clan will grieve for me, or gather around my executor, eager to get their hands on my estate. My estate is the state. I will be survived by a whole people.

Let the people enjoy my death, since their enemies will. Let them turn my memorial to sport. Why not? A good contest is what the Cubans crave, and I am one of them. I will bury this tape outside Santa Clara, on the grounds of a model citrus farm, under the arthritic tendrils of the district's *ceiba* tree. I won't tell anyone. I'll leave clues at all the ministries, on the scoreboards, in the ice cream cones at *La Coppelia.* I'll make the nation hunt for its inheritance, for this final sermon. Anti-social elements will not be eligible for the grand prize. And what will that finder's fee be? An insignia of merit in the form of Che's red star, fifty pounds of sugar, a lifetime supply of hardballs, and the equivalent in gold bullion of all foreign exchange I have puffed away all these years with my taste for export-quality *Montecristo A's!* A huff and a puff: that is all this tyrant has hoarded.

"I, Fidel Castro Ruz, a/k/a Alejandro, being of sound, unrevi-

sionist mind and flabby, unscathed body . . . ."

To Mamma and Pappa, I leave one share in the United Fruit Company, Cuban Division.

To sister Juana, I leave a combination cigarette lighter and molotov cocktail.

To sister Lidia, this retreat and all its grounds, to be used as a child care center.

To brother Raúl, my best rifle, my harpoon, my podium.

To son Fidelito, a world without me in it.

To wife Mirta, a drop of jism.

To friend Celia, posthumously, an academy for daydreamers.

To the fisherman Pérez, more posthumously, I leave one Soviet trawler in good working order—if one can be found!

To Batista, a second-hand condom and a Coppertone tan.

To Kennedy and Khrushchev, one missile each up the wrong end.

To Nixon and Brezhnev, my unused Gillette.

To Uncle Ho and Chairman Mao, my solidarity stuffed in a sack of fertilizer.

To Luis Tiant, a humidor. And to whom will I leave the thermidor?

To the peasants, museums. To the prostitutes, pickaxes. To the poets, walkie-talkies.

To Cuba, I offer the results of my amateur gardening—twenty *arrobas* of hybrid tomatoes—along with a gardener's warning: one season of neglect and the weeds start returning.

To Latin America, I leave slogans in the mouths of your children when I would rather leave bread.

To Che and Camilo and Abel and Inti and Allende and all the heroic Chicos, a trail map of paradise.

To the *Estados Unidos*, hated lover, worthy foe, tyrant and tease, I leave the exclusive television rights to my entombment. This must take place at the first American-Cuban World Series in Anti-Yankee Stadium. The proceedings will start with my videotaped rendition of Lou Gehrig's farewell—"I am the luckiest man in the world," flashed across the scoreboard—and end with my final cry of *"Patria o Muerte!"* That cry will be echoed by ten thousand cheerleaders from small towns in East Texas. The *gusanos* in the bleachers will fling their caps high. The "freedom flotilla" will sweep the infield with their tongues. A Marine Honor Guard will present the Cuban colors, which are also red, white and blue. Billy Graham will lead

the benediction. Régis Debray will throw out the first ball. Pat Boone and the Groupo Moncada will sing a medley of "The International" and "The Ballad of the Green Berets." Desi Arnaz and Pérez Prado will lead the Notre Dame Marching Band. J. Edgar Hoover will peddle hot dogs. Miss Barbara Walters will do the play-by-play. In a warmup bout, Kid Gavilan will outpoint Joe Louis. The C.I.A.'s Havana bureau chiefs, led by Meyer Lansky, will challenge the Venceremos Brigade in an Old-Timers Game; Mickey Mantle will lose an arm-wrestling match to the ghost of Roberto Clemente; the Commissioner will okay a deal giving Puerto Rico back to the Puerto Ricans for a country-to-be-named-later. Our hemisphere of corn and yucca, of cowboys and slaves, will finally be at peace.

Captain Sal and the Age of Irony

from *Bump City*

By the shores of the great bay (one-third filled and seven-eighths surrounded), by the shores of the abundant bay (one-third salmon and seven-eighths oil slick), by the shores of the unnoticed bay (one third post card and seven-eighths eyewash), we've come for a tribal birth. Fifty-thousand midwives, coaxing, cajoling, armed with scalpels and forceps, ambergris and homeopathy, skulls, and Ju-Ju, we'll whoop and holler while the babe remains silent. Push and pull and boil water and soak towels and look down there between the legs where we're not supposed to look. Find that soft crown and bring forth something pink and cheezy and more alive than we are. Jump-start the battery of our lives, gone dead. Rescue Bump City from the boondocks of history. Get that championship for them A's, them kiss-my-A's, who we'd seen go-in-seven-o and swing-'n'-run in seven-one and sock-it-to for you-know-who in seven-two. Just twenty-seven outs of labor pains, and there would be no turning back.

The amphitheatre will be our operating room. It's waiting for us, all sterilized: such an un-Roman coliseum, grey as the clouds that move in thin steely sheets. Ticket scalpers are doing great business a discreet distance from the surgical gates. The parking lot's full, so I park by the BART stop, where the untouched-by-human-hands system unloads the expectant Moms and Pops. Characteristically, the station's complete, but the pathway from platform to stadium isn't. I follow the most traveled route that crosses two sets of Southern Pacific tracks, an auto demolition works, a trestle bridge over a boggy factory runoff, to a newly-made hole in the Coliseum's fencing. All around are rusting axles and bay estuary sludge and Granny Goose potato chip exhaust.

How far from the places we live are these spectacles we stage: Miami becomes simply the Orange Bowl, Boston is the short porch at Fenway Park, and Oakland is reduced to this bare circle the players have nicknamed "the Mausoleum." But once inside the oval, there's that wonderful first glimpse of green outfield grass, so surprisingly alive and growing. There's the smooth symmetry of the diamond to welcome us, and assure us that all's in order for the birth. There's sausage waftings in the air to alert our canine senses, and a primeval

forest's worth of shrill calls from the vendors. There's the pow-wow humming of the stands, like a monotonous chant that alerts us to the coming ritual. Captured by this measured realm, we're willing to suspend all geography. We're ready for Captain Sal and the age of irony.

But where is our cap'n, the brutish Bando, the Catholic rock upon which Finley built his team? Seated high above the right-field line, Section 301, I squint and find Oakland's own Lil Joe Morgan, warming up before the dugout. He's playing catch the way all major leaguers do, with all the seemingly superfluous gestures and ticks that the smallest sandlotters use. It's as though the myth, the uniform, the traditions, are too strong for individual men. This game eats them up. They're still pretending, still dreaming about being ballplayers.

The A's take the field now. They've changed their fuzzy-wuzzy uniforms again. What a headache Finley's clown costumes would be to the chaw-chewing veterans with their superstitions and rabbits' feet hexes! They would have to compute the varying qualities of performance in all six combinations of green, white, and gold. And even as the A's go through their ballet of infield drills and stand with goody-goody white shoes against the clean lye of the foul lines for anthem-time, I'm looking like a good country doctor—we're all looking—for signs of choke. Choke is miscarriage is defects is fear of being born. Choke: the time you didn't and knew you should have. Choke: an uncomfortable escape with everybody watching. Choke isn't even failure, just ambivalence. And every sport fan knows the symptoms—strong conscience, weak constitution. So don't slip, boys. Don't look too closely at what's up ahead. Just slither like spermatozoa. If baseball is a game of inches, then what's conception? Or contraception?

A five-year-old sits down next to me and asks his own question: "Daddy, why is it called the World Series?"

I could tell him. I could recount the bitter corporate rivalry between the greedy American and National Leagues that produced these fall games as a kind of peace treaty. I could name all the winners since '03. Instead of answers, Daddy fills the kid with Fudgsicles and Colossal Dogs and even cheaper "Shaddups!" Behind me, a foghorn voice blasts down at the vacant outfield expanse: "We love you Catfish, oh yes we do. We love you Catfish, and we'll be true . . ." Peeking over my shoulder, I find the song belongs to a Filipino tomgirl in A's cap with black braids tumbling out to her waist, green-

and-gold frockery all the way. Her escort is her baby-pink grandpa. Behind them, and filling most of Section 301, is a gaggle of black matrons: all stout, all in knit caps with brims of flattened Coors cans, all clapping and shouting to keep warm. They're placing bets and offering advice and swapping tall tales about past games and future conquests. "Those Reds be bad, but our A's is gonna be monsters!"

The rest of the crowd filtering past me is a unique genetic blend, label it "Mixed Nuts." I look mainly at the feet: white imported shoes skidding past, then tennies, then hiking boots that belong to the back-packing crowd that's just parachuted in. Lower echelon business types drag their wigged wives wearily along, and Hayward pachucos bounce by, grinning to reveal the spaces where they once had front teeth. They're all seated by an usherette with goo-goo eyes and rosy cheeks and a smile that's all gums and hot chocolate. This must be her thousandth game, but she sways with the organ music and cheers Charlie O., the real-live mule mascot making his customary lap around the warning track's cinder. A proud wagonmaster dug up from the rodeo circuit, reminding us that someplace out there is a land called the West, leads the prized arthritic donkey back to his green-and-gold trailer. The usherette is up on the tip of her Thom McAns, practicing some bouncy routine—poor frustrated cheerleader who never made it past the tryouts. She's leading two sandy-haired executives to the seats on my right. They're arriving just in time, pulling up their tweed suits in the knee as they sit, once of them proclaiming, "How sweet it is!"

I'm glad to have all of them as company. Being alone at the ballpark is like eating alone in a restaurant—I must cheer as I would chomp, hoping no one objects. But first, there's the national anthem to hurdle, and I don't care if it's being played by Harold Farberman and the award-winning Oakland Youth Orchestra. Will I stand for it? The ladies behind me stay seated, and take swigs from their flasks to warm up their hollers. I end up rising but only to catch a glimpse of Charlie O.—the man, not the beast. He's in his imperial box behind the A's dugout, ready to reach for the hot line to his manager, entertaining some politician or beauty queen. Behind him, a field of silver Oakland banners fan.

The Reds are being booed, and a gangling teenager is struggling to place his own banner on the upper deck overhang before me. I recognize him right away as one of those accident-prone drifters, a loser for whom all of life's curveballs have broke wrong. But the A's

have made him feel like a winner, and his sign is a thank-you card. It shows a bulbous-nosed Athletic popping a red pill, and reads, "DOWN THOSE REDS!" The artist returns to his seat, but the sign is blown loose and flies up to obstruct our section's view of the field. The executives glance at me sadly, and we know what we must do. Tearing wildly, we destroy the banner, letting the pieces bombard the box seats.

Das Spectikal is upon us. As Pete Rose takes his primate stance at the plate, Section 301 and we hold our pencils poised, ready to make the first scratches in our clean scorecards, hoping we'll soon record an A's win, the birth of the manchild. Kenny Holtzman, the Oakland starter, is a stringy Jew who, like his people, always manages to survive. He's also a clubhouse intellect who reads Proust and pitches with a remembrance of games past. Swiveling, barely winding up, he pecks at corners and lives by inches. But the Reds get a rally going at once.

"I'll bet you half our new contract that those runners die right where they are." The young execs starting their own game.

"You're on, pal."

Holtzman ends the threat by getting a loping fly-out to George Hendrick, a.k.a. "Easy Rider," the A's somnabulist centerfielder. His nonchalance makes the nannies cry, "Be careful, Mister Easy Rider, that ball be hard and if you don't watch your bad self, son, why it can kill you!"

Cincinnati's Don Gullett matches Holtzman pitch for pitch and before we know it, the game's bogged down in its silent middle innings. In the bottom of the fifth, Gene Tenace steps up to bat, and the sun breaks through the swift ocean clouds.

"Better soak in those rays while you can, buddy boy," the businessman warns his companion.

"Daddy, what happens if a ball hits a teevee camera?" asks the kid between crunches of Crackerjacks.

"Lil lumber, l'il lumber now!" the beer-bellied mammas plead toward the plate.

And Tenace hears their plea. This fall, he's the meeting point of those concentric circles labeled actuality and hope. Gino hits his third Series home run, and it lands near a sheet hanging from the bleachers with a bull's-eye painted on it and the logo "Tenace's Target." In Section 301, we rise *en masse*, like an opera crowd treated to its favorite aria. But we have no "Bravos!"—just a childish cackle, a growl of delight. The usherette bounces in her crepe soles, and encourages

the cheers with a wave of her mittens. The black mammas exult. And Tenace, the coal miner's son, the second-string scrub, does his victory trot. He takes his place in the record books and in R. D. Laing's ledger of pseudo-events. How can we ever experience his experience of our experience of his experience?

It's time for Finley's ball girls to bring coffee (spiked, I presume) to the umps along the first and third base lines. It's really just a chance for these Lolita types to sway their Wedding Gown White tushies, and the crowd claps politely. But there's no room for sex when we hunger for its more potent aftereffects: the child, the child!

The A's don't make a habit of padding their leads, and they do not in the sixth—or the seventh. In the eighth, Holtzman weakens and Concepcion's single sends him from the game. Manager Williams brings on Vida Blue—a lefty to face lefty Joe Morgan, and one of those "percentage" moves that leaves my section to its own mathematics.

"Vida ain't no reliever." The consensus up the aisle.

"I heard that."

"Leave the boy alone, I say. He's angry at The Man. He ain't got room for this shit."

The executives are eager to repeat broadcast clichés.

"He's pitchin' in the kitchen," says one.

"He's so fast he can throw a pork chop past a timberwolf," says the other.

But Blue, who's been punished the whole Series for his early season holdout, is neither angry nor fast. He walks Morgan, and Oakland has advice for its own.

"Don't you be so quick, l'il brother, you hear me?" But Joe has no objective need to heed his off-season neighbors. All butterball-legs pumping, he puts the Reds in front, coming home from first on a crackling, definitive Tolan single.

The mood turns vengeful in Section 301. A loss now would be like a death in the family; the child stillborn. The cheerleading usher has gone glum. Only the execs pretend indifference.

"Back to the drawing board, Charlie O.," one laughs.

"It was a very good year . . ." the other intones in his best Sinatra croon. They pass their money down to me, and I pass them back more "suds."

And the ladies behind me are already passing the word, out the stadium and onto Tobaccy Road: "The brothers are beautiful, but they jus' ain't *ready*."

The A's have dominated the contest, and the crowd figures they deserve to take it in spite of the tender subtleties involved in either refurbishing or destroying the pitching ego of Vida Blue. There's general relief when he's replaced by Rollie Fingers. That's what a relief pitcher is for.

"Give 'em the finger, Rollie!"

Her grandpa chuckles at the Filipino foghorn's scatology. And Fingers responds by choking off the Reds' rally. The pitcher with the handlebar mustache is taking on Homeric proportions. His consistency of craft placates the crowd. Thanks to Rollie, the A's have one last chance.

"MIKE . . . MIKE . . . MIKE . . ." The scoreboard pacemaker tries to stimulate the comatose crowd.

The Mike being flashed on the big board is Mike Hegan, a pinch-hitter. He grounds out pitifully, and hopes of a miracle finish fade. There are nine Cincinnati gloves poised to make two pitiful outs. But I'm still feeding my fervor with a reminder that the ninth-inning A's are a different franchise, a new team entirely. Like students reluctant to face a written assignment, these A's have always done their best work while facing a deadline. Perhaps the usherette is thinking the same thoughts, since she's clapping her mittened hands together like two stunned fish. A nervy freak, passing in search of his seat, which has disappeared in a Budweiser haze, stops in our aisle.

"Hey," he whispers to the usherette so that only she and I hear, "you're gorgeous! Do you know that? You're really gorgeous!"

The drunk is gone before she can respond, but I watch her permanent stadium rouge deepen. She gets thrilled further when Gonzalo Marquez punches out a single. He's replaced by Allen Lewis, the Panamanian Express. Once again, whenever it seems to matter most, Gene Tenace is quietly digging his cleats into the batting box's brown dirt.

The Reds send for "The Hawk"—reliever Clay Carroll—to come swooping in for the kill. Tenace chops at the first pitch, and scrambles stubby-legged to first while the ball drops unharmed in that magical dimension between infield and outfield warps.

"Holy Jeez!" The executives are astir.

"Now we gon' get tight!" the sisters cry.

The bleachers rumble in waves of foot-stomping. The fickle-hearted who were headed towards the exits have returned to suffocate the rampways. Contemplations on the miraculous have begun.

With one throw, the game could be over, or ready to begin again. How open-ended baseball is! How wisely conceived! How many more possibilities there are on the diamond than in our own lives!

"DON . . . DON . . . DON . . ." This time manager Williams' surprise nominee for sainthood is Don Mincher, and the foghorn chants the catechism. A recycled first baseman, Mincher steps to the plate knowing he's been chosen not for the quickness of his wrists, but for the calm of his stomach.

Carroll's next pitch would later be accurately described by Reds' manager Sparky Anderson as "a bum high fastball with nothing on it." Mincher, amazed, responds with marionette reflex. Crack! Bat drawn away to full extension, muscles ripping, the hitter again makes those nine Cincy gloves irrelevant. He sends the pitch to that inner outfield wasteland where no player, living or dead, can get his butt quick enough. The Panamanian Express scores the tying run.

"Holy shit, buddy boy! How sweet it is! You better pinch me, pal, 'cause this I do not believe!"

Even the executives are midwives now, straining to glimpse the emergent skull of our savior.

Mincher leaves the game for a pinch-runner, savoring what was to be his last base-hit before retirement by flinging his cap to the ground with combative bravado. Saint Don has given us the strength to go on, and, under the rules, the chance. The last player on the A's bench is Angel Mangual, and the choir of nannies bless him: "Take it light, Angel darling! What it is and what it's got to be!"

Mangual swings at the first pitch, and we've hardly time to gasp. He appears to have been handcuffed, as the bat-on-ball makes no sound, not a good swing, sending a grounder with delicate tentativeness toward ecstasy. "Threadin' da needle," it's called. Skipping between first baseman Perez and a desperately lunging Morgan, the ball slows predictably in the dewy outfield grass. Tenace scores the winning run before the ball can be touched.

Clusters of Finley's fireworks look like holy chrysanthemums exploding in the coming night. Below, the Reds depart with the superman speed of all losers, and the A's carry off Mangual like a shimmering gold Madonna. The hero's fist is raised, partisan-style. The ninth-inning A's have pushed the other A's to the point of no return. There is no room now for enough mistakes to deny them the championship.

The Coliseum is one huge orgone box—wired with an affinity that spills down all the ramps, that tramples on the planted slopes

around the concrete bowl, that sparkles amidst the parking lot scramble, across the railroads and junkyards, over the little trestle bridge, over fences that are hurdled now with ease, out on the Nimitz, in the clammy bay waters. "By the bay, by the bay, by the beautiful bay . . ." Mister and Missus Baseball Fan U.S.A. are carried along by riotous pleasure. Dazed children wave stiff pennants, looking as though they know that gesture does not do justice to the moment. Their parents are grinning without fear, some whimpering and gasping and hooting, none of them worrying about looking ugly or forming words. Guard railings are casually destroyed on the happy march to the BART station, where the platform overflows with a chanting mob. The traffic cops look scared, but they've no need to be. The chants are not slogans, but odes to the A's. The arriving silver trains look like toys, like kiddie models, in the grip of the crowd's new strength.

Their eyes kicked out by Charlie O. and his mercenary mules, the fans carry visions with them—visions of a new world, visions that rise above the cities like jazz, visions that challenge the stupidity of their sources and actualize so sweet an optimism that even death seems a galaxy away. If only the parking lot had been filled with building blocks instead of chrome-rimmed cars! They would have built a new city for themselves right there, with towers and exalting nomuments that would have dwarfed the stadium with their usefulness, declaring: we are more permanent than any of our edifices. A goofy tickle seized the throng, sending it in spasms toward the unseen foe: spontaneity. A spontaneity, like baseball, deserving of a better fate than words. "Why not?" the throng asked itself about almost anything. "Why the fuck not?" Whoever invented this game did it so that ninth innings could be like this.

Never Get This Close To Anything You Love

Some preliminary notes on
Las Aguilas Cibaeñas, Dominican Republic
from *El Beisbol*, A Journal of the New World

YOU DON'T HAVE TO FOLLOW A BALLTEAM AROUND FOR MORE THAN a road trip to discover that these professionals spend less time perfecting their prowess than they do disrobing and robing before one another. Two-thirds of becoming a ballplayer, it seems, is looking the part. This humdrum renewal of the impersonation is strictly ritualized and, no less than the rest of the game, regulated by an unwritten code. The locker room, whether carpeted and flooded with muzak or bare concrete with benches and simple hooks as in the Dominican, becomes a dress and undress rehearsal for the upcoming contest. In either case, the performers who'll do best are the least self-conscious. Patting guts, flicking groins, jostling balls, realigning scroti, poking at hemorrhoids, sniffing the magnificent accomplishment of their dirty socks, excavating buggers: it is necessary that one never let on, before one's brethren, that one is not entirely comfortable with all the functions beholden to this animal. Unfettered as babes in the cradle, the more they saunter, spit, heave, fart, the more the team gets comfortable with themselves—which is, after all, the key to successful baseball. Not exertion, not athleticism, but self-acceptance. Playing "within one's limits." Feeling relaxed at the plate. Learning to stay calm and never betray yourself while you wait for the ball to drift your way. Baseball is one sport where you must be just who you are. (Think of the great ones: Ted Fucking Williams, Petey Neanderthal Rose, The Gluttonous Babe.) To that end, ballplayers do things in front of each other that they would not do in front of themselves—presuming they had a mirror handy. They do not need mirrors; they have each other.

AND YOU DON'T NEED A PROGRAM TO DISTINGUISH THE PLAYERS. JUST skip down the stalls and read what's on the underwear. In magic marker, across the elastic cumerbunds of briefs or the bands of jock ballast added to the cottony comfort, are written, in block print, a roll call of names that conjure magic to a continent's children: PEÑA, MORENO, HOSTETLER . . . . The gladiators trumpet themselves down

to their high-priced, long-term contracted rear ends. But there is a practical reason as well. The writing's there to help the equipment manager keep track of their laundry. The diapers that get dirty after every game have to get cleaned and returned to the right set of limbs. Thus infantilized, these are no longer heroes to me; the *Aguilas Cibaeñas* are good campers who don't want to lose their whites in the wash.

OF COURSE, THIS IS BATTLE DRESS THEY ARE DONNING. YOU CAN TELL that by the accompanying pomp, the grim deliberation born of a soldier's superstition, the need to replicate exact stylish combinations of jock cup, cut-off long johns, undershirts, knee socks. Every player does it his own way and constructs his own collage of armor. Some insist on tight knickers, and wear them to just above the knees. Others let them droop as far down as possible and turn sideways the stirrups they call "sanitaries," letting more or less of them show. Every bill of every cap is creased differently. If this really were an army, none of these men would pass inspection. Because baseball may be a battle but it is the least militarized of games. It does not impose too much discipline, instead requiring and encouraging the full florescence of each combatant's eccentricity because the acts common to his sport are performed in glorious and merciless isolation. Don't let the relay throws or the dugout kibbitzing fool you: baseball is not a team sport and does not attract team players. In this changing room, I see none of those sort of recruits who would be cheered by identicality and take pride in filling out a reviewing line. One look at any ballplayers, up close, tells us they are not enamored of clean edges, but of raggedy details. The slobbery of individual expression. The style that finds fruition in a hitching swing and sidearm throw begins with the length of socks, the number of wrist-bands per forearm. These self-made myths cannot become who they are until the uniforms they've been issued are made un-uniform, altered, reconcocted, sabotaged.

WHEN THEY EMERGE FROM TOILET STALLS, THEY MANAGE TO TAKE their time in hoisting up their pants, ending up waddling about hogtied by their underwear, like little kids who haven't quite got the hang of it. Journalism in all its glory: I have traveled all this way in order to write an eyewitness account of Omar Moreno taking a dump.

NEVER GET THIS CLOSE TO ANYTHING YOU LOVE.

MOST ARYAN AND MOST AFRICAN, TED POWER AND CECILIO GUANTE belong to a race apart. The two of them make a matched set: massive tendons and disproportionately swelled chests, great craniums, pteradactyl feet, nearly webbed, shoulders rounded as in the best Greek bronzes, forearms sculpted by Nautilus machines on which they must have done ten sets of fifty reps while still in the crib. Also, ready smiles, deep dimples, a geniality bred by overpowering advantage, a playful ease with their hugeness. Power must have guzzled ten gallons a day of milk as a kid; now he's switched to the brew that he gulps down like lemonade. His gay Nineties' mustache, rueful blue eyes, tightly curled blondness, would make a homosexuals' pinup. Guante, too, is strangely feminine: he tiptoes about, spritely nymph, with arched purple pear halves of buttocks, thighs so developed their musculature actually builds into two flexing triangles. His eyes dart, his nostrils are flared and equine, and his grin is molar perfection. Guante must use sticks of sugar cane for dental floss. Both of them are over six-foot six, so they can shout their taunts and teases over the heads of the rest. In the locker room, they are in constant communication: "Guante, you sick motherfucker . . . Guante, you're nothing but a sidearming cocksucker." The reply, "Hokay, Ted," then that flash of a smile and mutters in Español that undoubtedly comprise equivalent epithets. Power and Guante chuckle, uncircumcized rubber trunks of penises, more miracles of the glandular system, swaying back and forth and caroming against thigh walls. "Here, Guante," says Power, undressing. "Suck my underwear, Guante." But Guante just grins and answers, "I no hungry, Ted." Power throws his boxers in the pitcher's face. "Eat my shorts!" Guante tosses them back quiet as he catches them, merrily, with a "No *gringo* food for me. But maybe you like *comida Dominicana*. Hokay, Ted?" The humor is tight as their muscles, the laughter monstrous, the innocence girlish. Were the dinosaurs carefree as Cecilio and Ted? The earth shudders with each of their steps on the way to the showers.

DOMINICAN STADIUM TOILET GRAFFITTI. "*EN ESTA LATRINA, TRUJILLO es el jefe.*"

A BASHFUL KID WITH LIGHT-TONED, OPEN FACE WHO NEVER PLAYS. He sidles up and tells me, "If you want to know about Dominican baseball, you should go talk to my father." His English is perfect, befitting a fellow named Stanley. His last name is what counts: Javier, sired by Julian, who was one of the first Dominican big leaguers.

Now there's a stadium named after his father in his home village of San Francisco de Macoris. Televised wrestling matches, fake as ever, are broadcast live from Estadio Julian Javier. And son Stan will make the New York Yankees, though he never gets a start here. He is handsome, self-effacing and much too good-natured for any of this. I have not seen him hit, but I have a feeling that, at the plate, he must be overmatched.

WARMING-UP, TONY PEÑA IS ALREADY BURNING HOT. PLAYING A savage catch with his protegee Reuben Rodriguez, he practices the quick release and whips the ball back fast as any pitcher in a game could get it to him. He is practically daring the scouts to pull out their radar guns. He is not someone to conserve his talent. He has to believe it is unlimited. Good for two full seasons in each year, maybe three if they could be fit in. After he's revved his throws up to Bob Feller speed, he takes a breather on the bench right beside me. While he begins to strap on his shin protectors, his thighs touch mine and his cologne, activated by the evening's first sweat, makes an irritating vapor in my nostrils. Despite his fu manchu mustache affectation and game time demeanor, he is a shy, big-eyed pup at heart, perhaps not as shy as me, for he has learned to make people welcome in his own way. He finishes getting into the tools of ignorance, which, on him, become the ceremonial appendages of an imperial Roman subaltern. He reaches out with his chunky fingers and slaps me on the knee. This is his first acknowledgment of my existence, and I've got to respond. Now or never.

"You throw the ball like you wanted to be a pitcher," I start, trying to draw that thin line between jaded journalist and impressed fan.

"No, man." He gives me that grimace of the lower lip that turns his fu manchu into a full frown and lends determination to the koala eyes. "No pitch, always catch." He raises his brown hand and slices the air. "Always, always, man."

"How do you do it? I mean, how many games have you caught this year? Two hundred?"

"I dunno, man. I go out an' play this game hard. I gotta play hard because I love it." The pursuit of excellence, *sin traducción*.

"Do you play harder here, in Santiago, because it's your home town? Because of your people?"

"No, man, no way. I play the same in Pittsburgh, in Chicago, anyplace. I only know one way to play this game. Hard."

This has to be a speech he's given to reporters before, but I don't

mind. With Tony Peña, there is no line between interview and conversation. There are only two people who must be friends because they are in the same delicious predicament and they must play the game hard. If you don't play it intense, it isn't worth playing.

Tony P. stands up and walks to the top step of the dugout. He turns around to face me, and to do stretches with his arm against the top of the concrete overhang. He is a roly-poly panda, swinging on tiptoes, in shin-guards. He's a sleepy-eyed, rambunctious bear cub; fearsome only when it come to play.

"I dunno, man. Maybe I crazy . . . . I jes' love to play this game. I play all the time, same way, hard and crazy, because I love it."

Sweet baseball, that will o'wisp, that obscure object of desire. Even those closest to it continue to profess to adore it, maybe because they have never quite found it, conquered it. Unabashed, unashamed, the sentiments of true love still envelope baseball and all those who get near it.

"You gotta be crazy to play this game," shouts Tony P. He is no longer talking just to me, but to several teammates who've gathered to watch his act. He is aware of them and his leadership role. He uses the interview to whip them all up for the contest. He is screaming now, instantly hoarse. "You gotta be crazy! You hear? Crazy! You gotta play like a crazy man!"

He whirls around and takes up his duty.

FOR HIS NEXT SUMMER'S STINT OF CRAZINESS, TONY PEÑA WILL BE paid $800,000.

(HIS EMPLOYERS ARE THE ONES WHO MUST BE CRAZY, BECAUSE ANYONE can see that he would play for nothing.)

BARBARO GARBEY IS MOST SANE. HE PLAYS THIRD BASE LIKE A CATAtonic. He does not "pick it," as they say, but just plucks. He will never be much of a fielder, but his relaxed wrists are in sync with the catatonic ball. Clearly, he does not like to sweat. Once he returns from the indignity of having to actually exert himself in front of all those people, he goes fast as he can for his pack of cigarettes. He chain smokes, enjoying a new butt each inning. Maybe his nervousness has to do with his peculiar situation, or maybe he's just someone who really would have been a brooding monk or ulcerated exec or teleological existential instead of a ballplayer if given the chance. He does not speak to his teammates, and could not care less who wins

or loses. Except himself. He has already been a star in Cuba. He's taken money to fix games there. He's been suspended for such an admission, then had the suspension lifted, since his crimes were against Commie ball and therefore excusable, but Garbey remains under suspicion and he knows it. He plays and carries himself like a man on parole. He knows more about the insecurities of this profession than most of the others, who are in themselves pretty damn tobacco-spittin' insecure. Garbey rode on a fishing boat to the land of freedom only to find himself in Triple-A at Evansville and eventually, under the pernicious leprechaun thumb of Colonel Sparky Anderson. A parole officer if ever there was one. Baited and tortured by Fidel because he happens to be the first renegade scum *gusano* Cuban to live out the lingering Cuban dream of making it to the Yankee leagues, Garbey had been told that he'd been disowned by mother and sisters back in Santiago de Cuba. Later, through secret phonecalls, he'd learned that this was just Castro's psyche-job, some managerial disinformation. No wonder Barbaro Garbey, who is very dark and rather frail, with the kind of eyes that dart constantly and have almost no whites, never lets go his batting glove's grip on that next cigarette. He dares a smile only when some old man sneaks down from the stand to infiltrate the bench, give him the power-shake and tell Garbey, "I am also from Santiago." Then you can almost hear a spring of cold war tension inside the player pop. Garbey's smile has a devastating effect, because it is so infrequent. "*Santiago es muy linda*," murmurs the old man in chewed-up straw hat. And Barbaro nods, takes a drag, and looks down at the dark chasms between tobacco-stained boards of the dugout planking.

LOVE AMERICA AND HATE BASEBALL? HATE AMERICA AND LOVE BASEball? Neither is possible, except in the abstract.

THE DUGOUT IS THE WORST PLACE TO WATCH A BALLGAME. FROM such a side angle, the diamond is cross-sectioned and ceases to hold shape or gleam. A fine strata of mica chipping is all one sees. As through a periscope, the horizon flattens. The flinging of ball from mound to plate and then around-the-horn, the spraying of hits, turns to an absurd exercise in parallelism. A bobbing of white back and forth on a string. It is hard to tell if a pitch breaks, slides, curves, drops, forks, screws: only that it comes forward and then is tossed back. Viewed at ground level, the game is a progression of groaning knee-bends, prompted by the bats' metronomic aerobics class. The

action is reduced to a series of dust clouds kicked up by the rough and impudent skitter of something hard and stinging and unrepentant. Fly balls lose their loft and grandiose arc. They are just projectiles gone awry into left and right fields' peripheral spider web corners. The crowd tells you if a catch is made. From the dugout, too, baseball moves with grim and silent rotation, sending out its on-deck hitters with extra lumber and determination, returning them muttering to themselves, shoulders sagging. A procession ordered and predictable as a square dance, and less fun. A short walk off a statistically-guaranteed short pier. Eager county fair he-men eagerly taking their turn to win a kewpie doll for their best girl and so often coming back empty. Or outfielders huffing with the return passage from their Siberian outposts, stick figures becoming sets of short, energy-conserving strides and more angular kneecaps, tossing down their mittens when they arrive as if they can't wait to get rid of the cold. The bench is so much warmer and safer. Here, beneath the reinforced concrete bunker, there's little awareness of thousands cheering or squirming or razzing or munching behind. Despite the ebb and flow of the *Aguilas* with their followers, the informal mingling and flaunting of barriers that gives these people such evident joy, the world of the baseball participant and the observer are as far apart as any worlds can get. The game from the dugout has nothing to do with the game from the box seats.

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO THE UNMASKED MARVELL WYNNE WHEN HE plops himself beside you after scoring the go-ahead run? That he goes from second to home faster than a frightened pony? That he reminds you more of Willie Mays than any other player you've ever sat next to and tried not to flatter? Marvell is just a scared kid from Chicago who is trying to impress the scouts and has nothing to fall back on if the speed fails him. Yet I am in awe of his compact fleetness. And he, biting his lip so that he won't grin too cockily, catching his breath quicker than he expected, knows that he's on to something good. When he talks about what the Dominican has done for him, he talks about gaining experience. But I can see from the way he allows his wary ghetto eyes to linger on this roster of Hispanic soulmates that he has gotten a lot more from a country where, suddenly, he has so many brothers, of so many shades, speaking so many tongues; so many new and vibrant definitions of blackness. A lifetime's defenses against discrimination are dropping, notch by notch, base hit by base hit. They say that Marvell also shows quick moves at the disco.

STAY AWAY FROM THE ESPINOSA BOYS, THE GANG FROM VILLA Altagracia. Thin Julio smiles more often than his older, idolized brother. But Nino, who's all washed up in the States, can strut in his satiny Phillies jacket, fists in the pockets, and show off before the crowds, or play clubhouse enforcer, tossing out the *gringo* reporters, the shoeshine boys and all hangers-on before a team meeting. As if privacy is required for them to hear the manager exhort, "Let's go get 'em, *muchachos*!" Nino looks cool in dark shades; he brushes the first grey hairs back under his cap; he is adept at the bluff that's utilized by all fifth starters.

ONE OF THE SHORT-PANTSED VENDORS WHO RACE THROUGH THE dugout selling sweet thimblefulls of espresso poured from thermoses is selling something else tonight. "You wan' good pussy?" this little kid asks big-limbed, easygoing Chuck Cary. The coffee peddler and fledgling panderer is swooped up by the *noretamericano* hulk. Suddenly, fleetingly, he is just an orphan kid on a volunteer daddy's knee. "You got pussy for me, Jose? *Verdad*? *Verdad*?" The little guy is giggling and his front teeth are missing. "Yeah, man, *mucho* good pussy." But Chuck wants to know how old she is. "Seven years old!" the boy boasts, before the pitcher lifts him off his uniformed knees and swings him high above the bench, gripping the seams of the kid's shorts like he was going to throw a slider.

TODAY'S MEN ON THE BENCH ARE YESTERDAY'S SHOESHINERS FOUND more lucrative, if less steady, employment. When asked why he's become a ballplayer, one second-stringer shrugs and says, "*Por que no hay trabajo.*" Because there is no work. There is no mystery in any of this, except in why it is that I must come snooping around to find the mystery that's missing in the rest of my life. No story either, where I've come so far to find a story. The game's all over: rich bested poor 17-3, strong blanked weak 22-0. No scoops are possible anymore in this world, there's no unusual activity to report. Nothing in the way of surprise denouements or ironic twists. The story already written, leaving only nuance in its wake. And me, not a storyteller. A scavenger of nuance.

OTHER OFFICIAL STADIUM VAGRANTS ROAM THE BENCHES SEEKING used mitts, batting gloves, jocks, a scrap of undershirt. Anything saleable or souvenir. Dave Hostetler sniffs his batting glove. "You really want this?" The smell of a hand's sweat, with time, smells no dif-

ferent than the crotch. The odor of ten thousand tight grips of the bat has turned sexual. Hostetler's bloodhound face droops into the pocket between thumb and forefinger. "Pooo-eee! You don't want this!" But the boys nod. If they could, they would collect Big Hoss' excretions in a jar.

HOSS IS IN AGONY. SIX-FOOT FOUR CORN-FED, PRIME MEAT *PRIMERA* baseman reduced to whining and a welling up of tears as he trots in from warm-ups. No more, *nada mas.* He misses his wife, he's only seen his baby girl once, he can't take another bus ride over those damn rutted shitpile Dominican roads, and besides, he never seems to get a call. Either on a third strike or from home. Stinking telephones, dumb umps. He's been uppercutting at air in desperation and his average won't look to the Rangers, who keep badmouthing him and would like to unload his contract anyhow. He can't get over how they badmouth you at contract time and then keep expecting you to give your all. Big Hoss, the prototypical dumb jock, who even likes to call himself that, is the only one who's smart enough to imagine a different way of doing all this. He's figured out that this winter ball in the republic of the starved is no paradise.

"VAMOS, CONO! CONO! CONO! CONO!" SOMEONE TELLS US THAT THIS most frequently summoned bit of vocabulary means something like shit, but it may also a familiar and affectionate rendering of the word for brother-in-law. Which makes sense, since, as Chuck Cary observes, "They're all one big family. . . . See, they just can't keep their hands off each other!" And he's right: the horseplay goes on through the innings, no matter the score, a pinch in the behind here, a casual fart aimed at a pal, surprise mussing of the hair, or just an arm leaned on a buddy's shoulder while they discuss some beauteous *chicas* in the third row, or even a hug for army officers in full regalia, epaulets and medals that nearly get up and do the *merengue* by themselves as the *generales* saunter. These *pistoleros* are not just tolerated, but embraced as living mascots, perhaps better luck than Balthazar the midget. They are always someone's cousin, nephew, that in-law called the law, since tyrants and hangmen and rebels are all intimately related in the cosy island genealogy. *Conos* all. Still, it's disconcerting to have my view of the game blocked by a parade of holsters, shiny pieces, pearl-handled Colts. Until Chuck mutters, the good jaded Gary Cooper Yank, "I think they've got a contest to see who can go down to Woolworth's and pick out the biggest gun."

AND THE INQUISITIVE BERKELEY GRAD ACTUALLY WANTS TO KNOW, "What kinda government do they got here anyhow? Is it free or is it like Russia's?" He should know, he's been on this tropical boot camp longer than I have, and I hesitate to start sounding like a textbook. This is one kind of conversation I never expected to have in a dugout, but Chuck is one of a new breed of player that I never expected to find sitting there. "It's free," I tell him. "Free to do anything that the army and the landowners and the American corporations allow." Chuck doesn't even swallow hard. "They had some trouble down here in '65, didn't they?" And I'm off, explaining about Juan Bosch and the Constitutionalists and how the Marines were sent in to put down a popular revolt which was demanding nothing more than a legitimately elected government. Chuck's legs are folded, his gigantic left-hander's forearm at rest on his knee, his mitt at his side. His blue eyes are fearless. Nothing rattles him too hard: not a good shelling by the bottom of the opposing team's order, not the truth. He spits from his chaw and mumbles, "Good ol' Marines."

THE OLD QUESTION, THE EXPLANATION FOR THE DIVISION OF THE world, still comes down to chicken and egg. Are these people so kind because they've been oppressed, or have they been oppressed because they're so kind?

BALLPLAYERS EVERYWHERE, AND ESPECIALLY IN THE POOR COUNtries, practice this game face of grim concentration. They want everyone to think that they are straining themselves mightily as they sit on their duffs in the splintery dugout. Or that waiting their on-deck turn extracts a toll far greater than the few seconds of required exertion. Perhaps it does, but this still doesn't qualify them as athletes and everyone knows it. Such is baseball's charm. It is the impossible game that anyone can master. All it takes is pluck and an expertise in spitting and learning to wear the mask that hides a shit-eating grin which would reveal to one and all just how cushy a deal you and your colleagues are getting. This is not to say that *peloteros* don't get underpaid or sacrifice or suffer long bus rides and discomfort and deprivation or are immune to the pressure, the tragedy of a life that loses purpose when it loses youth. It is just that playing baseball is basically a great deal of fun and not very taxing. Not bad at all to slip into sanitaries, feel the itch of woolens, strut tall in one's spikes before friends and bookies, stand sentinel in the lights for all to see, then heave a round object hard as one can and receive it back with a gorgeous, life-affirming pop. Not to mention the money. Most every

beisbolista is a poor country kid born beside the proverbial pile of chicken droppings who reached in and came up with the proverbial gold watch in the form of *el beisbol.* The game face guards this secret and guards it well. One day, all of these fellows who are preening and slapping each other about and pinching each others' athletic rears and blowing bubbles and itching for sips of post-game brew and winking at seventh-inning stretch *senoritas* will have to go to work for a living. And so will I.

WHAT A COMFORT TO KNOW THAT OMAR MORENO LOSES HIS MITT between innings, must conduct a recurrent, chagrined, furtive search after all these years for the place he flung it, just as I do in my Sunday morning softball league. Dewy-eyed, pigeon-toed, high-waisted Omar! What a lethargic embodiment of grace! What few fluctuations in Arabian Panamanian temperament! His gloves go astray, but he doesn't. His professionalism is to be found elsewhere.

THE PITCHER IS A FREAK BECAUSE HE IS THE ONLY ONE WHO REALLY has to work. Nobody wants anything to do with him, lest they catch the disease. He sits at the far end of the bench between innings, arm kept warm in jacket sleeve wrapping, wiping sweat with a towel, more sweat beading, trying not to gloat or make excuses, depending on how the inning went, trying most of all not to think about how tough it is and what he faces next. In this heat, especially, it quickly becomes evident that the pitcher is baseball's only true athlete and responsible for ninety per cent of the contest's outcome and exertion. Don't get too near the *lanzador* or you might figure this isn't really such a terrific racket.

GONZO WILL NEVER MAKE IT. I CAN TELL THAT FROM HIS DUGOUT demeanor, not his pitches. He is too social. He wants to be part of the team. He cannot sulk like a pitcher, stare out grimly like a pitcher. He shakes his head for all to see. He puts his doubts far too easily on display. He acts like all of this should be easy and he can't figure out why it's not. He prefers signing autographs, or acting the "beeg mon" with local tykes, than he does being out there, by himself, on that mound of dirt. Never mind his velocity or location. Gonzo will always be one of the boys, never king of the hill. He doesn't have the stuff.

ONE OF THE SCRUBS TWEAKS MARVELL'S BEHIND, TRIES TO TWIST THE brim of his cap. But Marvell just pouts this time and won't play along.

"What's the matter, *hombre*?" Marvell answers, exasperated, "Nothing's the matter," in a tone that suggests he is venturing into entirely new and uncharted territory. "I'm actually *trying* to get into the game."

THE YEARS DON'T COUNT, THE AT-BATS ARE NOTHING, THE CONTRACTS and the championships for nought. Miguel Dilone paces the dugout, bat in hand, choking up, stopping here and there to assume his stance, bounce the knees and relax them, break wrists, then meet the imaginary pitch, eyes shut, then stroke in slow motion, again and again. He is still trying to get the thing right. Find the perfect groove. He crouches in that pose just like all the stickballers out in the street who will never have the chance to get in a game, face live pitching, hear the crack when the ball is well met. Miguel Dilone acts like he's never gotten his ups and won't ever get enough to get it down.

THE BABY-FACED EL CHILOTE JUST CAN'T KEEP UP THE MANAGERIAL mask. Returning down the bench from an emergency conference with some pitcher who's lost his nerve and his rhythm, after whispering to runners his orders for the bullpen, then chewing out a sleepwalking infielder, he can't help glancing toward me with those batting frog eyes and bursting into a grin that stretches all his kid freckles and puffy cheeks, as if to ask, "How can we spend our lives getting serious over something like this?" My answer is always a shrug to confirm his wise detachment. Then Winston Llenas, fledgling manager, puts a new chaw in his mouth, plants one spiked foot on the dugout's top step, and becomes just another serious fool squinting toward destiny.

BEFORE THE SEVENTH GAME, TONY PEÑA KNOWS IT'S BEST TO THINK about anything else but. A true team leader down to the timing of his distractions, he does not pace and get tight like the others, but slumps on the stoop of dugout steps and opens up a newspaper. He does not read it, he attacks it. Turning pages, he nearly rips them out. On the back of the tabloid, he spots a photo of an overturned school bus in Minnesota. Clumps of snow, that strange stuff, spot the picture. The caption says that twenty-two children were killed. Tony Peña swallows hard. His grimaces make all the arteries in his neck bulge. "Fuck!" he shouts with an accent that gives the word two syllables. "Fuck, man! You see this?" He wants to show Ted Power, show everyone on the team. The school kids could be his own honey-colored, droopy-eyed Tony Junior. His grief is immediate,

unaffected, personal. "Fu-uck!" He is moaning once again, the team captain trying to work himself up into the rage required for victory, only this time he is team captain of the planet. He takes all maladies and misfortune on his massive shoulders. He feels personally responsible and he wishes he could turn that bus back on its side, right it all, and he probably could have if given the chance. He is the ultimate catcher. He wants the ball. He's not afraid of any challenge. His strength is unbounded. He is the best that baseball can produce, a man who's convinced that he will be young forever. And maybe he will. He is shaking his head and the muscles in back of his bull neck are shuddering. Tony wants the fucking ball. He would like to flash signals for the universe. Like he screamed once at Gonzo, "Leave it to me, *cono*. I call a good game."

GAME, PLAY, SPORT. PLAY, SPORT, GAME. AS WITH THE MOST CRUCIAL words, one quickly runs out of synonyms. I have to repeat myself because no other words will do. Sport, game, play: the most frequently used words in my written vocabulary, the least frequently needed in my life.

WHEN THE CHAMPIONSHIP'S WON AND THE CELEBRATION'S ON—*cervezas*, not champagne, all around—and I feel more than ever like I'm crashing someone else's party, it is Tony P. who will rush to embrace me, fervently, making me feel that I, too, am an Eagle of the Cibao, or at least that I've contributed with a fielding gem, a timely pinch-hit.

AT A RARE TEAM PRACTICE THE NEXT MORNING, I CAN'T STAND TO watch any longer. I coax a big-league glove, blue semi-stiff Mizuno, from one of the relievers, who doesn't really want to part with any bit of equipment critical to his livelihood, but I promise, "Come on, man, I won't break your mitt," learning to talk player lingo and he relents. So I can take my place in the Estadio Cibao's threadbare outfield, before high right field walls plastered with rum billboards, and await batted balls. I am surrounded by the usual horde of interloper barefoot street kids in raggedy khaki shorts who act so nonchalant compared to me, so much less eager than me for a chance to shag major-league flies. One has a tennis ball, for between-pitches catch, and flings it over toward his newest pal.

SUCH LAZY MOVEMENTS, SO MONOTONOUS AND UTTERLY TRANSFIXing. It takes only a toss or two to lose my jitters and gain full control

over the dirty yellow ball. I snap back into a mode that's been in the making since New England childhood summers with the Red Sox games on the transistor, in California parks on LSD, with my buddies and my Dad and—like this kid—anyone who would humor me. Simulating pop-ups with high tosses, grounders with squibs, or gyrating in Tiant Perry Palmer Marichal mimes, I muster all variety of motions for my receiver. He grins as he studies the *gringo*, but does not dare break the good, silent respectful peace. Universal rapport of pitch and catch. There is nothing more that the boy and I could be saying to each other if we spoke, and it doesn't matter when we drop one or two. The United Nations Security Council, if they really want to further world understanding, should turn off their simultaneous translations and tear off their diplomatic suits, they should scrap agendas and grab mitts, disband and reconvene as one circular catch.

AND THEN, ALL TOO SOON, THOUGH I'VE BEEN PREPARING FOR A lifetime, there's a hard projectile veering off from home plate, appearing in my eye-corner radar screen. The real rawhide arcing in an erratic wobble off the bat of Dilone. He's swung late, though with considerable professional crack, and the result's looping toward right field and me. A miscarriage of geometry that I've got to handle. Every shot to the opposite field is like that. The opposite field—that sounds like a distant cousin of a black hole—and I always seem to be in it. As the ball gets bigger, it gets harder to catch. As I come toward it, it continues to spin away. Moving through the thin sky, it turns into a strophe of light. Try and catch a sunbeam! My feet back-pedal at first, then soft-shoe and finally scurry forward to make amends. Calculating without any awareness of what they're doing. The thrill of all physical movement, properly done, is that it is scheming without guilt or premeditation. How precious this one ball among many balls because I'm about to make it all mine! No solid pop as it falls into glove, I've miscalculated from inexperience and the orb's not in the leather pocket but up the heel, and I must continue to coax it, nurse it, slip as it slips toward grass and gravity, spoiling my nonchalance and turning this easy fly into a shoestringer. Now it's done. All the miles flown, the cash expended, the medicines swallowed, the credit card slips and the planning, the culture shock and anxieties, all the debates over journalistic ethics, all the doubts and stiff necks, the grueling rides through the heat that we've made these last few days, everything was for this. It may not be in a game, but I've caught a ball that was launched by a *bona fide* big-league hit-

ter. Like a big-leaguer, I must toss it in quickly, rear back and heave a nice strike to the cut-off man, over my shoulder, but in my excitement, I overthrow, send the relay skittering past second, over the mound and toward the opposing team dugout. No one notices this transgression but me. Nor my strong arm. Nor the catch. The ball that I'd craved, cradled, waited for over a lifetime's vigil, is gone. Gotten rid of as quick as it was conceived, like all true pleasures. The eight-year-olds on either side of me aren't impressed. They don't understand why I'm grinning. The one on my right pounds the tennis ball impatiently into his mitt, then holds it up toward me asking permission to resume the important work of our catch.

I USED TO THINK THAT MY LOVE OF BASEBALL WAS AN AVOIDANCE OF life, but I'm becoming convinced that it is my only route *toward* life. The obsessional, in general, has been given a bad name, when we ought to rejoice over anything that so enthralls us. What ensnares, what we keep coming back to, what cannot be helped—those are what defines us more surely than any claims we might make for ourselves. To study one's compulsive activity is to learn about all compulsive activities—like sex, politics, labor, love, war, dreaming, delusion. By refusing, for one moment, to forget about it, I keep baseball in very high company.

BASEBALL MAKES APPARENT THE MINUTE AMOUNT OF LEEWAY WITHIN which all human activity transpires. If the strike zone were a millimeter wider or the bats six inches longer or the mound a foot shorter or the bases a foot further apart, then the advantage would swing so far to either offense or defense that the sport itself would disintegrate. The balance of dimensions and forces is so remarkably precarious that one wonders how it could have been wangled without computer imaging or, at the very least, a crew of statistical engineers. Yet the first foul lines were crooked, the field paced out, the floppy bases flung here and there. So it is with the temperature of the upper atmosphere, the polar ice melt, the average amount of rainfall, the number of sunspots. And with the balance of payments, the world banking debt, the adjustment of currencies and wages against the dollar. Were the Dominican peso worth a few greenbacks less, there would be rioting and social upheaval—that's as obvious as what would occur if a batter was made to reach for pitches which were beyond his possible extension of arm. The web that holds rich and poor in place is no less fragile than the design that usually keeps a hitter from beating out a ground ball by a single step. Baseball is

not the only game of inches. So is politics, and certainly diplomacy, and friendship, and courtship, and reproduction most of all is a game of uterine inches. The difference between life and extinction is a few degrees, or parts-per-billion of monoxide. Justice itself, or our feeble notion of it, is but one more example of balanced dimensions. Our world order, inequitable and improvised, is a construct magnificent and reassuring simply because it allows some sort of game to go on. The most oppressive of rulebooks still requires our respect, and even the angriest among us has to shudder when he thinks of what may be let loose when the field of play's been fiddled with and redrawn.

"YOU GOTTA BE CRAZY," SAYS TONY P. "EAT MY SHORTS," SAYS TED P. "NO comment," says Barbaro. "It's a super experience," says Marvell. "I gotta get outta here," says Hoss. "The competition's what we need," says Stu Cliburn. "The poverty really makes you appreciate the U.S. of A.," says Ray Krawczyk. "I coulda been a Pirate, if they give me the chance," says Plutarco. "I owe my life to the *Aguilas*," says Osvaldo. "I can walk away from this game anytime," says Chuck Cary. "My buddies back home can't figure out how come I haven't made the bigs. They don't know how hard it is to play this game." And later, "I gotta have confidence to throw the slider on three-and-one, three-and-two." And later, "I know enough Spanish to order meals, shake off a signal and get laid." And, "We'll get them tommorrow," says El Chilote. And, "I can't get out there and throw the ball for them," says the pitching coach. "I thank God for giving me the talent to play this game," says the unknown benchwarmer. "Because there is no work," says another. "Let's keeck some fuckin' ass!" says Gonzo. "*Vamos, cono*!" say all the rest.

WHEN THE PLAYERS SPEAK, WHY DO THEY TELL ME EXACTLY WHAT I expect? Like a home run ball, we do not travel to discover but to confirm.

Berkeley Softball

The Last Game: 1983

For years the legendary Sunday pick-up game flourished at Codornices; it turned away or absorbed all invaders. The rules were simple and fair: the first twenty people played; then the next ten played the winning team. The losing team got on the end of the line. Anyone who didn't like the format of the game stopped coming. Permits for the use of the field were required by the city, but those who arrived with official paper usually backed down if not from fairness, then in the face of the sheer number of people playing and waiting to play. Occasionally the Codornices regulars lost a skirmish, but then they were able to outwait even the most entrenched game, though sometimes it took three or four hours of sitting to regain the field. Only the annual dog show unambiguously took over the field, covering it with rubbish and holes for the following weeks. But how could you argue with hundreds of trailers arriving full of exotic dogs from all over California?

Then, after State Proposition 13, the City of Berkeley decided to raise money from the use of the field itself. They began to enforce the permits by charging money for them, first $5.00 an hour, then $10.00 an hour. People paying for time fought the pick-up game more vigorously, and the Codornices regulars began to drift away because there was too often a hassle over the field. If they were going to give up a Sunday and, in some cases, drive twenty or thirty miles to get to *the game*, they wanted to know they would play, or at least be able to sit on the side drinking beer with their colleagues until their turn came.

The sawbuck was a problem, but it wasn't the main stumbling block. The sheer bureaucracy involved in getting the diamond undermined the spontaneity of the game. The magic of Codornices could not be sustained by people waiting on line for a permit. The game had to be improvisational, invented on the spot. It was organized

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This is the continuation of a series of pieces published consecutively in the first three editions of *Baseball I Gave You the Best Years of My Life:* "Berkeley Softball: 1975-1976," "Baseball Junkies," and "Berkeley Softball: 1979." All three pieces appear in the third edition.

by disorganization — dozens of separate people deciding on a given Sunday to come to a certain ball diamond, few of them ever having seen each other elsewhere and virtually none of them knowing who else would show up that day. How do you activate such a group to apply for permits? Players would have to be designated each week to wait on line at City Hall; word then would have to be gotten out about which hours of which Sundays we had claimed. Part of the excitement of Codornices was not being certain who was going to show up for Sunday's game. There were literally hundreds of people who played more than once and had some intention of returning, plus unlimited numbers of other potential players, one or two of whom stumbled upon the choosing-up every week.

Codornices was a pick-up game defined by the fact that someone might play in 1976 and next in 1981, might not even live in California. Yet half the people would recognize him when he came back, and no one would know if he came from outside Reno or on vacation from Denver. The players were like weeds, a fact belied by the spiffy neighborhood and the formal Rose Garden and tennis courts across the street. Even where you knew what sounded like a last name you weren't sure if it was a surname or a nickname. The swift strong-armed shortstop I had always (like everyone else) called Frampton turned out to be the shadow of a rock-star; he had a totally different name. Etch was really Etchieson. On the other hand, for years I was sure Merlin was called that because he was a magician with the bat, a righty able to hit with such accuracy down the rightfield line that he could beat almost any shift with line drive homers placed either to the right or left of the rightfielder; but he was Merlin at the post office on Monday too.

Finally, when the game was most vulnerable, the Department of Parks and Recreation held a meeting about the future of the field. The neighbors of Codornices showed up in great number; a friend and I represented the players (without their knowledge). The local homeowners complained about motorcycles, loiterers, beer cans, and too much Sunday traffic. They wouldn't say the game was also too black and Spanish — not in Berkeley anyway — but of course that's what they were saying. Responding to neighborhood pressure the City closed the field for a year, reseeded it, and tore out the parking lot and put a playground in its place. When it was reopened the University athletic department and fraternities seemed to have all the permits; it was no longer a blue collar, unemployed field.

Even with such obstacles I fought to get the "game" restored.

As an outsider I was able to objectify it, name it, make an image of it. But most of the players had no such experience. They just drifted away without being aware of anything happening because they did not consider it a formal occasion in the first place. Even so, I put together a small group to fight the permits; we exchanged names and phone numbers; we made appointments and met at City Hall. The mostly black liberal matriarchy wore us down in two weeks. You can't argue with bureaucrats anywhere, but in a so-called radical city, where minorities have taken over the positions of authority in cultural and artistic offices, the matter is beyond even discussion. We wanted the pick-up rules restored; short of that, we wanted some guarantee of times and dates throughout a long enough stretch to restore faith in the game. Said one black player: "There's no one tougher than nigger ladies when it comes to the enforcing of bad rules. The less they understand the more righteous they get."

The players were so tough and street-smart I had fantasized that the closing of the pick-up game would cause a minor revolution. They disappeared without a trace. The way the players fought their defeat was to ignore it, to abandon it and move on. And I realized that's probably how it's always been in North America: settlers leaving villages after the professionals pass their restrictive laws, continuing to the West or North. Now, with no frontier except parts of Montana and Alaska, rebels just find the next best thing, or sit in front of the tube all day. Redneck decadence. The potential revolutions of Latin America vanish as suddenly, a million or more, on streets, and in villages barely reclaimed from jungle, flare up and dissipate. It doesn't matter if the country is left wing or right wing. They can be stamped out by Salvadorian death squads or Nicaraguan Revolutionary Councils. The Resistance has to be really strong before they'll even give themselves a name, take responsibility for their actions, stand up for a piece of land. Until then it's shifting boundaries, pick-up games, unacknowledged and temporary alliances. Just ask the Mosquito Indians about the protection of the Revolution. The Tibetans learned the same lesson last decade. In fact, a Mosquito showed up at a Berkeley field long after Codornices was abandoned, a fine player named Blandino Knight, on a cold day in February when a group of people threw together a game just to get the season off the ground. He was on his way from Costa Rica to testify in Washington. He had taken a respite from the war and was playing a graceful Latin American centerfield in a strange country on a journey to the source. But that war would not end in our lifetimes,

his or mine. It was a question only of how far it would spread. How long it would be before Cubans would play in the post-Revolution, post-war big leagues, and what cities would be left. All that was played out silently by Blandino one day. And the game in which he rounded second and dashed toward a slide at third showed how we were squeezing innings into the eerie protraction of time.

For two whole seasons I played on odd diamonds, or didn't play, or tracked down rumors of other fields where the Codornices game was supposedly reborn. I never found it. Occasionally I saw a familiar face on some diamond down in the flatlands or out in Strawberry Canyon, but I couldn't tell if they had played in 1975 or 1979, whether they had quit before the game had quit on them or were still playing at the end. Isolated in their other drab games they lost all meaning. I heard that many of the more intense players joined official leagues and played for companies, the field assured. John Skeels got married suddenly, to a girlfriend no one had seen him with, and moved to Helena, Montana, to install satellite dishes — but last I heard he was in Hailey, Idaho, putting in burglar alarms again.

Without the strange and wild mix of Codornices, baseball lost its edge for me. I found myself only in middle-aged pick-up games, usually associated with a party or holiday, or because a team needed a player and someone thought to call me. These games lacked the violence of Codornices, but they also lacked its incredible spaced-out calm. People played with pompous competitiveness and self-conscious humor, unable to choose between showing off and spoofing their showing off. There was little of the spontaneous jive humor of Codornices, its outrageous riffs, its sense of floating in the cosmos at the heart of danger. It was just play-it-and-get-it-over. We didn't see each other; we played right past each other — even though we talked a whole lot more about "cultural things." My mind wandered and I didn't feel like diving for the ball; my heart wasn't in my throat each at bat.

Codornices was the great street game on the diamond in the sky. It was the lower-class Sunday in heaven. And it was the one break-dance in which I was allowed to play and do my few good moves — baseball. Next to that the picnic and white-collar circuit seemed like ballroom dancing, or, even worse, a bunch of anthropologists acting out a Jivaro ceremony.

I planted more herbs, watched football on t.v., and occasionally walked down to the park near our house in Richmond and hit Robin fly balls. The Sunday ceremony was over; it was back to dust-

bowl baseball, just the heat and sheer ongoingness of the game. There were only so many fly balls you could chase down in your lifetime. Even Merlin and Etch were learning that. The season was coming to an end.

Early in the new year, 1983, I got an unexpected phone call from Bob Pearce, the huge righthanded slugger who appeared in his Margarita's Mexican Lunch uniform in my earlier Codornices stories. He told me he wanted to have a reunion on the field, an official reopening of the baseball season. I, as the chronicler, he said, had to attend. He wasn't quite sure what to call his event: a reclaiming of the field?, a hall of fame game?, a party? "I've called at least fifty people," he told me, "and they've called their people. We're going to have ballplayers you've never seen, real oldtimers. We could have guys who haven't played at Codornices for ten years. April 2nd. Mark that date down on your calendar. It's going to be the function of the year." It was strange that Pearce was the one coordinating the revival. I had rarely seen him at Codornices in the last two years befrore the closing. But he was a legend there, and certainly a representative of its most ancient history.

In February our own lives began to change. After six years in the Bay Area we were thinking of moving back East because the schools in Richmond had become unbearable for our kids. We had assumed Berkeley was too expensive, so we bought plane tickets to go explore Boston and New York; however, the week before we left we found an affordable house in a busy area just off Telegraph and jumped at the opportunity to live at the center. It was like moving to 57th Street in Manhattan without the highrises and traffic. California still seemed like noplace to someone who had spent much of his life in New York, Massachusetts, Maine, and Vermont, but Berkeley was so close to the cutting edge, it was hard to leave. It *was* New York City—New York City 1952, when there was still something to do, before Madison Avenue and its bottom-line took over, when people had the patience, even the optimism to wait for history to happen and you didn't have to own the universe just to play on one of the teams in town.

We went East anyway, missing the last snowstorm of an arid winter by a week, but sled on its dwindling crust and walked in the old world in which our kids were born—back before the college at which I was teaching went out of business in Vermont, before the unending California summer. We spent our last two days in the City

itself on the cusp of spring; it was warm and sweet; as Neil Diamond sang, "those times can come again." For the first time since my high school graduation twenty-one years before, I followed the subway back, the same route I had taken every day for six years. Eight miles through Manhattan into the Bronx—I could never have guessed the last time it would be so long before I returned, or that the journey itself, which had seemed so safe and sure year after year, would have become so dangerous. The same tracks, the same stops, the same memories of memories, but it was not the same universe.

Out on the school ballfield, amid the last patches of snow, kids were throwing baseballs around between classes. The image was so familiar and so remote at the same time. More than half my life had elapsed between then and now, but I looked through it as clear as glass. I even looked both ways; not then but now, back and forth, as if this could only be a science-fiction story, this tale of reincarnation. And then we flew back to California through the time zones so quickly that even with a stop in Minneapolis we walked on the streets of New York City and drove our car through San Francisco 10:00 A.M. the same morning.

Awake almost twenty-four hours that night I sat up and watched a movie on the cable I had always missed. At the end of *The Wanderers* Richie is left back in the Bronx with his Italian elders and a shotgun Catholic wedding; only his theme song (Dion and the Belmonts) is left; the mysterious girl has disappeared into a Dylan concert; his friends are headed toward San Francisco on the Jersey Turnpike. It is maybe 1963; the gang wars are over, even as they were over a few years later in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in Coppola's version of S. E. Hinton's *Rumblefish*, or as Eddie and the Cruisers were to break up a year later, their last tape ditched in a junkyard, again New Jersey en route to California, the suburban energy blown out into the deserts and big sky of the West, into a hundred thousand nightclubs, small-town bookstores and restaurants, and pick-up diamonds. Coppola and Hinton across the Mississippi, Phil Kaufman and Richard Price back in New York City.

There is something about 1963, San Francisco, Palisades Park, Mickey Mantle, Dion and the Belmonts, the Kennedy assassination, and the early Bob Dylan; it is coming back to haunt me, as if to tell me why I'm in Berkeley now, but it's still New York City, like some occult force twisted into music and hexagrams out through New Jersey and Long Island. I can't even begin to name it, but I can see that the other end is 1983, New York, break dancing, Aikido in Marin

County, Nuclear Activism, Shea Stadium, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Neil Diamond singing "Brooklyn Roads," and the sweat lodge in Potlatch, Idaho. Exquisitely minute eras twist about each other, come to an end, and are reborn in our midst, even in the shortness of our lives. The game at Codornices was played in the dazzling tension between two poles; the field stretched from home plate on the Jersey Turnpike all the way through the dusty baselines of Oklahoma to the green tree-lined outfield of the Berkeley Hills. Dion in Florida singing gospel, David Frizell and Shelley West in Concord: "You're the Reason God Made Oklahoma." In the distance across the Bay from Vermont, "San Francisco Nights."

About a week before the event Bob Pearce called me again with some time to chat. He told me he had joined a team in Minneapolis called Triangle Sports; last year they were the winner of the Industrial Softball nationals.

"You know. Give the fantasy one last whirl before I settle down with the wife and the swimming pool." He quoted me the team batting averages: .671, .606, .663, .579. Most of the home run averages were over .300. People had records like 86 homers in 76 games. The team as a whole hit 603 home runs and batted .595.

He went on describing the other teams and the league for some fifteen minutes, as though I, for having written about Codornices, would understand the desire to be a fulltime baseball junkie. It was as though his own fantasy was beyond his understanding. He didn't say that. He said: "You know, just another guy chasing the American dream." The light and ironical California touch, so that you wonder if it ever quite touches.

"Bp starts at ten sharp" were Pearce's words, and Robin and I were there at ten after. It was first time on the field in two years, and for Robin it seemed almost back in his childhood in Vermont. He was now fourteen and big enough to play. After a long rainy winter the day was bright and sunny, but the field was occupied by seven girls and five guys, some in uniform, going through an embarrassingly inept and pretentious practice. A sort-of coach, a guy in a baseball cap, was hitting ground balls and calling out the kind of instructions that immediately branded him a fraud. He had spent too much time listening to Joe Gorilla on the tube.

It was clear that Bob Pearce had neglected to get a permit. Not only was it beneath him, it was beneath the dignity of the reunion. Legends don't need a permit to play. And most of the ground balls

were getting through.

Up on the hill in the shade of the one tree along the first-base line sat Berkeley's redneck team, Margarita's Mexican Lunch — also Pearce's one-time home team. They didn't play at Codornices: they were a tournament team — out-of-town games, arc lights, and gold trophies. Pearce had called them for this one honorary appearance (in fact it was unclear if he had called anyone else). He had told them that the winning team held the field; he probably hadn't mentioned the choosing up. In their blue and gold outfits they looked like a country and western band with soft equipment bags in place of hard guitar cases. One of them looked like a shortstop; the rest were designated hitters, outfield musclemen who could probably reach the reservoir at Codornices. They were an imposing-looking team, but they were brooding up on the hill. With their rep they didn't like sitting around on a pick-up field. They might have tolerated a snappy outfit of women going through infield, but to be kept off the field by a co-ed team of giggling imcompetents left them surly and edgy. Their sexist comments were being answered in kind by the ladies on the field. Even at ten after ten they were at the end of their rope. They were waiting for Pearce, and he was late.

There's a fallacy that softball players are cowardly non-athletes playing a watered-down version of a country game. For instance, at the book party thrown by Doubleday for their edition of our original baseball anthology, several of us in attendance gave short talks — first me, then my co-editor Kevin Kerrane, then a few of the contributors, and finally Kevin's buddy, the rock and roller from Delaware, George Thorogood. Thorogood, a self-consciously macho presence, is so impassioned with hardball that he built his own $200,000 diamond in Kevin's hometown (Newark, Delaware) in order to get real men back into playing the real game. Partly because his diamond is called Doubleday Field, he asked to address the party at the end. His speech to a mixture of press and Doubleday executives went something like this:

"I'm here to congratulate my good friend Kevin Kerrane. And I also want to say that softball is for women and faggots. Hardball's the only game for me. I've built my own diamond back home in Delaware. . . ." And so on. I'm not sure the Doubleday executives ever got clear who he was — nor the Met executives either when he showed up at the ballgame in Met uniform and went down to the dugout and signed autographs for the players in between innings.

But I think George was wrong. I have rarely seen a hardball

team as mean and redneck as a good industrial softball team. These guys are dirt poor, and they are into murdering other teams. They expect to hit two home runs an evening. They have no relief from the long ball, and they play for their job, and their lives. The Gentile brothers think *they're* in the majors not their father whose face appears on the cards. It's the redneck hippie majors, always on the road and not always on a team.

Lower down on the hill and further up the first-base line sat three Codornices regulars: Norm, Etch, and Merlin. Norm was leaning back on the hill, a fiery black ballplayer who does not equivocate. Etch is soft-spoken and mellow, and looks like a hundred major leaguers; with a little more talent he could have been George Brett; instead he has to drive up from Hayward for the games. Merlin looked older and sadder — the tall pencil-thin shortstop from the mail center. A lot of ballgames in a lot of leagues had been played since the last one here.

They greeted me and Robin warmly, and since I was carrying a handful of the earlier baseball anthology with the three pieces about Codornices, Norm said: "What's that? The bookmobile?"

Etch didn't shift his weight on the hill but lazily extending an arm said, "How are you, Rich." And then to Robin: "My, look at you. You're about ready to take your place with the big boys."

"Hello there Richard." Merlin's Idaho voice.

I sat down with the sense that this might be the last chance to go back to my old game and see what it was. I tried hard to listen, as they've been warning us since Ram Dass and before, "just be here."

"Jesus," said Norm. "Where is Pearce?"

"He called everybody up and then he's not here himself." Etch.

"I was gonna play my one game and then go home and watch the big game." Norm.

"Well you've still got time." Etch. "Louisville-Houston's not till two-thirty."

"The Big Game, man. N.C. State."

"You're talking consolation game."

"Consolation game? Oh no I don't think so."

"Are these ladies ever going to get done?" Merlin.

"Jesus you think they'd be tired chasing the ball." Etch.

"They'll quit soon." Merlin. "But we don't have enough to take the field anyway."

In the next half hour a scatter of other players and mixed teams show up. People begin batting practices at two other points, criss-

crossing over the team with the permit which attempts a half-hearted game at eleven-fifteen. That beat-up little construction-worker, the Indian Iggy, has shown up with part of a team. An intense player who has trouble handling the ball and not enough power to get many hits, Iggy cusses and boasts every inch of the way and has a great time. Pearce never called him, but Iggy is always there, even the day Blandino Knight showed up from Nicaragua en route to D.C. on the other side of town. This time, though, Iggy has a permit for the next game and a date with a team of mostly Japanese players.

Iggy is missing most of his ten; however, his opponents gather suddenly in fairly large numbers and assemble an elaborate barbecue along the first-base bench. They will heat coals for an hour and a half before cooking anything, going through several sacks. A few of them are playing a mixture of pepper and just hitting the ball up in the air off their bats like a paddle-ball. They cluster along the baselines and behind the backstop.

Scattered across the field are other people having catches, kids throwing to fathers, hardballs and softballs mixed. Within an hour, from eleven to twelve, the field has caught fire. It has become a landscape of baseball scenes as detailed as any Brueghel painting. The original game is entwined in dozens of partial games and is beginning to unravel. But we still don't have enough people to make a play for the field.

In any case Iggy is holding the permit today, actually waving it in the air in triumph like the prize from a raid on the Hills. He organizes an aggressive batting practice out in left, and every ten minutes runs in to ask us: "Hey, hey, if we don't got enough guys, any of you want to play with us, huh?"

"Sure, Iggy," Norm says with royal detachment. "I'll play in your game." Iggy is used to the condescension and is so delighted to get the lion he ignores it.

Just then a whole team of players with blue uniforms emerges over the hill from the street, looks down at the chaos, and begins to grumble. "Who the fuck called practice for here?" This is a space cadet bunch. Most of them pace on the top of the hill; a few begin throwing a ball and regularly stop and mill about. One is wearing a shirt that says Trans-Chemical, which could mean almost anything.

"Hey, you want to play?" Norm calls out.

He turns around and faces Norm without answering.

"You got a team?" Norm asks.

"I got a team. I don't think we know how to play."

Iggy has now moved his team up to a position to pounce on the field when the co-ed group leaves. They are warming up in exaggerated earnest, and he fires the ball right into the face of one of the blue players on the hill. Nonplussed, Iggy walks right up to him and asks for the ball back. "Fucker," the blue shirt says, and he kicks at the ball with all his might, trying to put it out on the street, but missing.

Iggy lets out a quick hysterical laugh. "Hey, white loaf," he says, "you want this Indian?" The guy just stands there like a frozen Devo, and Iggy picks up the ball and fires it back into his group where someone, almost incidentally, catches it. At this moment Margarita's Mexican Lunch gets up and marches out with some force and espirit for a group that has been lying on their butts under a tree brooding for two hours. As they saunter past us in line, the last one turns back just within earshot and says, "Tell Pearce we'll poke the other eye out for him." After walking the base line slowly, they get in a bunch of cars in the No Parking zone in right field, make u-turns, and tear out. So far as I know Pearce has two good eyes.

Norm and Etch turn to the game still in progress and start rooting in order to speed it up.

"Hey, c'mon; run that out."

"Oh my," says Norm, "look at that shortstop go into the hole." Of course none of this is happening.

It is time for Iggy's permit to take effect, but the Japanese players have begun barbecuing and are in no hurry, and Iggy doesn't have a team; he has even enlisted Robin now. A few more Codornices regulars show up: Brian (the childhood battery-mate of major-league pitcher Mike Scott), his perennial sidekick Tony still talking baseball stats in wise-guy staccato, then Frampton. Brian sits down and immediately begins discussing Mike Scott's failings, wondering why Scott MacGregor couldn't have taught him how to change speeds in college.

Then a sports car pulls into the No Parking zone, and the two Gentile brothers emerge like circus giants. "Oh no, I knew I shouldn't have called them," Etch says. He shakes his head and buries it in his chest. The Gentile boys like to *play* and kick ass.

Steve saunters down the first-base line well ahead of Scott, swinging his equipment bag. He stands before us in the sun, pale red hippie giant, surveying the scene, like all other scenes, forever. "Shit, what is this, guys? Where is the old . ball . game?" Putting the rhythm on each word, riffing as usual. He pumps a lot of hands, but

I am so enthralled at seeing my characters come together I forget I'm there. He's grabbed my hand and said, "Hey man, hello," before I can wake up. "Like remember me." After a pause: "I still got your book. I think. You can call my lawyer." Then a laugh as big as himself. Bouncing on his legs in place, he scans the world around him, all three hundred and sixty degrees. Now a speech:

"Softball's just getting too popular here in Berkeley. Look at these people playing. Radicals. No more real ballplayers. Maybe we should walk on, we could play on through."

But the co-ed team is leaving, and the Japanese team is all assembled on the sidelines. They have put on their Yoshi's Restaurant shirts and are summoning Iggy from leftfield. "Hey, get an interpreter," Gentile yells. "Tell these guys to put on their earphones, we want to talk to them. Christ, it looks like the Little League World Series. Get Tatum O'Neill."

After collecting his gear from the car Scott Gentile finally comes down the line. He has outgrown his brother in the last year, though he is slimmer and not at all red. "You're the little brother now, Steve," Etch says, but Steve's heard it before and is bored.

"Hey, pockets," Norm calls out to Scott. "Break out the M & M's." It's not M & M's.

Steve is trying to hustle his way into Iggy's game, but no one is paying any attention. "Some game Pearce called. I'm glad I stayed in bed and tore one off. At least my legs are weak. Hey, Iggy, you lead off. I'll play with you."

Etch is apologizing to Scott for calling his old lady instead of him. "I had the wrong phone number."

"Yeah. She's saying, 'Where's this BeebeeQ? Why didn't I hear about it?' I says: 'You didn't hear because I didn't tell you, and I didn't tell you because it's just a bunch of guys boozing and playing ball. And you don't want to go to that no way.' "

"Hey, Norm," says Steve, "let's go beat up some nigs." But the first pitch is being thrown in Iggy's game; just at that moment Pearce arrives, walking down the first-base line with three guys and two women. One o'clock.

"Look at that," says Norm, jumping to his feet and grabbing a ball to throw with someone. "The deuce shows up after the fact. There's your boy now. Ain't that brutal!"

"Hey, what's the fuss?" Pearce says. "We never have bp before one here anyway."

"But you called it for ten, big boy."

"Yeah, but nothing ever happens at Codornices until one. So what's going on now?"

"The Sushi bar is playing Iggy. It's a game of midgets," says Gentile.

"What a day for a game," says Pearce, throwing his arms out into the sky. "They've got the preliminary game on now, then the big boys take the field." To Norm: "Hey, how's it going, Mr. Angry?" They shake one another's hands and twist each other back and forth. Norm has a bat now and is hitting fungos. Pearce walks up the hill to greet everyone else. He introduces his wife Kathleen and his friend Dale. "He's played on some great A.S.U. teams. Now he's on my new home team, Ashby Lumber. Hey, Johnny Merlin there. How are you, old boy?" To his wife: "Kathleen, this is the guy who got me into it, back in the old days, remember, 1973, the Main Post Office Mets. And Doc Watt pitched for us; he must have been 48 when he threw that shutout. This is the man responsible."

Merlin stands up and approaches him. "I hear you're playing in the majors now," he says with only the slightest grin.

"Yeah, got to give it one more shot before I settle down with the backyard pool and the kid. I was up in Minnesota just last week; they've got seven feet of snow there. Gentile, has your brother filled out or is that just his wallet? Yeah, but Johnny Merlin got me into it. I fucked myself up later." He turns to me. "Rich, we're going to get a game in today."

"Typical Codornices," I say. "Always a complication. Three hours and we're only an hour from taking the field."

"Always an altercation," Merlin chimes in, seemingly unaware that he has changed my word.

Meanwhile, Gentile, ignoring the preliminary game, has gotten the spare out of his car and rolled it up on the right-field hill. "There's no fence here," he says, reciting one of his favorite Codornices riffs. "The slugger wants to put one out. Inside the tire's a home run. You don't have to run."

"We'll give it to you," Pearce says.

Gentile looks around slowly again and then makes another speech:

"What are all these people doing on the field? They should be up on the hill cheering for the real players. Where they belong. Now everyone wants to play. You should have seen our game here last year. The people were having their BeebeeQ. Good-looking ladies. When they were done they went up on the hill; they watched us and cheered.

We kept going and going. Norm hit a few out. The fans went wild. It was dark. They brought us beer. They fed us. We didn't want to leave. Fuck, it was dark. Norm wanted to turn some lights on. That was a game. Now I'm just standing here in the sunlight. Gentlemen, I don't know what it's all about."

"Just a day for a ballgame, Steve," says Etch. "A great day for a game."

"All lies," says Gentile. "All lies. Hey, look at that dog up there pissing on my tire. He must be angry at me."

With time to kill, Pearce asks me to walk him back to his car to see his baseball collection. I follow him out to the street and stand there while he opens his trunk. It's a memorabilia store in there. He's got binders full of 1950s cards. He's even got the sign they put up when the City shut down the field: CODORNICES CLOSED FOR THE SEASON. Now he pulls out a file of softball articles. "You should have seen our guys out there at the Coliseum when we had our home run contest last year. We were poking them out 360. Brett and Henderson and those guys sitting in the dugout, they couldn't believe it. There's this one guy who won the thing, Howard 'Crusher' Scheer. He's a hippie type, from upper Pennsylvania somewhere, has his old lady with him all the time. Everything's mellow with Crusher. He put seven of ten in the seats. He goes maybe six-seven, two-seventy. When we put on the show in San Diego, Jack Murphy Stadium, they asked him if they should put up a temporary fence in the outfield so he could hit some home runs. Hell no. He put the first nine in a row in the bleachers, three hundred and fifty feet. The guy is awesome. But the team I'm playing for, they won the championship; they beat some team from Florida called Jerry's Catering at the nationals. It's a great bunch of guys—an airline mechanic, a vice cop, boys who do different things."

By now we are walking back to the field, and someone tells Bob that Margarita's was there and left. "I doubt it," he says. "What did they look like, ballplayers or street people?"

"Both."

"That's them. They were just pissed they didn't get to play. They don't know the field. God, I'm so hyped for this season. I'll calm down once it starts."

People are wanting to choose up sides for when Iggy's game ends, so a sign-up sheet is manufactured from a piece of paper blowing across the field. It's instantly filled with twenty names. Then another one is filled. Someone in the second group wants to play fast pitch.

"Not on this field, buddy," says Pearce. "Slow pitch. Keeps the ball in play. Gives us a chance to play ball."

"But I've played fast pitch here before."

"For how long, guy?"

"Last year."

"That's one." Then Bob turns to the group. "You know who started it all on this field?—Beserkeley Records, the musicians on Mondays. That's what Codornices is about, just the local guys playing a little ball. No myth, Rich. Just us boys."

"It's the cocktail hour," says Gentile, pouring a drink. "It must be. It's afternoon." He alternately drinks and swings his bat. Scott is talking about how nice it is to be in the tournament in Martinez:

"Breeze blowing out to left. First day, first game. Diamond one. Eight A.M."

Iggy's game with Yoshi's drags on. Early on, his team is in the lead by a couple of runs, but they play the field for fifteen minutes without putting a batter out and are down by eleven runs. Both sides are arguing about what inning it is. "Bottom four," Iggy says, but an inning later it is still bottom four, and a Japanese woman with a calculator and a scorecard insists that's correct. It's now past two o'clock. Ignoring the basketball, Pearce has set up a blaster with old Abbott and Costello routines about baseball, not just "Who's on First." It is so loud it carries over the whole field. Louisville's playing Houston, but here 1940s radio has put us outside of time.

At 2:30 we take the field. I join Etch, Dale, and the Gentiles on one team against Pearce, Norm, Brian, and Merlin. They're a better team, and we chase them the rest of the afternoon into the teens. For all his intensity Pearce is held to some hard ground singles, and Gentile's swinging for the tire and getting mostly pop-ups. But a leaner and more desperate Brian, a rough year etched in his face, hits three prodigious shots into the trees, and Norman follows with two. We keep scoring runs too, and as the game nears its climax, the lead is cut to one. Then Norm hits a shot into the bushes up by the reservoir with Pearce on, and the two big boys jog the bases proudly and slowly. Once the ball is pulled loose, Scott whips the relay into Iggy who (as catcher) has already blown two runs on collisions at home. This time he catches the ball as the runners are halfway between third and home, and, light as a feather, tags both unsuspecting giants, one after another like a turnstyle guard, just as they are about to touch home in tandem. "Two fat eagles in one shot," shouts Gentile. But Pearce and Norm are enraged. It's a home run,

they demand. Automatic. That just puts Steve up on the soapbox:

"Did I see a fence there? Did somebody build a fence while I wasn't looking? Man, I told you a million times. If you don't want to run, get yourself a fence. That's why my tire's out there."

The feelings are now intense. Norm and Scott begin to swing at one another between innings. "I want a piece of that fucker," Scott shouts as his brother drags him away. Racial taunts go back and forth. We score two runs in the top of the seventh and go ahead by one. In the bottom half Pearce comes up with two on and smacks a monster shot clear into the reservoir. "All right!" Shaking his fist as he rounds the bases. That's the game.

Everyone disappears into the trees for a barbecue that Pearce's wife and Dale's girlfriend have been making. Before the food is served Bob lines us up. "The last photograph at Codornices," he says, handing the camera to Kathleen and running into the picture. I know he's right. There will never be another game here. "Fuck it, Norm," Pearce says. "One nigger and you've gotta stand up higher than everyone else." The picture is taken. Then another. Another. And finally Bob says: "Rich, I know you've stopped writing them, but there's gotta be a piece about this day. There's gotta be a story about how we came and took the field back."

And now a year later, as I go over my notes from that day and write Mr. Pearce's piece for him, I am reminded of Coppola's version of Hinton's *Rumblefish*, when Dennis Hopper, playing the father of the two grown-up kids, tells the younger son (Matt Dillon) about his older brother (Mickey Rourke):

"He was born in the wrong era, on the wrong side of the river, with the ability to do anything and finding nothing he wants to do."

But this is Berkeley, not Tulsa, and I think it will go on here, at least for the duration.

Softball Season

To paraphrase Chekhov, anyone who has waited at bat only to see a goat amble onto the playing field will always be a country ballplayer. And when I am positioned in the outfield, if my attention strays to this field of bright wildflowers or that formation of clouds brushing the evening sky, I feel a singular purity of experience. Once summer rolls around, playing softball in the country is akin to tilling the garden, picking lettuce and sweet corn, plunging into a cold lake. Like baseball in my city youth, softball has become a fond ritual in my country adulthood—a feeling shared, I believe, by the rest of the members of the teams in the Mascoma Adult Softball League, of Grafton County, New Hampshire.

Every year, when my wife and I play for the North Canaan team in our five-town league, I have those same tender thoughts. Started six years ago as part of a local recreation program, the league has leapt from four or five teams to double that, and each team's roster has overflowed as well. (Our town of Canaan now has four teams and is headed for a fifth.) The length of the season has been extended, too. Beginning in early June, the two-part season now runs nearly to the end of August; the first part is the regular season—a kind of warm-up when each team plays the others twice; and the second is the more competitive play-offs, a double-loss elimination tournament. Softball has caught on big here, and keen crowds of townspeople attend the semis and finals in a picniclike atmosphere.

Unlike regular baseball—or "hardball," as we used to call it in the sandlots of Brooklyn—softball is a lazy game, easier to play adequately and easier to master. There is no need for cumbersome equipment—spikes, batting helmets, catcher's mask; the pitching is slow; the ball does not travel so swiftly; and the fielders have more time to cover their positions. In all, the differences enable a wider range of individuals to participate—women, old-timers, and those not generally inclined to competitive team sports. All sorts of family combinations play in our league—mothers and sons, fathers and daughters, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives. This makes for some very merry fighting and joshing, and real family relaxation.

Baseball is a slow game, of course, a game measured beautifully

by its own sweet time and not by a clock. In an age of speed, it provides an old-fashioned pleasure. The extra slowness of softball (we allow three swings rather than calling balls and strikes) seems appropriate for the country. Because we play at dusk, the game is a perfect rounding out of the day, and during haying season there is something especially organic about it—the players moving from one field to another, from labor to leisure, day to evening, the air redolent of cut meadows. For older folks like myself, in our forties and up, softball is the perfect game, creating the right proportion between running and resting, between playing and remembering. Is there any site more conducive to memory than a baseball diamond at dusk, while you wait for a fly ball or grounder, and scenes from youth drift by? It is good for the reflexes to lunge suddenly for a line drive, invigorating to streak for an extra base or race for a long blast, a challenge to straighten out one's swing so that leverage and balance accomplish more than muscle. Not football, not basketball, not hockey—but softball, and maybe only softball, is the team game for middle-age, and communal summering.

Softball in the country is played as much for the delight of seeing old friends and town acquaintances whom one does not ordinarily see, or who have hibernated for the winter, as for the game itself. It resembles a country clambake, a fire department auction, a town meeting. It is a way of getting people together who otherwise might not mix, and getting them together on a voluntary basis, for steady pleasure, not bureaucratic need or administrative order. The games are sprinkled with appropriate banter and ribbing, festooned with farm and family stories. No subtle discrimination of class or gender or age here, but a rural melting pot that is genuine, vital, and democratic. One has a lovely sense, at the conclusion of each game when winners and losers traditionally greet each other, that something gracious and human has been shared by means of the game. How often do you experience such feelings in modern life?

We have been playing softball for six years now, and perhaps none of our teams has been more formidable—or more lucky—than the club we fielded two summers ago. The North Canaan team of 1980, after losing its first two games, became like the Giants of 1916, a mighty club that went on a winning streak that lasted the rest of the season. From mid-June to mid-August, playing two games a week, we won eighteen in a row, no small feat in any league. We won games on fielding, on hitting, on other teams' miscues, by developed skills, by luck, of course, and always with a special spirit. If there was one

feeling that united the team throughout the season, it was the spirit of good fun, of generosity of character. Certainly we were trying to keep the streak going, but not at the expense of pleasure in the game. Time after time in the late innings, we would be down by a run or more, and the bench talk was always, "Well, we gotta lose sometime," or "They're playing well." That relaxed attitude about losing seemed to enable us to pull out those games, surprising ourselves each time. Hardly ever during that awesome streak did we allow a bad call by the other side—we were our own umpires except in the championship game—or an opponent's frustration to turn us away from good feeling and toward victory-at-any-cost. Not that occasionally one of us didn't become momentarily combative, but he or she would immediately feel self-conscious, even guilty about the lapse. So: not a gaggle of greedy jocks, nor a gang of driven zealots, but a group of friends that exulted in keeping the high-wire act going, and enjoyed watching itself develop as a team.

And who were we? Ah, a mixed bag if ever there was one, a ragtag collection of characters dressed in jeans, cut-offs, baseball trousers, T-shirts, football jerseys, assorted caps—anything but uniformly outfitted. All ages, sizes, dispositions. At first base stood big Kevin, a ruddy-faced Williams with a ferocious southpaw swing and quick humor, a woodcutter by trade who responded to bad calls with good jokes. Once during the streak we were down to our last few outs in the game, behind by a run with the bases empty. Kevin stepped to the plate, only to see the outfield shift to four across and back up to the edge of the field, guarding against the home run but willing to give him the easy single. Unruffled by the coverage, stubborn as a stump, Kevin dug in, took a few pitches, and then crashed one over the center fielder's head and out across Route 4. He jogged around the bases, stepped on home plate—where he was wildly congratulated—and claimed he had had no choice, as he was too tired to stay on the bases and run. The clutch homer propelled us into extra innings, and we went home with a win.

At second, my wife, a fiery, slender Ph.D. (in literature), who had learned her baseball in her tomboy youth in Connecticut. She felt most confident when someone backed her up on the grounders, which sometimes went through her legs, but they became fewer as the season progressed. More than once a shrewd-hitting opponent, looking for an easy way to get on, would smash the ball her way. In an important midseason game, with two on and two out, a line drive was belted right at her; she stuck her glove up, and the ball

flew into it, knocking her over. The inning and rally ended, while Barbara sat on her haunches, dazed.

The shortstop was rail-thin Tim, a crackerjack in the field, a greyhound on the bases; wind him up and watch him run, long hair flying and tobacco wad bulging behind his bottom lip. In a play-off game, when we were behind by a run in the late innings, Tim hit a single up the middle, danced between first and second to draw the throw, and then proceeded to gallop — neck extended, legs pumping, head down — around the bases. Glancing back only once, beating the ball to every base, he dodged one would-be tagger and sprinted home with the tying run. Our only regret was that we couldn't watch him again on instant replay.

Third base was shared by two. Clancy was a laid-back young man who rarely failed to rise to a challenge. In fact, it seemed he sometimes committed errors on purpose to make the game more exciting. How many times did our collective heart sink as he fielded an easy grounder, took what seemed like a coffee break before throwing to first, and then overthrew by ten feet. Then on the next play, he would dive for an impossible shot, stand up and whip the ball to Tim, at second, who threw on to first to complete the double play. By midseason the club was turning a double play a game, not too shabby for any team.

The other third-sacker was John, high-school math teacher and summer carpenter, and maybe the finest athlete on the team. A slugger with the thighs of a Mantle, who frequently had a bad knee taped like Mickey, too. Gentleman John had a rifle arm, so that when you received his peg to second, as I did on occasion, you felt it for two full innings. During one of the two championship games, John showed me what hitting a ball a country mile meant — the ball started out as if it might just be caught by the shortstop, but it kept rising, making everyone on the field, defense included, stare in awe, and for a second even wonder if it would come down. Personally I was delighted to see that he had used an old-fashioned wooden bat, not one of the shiny aluminum things, for his robust shot.

The outfield, the seven of us who rotated out there in the pea-patches, as Red Barber named the territory, included a glass blower in left, policeman in center, computer programmer in right, a writer (me) in short-center, and several alternates — housewife, science teacher, lawyer. Actually we were not too bad a quartet out yonder, whatever the combination, flashing lots of comradely signals and constructing well-intentioned, though humorous, strategies. We were

forever discussing whether to play four across to cover the power alleys, or three deep and one short. The comedy was high-spirited, the four of us turning a fly ball into a hot-potato routine or lining up in a kind of I-formation in order to make three errors on one grounder. But usually we got the job done.

Mike, in left, always wore the same cut-off jeans and cap, hardly ever spoke — certainly never an ill-humored word — and pulled wicked line drives down the left-field line just fair or just foul. Why the opposition didn't play six fielders on the left side of the field was a mystery to me. As a fielder Mike was as game as he was skilled. I remember, in a late-season game, watching in alarm as he chased a long drive to the edge of the outfield, then dropped out of sight in the ditch bordering the highway. A full minute later he returned to the field, the ball held high and no one doubting that he had indeed caught it. With most teams, trusting the player's word in a crucial situation was a happy principle, especially when the player had just vanished.

Sue played short-center, starting as an absolute beginner and ending the summer a fair country ballplayer. True, the way she positioned herself for a fly, glove blocking her vision and arms way in front of her, you were always fearful the ball was heading for her face or chest, and not her glove. But she was determined and undaunted by early trouble judging the flight of the ball, and she screeched with joy whenever it landed in her glove and stayed there.

In right field was Andy, an ex-Peace Corps volunteer and a sturdy, silent presence whose bat spoke for him. All told, he may have driven in more runs than anyone that season, skipping dinners on occasion in order to make games. One evening Andy, arriving late, entered in the middle of the fourth. He proceeded to knock in eight runs in the next three innings, several on a triple to left and four more on a bases-loaded homer to right-center. Bespectacled, wearing his Bermuda shorts and golfer's cap, he was the most unlikely of sluggers.

Then there were the older folks, Don, the coach, and myself, both with scraggly graying beards, wire eyeglasses, and a fortyish creep in our movements. I, who had played a decent game once upon a time, even having tried out with the Phillies at age sixteen, now possessed an arm like rubber; while I daydreamed of throwing out a runner at the plate, I missed all six that summer.

In his youth, Don had been a splendid outfielder; now he periodically misjudged the ball and overestimated his speed. No doubt

much of the team's spirit emanated from him, our Gandhi of a coach, who resisted arguments at any cost, which meant on any questionable call or controversy that the result was the same: we gave in. No more dread moment existed for the coach than when he had to take the long walk to a player and ask if he or she minded being substituted for halfway through the game so that everyone could play. We continued to win that year despite our coach's supreme reluctance to force defeat on any of our opponents.

The pitcher was an intrepid young mother of two, Cookie, whose enthusiasm for the game bordered on kindly obsession. In her tie-dyed T-shirts and with short dark hair cut in bangs, she reminded me of Theresa Brewer, from the old Hit Parade, on the mound. Neither hard grounders at her shins nor line drives at her chin fazed her as much as an unsportsmanlike gesture from the other team. Basically she was one tough Cookie. One time, chasing a pop-up between home and the mound, Cookie and our catcher ran straight into each other, knocking themselves out flat and bringing on the local ambulance squad. The smaller of Cookie's two sons, a cherubic six-year-old with a wicked will, assured me confidently, as we stood over his mother while her mouth bled, that she would be fine. Three days later, at the next game, Cookie showed up to pitch, broken jaw wired in place. Our catcher, with a minor concussion and some teethmarks on her forehead, retired for the season.

As the winning streak progressed, so did our defensive excellence, a tendency suggesting, I like to think, our pacific temperament. More and more of our victories were marked by the gentlemanly art of defense rather than by mere slugging. Whereas early in the season the scores were 13-11, 16-9, 14-10, toward the end they were scaled down considerably. In the play-offs, for example, we won games by scores of 4-3, 5-2, 2-1, rather remarkable for a co-ed slow-pitch league, where the batter is served one easy pitch after another. In the play-off game at Enfield Center, where the setting sun is disastrously blinding for the whole left side of the field, a key drive to deep left-center with the bases loaded was hauled in by our center fielder, who shielded his eyes deftly while racing backward. Against West Canaan at Williams Field, where the stony infield resembles the rocky shores of Maine, an apparent base hit through the hole between short and third was converted in a dazzling double play when John made a lunging short-hop stab and whipped the ball to Tim, who relayed it to first breaking up a late-inning rally. And against the defending champ, mighty Orange (population 171), the defense continued to

excel in the final two wins. For example, there was the little-observed art of positioning fielders, which figured prominently against the three strong pull hitters of Orange; Mike in left and Clancy at third hugged the lines, and Tim cheated a step toward the line on every pitch, turning three routine doubles into three easy outs. These final games revealed an exquisite defensive timing and a team appreciation of the art. Fielding gems came to be more anticipated and cheered than home runs, which meant that we were growing truly sophisticated about our baseball.

No doubt that season and the evening of our team party to celebrate the championship were among the high points of local camaraderie. Pitching horseshoes, cooking franks and hamburgers and fresh corn over an open fire, and dallying at volleyball, we were more than eighteen happy souls. Adults the rest of the year, we were children that evening and that season, relieved of normal responsibilities and filled with our private dominion of summer and softball. Ours was a cunning unit, it may be said, more special than a team of youth, less coercive than a family, inspired by sport and exalted in spirit; for that season and that evening, anyway, we became self-acknowledged royalty. And softball was our kingdom.

Playing Possum

This was in Virginia. That first year I was just an assistant coach. "How come there aren't any black kids playing ball in this league?" I said.

"What are you trying to do," they said, "start some kind of a crusade?"

The next year I was a head coach. The league had city-wide tryouts. "When I draft a black ballplayer," I said, "Which one of you is going to burn a cross on my lawn?"

"What do you think we are, anyway," they said.

I waited until the last round to see if anybody else would do it.

"Clarence Williams," I said. "I draft Clarence Williams." They didn't say anything for a short minute.

"He's *colored*," one of them said.

"He looked like a ballplayer to me," I said.

"You better hope to hell you know what you're doing," another said.

"He didn't look to me like the only black kid at those tryouts who could play ball in this league," I said.

"We don't want to get too many," they said.

His birth certificate had said Clarence, but everyone but his mother called him the Possum. After our first practice I drove him home and told him what I thought he might be up against. "We be okay," he said. I told him about Jackie Robinson. "Jackie Robinson voted for Nixon," he said. "Ball is ball."

The Possum was flat-footed and pigeon-toed, but he could hit. He talked to the ball after he hit it, taking a sharp left-handed cut and watching the ball as he labored toward first base. "Get down, you mother. Get down." That first year I played him in left field and he hit .415 and led the league in RBI's. We won the league by three games.

"That's Black Power," I said.

The next year there were eight more black ballplayers in the league. I moved the Possum in to first base so he wouldn't have to do so much running. He was reading Eldridge Cleaver and Malcolm X and he wanted to change his name to Clarence X, but everyone still called him Possum. He got himself an enormous cheap yellow

first-baseman's mitt somewhere and he covered it with a ball-point rainbow of names and shades and shapes: Clarence X, Soulpossum, *Didelphis virginiana*, The Poss. There was a clenched fist, and an upside-down American flag. And on the back of the wide thumb-piece in electric purple: *Up Against the Wall, Outfielder.* "She my tattooed Lady," he said, pounding his fist into the soft pocket. "We be going to the circus."

Also on the team that year was a big white kid named Bobby Foster. He hit the ball a long way once at the tryouts, and I picked him for that, but he never hit one that far again. He was just big, kind of sullen, and not too bright. He kept his hands tight to his body with the bat low, so he had a bad hitch in his swing and he couldn't get the bat around quickly or with any power.

Early that year I gave the team a speech about how there were probably 1,500 boys of baseball age in that town, but the league had only 120 uniforms, so if they didn't want to come to practice or show up for games on time we could find somebody else who would. Bobby Foster showed up, but he didn't get to play much. I kept the Possum out of one game because he showed up late, and he didn't say anything. Then his friend Swamp told me that the Possum had been made to work late at the store where he carried groceries to the cars. I apologized. "You should have said something," I said.

"I coulda been here," the Possum said. "You got your rule."

Now in July that year we were playing a game on a hot afternoon, the kind of day when the hitting is good. The field was set in front of an ancient concrete amphitheater where the fans sat. It was Saturday, so there were about a hundred people watching, fathers in sport shirts, mothers in double-knit slacks, and the old men, the casuals who are always at ball games. It was real heat. You could see it shimmering beyond the brown diamond above the green outfield. We were losing, and the other team had runners on second and third with two out. The batter fell away from a high, inside pitch and hit a looping pop fly off the handle of the bat deep down the first-base line. The Possum ran out after it as hard as he could go, with the runners tearing around the bases and the fans and coaches and players yelling, and he dived for the ball and speared it just above the grass. It was a tough play to make, probably the toughest for a first baseman. The Possum bounced up and showed the umpire the ball. It was stuck in the top of the web, a scoop of vanilla ice cream above the rainbow leather.

The team came running in from the field, still yelling. The

Possum rolled the ball toward the pitcher's mound and trotted past our bench to the bat rack. A few of the fans were still clapping. "Way to go, Possum," said Bobby Foster, jumping up from the bench. "Nice catch, boy."

Possum wheeled from the bat rack. He slammed the rainbow mitt into the dust and looked at Bobby Foster. "What you say to me?"

Bobby Foster grinned. The regulars rarely acknowledged him. "I said nice catch, boy." The Possum strode hotly toward the bigger boy and bumped him with his chest. Bobby Foster stumbled backwards in surprise. "Whassamatter, boy? I said NICE CATCH!" Our other players were crowding around. I could see the other team's shortstop take a practice throw and hold the ball, watching. Behind us, from the concrete amphitheater above the diamond, there was a murmur.

Bobby Foster was sweating now. "Did I say something wrong?" He appealed to me. "You heard what I said, Coach. All I ever said was Way to Go and Nice Catch."

I was watching the Possum. He turned toward the bat rack and selected a bat. "Bobby Foster," he said slowly, "you is sooo dumb." Then he turned to me. I was watching the bat in his clenched fist. "Fifteen hundred kids in this town could be playin' ball," he said, shaking his head in disbelief, "and *you* go and pick Bobby Foster."

He walked away from the bench toward the on-deck circle, flexing the bat behind his shoulders. "Ain't it somethin'," he said to no one in particular. "Ain't it somethin' how the man that makes a great play in the field is always first man up in the next inning." He whipped the bat through the hot air. "Let's go get us some runs. We in this thing."

The Possum drifted away from the team toward the end of the season. We were out of the race early, and I began to play some of the younger kids. I made a few phone calls and drove around town looking for the Possum, but no one seemed to know where he was. The manager of the store where he worked said he'd just quit. "What kind of trouble's he in?" he asked me. "He told somebody here he was going to Pittsburgh."

During infield practice before a game I asked Swamp about this. Swamp considered the matter briefly, looking down and kicking at the dirt by the third base line with his spiked shoe. "Naw," he said decisively, "I don't know where he's at. But he didn't go to no Pittsburgh."

The Aerodynamics of An Irishman

There was a man on our block named Rooney Sullavan who'd often come walking down the street while the kids would be playing ball in front of my house or Johnny McLaughlin's house. He would always stop and ask if he'd ever shown us how he used to throw the knuckleball back when he pitched for Kankakee in 1930.

"Plenty of times, Rooney," Billy Cunningham would say. "No knuckles about it, right?" Tommy Ryan would say. "No knuckles about it, right!" Rooney Sullavan would say. "Give it here and I'll show you." One of us would reluctantly toss Rooney the ball and we'd step up so he could demonstrate for the fortieth or fiftieth time how he held the ball by his fingertips only, no knuckles about it.

"Don't know how it ever got the name knuckler," Rooney'd say. "I call mine The Rooneyball." Then he'd tell one of us, usually Billy because he had the catcher's glove, the old fat-heeled kind that didn't bend unless somebody stepped on it, a big black mitt that Billy's dad had handed down to him from *his* days at Kankakee or Rock Island or someplace, to get sixty feet away so Rooney could see if he could "still make it wrinkle."

Billy would pace off twelve squares of sidewalk, each square being approximately five feet long, the length of one nine year old boy's body stretched head to toe lying flat, squat down and stick his big black glove out in front of his face. With his right hand he'd cover his crotch in case the pitch got away and short-hopped off the cement where he couldn't block it with the mitt. The knuckleball was unpredictable, not even Rooney could tell what would happen to it once he let it go.

"It's the air makes it hop," Rooney claimed. His leather jacket creaked as he bent, wound up, rotated his right arm like nobody'd done since Chief Bender, crossed his runny grey eyes and released the ball from the tips of his fingers. We watched as it sailed straight up at first then sort of floated on an invisible wave before plunging the last ten feet like a balloon that had been pierced by a dart.

Billy always went down on his knees, the back of his right hand stiffened over his crotch, and stuck out his gloved hand at the slowly whirling Rooneyball. Just before it got to Billy's mitt the ball would give out entirely and sink rapidly, inducing Billy to lean forward in

order to catch it, only he couldn't because at the last instant it would make a final, sneaky hop before bouncing surprisingly hard off Billy's unprotected chest.

"*Just* like I told you," Rooney Sullavan would exclaim. "All it takes is plain old air."

Billy would come up with the ball in his upturned glove, his right hand rubbing the place on his chest where the pitch had hit. "You all right, son?" Rooney would ask, and Billy would nod. "Tough kid," Rooney'd say. "I'd like to stay out with you fellas all day, but I got responsibilities." Rooney would muss up Billy's hair with the hand that held the secret to The Rooneyball and walk away whistling "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" or "My Wild Irish Rose." Rooney was about forty-five or fifty years old and lived with his mother in a bungalow at the corner. He worked nights for Wanzer Dairy, washing out returned milk bottles.

Tommy Ryan would grab the ball out of Billy's mitt and hold it by the tips of his fingers like Rooney Sullavan did, and Billy would go sit on the stoop in front of the closest house and rub his chest. "No way," Tommy would say, considering the prospect of his ever duplicating Rooney's feat. "There must be something he's not telling us."

Backyard

for Larry

"There are two theories on hitting the knuckleball.
Unfortunately, neither of them works."

it was all so serious
as he taught me
digging the knees together

a deliberate hunkering
the back & forth wiggle
shifting the weight

it screws yr behind in the ground he said
protection I guess
or the secrecy of boys

he called it
The Stan Musial Crouch
& man how I practiced

getting it right to unwind
breathless exquisite & deadly
the permission to love

without going crazy
& o big brother
how much I remember

26 Feb 80

The Thrill of the Grass

1981: the summer the baseball players went on strike. The dull weeks drag by, the summer deepens, the strike is nearly a month old. Outside the city the corn rustles and ripens in the sun. Summer without baseball: a disruption to the psyche. An unexplainable aimlessness engulfs me. I stay later and later each evening in the small office at the rear of my shop. Now, driving home after work, the worst of the rush hour traffic over, it is the time of evening I would normally be heading for the stadium.

I enjoy arriving an hour early, parking in a far corner of the lot, walking slowly toward the stadium, rays of sun dropping softly over my shoulders like tangerine ropes, my shadow gliding with me, black as an umbrella. I like to watch young families beside their campers, the mothers in shorts, grilling hamburgers, their men drinking beer. I enjoy seeing little boys dressed in the home team uniform, barely toddling, clutching hotdogs in upraised hands.

I am a failed shortstop. As a young man, I saw myself diving to my left, graceful as a toppling tree, fielding high grounders like a cat leaping for butterflies, bracing my right foot and tossing to first, the throw true as if a steel ribbon connected my hand and the first baseman's glove. I dreamed of leading the American League in hitting — being inducted into the Hall of Fame. I batted .217 in my senior year of high school and averaged 1.3 errors per nine innings.

I know the stadium will be deserted; nevertheless I wheel my car down off the freeway, park, and walk across the silent lot, my footsteps rasping and mournful. Strangle-grass and creeping charlie are already inching up through the gravel, surreptitious, surprised at their own ease. Faded bottle caps, rusted bits of chrome, an occasional paper clip, recede into the earth. I circle a ticket booth, sun-faded, empty, the door closed by an oversized padlock. I walk beside the tall, machinery-green, board fence. A half mile away a few cars hiss along the freeway; overhead a single-engine plane fizzes lazily. The whole place is silent as an empty classroom, like a house suddenly without children.

It is then that I spot the door-shape. I have to check twice to be sure it is there: a door cut in the deep green boards of the fence, more the promise of a door than the real thing, the kind of door,

as children, we cut in the sides of cardboard boxes with our mother's paring knives. As I move closer, a golden circle of lock, like an acrimonious eye, establishes its certainty.

I stand, my nose so close to the door I can smell the faint odour of paint, the golden eye of a lock inches from my own eyes. My desire to be inside the ballpark is so great that for the first time in my life I commit a criminal act. I have been a locksmith for over forty years. I take the small tools from the pocket of my jacket, and in less time than it would take a speedy runner to circle the bases I am inside the stadium. Though the ballpark is open-air, it smells of abandonment; the walkways and seating areas are cold as basements. I breathe the odours of rancid popcorn and wilted cardboard.

The maintenance staff were laid off when the strike began. Synthetic grass does not need to be cut or watered. I stare down at the ball diamond, where just to the right of the pitcher's mound, a single weed, perhaps two inches high, stands defiant in the rain-pocked dirt.

The field sits breathless in the orangy glow of the evening sun. I stare at the potato-coloured earth of the infield, that wide, dun arc, surrounded by plastic grass. As I contemplate the prickly turf, which scorches the thighs and buttocks of a sliding player as if he were being seared by hot steel, it stares back in its uniform ugliness. The seams that send routinely hit ground balls veering at torturous angles, are vivid, grey as scars.

I remember the ballfields of my childhood, the outfields full of soft hummocks and brown-eyed gopher holes.

I stride down from the stands and walk out to the middle of the field. I touch the stubble that is called grass, take off my shoes, but find it is like walking on a row of toothbrushes. It was an evil day when they stripped the sod from this ballpark, cut it into yard-wide swathes, rolled it, memories and all, into great green-and-black cinnamonroll shapes, trucked it away. Nature temporarily defeated. But Nature is patient.

Over the next few days an idea forms within me, ripening, swelling, pushing everything else into a corner. It is like knowing a new, wonderful joke and not being able to share. I need an accomplice.

I go to see a man I don't know personally, though I have seen his face peering at me from the financial pages of the local newspaper, and the *Wall Street Journal*, and I have been watching his profile at the baseball stadium, two boxes to the right of me, for several years. He is a fan. Really a fan. When the weather is intemperate, or the game not close, the people around us disappear like flowers closing

at sunset, but we are always there until the last pitch. I know he is a man who attends because of the beauty and mystery of the game, a man who can sit during the last of the ninth with the game decided innings ago, and draw joy from watching the first baseman adjust the angle of his glove as the pitcher goes into his windup.

He, like me, is a first-base-side fan. I've always watched baseball from behind first base. The positions fans choose at sporting events are like politics, religion, or philosophy: a view of the world, a way of seeing the universe. They make no sense to anyone, have no basis in anything but stubbornness.

I brought up my daughters to watch baseball from the first-base side. One lives in Japan and sends me box scores from Japanese newspapers, and Japanese baseball magazines with pictures of superstars politely bowing to one another. She has a season ticket in Yokohama; on the first-base side.

"Tell him a baseball fan is here to see him," is all I will say to his secretary. His office is in a skyscraper, from which he can look out over the city to where the prairie rolls green as mountain water to the limits of the eye. I wait all afternoon in the artificially cool, glassy reception area with its yellow and mauve chairs, chrome and glass coffee tables. Finally, in the late afternoon, my message is passed along.

"I've seen you at the baseball stadium," I say, not introducing myself.

"Yes," he says. "I recognize you. Three rows back, about eight seats to my left. You have a red scorebook and you often bring your daughter . . ."

"Granddaughter. Yes, she goes to sleep in my lap in the late innings, but she knows how to calculate an ERA and she's only in Grade 2."

"One of my greatest regrets," says this tall man, whose moustache and carefully styled hair are polar-bear white, "is that my grandchildren all live over a thousand miles away. You're very lucky. Now, what can I do for you?"

"I have an idea," I say. "One that's been creeping toward me like a first baseman when the bunt sign is on. What do you think about artificial turf?"

"Hmmmf," he snorts, "that's what the strike should be about. Baseball is meant to be played on summer evenings and Sunday afternoon, on grass just cut by a horse-drawn mower," and we smile as

our eyes meet.

"I've discovered the ballpark is open, to me anyway," I go on. "There's no one there while the strike is on. The wind blows through the high top of the grandstand, whining until the pigeons in the rafters flutter. It's lonely as a ghost town."

"And what is it you do there, alone with the pigeons?"

"I dream."

"And where do I come in?"

"You've always struck me as a man who dreams. I think we have things in common. I think you might like to come with me. I could show you what I dream, paint you pictures, suggest what might happen . . ."

He studies me carefully for a moment, like a pitcher trying to decide if he can trust the sign his catcher has just given him.

"Tonight?" he says. "Would tonight be too soon?"

"Park in the northwest corner of the lot about 1:00 a.m. There is a door about fifty yards to the right of the main gate. I'll open it when I hear you."

He nods.

I turn and leave.

The night is clear and cotton warm when he arrives. "Oh, my," he says, staring at the stadium turned chrome-blue by a full moon. "Oh, my," he says again, breathing in the faint odours of baseball, the reminder of fans and players not long gone.

"Let's go down to the field," I say. I am carrying a cardboard pizza box, holding it on the upturned palms of my hands like an offering.

When we reach the field, he first stands on the mound, makes an awkward attempt at a windup, then does a little sprint from first to about half-way to second. "I think I know what you've brought," he says, gesturing toward the box, "but let me see anyway."

I open the box in which rests a square foot of sod, the grass smooth and pure, cool as a swatch of satin, fragile as baby's hair.

"Ohhh," the man says, reaching out a finger to test the moistness of it. "Oh, I see."

We walk across the field, the harsh, prickly turf making the bottoms of my feet tingle, to the left-field corner where, in the angle formed by the foul line and the warning track, I lay down the square foot of sod. "That's beautiful," my friend says, kneeling beside me, placing his hand, fingers spread wide, on the verdant square, leav-

ing a print faint as a veronica.

I take from my belt a sickle-shaped blade, the kind used for cutting carpet. I measure along the edge of the sod, dig the point in and pull carefully toward me. There is a ripping sound, like tearing an old bed sheet. I hold up the square of artificial turf like something freshly killed, while all the time digging the sharp point into the packed earth I have exposed. I replace the sod lovingly, covering the newly bared surface.

"A protest," I say.

"But it could be more," the man replies.

"I hoped you'd say that. It could be. If you'd like to come back . . ."

"Tomorrow night?"

"Tomorrow night would be fine. But there will be an admission charge . . ."

"A square of sod?"

"A square of sod two inches thick . . ."

"Of the same grass?"

"Of the same grass. But there's more."

"I suspected as much."

"You must have a friend . . ."

"Who would join us?"

"Yes."

"I have two. Would that be all right?"

"I trust your judgement."

"My father. He's over eighty," my friend says. "You might have seen him with me once or twice. He lives over fifty miles from here, but if I call him he'll come. And my friend . . ."

"If they pay their admission they'll be welcome . . ."

"And *they* may have friends . . ."

"Indeed they may. But what will we do with this?" I say, holding up the sticky-backed square of turf, which smells of glue and fabric.

"We could mail them anonymously to baseball executives, politicians, clergymen."

"Gentle reminders not to tamper with Nature."

We dance toward the exit, rampant with excitement.

"You will come back? You'll bring others?"

"Count on it," says my friend.

They do come, those trusted friends, and friends of friends, each making a live, green deposit. At first, a tiny row of sod squares begins to inch along toward left-centre field. The next night even more people

arrive, the following night more again, and the night after there is positively a crowd. Those who come once seem always to return accompanied by friends, occasionally a son or young brother, but mostly men my age or older, for we are the ones who remember the grass.

Night after night the pilgrimage continues. The first night I stand inside the deep green door, listening. I hear a vehicle stop; hear a car door close with a snug thud. I open the door when the sound of soft soled shoes on gravel tells me it is time. The door swings silent as a snake. We nod curt greetings to each other. Two men pass me, each carrying a grasshopper-legged sprinkler. Later, each sprinkler will sizzle like frying onions as it wheels, a silver sparkler in the moonlight.

During the nights that follow, I stand sentinel-like at the top of the grandstand, watching as my cohorts arrive. Old men walking across a parking lot in a row, in the dark, carrying coiled hoses, looking like the many wheels of a locomotive, old men who have slipped away from their homes, skulked down their sturdy sidewalks, breathing the cool, grassy, after-midnight air. They have left behind their sleeping, grey-haired women, their immaculate bungalows, their manicured lawns. They continue to walk across the parking lot, while occasionally a soft wheeze, a nibbling, breathy sound like an old horse might make, divulges their humanity. They move methodically toward the baseball stadium which hulks against the moonblue sky like a small mountain. Beneath the tint of starlight, the tall light standards which rise above the fences and grandstand glow purple, necks bent forward, like sunflowers heavy with seed.

My other daughter lives in this city, is married to a fan, but one who watches baseball from behind third base. And like marrying outside the faith, she has been converted to the third-base side. They have their own season tickets, twelve rows up just to the outfield side of third base. I love her, but I don't trust her enough to let her in on my secret.

I could trust my granddaughter, but she is too young. At her age she shouldn't have to face such responsibility. I remember my own daughter, the one who lives in Japan, remember her at nine, all knees, elbows and missing teeth — remember peering in her room, seeing her asleep, a shower of well-thumbed baseball cards scattered over her chest and pillow.

I haven't been able to tell my wife — it is like my compatriots and I are involved in a ritual for true believers only. Maggie, who knew me when I still dreamed of playing professionally myself —

Maggie, after over half a lifetime together, comes and sits in my lap in the comfortable easy chair which has adjusted through the years to my thickening shape, just as she has. I love to hold the lightness of her, her tongue exploring my mouth, gently as a baby's finger.

"Where do you go?" she asks sleepily when I crawl into bed at dawn.

I mumble a reply. I know she doesn't sleep well when I'm gone. I can feel her body rhythms change as I slip out of bed after midnight.

"Aren't you too old to be having a change of life," she says, placing her toast-warm hand on my cold thigh.

I am not the only one with this problem.

"I'm developing a reputation," whispers an affable man at the ballpark. "I imagine any number of private investigators following any number of cars across the city. I imagine them creeping about the parking lot, shining pen-lights on license plates, trying to guess what we're up to. Think of the reports they must prepare. I wonder if our wives are disappointed that we're not out discoing with frizzy-haired teenagers?"

Night after night, virtually no words are spoken. Each man seems to know his assignment. Not all bring sod. Some carry rakes, some hoes, some hoses, which, when joined together, snake across the infield and outfield, dispensing the blessing of water. Others, cradle in their arms bags of earth for building up the infield to meet the thick, living sod.

I often remain high in the stadium, looking down on the men moving over the earth, dark as ants, each sodding, cutting, watering, shaping. Occasionally the moon finds a knife blade as it trims the sod or slices away a chunk of artificial turf, and tosses the reflection skyward like a bright ball. My body tingles. There should be symphony music playing. Everyone should be humming "America The Beautiful."

Toward dawn, I watch the men walking away in groups, like small patrols of soldiers, carrying instead of arms, the tools and utensils which breathe life back into the arid ballfield.

Row by row, night by night, we lay the little squares of sod, moist as chocolate cake with green icing. Where did all the sod come from? I picture many men, in many parts of the city, surreptitiously cutting chunks out of their own lawns in the leafy midnight darkness, listening to the uncomprehending protests of their wives the next day — pretending to know nothing of it — pretending to have called the police to investigate.

When the strike is over I know we will all be here to watch the workouts, to hear the recalcitrant joints crackle like twigs after the forced inactivity. We will sit in our regular seats, scattered like popcorn throughout the stadium, and we'll nod as we pass on the way to the exits, exchange secret smiles, proud as new fathers.

For me, the best part of all will be the surprise. I feel like a magician who has gestured hypnotically and produced an elephant from thin air. I know I am not alone in my wonder. I know that rockets shoot off in half-a-hundred chests, the excitement of birthday mornings, Christmas eves, and home-town doubleheaders, boils within each of my conspirators. Our secret rites have been performed with love, like delivering a valentine to a sweetheart's door in that blue-steel span of morning just before dawn.

Players and management are meeting round the clock. A settlement is imminent. I have watched the stadium covered square foot by square foot until it looks like green graph paper. I have stood and felt the cool odours of the grass rise up and touch my face. I have studied the lines between each small square, watched those lines fade until they were visible to my eyes alone, then not even to them.

What will the players think, as they straggle into the stadium and find the miracle we have created? The old-timers will raise their heads like ponies, as far away as the parking lot, when the thrill of the grass reaches their nostrils. And, as they dress, they'll recall sprawling in the lush outfields of childhood, the grass as cool as a mother's hand on a forehead.

"Goodbye, goodbye," we say at the gate, the smell of water, of sod, of sweat, small perfumes in the air. Our secrets are safe with each other. We go our separate ways.

Alone in the stadium in the last chill darkness before dawn, I drop to my hands and knees in the centre of the outfield. My palms are sodden. Water touches the skin between my spread fingers. I lower my face to the silvered grass, which, wonder of wonders, already has the ephemeral odours of baseball about it.

Spring Training

The last of the birds has returned—
the bluebird, shy and flashy.
The bees carry fat baskets of pollen
from the alders around the pond.
The wasps in the attic venture downstairs,
where they congregate on warm windowpanes.
Every few days it rains.

This is my thirty-fifth spring;
still I am a novice at my work,
confused and frightened and angry.
Unlike me, the buds do not hesitate,
the hills are confident they will be
perfectly reflected
in the glass of the river.

I oiled my glove yesterday.
Half the season is over.
When will I be ready?

On my desk sits a black-and-white postcard picture
of my father—skinny, determined,
in a New York Giants uniform—
ears protruding, eyes riveted.
Handsome, single-minded, *he* looks ready.

Thirty-five years of warmups.
Like glancing down at the scorecard
in your lap for half a second
and when you look up it's done—
a long fly ball, moonlike,
into the night
over the fence,
way out of reach.

A Poem for Ed "Whitey" Ford

I wanted my name
curt: Ed
Ford: a name that gave away
nothing. I wanted
a cute cocky face. To be
a low-ball specialist
but sneaky fast, tough
in the clutch. Not
to retire the side with power
but with finesse.
I never wanted to go
soft, to fall in love fall
through it and keep
falling like this,
letting the light and air
pick my pockets at will.
Or dwell in this gray
area, this interval
where we search out by feel
the seams in the day,
homesick for the warm
map of a hand.
I planned to be
immune as Ford
on the throne of the mound,
my position defined
by both taut foul-lines,
the fence against my back.
To sight on the vanishing point
in the core of the mitt.
My delivery strict,
classic.
Not to sit thinking like this
how I drive the blunt wedge
of my breath before me
one space at a time,

watching words
thought were well meant
miss. I wanted
what we all wanted then:
To be ice.
To throw uncontradicted
strikes. To be
like Ed Ford at work
empty, cruel, accurate.
To be beautiful.
Our beauty pure expertise.

In Memory of Dale Long

By the end of his streak—
8 round-trippers in 8
consecutive games—
his grip had come to expect
the clean shock to complete it
when he'd connect.
Like a boy who recollects
the clack of a bolt-action rifle—
that slick exact way
the steel sleeves of the breech
unlock, retract, consolidate
shut—a boy who studies
in his small shoulders
such authority—
he relished it,
before the pitchers, not
to their great surprise,
discovered that they
could distract him with junk,
make him tipsy
with the force of his own
swing, a muscular sot.

20 years and I'll bet
he still balances in his hands

the tapers of bats,
climbs out of civilian clothes
into his old stance
like a suit and tries on
its shape, adjusting
the shoulders to get loose
again, to remember
what he'd done right.
Like the lovers who keep
their separate vigils,
who are always obliquely
looking off at something
not in the scene—
the lovers whose edges
hurt to be the same edge,
their very pain
the beauty they study,
a moment, a flash in the pan—
he smooths the void
with his swing, flashes it
again, wondering
if this flash or this
could equal the propriety
he found in his hands
when his swing rhymed
with every pitch and he
connected solidly, time
again after time.

Win Some, Lose Some and Some are Rained out (excerpt)

I don't know when it started—that feeling I had about baseball. My earliest recollections are those of throwing a ball in the air against the second floor of our home in the summer of 1933. I remember listening to the radio as the play by play announcer from Chicago related that Wally Moses, an outfielder for the White Sox, was going after a fly ball. I suddenly became Wally Moses and I was running under that same fly ball—only mine had rebounded off the side of our wooden house. A ground ball, as reported by Bob Elson the Cub radio announcer, hit to Billy Herman, the Cub second baseman, meant I had to lower my sights from between the upstairs bedroom windows to an area on the first floor below the dining room windows. A crashing grounder would rebound off the house and skim along the grass. I would neatly backhand the ball ala-Herman and make a level throw; this time it would rebound to me as the Cubs' first baseman—Rip Collins.

I was seven then and the radio reports came in daily when the Cubs or the White Sox were playing at home. My games against the side of the house were just as daily as I followed the game, pitch by pitch, play by play. There must have been a thousand-a-day tennis ball thumps against that house. Dr. Clark, our family physician, and my mother were trying to discover why she was having recurring headaches at this period in her life. I doubt they questioned the thumping noise constantly vibrating throughout the house during those summer days.

My parents and I lived on Clark Street in Marseilles, Illinois, that summer of '33. Marseilles was a sleepy, peaceful little town of about 4,000 settled one hundred years before in the Illinois River Valley some 70 miles west of Chicago.

We moved, in 1934, to a brick, two story structure west of town called the "new addition". It was there that Vernon Twait, the

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Ed Mickelson played for the St. Louis Cardinals and Browns and the Chicago Cubs. He was a longtime mainstay with the Portland Beavers of the Pacific Coast League. In 1950 he batted a combined .404 for Lynchburg of the Piedmont League, Montgomery of the Southeastern League, and the St. Louis Cardinals.

Schumanski boys and I built a baseball field. We cut the weeds, mowed the grass, laid out the bases and built a backstop. My Dad loved sports and still does—so there was always excitement for me when he could take the time to play with us in the evenings or on Sunday. Baseball was just one part of our summer days in Marseilles. We fished, went swimming on the Richmond's farm in a dammed up creek, and roamed the woods the year around. Winter meant sleigh riding down the steep hills and ice skating on the frozen river.

We moved to Chicago in September of 1935 and into apartment living. Baseball was played on the corner lot of Parnell Street. There were enough kids to play 7 or 8 on a side. Down the left field line was a three story apartment building with, what looked to be, a hundred windows. Down the right field line was open space. I became adept at hitting the ball to right field, which isn't easy for a nine year old right-hander.

The street kids of Chicago had a game called step ball. We played it for hours on end. Two or more guys played by throwing a rubber ball against concrete steps. We used to play underneath the elevated-train on concrete steps used by passengers coming down from the tracks overhead. Throwing a rubber ball against the steps and hitting the edge of the step counted 100 points. Balls caught on the fly—those that hit the back or top of the step and rebounded was worth 10 points. We would play to 5,000 or 10,000 points. It might take all morning for someone to get 10,000 points.

My biggest thrill in Chicago came when my Dad took me to see the White Sox play the Yankees in a Sunday doubleheader. It seemed hard to believe that I was actually seeing Lou Gehrig, Bill Dickey, Red Rolfe, and Joe DiMaggio for the Yankees and Luke Appling, Al Simmons, Ted Lyons, and Zeke Bonura for the White Sox. I don't recall who won the games, but I can still remember the action and recall the excitement of my first league game.

We came to St. Louis in 1937. I was 11 years old when I entered Delmar Harvard elementary school in University City for the last few weeks of 5th grade. These were fun years and I remember vividly my playmates, Bob O'Conner, Harold Fridkin, Mark Saphian, Norm Zwibelman, Gene Alper, Sonny Julius, and a host of other boys. We had a great time playing cork ball, which is native to St. Louis. It is played with a cork ball which is about one half the size of a baseball. We played cork ball with a tennis ball, however, because corkballs cost 25¢. An old tennis ball was easy to acquire and cost nothing. Each team had a pitcher, catcher and outfielder and got three outs

an inning for a nine-inning game. A swing and a miss caught cleanly by the catcher was an out. A foul tip of any kind behind home plate was an out. A ball caught on the fly was a hit and four hits scored a run. If the game went extra innings, hits would count as runs. A good pitcher could throw curves with the tennis ball and make fast balls hop. Sawed off broom sticks were bats. Our league leading team ended up one summer season winning 327 games while losing 142.

When we weren't playing corkball, we were playing Indian ball. This is also a game that I believe is unique to St. Louis. The game can be played with two on a side, but is better played with two infielders and two outfielders. The bases are placed 30 to 40 feet apart with two infielders guarding this area on the ground when balls are hit in their direction. Home plate is stationed a hundred feet or so from the opposing infielders. The outfielders are placed about 150 feet behind the infielders to catch the line drives or fly balls before they drop in the outfield for a hit. The team at bat has one of the members toss the softball (12 inches) underhand to the batter. No balls or strikes are called and the batter swings only at a desired pitch thrown by his teammate. A ball hit on the ground and caught cleanly by the infielder is an out, but if it goes past the infielder or is juggled it is a hit. After three outs the fielders take their turn at bat. Three hits in one-half inning loads the bases and each succeeding hit scores a run. A home run is a ball landing over the head and behind the outfielders. As in corkball, extra inning hits count as runs. We kept league standings in Indian ball, but unlike corkball where we could play 15 to 20 games a day, only 7 or 8 games a day could be played of Indian ball. We played from morning until twilight.

The Latent Yankee Syndrome (excerpts)

for Ted Berrigan

Stan Bahnsen

a bright star in a .500 season
Rookie of the Year & they called
your fastball the Bahnsen Burner

turning it loose on the A's, Senators
& 'em clubs like Seattle &
they traded you to the White Sox
fine relief years later at Montreal

I remember your brief tenure as hero—
post-game show & Dick Young columns
& wherever you are you know
it's more than most of us hope for

to Horace Clarke in St. Croix

days of beads, going career-wise in mediocrity's Leisure suits
to a point South-by-Southwest glowing Orange Breezes
where you are Senor El Perfecto, dogs friendly to your shoes.
The naked native breasts hanging on palm trees softly
twi-nighters in the Bronx only spoken in sleep. Oh short fame,
of legs not twisting to a somber echo—Here You Are
not Vic Davalillo or Fidel Castro, pine-tar surging in your
system.

Sweet rum & coke fills your late afternoons
to tunes of steel-drum beating loudly—
Ralph Houk sweats in the mainlands' urban box, while outside
your children play soccer under a waning Arawak Sun.

Will you live to see the day that Havana gets a team:
not caring, not forgetting, 96 stitches from Port au Prince.

The Yankee Clipper and Cap't Ahab

They say that Ahab
Emerged from the ocean
Pacific this time
In fact in San Francisco, by the gate
Trudged up the wharf
Barnacles and all
Until he found DiMaggio's place,
Found him soothin' himself at the bar,
Sipping a cocktail.
Ahab said, "Hey slim—give me a swig!"
Joe said, "Play the ball where it lies . . ."

Sorcery in the Event

The Black Hole of Calcutta
Was last seen up close in 1967
In a game between Baltimore and Detroit
At Tiger Stadium.
Ed Brinkman was at bat and
Steve Barber on the mound for the Orioles.
The mirage was brief:
The Taj Mahal shat itself
Free of the British Navy,
Winston Churchill and Mahatma Ghandhi
Dove for cover,
And Brooks Robinson re-emerged at third base.
Later, he admitted to chewing
Red Man tobacco,
Accepted a stiff fine,
And promised to turn over a new leaf.

El Paso vs. Jackson at the Dudley Dome

The Buddhists say,
"It's how you play the game
that counts."

Tell that

to the poets in New York City
who will never understand
the importance of Bill Max.

The man is excellent fodder for the Mets,
a hardswinging, homerun hitting
thirdbaseman
who can't hit for average
nor catch the ball

"Shit," the old man said,
"he's always diving for the ball
after it's already in the grass."

But he sure don't mind getting dirty.
You can say that about Billy Max.

Heaven, in fact, is made of real grass.

Let me tell you,
that's what it's like . . .

El Paso, Texas
or
Jackson, Mississippi

Swing hard, Billy Max,

I love you.

May 1984

Rules for a Softball Game Office Picnic, 1984

1. ONE LADY ON THE FIELD AT ALL TIMES.

2. EVERY PLAYER MUST PLAY AT LEAST TWO INNINGS (CONSECUTIVE).

3. STRAIGHT SLOW PITCH.

4. NO UMPIRES?

5. NO WALKS.

6. NO STEALS.

7. NO BUNTS.

8. ONE BASE ON THROWAWAYS.

9. ONE GUY OVER 50 AT ALL TIMES.

Of Bad Luck and Miracles

for Steve Sprague

It is said of Teddy Gold,
a revolutionary,
one of the Weathermen
who blew himself up
making bombs
to shape the world anew,
that he told his closest friends
he could never be a good communist
until Willie Mays retired.

Which is what happened,
and Teddy Gold is dead.

Which brings us to 1984
with everybody waiting
for the roof to cave in
or the bottom to drop out—

And I'm not talking World News,
but baseball—

while I'm for honest
trying to be a good Buddhist
not messing around with things as they are,
just my breath going in and out
like the trees and the earth, like
the universe itself—

BUT,

I mean, it looks like for sure
the San Diego Padres
against
the Chicago Cubs
for the National League Pennant.

Over in the other league
the Minnesota Twins
of all people
are BATTLING
the Kansas City Royals
for one division,
and the Detroit Tigers
are a cinch for the other.

Everyday I read the sports.
I can't help it!
Like Teddy Gold,
I'm a sentimentalist
of the worst kind.
I'm gonna pick the Cubs
over the Tigers in six.

So swing hard, Ron Cey.
Play it tough, Sarge.
And remember that old saying,

Frog jump in pond.
Plop!

Innings in Infinity

for Richard Dymond

I remember you in Atlantis.
We played on the same laserball team.
You were pitcher of crystals, and I,
catcher,
sent you signals,
telepathic.
The batter batted with an energy bar that phased
off
or ommmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm
at his will,
a Jedi Knight's lightsabre,
though
the hues were more
delicate
fibrous
like intertwining filaments, and
why not? What was it
but an extension of concentrated thoughtform?

Soulstuff.

You pitched a mean crystal.

Coherent light pulses
through the proper crystal:
good laser is given.
—from the Venusian *I Ching*

The object of the batter
in
lotus
posture
beside home plate head

inside
the
strike
zone
was
to phase-lock the frequencies of his oscillatory energy bar into a unified attunement resonant with the pitch of the crystal, by means of the
One
-pointed focus of his inner self.
(Remember the time Salinger was ump and you pitched your blooper so high it
spun
into
warp
on
its
way
down
and
before J. D. could call a wild crystal,
it hit
him so hard on his third-eye-*tika*
he was simultaneously trilocated into future incarnations as the diamond-body Buddha's mohair sutra
and
the oversoul of
Moe/Larry/Curly/-Joe/and Shemp
while
spontaneously intuiting the discovery of radio so that all Atlanteans would tune in their crystal sets daily at noon,
sundials shadowless,
ground-wires alligator-clipped to the central radiator
*shakti*crystal
thereby
inadvertently

bringing about the deluge,
for when the warning went out
years later it was the day
all Atlanteans had their ears glued to *Fibber McGee and Molly*,
and when Fibber's closet
unleashed
its
contents
in
a
flood,
the combined empathic mass of
all Atlantic
stirred the earth and sea with imagery
and the tides inundated the continent,
due to which karma
he had to
reincarnate as a Lucky Strike whiz-kid, with
concurrent, non-
sequential
parallel
transmigrations as John Glenn and the San
Andreas Fault?)

The knack of pitching the proper crystal,
and the ability you had that made you

number one

was
your total
affinity
with me
so that
my thoughts were your thoughts
my mind your mind
since signals (telepathically sent)
could be
tuned in to by the batter and other
b a s e r u n n e r s
should they be so talented

and happened to be standing
on one of the baseball dymonds,
randomly charged bases
named in your Pap's honor, winner of the Heisenberg Trophy
of Uncertainty
as discoverer of the Principle of
Love Beyond Form or Letter,
crystalline jewels
shaped as our present baseball diamonds.
Thought-amplifiers they were,
as long as they were integrated
in the circuitry
of
the
ten
visible and
(one)
invisible
bases designed
as
the Tree
of
Life
with connecting
baselines corresponding
to the
twenty-two Major League Arcana of the Lemurian Tarot.
When a team landed ten crystals on base
a quantum maser was formed
and both teams translated to a higher plane of reality
to begin another
game.

We never finished a game, you and me.
We were too good.
We became soul-mates then.
Kicking around the universe.
That's why we're here now.

the risks
And the dangers, you took!
The times you electrified the fans, and almost fried yourself,
tossing a spit-crystal! J. D. would just laugh
his heads over all heads laugh
and never call you on it. Your eyes
would gleam as the juice reverbed through the crystal, back to you,
but your thoughts never gave your pitch away.
It was times like that, I think, that most made me love you,
because your folly was
controlled
and impeccable
and you could lie to anyone
but yourself.
And me.
(And maybe your manager, S. Leonard Futurejew.)
The good old days.
We live them now.
We live them for ever.
The good ol' days on the Atlantis Braves.

To freedom we are bound.

Tisha B'Av at Fenway Park (excerpt)

Nighttime is different from the day, and things which appear so obviously clear in daylight take on new meaning and proportions when cloaked in darkness. Even our attitudes change along with our perceptions, and imagination comes in to fill out and amplify what our nightblindness has taken away. The world itself follows different rules during the night, and different animals come out to roam the earth. There are beasts of the day and beasts of the night, and each one lays claim to its own sovereignty. And so, under a black sky, the baseball game itself began to look different. What had seemed before so clearly a battle between Good and Evil, a clash between opposing forces, lost its distinct sharpness. And the proportions changed, altered by the fathomless firmament suspended above us. Suddenly, it appeared that we no longer were the faithful followers, rooting in sympathetic harmony for one side's domination over the other. At night, our own powers diminish, and we become aware of our mysterious dependencies. And so, although we were still fastened to the game, almost as if its victims, bound to the vagaries of its movements, we were now watching the strange workings of an organic entity, like watching the interchanging shift in clouds, each one bearing on the next, which held over us the threat of storm or calm. Ten men stood on the baseball field—nine of one side, one of another, but together they combined to form one single body, working like gears towards a single goal, whose outcome was still unknown. The game continued.

New patterns began to dawn on me. "Hey Max," I said, "look at the field. You see—there's so much room in the outfield, but everything in the infield is so close together. It's almost like an explosion, where the further out you get, the further apart the particles are."

"Hey, yeah," he said. "Everything from home plate outwards gets farther apart, like a mushroom effect." He grew to theorizing. "It's like the atmosphere, or the world—things closer to earth are packed together, but as you go upwards, the distance between things get greater."

I looked at the three outfielders, each one alone in a sea of grass, and at the seven players grouped more closely in the infield, with

the catcher and the batter so close they could reach out and touch each other. And then I realized what it reminded me of.

"Look Max—it's like in the kabbala. There are ten emanations. The three outer emanations are way out and far apart, lost in the highest realms. Then the seven lower emanations are closer, in a tighter relationship.

"Far out!" he answered, picking up on the idea. "That's right—there's Keter, Hochmah, and Binah, like Center, Right, and Left. And then you go down to two on one side—first base and second base—"

"Hesed and Netzah!" I said.

"—and two on the left—"

"Din and Hod. And the pitcher—"

"—that's Tiferet, which is perfect for the pitcher. The pitcher unifies the whole team, everything concentrates on him, he's the star performer, and then he delivers the pitch to the plate—"

"—and that's the union between Tiferet and Malkhut, which is the catcher—"

"Right! But it first has to go through Yesod to get to Malkhut—"

"—and Yesod is the batter, shaking his bat which joins Tiferet and Malkhut into one relationship."

"Far out!"

We saw the game with new eyes now, and we grinned from ear to ear. Everything was different. Tiferet stood up there in the middle, on the mound, and threw towards the plate. Malkhut stretched out its glove to receive the ball. Yesod swung. It was a sharp ground ball to Din, who scooped it up and threw it on to Hesed for an out.

"Yay!" we shouted.

"What are you getting so excited for?" Rebecca asked.

"Oh, it's beautiful," I told her and went back to watching the game.

The next batter stepped into Yesod and Malkhut, flashed a few signs and made a perfect target with his glove, waiting to receive. Tiferet nodded, and sent a fastball right by Yesod, which thumped into Malkhut's glove.

"All right!" I said. "Strike one!"

And Tiferet threw two more, just like the first. Three quick pitches and Malkhut received them all, right down the middle. Two outs.

The next batter stood up at the plate, and on the first pitch he hit a high fly ball and everyone watched to see where it would land.

Keter moved into position, pounded his glove, and made the catch. In the bottom of the ninth and the score was tied, 3-3. And suddenly the stadium grew tense, and started to clap in rhythmic fashion. We were impatient, we wanted to win, we wanted the game to end. Stomp, stomp, stomp, the noise grew.

Tiferet again peered in to Malkhut. Each player stood suspended in his position, poised and ready. He set, he threw. And suddenly there was a tremendous sound, and the ball leapt from the bat. Everybody rose to their feet, Mary Ann shrieked, the black man hollered, the man with the watch pumped his fist into the air, the freaks with the dope shouted wildly, as the ball, a perfect sphere, traveled in a long, perfect, elliptical arc, like the earth traveling in outer space, and it suddenly disappeared over The Wall, into the blackness beyond the stadium.

"Ayn Sof! Ayn Sof!" Max and I screamed in ecstasy, while thousands and tens of thousands of voices around us shouted hallelujah.

"We won! We won! We won!" We were happy, and we could go home now. It was like were were dreaming, and we laughed and sang. And suddenly the crowd surged forward, up the aisles, up the ramps, and headed for the stairs. I turned and looked backwards to where everything was already quickly emptying out, and I watched as candy wrappers blew across the playing field like loose pages from old, tattered books, and saw beneath the grandstand seats popcorn and peanut shells lying in scattered heaps, like the rubble fallen from ancient ruins.

"Time to go home," I said.

All-Zen Team

1st b. - Sadaharu Oh*
2nd b. - Johnny Temple
SS - Johnnie LeMaster
3rd b. - Buddy Bell

OF - Jim Rice
OF - Wally Moon
OF - Gil Coan

C - Les Moss

P - Wilbur Wood
P - Steve Stone
P - Bill Stoneman
P - Ken Clay
P - Glenn Abbott

*as in OH! — Satori

Mythopoeic Playoffs

Medusa's on the mound:
3 statues at home plate,
a 7th inning stretch that lasts
forever

In the empty bleachers,
a bevy of Baltimore Orioles
picks at peanuts, popcorn &
Prometheus

Heracles in the ondeck circle,
knocking the dirt from his cleats
w/a Doric column

Ball 4 to the Minotaur:
Theseus can't seem to find the plate
here in Labyrinth Stadium

Father's Day 1975

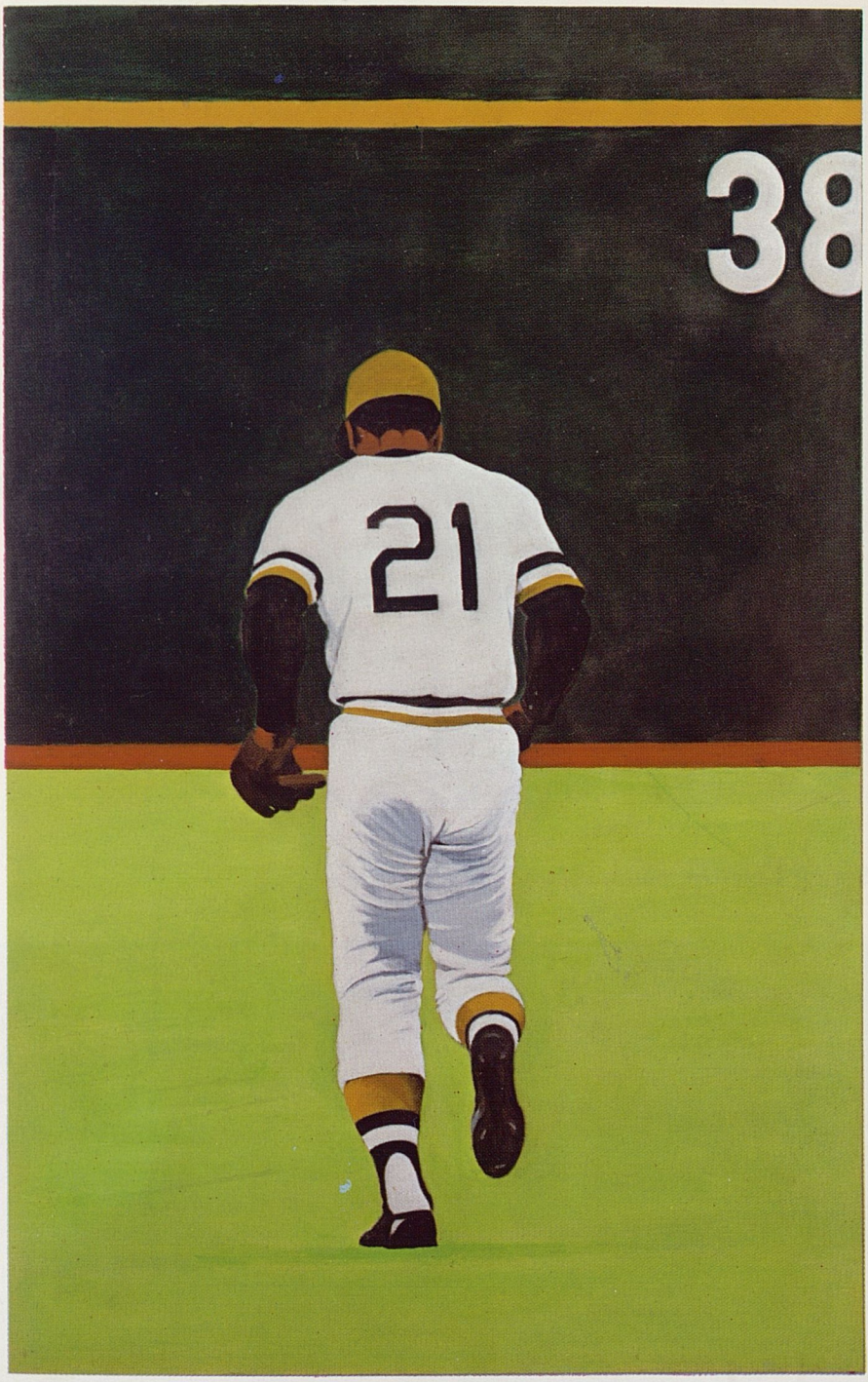
10 years ago
Shea Stadium
We saw Jim Bunning
Pitch a perfect game,
the perfect end
to a perfect life,
I guess
& Guru Maharaji-ji
not yet knee-
high to a lotus-
hopper

So here we are oldtimer
Both of us warming the benches
of countless dugouts
Both of us sitting in ondeck circles
& waiting for Lefty Godot
Not clapping or booing as calendars
bomb the plate
Blow the outback innings inside-
out
:we sit
we smile
we don't participate
Having made
of our lack of ambition
a bullpen
a blank scoreboard
of our
essential passivity
An art
unlike Lou Brock's

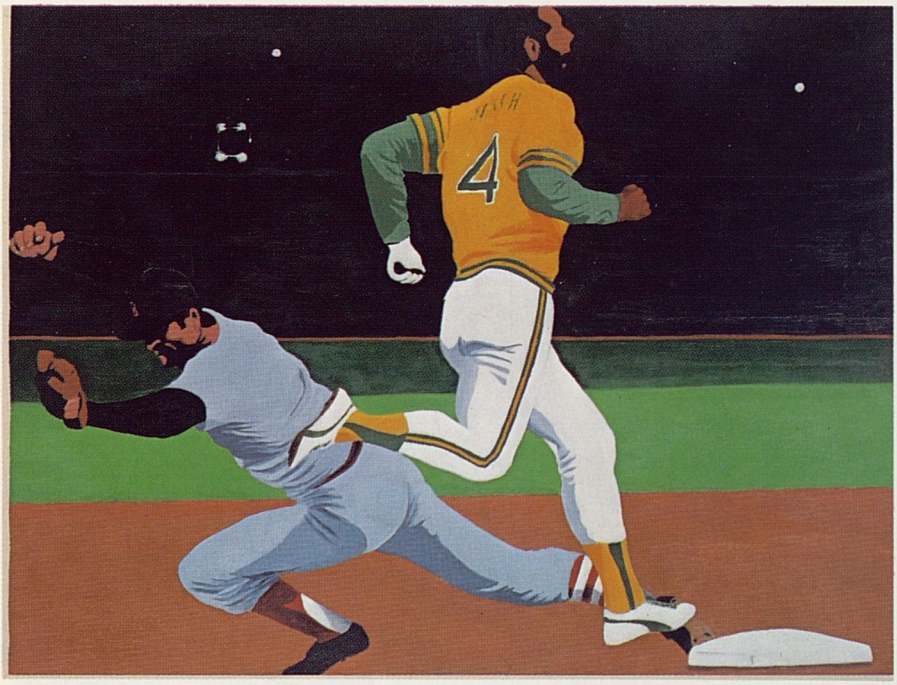
our fleet-
footed inertia

Abe old pard
If I ever make it to second base
I'll take you with me

Clemente, *painting by Tom Clark*

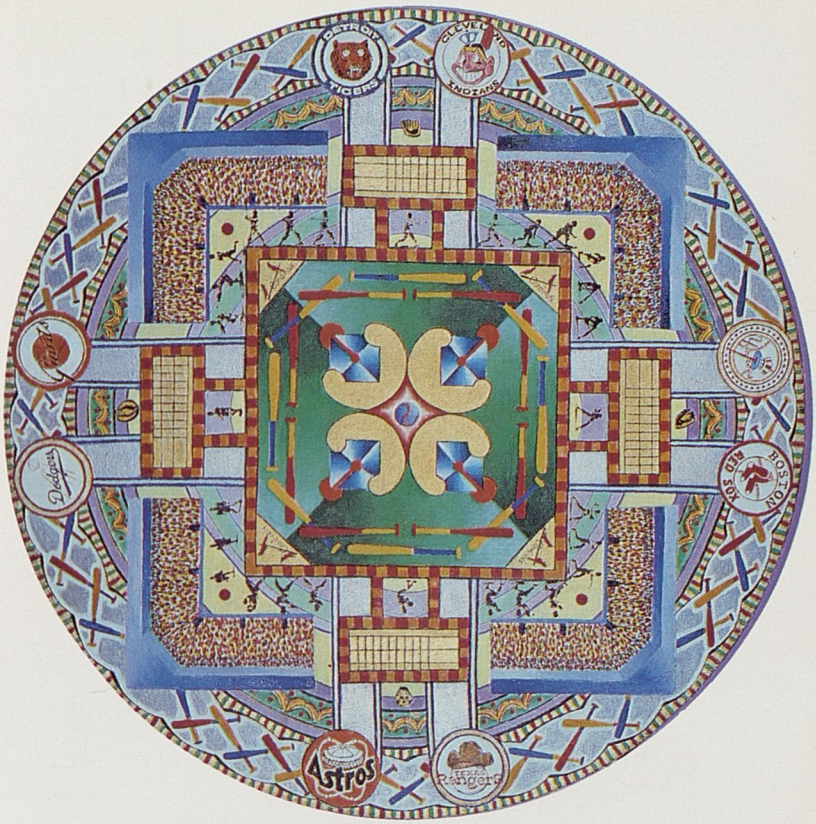


Oakland Coliseum Night Game, *painting by Tom Clark*

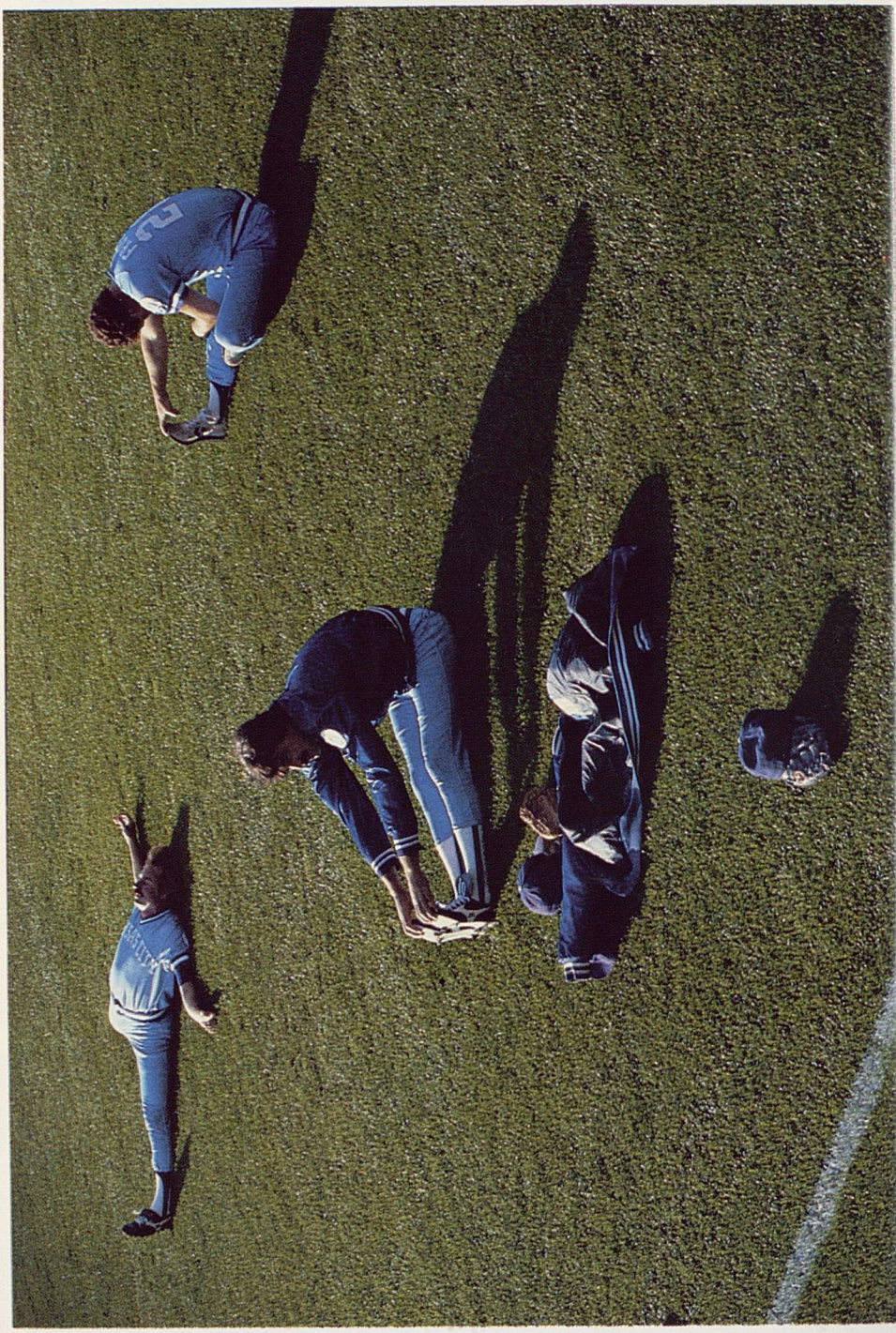


Spring Line-Up, *photo colored by Tom Blaess*

Keep Your Eye on the Ball, *painting by Tom Blaess*

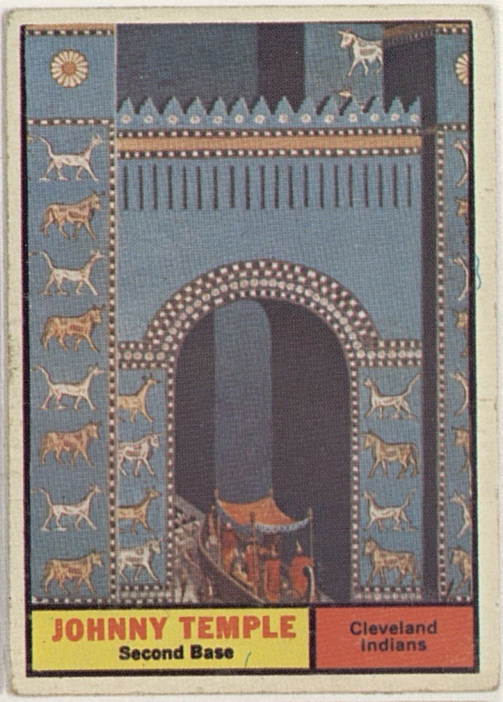


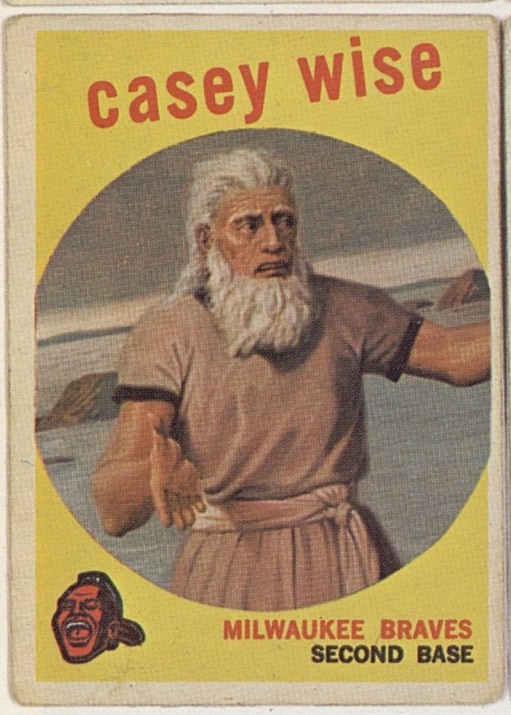
Royals Warm-up, *photo by Debra Heimerdinger*

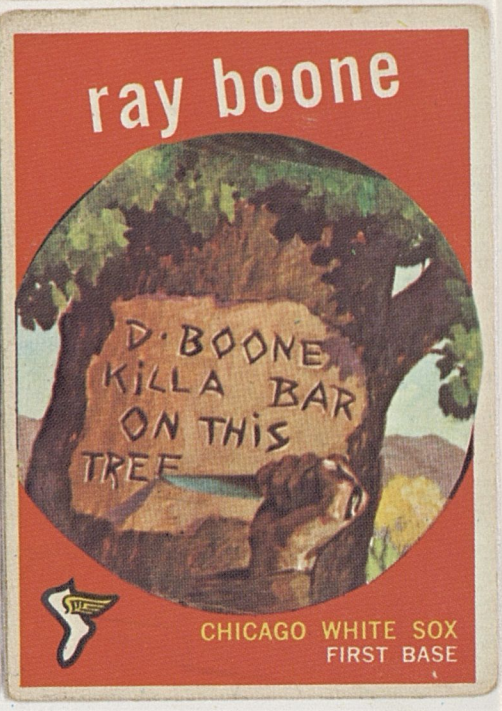


Mets Dugout, *photo by Debra Heimerdinger*

Baseball Cards, *collages by Mikhail Horowitz*







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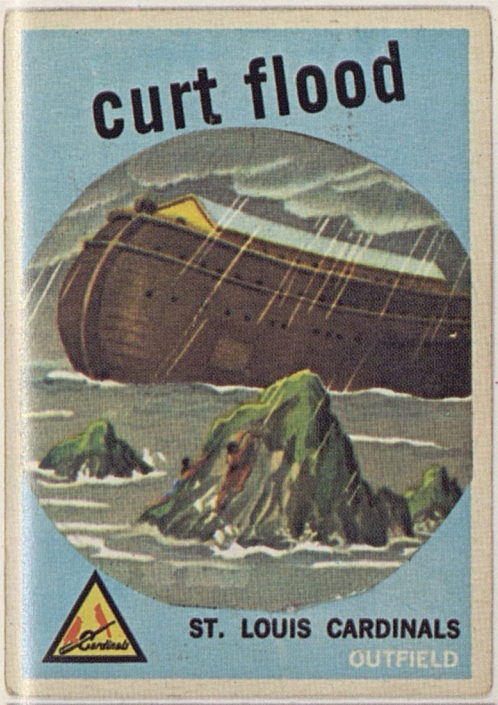

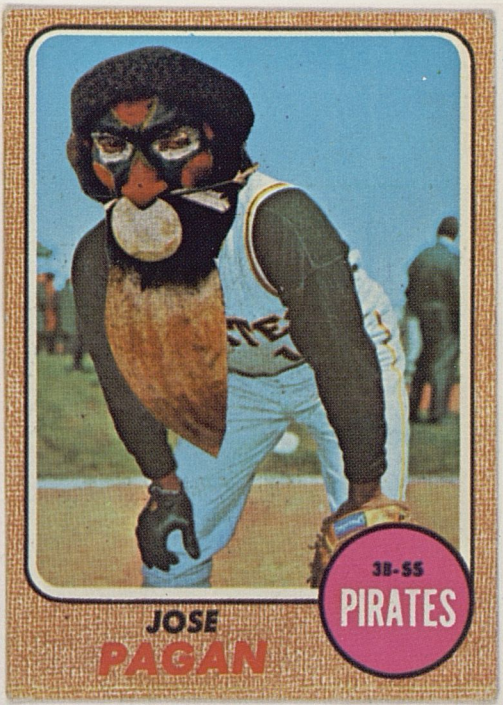

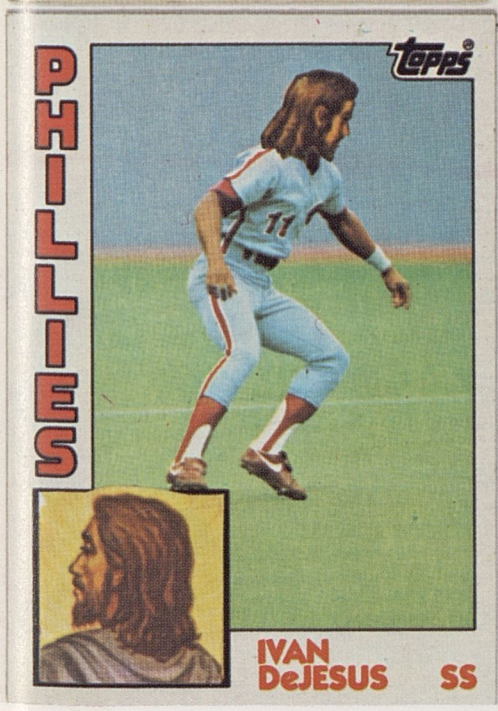

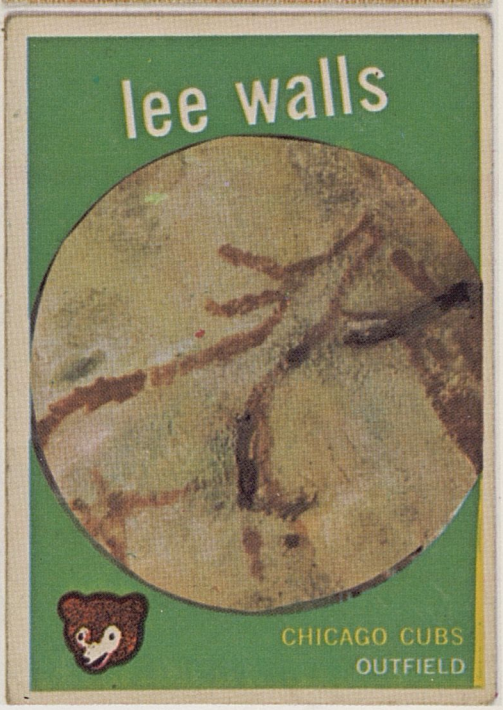

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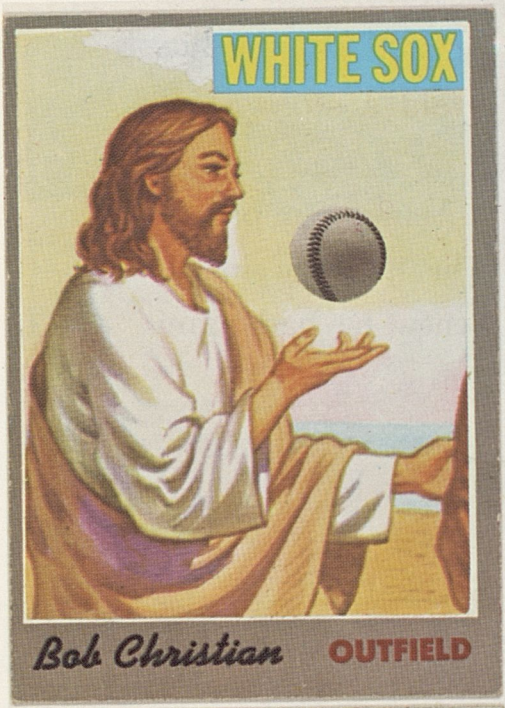

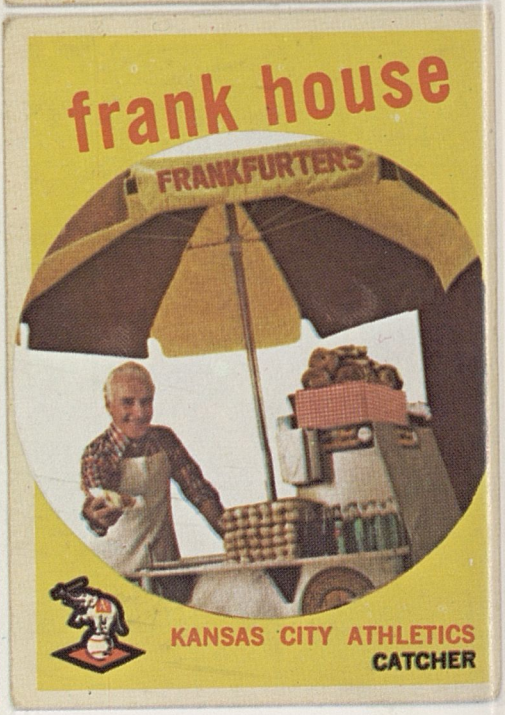

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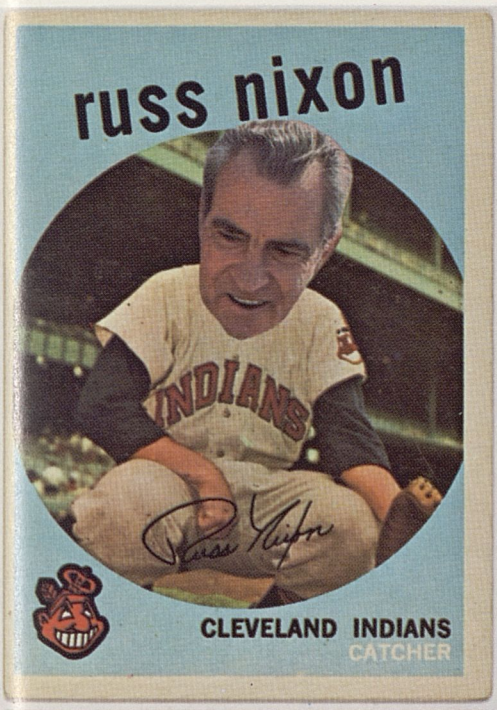

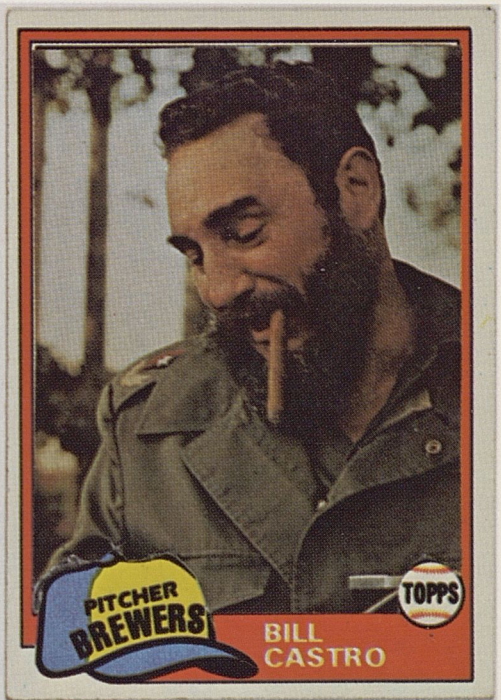

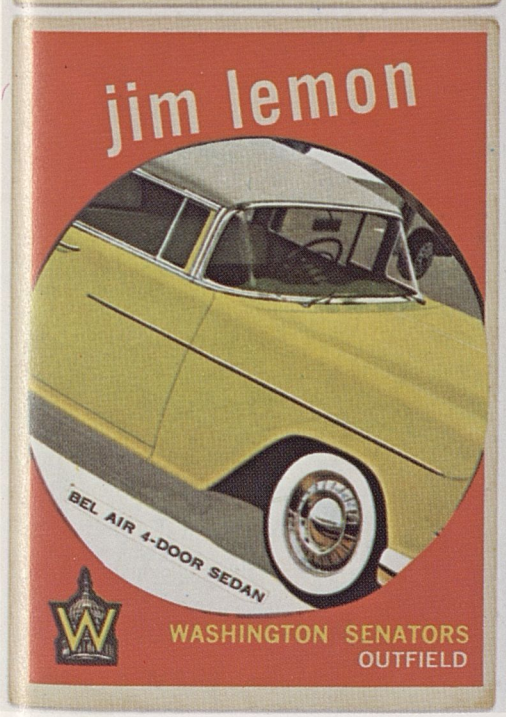

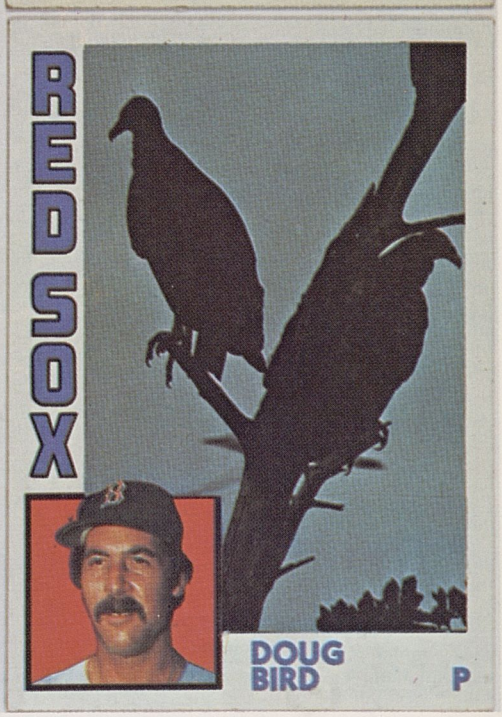

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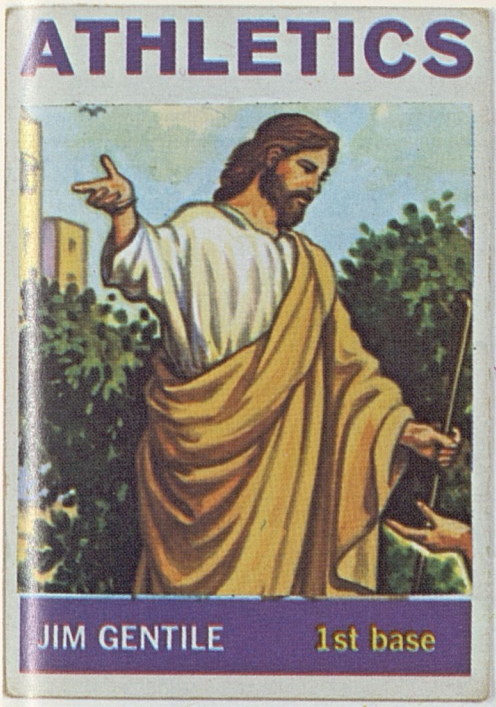
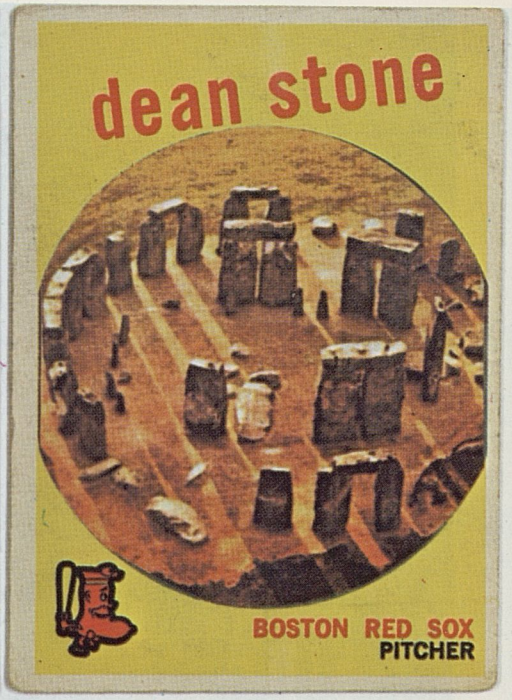
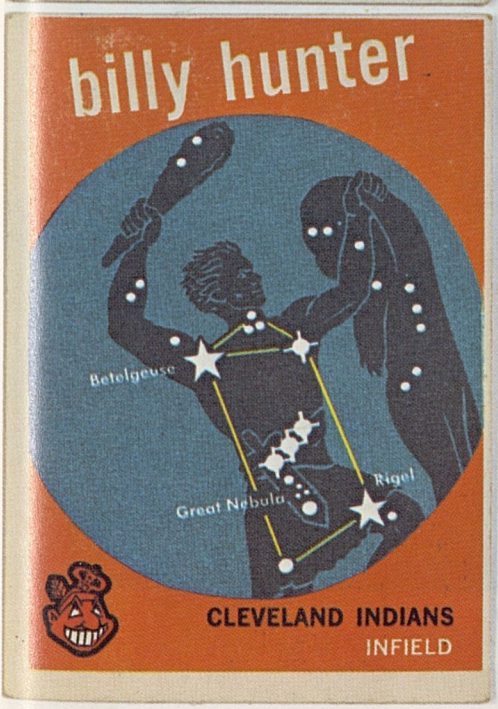
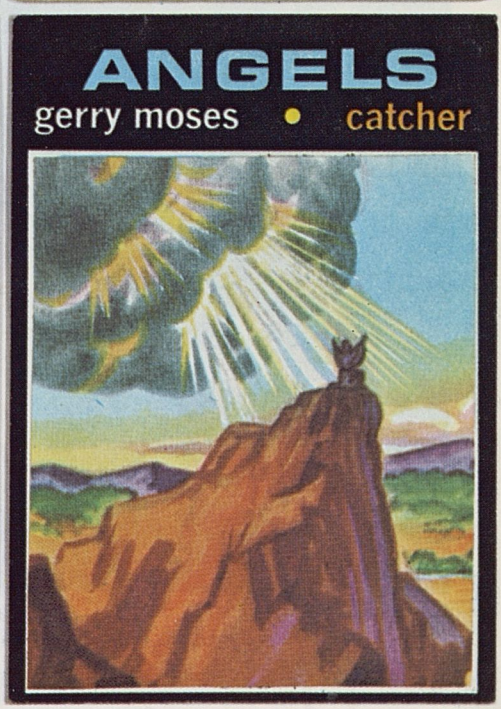
Baseball Cards, *collages by Mikhail Horowitz*

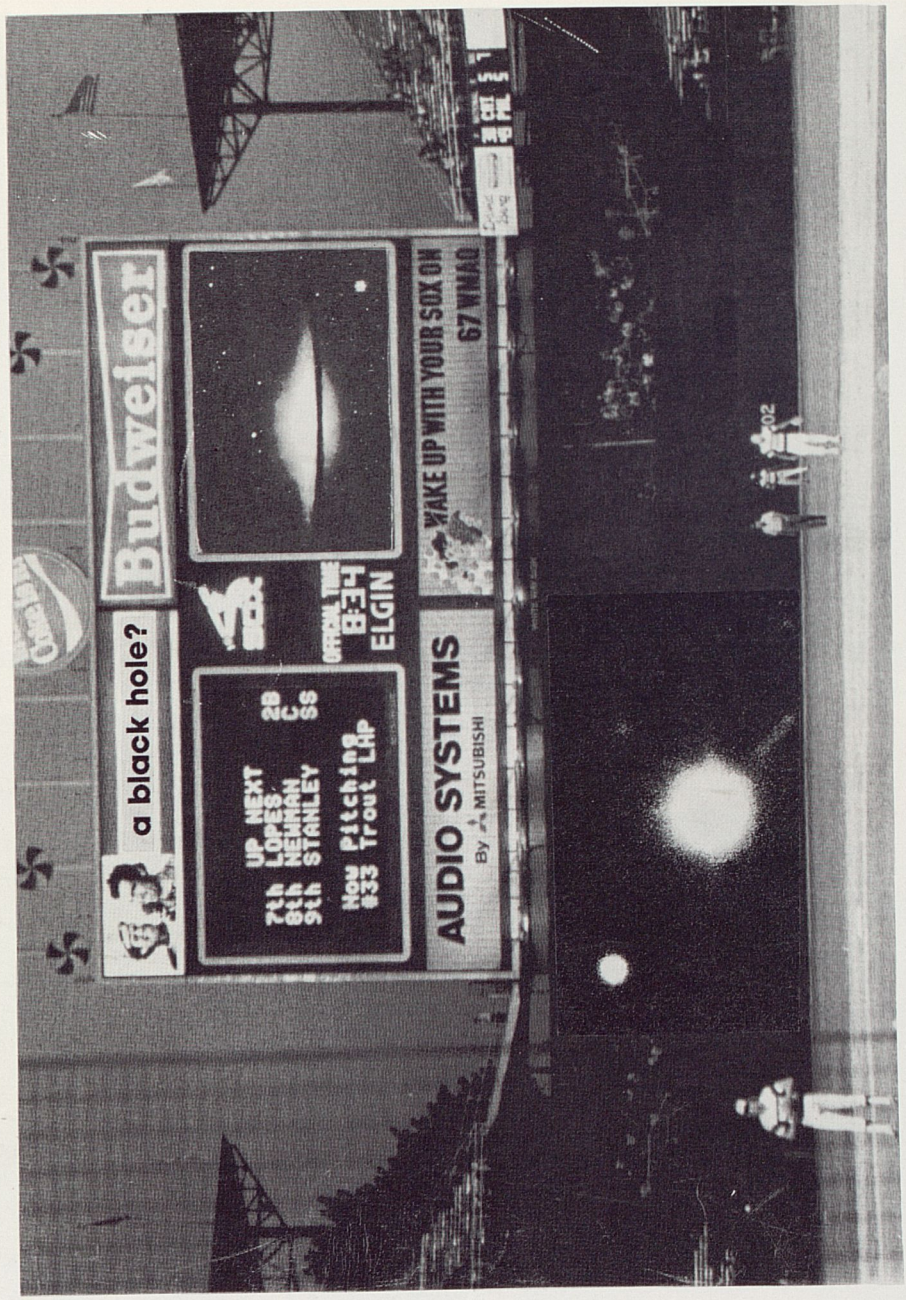








Quasar Scoreboard, *collage by Mikhail Horowitz*



Japanese Home-Run King Gives True Story on Famous Haiku

When he was 39, Sadaharu Oh
Had 800 homeruns & still
Took batting practice for a half-hour before every game
He ran with the rookies & roomed with a young player
on the road.
Fans stood in line outside the park.
& they waited at his house
For he always made time to sign autographs.
On one kid's cast he wrote —

That pond was smaller than a heart
The old frog no bigger than a tear
& the splash that broke the stillness
Couldn't startle the moon.

Portable Tigers Baseball Column (1984)

The catcher
must have taped
a picture of a porch
to his mitt

for we are in what
is known as Vacation Mode &

here comes that
screwball Large Thought
he has been searching for
    on this small diamond

& it comes on strong
like the Marvin Gaye–Tammi Terrell
duets out from the ghosts of Motown
past &

unless the Blue Jays can blow
apart the Tigers in their seven
head-to-head meetings during
the first half of June

they can suspend the AL East race
& show bowling reruns
for the rest of the season

A Zen Way of Baseball (excerpts)

"And so we resumed our work on a daily basis. I could no longer say it was fear or love of the game or even the presence of Nagashima-san, but I seemed to put more and more of myself into what I was doing. It was not so much a question of hours but of feeling. I wanted to swing the bat, I wanted what standing on one foot brought to me. More and more I came to see that when I stood on one foot, my sense of things changed. On one foot, I became hungry for hitting. On two feet, I was just another hitter. I loved the contest between myself and the pitcher, the struggle of wills that, miraculously, could be resolved in this unity of movement that was the home run."

As a Young Ballplayer

My uniform number was One—all the years I was in high school and all the years I was a major league ballplayer. Number One. People made something of that. BIG ONE the press blurbs read. Big One! What is a "big one"? I don't put that down. I enjoyed it too much. But I know who I am—or who I have been. I am ordinary. No larger, no smaller than life-size. But my number matters to me. In my mind's eye, I see my number on my uniform jersey in the only way that it has ever been important—showing toward the pitcher as I assume my batting stance. When I was at my best, I turned my back almost ninety degrees toward the pitcher. I felt like a rough Japanese sea. My number suddenly rose toward the pitcher like a dark wave just before I struck.

* * *

In the middle of all this was baseball. Baseball was everywhere in those years following the war. You could no more avoid baseball as a boy in Japan than a Canadian child could avoid skates. Even though we had no real fields to play on, though our equipment was handmade and very crude—balls fashioned from wound string and strips of cloth, bats made from tree limbs and discarded sticks—baseball seemed to grow from the very rubble itself, like some mysterious blossom of renewal. There were pickup teams from the

neighborhoods, sandlot teams, school teams, and the reemergence of the pro teams. Baseball had always been popular in Japan (an American missionary, so the story goes, introduced the game here in 1873; pro baseball began in Japan in 1936, although it was suspended during the war). But now, in the ruins of the Occupation, streets and alleyways became meeting places for sudden games of catch, eruptions of ground ball, and pop-fly drills. I was a very typical Japanese boy. From the earliest time, I simply loved baseball. The country was baseball crazy, and so was I!

* * *

Don Larsen *did* serve as an inspiration for me—but not in the way it was reported. The real story is far more curious. On New Year's Day that winter, Mr. Kubota said that he wanted me to watch a film of Larsen's perfect game. I went to a house in Toshima Ward to see it. There was nothing special about the house. It was small, unpretentious, typical of many in that area of Tokyo. But it belonged to Arakawa-san!

I could scarcely believe it when I saw this shadowy figure of my boyhood dreams standing there in the doorway to greet us. What did this mean? Did he remember who I was? Was this only the wildest coincidence, or had Arakawa-san all the while remembered me and been keeping tabs on me at Waseda? I bowed to him and shook his hand.

"We meet again," he said with a smile.

No coincidence at all!

But I could not bring myself to speak or to ask questions. I was there because it was determined that I should see this film, and that was all I permitted myself. The film, obviously, confirmed the correctness of what I had been working on. I saw what was possible at the highest level of professional play using this style of delivery, and it immediately compelled my attention. I watched Larsen's motion very carefully, making notes as I went. I studied the position of hand and glove at the waist, the way in which the turn of his body helped hide the ball till the last moment before the whip of the arm, how the stride forward left him balanced and in perfect fielding position. All the while I tried to see this in a kind of reverse mirror, checking each of these points against the movements I made as a left-hander. Yes, of course, it could be done. More than that, just because it eliminated so much excess motion, it might be the ideal counterfoil to the destructive effects of my nervous system. I

was full of hope for the new year and the new season, which was shortly to begin.

I felt tremendous gratitude to Mr. Miyai and Mr. Kubota for helping me. But toward Arakawa-san I felt something I could not begin to explain. It was as though, in re-entering my life at this point, he had all along been a kind of invisible helping spirit, watching me from afar, interceding just at those moments when I needed help the most. I wanted to say some of this to him, but it was all too confusing.

I bowed deeply to him when I said goodbye. I wondered if he saw what was in my heart. I did not want to embarrass him, and yet I wanted to convey some sense of this powerful upsurge of thankfulness. He smiled and nodded, and the glint in his eye, whether a glimmer of recognition or the simplest light of good feeling, was enough to send my spirits soaring.

At any rate, it was my impression then that this meeting was a kind of circle closing on a magical story. I knew I would be all right now. But I still had no idea at all that the story had not yet even begun.

* * *

One night I woke up and wrote this: "There are three ways to get rid of a slump. One is to drink and change the feeling you are walking around with. Another one is to get involved in some sort of hobby so you can forget for a while. The third is just to practice and practice again. In order to get rid of uneasiness, the first two ways should be considered. The last way sometimes deepens the feeling of uneasiness. However, the first two have nothing to do with progress. If the monster called slump requires improvement in technique and skill then there is only the road of practice and practice and practice. . . ."

The Training

Arakawa-san and I, as any other students, sat at the far edges of the room, on our heels in the proper position, toe touching toe. All of the fledgling warriors wore combinations of white or white and black blouses with *hakama.* Ueshiba Sensei alone was dressed in a full-flowing black kimono. The time I first saw him, he was approaching eighty. His appearance and manner, though, were vigorous. He had a long, wispy, snow-white beard and moustache

along with bushy white eyebrows. Severity and kindliness both seemed etched into his features. He looked more like a fifteenth-century village elder than a master of the martial arts—that is, until he began to perform the movements he had perfected over a lifetime. The beauty and power of these movements were astonishing. Trained athletes or dancers could not easily have duplicated them. They were the fruits of unparalleled accomplishment. When he finished his session, we spoke to him. It was Arakawa-san's turn to play the straight man.

"What is *ma*?" he asked, deliberately echoing Kikugoro. But the Sensei answered him differently.

"*Ma* exists because there is an opponent."

"I understand," Arakawa-san said. This seemed to jibe with something he was thinking. He took me by the elbow.

"You see," he said to me, "in the case of baseball it would be the pitcher and the batter. The one exists for the other; they are caught, both, in the *ma* of the moment. The pitcher tries in that instant of time and space to throw off a batter's timing; the batter tries to outwit the pitcher. The two are struggling to take advantage of the *ma* that exists between them. That's what makes baseball so extraordinarily difficult."

* * *

As long as I live, I'll never forget how lovely that day was. The sun on the sidewalk was like the first sun of the world. I have never seen such a sight! I stared like a man who has taken leave of his senses. My mother certainly was startled, because she prodded me to get a move on. I was late for the game! But I wanted nothing more than to drink in this sudden perfect beauty. There was a particular way the pavements shone with the rain of the night before; the color of the sky was so pure. I wondered, if Fortune had first put me in the way of Arakawa-san, was it not Fortune also at work in this moment? Not Fortune in any sense I had known before, but Fortune as a trickster, glazing my eyes and soul with the romance of things, so that I would be blind to the certain sorrows that awaited me. What was my answer?

The rain glistened on the pavements. The noon sun warmed the world. The sky was a painter's curve of blue.

"Get a move on, don't be so lazy! Move!"

Yes, I had to move. I had to leave, what choice had I? The beautiful aftermath of a storm. But you see, if it had rained that

day, I would never have become a top batsman. For it was out there, under that lovely blue sky, just an hour or two away, that the idea of hitting on one foot came about.

* * *

"Look," he said, "it's time we faced up to something. That hitch of yours looks like it's here to stay. We are going to have to get a little extreme, I think."

"Extreme?"

"Very," he said. "Remember one day in Miyazaki we returned from camp and I had you take different poses with the bat in your hands? Do you remember?"

I vaguely remembered trying to experiment with different batting poses as a way of getting myself to stop hitching, but I didn't remember specifically what Arakawa-san was referring to.

"The one-legged one, remember that? The one where you bring your right foot up and hold it there?"

"Yes, yes." It came back to me.

I was at first not sure Arakawa-san was really being serious. Perhaps this was just another bit of shock therapy to make a point. But, no, he was quite in earnest. He picked up a bat and coiled himself into the pose to demonstrate.

It looked *so* peculiar. I could not imagine how a batter could survive more than a few seconds in such a position, let alone react to any kind of pitch. But what I saw in front of me was a man standing on one foot, who told me, as he stood there, that the time had now come for me to try that in a game.

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I sat there bewildered. Arakawa-san winked and smiled. And continued standing on one foot.

I was miserable. Why was he playing with me? What was he trying to do? I finally decided that all this was just an attempt to psych me up for the game, so I tried as politely as I could to shrug it off and gear my thoughts to the afternoon's work. But Arakawa-san did not budge. Only now the smile left his face. I turned, finally, and began to go off toward my locker.

"*Oh!*" he called; his voice snapped like a whip. I turned around. He was glaring at me.

"I order you to do it."

I stood frozen for a moment, terrified. All I could do was bow my head.

And thus commenced the biggest gamble of my life. The tens of thousands of fans in Kawasaki Stadium witnessed my first attempts at "flamingo batting" in the game that followed. I had no chance to try it beforehand, because the team had omitted batting practice; even in the on-deck circle before my first at-bat in the game there was no chance to do anything but kneel and wait.

"Batting for the Giants, number one, Sadaharu Oh," boomed the loudspeaker. I approached the plate, stepped into the batter's box, and then assumed my pose. The crowd buzzed, then chattered, then hooted and roared as the first pitches to me were thrown. With the count two and two, I flicked out my bat and hit a clean single into center field. The roaring of the crowd suddenly dropped away. I was standing on first. The first trial was done.

I came up again two innings later, and this time the crowd was ready for me. They whistled and stomped and called out to me as I moved to the plate. When I coiled myself into the flamingo position, they roared—I didn't know whether they were enjoying this or viewing it as an insult of some sort. I tried to concentrate. I held my leg as steady as I could. I took one pitch. Then, on the next pitch, an inside fastball, I stepped forward, bringing my curled leg forward and toward the mound, snapping my bat through in the shortest possible arc. I hit the ball on the sweetest part of the bat. It rose on a low trajectory and kept going, far over the right-field wall. I circled the bases, wondering how in the world I could ever have done that standing in that position. But who was I to argue with Fortune, who had indeed smiled on us that day?

"Yes," Arakawa-san said, beaming with satisfaction, "yes. You have passed the 'dog-lifting-his-leg-at-the-hydrant' test. Now all that remains is for you to become what you secretly are."

* * *

"Look," Ueshiba Sensei said, "the ball comes flying in whether you like it or not, doesn't it? Then all you can do is wait for it to come to you. To wait, this is the traditional Japanese style. Wait. Teach him to wait."

* * *

"This business of standing on one leg," Arakawa-san purred, "we discover is a matter of life and death. Accordingly, when you step into the batter's box, you may never do it casually. Too much is at stake. The center in your lower abdomen prepares you for any

contingency just as if you were a warrior awaiting the moves of a deadly opponent. Likewise, when you are good enough to have mastered *ma*, you bring your opponent into your own space; his energy is then part of yours. Together you are one. This is what concentration can bring, why it is so crucial. So you must locate it properly, in the one point, and be conscious of it at all times, even when you're walking down the street or sitting at a meal. Once your concentration is thus focused, you automatically begin to see things better. In a state of proper concentration, one is ready for anything that comes along. Even a baseball hurtling toward you at ninety miles an hour!"

* * *

As I have mentioned, you cannot be "merely technical" when you swing a sword. If it is possible to fall into the habit of a harmless game when you repeatedly swing a baseball bat, that can never happen with a sword. The feel of a sword in your hands will prevent this; the knowledge of what gleams on the edge of the blade compels your attention. It is also impossible to swing a sword without in some way risking injury to yourself. A slip, an off-balance move, going too far in a follow-through, and you run the very real risk of slashing yourself. Practice with the sword demands intensity. As your mind must be concentrated when you face an opponent, so, too, your practice must include this mental effort.

* * *

Because Arakawa-san forbade me any kind of combat in my training, he was forced to find other means to challenge me. The challenge of an opponent is, of course, the ultimate test in any martial arts practice. In baseball, just as much as in Aikido, success against an opponent is fundamentally bound up with timing. Our goal, "acquiring the Body of a Rock," literally meant having the discipline to wait. This implied far more than balance. To train one's entire being to hold back from the tricks and feints of a pitcher, no less than from an enemy with a sword, is finally the single most important step in harmonizing one's *ki* with the opponent's. *Ma*, the interval or distance between you, is eventually that which you rather than the other create by the strength of your waiting.

* * *

Arakawa-san and I had reached the point where there were no

tricks in what I was doing. And consequently no tricks used against us would get in our way. Nothing could stop me from hitting. I longed to hit as a starving man longs for food. The ball coming toward me was a rabbit, and I was a wolf waiting to devour it. I attacked a baseball as though it were no longer a question of hitting it but of crushing it totally. The home runs rocketed off my bat almost as though a power beyond my own was responsible. I was fascinated by the runs I got all by myself. My head, my mind — quite literally — became a void. I went to the plate with no thought other than this moment of hitting confronting me. It was everything. And in the midst of it, in the midst of chanting and cheering crowds, colors, noises, hot and cold weather, the glare of lights, or rain on my skin, there was only this noiseless, colorless, heatless void in which the pitcher and I together enacted our certain, preordained ritual of the home run.

Breaking the Home Run Record

When I left my locker and headed for the field, I had no feeling of tiredness. I could feel in my bones that this indeed was the night. I came upon the lights and noise of Korakuen almost as if they didn't exist. The quietness my mother had brought me surrounded me like a spell. It was not going to be broken. I hit in the first inning and then in the third. The third inning. One out, no one on base. The pitcher's name, in this twenty-third game of the year against the Swallows, was Kojiro Suzuki. The goal, Arakawa-san had always said, was oneness of mind, body, and skill. You and the opponent together create the moment. The *ma* is the one you create but in which you are not at all separate from your opponent. The pitcher and I, the ball — and the silence my mother gave me — these were all one. In the midst of whatever was going on, there was only this emptiness in which I could do what I wanted to do. The count went full. Mr. Kojiro Suzuki threw a sinker on the outside part of the plate. I followed the ball perfectly. I could almost feel myself waiting for its precise break before I let myself come forward. When I made contact, I felt like I was scooping the ball upward and outward. The ball rose slowly and steadily in the night sky, lit by Korakuen's bright lights. I could follow it all the way, as it lazily reached its height and seemed to linger there in the haze, and then slowly began its descent into the right-field stands.

The crowd erupted, almost as a single voice. A huge banner

was suddenly unfurled that read, "Congratulations, World Record!" Everywhere — but on the diamond — people were running and lights were flashing. For me, it was the moment of purest joy I had ever known as a baseball player.

No one can stop a home run. No one can understand what it really is unless you have felt it in your own hands and body. It is different from seeing it or trying to describe it. There is nothing I know quite like meeting a ball in exactly the right spot. As the ball makes its high, long arc beyond the playing field, the diamond and the stands suddenly belong to one man. In that brief, brief time, you are free of all demands and complications. There is no one behind you, no obstruction ahead, as you follow this clear path around all the bases. This is the batsman's center stage, the one time that he may allow himself to freely accept the limelight, to enjoy the sensation of every eye in the stadium fixed on him, waiting for the moment when his foot will touch home plate. In this moment he is free.

Retirement of the Master

In our game, ever so team oriented, there is a high moment of drama reserved for that contest that takes place between one strong batter and a strong opposing pitcher. We give the name *shobu* to this moment, and it is as if the struggle of one team with the other is narrowed and intensified in this desperate and decisive surrogate combat. It is the highest kind of individual struggle, but it bears with it the potential for victory or defeat for an entire team. Yes, I loved the *shobu*. The more intense the challenge, the more intense I was. I was just not up to this now. Whether I wanted it that way or not — and I certainly did — my performance on the field had direct bearing on my team. I had a certain pride as a professional player, which meant more to me than any record. And my pride, more than anything, revealed what it was I was facing. For the fact of the matter was that in this "slump" — as opposed to any other — I had lost all desire for combat. In my earlier days, when I had done badly, I had come back to the bench in a fury. I was already afire with desire for my next chance. Not now.

I struggled against this, of course. I did not want to admit that my spirit, which had served me for so long, had seemingly faded. Perhaps with renewed spirit, I thought, I would find enough in my body to return to some semblance of form. I began to sign my autographs with the word "spirit" — rather than, as earlier, with the

words "patience" and "effort." I also went to my Sensei and, as I had done when I first began working with him, bowed before him, palms to the floor, and with all the yearning of my heart begged him to once more teach me.

Arakawa-san and I worked without letup for three days—just as we had in the past. Standing in my shorts, I swung bat and sword until my body was pouring sweat; I listened carefully for the low whistling sound of my sword; I measured carefully the kind of cuts I made through the swinging cards; in everything, in every motion I made, I concentrated *ki* in my one point and projected it downward into the ground and out through my forearms into the secret lengths of bat and sword.

"What shall I tell you?" Arakawa-san said at the end of our time. "You still can hit."

"But what has happened to me?" I asked.

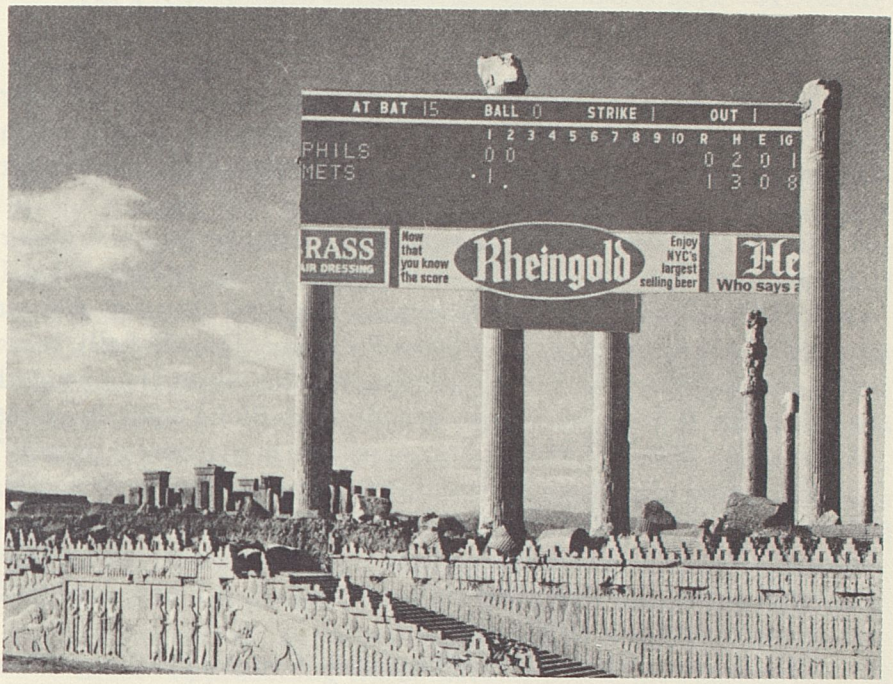
Arakawa-san shook his head. "You still can hit," he repeated softly.

He knew what I was thinking without my having to spell out anything for him. There was no discussion of retirement or of my fears.

"I have no anger anymore," I said finally. He shrugged.

"Mastery in Aikido means loss of desire for combat. You have been a master for many years."

Temple Scoreboard, *collage by Mikhail Horowitz*



Bred To A Harder Thing Than Triumph

from *Why Time Begins on Opening Day*

Beneath a mist of World Series victory champagne in the locker room of the Baltimore Orioles, Mike Flanagan stood gazing upon the giddy scene before him with all the lenient bemusement appropriate to his New Hampshire stock.

Before him wobbled John Lowenstein, on his way to a new major league record for sucking back a magnum of the bubbly. "Am I waxed!" Lowenstein murmured contentedly. Rick Dempsey was on the phone nearby, quipping with the President. Joe Altobelli, tears in his stinging eyes, said he was too exhausted for joy and just wanted to get back to Rochester and play grandfather. Rich Dauer, feigning disgust, said, "Now we gotta go home and ride in that stupid parade."

Flanagan, almost melancholy from too much bliss, said quietly, "Several times this season, I watched the highlight film of last season. I'd remember it all and enjoy it, until, near the end, I'd realize that I already remembered the last part too well. And I'd turn it off. I never could watch it to the end.

"Now we've got what we all wanted. A highlight film with a happy ending."

For the lifelong fan, the most abiding pleasure may be cleaving to one club for years and studying it well. Our most engrossing delight comes when that team gets into a tough pennant race. At last all our attention and affection pay off. We sense how every twist of luck or heroism interacts with every wrinkle of providence that has gone before it. In the year when history calls the team to its accounting, we share the club's extremities of joy and anxiety.

If we have a thread of the artist in us, we can even flirt with a higher satisfaction. By keeping a pane of private glass between ourselves and the action, we sometimes fancy that—thanks to this fragile emotional buffer—we understand the club just a shade better than it understands itself.

How do we watch one team, our team, in a pennant race?

Doesn't the adamant fan crave the raw evidence of the past so that he can draw analogies to his team in the present? What wouldn't we give for entrée to the dugouts of the '51 Dodgers or Giants? If

we knew them, and other such teams, more thoroughly, mightn't we watch the pennant contenders of the future with a deeper comprehension?

Let's visit a classic pennant race of the recent past—one which proved to have a resonance beyond its own moment—and view it from the inside.

No, not Baltimore's triumph last season. After all, the Birds clinched their division a week early, then dismissed the White Sox and Phils in the playoffs and Series in just four and five games respectively. Instead, let's look at the pennant race of '82. *That* was the engine which drove the Oriole machine in '83. That was the experience which galvanized a team so powerfully that it seemed preternaturally resistant to crisis the following year.

Often, great disappointments beget great achievements. Just as the past-their-prime Phillie and Dodger champions of '80 and '81 were soldered and strengthened by their repeated post-season failures in the late '70s, so the Baltimores were tempered to steel by defeat.

The Chase of '82 in the American League East was surpassingly special. The last six weeks of that struggle between the Orioles and Milwaukee Brewers had all the best qualities of any excellent race. The dynamics of pressure baseball were as close to the surface, as open to inspection, as we are likely to see.

Before approaching the subject in detail, let's have a taste of synopsis.

On August 20, Baltimore trailed Milwaukee by 7½ games. By September 20, one torrid, 27–5 month later, the Orioles had seen their hopes, their fantasies, even their most preposterous whims, become reality. The final thirteen days of that season were delightful madness. Three times, the Orioles seemed dead. Each time, they rose. On the last day of September, Baltimore's margin of error was down to nothing. In the last hour of the month, three Orioles came to bat assuming that if they made outs, the race was over. All three got RBI hits.

At sundown on October 1, the Orioles returned home for four games in the season's last three days, all against Milwaukee. If Baltimore won all four, they'd win the division by a game. Lose any game and they were eliminated. Less than twenty-four hours later, the O's had won three times. Total score: 26–7. With one more victory, they could complete the greatest last-week comeback in the history of the sport.

"It feels like it *must* happen," said owner Edward Bennett

Williams. "Does that mean it's going to happen?"

Baltimore sent the hottest pitcher in baseball—thirty-six-year-old Jim Palmer, on a 12–1 streak—to the mound. For preposterous garnish, that Sunday was also the final game of his career for manager Earl Weaver, the retiring legend.

In fantasy, the Orioles would have won; the crowd would have cheered till every eye was wet. In fact, the Orioles lost. But, to illustrate that we are sometimes better creatures than we suppose, the crowd roared anyway, for a quarter of an hour, until the Orioles returned to the field to weep and blow kisses and, finally, join in the joyous innocent spelling of their team name.

Every excellent team has its own signature.

The '70-'76 Reds were thoroughbreds; Cincinnati meant talent. The '76-'81 New York Yankees were gritty, gamy, nasty, hellbent. Those Yanks meant guts. The Los Angeles Dodgers of '77-'81 were ritzy, dapper and disciplined. Dodger Blue meant baseball breeding.

The Orioles of '79-'83 meant—and still mean—brains. They play in a working-class town in a glamorless brick ballyard before middling-size crowds in a television market offering modest profit. Other clubs may be more exciting, controversial, wealthy and talented. But nobody matches the Orioles for smarts. How else could a team that has never signed a free agent for more than two-hundred-thousand-dollars a year win more games than any team since the advent of free agency in 1976?

Baltimore intelligence takes forms which sometimes shock the newcomer. Each spring, as was the case in '82, some newly acquired Oriole looks perplexed. How can the players insult Weaver? And he them? How can the team, in fact, mock Weaver to his face with squawking imitations of his laugh ("Whaaa . . . whaaa") just seconds after he's chewed them out during a losing streak? How can the manager's only rebuttal be "Whaaa . . . whaaa, yourselves."

Why are there so few cliques? Why do most of the players live in Baltimore in the off-season, not Southern California? Why is race seldom an issue? How can rookies feel welcome almost instantly, even become team leaders? Why is the locker room so relaxed after a loss? How can players talk so freely to reporters? How can one pitcher read John Updike in the clubhouse, while another talks about his published poetry and his gourmet restaurant?

Why does everybody work willingly on boring fundamentals? Why have players cut off contract negotiations at a salary under what their agents tell them they could get if they pushed harder? How can

the owner and general manager wander about amid an aura of respect, just as old-timers say it used to be before baseball's labor wars? Above all, how can a big league team prosper when it not only shows respect for, but actually encourages, intelligence, humor, eccentricity and dissent?

"When new players get here, they're so used to dealing with jerks that they have to get readjusted to real people," says Ken Singleton. "I enjoy watching them as they sit here and figure out one little piece of the puzzle after another. This team knows it's going to win and it's just going to have as much fun doing it as possible. We win them over to our way of doing things."

The Oriole way starts at the top, with owner Ed Williams, trial laywer, prominent liberal Democrat. It's delighted Williams to discover that he accidentally bought a team in '79 which already embodied many of his values. He's become far more addicted to the sport, the team and the town than he expected. "EBW" had plenty of jet-setter in him. However, he reformed enough so that he came to see the Orioles (as long as they don't cost him money) as a community trust, an indigenous part of the genteel, old-fashioned Baltimore ethos.

Williams had the wisdom to take a crash course in baseball from his employees. General manager Hank Peters and Weaver did the talking, Williams the listening. Revolutionary, for an owner. Williams learned the O's tradition of building from within, emphasizing scouting, then teaching young players well, while only trading or buying free agents when a certain piece looked perfect for the puzzle.

The core of the club is homegrown, nurtured and tutored from the first day at Bluefield, in the Appalachian League. The Birds have their Book, with theories on everything. Other clubs buy pitching. Baltimore teaches it: in '82, the O's introduced their latest prodigy, George (Storm) Davis, twenty, then the youngest player in the majors. True to the mold, he was poised, an assured fielder, able and willing to throw strikes. "Looks like a duplicate of Palmer," said Mike Flanagan. "Guess that means he's not a Storm. He's a Cy-clone."

No one person or policy is responsible for the sense of moderation, tolerance and decency that runs through the Orioles. Partly it's sequestered Baltimore. Partly it's the fifteen-season influence of Weaver, who, beneath his saltiness, is a cracker-barrel philosopher and a concerned man. Partly it's dumb luck.

Also, before signing a scout, coach, manager or player, the front office considers temperament as well as talent. Perhaps this single

commitment has brought the Orioles their consistent excellence. Some teams talk about having Dodger Blue in their veins, or possessing Pinstripe Pride. But the modest, make-do Orioles, the team that has won more games than anybody since 1957, would never make such grandiose claims. They're too smart for that.

As you entered the 1982 clubhouse, the first Orioles locker you saw belonged to Floyd Rayford, a young utility man who stood five foot ten and weighed a great deal. The team called him Fat Floyd and Honey Bear. When the O's first saw Rayford in spring training, Palmer asked innocently, "Excuse me, Floyd, how many people are trapped in that uniform?"

Rayford, the least important Oriole of '82, was nonetheless typical of the team. Like many Orioles, he seemed underqualified for his duties; yet Weaver could expound at length on the bizarre potential advantages of having this Rayford creature, who could catch, play third, pinch-hit or even pinch-run. Weaver'd never seen this exact combination; it fascinated him. Rayford provided Weaver with his most precious managerial commodity: "Moves." The existence of this smiling Buddha allowed Weaver to pinch-hit for catchers, rotate infielders or use a pinch hitter in an unconventional spot. Mind you, in none of these circumstances would Rayford actually play. His existence was an emotional insurance policy so Weaver could wheel and deal.

Rayford, the butt of jokes, was usually the winner in repartee and found ways to earn his letter. He had more courage than skill and he played without fear of failure. As Martin Luther would have wished, he went and sinned bravely. If Ron Guidry struck him out, Rayford glared at him as though Lou'siana Lightnin' had just bought himself trouble down the road. Because of his indefatigable bearing, Rayford's mistakes never unnerved his mates the way the jittery errors made by another sub—the more talented back-to-Rochester Bobby Bonner—always did.

Once, the Honey Bear slid into second, then stood up in the face of the shortstop turning a double-play pivot. The throw hit Rayford in the head, shattering his helmet; the ball landed in the on-deck circle on the fly as the winning run scored. When the groggy Rayford told his buddy Eddie Murray that they were taking him to the hospital to X-ray his skull, Murray said, "They must have a new machine."

When Rayford hit his first career home run, the Orioles gave him such a polished silent treatment that Rayford sat alone, convinced no one would congratulate him. Then players began fainting and

being revived with towels. Finally, all engulfed Rayford and tried to pound him to mush.

Rayford's other home run of the season was a sudden-death game-winner in Memorial Stadium. The Yankees fainted.

Next to Rayford sit Eddie Murray and Ken Singleton. They've been the offensive heart of the team for five years, averaging a hundred RBI a year. Murray, twenty-six, is close to his peak; Singleton, thirty-five, is past his. They couldn't be more different.

Murray finds it natural to live by the motto on his necklace: "Just Regular." However, Murray is often suspicious of anyone who is not part of his blood family (he's one of twelve children) or his baseball family. Three of his older brothers played pro ball; none made the majors. Murray grew up hearing hard-boiled stories about the realities of big-time sport.

"We had a lot of little downfalls," says Eddie's brother Leon. "Eddie avoided them."

"Some people just got to get hurt. You can see it. They either run into walls on the field, or they run into 'em off it," says Murray as his brother listens. "The easy way is the only way. Avoid problems. I might be the weakest of the five brothers, but I didn't run into the problems they did. You gotta push things away in the game that bother you and upset you and keep you from your goal. It almost happened to me, I think. I got mad the year I wasn't sent up to triple A when I thought I should. It was hard to swallow, 'cause it's your pride. But sometimes you got to swallow. Otherwise you'll get on the club's bad foot. And that's the beginning of the end."

That's a long Murray monologue, probably only delivered so his brother could hear how well he'd learned their hand-me-down wisdom.

"Eddie has no problems, no wife, no children," says Leon. "He's only got one boss—our mama. What she says goes. There are no hard heads in our family. None of us has ever been wild or bad."

Murray regards notoriety as poison and ducks the limelight as religiously as Reggie Jackson courts it. Murray firmly believes what old Lee May told him as a rookie: if you have talent, fame can't help you, but it's an even bet to ruin you. To hawk his personality like some public commodity is, he suspects, a perfect way to be robbed of his sense of self. Murray's weakness is that, like Hank Aaron, he's a leader only by example; little fire, only efficiency. He lacks the charisma of the last Oriole leader, Frank Robinson. The Birds accept Murray for what he is. Just your run-of-the-mill future Hall of Famer.

Singleton is the most emblematic Oriole. Like the Birds, he is consistent but seldom spectacular. "We're persistent," says Terry Crowley. "You know how sometimes you stick your key in the front door but it won't open. You say, 'I know this is my key,' so you just stand there jiggling that key in the lock until it opens. That's how this team is in a close game."

Like Singleton, a slow runner never burdened by great expectations, the Orioles have the mixed blessing of limited talent. Each spring they are the underdog against some more glamorous collection of stars. They are often excused, and even pitied, if they come up short after gallant attempts. To the degree that this near-miss perception infects the team—giving it a Noble Loser Complex—it constitutes a sort of defeatism.

The Orioles' weakness is their lack of a fierce athletic wildness; they almost never throw a knockdown pitch, crash into walls, spike opponents, get into bench-clearing brawls. Their only forms of intimidation are mental: bench-jockeying, Weaver's mind games with umpires and the sense which they transmit to other teams that they have some unseen, inexplicable edge because they understand the game better. Like Singleton, the Orioles are hardnosed, but not pugnacious; they'll play hurt, but they won't hurt you. Everybody respects Baltimore; but nobody fears them.

Filling out the row of lockers against the left wall is the real substance of this and any other Oriole team—the pitching stars. They have their chairs in a row, the better to discuss their common craft. Nicaraguan Dennis Martinez and Coloradan Tippy Martinez come first; they sit together so they can confuse media types who don't know that they're not related and that Tippy, a third-generation American, doesn't speak Spanish at all.

Next come the club's Cheech and Chong—Sammy Stewart and Mike Flanagan.

In the bullpen, Stewart practices juggling a baseball, Globetrotter style, bouncing it off all portions of his body, catching it in the crook of his elbow and finally making the ball disappear into thin air. He's convinced that someday, in a World Series, the national TV cameras are going to be focused on him; he wants to be ready. The righty also works on his sweeping left-handed curveball—taught to him by the devious instigator, Flanagan. Stewart's already used it once. "A lot of managers might have gotten real upset about that pitch," drawls Stewart, called "the Throwin' Swannanoan," after his North Carolina hometown, "but Earl lived right up to my expecta-

tions. He said, 'That's why I still enjoy comin' to the ballpark. You never know what the hell you might see.'"

Stewart serenades his teammates with bluegrass ("In the pines . . ."), rock 'n roll ("I'm not your steppin' stone . . .") and the latest punk rock. One evening in Yankee Stadium he spotted punk leather queen Joan Jett, whose album had hung in his locker for a year. He introduced himself, used his "A" material on her, then was shattered to discover that Jett had come in hopes of meeting Jim Palmer. "It's not fair," said Stewart. "She ain't seen me in *my* underwear."

Flanagan is New Hampshire's wry, hidden child—world-leery and cryptic. The '79 Cy Young winner is a third-generation professional pitcher, yet he describes his job as "fool on the hill." Under his uniform, he always wears a T-shirt that says "Dead Goat Saloon." "If I weren't a baseball player," Flanagan says, "I think I'd make an excellent killer bee." His nickname is Dr. Large, but you could call him the Samurai Southpaw.

Everything about his appearance is deliberately and defiantly styleless. He forgets to shave. He's sweaty. His uniforms are baggy, as if they were borrowed from his dad's era, when Sal Maglie was the epitome of pitching style. He never displays emotion, never shows up an opponent, never plays to the camera. When he won a Series game, he barely tipped his cap.

Flanagan is a gamer, an Iron Mike who pitches hurt. Once, he went 155 turns without missing a start. He has paid a high price for following the tough-it-code of his father, his state and his manager. By ignoring various discomforts, Flanagan has seen his status shrink from superstar to that of the gut-it-out fifteen-to-eighteen-game winner. He lost a couple of feet off his fastball somewhere along the way and will probably never get it back.

Finishing the row are the team's class acts: Scott (Dr. Small) McGregor and Jim Palmer; they appear antithetical—a choirboy and a sex symbol. Actually, they're entries 1 and 1-A in the clean-living sweepstakes. Each, however, has a hidden quality.

McGregor's pitching soul is made of ice. "He'll stand out there with nothing but those cold eyes and never give in," says Singleton. "You shouldn't be able to win twenty games with his stuff. Cold eyes, man." McGregor probably has the sport's best change-up and one of its most intuitive minds. He also has an athletic audacity that comes from a rare source: serenity. Before games, he'll sit for forty-five minutes in the dugout during batting practice, absolutely unmoving,

staring before him. Is he meditating? Psyching himself up?

"I just think it's beautiful watching the park fill up and the evening approach," he says. "I'm just sitting there getting peaceful."

Once, in a 1-0 victory, McGregor struck out Reggie Jackson three times on nine consecutive pitches. "They were all fastballs right down the middle," said McGregor. "I couldn't understand why he didn't hit every one ten miles. But he didn't. So I kept throwing 'em."

Palmer appears to be a similar placid portrait; actually, the club watches this all-time great out of one corner of its collective eye to see what quirky, bizarre, compulsive thing he'll do next. Think of him as one-half Mr. Perfect and one-half the Hyperactive Hypochondriac. Doug DeCinces once said of Palmer, "We're a club with twenty-four team players and one prima donna." Palmer has not, in recent years, been completely a part of the team. He's considered a freakish special case who, the club seems to have agreed, will never unduly annoy or distract them. "We try to bring him down to the same level as the rest of us," says Singleton.

Tucked among these more or less fabled hurlers is the Future—Cal Ripken, Jr.

In April of '82, he was a twenty-one-year-old third baseman trying to get his batting average over .200 and struggling to crawl out of the small shadow cast by his father, the third-base coach. By October, Ripken was the Rookie of the Year shortstop, a slugger with twenty-eight home runs and ninety-three RBI. Though even Weaver could hardly believe it, the kid was also the closest thing the club had to a team leader during its pennant fight.

When Little Cal is mentioned, it is with an affection few rookies will ever know. Partly, it's because many have known Jr. since he was a child. Dauer recalls looking behind him during batting practice in Asheville, North Carolina, years ago and seeing a thirteen-year-old catcher snagging the best stuff that Double-A pro pitchers could bring to the plate. "We've known for a long time that he was going to be special," says Dauer. Doug DeCinces, traded to make room for Ripken, went further: "I'm just playing between legends—Brooks and Rip." Once, a crazy kid was firing a rifle from a hill down at the Asheville diamond and DeCinces scooped up Little Rip and dove into the dugout with him. Palmer even remembers Ripken as a three-year-old playing at the park back at Aberdeen in '64.

Mostly, however, the affection around Ripken has to do with his father. Little Rip is Big Rip's reward for all the BP he has pitched, all the towering foul pops he has fungoed, all the pitchers he has

warmed up, all the buses he has ridden in twenty-five years in the Oriole organization in Phoenix, Wilson, Pensacola, Amarillo, Appleton, Little Rock, Leesburg, Aberdeen, Kennewick-Richland-Pasco, Rochester, Miami, Elmira, Dallas-Fort Worth and Asheville.

When outsiders pester the senior Ripken with questions about his son, he says, "I've never been able to watch him at any level, even Little League. Why should I start talkin' at him now? He's got his job. I've got my job . . . Am I proud of him? Well, sure, I'm proud of him as my son. But as a ballplayer, ask in fifteen years."

Now we've reached the back wall of the locker room. The general tenor of literateness and quick repartee continues. John Lowenstein holds down one end of the row. He's Brother Lo, the aging hippie with indoor sunglasses and a perm. He's the native of Wolf Point, Montana, who's a backpacker, white-water rapids shooter and wilderness worshiper. He's the college grad with a degree in anthropology. He's the husband of a former Las Vegas dancer and lives in Sin City.

A veteran, Lowenstein is the quintessence of a Weaver player. Lowenstein has nightmares about left-handed pitchers and loves being platooned. He considers it providence that in his baseball old age (thirty-five), he was sent a manager who not only believes in his ability but also believes in free speech and couldn't care less what he says and thinks. One member of the '82 Orioles batted .320, hit twenty-four homers and led the major leagues in slugging average. It was Brother Lo. As his teammates reminded him, "Man, you picked one helluva year to go from being a [career] .245 hitter to doing your Babe Ruth imitation." His contract was up and he became a free agent.

At the other end of the back row is the perfect bookend for Lowenstein: pitching coach Ray (Rabbit) Miller, the club's resident school-of-hard-knocks sage. Miller has the first seat by the entrance to Weaver's office; like the man who sat there before him—George Bamberger—he is a genial, funny, widely-liked man who, beneath his tall tales, knows and sees everything within the club's small world. Like Bamberger, he knows as much as anyone about the players' lives, their motives, their private problems. When Weaver needs to know something in the Heart and Soul Department, Miller tells him.

Miller has the burrs from fifteen years' worth of bush-league briar patches. His spitball, his knockdown pitches and his gentle, buck-toothed smile never got him past a lot of AAA strikeouts. When the burly, six-foot-three Miller wasn't pitching for off-season teams

like Federal Storage or Buffalo Sand and Gravel, he was working as a coal miner in Pennsylvania, a street sweeper in Portland, a shipping clerk, a rental cop, a house painter or an electrician. "I learned that it's better to get shocked on the back of your hand than the palm, and I saved enough money so my wife and I could build our dream house. I'm proud that I did it before I got to the majors." On the wall of their New Athens, Ohio, home is a letter of congratulation on their wedding from J. Edgar Hoover. "That gets some double takes," Miller says. "I met my wife when she worked for the FBI. I tell people she was investigating me."

A typical Miller tale comes from his winter ball days as a twenty-eight-year-old pitcher, coach and manager in Venezuela. "I'd visit the pitcher on the mound, send myself to the bullpen, warm myself up, visit the pitcher again, replace him with myself, pitch, visit with myself, signal to warm up a lefty 'cause I was in trouble, call a coach out to calm me down, give the ball to the new pitcher and send myself to the showers. Then the other guy would get shelled worse than I did, and I'd have to explain afterward why I couldn't pitch, coach, *or* manage."

Between Lowenstein and Miller sit a handful of folks who fall under the generic term "good baseball men." Cal Ripken, Sr., Ralph Rowe and Jimmy Williams are reliable, contented career coaches. Among them sit catcher Joe Nolan and outfielder Jim Dwyer, both of whom frequently compare the awkward clubhouse life of their various former teams with the easy pleasures of being an Oriole. Nolan escaped the regimentation of the Cincinnati Reds ("like being in the Army"), while Dwyer was a graduate of the Boston Red Sox' pre-Houk institute of cliques.

Now, as we come to the right-hand side of the O's smallish, eight-by-twelve-pace inner sanctum, the tone becomes more that of Any Team, U.S.A. Here we have your basic, well-adjusted, the-major-leagues-are-heaven jocks. Al Bumbry, Tim Stoddard, Terry Crowley, Gary Roenicke, Rich Dauer, Benny Ayala and Rick Dempsey read the sports page first. They are blue-collar ballplayers and proud of it. They don't fire off quips or make headlines; they believe in team spirit and live by it. None of them find baseball an easy or secure life. None has signed a million-dollar contract.

The grinning, needling Bumbry is a small, overachieving bundle of muscle, work and worry. If he could lay off the letter-high fastball, he'd have made a half-dozen All-Star teams and be as rich as he is popular. "It's like chocolate cake," Bumbry once said of the

pitch. "I see it and it looks so good that I swing."

A Bronze Star platoon leader in Vietnam, Bumbry's bearing is military, as is his inner self-discipline. On the road, the Bee wears three-piece suits—and on a club given to jeans. Bumbry may lead all of baseball in one category—charity work. He goes everywhere, does everything. Bumbry is basically shy and once had a bad stutter. By meeting people, speaking in public, he has his speech under control most of the time, though when he feels strong emotion he reverts.

Perhaps only an Oriole would understand why the five-foot-seven Bumbry and the six-foot-seven Stoddard—the smallest black and the largest white—would have adjacent lockers and be friends. Forget the high-priced sociology. On the Orioles, it just never applies. Stoddard and Bumbry are friends because Stoddard started as forward for the NCAA championship North Carolina State basketball team in '74, and Bumbry thinks he could have too. Probably right. Their bond is ball. One reason for the Orioles' chemistry is that half the team is addicted to basketball. Ask these grown men, making hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, what they'd *really* like to do and Stoddard, Bumbry, Murray, Stewart, Ripken, Palmer, Flanagan, Dauer, Crowley and a half-dozen others would say, "Play pickup basketball."

Every team has to have a couple of hardnoses and an old pro. In Baltimore, Dauer and Dempsey are the former, while Crowley is the latter.

When Dauer graduated from USC, after being an All-American on back-to-back national championship teams, he easily overshadowed teammates like Fred Lynn, Steve Kemp and Roy Smalley. Dauer set new NCAA records for hits, RBI and total bases. And he broke USC's season records for homers. When he hit .336 in AAA, the O's assumed he'd be at least as good a hitter as Bobby Grich or Don Baylor.

Nobody's figured out what happened to Dauer, who is a lifetime .261 hitter with no power. Unless . . . Few players have ever had such a traumatic baptism in the majors. Touted as a potential batting champion, Dauer arrived in September of 1976 as a finished product of twenty-four with more than enough seasoning and no available excuses. He went four for thirty-nine. The next spring, still tagged as a phenomenon, Dauer didn't get a hit until May 13 and was one for forty-one entering *June.* Think of it. Three *months* in the majors and only *five* hits. An .063 batting average (five for eighty) and a

terminal case of shattered confidence. Dauer went into a shell of being a no-ego team player, erasing all those predictions of greatness from his self-image.

As though trying to squash high expectations, he's begun seasons with slumps of oh for twenty-two, three for twenty-eight, two for twenty-seven and eight for fity-four. Dauer bats defensively, often seeming content to slap the ball somewhere in play early in the count. He's unselective, seldom walks, never looks for a pitch to hit for power, and when the game isn't on the line, hardly seems to care, giving away at bats carelessly. As a hitter, he lacks ambition as well as dicipline. Every O's batting coach has wanted to strangle him. By contrast, he's a good clutch hitter.

Dauer's nickname is Wacko.

The only time the too-humble Dauer has expressed frustration was when his major-league record of eighty-six consecutive errorless games was broken by Manny Trillo. Dauer, who has the highest fielding percentage of any second baseman in history, felt the record was virtually stolen, since Trillo plays on perfect-hop turf and he plays on grass.

"Look at it this way," said his roommate, Flanagan. "It took three guys to break your record."

"Three?" said Dauer.

"Sure," said Flanagan. "A Trillo."

If Dauer is called "Wacko," then Rick Dempsey really is wacko. His parents were a vaudeville act. So is Dempsey. During rain delays, he has stuffed pillows under his jersey, turned his hat sideways and brought thirty thousand people to their feet with his "Baseball Soliloquy in Pantomime." After starting with a parody of Babe Ruth's called-shot home run in the '33 series, Dempsey takes a belly-flopping trip around the tarpaulin-covered infield, pratfalling over every base, then sliding face-first through the rain and puddles to home plate. Other players are in awe of Dempsey's stage presence and *joie de vivre*. To know Dempsey is to be reminded of a British diplomat's evaluation of the exuberant Theodore Roosevelt: "You must always remember that the President is about six."

Dempsey is about five. He climbs the backstop screen for foul balls and loves home-plate collisions. "Dempsey loves pain," says Weaver. Once, Dempsey and Weaver threw shin guards and a chest protector back and forth at each other. Since it was Dempsey, nobody took the incident seriously.

The battle between the two was constant. Dempsey always

wanted to play, Weaver always wanted to platoon him. Weaver cited as evidence the case of a game in which Fergie Jenkins struck Dempsey out four times on twelve pitches, all sliders low and away. Dempsey missed them all, and finished each at bat by spinning in a small circle, wrapping the bat entirely around his body. Weaver considered pinch-hitting him on the fourth appearance, but as Weaver said, "Everybody wanted to see if he could do it again."

In '82, Dempsey decided, at thirty-two, to become a switch-hitter. In the end, by much diligent labor, Dempsey turned himself into the worst left-handed hitter in history. Including pitchers. Weaver humored Dempsey, though he finished spring training on an oh for nineteen. Weaver even let Dempsey bat southpaw on Opening Day just so, once and for all, he'd make a fool of himself and be done with the damn project forever. In his first at bat, Dempsey got a broken-bat pop-fly hit. It took Weaver the rest of April to get Dempsey to stop batting left-handed.

In spring training one year, a Japanese firm was peddling electronic gloves that allowed a manager to give signals to his pitcher or catcher.

"Great, dial-a-pitch," said Dempsey. "Now Palmer can blame you instead of me."

"I just hope," said Weaver, looking at Dempsey with paternal concern, "that you don't electrocute yourself."

Dempsey, in his never-ending attempts to one-up Weaver, once allowed his hair and beard to grow for the entire winter. On the first day of camp, Dempsey showed up looking like a Miami drug dealer, complete with red bandana, motorcycle boots, sunglasses, gold chains and diamond rings. Dempsey paraded past Weaver's nose as the manager tried to figure out whether to call the police or just hit him over the head with a bat and bury the body.

"Who the fuck is that and how'd he get in our clubhouse?" hissed Weaver.

"This is your fucking catcher, Mr. Genius," exulted Dempsey.

The next spring, Dempsey arrived with his hair short, no mustache and dressed in white shorts. "Tennis, anyone?" he trilled, prancing through the clubhouse.

Dempsey's great moment of '82 came in September in Yankee Stadium. New York owner George Steinbrenner had been discussing shortening the left-field fence and moving the stone monuments to Yankee greats which stand beyond that fence. Dempsey said he thought the new fence would make it easier to hit home runs, but

it would be a shame to move those graves.

Someone related the grave story to Weaver but wouldn't identify which player had said it.

"Aww, gimme a hint?" said Weaver. "Is he the only one who plays in foul territory?"

Decidedly.

The care and feeding of the beloved Dempsey is entrusted to his roomie, Terry Crowley—the Crow, the King of Swing. It's like putting a walking mare in the same barn with a skittish thoroughbred; it's hoped that some of Crowley's genial sanity, his patience and his sweet compact swing will somehow rub off on Dempsey.

Now we come to the short front wall of the locker room. Here, as though drawn together by their similar concerns, are the season's most tormented players: Disco Dan Ford, Lenn Sakata, Ross Grimsley and Don Stanhouse.

The Japanese-Hawaiian Sakata is a stone-silent little infielder who can bench-press four hundred pounds. Sakata has soft hands but tight muscles, a gentle disposition but a tightly wound, athletic physique. If Sakata's muscles and mind were less taut, less prone to nagging pulls and tormenting strains, he'd be a starting infielder instead of a quality utility man. A natural second baseman, he was given the shortstop spot for half of the season but couldn't hold it. The shortstop requirements—the mental alertness to relay both signals and throws, the verbal cockiness to be a take-charge guy—weren't part of Sakata's makeup. By July, Sakata played himself back to the bench and often seemed happier there, contributing nicely around the edges, not being asked to play beyond his own, limited version of his abilities.

Next to the sober Sakata sit the club's two zanies: Don (Stan the Man Unusual) Stanhouse and Ross (Skuzz) Grimsley. Both were once fine pitchers in Baltimore. Both left for free-agent millions. Both became hurling disasters and pariahs on their new teams—Grimsley with the Indians, Stanhouse the Dodgers. Both were released outright after '81, told to take their bags of money and stop cluttering up the roster. Both still had $400,000-a-year contracts with years to run. Neither needed to pitch to be rich. But both decided pitching was what they did best. They'd do it for nothing. So they worked out all winter, came to Miami for a tryout and finally regained their professional dignity by making the Oriole team as mop-up men. All year there they were pitching a half-decent inning or two to help save the bullpen's arms. They were proud to be on a team in a pennant

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"It is an impressive book, very evocative of the summer game. Somewhere, though, the book incurred the wrath of the image-conscious A's, though Krich and publisher Richard Grossinger insist the book was worked on with the full knowledge and legal cooperation of the team. Anyway, once the book appeared A's management not only refused to help promote it in any way; they threatened to sue because the logo on the players' uniforms is a trademark. . . ."

Bernard Ohanian in the *Media Alliance Newsletter*

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race.

Weaver, judging them by their dedication to task, not their eccentricities, referred to them as the Unusual One and the Mystic. Stanhouse is prone to primal-scream therapy and for years drove a black hearse to the park; a toy gorilla sits in his locker and is periodically fed beer. Grimsley, a greaseballer, has spacey, pale-blue *Village of the Damned* eyes and long, curly hair that looks like you'd have to measure its oil content with a dipstick. On most teams, Stanhouse and Grimsley would be tagged as bad actors, veteran subversives. In Baltimore, they were seen as boosters of morale, just straight-talkin' fellas.

Even on the Orioles, though, there are limits to broad-mindedness. For instance, Dan Ford. If ever a player was meant *not* to be an Oriole, it was Ford. He arrived from the Angels, traded for DeCinces, with a bad rep. The previous year, he'd been suspended for using a corked bat, started two brawls, posed nude for *Playgirl*, and was criticized as a self-centered, moody player. Weaver dismissed this, saying that he'd had his best minor-league season using a corked bat, that he'd had a few fights himself and that he'd just posed in his underwear for a TV commercial with Palmer. Why was everybody breaking out into a rash?

Ford proved an acceptable fellow; it wasn't his personality, just his fundamentally atrocious play that bedeviled Ford. When he was confronted with his flaws, Ford managed—in his good-natured way—to put at least half the blame somewhere else. That just made DeCinces' stats as an Angel look even better. Ford needed to be back in Anaheim, where baseball illiterati play with a beach ball during the late innings of tied games. There, like Ford, they don't even know what a cutoff man *is*. And they don't care. They cheer one-handed catches, enjoy a smile after an error and think two runners trapped on one base is cute.

In that slack atmosphere, Ford could relax and let his natural talents—slashing first-pitch hitting and speed on the bases and in the outfield—express themselves. To Ford, Baltimore was an uptight town; the place taught him, for the first time in his career, the dangers of thinking, of worrying, of playing for the team. Ford tried to change himself from an open-hearted good-time ballplayer into a Weaver player. The result was a mess.

Rock Bottom and Rebirth

Ford was also upsetting because he seemed symbolic of the gradual erosion of the ambience which provincial Bal'mer called "Oriole Magic." In '79 and '80, the O's seemed to be in a comely state of grace; where was the bell jar big enough to cover this team and preserve it from harm? Many a time Weaver must have wished he could put his team in suspended animation and protect it from the world and time.

In bilious economic times, the Birds showed that the game could be played properly. Yet even the Oriole brass suspected that this flash-powder paradox of a team would eventually find itself in jeopardy. Nothing good can stay. By August of 1982, the bell jar seemed shattered. Rust never sleeps, not even in baseball. Slowly the O's returned to dismal, everyday reality; they became as testy, as prone to second-guessing, as given to bonehead plays as a run-of-the-mill team. The process by which the pastoral idyll on Thirty-third Street turned sour was familiar and drab.

To summarize a season in a sentence, the '81 Birds were put off their feed by the strike and played disinterestedly by September. In the off-season, the worried front office discovered that many players had no market value whatever. The winter meeting consensus was that the Orioles had irreversible dry rot; the club apparently had neither the farm system nor the cash to save itself. Peters and Williams kept the old gang together because they had no choice. Ironically, the Ford-DeCinces trade was their attempt to placate fans.

For five months of '82, the O's imitated '81. Their capacity for avoiding significant accomplishment was astonishing. Every rubber game of a series or a road trip seemed to go against them, usually in some ugly fashion. This knack for futility became a bitter team joke. Oriole Magic was turning Oriole Tragic.

Touchingly, the team clung to its sense of itself as indefinably special. But first their foes, then their fans, became aware that the Birds' clean economy of play was deteriorating; this club could go south in a hurry, and stay there for years, as the Cincinnati Reds already had. Finally, after nearly two seasons of treading water, the club admitted its deep, almost sorrowful concern. Once, McGregor was told, "You play your next dozen games against the worst teams in the league." "You mean," said McGregor, "we get to play ourselves." Dempsey, the soul of enthusiasm, said, "We may be watching the

end of an era."

When the Orioles flew to Boston in August, owner Williams went too. "Damage-control mission," he said bleakly. The next day, on Weaver's birthday, he gave his best summation-to-the-jury pep talk. "I asked him how he ever lost a case," said an impressed Palmer. That afternoon, the Orioles won when a throw to home plate in the tenth hit a rock and bounced sideways. "The road back! We may never lose again!" crowed Dempsey.

Weaver was relieved: "I asked Ed not to do it. Those pep talks scare me to death. *What if you lose?* Then what do you do next? Glad I was wrong."

But Weaver wasn't wrong. The next morning, The Orioles' born-again chapel speaker was Charles Colson. An hour later, the Red Sox got *nine* consecutive batters on base in one inning—the most by Boston since 1901.

Then things really went bad. In Minnesota, the Orioles led by a run in the tenth inning with two outs. "Dauer's playing third," said Weaver, "and we yell at him to move closer to the line. He does. The batter hits a grounder right where we placed him. The ball goes right between his legs into the corner. Two runs score. We lose. We were in shock. The next night, in the first inning, they scored six runs before we got anybody out. That was the low point. It was just unfucking-believable."

One rule of watching baseball is that a team is often most slapstick just before it goes on its longest win streak. Teams get more and more disgusted, bedeviled by minutiae until finally a genuinely fantastic misadventure pushes the club over the edge into a harmony of indifference. Suddenly they laugh, they relax, they say, "That's unfuckingbelievable." Before they know it, they've won three in a row.

A team will frequently slump until it embarrasses itself so thoroughly that its whole collective system is purged by the shock. Weaver has never hidden his instinctive relish in horrid, error-filled defeats. Take the cure in a couple of big, gulping doses, not in a dozen one-run sips of defeat.

For the O's, the Minnesota nadir proved the springboard for the hottest streak in the club's history. "When we got to Texas, there was a revolt on the team," said Dempsey. "We were revolted with ourselves."

Another hidden revolt took place in Texas. It went on in Weaver's mind. He finally decided that he would manage the club more the way the team and coaches wanted it managed. All season, Weaver

had been criticized by his players more sharply than ever before. In July a coach told me, "I may quit. Earl won't listen to anybody. He's got an autobiography and a biography out at the same time. He's retiring. He's on every TV show. He's carried away with himself. I've made a million suggestions and he hasn't taken one."

The bill of particulars against Weaver makes dull history. Every team in every season has squabbles concerning ambiguous questions of dicey baseball judgment. In a sense, only the team cares about them and only the team knows how important they are. The Orioles' gripes were typical of how every team's inner gears grind. Weaver faced many questions.

Should Cal Ripken play third or shortstop? Should Ford be benched against right-handers? Should Gary Roenicke play outfield full-time? Should Bumbry, nursing leg injuries, be benched against left-handers? Should Singleton, in a two-year slump batting right-handed, be benched against left-handers? Should Tim Stoddard's arm be treated more gently? (At one point, Weaver had Stoddard warm up twenty consecutive days.) Should rookie Storm Davis be used more, both spot-starting and relieving? Should the exasperating comedy team of Stanhouse and Grimsley continue to be brought into important long-relief situations? Should pinch-hitters Terry Crowley and Benny Ayala play more? This is the kind of scuttlebutt which saturates most contenders, since the smallest move affects several players.

Starting in Texas, Weaver began shifting his tactics, changing the ingredients in his managing brew: less Bumbry, more of rookie John (T-Bone) Shelby; less Singleton and more Ayala; less Ford and more Roenicke; much more Cyclone Davis and almost no work for the Unusual One and the Mystic; Ripken every inning at short and plenty of the walk-drawing third baseman Glenn Gulliver, but less Sakata; less manic warming up in the bullpen; less stubborn insistence that Palmer work his way out of late-inning jams.

This was a hard potion for Weaver to swallow, particularly because, in his last seasons, Weaver developed a strange flaw. Throughout his career, he insisted the key to managing was making impersonal, team-first decisions. However, Weaver became increasingly hurt by the denunciations of veterans when he finally had to cut their professional throats. Weaver's need not to hurt those who had helped him—and conversely, not to be hurt by their howls of betrayal—became obsessional. Frequently Weaver cited his desire "not to hurt people anymore" as a reason for retiring. Outsiders scratched their heads, never dreaming Weaver was being honest. His patience

with Bumbry, Singleton and Ford drove Williams and Peters bananas. Even in the last week of the season, Weaver was still agonizing over "what Kenny [Singleton] and Al [Bumbry] must feel like" on those occasions when he benched them.

On that night in Minnesota when the Orioles hit bottom, when the club, after two years of resistance, finally shrugged its shoulders and admitted that no act of will power could reverse their course, nobody could have foreseen that the team would win seventeen of its next eighteen games.

In retrospect, several basic baseball-watching factors were involved.

First, the depth of the team's depression was a perfect psychological juncture for a total reversal of form: streak to streak.

Second, the team's awful play prompted the manager to make shifts that were overdue but hard to accept. Nobody takes castor oil *before* his belly aches.

Third, the American League's schedule came into play.

For a century, schedule-studying was a waste of time, because schedules were well made. Now that's changed. In 1977, the AL voted to expand to fourteen teams so each owner could grab a couple of million dollars as his slice of the expansion fees paid by Toronto and Seattle. These "fees" are the bribes baseball requires to get into its monopolistic social club.

The league found, to its shock, that neither man nor machine could create a rational schedule out of a fourteen-team league. The increase by just two teams had complicated the matrix in ways no one had dreamed. The results have been an annual embarrassment.

For instance, on July 26 in '82, the Brewers began a streak of thirty-eight games in which thirty-six of their opponents were among the league's losing teams. On the *same* date, the Orioles began twenty-three straight games against winning teams. Later, the worm turned. Baltimore played thirty-four straight games against losers, while Milwaukee closed the season with twenty-nine games in a row against winners. That was one central explanation for the ebb and flow of the '82 race—that goofball schedule. By no coincidence, of the twenty-seven wins in Baltimore's 27–5 comeback, twenty-six came against losing teams.

The cumulative effects of such a schedule are even greater than most would imagine. The more losers you play, the less abuse your pitching takes, the more confidence is built and the more rested the bullpen becomes. By the same token, a team's hitters tend to get their

kinks worked out when they go weeks without seeing the front-line pitchers on contenders.

Finally, losers know how to lose—dramatically. During their comeback, the Orioles got sudden-death homers from five players. Such shenanigans make a team think it's pixilated. The opposite effect is equally strong. If you play winners for a month, your pitchers lose confidence, your bullpen is worked to the bone, your hitters get demoralized and "momentum" drains.

The Orioles, like several teams in recent years, have proved to be preternaturally suited to "streak and sweep" baseball. In '79-'80, the Orioles—like the Reds and the Pirates in earlier periods in the '70s—made a shambles of any theory of baseball probabilities. In those years, Baltimore *swept* thirty-two series, while being swept only three times; their total record in all *swept* series was 91–9. In all other games, 111–110. Chew on that. It should give palpitations to the too-serious gambler.

To tell the truth, the Orioles litmus test didn't come in the month when the public was drooling over their historic rush. Only one of the Orioles was aware of both the schedule pattern and the team's knack for rattling off series sweeps. Weaver, naturally. "Of course, you have to look at the schedule," he growled. "You never know *how* you're really playing until you look at *who* you're playin'."

By Labor Day, the Birds knew they had, with some luck, righted themselves once more. The sense of revived spirits and restored faith was as sudden as the deterioration of that confidence had been slow; the damage done in two years seemed fixed in two weeks. Perhaps that's the real mark of team character. "Over the years, we've crawled out of more coffins than Bela Lugosi," Weaver snorted.

That Labor Day weekend provided one tableau which captured the redemptive mood which surrounded the team. Enormous fireworks filled the sky above Memorial Stadium, exploding until their tracers seemed to fill the bowl of the ballpark with their colorful splendor. "God Bless America" filled the air—loud, clear and poetic enough so that even Baltimore's Francis Scott Key couldn't have begrudged the selection. Beneath the canopy of sight, the panoply of sound, a cannonade of bomb bursts ripped into the night. Beside the third-base coach's box, the Orioles, still in uniform and fresh from a victory minutes before, sat on the grass with their families and watched the show. This fireworks display had been scheduled for May but, symbolically, was rained out. In September, with the team finally making fireworks, the rescheduled exhibition had rolled around just

in time.

Pleasures deferred are all the sweeter.

Into the Fire

Some teams have Bat Day and Cap Day. 'Round the Ides of September, the Orioles had Divine Intervention Week.

Five times in four days the Birds beat New York in Memorial Stadium before delighted congregations of Yankee-haters. In each of the first four games, Baltimore had to come from behind, overcoming a dozen runs' worth of Yankee leads. In those four increasingly dizzy games, the winning pitchers were named Mike Boddicker, John Flinn, Storm Davis and Don Welchel. All had been at Rochester in May. Sometimes reporters had to request maps to find the previously uncharted auxiliary dressing rooms where these gentlemen donned uniforms bearing numbers in the fifties.

Kids, kids, kids! Everywhere you looked, the Orioles were trying to steal a pennant from the Brewers with a bunch of children. If it wasn't those infant pitchers beating the Yankees, then it was Ripken—always Ripken—hitting a home run or making an intuitive play at short. As the mean age of the Oriole heroes got younger and younger, it seemed the club found its natural field leader: the six-foot-four, two-hundred-pound rookie. His blossoming could be traced to two simple factors.

First, in the depths of a May slump, Ripken accidentally got identical pieces of advice on the same day from two people he respected—his father and Reggie Jackson. Both told him to stop trying to be a pull hitter (Weaver's influence) and revert to his normal, all-fields, line-driving hitting. From that day, he hit over .300.

Next, in August, the kid was having his problems in his first month at shortstop. Coaches were moving him and shading his position on every batter, almost every pitch. Weaver told him, "Play short just like you did in high school. Do whatever feels right. Stop looking in the dugout."

So Ripken did. Gambling and guessing, shading and leaning as his instincts told him, the big, polished kid with the strongest arm on the team began materializing on the grass in short centerfield to turn grounders-through-the-box and bloopers into outs. Twice, and only twice, Ripken guessed wrong and looked foolish as routine grounders hopped through his normal position as he was caught flat-

footed and couldn't reverse his direction.

By his twenty-second birthday, in August, Ripken was the oldest head in the infield. It might be his first season in the bigs, but he'd been a Ripken much longer.

The appositeness of these contributions from the team's infants could hardly be overstated. They came just when it seemed the pitching staff was unraveling.

First, Stoddard slipped in a Manhattan eatery and disabled himself for the season; Big Foot wasn't drunk, just hungry and, as usual, clumsy. Next, McGregor came down with shoulder tendonitis and won only one game in the final seven weeks. Finally, Palmer pulled his monthly prima donna stunt, taking himself out of a game in Cleveland after seven innings, despite a 2–0 lead and a two-hitter in progress. Palmer, observing that the bullpen was rested, deduced that he should take a powder and informed the five-foot-seven power structure of this decision before retiring to the warm water. The bullpen blew the lead, then the game. "If I were one of Palmer's teammates," said Weaver, "I'd punch him in the mouth."

In the face of such miseries, minor miracles were mandatory. And they were delivered forthwith. In one win over the Yankees, the blithe Stewart was told to warm up in a hurry. "I got tickled at something [bullpen coach] Elrod Hendricks said and I laughed so hard that I swallowed about half a can of snuff," said Stewart, who came in to get the save. "I didn't pitch too bad for a sick guy. I was so dizzy warming up that I saw four bullpen catchers."

To this the pitiless Orioles responded, "Way to 'snuff out' that rally, Sammy."

By September 16, the Milwaukee lead was down to one game. The Orioles, caught up in the pennant-race thrall, believed themselves possessed of mystic powers. During one Yankee game, the Oriole dugout alternated their late-inning cheers, half the time yelling, "Come on, Tippy," and half the time hollering, "Come on, Lance." The Yankees understood the Tippy part, since Tippy Martinez was pitching in relief. But who the heck was Lance?

Well, you see, Weaver not only tolerates scoreboard watching but loves it, insisting, "We're supposed to *enjoy* this." Since Weaver believes in every conceivable superstition, he often picks out a scoreboard hero—some player he senses will beat the team that the O's hope will lose. This day, Weaver's choice as Orioles helper was Detroit catcher Lance Parrish. So the whole dugout picked up the idea. What the Birds couldn't believe was that, within minutes of

leaving the field with another victory, Dan Ford burst into the locker room and shouted, "Lance did it! Two-run homer in the eleventh. Milwaukee loses, four to three."

Stunned? Oh, yes. But not too dumbfounded to start screaming, "*Thank* you, veeery much," and "Thank *you*, very much," and "Thank yooooou, very *much*," and all the other readings of those four silly words.

When we are children, we're fetched toward baseball by the game's romantic fiction—the fables about characters like the young High Pockets of John R. Tunis making his way through the minors to the majors. No florid excess of plot can be omitted. There comes a point when a beat writer has to admit to himself that there's a substantial difference between the reality of a major league race and the fictions of childhood. There's no escaping the fact that . . . well . . . the real thing is much better. Actual pennant races are more melodramatic, improbable and all-purpose purple than fiction dares to be. Every first-class pennant race puts the excesses of pulp fiction to shame.

Take "Thanks Earl Day."

As a minor league player, Weaver was a small, slow, tough, short-on-power second baseman who hit and ran, seldom struck out, made the double-play pivot in the face of spikes and hardly ever made an error. That also describes Dauer, who is the embodiment of the big leaguer Weaver never quite got to be. So, in the tenth inning of a 2–2 game against Cleveland, Dauer stepped to the plate as 41,194 fans asked him to give Weaver a present that would surpass all the gifts and garlands that he'd received before the game. Dauer once went without a home run for more than a calendar year and became known as the Hostage, because, as Flanagan put it, "Richie's been kept inside the fences longer than the hostages were held in Iran."

This time, Dauer launched the first and only sudden-death home run of his whole, six-season career. In a strange, fitting sense, Weaver got to see himself hit the game-winning home run on his own retirement day.

Want something even cornier?

Who pitched all ten innings on Thanks Earl Day but Flanagan? Before the final game of the '79 Series, Flanagan's wife, Kathy, had a miscarriage. Five months later she had another miscarriage. Doctors told the couple that she should have a hysterectomy; they should adopt children. No news could have hit the couple, both from the same small

New Hampshire town, harder; both define themselves in terms of kith and kin. Flanagan refused to allow the operation, saying they would wait and hope some new medical process would be discovered.

For nearly three years, Flanagan seemed a changed person, less active, less motivated, deeply troubled, as though his major league success, even his $2.5 million contract were some kind of vicious joke when balanced against personal disappointment. The Flanagans bought the house overlooking a small lake in Amherst, New Hampshire, the one they had always wanted; but in a way it was an empty house.

Flanagan's pitching mirrored his state of mind. Star-crossed and often injured, he pitched just badly enough to lose, where he'd once pitched just well enough to win.

In July of '82, Kathy and Mike Flanagan made world news. They became the fourth couple in history to have a "test-tube baby" through artificial insemination. The new process that Flanagan had insisted would be found had been found.

When their daughter was born, Flanagan's record was 8–10 for the season. Within a week of the birth, Flanagan started his longest winning streak since his Cy Young season, of '79. Over the last three months of the season, he lost only one game. And on Thanks Earl Day, Flanagan won his seventh game in a row. Afterward, in the locker room, he held his two-month-old daughter in his arms as his teammates dropped by to inspect the miracle.

To illustrate that such excess, once underway, knows few limits, the next night Baltimore won in the bottom of the ninth when a Lowenstein flyball hit the top of the rightfield fence and bounced into the stands momentarily. The Tigers' Sparky Anderson stormed, "At no time did that ball leave the park." "I don't know if it left the park or not," retorted Weaver, "but I'm goin' to."

Those back-to-back sudden-death homers by Dauer and Lowenstein were both the crescendo of the Orioles' streak and the end of it. No sooner had the Orioles reached this strange, uncharted world where fantasies were granted nightly than they were reintroduced to reality, losing their next three games 11–1, 10–5, and 15–5. Not only did the pitchers allow thirty-six runs, forty-nine hits and 8 homers in just three nights, but the defense chipped in with nine errors.

GM Hank Peters, a dignified man occasionally mentioned as a possible commissioner of baseball, summed up the three days pithily: "We can play some real horseshit baseball."

Many an Oriole knew the genesis of this collapse. It began, as

so many twists of a pennant race do, with one pitch—this one thrown a thousand miles away. On the night of Lowenstein's sudden-death homer, the O's gathered in the clubhouse to listen to the final outs of what they supposed to be a Red Sox victory over Milwaukee. They listened as the Brewers, down a run in the ninth, made one out, then two. Down to the last hitter. Then, down to the last strike.

The Birds called on their best voodoo. "Pop one of those balloons," snapped a coach, and one of the balloons in Elrod Hendricks' locker had a pin jabbed at it. Then Dennis Eckersley decided to end the game with a high fastball. And Ben Oglivie decided to hit it into the bleachers to tie the game. "When we heard Oglivie's home run over the radio," said Weaver, who was on his way home, "my brother-in-law almost drove us off the road."

That home run, and the winning run which the Brewers eventually pushed over in the eleventh, hit the Orioles in the solar plexus; the Brewers weren't planning to cooperate in this matter of the Great Baltimore Comeback. To the O's, a team much given to omen-pondering, it seemed to demand that they lose horridly three times in a row.

The first two losses, to the Tigers, were bad enough, but the third was a horror, since it came in the opener of a three-game series in Milwaukee. The Brewers' greeting to the Orioles was nothing less than bloodthirsty. In just six innings, they put twenty-two runners on base and scored fifteen runs. The parade of Oriole relief pitchers should have been driven from the bullpen by ambulance, rather than Toyota.

The Orioles could have been devastated by that evening's charade. Yet Weaver's reaction was the absolute opposite. He was in a genuinely upbeat, cheerful mood. Weaver loves to get slaughtered, certain that the thrashing will, in the long run, do more good than harm.

So four games behind with nine to play, with his pitching staff in tatters, Weaver put on one of his best postgame performances. "This is the way we like it. Tough as nails," rumbled Weaver. "A two-game winning streak and we're just two games out. No wonder we're closin' in on 'em. We've won twenty-seven of our last thirty-five and I'm proud of these guys who have done it."

Peter Pascarelli, of the Philadelphia *Inquirer*—a cigar-smoking wise guy who covered the Orioles with distinction in the previous year for the Baltimore *News American*—walked up behind Weaver. In his best gravelly Earl-imitation voice, Pascarelli read back the

preposterous quote: "This is the way we like it. Tough as nails."

Weaver snorted so hard, trying to keep from laughing, that he choked on his postgame cold cuts. Then Weaver rolled his eyes like a little boy. No, not this tough.

The next evening at sundown, Weaver, in the dugout, said out of the blue, "What I want to know is, what the hell are we doing in this race?"

Weaver didn't get his answer, but he got his wish. On Saturday, Palmer beat Milwaukee with almost disdainful ease, getting the last seventeen outs on twenty-seven pitches. His victory seemed to say, "What's so tough about beating Milwaukee?"

The next day's pitcher, Dennis Martinez, had been watching. "They are a very hungry team for fastballs, and they will follow them out of the strike zone," he said. "Look at Jimmy and learn." If Martinez was watching Palmer, then every Oriole was watching Martinez. Exactly one week before, Martinez had learned that his father had been killed in a traffic accident in Nicaragua. Martinez flew to the funeral. Teammates scrutinized him closely on his return. "This might be the most interesting game Dennis ever pitches," said one Baltimore veteran. "He's never been able to concentrate as well as he should. He's never wanted to win as badly as some pitchers. But he's going to want this win for his father. We keep waiting for the New Dennis, the Mature Dennis. Maybe this will bring it out."

On national TV, the right-hander pitched one of the guttiest, most intense games of his careeer; he was, in a hard-to-define way, everything that he had not been in his first five seasons. Crises seemed to invigorate him, call out the best in him, whereas, often in his career, difficulties had ruffled him, as though the unstylish job of pitching with men on base was beneath him.

Thanks to the best Orioles throw of the season—a peg to the plate from center field by Shelby in the eighth inning to gun down the tying run—both Martinez and the Orioles had their victory.

"Shelby wasn't aware of the urgency of the moment," appraised Lowenstein. "Otherwise he'd have thrown the ball waaaaaay over Dempsey's head and askew to the right. Sometimes it's better to have an unconscious rookie than a seasoned veteran."

Now two games behind with a week to play, Weaver looked like a bullheaded little tough-as-nails prophet. In September a manager's most vital job may be fine-tuning his team's mood by his choice of public and private words. He can't determine how his club will react, but he can certainly shade it, lead it, help it arrive at a useful com-

posite of feeling. Language, as well as strategy, is a manager's medium. Picking the right tone of voice, the proper gut response to events, is an art. Perhaps it is, finally, more a product of experience, trial and error than intelligence.

Weaver's strongest suit in a pennant race may have been this knack for sensing the flow of a season the way a riverboat pilot might once have sensed the twists of the channel. He was acutely aware that a team's direction could easily be reversed in only two or three days; that's all the time it takes for a rested, synchronized pitching staff to get shot to hell; that's also how long it takes a bedraggled staff to catch its breath, become strong again.

"Every team carries nine or ten pitchers. That's always the wrong number," said Weaver. "Either six is too many, or twelve aint' enough."

When the world is going well, six pitchers are too many, because there is only enough work for the four starters and one short reliever. So the rest of the staff gets rusty. Eventually, of course, the starters all get tired—often at the same time—and all have a bad turn. That's when twelve pitchers aren't enough. The starters get shelled by the third inning day after day; the long relievers haven't worked in two weeks, so they're lousy. The whole staff gets crucified, the process feeding on itself.

In the same way, batting lineups tend to get hot together, then go into slumps together. The process repeats itself eternally for every team in every season. First a couple of off-key hitters get hot. This puts men on base, damages the opposing pitcher's confidence, excites the whole offense, creates myriad opportunities for every other sort of tactic. Marginal hitters glow in the reflected light of larger stars. The cliché "hitting is contagious" is a basic truth with predictable lines of causality.

Conversely, the "cooling off" of just one or two hitters has the reverse ripple effect throughout a lineup. Word of who's hot and who's suddenly not goes quickly through the pitching grapevine.

Almost every major league game has these elements in play. In a pennant race, it is essential that a manager know the true reasons behind his team's play, rather than retreating (even in his own mind) behind catch phrases like "we have momentum" or "my guys are choking."

Weaver saw his team clear and whole, reached valid conclusions, not emotional ones, and took strategic steps that had a concrete, rather than a superstitious, connection with events. Where another manager might, as a desperate joke, pull his batting order for the day out of

a hat, Weaver would try a specific ploy, like batting the team's coldest hitter in the No. 2 spot in the hope that just one day in front of Singleton, Murray and Ripken would let him see a diet of fastballs instead of curves.

"You're never as good as you look when you're winning," said Weaver, "and you're never as bad as you look when you're losing." And the shifts from one to the other can be so sudden, part of a cycle that is so quickly repeated, that a team can get terminal vertigo.

Perhaps that's why, as the Orioles left Milwaukee in an exultant mood, Weaver was a worried little prophet. Before the Birds and the Brewers could end their showdown with four games in Baltimore, each had to play three dangerous road games: the Orioles in Detroit, the Brewers in Boston. Weaver, who had in a week seen his team go from hot to cold and then back to heroic, was worried that the roller-coaster syndrome, once started, might be hard to stop.

"Now's the time that their two-game lead really helps them," said Weaver, sitting in raw, autumnal Tiger Stadium. "They don't *have* to win every game in Boston." The Orioles' euphoria on leaving Milwaukee was separated only by a thin membrane from potential panic in Detroit. Again Weaver was painfully correct. The Birds and the Bengals played fierce, taut games before small, disinterested crowds in that big old park. It was a textbook case of a team going nowhere trying to ruin the season for a contender. The first evening, it was Lance Parrish turning a Detroit defeat into victory with a late-inning home run. The next night, John Wockenfuss hit a tie-breaking home run to beat the Birds again. Both nights, Milwaukee won. Their lead was back to four and seemed like forty.

Monologist Sparky Anderson, baseball's master of the double negative, summed up this annual baseball slice-of-life nicely. "I don't like the taste. I make sure I walk real slow when I come out of the dugout. I don't want the Orioles sayin', 'Look at Sparky. He thinks he's doin' something.' I remember what I used to think about those 'spoilers' when I was managin' the Reds. Believe me, they ain't nice things. I hope none of my players says they're enjoyin' this, 'cause I'm not . . . Back with the Reds, lousy teams would beat us in September and say, 'We blocked 'em [from clinching].' Man, that made me hot. Where were they in April-May-June-July, when it was on the line and we were sweepin' 'em six in a row? Then, when the pressure is off 'em, they start talking about 'blocking' and 'spoiling.' No spoilers don't collect no checks."

Thus ended the sermon and, it appeared, the Orioles' season.

Nothing in baseball is quite so depressing as losing a long, hard pennant race. A club bleeds to death collectively, one tiny nick of fallibility after another, its chances draining away until finally the last cut feels more like a decapitation than a scratch. Wockenfuss, a swarthy, hairy fellow who would look at home with an ax in his hand and a black hood over his face, was a fine choice as executioner. As the fellow referred to by Weaver as "Wochenfutch" circled the bases and was engulfed by the brazen Tigers at home plate, the Orioles' gopher of record, reliever Tippy Martinez, remained at the base of the pitcher's mound, slumped in an abject crouch, a small, unmoving man suddenly shrunk to toadstool size.

So low had the Orioles sunk that, by the next night, they had completely changed their goals. Instead of thinking about the World Series, they were disgustedly determined not to be swept in Detroit. The same idea sprouted in several heads; all had visions of "how awful it would be to go back home for three sold-out dates and not have the games mean anything." If all else was lost, the Orioles decided to win one for the spite of forcing the Brewers to clinch in Memorial Stadium.

With two out in the Oriole ninth and the Tigers ahead 5–3, even survival seemed remote. Down to the last out, Ripken singled a run home. Then Jim Dwyer singled to tie the score on the next pitch. Finally Gary Roenicke hit a pathetic shattered-bat bloop that floated over the mound and eluded the gloves of two diving Tigers by inches as the winning run scored.

When the Brewers blew a lead and lost in Boston, the Orioles quickly began refiguring their arithmetic. Instead of being eliminated, they were suddenly three behind with four to play. The odds against sweeping such a series from the Brewers to steal the division flag were one in sixteen—a 6 percent solution.

Weaver saw matters differently. "Our magic number is four," he said.

What the Orioles faced following their victory in Detroit was completely against the nature of the human constitution, but completely true to the nature of pennant races. After midnight, the Orioles flew half the width of the country, getting into their own Baltimore beds before sunrise. Then, excited but also exhausted, they tried to get a few hours' sleep before meeting the Brewers three times in less than twenty-four hours. Yes, three games in a day, since the Friday twi-night doubleheader was followed by a day game. Baseball makes everything as fair and orderly as possible on the field and as unfair

and chaotic as possible off it. The sport is as much a test of self-management as a test of skill. So many days, so many ways to beat yourself.

If those three games in twenty-four hours were difficult for the O's, they were impossible for the Brewers. The Birds had adrenalin, fresh hope and a home crowd, as well as the residual anger from their Tigers losses. The Brewers had nothing. Milwaukee had played winning teams for a solid month. They, too, had flown at night, but flying along with them to Baltimore was the champagne they'd wanted to uncork in Boston—a bad omen. Worse, the Brewers' pitching was on the edge. Reliever Rollie Fingers had been disabled nearly a month earlier and the whole staff was overworked, from sore-armed starters Pete Vuckovich and Mike Caldwell to a bullpen full of convicted arsonists. The Brewers' everyday players were worn close to the nub after 158 games. Playing in front of fifty thousand fans who were screaming, "Sweep, sweep," and shaking brooms at them didn't help.

In one harrowing Day of the Orioles, the Brewers lost 8–3, 7–1 and 11–3.

A four-game lead on Thursday night was a no-game lead by Saturday. The Brewers had gone from total security to total anxiety in forty-two hours. What befell the Brewers was more like a series of natural disasters than baseball. The Orioles released a season of hostilities in those three games, putting fifty-eight men on base in just twenty-four innings.

"Every break went our way, every close call, every ball in a gap," said Flanagan. "The only thing we had to guard against was overcheering."

A collective psychodrama was running its course. The Orioles didn't have to search for the proper analogy as they gazed at a Brewer team that looked like twenty-five Daniels searching for a friendly lion in Baltimore's deafening den. For proper comparison, the Orioles only needed to think of themselves in the final three games of the '79 World Series. Perhaps nothing in baseball is so fascinating, so morbidly riveting as watching an excellent team caught in the riptide of such events. With each inning, the Brewers seemed to be pulled farther from the safety of shore.

By sundown Saturday, one word described the scene.

Perfection.

After six months of mutual torture, the two teams with the game's best records (94–67) would meet one last time on the final day of the season to settle their differences. Such a last-day winner-

take-all game had only occurred three times in 113 years. The pitchers would be those posterity might prefer—263-game-winner Palmer, winner of 13 of his last 14 decisions, against 257-game-winner Don Sutton, the Brewers' million-dollar late-season pennant insurance, acquired from Houston in a trade.

Rarely do teams know, down to the marrow, that they cannot escape becoming part of their sport's history. If Baltimore won on Sunday, it would gain five games in the final four days of the season—the greatest last-week comeback in history. The Brewers had a much different sense of history. History repeating itself concerned them. For weeks both teams had become increasingly aware of an exotic leitmotif running through their struggle.

Back in June, Milwaukee catcher Ted Simmons thought that a John Lowenstein strikeout had ended an inning, so he casually flipped the ball in the general direction of the umpire as he jogged toward the dugout. Before Simmons realized there were only two outs, a pair of Baltimore runners had advanced a base. The next man singled home two runs, instead of just one. The game ended in a 2–2 tie instead of a 2–1 Milwaukee victory. Then rain arrived after nine innings. But for that tie, which was replayed as part of the Friday doubleheader, the Brewers would have clinched their flag before they ever got to Baltimore. Baseball historians will instantly note the similarity to the famous Merkle Boner of 1908 when Fred Merkle cost the New York Giants a victory over the Chicago Cubs when he forgot to touch second base after a teammate's apparent game-winning hit. Instead of a victory, the game went down as a tie, and the Giants, forced to replay the contest at season's end, lost the pennant to the Cubs by a single game.

Simmons, asked if he was aware of the parallel with Merkle, said, "I've only thought about it *every day* since it happened."

The levels of pressure in baseball and the reaction to that pressure sometimes seem to follow immutable laws that operate just far enough beneath the surface that we cannot quite fathom their basic principles or predict their results. Yet as soon as a thing is done, it acquires in hindsight a quality of inevitability so that it seems we knew the outcome all along, but couldn't recognize it until the instant of its completion. This tantalizing, addictive "of course" is at its strongest in pennant races. Many a midseason game seems ruled by caprice. But when every player feels himself to be on a psychological and physical rack, the sense is strong that we could foreknow the outcome if only we knew the participants well enough.

Meet a veteran player or a manager before some "ultimate" game, and it's hard not to say, "So what's going to happen?" There is a shared sense that if somehow our senses were just a trifle better, we could see the shadow of the future.

There are times, however, when even the immediate future seems a mystery. The path to the present moment has been so full of twists and doublings back that, though we assume some line of causality runs through the proceedings, we have long ago given up trying to figure it out. That feeling that we have no idea what will happen, but that it may well be wonderful, is the ideal concluding note for a pennant race.

Twice in recent years a season came to that. The mystery reaches a point where the path to the present is overgrown with incident, so that we give ourselves up entirely to the moment. The event is richer than our imaginations. The last days of such a pennant race are like the living equivalent of a dense detective yarn where finally, our heads aching, we forsake deduction and say, "Surprise me."

In 1978, when the Yanks and the Red Sox met in a playoff for the American League East title, both teams seemed caught in the hands of the event, as though the game were playing them. No one on either team claimed to have an intuition of what would or should happen. No one was crass enough to predict.

That sense of being suspended in midair, caught on the high wire of the moment, also existed before the final Oriole game of 1982. Even driving to the park on that crystal October morning was a sharp pleasure, as though all days in paradise would be freighted with such high-spirited, innocent anticipation. And such certainty of a resolution.

Before the seventh game of the World Series, or the last game of a pennant race, the players barely know what they feel and certainly don't want to discuss it. Not only are the stakes self-evident, but in a few hours all pregame thoughts will be rendered irrelevant by the game's outcome. Often a player will just grin and shake his head involuntarily as though saying, "So here we are."

On Saturday, Milwaukee's team leader, home-run champion Gorman Thomas, stood by the batting cage, irritated and antsy, and said, "This shit has gone far enough. We better win today, 'cause nobody wants it going down to Sunday." On Sunday, by the batting cage, Thomas had lost that case of nerves. He was quiet, observant, dignified. Like thoroughbreds in almost every field, when it was genuinely important that he perform, Thomas had the capacity to

be at his best. "Feel fine," he said, while talking about the reassuring particulars of his craft—the shifting of the wind, the white-shirt-sleeve background of the upper deck.

Actually, only a handful of plays from that game retain a particular vividness. Each told enough of the tale so that much of what was to come after seemed to follow obediently.

Robin Yount, the second batter of the game, hit a flyball to the opposite field that sliced into the bleachers for a homer. That loosened the Brewers' shoulder blades and proved to both dugouts that Palmer didn't quite have the fastball he needed.

In the bottom of the first, with the bases loaded, rookie Gulliver ran through a stop sign at third and was thrown out at the plate by forty feet to end the inning. The next batter would have been Jim Dwyer, who had reached base thirteen consecutive times, three short of Ted Williams' all-time record. After a portent like that, you could have played "Dueling Banjos" on the tension lines of Weaver's forehead.

All the breaks and blessings which, mixed with talent and grit, had enabled the Orioles to beat Milwaukee five straight times in eight days suddenly switched their allegiance and came to the rescue of the equally deserving Brewers. Yount homered again, then Cecil Cooper went deep, firing his fist in the air. Sutton pitched well, helped by the Orioles' gradually tightening nerves. "They bought the gold goose," said Lowenstein of Sutton, "and today he gave them the golden egg."

In the final act, Oglivie made a sliding catch at the foul line in left to end the O's last serious rally. Milwaukee scored five runs in the ninth, a useful conclusion since it made the final score a decisive 10–2, thus aborting the usual blame-casting postmortems. History and drama lost that day, but perhaps justice and generosity won. Many in Memorial Stadium capsulized the day in four clean, consoling words: "The better team won."

Tears and Cheers

From '78, I remember the marvelous silence which fell over Fenway Park for several minutes after the last Red Sox out; a gentle, sad organ calliope played over the public address system; that moment was so vivid that no one in the park wanted to move, to hie himself to some lesser place.

From '82, I remember that morning drive to the ballpark and the bittersweet sensation of wondering what prevented all days from being so urgent and full.

And all for a "meaningless baseball game," as the proper modern convention tell us—forgetting to mention what does mean something. Even the players would admit that this game was only one slice of a career; just, finally, one more manageable, digestible, expendable day at the park.

Yet the sense of accumulated life, of past days all packed into the precarious teeter-totter of one present hour, is intoxicating. We move very slowly, appreciate every detail and sensation, just as we might feel gratitude for every detail of every day, were we better.

When the final Orioles out had been made—some flyball to the outfield, it usually is—the Baltimore crowd did what no crowd in American sports has done. The throng, spontaneously and immediately, decided to reverse the outcome of the game. They found defeat unacceptable, unworthy of both themselves and their team; so they decreed a victory. After all, joy and sorrow are often arbitrary, largely states of mind; nowhere is it written that joy must accompany victory and sorrow defeat.

Had the Orioles won, spelling would certainly have been in order. So, in defeat, the crowd began to spell "O-R-I-O-L-E-S." It started loudly and then became gargantuan. "When they started spelling 'Orioles,'" said Ted Simmons, "you'd find yourself yelling it along with them out of self-defense."

When they weren't spelling, they were chanting, "Earl, Earl, Earl." So Earl came out, looking as small and vulnerable as we visualize ourselves in our dreams. He was a mess, his hair mussed, his gray undershirt on lopsided. Tears ran down his face and he let them; he blew kisses to the crowd, but especially to the loyal loonies in Section 34 in the rightfield upper deck. He joined with the team's mascots in leading the spelling, using his body to mime the letters.

Finally, Weaver called the team out, and they came. All in various stages of emotional undress, their faces torn between the deep disappointment that they felt, the sense of self-betrayal, and the delight they took in the crowd's standing ovation. Finally, one by one, the players broke the rules of sport-for-money and began smiling, laughing, joking with each other in disbelief. Gradually, they understood. The crowd had decided that they had won. After a quarter hour of cheers, they decided to concur.

In the Boston locker room in 1978, the Red Sox looked as if they

had died and were sitting in some anteroom of hell waiting for the barge to take them over into damnation. In the Baltimore locker room in 1982, the Orioles smiled and drank their beer. No one blamed or was blamed. No one was downcast. As they left, the Birds shook hands and made plans—for the first winter basketball game, perhaps. Rich Dauer, grinning, wandered around giving handshakes. "It's a weird feeling," he said. "I can't wait for Opening Day." Weaver thanked the team, told them they couldn't have thrilled him more if they had won the World Series. Then, all baseball to the end, he said brusquely, "Win a hundred and five for the new guy." (Little did he know that in 1983 the Orioles would win 98 regular-season games, 3 in the playoffs and four in the Series: exactly 105.)

For once, defeat had no funereal overtones. The crowd and its team had finally understood that in games, as in many things, the ending, the final score, is only a part of what matters. The process, the pleasure, the grain of the game count too.

Public and Private Baseball: Notes on the 1984 Mets, With a Retrospective of Met History

This piece is a retrospective on the New York Mets as I have followed them over the years, but grounded in the events of the just-past 1984 season. If I had pursued even a small number of the other possible tracks in this narrative, it would have turned into an amorphous anecdotal book. As it is, the piece is filled with references to names and episodes that may be unfamiliar even to ardent baseball fans, and I suggest that the reader accept them as indigenous baseball chatter. I don't claim every single fact is right or that I have all my episodes in the right historical sequence; I have tried more for a meandering folk tale than a baseball history. The dialogue is reconstructed from my notes, not from precise tape-recorded material, and I hope it carries the spirit if not the letter of the exchanges. In many of my older books there are pieces about the Mets and other topics discussed in here, and the following can serve as an informal bibliography:

"Baseball" — in both *Io/#6, Ethnoastronomy Issue*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1969, pp. 111–116; and *The Continents*, Black Sparrow Press, Los Angeles, 1973, pp. 30–36. This was my first attempt at a piece on baseball and totemism; it reconsiders my childhood interest in baseball in the context of later occult and shamanic concerns.

"The Southern Cult of the New York Yankees" — in both *Io/#7, Oecology Issue*, Mount Desert, Maine, 1970, pp. 233–237; and *The Continents*, pp. 85–90. Written several months after the preceding piece, "The Southern Cult" uses mostly Yankee history in comparing the archaeology of Southeastern American Indian artifacts with strata of players in the formation of baseball teams. The Southern Cult, which was attributed to the late pre-Columbian Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, Natchez, and neighboring tribes, is interwoven with fragments of the New York Yankee dynasty of my childhood.

". . . Is Not The Beginning" — in *The Continents*, pp. 194–195. This is a snapshot of the Mets from the coast of Maine at the end of the 1969 season.

"An Interlude During Which Enoch Stanley Sitting in His Rooms in Southwest Harbor Watches the Mayor of New York Get Dunked with Champagne by Rod Gaspar" — in both *Book of the Cranberry Islands*, Harper

and Row, New York, 1974, pp. 47–50; and *Io*/#10, *Baseball Issue*, Cape Elizabeth, Maine, 1971, pp. 222–225. This mythical celebration of the Mets was written on the day they won the World Series in 1969; it is done in imitation of Herman Melville and Charles Olson (and, at the same time, includes the 1968 New York Jets).

(untitled piece on the Mets' winning locker room and the subsequent publicity) — in *Book of the Cranberry Islands*, *op. cit.*, *pp.* 59–62. It re-examines comments made by the players in the light of Hindu sacred texts and the writings of Aleister Crowley, and it satirizes the excessive sports-writing about the Miracle Mets.

(untitled dream of Wayne Garrett) — in both *The Book of Being Born Again into the World*, North Atlantic Books, Plainfield, Vermont, 1974, p. 42; and *Io*/10, *Baseball Issue*, p. 225. This obscure dream fragment speaks for itself and for all the others unrecorded.

(untitled description of Met game heard on the radio in September, 1971) — in both *The Book of Being Born Again into the World*, pp. 86–88; and *Io*/10, *Baseball Issue*, pp. 225–227. I try to locate a single game between the Mets and the Cubs in cosmic history.

"Preface to a Baseball Issue" — in *Io*/10, *Baseball Issue*, *pp.* 5–14. The preface to the original baseball anthology is a forerunner to the present piece; it is a recollection of my childhood following the Yankees, and an analysis of the (then) present (1971) Mets; our history and our memory change as we change, so this piece has different episodes and interpretations from the present one.

"Parc Jarry" — in both *The Slag of Creation*, North Atlantic Books, Plainfield, Vermont, 1975; and *Baseball I Gave You All the Best Years of My Life*, edited by Kevin Kerrane and Richard Grossinger, *Io*/24, North Atlantic Books, (third edition), Richmond, California, 1980, pp. 307–310. I go to Montreal to see the Mets play during the summer of 1973.

(untitled piece on following the Mets on the radio, 1973) — in *The Slag of Creation*, pp. 56–59. This is a reverie amidst staticky radio receptions at night looking back through baseball at my own aging, the birth of my children, and the formation of a family around me.

(untitled piece on following the Mets' pennant drive on the radio at the end of the 1973 season) — *ibid.*, pp. 72–79. This covers, in particular, the climactic series against the Pirates, the move into first place, and the pennant clinching against the Cubs.

(untitled piece written the day of the seventh game of the 1973 World Series) — *ibid.*, pp. 82–83. This is a trip along the dark mortal side of World Series ecstasy.

"The Baseball Junkies" — in *Baseball I Gave You All the Best Years*

of My Life, pp. 401–410. This piece begins with a description of Jim Bouton's last game.

"Three Repeating Baseball Dreams" — *ibid.*, pp. 426–428. The notes to these dreams discuss the formation of the New York Mets and Houston Colt .45's and the mythology brought into existence at that time.

My baseball interest began in 1952, so I have no memory at all of Joe DiMaggio as a real player. At the end of the '52 season I stayed home from school and listened on the radio as Bob Kuzava pitched out of a bases-loaded jam in the seventh game of the World Series against the Dodgers, Billy Martin at the last minute racing across the infield to catch an abandoned pop fly for the third out. By then it seemed as though I had been following the Yankees forever, so steeped in their history had I become in one season. When the Indians beat them out of the 1954 pennant I experienced it as the end of an era, but I went with my stepfather to a World Series game at the Polo Grounds. When Willie Mays caught Vic Wertz's drive running back to home plate, I remember only the confusion of the rising crowd and my disbelief and disappointment the ball hadn't fallen in. I'm not sure I even saw the catch.

For years growing up in New York I lived at the heart of the American League, the crucial meetings between Yankees and Indians — Allie Reynolds, Vic Raschi, Eddie Lopat, and Whitey Ford (the kid) against Early Wynn, Bob Lemon, Mike Garcia, and the ghost of Bob Feller. I saw Bob Grim pitch his first game at Yankee Stadium in 1954 and Jim Bouton in 1962. Between those years the Yankee pitchers included Bob Turley, Don Larsen, Johnny Kucks, Tom Sturdivant, Art Ditmar, Bud Daley; the sounds of their names bring back the resonance of my early consciousness in which they played. My brother and I sit forever in Central Park with our radio, listening to the changes in fortune, the progress of games into late innings — Phil Rizzuto drawing the walk and then Irv Noren delivering the clutch pinch double. Through lonely years of summer camp my large brown radio was a touchstone to the center of a more luminous and composed universe — Bob Weisler trying once again to get his control, Don Larsen batting eighth ahead of Willie Miranda, Tommy Byrne's line singles in a game he pitched, Mickey's godlike homers, Eli Grba winning that crucial fourth game of a series against the White Sox, Joe DeMaestri's pinch single capping a comeback against the Tigers, Gil McDougald's two home-run game late in his career, and, finally, Johnny Blanchard coming off the scrapheap to

pinch hit home runs and turn a season around.

In an average year between 1952 and 1962 (my last year of high school) I saw about thirty games at Yankee Stadium. My father's company had a box behind the visitor's dugout, and, although I didn't see him much during my childhood, I was often able to claim unused tickets at his New York office. As I got older and mastered the subway I went more often and took my friends. In 1961, the first time I went on a date with a girl, I asked out a baseball fan, and we saw Roger Maris hit his 61st home run.

In earlier seasons, before I was old enough to get around, there were a few magical nights when my father showed up unexpectedly in New York to take me to a game. I remember two that went into extra innings — Gene Woodling homering in the eleventh to win one suddenly for the Yankees, and, years later, Al Smith capping a monumental Indians' comeback from an eight-run deficit with a home run in the tenth (though we were in the parking lot when he hit it because my father said, "Nine innings only"). In fact, one of the first times I ever saw my father (at age eight, after my first Yankee season) he took me to Al Schacht's baseball restaurant with two of their players, Joe Collins and Charlie Silvera. In 1962, a lifetime later, I came down from college to see Bill Stafford outduel Billy Pierce in the third game of the World Series; after the game my father and stepmother and a bunch of their friends joined Stafford and Eli Grba for dinner, and they talked of finishing the Giants off quickly now that they had a 2–1 lead in games. But the next day my family returned to the country and I went to the Stadium alone and saw Chuck Hiller hit a grand slam into the right-field stands off Marshall Bridges, then took the late bus back to college. It was the height of my Yankee interest, so I could hardly have suspected at the time that it was to be my last visit to a baseball park for a duration longer than the whole time I had then followed baseball. A week later, after many San Francisco rainouts, I stood in a television repair shop in Amherst, Massachusetts, to watch the seventh game on the only "public" t.v. around, poised in anxious anticipation as Ralph Terry worked to Willie McCovey with men on base and the Yankees leading 1–0 in the bottom of the ninth. "If you care that much about this game," said the repairman, "I feel sorry for you."

The caring is not always what you think it is. I imagined myself a Yankee fan forever because I assumed unconsciously that things would be the same, but 1964 was my last season. Life away from home changed everything, and I became a different person to myself.

With survival itself at stake baseball became less important. I was thinking about summer jobs, girls, the lives of my friends, and I tried to make peace with the deteriorating family in which I had grown up. The 1963 season was my least attentive in years, and all that kept me going through 1964 was loyalty to Mel Stottlemyre, the last rookie I followed up through the Yankee chain. When the Cardinals knocked him out of the seventh game of the World Series, it was over for me, but I became aware of it only gradually, for I entered a dark period that winter and struggled with sanity itself for the next eighteen months. In less than two years, I was an adult, married, headed for graduate school in Michigan. As I regained an interest in baseball in following seasons, the Mets alone attracted me. They were part of a reawakening to regular life. The Yankees had already happened; their history of my childhood was complete, back in New York, with my old family that fell apart and dispersed. Of course there would be Yankee teams in the future, but they didn't have to do with me; deep at the heart of my self-definition, the link had been snapped, the cycle of games passed into legend and myth.

I never lived in New York again, but the ongoing city of my childhood was sustained in a magical aura of Met games and seasons, player by player and box score after box score. My wife Lindy was not a fan, so I kept a quiet and private practice of the Mets going, mostly on the radio, from Massachusetts, Michigan, Maine, Vermont, then lost somewhere between Chicago and the Iowa border in 1977 moving out West just as Ed Ott slid into Felix Millan and, in the subsequent melee and static, threw him to the ground, ending his career. But the radio station faded out, and the Mets became scores at the end of the local news broadcasts and morning sports pages.

I actually became a Mets fan in 1961 when the team was formed. The winter before their first spring training, I played an imaginary season with a spinner game using the roster of the team drawn from the draft (plus free agents) along with their equivalents from the Houston Colt .45's. The baseball personae of Bobby Gene Smith, Ray Daviault, Chris Cannizzaro, and Craig Anderson were already familiar to me by the time the season started, but they had to change with actual play (for instance, Cannizzaro won the home run championship in my league, but during the regular season a young Howard Cosell, who did the original Mets post-game show with Ralph Blanca, sat pleading with the actual Cannizzaro that he could still learn how to hit after yet another disappointing day). Rod Kanehl became my first favorite Met when he got a pinch single in an early spring

training game; he was the first player to appear on the actual Mets who hadn't been in my own game, and that's why I picked him. I was charmed by the idea of strange players entering a league I had never followed. The Mets were like a scientist discovering unknown phyla of animals and baseball arcana and placing them in the immediate sunlight of American life.

The Mets were also volatile and novel; their path stretched into my own unknown future. The Yankees had been an intimate family affair, first with my stepfather and brother, then later with my father (his box seats and friendships with the players themselves). When I went to the Polo Grounds by myself and cheered while Elio Chacon stretched a single into an "inside the park homer" on errors, I was already breaking away from authority. I bought my own tickets and sat in the grandstand — eight times in 1962 — and watched the Mets go 7 and 3 at the Polo Grounds (two were doubleheaders). I can still see Pirate farmhand Al Jackson, looking unlike any player the Yankees ever had, bearing down in the late innings of a tight game, and Hobie Landrith beating Warren Spahn 3–2 with a two-out ninth-inning homer that caught the short ledge in right as it fell.

The early Met rosters were complex and constantly changing, and my memory of my life became entwined with all the intricacies of their building and disassembling. The movements of players and unfulfilled partial careers had a real texture and led me away from my Yankee past. I read all their box scores and listened to games, mainly at night, in the midwest and then northern New England — and even those took some juggling with the radio, searching for power spots and tilting the solid object between invisible airwaves and competing stations. In Ann Arbor I had to stand in the shower holding the radio to the ceiling for Pittsburgh, but I could get Chicago in the daytime on the car radio if I parked at a particular spot in the driveway.

During the very early years I had hopes for Cliff Cook and Carlton Willey, Don Rowe and Jim Hickman, and each of them had his moments (during my years in college there were some days on which Jim Hickman seemed the Mets' reincarnation of the Mickey Mantle of my childhood). Then it was Rob Gardner and Dennis Ribant, the foundations of a new pitching staff, outfielders Johnny Lewis, Joe Christopher, and Cleon Jones. I rooted intensely for each win during these formative years, but I was not bothered by the Mets' place in the standings; the gradual accumulation of team lore kept my interest. I was an anthropology student in graduate school and

an even more serious student of the traditional occult; the Mets provided a secular counterpart to sacred hierarchies of symbols. They were not a lost alchemical text or a Hopi ceremony, but they were built in layers of names and hidden numbers in just the same way, and (I suspected) they were gathering toward an astrological transit, a moment in which their own history would synchronize with another cycle, and their secret identity would be revealed.

In reality they were becoming a better team, almost imperceptibly: Tug McGraw, Dick Selma, Bud Harrelson, Ron Swoboda. Add Koosman, Seaver, Ryan, Boswell from the farm system; Cardwell, Taylor, Agee (for Ken Boyer) in trades; and we arrive at 1969 and a ceremony no one had seen coming: Moon landing, Woodstock, the birth of our child, the pennant, the World Series, the move back East to an island off the coast of Maine. The year before, our Michigan neighbors cheered for Denny McClain and Willie Horton and a World Series in Detroit. "Tom Seaver will be a better pitcher than Denny McClain next year," I said, and they laughed — but we were long gone by the time it happened. Robin was born on June 19th, and in August we drove a new station wagon to Maine so that I could do anthropology fieldwork among lobster-fishermen. On the way we stopped in upstate New York with a U-Haul full of cats and books and a few pieces of furniture, and watched the Mets catch and pass the Cubs on my father's t.v., Tommy Agee barrelling home with that first big run in the head-to-head series. From then on it was the Maine coast, the starry night, the tiny baby crawling on the living room floor, and those final games of the '69 rush leading to a pennant after eight years in (or near) the cellar — not at all like the Yankees whose succession of dynasties I had stumbled into. The Mets I had seemingly built out of my own transition from child to father. Their wonder of transformation and pure joy was my own.

But '69 was not the finale; it was a part of the continuity. We moved south to Cape Elizabeth, and I taught at the University of Maine and followed the '70 and '71 Mets on a New Hampshire FM station, (available even in the daytime). I would go to Crescent Beach with Lindy and Robin, sit with him on the edge of the sea, in between innings run into the waves and back, holding his hand. Or I'd lie in the high grass outside the barn with a book while he threw plastic toys into the wading pool — trying to overcome the Pirates in the late innings with Jim McAndrew pitching, and not quite making it. Those were the dreamlike idyllic years of a young family, before we moved to the mountains of northern Vermont in 1972. The Mets

gradually shifted, sending Nolan Ryan away in a trade so obviously terrible even at the time it was a wonder they could have made it; Jon Matlack came, and John Milner, Ray Sadecki, Ken Singleton, Dave Schneck, Teddy Martinez, and Don Hahn. Singleton went to Montreal along with Tim Foli and Mike Jorgensen for Rusty Staub, and though the brilliant promise of '69 was unfulfilled, we were building toward the Indian summer of '73. Earlier in the '73 season Lindy and I left Robin with another family for the day and drove to Montreal where we ate lunch and wandered around the city, then in the evening went to Parc Jarry and saw the last-place Mets pull out a game against the Expos in a season whose ending would be pure magic.

During those years I was living through a change of identity so profound I often felt like someone who had travelled to another planet or been born a second time. The ballgames were a sameness, an anchor to the remote past, but I thought of them as the radio background to my life; I didn't identify with the other Met fans in New York and I had become phobic about going to the ballpark. I could not find the person within me who had once gone enthusiastically to the games, and I was even afraid of the feelings I would uncover if I approached the trauma. But in 1973 in Montreal it seemed possible to come to a game fresh and new, without the melancholy for the past. Parc Jarry was so small and local that it carried almost no memories of Yankee Stadium; the city was strange, the light was different, and the crowd could have been people from a tribe that didn't exist when I was a child. Part of the experience was also unchanged: the clarity of the actual players in three dimensions, the slow discontinuous rhythm of baseball cut free of running commentary. In 1975 I went back one more time, to watch a "phenom" who didn't pan out, Randy Tate, and then we moved to the Bay Area of California.

Through the mid-seventies the Mets were becoming a different team again: Buzz Capra, Craig Swan, Skip Lockwood, Del Unser, John Stearns. Out of radio range, I began going to every game of theirs at Candlestick Park. I even went to other games — one day to watch Bill Lee, another time to see Jim Bouton win his last game with the knuckleball (almost two decades after I saw his first), and occasionally to root against other Eastern Division teams when the Mets made a poke toward recovery. It took years, though, before I found an identity comfortable with being at the ballpark, a continuity through myself between the old Yankees and the young Mets.

The last years of the Payson regime, after the death of the Mets' patron and founder, were increasingly discouraging in a way pre-'69 teams never were. It was because the owners were at war with their own players, and the Met myth, which had sustained questionable front-office motives and inappropriate politics from M. Donald Grant throughout the early teams, began to deteriorate; even their own gods were abandoning them. The Mets dismantled the great pitching staff of the two pennant years, and, in the wake of the Steinbrenner/Yankee renaissance, simply gave up and became the minor-league team in New York. All this happened as it does in baseball, slowly and leaving always flickers of hope that the team can be restored. Finally, by the late '70's, the last vestiges of the old Mets were gone, and one looked up and saw Steve Henderson and Lee Mazzilli in the outfield, Dave Kingman and Joe Torre in the infield, Frank Taveras at short, and Kevin Kobel, Wayne Twitchell, Pat Zachry, and Mark Bomback on the mound. Then the ownership changed in 1980, and a group including Nelson Doubleday and Fred Wilpon began to build the old Mets again from scratch.

In the years after my leaving New York the Mets gradually came to stand for the mythic land of my origin, a native country that was otherwise obliterated by concrete and the changing occupants of apartment buildings. They represented the fierce regional spirit of the ancient boroughs, the part of New York that was idiosyncratic, small-town, and regional — as much African and European as American. The brief glimpse of Shea Stadium in Wim Wenders' film *Alice in the Cities* reminds me that New York is as hieroglyphic as a Peruvian village center if viewed totally from the outside. Those old Mets also represented the miracle of the streets and of our belief in ourselves. When they were terrible, we accepted their losses with compassion and understood them as a process deeper than won/lost baseball, and when they turned their destiny around, they did it swiftly and gracefully in one season — as sudden as the landing of a UFO in Times Square.

The Yankees on the other hand came to stand for the New York I fled and even denied in myself — the arrogant provincial capital of the corporate imperialist empire. They were pure Manhattan, Madison Avenue, the self-promoter, the public-relations bully, the carpetbagger who rebuilt by stealing the players and the souls of other teams — Catfish, and Reggie, and Goose. They were owned by crass, win-at-all-cost America; thus, their victories were not interesting. George Steinbrenner even went into the clubhouse to steal

the hearts of his players; everything honorable and liberated said that the Yankees couldn't win in the end.

The Miracle Mets of 1969 were a part of the brief American Aquarian Age; the Miracle Mets of 1973 restored Earth Day for a second before America dove into home computers, punk rock, designer jeans, and yuppie supply-side culture. Living away from the City I always wondered what happened to the original Met fans in the years after '73. I could not believe that so many of them had turned into Yanquis; yet even people who once only idly followed the pennant races except to hate the Yanks had turned into closet Yankee-rooters, accepting Steinbrenner as some inevitable tour de force like *The Return of the Jedi.* Socially conscious Yankee fans argued their case eloquently: it was the Yankees who went out and got the important Afro and Latin players — Willie Randolph, Ed Figueroa, Reggie Jackson, Mickey Rivers; the Mets meanwhile were publicly embarrassing Cleon Jones and dumping Tommy Agee. The Yankees were also rich in downhome lore, bringing together good old boys like Catfish Hunter and Ron Guidry, and offering a forum for the expression of such diverse talents as Thurman Munson and Graig Nettles. At the same time the Mets sent off Tom Seaver in the night and dealt Tug McGraw before anyone else heard he might have a tumor on his arm. They were in the process of trying to get rid of John Stearns and Craig Swan at the moment ownership was changing (oddly, all four principles in that uncompleted trade — Willie Aikens and Dickie Thon for the Angels — were to have their careers curtailed). Anti-Met new-breed Yankee fans argued that Steinbrenner at least was creating a team and expressed a gratuitous intention toward ethics. How could anyone stuck with M. Donald Grant complain about crassness and the ugly American? Yet that's who ran the Mets until 1980.

During the ten years that followed the Mets' last pennant they got less and less coverage in New York papers. Even the *Village Voice* considered the Yankees the only team worth deconstructing. To me, perhaps the Mets were in exile, but the soul of New York was there with them. The Yankees were simply a well orchestrated advertising campaign; they were glitter on a hollow core. What now of that college kid who stood in the t.v. repair shop in Amherst and let out a whoop of relief as McCovey lined at Richardson? No doubt I was different, but the whole American landscape had changed too. In twenty years, hard drugs, megabucks, and nuclear build-up had erased the possibility of a baseball moment so pure. And the Yankees

pushed their way right into the mainstream. Only the Mets were my lifeline back to the beginning of baseball in myself — the frogs around a summer pond and the clouds drifting across the mirror of a blue sky while Mel Allen welcomed me to another Yankee broadcast.

From our first visits to California I tried interesting Robin in baseball, but when I took him to games he was bored and mainly looked around for the ice cream man and mascot clowns. In 1975 he saw Ed Halicki no-hit the Mets in the second game of a doubleheader, but he was only concerned with punching me in the arm because I wouldn't leave, as I had promised, when the upper and lower scoreboard numbers filled in all the way to 5 (his sole interest for the previous hour and a half). After a couple more tries I gave up, so I was quite surprised when I found him watching the Yankee-Dodger World Series on t.v. — twenty-six years after I was initiated to a different Yankees and Dodgers, and at about a year older (but then I was a city kid, and he had mostly grown up in rural Vermont with bikes and sleds). We both got into it the same way: cards. My friends and I began collecting Flash Gordon cards; with the change in season the same candy stores offered baseball pictures with gum — team emblems and faces on their fronts and numbers on their backs. I was originally drawn to the Yankees by the bright yellow of the Gene Woodling card (like a precious gem). For Robin night-sky gods preceded baseball also, for his friends collected Star Trek cards and then baseball ones, and he got curious about the teams. It had little to do with my interest. In fact, I had stopped following the 1978 season after the Mets were done, and I was hostile to the Series being in our living room. He was triumphant in his new understanding of the game and a little puzzled by my attitude. I was surprised he suddenly knew all the rules and who Reggie Jackson was and other things like that.

When he began following baseball from the beginning of a full season (1979), he briefly considered rooting for the A's, but then chose the Mets because of the colors of their uniforms. I told him life would be far easier if he rooted for a local team, but he was stubborn about his decision. Back in our old farmhouse in Vermont we had painted his room childlike blue and orange, and for the years in the Bay Area he had longed to go back there. The Mets expressed his nostalgia for his old room and also the alienation he felt from California. The difference he felt from his friends was one of the deepest experiences of his daily life; they were unreliable, always running after the latest

fad and "being cool." If they liked the A's, they made them into disco heroes indistinguishable from macho martial artists and rock stars. The Mets were strange and foreign, and no one talked about them. In the world of the cards they were as precise and idiosyncratic as any team, but they weren't jive or show-offy (at least Robin imagined their fans weren't). From then on he acted as though the Mets were something he invented quite apart from me; he was rooting for his own blue-and-orange baseball-card Met team, a team that began at the moment he noticed them. In fact he was irritated at first by cards of players no longer on the team.

As the 1979 season began, he counted the days till the first visit of the Mets to Candlestick. We got our seats from Art Richman, a club official who travelled with the team and who was a longtime friend of both my father and stepfather. Once a sportswriter for the now defunct *Daily Mirror*, Art was worn out from too many years around a child's game and jaded by the behavior of the new generation of self-oriented players. "I've got to be baby-sitter now for a bunch of spoiled kids," he told us in '79. He was real New York downbeat, seen-everything — not the jolly fan I remembered as a kid — but he graciously gave us seats with the Mets' families and friends, and sometimes he even let it slip that he liked these kids and was rooting for them to win. More often, though, he felt obligated to apologize to us for their miserable play.

We came out to the ballpark the first time a couple of hours early and stood behind the Mets' dugout watching the warm-ups. Robin picked out John Stearns as his favorite player from a specific incident.

The Mets then had a German calisthenics coach who led the team in exercises and stretches before the game. Before their baseball warm-ups the whole team had to lie out on the grass and follow his instructions. Many of the players seemed either irritated or embarrassed by this public activity, but the one-time Colorado football back John Stearns gave voice to the dissatisfaction. At the appropriate point in each repeating cycle Stearns said: "And oun streeeeetch," mocking the accent and then laughing.

Later that series we ended up sitting with Stearns' college friends from Colorado who now farmed in Wyoming. I had previously imagined him a typical jock, but through their eyes I saw a rebel and a cowboy hippie. In the fierceness of his play Stearns had always seemed the heart of the post-'73 Mets; he maintained the desire to win again and sustained a fury at being beaten. The image stays in my mind

of him kneeling by home plate that week as the tying and winning runs crossed, looking forlornly up at his friends as he grasped the dirt with his fist. They gave him a V sign and he nodded slowly and then bounced back to the dugout. I hoped then that the Mets would revive in time to let this native Colorado philosopher play for the pennant in their uniform. Through an exile of undetermined length he was the soul of the team.

It is hard to pinpoint Robin's maturity as a Met fan because it came so fast—from a few cards to a room filled with banners, yearbooks, and baseballs. After one year he was trying to collect cards of every player who ever played for the Mets. He kept a checklist of their all-time roster and took it to old card stores, though he realized that some would always be missing (Don Rose, Lute Barnes, Greg Harts, etc.). When I discovered a source of minor-league cards he began collecting the whole farm system insofar as it was available: Tidewater, Jackson, Lynchburg. He was excited to think that he had been born in '69, though he was frustrated that he had missed it, and he milked me for details of what it had felt like. It was strange for me to answer because when I thought back to those evenings by the ocean in Maine I remembered not only the radio and Don Cardwell pitching and Ron Swoboda hitting those home runs off Steve Carlton, but him innocent and unconscious in his diaper, moving across the universe that precedes this one. Time itself strews our lives into separate countries left far behind, and nothing can restore them as they were. Lindy and I were older, with a second child, Miranda, born in 1974, but for moments I relived 1969 all over again for Robin.

The next season I went east for a book party for the Doubleday edition of my first baseball anthology, and, since the team and publishing company were partially co-owned, the editors and writers at the party went out to the company box at the ballpark afterwards. By the time we got there John Fulgham of the Cardinals was in complete control with a big lead and John Pacella, a rookie, was mopping up for the Mets, his cap falling off on every other pitch as he overthrew the fast ball. I called Robin from a phone booth, and he was disappointed with the score but enchanted that I was at Shea and speaking to him. He asked me to describe every detail. I had been sitting next to Fred Wilpon, who was part of the new ownership, and we talked about the Met future. He had been discouraging on Pacella and Juan Berenguer, I told Robin, but he also said it was a good day for the franchise: they had just signed their number one

draft choice, Darryl Strawberry. The rock singer George Thorogood, a friend of my co-editor's and a longtime Mets fan who had never been to Shea, was with us and rooting vocally for the Mets while trying to get Wilpon to sign his buddies Bernie Carbo and Jay Johnstone. When an usher asked Wilpon if he wanted him removed, he responded: "No, but find me five more like him." Complete with Met uniform shirt and cigar, right at the corner of the dugout, George sat there yelling for Pacella to throw the curve Wilpon promised he didn't have. Later, looking back at the ballpark from the parking lot, George said: "To hell with Yankee Stadium. This place is a shrine."

A couple of weeks later the Mets were at Candlestick on Robin's birthday, and Lindy, Miranda, he, and I went to the park together. Before the game Art Richman brought over players to congratulate him. Joe Torre asked him why he wasn't married yet; Bruce Boisclair said uneasily that he would try to get a hit for us. Then at our suggestion Art found John Stearns. Lindy knew from us that he was from Denver, so after his few moments of talking ballplayer-to-young-fan to Robin, she asked him, "What high school did you go to?" They then began throwing back and forth quippy comments about Denver.

"I know about girls from Kent," Stearns said at one point.

Afterwards Lindy teased Robin: "How do you like that? Your mother not only talking to your favorite player but with some aplomb."

"That's fine, Mom, but let's not talk about it any more, okay?"

Robin did make it to Shea that season. We flew east as a family for a few weeks in August, and on a rainy night I took him and my brother out on the rickety el to the ballpark. It was a dismal game—hardly any fans, continuous rain, and a substantial Met loss to the Phillies. We didn't even stay for the scheduled second game, which was played many hours later that night. On the way home Robin expressed surprise that the bulk of obnoxious people cursing and yelling dumb insults were Met fans; he had gotten used to being in a small island of "good guys" surrounded by the nasty mob. It took him a number of trips in different seasons to see that Shea was still relatively good-humored compared to Candlestick. The Giants bring out the unpublicized redneck anger that surrounds the core urban area, as ornery and mean a group of fans as there are. It's the South San Francisco gay-bashing crowd. I don't think at Shea you'd find the fat woman who sat behind me one day drinking beer and kicking my seat with some force because I was rooting for the Mets. "You're in public now, you prick," she said, in answer to my modest

objections. "You can't tell me what to do." Of course, at Yankee Stadium the punks were bigtime and came armed to take back Cuba, but that was a different ballgame entirely, with Admiral George setting the patriotic mood.

Later that season the Mets came to San Francisco; they lost the last three games of a four-game series at the end of August, but when they left town for Los Angeles we followed them down the coast en route to a regional booksellers' fair in San Diego. We heard the Mets lose the first game to the Dodgers on the car radio, and we stopped in a motel in Anaheim and took the kids to Disneyland the next day. In the evening Robin and I drove up to Dodger Stadium to watch John Pacella pitch against Dave Goltz. Two of the three players the Mets had just brought up from Tidewater played in their first major-league game. Wally Backman started at second and hit a couple of shots up the alley; Mookie Wilson played center, got his first hit as well, and ran down some balls to deep center, though he turned the wrong way on them. The Mets lost 6 - 5, and were swept the next night as we drove south. The following afternoon in San Diego we stood in the hot noon sun behind the visitor's dugout as the players warmed up. When Mookie Wilson wandered close enough, Robin called out to him and showed him his Tidewater card and congratulated him on his first hit. Mookie was astonished anyone knew who he was. When Wally Backman walked by, Robin shouted, "Nice hitting the other night." Backman smiled and came over and talked to him. A few rows back I was laughing quietly; with these rookies Robin had found his own first Mets.

The Padres came back and beat Neil Allen that day, knocked out Mark Bomback the next game, and then the following night we sat in a small Mets' cheering section behind third base, including Wally Backman's wife and parents, Alex Trevino's friends and family from Mexico, the mother and sisters of another rookie, Hubie Brooks, and the father and sister of a Mets Double A second baseman named Brian Giles who (we knew) had a good year at Jackson (Mississippi) with a fair number of homers (Giles himself sat a few rows down below). It was an evening of unreserved buoyancy that could not ever really be repeated — not as these players got older and their families hardened to the modern game. That night the new Mets played openly to their small cheering section, looking back and smiling. It was the first game for Hubie Brooks, the second for Mookie Wilson and Wally Backman. Ray Burris got knocked out early, but all three players got hits. We were an island of pandemonium as the Mets closed to 8 - 7

before a fine backhanded stop by Ozzie Smith ended the rally.

Far from New York City we were seeing the initiation of a new team; in the midst of a deadly losing streak the Mets were shedding their skin and changing. All winter Robin and I talked about going to opening day at Shea, and when bargain air fares were announced in March we bought two tickets. We would go see those same rookies open on the home team in New York.

The last weeks before a new season were filled with strange dreams in which all my ambiguities and symbolizations of baseball ran through each other. I was taking Robin the child to a game, but as we sat down he turned into an old man with a beard, and the guards ordered us to leave. Another night we found ourselves in the old underground of Yankee Stadium; there were no Mets anywhere, but Bill Skowron and Mickey Mantle were dressing for the game in a shabby room behind the hot-dog/orange-soda stand. As it got closer to April I dreamed that we were trying to get from the el to the ballpark, but the exit ramp became a bridge over a vast stretch of ocean; we could see the ballpark far beneath us in an archipelago, minute figures enacting not only the game but a whole season in another space-time. Then I dreamed the Mets were opening the season against the Red Sox in a city park in New York, a sandlot field without stands and fences. The usher seated us on the grass just outside the foul lines, and I was afraid we were in the way. The first batter lined a ground ball foul just on the other side of us, and we had to leave. Now Tim Leary was delivering a lecture dressed in street clothes. Closer still to opening day I dreamed that we arrived late at the ballpark to find the Mets playing the old St. Louis Browns in the first game of a World Series. The Browns had jumped to a 3–0 lead: we saw the last run score on a grounder down the third-base line which the fat Met left-fielder (whom I didn't recognize) bobbled. Two days before we left on the plane, and in the core of a dream about something else, a line drive was hit right at me; I dove to make a backhanded catch and then looked up to find myself on the field on opening day, the rightfielder. How did I get there? How could I slink away before revealed as a fraud? Baseball, like a poison, was working through my bloodstream to every level of consciousness and unconsciousness.

Actual opening day was rained out, but the next afternoon we took the subway out to the ballpark with a friend and stood in the East Coast pale spring sun, the chill of winter still in the shadows, the Stadium unopened. Times long ago and times present seemed

merged in the clear prism of memory and the New York City light. I felt in myself the subway trip to Ebbets Field for a World Series game with my stepfather — the same chill in the air, the same vendors selling programs, the smell of cigar and old clothes recalling the tense pleasure of baseball cruciality and promise. The Mets had an early season sparkle with Mookie Wilson lining the ball up the alley and running around to third on a bobble, Doug Flynn driving in a couple of runs. They beat the Cardinals and then the Expos after a loss. Craig Swan threw again, and Pat Zachry won as the fans stood and cheered the first big moment of the season — Dave Kingman launching it high into the left-field stands to settle the issue. We were sure we wouldn't be embarrassed at Candlestick again with this new young team, but at Candlestick it was always the same story, and we were in for another disappointing year.

It didn't seem to matter if the Mets were playing well or poorly at the time, they let most games at Candlestick slip away, as though there were something about the very shape of the ballpark and the color of the light that made the Giants invincible against the team that had taken their place in the old city. Let the Giants play the Phillies or Expos or Cubs and fall behind by a few runs early, and the game was all but over. For the Mets no lead was safe. The games of the late seventies and early eighties all blur together: Jack Clark is homering off a too-young Jesse Orosco in the eighth inning to give him his first major-league loss. Johnnie Lemaster triples in the eighth off Pat Zachry and scores the only run of the game. Neil Allen throws a pinch homer to Hector Cruz in his first at-bat as a Giant to tie a game with two outs in the ninth — Giants win in the tenth; Neil Allen throws a three-run pinch homer to Reggie Smith turning victory into defeat in the ninth. I can still see the balls falling against the backdrop of cheering fans in the arc lights, and I remember the frustration and wounded hopes we carried to the parking lot as if it were all one relentless event, like a mystery cycle repeated in discrete incidents, a curse that could not be lifted. Even in 1984 there was the light-hitting Brad Wellman lofting a two-run homer just inside the left-field foul pole off Jesse Orosco to turn a hard-fought one-run win into a one-run loss and costing them a game in the standings they couldn't afford to lose then to the Cubs. Robin and I sat there flushed and numbed, shocked not that it happened but that it continued to happen despite the fact the Mets were a contender and the Giants the worst team in the league. We were trapped in a labyrinth even Davey Johnson might now know: falling one run

short against Vida Blue, one run short against Ed Halicki, one run short against Allen Ripley, one run short against Al Holland when he was a starter. From the East Coast, Candlestick might seem exotic, the site of late-afternoon games and night games shrouded in mystery and fog that spilled over into the A.M. of the next day. But in San Francisco itself, in our own time zone, the games were utterly lucid and factual. The Giants were always a sleeping dragon aroused by the appearance of the actual Mets.

The experience of the ballpark went far beyond winning and losing. We would drive across the Bay Bridge two hours before game time and stand in either the last afternoon before twilight or the late-morning light and watch the players come down from the clubhouse onto the field and warm up. 1982 stands out. We came through the gate that first time after winter into the visibility of the ballfield sitting out there below like the Earth from the Moon, the late-afternoon sun coloring the field like farmland, and the music playing Johnny Burnette: "She's Sixteen, She's Beautiful, and She's Mine." Baseball herself. We walked down the right-field line and reached the bullpen just at the moment the Mets were coming out of the tunnel to their clubhouse. Tom Veryzer walked onto the field with a few team-mates, and another expatriate American Leaguer yelled out to him: "Welcome to the big leagues, boys."

When he was younger Robin would go down to the edge of the field and get his yearbook and cards autographed, but year by year the behavior of the other fans discouraged him more, spoiled kids and grabby adults pushing people out of the way and cursing at players who ignored their screams for attention. After a while he realized that many people got the autographs simply to sell them. He went through a transition of getting them despite his better judgment because he could think of no alternative record of the experience, and then he was satisfied just to stand there and watch and have the memories. It was always a wonder to see the baseball cards come to life in full uniform, the names and numbers in the box scores standing there throwing a ball back and forth, the new players catching our first attention. In that warm-up situation the Met identities were indelible and eternal; they didn't have to be making plays in a game that would be part of a newspaper statistic; they just had to throw the ball back and forth, take their swing in the cage, and walk across the field. That was the ordinary game of baseball that never appeared in the newspaper or on the radio and, in between innings, was crushed out by ads on t.v. It was the calm necessary

preparation for the ceremony that followed.

At Candlestick we sat in the family section behind the dugout and enjoyed the "shadow" Met game as on that one evening in San Diego. In different seasons we saw (or heard): rookie Mike Vail's parents shooting movies of him every time he came back to the dugout and his mother yelling, "Mikey, smile," as he kept his eyes sullenly downcast after successive strike-outs; Gary Rasjich's brother trying to figure out how Gary could get into the game and telling us about their baseball-fan mother; Wally Backman's wife telling us about Tidewater and Ronn Reynolds' wife talking about the season at Jackson; Mike Scott's parents worrying; George Foster's wife and sister in furs (his sister had his same face, and his wife promised us George would win the game); and Leon Brown's father expressing sorrow that his son wasn't as good as Gary Matthews on the Giants: "Now there's a player. If only he could have been like that."

In 1982 during a day game we realized we were sitting next to Lou Gorman, the vice president of the team, and, over the quiet course of the afternoon, he was willing to run down the prospects of the best players in the system: Ron Darling, Doug Sisk, Herm Winningham, Terry Blocker, Jeff Bittiger, Jay Tibbs, and the one great power hitter: John Christensen, "the boy we signed out of Cal. State Fullerton." We discussed when Tim Leary might come back, and Gorman said he was throwing pain-free but needed a year of rehabilitation. I couldn't tell if he was truly pleased we knew so much about the Mets and the names of so many players in the chain or whether it was just another kind of fan to deal with, the over-informed type probably not uncommon in New York. After all, our information was from minor-league newspapers (like *Baseball America* and *Mets Inside Pitch*) and stat-sheets; to him these were real people, players with specific talents and histories: we were talking about two different things. He said that the reliever with the fine record at Jackson, John Semprini, had a trick pitch, a kind of drop, and that when he got it over he was unbeatable at that level, but he needed more to get to the majors (a couple of years later he went to Seattle in a minor-league trade). He said that Greg Biercevicz, a pitcher leading the International League in earned run average, was a prospect he had at Seattle who hurt his arm and now he had re-signed him for the Mets (later, he played out his minor-league option and became a White Sox farmhand). He said Mike Scott had as good stuff as anyone on the staff, but he wondered if he was teachable and thought they would have to give up on him (he was traded to Houston for Danny

Heep after the season). He liked Ed Lynch okay: "Ed's a good pitcher and a fine person. I wish he were a better pitcher because he's a credit to our team, but we've got some boys coming along that are really special, and they may push him out." When he mentioned Biercevicz, I suggested that maybe Whitey Herzog went after Amos Otis after leaving the Mets, and that it was a pretty smart trade because getting Bob Johnson and Amos Otis (with the players that came from trading Bob Johnson later to the Pirates) established the old Royals. Gorman chuckled: "That was me that made those trades. I built the Royals." Then he added: "And how about Craig Reynolds for Floyd Bannister?" (a deal he pulled off at Seattle). "Wasn't that a good one?" It was interesting to see that he was openly proud of these transactions, like an artist discussing the high points of certain periods of his work. He told us that the Mets were one of the best teams he was ever involved in putting together, which would become apparent when they jelled in a year or two. I think he talked to us partly because the image of the future team engaged him more than the particular group of players on the field; he seemed to pay only on-and-off attention to the game until Jesse Orosco came on in relief with a small lead. Then Lou Gorman leaned forward and radared in on every pitch. "This is one of the most promising players we've got, and everyone wants him. All he lacks is confidence. If he gets that he'll be the best left-handed retriever in the league."

In retrospect, that almost seems to have been the day Jessie turned it around. The Giants were helpless against his assortment of fast balls and curves, and, when Dave Kingman put one out with men on base to clinch the game, Lou Gorman stood and roared with the rest of us.

The following season Robin and I adopted his points of view and became more involved in tracking players through the minors, using materials from *Baseball America* and *Inside Pitch*. We would follow a player from the original draft through different levels of the farm system, seeing which ones improved, which ones were dropped, and how many levels a player advanced. In 1983 the Mets' whole farm system seemed to come to life. At their highest Class A team at Lynchburg they fielded one of the best minor-league teams to be seen in many years; their pitchers included Dwight Gooden, Jay Tibbs, Jeff Bettendorf, Bill Latham, Wes Gardner, and, after the draft, Calvin Schiraldi, who helped Texas to the College Baseball Championship. Dave Cochrane hit 25 homers; Len Dykstra, a swift centerfielder, hit .358. A notch higher at Jackson John Christensen

batted .333, and the third baseman Kevin Mitchell and the catcher John Gibbons both had fine years with a lot of homers. Herm Winningham led the league at .354 before he was moved up to Tidewater. Columbia, a lower Class A team, had three of the most promising starters in the South Atlantic League in Randy Myers, Floyd Youmans, and Kevin Brown, and a good young catcher in Barry Lyons. Another draft choice, Dave Magadan, *Baseball America*'s college player of the year, broke in at .336. The Mets got both Schiraldi and Magadan because the Braves signed Pete Falcone, a Type B free agent; it was like trading Falcone not only for Bob Horner and Steve Bedrosian, but to be delivered down the road when needed. Their own first-round choice got them Stanley Jefferson, another fleet centerfielder who went on to be voted the best major-league prospect in the New York–Pennsylvania League. Meanwhile, the big-league Mets, struggling through another last-place season, took a gamble on making the future come sooner by trading Neil Allen and Rick Ownbey, young pitchers with fine stuff, for Keith Hernandez in the midst of playing out his option. They had made a similar move a few seasons earlier, trading Jeff Reardon for Ellis Valentine, and Valentine neither lived up to his potential nor signed with the Mets.

That summer, all of us went to a three-game series at Shea, and during the third game Robin and I sat with Fred Wilpon for an inning and discussed the future of the team. No small part of it would be signing Hernandez, and I asked him the obvious: could they convince him the Mets would be a contender on the basis of the farm system? Wilpon said that that would certainly be part of their case; Hernandez needn't go elsewhere to look for the team of the '80s. The in-between Mets were already improving in the latter part of 1983 as they swept the Cubs that weekend, Walt Terrell pitching his first shut-out in the process.

On the same trip East we got to see another level of the Mets' system for the first time. We drove from Falmouth, Mass., where we were staying, to Pawtucket, an old Rhode Island industrial town, one evening in late August, to watch the Tidewater Tides managed by Davey Johnson play the Pawtucket Red Sox. The ballpark was in a residential neighborhood, and the crowd seemed to walk from the houses at game time. It was a small field with painted signs in the outfield — a visit to a more authentic era before baseball was packaged and synthesized. The game here seemed reduced to its basics of twenty-seven outs a team, one in the field, one at bat. It was also a glimpse of the Mets yet unformed. Unfortunately, Tim Leary was

very wild and Gary Rasjich dropped a fly ball in right field with the bases loaded, so the Tides got beaten badly. Still, Terry Blocker hit the ball hard every time up, and Mike Fitzgerald homered over the wall in left. Gardenhire and Backman looked lively at short and second — in their Tide greys with Pirate-like oldtime caps, a confusion of Met past and future.

Our real high of the 1983 baseball season was the Triple A World Series on ESPN. Although finishing in fourth place the Tides got to represent the International League by knocking off both Yankee and Brave farm clubs. After splitting a doubleheader with the other two teams in the tournament (beating Denver, losing to Portland) in the untelevised portion, they played a Sunday doubleheader against the same two teams, starting Dwight Gooden, just up from Class A where he was 19–4 with 300 strikeouts in 191 innings. It was our first look at him — a raw minor-league fireballer in an historic Triple A setting. He started out shakily, giving Denver two early runs, but then he built up a head of steam and was overmatching the hitters in the late innings. We were ecstatic; the Met future was more than just numbers and names; it was visible in a teenage pitcher rising to the occasion two notches above the level at which he had pitched all season. In the second game of the doubleheader, one-time great prospect Jeff Bittiger mastered his control and fine curve ball and beat a very good Portland team of mostly ex-major-leaguers, Brent Gaff getting the final outs. The next day this team of Davey Johnson's won the championship without playing as Denver beat Portland. It wasn't the World Series, but it was the furthest the Mets had come since we had been following them. We wanted to see Johnson as Met manager — no more calling George Bamberger and Earl Weaver out of retirement. We now saw the future Lou Gorman saw — the whole Met system; it was the best in baseball at a time of parity. The old major-league shell was almost completely shed. In 1969 the Miracle Mets had *beaten* the Dodgers and the Orioles; the 1983 Mets were in the process of *becoming* them.

Although we now looked forward to 1984 with heightened interest, we were frustrated by the fact that we had no way to get the Mets regularly on either radio or t.v. We were limited to the twelve games against the Giants (at Candlestick or on the radio) and most of the twelve games against Atlanta (on cable television) plus an occasional other game on network t.v. We had no plans to go East, and it looked like a bad season for following the Mets — just as they were building toward something notable. Donald Sutherland might

dial in the games of his beloved Expos from a phone booth on location in Italy, but short of Hollywood salaries there seemed no way to keep in touch by radio.

We misread the computer age: radio was no longer the common person's medium. There was a far simpler and cheaper technology for following the Mets: WOR, channel 9 in New York, was on one of the geo-stationary satellites, and it carried two-thirds of the Mets' games. On and off for years I had tried to convince the local cable system to pick it up, but they were uninterested. Their offerings were slim anyway, and when I finally worked my way up to the home office in Denver the salesman told me: "Why pay out more money in royalties when we're not going to add very many new subscribers?" Dead end.

There was a satellite dish atop a video store on Highway 101 north of San Francisco, and during the winter I stared longingly at it and fantasized going in and asking to watch the Mets sometime. In late March I stopped there and asked the salesman if I could see a bit of opening day. He told me to call the home office of their company, Cygnus Satellite, in Sausalito. To my surprise I got a Met fan on the phone, and he immediately invited me to watch the game with him. So on opening day I drove across the Richmond Bridge and down 101, and then sat there enthralled as he punched the correct satellite into the computer. There were Tim McCarver and Ralph Kiner — as live as if I were in New York.

The Reds jumped on Torrez early, and won easily behind Mario Soto; Darryl Strawberry's long home run on his first at-bat was the only high point. But all through the game we talked prices and strategies, and it became clear that with a group of fans a dish was affordable. On the way home I kept dividing $3000 by numbers of possible members: 10, 20, even 30. That night Cody's Bookstore in Berkeley had their annual party in honor of the baseball season, and there I announced the idea of a baseball satellite t.v. club and put down a sign-up sheet. I got ten names on the first try, and another twenty from phone calls and by word of mouth over the next week. A couple of preliminary meetings cut the list in half and without a resolution among the remaining members about where to put a dish. We found no bar willing to cooperate and no rentable space either cheap enough or located with a view of the right portion of the sky and no microwave interference. In talking to both bar owners and prospective members we had a problem getting people to believe the real wealth of baseball available through the dish: not only regular

channels carrying the Mets, Cubs, Yankees, Braves, and Red Sox, but regional sports networks showing alternately the Rangers and Astros, the Cardinals, Reds, or Royals; almost all other teams occasionally on one network or another, including many minor-league games; and, most notable of all, raw feeds of all games being sent back to a home city any distance away — in other words, the uplinks from stadiums to satellites, with announcers chatting with each other in between innings, no ads, full field coverage of rain delays, and often pregame batting practice.

During those frustrating weeks, while April slipped away, I had my eye on an unlikely site: a collapsing garage in our backyard. It was uninhabitable, unable to support any weight, and with an angle of hardly any of the open sky, but I was convinced it was the right part, and there were tall buildings blocking the microwaves. When all else failed I asked Cygnus to come out and do a survey. The result: no significant interference and a view of barely and precisely the satellite band above the roof-tops and trees. After two weeks of cleaning, reinforcing, and wiring the garage, we had Cygnus assemble and mount the huge ten-foot-diameter parabola with its blue feedhorn core, we put a t.v. inside, and suddenly there was WOR, its magical 9 turning into the Met insignia in a backyard in Berkeley, California, and the voices of Tim McCarver and Steve Zabriskie within a few blocks of Shambhala Booksellers, Cody's, Telegraph Avenue, and People's Park. Our wish to see the Mets had finally overcome the distance, the East Bay Baseball Satellite T.V. Club was born, and our backyard was now part of metropolitan New York, and Chicago too.

Setting up a baseball club of this sort with a stable membership was tricky. Notices in the paper brought inquiries only from people who wanted to join without dues or who thought that we could somehow beam the games to their houses. When it came time to buy the dish, only eight of the people on the original list joined as full members, and two of them dropped out within the first month and were replaced. Throughout most of the first season we had eight full and eleven partial members. Many of the original ones were either Giants or A's fans, and Robin and I honestly worried about getting voted out of the Mets. However, the people who showed up most frequently were pure baseball fans, quite willing to watch a Met team that had Gooden, Darling, Hernandez, and Strawberry.

Some members preferred a pastiche of games, going from situation to situation across the sky, stopping during rallies or to watch

interesting pitchers. One fan brought stat books, baseball abstracts, and scouting reports, picked the best game (or the only game, even if it was Cleveland–Milwaukee), and sat in one of the old donated chairs analyzing each at bat with charts on both the pitcher and batter. After the games he began painting the inside of the garage (bright green) and hanging oldtime baseball photographs in frames. Other members brought in balls, bats, helmets, and paintings, and soon the inside of the clubhouse became a little baseball museum. Groups of adults and children seated in the pure dark on a stone floor watching the lit screen brought back memories of community baseball. It was mysterious as a planetarium and contactful as a Grange Hall.

Using the dish to search for unexpected games, Robin and I came across Tidewater on a few occasions — once, to see Rafael Santana single in the winning run in extra innings; another time, to watch Wes Gardner pitch inning after inning of effective relief. We also found Sid Fernandez pitching for Tidewater just a channel away from Dwight Gooden pitching for the Mets on the same satellite one night, and we flipped back and forth. Our last Tides game was a raw feed of the Maine Guides; we came upon a beanball battle in which both benches emptied and Guides' manager Doc Edwards was ejected, at which point he went and picked up third base and threw it away, then second base, then first base, and finally home plate he took into the clubhouse with him. After that we watched Jeff Bettendorf finish up and get the win as the Tides came from behind. He was the pitcher stolen from the Mets by the A's in the winter draft, mishandled by them, and then returned to the Met system; his recovery had been a high point of our early season.

One night, with a large number of members present and a dozen games circling the Earth above the equator, people finally settled on a Red Sox ninth inning from Fenway against the Yankees — a rally developed, and Bill Buckner bled a single through the infield for the tying run; then Reid Nichols fouled off a dozen difficult pitches and finally put it into the black above the screen.

The satellite t.v. nation of baseball is a relatively unpublicized offshoot of a telecommunications bureaucracy that more often works against individualization. People who use dishes can avoid Game-of-the-Week selections and national media coverage which tries to trick us into believing for a few hours that their chosen game is the showdown of all time. Baseball becomes regional once again, but in a whole new way. Remote areas of the Northern Hemisphere which

once had no television and barely any radio suddenly are able to follow the day-to-day fortunes of most major-league teams with their local announcers and pre- and post-game shows. Cubs fans in the Dominican Republic watch Chicago television and listen to Harry Caray. Met fans follow their team from Guam, Eastern Oregon, Alaska, and rural Alabama — live, in their local time zones. Ballplayers buy dishes for their wives and fathers to keep track of them. The town of Ukiah gets a dish so that the friends and relatives of Kelvin Chapman can hang out and watch him.

On the raw feeds the announcers are also more candid. When Tim McCarver complains on the air about a Met's unproductive pitching, someone in the booth tells him in between innings that they should send him to Triple A. "I'm not even sure he's a good Triple A pitcher," McCarver says.

Another time, in the inning break after an embarrassing miss of a ball by a Met outfielder, McCarver lamented: "In my day all you had to do was get to the ball, catch it, and throw it. Now it's not whether you catch it but how you look doing it."

Several weeks after the dish was up, another Met fan joined the club; he had heard there was a garage in Berkeley where you could watch the Mets, but he didn't believe it until a mutual acquaintance brought him by. The Mets were a big part of his life, and the satellite club looked like heaven.

Stu was a stockbroker on the Pacific Exchange who told us he moved to California after hearing a kid at a game in San Diego ask his father how it could be raining (as the scoreboard said) in Cleveland if it was summer. He was an uncompromising Met fan who considered Jim Frey and Tom Seaver traitors. "If I were traded to another team," he said, "especially a Chicago team, I wouldn't go, I'd just quit."

"Is that what you expect of them?"

"Absolutely. The only two things that should never happen again is the rearming of Germany and a pennant in Chicago."

"Don't you feel we owe them something for '69?"

"Owe Chicago anything? A city where everyone looks like Harry Caray?"

He kept denying the Cubs all year even as it became obvious they were formidable. All season he repeated: "Bob Dernier's a bum; Ryne Sandburg's a bum. They've got one guy who can play the outfield, no left side of the infield. The only thing that's going to fall faster than the Cubs is Bob Brenly's batting average." He was wrong on both counts but undaunted: "Next year Sandburg's hitting .220.

What's he done the second half anyway."

I remember Stu in the summer of '84 by one remark in particular — on an evening after I cooked dinner, Robin came back to the garage from the house with a message from Miranda: "She wants to know if she has to eat her spinach."

"Yes," snapped Stu before I could answer. "And give her seconds."

Here was a classic street New Yorker. He never saw a tomato on the vine until our backyard garden, although he had lived in California for nearly ten years. He had never even been into Berkeley (commuting from Walnut Creek to the stock exchange) until he heard the club was there. He believed that you stepped on all insects. After Glenn Hubbard put a hard tag on a Met runner, Stu screamed: "The next guy who goes down there on a doubleplay, put him out for the season." Then he looked at me and said: "The guy's not even gonna be able to walk." After hearing of Dick Ruthven's arm injury he said, "Six months at least I hope." Same line for John Denny. No good sportsmanship for Stu; he wanted to win. When the Mets were on their surge he delighted in switching to the Cub station to hear Harry Caray get the score. "Take that, you bum," he said.

The Mets were the persona Stu presented to the world. Their stubbornness and magic represented and allowed his own individuation. The Yankees were his arch enemy. "My whole world's falling apart," he said at one point in late August as the Mets continued to be pounded by the Cubs day after day and the Yankees put on a second-half surge.

One game, earlier in the season, Stu screamed for Mike Torrez (who had already put Dickie Thon out for the season) to drill Gary Carter on his sore elbow; the Expos were coming hard at a Met lead and Torrez hadn't won all year. He jumped up with a loud clap and cheer when Torrez did just what he asked for. After the game I told Robin he didn't necessarily have to agree with Stu, even though he was rooting for the same team. He thought about it and then said: "But he's such a good Met fan."

The interaction between the two of them was quite significant. After a year of hard work in ninth grade, Robin retreated to his two favorite things: the Mets, and his building projects — so he was sitting out in the garage for the games, and otherwise buying tools, collecting scrap wood, and assembling structures. He never called a friend all summer. Although Stu's personality was the opposite of his, Robin preferred him to anyone else. "You know why it works,"

he told Lindy. "It's because there's a part of us that's exactly like him."

From the time he was a little kid Robin was always a reasonable and articulate kid, a peacemaker at school and on the street, even in the roughest of neighborhoods. But he was also fed up with the reaction of his yuppie friends in prep school. That they teased him about rooting for the terrible Mets didn't bother him, for it served as an expression of his own difference from them, but then they themselves only rooted for the team that was winning, changing from season to season: the Braves, then the Phillies, then the Orioles. This year they began wearing Tiger caps. Or if they were Giant fans they insisted the Giants were "awesome." When the Giants did badly they told Robin the 49-ers were better than the Mets. When the Mets did well, they said, "Hey, how about those Cubs!"

Stu expressed the part of Robin that was loyal and steadfast. He understood that only when you root for a team when it's down does it mean anything to root for them when they're winning —not an easy line to sell in the upwardly mobile Bay Area.

During the hot streak of June and July when the Mets put together several long winning streaks and soared into first, Stu transported us from Berkeley to a hot bar in Queens. As tense game after tense game ended in victory the three of us would rise with a collective roar, and Lindy and Miranda inside the house knew the Mets had won. Jesse Orosco would be pounding his glove, leaving the mound, or Keith Hernandez would be rounding first as Mookie Wilson raced home to beat Neil Allen and the Cardinals. It was probably too much too soon, and at the end of July we were confronted by the intimidating rush of the Cubs.

When we held our final meeting of the club for 1984 after the season I discussed the dues and then asked people their predictions for 1985. There was a brief silence, and suddenly Stu said: "All I can say is you better collect the money from those Cub fans up front, because they're gonna be losing interest long before we get to the all-star break."

Candlestick Park, May 15. Having a press pass for the first time in my life I still find it hard to walk onto the field. I stand in the front row behind the Mets' dugout with Robin. As the stream of Met blue pours out from the clubhouse, I do it, opening the gate behind home plate and walking onto the field. I take a few steps and then look back at the stands, lightheaded: the world has been turned inside-out. I have violated a taboo almost as old as myself, so I hold my

press pass in my hand like a child with his first movie ticket.

Seeing the players not only up close but in a situation where I am free to move among them immediately creates the dilemma: they look so familiar but they don't know me at all. I am an intruder, even with a pass. Although it feels impolite to be turning away guarded glances and ignoring people on purpose, that seems exactly the etiquette needed in this situation. Where the physical barrier has been removed, another barrier exists between players and visitors to the field. You can talk to a player and not actually penetrate it.

I remember with some apprehension an incident that happened to my brother many years ago when he was in college in Wisconsin. Physically he had turned into a hippie and an adult, with shaggy clothes and long hair; yet in a part of his mind he still imagined himself as the child-prodigy star shortstop of the summer-camp league. He had gone to see the Yankees play in Minneapolis, and before the game that morning he walked into the lobby of the Yankees' hotel for a glimpse of Mickey Mantle, his alter ego all through childhood. Boyishly trooping across the lobby he was frozen by a voice behind him. "Hey, someone is looking for you?" He turned around eagerly, expecting somehow to see Mickey. It was Elston Howard and he said: "The barber."

I stand safely in the coterie of sportswriters behind the batting cage. Familiar Mets are all around: Ron Hodges, Hubie Brooks, Keith Hernandez, George Foster. I had great plans for an article in the *Village Voice;* now I find I have nothing to say to any of them. Jesse Orosco and Chili Davis are off to the side talking to one another — seems strange since Chili hits him well and boasts about it to the press; one imagines them as simply names and opponents to each other. Then Chili finds Darryl Strawberry, and the two of them huddle by themselves by the Giants' dugout and talk intently until Mets' batting practice. They don't seem so much to have words in the sense of "gabbing;" much of the time they stand silently together, as though in a show of solidarity against the tyranny of false promise. Joel Youngblood has been hanging around the batting cage, waiting, and he greets his old Met friends with exuberance when they arrive. Wally Backman approaches, and he breaks into a big smile; they clasp hands, almost hugging. "Hiya Blood," says Wally.

Kelvin Chapman arrives in a group of players right behind Backman, and Youngblood shouts, "I never thought I'd see you up here again. Ever." It also seems as though the whole town of Ukiah is there shouting at Chapman from the stands. After visiting with

Youngblood he stands by the dugout talking with people, answering questions, asking about weddings, babies, little-league games, Robin tells me.

I remember my first days on the wharf with lobstermen in Maine. You know you don't belong there and that they're sharper than you, and one way or another they're going to prove to you that you shouldn't be there, and even if you prepare yourself for their edge it doesn't do any good. The one person standing around unoccupied is the Mets' batting coach Bill Robinson. I walk up and ask if we can talk. "Why not," he says. "I'm not doing anything." I am not sure if he's being ironical.

I ask him how the Mets are different from what he imagined coming over here. "Different? It's a whole new organization, new players, new attitude. It's not *different*. It's just not the same people."

"What changes have you brought about since the start of the season?"

"Well, Fitzgerald's hitting better. Oquendo's a better hitter than he was. Hey, you're not writing any of this down. If I'm going to talk you've got to write it down. That's your job."

Pen poised I ask if there are any good hitters in the Mets' minor-league system. "The best are here," he says. "But there are some good hitters down there: Kevin Mitchell, John Gibbons."

I thank him for the interview and go back to the safety behind the batting cage. Keith Hernandez is answering questions for a group of sportswriters, and I simply listen. He says he was very unhappy with the trade at first; he had been a Cardinal fan all his life. He didn't at all expect to sign with the Mets because he wanted to be on a contender. "Just playing out the string is drudgery. You want a chance to win. But they told me they had some pretty good players in the system, and I found out in spring training they weren't kidding. It's a far better team than I realized. I just rolled the dice and came out lucky." A writer asks him what it's like winning in New York. "I don't know. I never won there. I haven't found out yet."

Up close Hernandez is different from my image of him; there's a force from his presence, and I sense the sharpness of his drive that gets expressed in every game. Yet, as he jokes with his brother Gary on the field and takes practice swings, he has a quality almost like jolliness; perhaps he was once a little brother, a clown; he has outgrown it but still has the twinkle of slapstick in his movements. At the plate Ortiz and Oquendo are involved in a batting-practice contest, arguing about what's a hit and what's not.

In the game itself Ron Darling is knocked out early on home runs by Leonard and Clark, but the Mets creep back into it, tying, and then taking the lead as Fitzgerald hits a key single with the bases loaded; but then it is the Giants' turn to tie the score, after which they load the bases with no one out in sudden-death against Orosco, who gets a pop-up and then a strike-out on the suicide-squeeze try. In extra innings Kelvin Chapman brings Ukiah to its feet with a pinch double into the left-field corner, and, three batters later, Hernandez brings him in with a sacrifice fly as the winning run.

In the excitement of the comeback win I decide to take the next step, a visit to the clubhouse. We find the correct elevator, go down a flight, and are stopped by the guard at the tunnel; he approves my pass but says Robin must wait outside. I leave him at the entrance and walk in.

The Mets' clubhouse is a rush. Players are walking around, undressing, eating cold cuts from a table spread and drinking beer. Luckily there are "other" sportswriters there, and I can stand with them in the center of the room and get my bearings. Nick Peters, a friend who covers the Giants for the *Oakland Tribune*, ran into me in Berkeley a few weeks later and said: "Richard, I was ashamed of you." Immediately I wondered what gaffe I had made. "You didn't even say hello to me in the Mets' clubhouse after that night game. You were standing there, eyes wide open, looking like a ten-year-old kid." No doubt I was. I saw Mookie racing around excitedly, Rusty talking in a loud voice — his uniform removed to show a red hammer-and-sickle with a line drawn through it on his tee shirt and the words: "Fuck the Russians." Most of the reporters crowded around Chapman's locker, those in the back asking those in front if he really was local. George Foster at the next locker pretended to whisper to him:

"Tell them your name. Make sure they get your name." Every now and then he would turn to a newly arrived sportswriter and say: "Don't you know who that is? That's Keith Hernandez."

Being with the players in the locker room is different from watching them on the field. It's a group of men. In a certain sense they are still the Mets, still familiar, and that's what makes it a powerful and disorienting experience. But on a gut level I respond to them as people, reading their energy and motives as I would any group of strangers. In that sense I wonder what I'm doing here. There's a real sense of danger when unknown people mix in a social situation; the enforced intimacy of the locker room intensifies that. Staub and Foster look particularly imposing; I would not want to get in

their way. For no particular reason many of the other players look unapproachable too: Heep, Gaff, Fitzgerald, Torrez, Hodges. I have nothing to exchange with them. Tim Leary, appearing much taller in person than even Christopher Reeves, asks me if I know where Bruce Jenkins is; that interrupts my introspection abruptly.

"The American League," I tell him.

"Oh, he covers the Yankees."

"You mean the A's."

"Yeah."

"How's your arm now." Dumb question.

"The arm is (pause) great." A big spacey smile; he's said it too many times and is teasing me. "Just . . . great."

I see no reason to be another person bothering Dwight Gooden or Darryl Strawberry, so I stand and listen to a journalist I know make a radio tape of the Mets' young pitcher. Gooden answers his questions in a flat diffident way as he changes his clothes. He's not even bored; he knows precisely what's expected of him and he supplies the appropriate words. The one player who looks approachable is Ron Darling, and since he was taken out of the game early, no one is at his locker; he sits there, almost completely dressed, looking dreamily into the air.

"Hi," I say. "Do you mind talking briefly?"

He is a little surprised. "No, that's okay." I ask him how he thinks the season is going so far. Accustomed to talking about himself he answers accordingly: "Tonight wasn't that bad a game. I've been getting better each start. I *am* improving." He is answering questions that people always ask him, putting forward the ostensible central issue of his career. Of that night's game he says: "I made some bad pitches. I just lost my concentration. With Clark I simply forgot. I threw the ball before I remembered. The pitch I made to Leonard was okay. It usually gets popped up. But he's a good hitter."

I thank him and head toward the door, but Frank Cashen, the general manager, passes me going the other way. I ask him if we can talk sometime. He is less than enthusiastic but says, "If you get to the park an hour or so before tomorrow's game I'll give you a few minutes."

Outside the door I find Robin who has been excitedly watching the players leave in street clothes. "It was amazing. I'm just standing there and Tim Leary walks by. And then Danny Heep. And Keith Hernandez."

The whole visit left me feeling troubled. Being a sportswriter

was just as parasitic as being an anthropologist was: each one preyed off the symbols generated by other people's activity; the distinction between observer and informant was merely self-serving. For the ostensible transfer of information into goods the anthropologist/sportswriter is tolerated as a hanger-on, at least in the self-conscious Western World. But the native subjects always intuit artificiality and false objectivity, even if they can't articulate it. No one stands outside of history; history is what happens to us, regardless of our pretense of documentation. The summer I spent a few days on the Hopi Third Mesa the people were politely asking the anthropologists to leave, to go home so they could do the wash. The "natives" were inundated not only with Ph.D. professors but summer schools of graduate students with government money to pay them to generate "data." Only with baseball, both you and they realize that it's the daily reporting of these events that turns the game into media, and the media that create the marketable demand. That doesn't make it any less of a violation; it merely expiates it with collaborative greed.

The next day was not only a day game but getaway day, so the Mets didn't arrive at Candlestick until an hour and a half before game time. Robin and I stood outside the clubhouse waiting, and when the bus arrived, the players got off one by one, most of them in sports jackets carrying briefcases: Gardenhire, Brooks, Lynch, Gorman, Orosco, Gaff, Hodges, Fitzgerald. Darryl Strawberry arrived separately by cab and paid the fare. The modern ballplayers might look like young businessmen arriving for appointments, but that didn't make their entry into the ceremony any less spellbinding; the very absence of the uniform showed its power. I waited for the bus to empty and everyone to disappear into the locker room; then I went and found Frank Cashen at the center table. He seemed no more anxious to go through with the interview than the night before, and I felt guilty, but he signalled for me to follow him and then suggested we go out to the field and sit in the sun. Momentarily I wondered what to do with Robin who wasn't allowed past the guard, but in the process of my calling out to him to tell him what was happening he simply ran up and joined us. The guard said nothing, so we continued down the tunnel onto the field and sat on the bench in the Giants bullpen.

Since I wasn't sure how much time he would actually give me, I decided to start with the more obscure questions. I asked him why he made certain minor-league trades that might seem inexplicable to the outsider, like getting Jason Felice back from the Reds after

sending him over in the Seaver deal, or picking up two players each from the Cubs for Tom Veryzer and Terry Leach. He said that many trades are made without the big-league club in mind; for instance, Felice had simply not been comfortable in the Reds' system and wanted to be back with his friends on the Mets, so they worked out a deal. In other cases you move a player no longer able to help the organization, and it doesn't matter whom you get in return. The answer made sense in principle, but, as it turned out, Felice hit over .300 with power for Lynchburg, and the two pitchers picked up for Leach had remarkable years and made the Carolina League all-star team (Jim Adamczak and Mitch Cook, although Cook later went to the Astros for Ray Knight). So they weren't just any old bodies — and Leach himself was back in the Met system pitching well for Tidewater before the season was out.

I then asked him a few more questions about trades and player development, and he perceived the direction of my interest. I was a writer, yes, but I was also a Met-fan imposter, using the writer persona to talk to an intimate about the team. He said he was willing to answer in depth, but remarks had to be off the record — so during most of the conversation I put down the pen and simply listened. He then spoke about the players he thought were going to make it and others he was disappointed in. About one player he said: "He has that laid back Southern California attitude. Everything has to be done in a certain style. He thinks he's playing hardnosed baseball, but he's not. But because he thinks he is, it's difficult to get through to him. He's been passed by people who don't have his talent." One idea he threw out in confidence can now be written: "I think Hubie Brooks can be a fine middle infielder, if he wants to do it."

Among his less controversial observations were: that Dave Cochrane had a great future, but he wasn't sure he could play third base in the majors; that John Gibbons was the best catcher he had ever developed and could well become a 20-homer-a-year player on a major league level; that Billy Beane was still a prospect, and surely a great outfielder, but he was spending a third year in Double A learning to hit. I asked him if he was at all interested in Shane Mack in the upcoming draft, and he said, "Probably not," because they had a lot of outfielders in the system more or less in his mold — Winningham, Blocker, Dykstra, Jefferson. I mentioned that Marvell Wynne was another one whom he had let go, and I wondered why he didn't at least try him in the majors first.

"I simply like Mookie Wilson better as a player."

"What about leftfield?"

"I need more power from that portion. I'm not going to get it from first base, centerfield, or my catcher, so I have to make it up in leftfield. You don't simply pick out players. You try to put together a team that will work." I asked him why he brought up Brent Gaff ahead of some other pitchers, and he said: "Because I think he has the right temperament to be a middle-innings reliever."

Apologizing about the question, I asked him about the Seaver affair, adding that I didn't think the White Sox drafting Seaver hurt the Mets because it opened up a spot on the pitching staff and freed them from the draft for three years.

"That's true. But the point is: I made a mistake. I didn't intend to lose Seaver. I thought I had gone through the possibilities pretty thoroughly, and I judged what the White Sox needed and what they didn't need. I didn't take into account the ownership there and that they'd make a showbiz choice."

I asked him about artificial turf at Shea: "As a pure baseball man I hate it. As the general manager of this team concerned with the bottom line I take a different point of view."

We drifted back into his history, and he spoke nostalgically of the days before being a baseball executive, the Sundays on the beach with friends reading the box scores. It reminded me of my stepfather when I was growing up, the *Times* sports section spread out on the sand at Long Island, the new game just beginning on the radio set on a blanket. Although he never said it, I sensed that Cashen experienced baseball as an internal work, a philosophy as much as a game. I was debating the designated-hitter rule with him when Herm Starette, the Giants' pitching coach, came over and said to Robin and me: "Listen to everything this man tells you. He won't steer you wrong. He's one of the great people in this game." Then to Cashen: "I guess you saw our whole pitching staff last night."

"And you saw a good part of ours. You know, people might miss it, but the thing that won the game for us last night was middle-inning relief." Starette agreed. Then Cashen said: "Of course there's one boy on your team we'd like having in New York if you ever get tired of him: Mark Davis."

Starette chuckled. "I guess we'll keep him. Frank, it's such a shame. He looked so good in spring training, had a bad game at the start of the season, then he hurt his finger on a play at home plate, and he hasn't been able to straighten himself out. When I first heard he was available from the Phillies, I said, take 'im."

The two began reminiscing about their years in the American League in the '50s and '60s. They compared Tim Leary to Jim Palmer. "I remember when Palmer went down to Rochester and then Miami," Starette said. "His arm hurt and he didn't want to pitch. He used to throw a bit on the sidelines and just go a few innings. Then Cal Ripken decided to push him one day. He kept saying, 'One more inning, one more inning.' He got him to pitch his way through it."

Another fatherly pitching coach, my old Yankee favorite, Mel Stottlemyre, came over and joined in the conversation. They were talking about the American League of the '60s when Cashen suddenly noticed Heep and Sisk diving around in the outfield tackling one another. "Jesus," he said to Stottlemyre. "Don't let them do that." But instead of acting on it they began discussing players whose careers were ended by horseplay. Eventually Heep and Sisk ran by on their way to the clubhouse. "Hey, Dougie," said Cashen. "What's going on out there."

"Don't you worry," said Sisk, seemingly missing the point. "He's not going to take me down."

Tom Gorman, who was peripherally involved, came by quickly and tried to slip past into the clubhouse. Cashen's face lit up. "Tommy Gorman, my hero," he said, and Gorman's large-featured clown's face turned red.

Back down the tunnel and outside the clubhouse door we joined the crowd entering the stadium. "Did we just do that?" Robin asked. "Did we just sit in the bullpen talking to Frank Cashen and Mel Stottlemyre about the Mets?" It was almost a perfect day. Leading 3–1 with two outs and nobody on in the ninth, the Mets gave up five straight hits to the Giants (Terrell and Sisk) and lost 4–3. Only gradually, in the remainder of the Berkeley afternoon, did it come back to us that our experience was larger than the game.

The Mets returned to San Francisco in August. In the meantime they had reached a maximum of 4½ games in first, but after that were defeated seven times in a row by the Cubs to fall as much as 6 back before beginning a slow recovery that brought them to within two games of first after Sid Fernandez beat the Dodgers in L.A. and the Cubs lost in Pete Rose's debut as manager in Cincinnati. On August 17th they came to Candlestick Park for a Friday night game with high hopes. Robin, Stu, and I went to this game together, in Stu's car by an absurd route up and down hills and through the most dangerous parts of San Francisco (no wonder he had wanted to drive). We got to the park very early, and I took my press pass

and went down onto the field.

Over at the cage the Mets were taking batting practice. In response to Junior Ortiz's attempts, Bobby Valentine, throwing in the pitches, teased: "Send him to Yakima." Then: "Anything you want, Hubert," to Brooks. As Hodges batted, Foster leaned over intently from his position alongside the cage and, after each pitch, solemnly said: "Hodgo." Down the third-base line Davey Johnson was surrounded by reporters; one questioned him, others waited in line. I gradually wandered over that way, observing the action on the field until I was within earshot. The reporter on line was asking fairly trite questions, and Johnson had little patience. "Why have the Mets improved?" "Are you having problems with Darryl Strawberry?" "Is it hard managing in New York?" Sometimes Johnson just didn't answer, or answered only wearily after a long pause. He responded to a number of questions with variants of a line — something like: "Those are just sportswriters' questions." Or: "You sportswriters think these things up, but they don't have anything to do with the real game." But the interviewer persisted, speaking his questions as though from a list; he had an agenda and he was going to go through it regardless of the rapport he had with Johnson or the responses. When the next writer followed a similar tack, Johnson began answering questions before they were asked: "Of course Darryl Strawberry has the tools to be a great player. Yes, he has a lot to learn." A number of reporters were particularly concerned with his use of a computer, and he said: "You sportswriters make too much out of the computer. Yes, I've been working with computers seventeen years. I should know how to program them. No, I don't over-rely on them. No, I don't overlook the human factor." Again, in answer to questions that hadn't been asked.

I had not intended to try Davey Johnson, but after listening to these exchanges I imagined how much better I could do, so I waited in line, introduced myself as a freelance writer, and started by asking him if there were any players at Tidewater or Jackson who might help the Mets before the end of the season.

"I'm not concerned with things like that," he said. "I've got the best twenty-five men up here." I threw out the names of some of the better players in the farm system, and he looked at me silently. So I asked: "Was John Stearns able to swing the bat when he was up?"

"I should hope so. I had him in the on-deck circle three times."

"I just wondered because you didn't use him against DiPino when you had all those lefthanders coming up in the ninth inning

at Houston." I had stumbled into a second-guess without realizing it, and I was immediately embarrassed. He said he didn't know which game that was. I then made matters worse by reminding him that Mark Bailey hit a two-run homer off Sisk in the bottom of the ninth to win it, and he said he didn't remember the game. So I asked: "Was Rafael Santana better than you thought he'd be?"

"Better than I thought he'd be? What does that mean? He was hitting .280 in Triple A, so I imagine he'd be pretty good."

In fact, I had done no better than my predecessors and was more pretentious in my failure. I backed out of one identity into another and told him about our dish and the baseball club. He nodded, waiting, arms folded. I thanked him and moved on.

That night Dwight Gordon and Mike Krukow dueled through nine scoreless innings, one with an overpowering fast ball, the other with curve balls and changes of speed. The Mets had Krukow on the ropes early several times but failed to get runners in from third with less than two out, and the Giants almost broke through Gooden in the late innings. In seats all around us there seemed to be a new category of fan — black people who came out to root just for Dwight, not the Mets. They danced in the aisles and gave high and low fives for his strike-outs, then left for the concession stands during the Met at-bats. It was as though he were Michael Jackson or some sparkling young break-dancer from New York. In the tenth inning Wally Backman lined his first homer of the season into the right-field stands with Mookie Wilson on base, and we stood there cheering until we were hoarse. Stu ran into the aisle throwing his arms up and down. 1½ games out; take that, Harry. Leaving the stadium, he said to us: "I don't care about anything else. All's right in the world. National debt, nuclear proliferation, no problem; the Mets have won." We were walking back to his car outside the stadium when Robin noticed that the Moon over the Pacific seemed much too large.

"Maybe it's falling," he said.

For a second I too was slightly concerned. The Moon was enormous, but then I realized if we were in real trouble, there would be tidal waves and an earthquake, and I pointed that out to him.

"That sure would ruin a Mets' victory, wouldn't it?"

We were guilty, and were reminding ourselves that you never know ahead of time how things are going to turn out, either way. In our minds we were trying to hold onto the win and to keep coming, but 1½ was as close as we were to get to the Cubs on this last great run of '84.

We arrived at Candlestick early for the Saturday afternoon game and went right to the clubhouse. Robin waited outside, and I continued inside to look for Keith Hernandez to discuss an idea for a book project Bruce Jenkins and I had. But Hernandez had not come on the team bus, so I stood around waiting. It surprised me to see the players smoking, eating candy, and drinking soda and beer before the game; I naively had assumed athletes stayed away from sugar, nicotine, and chemical additives. It was strange watching stars peel open chocolate bars. The clubhouse t.v. set was tuned to NBC and the pregame show for Game of the Week. The announcer began talking about the race in the N.L. East, and a number of Mets clustered around the set in various states of uniform, street clothes, and nakedness. I could no longer hear his voice as he must have been describing Dwight Gooden, for the players were whistling and cheering the image of Dwight firing away. "Can't hit that, right?" someone called out. Gorman and Sisk, right in front, drank from their cans and laughed. I looked at Dwight Gooden as he stared at himself on the tube. He seemed half-smiling, half-serious; there was no way he could possibly have caught up with himself yet. The players suddenly let out a loud cheer for Backman's home run. I looked around at their faces: they were so familiar and, at the same time, closed utterly to the outside. They knew instinctively how to keep their privacy. They had perfected remoteness in intimacy: Strawberry, Berenyi, Backman, Orosco, Lynch. They were young, in some cases almost childlike, but intense, Strawberry's already impassive classic look, brooding yet still buoyant. The kid of old minor-league Giants' photos was completely gone from George Foster's face. Then the network switched to the Cubs, the debut of Pete Rose in Cincinnati: a hit to the outfield followed by a crashing slide into second base. A bunch of players burst out laughing. "Slides and no one's on the base," someone said. "Look at that slide. There's no one near him." Now the announcer says that they will be back after this message for the next segment — "The Beanball Wars." Jay Horwitz, Mets' public relations director, nudges Ed Lynch, who gives a friendly shove back. The remaining players come from their lockers and crowd for position around the set. Even Tim McCarver is there, suddenly right in the center.

Pascual Perez hits Alan Wiggins with a pitch; the room is filled with whistles and hisses. Then Perez is up and the pitcher drives him off the plate. Just as he falls away backwards, Hubie Brooks wriggles in front of the t.v. in imitation of Perez' almost feminine quality. Perez is standing by home plate protecting himself by waving the

bat. "Put down the bat," shout several players. "Put down the fucking bat." They are right there in the confrontation. Perez bats again, and you can feel the heightened tension in the room. Behind me Jessie Orosco is pushing to get closer, holding an unopened bottle of wine in the air. I move out of the way and find myself looking back at the crowd around the set. Perez is finally hit and the team erupts in a cheer. I realize I am watching the players watch themselves in a media event. The tinny t.v. image is the same one we have in our Saturday living rooms if we are decadent enough to watch the preselected game and to turn it on ahead of time; here, the set is dwarfed by the players around it. They are the real source of energy, but they are reduced and packaged and put inside the software so that their actions become a marketable item. In a few minutes they're going to go onto the field to continue to provide a living thread for the machines to grind out second-hand myth. It's not who they are, and they know it's not who they are, but everything in their background warns them to go along with it. The actual Mets seem more touching and vulnerable than the baseball-card Mets. They are not statistics or national heroes; take away that little box and the addiction of millions, and they're a bunch of mostly small-town guys recruited to play on a company team.

The segment ends and they drift away, back to getting dressed. Rafael Santana is wearing a Licey tee shirt, making real a line of winter-league stats. Jesse Orosco has opened his bottle of wine and is drinking; handlettered on the back of his tee shirt: "The Scum Bunch."

Ron Darling is the starting pitcher that day, and I go over to his locker. I expect him to remember me, but I am cautious. You follow them but they don't follow you. They go from city to city; you track them, like planets. We talk only briefly, and I wish him good luck and am about to end the conversation when I find myself actually touched by the person rather than ballplayer to whom the person has given his name. I tell him how I wished I could have pulled him out of that afternoon in Chicago when the Cubs knocked him out; he hit a batter, the fans booed, and he left the mound to a virtual Boschian hell of crazed midwestern faces cursing at him all the way into the dugout. Ron Darling has a particularly conscious glow around him, and though the fan in me wanted him to stay in there at all cost and win, the human being in this room seemed to have no place in that Chicago madhouse. He was closer to Robin's age than mine, but he was fullgrown, an adult, so he was literally halfway in between

us. "It was a nightmare," he said. "Sometimes you just find yourself there and it gets worse and worse, and you can't find any way out." Then he realized how introspective that sounded and he caught himself, the professional athlete again: "I guess you have to expect that sometimes when you go up against the best hitters in baseball."

The t.v. set proclaimed a segment on the Padres, and Darling excused himself to go over and look at it. "I want to see the Padres. I'll talk to you later."

Hernandez had just arrived, but when I approached his locker he said quickly: "I'm late. Let me get into my uniform first."

I wandered over to the t.v. where a few of the players sat watching the Padres and then the beginning of the Angel-Oriole game. "Where was that pitch?" asks Jerry Martin, like any fan. Darling is wearing a white tee shirt with a black outlined ghost and the words: "I'm Not Afraid of No Ghost." Staub shouts to Hernandez across the room: "When you struck out the second time, I said, the old man's in the stands."

"I know," says Hernandez, tying his shoe.

Everyone has left the Oriole-Angel telecast except Hubie Brooks who sits against the concrete post holding up this cold stadium, his eyes more on the ceiling than the tube. He is idly rubbing a styrofoam cup along his lips and scratching his cheek. I take that as a statement of privacy. People's feelings of themselves, their inside familiarity, are what are so hard to keep here — to have something that feels like you while you space out the unrelenting media version of the game. I have always believed in Hubie's integrity, though I have no way of proving it. He is one of my favorite Mets on a gut level. I have defended him as a coming great player for years, but he has had a legion of detractors. I hear that Bill James, that arrogant armchair expert, puts Hubie down on just about every level as a bad player. So I'm glad Hubie has had the kind of year that shoves it right back down Bill James' throat — not only average but homers; not only average and homers, but game-winning hits; not only hits and power and clutch hits, but playing hurt and adjusting his style to deliver for weeks with a bad wrist; not only playing well and from the heart but shifting to shortstop late in the season and making game-saving plays the first week (like against the Padres the last time the Mets faced them when he kept them in the game with two double-plays until they could get to Gossage — "our whole season right there on that pivot," Hernandez said later); and all the time continuing to get the big hit.

Yes, Hubie is sort of spaced out: he may dive to catch a third-strike bunt foul or run into outs at third base after driving in runs with a clutch hit; he may take too long with a throw and then sail it over first — but that kind of stubbornness seems at the core of his individuality. People can't always improve forever, eradicate all their faults. Hubie seems to need his idosyncracies to play as well as he does; he thrives on the complications he generates.

At the end of last season someone in the Mets' management, at least by rumor, accused him of having a bad attitude. "They don't know me that well," said Hubie. "What makes them think they understand me? My own mother hasn't figured me out yet."

Right on, Hubie. They are rough on letting black players have complex personalities; the stereotyping comes so easily. Hubie is an interesting and difficult man and a complicated player, worth appreciating no matter what he does.

In order to talk to Hernandez I have to run the gauntlet of George Foster who is trying to convince me that Keith's brother Gary is Keith. "You want to talk to Keith? Here's Keith."

I finally have a brief exchange with Keith about the project; he says to let it go another season or so. Then I leave the locker room, and Robin and I walk around the stadium to the entrance. He tells me about how he saw Terrell, Heep, and Berenyi race into the Giants' clubhouse. "I wondered who they were going to talk to. And then they came out, and one of them was wearing the Crazy Crab costume." That player, possibly Terrell, then went around attacking his teammates with his claws. When we got into the ballpark and down to field level, Walt Terrell or Danny Heep as Crazy Crab was running around the outfield tackling Met players before fleeing back into the tunnel. Lucky Frank Cashen wasn't on this trip.

Standing on the field, I am aware of the sounds the players hear: "Wally, nice shot last night." He doesn't look up. Then, just as he is entering the dugout a fat Met fan comes charging down the aisle and in a big voice calls out, "Wally Home Run Backman," giving the thumbs up sign; Backman can't resist a smile. Behind the batting cage Frank Howard joins a closely-staring Bill Robinson. "You ain't observin' shit," says Howard, giving him a playful shove.

Only a few Giants are left on the field as the Mets take it over. Strawberry and Brooks entertain one of them over by the dugout, and Wilson and Hodges tell jokes and horseplay with Youngblood behind the batting cage. Then Youngblood is the only one left. He is busy describing to Wilson and Backman how hard it is to see

Gooden's pitches. He holds up the bat like a gun and aims it. "You only see the littlest bit of the ball." He makes a mark the size of a dime. While they are fussing over Gooden's fastball, Youngblood sees that all the other Giants are gone. He lingers for a second with his old team-mates and then starts back to the dugout. Halfway there he turns around and looks back, right at the two of them. "You guys, be good. Now don't get psyched out."

It was almost the sweetest thing that he could have said.

I stand behind home plate trying to watch Strawberry's swing. It's harder to follow than anyone else's. It isn't just the bat on the ball; it's as though something more subtle and unconscious is happening. There's a delicate rhythm, not easy to perfect. Foster stands by the side watching Hernandez step into the batter's box. After a couple of swings Keith asks, "How many pitches?"

"Pitches," says Foster. "You did say pitches?"

Strawberry's next turn he gets under the ball and hits it high in the air to medium right field. Foster runs out in front of him in the cage, holding up his hand as though to watch a ball disappearing into the horizon. "It's, it's, it's," he keeps saying, continuing to raise his hand. As the ball drops and is lazily caught by a pitcher running in the outfield, Foster flips his hand, as though about to give five to Strawberry, then lets it fall away suddenly and turns around and takes up his spot behind the cage. Almost mesmerized I wonder what I am watching; I think: 'We don't get to choose our own myths.'

Darling starts well that Saturday, but he is wild and throws a lot of pitches; Wes Gardner replaces him in the sixth, the Giants hit him hard and take the lead; the Mets come back to tie it on a pinch hit by Rusty Staub, but Gaff sets up the winning run with a wild pitch in the ninth.

On Sunday, the day of the Mets' last game in San Francisco (a doubleheader), I make a final trip to the locker room. Art Richman is clearly getting tired of seeing me in this role. "Up early, Richard," he says.

Ron Darling is sitting in front of his locker; he asks me how my piece is coming, and I tell him my ideas — the season following the Mets with Robin, my insights about the confusion of public and private, and my uneasiness at my own role. "When I talk to you," I say, "you're of course just another person, but then there's this other version of you out on the mound, so when I go sit in the stands I'm just one of eight million people."

"Or six hundred here."

"No, I mean all the people who read the box scores and follow the games. You're a name and a number in that world, but if it weren't for that we wouldn't even be talking."

He remarks that the role is difficult to keep playing. "There's no real privacy," I say, "so you have to develop the persona of the ballplayer."

"There's another thing," he says. "What about greatness? They decide who's going to be great and then that's that."

"It's a media event," I say. "They invent you to serve themselves, like the way they collect taxes now, always withholding; they want your money right away, not at tax time, because they've already spent it. Same thing with greatness. They want to capitalize on you before you've actually become anything. In a sense they steal it from you because they've used up everything else. You're left being some movie character, like Robert Redford playing a ballplayer."

"It doesn't leave much room for development when they say you're great. You either do it. . . ."

"And when you do, they've already said it."

"They've made the mold, and you can either fill it or fail."

"It's like with Gooden," I say. "They're always digging up new records for him to break — number of rookie strikeouts, strikeouts for a teenager, ten or more strikeout games. These things have nothing to do with what he's actually pitching for, and when they trump them up, they rob the game of its integrity."

"Or look at Strawberry, the hard time he's had."

"What space is there just to grow into something different?"

"But I feel it's okay playing baseball," Ron Darling says.

"There's a myth in baseball that works. It wouldn't work if it were roller derby. Everyone sees through that."

"Or wrestling," he says. "I tell myself sometimes that baseball is so old, it's like history, it must be okay."

Looking at Ron Darling sitting there with his glove I picture the players of the fifties disappearing back into the men of the forties, and then back to the old-time uniforms and small gloves at the turn of the century, the bases laid out on the Civil War battlefield, then, before that, club-ball in England, field games with bean-filled balls between Indian groups to mark the equinox, an opening in the ancient North American wilderness. The diamond within the circle of baseball summarizes thousands of ancient games and extinct tribes, peoples who have disappeared by becoming us, pitchers who threw before there were balls and fielders who caught according to the rules

of nondecimal systems. There is something about Ron Darling as a half-Chinese, half-Irish pitcher from Hawaii that is both nineteenth-century and pre-Columbian. Modern baseball cheapens its own largeness through its ambition and self-promotion, but the overdrop of history is still there and gives it the texture that the media then hammers out into its own hysterical season. The myths may be a threatened resource in 1984, but they have not yet run out. The pretense of empty records and fake history is overshadowed by the old fields and decades of grassroots players who carried out this game.

Looking around the locker room of the Mets one last time, I am saddened by the media event, though it's the only reason I'm permitted to be here. Despite the proprieties the confusion of public and private is a confusion of *our* identity with *their* identities, and underlying that is the almost epochal confusion of our compassion for each other. We are overwhelmed by news of famine in Africa and slaughter of boat people at sea by Asian pirates. We hear about new brutalities and abuses of the innocent everyday. We have almost lost our authentic emotions for each other, and we have turned the possibility for true comradeship and empathy into star-creation and hero-worship; the media has exploited our weakness into its own billion-dollar industry — in the process, turning it into a collective neurosis. Instead of looking for humanity in everyone, we seek it in these players because they are already universalized and particular, and it is easier to locate their public personae than the terrifying blank wall of millions of starving Ethiopians. When we find the ballplayer's supposed humanity it is like discovering our connection to the root. But it is a dangerous lapse in modern life, and its consequences are not determined because we do not know yet what will be required of us in this century. Don't think for a moment that the Soviets have avoided this because they are ideologically non-capitalistic; even as they suppress the cult of personality, they manufacture Olympic athletes, and generals, and astronauts, and scorn the black and Spanish masses they feed with arms. The result is a profound and hollow cavity in the clubhouse and in the game itself, a loneliness in the midst of crowds. The pennant can still bring a wave of euphoria to a city, but it would take the spirit of a Papago ballgame to carry that fire through the winter and transform it into a new harvest of brotherhood and sisterhood in the spring. Until then, we must make do with what we have.

I also realize that the real moments of the game are invisible to people watching "baseball" because we are addicted to the familiar

scenes, the camera clichés. Debra Heimerdinger, a photographer, took a whole portfolio of odd moments between plays and before games, unfamiliar images of players on the field and their gloves and bats, the loose balls, the awkward stretches, the nonfluid motion at the core of a pitcher's delivery, the forgotten hand after a completed play. She took all these pictures at the Oakland Coliseum, and the angry A's management tried to ban the book because it seemed to them an unflattering portrait of the game they were trying to sell like a designer jeans ad. She had represented their product as drab, actionless, dreamlike, but real — and they only wanted to see Rickey Henderson in a cloud of dust, the umpire's arms outstretched in *Safe!* But for all the great players and the cumulative intensity of the pennant race, there are a thousand times more instants of hollow repose, of dreaming out from the game, and of the gods battering away at the stale repetitious images through the irresistible power of their archetypes.

Brad Wellman's two-run homer off Jesse Orosco in the ninth inning of the first game of the Sunday doubleheader was a turning point in the Mets' season. It broke head-on the momentum that had brought them to within a game and a half of the Cubs; during the following week they lost twice in San Diego and returned home on Friday to play a doubleheader against the Giants. San Francisco came back from a five-run deficit in the first game and won two more before they were finally halted on Sunday (Brent Gaff going most of the game in relief and Kelvin Chapman hitting a grand slam). This set the distance between the Mets and the Cubs at roughly where it would remain for the duration of the season: six games. After those eight losses in ten tries the Mets put on their last great surge of the pennant race. The Sunday win was followed by a sweep of three close games from the Dodgers, and then four out of five in three days from the San Diego Padres over the weekend. If the Cubs hadn't been flying too, the Mets would have been back at their heels ready for another miracle. But in this battle of tribal magic and team totems the constellations were on the Cubs' side. The Mets' run at the end of August had all the makings of the return of the gods of '69, but the Cubs had the curse of '69 driving them, its powerful counter-hex making them virtually impregnable. If Don Juan Matus had come to Los Angeles in 1980 disguised as a plump young Yaqui pitcher (to tease Carlos and answer Tommy Lasorda's prayers to the Big Dodger in the Sky), then the ghosts of the '69 Cubs, led no doubt

by Ron Santo and Leo Durocher, revisited 1984 as Odin, a right-handed pitcher who materialized in mid-season to lead them to the Eastern Championship.

That the Mets had their own ancestral spirits and magic was clear on September 1st against the Padres. Having split a doubleheader the day before and won the first game that day, the Mets gave Calvin Schiraldi his first major-league start in the second game against the Padres' number one pitcher, Eric Show, a moralistic self-declared right-wing ideologue. The Padres got to Schiraldi fairly quickly and had a 5–1 lead in the bottom of the fifth. The Mets had no one on base, two out, and the pitcher due up when they sent out an old warrior, John Stearns, who had not been to bat in over two years because of injuries. In a t.v. interview after the game he said that, although he had envisioned that moment hundreds of times over the years of absence, he was calm, almost without feeling at the plate; he did not even remember hitting the ball, lining a double up the left-field alley, but he stood on second base clapping his hands in triumph and redemption. Backman followed with an infield hit; Herm Winningham, starting his first major-league game, stung a two-strike pitch to the opposite field; and, after a couple of walks, Hubie Brooks cleared the bases with a shot off the base of the centerfield wall. He was thrown out by twenty feet trying for third, but the Mets were up 6–5 and went on to win the game. John Stearns' first at-bat in two years had sparked five runs.

The next day, in a tightly played 2–2 game that went into extra innings, Hubie made a series of wonderful stops and throws from the strange shortstop position. He took the pivot on a game-situation double-play (the one Keith Hernandez remembered, as Backman fielded and flipped to Brooks crossing the bag), and turned it against a fast runner. Then they outlasted the Goose, who worked five innings — George Foster hitting a two-out flare to right center and Mookie Wilson racing home with the winning run in the twelfth.

The Mets and Cubs were now both hot and headed for a showdown, but the Mets' stopping place en route was ripe for an ambush. Ever since Hernandez had beaten the Cardinals on the field in New York in July and referred to them as a second-division team, St. Louis played the Mets extremely tough, winning the last seven meetings between the clubs. The ballpark in St. Louis was just the right antidote for Mets' magic: a shopping-mall and pinball machine. The ball bounces off the hard rug, the Cardinals run the bases like flashing colored lights, the organ plays beer commercials and other

junk-music jingles: it's what Bill Lee warned synthetic space-age baseball would become — no sweet grass, no natural sounds, no soft bounces, no calm between plays, no sky, just a giant indoor shooting gallery in which the players are reduced to blips on a screen. The Mets lost two in St. Louis and another in Pittsburgh before coming home to face the Cubs.

On Friday night, before a national-t.v. audience, Dwight Gooden pitched a one-hitter, and the Mets won 10–0, ending their own seven-game losing streak against the Cubs. Although the pennant race was all but over with, Gooden's game did more than any other in the season to establish the 1984 Mets in the imagination of fans across the country. He pitched a flawless game from a center of poise so striking that for that night he was the Natural, the archetypal pitcher: old baseball shining through even the media hyperbole. Gooden was to follow this game with back-to-back sixteen-strikeout performances and close the season as the most dominating pitcher in baseball — a huge jump from the Triple A World Series in Louisville. But we were already looking to 1985: Rick Sutcliffe was the man of 1984, and he stopped the Mets just as cold the next night, adding a tremendous double. Ron Darling beat the Cubs on Sunday, but the Mets lost three out of four to the Cardinals and Pirates again, this time at home, and then the first two over the weekend in Chicago. When Bruce Berenyi pitched at the level of his stuff and two-hit the Cubs on Sunday, it was the first victory for the Mets at Wrigley all season. The spirits of the '69 Cubs had found their moment for revenge. It's just too bad they waited only fifteen years; they could as easily have waited 150 or 1500.

The Sunday win broke the spell and also set the Cubs into their one big losing streak. But Gooden lost his second 16-strikeout game on a balk in Philadelphia, and it wasn't until the following weekend against Montreal in New York that the Mets began to make up ground: they swept back to back series against the Expos and Phillies, but as Gooden beat the Expos for number three on Sunday, the Cubs were sweeping the Cardinals, setting up the pennant-clincher on Monday night. Cub fans swarmed the satellite-dish club on those final days, some of them celebrating after as many as thirty years of personal disappointment. Now it was us on the outside, only imagining Jessie Orosco coming in from the bullpen to face Kirk Gibson and Darryl Strawberry going up to bat against Jack Morris.

At the end the pleasure was in watching Winningham, Christensen, Beane, Mitchell, and Gibbons on the Mets, though it

was with the sadness of knowing that the games were dwindling down to the finale, the fall equinox approaching winter, and the death of the 1984 Mets. Next season would bring a new team, a different point in my life, unforeseeable rhythms and possibilities. 1984 had been a bounteous year, but it would end in ashes and silence (if not defeat). The ceremony was over, its symbols sown. The Mets had won back their dignity, their fans, and their destiny; no more could be asked for. The players would continue to exist during the winter, privately, as whoever else they were, but the characters they played would go into hibernation, the implements of baseball stored, and the Northern Hemisphere itself, the civilized developed world, would go through a dangerous winter before the props were unpacked in Florida in the spring.

Because baseball is a game, one forgets it is also a play; the players are actors; otherwise they would be baseball players year-round all of their lives, like worker ants. The illusion is that they play only the game, the ancient game with its linear rules and precise boundaries, but they play also themselves — they play themselves playing baseball. How well they play is a function of how they communicate the cyclical dramas of baseball.

A game is different from a play, or a dance, for its outcome is unknown; its moves are not scripted by any playwright or choreographer. It is a play caught in elemental probability theory, unfolding as the universe of matter does, giving shape to itself instant by instant according to rules. But a game is also a myth, so it repeats its themes by variations: new players occur in pre-existing roles, even as Osiris was transformed into Horus, and Mars replaced Ares millennia later.

On the 1984 Mets Darryl Strawberry played Darryl Strawberry, not exactly as the media and fans expected him to play it, but he did it well and transformed the role. Hubie Brooks also transformed the character of Hubie Brooks. Ed Lynch found weaknesses in his character, so his position in the game is in jeopardy. There is also no way to explain why one season Danny Heep plays Danny Heep with four pinch homers, the next season with none. There is no way to foresee the sudden arrival of Dwight Gooden with such *tour de force*. But since these are only people playing roles in a game, they must go home, live, dream, change, survive, and come back to the myth, which will also change with the constellations of the night sky. For years to come the ghosts of Herb Score and James Rodney Richard will haunt the character played by Dwight Gooden until

he pitches past them. In the meantime the collective mythical being constituted by the Mets rests at a turning-point moment in its existence, with the possibility of making something more lasting than 1969. To that end Herm Winningham, Randy Myers, Barry Lyons, Kyle Hartshorn, and Stanley Jefferson wait in the wings.

But when Herm Winningham flies out to end the season, this is the moment of the longest wait till the next game. There is an unexplored sorrow in this, but it is the way everything is: darkness lies between night and morning, consciousness and unconsciousness, and fills interstellar space between epochs and suns. Baseball is wonderfully ordinary and we don't usually think about it in cosmic terms. We want to find a gentle thread of continuity waiting for us again in some form next spring. If life on Earth survives, the players will be reincarnated by their ka-souls on sunny practice diamonds in the spring, and, within this episode of American life, the ceremony will go on.

Postscript—December 10, 1984

The months following the season brought little baseball except for the assembling of this anthology. "You should talk to Steve Boros," novelist Barry Gifford told me at the end of October. "He and I have been discussing things, and I think he might have something for your book." I dropped Boros a post card, and he called me and suggested a meeting time, Friday afternoon, November 9th, at Cody's Bookstore on Telegraph. I decided to send him a copy of my piece on the Mets in the meantime.

That day Miranda and I walked up to Telegraph, buying some cookies at the bakery on the way to the store; Steve arrived with his wife and kids and left them to shop while we went back to our house. He was curious to see the Satellite Baseball T.V. Club, so we walked right down the driveway to the garage where Robin met us. In the winter it was barely habitable, a cold dank outdoor room with towels over the receiver and dish drive, and roof tar all over the ceiling failing to stop the leaks (and plenty of damp spots on the stone floor). "Here's your temple of baseball," Steve joked, as he looked at the pictures and the schedules of a season past. "But I like the green paint."

That afternoon we began our interview and also talked about the Mets, especially Jeff Bettendorf (whom he had managed earlier in the season when both were with the A's) and Bruce Berenyi ("you've got scouts combing the bushes all over America just trying to find big strong kids with his kind of arm").

He was warm, thoughtful, and expansive, and when he left, Robin remarked, "Isn't it strange that we had to root against him last season so that now we can root for him?" It would have been nice if he were moving on to the Mets, but his next job was assistant farm system director for the Padres.

We agreed to finish our discussion during the week of the winter meetings, and when we spoke on the phone beforehand, we ended up discussing the trade of Rickey Henderson to the Yankees for four prospects and Jay Howell. We agreed that it could end up being a hell of a trade for the A's, but then we both favored the farm-system over free agents and big trades.

Robin and I kept checking the radio all week, and only on Friday was it reported the Mets had made a trade with the Tigers (to be announced later). Robin passed the day nervously at school, but he could have saved his expectations; we had already guessed it.

When he got home and looked at me eagerly, I simply said, "We know the Mets too well."

"You mean it *was* Terrell for Johnson?" And I nodded.

Steve came over on Monday, December 10, to finish the interview. We met at Cody's again where he was interviewed by ABC television on the Henderson deal; then we walked back to the house. I first showed him the issue of *Inside Pitch* that had come that Saturday, particularly the interview with Steve Schryver, the Mets' farm-system director. We contrasted the Mets' pride in their own players to the Yankees' willingness to deal off their top prospects. "When someone asks them where they learned to play ball," Schryver had said of the minor-league Mets, "you hope they'll say it was back when I was at Lynchburg or Columbia."

I was cooking an early dinner that night, seemingly safely beyond the baseball meetings, when the phone rang. It was the poet Tom Clark.

"Just wanted to know what you thought of the trade?"

"Which one?"

"Gary Carter."

I paused for a moment, and a childlike wave of apprehension passed through me. "Not to the Mets?"

"That's right."

"Oh no."

"You don't like it?"

"Well, for whom?"

"I think it's great. They're going for it all."

"For whom?"

"Do you care?"

"For whom?"

"Okay. Hubie Brooks. . . ." I felt a chill of disbelief, as though Tom had told me that Hubie had been killed. "A guy named Youmans, you probably know who that is. Herm Winningham. Mike Fitzgerald."

I was silent, stunned, weighing whether such a thing was possible against the unlikelihood of Tom teasing me in this way. If this was happening, the Mets had changed utterly, from the heart.

"Well, I'll let you go," he said. "You know, it's like being born."

Robin's vigilance was great enough that he was already approaching me with alarm. I told him the Met players first to make it a little easier, but he was heartbroken. He just kept saying, "They couldn't. . . ."

Maybe they couldn't, so I called Stu. He hadn't heard of such a trade, and he warned me to hold everything because people had been telling him fake deals all week to bait him. He would call New York to make sure. Two minutes later he was back on the phone. "It's for real. A blockbuster. Gary Carter for four players. I just don't know. I kind of wish they hadn't." Both of us had Hubie Brooks as the shortstop on our 1985 Mets.

I was racing through feelings and thoughts. I kept picturing Hubie that first night in San Diego, Hubie in the locker room at Candlestick, then turning the doubleplay at Shea, interviewed by Ralph Kiner after the game.

I said angrily, "Well, we might as well go out and get Cal Ripken, Jr. to play short and Jack Clark for right field. We'll move Strawberry to center, sign Jim Rice for left. We'll put an all-star team out there and beat everyone."

"Yeah," said Robin. "And it won't be the Mets."

For the next hour we both walked around in a daze. The baked potatoes I was putting in the oven when Tom called were ready. Plus stringbeans. Lindy looked cynically at her plate.

After dinner Robin went upstairs and took a shower. But instead of putting his Met cap over his wet hair, a strange custom of his, he was discovered sitting reading on the floor in his room with a much darker blue cap on, an unfamiliar white-outlined gold serif M on its front.

"*What* is that?" Lindy exclaimed, and I came in the room to look. It was Margarita's Mexican Lunch, the cap of the redneck Berkeley softball team that slugger Bob Pearce had given me in honor of my piece on him. I hadn't seen it for over a year.

"I'm in protest," Robin said.

Later that night Steve Boros called to console me, but I told him about the cap and suggested that Robin was the one who really needed consoling. "You'll get over it," he told him. "That's the way baseball is these days. Trades are totally cold. You'll get that Mets' cap down off the shelf before the spring, and, if you don't, well, I've got a Padres one for you."

"Look," I said, as I tucked Robin into bed. "Sometimes the world is stranger than you can imagine, and that means more than the ways in which it disappoints you. What would you have thought if I told you at the beginning of the season that Hubie Brooks would have a great year, finish the season as the Met shortstop, get traded to the the Expos, and that Steve Boros would call and console you?" He

laughed, and then turned over to sleep.

By the next evening I found that Stu had made the adjustment quickly.

"What a trade! When I came in to work this morning you should have seen the long looks on those Cub fans. They couldn't face me. 'Earliest clinching of a pennant,' I told them. 'December 10.' I said: 'That sound you heard yesterday was Dallas Green's jaw when he got the news. Then he called Rick Sutcliffe and told him — Hey, forget it. We can finish second without you.'"

Robin and I would never make the adjustment. We'd root for the Mets next season, but the Mets' team we cared about, that began on a night in San Diego years ago, was gone; it would never play in a World Series — not when Gary Carter was substituted for Hubie Brooks. If this Met team won the division, we would root for them of course, all the way there and all the way through the post-season, but something would be missing. It would be a victory in partial exchange for their soul.

"I didn't realize how perfect it was," Robin said, "how they represented everything right. They were the perfect team for us. But I didn't appreciate it until it was over."

By next season, yes, it will almost be forgotten. Teams, just like people, die a little bit at a time; and by the time you win, it's probably always too late, at least in this existence. I had tricked myself into thinking the Mets were different, but how could they be? They were the Yankees' shadow and just another powerhouse in the white macho Eastern Division.

"Poor Hubie," said Robin.

Growing Up Bronx (excerpts)

Sometimes, after school, on a day when the Yankees were playing a night game, I would remain on the train for two additional stops, journeying to Yankee Stadium to talk to the players as they arrived. This always seemed unbelievable to me: that you could, simply by loitering outside the stadium, get to talk to the players—Mickey Mantle, Whitey Ford, Billy Martin. The same players whom the men at Ha-Ya Bungalows discussed for hours. The same players who appeared on TV and in the newspapers every day, the players thousands of people paid money to see at a distance. You could walk with them and talk to them for free.

It was like getting in touch with Real Life.

Of course, things didn't always go smoothly. One afternoon I ran over to greet Yankee pitcher Allie Reynolds, called "The Big Chief." I had seen so many photos of him, had watched him pitch so many times, that he seemed like an old friend. I ran right up to him and said, "Whaddya say, Big Chief?" I expected a warm response. He grunted and shoved me roughly out of the way. Well, perhaps he'd had a hard day. For all I knew maybe he blamed me for stealing this country from his people three hundred years ago. If the kids at Sacred Heart School could spit on us for "killing the Savior" when the Philadelphians played basketball in their gym, anything was possible.

* * *

In May of 1955, I became batboy for the Cincinnati Reds at the Polo Grounds. I got the job for a day—a doubleheader on a Sunday—through my friend Midge Waxenthal, the Giants' batboy. Midge had been the batboy for the Giants during their miracle world championship year of 1954 and it was during that season that my association with the Giants had begun. Midge and I journeyed to the Polo Grounds after school to sign baseballs in the clubhouse for the veterans in hospitals. We each practiced imitating the players' signatures and we specialized in half the team apiece.

In a way, I guess you could say this was my first experience in writing fiction. I took on the identity of other characters, imitating them, and writing words for them. People believed it was true, and

it made these people happy. No one was hurt by it.

On the day of the game, I went to the park early and put on my Cincinnati uniform, number 99. I went out onto the field for the Giants' batting practice. Not sure where to go, I wandered into the outfield.

When I reached my position in center field, a muscular man, about my height, perhaps a little shorter, trotted my way and stopped a few feet to my right. When I looked at his face, I saw he was Willie Mays.

Just then, the batter hit a fly ball toward deep right-center field. I took off after it. Willie Mays took off after it, too, but I was closer. Before I realized what I was doing, I shouted, "I got it, Willie!" He pulled up and stood back as I caught the ball and threw it into the infield. He went back to his position.

And suddenly, it occurred to me, what I had done. I, Danny Schwartz of Nelson Avenue, had waved off Willie Mays, arguably the best all-around baseball player that has ever lived, and I had caught a ball in his territory, center field at the Polo Grounds, a huge pasture which he *owned*, which, in its immensity, seemed almost to have been built just for him to have the space to show off his amazing talents in front of millions of people. I had shouted, "I got it, Willie," and I had caught the ball just like that.

I didn't know what to make of it. On the one hand, I feared that I was in the wrong place, taking Willie's space; on the other hand, there was Willie, back at his position over to my right, not complaining, acting like I had done just what I should have by calling for a ball that was mine.

And I did catch it. And as I stood there, I began to feel very good about what had happened. Nothing else that happened that day or for years afterward quite touched that catch.

Interview

with Richard Grossinger
November 9 and December 10, 1984
Berkeley, California

Grossinger: I think of you less as the recent manager of the Oakland A's and more as the third baseman for the Detroit Tigers in the early '60s. I guess you were from Michigan and got to play with the local team.

Boros: I signed with the Tigers mainly because I had always been a Tigers fan. My father had always been a Tigers fan. When I finished my senior year of high school I went to Tigers tryout camp on my own because I didn't do well enough that year to warrant having any clubs interested in me. I made something like thirty errors in twenty games and hit about .285. At the tryout camp they said: "Go to college. Don't even worry about pro ball." A few years later I had grown a couple of inches and put on twenty pounds. I developed confidence and really blossomed as a ballplayer. Now we're suddenly sitting down talking about signing maybe a bonus contract. I had had this little dream that I'd sign one just like Harvey Kuenn and Al Kaline ahead of me, go right to the big leagues, and be a big star. But I wasn't ready to play in the big leagues. I was with the Tigers in 1957. I hit about a hundred and forty in fifty at-bats. Then they changed the bonus rule so that I could be sent to the minor leagues. I was in the minors three years and then came back to the big leagues.

Grossinger: You had an incredible year for Denver in 1960. You either won the triple crown or were MVP.

Boros: Most Valuable Player. That's the best year I ever had as a baseball player. That was *my* year. It was that magical thing that happens to a ballplayer when just about everything falls into place. We had a great line-up. We were playing in a park that was very conducive for hitting. I had good hitters in front of me, good hitters in back of me. About eleven or twelve players off that Denver club went to the big leagues. Some of them were pitchers—Phil Regan and Fred Gladding. But we had some fine hitters: Dick McAuliffe, Bubba Morton, George Alusik, Frank Kostro, Jake Wood, Bo Osborne, Mike Roarke, Ozzie Virgil, Coot Veal.

Grossinger: You hit pretty well when you first came up too, but I remember vaguely that you were injured during the 1961 pennant

race when the Tigers were battling the Yankees. I was a junior in high school and I was in summer camp. Some cook who was a big Yankee fan had the only t.v. in the place in his room, and he told me one day: "Boros got hurt. Forget the Tigers."

Boros: What happened was that in '61 we were playing a doubleheader with the Athletics in Kansas City, and Dick Howser bunted the ball down the third-base line. It looked as though it might go foul, but it was still a real good bunt. With men on first and second and nobody out, it was the kind of a bunt that I would rather let it roll and make him try to do it again. I didn't think he could. As it turned out, the ball did stay fair. I was watching it so close I didn't have a chance to yell, "I got it," which is the third baseman's call; and Frank Lary, who could really get off the mound quickly, came over. At the last minute he saw I was going to make the play, and he tried to jump over the top of me. His knee clipped my collar bone on the left side. It just snapped. They said they could hear it up in the press box. That put me out six or seven weeks. My loss, I don't think, was that great, because when I came back the first of September, we were only a game behind, and Bob Scheffing put me in the line-up for our big series with the Yankees. We lost all three ball games and proceeded to lose another five games in a row. We went from one game out to about nine games out.

Grossinger: That was the year Maris hit the sixty-one homers.

Boros: Yes. You wrote how you saw that sixty-first home run. I saw his fifty-sixth or fifty-seventh, I've forgotten which. They were in Detroit, and Terry Fox was pitching. He was our best righthanded relief pitcher. Maris hit a curve ball off the facing of the third deck in right field. I still remember that. Maris was losing some hair on one side of his head because of the pressure in trying to break Babe Ruth's record. I was watching him very closely from by third base, and it was amazing to me the poise and control that he showed, how he laid off bad pitches and made the pitcher come to him. If I remember right, the curve ball he hit off Fox was a pretty good pitch.

Grossinger: The player who replaced you I think was . . . .

Boros: Reno Bertoia.

Grossinger: Right. And someone else got hurt. Who was that?

Boros: Someone else got hurt, but I can't think right now who it was. (Later Boros checked his scrapbooks and found it was Dick Brown, the catcher).

Grossinger: You had a good year in '62 also. Your average fell off, but you hit for some power.

Boros: When I got to the big leagues after the great season at Denver I found out that I had to make a choice. If I wanted to hit for power I was not going to hit for average, I was going to strike out a lot. If I wanted to hit for average, then my home run production would come down quite a bit. And when I say, "Hit for average," I mean nothing spectacular. My best year for average was .270 in '61.
Grossinger: How do you do that?
Boros: I'd wait on the ball longer and get jammed occasionally on inside pitches. I'd shorten up on the bat a little and shorten my swing, and I'd use the whole field to hit in. When I chose to go for home runs in '62, I looked for the ball inside. I took a big swing and tried to pull. I made sure that I was ready for a fast ball and got out in front and did not get jammed. It left me vulnerable to anything on the outside of the plate and anything offspeed, like the change-up, slider, or curve. So the strikeouts were there as well as the home runs.
Grossinger: I'm afraid '62 was your last year as a major-league regular. What happened?
Boros: I got traded to the Cubs. When I went to the Cubs, Ron Santo and I were supposedly going to fight it out for the third-base job. We had had pretty much the same kinds of year in '62. We both hit sixteen home runs. I drove in something like fifty runs; he drove in sixty or seventy. I hit .229, and he hit about .229; he had a bad year. Well, the fight didn't last very long. He played every inning at third base that year and hit .300 and had something like thirty home runs. He had 99 RBIs, and on the last day of the season, twice against Warren Spahn he grounded into double plays with the bases loaded. He was so disappointed he didn't want to talk to anybody or be congratulated on his year. My playing time was limited to a little bit of first base against certain righthanded pitchers when a guy named Ernie Banks needed a rest and a little bit of right field when there was a tough lefthanded pitcher and our manager Bob Kennedy didn't want to run a young lefthanded hitter named Lou Brock out there. I had something like seventy or eighty at-bats, so I asked the Cubs to trade me. I got sold to the Reds' triple A farm club at San Diego but was invited to spring training with the big-league club. I got sent to the minors on opening day when they had to cut one more player. I remember watching the game on t.v. at a hotel in downtown Cincinnati. But thirty days later they brought me back, and I finished the year with the Reds and hit .257. That was '64, the year there could have been a three-way tie for the National League pennant. The Cardinals finally edged us and we

ended up tied for second place a game out of first.
Grossinger: The Phillies ended their slump and beat you on the last day of the season, right?
Boros: The last two games. On Friday night we had a lead, and Chris Short hit Chico Cardenas with a pitch. Cardenas went out to the mound with a bat in his hand, and it just woke the Philadelphia Phillies up. They were pretty much riding it out, waiting for the end of the season. They came back and beat us that ball game. Saturday we were off, for whatever reason, but the Mets beat the Cardinals on Saturday, and just by winning on that last day we could have tied the Cardinals.
Grossinger: And by losing you set up the possible three-way tie.
Boros: Exactly. But the Cardinals won, and Jim Bunning pitched like a three-hit shutout against us.
Grossinger: Were the Expos your first front office job?
Boros: No. Before the Expos I was in the Royals' organization for eleven years. My last year as a player in 1969 I was with their triple A club in Omaha. Then I went to minor-league managing for the next five years. I was three years in Waterloo, Iowa, and two years in San Jose, in the Cal. League. And then Jack McKeon brought me to the big leagues as a coach in '75. When he got fired, Whitey Herzog came on, and I coached for Whitey through '79. Then we were all fired, Whitey and the whole coaching staff. I went to the Expos in the minors one year as a Rookie League manager — Calgary, Alberta, Canada. They brought me to the big leagues two years as a coach, in '81 and '82. Then I came to the A's as the manager in '83.
Grossinger: When the A's hired you, it must have seemed out of the blue.
Boros: It did for me because I didn't know anybody out there. I think what had happened was that they had drawn up a list of criteria that they were looking for in a manager, and they went and talked to other baseball people and asked them if they had anyone in mind. I think John McHale, who was the general manager of the Montreal Expos at the time, and my boss, had quite a bit to do with my getting interviewed for the Oakland A's job. I was in fact managing down in Puerto Rico in the winter league at the time. Taking that job was a way of sending the signal to baseball people that I was indeed interested in managing.
Grossinger: Were you trying to do anything particularly unique as a manager?
Boros: Fifty years ago it was taken for granted that a manager was

going to yell and scream at his players in public and in front of other players. Now I think many managers are going to go in the direction I was going in. The modern ballplayers are virtually stockholders in the ballclubs because so much of the value of the franchise is tied up in their contracts. More and more you're going to have to consult them. And I think it's a healthy thing. You're going to have fewer loud and abusive managers and more managers that take a player aside and talk to him.

Grossinger: Do you feel that Oakland was the wrong place to try that?

Boros: Not at all. The problems with the A's in 1984 were more the effect of our pitching staff than of the style of managing. And I think if the owners were honest they would admit that. One of the problems is that they are fairly young and new to baseball. They won in their first year, and that was very unusual. But the circumstances were unusual. They got off to a great start in '81, and it was the strike season. They won the first half going away. They had problems after play was resumed, but they defeated the Royals in that mini-series, beat 'em handily, and then of course lost to the Yankees in the playoffs. The club was able to win a shortened season when maybe it wasn't as talented as a lot of people thought. After that there was a tremendous amount of disappointment among the fans and the owners that they weren't able to come back and win right away. The ownership felt that the club just wasn't able to win under me. I don't agree, but that was the assessment they made.

Grossinger: I sense in them a sort of ambivalence about toughness. They want to have a humane and civilized situation, and they want to appear publicly as an enlightened new baseball ownership. On the other hand, they fall back automatically on a kind of simplistic macho pragmatism.

Boros: I don't think they expected me to stay with this approach as long as I did. But I stayed with it until the day I got fired. They felt the pressure of being a big-league manager, the need to win, the frustration of dealing with twenty-five ballplayers, would somehow change me. They thought it would bring out certain qualities, abilities—well, they'd call them abilities, but I would look at it differently. They wanted me to scream and yell at the players and umpires. They wanted me to show that I was disappointed in the players and to show it in such a way that it could be seen not just by the players but by the fans too. I told them I couldn't do those things. I just couldn't. If I was going to do something dramatic out in front of everybody, it would be something humorous, a prank.

But as far as cursing an umpire, kicking dirt on him, carrying on a scene—no way. I don't see behaving any differently on the baseball field than I do at home with my family or the postman. I've never done those things. The fact that I was a big-league manager wasn't enough to change my way of behaving. A prank as a piece of theater maybe, but embarrassing players, kicking dirt, no.

Grossinger: I don't think those things necessarily win. Sometimes they do, sometimes they don't.

Boros: You still can be successful using the kind of approach that I use. I don't know that I'll ever get a chance to manage again. If I don't I won't view it as some kind of tremendous failure I'll take to the grave with me.

Grossinger: Does your interest in literature and writing help put baseball in perspective?

Boros: Most people who know me find it very strange that someone in baseball would have strong interests in literature. But, looking back on my life, I see that what came first was literature. My first experience with narrative came when my parents took me to the local movie theater. From there I went to radio drama, and then books, lots of reading as a child. But suddenly this athletic ability came out, first in softball games in the neighborhood, then finally in baseball. During this period my interest in literature is kind of at war with my interest in athletics. Then a freshman English instructor I had at the University of Michigan was interested in my writing and encouraged me to enter the Hopwood contest. About that time I started to realize the affinity between baseball and literature. Originally my parents wanted me to be a doctor, go to medical school, but I wanted to play baseball. So I started out in pharmacy school; I liked those nice clean white uniforms. I didn't feel that was right, so after two years, I switched to business. That was the worst year I had in college. But after my rookie year in the major leagues I realized I could go back to Michigan and choose my own major. I was paying for my own education with my bonus money. I went into the dean's office, and I finally decided to try history, but when I was driving home, I thought, "Why not literature?" So I called him up and changed it. I took five English courses the next term. I also took courses at Wayne State later on, and I was accepted at the University of Chicago for graduate school, and I almost went after my last season with the Reds. Baseball and literature have become unified because my experiences in baseball have given me narrative, I've gotten to see extraordinary individuals performing

in pressured situations; and my income from baseball allowed me to keep writing and going to school in the winter time. But baseball and writing have also been in conflict. When I got married and had children, I didn't have time to write because I needed to earn income from winter baseball. I can also still remember my manager at Birmingham in double A ball Skeeter Newsome telling me not to read when I was a young player because it would hurt my eyes. When we had a rain delay and I read instead of playing cards, he sometimes sat me down. It made him pretty angry. (*pause*). You know I thought your piece was a pretty accurate description of baseball.

Grossinger: Well, as I told you while we were walking over here, I meant the piece to be from the outside looking in because that's where I am. It's not like Roger Angell, who writes as though he wants to be on the inside. I actually want to stay on the outside and look at it from there and try to understand why it moves me emotionally and why it happens at all.

Boros: When you said that, I thought you meant it was because it was a little bit cool and indifferent, but now I understand what you mean. From the viewpoint of you the writer, the insight it has into you as a young boy growing up with baseball and the effect it's had on your family, it's very much on the *inside*.

Grossinger: But, in the clubhouse, I'm on the outside.

Boros: Yeah, and I think you're right in that you don't want to get awfully close because then a lot of the magic of the ballplayers is gone. You can almost get to know them too well. And there are some that I think are really characters and people that you want to know intimately, but then there are a lot of them that you'd rather just have the picture you get on the back of the bubble-gum card. What you wrote about Stearns was perfect. You look at a ballplayer out on a field, you see him conduct himself a certain way, his gestures, expressions, you know, all those great things you can pick up on a baseball field that you can't see on a football field because of all the paraphernalia. Now you make certain mythological observations about him on the basis of that. If you got to know John up close and personal, like they say on t.v., you might not find that he lived up to it. It's nice to be able to see the players but still have a little distance to it. We look to those ballplayers to somehow exhibit the best, but the worst is in them too, just as it's in ourselves.

Grossinger: The game provides the set, and the players don't have to act outside the set. Dwight Gooden doesn't have to do anything else; he doesn't have to go on a diplomacy mission to China or Syria.

The game provides him with limits. The players are symbolized and mythologized within that context. It's not only a matter of *some* players being larger than life; even the ordinary player is larger than life because the role is mythologized, the game is mythologized. People say, "How can they be heroes? They're not doctors. They're not scientists. They're not artists." But none of that matters inside the game.

Boros. No. Not at all. To me one of the most fascinating things about baseball is that when you're sitting with perceptive fans, people who really know the game and know the players, they see someone get up, say from the bullpen bench to walk in to the mound to get warmed up, they can tell by the way he walks who it is. They can't see his number. Sometimes the announcer doesn't even know. But that fan knows. And if you ask why, he says, "I can tell by the way he's walking." Now that to me is why baseball's a great game. If you sit there and watch it closely enough and look at their faces, their expressions, the way they walk, their stance, and all that, you really come to know them.

Grossinger: And that's very personal without being personal.

Boros: Yeah, and to have some announcer tell you, that's number so-and-so who is hitting such-and-such this year, and he's six three, two hundred pounds, is beside the point. I'd like to hear the t.v. announcer say, just one time, that's so-and-so getting up to throw. Now watch the way he walks, how he drags his right leg, or whatever, or notice the his hat is off to the side, that can only be . . . .

Grossinger: Like in my description of Hubie Brooks with the styrofoam cup. That's the same signature, the same character, the same kind of dreamy playfulness as the guy who doubles in three runs and is thrown out at third base.

Boros: And who jumped in front of the t.v. set to mimic Perez. But many fans try to find out more about players than they'd actually care to know.

Grossinger: For many of the ballplayers, rock stars are the idols. The time with George Thorogood that night at Shea Stadium, *he* was signing autographs for the players.

Boros: It's amazing. Did you see Lowell Cohn's piece in the *Chronicle* today? Jabbar compared his sky hook to a ballad by Thelonius Monk. He said, "Gee, I hope people think of it that way." He sees himself as somehow in some way duplicating what jazz artists do when he's making his moves on the basketball court. When I was at Michigan, one of my English instructors invited me to a cocktail party for writers

at a symposium. Gore Vidal was there, William Styron, and also Nelson Algren. I was anxious to meet him because he had covered the White Sox in the '59 World Series. I asked him: "Why is it that you as a writer are so interested in athletics? I'm a guy who may have a chance to be a decent major-league player, but I'd trade all of that in a minute to be someone like you, a published novelist who's written some things that are going to be around for a while." And he said: "I think it has something to do with the fact that a writer is never sure that what he has written is really worthwhile. When you see Henry Hank in the ring fighting someone who's good, and you see the look of confidence Hank has that he's going to put him away, that's a feeling of confidence I never experience as a writer. I'm never sure that what I'm writing is worthwhile, that the next thing is going to be any good. But when you see a jockey that's got a good horse under him, you look at him and you know that jockey knows he's going to win." This really hit home to me. The magic of doing something well on the athletic field . . . .

Grossinger: Perhaps the silence of making the play is the same as the silence of finding the right word, or the right flow of lines.

Boros: Sam Sheppard said that he got more pleasure out of finishing first in a team roping contest in a rodeo than he did in winning the Pulitzer Prize. It's something you do right there, quickly and perfect, with your body, like hitting the ball solid or making a good play—there's no feeling like that.

Grossinger: That's the experience the fan may identify with but can never get inside of; it's the intimacy he can't have.

Boros: And the media are always trying to put you there. They don't simply leave them alone and let them play ball. Every time Dwight Gooden strikes out a batter, they have some stat they can pull out to somehow give this meaning and give it some importance, when just what he does—sit there and watch him do it—that's what's beautiful, rather than giving it false significance by saying that he struck out ten batters in a game for the twelfth time, and that hasn't been done since 1932, or whatever.

Grossinger: I'm still struck by Gooden's demeanor, the look on his face. Maybe you've seen that too.

Boros: Yes, I have.

Grossinger: And I'm sure he doesn't even understand it.

Boros: And it's probably just as well. It's amazing when that kind of player comes along. When you're a minor-league manager and you've spent time in the minor leagues, you see so many hotshot

players come through and fail because mentally they don't have it. Either they're irresponsible, or they're not confident, or they don't have the thoroughness and completeness to finish something they begin on the ballfield. Whatever it is, it's missing. And then you've got this guy who will run through a brick wall to make himself a player, but physically he doesn't have it. And then you see a Dwight Gooden, and everything just dovetails, and you have a unique ballplayer, a player that comes along every twenty or thirty years. And you just hope that he doesn't hurt his shoulder, that he doesn't on a cold day drop his elbow, throw a fast ball from the wrong position, or a curve. I saw Frank Lary do that on a cold opening day one April.

Grossinger: And then there is the way of looking at baseball that Sadaharu Oh describes in his book. The American player doesn't see that the pitcher and batter are not only opponents but collaborators in a greater unity.

Boros: You have the expression in baseball, "he challenged me." It means that a pitcher came after me; he threw a fast ball down the heart of the strike zone saying: "Here, who's the best man?" When I read Oh's book I thought back to a confrontatioin I saw between Reggie Jackson and Bud Black this year at Anaheim Stadium. That was a tremendous moment when Jackson hit his five hundreth home run. Just before he crossed home plate after circling the bases, he turned and gestured with his finger at Bud Black as though to say: "Hey, thanks. I appreciate the fact you came after me and gave me something to hit." That was a special moment. I have to feel that Black felt a little good. No one likes to give up an historic home run, but he was a part of this too; he understood that Reggie understood he couldn't have done it without him. Oh makes that clear. There isn't a confrontation at all in the end. There's a unity between pitcher and batter. They're both necessary ingredients in a beautiful balanced dynamic—whether the pitcher strikes him out or the hitter hits a home run. In either case they're both a part of it. It's not really that one failed and the other succeeded.

Grossinger: It's not in American ideology to realize that opponents are actually collaborators.

Boros: It certainly isn't. I guess capitalism dominates: winner and loser, buyer and seller, always a split, always a dichotomy. But Sadaharu Oh describes the real relationship between a hitter and a pitcher. He described what actually happened in Anaheim Stadium between Reggie Jackson and Bud Black.

Grossinger: This is a different kind of collaboration, but remember Denny McClain trying to give Mantle that home run, I think on his last at-bat at Yankee Stadium.
Boros: Yeah, he simply grooved him a fast ball.
Grossinger: Mantle was laughing so hard he almost couldn't hit it.
Boros: He kept fouling pitches off. But, hey, it takes something to hit a ball in the seats. Even when you're hitting off a forty-five year old coach throwing a fifty mile an hour fast ball right down the middle, there's a special magic when you hit it in the seats. Even in batting practice. The pitcher and infielders, the batters standing around the cage, they all take note when someone hits a ball out of the park.
Grossinger: A different question: There seem to be two opposite tendencies in baseball now with building teams. By one philosophy you create a sense of specialness about your organization in the farm system. You have good instruction at all levels and bring along players according to your own style. When they come to the big leagues they're trained by you and have your baseball values. You value your own players more than those from other organizations. The Orioles have always built from within; so did the old Yankees, the pinstripes. That's what Dodger blue is all about. It's a joke, but it works. The Mets are trying to do that now. By the other philosophy you constantly trade your own homegrown players for those that have made a name for themselves elsewhere, like the Yankees sending five of their absolute top minor-league prospects for Rickey Henderson, or the Angels.
Boros: In a market like New York, there's a lot of pressure to win, and there's a lack of patience on the part of the fans to wait and see a player develop into a bona fide major leaguer. They'd rather have someone who has a name and can put people in the seats. Once upon a time trades were something special and magical. Now they're the coldest most calculating sorts of things. Do I want this salary? How many more years before this player's option is up? How much is this player going to increase my radio and television revenues? People are slow to see it, but the magic is gone.
Grossinger: I don't think the owners realize it themselves, but these very moves ultimately rob them of the value of their franchises over time, for they destroy the romance and continuity of the team. I think one of the problems with the A's management is that they have stereotyped baseball as a certain kind of high-voltage action. They don't have the confidence that the fans will support ordinary baseball, so they try to jazz it up.

Boros: Well, the A's didn't draw even when they had good clubs, though of course Finley did everything he could almost to prevent people from coming to the ballpark, or once they got there, to prevent them from enjoying themselves. The new owners felt they had to do something to create excitement, to make it more fun at the ballpark. But I think once you have a baseball team and develop a following, the fans grow to appreciate the game and the building of a team. The sense of fun about being at a ballpark develops naturally. You don't have to do anything to try to enhance that.
Grossinger: Like the Cub fans. They called it years of suffering, but it was really years of enjoyment, of enjoying the team.
Boros: I told my wife how much fun those fans have. There's a sense of joy like a celebration in that ballpark. Finally I got her on a road trip to Chicago, and she saw it. There's a sense of fun in that ballpark that's not destroyed even if they blow a five-run lead in the ninth inning. Somehow there's a team mystique there. The funny thing about it is: you don't find that over in the White Sox' park. Very same city and the other side of town. They're angry, and they get rabid, mad, throw beer on the visiting players when they come in the dugout when they're losing. I don't care how brilliant you are or how much money you're willing to spend if you're an owner, you can't buy or manufacture or create that mystique; it's just got to happen. It's kind of like the Mets when they were losing. I loved going to that park, not because we'd probably win. I loved the signs; the signs were witty and clever. And then you have the Yankees on the other side of town. I was a coach on the Royals team that lost three straight years to the Yankees in the playoffs. We had to have policemen from Kansas City sit with our wives to protect them. (*pause*). To me, excitement isn't going to a ballgame; that's because I've so much been a part of it. Now just watching isn't enough. To me, excitement is going to the theater, and waiting for that curtain to go up. I don't know what is going to happen. Even if I read the play I don't know how this particular director and these actors are going to handle the material. A ballgame is like a play in which even the players don't know what's going to happen. You don't know how that ball's going to bounce and what freak of nature is going to come into play.
Grossinger: I think a game is a play not in the clichéd sense that everything is a play, but on a subtle level of collaborative make-believe. Baseball may also be a business, but that doesn't make it any less a play. Everything is there, arranged for spectators. The

players have roles; they have positions; they have the level of their own performance they reach to and fall away from. Do players realize this?

Boros: The level of consciousness about these things was never very high among major-league ballplayers and it's decreasing more and more all the time. There's so much money involved, and they're aware how short their careers are, how short the period is when they can make these tremendous sums of money. The average career is four and three quarters years, exactly mine. The play-like, the theater-like quality goes right past them because they take the money so seriously. But you're right. The stage is there. It is a theater. I still remember walking into Tiger Stadium as a young boy for the first time and being amazed, first of all at the vastness of the ballpark and then the beautiful green grass, the white lines which defined the field perfectly, and then seeing the Tigers come out in their shining white uniforms to warm up and start their practice. The only way I can relate to that sensation now is the moment before the curtain rises in the dark theater, waiting for the play to begin.

Grossinger: It's classical Greek theater. There's a starkness, a chorus-like quality to the teams in their colored uniforms, their robes. The game is only part of the play; the ritual drama is still going on while they are warming up, throwing on the sidelines, even chatting with each other.

Boros: One thing that draws people to baseball is that it's a year-to-year ritual with each team, and we think of our lives on a year-to-year basis. It's also day-to-day: 162 games, but even before that—the 1984 season began with the workouts with Caudill and Kingman at the Coliseum right after the first of the year, the excitement about the new players, the season itself, then the playoffs, the World Series, the winter meetings. It's really a year-round ritual.

Grossinger: I think my interest in baseball comes in part from the fact that it is a kind of secular ritual. Baseball is a ceremony in which value is built up by specificity and in layers, just like a Hopi Powamu. Baseball is made up of names, of successions of symbols, of continuities of seasons. I suppose a sacred ceremony is closer to the heart of the universe, but raised in this culture I don't feel as though I can live in a sacred world all the time. I have friends who seek that, though; they can't get interested in baseball because it's too secular, too trivial. On the other hand, I have friends who are too secular to get into baseball. They say: Who cares about these games; there's nothing in it for me. Why root for someone else? The players

themselves would often approach this position of materiality, except they *are* getting paid. Some people are so compelled to act only secularly that they have to bet on games or build elaborate structures in which they draft actual players and make money from their stats during the season. They have to have the practical gain to feel it's worthwhile. Otherwise, baseball is too sacred, too unselfish. To me, that's the point. Baseball suggests a hidden ceremony, but from a secular position. In rooting for the Mets I get nothing material back, but I would never bet and ruin the ceremony. At the same time, it's so literal it's not a ceremony; it's a relief from the sacredness of nature. When the Hopi go down into the kiva with their prayersticks, they are directly testing the dream of life. Following baseball allows you to get some distance from the dream and believe in it. Since nobody ever split the world up into sacred and not-sacred, actual circumstances borrow from both imaginal poles. That's why baseball never really becomes debased, though the modern spirit tries to do that. The ownership and the commissioner's office are crass enough to market the myth, commercialize the magic. But then that's the whole story of modern life. One philosopher points out that we have even turned sacred water, the spring of the gods, into industrial H_2O. Because baseball can never be cut off from an unknown grail, the players can never fully succeed. You win, but then you lose. You get a hit, but then you strike out. You win the World Series, but then you have to go out next season. Oh expresses it clearly: he's trying to become a good hitter only like a swordsman, in order to understand the balance of forces in nature. That's bigger than winning and losing. Remember that great moment when the Tigers put Mickey Stanley at short so Al Kaline could play in the World Series.

Boros: That will always make me have a special place in my heart for Mayo Smith. Al Kaline is one of the classiest men ever to play baseball.

Grossinger: It was almost as though he was saying: This is the World Series. It's more important to do this right . . . .

Boros: Exactly. Than to win. And the beautiful thing about it was: Stanley did well at shortstop and they were able to win too.

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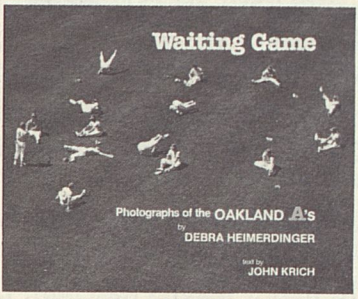

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