

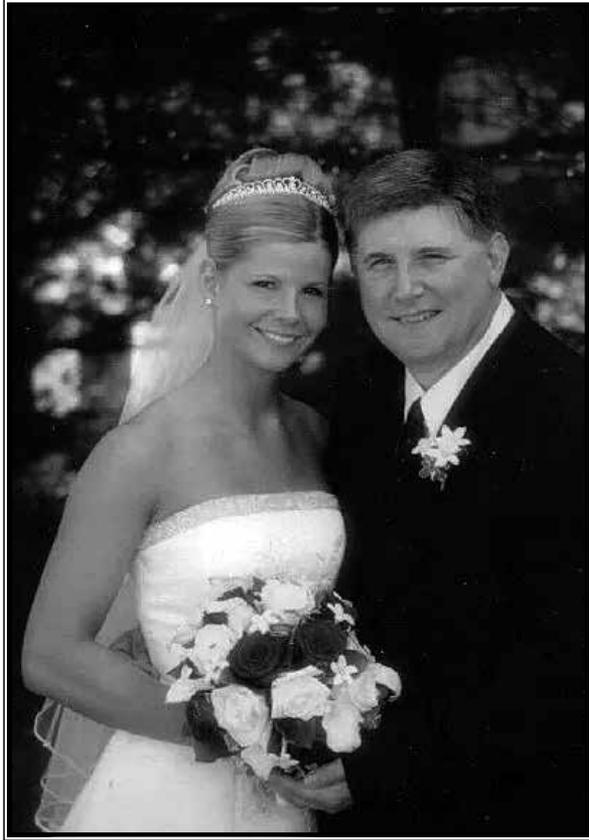
SPORT Literate

End of Winter 2015

Volume 9 Issue 1

HONEST REFLECTIONS ON LIFE'S LEISURELY DIVERSIONS





In memory of
Meghan Leigh Strole
May 17, 1980 - January 1, 2015

Of Discontented Winters

SL Foreword

William Meiners

From Thanksgiving through nearly Easter, it's hard to think much beyond winter here. Mid-Michigan—sweet freezing Jesus—in a midlife crisis. Even the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, a February staple reminding males everywhere of their ordinary lives, chills in the solitary confinement of the mailbox. As hot as those photographed women are, the glossy magazine arrives cold to the touch. At least we put ours in a protective yellow envelope.

This was supposed to be *Sport Literate's* 2014 edition. But real life often trumps reflections on life's leisurely diversions. So we're stepping on the toes of what will be our 20th anniversary issue. If you've been with us from the start, which probably means you're related to me, can you believe friggin' it? I use "frig," of course, in place of a harsher f-word modifier.

Life friggin' flies. Twenty years for us is pure survival. Like Mickey Rooney getting some sort of lifetime achievement award. We've just hung around long enough without having the least bit of business sense. We also hung out the shingle for good sports writing and came across some pretty good examples of it over the last two decades. We'll lament more on that fast passage in the next issue—late in 2015. Bank on it.

To follow is a bulky collection featuring the work of six poets and 12 writers. Counting Mark Pearson's thoughtful short essay on judging the contest, that's a baker's dozen. If you're scoring at home (and I certainly hope you are) there are eight women authors in the mix. I'm not sure why that would surprise anyone. Maybe I shouldn't even bring it up. Some of our best writing comes from a feminine perspective. In a close call, Pearson chose Ali Nolan's essay, "Channeling Mr. Jordan," as his personal favorite. I know it's given me chills in three or four readings now. And that's not another winter allusion; I first read it last spring.

This is a year of milestones. I'll turn 50 in November, ever regretful of not making more money in my half century. I could have treated my body better, too, but I didn't think it would hold out this long. My father—that's him in the "Life is Good" photo—is tentatively scheduled to reach 90 in May. One of those birthdays where you don't want to buy the cake too early.

For him and the rest of you, we've got all sorts of honest reflections here—from runners to a rugby insider, a hiker and former hoopster, an ice skater, a traveler, and literate fans. Poetry to boot! We continue to publish what we simply like. Potential writers would do well to read us and figure out what that might be.

Both baseball essays in this collection hit home with me. Keith Raether writes about the 1965 World Series—one I may have only heard from the womb. Funny, though, in the timeless baseball sense how Sandy Koufax's performance compares to Madison Bumgarner's in the most recent fall classic.

Beyond Koufax, Raether is writing about his father's pitching advice and watchful eyes as he recalls his Little League days. Peter Stine pens a poem about a similar father and son battery that speaks to cyclical nature of baseball. You might tear up with that one. And Nolan channels her own father, as well as Michael Jordan's.

I would have never started *Sport Literate* if it weren't for my dad. It's why his picture is in each issue. Sport stories have been one of the markers of his life. And I've heard every one of his a dozen times.

In spite of the T-shirt sales, life isn't always good. It beats the hell out of the alternative. But some of my favorite stories, a few of which you'll find in these pages, are about those survival instincts that allow us to reach winter. And maybe even dream of spring.

William Meiners is editor-in-chief of *Sport Literate*. Now a fulltime freelance writer, he lives in Mount Pleasant, Michigan, with his wife, blended family, and dog George. In 2015, he hopes to explore the narrative possibilities of Rock Steady Boxing — an Indianapolis-based gym that provides boxing training for people with Parkinson's disease. For more information on him, visit www.williammeiners.com.



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Note: If you're also a loyal reader of the fine print in the last issue, you can see we've cleared the decks of supporters for the start of Volume 9.

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Late in August around 9:30 the sun had finally gone out. Half an hour later it was still 90 degrees and especially humid, so between brief drinks of water I told my wife I was going to take off my shorts and finish the last few miles naked. She laughed a little then as I leaned on a darkened tree, tugging at the wet trunks, working to pull my leg free from the mess of black fabric. Then finally, standing there in the woods—the jumping white light of our headlamps, the breezeless quiet of the grass and leaves, the salt crusting crystal on our skin, and the whole of my body revealed to the moon and plants etc.—she said nothing, and just ran off down the trail.

There were only two people in the woods that night and they were us, so I had little concern for modesty, or fear of turning a corner and becoming sudden-surprise-sex-offender. We'd been there an hour already, running the sweaty trails as the long day was drawn back lazy behind the horizon. Now under the black lattice of branches the trails had become primordially dark; everything in the forest, heavy with heat and moisture, seemed at rest.

Except us.

And because we moved so quick and quiet through the trees and over the pools of silent water, around nearly every turn we were met with the waiting lighted eyes of deer—expectant of so many things except the pale hurrying limbs of two people running by. They looked, the eyes, with near interest and then turned away. Because we were come and gone so quickly—disappeared so completely—we may as well never have existed.

There were the other things too. There were the hundreds of curious specks of light alternately shining and dimming along the trail. When I stopped running and, on my hands and knees, looked to see what they were, they darted out of the way, because what they were were all the nebulous mirrored eyes of so many hungry spiders reflecting in the electric light of my lamp. There was the owl that flew across our path, and the ubiquitous moan of toads around the marshy areas, and the long, sturdy silence as we ran higher up into the hills. And except for the shoes to protect my soft feet and the light to direct my dull eyes, there *I* was, naked for it.

Because it was hot, and clothes were a burden, and because it felt good to feel the air trace across the fairest parts of me, it was too easy to pretend myself something feral—to conjure the thought that there was really nothing to distinguish me from the dirt and heat and darkness that grew around us.

I was a thing from the earth, and wherever I moved, I was home.

And because I wanted this—wanted to belong, wanted to disappear, wanted for once to not blindly ruin every delicate thing sewn across my path—I held onto the idea, let my sweat stink with it.

But it was not the nakedness that had done this. I had been naked before. There was nothing illuminating or profound or subversive about naked. Naked was maybe the easiest thing to be. Nature expected nakedness.

But *running*.

For a minute I lost her. She was faster than me, and in the dark it was hard to tell the trail we'd just come down from the trail we were supposed to take forward. I had to stop, turning out my light that I might better see hers cutting between the squat columns of black wood. Immediately my skin became host to all variety of tiny winged animals. The mayflies and mosquitoes and moths who were either instinctively drawn to my humid stench or, like me, were too blind in the dark to see where they were going. I stood for a minute while the bugs had their way—slipping their fragile mouth parts beneath my outer layers, vacuuming the salt fluids from behind my ears, burrowing together below my waist for sex and rest and the protection of an unmoving, oblivious body.

A *body*. There were so many fine things to do with a body—aying it in the sun, making it naked with other bodies, putting it in cars with windows down and hurling it across minimum-maintenance roads in perfect humming spring afternoons. But *this* thing, running, was perhaps the most pure, the most immediate, the most uncomplicated way to be alive that we had access to. It was also, happily, a rather perfect offense against sleep and death and the general numbness that so much of the rest of the world ran on.

“Hey!,” she yelled to me from somewhere above, “Go left!” So I did, bounding along the incline, rising closer to her with every stretch of my legs. And with one move I left the static of hovering insects behind me; their short lives going ahead as planned—my fleeting interruption having proved as inconsequential to them as the breeze.

In nature, swiftness was necessity. But in a world made of cars and Internet and drone-fired warheads, physical speed had become, at best, an obsolete advantage. Now, technological speed chose the heroes, made the trades, won the wars. For most of us in the First World, modern life barely required anything more strenuous than getting out of a chair, let alone moving anywhere with anything resembling deliberate haste.

Once we were back together we came fast down a hill, my wife in front and me behind. Every time she jumped to avoid some snag in the trail she shrieked

and shouted back to me: “Watch it!,” which I did. But as we closed in on the end of the trail we were moving too fast. Now our eyes could hardly keep up with our headlamps. Now the muscle and tissue and rubber bands in our legs were less propelling us forward and were only, more desperately, holding us up.

Running required moving your feet quickly across the ground, but curiously, most of the experience was spent in the air, between strides, touching nothing. It was a small taste of that vestigial dream of flying, the fantasy of a total, graceful kind of freedom. There were other ways to feel untouched by the world—skydiving, bungee jumping, drugs—but they were all just various states of falling, of letting go. Running was different. Running was the opposite of letting go. Things like yoga and gardening and cold rooftop beers were good ways to remember how to be slow and deliberate in the world, but running does the other thing. When you’re tearing down a steep path in the woods in the dark with so many rocks and roots waiting to trip and pull you down, and you’re bouncing and volleying back and forth across the narrow lane, every action becomes automatic, without thought, *indeliberate*. And soon it becomes very difficult to think of yourself as anything nobler or more complex than a hot and breathing body of living meat simply trying not to break a leg. Going fast helps all of this, facilitates these responses, uncovers the old reflexes.

But then she fell. Unlike me she had no one to follow, no one to tell her to watch it, so when the trail buckled before a washout, she tripped. And all I saw was the lamp on her head drop and roll and then stop, shinning up beyond the trees until it dissolved into the night and clouds and indiscriminate stars above us. And back somewhere on the ground there was my wife, groaning “Shiiit.”

Of course she was fine. She was always fine. Too fit and strong to ever be otherwise. She wiped the blood from her knee onto her hand and then onto her shorts and kept going. When our trail ended at a patch of concrete where the car was parked she was the first one there.

“How long are you going to stay like that?” she asked, nodding to my pale and sweaty penis when I finally arrived.

The city of Bellevue, Nebraska calls the woods we had come through Swanson Park. It is 350 acres of forest and grass, stretched across uncommonly hilly terrain amidst the somber corn fields surrounding. A few decades earlier, the place had a different name: The Sarpy County Landfill. For 30 years the land was home to nothing more than an enormous collection of trash—domestic waste of all types, sizes, and odors. In 1989 the guys in charge of the place deemed the landfill complete, covered the whole of it with fifteen feet of soil, strung barbed-wire fencing around the perimeter, and left it alone.

Because the trash will remain, for generations, only a few shovelfulls below the surface, no foundations can be poured here, no infrastructures built, no foods planted, no animals grazed. Today the only hint that the hills and valleys of the forest are actually variously-sized mountains of garbage is the occasional black shopping bag that pokes through the bluestem, or the glinting bits of shattered glass sporadically decorating the soil, or the purposeless white crags of hard plastic puncturing the dirt trails—stubborn things all of them, refusing the melt of entropy and decomposition for dozens of years already and hundreds of years yet to come.

We were breathing hard in the parking lot and didn’t really have much to say, so we carried the quiet of the trees with us. How quickly the dark had disappeared though. Looking over my shoulder, the forest was a featureless hue, containing all the blackness and silence that had seemed so complete from inside. I turned around though and there were the tall unblinking lights of the street, and beyond that the homes and stores and cars of all the other people, still awake, right where we had left them.

My wife can remember the years joining her dad as he directly disposed of their family’s old couches, diseased toasters, and unforgivably-ugly carpeting at the landfill. Now that her wasteland had become our playground those days could only appear especially distant. This was how the world was made. First the grass, then the small woody shrubs, then the trees, and



in short order there were the birds, and deer, and foxes, and whatever else wanted to find itself at home there. It was only fair then that we should do the same. I owned a car and money enough for gas to get us there, so we were eligible, we belonged: trash-loving animals running through a trash-loving forest.

I finally put my shorts on in the stale heat of the car then turned the engine. The radio had been left on very loud and, reflexively, I turned it down.

The best thing about running was that it was pointless. It was one of those rare perfect gestures—the totally unnecessary achievement. Granted, all that exercise did help make for a well-oiled heart and lungs, but this was only an ancillary reward; the real prize was in all that energy burned, all that time wasted, all that pain spent with absolutely nothing at the end to show for it. Most sports have a scoreboard, mountain climbers have their peaks, quilters have their quilts complete, but running's most lasting awards were things completely intangible. It is a difficult but completely fruitless pursuit, which is why it also happens to be such a potent act of resistance to the psychotic productivity and gluttonous pleasures keeping this particular society afloat.

Plus (did I say this already?) it hurts. Your lungs get to feeling like stretched and burstable sails, and weird corners of your legs or groin or toes that have never before enjoyed so much as a twinge are suddenly pissed and throbbing. And if you let it hurt bad enough, and for long enough, it all eventually bleeds into a kind of general heat and awakesness, and then it becomes quite reasonable to imagine yourself not yourself, but instead the dumb and healthy animal you once might have been.

Of course, this is not generally the tone of slogans shouted at marathon finish lines. As with all activities codified enough to sustain a sub-culture, certain details of the dream inevitably begin to get a bit ridiculous. And because in America everything—even this *great* thing—was eligible to become another opportunity to buy something, there is an entire industry devoted to the rapid placement of one foot in front of the other. There are the special shoes and socks of course, but every other conceivable article of clothing too has been specially tailored: running gloves, running hats, running sunglasses, running skirts, running utility belts carrying specially-designed running gels, powders, and liquids, all manufactured to the end of moving further faster. There are the magazines too—*Runner's World*, *Running Times*, *Trail Runner*, *Ultra Running*, *Women's Running*—publications still finding words to print (some after four decades of existence) about what is ostensibly one of the most basic functions of the human body.

My wife didn't start running until a few years after we were married. Actually, if she had been a "runner" when I met her we may never have even dated. I was only 18 then, and having only recently escaped the caste system of high school I still harbored an old aversion whenever I met a person who flaunted their athleticism. I was sure a person had to be either a narcissist or simply dim-witted to want to spend so much time at the gym, to wear sweat-wicking fabrics at every social occasion, to advertise the number of kilometers they once ran on the back of their Subaru, to be swayed by the testicle rhetoric of Nike.

She wasn't like that though. We were 18 and 19, scrawny and greasy-headed. Her idea of a nice evening involved canned beer and clove cigarettes shared in the mist of a long hot shower. I liked Woody Allen movies and didn't even own a pair of shorts. No one could ever mistake us for athletes, and for that we were glad. We were in love. Too interesting for exercise.

Somewhere it had been decided that every experience could be turned into another opportunity to measure our relative success or failure. Karl Marx and Jesus reminded us that money is a particularly unbecoming way of establishing a person's worth, so other metrics had to be invented to determine who among us was best. Eventually, every possible thing—every trait and enterprise—was made ripe to beget new species of ambition, and in a country as sedentary as America, the condition of our bodies became an obvious opportunity for selecting winners and losers.

I didn't want to play this game. Down that road lay weariness. Even at 18, when there were so many things I could not know about the future, there was still that one certainty we all shared: no matter how much we'd won, our bodies will inevitably fail us.

And the real bummer was this, before our meat and bones really begin to fall apart completely, there would be so many other small failures to endure. When Dr. Mehmet Oz, a T.V. physician, was asked to explain, on Oprah Winfrey's program, how one might recognize the passing of an ideal turd if one was ever lucky enough to experience it, he said: "You want to hear what the stool, the poop, sounds like when it hits the water. If it sounds like a bombardier, you know, 'plop, plop, plop,' that's not right because it means you're constipated. It means the food is too hard by the time it comes out. It should hit the water like a diver from Acapulco hits the water. Swoooosh!"

Remarkably, even our feces are not exempt from the scrutiny of success. Even the bathroom had been made into a proving ground. This was it—we had arrived at the era when even our poop could betray us, outing us as failures, deficient to the core.

During the weeks surrounding this naked night in August I was marginally employed as a writing tutor and generally had a lot of time on my hands. Every morning I woke up, fed the dogs, fed myself, tied my shoes, and ran away, pushing myself to go some measure further than the previous day. I had printed a map of the northern neighborhoods of Omaha where we lived and every morning, after coffee, I selected obscure intersections 7, 8, 10 miles from our front door and then ran to them.

Many people living in Omaha consider the north end of town a violent ghetto, a blighted community populated by crumbling people and ruined buildings. Unfortunately, this is not an entirely unfounded opinion. While I was writing these very pages, a 5-year-old girl, living two blocks away from me, was killed by a stray bullet while she ate her breakfast cereal. It was 9:45 in the morning and the sound of the errant shots had not compelled me out of the chair.

It *is* a violent area. And many people making their lives here hold the same opinion of the place as those from neighborhoods further west—people who would prefer to never drive alone down Lake Street at night or through Miller Park (“Killer” Park) ever. To believe the wisdom of popular opinion: ours was less of a community and more of a slowly materializing riot.

“You live off Bedford?” Ron, a 50-something, lifelong resident of North O, asked me when I told him where we had bought a house.

“Well that’s the edge of it,” he said. “Most the gang affiliated dudes in Omaha stay right on Bedford between 33rd and Fontenelle Boulevard.”

This may have been true, but to me those blocks were just the first quar-



ter mile of my run every morning. I couldn’t have avoided it. And despite any dangers, there were a great number of lovely, underappreciated details making up that scene. For one, there was no more dynamic architecture in the city than here. Here, where there were entire streets of meticulously sodded, uniformly painted public housing intersecting rows of hundred-year-old brick mansions in various states of repair. There were too, the vacated, unowned, unsellable empty lots gracing every block, with concrete stairs leading grandly from the street to—not an absence of life—but a tangle of volunteer trees and grasses and full-blossoming weeds where cats and opossums thrived on trash and smaller mammals. There were the various bodegas and bars and paint-peeling churches, places that looked so inhospitable they might close out of sheer boredom, but which were still managing to service the hungry, thirsty, faithful.

I knew that everything about me was conspicuous as I ran through these places, down the tire-strewn alley, past the dialysis center, around the unvisited and inconspicuous monument marking the birthplace of Malcom X. Most striking was the fact that where so many others worked—driving trucks, filling potholes, tending stores—I had found time to play. Yes I was white and shirtless and iPoded, but the thing that really distinguished me from my surroundings was the running.

Mine was the kind of life that afforded this kind of waste. I had energy and health and unencumbered hours enough to pass much of every working day of the week in pointless pursuit of some arbitrary point on a map. I had a college degree, a garden full of kale, two dogs sustained on dehydrated, free-range, bison nuggets, and the way I chose to spend my summer vacation was in exploring the bombed-out corners of the Black neighborhoods.

We were nothing if not gentrifiers. Even my leisure—my totally free, ambitionless exercise—seemed rank with privilege. On 22nd and Lake I would often stop and admire the masonry of a handsome Tudor building, erected in 1906, once home to American Bell Telephone, then the Urban League of Omaha, and then most recently the Great Plains Black Museum. I could try and see through the wrought iron on the windows, I could admire the ivy disappearing the place in green, I could climb the grand stairs and pull on the heavy wooden door, but I could not go in. The sign was still there but the museum was long locked, unable to pay the bills since 2001. Whatever history remained inside was not mine to explore.

Running was always about competition. The slow ones are always the first to be eaten. The act of moving your legs quickly was rendered a sport well in time for the very first Olympics in 776 BC. Body was pitted against body, and at the finish line there could be only one winner. The competition is rarely so

straightforward today though. The more recent invention of obsessive self-competition—PRs, training plans, timed races—seems a unique achievement of a bored, late-20th century America. Garmin, a company that has made GPS mapping devices since 1989, introduced the “Forerunner” in 2003, a wearable GPS tracker that allows athletes to measure the distance, speed, terrain, and overall success of their work-outs. It was a huge hit and led to eighteen different, newer, better, models in just the last 10 years. Along with this innovation came certain websites—mapmyrun, dailymile, strava—virtual places for runners to log their miles and times. Critically, these sites allow you to track your friends too (or perhaps more satisfyingly, your enemies) and contrast figures, determine winners, see whose is longest.

I know from experience that mine is an unpopular position. I know that thousands of very passionate people would take opposition to this. They would talk about the value of achievements, of pushing yourself, of overcoming this or that obstacle for the sake of just doing it.

But running is so much more powerful than this. These things—success, winning, overcoming—are exactly the bullshit that lulls us into thinking that the only thing that matters is how much we do or do not accomplish in life. It’s the selfsame trap that says work is good because money is good because buying things is good because buying things helps keep the death away. Running is better than this. It is, at its most basic, an act akin to prayer, and prayers are only beautiful when they expect nothing in return. Like a forest with garbage in its roots, with no greater goal than to grow and change and become anything other than what it once was, it is best not to make demands of such simple things.

I don’t know why my wife started running, but when she did, she quickly made it part of her identity, and waiting in the wings was a whole industry lining up to help her do so. But despite the corrosive pressures of marketing, running will always be a subversive act. Even though it is now such a widely popular pastime, it is still countercultural. It is still contrary to the vapid cycle of progress and distraction, progress and distraction that our economy depends on.

I may have stayed stubborn a lot longer than my wife, but the first time I tried it I knew. *Fun*, that was the sublime goal. To ask anything more was about as wrongheaded as setting up shop right there, on the very steps of the temple.

We left the woods in our car. We were dehydrated and hungry so we drove to Burger King and asked for milkshakes and onion rings to be made for us. In some other decade the Burger King was built next to a high school football field, and on this night a game had just ended and the parking lot was crowded with excited kids. I parked and was walking around the car to get my wallet from the

trunk when out of the asphalt din a voice proffered in my direction that most hostile of teenage epithets.

“Faggot,” someone said. Behind this was a rejoinder of other young voices, laughing at what must have seemed, to them, an easy target.

There I was, hair pulled into a sweaty ponytail, bent over the trunk of a car with no shirt or shoes, in shorts which were very short, and, most damning of all—my socks, which were pink. Of course I already knew there was a reason every discount bin at every running store is full of pink men’s socks. The teenage boys at Burger King already knew it too—it was their job to know—only faggots wear pink.

We pulled into the drive-through and I talked to a girl through a black speaker in an illuminated screen. We rounded a corner and in a few minutes there she was, that same girl. She smiled as she took my money, and while closing the sliding window between her and me she smiled again, singing brightly, “Have a nice night!”

We ate the ice cream and fried onions in the white buzz of a street light and talked about whatever we felt like. My wife said something funny to make me laugh, and I laughed. Then I did the same for her and she laughed too. We were still dehydrated but the salt and fat tasted so perfect we ate everything without pause, like animals. It was yet another pleasure we felt our bodies deserved and which we were only too happy to provide, as long as we were able.

We were back. It had happened so quickly too, returned to the realm of concrete and fake food and other people and the things they said. It was a world almost too incongruous to believe. When we had finished, I threw our cups and napkins and unwanted plastics in a bin, never to be seen again, and pointed my car in the direction of our bed.

Patrick Mainelli lives in Omaha, Nebraska, where he works as a community college writing tutor. “Old Moves” is selected from his work *Encomia*, a collection of essays exploring issues of place and the American infatuation with absence. His writing has previously appeared in the journal *Fourth Genre*. Although he claims a blistering marathon pace of 16 minutes per mile, this statistic has not been independently verified.

I try to resist the call of the ice. The call of blades and music, of leg warmers and adrenalin. A call so deep, I feel it in the bones of my thighs, in the sting of my eyes, the same sting that comes when I skate hard and fast in the cold.

I try to resist it.

How can I focus on figure skating, an elite and some would say frivolous sport, when there is so much important work to be done in the world? A war to stop. Poverty to eradicate. Wrongs to right. I tell myself I could use my time, my voice, so much more wisely and productively. Flitting around a rink will take me away from work that could make a real difference.

I can't stop dreaming about it, though. Every single night I find myself skating inside the domed arena of my skull. Some nights I can do double, triple jumps, and I wake up utterly exhilarated. Other nights I forget my routine during a show, or fall and cause my entire synchronized team to tumble, and I wake up frantic. Either way, I wake up longing for the ice.

I remember what people told me when I was a new mother and hesitated doing anything for myself, away from the kids—if we take better care of ourselves, we can take better care of others. Maybe if I allow myself the pleasure of skating, if I let my body stretch and glide the way it wants to, I'll be energized, inspired, ready to take similar leaps as an activist, a writer.

Every Tuesday at 6 p.m., IceTown offers a free introductory lesson. I figure that's as good a place as any to start.

As I lace up my skates and breathe in the familiar sharp chill of the air, I notice a magic-markered poster that reads "IceTown Has Classes For Grown-Ups Too!" A hand-drawn woman in a purple turtle neck and teal pants stands on the ice, little braids snaking out of what looks like a fuchsia swim cap but is probably a helmet. She sports matching fuchsia mittens, plus black and white pads on her elbows and knocked knees. Her eye brows are raised, her eyes dark nervous ovals, her mouth a perfect O of terror, filled in with solid orange marker.

I can relate, even though this isn't really a class for grown-ups. It's for anyone who wants a free taste of skating. My nerves jangle with fear and excitement as I walk over to the vending machines, where I was told to wait. I feel a wave of nostalgia for the vending machines at Robert Crown, where I would often buy

Planters Peanut Bars or a cup of chicken soup, flecked with dried parsley, for energy between patch and freestyle sessions. I always hoped the chicken soup didn't come out of the same nozzle as the hot chocolate.

A boy who looks no older than 12, his hair a mass of curls, his cheeks deep pink—from cold or exertion, I'm not sure—strides up to me in his skates and introduces himself as David. "You're here for the intro lesson?" I'm surprised by his voice, deep like a radio announcer's, so incongruent with his young face.

I nod and tell him about my past as a skater.

"So you don't need the basics then," he says.

"It's been 26 years," I tell him. "I need the basics. Teach me everything."

David is 19, it turns out. I haven't skated for longer than he's been alive.

When I was five, the first thing I learned was how to fall down, but the first thing he teaches me is how to get up. I guess by the time you're 39, you know how to fall pretty well. David shows me how to get on one knee, then hoist myself to my feet. I'm embarrassed by the old-man groan that comes out of my mouth as I stand, my knees aching.

"Any tips on falling?" I ask, worried about my joints.

"If you feel wobbly," he says, "just put your hands on your knees."

We practice that a couple of times, wobbling and then touching our knees as if we're doing some strange ritual dance. Then he has me stand with my hands out to the sides and march in place for a while; "just to get used to being upright," he says. And then it's time to take to the ice.

"Show me what you can do," he says as we step onto the rink.

"Where should I start?" I ask, my limbs trembly with adrenaline.

"Forward stroking," he says, "to the other side and back."

I skate both ways across the short end of the rink, feeling self-conscious, my movements a bit stiff, my toe-picks snagging the ice every few strokes.

"Pretty good," he says. He has me do swizzles, forward and back, then various stops. I realize that I've forgotten how to stop. I can twist my blades sideways until they scud to a halt, but I can't remember the other forms of stopping. He refreshes my memory—the snowplow, where you turn your toes together and swing your blades outward, and the t-stop, first the traditional way with the back foot horizontal behind the front vertical foot, then the reverse, horizontal foot in front. Somehow the t's don't seem to stop me as well as they should. I keep dragging forward, my feet perpendicular.

"I think my blades might be dull," I tell him. "They're not digging into the ice." He has me lift up one of my feet so he can inspect my edges. "They look fine to me," he says. "You just haven't been putting enough force into it." I

guess I've been putting my force elsewhere—I've locked my finger in my belt loop so hard, I've yanked the bottom of it right off of my corduroy pants. Maybe part of me thought that one finger, clenched, could keep me upright.

David has me do some basic footwork—three turns and mohawks, which feel fine, then pivots, again okay, then backwards pivots, which are so scary, I can barely hang on for a quarter turn. My body is not used to spinning backwards. My body is not used to spinning, period.

"I have to do a lot of backwards pivots," David tells me. "I skate pairs." I have a sudden image of him grabbing my hand and twirling me backwards into a death spiral, my hair brushing the ground, his toepick the only thing grounding us to the ice, but I shake it away.

He asks me to spin—front scratch spin, very wobbly; back scratch spin, which I can't remember ever doing before, terrifying. Again, I can barely do a single backwards rotation.

"You keep working on that," he says. "It appears our lesson is no longer private."

A little boy, five or six, has stepped onto the ice in bright blue rental skates and is moving toward us with careful steps. I recognize him—he had worn a little Santa suit and played the piano and sang at a holiday show put on by the performing arts studio where my daughter used to take lessons. An adorable kid. As David teaches him to march and fall and get up, I practice spinning. I'm all over the place, completely out of control. And dizzy, dizzy, dizzy as soon as I stop. Queasy, too.

My equilibrium has changed a lot since I've had kids. It took me a while after I gave birth before I could even go on a swing without getting nauseous. Rollercoasters, which I used to take in stride, discombobulate me now. I get a bolt of fear—what if I get dizzy every time I spin? What if skating makes me so sick, I can't move forward with it?

David skates up to me. "We have time for one more thing," he says. I'm not sure I'm up for anything else, so I'm relieved when he flings out his hands and jokes "Double axel!"

I step off the ice and say hello to the boy's mom, who is waiting for him.

"I remember you from Annie Get Your Gun," she says in her Eastern European accent, and I feel myself blush. If it hadn't been for Annie Get Your Gun, I may not have started skating again.

Last year, I took my daughter to the audition for the musical; as I sat on a bench, ready to watch from the sidelines, the assistant director walked up to me. "As long as you're here," he said, "why don't you audition, too?"

I resisted at first—I was just there to support my performer girl. Plus, I

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had never sung or acted in front of an audience, at least not as an adult. When I was 10, my sister and I staged "Annie on Roller Skates" in front of our building and we briefly put together a traveling theater troupe where we'd knock on neighbors' doors and ask them if they wanted to see a production of Hansel and Gretel in their living rooms, but those were flukes in my life as a quiet girl. It was always easier to express myself through writing or non-verbally, through skating and dance. I'd never been comfortable with my singing voice, and felt incredibly self-conscious singing around other people—even "Happy Birthday" at parties tended to make my heart pound. But the assistant director was persistent, and Hannah chimed in with her own encouragement, and I decided to go for it. I told myself that if I ever chose to write a story where one of my characters wanted to audition for something, at least I'd understand the experience from the inside out. Writing often gives me a good excuse to go outside my comfort zone, be braver than I normally would allow myself to be.

I threw myself into the audition process—I danced up a storm, read from the script in a hammy Western accent, belted "Happy Birthday" louder than I ever had in my life—and, much to my shock, ended up with the lead role. Never in a million years would this gun-abhorring peace activist imagine she'd have a chance to swagger around as sharpshooter Annie Oakley, but life, I keep learning, is full of surprises. The experience with the play opened me up in many ways—it made me realize that we're all capable of more than we give ourselves credit for.

My skating dreams started during the rehearsal process for the musical. Any performance anxiety nightmares were set on the ice, not the stage. Any reassuring performance dreams were set on the ice as well, the soaring rush of it. Part of me must have already been longing to step into my old white skates along with my new cowboy boots.

"You're a good skater," the boy's mom says. I wonder if she's from Russia, my own family's motherland. A place where skating is a very big deal. "You should be teaching this."

“No,” I smile, still dizzy. “I’m a beginner again.”

The nice thing about being a beginner is there is only room to improve, to grow. Anything is possible.

When I say I haven’t skated in 26 years, it’s not exactly true. I just haven’t skated seriously in 26 years. I’ve probably skated an average of once a year in between, maybe once every other year, either at birthday parties or because the kids have wanted to get out of the summer heat. About 10 years ago, I decided I wanted to get back into skating, and my husband bought me some skates at the IceTown pro-shop so I wouldn’t have to deal with the agony of rental skates. Skating on rental skates is more frustrating for me than not skating at all—the lack of ankle support, the dull blades, make it impossible for me to relate to the ice. On one of our first dates, Matt and I went skating; I was 19. It was the first time I had skated in several years, and being on rental skates made me want to cry. It was like standing in a rose garden with a clothespin on my nose. I found a teenager with good skates who appeared to have my size feet and asked if I could borrow them while she took a break; she graciously let me, and it was like the clothespin came off my nose and I was surrounded by overwhelming sweetness. Such a joy to feel those edges, to be able to glide.

The pro-shop didn’t have skates that fit perfectly, but they had some decent ones—Riedell boots, Wilson blades—that fit well enough. I was so excited to have my own skates again. I had sold the ones from when I was 13 through a free ad in the *Recycler* a couple of years before, and it broke my heart to let them go. As I spelled out the name of the boots (SP Teri) and blades to the operator who helped me place the ad, tears ran down my face. I sold them for \$50 to a man whose daughter was in the Lake Arrowhead Skating Club and who had a side business refurbishing and selling old skates. When my mom had bought them for me, for much, much more than \$50, I told her that they were worth every penny. I would do my first triple on those skates, I told her, but I quit before I got to that level.

Matt bought the new skates as a birthday present; later, he also presented me with a pass for a number of freestyle sessions. I was so excited. The kids were pretty small at the time, and it was hard to get away, but I found some early morning sessions that I could get to before Matt had to go to work. The first time I went, though, the ice was full of advanced skaters, Olympic-caliber skaters, pairs doing triple throw jumps, women doing flying spins. I skated around the perimeter of the ice a few times, doing some shaky crossovers, some hesitant three turns, and I felt so intimidated, so out of my league, I left after about 10 minutes and didn’t consider seriously returning to the ice until now.

A few days after the intro lesson, I decide to sign up for the Adult 2/3/4 class, even though it’s probably a bit over my head. At the rink, you’re considered Adult when you’re 13; I wonder if I’ll be the only “real” grown up in the class. It wouldn’t be the first time.

When I was in college, I wanted to learn as many dance forms as possible. I was getting my BA in “Poetry and Movement: Arts of Expression, Meditation and Healing,” a major I created at the University of Redlands, and there weren’t any dance options on campus beyond modern, jazz and ballet. I had to look elsewhere for workshops in world dance, so I was thrilled to find a flyer for a Bharat Natyam class just a few blocks away; it was held in a woman’s garage, which she had converted into a dance studio. I was the only non-Indian-American student in the class, and the only one over 9 years old. The teacher wanted to make me less of an outcast, so she told the class I was 12 (which I easily could have passed for at 20—I had such a baby face.) She thought the girls would feel more connected to me if I was closer in age, and I didn’t contradict her. I suppose it worked, but I’m not sure what they thought when, after our ritual cup of after-class hot chocolate each week, I got into my car and drove myself away.

I drive straight from UCR, where I’m teaching a summer session Fiction Workshop, to IceTown. I empty all the class-related work from my backpack into the trunk of my Honda, then slip my skates into the bag. It feels like a changing of the guard, a shifting of gears, transitioning from teacher to student, thought to muscle.

I register for the class and am given a bright yellow Skater ID that I will use to check in every week. I am happy to slip the card into my wallet—tangible proof that I’m a skater again. When I go to a bench and take off my shoes, though, I can find only one sock stuffed inside my skates. I rush out to check my trunk, but there’s nothing but a manila folder full of my students’ short stories. Luckily the

“I was thrilled to find a flyer for a Bharat Natyam class just a few blocks away; it was held in a woman’s garage, which she had converted into a dance studio. I was the only non-Indian-American student in the class, and the only one over 9 years old.”

pro-shop is open, so I buy a pair of iTech performance socks—hockey socks, the thinnest in the store. The socks end up being a revelation; first of all, they're knee socks, which I haven't worn since I was a kid, and they make me feel like a school girl as I pull them up my legs. The package says they're "designed to improve the fit of a hockey skate", but they work beautifully for figure skates, as well. I can feel the inside of the boot in a way that I never have before. It must be similar to the difference between a regular and a "sensitive" condom for a guy—much more sensation. I can pull the laces tighter than I can ever recall. Unfortunately I can also feel the tightness against the edges of my feet more than ever, too. I tell myself I need to get new skates as soon as I can afford them.

David, who taught the intro class last week, is playing a video game with a young girl in a skating dress. I wave when he looks up, but either he doesn't see me or doesn't remember who I am.

There are two other students in my class—Janessa, a teenager who just started skating a few weeks ago, and Kim, another returning skater, older than myself, who decided to get back on the ice after 30 years. Kim had been an ice dancer as well as a freestyle skater, and competed at a higher level than I ever achieved. Her uncle had been part of the 1961 World Figure Skating Team that perished in a plane crash in Belgium; for a while, she was sponsored by the memorial fund. Now she is a first grade teacher, juggles two other jobs, and drives all the way down the mountain from Big Bear, one hour each way, to get her skating fix.

The teacher, Melissa, skates over to us. She has clear blue eyes and a kind face, her dark blonde hair pulled back in a pony tail. After we all introduce ourselves, she has us start off with cross-overs—right over left, which feel good, and left over right, which felt awkward even when I skated regularly.

"Lean into the circle to get more of an edge," she tells me. "You're too upright."

When I was a freshman in college, my friend Chris told me I moved in a controlled way during a school dance. Even though he didn't mean it as an insult, I was upset; I made it my goal to start to lose control as I danced, to let go of my inhibitions. I feel the same way when Melissa tells me I'm too upright; it makes me want to be wild. I lean hard into the circle and almost topple over.

We move on to edges, doing half circles across the center of the rink, one foot then the other, one foot, then the other, leaving a serpentine belt on the ice. Things have changed since we last skated, Melissa tells me and Kim. Since figures aren't a part of figure skating any more, the placement of the foot has changed during edges—you keep the leg straight in back rather than tucked in close to the heel.

Things have changed with jumps, too. In a waltz jump, the only jump I can do so far, a simple half turn in the air, your free leg needs to be bent now, in an h-shape, upon take off. "You get more height that way," says Melissa. "You really pop off the ice."

I try a few jumps, but can't quite figure out what to do with my legs. They feel awkward in the air. A couple of times, I do feel that extra pop, and it scares the hell out of me. It scares me, too, when Melissa says we're moving on to salchows. I haven't done a full rotation jump in 26 years. Kim falls and slides past me on her back in a dramatic whoosh, her pale blue tracksuit sponging up ice shards.

"Are you okay?" I ask, and she gets up smiling. I wish I wasn't so afraid of falling; she makes it look easy, even fun.

I tell Melissa I'm nervous, and she breaks the jump down for me slowly—do a three turn, wrap your free leg around forward, jump, land. I try it a few times without leaving the ice, just going through the motions to get my body to remember them. Then I finally work up the nerve to try it in the air, doing the three turn as slowly and carefully as possible, and it works! I land it! I'm flooded with exhilaration. I didn't expect to be doing a full rotation jump on my first real class.

My friend Stephan once told me his grandfather said there is no such thing as hard and easy, just new and familiar. This is new and familiar all at once. I'm finding what I didn't lose, learning what I need to improve, to change.

I do a few more salchows—some with a double-footed landing, but some that feel pretty clean—before Melissa says "Good work. See you next week."

In the parking lot, I find my car is festooned with fallen jacaranda blossoms. It feels like a benediction. I smile as I drive away from IceTown, pale purple flowers careening off the hood.

Gayle Brandeis is the author of *Fruitflesh: Seeds of Inspiration for Women Who Write* and the novels *The Book of Dead Birds*, which won Barbara Kingsolver's Bellwether Prize for Fiction of Social Engagement, *Self Storage*, and *Delta Girls*, and her first novel for young people, *My Life with the Lincolns*, a Silver Nautilus Book Award winner. Widely anthologized, her poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in such places as Salon.com and *The Rumpus*. In 1986, at 18 years old, her essay on the meaning of liberty was one of three included in the Centennial time capsule of the Statue of Liberty. *The Writer Magazine* named her a Writer Who Makes a Difference for both her community work in the community and the social content of her writing. She lives in Incline Village, Nevada, and from 2012-14, served as Inlandia Literary Laureate at Sierra Nevada College, where she is now a Distinguished Visiting Professor/Writer in Residence.

Beautiful Strength

SL Essay

Rachel Furey

At the gym one day, this guy walks up to me and says, “You’re pretty fast for a girl.” Because he’s brown-skinned and speaks with an accent and is maybe from a country where what he just said might actually be a compliment, I say, “Thanks.” He introduces himself, then sticks out his hand. I give him my name and shake his hand. He smiles and says “See you around here again” in a way that makes me wonder if his comment regarding my speed was actually an attempt at a pick-up line.

I want to believe that strength and athletic poise equal beauty—that a woman can be truly beautiful at the gym. But past experience tells me that guys don’t always know what to make of a strong woman. In my early twenties, I volunteered in Mississippi after Hurricane Katrina, and I was one of two girls in a group full of guys. In the morning before work we’d compete in physical contests. The guys got way into it, sometimes thumping their chests with their hands after they won.

Then one morning we had a push-up contest. We were stretched out in plank position, our hands pressed into mud and grass, cicadas humming in the background.

I beat every guy but one. One of them looked over at me—looked sick like he might just pass out—and asked how I did it. Because I couldn’t thump my chest with my hands, I shrugged. The truth is, I probably could have beaten every guy in that circle if I’d really wanted to. But we were living in close quarters, working together, and I was already the strange quiet one. I couldn’t afford to ostracize myself further.

Maybe I’m not giving the guys enough credit. Maybe there are other reasons things changed after that day—other reasons why they grew closer to the girl whose arms had given up before mine while keeping their distance from me. Maybe it had more to do with the fact that I was the one member of the crew who didn’t break the rules and get drunk that one night. Or maybe it was because my words were far and few between, that while I could easily eek out push-ups, my spoken voice lacked the same power. I could see how this contrast might be off-putting.

Sometimes it’s clear that I’m supposed to play a certain role, and I’m not all that great at doing it. In a Navy SEAL class at my college recreation center in my late twenties, I was the only girl who continued to show up after the first few weeks of class. This meant that when it came time for a Navy demonstration at a

local high school, I was asked to play the hostage. The guys laughed. “Someone has to play the damsel in distress,” they said. Because I wanted to be included, I said, “Yes.”

The guys got to dress in camo, shoot blanks, and throw smoke grenades while I held the spotlight for them to make their entrance onto the football field. Then I dropped the spotlight and was taken hostage. In the midst of it all, I forgot what the lieutenant told me—that I could elbow my captor in the stomach if I wanted. I kicked myself for this later. While the guys had guns and smoke, I could have at least had a hard elbow to a guy’s ribs.

In the movies, the hostage collapses into someone’s arms. The hostage is scooped up and carried away to protection. That evening, I was left alone on the football field while the guys carried off the villain. Don’t get me wrong—an embrace would have been awkward for all of us. But given the cliché nature of the script, I was disappointed that they didn’t make the offer. One of the guys, however, did give me a ride home while the others headed out to shoot wild hogs. A couple of weeks later, I met all of the minimum requirements to become a Navy SEAL except for the pull-ups. Of course, as the lieutenant was sure to tell me on the first day of class, women can’t actually become SEALs.

While the group of guys had been largely supportive, one had asked me, “Why do you even bother to take the class?” Maybe I love a challenge. Maybe I’m a tomboy. Whatever that means. The funny thing is that while I’ll never be



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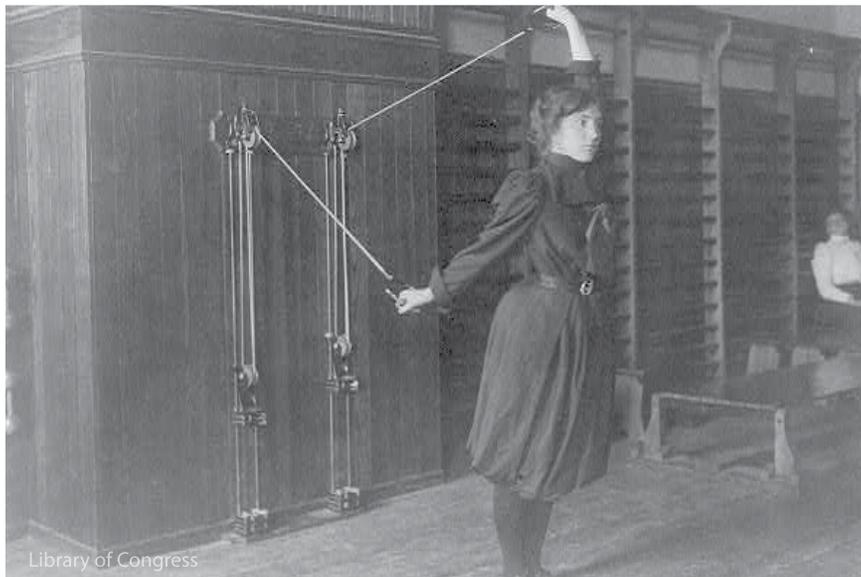
just one of the guys, I've had girls tell me I'm "pretty much a guy." Sure, I'd rather go to the gym than a concert. Sure, I skip makeup. Sometimes when I make a wrong turn in the store and end up in the cosmetic aisle I want to shout at the top of my lungs, "Fuck lipstick!" But I'm still a woman. Even if I didn't go to my prom, opting instead to shoot hoops under the stars with a glow-in-the-dark basketball until the coyote calls came so close I felt goose bumps rise on my back.

I've imagined my wedding day. It all goes down at the Basketball Hall of Fame. I have myself coming down the aisle in a basketball jersey and shorts, sneakers so blue and shiny that the flower girl—tossing Tootsie rolls to the crowd—drops her basket and just stares at my shoes and the way light shines off of them. I dribble through my legs spider-style all the way down that aisle.

The preacher keeps his spiel short and we quickly run off to the basketball court, where a punch bowl full of Gatorade sits at half court, where I dish assist after assist to my husband until he gets tired and tells me to play the post. And because it's my wedding day, for once it doesn't matter how damn short I am. I perform a crossover dribble, pump fake, and hit the lay-up every time, the ball bouncing off the backboard and then through the net in an even *thump, swish* rhythm.

Maybe this isn't any guy's idea of a wedding. Maybe no one will ever ask.

I'm willing to wait. Because when I need to remind myself what beautiful is, I remember the photographer at mile 11 of my first half marathon who looked up from his camera long enough to say, "You look strong, *real* strong."



“I remember the first time a shirt fit me everywhere but where my biceps sat and my dad said, “You’re too good for that shirt.””

I remember the first time a shirt fit me everywhere but where my biceps sat and my dad said, “You’re too good for that shirt.” I remember the light that shone in my mother’s eyes after she came in from an evening of gardening, the way my sister’s cheeks glowed after a run along the trails behind our house. I remember the summer I worked trail crew out in Colorado and didn’t shower for days at a time, re-wore jeans and a T-shirt, my bangs perpetually pasted to my forehead underneath my hardhat. And yet, with that rock bar in my hand helping me to move rocks three times my size and my muscles taut and the sky ocean blue, mountain bluebells lining the path, and all that clear, cool mountain air filling my lungs, I couldn’t feel anything but beautiful.

Rachel Furey completed her doctorate at Texas Tech and is now teaching at Lincoln University in Jefferson City, Missouri. Her work has appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Sycamore Review*, *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, *One Teen Story*, *Women’s Basketball Magazine*, *Chautauqua*, and elsewhere.

I Will Die on a Treadmill

SL Poetry

April Salzano

pushing past the point of endorphin rush,
on my way to intentional
exhaustion. I will collapse. The belt will
burn my skin, rub it raw before anyone
finds me or notices the absence
of footfalls on revolving belt. Miles
will be logged in red,
a sad journey nowhere.

From Age This Renovation

I need to remodel my ass again. Every 10
years, it is time to downsize. It is nearly 40
and more than a bit dated. I squat, lunge,
deadlift my way to complete restoration,
or the best I can hope for without erasing
20 years, 2 sons, and introductions
to ice cream and cheesecake.

From Anger This Adrenaline

rush. Pedal to floor, music raging
through speakers because screaming
metal is fuel to fly me to the gym.
Extra weight, more reps. Turn inward
what cannot be turned out. Another mile
because burning muscle consumes rage.

April Salzano teaches college writing in Pennsylvania, where she lives with her husband and two sons. She has finished her first collection of poetry and is working on a memoir on raising a child with autism. Her work, which has been nominated for two Pushcart Prizes, has appeared in journals such as *Convergence*, *Ascent Aspirations*, *The Camel Saloon*, *Centrifugal Eye*, *Deadsnakes*, *Visceral Uterus*, *Salome*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Writing Tomorrow* and *Rattle*. The author also serves as co-editor at Kind of a Hurricane Press.

The Man's Game

SL Poem

Penny Guisinger

It's a football game, and I don't understand it. Not just a football game, but the Superbowl. And I'm from Denver, and they're playing, so I'm supposed to—maybe—care. I don't care about the score, but it's a chance to—maybe—bond with my dad who does care—a little bit, anyway—about the score. I do all the right things. I make a tray of guacamole and stripe it with thin lines of ranch dressing to look like a gridiron: a number “50” in the center. I buy good beer. I put the kids in the Orange Crush shirts that our Wyoming relatives sent for Christmas. I try to follow the action, but it looks—mostly—like grown men just crashing into each other for money. Our team is losing. Even I know—I think—that when the quarterback throws the ball, someone wearing his same color is supposed to be there to catch it. Manning throws over and over to an empty patch of green. My dad gets angry and leaves the room. I don't know how this game is supposed to be played, but I am sure we're not doing it right. I start listening to the sportscasters and their inane truisms. “Denver has got to get back in this game.” My dad returns to his recliner, and we are able—finally—to laugh at some of the beer commercials. I pack up the rest of the guacamole and retrieve what's left of the beer. Not sure if we have bonded or not, I leave my parents' house before the bowl is over because it's a school night and the Broncos aren't the only ones who are beat. In the final minutes, on the car radio, I hear that Seattle's star player is being carried off the field. The announcer observes—wisely—that, “You just don't want to be carried out of the game on the back of a cart. You want to stay in the game.”

Penny Guisinger lives and writes on the easternmost tip of the United States. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Fourth Genre*, *River Teeth*, *Solstice Literary Magazine*, *Under the Gum Tree*, and *About Place Journal*, and her reviews appear regularly in *The Quoddy Tides* and *The Review Review*. Her essay “Coming Out” was a finalist in the 2013 *Fourth Genre* essay contest, and one called “Provincetown” was awarded an editor's choice award from *Solstice*. She is the founding organizer of *Iota: The Conference of Short Prose*. She is a graduate of the Stonecoast MFA Program at the University of Southern Maine.

Free and Easy Wandering on the Pacific Crest Trail

SL Nature

Scott F. Parker

In the past, and not without reason, my wife, Sandy, has substituted *foolhardiness* for what I take to be my courage. Nevertheless, after making known her concerns for my safety, she has ultimately endorsed my trip out West to search for adventure while she stays home in Minnesota to work. I've provided every justification for her concern, and here I am headed once again into the woods, haphazardly prepared as ever. I have with me a sense of purpose and a sense of direction, as well as the sense that these may not suffice. The thought briefly passes through my mind that I'd like to be better prepared, but it's really more that I'd like to be the kind of person who could bother to be better prepared. Except even that isn't quite right. There's a reason I create these hardships for myself: I'm drawn to the opportunities they afford. And yet part of me must believe in becoming someone else, even the kind of person who prepares for things. We don't journey alone into the woods *only* for the scenery or peace—or adventure. We journey into the woods so that the scenery and peace and adventure might change us. It's a psychological project, if not also a spiritual one. The rock-bottom appeal of a journey is it literalizes our metaphors. Here we are. And there we go. And how we will get there. And if. The life and the story can be overlaid, harmonized. At least my temptation is to think so.

My plan is to hike 113 miles south on the Pacific Crest Trail from Mt. Hood to McKenzie Pass, where I'll hang a left on Highway 242 and do about 15 more miles into the quaint mountain town of Sisters, where my dad will pick me up Tuesday morning. Right now it's Thursday morning, mid-June, early in the season. I've got a backpack and only the least bit of backpacking experience.

Years ago, I hiked from the Columbia River at Cascade Locks 40 miles or so up and around the western side of Hood to Timberline Lodge with my cousin Anna. That section, directly north of where I'm starting now, is the most difficult stretch of the Pacific Crest Trail in Oregon, gaining 6,000 feet over those miles. That's under good circumstances. Under our circumstances it was also raining and miles of trail had been washed away in the Zigzag Canyon, where there'd been a major landslide the previous winter. Luckily, I'd hiked—which is to say I'd gotten Sandy and myself horrifically lost in—that section of the trail a few weeks before and now knew my way across.

That was my first backpacking trip, and I subjected Anna to conversations like:

Scott: "How will we carry enough water for three days?"

Anna: "You're hilarious."

Scott: "I'm serious."

Anna: "Oh! We'll find streams to drink from."

Scott: "Wait. Are *you* serious?"

While mostly I'm amused by my ignorance it carries a bit of shame with it too. Intellectually, I reject the mythology of the self-reliant—often American, often male—individual, but part of me nevertheless remains identified with it and needing to grapple with it. By going alone into the woods and finding my own water, which Anna showed is fairly manageable in the Pacific Northwest, I will achieve my Western bona fides. This will to prove myself through conquer (of nature, of weakness) is so embedded in me that I fear any rejection of it is not in fact a transcendence but an admission of an inability to achieve it, the maturation really a resentment. I reject the terms of absolute independence only because I cannot succeed by them. And so, for the sake of my integrity, I must succeed first and turn my back only later. After all, we carry our pasts with us as well as our packs when we enter the woods.

Day 1.

First thing I do in the parking lot at Barlow off Highway 35 on the southeast side of Hood is go off to piss on a tree, this being one of the true masculine joys of outdoor recreation. Then I strap my unwieldy pack onto my back and commence to walking. On the far end of the parking lot I encounter my first obstacle. There is an unmarked four-way intersection of trails, two of which directions must be the Pacific Crest, only one of which is the one I'm looking for. I pause, deliberate, pick the one I suspect as most southerly, and hope for the best. Pacific Crest hikers should always carry a compass, I learn the predictable way.

My guess is good, though, and soon I am getting farther away from the mountain and noticing trail signs that confirm my direction. A heat wave is expected to move in tomorrow, but today it's cool still and the air is moist, dense Northwest forest all around me. I settle into a comfortable rhythm, my heavy backpack keeping my pace restrained and steady. Forced to go slow, my thoughts turn introspective. Do we not always enter the woods in search of a way to live?

The feeling of solitude sets in suddenly. If I don't get too lost, I have 109+/- trail miles to McKenzie Pass and all the hours till then to be remind-

ed how I like living with myself. Some people find this sort of thing insufferable. In his short book *America and Americans*, John Steinbeck writes, “We are afraid to be awake, afraid to be alone, afraid to be a moment without the noise and confusion we call entertainment.” Not much, by my reckoning, has changed in the half-century since he wrote that. But for me it’s a relief to be alone in the woods with nothing but my thoughts to distract me from the task of being awake in my surroundings. Visions of clarity and transformation appear before me and I pursue them into the woods one step at a time.

The trail is well marked and very clear, and if a hike is a metaphor for a life it’s one that only plays in retrospect. The metaphor breaks down in the present, as the trail advances in single-minded or single-track direction while the life—my life—is always at risk of going off course. There are even occasional mile signs nailed to the trees—and thank god there’s no life analogy here. For years my goal in life has been to be prepared for death when it comes, whenever it comes. I think of Chuang Tzu, who asked how he knew in hating death he was not “like a man who, having left home in his youth, has forgotten the way back?” I often understand myself as a man who is lost, but I aspire to the equanimity to handle what I encounter along my way and be ready when the trail ends. This is a challenge worthy of a human being, I believe. The ground is rolling beneath my boots these miles but no major climbs or drops so far. I hear trucks on what must be Highway 26 cutting south from Hood to Prineville. I press on, aiming to get in as many miles as I can while conditions are great.

There’s a whole spread of daylight before me and I’m only four miles from where I thought I might end up today, Little Crater Lake. Making good pace. Leisure departs me when I’m alone and my vision tunnels around the trail. I

“ The joy I find in hiking arises from the motion, the rhythm my legs start that spreads to my breathing and my thinking. The surroundings are secondary to the fact of my body moving through space. Analogy to essay: I like the thinking more than the thoughts, and I’m willing to risk occasionally getting lost. ”

see miles ahead of me and no reason to stop. To smell the proverbial flowers, which in this case are pink rhododendrons. The joy I find in hiking arises from the motion, the rhythm my legs start that spreads to my breathing and my thinking. The surroundings are secondary to the fact of my body moving through space. Analogy to essay: I like the thinking more than the thoughts, and I’m willing to risk occasionally getting lost. Perhaps I would stop if it weren’t for the barbaric mosquitoes swarming about. There are other creatures as well—one deer, one frog, a few humans back near the crossing of 26—but it’s the mosquitos I really notice as it finally occurs to me where the term “bug” comes from.

The trees are starting to thin out as I move gradually into desert, and when an east wind blows it carries juniper and hot dry air. I find a fine-looking stump and sit down to eat my second donut from Joe’s and demonstrate anger toward the insects. The damn things are not impressed. A troop of scouts come along on their way north from Olallie Lake, a five-day trip for them to Barlow Pass. I tell their leader my plan to make Olallie in two days before passing Mt. Jefferson on the third. I can’t tell if I’ve impressed him or embarrassed myself, but he wishes me luck in the snow and takes his responsible boys 10 miles a day northward.

I make Little Crater Lake by mid-afternoon. It’s an idyllic scene, this gentle walk over from the PCT on a wooden walkway over a marsh of purple flowers and fat bumblebees. There is still hope. The lake is 34 degrees (I read on a placard) and clear as sunshine. You can see the rocks going deep under to the wellspring that feeds it. I just emptied my third water bottle and I’m in need of a refill. The West has been called the place where the issue is water. Hiking the Cascades, I’m describing the dividing line between that West and the Pacific Northwest, where the main problem with water is that we’re all soaking wet half the year. And with no Cousin Anna this time to collect my drinking water, nothing makes me more nervous on this trip than the possibility of dehydration or drinking bad water. I trust my sense of direction and deductive reasoning to get me out of any lostness my carelessness might get me into, and I’ll take my chances with a bear (there aren’t any grizzlies around here), but I have less than full confidence in my ability to identify safe water. Do I remember reading that lake water is good for drinking because it receives so much UV light? And don’t I also remember reading that moving water is preferable? Well, lake water is the water that’s available, so lake water it is. I fill all three of my bottles and wait for the iodine pills to do hopefully enough.

I like to think of myself as an outdoorsman. It's an appealing self-image, though the correspondence with reality in this matter is approximate. I do like being out here. And no small part of what I like is the possibility that things can go wrong at any time. Besides, what I lack in experience I make up for in stubbornness. If I have a skill it's for following through doggedly.

And with that, onward.

I stop for a short break as I change out of my hiking boots into my water sandals for my first creek crossing (a feeder into Clackamas Lake, I think). My feet are pale, wet, and wrinkly. Sort of remind me of naked mole-rats. My left foot features a lone blister, my right has a few more (two blood-filled) and my fourth toe is bloody around the nail. I walk into the cool water and feel life returning to my toes.

I'm at about mile 2,082, which puts me at 20 miles or so from Barlow Pass. Camp is already set 30 yards off the trail in a sort-of flat opening on the forest floor. I don't know the names of as many trees as a writer should. Nature to me is an ambiguous concept I love to lose myself in. I trust that the trees have names and that there are educated people out there who know them. But naming is not knowing, and description is only sometimes explanation. A name is only what a tree is for us; what interests me about trees is how they are and what they do. I know this about them: they are balm on my wounds.

My approach to hiking is consistent with my disposition: I don't know what I'm doing out here, practically. But in another sense I know exactly what I'm doing out here. And about what my weaknesses are: my insecurities. About what my strengths are: my confidences. Do I have that backwards?

The mosquitos are back, and I'm too tired to bother much with dinner, so I eat a peanut butter sandwich and tie my pack up in a tree away from any bears that might come looking for a Snickers bar. I climb in the tent and kill the only mosquito that gets in with me. I'm too tired to be a good Buddhist this evening, but I think Chung Tzu would approve. And it's he who after tremendous deliberation I've brought as my sole companion. At one point during packing I had as many as five books stacked up ready to go, sure each would be needed at some point on the trek. Symbolic and heavy-handed choices, all of them: Dante, Augustine, Whitman, Thoreau—all left behind in favor of Burton Watson's translated *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, which has the hiking advantage of being lighter weight than the others. Not to mention it's the book more than any other I've tried to live my life by; notwithstand-

ing the paradox of taking direction from an author who communicates in parables, an ethicist without prescription, someone whose best known passage asks whether he has dreamed himself a butterfly or whether he is a butterfly dreaming himself a man. The trick for me would be to not know anything and yet to function—no, *flourish*. And besides, I can't help but bring plenty of other writers bouncing along in my head with me. I open the book up to Watson's introduction and fall promptly to sleep.

Day 2.

I wake up early with a heavy body. My legs are stiff and my shoulders prefer that my arms not be raised overhead. I wonder if I have the strength to haul myself and all this gear across the Indian Reservation today. Of course, I do.

I make four things of oatmeal and one cup of coffee for breakfast by adding the last of the cold lake water I collected yesterday. To save weight, I didn't bring a stove, so everything I'm eating I'm eating cold. Also, I don't own a stove. The cold oatmeal is a fine success, but the coffee holds onto the iodine flavor of the water. Shit. But at least I have come across my first indisputable lesson of this journey: refraining from the wild does have good coffee to recommend it. I dump half of it for the chipmunks and, only moderately caffeinated, load up. The fourth toe on my right foot is big and purple and in no way interested in going back in the boot. But in it goes.

An hour later, as I cross into the Warm Springs Indian Reservation, the trees are getting smaller and the sky is getting larger. With more sunlight reaching the soil the undergrowth is more bountiful here. A large gray-brown toad so big it can barely hop stumbles out of my way. A few steps further along a light green tree frog no bigger than my thumbnail hops so big it practically flies off the trail. This is the time of day for wildlife. I keep my eyes to the ground and notice two small piles of scat full of white fur. Can I convince myself it was left by a cougar? I try, but I cannot. No cat would be so indelicate as to shit on the trail and not bury it. Raccoons seem more likely, those assholes.

Mid-morning I stop on the trail to eat a PopTart, which one blog recommended. The flavor I have is Double Fudge Chocolate Sprinkle Blast! or some such processed nonsense. Note to self: find new blogs to read.

I find a spring and begin the process of filling up water bottles and waiting for the iodine to kick in. It's been clear to me most of my life that I'm one

of those people who is out here waiting for something to happen, and that something could best be described as hearing god talk to him through the trees. I bet it is. But if spiritual signals are coming my way I'm not picking them up. My attention extends not much further than the next water source. To be responsible for your own survival is to be attentive to the elemental foundations of life. I think of water, sometimes I get as far as shelter and food, but if this is its own spiritual lesson (and maybe it is) it's not a transcendent one but an embodied one. Literally: I am body. Which can be an invigorating fact to be reminded of. Days spent searching out potable drinking water, evenings spent hiding food from bears, this does heighten the sense of being alive in a way that everyday screen-saturated life just cannot.

But even so, we're only ever so much "in nature." I help myself to salmonberries as I happen upon them, but the food that sustains me comes with me from the world of commerce and excess. Am I in the mood for Organic Yakisoba Noodles or Garden Vegetable Couscous tonight? Whichever I choose I will simply add water and in so doing feel proudly self-sufficient.

For humans there is only the human world, just as for bears there is only the bear world. Or maybe better to say, for humans and for bears there is only this world: what we make and what we find (whoever, whatever made it). *Natural*—the closer you look at it, the less it means. If the human tendency toward destruction weren't natural then neither would be the creatures who pursue it. Conversely, were we a wiser species than we seem to be, that situation would have been just as natural.

I like for such thoughts to visit me neutrally. If *natural* is a meaningless concept, then whatever is the case is merely what is the case, and the normative claims the deepest core of what feels like *me* desperately wants to make are but my peculiar commitments, however capriciously acquired. I will declaim the virtues of the wild to anyone who will listen, but when did I take on the assumption that life is entitled virtues? It's true that we don't miss the buffaloes when we don't think about them. And if we don't tell our children what they're missing, how will they ever know? You can build a society this way. If the world is as it is, I ask myself, what good is there to be upset? Sometimes I answer *nothing*, and sometimes I oscillate back to *everything*.

The water must be safe by now. After a successful night and another successful water collection I'm feeling very confident, like I can do whatever needs to be done. I can drink from lakes and springs, I can dig a hole to bury my own shit. I can climb mountains, cross creeks, talk to the trees. I am appreciating Gary Snyder's "gratitude to it all; taking responsibility for your own acts; keeping contact with the sources of the energy that flow into

your own life (namely dirt, water, flesh)." The PCT is the most pristine I've been on. Eighteen inches wide, running the length of our American West, and so far not a single piece of trash on the ground. The Bic ballpoint pen I found writes as well as it ever could have and some poor hiker somewhere is disappointed not to record his own best thoughts. It is a valued thing. I gather that those who are inclined to hike here have a deep reverence for the land. And it's this reverence for the land I'd like to extoll more even than the land itself. It's not in its own that the land is valuable but as part of us. And yet in calling attention to this pristine stretch of land, I reinforce the very dichotomy I want to dissolve: in celebrating, I otherize. Nature is good; we are sinners. But the Bic pen is a valued thing and valued things and valued places are two products of the same outlook, an outlook that leads to valued life.

We'll see if this optimism maintains if I get tired in the afternoon. But for now I am very content here just making my way steadily through the peaceful day.

Five hours and 12 miles in, I stop for lunch alongside a meadow of rhododendrons buzzing with pollinators. In addition to an energy boost, a lunch break will give me a chance to rest my legs and will marginally lighten my load. I can't get used to the metallic taste of iodine water, so it's a delight to have time to indulge by mixing a packet of EmergenC in with my water. For food I open a packet of ramen into my bowl and add cold iodine water. While this softens I eat another PopTart, which has not improved in taste. I'm out of patience trying to keep insects out of my bowl, so I rush to eat the ramen before it's ready. The smaller pieces are softish and only the bigger chunks are fully crunchy. But it goes down just fine. It would probably be best to rest awhile and maybe read some Chuang Tzu—his Master Yu would have something to teach me now about the best uses for my failing body—but there are literally ants in my pants and it's time to get moving. Starting back out, I hear chainsaws (or ATVs?) ahead on the trail.

Been walking three hard hours. It's hot. I don't think I'm sufficiently hydrated. The trail goes nowhere but up. When the mind isn't put to good use it threatens to become a hindrance. As one can't help but notice as life's daily distractions are replaced by what constantly underlies them. Only 24 hours alone in these woods and already I'm seeing myself more clearly, noticing the fluctuations in my moods and my attention. According to Roderick Nash, "The solitude and total freedom of the wilderness creates a perfect setting

“ My tiny human steps getting me nowhere, the doubt creeps in: Why am I on this hike? Why am I on this life? What do I want to happen on my way through the Cascades? Don't mosquitos ever rest? ”

for either melancholy or exultation,” and I'm hitting either on the regular. A lookout point that doesn't reveal an overly clear-cut landscape (I've learned not overly clear cut is the best I can hope for), a good spring to drink from, the possibility, however remote, of encountering a cougar—these are enough to send me into paroxysms of glee. And just as suddenly . . . Maggie Nelson says loneliness is solitude with a problem. My solitude can become an acute loneliness for brief afternoon stretches when the forest goes quiet and still and a wave of fear sets over me that this universe really is inanimate.

My tiny human steps getting me nowhere, the doubt creeps in: Why am I on this hike? Why am I on this life? What do I want to happen on my way through the Cascades? Don't mosquitos ever rest?

A light breeze crosses against my cheek. This will suffice to keep me, pointless or not, walking a little while longer until this web of experience comes fully back to life.

At Jude Lake, where I'll call it a day. I find a small campsite off the trail, discard my pack, remove my shoes, and sit on the lakeshore where I plop and dangle my feet in the cool mountain water. Rest. For 15 minutes I do little more than wiggle my toes, which is plenty. Whatever else is happening in the world, there's nowhere I'd rather be than soaking these feet in this lake. And if there is something better somewhere out there, I'm too content to bother imagining it.

After thinking myself satisfied, I set up my tent and come straight back to sit in the water some more. This time I strip all the way down and dive clumsily in through the lake muck. Wild ducks splash land out in the open water and it's just me and them out here.

It was a tough afternoon. South Pinhead Butte doesn't look like much on the map, but I timed it just right so I hit it at the heat of this hot day. Direct sunlight, dry desert air: maybe I can learn how to be easier on myself.

I climb out of the water, put on my boxer shorts, and resume my position sitting on the shore. My left foot looks the same as yesterday, my right

foot actually better except for the fourth toe, which is bleeding on top with a large blister wrapping around the whole bottom and front—hopefully this cold water is helping. Looking down at my submerged feet, I notice a crawdad crawling back to the cover of a log I dislodged. He is bright pink and disappears quickly. I move the log again but cannot find him. Now that I'm looking, though, there's a brown newt a little shorter than a pencil swimming around my toes—maybe feeding off my bloody toe, what do I know? Hungry or not, it's as curious about me as I am about it. I swirl my foot slowly; the newt takes caution and then returns as my toes settle. I saw a garter snake this afternoon. If I hadn't been so tired I might have seen it before scaring it away, as it was lying out on the trail. If it were here now it might go after this newt, the garter snake being one of the only animals resistant to the newt's toxins. One of those textbook evolutionary arms races.

And an hour is gone, but gone where? I am still here. And I am still me. The skin that has flaked away in the water, the blood and pus that have leaked out. The fluctuating reality of “I.” I am no more these intermittent fears, lonelineses, and hopes than I am the pieces of body I leave behind. They vanish in and with the movement of time and what's left is only what's left. In this moment is the totality of “I.” Nothing is lacking. And wherever the hour has gone it has taken with it everything that is not happening now. Existence is Experience. And experience when you attend to it is enough. Some dark clouds have been moving in, maybe a little rain tonight.

I go up to the tent, eat half my Indian Curry, hang up my pack hopefully out of the reach of bears, and lie down. I make it through the introduction this time and into Chuang Tzu's “Free and Easy Wandering” before my mind settles down into my tired bones.

Night.

I wake up to the sound of something rustling outside the tent. It sounds small, probably raccoons or mice, but I'm picking up a strong whiff of urine, which is characteristic of bears. My food is up good and high, except that I put the leftover Indian Curry down the trail by a rock so I can pick it up in the morning. Do bears like spicy food, I wonder as I try to sleep, glad that I didn't make salmon.

Day 3.

I only peed once yesterday and that can't be good. My shoulders are stiff like they've been holding up my world, which in a way they have been. But my legs, by god these legs can do anything. I count my blessings and make

myself pee. What comes out isn't what it should be but a trickle of fluorescent yellow and that can't be good either. Three and a half miles ahead I'll leave the Indian Reservation and arrive at Olallie Lake, where I'm expecting to find a campground with a general store. Let them have Gatorade.

In the store at Olallie Lake familiar comforts are almost beyond my ken. I buy two Gatorades, a Pepsi, a gallon of water, and get to guzzling. I buy extra oatmeal and some "all-natural" insect repellent, refusing I guess to really believe the word means nothing. I drop \$20+ and it's worth it. I drink the Pepsi, one of the Gatorades, and half the water. The rest of the water I use to fill up my bottles.

It's disorienting to see humans for the first time since I left Timothy Lake the day before yesterday. I ask the kid working the store how long it'll take me to pass Mt. Jefferson today. He stares at me for an inordinate period of time before telling me that despite working and living here he's never gotten around to hiking up that way. These humans, sometimes I just don't know. Before I go he hazards a guess, "Maybe a week?" Now I'm the one staring strangely, pretty sure I'll make 20 miles and be coming down the other side before dinner.

Better hydrated, I begin working the base of Jefferson.

Coming up from Olallie is all happy John Denver tunes in my head. Open meadows and strings of alpine lakes, Jefferson right over there. La-da-da life is grand and if I can later see me now I will smile.

Approaching Breitenbush Lake I enter a burned up valley. It's eerie as shit, end of the world scene. Some grass patches speak of a future, but otherwise it's charred black sticks speaking only of what happened. Damn. I'm glad to see this. These woods are so tender, this land so precious. I put my feet down gently, humbled.

I'm into the Mount Jefferson Wilderness. No fires allowed here. Not that I have the tools to start one. As I gain elevation the snow melt increases linearly, but the mosquitos do so exponentially. I spray myself down with the natural stuff but it makes no difference. As soon as I slow down I'm swarmed. I eat a Snickers and mix a bowl of cold ramen while I walk, my one arm flailing helplessly about my head. These fuckers are under my skin almost literally—they're biting me through my shirt and I will never kill enough to satiate my blood lust. We are of a kind in this. In my anger I'm

sweating sloppily, climbing higher, and thinking to myself it doesn't even matter how beautiful it is.

The snow's getting thicker. I trudge on. I come to a snowfield, look across to where I reason the trail should be and try to keep my aim true. The snow is hard packed and I do not fall through much, but it's slippery wet in this heat and sometimes I slide a little. I plant my walking stick, lean in, and take conservative steps. I'm too close to Jefferson now to see it. Mt. Hood is visible to the north. The snowfields run right over the ledge, spilling into the valleys between. I plant my walking stick, lean, and take my conservative steps uphill. As long as I reconnect with the trail every 10 minutes or so I trust I'm moving in the right direction. There's a climber lost on Mt. Hood, I read in the paper before I started this trip, and that's a shitty thing to think about right now.

I haven't seen any dirt in a while and there's none of the signage I saw in the Mt. Hood Wilderness here, so I can't be sure I'm near the trail. I turn my phone on, and though there's no service the GPS function tells me that I'm 300 feet at 242 degrees from the trail. I line up what I can tell about north and south from the ridgeline, guess what 300 feet means out here, and give it a shot. The GPS now says 117 feet at 60 degrees, so I guess I'm getting closer. I play the guess and check game for 30 minutes and I'm once again feeling pretty good about myself. The voice in my head that expects to make it is still the loudest one, but the voice of doubt—or reason, whatever you want to call it—is starting to speak up.

I've got another thousand feet of climbing ahead of me. I'm still on the northern side of the mountain, meaning I can't count on much more melt until I crest or break the timberline. And when that will happen I don't know. And what if my phone battery dies while I'm still in the snow? Then I'll be forced to guess without checking. What risks am I prepared to take today?

I lean against a tree and wait for a sign. I'm not aware that that's what I'm doing. But it is. I think I would make it. But if I get off the trail, if I can't tell where I am on my maps, if my GPS dies. Big problems start with small mistakes. I say that I'm troubled by archetypes of conquer and metaphysics of opposition, yet here I am ready to go higher in the mountain with no honest plan for how to get to the other side. And why? Because I'm seduced by the challenge and the possibility of being my own hero, asserting an indomitable will. But look closer at this will, and isn't it the source of my frustration in the moment? My ideas about what I should do at odds with the

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circumstances surrounding me. My attachment to a rigid version of my *self*. Without such steadfast preconceptions, where would the problems arise? Not under the high mountain sun. Not in the shade of pines. Perhaps if success means anything on this journey it won’t mean a conquering but rather the dissolution of the terms of conquer. If I can focus less on a trail I must complete at all costs and more on the experience of being on the trail I can wander more freely and easily. I can even convince myself that in this humility lies a rejoinder to the spirit of dominance that has ruled this land since the Enlightenment swept west. I can convince myself of this, can’t I?

I look down at the phone. A single bar of service flashes. Well, I guess there’s an escape plan. I open the phone function but the service is lost. I climb a bump and move away from the trees and wave my phone around like a crazy person. When the bar of service returns I call my dad, who says, “Hello? Hello? Scott? Are you there?” Nothing I say goes through. I text my sister: “Too much snow. Can’t pass Jeff. Tell dad Breitenbush Campground tomorrow. Anytime.”

I try in vain to get another text out, but the bar of service has vanished. I lean once more against a tree and try to accept the finality of my decision. There is some relief at having made what I think is the right decision, but there remains a feeling of defeat within me. I’m suspended somewhere between common sense and cowardice, and I cannot tell which is closer.

I’m cooling out in the Breitenbush River, but the mosquitos are inside my mind again, which is already buzzing. Did the message go through? Will it make sense? And other such questions I can’t answer.

I get out of the water and hike up to the campground. Even though it’s hot, I’d rather get in my tent than deal with these mosquitos.

Once the tent is set up, I decide, no, I’d rather deal with the mosquitos than bake in the tent. I walk around the grounds. My legs are so used to motion they don’t want to stop. The fundamental component of reality—of

human reality at least—is momentum. When it’s working for you, there’s not much work left over you have to do. But right now my legs and plans are at cross vectors.

I walk over to the mosquito hatch that doubles as a scenic lake and suddenly it occurs to me that something isn’t right. Breitenbush is one of the more well-known campgrounds in Oregon, but there are only two other groups here. The rest of the grounds are empty. I approach one of the groups and ask if anyone knows exactly what is the deal. A middle-aged woman produces a map and shows me that we are at Breitenbush Lake Campground, a somewhat isolated campground back in Warm Springs. Eyeing her brand-new Subaru Outback, I ask how far it is to Breitenbush Campground. Eyeing the knife tied to my belt, she tells me it’s a 13 mile hike and if I leave pronto I can make it before dark.

Tent re-disassembled, I pack ‘em up and move ‘em out. The long road to civilization is a bumpy mess, rocks and potholes, dust and deep ruts. Dad would never make it up here in his Camry (if it occurred to him, if he got the message and checked the other place first), so good thing I’m walking it. Gives me something better to do than wait.

I’m walking my versatile legs along, appreciating that it’s all downhill and thinking about why evolution never produced the wheel. No more than a mile in, though, my reasoning is forced to confront the versatility of a four-wheel drive, double-rear-wheel beast. A truckful of guys pull up and the driver shouts out, “Hey, man, want a ride?”

I say exactly what I always say. “No thanks, man, I got this.”

Thirteen, now 12, miles is nothing I can’t do, so why would I want any help? Is my thinking. His thinking turns out to be that it’s hot as hell and I’m walking on a shitty rock road. This is only one way in which Tom is smarter than I am. I hop in. Tom and his three buddies are old-fashioned Oregon outdoorsmen in a brand-new black truck that I fall for completely. It’s roomy and air-conditioned and built for mountains. The power we have here is exhilarating. Tom and his buddies have hiked and hunted all over the state and know well where I ran into my trouble. Another week maybe, two definitely, they assure me, and I would have made the pass. Too bad, too, it’s the best stretch in all of Oregon, they say. We mash over the road like nothing, slowing only to make room for a struggling minivan and pretty soon we’re at the campground.

It’s not yet dark as I claim the last available site.

Here I am now at my own picnic table, time to sit by the river and really dip further into the Chuang Tzu (“There is a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a beginning.”), time to drink coffee made from non-iodine-flavored water, time to write in this journal. Time finally to sit still. Now that I’m not in a hurry to get further along maybe I can get somewhere.

It is a good feeling to relax and know that as long as communications went through all I have to do is read, write thoughts as they occur to me, and listen to the river. No more studying maps and planning water stops. In the wilderness you must stay aware of wilderness. Here it is enough that there are trees and a river and lovely places to be. Lovely ways to be. *Here*, I note, in a crowded campground, not out in the remote woods. Here, where I can be outdoors at real leisure. The interplay of nature and culture impossible to think about isolating. It lacks a purity—and I should hope so.

I find myself here, the closest thing yet to the self I want to be. Like something I was destined for. What an exhausting word to write, *destiny*. Every being has a role. The butcher to cut meat, the rooster to crow, the big to be big, the small to be small, the great to be great, this tick on my elbow to be crushed under my pen, the sacred tortoise to drag its tail in the mud. “The whole world could praise Sung Jung-tzu and it wouldn’t make him exert himself; the whole world could condemn him and it wouldn’t make him mope.” I am a man (small) in a land (big). How small? How big? I do not know. I discover my perspective from the ground and sing my songs into the breeze. I’ll go down cheerfully here, whether I’m here or not here. The dead man laughs at the living. Po Chu-i lost his reason for being; he was never happier. I have been here since creation and yet I am a mere fart in the wind. How foolish is this bumbling existence. And what makes a thing so? Making it so makes it so. I speak of things made only because I haven’t the words for those unmade. Understand they are no different. Ha! forget your commentaries. I breathe Oregon air because my mom went to medical school at OHSU and my dad’s dad got a job out West. Also in China long ago a butterfly dreamed of flapping its wings. The rhythm of that flapping dictates the meaning—I vibrate, I vibrate—the tick finds me large, the trees find me small. What am I? Further vibrations inside vibrations meaning I could go on forever.

I had a hard time turning around. I thought the journey was a failure. I realized, though, I didn’t know where the journey was leading, much less if it was a failure. These judgments bring suffering. Edward Abbey, another intermittent Taoist, writes, “It doesn’t much matter whether you get where you’re going or not. You’ll get there anyway. Every good hike brings you eventually back home. Right where you started.” Amen, wherever I end up.

Day After.

The hiker is not hiking but looking up at the trees keeping score.

A stranger approaches. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Does anyone find what he’s looking for?” he says.

“So you didn’t?”

“No,” he says, “but I found something more valuable: what I wasn’t looking for. To look for is to be without. To not look is to be with. To look is not to find. To not look is not to be lost. What could I possibly be looking for?”

The stranger is beginning to look familiar. “Come, I have great rewards to offer you.”

“Go away! I’ll drag my tail in the mud!” he says.

With no phone service, he doesn’t check every two minutes to see if he’s still alive. He sits there on the ground and waits.

Scott F. Parker is the author of *Running After Prefontaine: A Memoir* and the editor of *Conversations with Ken Kesey and Eminem and Rap, Poetry, Race*. “Free and Easy Wandering on the Pacific Crest Trail” is from his in-progress essay collection, *How Big the Bigness Is: And Other Love Letters to Oregon*. To learn more, visit www.scottfparker.com.

The Meat and the Glove

SL Travel

William Huhn

I have a hard time recalling exactly what he looked like. He was a Saudi, I remember that much. I was in Brussels, playing my violin at the edge of the famous square La Grand' Place when I met him. I was used to meeting all types when I performed, and then not thinking about them ever again, but this guy said something unforgettable that really hit home. Weather details—the play of the autumn sunlight, the gusty winds in the square that day—have all grown hazy. His loose white trousers, the flow of his long white tunic, elegantly trimmed with gold, the nervous timbre of his voice, even his exact words will soon be lost to me. But his message won't be. The gist of it will be tattooed on my ghost.

I was fiddling just within the boundaries of the square, on a spot the police had shooed me away from before. But usually they left me alone here. As long as you weren't playing your folk music smack in the middle of this great *meer* of cobblestones, the cops would either stop to listen or just benignly stroll by. Victor Hugo called this square “the most beautiful on earth.” He'd made his residence on it when in exile for his role in the 1850 revolt against Louis Napoleon. And in the 1870s Verlaine shot Rimbaud just a block away from where I was standing. I could see or, rather, feel why the square would draw people with anarchical leanings. When I played my medleys of old-time fiddle tunes here, at a maniacal clip, I felt at one with a spirit of liberation and openness that I hadn't known elsewhere in my travels.

Having quit a job and abandoned my life in New York City several months earlier, I had recently arrived in this unfamiliar metropolis, the latest in my busking tour of the great European centers—Athens, Rome, Milan, Paris—and now here I was in the seat of NATO. The first Iraq war was long over, the second hadn't begun. The Twin Towers didn't as yet look like a thousand elementary schools crushed and heaped in a smoking pile.

I had plied a brisk trade so far here in Brussels, and today the pleasant weather had been to my advantage. La Place was swarming and lively. I'd already pulled in considerable coin.

The Saudi was spiriting a hawk around the square on a gloved fist and was far away when I first saw him. Until he joined the motley of passersby that my sideshow had attracted, I'd barely noticed him. His hawk was sizable and daunting, but as the swarthy man stepped up, my screechings frightened her. She was jessed to a short leash, but she reared up and, flapping, made a show of at-

“His hawk was sizable and daunting, but as the swarthy man stepped up, my screechings frightened her. She was jessed to a short leash, but she reared up and, flapping, made a show of attempting flight.”

tempting flight. While her master was able to settle her back down, her powerful legs remained braced for takeoff, and the oval of her angry eye never left me, not even when I lowered my fiddle.

The man's late middle age, beardless chin, and white headdress (called a “ghutra,” as I'd later learn) brought out the narrowness of his skull. He too seemed to eye me with suspicion. I didn't as yet know enough about him or his culture to question his lack of facial hair, but I would soon learn that he was quite westernized.

“Why not you still play?” he asked. His English, though wanting, bore the inflections of time spent with a British nanny. “She and me love good music on violin. But to her is scary thing.”

“I didn't want her to fly away and take you with her,” I said. “What kind of hawk is it?”

“In English what you call is ‘sparrowhawk,’” he said. “I know what kind of creature yours.” He smiled and gestured with his free hand. “I played violin when I was boy.”

Faintly smirking now, he placed a generous bill in my case.

“A man of talent! But I call my instrument a ‘fiddle,’” I said, returning his smile—and pointing my bow at the bill. “Thanks for that.”

“Yes, yes, I know this word—‘feedle.’ Yes, they are same.” Thanks for confirming that, I thought, for he'd spoken with a thin air of condescension. His tone had said, “I know all about your music nonsense, fiddle boy,” as if I'd roused some dormant, unfulfilled passion that he had for the instrument. Nonetheless, he also seemed friendly and well-meaning.

“Is your hawk trained to hunt?”

“My brother catch her wild in mountains of Asir, in Saudi Arabia, where I am born. He gave for me as gift. Oh yes, she is beautiful trained to hunt. I was first who train her.”

We introduced ourselves, but I could barely pronounce, let alone remember his name. His hawk's name I remember, though.

“She’s called ‘Undulata,’” he told me. “‘Undulata’ is also name of rare species of bird. Almost extinct, I’m understand.” He was smoothing the feathers along the lower side of her neck. “Sometime my hawk Undulata catch small rabbits, but normal thing she likes is game bird: grouse, quail, plover... But then one time she catch this rare undulata. It is for this why I call her. For five months when I have her before this name, I call her ‘Madonna,’ like American singer, then ‘Undulata’ after she catch the extinct bird. I have also two falcons...”

Undulata didn’t seem to like his mention of the falcons. She bristled, flapped, and reared up again, displaying the gray-brown underside of her belly and a three-foot wingspan. My fiddle fans, two small boys among them, stepped back, but kept staring. The man seemed indifferent to the conversation, all in French, that surrounded him and his charge: “Does it bite?” “She’s on a leash.” “Does he fly her in the square?” “I bet it could tear your liver out with those talons.”

He had his hawk facing him now, an orientation which seemed to have a calming effect, as if he’d hooded her. Meanwhile, a tall restive policeman had taken notice of the falconer from afar. Over the Arab’s shoulder he stood out among the shoals of square-goers. I immediately stooped to gather my earnings and put away my fiddle. The Arab kept on about his falcons.

Rising again, I said, “I’ve always wanted to learn falconry.” I was stuffing my blue-jean pockets with fistfuls of coins and bills. “How the heck do you get the birds to trust you?”

I could count my earnings later.

“There is only she is beautiful trained,” he said, his face at once overhung by a craggy frown. “She doesn’t trust me.”

The cop stopped to talk with a female of his uniform. She scanned for us and saw.

“But how do you train a wild hawk to perch on your hand?”

“It can be much problem,” said the man, “but method is not difficult. The term you call in English is ‘manning.’ To man a hawk, you need only patience and supply of fresh meat. You must get her she accept meat from you, then you get her come closer for the meat, and in time she flies to your hand for meat. Since man supply her food, she seeks for man even after she’s release. Is nothing to say about trust, this. There’s not trust on earth—not with animals, specially not with hawks or falcons, just like so there’s not trust with woman.”

He’d had his heart broken. I could tell: I saw myself in him. We were brothers of the hawk, the two of us, apart from the flock, connected only to others like us, and only then by our aloneness. It was perfectly fair to say that there’s “not trust on earth.” I’d known this truth from the day the woman I loved betrayed me. This was partly the reason I was here in Brussels, and why I was roaming



the world as a street musician: I’d had my heart clawed out. But I wouldn’t cave to his cynicism, not wittingly. I might mouth his morbid credo with my last breath of air, like a prayer, like the one truth I was taking with me, but I’d live as if he lied.

“I don’t see it that way,” I said. “The hawk trusts you. She trusts that you won’t harm her, that you’ll give her her meat.”

This reply visibly irked my Arab friend.

The cops, male and female, were walking toward us. I bent down to my case, snapped closed the latches, and picked it up.

“My brother trained the Black Eagle to hunt for him,” said the man, a new urgency in his voice. “Do you know about this bird—the Black Eagle? It’s called also ‘Verreaux’s’ ... ‘Verreaux’s Eagle.’”

“No, I, ah... Isn’t that a town in northern France?”

“He’d had his heart broken. I could tell: I saw myself in him. We were brothers of the hawk, the two of us, apart from the flock, connected only to others like us, and only then by our aloneness.”

“Very rare—this is why you never heard—worse than undulata; and very fierce this bird, wingspan tremendous.” He flung his free arm out, its cowed white gold-trimmed sleeve hanging down. With my fiddle now safely stowed at my side, my fear of the police fell away. I could linger as if no guiltier than the other bystanders.

“When you look my brother with his Black Eagle, you think—these good; eagle like his pet, like his slave. But do you believe this animal trust him? Would such creature trust silly man? Oh, no! Too much. The presence of man says ‘meat’ is all!”—his pitch soared now. “Is not trust! Birds of prey they tolerate much things, even man, for fresh meat.”

“But he still trusts your brother, even if not fully.”

“You make your illusions, my friend, you with your feedle. I ask question, if he doesn’t trust absolute, then how he has trust at all? Is nothing! Be careful you make illusions of trust.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” I said.

“Why you say this—‘hard on myself’?”

“You don’t trust anybody. It’s hard enough to get through life as it is, but without trusting anybody? I mean, you can’t love without trust.”

The hawk raised a wing and scratched beneath with its beak.

“You still to learn, my friend. I speak of trust in the things of this world. You one day learn there is more important trust. The world will one day learn.”

“I don’t want to learn how to distrust people.”

“I’m understand.

But the world teaches its young. There’s no trust in the world, but it teaches.”

Islam came into it now. My new friend was an excitable man and suddenly all in a frenzy over making his point. He held forth on Allah and



how one can rely on Him alone. A verse of the Quran that he translated, though tender in meaning, felt aggressive on his lips. Of the two of us, I alone seemed to hear the poetry in the passage. He seemed to find only cold meaning. From his perspective my joie de vivre must have felt like a dangerous thing. Our tiny audience fled him. Even Undulata seemed to grow impatient with him.

Were the police not 30 feet behind his ghutra now, I too would have begged off. But I stayed, because his dictums burned with a sober wisdom, and he listened to me when I offered him my thoughts. At one point he drew on the phrase “a boot on the neck,” but his gentler maxims cast the world as a dreamscape, urging that we must not be “blinded by this life.” And when finally he came full circle, back to falconry, his harshest saying—“There’s the meat and the glove, nothing more”—entered me like a small twist of shrapnel, whose heat I can feel to this hour.

“Papiers, s’il vous plait?”—The Belgian police had no licit business with this man. He may have been hardened by life, but he loved nature, loved music, loved wisdom. He shed vibes of oil-wealth and sheltered innocence, and somehow his heart was broken.

I didn’t think that his prejudices could have a darker side. I’d been brought up to think well of people. This man wasn’t booby-trapped. There was no ordinance against birds in the square. His leashed hawk posed no more a threat than my encased violin. But the law didn’t like these things we go-about carried around. It didn’t matter if they were all we valued in the world anymore. We valued something. Myriads have lived out the whole of their lives with less.

William Huhn’s narrative essays have appeared in the *South Carolina Review*, *Tulane Review*, *Fugue*, and other publications. His work has been twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has been cited multiple times as a “Notable Essay” in *The Best American Essays* series. In 2013 he was a semifinalist in the *New Millennium Writings Awards* for nonfiction. His essay “You Forgot These” is forthcoming in *Thema*, September 2015. An alternate version of “The Meat and the Glove” appeared in *The American Literary Review* in fall 2007.

Referee's Decision

SL Contest

Mark Pearson

Declaring a winner in a writing contest seems contrary to the spirit of writing. As a wrestling coach and former competitor, I'm used to victories won through sweat and blood, or technical expertise. It's almost a shame to declare one work of fine writing better than another. At a certain level technical expertise is expected and difficult to draw distinctions between. It becomes subjective.

As this year's judge in *Sport Literate's* essay contest, I knew almost immediately that I had my work cut out for me. At first, I thought I would be able to eliminate a few essays after reading several paragraphs, but I couldn't put any of them down; one sentence led on to another; I was hooked. I read six essays all the way to the end. The winners here are the *Sport Literate* subscribers who get to read the work of the finalists.

In wrestling, they used to have something called a referee's decision which was used to determine a winner after all overtime periods had expired and the score remained deadlocked. The referee literally made the call. Wrestlers walked to the center of the mat and the referee raised the winner's hand. It was his decision. The results would read something like, 9-9, 5-5, r.d.

I can think of any number of wrestling matches where referees intervened in the outcome of a contest I was involved in, mostly, I believed, against me, but I clearly recall one in my favor. That one, an obscure first-round 109 pound consolation match in the 1977 national prep school wrestling championships at Lehigh University.

I had a bloody nose that wouldn't stop. The match seemed interminable. It was late at night, the overtime periods extended by injury timeouts. The match lasted three or four times as long as a regulation six-minute match. My blood covered me; it stained my opponent's white uniform; the table workers mopped it off the mat; it blew in a mist from my nose. I smelled it; I tasted it. I wanted to win that match more than anything. I had entered the tournament unbeaten and lost in the first round. It was a long way back to third through the consolation bracket and that match was the first step toward redemption. In between that first round loss and that first consolation match, I wanted to quit, I swore, I kicked a wall, I cried like an entitled baby, and then I got up and stepped on the mat.

I sometimes wonder why I won that match, and was given the opportunity to continue in the tournament, where I went on to win four more matches and

eventually place third. The referee must have looked at the blood I spilled and decided right there.

Each of these essays resonated with me in different ways. Engaging, entertaining, thoughtful and skillfully wrought, they struck that chord between the familiar and the strange. No wrestlers here, but the struggle was evident: coping with loss, fathers, daughters, runners, rugby, basketball, baseball, an ex-pat falconer, philosophy.

In the end, I asked myself this: Who left their heart on the page?

Here is your winner: *Channeling Mr. Jordan*, a story of loss and longing, father and daughter, of the fictions we invent to protect that vulnerable child in all of us, our American connection to baseball, however tangential, and heroes invulnerable to loss and grief whose stories may give us the courage to face the cold realities of our own lives and persevere.

Mark Pearson's first *Sport Literate* essay, "The Short History of an Ear," was anthologized in *The Best American Sports Writing 2011*. A widely published writer of essays and fiction, he is the author of *Famous Last Lines*, a short story collection published by Main Street Rag Publishing Company. He teaches English and coaches wrestling in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, where he lives with his wife and two daughters.

Channeling Mr. Jordan

SL Winning Essay

Alessandra Nolan

The season after my father died, the Boston Red Sox won the World Series for the first time since 1918. Being born in Rhode Island and from prudent Irish blood, he was a Red Sox loyalist from childhood on. But I, in what must've been a disappointing turn of events for him, was born a Jersey girl with a penchant for being contrary. Thus, I turned out a Yankees fan. So in the games leading to the 2004 World Series, when the Red Sox came back from a three game deficit to defeat my beloved Yankees and then stormed the Cardinals in a straight series win, I felt him smile from beyond the grave. I remember buying a pack of smokes and a Coke Slurpee at the 7-11 when I heard the Sox won. I hadn't watched a single game of the series. Really, I hardly watched baseball at all. Stepping outside, I looked past the light pollution in my coastal Jersey town and up towards the stars. I imagined my father's head floating up there, the way they teach you God floats around in Catholic CCD. I pointed a finger towards the sky. Boston, I thought, still sucks. But if a World Series was Chuck Nolan's dying wish then, Amen, let the curse be undone.

Making that connection was easy. Memorializing is easy. After he died, my father became a mythical creature with a few concise tall tales. I'd recall favorite memories on cue, laughing through stories of him weaving dental floss around the necks of mine and my sister's Barbie dolls and then hanging them from the ceiling fan. "Barbie suicide" I would parrot, repeating what he called his deed, his apparent punishment for us leaving their naked bodies strewn across the shower floor. There were other easy facts. My dad loved golf. He liked Motown, enjoyed baking pies, smoked like a chimney. He was a Red Sox fan, a Giants fan, a Larry Bird-era basketball fan. These tiny preferences built a laudable memory of a man I hardly knew. For 17 years I loved, cherished and resented my dad for his whole self. In death, I drew him as a stark caricature and carried that with me, remembering what was easy to remember in an attempt to keep the sorrow at bay.

It was only natural then, nine years later, for grief to finally appear. Destruction and regression happened quickly. First, I quit my job. Immediately after, I quit trying to leave the house at all. It was my second November living in North Carolina and being what the blessed folks in these parts know to be a stubborn Yankee, I figured I was destined to melt in this strange autumn heat. I trudged to my graduate classes in sweat-soaked sun dresses, turned down bourbon in lieu of unsweetened iced tea and made no effort to find joy in the quaint and confederate town of Wilmington, North Carolina. I missed my friends, my home, my family and I missed knowing what missing my dad felt like. In the hours outside of class, I moped around the air-conditioned comfort of the one bedroom apartment I shared

with my fiancé. On good days, I wrote. Otherwise, I watched TV.

Inside the television, sports stories from my father's era lived. The Netflix-Gods offered a series of sports documentaries and athlete biographies—every sport and every human condition—Greek tragedies played against the backdrop of infields and metal bleachers. I settled into my couch and barely moved for weeks.

Croot, my fiancé, worked long and late hours. He would return and humor me if I was awake. He'd pick the popcorn out of my hair and answer questions I'd written down about various sports technicalities I was too lazy to look up. Usually though, he'd come home to half-eaten frozen pizzas, a glowing box and a sleeping wife-to-be. Our couch sagged. I felt the pillows soften and redistribute themselves under the weight of my body. Often, I was lulled to sleep by a series of halftime whistles, shot clock buzzers and the sound of a roaring crowd.

The documentary cycle lasted longer than I think both of us expected. I was determined to make it through every sports-related program Netflix had to offer. Within three weeks, I was down to two and saving the best for last. The first: a three hour and 50 minute PBS special on boxer, Jack Johnson. The other: a seemingly lighthearted account of Michael Jordan's foray in baseball.

In a ritualistic manner, I planned and scheduled the viewings. I would save Jack Johnson's for last as I placed more value on the historic relevance of its subject matter. I would force Croot to sit through that one with me. But until then, I would watch Michael Jordan's disastrous attempt at baseball. To prolong the expectancy, I decided to ceremoniously clean. I dragged myself and a vacuum around the house, stripped the couch of cushions and cleaned the crevices of a month's worth of popcorn and cat fur. I made the bed. I washed some dishes. I scrubbed my hair. And then, I opened a window and unlocked my door. Holding the remote with authority, I pressed play.

The 1994 Jordan baseball debacle, to my father, was nothing more than a publicity stunt. I remember hearing sportscasters lament about the idiocy of the White Sox for giving him a shot. I was in second grade, and a Bulls fan, since the Bulls were a winning team and red seemed an acceptable enough color. Michael's retirement did little to my 8-year-old psyche. I simply switched teams. The Knicks, after all, had Ewing.

But now, at 26, I sit crying for the Michael Jordan of 1993-94. The documentary paints his baseball attempt as an epic battle. Athletic egotism had nothing to do with it. *Listen*, pleads the *Sports Illustrated* journalist who initially wrote that Michael was ruining baseball; *this is a tale of a loving son*. He's sorry for writing that original story now. Spellbound, I sob, becoming too involved in the story of Michael as a grief-stricken child, who upon losing his father loses his will to play basketball. In his loss, he gains the desire to pick up a baseball bat. Baseball, we learn, was his father's dream for him.

The documentary opens with a crime scene. Cameras flash signs of 74

West and the I-95 ramps in Lumberton, NC. *That*, I acknowledge, *is where I am*. Lumberton is just over an hour away in a part of North Carolina that I've never been to, but that seems so close now. The director's voiceover tells the story of James Jordan's murder. Travelling from Wilmington to Charlotte one night, Mr. Jordan allegedly pulled over to rest just south of Lumberton. According to highly debatable court testimony, Mr. Jordan was victim to a random theft. The perpetrators shot him in his sleep, dumped his body in a South Carolina swamp and took his \$43,000 cherry-red Lexus. A fisherman found the body, though it was so badly decomposed that at the time of its discovery, no one knew it was him. He was hastily cremated before being identified—apparently standard practice for strange bodies found on the South Carolina side of Gum Swamp Creek. Two weeks later, a comparison between his dental records and impressions taken by the South Carolina authorities confirmed his identity.

With the documentary paused on the still frame of the funeral, I call Croot to relay my new knowledge.

"Oh?" he replies, distracted, when I finish going through the facts. He is not nearly as excited as I want him to be. "Yeah," he responds to my silence. "I think I remember that story now."

"Oh." I feel a little deflated. I feel as though I was maybe the only person who knew the whole story of Michael Jordan's father. Or at least, the only person who earned a right to know. "Did you know it happened around here?"

He tells me he thinks he remembers hearing something about it and it occurs to me that he was holding onto highly sensitive information that should've been shared. I resist the urge to tell him so. I'm sitting upright, eyes still fastened to the television. On the screen, Michael Jordan wears Ray Bans.

"Okay, babe. I gotta get back to work. I'll see—"

"Oh, and um, Croot." I inhale and pause. "Mr. Jordan. His gravesite is like 40 minutes from here." I've pressed play again. I watch Michael and the other pallbearers carry a casket out the church's front door. I assume the casket contains his father's ashes. If not, I assume the casket certainly houses his father's spirit.

"I think we should go."

We hang up after our "I love you's" and "see you soon's." He assures me he's game for the gravesite adventure and so I print directions from Wilmington to the burial site in Teachey. Just the idea of visiting the grave is delightful to me. I come to think of the trip as a means to seek closure. In class the next day, I tell some of my more sports-savvy friends about Mr. Jordan's location. I tell them I want to bring an Ouija board to get help with my March Madness bracket and ask his spirit about Oklahoma City's chances for the season. Some laugh. A few look concerned.

For years during which my father was both alive and dead, I operated under the assumption that he would've preferred me to be a boy. He had three girls, but I

was the daughter charged with playing sports and eating Triscuits with him during Sunday night football. In childhood, I pleased him by executing a white girl's version of a layup and by resisting the temptation to pick flowers during recreational soccer games. By high school, I was a decent enough tennis player to make the varsity team as a freshman. My father was smitten. I was more interested in the post-practice activities; long hours spent at the track smoking cigarettes in my tennis skirt and drinking beers with the boys from detention. Oblivious and clearly deluded, my father invited scouts from D-1 schools to see me play. Two weeks to season's end, I stopped showing up at practice. Shortly after, I stopped going to school. By that time, my Dad and I were only talking through shouting. He was disappointed. He shouted words like "potential" and "promise" and "wasted talent."

I spent most of my 15th year sleeping in a cocoon of clothes on my bed that I never bothered to put away. One rare day, when I was away from my nest, my father—drunk and annoyed by the mess—decided to rip apart the content of my dresser drawers. He tossed desk drawers too, broke perfume bottles. Tiny glass animal figurines—shattered. Old youth soccer trophies were snapped in two. I held the two pieces of a broken giraffe and stared at my bare wall. Mere days later, a fight between us grew cold and loud. Something animal growled inside me and I lunged toward him, arms flailing. His fist stopped me. I felt the slow lumps of his four knuckles against my right temple. We were both stunned submissive.

Ultimately, my parents did what you would do to a bad puppy—at 16, they sent me away to obedience school. Time apart mended wounds, but we were strangers when we talked. For the six-month period of peace before the brain-tumor-removal-gone-wrong, we talked on the phone about Tiger Woods and Sammy Sosa. We chatted lightly about cross-country season, our genetic predisposition to weak ankles. At the end of seven minutes or so, the line would grow quiet. I would wrap the phone cord around my finger over and over until he would cough vaguely and with relief, hand the phone to my mother.

After the surgery, as he lay dying for a month in a hospital bed, we talked about my upcoming basketball season. He never let the phone go during those conversations and I didn't mind. I'd wrap the cord around my arms and listen to him breathing into the receiver. The morphine drip worked on him, as it does many tough men, and he was loose enough to speak his love and say his goodbyes. I responded appropriately, but couldn't bring myself to believe in his love or his death. In my first basketball game immediately after he passed, I fouled out hard within the first seven minutes.

Croot and I set a date. We didn't have a date for our wedding, but we set a date to visit Mr. Jordan's grave. We scheduled our trip for a Saturday morning in December, bright and early, before Croot's work. We would visit. With every

day I crossed off the calendar, Croot tried to understand. He asked the question I dreaded: why? He asked it over and over.

“It’s not like he’s not really famous or anything.”

I told him I just needed to. “To get a feeling,” I’d say. Really, I had adopted Mr. Jordan as my surrogate, southern father.

I read more about Mr. Jordan’s murder. I read about conspiracy theories, mishandling of evidence, the blame the media put on Michael’s gambling. It was all old news. One of his alleged killers sought an appeal and thought he would walk out a free man. He claims only to have been a part of the robbery, not the killing. He’s still in jail. I made a mental note to ask Mr. Jordan about his attackers when we go.

Mr. Jordan’s grave is at Rockfish African Methodist Episcopal Church cemetery in Teachey, North Carolina. We venture inland, down route 40 West. Leaving Wilmington, we pass route 74, the highway Mr. Jordan was driving on when he was shot. I begin to ask Croot if we would have a better chance at finding his spirit if we go to the crime scene instead, but stop myself. I have directions to the grave and feel uneasy enough already venturing out of Wilmington—into what I can only assume is deliverance country—with New Jersey plates. We don’t need to risk getting lost.

Croot drives, talking at length about the coastal resort he works at. They have two parrots there, Gabby and Abby. The birds love him. He tells me about guests and his boss and how busy they are for the slow season. I fixate on the birds and the fact that they’re male parrots with female names. Gabby is slightly neurotic and has plucked out most of his colorful feathers leaving tufts of gray regrowth in their place. I tell him I think the bird is going through a gender identity crisis. I threaten to set them free. Croot sighs.

We travel in neutral silence then for a long time. The air is 40, but the sun is hot. Croot keeps opening and closing the window. We pass some road kill—a gray mangled, decapitated mess. I strain for the opportunity to stare at the mounds of pink insides spilling out of what was his neck. His blood is water splashed from a fountain, shiny and reflective on the hot pavement.

“I think that was a coyote.” Croot says.

“Hm...” I say

He rolls the window down, lets the air out.

We exit into the town of Wallace. It’s a rundown, nothing town with a landscape similar to any mid-American place. We pass a gas station, a five and dime, rows of rainbow-colored trailer homes, the dump. Just out of town, we drive past abandoned farm homes with crumbling foundations. Something in me has always loved the bones of houses. I look at them like modern day ruins. My favorite of this lot is a dilapidated two-story beauty with land for miles and boots by the mail-

box. The porch is collapsed and every window but one is burst into jagged glass fireworks. Grass grows through the wheelchair ramp leading to the front screen door. On the lawn, three decent looking vehicles are parked in varying positions. A clothesline with clean sheets hangs out back. It’s inhabited. A skeleton house with a family inside; a true oddity.

I navigate us down a road I suspect was just recently paved and into the empty parking lot of the church. In the documentary, the funeral procession poured from the church’s front doors with Michael Jordan at the lead. The video footage captured him in a suit and dark sunglasses. Mourners gathered at the bottom of the church’s stairs. Today, there is not a soul for miles. The announcement board has no words posted. Croot reads the lengthy name of the church aloud. I stare at my palms. He parks, I feel, too close to the road and I ask him to reverse to hide the car and the license plates against the church’s side wall.

The parking lot backs up to 12 old, old grave stones; the kind that look like Halloween decorations that could fall over with a cold breath. I walk over them to the newer section, glancing from memorial to memorial. In the graveyard, the sun seems to touch everything. We look pale in this exposing light. I don’t take my eyes off the ground. Most graves have bouquets of fake flowers placed at the head. At the tree line, green plastic stems poke out from a pile of real, brown leaves—a makeshift grave for polyester blossoms.

“Everyone here is named Wallace.” Croot announces.

He’s walking through the old section still. The air is thick with the smell of decomposition. I try to reason that it’s just trash—the humid smell of the south without orange blossoms—but I swear it’s coming from the ground. I stop, briefly, at what looks like a misplaced, unfinished piece of sidewalk. The name *James Jr. Jefferson* scrawled by hand—the words carved out by someone’s finger.

Since we planned our trip to the grave, I’ve been daydreaming about introducing my father’s floating head to Mr. Jordan’s floating head. I’ve been imagining how pleased my father will be to meet him. Being here now, it feels all wrong. I’m not a stupid person. I recognize the connection I’ve been artificially trying to forge. In the unsettling weeks of homesickness and despair, I looked for comfort in the arms of a connection I was never able to foster with my late father. I wonder though, in attempting to resurrect our connections to the dead, are we—the living—merely distracting ourselves from the suffering we feel at the pit of our own mortality?

I think of a dear friend who at 18, suffered from kidney failure, faced death and by the grace of God received a transplant. When he told me about it, I asked if it still affected his life now, nearly seven years later. I was wondering about his general health, the technicalities of the procedure, and the lifespan of an alien organ. Instead he told me about the night terrors he has—of waking up in from a deep sleep to the sound of his own screams.

“From the memory of pain?” I asked

“No, not at all.” He explained, “From being so close to dying.”

His answer stunned me. He lived on the edge, in a limbo between life and death, in constant physical pain. And yet what rattles his subconscious still, nearly 10 years later, is the memory of his proximity to death. I think of my father’s labored breathing—the hollow rise and fall of his collapsing chest after we pulled the plug. It went on for an hour.

Could he see the other side? I asked. No. He said in the moments he thought he was slipping away, he saw nothing. I wonder about the fairytales I’ve told myself—heaven, God, floating spirit-heads, life after death. I’ve honored my father by trying to please a spirit that may or may not be there. Michael Jordan played baseball. I watch documentaries. Someone cared enough about James Jr. Jefferson to stick their finger in wet cement and mark his grave. And for what?

My memory of my father was nothing more than a myth. I wove imaginings of happy times spent together, made calculated lists of his dreams and goals for me from thin strands of idealized memories. And when, nine years later, I sought to make yet another flimsy connection, reaching out to a headstone and gravesite of a sports legend’s relative—thinking in a stream: sports, story, myth, father, expectations, grief—and was left dissatisfied with the outcome, there was no denying that this grief was not the fabricated kind I’d been using to compensate all these years, but the grief for a man I could no longer construct, whose figures and likes and memories were so few that there was no longer any new stories to tell. I was grieving now, not for the death of the father I knew, but for a father I imagined and never even had. The real man rests in a grave I haven’t visited in nine years.

I watch Croot’s thin legs maneuver around the graves. He takes delicate steps, careful not to disturb anything. He looks back at me with the everything sun shining over his head and smiles. I tell him I’ve found Mr. Jordan’s grave, though it doesn’t seem to matter anymore.

“Well this is it.”

We stare down. It’s a concrete twin bed cut in half and buried shallowly. Mr. Jordan’s fake carnations are a faded, Technicolor red. For many moments we don’t say anything. I fold my hands together in front of my stomach because I don’t know what else to do with them and they glue themselves to each other. I can see myself in the reflection of his mirrored grave cover. I look at the grave, then at myself, then around the yard, and back again at my own sunlit reflection mangled in the fiberglass. My head and neck float around the perimeter of the body length monument as I shuffle around his resting place, taking desperate inventory. Beside my reflection, I can see shadows of twisted, leafless trees far above me. I stop and settle at a spot directly above his nameplate. It is a concrete square, in light gray, and rests on top of where his shins would be, if there was a body down there. James R. Jordan, it reads. And just underneath: 1936-1993.

“Strange.” It’s the first words either of us has spoken since we found him. I untangle my palms from one another and point down at exposed handles on the left side of the grave cover. “Those are supposed to be buried, right?” I’m barely audible. Croot crosses the grave.

“Ground must’ve settled.” He whispers too loud in my direction. Crouching down, I brush some pine needles and a prickly burr away. The reflective plastic isn’t as cold as I expected it to be, just slightly warmed, slightly unsettling and so I stand. With the ground so soft, I think I can feel myself sinking.

“Okay” I announce, breathless.

“Okay.” Croot agrees. He snaps a few pictures as I charge towards the car. I call orders for him to get a picture of the concrete slab with the handwritten name. I don’t know why exactly, the words just come out of my mouth. When Croot settles into the driver’s seat he looks over at me. He looks as though he can’t contain himself, as though a thought has just occurred to him that must be let out.

“I wonder when the last time Michael Jordan was here,” he bursts like a star struck 10 year old. I shake my head and shape my lips into something of a smile. I love him. I can’t handle my own brooding at that moment. I will myself to lighten up, but pulling out of the parking lot I can’t shake the feeling that we’ve been disrespectful somehow. Mr. Jordan, after all, is not my father.

Miles from the graveyard, I see my inhabited skeleton house again.

“Slow down,” I tell Croot who slows just enough to view the home in a single mind’s frame. I study its rotting wood, crooked shutters. I’m sure it was once a color, but now it is just the color of dust. On the second story, the only intact window is now fully raised, open wide. There’s a curtain hanging in that window space, ivory with age, but wv intact; it is a beautiful antique lace. It flaps in and out, the wind tossing it across the windowpane until, for a single moment, it stays billowing inward. A pocket of air pushes in toward the middle of the room. The fabric on either side of the window adheres to the sill, capturing a semi-circle of outside air. The trapped wind reminds me of my father’s final inhalation; the swollen breath inside his risen chest. I feel Croot looking at me and turn to meet his eyes in the rearview mirror. When I look back at the house, the curtain snaps back tight against the window frame.

Alessandra Nolan earned her MFA at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. She is now freezing in Ithaca, New York, where she works as an assistant editor at Momentum Media Sports Publishing. She has received honors from Gulf Coast and recently completed artist residencies at Norton Island and Wildacres. Although she should be spending her time finishing her book (a memoir about her experience in a controversial therapeutic boarding school), she requests that anyone who’d like to discuss sports documentaries ad nauseam, please contact her.

Playing Defense

SL Winning Poem

Robert Claps

Remember the time we cleared a half-foot of snow
Off the blacktop across from the Polish church,
And under the tilted backboard taught you defense?
Eddie Lobb's little sister, the one girl in our group,
You held out slender arms as though offering
The mild January day more than it could give,
While I dribbled side to side between the snow banks,
Looking to score. When I dropped
My shoulder and turned toward the hoop
You reached in hoping for the steal,
And for the first time I felt the heft and give
Of a woman's breast. I still recall the blush

That spread across your face, the way I hear
Your cancer has spread, the cells
Like bits of black gravel embedded in snow.
If Eddie should call today and assure me
Your faith will sustain you, should I mention
Our tussle under the backboard, and how the Polish
Bells rang as if to consecrate the moment?
He'd dismiss me, you would too.
You'd place your hands on my shoulders, pull me
Close so that once again I'd breathe your scent of Jean Nate,
And whisper wetly some truth, "You think too much,"
Or "We were kids at play." You played defense,
Going for a steal just as the dusk turned cold
And your mother stepped onto the porch to call you in,
With the game scoreless and time running out.

Long Jumper

The thick black hair tied back
And waving wildly
As you took your first long strides
Down the runway—
That's what I want to remember
When a friend calls to say
Your cancer has spread—
And the backward lean of your body
In mid-stride,
Hips slightly trailing your shoulders—
The hips I held when we slow-danced
At our freshman prom,
More sway than dance, with Sister Regina
Interrupting now and then to make sure
We kept the proper distance apart.

Growing more distant you gathered
Speed down the runway
Until your left foot hit the board
And, pushing off,
You ascended— no hand of God reaching
Down from the clouds
Or clutch of angels like those that accompanied
Mary in our illustrated
Catechism,
Just an ordinary ascension that lasted a second
Or two, long enough
For me to notice the pair of wings
Outstretched on the back of your uniform,
That even then seemed to be lifting you.

Robert Claps lives in eastern Connecticut and works for the same insurance company that Wallace Stevens worked for. "Not that any of his work has rubbed off on me," Claps says. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Tar River Poetry*, *The Green Mountains Review*, *The Hollins Critic*, *The Atlanta Review*, and the *Connecticut River Review*, among others. He has been involved with track and field since high school, first as a thrower, later as a coach, but best of all as a spectator when his children participated.

The Rush Gives Warmth Enough

SL Essay

Rachel Luria

Watching rugby is like staring into restless water. Bodies surge and recede like tides. Thickly muscled young men leap into the air, only to crash against each other, roll to the ground and onto their feet. In the line-out, these men stand in a row, hoist a teammate by the shorts and toss him up five feet so he can catch the white ball and look for all the world like some great shark plucking a gull from the sky. Beneath these grey skies, I am hypnotized by the movement of the game.

The Maryland uniforms are red, black, and yellow. Most of the players have shaved heads and goatees. They look mean even as they are nearly all dwarfed by the Penn State players. Penn State rugby has money, scholarships, active recruiting strategies. I hear their British accents and I think these men have grown up with the sport; it must be reflex by now. Maryland takes whatever scruffy ruffians are brave or foolish enough to hit the field.

Both teams link arms and form the big, grunting circle of the scrum, bodies facing center. The ball is thrown to the middle of the scrum and both teams try to kick it backwards to their side of the field. Suddenly the circle bursts open. Penn State has the ball and everyone is running down field. Someone falls and a dozen men pile on top. The ball is thrown free and play continues. In a few bursts, Penn State scores and Maryland and their fans cry out in disappointment. Most everyone here is a friend or family member. They voice their support between beers or wrestling matches with their dogs. Though the crowd of spectators is small, both teams play as if they are at the center of a grand arena.

Play is violent, aggressive. A Maryland man plays with a bloody nose. His mouth and jaw are smeared red and sweaty. He hardly notices, casually wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. The rise and fall begins again until, like a tidal wave, a Maryland player nicknamed Hobbit breaks free and races down field. He is past me in a stocky, blond blur. Hands reach for him. Legs beat the earth to catch up, but he is gone, gone and scores. Maryland has its first try. We cheer and, for the moment, feel buoyant.

Eventually the excitement of Hobbit's try wears off and the mood turns grey. There are no more heroics and Maryland loses. Everyone wanders off, myself included. We will meet again later, after sundown, for the party, or the "third half." Everyone will go to the party—at least for a little while. It's tradition. Win or lose, it is something to look forward to.

I am a graduate student. I am here to write a paper, study the University of Maryland's rugby culture, the rituals, the language. I am a welcome guest in this community but an oddity too: the girl writing the paper. It is a class assignment: write about a local community.

With terms like ruck and maul, play sounds more like a brawl than a game. Kicking or stomping on someone is not exactly part of the official playbook, but it happens. If you can be clever or sneaky about it, so much the better. You can't throw the ball like in American football; you can only pass it sideways or backwards. Crazy, violent, ugly, these are the labels they wear with pride. I don't argue with their descriptions, I only stand on the sidelines, my gaze turning inward and then out again, my thoughts, like the rugby ball, tossed backward and carried forward.

When the sun goes down, the party and the songs will begin. Someone will raise a glass and start a verse. The rugby players will all face each other in a circle and sing while the rest of us stand back and watch. The vulgar lyrics, the drunken intensity will scare me and yet, as I watch, I will understand. I will understand what it must feel like to be on the inside of that circle, to embrace that which chases all but a few away. Most of us will never, even for a moment, feel so aggressively connected.

I am wandering alone through the party's crowd when Hobbit calls me over. I think, if Hulk Hogan were a little shorter and less bald, then he'd be Hobbit. "Hobbit" is a nickname inspired by his slightly lopsided gait—one leg is a bit shorter than the other, giving him a limp as if he'd been hobbled. He is surrounded by young women who, as soon as I am within earshot, ask me to confirm that girls masturbate. I assume this is how young people flirt with each other. I don't really know anymore. Not that I am that old. I'm only 25 to their 21, but somehow that's enough. I am repeatedly told that I must be older. I want to blend in so when Hobbit and these girls pull me into their flirting game, I play

“The vulgar lyrics, the drunken intensity will scare me and yet, as I watch, I will understand. I will understand what it must feel like to be on the inside of that circle, to embrace that which chases all but a few away. Most of us will never, even for a moment, feel so aggressively connected.”

along. *Yes, I say. Girls masturbate.*

The girls are vindicated, though Hobbit isn't entirely convinced. He insists it isn't the same and, before I can get pulled any further into the mechanics of female masturbation, I change the subject. *Where is everyone?* I ask. *Where is the other team?*

Hobbit tells me Penn State left early. They got pissed when Maryland sang *The S&M Man* even though Penn State warned them not to. *The S&M Man* is a rugby song sung to the tune of *The Candy Man* and its lyrics are so vile that it is enough to send even the supposedly unoffendable home in a huff—verses gleefully describe violence to men, women, children, and chickens. Perhaps it wasn't just the lyrics that so upset Penn State, maybe it was the consequence of getting them wrong. If a player finds himself forgetting or unwilling to sing too many lines in one of the traditional songs, then he must submit to something called an anal boot, a tradition in which the offending player must drink a boot-full of beer that has first been poured between the butt cheeks of several teammates. Or maybe they just really didn't want to sing a song about hammers and twats. Whatever the reason, Hobbit is unapologetic.

These new guys, he says referring to the Penn State players and the FNGs of his own team (fucking new guys). *They're too soft*, he says. *They're not committed to the traditions.*

I don't know if he is right. I watch an FNG survive his first anal boot and I think, he seems pretty committed. In a few weeks' time I will see the young men of Catholic University's team sing *Jesus Saves* with great enthusiasm, a song that is basically just a list of all the reasons why Jesus can't play rugby. A list that includes the fact that his father would fix the game and that his arms are "out like this" (miming crucifixion). Tradition preserved, I will think.

At this same party with Catholic, I will also see a tradition called a Zulu. The party will be held in the back yard of one of the Maryland players. The neighborhood is near campus and the neighbors almost exclusively college students. The yard is bare of grass and soon it will be covered in discarded red plastic cups and cigarette butts. The night will be chilly though most everyone will remain in their uniform of shorts and rugby socks and jerseys. Alcohol and the rush of the game will give warmth enough.

The Maryland players will have won the game and one of them will have scored his first try. His reward, a Zulu: an initiation ritual in which the player must perform whatever task is asked of him. This night, it is to stand nearly naked in freezing weather and knock on a stranger's door. It will be dark but the porch light will shine a yellow spot on him as if he were on stage. We will watch him dance from foot to foot in the cold. Though mostly nude, his skin pink

and puckered from the chill, he will still wear red and white socks pulled to his bloody knees and black cleats. A moth will flutter in the spotlight, swoop to the young man's shoulder, then disappear. He will look back at us but we are hidden by the dark. As he waits, sometimes with his hands at his side sometimes with them cupped between his legs, I will wonder if I would do the same. How far would I go to belong?

A young woman, presumably a student, will answer and she will not be frightened by his dirt-smearred nudity. She will only laugh and give him what he asks for: a cup. The watching crowd, myself included, will cheer. The woman will close her door and the crowd will return to their own yard and the party will continue. The young man will get dressed but the image of his bare, goose-pimpled body will stay with me. I will remember how soft this young man looks off the field and out of uniform. His flesh, pink like raw chicken, and his soft genitals, partially hidden behind his cupped hands, will haunt me. He is just a body, I will think.

In 10 years' time I will recall this feeling, this sense of dread, as I watch my father's body wither with cancer. Irrationally, childishly, I will fear his nude body as much as I fear anything and I will avoid the sight of it at all costs. To see him bare like that, I will think, will be to lift a veil, to reveal more than his flesh and to admit, finally, that he is mortal. I will want to remember him as he was: modest, stout, quick-witted. Not an athlete but robust in spirit where his body was soft. I will successfully avoid the sight of his nudity, even as he is moved from hospital bed to gurney and back again, but I will see him die anyway, his skin jaundiced, his eyes black and staring. I will see him buried in his favorite suit.

For now, though, I am still with Hobbit. He is still on about players being soft, not wanting to play hurt. He plays hurt. He plays with stress fractures in his legs. His friends say he is addicted to Percocet. He is the team's hooker, a human battering ram. *I sorta hook the ball back in the scrum*, he says. *I throw the ball in on the lineouts, weird stuff.* He says he has one and a half tons of pressure on his neck in every scrum. This is what he likes about the sport—the competition, the combination of strength and conditioning, not anyone can do it. The pain, the exhaustion, even the humiliation of the initiation rituals, it unites them. They are inside the scrum, everyone else is out. Despite everything, I understand what Hobbit loves about the game, why he says he wants to go on and play in the major leagues: Australia, New Zealand, England. He won't, and perhaps this will cast a chill to his life, a chill he will warm with alcohol, as he is already warming himself with alcohol. I will see a report for a DUI that I will believe to be Hobbit, but I won't really know. And if it is Hobbit, I won't know if this is a reflection of one night's poor choices or a lifetime's. I will wonder if he feels

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alone and, if he does, I will want to tell him that he isn’t. There will always be FNGs, drinking songs, more than a ton of pressure in the scrum and legions of men splintering their bodies just to say they can.

I am sitting in a college dorm; it is furnished in standard-issue office furniture that is certainly older than the young men who use it. I tuck myself into the corner of an orange sofa and try to avoid the sticky cups of chewed tobacco that line the end table beside me. I am with Hobbit and James and several other teammates.

I am told that rugby is like a fraternity only cooler, like a brotherhood. Everyone has each other’s back at all times. They respect each other because they are out every day killing their bodies. They tell me that, in a fight, someone will always jump in to help—even if they have two broken arms and a broken leg, they will kick with their good leg. They don’t care about appearances. No pretty boys here. They are like a fraternity only tougher. Like football players only braver. No pads, no helmets, no problem. Like all brotherhoods, the hazing and the physical trials are meant to keep the unworthy out, bind the survivors like family—not through shared blood, but spilled blood. This bond is both attractive and repulsive. The players tell me it is hard to recruit new guys. The team may be dying, making their bonds all the more precious. If they must strip themselves bare to prove their loyalty, it is worth it.

They do strip themselves bare, and not just for the hazing rituals like Zulus. They tell me of life in their shared dorms, a life that is “completely on the other side of the mountain” from where they started. A player named John says, *When I came here people were shoving their thumbs up my butt and yelling “thumbs up, boner” and I was like what the hell is wrong with these people?* He says you get used to it and everyone agrees. They say people walk in when you shower, when you take a piss, no one closes the door when they go to the bathroom, and you might think they are all foul motherfuckers when you first move in, but then

you’re taking a dump with the door open two weeks later.

I don’t admit it, but I know just what they mean. I am living with my boyfriend Tom. We have developed this same sort of intimacy, which isn’t intimate at all. It is a disguise: we think because we have broken this taboo that we are moving closer to each other. But, in reality, a shared knowledge of one another’s bodily functions is no more intimate or revealing than reading an anatomy textbook. We show this private, but ultimately meaningless, side of ourselves while guarding ever closer the secret of our feelings.

I am feeling smothered by Tom. He is as nurturing and sensitive as the rugby players are crude. His way of expressing love is to cater to my every need, to invent need where there is none. The final break will happen because of something small—so small that I won’t even realize its importance until much later. Tom wakes and leaves before I do so I have developed a habit: when he leaves the bed, I take the clock from the nightstand and put it on the pillow beside me—it is easier to see this way and helps me to keep my own schedule. One morning, when I reach for the clock, I find that Tom has already placed it on the pillow beside me. A small gesture, an act of kindness, but one that leaves me lying limp and useless—one more thing I can’t do on my own. I never thank him, never mention the clock at all, but every morning it is waiting for me.

I feel helpless, like an infant, unable to even cook my own meals or wash my own clothes. I feel that I am never alone but I am unable to express, or even recognize, this unease. We are, after all, so close that not even the bathroom door stands between us. This intimacy that isn’t will distract from the distance that is growing between us, we won’t even notice the gulf until we have fallen into it.

I don’t know what Hobbit would say, if I told him about Tom. Maybe he would call him a pussy, or maybe I’d be the pussy because I am too weak to act on my unhappiness. I don’t leave. I don’t cheat. I endure. Maybe Hobbit would like that—I can take a hit. Suffering is worshipped here. Someone calls rugby’s violence a cult. When I ask Hobbit how he has changed since starting rugby he says he hasn’t, then he says he is more violent, then he says he is addicted to painkillers, and then he says he hasn’t changed again. It makes sense that Hobbit can’t tell if he has changed. No one recognizes change as it’s happening, it would be like trying to watch your own feet as you run down field. But he is changing. I’m changing. The team is changing too, or so says Hobbit.

I ask him why he thinks that is. *Well, the school is getting more competitive now. So not as many meat heads can get in.* Hobbit thinks he is a meathead. He doesn’t have the best grades. But then again, he tells me, it isn’t always about grades. He tells me of his high IQ. Brian and James tell me of their and their teammates’ high GPAs, their positions in student government, their cunning on

and off the field. Brains versus brawn: two opposing teams on the same field. Rugby players are more than sacks of meat who can take a beating better than most, but to admit that is to admit weakness. Rugby players don't care about anything beyond the team, beyond the pitch (except when they do). They don't feel anything, not humiliation, not shame, not sympathy. They feel only pain and the rush of the game, these are the only feelings they can admit to sharing. This is how they feel close.

Standing on the sidelines watching the team practice, it is just Hobbit and me. He is more subdued than usual. *It doesn't look like a rugby team anymore, he says. There aren't any more ugly guys like me.*

He must be thinking of the game lost to Penn State. He must remember the rush of blood as he broke free and ran down field to score Maryland's only try. He must remember how it felt to be alone like that, both thrilling and hopeless.

I won't see Hobbit again after this. I will hear from James—who will father a son—that Hobbit plays on some rugby club teams and enters a strongman competition, which he will lose, and then I will lose track of both of them forever. I will imagine Hobbit as he's aged. I imagine his shoulders still broad, tough somewhat sloped. His chest, I think, is muscled even as the rest of his torso slips into softness, his belly round and ordinary.

Will his teammates still have his back? Would he still dive into a brawl, his good leg kicking like a donkey? Will he talk of his rugby rituals and initiations with pride like a veteran of war? Or will he speak of them with embarrassment, use them only as a measure of how much he has grown? I will never know.

I will never know exactly what becomes of Tom. Our unhappy relationship will end and for a while we will try to stay friends. But the phone calls will grow more strained and less frequent until they stop altogether. I will get word of the basic statistics of his life, but if I see him again, we will be strangers. I will fall in love again, make a new life with a new man. Though I've learned to keep some doors closed, I will be happy.

My father will die on November 19, 2009. I will see it happen and yet it will never feel real. I will walk into my childhood home and find my uncle, my father's brother, standing at the window, his back to me. He will be wearing a shirt identical to my father's and have the same gray hair and I will gasp with delight. For a split second it is my father, returned.

There is a photo of my father that I look to again and again. In it, I am about 5 years old and my father is holding me, swinging me into the air. We are a matched set: he in a yellow sweater and white slacks, I in yellow pants and white windbreaker, both of us smiling and red cheeked. It is a stormy day at

the beach. Gray skies roil above us like a cold ocean. You can't see it, but we are standing in the ocean. My father is lifting me over the waves as they crash against his legs. We are smiling and laughing as cold water tears at the shore.

Rachel Luria, a Pushcart Prize nominee and two-time winner of the South Carolina Fiction Project, has been a contributor at the Tin House Summer Writer's Workshop, and her fiction has been recognized by *Glimmer Train* as a Top 25 finalist in their Very Short Fiction contest. Her work has appeared in *Saw Palm*, *Phoebe*, *Dash Literary Journal*, *Literary House Review*, *Yemassee*, and elsewhere. She is also a co-editor of the recently published anthology *Neil Gaiman and Philosophy*. In 2006, she earned her M.F.A. in creative writing at the University of South Carolina and is currently an assistant professor of rhetoric and composition at Florida Atlantic University.

Football Elegy to My Father

SL Essay

Stacy E. Holden

“The Lord is first,” wrote Gale Sayers, “my friends are second, and I am third.” Some 40 years after reading the epigraph of Sayers’s memoir, the words still move me. As a girl of eight years old, I had borrowed the book *I Am Third* from my father’s bookshelf. The autobiography tells the tale of Sayers’s triumphs and trials as a running back with the Kansas Jayhawks and then the Chicago Bears, while also detailing his friendship with Brian Piccolo (the basis for the tearjerker “Brian’s Song”). I remember this book distinctly as the first “grown up” book that I ever read. It seems I went directly from sounding out Dr. Seuss to consuming sports memoirs. My father has been gone for 13 years, but I still prize the memory of our shared appreciation for Gale Sayers, for his actions both on the field and off of it.

My father loved football and had it right when he gave this book pride of place on his bookshelf. Sayers embodied the everyday values that my father worked hard to instill in me. With only a high school degree, Dad had worked his way up from the mail room to become a vice president of an insurance company. Like Sayers, he was not about bling and ego and big money. Coming from a working-class background, my father would nod his head in approval at Sayers’s contract negotiations with George Halas, the celebrated founder and owner of the Chicago Bears. In his memoir, Sayers describes how Halas offered him \$24,500 to play during his rookie year, but he held out for an extra \$500 in order to make a neat \$25,000. And this, my father would note, in the very year that Broadway Joe signed his \$400,000 contract with the renegade AFL Jets! It was the experiences of Sayers, scrabbling for that hard-earned additional sum, not the jazzy and much-publicized Namath, that resonated for Dad, for he, too, schemed and toiled to earn a modest sum for his wife and three children.

Indeed, my father must have seen something of himself in Sayers. This highly touted running back reserved his flash for the football field, and so Dad could hold Sayers up as a role model. A taciturn man, my father, like so many of his generation, did not easily express his inner thoughts. But Sayer’s memoir proclaims the principals valued by my Irish-Catholic father: love of family, a nearly antiquated sense of honor, loyalty to friends and hard work. Sayers never gave up, even when succumbing to what might have been a crippling knee injury that could have prevented him from playing football, as in 1968, when he tore the ligaments of his right knee. And as a white girl growing up in a white

neighborhood, I also appreciated—even back then, although my father and I never talked directly of race—that it took admirable courage for the Kansas Comet to break new ground for black athletes in the 1960s.

Alas, this is not a tale of endless weekends talking about Gale Sayers as Dad and I sat on the couch and courted a “football coma.” In truth, our relationship grew troubled as I became a rebellious teenager determined to distance myself from the “Podunk” Connecticut suburb where I was raised. At age 18, I dropped out of college and began to sport a bright blue mohawk. When I finally reconciled with my family and thereafter returned to school, I studied African history. In earning my PhD, I ventured to places that left my father scrambling for a map: Mauritania, Mali, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia. Although the rebelliousness had been tamed, my desire to be different had not, and this was especially apparent when I showed up to Easter mass wearing a flowing Moroccan jellaba. I had set Gale Sayers aside, and football was something that Dad did on his own time, a quaint provincial pastime.

And then, six years ago, I was watching TV with friends, when one suggested a Boise State game to while away the time. I trotted out my objections, noting that I just wasn’t the type to watch football. Overruled, I watched the first play run on that electric blue field and saw it. Before the yellow flag hit the ground, I cried out, “False start by the offensive tackle!”

My friends’ heads snapped in my direction, and they looked at me like I was levitating. “I thought,” one said, “you didn’t know football.” Based on my instinctive reaction to the play, I understood there had been more football bonding between my father and I than I consciously remembered, certainly enough to know a blatant foul when I saw one!

Since then, I have become a regular fan of football, now spending Sunday afternoons in front of the TV with my husband Mark and our dog Wulfie. It was like I came out of a time machine—from 1979 to 2006—one that initially left me wondering who was this linebacker Ray Lewis and his Baltimore Ravens. But it turns out, Dad handed down to me a host of football lore that stands me in good stead. He conveyed to me this God’s honest truth: Notre Dame—correctly pronounced Note-R, not Not-Re—is the best damn college team out there and, yes, Knute Rockne did indeed invent the forward pass! And the Jets, despite their storied past with their charismatic Broadway Joe and their divinely inspired win in Superbowl III, will never be as good as Frank Gifford’s Giants, whom my father used to watch play in Yankee Stadium. (My father may have harbored little love for the Jets, but he did take pride in being one of the many thousands of fans who jammed NBC’s switchboard in 1968, when the film “Heidi” went on the air at 7 p.m., preventing viewers from seeing first-hand the team’s sad fate against the Raiders.)

And so, 13 years after his passing, I recognize that my father legated to me a love of football. I love football because it connects me to what was worthy in my childhood, before the angst and rebellion. I am grateful that my father kept that dog-eared copy of *I Am Third* in his library back then, for he provided me with a childhood role model whom I still hold in esteem. And I can recognize now that our father-daughter talks about football were in fact conversations about principles. I only wish that my football rebirth had come sooner, before my father passed, for I would have enjoyed sharing some present-day insights into football, finally understanding full well that we would actually be delving into so much more than the actual game.

Stacy E. Holden is an associate professor of history at Purdue University, where her research and teaching focus on the Arab world. Her publications have heretofore focused on urban labor in Morocco, the socio-economic history of modern Iraq, and the political import of American representations of the Middle East and North Africa in post-9/11 romance novels. When she is not delving into the politics and society of the Arab world, however, she is channel surfing between ESPN and the NFL Network, hoping to find either an actual football game or, in the off-season, a documentary about a football player. (Cris Carter talking on any aspect of the game is also a welcome diversion.) Holden would like to thank Randy Roberts and Carolina Steup for their helpful encouragement in this endeavor as well as Robert Kugler, who let her know the essay resonated with a sport-savvy audience.

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Negative Splits

SL Essay

Dave Essinger

negative split, v.: in a race, to run the second half faster than the first, or to increase in speed over consecutive laps or segments.

I watch my children scramble frantically past each other on the sidewalk. They both want to *lead*, never mind where we're going. Earlier, to speed us out the door, I speculated out loud on who would get their shoes on *first*.

Some nights, my daughter will devour her pie or parfait or chocolate chip cookie as rapidly as humanly possible, so quickly she couldn't possibly be tasting or enjoying it. Then, plate empty and mouth full, she'll survey the rest of us and proclaim herself the winner at dessert. She doesn't care that we have dessert left, and hers is gone. Her look is gleeful, triumphant, and my heart breaks a little bit: who did this to her?

Of course, no one did. Or, we all did. Society, nature, human nature: the whole world is competitive. In the evolutionary sense, discontent and ambition get rewarded, and the allure of acceleration takes hold in each of us early on. It's not even a singular victory that drives us, so much as the desire to *be winning*, as a state of being. Accomplishments are transitory. All we really want is to be forever peaking—always at our zenith, or at least on the upswing.

The Beer Bottle Open 4-miler is an annual event I try not to miss. The weather can be fickle in early March, but I've lined up for the Beer Bottle in heat, gale force winds, pouring rain, and a Level 2 Snow Emergency.

It's one of the biggest road races in northwest Ohio, and for more than 30 years, hundreds of recreational runners as well as the area's best top speed "talent" have converged on tiny Columbus Grove; the mass start packs High Street a hundred yards deep. The last time I ran there, on a pleasant spring day, I made my way casually toward the front with two friends in my age group, Ken and CJ.

The starter wasn't out in the street yet. We had at least a minute. In the first rows, kids from the local track and cross country squads jostled for position. CJ cracked his neck, and shook out one knee, then the other. Ken squinted at his watch, and I knelt to untie one shoe and retie it exactly the same way. "Gonna be some traffic," CJ murmured, indicating the crowd around us. Before the first quarter mile, the course takes a sharp turn to the left. "It'll clear out," Ken said. "I can be patient."

When the starter pistol fired, all the kids in front of us bolted. The herd briefly thinned, then packed up again at the turn, as the leaders' surges began already to fade. We emerged on the county road, with 50 or more runners ahead of us. "They'll come back," CJ commented. "Always do," Ken said. He was breathing hard but relaxed. And very quickly, those who had shot off the starting line began to slow.

"Have a good race, guys," I said, as we all spread out.

"You, too."

We've run a few of these. I'm not sure I've ever been passed after the first mile at Beer Bottle. That year, Ken and CJ finished easily in the top 15, and I was maybe a minute behind. At the end of the finish chute, we walked in small circles, getting our breath back.

"Love that tailwind," CJ said. "On the last mile."

"That'll always help," Ken said. "You like that finish, Dave? You run good splits?"

I nodded, still gasping. I'd run the first mile controlled, picked up through the middle two, and took some 20 seconds off my pace in the last mile.

"Negative all the way in," I said.

"That's what we're looking for," Ken said. "That's how it's done."

You can hear this conversation after any local 5K. Splits are a way of picking out the miles or segments that were weaker than others, and dissecting one's performance numerically. In an ideal race, each mile will be run slightly more quickly, "negative splitting" in gradual but cumulative, and constant, acceleration. The psychological appeal is obvious. To negative split is to improve under duress, and signifies a wise distribution of effort. Conversely, "crashing," or failing to hold a pace, suggests foolish inexperience, like the exuberant kids who started Beer Bottle too fast.

For distance runners, negative splitting is generally desirable. For everyone else, outside of the context of a literal race, acceleration is such a universally assumed goal that we don't even have a term for it.

Moore's Law observes that computing power roughly doubles every two years. While some see this plateauing as transistor size approaches that of just a few atoms, others predict further increase involving optical or quantum computing.

Over the last half century, human nature and competitive industry have made of Moore's Law a self-fulfilling, or at least self-perpetuating, prophecy. The benchmark has been established. The question is only who will meet it first.

In a professional career, pacing can function counter-intuitively: an outstanding performance in a first year, first quarter, or first assignment reflects negatively if not subsequently topped. In academe, where tenure and promotion decisions depend on records of continuous improvement, many young faculty members are counseled to pace themselves, to avoid too many commitments early on. It looks better if you leave room to improve, and modestly but regularly do so.

In any long-term proposition, it is unwise to squander resources too early. While a burst of speed anywhere on the marathon course may make sense tactically, the cameras only flash at the finish. Everyone remembers the runner who sprints the last 100 meters to the dramatic win, perhaps to collapse across the finish line and drop dead after muttering only “Nike,” or “Victory.”

Physiologically, the science on negative-splitting as the truly optimum race plan is uncertain. Jeff Galloway, a former Olympian himself and now a trainer for “average people,” advocates a run-walk method that anyone can use to finish a marathon. Negative splitting is good advice for the novice runner, whose enthusiasm may otherwise propel him to an overzealous start that degrades to a death-march by race’s end. It’s sound and conservative to start slow.

This thinking also posits a kind of biological inertia: in a long race, speeding up gradually should maximize metabolic efficiency, allow muscles and joints to warm up and stretch out, and optimize breathing, pulse, and other systems. This also minimizes accumulating damage due to microscopic tears in muscle fibers, electrolytic depletion, and general exhaustion. These are good and sustainable tactics for ensuring a respectable time.

However, Pete Pfitzinger and Jack Daniels, two of the foremost names in the science of running, interpret the raw science otherwise. In theory, just about anyone’s *perfect* race will be run at or just below Lactate Threshold pace, which is the point when the waste product lactate accumulates in the muscles faster than it can be removed. Your Lactate Threshold, or LT, predominantly dictates how fast you can run for a prolonged length of time. Once this threshold is surpassed, you will begin to slow down. Ideally, according to Pfitzinger and Daniels, it is possible to run so slightly above LT pace that you approach critical lactate levels just before the finish, getting the absolute most out of your body’s resources. So, by this interpretation, whenever you negative split in a marathon or comparable distance, *you could have run the first half faster.*

Results, as the expression goes, may vary.

Wilson Kipsang, until recently the world’s fastest marathoner, ran a remarkably even pace while setting his record. His slowest part of the race came in

the third quarter, followed by a strong surge at the end. It was a narrow positive split. Paula Radcliffe, though, the current women’s record holder, has negative-split a number of her strongest races. Her record set in London in 2003 has stood for over 10 years, during which time the men’s record has changed hands five times. In that race, she ran her second half nearly 40 seconds faster than her first. Several elites have negative-split in their best races. Deena Kastor, the first American to win an Olympic marathon in 20 years in 2004 in Athens, started slowly, at one point ranking 26th in the pack, and accelerated to pass other runners who broke in the heat.

Last month in Berlin, Dennis Kimetto took 26 seconds off of Kipsang’s record. He was behind record pace at halfway, but ran a 33 second negative split in the second half of the race. Often when such records are set, the winner is running alone, far ahead of the rest of the pack, racing against the clock instead of any other contending runners. In Berlin, though, Kimetto was pushed hard by Emmanuel Mutai, who finished only 16 seconds behind him.

In some cases, psychology and strategy may overrule the measurable science.

So a progressive and not-too-terribly-aggressive training plan might exhaust your body’s daily energy budget once or twice per week, on the principle that this will result in increased maximal budgets from which to draw on future days. Anyone who’s ever worked on a committee budget in the academic or business world might recognize how this works: what happens to an unspent budget? The money disappears, is sucked back into some nebulous general fund, repurposed toward goals that are not specifically yours. Or, worse: “If we don’t spend our whole budget, we’ll be allotted less money next year.”

Physiologically, when you go a long time without exhausting all available resources, some biological administrator decides you don’t need so much, or can get by with less, and allots the energy elsewhere. For an institutional organism, a tribal greed mentality on the committee level is inefficient, but for a physical organism, regularly maxing out the budgets makes good long-term sense. Unlike your antiquated cellular plan, your body doesn’t give you unending rollover minutes.

Earlier this year, my wife and I watched Meb Keflezighi win the Boston Marathon—the first American to do well there in quite some time. Ryan Hall and Shalane Flanagan led the pack with strong paces for a while, but soon fell off; coming out of the hills, Meb held a lead of almost a minute. The announcers commented on his decreased mileage in training, a concession to his “nearly 39-year-old body.” Near the end, a Kenyan, 10 years younger, began closing

fast, and Meb's lead dropped to 12 seconds, then 10, then eight. The camera kept switching from close-ups with nothing but an empty expanse of street behind him, to deeper-focus shots that made it seem like the Kenyan in orange was suddenly two feet off his shoulder. "My God, will they stop *doing* that with the camera!?" I burst. Like a dog dreaming of rabbits, my own legs were twitching as we watched the final mile. Meb kept looking frantically over his shoulder, and we were mentally reaching with him on every stride; as if it could possibly help, I wanted to run the last quarter mile *for* him.

Honestly, I'd love to watch any American do well at Boston. But Meb's *almost 39*.

Sprinters peak early in life, as do athletes in all sports favoring quick reflexes and explosive fast-twitch muscle fiber exertion. You don't see 50-year old guys dominating the 100 meter dash or leading their teams to the Super Bowl or pulling down rebounds in the NBA; if they're over 40, it puts them on a short list of trivia anomalies. According to conventional sports-announcer wisdom, Meb's pushing it.

On the ultramarathon scene, though, in races of 50 kilometers or 50 miles or 100 miles, half of the leaders may well be "Masters," or 40 and over. Sometimes the "Grand Masters" are right up there. When it comes to endurance, you can keep improving for decades. Your lactate threshold is not some immutable thing you are born with, or that inevitably declines after age 25. Targeted training will change it. Runs of 20-50 minutes at just a little beyond your current LT pace provide your body with strong incentive.

By working for short periods of time beyond what we can sustain for longer, we all find that it is possible to increase our optimal pace, our maximum sustained effort. Most of us don't think of this as training, but as growing up.

The undergraduate program my wife and I attended centered on an interdisciplinary, writing-intensive curriculum. The workload escalated yearly, culminating with a senior project rivaling some graduate-level theses.

In an editorial cartoon from one of the student newsletters, a freshman complains in the first panel about the 3-5 page papers he has to write *every week*; he wishes he were back in high school. In the next panel, a sophomore bemoans the multiple 10-page papers she has to crank out in a semester, and wishes she could go back to just jotting off a few pages a week. Then we see a junior complaining about his semester-long project, and all of the pressure that puts on a single piece of writing; a few 10-page papers would be easier, and *so* much more humane. Next, a student laments the unbearable strain of her year-long senior project: "You have no idea. It's so much harder than the semester project." And

in the last panel, a recent graduate says, "Wow. The real world is *hard*. Couldn't I just start a different 100-page project every year?"

The takeaway is this: everything gets more difficult. The next thing will always be harder than what you're doing now.

If you were doing the math earlier, you may have noted that Emmanuel Mutai, in finishing second behind Kimetto in Berlin, also broke Kipsang's old record. On any day prior, that performance would have given Mutai the record, and made him, for at least a while, the fastest marathoner in history. Just, not *that* day.

Runner's World, in a list of "fun facts," notes that this was the second time Mutai broke a previously standing course record, finishing second behind Kimetto. Since 2009, it was the seventh race in the World Marathon Majors he finished second to Kimetto.

The "best," by definition, never gets easier. Records never get slower. A performance that may have been the best in human history yesterday, may count for little tomorrow. It may not even be good enough today. These are "fun facts" we don't have to look up. We know them innately.

So much is out of our control, that it may seem our bodies and minds are all we have left. In the same way that meditation seeks to discipline the mind, training your body delivers measurable results. Physical conditioning may offer the most guaranteed tangible return we can know in this world.

And yet, still, so many of our athletic compliments tell blatant untruths. "You're an animal!" Such ecstatic renouncement of humanity. "You're a machine!" Our highest compliments defy even mortality.

If you are getting faster, lifting more, going farther, you are in control. This is security. It's also denial.

Sometimes, life makes it difficult to turn in a faster second half. Sometimes, the first half of a course glides gently downhill, while the right end of the elevation chart wrinkles into nasty hills; sometimes, a pleasant training run can get ugly, if you turn around to find your mild tailwind morphed into 10 miles of mean horizontal sleet. In the longest races, you might rein back your running pace and conserve energy all day, and after midnight, be lucky to maintain a walk.

Eventually, no matter what, your fastest days will be behind you. Maybe you get the idea to try running not faster, but farther. To take it off road, for distances from 50k all the way up to stupid. Maybe you'll buy trail shoes, and a hydra-

tion backpack with a tube and bite-valve, and a headlamp for when it gets dark. Maybe you'll upgrade to a satellite GPS watch with longer battery life, or maybe you'll quit caring about pace and wear the lightest watch you can find, that just tells time. Maybe you'll practice walking fast.

It's the opposite of any other kind of training. On the cellular level, the goal becomes teaching your muscles to do more with less—maintaining minimal function through increasingly toxic conditions, persevering for longer before failure.

Is patience a kind of negative-splitting?

First, in life, we work to do *more*. Then, to do more with less. Finally, it becomes about doing anything at all, with less—and then with even less than that.

Eventually this too will fail.

Though we have no leverage, nothing with which to bargain at all, nothing stops our desperate negotiations with time. And this becomes another kind of negative-splitting, a growth of diminishing, accepting less, and less. And then still less.

It takes two weeks, supposedly, to form a habit. It takes seven moves to replace all of your household possessions. Three days pass before you begin to like a new haircut. Our outer layers of skin regenerate every seven days. You fall out of shape in half the time you spent getting into it.

How long does it take to forge an identity, and once that has become psychically ingrained, how long to reconceive a different sense of self?

While I rehab a long-term injury over several months, I have become a runner who does not run. Every day, I wonder what I'm losing, but this is short-sighted: I'm losing the same thing all of us are, every day, which is: exactly one day.

Everything built comes undone.

The Four Bodhisattva Vows of Zen Buddhism state: "Beings are numberless; I vow to free them. Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them. Dharma Gates are boundless; I vow to enter them. The Awakened Way is unsurpassable; I vow to become it."

In other words, you will never, ever, in a lasting or final way, "win." There is not even such a thing as a finish line. So, you could give up, or you could pretend, or, finally, you could make the choice to persevere toward something worthwhile, and never mind it's unattainable.

Committing to more than can be achieved, by yourself or anyone, can be freeing, is the idea. It's embracing the effort as much as the failure: one is inevitable, but both are beautiful.

Sometimes we hurry, and other times we are hurried. The only difference is who is holding our feet to the fire. Maybe, when the decision is our own, we can feel at least a little in control, like we are not entirely just along for the ride in this world that dictates how much we do, when, and how quickly.

Self-proclaimed super-masochist Bob Flanagan, a lifelong sufferer from cystic fibrosis, made the argument that choosing his own pain gave him control, made him not helpless against the inevitable effect of his disease. Flanagan may be best known for his starring role in the video to the Nine Inch Nails song "Happiness in Slavery," which is both pretty unspeakable and arguably among his lighter-themed works.

The Hagakure, aka The Way of the Samurai, advises, "Throughout your life, advance daily, becoming more skillful than yesterday, more skillful than today. This is never-ending." Also: "No matter if the enemy has thousands of men, there is fulfillment in simply standing them off and being determined to cut them all down, starting from one end. You will finish the greater part of it."

Anyway. As Hank Williams reminds us, no matter how we struggle and strive, we'll "never get out of this world alive."

I'm not a patient person, nor a secure one; if I am able to do something one day, part of me always wants to test whether I still can the next. When it comes to injury rehab, I'm like a little kid peeking under a Band-Aid. Is it better yet? Nope. How about now? No. Now?

Part of what I like about long races is proving I can do them. I can't relate to people who run one marathon, to check it off their lifelong scavenger hunt of experiences, and then never jog another step again. Sure, you did that once. Could you, tomorrow? Next week? Next year?

Who would remember Sisyphus if not for his boulder? What if he knew he needed that rock more than it needed him? Goal. Punishment. Semantics, really.

As long as you are testing yourself and passing, there is order, there is progress. Whatever does not kill you makes you stronger—right up until the thing that does kill you. As hard as we work to demonstrate improvement and increased order and ability on a finite timescale, all things trend toward entropy. If suffering springs from desire, and our desire is to beat back entropy, we're fighting a foregone battle.

That can still leave a lot of time to kill, though. What to do with that? Keep getting faster, if you want to. Or, going farther. Either goal is as good as any other.

There's denial. And, there's collaborating in our own dissolution. And between these, perhaps, lies a kind of accepting participation.

Last year, shortly before dawn on the Sunday of the summer solstice, I was 25 hours into a race over challenging terrain in unseasonably chilly weather. Stumbling along a creek in the dark, I had reached the end of what caffeine could teach me, and then as the sky lightened, I crested a hellish ascent to a ridge. When I reached the top, the heavens opened, and the sky dumped a violent rain. Almost instantly the well-drained trails were a half inch deep with water. I'd been rationing my energy reserves, but now it was cold and raining hard and I ran. Rain clattered against leaves and slashed at the ground in sheets, and my every step was a new explosion of mud. My waterlogged shoes doubled in weight, my shirt quickly soaked through, and my shorts pasted themselves to my legs. Freed of pacing and decisions, I tore ass through that forest. It was primal. It was ridiculous. It was as pointless as anything else, and when the rain finally slackened, I was still wet and still tired and still alone in the forest. I wasn't winning at anything, or benchmarking a performance or demonstrating strategic progress or training for the next challenge or proving anything repeatable, or taking the slightest notice of my distance or pace or time, much less tracking splits. By any measure of data or quantifiable effect, it might as well not have happened. I could have just as easily kept walking, or sat down in the middle of the muddy trail. Nothing important would have changed. What happened, was this: in a time and place in which it could not have mattered less, I ran. That's all.

Dave Essinger's most recent fiction and essays appear in *ellipsis...literature and art*, *Pilgrimage*, and elsewhere, and in last year's *Sport Literate*. He received his MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and is an associate professor at The University of Findlay, in Ohio, where he teaches creative writing, serves as the Richard E. Wilkin Chair in the College of Liberal Arts, and edits the literary magazine *Slippery Elm*. He has recently completed a novel about ultrarunning, which was shortlisted for the Caledonia Novel Award.

Sport Literate originals

Admittedly, we don't know much about these Vassar women playing basketball just prior to World War I. But if *Sport Literate* were around, don't you think they would have passed it around the dorms like the Spanish flu? You bet your unvaccinated ass they would.



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Glamour and Romance

SL Essay

Frank Soos

O Youth, the glamour of it, the romance.

Joseph Conrad

In the gym was where I found the romance of those epic poems *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and Pocahontas High basketball, its nearest visible manifestation, could come together. As a boy with a hyperactive imagination, I was all too willing to lift a basketball game up and away from the day-to-day life that surrounded me.

Still, I wondered how it was possible that a boy could put on a basketball uniform, step onto a floor and be magically transformed, not only in the mind of spectators, but in his own mind as well. When Van Gentry stood on the free-throw line in that last home game against Big Creek in 1962, did he feel the weight of our expectations? Did he take up that weight joyfully knowing he was golden at that moment? When he made those shots, had he launched himself forever to a place above our ordinary lives?

A basketball uniform, especially the uniform worn in the '50s and '60s was a skimpy thing. The satin shorts, the sleeveless jersey with ample arm openings called attention to, exaggerated even, whatever shape the body inside it took. A lanky bag of bones looked even more so in such a uniform.

Yet the boys I admired did manage to put on their uniforms and achieve the miracle of transcendence before my very eyes. It helped that their uniforms fit better than mine, that, unlike some of the teams they played against, everybody's matched and was in good condition. The boys on the varsity made their uniforms their own. They sweated through their jerseys, pulled their shirttails out and wiped their faces on them, reached down to their ankles and dried their sweaty hands by pulling them up along the long socks until their uniforms became extensions of their very skins.

Mostly, though, those boys managed to transcend themselves in the most literal way. They forgot. They forgot they were skinny and frail. The ball became the center of their universe and chasing it up and down the court, claiming possession of it, following its flight to the goal, became the only thing that mattered to them. And at such moments of high concentration, they ran as if there were no wall at the end of the court to stop them, they jumped as if they might fly up and above the rim, even the backboard. They threw passes that sailed the length of the court or bounced slyly between two defenders. They shot arcing jump shots from

distances well beyond the free-throw circle, their arms extended long after the ball had flown free—a kind of supplication for a perfect trajectory to the goal.

Or at least that's how I remember it. Through my memory, I have transformed what's left of an actual history into myth. Within that myth are the qualities of glamour and romance. Glamour, it turns out, is a Scots word meaning magic, enchantment, meaning the ability to deceive the sight. And romance might be thought of as an exaggeration, an invention, though to me it is a story, a story raised far above the ordinary. In my boyhood, I'm not sure I could help myself from reconfiguring the world in this magical extraordinary way. In my adulthood, I have to wonder how well it served me then, and whether it might serve me now in a world where glamour and romance have grown in short supply.

Some years ago, the disgruntled football player Dwayne Thomas called his coach Tom Landry "Plastic Man." As it happened I knew a guy who got a tryout with the Dallas Cowboys right about that time. He didn't make the cut, but came back to school reporting that Tom Landry was a fine fellow with a good sense of humor. I don't doubt it.

On Sunday afternoons, I used to imagine John Unitas drawing his pass patterns in the dirt as the Baltimore Colts staged another last-minute comeback try. If the Colts only could get the ball at endgame, anything seemed possible. I wonder if Dwayne Thomas wasn't subject to some of those same imaginings himself. After the first Super Bowl, the story went around that Green Bay Packer end Max McGee had pitched a drunk the night before the game only to pull his hung over self together by the next afternoon and play a remarkable game. Just so. Hadn't Knute Rockne dragged George Gipp out of a South Bend poolroom before big games? As Joseph Conrad would say, the glamour of it, the romance of it! Youth overcoming great obstacles even when youth itself set the obstacles in the way.

Conrad put glamour in his character Marlow's mouth as he tells a tale of his own youth as the second mate of a sailing ship that in mid-journey burns to the waterline and sinks. In this instance, Conrad's lived experiences and Marlow's fictional ones were very nearly the same. In giving him his own story to tell, Conrad made Marlow the kind of man who could both relish his youth and gently mock it.

Two versions of Marlow inhabit "Youth." One is the older man telling the tale. He sees the Judea as she truly is, a leaky, broken down tub that's seen better days. He sees the captain as befuddled and slightly inept though well-meaning. And he sees the series of near-disasters that befell the ship as, at best, a running bad joke against all aboard.

But the younger Marlow living the tale looks on the Judea and sees her glorious motto: Do or Die. He sees the misadventures as trials to be met and mastered.



Sailing into Bangkok harbor in a 14 foot boat with a sail made from a coat is the culmination of a grand adventure.

The world of Conrad's "Youth" is narrowed to that ship, the *Judea*. Would it not be so different from a basketball court? As the aperture of experience is narrowed to a world of elemental actions, actions with clear meanings and

expectations, qualities might emerge seemingly closer to the truth of who we are. I think I believe this. A closely guarded player makes the clutch shot or he doesn't; a team beats a press without panicking or it doesn't. A team wins a close game or it doesn't.

I think Conrad might agree that the same Marlow regarding his boyish self in "Youth" has somehow, by making a success of his first command even if it is only a long boat, made the first steps to ready himself for the sight years later of Kurtz's collection of human heads impaled on stakes. Once again, Conrad's fiction is not so far from the facts of his own trip up the Congo River. But even "Heart of Darkness" is a distillation. So too would be the *Iliad*, where war isn't glorified but magnified through Homer's narrow lens.

In "Youth," the younger Marlow would make his story a romance if he could—a story outside the bounds of ordinary life—if his older self did not keep pulling him back with the all too ordinary details of this tale—the ship laid up and in need of caulking, the presence of the grumpy first mate and the captain's motherly wife. And a reader finds himself pushed and pulled between the two. For all his mockery, the older Marlow allows his younger self a transcendent moment as he and his exhausted crew awake and look up on the dock into the faces of the men of the East, each a mystery to the other.

On the all-sports channels at the end of a day (though with 24 hour coverage, does a day ever end?), a person might see a cobbled together highlight film of every spectacular play from a whole day's worth of basketball. Dunk after dunk, block after block, buzzer beater after buzzer beater. Who can care when acts once thought to be exceptional become commonplace?

Unlike my brother, the avid reader of *Velonews*, the subscriber to the expanded cable TV package so he can watch every stage of le Tour de France, I tend to watch cycle racing as warily as any other contemporary sport, watch out of the skeptical corner of my eye. Still, Floyd Landis's ride on the last mountain stage of the 2006 race inspired and lifted me up. For a moment I was taken in by everything I wish sport might be: His breakaway. A lone eagle soaring above all others, finding strength within himself to make an incredible comeback on that most difficult terrain. Courage and determination. An athlete asking much of himself and finding the strength within to triumph.

As Roland Barthes, that surprising fan of le Tour put it, sport at its best is "the euphoria of men raised for a while above the constitutive ambiguity of everyday situations." Here was the very kind of moment Barthes and I were hoping for. It couldn't last, could it, dragged down as it was by smarmy allegations and denials of doping that have become expected in modern sport? Will people ever again line the route as the Italian fans had done for their hero Fausto Coppi and sweep the road with their coats to protect some future rider from punctures?

Whether Pocahontas lost to Haysi or beat Big Creek, we all, parents and kids alike, stumbled from the gym at game's end wrung out from catharsis.

In the bleachers, I had sat transfixed by the glamour, the romance of the game before me. That these players were on a stage, that they were the center of a drama that consumed not only them but the people of our town who crowded into the bleachers seemed lost on them. Their only moments of self-awareness were those when they were whistled for a foul. In those days a player was required to acknowledge he had committed a foul. So with a look of stricken amazement, a player would often hold one hand to his chest, to his number, and raise his other—a victim of an unfair call by the referee appealing to the larger audience for a better verdict.

Aren't glamour and romance qualities of life suspended in the ever-present, of an expectation that the now will always be now? These games from my boyhood remain as present for me as they were on the day they were played. Their outcomes cannot change; their heroic feats and tragic blunders remain. I wonder, then, how it feels to be Jerry West or Bill Russell, how it feels to have so many recorded images of yourself in the not-now. What's it like to watch yourself on film doing things you know you can never do again? Can the glamour that my heroes seemed to possess, that held me as a boy, for a high school basketball season of twenty games or so, persist? Should it?

Here's a picture of a boy, maybe every boy who ever imagined a moment of transcendence on a basketball floor. Maybe he is Pocahontas guard Eddie Goss

shooting jump shots at the lonely goal set up in the bottom land below his parents' house: "Time is running out ... five ... four ... three ... Goss with the ball at the head of the key ... he shoots.... Will it drop? No! It's short. But wait! Goss gets his own rebound... the short jumper is up! It's good! The crowd goes wild." With every practiced shot, he anticipates the grander moment in the making.

In meeting the players of the great Pocahontas teams of I have been struck by their tranquility in repose. Among the stars from those teams, most all have made a satisfactory life on their own terms. How much of this is a result of playing a simple game? How much of it is a result of being a part of a team who made the steals, made the shots when the game was on the line?

Unlike the great team of 1962-63, which could rout opponents if it was in the right mood or lose to a weaker team if it wasn't, the more successful team of 1965 won efficiently, consistently night after night. In my senior season we mostly lost, rarely blown out, most often losing by a few points. You might say we found a way to lose consistently, to fold up reliably at some critical moment in the game.

Just how much do moments of transcendence depend on having an audience? When Sam Caldwell made his three-quarter court shot to beat Honaker in the final second, he was golden among his teammates and classmates. The next day, Coach Tommy Lucas taped a bill on the floor on the spot Sam had shot from. If he could replicate his shot, Sam could have the money. Was it a five? A twenty? Over the years, the denomination must grow in my memory to hedge glamour against inflation. Regardless, Sam couldn't come close in the three tries allotted him. His feat of the night before became all the more remarkable in our eyes. When it counted, when the team, the school, the town was counting on him, Sam made his shot go in.

My coach friend Ernie Pope used to call remarkable play "going unconscious," when a player's shots find the goal, his passes find the open man when a player's every action is a right action. The crowd and his teammates sense his heightened powers and turn to him. And his opponents sense it, too, but can't seem to do much about it.

Going unconscious, playing within yourself, is an aesthetic as much as an athletic gesture. The Champion's Light, mythmakers call it, something that's been recognized since ancient times. It's what Homer says of Achilles when he returns to battle so the Achaeans might salvage the body of Patroclus. Athena interceding "bound his head with golden cloud, and made/his very body blaze with fiery light." (Iliad, book 18, line 442) Seeing him illuminated so, the Trojan warriors quit the field of battle.

In the dressing room afterward, the uniform that meant so much minutes before is dropped on the floor for the manager to pick up. A player who's played hard will hit the shower and wash the game away. One who's not played at all will slip on his street clothes and silently go.

Out in the gym, the bleachers have been pushed back; the janitors are running their wide dust mops, pushing the stray popcorn boxes and empty soda cups along. This is aftermath. The air is still overheated, but the crowd is gone. Some parents, a girlfriend or two are waiting. But when a player returns to the gym now, he must return as his most ordinary self regardless of how he has preformed that night.

Transcendence is a fleeting, fragile thing.

Such transcendent moments never happened for me. Then I was such a bag of bones that I wonder now what it would have taken to overcome the mere physical fact of my boyhood body and become a hero on a basketball court? I would first of all have to overcome myself. My first basketball uniform was a baggy orange jersey adorned with the number nine and nothing else, no team name, nothing. And the nine was huge, big enough to go on a football jersey. The arm holes came nearly to where the shirt tucked into my black shorts, shorts of a uniform rather than plain old gym shorts by virtue of a piece of orange trim. The leg openings were ample so a boy sitting on the bench might be offering a view of his jock strap and who knew what all else. We had no warm-up outfits, and to step from the locker room into the gym was closer to the walk from the dressing room at Falls Mills Dam before jumping into that cold lake. I spent most all of my ninth grade year sitting on a bench in our empty gym or an equally empty gym at another school conscious of every bone in my body uselessly on display.

Often I experienced the very opposite of transcendence. In a JV game against Whitewood, the score tied with seconds remaining, I had played fairly well so far. Approaching the man I was guarding on their inbounds play, I stamped my feet, a little war dance to let him know I was ready for whatever might come. When he only laughed, it set me back; wasn't I a silly goose? Next thing I knew he had slipped around me for the ball and an easy basket.

Playing well, then, turned out to be harder than it looked. The romance of spectating is found in that distance between the stands and the floor. The glamour of playing, brought out by accomplishment, is rarely available for losers.

Over my workbench is a poster, a scene from the 1924 Tour de France. Ottavio Bottecchia and a second are pictured in a tight switchback climbing the Galiber. The road is hard packed dirt. A snowfield is in the foreground and in the back, cold mountains against a hard sky. There has been no parade of sponsors' cars filled with pretty girls tossing souvenirs to the crowd. There is no crowd. There are no

following team cars carrying coaches, mechanics and spare parts. The riders carry spare tires looped in a figure eight through their arms and across their backs. A few spectators line the route bundled in overcoats. A few bicycles lie beside the road. These spectators have come more to witness than to cheer.

I wonder, whether he knew it or not, if this picture is close to what Dwayne Thomas, what all of us true believers in the romance and glamour of sport, had in mind? Nothing in this picture speaks to scientific training practices featuring computer generated workout schedules, strategic and tactical decisions dictated by a coaching staff. Here are athletes true only to themselves, present only in their moment.

Yet often times audience matters. It's not that transcendence requires an audience, but that the events surrounding it matter. The remarkable feats a player might perform in practice, in a pick-up game on a Sunday morning cannot count in the same way when there are no witnesses. So I believe. Playing well in practice doesn't count. And good play counts in a game because the honor of the team, the school, the town are at stake. To win is to be recognized, recognized as somebody doing something.

I have had my own minor Galiber moments. Once on a spring break cycle tour, I climbed to the summit of Mount Ola in the Ouacitas on an unseasonably hot day; another time I climbed Brushy Mountain in near my Appalachian home—two steep climbs on loaded bikes along roads twisted with switchbacks. At the top, unnoticed and alone, I rested long enough to take a swig from my water bottle and began my descent. If there is romance to be sought at all in such episodes, it may only be found through the telling.

It's the great gift of literature that it can make transcendence happen. Achilles has achieved his lasting fame thanks only to Homer who has preserved his actions into a more permanent form. As for Marlow, his story is more accurately a chronicle of failure. Conrad has allowed him to recast the story of a ship lost at sea, a cargo gone undelivered into an adventure. Achilles and Marlow have had their transcendent moments through language transferred to us readers, their witnesses. Bottecchia lives on by the grace of a grainy black and white photograph.

I have saved a clipping from the Tazewell County *Free Press* my mother sent me in the year before her death. Mark Little, a player from Pocahontas had bested the school's career scoring record, a record held just then, in fact, by a girl, Carrie Dawson. I saw from his picture that he was a wiry boy, smallish, very like the Pocahontas ball players I have known. Later on a visit home, my mom had pointed him out to me, just a kid stuck in a hall waiting, waiting for something or some-

body. I looked for the Champion's Light around him, but could not see it. I guess I would have had to be there in that overheated gym.

At what age can a person look back on the passion of his youth with good humor and irony? And under what circumstances?

I think of Big Eye Jennings in his Milwaukee apartment carefully unfolding for me to see his clipping from the 1961 Tazewell County Tournament. I wonder if it is an emblem of a boyhood left incomplete when he ran off to join the navy, a boyhood he can't get back, a boyhood that had its moments of glamour and romance but such moments were never enough.

My mother believed the purpose of sport was to teach character. If it is so, a person may learn it best when he loses, when he fails. I wonder if my own failures on the basketball court have something to do with my mulish persistence in playing at sport as long as I'm able to stand. Still, I often go out expecting to fail. It's a psychology made from an odd combination of determination and self-doubt and has served me best in lonely sports—long-distance running, cycling, cross-country skiing, sculling. And it has served me best when I am truly alone, when there's nobody to answer to but me, when given my age and limited skills, the only available triumph is in finishing.

If there is a revelation in "Youth," it's found when the elder Marlow suddenly lets go of his ironic tone, "Ah! The good old time —t he good old time. Youth and the sea. Glamour and the sea! The good, strong sea, the salt bitter sea, that could whisper to you and roar at you and knock the breath out of you."

Yes, when the strong sea knocks you down, there is no time for irony. Glamour is felt more than known, romance recognized only afterwards. Such trials are good things, though, to have lived, to have experienced.

It's unlikely that on our deaths, athletic contests will be held in our honor, great funeral pyres, fed by sacrificed animals and enemies, will cremate our corpses. Most likely we will die quietly in our beds, whatever transcendent moments we experienced forgotten by all save ourselves.

In truth, I'm not sure transcendence is available in the visible world. We make it happen in our heads and hearts, we feel it, we come to know it and cherish it. It is ours to remember and never allow to die.

Frank Soos lives in Fairbanks, Alaska, where he writes short stories and essays. His two collections of stories are *Early Yet* and *Unified Field Theory* and his essay collection is *Bamboo Fly Rod Suite* (containing two essays first published in *Sport Literate*). Most recently he published *Double Moon: Constructions and Conversations with his wife Margo Klass*. He was recently named Alaska State Writer Laureate.

Bus Driver

SL Poetry

Thomas Reynolds

Marge again,
Her window open,
Hair swirling
In late autumn breeze
Like a headful
Of angry snakes.

Marge, who doesn't joke much,
Whom the team first tried
To rib, then mostly let be.

Marge with bow legs
And a daughter somewhere
In Indiana with a pock-marked
Husband who cheats on her.

Road unrolls before her
Like gray, cracked linoleum.
Beyond the barbed fence
Are square miles of indoor,
Outdoor carpet.

When they arrive and the team,
Hustles inside steel doors,
She naps against the window,
Reads a romance novel chapter,
Watches that black cloud nearing,
And thinks about her father.

By the third quarter she sits
On the front row munching
Popcorn, sipping diet Coke.
Seven minutes to go she's
Warming up the bus.

"Ah, youth," she thinks,
"They can have it."
Her life now a succession
Of days like this—placid,
Small, attentive to the sky,
To the taste of rain.

After time,
Losses don't hurt so much,
She would tell them,
Even husbands who leave you,
Or children who die young.

Except sometimes on a dark road
When you're humming some old hymn
And staring at your reflection
In a bug-stained windshield,
The past leaps out
Into the light like a deer
And you swerve
Yet again.

Thomas Reynolds is an associate English professor at Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, Kansas. He has published poems in various print and online journals, including *New Delta Review*, *Alabama Literary Review*, *Aethlon-The Journal of Sport Literature*, *Sport Literate*, *The MacGuffin*, *Flint Hills Review*, and *Prairie Poetry*. Woodley Press of Washburn University published his poetry collection *Ghost Town Almanac* in 2008. His chapbook *The Kansas Hermit Poems* was published in 2013.

Ghostie on Third

SL Essay

Holly M. Wendt

In our backyard baseball diamond, a natural spring bubbled up in foul territory, and for most of my childhood, first base was a decrepit cherry tree (and then its stump). The narrow infield lay between two steep hills, one going up behind the cherry tree and one dropping off from third base. Second base was my dad's archery target, a block of straw bales and styrofoam, a patch of grassless dirt below. A creek cut where a real field's outfield grass would start, and a steep, forested bank lay behind it. The dimensions precluded playing with a hard ball and real bat, but the airy, plastic the wiffle ball fit the confines perfectly, and wiffle ball meant we could swing as hard as we wanted—we could *mean* it. It was important to mean it. The backyard sport was played in deadly earnest, no matter how young we were, no matter the challenge of the space itself, the very space that meant our backyard “baseball” was, in fact, a complete fiction. There couldn't be 90 feet between any two bases, nor was there room for even the fixed Little League and softball proportions, the easy, clear consistencies that eventually took over our summer nights and weekends. Still, first base remained the cherry tree itself: if you got your hand or foot on the trunk before the throw struck the tree, you were safe.

The cherry tree taught us how to throw with a little more accuracy, and it taught us (for better or worse) how to argue. But mostly, the cherry tree and the rest of it taught us that we didn't need a crowd to play baseball, not the way the kids in the movies did, kids who lived in neighborhoods, kids who had neighbors at all. We didn't need any of that. We had ghosties.

Ghosties meant, mostly, ghost-runners, because that's where we needed them most, but sometimes we needed them in the field, particularly at third base, where there was usually no person and never any object to take the throw. Ghosties were a test of the honor system: was the throw on-target enough to suggest a reasonable catch? We had to judge it fairly, and we had to learn to make adjustments—throwing a wiffle ball harder does not mean throwing it more accurately.

Ghosties meant, too, that we usually didn't go after the lead runner. Ghosties were exempt from the kickball-esque “If I Peg You While You're Running, You're Out” rule modification. And ghosties were smart, if not terribly fleet, runners: a single was guaranteed to move them up one base; a double moved them up two. A ghostie never got greedy and tried to stretch the advance;

a ghostie never got picked off dancing off first; a ghostie never left early while tagging up. Ghosties were, in essence, everything we were not.

Purists—and anyone with even a modicum of internal order—will attest that what we played in my parents' sloping yard was not actually baseball. Baseball is a game of precise rules and measurements, of particular order in all capacities. Baseball is measured with straight chalk lines and nine neatly numbered positions dotted about the diamond. To the observer, our two- and four-person games must have been ridiculous, so much inconvenient green in all directions and only one teammate, if any, on which to rely, in a game rooted in transfer and connection.

But even if our attempts at double plays evoked no memories of Tinker to Evers to Chance, baseball remained whole in our minds, and we imagined the fielder we couldn't see eagerly waiting to scoop a low throw at third. Ghosties taught us faith: if their hands were solid, if their gloves were made of more than our hot air, we imagined that they would have made the play. When we *had* teammates—on real teams, where we would eventually learn to be specialists, me behind the plate, my brother on the mound—we trusted that the flesh and blood would be as reliable as the ghosties of our dreams. Sometimes that faith was rewarded. In the early years of being parts of teams on fields with foul poles and backstops, sometimes that faith wasn't. We learned to back up the play.

Baseball is a game imbued with ghosts of all kinds; any sport so gripped by its own history and statistics can't be anything else. The final essay of Roger Angell's *The Summer Game*, “The Interior Stadium,” suggests the spectral flicker of memory, too: though baseball is changing and, in Angell's 1991 view, perhaps not necessarily for the better, baseball remains forever constant in the mind's hologram. So long as one remembers, every game, every great player, is an eternal constant, and to have lived and watched and written as long in baseball as Angell has, it's hard to imagine feeling differently. And knowing the players who were and are part of Angell's personal memories—Mays and Maris and Musial, Koufax and McCovey and Clemente, the players who were gods to my father in his boyhood—well. What any of us would give to live a while in the game forever playing behind Angell's eyelids.

Part of growing up on our slantwise diamond was a certain isolation, manifested not only by our incorporeal teammates, but also in no real access to even the small-screen facsimiles of the game that so infused our lives. The television antenna, snugged into a fencerow, gave us only the big three networks and a grainy PBS, caught from northeastern Pennsylvania, none of which showed

anything except the World Series. In our little creek hollow, it was a struggle even to get the radio signal. For me, the static will always be part of Harry Kalas's voice. Sometimes we drove around, watching deer pick their way into crepuscular fields and stopping beside one where the view was good and the airwaves clear. The audio blur attached to players, too—I know the names and now I know the weight of seeing, in my mind's eye, Mike Schmidt at third or completing his home run trot, of hearing about whatever Ozzie Smith miracle was happening in Saint Louis, but when it was happening, I was a child. I was far more interested in being the one with the touch delicate enough to stop the radio's manual dial where everything was clearest, in trying to mold my small hands into the knuckler's grip, the two-seamer, the split. Now, those games and memories are shadows, and I don't remember the days before there were night games at Wrigley at all. Even into the 1990s, the Phillies—*my* Phillies, the ragtag bunch who were “ball players” and not much else, somehow succeeding inside the concrete bounds of Veterans' Stadium—are ideas rather than images.

But we had two VHS tapes that stood in, and I don't know how the flimsy tape didn't wear out or snap because for years, several times a week, we cued up a 30-minute, professionally produced blooper reel (complete with the Philly Phanatic's excellent antics), and a 30-minute tribute to the greats of Yankee baseball, focused mostly on the stretch from Murderers' Row through Mickey Mantle's career. The details, somehow, are still fuzzy for most of it; I remember more clearly the variegated brown carpet in my parents' living room, my rear parked firmly in the middle of it. I remember the various positions of the television around the room—in a corner all summer, beneath a window when it was time to put up the Christmas tree.

Those tapes were certainly beneath that tree at one point, presents for my brother. Sometimes we watched them together. Mostly, I remember watching them myself, the *Benny Hill* theme playing over outfielders bouncing off each other and pitchers winging baseballs into the next zip code while runners helter-skeltered in the wrong direction, various mascots plying their trade to “No Business Like Show Business,” and me, sometimes watching, sometimes letting the good, familiar noise of it wash over whatever I was drawing or the covers of the novel I was reading. I remember looking up during the other one, always, during the Lou Gehrig story. The Iron Horse was everything.

Part of it was surely that Gehrig's story was a sad one: what might there have been for him—for *us*—in a career not cut short? But it was his most famous statistic that got our household's attention, his 2,130 games in a row. Every day: going to work, working hard. It was what my parents did, waking up every morning before 5:30, to do jobs that were physically demanding, in inclement conditions.

For my dad, working most often back then on framing and roofing, that meant driving nails in the rain and sometimes snow, carrying bundles of shingles onto sharp pitches, kneeling on tar paper radiating back the sun's scorch. For my mother, it meant feeding hunks of steel bigger than her forearm into a machine that cut them into razor-edged bits that companies like Boeing used in the making of their plane engines. The building's tropical heat was suffused with a humidity of oil, misting her and everything therein all day, minus the 15-minute lunch in her car or on a bench beside the Susquehanna River. Years ago, someone she worked with wore his wedding ring to the factory. When one of the machine's wheels caught it, it chewed the precious metal and spat it back through the meat of the man's finger. My mother, who has an associate's degree that helped her work a few years as a medical secretary, was the one who was called over to look at the wound, to assess what should happen next.

They both still do these things, every day, and though they have certain fondnesses for this aspect or that, there's no masking what either of them does as anything but work, and we spoke and speak of everything in that way. I didn't know it back then. I knew Gehrig was praised above all others; I knew his skills were well worth praising. Even without the games-played streak, even without his heartbreaking and dignified speech that reminded us who had been luckier still to see him play, he was a singular force on the diamond. And so it felt right to put him onto our misshapen one, to imagine that cherry tree not snarl-barked and ant-pocked, but an effigy of Lou, sturdy in every way. Sometimes, we dared to call ourselves by his name; when my dad played with us—often—he called us to the plate by many hallowed names. Even with a fixed pitcher (Dad), or teams of two against two (when Mom played, which was regularly), the ghosties had to be there. They ran, and we swung, time after time, the echo of Gehrig, Ruth, Mays, and others, spinning out of us after successful swats. Ghostie Lou Gehrig stands at third: how could we do anything other than bring him in?

Sometimes, we named ourselves more modernly, after the Phillies—to say Mih-key Mor-an-dee-nee in Kalas's voice is still a joy—or Pete Rose. In those years, I didn't really know anything about Pete Rose. I only knew him as Charlie Hustle, hit machine, knew nothing of his hauteur, his aggressive play, his mercenary shopping of himself. (This is how my dad put it, in a phone call last week. I still have no actual memories of Pete Rose playing; he is only a technicolor highlight reel, a point of discussion.) What I knew was that *good hustle* was the highest compliment I could receive.

It's been years since I've played at this game; even playing catch is rare enough that I'm always surprised at how good it feels still to curl my fingertips over the

stitched seams, to feel the whole body cock and fire, to receive the ball's crisp snap in my own web. I've forgotten in my head even as the body says *oh, this I remember*, and there's something otherworldly in that.

Growing toward my own middle innings, too, I've collected some second-hand baseball ghosts, most recently in the form of books. A friend whose name is Linda, like my mother's, is a great reader and frequently receives books of all kinds that she passes on to those who might appreciate them most. It was from Linda that I received the small, neat copy of John Updike's famous essay on Ted Williams, "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu," which I hadn't read until well after Williams was dead, when my two most lasting associations with the greatest hitter we may ever know were his frozen body and the omnipresence of his book on hitting in my parents' house.

My father was a student of baseball, perhaps with some longing for his own playing years, certainly with some aim for my brother, who grew to be almost six and a half feet tall, who was left-handed in sports (not anything else), and who did end up having a successful high school career on a successful team that sent two players to the minor leagues. But my father studied baseball with sheer curiosity and awe, too, and I think that, more than anything, was why Williams' book migrated around the house for at least a decade: now beside Dad's chair in the living room, now on his workbench, now on the kitchen table. It's probably still in the crowded wooden rack beside the recliner, were I to look, and so to read about baseball's goodbye to Williams felt strange: how could Ted Williams be going away when he had always been there?

It's a ridiculous position to take: Ted Williams was never *in* baseball while I was alive, and Updike's essay showed Williams at arm's length from everyone. Still, the cover of *The Science of Hitting* seemed an invitation, paradoxically: enter the world of a nearly impossible-seeming hitter. The intimidating batting averages studded the book's front in the shape of a strike zone heat map, the numbers listed in a grid that reminded us there was nowhere a pitcher could throw a strike that gave Williams real trouble, and the red-tinted belt-to-elbows patch amounted to pitching suicide. But despite that statistical force, the cover is a wash of pleasantest pale blue, a ready-to-swing Ted Williams looking only calmly focused, as if to say *it's really this easy*.

Everyone knows, of course, that it's not. In almost 15 years of playing competitive fast-pitch softball, I struggled mightily at the plate, hoping mostly to work walks and perfect the art of the drag bunt. From first, I could steal my way to offensive value, but getting there was never easy, no matter what Williams's face said.

By the time I read Updike's account of Williams, both men were dead, and the tale ranged wide, encompassing: here fans understanding that what

they saw would never come again, here Updike plumbing that feeling with quiet, heartbreaking simplicity, here Williams being disappointingly cold with the press and fans, here John Updike writing a sentence that can only trumpet himself as the real artist of this study—brassy, ostentatious, infuriating, and architecturally marvelous.

The book was a gift, in all senses of the word, and not without its weight and complication, and, last year, Linda sent me another: *Baseball: A Literary Anthology*, a 2002 compilation by the Library of America of famous essays and poems and fictions all centered around baseball. It contains Updike's essay, and several pieces from Roger Angell, excerpts from most of the notable baseball memoirs and excerpts from memoirs by Annie Dillard, Amiri Baraka, and Tallulah Bankhead, and dozens of other pieces of baseball-tinged ephemera from the American literary landscape. The book was a birthday present, one that arrived shortly after I took a week-long sojourn to the Arizona spring training grounds. In the letter Linda sent, still tucked inside the jacket, she wrote,

This book is part of a legacy I agreed to accept several years ago from a friend who knew he had limited time left on this planet and had no one closer to leave his Library of America Collection to.

Charlie would definitely have approved of my sending it along to you.

It still makes me tear up, and that's one of the reasons I haven't really touched the book since. I want to; I'm afraid to. Baseball is a game of so many endings—each inning, each night, and the saddest, each season, giving way to the growing chill and dark of winter—and yet how familiar this, passing on these collected seasons and memories to someone else, the way we do each time we speak of baseball.

The back flap of the dust jacket is tucked between the pages marking Yusef Komunyakaa's poem, "Glory." I am ashamed to say that I don't know who marked it: was it me when I first received the book? Was it Linda, before she sent it? Was it the original owner, Charlie, whom I can never ask? I will say it was Charlie, that Charlie somehow knew where the book was going. Komunyakaa's poem is, on one hand, about the neighborhood baseball my brother and I couldn't play—people who lived within shouting distance of each other coming together on nights and weekends to run and dive and athletically preen in real company. Our rural Pennsylvania county, too, had no real ties to the black baseball players Komunyakaa immortalizes. But his closing lines—"A stolen base or homerun / Would help another man / Survive the new week"—were everything familiar, not simply in the schoolchild's September clinging to summer, but in the nights and weekends we watched my father play.

That game wasn't baseball either, was slow-pitch softball, but everything

outside of the fat ball's moony arc to the plate was what we craved. The mantra of *sacrifice the body for the ball* continued to hold, even for these fathers who had to work in the morning, none of them at jobs that cradled the body quietly in an ergonomic chair, who would probably end up carrying one or more child up a flight of stairs to bed even as the raw strawberry on the knee from a slide into third still oozed. There was no infield any of us ever played on that wouldn't slough off the skin; in my last years playing, there was one field on which everything from second base to the backstop was crushed brick. Other fields where we all played left coal dust embedded in the skin, black rime that would stay there unless we were judicious with the peroxide and washcloth, the post-game scrub through clenched teeth. But before that, when the games meant sitting in the dirt beside the players' bench (there were no dugouts) while mayflies hatched by the hundreds of thousands from the nearby Susquehanna, clouding the late-night lights, and games paused from time to time to keep the passing trains' roar and whistle from obscuring *I got it I got it*, we watched grown men leg out singles, stretch doubles, lay out in the dewing grass like it meant something, like their lives depended on it. I think, for many of these iron horses, it did.

Angell wrote about the memory's ability to invent, too, to plight the multigenerational best against each other, against time, against impossibility. Baseball people understand the *what if*, understand it with a pain and longing that all sports fans know, but that baseball perhaps has monopolized by its deliberate pace, by the magnification of the single play. The ball can only be in one place at one time. The fielders move toward it, gravitationally, but everyone understands that, in most cases, it's *someone's* play—that ball's placement marks it as the second baseman's ball, this one the center fielder's call. The runner's path is immutable. And so the magnifying glass—the microscope, more truly—has its one place, and there we focus: the ball scooting between Billy Buckner's legs, over and over; the blown call at first that robbed Armando Gallaraga of a perfect game all too recently; a hundred balls versus strikes, a hundred if-the-transfer-had-been-cleans, a hundred inches' fractions as a ball lines over third, fair or foul, every single season. With this tool, the baseball fan agonizes. The more optimistic among us correct the unhappy moment: the ball is fielded cleanly, the call is made, joy erupts. And we relive: in my own memory, Brad Lidge is always falling to his knees, arms raised, mouth alight with triumph. Carlos Ruiz is always dashing towards him; the whole field is rushing towards them both.

If I were playing that backyard game again, if I could ever dare to adopt one of those storied names again, I don't think I'd reach back so far. I know what Gehrig and Mantle and Mays did, understand the full gift their careers were.

Now, I'd ask for wish fulfillment: for Ken Griffey, Jr. to play uninjured forever, his seasons untouched by labor disputes. I would stand in and it would always be 1993, The Kid always making those galloping catches in center but this time with titanium wrists. 1993 wasn't even his best season, The Kid still a kid at twenty-three, but that was even better than watching him in his later-nineties prime because we knew we hadn't seen him at his peak. We were still imagining it, still giddy for the promising unknown.

I don't think I could do it anymore, the imitative fiction of *being* that player. I'm too old now, too aware of everything my body cannot do, too aware of knowing that all players' bodies will one day know what they cannot do, either. But that doesn't stop the longing. It doesn't stop me saying I'd give anything to even *see* it—I don't need to feel it as experience. The shape of a bat between my hands and squinting my brother into Roger Clemens, who once struck out 20 Mariners in a game, or Mike Mussina, the ace from central Pennsylvania, doesn't matter anymore; reality or anything tinted with its brush can't help me. I can only turn the gaze inward toward the flat, open space we dreamed our backyard could be, to find the place where this legacy I've agreed to accept is possible again, to find the kind of invisible on which we've always relied.

Holly M. Wendt is an assistant professor of English at Lebanon Valley College and a contributing editor at *The Classical*. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *Gray's Sporting Journal*, *The Rumpus*, *Classical Magazine*, and others, and she is a recipient of fellowships from the Jentel Foundation and the American Antiquarian Society. She is also the winner of the 2014 *Memorious/Writer's Block* poetry contest. She is currently at work on a novel about 18th century piracy, which, despite hurricanes, shipwrecks, and other calamities, is still more comforting to consider than the 2015 Philadelphia Phillies' season.

Hung Out to Dry

SL Poem

Jacob Collins-Wilson

I remember crispy mornings
when I was more asleep than awake
when it felt like the first sunrise
anyone had noticed and it happened to me, merely a boy
catching the awe of light and clouds in my glove like a double-play.
I chewed a half-piece of Spearmint gum
left overnight on the dashboard of my father's yellow 1970s Datsun pickup
that looked nothing like the sun.
We always arrived two hours before the first pitch
to rake and line and, if it hadn't rained, water the infield.
I was in charge of holding the stake behind home,
"Hold the line tight," my father would call.
I would pretend I was playing catcher
snapping my glove closed to catch Nolan Ryan's smoke.

I remember the sound of sharp grass crunching under my spikes.
That early in the morning you can feel your arm
warming up when you loosen up. Shoulder stretching and
radiating like a miniature sun
in a ball-and-socket joint.

If I love anything
it's the afternoons of tournaments
when children crowd playgrounds with shouts
when everything smells of hotdogs.
I used to race people for foul balls
because Lloyd, before he died, would trade a ball for a piece of bubble gum.

He gave me my second glove
a glove that fit my hand so perfectly
it was an extension of my wrist.
I've lost a lot since those early morning weekends
but nothing seems so permanent as outgrowing that glove.

Jacob Collins-Wilson has poetry and reviews published in *Spillway*, *Verse-Magazine*, *Hobart*, *Spry*, *Split Lip* and *Crack The Spine* (Selected for Summer Anthology) among others. He has been a recipient of an Atlantic Center for the Arts residency and a finalist for the Best of the Net 2013 anthology. He is currently earning an MFA in poetry at Syracuse University and can be reached by everyone at emailingjacob@gmail.com.

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Innocence in Rerun: Lessons from Little League

SL Essay

Keith Raether

... for it is not the irreversible I discover in my childhood, it is the irreducible: everything which is still in me, by fits and starts.

– Roland Barthes

I see a small, self-absorbed boy in the hallway, rehearsing to be a big man on the mound. Once a week, before each game that I pitched, I'd stand in full uniform in front of a full-length mirror at home. I'd consult the beveled looking-glass for a sign, nod, and start my windup. Strike one, four-seam fastball, outside corner. Pitch after simulated pitch, I'd run through my delivery in slow motion: arm angle, leg drive, follow-through. Ball one, hanging curveball, letter-high. I'd imagine opposing batters, settle on the pitches I wanted to throw, mark the targets I had to hit. I was not alone. Over my left shoulder hovered the shadow of my father, six feet three inches of scrutiny and instruction, a right-hander in the manner of Vernon "Deacon" Law. In my head rang the first commandment of my dad's code: "Low and on the corners. Low and on the corners."

In the course of a season I spent hours abrading the fine-pile carpet under my Jack Purcells ("No cleats in the house!") for the purpose of memorizing my pitching motion. At least that was the reason I blurted to my brother whenever he badgered me about living in front of the mirror. The larger incentive was vanity. I loved to watch myself in a freshly pressed uniform, the stirrups of my socks altered by my mom to show exactly six inches of sanitariums in the front, seven in the back. I was Sandy Koufax.

Forty years after my Little League life, my wife surprised me with a subscription to MLB.com, then a new website for Major League Baseball. The MLB site promoted a catalog of streaming videos of baseball's greatest games. Her hope, I think, was that with every extended archival moment I'd recall a time when I was green and life was easy on a baseball field, like Dylan Thomas under apple boughs.

Little did either of us know how much one archive would stir another. A single link—to the 1965 World Series—suddenly activated two baseball pasts. It was the year after I finished Little League with an arm injury, the year before Koufax retired from baseball when the Dodgers and Minnesota Twins played for all the marbles.

In the time it takes a Gillette Blue Blades commercial to stream across the screen, I've found my way back four decades. Game seven of the Series is set to start, and already, in this moment fugue, I'm oddly anxious. It's as if I'm 12 years old again, fighting to hold down a meal before pitching a game. No matter that I can dimly recall the happy outcome at Metropolitan Stadium. A stomach knotted in the immediacy of memory knows nothing of retrospective distance. Koufax is pitching the endgame of the Series on two days' rest. All this after throwing 336 innings during the regular season and 15 innings already in the series.

The Gillette commercial dissolves into an ad for Toni, the "uncurlly permanent." The cultural curator in me is in stitches, but my stomach might as well be nautical rope. Why didn't Walter Alston, the Dodgers' manager, go with Don Drysdale, the other ace in the rotation? The Twins' lineup is stacked with right-handed hitters. The arthritis in Koufax's left arm is so far advanced that even cortisone dosing has run its artificial course. The daily Empirin with codeine no longer masks the pain. There is no Tommy John surgery to save his elbow and extend his career. At age 30, when pitchers nowadays routinely check in for bionic arms through reconstructive surgery, Koufax would be finished with baseball.

My butterflies may be born of sympathetic pain. At the end of my final season in Little League, my own arm went dead after snapping off one too many curve balls. Warming up for a night game against McGuire's Mirror Glaze, a sudden, immobilizing shock radiated up and down my arm, as though I'd stabbed a butter knife into a wall outlet. Everything went numb, and for the rest of the summer tossing a baseball felt like throwing a shot put.

The NBC peacock fans its feathers on the screen. Dodgers broadcaster Vin Scully, sharing duties with Twins announcer Ray Scott, welcomes viewers to Game seven. The series has moved back to Minneapolis, so Scully, appropriately, leads with the weather report. An electrical storm blew through the city the previous night, a repeat of the weather before Game two, which Koufax started and lost. More portent and worry. The forecast for Game seven is blue skies, but Minneapolis under any circumstance in October is refrigerated compared to Los Angeles, where Koufax threw a four-hit shutout with twelve strikeouts in Game five. Cold weather is the bane of pitchers. For an instant I picture Koufax's arm snapping like wishbone ash in the hard lake breeze.

Maury Wills, the Dodgers' shortstop (and Doris Day's heartthrob in those days), steps into the batter's box to face Twins' starter Jim Kaat. The sleeves of

Wills' uniform are already sweat-stained. Forget Midwest cold: How muggy is it in Minneapolis, and how much does Koufax have left in the tank after throwing more than 3,500 pitches in one season? Why do MLB's uniform suppliers still have him and every other major-league hurler pitching in flannels?

Kaat strikes out Wills on a check swing, and a roar erupts inside Metropolitan Stadium. It is all I can do not to think that a sign beyond the diamond has been sent. Jim Gilliam quiets the crowd briefly with a line-drive single to left-center, but Willie Davis bunts into a fielder's choice. When Twins' right fielder Tony Oliva, the American League's batting champion in 1965, makes a circus catch on Lou Johnson's lazy fly ball, the Twins' faithful shed any semblance of Calvinist restraint. A deadly commotion fills the stadium. Omens are the stuff of preposterous movies, but momentum in baseball is an enormous, decisive force. After half an inning, the Twins own it. Never mind that this moment is four decades past. The willing suspension of disbelief has its own dark side.

I loved and often dreaded Little League over the five years that I played in it. In the beginning I felt free in the infinite emerald space of a baseball field, and powerful in my small body, pretending I was Vada Pinson in center field or Koufax on the mound. More important, though I couldn't see it then, baseball was the one unassailable bond I had with my father, who played the game through high school and sporadically in college. It was a peace pact whenever we were at Oedipal odds, a practiced language that broke the brooding silences. Playing catch was a ritual that neither of us could disrespect.

My dad taught me the fundamentals of the game at an age when the mind took certain orders gladly and arms and legs responded effortlessly. Every prompt became an imprint. At first, there was no awareness of being watched, no fear of making an error. I knew nothing of the fine line between vanity and self-consciousness, confidence and doubt. But the better I became as a player,

“I loved and often dreaded Little League over the five years that I played in it. In the beginning I felt free in the infinite emerald space of a baseball field, and powerful in my small body, pretending I was Vada Pinson in center field or Koufax on the mound.”

the more I felt the weight of my dad's expectations. He, too, had a stake in this father-and-son baseball business. Mine wasn't the only image on the line each time I went to the mound.

Koufax's first pitch to Zoilo Versalles, the Twins' speedy shortstop, is uncomfortably high. My nervous system murmurs that the Dodgers may be in for an anguishing day. Versalles wants to see the ball, hoping to get inside Koufax's head. Home-plate umpire Jim Hurley obliges. Koufax kicks at the flat mound at Municipal Stadium. Is he thinking what I'm wondering? Did the Twins' ground crew shave the mound to neutralize his advantage over hitters? Koufax punches out Versalles, but it comes on a high fastball that the Twins' power trust—Oliva, Harmon Killebrew, Earl Battey, Bob Allison—could well feast on. With two outs in the inning, Koufax walks both Oliva and Killebrew, the latter on four pitches. Drysdale begins to warm up in the bullpen.

Koufax keeps shaking out his left arm between pitches. Is he simply adjusting his undersleeve? Or is he favoring a golden wing that, in another season, threw 323 innings without hitting a batter, an extraordinary statistic for a pitcher whose fastball traveled in the high nineties. Koufax makes a fist with his left hand, as if to test for any feeling left in his arm. He has yet to throw a curve ball that has behaved like one. Battey, a .297 hitter in 1965, steps in. If Koufax knows Drysdale is loosening up in the bullpen, he gives no indication of it. He fans Battey on four pitches.

My dad never emphasized speed in my pitching, in part, I suspect, because it would have been a futile exercise. I was a bantamweight, a 12-year-old version of Harvey Haddix. Instead, my father drilled me on locating the fastball and showed me how to throw a proper curve. He harped on driving through my delivery with my legs until the sequence became automatic.

There was little praise in his critiques. A simple “That's it” when I broke off a sharp bender or aired out a fastball that found his low target was the extent of his approval. It was his way, perhaps, of making sure I didn't take a big head to the mound. And yet, I know he expected me to drop my jaw after he'd thrown one of his patented Ken McBride roundhouse curves to my target. He'd finish the pitch, take a few steps toward me, and say “Where was that?” He knew, of course, but needed to hear “bulls-eye” all the same. “Whatever you do, don't let a ball in the wheelhouse beat you,” he'd insist.

Jim Kaat reminds me now, as he vaguely did then, of a genial Minnetonka farmer who just stepped off a John Deere tractor after a full day of tilling 40

acres. He saunters to the mound as though the space between his legs from ankle to thigh were cradling a medicine ball. Kaat proved many disbelievers wrong in his career. In 1965, “Kitty,” as the southpaw was known, won 18 games for the Twins. A year later he posted 25.

Scott seems more unsure of Koufax’s immediate future than Kaat’s. He asks Scully if Drysdale is a pitcher who requires a lot of time to get loose. It’s a benign question. But hearing it now, as though for the first time, stirs more worry. Scully’s answer is slightly reassuring. Koufax tends to struggle early. Drysdale tires late in a game. Left out of the discussion are the indications that Koufax is favoring his left arm after every pitch.

The Dodgers threaten in the top of the third, but Davis ends the inning with a pop foul to Battey with two runners in scoring position. In the bottom of the third, Versalles strokes a one-out single up the middle on a hanging curve. From all indications, Koufax has one pitch: his fastball. Versalles steals second, but the Dodgers catch a break. Batter’s interference is called on Joe Nosssek, sending the shortstop back to first and Nosssek to the dugout. A few pitches later, Billy Martin, the Twins’ tightly-wound third-base coach, storms toward home plate to beef with Hurley. Koufax is balking, he screams. The scene snaps me back to 1960, when Martin played for the Redlegs. Convinced that Chicago Cubs pitcher Jim Brewer was throwing at him, the Reds’ volative second baseman charged the mound and decked Brewer with an overhand right that fractured the orbital bone of his right eye.

Koufax comes back with a blistering fastball that retires Oliva on strikes and silences Martin. The Dodgers’ ace has six Ks in three innings but no curve ball or changeup. Scully recalls that, after Koufax’s Game five shutout victory in L.A., someone asked him how he felt. “Like I’m 100 years old,” Koufax said. In three innings of Game seven, he has already sweated through his undersleeve and jersey.

When Walter O’Malley moved the Dodgers from Brooklyn to L.A. in 1958, the team’s temporary first home was the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, a massive concrete oval twice the size of its inspiration in Rome. No boy forgets his first view of a big-league stadium, and mine of the Coliseum still seems larger than life, in part because the diamond was part of a football field. The Los Angeles Rams and University of Southern California Trojans played their home games there.

Coming out of Tunnel Ten into the stadium, the color-field of green no longer conformed to a 20-inch Zenith TV set. The carpet of Bermuda grass seemed to stretch forever, like a Diebenkorn canvas realized with aerial perspective. In

the lower left corner of the frame were four daubs of white. Centered within them was a short, precise brushstroke of matching white where the likes of Law and Gibson and “Sad Sam” Jones toed the rubber. The longer white strokes on the canvas—the baselines—had yet to be filled in.

Vendors sold ice-cold lemonade in thin, shaped cardboard containers. It took me all of an inning to discover that, emptied of its contents, the tapered cylinder doubled as a small megaphone. You could plead with Wally Moon to hit one of his patented “moon shots” over the Coliseum’s tacky but necessary left-field screen, which kept second-basemen from hitting 251-foot home runs. You could pass judgment on Ted Kluszewski’s ratty cutoff sleeves like an agitated Greek chorister. My dad laid out the ground rules before the first pitch was thrown. Never disrespect a ball player. Boo a call, but never condemn a player.

Lou Johnson, a 31-year-old journeyman filling in for the Dodgers’ regular left fielder, Tommy Davis, leads off the fourth inning against Kaat. In 13 years of pro ball, Johnson has worn the uniforms of 18 teams, all but three in the minors. Scully calls him “a living storybook.”

On a 1-1 pitch from Kaat, Johnson turns on a low fastball and scalds it down the left-field line. The ball hooks like a scythe but kisses the foul pole before it finds the seats. Home run! The Dodgers take the lead, and “Sweet Lou,” as Johnson’s teammates knew him, celebrates the poetic justice of the moment.

The few L.A. faithful at Metropolitan Stadium are beside themselves with joy, knowing one run is all Koufax needs to win any game, anytime. Kaat knows this, too, and his focus dissolves. Ron Fairly rips the left-hander’s first pitch for a double. Wes Parker hits a ground ball over first baseman Don Mincher’s head, scoring Fairly. Sam Mele, the Twins’ manager, yanks Kaat. Reliever Al Worthington stops the bleeding. But the Dodgers have scored two runs for a pitcher whose combined earned-run average in 1964 and 1965 was 1.89. As Pirates slugger Willie Stargell put it: “Trying to hit [Koufax] was like trying to drink coffee with a fork.”

Bob Lemon, who pitched for the Cleveland Indians, once said that baseball was made for kids, and grown-ups only screw it up. Little League in my day was hardly the aggressive, high-pressure, Major League-mime show and combat zone that it has become in so many districts across the country. Still, we had our share of Lucky Strike-ignited field generals in the dugouts and in the stands. Now and then there were loud words between parents and umpires, or parents and opposing managers, or parents in the faces of other parents. A few goons even rode their own kids in public without an ounce of shame.

“Bob Lemon, who pitched for the Cleveland Indians, once said that baseball was made for kids, and grown-ups only screw it up. Little League in my day was hardly the aggressive, high-pressure, Major League-mime show and combat zone that it has become in so many districts across the country. Still, we had our share of Lucky Strike-ignited field generals in the dugouts and in the stands.”

Earl Whitaker was one of the martinets in civilian clothes. His son, Greg, a schoolmate of mine, was a pitcher, shortstop and perennial All-Star in a different Little League district than ours. He threw very hard, with a high leg kick in the manner of Marichal. He hit the ball even harder. He was a 12-year-old Ernie Banks; everything that came off his bat seemed to travel on a line. After a while, he was like Banks in another way, when Mr. Cub was a kid: Neither wanted to play baseball. The only thing that stopped them from quitting was their fathers. Banks' dad would bribe him to play catch. Greg's father would cuff him if he left the diamond before Mr. Whitaker was “good and ready” to end their private batting and fielding practices.

Greg's dad was a square, muscled man with a flattop and eyes like the slits of a pillbox. He threw long, punishing batting practices to Greg. Then he'd send his son out to shortstop to field ground balls and line drives. If Greg threw wide of home plate, where Mr. Whitaker was stationed, he'd launch into a tirade, cigarette jutting from his mouth.

“Can't you see the plate, numbskull? How many times do I have to say it? Don't throw off your front foot! Plant before you throw!” Greg would just listen, head lowered, face buried behind the bill of his cap, waiting for the next hot smash to find him.

Frank Quilici rips a double to the gap in left center field, and Drysdale stirs in the Dodgers' bullpen a third time. “Drysdale is pitching a ballgame in back of Sandy,” Scully says. “You can bet they're counting pitches as he goes.” He pauses to note the defensive alignment against Versalles. “Gilliam is guarding the line at third. The last thing the Dodgers want is an extra-base hit that would tie the game.” Then Scully suspends the narrative tension with a sly digression.

“By the way, the Twins had their own left-hander by the name of Sandy pitching today: [outfielder] Sandy Valdespino, who threw batting practice to the team in anticipation of the other Sandy.”

Koufax forces a fastball, leaving it in the breadbasket for Versalles. The shortstop hammers the ball down the third-base line, just as Scully warned. But Gilliam is positioned perfectly to glove the rocket. He backhands the ball and takes it to the base for an unassisted force-out.

Scully fuels the nonpartisan fires again. “How long can a pitcher go with one pitch?” he asks. Oliva steps in. On Koufax's first pitch, the Twins' premier hitter swings, misses and watches his bat sail into the field boxes behind the Twins' dugout. Fans drop for cover like rows of dominoes. Scully makes sure no fan is hurt before supplying his own comedic sigh of relief. “No wonder they don't play [Oliva] to pull,” he says.

I used to pray for rain on days that I pitched, even when we faced a bottom-feeder. I was a jumble of nerves; fruit salad was the extent of my pre-game meal. Part of the anxiety owed to the game itself: The more competitive Little League became, the less fun it was to play. And part of the anguish, I'm loath to admit, was the towering form behind the backstop, 10 feet right of home plate, rating every ball and strike: my father, direct from the office.

Except when business kept him out of town, my dad would leave work early to watch my games. Each appearance was a display of love, I realize now, as was his “whisker-rub torture” was when we wrestled in front of the fireplace at home. But his presence only sapped my confidence, because I knew a critical eye accompanied it. No fault of his, he made me aware of all the ways I could embarrass myself and him in front of a hundred or so howling, opposing parents. When I worked myself into a jam, I could see, out of the corner of my eye, my dad become impatient behind the chain-link. Or was the fidgeting and pacing symptomatic of his own anxiety? My father may well have lived and died with every pitch I threw. By the same token, I never recall hearing an “Attaboy” after I fanned a batter with runners on base.

Bottom of the ninth inning. Koufax's arm is still attached; the Dodgers are still clinging to a two-run lead. Their bats have been silent since the fourth inning. Their chief offensive weapon, in fact, is Koufax, a thought that only occurred to me long after he retired from baseball. Koufax as much as the Dodgers' hitters was the team's firepower for a very simple reason: He occupied the minds of his opponents from the time they suited up for a game. Because he wasn't overly combative like Marichal, batters didn't go to the plate angry at him. They

went intimidated, in holy fear of his fastball. This despite the fact that Koufax inadvertently telegraphed his pitches, according to many hitters. When his hands were high overhead in his windup, as the theory went, a fastball would follow. When they traveled back behind his head, a curve ball was coming. St. Louis Cardinals catcher Tim McCarver once observed that batters “could guess with [Sandy] easier than any pitcher. That you still couldn’t hit him was [a measure of] his greatness.”

After Koufax had worked through a lineup once or twice, reducing the likes of Giants and Pirates to lilliputians, the effect seemed to carry over into their play in the field. They were distracted, frustrated, prone to errors and mental lapses. They went to their positions rattled, set up to fail at “small ball,” the Dodgers’ stock-in-trade in those days. Maybe Oliva’s bobble and Nossek’s blunder in Game seven of the ’65 Series were more than unprompted blunders. How many errors on average, I wonder now, did opposing teams make in games against Koufax compared with games against other pitchers?

On opening day of my final Little League season, there was no room for error. League managers and coaches had picked our first opponent, Pasadena Chamber of Commerce, to win the division. Pat Rouser, our league’s answer to Greg Whitaker, was the starting pitcher for PC. I got the nod for Smith Precision Instruments.

Pat’s dad, Harry, who managed PC, paced the dugout, barking at the umpires, his bulbous nose a knot when a borderline strike didn’t go his son’s way. My dad was in his usual corner, gesturing from time to time to remind me about location for the hitters that mattered. Both strategies seemed to work. Pat and I took no-hitters into the fifth inning of a six-inning game. No-nos weren’t uncommon in Little League, where hitters, on balance, had yet to catch up to pitchers. Nonetheless, Pat and I knew where we stood to that point, and what was still at stake.

Scott has taken over for Scully, who is “wending his way to the Dodgers clubhouse in anticipation of a celebration.” How, I wonder, can NBC be thinking of champagne when Oliva, Killebrew and Battey are due up? History dissolves. Game seven hangs in the balance. Koufax has retired the last 11 Twins in a row. He has pitched 17 innings of shutout baseball in the past two games. Is this cause for reassurance or a portent from the baseball fates? Neither statistic sits well by the law of averages.

Koufax gets Oliva to ground out. One away in the ninth, Killebrew advancing to the plate. Koufax visits the rosin bag and tugs at his cap. He adjusts his jersey, which may be another way of saying he returns his shoulder to its socket

at this point in the game. He threads a fastball by the slugger appropriately nicknamed “Killer.” But Killebrew catches up to the next one, lining a single to left. Battey steps in, representing the tying run.

In the top of the fifth, Pat retired the side in order. I was one of his sitting ducks, fanning on four pitches, the last a called strike. In the bottom of the inning, I exacted some revenge, getting Pat to hit softly back to the box. Then I struck out Butch Chester on straight fastballs. Night games always boosted my velocity, if not my confidence.

Koufax hikes up his pants, stretches his back, expands his lungs, pulling all of his body into the battle. He throws a strike to Battey. Then another. And a third, which the catcher only stares at, shell-shocked. Two outs, but a runner on and the dangerous Allison making his way to the plate. In game six, the Twins’ left fielder busted a two-run homer. During the regular season, he slammed 23 more. The wind in Metropolitan Stadium is blowing out to left field as he steps in.

Eddie Castroneves, PC’s beefy left-handed clean-up hitter, followed Butch to the plate. Eddie was the 12-year-old equivalent of “Big Papi,” Boston Red Sox slugger David Ortiz. Like Ortiz, he devoured fastballs. So I fed him curve balls in small helpings, low and in, low and away. The plan had worked all evening, and it was working with two outs in the fifth. I jumped ahead in the count, 0-and-1 and then 0-and-2, on lazy rainbow junk.

In an abbreviated career, Koufax pitched four no-hitters and a perfect game. He struck out 18 hitters in a single game. He won five consecutive earned-run-average titles, three unanimous Cy Young awards, two World Series-clinching victories. Each achievement was an accumulation of moments: solitary battles against hungry hitters, measured in batting counts, pitch sequences, strike zones. A season and a championship are riding on the moment with Allison.

Koufax pitches the Twins’ young slugger high and tight. Allison works the count to 2-and-2. Koufax paws at the bottom of the mound with his spikes. He knows Allison is likely looking for a fastball; if the count runs to full, he’ll be sitting on one. Koufax has no other weapons to keep the enemy guessing. He bends his aching back, reaches for the rosin bag, hikes up his pants yet again, pulls at his left sleeve. He tugs at the bill of his cap, the back of his cap, the bill again, the back again. He steps on the rubber. Then he steps off to get more rosin. He takes a breath and reaches back for whatever is left.

I had Eddie in a hole trying to dig out after two quick strikes. I could tempt him with more curve balls out of the zone, or cross him up with a fastball and end the inning with an underline. He wouldn't catch up to the fastball even if he anticipated it, I told myself. The curve balls had thrown off his timing.

I shook off Bruce Silver's sign and sent a dart toward his target, low and on the outside corner.

An arrow flashes toward Allison. *Whoosh.* He waves at air. "He did it!" Scott exclaims. "Sandy Koufax has thrown a shutout! . . ."

My fastball was neither low nor on the corner. I saw Eddie's bat whip forward, heard the crack of hickory on hide, saw a comet streak across the night sky. A burst of sound shot up like bottle rockets from the PC side of the stands. The roar continued well after Eddie crossed home plate. Mr. Rouser bounded from the dugout like Bozo the Clown—or so I remember thinking at the time—swinging his arms up and down, fanning the noise. Dave Salas, the home-plate umpire, lobbed a new baseball to me. I turned my back on home plate and watched the park lights swim in my eyes.

Mr. Silva, our manager, made a visit to the mound. "You're pitching a whale of a game, Ray," he said, consoling me with the nickname he'd made of my last name. "Get this batter, and we'll tie it up in our half."

I did, but we didn't. Pat retired our side in order while his dad played to the fans in the stands. When the last out was made, an ascension of hats and gloves filled the air over the diamond. A mob of teammates tackled Pat in front of the mound. Behind them, a trail of zeros hung on the scoreboard next to the initials SP.

Koufax does not jump into catcher John Roseboro's waiting arms, as pitchers routinely do in one of countless theatrical routines that now permeate baseball. There is no mass of grown men in a dogpile on the mound, no bouncing up and down at home plate like 6-year-olds on Pogo sticks. No mugging, clowning, chest-thumping; no kissing the ground, saluting the Almighty, parading with a flag around the perimeter of the field. The Dodgers are shaking hands. They are beaming but barely slapping each other on the back as they walk on air from the field to the clubhouse. It is a display of decorum that has all but vanished from the game, and, for that matter, most sports.

Koufax is the first to join Scully on the victory stand in the clubhouse. Scully reminds the shy southpaw of his "100 years old" comment after Game five.

“Koufax does not jump into catcher John Roseboro's waiting arms, as pitchers routinely do in one of countless theatrical routines that now permeate baseball. There is no mass of grown men in a dogpile on the mound, no bouncing up and down at home plate like 6-year-olds on Pogo sticks.”

“So, today, how do you feel, Sandy?”

Koufax grins. “One hundred and one.” The rest of the truth follows. “I feel great, Vinny. I know I don't have to go out there again for another four months.”

Johnson follows Koufax on the interview stand. Scully's first question cuts to the quick.

“Lou, were there times when you thought you'd quit?”

“This year was it, Vinny. This would have been my last year if I hadn't gotten a chance to [stay] on a major-league club . . . Actually, Vinny, I want to cry but it won't come out.”

I was less of a mess when I met my mom and dad after the game. I saw sadness in her heavy eyes, but she smiled when she hugged me. Dad was his usual stoical self. In the dark away from the lights around the diamond, he reminded me in his black suit of a minister shorn of vestments after a service. He looked at me, then away. He was squinting, I recall, as though he were trying to solve some mystery—of faith, or even trust.

Fumbling for words, he spoke the only ones, perhaps, that either of us could offer in the moment.

“You grooved the fastball, didn't you?”

When he realized what he'd said, his brow knitted and he looked away. Then he tried to repair the damage.

“Your curve ball was working. Next time keep throwing it until the guy shows you he can hit it.”

My dad was no Earl Whitaker. In his disappointment, he was injured, not incensed. Part of his ache, I imagine, was for me. Part of it, I suspect, was for himself and the crow he'd had to eat in front of Harry Rouser. I'd let him down, after all. I'd broken our bond, strayed from my game, the game he'd taught me as diligently as he practiced his own work. I'd chosen to show off, like Harry

Rouser. Hubris had persuaded me to pitch cute instead of smart, the way Koufax did. The way my dad, in his austere but allied way, instructed me to do.

“Experience,” Vernon Law once said, “is a hard teacher because she gives the test first, and the lesson afterwards.” Perhaps I pierced a layer of my dad’s own sum and substance when I breached our trust trying to be the big man with one pitch. Maybe his replay of my lapse reminded him of the ways he, too, hadn’t always measured up, if not at the office then at home with his family.

That night, tucked in bed, I was powerless to say anything. All I could do was watch, in my mind’s eye, Eddie Castroneves’ moon shot soar over the right-field fence, time and time again, like an ESPN highlight reel. For his part, my father managed no more than three little words. “Good night, bud.” Maybe he didn’t know what else to say. Maybe he felt he’d said too much for one evening, and “bud” was his way of making amends. Distracted and exhausted, I never wondered. The next morning, mid-May, sun out, my dad and I shook it off like a catcher’s sign, and moved on.

Keith Raether works at Whitman College, where he directs the Office of Fellowships and Grants and occasionally teaches the study of jazz. In a previous life, he was an arts editor, columnist, critic in the States and Europe for 25 years. He received an MFA in nonfiction from Bennington College. He also studied literature and writing at Boston University and the University of California, Riverside, where he received a B.A. in English. His essays have appeared in *The Southern Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Brilliant Corners* and other literary journals. Raether was born in Chicago. As much as he was mesmerized by Koufax, the Cubs are in his DNA.

Need a writing exercise? Show us your shorts!

“Brevity is the soul of wit,” said William Shakespeare (that’s not him in the office). In honor of *Sport Literate*’s 20th anniversary, we’re asking you to keep it brief for our “sport shorts” essay contest. You’ll have to bowl us over in 750 words or less. The *SL* editors will send anonymous finalists to *Brevity*’s Dinty W. Moore (that’s not him either), who will select a winner. Said winner receives \$500 — American!



Double down for \$500

With a \$25 reading fee, enter up to two creative nonfiction pieces (no more than 750 words each) through the Submittable online submission tool on our website: www.sportliterate.org. **All submissions considered for publication.**

Look for contest details online and set your smartwatch for a submission deadline of June 30, 2015.

We don’t know who this guy is.

Poem to my Father on His 75th Birthday

SL Poetry

Peter Stine

This story I love to tell Nick,
me on the mound at twelve,
with my mediocre but accurate arm,
working my way through the Red Bank sluggers –
Vince Ciaggia, Bucky Stevens –
with you in the bleachers,
signaling the pitch locations
we'd figured out the night before,
creating magical holes in their bats . . .
until with the last out,
walking off the diamond,
I smiled at you in the dispersing crowd,
co-conspirators in victory.

Through the years, Dad,
you were always my battery mate.
I was born into a war between generations
that drove us apart,
where the old lines of white chalk
were drawn in blood,
and the rules changed into nothing.
But even when the bleachers were empty,
I tried to deliver your call –
a respect for things done right,
compassion for the weak or victimized,
and above all else,
an abiding sense of fatherhood.

After Mom died I faltered badly
on that field, but somehow
in the same saintly way you took care of her,
you wrapped me in your cloak of love
and kept me whole . . .
until now in the back yard,
warming up Nick's rifle of an arm,
I've almost become you:
your way of seeing and doing,
your very face.

After Baseball

A baseball on a bedspread in a slant of sunlight,
names scrawled on its cover in red ink, too scuffed
to make out, Little League teammates long since
retired to the bench or gone – claimed by accident,
Vietnam, wealth, violence, illness, despair –
the usual late-inning closers in life.
But at twelve we had that raked dirt infield, fresh chalk lines,
sun on our necks, quirky unpredictability in the air,
the game's meandering promise of endless summer,
loneliness banished with the crack of a bat.

What was it about the green grass, the sponginess
of the earth in spring? At this moment boys are
moving across that green, picking sides, and baseball
is starting up again. My season has passed, yet
something about the game still affects me like the itch of
an amputated limb. Crossing a vacant lot yesterday,
I came upon an abandoned bat and started hitting pebbles
out of the air over a far wooden fence.
There were no attending fantasies, no flashbacks –
only the clear and reviving crack of a bat.

Peter Stine is the author of *The Art of Survival*, a collection of literary essays. His fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have appeared in *The Iowa Review*, *Boulevard*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Antioch Review*, *The New York Times*, *Harold Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, and elsewhere. He was the editor-in-chief of *Witness* from 1987 to 2008 and during that time received 10 editorial grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Contributor Guidelines

SL YOUR BYLINE HERE

S*port Literate* remains the nation's lone literary journal focused primarily on the creative nonfiction exploration of sports. And we've got a stellar lineup of poets in this issue, too. Since 1995, we've produced 26 issues, earned 19 grants from the Illinois Arts Council, and garnered awards and recognition in national anthologies. Think you got what it takes to make our pages? Check out the departments below that make up our standard issues. Consider reading a back issue or two, too.

Who's on First: This first-person essay begins each issue. Mark Wukas led off "Spring Eats 1997" with "Running With Ghosts," an essay subsequently recognized in the *Best American Sports Writing (BASW)* anthology. Michael McColly's "Christmas City, U.S.A." won a creative nonfiction award from the Illinois Arts Council back in the day. Frank Soos was recognized in *BASW* in 2013 for his lead-off essay, "Another Kind of Loneliness."



SL Nature: Though not always recognized with its own department, nature lovers have provided several thought-provoking essays over the years. Consider what Scott F. Parker has to offer in this issue about his hike along the Pacific Crest Trail.

SL Travel: As that stranger in a strange land, what did you learn on the road? What's the leisurely life like over there? Robert Parker's travel piece, "The Running of the Bull," was recognized in *Best American Essays 2006*. In this issue, William Huhn encounters a man and his falcon overseas.

SL History: From Judy Widen's profile of a real-life baseball player from the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League to Ben Giamo's alternative history musings on writer Jack Kerouac, *Sport Literate* writers have used all the tricks of creative nonfiction to enhance a true story.

Personal Essay: We're hip to all the nonfiction forms—nature writing, immersion journalism—whatever floats your prose. Several *Sport Literate* writers have been cited in the annual *Best American Essays (BAE)* and the *Best American Sports Writing* collections. Mark Pearson's essay, "The Short History of an Ear," was our first to make the latter anthology's pages. Cinthia Ritchie's "Running" appeared there 2013. Most recently, Dave Essinger's contest-winning essay from our last issue, "Hallucinating in Suburbia: John Cheever, Buddha, and the Unabomber on the Urban Ultramarathon," received a nod in *BASW*. Katie Cortese's essay, "Winning Like a Girl," earned a similar recognition from *BAE*.

Poetry: Nick Reading and Frank Van Zant are the poetry gurus around here. Robert Claps won our "Can't Lose Poetry Contest" in this issue. Judge for yourself and consider submitting.

Photo Essays: We most often dig these out of yesteryear archives, but we'd be open to your stories in black and white. Query with your visions.

Interviews: We hope these are just good conversations with smart people. In past issues, we've featured Chicago footballers (Bear, Chris Zorich, and Cardinal, Marshall Goldberg), sportswriters (Bill Gleason and Robert Lipsyte), and even a poet (Jack Ridl). Query with suggestions.

Most submissions come online now. Please submit through Submittable, which you'll find on our website: www.sportliterate.org.



Nicholas James Mather Reading
Born September 30, 2014

SPORT

Literate

End of Winter 2015

Featuring sporty, yet literary, reflections in poetry and prose from

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William Meiners

Alessandra Nolan

Scott F. Parker

Mark Pearson

Keith Raether

Thomas Reynolds

April Salzano

Frank Soos

Peter Stine

Holly Wendt

Best American Kudos

Two writers from our last issue caught the attention of editors in two of the *Best American* series. Dave Essinger was recognized in *The Best American Sports Writing 2014* for his contest-winning essay, "Hallucinating in Suburbia: John Cheever, Buddha and the Unabomber on the Urban Ultramarathon." Katie Cortese received a nod in *The Best American Essays 2014* for "Winning Like a Girl." Thanks to both for sharing your work with us.



U.S. \$12.00
Canada: \$14.00