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The Art of Cheer

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The Art of Cheer

Abstract
The afternoon I bought my first record, "Red Rubber Ball" by the Cyrkle, I went to my best friend Jovita Becker’s house. She plucked the single from the sleeve and dropped it onto her turntable with a crunch of the needle as the sound of the Farfts organ rang out, and we danced the Pony on the bouncy, wood floor of her upstairs bedroom. I went to her house often, late afternoons, after Catholic school, while her parents were still at work at their grocery store.

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THE ART OF THE CHEER

DEBRA MARQUART

Poetry was no longer a strange and irrelevant loveliness in a chaotic world; it was a necessary and consummate flowering on the great tree of life; it was the immanent purpose of the universe made vocal.

—THE ORPHIC VOICE, ELIZABETH SEWELL

1.

The afternoon I bought my first record, "Red Rubber Ball" by the Cyrkle, I went to my best friend Jovita Becker's house. She plucked the single from the sleeve and dropped it onto her turntable with a crunch of the needle as the sound of the Farfisa organ rang out, and we danced the Pony on the bouncy, wood floor of her upstairs bedroom. I went to her house often, late afternoons, after Catholic school, while her parents were still at work at their grocery store.

It was the first metaphor I understood to be a metaphor (The rollercoaster
ride we took is nearly at an end), and perhaps the first simile (The morning sun is rising like a red rubber ball), because we talked about such things, the poetry of song lyrics, just as we wore each other's clothes and secretly applied her older sister's makeup on each other's eyes and cheeks and lips, trying out our future faces.

2.

And in Jovita's bedroom, where we went to get away from her four pesky younger brothers, we made up moves and cheers to accompany pivotal moments in imaginary games to come: *Push 'em back, push 'em back, push 'em waay back* and *Let's go, let's go, L-E-T-S-G-O*. Our hands clapping, our feet stomping as we released our cheers, our vowels and consonants like desire into the world.

And she was always better at it than me, getting the body's motions to mirror the meaning of the words, all of which she made up, and which I learned from her and mimicked so that the cheer's effect would be doubled in the world.

This was 1966, years before Title IX would reach us. We were tiny beings anyway, ten-year-old girls, our skinny bodies preparing to take our place on the sidelines, preparing to raise our voices in meaningful, structured ways, all in an attempt to embolden the giants among us.

3.

The game of basketball is a closed and finite experiment, designed to test the mettle and training, the natural talents and improvisational skills of its participants. The confines of the game's structure create the effect of heightened drama, because, unlike life, every moment of a basketball game reminds us that something is at stake.

The game unfolds with cold precision, in preset increments of time, the passage of which ticks away in minutes and seconds on a wall display, and whose expiration is announced by horns and buzzers. In basketball, there
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can be no mystery about where the time has gone; yet, it often slips away inexplicably.

The playing court, too, is defined and preset: a long rectangle of dark floor marks indicating in-bounds, out-of-bounds, front- and backcourt, the free-throw line, the ten-second line, the top of the key—all agreed-upon spaces in which certain things may or may not occur, but places in which invariably many wrong and unfortunate things do occur. Referees dressed in black-and-white striped shirts, to differentiate them from the players, are present on the floor among the players with their whistles to point out, monitor, and officiate the infractions.

The game’s impeccable intentions stand in high relief to the foibles of humans: the fumbling inaccuracies, the missteps and double dribbles, the winded back-and-forth rushes of sweaty bodies, the wild passes.

In this small interpretative space, where time slips away, where rules are broken and penalties incurred, a few humans manage to structure moments that coordinate the mastery of eye and hand, breath and foot, that makes basketball unfold like poetry. And it is here, I would suggest, where cheers, artfully enough designed, might also enter the game’s calculus and influence outcomes in infinitesimal ways.

4.

My ex-husband told me about the years when he was a young boy, praying in his upstairs bedroom in Rapid City, South Dakota, praying in the bathroom on the toilet, praying in the shower, praying before he went to bed, for the St. Louis Hawks, the Minneapolis Lakers, the Philadelphia 76ers, praying for anyone to beat the Celtics.

Then one day he had this thought—Was some other boy, possibly in New England, praying more fervently in the bathroom, on the toilet, in the shower, praying in bed each day of each year for the Celtics? And weren’t there more of such boys in New England than the unpopulated West? So he wondered, Do the prayers of opposing fans cancel each other out and does one team prosper in the imbalance?
Which caused him to puzzle out if God had a team, and, if so, was he Catholic? Or did God watch over the conflagrations of humans like a dispassionate Zeus, while Athena, Apollo, and Artemis interfered with the outcomes of our mortal play?

5.

When it comes up, because it always seems to come up, what we did back in high school, I'll admit I was a cheerleader. In a small town, everyone has to be at least five things—school newspaper editor, choir, 4-H, drama club, cheerleader—in order for the town to function like a proper town. It could have been worse. Braddock, a smaller town thirty miles away, had only one boy in a senior class with eight girls. Imagine how stressful homecoming was for him. Imagine his prom.

We were growing up in Napoleon, North Dakota, a town of short, fierce people named after a short, fierce emperor. At 5'4", I was a female giant in my tribe. Sometimes, at family gatherings, the grandparents would point at me with pride and say, "Look at her long legs.”


6.

Into the taut spatial and temporal construct of a basketball game, adversaries must step with only this one round ball to share and fight over among ten players, five people per team. Off the court, they may be friends or admirers,
lovers or coworkers, sisters or brothers, but here on the court, everything becomes Either-Or—teammate or opponent, offense or defense—switching back and forth throughout the game, in infinite varieties and configurations.

Above all this, suspended at a lofty height, is the game's other plane, the backboards, the orange rims, and the empty floating nets of the two baskets at either end, to be scored upon or defended. Two empty nets, but only one ball.

The purity of their emptiness drives the action, causing players to pass, to run, to block, to steal, to fumble, to foul, all driven by the urge to fill the opponent's void with the ball in your possession, however momentarily, to feel the swish that will result in a score that will finally count for something.

7.

Those afternoons at Jovita's house, before we were old enough to be cheerleaders, we practiced the high jump, the splits, the hand motions, the sequence of hand claps. We mastered the cartwheel, the back and front flips. We became athletes of cheering.

Our first utterances, the sounds we made in grade school—whispers behind cupped hands, gum pops, sighs, gasps, laughs—grew more organized and filled with intention as we matured. Our sounds made their way to talk, to chatter, to songs; made their way to bad rhymes, then bad poems written in wide-ruled notebooks in sprawls of pink and green ink about bad boys, about boys who didn't notice, about boys who had the moves. Ronnie, Ronnie, he's our man. If he can't do it, no one can.

At last, finally, we were selected, given license, to yell, to jump, to scream along the sidelines. We were put in charge of pep; we were given a rally. People got out of fifth period and were required to file onto the bleachers and listen to us as we jumped and shouted about the importance of pep until the whole student body learned the cheers along with us, so that we could organize their shouting when the critical moment arrived, so that the effect would be multiplied again and again.

The pep rally had its own highs and lows, sobering moments when an
injured hero was acknowledged, when the direness of the situation was explained by the coaches. Then the team was called out to the gymnasium floor in their sports coats and ties, where we led a cheer for them, attempting to fill up our team, contaminate them with pep, so that we could send them into battle brimming with encouragement.

During the chaos of the games, it was our job to transform the untrained and random sounds of the crowd—the frustrated voices shouting *C'mon* or *Air ball* or *Good job*—and harness them inside the amplified crucible of the gym into *De-fense, De-fense, stomp-stomp, stomp-stomp-stomp*, so that the words would break through and rearrange the heartbeats of our champions.

8.

The acoustic landscape of a basketball game is full of noise and cheers, wishes and curses. It’s full of prayers, chants, and incantations, coming from all parties and moving in all directions. Fans scream and call and plead their way into the game. Athletes pray, and trash-talk, and wish, and curse—at each other, at the refs, into the ethers, into the heavens, calling on reserves, calling on favors.

Do these ur-utterances make a space where something happens? Before poems and prayers, there were spells and charms—carefully arranged words selected not only for their figurative and literal meanings, but also for their acoustic value, arranged and vocalized in specific, ritualized ways, so that they would travel as acoustic values through the waves of the world and effect change on the material plane.

9.

I’ll admit I’ve imagined a world where poets would fill stadiums as athletes and rock stars now do. Where droves of people would fight traffic, take time off from work, to stand in line and rush to buy things that are far too expensive—tickets, T-shirts, beer, hot dogs—all the while wishing they
could get back to their seats where they would scream and chant and cheer over a well-turned phrase, over the beauty of an image, the ingenuity of a metaphor.

I’ve imagined people so enraptured with poetry performances that they would recondition their RVs and show up early at stadiums, tailgating in cold parking lots, drinking beer and grilling burgers with total strangers, just so they could prolong the anticipation and the experience of hearing poetry read. Crazy talk, I know. But what is basketball but ten men in shorts, two empty baskets, and their desire to fill it with the one ball allowed in the game?

Imagine: A poem is a closed and finite experiment designed to test the mettle and training, the natural talents and improvisational skills of its participants. The confines of the poem’s structure create the effect of heightened drama, because, unlike life, every moment of a poem reminds us that something is at stake.

10.

“Poetry makes nothing happen,” Auden wrote. But what is the nothing about which Auden speaks? Does he simply mean that poetry doesn’t fix potholes? That the world is made by the doers and that poetry has no effect or value in the material world?

Or when he speaks of the “nothing” that poetry makes happen, does he mean the expression of the rare and intangible thing, the ineffable, which is all around us but difficult to communicate because of its scale, especially with such small instruments as words and actions—like teaspoons measuring oceans. Most days, the magnitude registers as a void. Perhaps this is why prophets go to the desert, why tourists go to the Grand Canyon.

Sometimes, if the world goes silent for a moment we might cognize a small increment that intimates the largeness, but when we attempt to speak of it, the very sounding makes the ineffable move out of view. The words remain to remind us of the larger things that stand behind them in silence.

I’ve felt this absence of presence in rare moments after I’ve given a poetry
reading or taught a class, when I prepare to leave the room, but look around one last time because I feel as if I've forgotten something there.

I've felt this presence, alone in the gym, after a long night of cheering, after things were decided and the game was won or lost—in the humming glare of the fluorescent lights, the gloss of the wax floor, the lingering smell of popcorn.

And I've observed it in the chaos of competition, in moments of near perfection that arrive with such elegance—the high diver's body entering the pool without a splash; the inaudible swish of the perfect jump shot.

Surely this is approaching the ineffable—to enter the water without the water knowing it, to put the ball through the hoop without troubling the net. It gives one hope. And surely this is what poets try for every day, arranging acoustic elegances that will intimate the magnitude. Surely this is what all the fuss—what all the cheering, the crying and gnashing of teeth—is all ultimately about.