Men of autumn

Jim Dietz
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd

Part of the Creative Writing Commons, and the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
https://lib.dr.iastate.edu/rtd/14424

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Iowa State University Capstones, Theses and Dissertations at Iowa State University Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Iowa State University Digital Repository. For more information, please contact digirep@iastate.edu.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BASEBALL AND POETRY</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MEN OF AUTUMN</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BELLEAU WOOD</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLAYING CATCH WITH PAPA</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HARVEST</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GONE</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIOLOGICAL NEEDS</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPRING AND FALL</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE FAITH OF JOB</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE UNFURLED PENNANT</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OBITUARY</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEAR</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMING HOME</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUICIDE SQUEEZE</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I question my soul,</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FADING DAYLIGHT</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VEECK'S IVY</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFTER ROTATOR SURGERY</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TERMINAL VELOCITY</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHECKING THE SIGN</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HANGING CURVES</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
BREAKING FOR SECOND 3 9
SINS OF THE FATHER 4 0
GOING THE DISTANCE 4 2
FIRST PITCH 4 4
In the parks of Santa Domingo 4 5
THE 432: NON-STOP PHILADELPHIA TO DETROIT 4 7
EXCALIBUR 4 8
GONE BALLISTIC 5 1
GEORGE WILL'S OUT AT THE BALLGAME 5 3
LINEUP 5 5
THE END 5 6
Acknowledgements

It is almost cliche to thank everyone in an acknowledgements section. Although this experience has given me the privilege of meeting many wonderful writers and human beings, there are several people whose contributions and support stand far above the rest. In keeping with the subject matter, they are the "All-Star team."

Dr. Neal Bowers, for his support in getting a student without an English background to stick with the program and see that a different background is an asset to a writer.

Drs. Rawson, Wilt, and Kottman, for allowing students to explore their own thoughts and encouraging learning--something not seen in colleges much anymore.

Mr. Boston, for introducing me to the joys of writing back when I was an undergrad. From that time on, writing has always been on my mind.

And, finally, Julie. It takes a special person to put up with a writer under the stress of deadlines and the chaos of what comes after this. Through everything, she was there for me. I hope somehow, someday that her encouragement proves worthwhile.

To all of these people, thanks. I hope this work doesn't disappoint you.
The question is why? Why write about baseball? Well, that all depends on the people involved and their attitudes towards both poetry and baseball. My feelings have grown stronger over the years as I have seen the way writers and the media treat the game. Baseball is slowly becoming a keepsake of East coast intelligentsia, represented by George Will or the late A. Bartlett Giamatti.

This work came out of a desire to keep baseball simple, something everyone can relate to. There is no need to create the theory that baseball is a microcosm of the old American dream, a miniature melting pot, a sport for the smart and sophisticated. Giamatti's writings, like Will's, take the game away from the very people who need it most: you, me, the general public, and anyone who just wants to have fun.

With poetry becoming less mainstream, a poet runs the risk of following the same misguided trail of writers like Giamatti and Will. I can see their trail, leading bright and sunny towards the horizon, but I can't help but think that the horizon hides a bottomless pit. Therefore, I have tried consciously to write as clearly as possible. I want this to be easy to read. The ultimate goal of any writing is to share ideas and entertain. I hope this collection successfully meets the criteria of both these categories.

After all, enjoyment is the name of the game. Civil War soldiers played it in their encampments; professional teams have been around since the early 1870s; and who can forget hearing
"Casey at the Bat" for the first time or the legendary Babe Ruth's called shot off of Charlie Root? But even nostalgia can turn us to the dark side represented by those like Will; baseball is an ever-changing game, for better or worse. No matter how much it changes, though, it is still supposed to be the fan's game.

When the game changes, players and fans have to adapt to the new situation. When Ruth hit more home runs in 1921 than the entire American League, fans were shocked and loved the new dimension raw power added to the game. By the 1950s power was rampant everywhere, and along came Jackie Robinson, Maury Wills, and Lou Brock to electrify the game with pure speed. The '60s saw pitching dominate, even to the point that Bob Gibson's 1.12 ERA in 1968 forced baseball to change the physical size of the pitching mound. And now, over the last twenty years, the sport has entered the age of specialization. There in now a player for every need: closers, middle relievers, 5th starters, pinch runners, and platoon outfielders.

But still, what does any of this have to do with poetry? Poetry, to me, is a way to tell a story in a short way with sudden, quick dramatic bursts. This invites comparison to baseball, where scoring often comes in bursts or rallies separated by long periods of scoreless innings. Most games come down to three or four key pitches out of 200-300. Being similar, poetry offers a good way of bringing out the best of baseball on paper.
To this end, the poems in this work may be divided into two broad types of poems, "Icon" and "Metaphor." The icons represent baseball as mythology, baseball as everything good. They hearken back to childhood dreams of getting to play someday in the major leagues. When I was growing up, I held up several players as idols or heroes, and I was lucky to not have them disappoint me. Now, in 1992, I can look back and regret that times have changed, or I can look fondly on my childhood and think of the endless happiness baseball gave me (and still does).

The section on baseball as metaphor looks at baseball more seriously. Partially from my fanaticism about the game, I see baseball everywhere in everything, especially in the spring when there is no major baseball news available. But baseball is far more pervasive than just being a longing for the next season. Writing poetry about baseball and its relation to other aspects of life has helped me work through my personal feelings about my father's death. Whether the poems are factual or not is immaterial, but I wanted to explore the serious side of the sport. Everywhere a person turns, there's baseball terminology--dating, other sports, work, and so on. These poems aren't meant to depress a reader; instead, my intention is to get the reader to say, "I hadn't thought of that before."

And finally, anything that is ever written down is meant for an audience at one point or another. These poems are meant to be read and enjoyed. If they are, then my task as a writer (and, more importantly, as a baseball fan) has been fulfilled. If not, then this
work will wallow in the basement for eternity, just like my beloved Cubs.
MEN OF AUTUMN

The leaves fall from the trees;
the Wrigley ivy shrivels
into tired, clinging vines,
and Summer has gone again,
leaving behind another season
for a cold winter's dream.

The casket is heavy, but smooth and ridged
like a Hank Aaron Special
as it sits over the pit like a man
in the on-deck circle,
waiting patiently for his turn at the plate.
And when it comes and he is done,
he returns to the dugout, his hole carved
from the stadium's small world,
and waits, hoping that his turn
will have been remembered
after the boys of summer have faded to dust.
BELLEAU WOOD

I camp in the clipped grass,
on the open plain called centerfield,
a graveyard for fly balls,
even when Ruth comes up next inning.
The wool sleeves cling to my body,
sticky from yesterday's rain,
lingering to haunt me once more of you,
a reminder of what once was
a nightmare on a grassy field
with men running
from station to station,
holding close to their position,
crouching
sprinting
diving,
not worried about the dirt
as shots whizzed past,
kicking up dirt and sod,
Crackling ev'ry so often,
and we raced to our dugouts,
and I couldn't think of anyone but you,
lying on that summer field, holding
the red seams of your intestines in,
crying "Oh, God! Oh, God, please!"
as I wait for Combs' fly ball
to come down and strike my glove.
PLAYING CATCH WITH PAPA

--Growing up with a German family, I was taught "Opa" for Grandpa. I couldn't ever say that, so it became "Papa."

Out in the backyard,
I always stood by the plum tree,
in a tiny worn out patch
where I had killed the grass
playing catch so often.

When I was seven, Papa
threw fast, scaring me
with the blazing speed
of his fastball, his size.
I never needed to get my glove
to make that cool "POP" sound.
The plum tree always helped me,
stoping missed catches before
they rolled into the neighbor's yard.

After Little League, though,
his fastball was easy to catch,
and I had to stop throwing
full speed, afraid to break
through slowing reflexes.
And the plum tree was dying, 
victim of some terminal tree disease. 
Its fruit rotted, falling in clumps 
of mush onto the ground, I thought 
about my stepfather preparing 
to cut it down this fall. 
And like the tree's bark, I could see 
my grandfather's hands gnarling, 
slowly withering, waiting 
for their eventual pruning.
HARVEST

Raking leaves puts the feel
of hickory back in my hand,
one more time, after grass
has browned, vines shriveled
against our brick house,
and the sunny soil has hardened
into unforgiving rock.

My grandson shows me the same
energy of little Jim, green
grass stains on the knees,
and a leather mitt on the right
hand, trying to help
Grandpa prune fall's dying dream.

Even the funeral reminds me,
as the pallbearers' hands search,
looking for the tape, finding
none on the aluminum handles,
and wondering when they too will
find October piling leaves
around and over them.
GONE

The stained oak reminded me
of learning to play ball,
the pitches thrown to me as I swung
my Louisville Slugger around
my skinny body, the occasional hit
and watching my father chase the ball
as it rolled into Phelan's yard.
I remember getting older, playing
real ball, and taking a curve deep,
hearing my father yell from the stiff
metal bleachers. The wood of a bat
is so smooth and polished; it was the only
thing I could think of as I watched
them put my father's casket into the ground.
It was cold like Steinbrenner
as the wind came in off the lake,
twenty foot whitecaps
on the murky, gray water.
We came to Chicago,
Brian, Rob, Eric, and me,
to see baseball in the sun,
in the bleachers
with beer and red hots,
the way God Almighty intended it to be.
We drove down and parked
near the nunnery
that never charged for parking.
We walked the three blocks to Wrigley,
Mecca to all true baseball fans,
a pilgrimage to the only Holy Land,
quiet, a mosque before morning prayers.
Feeling the ridged sides of the tickets,
we walked, turning hues of blue,
hunching like Quasimotos,
hoping for some shelter
from The Lake’s icy winds,
roaring down the streets.
When we reached the gate,
it was barricaded.
It should have been open,
game time was in ninety minutes.
We,
and the others of the True Faith,
were puzzled,
but it was just not meant to be.
Because of the too much rain
the night before,
the field was not ready,
but we had no tickets for tomorrow.
Bleak despair rained in Chicago
--so far a journey,
only to be stymied by nature.
We walked back to the car, silent,
and went back to our motel
    and planned,
    and waited,
    for tomorrow to come.
We would return to Wrigleyville,
talk to the scalpers,
and see a game anyway:
we could not be denied our ultimate destiny.
SPRING AND FALL

--The Soviet Union was created since the last Cubs World Series victory and fell before the next one.

When the time's right, we discuss Spring and decide this is the right time.
Finally, the Cubs will win the whole thing and any other result would be a crime.

Sandberg is God at second base;
Maddux is the steadiest pitcher around.
We think this gives us a reasonable case and keeps our hopes resting on solid ground;

but, beyond Maddux, there is nada for pitching and they haven't had a quality third baseman since Santo or Madlock. Even with our bitching it's obvious the general manager has no plan.

No matter how perfect Spring makes them seem, by Fall, even third place is just a dream.
THE FAITH OF JOB

One of these years the Cubs will win
A pennant for all loyal fans;
A city has waited over forty years for this.
Perhaps that time has become the present?

A pennant for all loyal fans,
Something Ernie Banks never received.
Perhaps that time has become the present
For Cub fans to have their glory.

Something Ernie Banks never received--
the recognition for outstanding achievement.
For Cub fans to have their glory
In a park with daylight baseball.

The recognition for outstanding achievement,
Playing in the month of October
In a park with daylight baseball
Against an A.L. team.

Playing in the month of October
The Windy City would be so happy for a win
Against an A.L. team
And all sins of years gone by would be forgotten.
The Windy City would be so happy for a win
(one of these years the Cubs will win),
And all sins of years gone by would be forgotten--
A city has waited over forty years for this.
THE UNFURLED PENNANT

From my catbird's seat,
I look down upon the eastern valley,
domain of my reign as ruler of the year.
Precarious on my peak, afraid of a single stone,
foreshadowing for an avalanche, rolling me
quickly to the valley floor.

Pebble on pebble on stone on boulder
unbalanced my perch and rolled me to the cellar,
others laughing--from prince to lowly pauper.
The valley is dank, the ground rained out
from so many tears of misery, jagged
with the bleached bones of yesterday's princes.

The climb from the muck is difficult, the path winding
and princes falling by the wayside now and then,
burdened by their age, inability,
or the wages of their knights.
Halfway there, a bankrupt Canadian has made
his encampment, exhausted, forced
to be content going only halfway.

The summit grows near and I see the pebbles
being heaped by a petty pretender, trying to dislodge
yet another pirate prince, mighty in his position,  
his short reign limited  
to two summer campaigns.  
I brush the well-met villain aside, ashamed  
of him as pretender to the throne, always  
an also-ran, refused the summit's dizzying height.  
I kick the pirate from my mound, manly in my muscle,  
and regain what is rightly mine, stolen  
in Detroit in 1945 and now returned:  
a dynasty of a thousand years.
OBITUARY

Reading the boxscore
in the old Q.C. Times
tells me exactly
what happened
at that game long ago.
You started so fast,
blazing away with your
speed, your impatience
and lack of control,
an unstable flamethrower
spewing napalm at the plate.
Soon, though, you settled
down and looked ahead
to the later innings
when your lineup would
have put you ahead to stay.
But instead of remaining
in control, somehow
everything slipped away,
taking away your endurance
and leaving me with nothing
except the satisfaction
of remembering you
on my 53rd birthday.
Faded.
Brown with age, or
is it the greased
stains of dirty thumbs?

The photograph sits,
staring at me, two men
looking beyond me, out
into my world, standing
at attention, wearing
the white wool uniforms
of the old Detroit Tigers.
The one man, so obviously
Ty Cobb, is fierce, waiting
to pounce like a cat
on the first thing
to come his way;
his smile
is a snarl, a growl
captured forever in his throat.

And I can't recognize
the other man. Where
his arm used to be, the photo
is torn, a segment missing,
ripped away by age. Even
next to the Georgia Peach,
the man looks old, past
his prime, and he looks
calm, resigned, as if he
isn't paying attention, but is watching
the stands fill, for the first time,
for the last time, the photograph
a memento of a day spent
on the same field as Ty Cobb,
or perhaps a reminder
of what could have been.
The chalked line is my pavement,
running 90 feet towards home,
like the faded white concrete
on the ninety mile drive home.

And when I finally do come sliding,
leg locked under me, towards
the catcher, an armored giant,
I rush in first, safely home,
like barging in the door
the first day of Break.

But Break is over,
and the house is silent,
empty and cavernous like Cleveland's
Memorial Stadium. And I am still
home. Everyone has gone to watch
the drama at the hospital
where my brother lies in a coma;
I take each step slowly, not wanting
to disturb what once was my home.
Instead, I want to see 1974
all over again and have my little
brother round the swingset used as third base,
come towards me, and let me catch
and hold him when he finally comes home.
SUICIDE SQUEEZE

--Donnie Moore, a veteran reliever, killed himself a few years after giving up a home run to Red Sox outfielder Dave Henderson.

Walking down the street,
looking for something
to eat, or use later, perhaps
a sheet of cardboard
or a nickel-deposit bottle,
makes him feel like everyone
is watching, waiting
for good ol' Donnie
to choke again, cough up
another one.

But that was years ago. Why
can't others forgive and forget? He
suffered grueling interviews,
editorials graciously, never
denying the blame, always
congratulating Dave for his
sweet, sweet swing.

The pressure is still there.
Donnie walks and sees traces
of recognition, especially going
past the run-down sports bar.
He can feel the fans
pointing at him from passing
cars or pedestrians staring
as they are walking past,
watching him just like yesterday
and every other day, when he
comes in from the pen
and throws that last fastball
or curve or slider and
winds up giving up
a thousand foot shot
to Dave Henderson, and every
day sees his life fly a little farther
out of the park.
I question my soul,
but it only reflects like the screen
of my battered black and white TV.
Once, once I did not doubt,
did not question.
But when my wife died, all I was left with
was my love of the Cubs and my Faith,
to keep me company in winter and summer.
When I saw the ball, big as a boulder,
bounce through the hands
of a praying Leon Durham, I knew
that if there was a god,
he gave no mercy.
And when Frey left Sutcliffe in,
I knew there was no God.
And after the loss, I went
to my bed and cried, figuring
I had witnessed for my last time
a Cubs team with a chance.
Even the crying gave no relief,
leaving me empty and hollow
like the grounds of Wrigley,
echoing the silence
of the warning track cinders,
vacant now until April.
FADING DAYLIGHT

"Jeff Stone is rapidly reaching the record for career minor league stolen bases." — minor league scouting analysis

No one has heroes anymore.
They aren't real,
just creations of the media,
the pink sugar bubble
of baseball cards and heroes,
popped by steroids, Steinbrenner, and Rose.
But I know a little boy, a quiet boy who,
if you ask, and promise not to tell,
will tell you about a hero. . . .

Hanging, floating in the air,
tottering towards the glove
stuck in a noon-day dream.
The crowd,
silent,
aware,
this could be. . . .
The gloomy clouds
of a September storm front part,
momentarily,
and the sun warms
the flat olive-drab bleachers,
The Lake's gusting winds
falling to the occasional flutter.
Today, of all days,
you said, "Let's play two."
Few twos were left
for a 38 year old from Mobile.
A career,
my childhood,
would end this September.
I sat,
eating a Dave Berg hot dog,
with mustard only (that was all you got)
Not realizing what was happening.
I would—in twenty years.
History, baseball history.
The ball, still tottering
towards the plate comes in,
towards the hitter.
The batter's ankles pivot,
his wrists,
legendary for their snap,
bring the quickly into the strike zone
(in the old days, the bat was just a blur).
The bat touches the ball
and a CRACK explodes into the air,
a sound only a hero can make
and a boy can hear.
The ball flies quickly,
awakening from the dream,
"This could be. . . it could be. . . ."
The leftfielder races to the track,
to Bill Veeck's ivy,
browning from autumn's chill,
and clinging desperately to the brick wall.
The leftfielder leaps, slowly,
glove raised in humble supplication,
praying for the ball to find his glove.
"This could be. . . it could be. . . . HEY! HEY!"
The hitter rounds the bases,
unaware this was it,
a final hurrah,
in a half-empty park.
512 homers, most ever by a shortstop.

When I bought a VCR, I waited
for WGN to televise that moment.
Weeks into the baseball season
I captured it and him for eternity.
I could replay the moment over and over
and admire the swing
and his longing glance after the ball.
VEECK'S IVY

Crowds grow impatient, waiting
for the summer to lure them
with bait of pennants,
of popcorn, of peanuts.
Dark-skinned youths sit in bathing suits,
burning pink under the afternoon sun
as leathered old-timers recall
Mr. Cub, Gabby, and "the Gloamin',"
curled over the green steel bleachers,
waiting for a sign, a miracle
as the ivy greens. Is this the year or yet
another failure for the faithful?
The pinstriped man on the mound
reels and delivers and with the batter's swing,
the hunched old men watch
the ball's trajectory, skipping like a stone on water
down the length of Waveland, kids scurrying
to heave it back. And the old-timers realize today
is another loss, and tonight
is another day's graveyard shift.
And the old-timers sigh, waiting for a miracle,
leathering under the sun
as Veeck's ivy etches deeper
into the old brick wall.
In an age of polymers and plastic,
he is an icon of wooden bleachers
and iron men. An immortal
living in my field of dreams,
blue and white pinstripes
flying,
diving
into the hole,
onto the grass,
over a sliding runner.
Or even propelling around the infield
after the dispatch of the ball
to four kids out on Waveland.
Players come and go, but this iron man
does not rust, does not wither.

Reality shatters my fantasy,
and Sandberg is colorized, no longer
the man of old, but simply old.
The Iron Man is rusting,
a little every year,
his range and speed corroding.
But when I sleep and dream,
he has wings and flies
over the infield, giving me
the security I need
that it is okay
to gracefully grow old.
AFTER ROTATOR SURGERY

The junkball artist leaves
his portrait empty,
a barren white,
sterile.
He concentrates
on the frame, adjusting
and lancing the corners,
aiming for precision scalpels,
skirting the issue,
using only black seams
for his work,
nothing else, relying
on skill and experience
where once ability carried the day.
TERMINAL VELOCITY

As a rookie, abilities transcend humanity.
The Express clocks in at 103 plus,
and time begins to erode everything.
Who cares when you're young and the Heat is hot?

The Express clocks in at 100 plus
in the heat of the Texas night.
Who cares when you're young and the heat is hot,
and the fastball starts to fade?

In the heat of the Texas night,
the power of youth collapses
and the fastball starts to fade,
leaving craft and guts to carry the day.

The power of youth collapses
and the Heat comes in now at 95,
leaving craft and guts to carry the day.
How soon before these leave, too?

And the heat comes in now at 90,
too much for other older players.
How soon before these leave, too,
dying in the sun, glories forgotten,
too much for other older players.
As a rookie, abilities transcend humanity
dying in the sun, glories forgotten
as time erodes everything.
CHECKING THE SIGN

All I could think of was your face,
hiding behind a steel-encased mask.
And all I could do was stare
at every move you made,
every gesture, every wiggle of your pinkie
telling me what I should do,
where and how.
But even as I shook my head, I
didn't mean it as a brushoff,
it was merely confusion
of what my conscience would let me do.
And as I begin my delivery, I know
I will never see you again.
HANGING CURVES

"Love is a madness, if thwarted it develops fast."

--Mark Twain, 1917

All I could do was stand
and admire you
as you flew away from me.
Quickly at first,
like a child in terror,
but as you flew,
I could tell that we were finished,
and that, although two men
had their eyes on you,
you would wind up content
to settle for one of them.
And as you came down from
that emotional high, you floated,
and just for a second, I thought
you would turn away from the suitors
and give me one more chance.
I was wrong, and now
I'm out.
BREAKING FOR SECOND

All I ever wanted was to reach first,
securely on base, not like boys joke
on the junior high playground,
but seriously, trying to go
beyond our relationship,
taking my own path.
But as I tried to move away,
I kept coming back, unable
to leave, afraid I'd
be noticed if I ran off.
And the more space I put between us,
the more I wanted to rush back
until I got the sign.
But you can't stay on first forever,
there can only be one
person to a base. Two
is not allowed.
Scared, my heart twitching
in my thighs, I finally broke for second,
and I didn't look back.
SINS OF THE FATHER

Growing up, fixing things always intrigued me.
My favorite pastime was repairing my battered baseball glove, putting the rawhide stitching back in, tying the ends tight in a double knot.

I kept that glove until my sophomore year of college.
The glove died of old age, battered by abuse from softballs, instead of being used with baseballs as the glove was designed to be.
But by then, my interest in repairing gloves or cars had died, replaced by a seed from my father: the need to excel at biology, so I could be a top-notch doctor.
That nudging went on and consumed me, taking my life and reconstructing it.

My father died last week of cancer but he was happy; his only son was finally a surgeon
after a decade of perseverance.
But now looking at stitches
reminds me of Rawlings
and gloves and seams,
and how I'm still living
my father's dream.
GOING THE DISTANCE

Spectators at games no longer
are interested in baseball;
instead, they brag about income
and sit with ties flapping
in the Lake Michigan wind,
in the chic bleachers,
in my bleachers.

I wish I could quit, stop
loving this game, but I can't.
Like a marathon runner, I
pass my pain threshold in March
and the endorphins kick and deliver,
letting me endure the Yuppies
in the stands, the salary squabbles,
ticket prices, and even hot dogs
that don't come with ketchup.

All I can do is hope
for a better world where
I don't have to explain to my son
that a strike is a pitch,
not a bargaining stance, and that players
once held off-season jobs, playing
the game for love, not money.
I can't tell if these days will return,
but I know there are others,
like me, waiting,
like Lenin's Bolsheviks,
for the day to rise up and right
the wrongs brought upon
my most cherished game.
FIRST PITCH

Rotate the ball, sign: three fingers wiggling outside--knuckler. Into the set, slowly putting the ball into the glove, rotate the seams with smooth fingers, without nails, then rocking from the heels to the toes, forward through the windup, pushing off the rubber, the baseball waltzing towards the plate slowly, in three-four time, taking the hitter by surprise as dirt flies from his cleats as he tries to regain his balance, pulling his arms in, the bat a blur as it comes around like a ceiling fan as the hitter's knees lock and his arms tighten, trying to check his swing, missing the ball, the ball gently landing, with a slight puff of dust into the catcher's mitt.
In the parks of Santa Domingo

little patches of concrete or dirt
surrounded by shanty huts
or chain-link fences, children
from five to thirty gather
at six a.m. to begin the game.

By noon, a crowd has gathered,
creating a foul territory boundary
made of the homeless and unemployed.
As the day goes on, the teams
change, but always the game goes on,
now entering its thirtieth season.
And always the crowds grow, as less
and less can work and the shanties
grow, leaving the game as the only
means off an impoverished isle.

And as the sun sets, again,
the game goes on until
the few street lights no longer
carry the shadow of the ball
to the hitter, the catcher, the fielders.
Eventually, the last players leave
and the die-hard crowd goes home
with the thrill of the 278th inning, filling their insides, and warming their gut where food should have been.
THE 432: NON-STOP PHILADELPHIA TO DETROIT

In the city station, down by Franklin's Flour, the men gathered at the belching metal beast, entering, waiting to leave, waiting until she arrived in Detroit, sometime the next night. The men's suits pastelled into the wooden benches, the suits gray and pinstriped, matched by their hats and shoes. No one was at the station to see them off, and few even knew that these men headlined their papers everyday: Bender, Dykes, Combs, and Plank, who was carefully watching Waddell, semi-retarded, "Rube" to the Athletics' fans, buying sixteen sticks of chocolate for the long ride to Michigan.

When the 4-6-2 Pacific started to belch white, the conductor climbed aboard, and the steam hung in the air as the weather cooled, an early warning of the coming end. August ended in seven days. The men sat in the passenger car, reading, talking, and playing cards, leaving another four game series etched in their leathered faces and smoothed bats.
EXCALIBUR

I had Ted Williams' bat,
the one he hit 3,000 with.
I kept it in my workshop,
where I could maintain
proper atmosphere conditions,
so the wood would last forever,
something to show my grandchildren.
But two years later,
I was at Fenway Park,
when a wrinkled man,
cloaked in black, grabbed me
in the parking lot and told me,
"You must plant the Splendid's Splinter,
return it to its roots," and he was gone,
lost in the crowd of people
leaving the field
after another Bosox victory.
And I went home and held Ted's bat,
my bat, caressing its beauty,
the smooth feel, the narrow, tapered handle.
The bat felt so "right;"
I decided, from the warmth
radiating through the bat
into my hands and my soul,
to plant the Splinter
outside my door, just to see
what would happen
on the old man's prophecy.

The hole dug easily
from the recent rains,
the wind blowing gently, tickling
my sleeves and chilling
the sweat trickling down my chest.
And when the hole was finished,
I took the bat,
the Splendid Splinter's bat,
and gently buried it in the ground.
Slowly, the land moved
and the hole filled itself in.

And I went to bed that night
and could not sleep.
All I could see was that bat,
the rings of the tree
it came from, buried in my yard,
That nightmare wouldn't go away.
Night after night the bat grew
larger, more real, until
I could smell the pine, feel
the vibrations of ball on bat.

In a week, I had had enough.
Early Sunday morning, I took
a shovel and dug up the spot
where I buried the magical Sliver.
Nothing was there, so I began
digging everywhere in my yard,
until it began looking
like those gopher cities
out in South Dakota, but
I couldn't find that wood.
GONE BALLISTIC

"I love to think of the great and godlike Clemens."

-- Rudyard Kipling

With the wind-up, we have ignition,
and the first stage burns
as Clemens rockets the ball home,
a BOOM trailing the smoke
as it roars past the speed of sound.

But a glitch in the programming develops
and Fielder alters the ball's trajectory.
Mission Control is stunned--4,000 launches
this year, and only twice
have malfunctions come up.

The stadium shudders with the sonic thunder
as the smoke trail follows the white hot dot
into the sky,

    inner space,

    outer space,

and beyond the solar system, out
to the fringes of the Milky Way,
another shooting star burning
bright in the nighttime sky.
Clemens cranes his neck upward, admiring the flight of his rocket as Fielder pudges around the diamond. Clemens waits, loading the next rocket into his cannon. The mistake doesn't faze the man; after all, shooting stars rise, burn, and fall. Someday that shot will come down and someone will catch it for the postscript out.
GEORGE WILL'S OUT AT THE BALLGAME

Enjoy with me, if you will,
a day of jubilee, a day for culture
and the ascension of American values
to a higher plane, as Americans join
in travelling to personal Meccas, to merge
self-identities into a spiritual world.
We can eat carmelled popcorn and unshelled peanuts,
or, better yet, sushi in Saint Louiee.
Oh, how I wish this went on, one pitch
every five minutes, to relish the exquisite
wait, while analyzing every option, every stat,
every cloud on the hazy horizon. I wouldn't
care if I ever returned to my five bedroom home,
commuted, or owned a D.A.T. and cellular phone.
So, let us rejoice! Sing the praises
of the host team, but if they lose, the experience
was still transcendental, a shame only
if no critical analyses were made.
So, it boils down to the elegantly simple,
yet deceivingly complex phenomenon of
one
two
three
strikes you are out,
when you are attending
a microcosm of the American way.

P.S. Businessmen in suits and ties have been seen, in increasing
numbers, in the bleachers of Wrigley Field and other baseball
stadiums. Please, help us stop the pain.
LINEUP

Young Chance Bonds Flood Leach
Leach Flood Tinker Young
Bonds Tinker King Law Chance
Tinker King Law Chance
Law King Bench
King Bench
When the season finally ends
and the park near my house
stands forgotten, occupied
only by rabbits and garden snakes,
I am alone, left in the dark
as autumn turns cold.
Winter comes soon, burying
all warmth and life
in a mummy wrap of white.
But I wait. And though the year
has ended, I cross off the days
until mid-February when the majors
start training and the weather here
starts raining, leaving me counting
the days until I hear gravel crushed
under the wheels of cars, the ping
of softballs on aluminum bats,
and the joy of baseball brought back
on the warm summer wind.