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Scores: A Story Collection

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SCORES: A STORY COLLECTION

A Thesis

by

ROBERT PAUL MOREIRA

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2010

Major Subject: Creative Writing Fiction

SCORES: A STORY COLLECTION

A Thesis
by
ROBERT PAUL MOREIRA

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May 2010

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ABSTRACT

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This is a short story collection dealing with the themes of identity, immigration, death, and ethnicity, all juxtaposed with the game of baseball. The critical introduction of this thesis begins with a detailed survey of the baseball fiction genre, with a focus on seminal works and their respective authors, and their place in American literature. I examine major authors outside the genre who have employed baseball (metaphorically, symbolically, synecdochically) in their own works, as well as analyze the effect and evolution of realism in baseball fiction, and the themes of ethnicity and identity. I explore my own works in the hope of determining whether or not they qualify as baseball fiction or rest outside the genre. Finally, I speculate as to the future of baseball fiction, and the possibility for a new subgenre of Latino/Latina-authored baseball fiction.

DEDICATION

This thesis collection is dedicated

to the memory of my father,

Flores Moreira.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work could not have been completed without the guidance and support of my committee chair, Dr. Philip Zwerling and my committee members, Professor José Skinner and Dr. Marci McMahon.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following publications in which the following stories first appeared or are forthcoming: “Cobb and Me” in *Aethlon: the Journal of Sports Literature*, “Scores” in *Storyglossia*, and “Rats” in *The Acentos Review*.

Thanks to Dr. Timothy Morris and Dr. Scott Peterson from *Aethlon* for their vital information and for believing in “Cobb and Me.”

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INTRODUCTION

SWINGING AWAY AT BASEBALL FICTION

I was seven years old in 1983. I remember stuffing my He-Man action figure into my pocket that April 11th morning, and jumping into Dad's green Pinto to catch the game at Dodger Stadium. We picked up my uncle along the way because he had the camera. It was Picture Day at the Stadium, Dad explained, the one day of the season fans got the chance to walk on the field and get close to players, and he was determined to get that shot of me with his favorite Dodger player: the 1981 Rookie of the Year/Cy Young Award Winner; "El Toro," as Jaime Jarrín nicknamed him; Number 34 himself in Dodger Blue—Fernando Valenzuela.

We didn't have tickets, so Dad bought three from a scalper who promised great seats, right behind home plate. We made our way through the turnstiles, past ushers wearing blue vests and straw hats, and I snuck a peek into the concession stands where piles of Dodger Dogs sat warm on the counters. We followed the giddy crowd down cement steps and out onto the field, third base side, where that green grass ocean spread out and ended with the walls the homeruns usually went over.

Dad held my hand. I checked in my pocket to make sure He-Man was O.K.. A long rope sagged on poles from the edge of the bullpen gate in left field, all along the chalk line, over third base and home, all the way to the fence behind home plate. The crowd I was in was one loud murmur of anticipation.

Dad took me by the shoulders and cut through the crowd of Dodger jerseys, all the way to the front of the cordoned area. The sun crept up a little higher, up past the giant scoreboard, up and over the crowning Union '76 sign, forcing me to squint. I saw them coming. They galloped out of the bullpen gate, dressed in white glory. The crowd whistled and cheered, and cameras flared, as blue caps and cleats and numbers came towards us, but I couldn't find Number 34 anywhere. Dad squeezed my shoulders. "Ahí viene," he said in his Cuban-accented Spanish, and pointed out in front of me. "Look! Here he comes. Valenzuela!"

That day, Dad didn't get the photograph of me with Valenzuela. Our seats turned out to be behind home plate, all right—three hundred feet above the batter's box, that is, on the Top Deck. I didn't get a Dodger dog either. But the Dodgers took the game in extras, 4-3, and that was all that mattered. Ever since then, baseball has vested me with my own Jekyll-and-Hyde complex, prone to fits of rage after tough losses (I once threw my terrier across the room after the Dodgers blew a six-run lead, I'm ashamed to admit), and glowing, feel-good ecstasies after any walk-off win. It would be easy to chalk up my amazement with the game to my upbringing in Los Angeles, all the great Dodger teams of the 1980s, Fernando Valenzuela's screwballs and the fan craze known as "Fernandomania," or Kirk Gibson's Game One, game-winning homerun in the 1988 World Series against the powerful Oakland A's. But it's more than that. It has something to do, for instance, with the fact that it's the only game that requires the president of the United States at each inaugural game and that, growing up, I preferred the sound of the voices of Vin Scully and Jaime Jarrín on the radio rather than the images of the game on TV. It's also the sport Cuba is most famous for, and my father was

Cuban. It's that I was named after the Cuban slugger, Roberto Ortiz, who played for the Washington Senators and Philadelphia Athletics in the 1940s and 50s. Finally, it's that baseball was the one pure thing my father and I could talk about without reservations up until the end of his life.

As a writer of fiction, it is the intangibles that have always driven me to pen and paper. Luckily baseball, just as life, has so many of them. It is for this reason that I have chosen to challenge the baseball fiction genre with stories of my own, and to push the field to a more diverse realm in terms of ethnicity and identity. This foray into the genre of baseball fiction has taught me above all else that great baseball stories manage to endure “outside the chalk” and stand the test of time, not because of individual feats or late-inning heroics, but because, as Cordelia Candelaria puts it, “what happens on the diamond resonates beyond the ballpark” (24). The fact that Jackie Robinson went hitless in his Major League debut on April 15, 1947 is insignificant compared to him breaking the color barrier in organized baseball. Baseball stories become memorable when they deal with those universal themes—love, success, and of course, defeat, among others—that speak to our human existence. This is the reason the beleaguered Roy Hobbs of Malamud's *The Natural* is so appealing, for example. We read about an extraordinary homerun hitter, yes. But, in the end, he's just like us, as well.

In this critical introduction to my thesis, I provide a survey of the baseball fiction genre, with a focus on seminal works and their respective authors, and a discussion of their place in American Literature. I examine major authors outside the genre who have employed baseball—metaphorically, symbolically, synecdochically—in their own works. I also analyze the effect of evolving styles and ethnicity in baseball fiction. I evaluate my

own works of fiction and elaborate on their contributions to the genre and other popular fiction. Finally, I speculate as to the future of baseball fiction as a genre, with special commentary from editors from several sports-oriented literary journals, and explore the possibility for a new subgenre of Latino/Latina baseball fiction. The Appendix includes three interviews. The first is by Anne Valente, Assistant Editor for the online journal *Storyglossia*, where I explain to her my own unique views on particular aspects of baseball fiction. The other two interviews were conducted by e-mail with Drs. Scott Peterson and Timothy Morris, Fiction and Nonfiction editors for *Aethlon: Journal of Sports Literature*, respectively, where they were kind enough to answer my inquiries on baseball fiction's past, present, and future.

Scoping the Field: A Survey of Baseball Fiction

“Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America” wrote the historian Jacques Barzun, “had better learn baseball” (Bartlett 869). This adage is as common in baseball lore as, say, Russ Hodges’ immortal call of Bobby Thompson’s “shot heard ‘round the world” in 1951—“The Giants win the pennant! The Giants win the pennant!”—or All-Time Hit Leader Pete Rose’s declaration: “I’d walk through hell in a gasoline suit to play baseball” (Adomites, Cassidy and Herman 94, 243). Each of these quotes addresses the significance of the game of baseball to the average player and aficionado alike. They shed light on the excitement of a winning moment (or, unfortunately, the sting of defeat if you were a Brooklyn fan in ’51), as well as a Ty Cobb-like passion for a game involving little more than chalk lines, bats, and balls. Barzun’s quote, however, goes much further than the confines of the diamond and its

fans, for it addresses a syncretism between not only baseball and the game's adherents, but quantifies the sport by equating it with the essence of what it means to be an American. Baseball—the game, its owners, players, and raucous fans—has grown up alongside the United States embroiled in its own problems, from gambling and salary arbitrations to the recent scourge of performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs); and, like America, has found a way to endure. It is this parallel upbringing amidst the swells of scandal, wars, and stock-market depressions that have served to weave the game of baseball into the very fabric of the American ethos and, inevitably, into the literature of the nation.

From its beginnings, baseball aided itself in its embrace by American writers with the very invention of what is known as the “Doubleday Myth,” where early promoters of the game sought to popularize the sport with the claim that a Union general named Abner Doubleday had invented the game. This, Cordelia Candelaria posits, “planted the kernel of fiction” (13) that slowly found a voice in the American literature of the day, though it was sparse. In fact, many of the great American Romantic authors of the Nineteenth Century—Hawthorne, Melville, Cooper, Irving, Brockden Brown—failed to view the game of baseball as anything of consequence to American life, let alone their respective works, primarily due to the fact that baseball was not considered a gentleman's sport at the time. None of these authors, writes John Lauricella, “imaginatively possessed baseball as a feature of American life that they could use in their respective fictions” (29). It would take a new approach and attitude towards leisure activities in order for baseball to find a place in the scope of American literature.

Two major American authors that first mentioned baseball in serious prose include Walt Whitman and Mark Twain. In the wake of the Transcendentalist Movement, Whitman found a kinetic energy inherent in baseball and other leisure activities which he firmly believed every man, woman, and child should partake in:

I see great things in baseball. It's our game—the American game. It will take our people out-of-doors, fill them with oxygen, give them a larger physical stoicism. Tend to relieve us from being a nervous, dyspeptic set. Repair these losses, and be a blessing to us (Whitman).

And yet another poignant example of Whitman's interest in the game:

That's beautiful: the hurrah game! Well—it's our game; that's the chief fact in connection with it: America's game; has the snap, go, fling, of the American atmosphere; it belongs as much to our institutions, fits into them as significantly, as our constitution's laws; is just as important in the sum total of our historic life (Nebraska-Lincoln).

One can instantly see the significance Whitman gives to baseball as an activity in both of these passages, mentioning it alongside the Constitution of the United States and calling the game “America's game.” By fusing baseball with that strong post-Civil War urge of expansion and Manifest Destiny, Whitman sought to encourage all Americans to partake in leisure activities such as baseball, and with his language, stimulate that sense of community and solidarity needed in post-Civil War America.

Mark Twain's inclusion of baseball in his fiction took the game from Whitman's prose images of “pastoral perfection” (Morris, *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction* 7) to an ironic blend of social commentary and political criticism. “Like Whitman,” Lauricella writes, “Twain knew baseball...[and] recognized baseball's competitive vigor a manifestation of...America's distinctive vitality...‘the very symbol...of the drive...of the booming nineteenth century’” (31). For Twain, baseball

represented that one untainted “American” activity that separated the United States from other countries, a personification of that ruthless drive behind American industry and power. For this reason, in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, first published in 1889, Twain had his protagonist, Hank Morgan, replace the jousting tournaments in Camelot with the game of baseball. A backwards colonization of sorts, Twain wished to portray the foreign American as the sole instructor of the royalty. Using satire, Twain played on the strict rules of baseball, rules simple-minded knights were incapable of comprehending, such as their refusal to remove their armor during ball games, or their violent nature towards an appointed umpire whose “first decision was usually his last” (Lauricella 33). In baseball, both Whitman and Twain found a viable conduit for American self-expression, so that the inclusion of the game granted a nascent importance to that activity in the public eye; and, even more importantly, managed to marry baseball and its leisure advantages to the developing United States. More than just backdrop or sport, baseball supplied these authors with a malleable social tool, with its own rules and heroes and fools, whereby a budding American nation could be studied and, if need be, criticized.

In 1888, The *San Francisco Examiner* published a poem titled *Casey at the Bat* by a young newspaper reporter named Ernest Lawrence Thayer, and baseball literature would never be the same thereafter. The 52-line poem rehashed the Humpty Dumpty rhyme of old (Candelaria 22), placing the “Mighty Casey” of the Mudville team up against an unknown pitcher, with the game on the line, runners on second and third:

The sneer is gone from Casey’s lip, his teeth are clenched
in hate;
He pounds with cruel violence his bat upon the plate.
And now the pitcher holds the ball, and now he lets it go,

And now the air is shattered by the force of Casey's blow.

Oh, somewhere in this favored land the sun is shining
bright;
The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are
light,
And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children
shout;
But there is no joy in Mudville—mighty Casey has struck
out (Staudohar 3).

Casey at the Bat, above all else, and beyond its amazing imagery mixed in with prosaic language, gave baseball literature its first glimpse of an imperfect, yet lovable character in Casey. It supplied the type of protagonist that would lose traction in the early twentieth century, when baseball stories were Bildungsromans, stories of developing, maturing characters, and strictly relegated to juvenile, pulp-variety fiction. Authors of these types of works included Gilbert Patten (*Frank Merriwell Series*), Ralph Henry Barbour (*Weatherby's Inning*, 1906), Owen Johnson (*Lawrenceville Stories*), and Zane Grey (*The Redheaded Outfield and Other Stories*, 1920). These stories supplied the budding genre with perfect heroes and predictable, didactic plots geared towards “vicarious self-projection” (Candelaria 19) rather than “true” literature, where fans of the game could fulfill their illusions of baseball grandeur by reading such stories, as well as learn the proper social etiquette of the time. But even with that said, the importance of these texts should not be overlooked. As Timothy Morris suggests in *Making the Team*, and a point I will discuss later in this introduction, these same texts may have been completely ignored by the literary community of the time, but the “cultural work” they have done continues to this day in terms of gender constructs, race, and acculturation (9).

No survey of baseball fiction would be complete without discussion of the stories of Ringgold Wilmer Lardner, more commonly known as Ring Lardner, a sportswriter for

the Chicago Tribune in the 1920s. His “trenchant irony” snatched baseball from the confines of juvenile literature, and ultimately saved and reinvented the genre (Candelaria 3). All of his baseball stories dealt with realistic themes, where more often than not pivotal characters were naïve, illogical, and thrust into the baseball world, forced to learn the rules of the game, as well as life, while coping with their own shortcomings, all at the same time. His fiction steered away from the typical, triumphant, pulp-type endings and, like *Casey at the Bat*, explored imperfect characters and the outcome of their decisions. *Alibi Ike*, one of Lardner’s great baseball stories, shows us a classic example of the quintessential, inexperienced character that populates many of his baseball writings:

“Alibi Ike” was the name Carey wished on him the first day he reported down South. O’ course we all cut out the “Alibi” part of it right away for the fear he would bust somebody.

He ast me one time, he says:

“What do you call me Ike for? I ain’t no Yid.”

“Carey give you the name,” I says. “It’s his nickname for everybody he takes a likin’ to.”

“He mustn’t have only a few friends then,” says Ike. “I never heard him say ‘Ike’ to nobody else” (Lardner 295).

Lardner’s use of the vernacular and dark humor in his stories places him alongside Mark Twain in terms of style. But it was his break from the feel-good storyline to the “darker, more disturbing” side of baseball, as Timothy Morris holds, that solidified him as a seminal writer in baseball fiction (2). Without a doubt, a major contributing factor to the success of Lardner’s prose had to have been the disillusionment he felt following the famed “Black Sox Scandal of 1919,” during which eight members of the White Sox baseball team were accused of throwing the World Series. An indelible mark came upon Lardner and his writing after that fall from grace from such baseball icons as “Shoeless”

Joe Jackson. A mark that would start the trend of narrative realism in baseball fiction for many years thereafter.

In 1952, Harcourt Brace and Company published *The Natural* by the Jewish author Bernard Malamud, the story of an embattled baseball player named Roy Hobbs; and even though the inclusion of baseball in the storyline typified the novel as “bad literature” in the eyes of some reviewers (Morris, *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction* 154), the book still managed to astonish critics with its depth and style, so much that *The Natural* is considered by many to be the perennial baseball novel. Like James Joyce in his masterpiece, *Ulysses*, Malamud built *The Natural* on a “framework of allusion” (Candelaria 65), working on established archetypes that included fertility, death, and heroism, educed within an all-around mythic structure, with contemporary characters and locales, that “informs the reader of the universality of Roy’s story” (Candelaria 67). In addition to the avant-garde structure for the time, Malamud employed magical realism with “Wonderboy,” Roy Hobbs’ supernatural bat that hit homeruns without fail. Critics agree that the genius of *The Natural* lay in its use of allusion, as well as Malamud’s success in taking baseball fiction through what critic Arthur Cooper calls the “Allegorical Stadium” via a tableau of irony, mythopoeia, and magical realism (Candelaria 46).

If Ring Lardner set the standard for narrative realism and the use of vernacular with his baseball fiction, it was Mark Harris who developed it further. Harris’ works include the “Henry Wiggen Stories,” a metafictional tetralogy, though major praise is reserved for two novels of that collection, *The Southpaw* (1953) and *Bang the Drum Slowly* (1956). Told in the first-person point of view (again, like Lardner), Harris

epitomized the role of the beleaguered player-author—in this case, pitcher Henry Wiggen—and his everyday struggles on and off the baseball field.

Three more recent authors have made substantial contributions to the baseball fiction genre. Among these are Pulitzer-prize winning writer Philip Roth, author of *The Great American Novel* (1995), which deals with the imaginary Patriot League. Robert Coover's even more daring novel, *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc.* (1971), which is yet another book that seeks to break the boundaries of conventional baseball fiction, detailing an imaginary league inside an accountant's head. Finally, author Jay Neugeboren's baseball and sports-oriented novels, including *Sam's Legacy* (1974) and *Listen to Ruben Fontanez* (1997), have constantly given a voice to minority characters, including Latinos. All three of these contemporary authors have revolutionized baseball fiction in their own respective ways, searching for ways to herald the genre into a new plain of narrative exploration. In terms of anthologies, Paul Staudohar's *Baseball's Best Short Stories* (1995) showcases some of the best baseball fiction, including stories by Ring Lardner, Frank Deford, Michael Chabon, and Stuart Dybek. Sports-oriented literary journals of note include *Aethlon: the Journal of Sports Literature*, *NINE*, and *Elysian Fields Quarterly*.

Through the years, baseball literature has grown in leaps and bounds from that fledgling child of juvenile literature to an experienced citizen of the literary world. In the process, through the powerful work of all the authors discussed earlier, the genre has managed to add to its literary merit and, as a result, cannot be ignored. Time and again, throughout United States history, authors have turned to baseball, for they have understood the significance of “the game as both a lamp and mirror [that] reflects the

zeitgeist of...society” (Candelaria 2). Baseball, like human beings and the institutions they uphold, is imperfect. Growth alongside America has solidified the game as a perfect microcosm, and it continues to provide authors with that unbridled frame of reference for social commentary.

The Majors: Baseball in Popular Fiction

Several major American authors outside the baseball fiction genre have included the game (or aspects of it) in their works. F. Scott Fitzgerald, for instance, who chided his contemporary and friend, Ring Lardner, for writing about “a few dozen illiterates playing a boy’s game,” still managed to catch a glimpse of the importance of the game in his era, and thus, included one of the most famous baseball allusions of all time in his opus, *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, Ring). Baseball allusions can also be found in William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, as well as in several works by Ernest Hemingway. Thomas Wolfe uses baseball as a metaphor for the human need to come “home” in *You Can’t Go Home Again* (1940). In short fiction, contemporary authors Tobias Wolff, T. Coraghessan Boyle, Michael Chabon and others, have all found places for the game of baseball in their own works. All of these authors have managed to see beyond strikes and balls, fair and foul balls, and have glimpsed the depth of the unspoken in the game, in order to flesh-out their respective characters, to comment on society at large, and deliver moving prose. What follows is an analysis of three canonical authors—Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner—and their unique inclusions of baseball in their works of fiction.

Francis Scott Fitzgerald, America's quintessential author of the early twentieth century, did not care much for baseball, nor did he deem it a subject any serious writer should waste his time on. He wrote in his famous eulogy for his friend, Ring Lardner, that baseball was "a boy's game, with no more possibilities in it than a boy could master, a game bounded by walls which kept out novelty or danger" (Fitzgerald, *Ring*). Scholars even agree that Fitzgerald's tragic character of Abe North in *Tender is the Night* (2003) was indeed modeled after Ring Lardner. Yet for all his apathy towards the sport, Fitzgerald still evinced some interest in the essence of baseball, as exemplified in his mention of the game in *The Great Gatsby* (1995). In the classic baseball allusion in *Gatsby*, Nick shows an inquisitive nature with Gatsby just after meeting the mysterious, human-mollar-cuff-linked Meyer Wolfsheim:

"Who is he anyhow—an actor?"
 "No."
 "A dentist?"
 "Meyer Wolfsheim? No, he's a gambler." Gatsby
 hesitated, then added coolly. "He's the man who fixed the
 World Series back in 1919."
 "How did he happen to do that?" I asked after a minute.
 "He just saw the opportunity."
 "Why isn't he in jail?"
 "They can't get him, old sport. He's a smart man"
 (Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* 77-78).

There have been various interpretations of this scene. In the context of Nick as a character, Fitzgerald may have been trying to juxtapose the "fixed" nature of baseball with that of Nick's unstable bonds profession. Lauricella, however, argues that Fitzgerald, the genius writer that he was, saw much more to it than that. "Fitzgerald," Lauricella says, "recognized [baseball's] importance to his readers and calculated the scene's rhetorical effect" (Lauricella 44). It is clear that Fitzgerald could have chosen a

different sport, but he chose baseball because of the effect he knew the allusion would have on his readers after the Black Sox Scandal of 1919 discussed earlier. It is common knowledge that Fitzgerald even wrote a second baseball scene which took place at the Polo Grounds, but which he ultimately reworked into the existing Chapter VII.

Ernest Hemingway never wrote a baseball story per se, but the game continually found a home in his best prose. It was the one American sport he identified with, since he found football “inequitably brutal” (Lauricella 98) and many a time compared baseball to his profession of writing: “They can’t yank a novelist like they can a pitcher. A Novelist has to go the full nine, even if it kills him” (Ernest Hemingway Quotes). To say that Hemingway had an infatuation with sport would be an understatement, since he is best known for his stories concerning bullfights, big-game hunting, and fishing. “In Hemingway’s fiction,” writes Cordelia Candelaria, “sport function[ed] as a metaphor for life and for one’s style of coping with it” (55). For Hemingway, sport represented obstacles that characters were forced to overcome and, thus, expose their innermost strengths, perhaps even weaknesses.

Two of Hemingway’s most memorable baseball allusions can be found in some of his best pieces of fiction. In *Three-Day Blow*, for instance, a short story dealing with two male friends, Nick and Bill, coming together in a snowed-in log cabin after a breakup, the conversation quickly turns to baseball as the two warm by the fire:

“Got anything to read?” [Nick] asked.

“Only the paper.”

“What did the Cards do?”

“Dropped a double header to the Giants.”

“That ought to cinch it for them.”

“It’s a gift,” Bill said. “As long as McGraw can buy every good ball player in the league there’s nothing to it.”

“He can’t buy them all,” Nick said.

“He buys all the ones he wants,” Bill said. “Or he makes them discontented so they have to trade them to him.”

“Like Heine Zim,” Nick agreed.

“That bonehead will do him a lot of good.”

“He can hit,” Nick offered.

“He’s a sweet fielder, too,” Bill said. “But he loses ball games.”

“Maybe that’s what McGraw wants him for,” Nick suggested.

“Maybe,” Bill agreed.

“There’s always more to it than we know about,” Nick said (Hemingway, *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* 86).

Out of context, this exchange between Nick and Bill may seem downright boring, no more than chitchat between friends. However, if one comes to understand the baseball both Nick and Bill are referring to as a metaphor for Nick’s failed relationship, the excerpt’s meaning quickly begins to surface. Hemingway used a rhetorical technique called “synecdochic naming” in which he “dropped” the name of a real-life figure into his fictive narrative to serve a symbolic end (Lauricella 85). In this case, it happened to be Heine Zimmerman, the New York Giants outfielder who was accused of corruption charges around the same time as the famous Black Sox Scandal discussed earlier. This juxtaposition of a relationship with baseball serves, at least in Hemingway’s prose, to show that, just as a nine-inning game, the outcome of a relationship is uncertain. By talking baseball, both Nick and Bill exemplify their manhood, while at the same time are forced to deal with the consequences of unknown results.

The Old Man And The Sea contains a single baseball allusion—“The Great Dimaggio”—but it is more than enough to show the strength of the human spirit through the protagonist, Santiago. Over and over, in mantra-like fashion, Hemingway has Santiago, the old Cuban fisherman, evoke the name of his baseball idol, Joe Dimaggio,

New York Yankees center-fielder from 1936 to 1951. Even though Santiago knows full well that Dimaggio is imperfect with “the bone spur in his heel” (Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* 68), the Yankee great still stands as a symbol of human resilience and the insuperable human spirit for Santiago which, as Lauricella states, allows the fisherman, at least for the time being, to “metaphorically postpone death” (101). Baseball also serves as the one topic that Santiago and Manolin can speak about when the world gets too heavy around them:

“Tell me about baseball,” the boy asked him.
 “In the American League it is the Yankees as I said,” the old man said happily.
 “They lost today,” the boy told him.
 “That means nothing. The great DiMaggio is himself again” (Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* 21).

In this exchange, Santiago instills in Manolin the ideal that defeat is but a temporary setback. The old man’s vicarious relationship with Joltin’ Joe is tantamount to a guarantee that a new day—a new ball game, if you will—will grant him a new opportunity to shine, at least until the end of his days.

William Faulkner touches upon baseball briefly in *The Sound and the Fury*, as well, relying on the power of subtext to shed light on the emotions of his characters. In a scene involving an already disillusioned narrator, Jason Compson, after losing his money invested in the cotton trade, Faulkner confronts him with a surefire bet on the Yankees and the 1928 World Series:

“Well,” Mac says. “I reckon you’ve got your money on the Yankees this year.”
 “What for?” I says.
 “The Pennant,” he says. “Not anything in the league can beat them.”
 “Like hell there’s not,” I says. “They’re shot,” I says.
 “You think a team can be that lucky forever?”

“I don’t call it luck,” Mac says.
 “I wouldn’t bet on any team that fellow Ruth played on,” I says. “Even if I knew it was going to win.”
 “What you got against Ruth?” Mac says.
 “Nothing,” I says. “I haven’t got any thing against him. I don’t even like to look at his picture” (Faulkner 252).

Subtextually, the conversation between Mac and Jason works on different levels.

Although the reference to baseball here is miniscule compared to, say, *The Old Man and the Sea*, Jason’s distrust in the sure-bet 1928 Yankees is obviously impacted by his earlier loss in the cotton market. Secondly, as Lauricella points out, this baseball reference can be construed as foreshadowing the problems with the stock market in the late 1920’s (53). Finally, *The Sound and the Fury* is after all set in the South (albeit an imaginary one), so Lauricella claims that Jason’s dislike of Ruth may have had something to do with the unfounded rumors of the slugger’s African-American blood ties (59).

The incorporation of baseball in the above respective fictions showed the possibility of baseball as a subject without resorting to full-out, Bildungsroman stories of the pulp-variety mentioned earlier. Baseball could be mentioned in serious literature, have depth, and mean more than just balls and strikes.

Triple-Play: Style, Ethnicity, and Identity in Baseball Fiction

Prose styles have played a major role in lifting baseball fiction from lowbrow, juvenile-type literature to writing of more literary merit. The focus of this section will be various authors and their styles, and how these have impacted the genre. Along the same lines, I will also discuss ethnicity and the way in which minorities have been portrayed in popular baseball fiction, including women and gay/lesbian characters. All of these

elements have served to take baseball fiction in new directions, and to broaden its scope and landscape into an all-inclusive genre that seeks to truly mirror mainstream America.

Without a doubt, beginning with Thayer's *Casey at the Bat* in 1888 and refined in the early twentieth century by Lardner's stories, the advent of Narrative Realism saved baseball fiction from eternal pulp condemnation. Lardner's gritty, down-to-earth characters, as well as his use of colloquial vernacular, changed the baseball fiction genre completely, granting it a fresh voice fully aware that baseball, like life, is not perfect, no matter how many rules the game must abide by. Moreover, Lardner's consistent use of the first-person point-of-view was yet another aspect of his writing that is often overlooked. He managed to take his journalistic style and morph it into a new mode of fiction writing that would influence many who would come after him, most notably Ernest Hemingway.

Thomas Wolfe was another baseball fiction author with his own unique writing style. In *You Can't Go Home Again*, Wolfe follows Lardner's trend of realism, though his prose bears hints of impressionism. Wolfe's baseball allusions in the novel serve to provide objective correlatives to major themes and psychological states, rather than actual events and players, as Lauricella states:

When Wolfe expands his field of vision...the baseball content seems to become more self-consciously symbolic rather than representative of what baseball is or can be in itself (68).

Wolfe's prose style can be said to have been an evolution of Lardner's incisive realism, seeking to combine Whitman-styled idylls of baseball with more practical characters and settings.

The trend of magical realism in baseball fiction is another prose style that is deserving of mention. Most recently, the works of W.P. Kinsella are by far the most famous, with his novel, *Shoeless Joe* (1982), or its more popular Hollywood movie version entitled *Field of Dreams* (1989). Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association* has also been associated with magical realist and postmodern trends, though critics more often than not place this particular work in the fabulist realm due to the author's experimentation with form and time sequencing. But the father of magical realism in terms of baseball fiction was Bernard Malamud with *The Natural*. His ethnopoetic structure similar to Joyce's *Ulysses*, as well as his mythopoetic language and magical elements, make for a work that continues to stand as one of the best-respected contributions to American Literature:

[Roy's] impulse was to knock the dirt out of his cleats but he refrained because he did not want to harm his bat in any way. Waiting for the pitcher to get set, Roy wiped his palms on his pants and twitched his cap. He lifted Wonderboy and waited rocklike for the throw.

He couldn't tell the color of the pitch that came at him. All he could think of was that he was sick to death of waiting, and tongue-out thirsty to begin. The ball was now a dew drop staring him in the eye so he stepped back and swung from the toes.

Wonderboy flashed in the sun. It caught the sphere where it was biggest. A noise like a twenty-one gun salute cracked the sky. There was a straining, ripping sound and a few drops of rain spattered to the ground. The ball screamed toward the pitcher and seemed suddenly to dive down at his feet. He grabbed it to throw to first and realized to his horror that he held only the cover. The rest of it, unraveling cotton thread as it rode, was headed into the outfield (Malamud 80).

The Natural is a great example of the classic antihero, in this case Roy Hobbs, striving to resolve his shortcomings in a world that demands too much, and at the end of the novel,

takes it all away without remorse. As a result, Hobbs as a character becomes someone readers can empathize with and come to care for.

Turning to ethnicity in baseball fiction, the subject is far from a fat, lazy batboy on the genre's bench. It is a topic that has been a vital participant in the evolution of the genre, in fact, though more often than not its role has been overlooked by authors, sometimes even readers. Cordelia Candelaria states the following:

Baseball fiction reflects, illumines, and sometimes even anticipates the cycles of change in American society and its values...serious baseball literature metonymically captures, with dramatic precision, the reality of American life, history, and lore (102).

Like the sport itself, baseball fiction has also taken its time to adapt to that “reality of American life” Candelaria speaks of. The genre has forever been concerned with assimilation to American life and standards (Morris, *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction* 3) more than anything, though the balance of power has never tipped in favor of minorities. In Lardner's stories, for example, the rookie or “busher” is always looking from the outside in, unsure of his place on the team, until he learns the rules of comportment by which his teammates abide. Along those lines, immigrants and minority characters in the genre, Latin American characters especially, have been relegated to clichéd, stereotyped roles and served for little else than comical relief. No one can forget the classic scene on the mound in the movie *Bull Durham* (Shelton), between José (played by Rick Marzan), the voodoo-practicing, thick-accented Latin American player, and flame-throwing pitcher, Nuke LaLoosh (played by Tim Robbins):

JOSÉ
Don't throw anything to me—my girlfriend put a curse on my glove.

NUKE

I'll take the curse off the son of a bitch!

JOSÉ

Then you got to cut the head off a live rooster.

NUKE

Shit.

Bull Durham was billed as a romantic comedy. But, according to Timothy Morris, in the scope of baseball fiction, the genre is “frequently convinced that Spanish does not really exist, that speakers are subhuman, incapable of rational language” (Morris, *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction* 5). *The Hector Quesadilla Story* by T. Coraghessan Boyle, originally published by the Paris Review, a literary journal known for highbrow literature, is a great example of this tendency in baseball fiction to use Spanish sparingly and, worse than that, make fun of Latin American-born characters:

He was no Joltin’ Joe, no Sultan of Swat, no Iron Man. For one, his feet hurt. And God knows no legendary immortal ever suffered so prosaic a complaint. He had shinsplints too, and corns and ingrown toenails and hemorrhoids...and the once-proud knot of his frijole-fed belly had fallen like an avalanche. Worse: he was old (Staudohar 375).

It is interesting to see the comparisons Boyle makes between his fictional baseball player and real-life participants of the game, as well as his choice of words here. His allusions to “Joltin’ Joe” (Joe Dimaggio) and “Sultan of Swat” (Babe Ruth) are employed to deflate Hector’s athletic image, for example. Moreover, Boyle’s negative description—“his frijole-fed belly”—may sound comical at first, but it also manages to ridicule Hector’s Latin-American heritage, as does the surname “Quesadilla,” the Spanish word for a cheese taco. Though Boyle uses tight prose to portray an aging baseball player trying his best to shine one last time in *The Hector Quesadilla Story*, the derogatory

descriptions do not seem necessary, let alone worthy, of a piece that has been lauded by many as true literary fiction.

This unfortunate representation of minorities in baseball fiction has led to the exclusion of women and gay/lesbians as well. There has been little to no writing dedicated to the contributions to the game from women players such as Alta Weiss of the Weiss All Stars of Cleveland in the 1920s; or Jackie Mitchell, the only woman to have ever struck out both Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig (Adomites, Cassidy and Herman 113); or the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, who played between 1943 to 1954, made famous by Penny Marshall's movie, *A League of Their Own* in 1992. No mention of *Las Debs* of Corona, California, either, or any of the other Latina baseball teams of the same era (Alamillo 200). In baseball fiction, women have either been the objects of affection or the consolers of male protagonists, hardly ever the centers of attention. More recently, authors such as Michael Bishop and Peter Lefcourt have dared push baseball fiction further by exploring homosexuality in *Brittle Innings* (1994) and *The Dreyfuss Affair: A Love Story* (1993), respectively, though reception to this type of literature has been lukewarm, to say the least, thereby confirming that there is still a long way to go.

As a heterosexual sport, American baseball has indeed, as Fitzgerald claimed, resisted "novelty or danger" by failing to broach these subjects; and it is worrisome to think, as Timothy Morris argues in terms of baseball fiction's cultural implications, that "for the sports-loving American boy, such fictions have provided a model for the construction of adult sexuality" (Morris, *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction* 79). Luckily, this xenophobic trend has been changing steadily in the last thirty years, both on and off the field. In professional baseball, for example, Japanese

pitcher Eri Yoshida and Tiffany Brooks of the United States have both received baseball contracts from minor league teams recently (Griebenow; Associated Press). In terms of minority portrayals, movies such as *The Perfect Game* (Dear) have emerged to celebrate the contributions to the game by Latin American players. As for women, *Bull Durham* is a movie that ultimately tells the story of Annie Savoy, played brilliantly by Susan Sarandon, a strong female character in a leading role, who deals with men on her own terms; and, even more importantly, who knows baseball better than the men surrounding her. These are all positive indicators that, through different art forms, the ethos of baseball is moving away from its male-centered, ethnocentric ideals in terms of women and minorities. My goal is to continue this trend of minority empowerment with my story collection, and to urge other Latino/Latina writers to do the same.

Swinging Away: My Contributions to the Genre

In my interview for the online journal *Storyglossia*, Issue 38, I made a point of delineating the distinction between a “baseball story” and a story that includes baseball (Valente). My stories fit the latter description. This is not an attempt to distance myself from baseball fiction by any means, but involves my desire to contribute something new to the genre. I want to go beyond that tired tautology and solipsism of early baseball fiction, as well as conventional stereotypes bound in assimilation and Bildungsroman stories of early pieces, and write stories that explore identity by using baseball as a recurring, unifying motif and theme, and portray a game embraced by Latinos/Latinas just as much as white Americans. By mixing the styles of my favorite authors—the narrative realism of Ring Lardner; the gritty, dirty verisimilitude of Cuban author Pedro

Juan Gutiérrez; the minimalism of Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff; the synecdochic emblems and persistent characters of Hemingway; the long, sometimes elegiac sentences of Fitzgerald and Wolfe—I have ventured out into the threshold of baseball literature and put it all together to formulate a unique voice, hopefully worthy of a wide audience.

In my first story, *ManRam the Great*, I comment on the user of Performance-Enhancing Drugs (PEDs) in Major League Baseball. I first ran across this idea in Lardner's story *Sick 'Em*, where a pitcher is described as being “full o' dope” (234). Then, by chance, I happened upon the story of Doc Ellis, the Pittsburgh Pirates' pitcher who supposedly threw a no-hitter in 1970 under the influence of LSD. Using these as inspiration, my story centers around an unnamed author introducing PEDs to his teammate named Lee. In the story, Lee becomes addicted to the unnamed drug, and the narrator, sobering up as the story progresses, is amazed at the new “being” he has created in an addicted Lee. This story uses synecdochic allusion, specifically to Los Angeles Dodgers' left-fielder, Manny Ramírez, nicknamed “ManRam”, though the unnamed narrator in the story uses that term to refer to both the drug and the baseball player. The purpose of this is to show the significance the addicted Lee has granted his drug. *ManRam the Great* also speaks to the disillusionment of fans with sports' heroes and, in a wider sense, institutions as a whole.

My second piece, *The Deuce*, is written in the style of Eudora Welty's famous piece, *Why I live at the P.O.*, and is told in the first-person by a bigoted narrator. I consider this my tribute to Ring Lardner, since my use of vernacular and slang translated into great interaction between all the baseball players in the story. In this piece, I attempted to comment on various themes, such as immigration (specifically, Cuban

immigration), politics, and the role Latin players have manifested as baseball players.

The Deuce is a play-on-words title, alluding to the nickname given to a curveball and its confusing nature, especially to anyone having to hit it. In the recent wake of Cuban defectors into the Major Leagues and their contributions to baseball, most recently shortstop Alexei Ramírez of the Chicago White Sox, first-baseman Kendry Morales of the Anaheim Angels, and phenom left-hander, Aroldis Chapman, of the Cincinnati Reds, *The Deuce* seems an appropriate first-person satire meant to cast a light on the importance of Latin American players in the sport.

Cobb and Me, winner of the 2009 Best Graduate Fiction Award from the Teachers Association of Creative Writing Teachers (TACWT), details the abusive home of Jaime, a teenage baseball player, who, through the course of his and his mother's abuse, comes to imagine the doppelganger of his assigned baseball player, Ty Cobb. The story is in the first-person; and, like Ray Kinsella in W.P. Kinsella's novel *Shoeless Joe*, Jaime hears the voice of Cobb willing him into action, though Jaime more than often seems to let Cobb down. Through the course of the story, it is unclear whether Cobb truly exists, though Jaime speaks to him as he would his best friend, Sal. In the end, through a slight shift in point-of-view, readers come to understand that Cobb is no more than a figment of Jaime's imagination, and it is Jaime who loses his mind in the grief that follows. *Cobb and Me* deals with many themes, including gender and sexuality, as well as death and insanity.

Rats is a short story that contains but one baseball reference. A minimalist piece in its entirety, I set out to construct the piece on Raymond Carver's premise that "too often 'experimentation' is a license to be careless, silly, or imitative in the writing" (*On*

Writing 47). *Rats* is kitchen-sink realism at its plainest, though at the end I dared take some liberties and imbued the piece with my own version of Pedro Juan Gutiérrez's technique of "dirty realism," allowing my characters to explore their sexuality and to drive the story's tension. The story is of a young writer, Jaime, searching for a break in a world where his father is fading, his mother is complacent, and those he loves tend to let him down. The baseball reference serves to illustrate the strong bond between Jaime and his father. His new neighbor, Cassie, an overweight and free-spirited teenager, is a strong-willed female character meant as the antithesis of Jaime in both comportment and psychology, and who ultimately offers him some semblance of normalcy in a world with walls too high to climb up and over.

In *Scores*, the next story in the collection, my goal was to abandon conventional, linear structure and to try something completely different. The strongest influence came from Hemingway's novelette, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, where the long rhapsodies of stream-of-consciousness shed light on the main character and his failing health. In my story, a young man named Tito struggles both physically and mentally after an accident leaves him bereft of his legs, but even worse, kills the parents of his girlfriend, Luvy, all because he is listening to the Astros' game on the radio and not paying attention. Through a series of vignettes and stream-of-consciousness interludes, a story of loss and redemption emerges, where Tito wrestles within himself just so Luvy can forgive him. Thrown into the mix is Tito's brother, Clete, a star baseball player, who happens to hate illegal Mexicans, which include Luvy. In *Scores*, baseball serves as the only mode of communication between Tito and his brother. It's that dichotomous activity that ultimately takes Tito's legs, too. Finally, it's the enterprise that separates him from Luvy.

Interestingly, in terms of gender roles, this same estrangement empowers Luvy, since Tito's redemption ultimately depends on her. All the names of the central characters save for Clete—Tito, Luvy, the dog, Tamora, Don Saturnino—were influenced by Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. By melding high literature characters and techniques, *Scores* is a testament to the ability of fiction to adapt to alternative structures and, I hope, deliver a powerful piece of prose.

The Lighthouse is the final story included in my collection. It details the journey of four Cuban rafters—three baseball players and a girl—on route to the United States. A few things happened with this story. First, I chose the third-person limited point of view in order for the religious undertones to be heard, since the protagonist of this piece, Lázaro, in addition to his being a catcher, is also a follower of the Afro-Cuban religion called Lucumi, more commonly known as Santería. Second, I wanted the freedom in *Lighthouse* to explore each of the other characters—Bárbaro, the sly, burly slugger; Pedrito, the quiet pitcher; Teresita, the young prostitute. Thirdly, I purposely chose the baseball position of catcher for Lázaro since I believe it to be the true position of authority on the field, not the pitcher, as most conventional baseball stories have promoted through the years (Candelaria 75). *Lighthouse* is the story of a man, Lázaro, on an uncertain journey of both mind and body, and a thorny regret following him, with nothing else to rely on but his love for baseball and his religion. The piece is my attempt at a metafictional, mythopoetic illustration of the perilous crossing undertaken by Cuban rafters to this day, and the way in which baseball translates for some and spurs them out onto the ocean in search of that nebulous 'American Dream.'

My works of fiction are an earnest attempt to add a new dimension to the baseball fiction genre, and to prove wrong the notion that “standard English...is the literary language...of the US” (Morris, *Making the Team: The Cultural Work of Baseball Fiction* 100). Just as in contemporary America, Latin Americans and Latinos/Latinas play prominent roles in my stories. In my fiction, baseball exists, but it is *with* the game, not *through* it, that my characters and their plights are revealed.

Going Into Extras: The Future of Baseball Fiction

John Lauricella says it best: “A baseball game is like a story” (218). From its very inception in America, the game has found kindred meaning alongside the United States, allowing authors inside and outside the baseball fiction genre to use it as a mirror of American society and politics at large. Allusions to the game can be found anywhere—in popular music, such as the rock band Nickelback’s song, *Rock Star*, where the lyrics say “I want a bathroom I can play baseball in” (2005); in non-baseball movies, such as *Donnie Brasco* (1997), where Lefty Ruggiero (played by Al Pacino) is so enthralled after meeting kingpin Santos Trafficante that he tells him it’s “like meeting Mickey Mantle” (Newell). In Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight*, even, during a thunderstorm: “‘Are you ready for some ball?’ Edward asked [Bella], his eyes eager, bright” (Meyer 367). And the ultimate compliment of all, I think, when the sports commentator, during the Vikings-Cowboys playoff game this January, compared the Cowboys’ attempt at a comeback with something similar to the classic baseball aphorism, “bottom of the ninth, bases loaded, the game on the line.”

The game's popularity has grown to encompass Latin America, Europe, Asia, even Australia; and with the dawn of the World Baseball Classic and Japan's back-to-back championships in 2006 and 2009, it's easy now to affirm that great baseball (perhaps even better baseball) is being played outside of Major League Baseball. Ironically, with recent PED scandals and incredible salaries, it now seems easier to agree with Oscar Valdes Estevez's Fidel Castro character when he states "[American baseball is] a great game, but all the money in it has corrupted it" (62).

But even with this international acceptance of baseball, the game has not translated to more minority, specifically Latino/Latina-authored, baseball fiction. Timothy Morris' web site contains an extensive bibliography of baseball fiction in print, and yet I was only able to find ten authors with Spanish surnames (*Guide to Baseball Fiction*). In an e-mail interview with Dr. Scott Peterson, Fiction Editor for *Aethlon: the Journal of Sports Literature*, he states that he is unaware of the reason behind so little Latino/Latina-authored baseball fiction. That, other than myself, he cannot recall any Latino/Latina authors he has published recently (Peterson). Timothy Morris, nonfiction editor for *Aethlon*, says much of the same: "I know of very few Latino/a authors who have written baseball stories" (Morris, *RE: Questions Concerning Baseball Fiction*). I'm hoping my stories will change this trend and give impetus to other Latino/Latina writers out there so that they may explore what baseball means to them.

Baseball is a simple game, so simple that many do not understand it. Modern sports fans prefer fast-action games like basketball and football because, they say, baseball is a "boring" game. It's too slow. I've never understood that reasoning. For me, there is no better test of will than the showdown between a pitcher and batter.

Baseball is a game of contradictions and coincidences. It's the Black Sox Scandal of 1919, but it's also Branch Rickey giving Jackie Robinson a chance to play on April 15, 1947. It's famed Chicago Cubs 1906 pitcher Mordecai "Three Finger" Brown's hand accident that left him with only four fingers on his pitching hand, but gave him a devastating curveball that even Ty Cobb had trouble hitting. It's "The Professor," Casey Stengel, dolling out his "Stengelese," calling good fielders "plumbers" and rookies "green peas" (Adomites, Cassidy and Herman 210). In the modern era, it's the infamous Delino-Deshields-for-Pedro-Martínez trade. It's Hideo Nomo's contortionist windup, Curt Schilling's bloodied sock, and Antonio Alfonseca's polydactylism. It's collective bargaining agreements, fifteen and sixty-day disabled lists, and the labor strikes of 1981 and 1994. It's Mark McGwire hitting number 62, driving the fans crazy, and then admitting to PEDs. It's Tiffany Brooks, suiting up for the Big Bend Cowboys, and taking ground balls at first base. It's Eri Yoshida, side-arming her knuckleballs for the 2010 Chico Outlaws of the Golden Baseball League.

In our modern era, Baseball and its drama have played a positive and pivotal role in the acculturation of Latinos/Latinas of my generation in the United States. Baseball has embraced us as a community, accepted our differences, included us into the culture of the Major Leagues. The recent influx of Latin American players into the Majors today, as well as the popularity of the sport in Latin American countries such as Venezuela, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and Cuba is a testament not only to the game's responsiveness and adaptability around the world, but to the diversity it offers us as fans in the United States. This is a good thing for creative writers. It opens the field to new forms of narrative styles and modes of inquiry into identity and leisure activities. With

my stories, my hope is to spearhead a new movement of Latino/Latina-authored sports writing. My future plans are to survey the genre even further, perhaps even assemble an anthology in the near future that will include stories similar to my own. I am confident there are many Latino/Latina writers out there who, like me, find an allure in baseball as they do in no other activity. Who feel a profound sense of accomplishment each time Saint Louis Cardinals' first-baseman Albert Pujols steps up to the plate, or Seattle Mariners' pitching ace Felix Hernández takes the mound; or, like my father, who had the chance to witness the magic of Fernandomania at Dodger Stadium. Creative people, like me, who feel compelled to write about the game they love, and to show through their fiction what baseball is truly about.



Figure 1: DAD AND I, DODGER STADIUM, JULY, 1983.

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MANRAM THE GREAT

Put down my Bulfinch and take a gander pregame to make sure no one's looking before pincering the diamond blue out of the cellophane bag and showing them to Lee.

"What is it," he asks.

"Four-for-four, baby," I tell him. "Guaranteed."

"Seriously, man—what?"

I ogle his poster. "ManRam," I say, and Lee laughs.

Then me and Lee, we pop one each.

We hit the field before anyone else, feeling Olympian and shit, and we vacuum Coach's ground balls with surefire feet and hands, and we sweet-spot the BP balls, no problem; and I wonder if Lee feels the same thing I do. The fluttering at the center. Like we just swallowed both of Hermes' ankle wings.

"Sissy."

"Fuck you."

"Prove it, then."

Right in front of L.A.'s finest, Lee slaps the twenty into the scalper's palm, and we get two Mannywood first rowers. I slap a high loogie on Sunset. Lee flips-off the badge. We scamper up Stadium Way like Prometheus on roids, past long rows of stop-n-go, kaleidoscope fenders, and cliff-gulped homes, parking booths, and we pick up two

two-buck peanut bags (inside they're five bucks a pop!); all the way up the Ravine to where the stadium churns into the jumbo scoreboard with fleecy light. Where the fans stretch into turnstiles, like bubble gum caught at the bottom of a blender.

"Here?"

"Yeah, Lee."

"Whe-when's he coming?"

"Any minute."

Cracking shells when I see Push rise. He chariots through the crowd in sandals, all Dodgered up, all the way to where Lee's itching beneath the mammoth banner of his idol, Manny Ramírez. Push opens up his Dodgers jacket and Lee gobbles it all up like sweet salvation. We hit the carnival in the stands. We take in the game with Gorgon eyes.

"No one's perfect."

"ManRam...is."

"Shit. He didn't even get a hit today."

"I...did...am."

"Whatever. Who you think he'd be on Olympus, Lee?"

"ManRam...the Great."

"Nah, man. Really."

"The...powerfullest one, then. I don't know."

"Zeus had problems, man."

"ManRam...then."

“Kiss-ass.”

Cough. Lee chortles, on his cloud, way up high.

It breaks on ESPN before squashing Lee, and he can't believe it. Fifty-game suspension for Manny, and in the middle of a fucking good season. I rub it in, of course.

“Told you.”

“Yeah, yeah. Asshole. Give me some.”

“I'm out.”

“Fuck you are.”

“Seriously.”

“Where you hiding it? Where's ManRam?”

“I'm out, Lee.”

“Fuck off,” he says, rising. “You're never out. Where's the stash?”

“I told you. I'm out.”

Lee centaurs on top of me, starts pummeling me hard. “Motherfucker! *You're* out? Shit! You're never out. Where is it? Where the *fuck* is it?”

And I'm a god, trembling with creation.

THE DEUCE

Just warmin' up when – BAM! – it finally hits me: they think I done it on purpose!

I mean, I didn't have it planned or anything. It just turned out that way. We was all gulping down those Weisers like milk from Dolly Parton's titties! *Gulp! Gulp! Gulp!* Johnson got the first round to celebrate his shutout and then Martinez and then that black fella – God, what's his name? Second base. Just traded for him. Can't remember – and I got the fourth. I shoulda known something was brewin' when Fidelito wasn't drinkin'.

“Slow down, Roge,” says Johnson. “You're up tomorrow, ain't ya?”

“Bite me,” I says with a long swig. No one told Koufax what to do before a game. Mantle drank a twelver before even putting his cleats on. That's what I said to him. So Johnson comes back with, “You ain't no Mantle and this is the TL.”

“And you ain't my mother either,” I tells him. *Jesus!* You put up a goose egg and a 'w' and you think you're Moses or something! Johnson's mouth could open as wide as a pitch-out sometimes.

Then Martinez says to Johnson, “Let him drink all he wants, ese. It's ok. Fidelito's up tomorrow anyway.”

I looks at Martinez like I was lookin' for a sign.

“What you mean, boy?” I says. “My game tomorrow.”

“Coach wants a righty against Greensborough’s three-four-five,” says Martinez. “He didn’t tell you? They own southpaws – zurdos, you know?” and he brings his left arm over like he was throwin’ a pitch. Catchers. They think they can tell you what to do even outside the lines.

All the time Fidelito’s just sittin’ there, him and his lazy eye, without a care in the world. His story, so I heard, included some boat trip with a bunch of other Cubans across the channel to Florida and some baseball camp in Fort Lauderdale. ‘Bout ten Cubans died, they say, ‘cept for Fidelito who was some big shot pitcher back on his island. They even say of them ten that died (which was pretty much everyone else) none of ‘em ever let him use his right arm for nothin’. No rowin’ or anythin’. *Jesus!* You believe that? They guarded his arm like it was a good luck charm or somethin’. But they all died anyway, ‘cept for Fidelito, who went on to be the flavor of the month and we signed him. Don’t know for how much, though. Still don’t know his real name either.

So I got six weisers in me and I just wanna kick Martinez in the nuts!

Black kid - second-baseman I told you ‘bout - he came up with the idea. “I feel like hittin’ a couple,” he says. I coulda hit a couple of things, that’s for sure! Everyone agreed, even Fidelito, who didn’t speak a lick of English but saw everyone noddin’ and did the same.

So we drove down to the field and bribed the security with a bottle of JD and a girlie mag. He even turned on the lights for us.

Fidelito sat on the green on the third-base side. He was pitchin’ tomorrow, Martinez reminded us. Ass-kisser. Johnson wasn’t gonna pitch for sure and I didn’t feel like it. So we got a bag of practice balls and a few Louisville Sluggers and the black kid

pitched to us. It was my turn to bat when the black kid tells me, “See if y’all can hit my curve,” and I told him I’d have a go at it. Why not? I thought. How good could an infielder’s deuce be, right? Boy, was I wrong? When he done thrown that pitch at that three-quarter angle I was so far in front of it I couldn’t of hit it with a sand wedge! The bat went straight out of my hands and flew straight at Fidelito! Struck him smack dab on his pitchin’ arm and – CRACK!

Everyone ran to him, of course, and he was wrigglin’ on the ground like he was doin’ some salsa dance holding his right arm. He was yellin’ something in Spanish that must have been curse words ‘cause even Martinez looked shocked. Poor bastard, I tell you. We had to phone the ambulance to take him away, and no one took the bus back home with me.

So there you have it. Scout’s honor, that’s the truth! Everyone’s inside the dugout and blamin’ me, that’s for sure. But I’m warm now and ready. I feel like a winner. It was my game anyway.

COBB AND ME

Cobb came to stay the day I gave Coach the idea. The same day Memorial kicked our ass and made it ten straight in the loss column. “I’m at wit’s end, Jim,” Coach said to me. “I can’t take it no more. And I’m ready to blow.”

Coach Casey was a mayate from Mississippi who hated white people. We got along, though. He trusted me ‘cause he knew I was half Cuban, and he’d known a mulatto in North Carolina who made killer tostones. He didn’t have anything against Mexicans either and that was good since the whole team, including my other half, was all Beans.

But the losing irritated him. Beads of sweat that usually sloped off that proud, African forehead with ease now found themselves pooled in tense, rumped rows of skin like late-morning dew on the bleacher stairs. Frustrated, Coach eased back in his chair, locked his fingers behind his bald head, and studied the pockmarked squares that made up the ceiling.

I stood in his office, dead-tired from playing, toting the heavy ball bag he’d asked me to carry in. I didn’t know what to say. My eyes wandered from Coach to his glittery trophies to his Tupac poster taped to the glass pane set in his door. Finally, I came to the old black-and-white of his uncle, the Negro League phenom he always talked about, thick-dusted and slanted on the tall filing cabinet by the door. He was the picture of confidence in that photo, his uncle was, as graceful as a ballerina frozen in time with

closed, dreamy eyes, zoned in a still dance, his long right arm drifting forward, letting the ball go. Twenty-five K's in a single game once, Coach always boasted. None of the honkie teams could touch him. And since they couldn't catch up with his fastball, they lynched him instead. Coach watched it all happen. "He got dead 'cause he was good," he said, and so he carried in his pocket a bit of the rope the whiteys used. "My good-luck charm," Coach called it. He stroked it whenever the winning run was on third or when the game was on the line or when any one of our pitchers shook off the signs 'cause he didn't have his best stuff. Lately, though, with our steady losing, he probably just wanted to whip it out and lynch us all.

My gaze fell on Coach again. I slipped the bag off my sore right shoulder. He gave an almost maniacal laugh——*Hah!*——and scribbled wildly on a piece of paper. He tore it into tiny strips, crumpled them, and dumped them all in his coffee mug.

"Follow me," he said.

We hit the locker room fast and our noses soaked up the smell of sweaty cotton and jock straps. Cleats and shouts and the crash of thin metal doors echoed everywhere. "Here," Coach said, pushing the mug in front of me. "First dibs for the idea." I pulled a piece of paper out. "Don't open it yet," he ordered. He did the same with the rest of the guys.

"We're gonna try something different, senioritas," Coach said out loud when everyone had gathered around. "I don't like losin'. Screamin' and hollerin' ain't worked up till now. I'm thinking if I can't get you winnin' maybe you can learn how to do that from those who have." He put his heavy hand on my shoulder. "You can thank Jim here. He came up with this."

The guys didn't look too thrilled, especially Cantu. He grabbed his crotch in the corner, lifted his chin, and gave me his usual stare.

"Each of you is gettin' a player," Coach went on. "Each of 'em was a winner in his day. Study 'em. Do some research. Get into your player's head. I want you to know everything 'bout him. Everything from his bat size to his favorite ice cream and beer to the size of his gonads. What made Ruth the best? Mathewson? Mays? DiMaggio? Robinson? Aaron? How can you become the best? Go on, now. Open 'em up."

Everyone did. Not me. I waited. I don't know why. Sal closed his locker, elbowed me, and showed me his wrinkled name.

"Eight pages," Coach continued, "double-spaced, on my desk before the cock crows or your dicks grow next Friday." The guys in towels glanced down at their crotches. "By the look of things," Coach said, "I'd bet on the first bird."

We all laughed half-heartedly. Not Cantu, though. His eyes remained on me.

"It's a hell of a game, gents. It's life. Means it's cruel. Unfair. Everything happens between the lines, good and bad, just like out in the real world, but you get up and keep playin'. It's what the greats did. All you can do too."

Sal nudged my shoulder. "Who'd you get, buey," he asked.

I opened my slip slowly, like I was on the History Channel on assignment in some dark, unexplored cavern in the Holy Land, unfurling a Dead Sea Scroll. Like my religion depended on it. Sal read the name out loud.

"Mira nada más," he said.

That night, Cobb was born. I found his picture online, a full, baseball moon floating outside my window, while Lazy and Mom breathed hard and talked to God in

their bedroom, over and over. A growing, grunting rhythm paced each word on my computer screen, louder and louder, faster and faster, until it exploded and died. Gone, like something escaping. Cobb crawled out from under my bed. He dusted himself off and introduced himself with a pine-tarred hand. He wanted in, he told me. He wanted to get in the game.

I heard Lázaro stumble through the door like always. He yelled Mom's name loud—"¡To-ña!" I had to save her. He got her good the week before when I froze up. Plus, I promised Cobb I wouldn't let it happen again.

So I ran into the living room to where Lazy—that's what I called my stepfather 'cause he just lived off Mom's welfare—kept his most prized possession: a vintage baseball glove. He kept it inside a tall glass dome. It was brown with dark patches, like old, folded pancakes. Lazy told everyone it belonged to his grandfather once, the first Cuban to pitch in the Negro Leagues back in the day. I always wondered if he'd ever met Coach's uncle, pitched against him, was his teammate, maybe even had a beer with him after a doubleheader on a hot day. Cobb blew dead air through stained, gravelly teeth. He didn't give a shit about things like that. That was pussy shit, if you asked him. He told me to take the glove out and I did and I tore into it easy 'cause it was old. The meshed, yellow cotton inside was soft like Mom's hair.

Lazy roared in the kitchen meanwhile. "Es imposible, chico," he said, just impossible to find a job when Mexicans like Mom were everywhere. "Pura mie'da" he slurred, Cubanese for 'pure shit', and he wished he was back in Miami where Cubanos

outnumbered everyone else and looked after one another. Por supuesto he'd find a job there, he said.

He always promised stuff like that but never made good on it. Two, three days tops he'd be gone. Then he'd come back con la cola entre sus patas and Mom would feel sorry and it was the same shit all over. I hated the puto ever since Mom hooked up with him. Cobb didn't like him either. Said he reminded him of pretty much everyone he ever played against.

Lazy grunted when he hit her.

I rushed into the kitchen, what was left of the pinche glove in my hands. Lazy dropped Mom right away. He was a tall mulatto, thin-faced and framed, like a bat's long shadow. His hair was burned, wet popcorn; oily, 'cause he really slapped on the Three Flowers. In his mouth, always a Marlboro Red. Mom met him at the Bingo on 23rd. He moved in a week later. He fucked her non-stop for two weeks straight. He grunted when he did that, too.

Mom's cheeks were puffed and pinkish-red. Brown, just like mine, any other day. She gathered into a tight, trembling bundle by the counter below the baseball-shaped cookie jar I bought her last Christmas. She reminded me of those house spiders I liked to step on when I was a kid.

"Mira 'pa eso," Lazy said in disbelief. Drunken eyes wobbled on me like Sal's knuckleballs at batting practice. "You didn't," he said, ripping the glove from me. "Era del Viejo! My grandfather! He gave it to me, maricón! To me! Hijo de puta!"

Mom's lips. Busted, and flowing red. The puto was fast. Before she could warn me, he hit me hard aside the head and I fell.

The room became a merry-go-round. Lazy took me by the wrists. Sweat slalomed between the hairs on his tobacco-colored arms and rode down towards me. His breath reeked of aguardiente. The ash from his Red burned my skin.

He turned to Mom. His neck had a rivery vein running the length of it, just like the one on his snake of a pinga. He stroked it one day coming out of the shower while I took a piss. I was twelve. He wanted me to touch it, but I ran away. Only him, me and now Cobb knew about that.

“Eh, Toña,” he said. “Your boy’s brave, no? He’s come to the rescue.” He turned to face me again. “He’s a man with cojones now. Big cojones!”

And he started on my face, hard. Mom wailed.

Cobb watched. He stood by Mom, wide-eyed beneath his cap, arms and feet crossed, studying, his socks pulled up high on thin knees. Dirty, unlaced cleats caked in infield mud mixed with Mom’s blood on the floor. He came close and whispered to me beneath the blows about the time he fought Boss Schmidt, his teammate in Detroit, ex-boxer, who gave him the ass-whooping of his life. Boss pounced on him like no one else. No one understood why Cobb would do such a stupid thing when he knew he couldn’t win. But Cobb knew he didn’t have to. He just needed to get back up each time Boss let him have it, and he did. Boss never bothered him again. Losing, Cobb told me, was just another way of winning sometimes.

The pummeling on my head gave way to a numbing haze.

Then, black.

Thursday, so Cobb and me took out the trash. Lazy usually did it, but he was gone. Disappeared again. Mom came out and told us to buy some milk on the way back from school. She gave me five bucks. She ran back inside when she saw Sal coming down the sidewalk.

Sal was a lefty, and southpaws are always weird. He believed that if you took out your wisdom teeth you went dumb. Said it happened to a cousin of his back in Mexico. He didn't like to piss next to anyone or shower at school either 'cause he said maricones were everywhere and they all went crazy whenever they saw cock and balls. The same thing that happened to guys like us, he said, when we saw tits and pussy.

We were compadres and we had plans. Nothing but the Big Leagues for us. Thirty, forty dingers for me a year. For Sal, he'd settle for twelve thirty-win seasons and five or six perfect games. That was it. Two slices of humble pie. Then, after nice careers and our own bobble-heads, the ultimate: Cooperstown and the Hall of Fame. That's how we saw it. That was our plan.

Sal got a good look at me and didn't say a word, but I knew it was coming. Cobb followed us on the curb, spitting at cars passing by, ripping leaves off trees. I had to say something. I told Sal I took a tumble down the stairs.

“¿De veras?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Wow. So is falling like a tradition in your familia or what?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your jefa,” he said. “She looked as good as you back there.”

“Ya, buey,” I said to him. Sal could be a nosy mother sometimes. He wasn’t stupid, though. He knew the signs. His own dad used to beat the shit out of him too before the dogs found him out at the Reynosa Border. That’s why he had that funky delivery. He taught himself how to pitch after breaking his collar bone. I don’t know why I couldn’t tell him. Ashamed, I think. He didn’t know about Cobb, either. It was embarrassing, like admitting I thought of his cousin when I jerked off.

“Ta bueno,” Sal said. “Fine.”

We turned onto Veterans Road where the power lines sagged above us beneath the weight of hundreds of crows. It was the same on the other side of the street too, on and on for a good distance, like two long zippers set against the morning sky. Cobb found our conversation boring. He swiped up some dirt, slapped his palms together, dug his spikes into one of the nearest posts, and climbed up as fast as a squirrel. He tightroped it to the crows, plucked their feathers, laughed. Sal and I moved from under the lines so we wouldn’t get shit on.

“And your research paper, buey?” Sal asked. “Who’d you get again?”

Cobb jumped all the way down with fists full of feathers.

“Ty Cobb,” I said.

“He was chingón, no?”

“Pretty good.”

“Pretty good? Fucker was bad ass,” Sal said. “Chingos of batting crowns. Ruthless mother. Fought with everybody. Played for the Tigers, que no?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Who’d Coach give you?”

He cleared his throat. “Anus Wagner,” he said. “Que pinche nombre, ¿eh?”

“Anus,” I said. “You mean ‘Honus’. Honus Wagner?”

Cobb’s eyes glared when I said that name. He thrust the feathers onto the ground and they stuck into the concrete like darts. If he’d had a bat, he sure looked like he would’ve used it.

“Ese buey,” Sal went on. “Pittsburgh Pirates. Second baseman. He hated Cobb, man.”

“Everyone hated Cobb,” I said.

And Cobb smiled.

“Think it’ll work? Shit,” Sal said, “it’s been so long, I don’t even remember what winning feels like.”

“We’ll see,” I told him.

“Chale,” Sal said.

We got to the crossing on Ridge. Sal pointed out a girl with two pitching mounds for an ass while we waited for the little man to turn green. I watched Cobb. He busied himself by blowing his tobacco breath into the ears of everyone waiting. Gritty, yellow teeth made up the slyest grin ever next to Lazy’s four years ago in the bathroom. When he tired of doing that, he stomped on fire ants crawling on the floor ‘cause he hated the way they moved, he said.

The little man turned green. Sal went after the big culo like he didn’t know me. Cobb sprinted the length of the thick, yellow pedestrian line. He bellowed and scared the crows above into a dark mass set against the sun that expanded, contracted. Rose, dove. On and on. Straight into the sun.

The water fountain water tasted like shit but I didn't want to waste Mom's five on the bottled kind. Jam-packed hallway. In English class, Mr. Lee always reminded me of an Asian Mister Rodgers, right down to the wool-knit sweater and cheap imitation Vans. Cobb couldn't figure out how the Jap wore a sweater in the heat of el Valle. Maybe it was an Asian thing, I told him. Cobb sneered. Bullshit, he said. Everyone sweated, even nips. He spit on Mr. Lee's neck and his hock rolled down like sweat.

I watched *The Neighborhood* as a kid. It made me think of Dad. The real one. His name was Juan. I lay on the floor in front of the TV. Juan sat on his favorite rocker in his white Fruit-of-the-Loom tee and read the paper. He was Cuban like Lazy but Mom met him in L.A. She had a thing for Cubans, I guess. Juan came to the States during the Mariel Exile of the 80s, played some professional ball back on the island. Mom always told me I got my playing skills from him.

But when I turned five Mom did some exiling of her own after finding Juan with her best friend. We moved to el Valle after that. Lazy showed up, and that's when I started hating Cubans. I asked Cobb if hating Lazy and Cubans meant I hated myself when half of me was Cubano. Cobb thought to himself. He pinched his rock of a chin, squinted, flexed his nostrils a few times. He finally bent over and lifted his pant leg to show me a scar that never healed.

Coach studied me for an instant. "You sure," he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I wanna play."

"You know how you feel," he said, his eyebrows coming together. "But, Jim. The rest of you. That ain't feeling the way your face looks, right?"

Cobb couldn't help it and keeled over by the doorway, laughing his ass off. He wouldn't come in 'cause he hated the office. Too small, he complained, like a womb stuffed with a desk and trophies. That, of course, and he hated niggers.

"I'm good," I said, and Coach added my name to the lineup card.

"Paper coming along," he asked.

"Yeah," I said.

Coach leaned back in his chair. "I ain't one to praise honkies. You know that," he said. "But that white boy sure could play. 'The Georgia Peach'. That's what they called him to poke fun at him. Hell of a hitter. Ferocious at the plate, on the field, pretty much everywhere. Mm-hmm. He couldn't stand us, though."

Cobb snickered. He smacked his cleats against the frame of the door, hard. His sign that he wanted to go.

"One time, Jim, black fella named Bungy Davis tried congratulating Cobb after a game. Cobb slapped him, kicked him in the head. When Bungy's wife tried to help, Cobb gave her a lickin', too. Teammates had to tear him off the poor woman. Lots of people thought that 'D' on his cap stood for Detroit. No way."

"What, then," I asked, and even Cobb stopped to listen.

"'Devil', Jim," Coach said. "Suit up."

Cobb walked into the womb for the first time, nothing but smiles.

We were terrifically terrible that day. Sal pitched like he'd gotten his ass kicked instead of me and gave up ten straight hits and five runs in the first alone. We got three

back in the second when Cantu hit it out. Sal settled down when the knuckleball started working again.

But then it was our turn, the defense. In the fifth, Diaz dropped two easy ones at first, blamed it on an ingrown nail. His finger really did look like shit. I booted one that could easily have gone for an inning-ending DP in the sixth. Couldn't get down far enough, compliments of Lazy. PSJA got five more after that. Cobb, asshole that he was, laughed his ass off next to his new best friend in the dugout. He even put his arm around Coach. That's how it ended, 10-3.

Sal went straight home, pissed, didn't want to talk about the game at all. Coach disappeared, too. I was in the locker room where Cantu beamed after his homer. He had this crazy tradition each time he whacked one out of taking off his towel to show everyone how he could get his unusually large balls to snap by moving his hips back and forth. Everyone laughed, of course, including Cobb, but not me. I hated the fucker. Good player, but he showed off every chance he got. With his bat, his muscles, his balls, didn't matter. He didn't like me 'cause he said I was Coach's favorite. The assignment didn't help, either. He told everyone there that if it hadn't been for him PSJA would've shut us out, bunch of losers that we were. "Boom," he sounded, grabbing his dick with both hands, swinging it like his bat earlier, everyone laughing but really scared, the tip of his pinga flushed purple from how hard he held it. He let go and the mushroom head fell like a weight between his legs.

He dangled his way towards me. "What," he said.

"What?"

"You never laugh. ¿Porque?"

“Something’s funny?”

“Yeah,” he said, cracking his neck. “You.”

“How am I funny?”

“Your face, puto. You look like someone made you their bitch last night.”

The laughter stopped. Diaz, Garcia, the rest of the guys backed away.

Cobb’s breath warmed my shoulder.

Cantu stood before me, naked, six feet, nearly three-legged, chest full of pimples and tufts of hair on wide shoulders, waiting, waiting.

Cobb hit the back of my head with the bill of his cap, like a bull rousing in anger, twitching his horns.

Cantu waited. Cobb dug into my shoulder blades and urged me forward. He reminded me of Boss Schmidt and my episode with Lazy. I was ready, he said, and he kneed my ass. He wanted action.

But I couldn’t move. I trembled instead. Frustrated, Cobb spiked the back of my knees and they buckled.

“Pussy,” Cantu said.

He backed away. Everyone went over to him. Cobb raised a storm, cleated the lockers hard, tore off his cap, and slapped his dirty knees. Black spit spluttered over his cracked, angry lips and dribbled onto his uniform. Stained like that, he disappeared.

I hit the library for some more research on Cobb. I found the pitching-mound ass girl there, bent over and showing it all off near the entrance in front of the Harlequin section, a couple of tattered paperbacks by her dirty toes, her long nails scraping across

white spines with tacky titles. I wondered what Sal was doing. This could've been his chance, I thought. Oh, well.

I wondered about Cobb, too. He was MIA since the locker room and I looked everywhere, expecting him to burst out from under a table or come hurdling over the bookcases; maybe even hock out his slavered, spittled chaw and use it to write his name all over the walls. But he never came. "Pitching-mounds" hooked books off the shelf and let them fall at her feet, her bubble-gum ass in a slow-motion sway like a pair of tethered balloons covered in corduroy.

I dropped my gear near a computer and Googled some more on Cobb. The same photos and text again. Mom popped into my head all of a sudden. The milk, I remembered. Then I pictured her on our linoleum floor, wailing, flowing red, Lazy letting loose on both of us, the mesh from that fucking glove everywhere, stinging in our eyes, breathing it in, filling our lungs, clogging our throats and choking us till we couldn't breathe. My head hurt. To hell with Cobb and waiting, I decided. I didn't owe him anything. I needed to go home and see Mom.

But the last click of the mouse brought a brand new image of Cobb I hadn't come across before. He stood with his black bat, a hunter with his rifle, young, dog-faced mean, a pair of funny bat ears on a thin head at the top of a lanky, gangly frame. Polished, leathery cheeks held up the trademark smirk of the player who never doubted he was in his prime, ever. A picture of perfect pride. Relentless confidence drove him on, like the unstoppable winds of the most powerful hurricane. You got in Cobb's way, you got hurt, bad, and a lot of players did. Cobb's favorite was what he called his

“kiss”—each time he got to bury his steel spikes into anyone foolishly guarding second, third, or the biggest prize of them all: home.

I scrolled through Cobb’s bio on the right side of the screen:

- wicked left-handed stroke
- .367 lifetime batting average (the highest ever)
- twelve batting crowns (nine in a row)
- fifty-four career steals of home (the most ever)
- four-thousand plus hits in twenty-three years
- the first player inducted into the Hall of Fame.

His eyes pierced me.

I read on about his life, his early years, before his baseball glory days. His mother, Amanda, and the shotgun to Cobb’s idol, his father. A mistake, she pleaded. She thought a prowler threatened her outside her window so she pulled the trigger and—BOOM!—his father was dead. Cobb was only nineteen. He never got over it. He became a machine after that; a machine that spat, spiked, and cursed its way into greatness, rushing headlong into anything and everything, no matter what, ‘cause winning was the only thing he could truly call his own. I thought of my own life then and there. If I lost everything, I’d rush headlong too. Unflinching. Unwavering. I’d be like Cobb and do the same fucking thing.

I couldn’t face Cobb anymore. Me, the kitchen-floor coward. The locker-room pussy. I couldn’t bear the sting from his eyes.

“Hey, Jim,” I heard behind me. “Been lookin’ for you.”

I turned round. Sal stood next to Coach, two cops behind them. Sal looked the way he did when he found out about his dad: wide-eyed, unable to keep his glance on anything more than a second or two.

He didn't look at me.

He didn't have to.

"Your mom, Jim, she--," Coach started again, his hand in his pocket.

He explained what happened with slow, deliberate words that noosed my heart and pulled it out from inside me. And then the words lingered there, and I thought of long ago, Coach frozen in fear beneath his uncle, the lynched Negro swinging from a tall, looming sycamore, his twitching toes brushing hopelessly against the top of young Casey's head.

A brace around her neck. Tubes thrust into her mouth and arms. I hardly recognized her.

I stared at Mom's feet 'cause they were the only part of her that looked normal and unharmed. We had the same toes. I felt all the pain.

I went outside for a breath of air. The moon was made up of a soft, numbing glow while it teetered on the tall Rio Grande Regional sign. The Expressway twinkled with lights, thousands of them hurrying by, busy iron fireflies rushing past on the asphalt trail towards Brownsville, South Padre, and beyond, moving towards the freedom of the ocean, fast as a McGwire homerun.

I zigzagged wildly through parked cars with filthy hoods and fogged, weeping windows. A newborn wailed in a tired mother's arms, her large family joking and

laughing behind her. A little leaguer complained to a moustached man about dolor in his swelled right arm, stomping his cleats on the asphalt, but he still had to bend over to pick his cap up off the ground. The fat security guard crossed my path in a punished golf cart, a tear beneath his crotch where the smallest part of him peeked through, and I didn't have the heart to tell him.

That's when Cobb came back. I caught him dancing beneath a slanted light post, stomping on fire ants again, his pearly uniform moving against the black of night like Mom's milk thrust into the air.

I stormed his way. Before Cobb could hiss anything, I was already on him.

I pounced on him relentlessly, not caring, ripping my knuckles against his steel teeth, smashing his cement nose, until he flowed and flowed. He flailed bony arms and his grunts brought back Lazy and I hated him even more. He squirmed, trying to get away, and I thought of that puto Cantu and his chin and his snapping balls. I slugged and punched and thought of swarming crows and desperate Cuban exiles floating on dreams and Dad reading *La Opinión* while Mister Rogers sang a song on TV. I imagined Mom behind one of the hundreds of drowsy hospital windows, out of her bed and tubes and full of life and peering down. I thought of a first-inning homerun, Coach saying, "Atta boy, Jim," then striking out in the ninth to end the game.

Cobb poked my shoulders when he'd had enough. I didn't stop. I brushed him off like a bad sign. Fuck off, I told him. I smashed my bare, bleeding knuckles against his stiff, flat head, over and over and over.

This, I told him heaving, this is my game.

But the laughter. That fucking laughter from behind.

The moustached man yelled at his little leaguer, cap tipped back on his head, changed mood, holding his arm, coming around to get a better look at the weirdo pounding flowing fists on the concrete floor. The fat guard stopped short, jolted, stumbled off the springing cart, a look on his face as if a drunken bee riding the humid air had found his hole and stung him. Far off, in a mother's arms, the newborn wailed and wailed.

Cobb got up, dusted himself off. He came close. He whispered something in my ear that made me cry.

RATS

I'm out in the sweaty stew that's South Texas, I'm checking the mail, when the Michigan-plated U-Haul backs into the gravel drive next door where old Doña Garza used to live with her cats. A Mexican climbs down first. He's tall and broad-shouldered. He's got gray, cock's comb hair and a thick gold chain around a trunk of a neck. It drops like a "V" on his chest and ends in a pendant of the Virgin of Guadalupe. The gravel crunches beneath his snakeskin boots. He disappears down the driveway.

Next comes a girl. She's of a fresher brown, pigtailed, fat with arms like macaroni. She comes down, her flip-flops snapping, her movements more like a bodybuilder than a girl in her teens. She sees me and smiles and disappears, too. I'm alone.

There's nothing in the mail. Mom peers out the front door, tells me to head on out to the home without her. The noon bells of the San Juan Basilica tickle the hairs in my ears.

"Mister Martinez," the social worker says. "Y'all can come in now."

Dad's not too happy when I turn him away from the TV. He lets out a long "¡Coño!" in protest. Some of the residents wake up.

"Ya, Cubichi," I say to him.

He slurs through more Cuban curses, but I know it's the medication. He pats his thin forearms, complains it's cold. He wants to know what's going on. I can't blame him for that. I wheel him into the small office and close the door.

The social worker says "¡Hola!" sitting behind a desk. "How are you today?"

She's talking to Dad but he's still pissed off about the TV and doesn't answer. Everywhere behind her, on a dead white wall, hang neatly-framed portraits of the social worker with Glamour-Shot smiles between two boys and with a poodle and holding a diploma. She's got pockmarks under thick makeup and a lazy left eye in real life. Not in the photos. In the photos she looks good.

"It's fine," I say.

"Kay," she grins. "Your Mom?"

"Couldn't make it."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty."

"Perfect. You'll fill her in, then?"

"Yeah."

She opens a manila folder and leafs through the pages. "Kay," she starts. "Your father meets all the requirements for our facility. His condition—CHF, we've talked about it, right?—qualifies him for long-term care. The government of Texas has covered all expenses these past few months. However," and she looks up, her lazy eye quivering, "those funds are about to come to an end."

Just like that, Dad's dozed off. His head hangs. The air-con hums.

“There’s CBA, of course,” she continues, “but that only pays for home modifications and he’d have to be going back home. Right now, in his condition, he needs care more than anything. Care like we offer here. It’s a difficult situation.”

Dad snores and wakes up but falls asleep again. His head hangs. Eva, his nurse, told me he’d be out at least until dinner and I pretended not to believe her. It was the game we played. It always made her smile and that stud on her left nostril to glitter. I loved that. The teasing always came at Dad’s expense, but so what? She was the prettiest thing I’d seen since Dad arrived here.

“Mister Martinez? Do you see the problem?”

The social worker brings me back. She taps her French-tipped nails, red with white tips like pills, on the desk.

“Someone’s gonna have to pay, bottom line,” she says. “No way around it, really. I’ve looked everywhere and haven’t found a thing. I hate that it’s come to this.” She shakes her head and half smiles and her pockmarks constrict to shadowy slits. “Ten days. That’s all that’s left. Before the charges start. I’m sorry.”

“What if we can’t pay?”

“Y’all will have to take him. Home. Somewhere. Just not here. It’s a difficult situation, I know.”

The air-con exhales.

“What’ya reading?” she asks out of nowhere. She’s looking down into my lap and I remember the book I brought with me. “Hemingway,” she says, trying to act impressed. “Wonderful writer.”

“Pretty good,” I say.

“I hated those whole-book assignments at UT. Book report?”

“I’m not in school right now.”

“What, then?”

“I like to write.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Wonderful.”

She closes the folder. “Well, then. You’ll talk to your Mom, right? Let me know what y’all decide?”

“Yeah,” I say, and shake her Arctic hand.

I wheel Dad out and close the door. The room is empty ‘cause it’s lunch time. The TV’s on but turned down low so people on it act like mimes. Plates crash in the distance and the sun creeps and stretches through the glass double-doors in jagged angles.

It’s a few days later and Mom swears by her own mother she saw a rat race across the living room the night before. She was working on a crossword puzzle, about to find the word *mentira*, when the rat darted out of the hallway and scared her half to death.

“How big was the ratón?” I ask her.

“Por mi madre,” she says. “Not a mouse, a rata,” and she shows me how long. She hates ratas, she tells me, more than cucarachas, even. No respectable home has them.

I remind her we do have roaches.

“Gracioso,” she snaps back.

“Any mail?”

“No,” she says.

“What about Dad?”

She walks away. I go out back to find where the rat’s getting in.

The sun is fierce. The grass in the backyard is tall and it bends. Dad’s old Nikes, the ones he used when he cut the grass, hang by their laces from the lemon tree near my bedroom window. I don’t touch them. I move a few things and check inside the wood closet where the heater is. No holes. I find a black widow still as death in a cool corner. I say “Man!” ‘cause my back is sweaty.

“What’ya doin’?” a voice says.

It’s raspy, like good pain. It comes from across the fence, over on Doña Garza’s side. I see the girl from the U-Haul there staring at me beneath the same pigtails, her thick hips and thighs stuffed into shorts that barely fit her.

“Hey,” I say, straightening up.

“¿Que haces?” she asks.

“Just looking around.”

“I’m Cassie,” she tells me.

“Jaime.”

She giggles and licks her lips and they glisten. She doesn’t have a neck and can’t keep her feet still like she needs to pee. Her bra is tight so it looks like she has four tetas.

I ask her, “You’re from Michigan?”

“Nah,” she answers. “Just work there in the summer.”

“You and your Dad?”

“Yep.”

“Did you know Doña Garza?”

“Who?”

“She lived in your house with a million cats.”

“Nope,” she says, still shuffling.

“She died.”

“Too bad.”

A lemon falls from the tree. I steal it from the ground. Cassie watches.

“Where’s your room?” she asks.

“Why?”

“I wanna know.”

“That one,” I say, pointing.

“I’m sixteen.”

“Uh, that’s great.”

“Got a girlfriend?”

“Huh?”

“Girlfriend,” she says, “Novia. Got one?”

“I, uh--”

“Yes or no?”

I think of Eva. “Working on it,” I let out.

“Good,” she says, and runs off.

I’m left with the fruit in my hand. It’s warm. Its skin is a pimply, fleshy yellow that trails and curves and ends in a hard nipple. I rub it with my finger, over and over.

Caldo de res fogs up the inside of the Tupperware Mom poured it in. Her excuse is the same—too much to do at home. The last time she visited Dad was back at the hospital where she promised him he'd never end up in a nursing home. That was months ago. So, to make up for it, she always sends his favorite dishes—picadillo with white rice, ropa vieja, rabo encendido—and I'm the deliverer. I keep telling her they've got Dad on a strict diet—no salt, especially—but she flicks her hand at me and says “Bah!” and that doctors don't know everything. “Home cooking is all he needs,” she says. She always adds a little more salt to everything she cooks 'cause food should never be bitter, she tells me. Life is bitter enough. She points to a Wal-Mart bag with clean clothes, and then walks away.

The drive to the home is a barrage of thoughts between traffic lights, mechanic shops, fast-food joints. It's loud, like a late-night train on the tracks on Old Highway 83. At the first stoplight on 'I' Road, it starts to come back to me, and I'm yelling at Mom for agreeing to the transfer from Rio Grande Regional without telling me. Then, I'm at the post office on Blue Bonnet, months ago, mailing short stories to different contests, making sure all the addresses are right, two, three, four times. Out of nowhere, it's Eva for the first time, green Crocs and long, red hair, and Dad poking her in the ribs while I'm watching, liking what I see. Finally, at the projects on McColl, I remember the cat I flattened, the stain that's endured as a deeper shade on the asphalt, the last thing I see before arriving. I make the last turn. Today, the clouds in the sky are the red-orange scales of a cotton dragon.

I walk in. The place smells like wet Band-Aids. A pair of nurses laugh and leaf through an issue of Cosmo at the nurses' station. No sign of Eva anywhere.

Dad's hallway is deep and long and white with frames between every open door. Most are cheap, scenic pastels of pristine landscapes, a few vibrant bouquets. There's a holler, somewhere. The intercom thunders like the voice of God: *Maria to the Nurses' Station. Maria.* Then, another scream. I follow the thin, blue snake from the outlet to where the janitor buffs the cold, tile floor.

The lights are off in 58B. The curtain's drawn around the first bed where shadows shift and laugh in the inside glow. The bed creaks.

To get to Dad I have to go in, deeper, all the way to the large window. His bed is there. So is he, sleeping, again, always. He's the thinnest I've seen him, far from the robust Cuban who once harvested sugarcane in Santa Clara, played first base for Industriales, and held me up with only one hand, butt-naked for the entire world to see, in front of a Woolworths in Los Angeles when I was only ten-days old. That's the man in front of me. That's the man who encouraged me to write when he still had the strength to. But now, face up, brittle hands on his chest, I can only compare him to the mummy of some pharaoh of Ancient Egypt, hollow-cheeked, hidden away. I think of the greatest pharaohs like Seti and Rammesses the Great, stoic and regal, and try my best to hold on to that image. But the truth is inescapable: I hate to see him this way—and I'm powerless. The Earth wants him inside her, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

The curtain screeches open. I recognize my neighbor right away. He looks comical in yellow scrubs, like a faggot rooster. He stands there, tennis shoes instead of snakeskin boots, trying to place me, I know, while his pecs thump beneath his shirt in rapid succession. I don't see his chain, either. Where the light hits it, his neck shines like the brown spots on a fried plantain.

“¿Qué hubo?” he says, fixing his pants.

Eva appears from behind him. Her hair is red. Her lips are stretched, smeared. The light hits her stud but it doesn't glitter like before. My eyes blur and they both transform into a two-headed snake that speaks to me.

“Jaime,” the small head whispers, a bit flustered. “We—I didn't hear you. He's sleeping. He's had all his meds.”

I don't say a word. Neither does the large head. It just stares.

“This is, uh, Patricio,” Eva hisses in my direction. “He's new.”

Dad's IV beeps. It's been beeping since I arrived, I know, but it sounds different now. I watch Eva's hand coil around my neighbor's arm.

“Vámonos,” she says to him, and they slither out the door.

I hang Dad's clothes in his closet. I flush Mom's stew down the toilet. I stagger to my car and drive home.

No lights are on in Cassie's house. Abel's sprinklers hiss at me from across the street. Through my own screen door I hear Don Francisco, el Chacal and his trumpet, the audience clapping, Sábado Gigante in full swing on the TV. A black cat like a shadow darts into one of Mom's bougainvilleas, the white one. At the porch, tiny salamanders scale the wall like lost, wet tongues.

Mom turns down the volume, starts about the rat again. She sits in her usual spot on the couch, pillow beneath her 'cause of the spring she felt a few days back, papers strewn around her and orange peels and bloody-tipped toothpicks. The ceiling fan turns round and round and round.

But I'm ready this time. I want her to tell me once and for all what she wants to do about Dad. I want her to promise she'll come with me to visit him tomorrow and every day after. I want to tell her I don't really blame her. That's just the way things are. I'm ready to say these things. The words are on the tip of my tongue, I can feel them, pattering with tiny, anxious feet that claw into me and are readying to jump out and mix with the cumin-scented air. I take in a deep breath.

But, before I can say anything, Mom turns up the volume, and Don Francisco steals her from me. I'm forced to swallow everything.

I walk away.

I close the door to my room, rest my head against it. It's cool, with my eyes closed, but it's hard to breathe. Something nips and gnaws at me from the inside, non-stop. I'm alone.

A knock on my window. "Open up!" I hear.

I flip the latch, pull it open. A chubby hand appears; then a foot; a thick leg. Cassie squeezes through, breathing hard, and I'm impressed. She straightens up like a bull ready to charge.

She isn't dressed complicated, and I like that. She bulges beneath a white tank top and her nipples poke against the thin cotton. Her shorts were once jeans now cut high on her stubby legs. Her wet hair smells of vanilla.

"OK," she says once she's in, and looks up at me. Beads of sweat harbor on her upper lip.

"What about your Dad?" I ask.

"Working," she says.

“Where?”

“Some place for old farts,” she says. “He gets off at midnight but he won’t be home ‘til five or six. He’s got a new novia.” She sits on my bed. “What time does your Mom go to sleep?”

“No time, really,” I say.

“Oh.”

She leans back on her hands and something startles her.

“What?” I ask her.

She produces a pair of envelopes. “‘The Pinch’,” she reads, “and ‘Bou-le-ward’.”

“My mail,” I tell her. She hands the envelopes to me. I want to open them but I don’t.

“Lock the door,” Cassie says to me. “Get the lights, too.”

I do as I’m told. I put the letters in my back pocket. In the moonlight, I watch Cassie kick off her flip-flops and sit up.

“Come here,” she whispers.

I stand in front of her. She looks up at me, a russet potato with eyes, and the gnawing inside me changes. It’s further down now. A hardening; a flowering. She bites her lower lip and brushes my bulge. “Mmm,” she says.

For some reason, I start to think about Dad. Eva, too. I wonder what they’re doing. Fading. Fucking. I hear a sound like scratching coming from one of my walls.

“What’s that?” asks Cassie, wiping her chin.

“Rats,” I tell her.

“In here?”

“The wall.”

“But not in here, right?”

“No,” I lie.

“Weird,” she says.

“Yeah.”

“I hate rats.”

“They’re everywhere,” I say.

She pulls me close and starts again. My buckle grazes my knee and it’s cold. I feel like I’m falling. I close my eyes and picture the rats making loud love inside the walls.

SCORES

Killing Luvy's parents the same night the Astros are hitting four jacks off T. Hoffman in the ninth for an unbelievable walk-off win. Headphones on, caught up in the game, missing it, the stop. Coming to with the roar of the crowd in my ears and my bike bent and not feeling my legs. Berkman cranking the winner as the firemen pull Luvy out of the Volkswagen wrapped around the light post, her parents pinned inside. Luvy hanging out at the Hole ever since. Me, watching from the edge sometimes...

“Don’t move, Tito,” Clete says. “Almost there.”

My older brother stands next to me, his hand on my shoulder. His real name is Anacleto Gutiérrez Jones and he’s the best pinche baseball player in town, period. Everybody knows it. Better than me when I could still play. He’s never liked his name, though. “Too Mexicano,” he says. So he tells everyone his name is Clete, skips right past Gutiérrez, and rolls out a long ‘o’ in Jones for emphasis. Why Mom named him after her Mexican father is beyond Clete. But he passes for a white boy anyway with his baby blues and skin so white he turns pink beneath the sun at day games. Got all of that from Pop, sports and lobster skin, Clete did, Mom says, and she owns the pictures to prove it. Me, I got her brown, champurrado skin and black, chicharrón curls.

Clete squeezes my shoulder, hard. The heat rises from the parking lot asphalt in clear, wiggly waves.

“It’s fucking hot,” I say, my head inside my cap and my shoulders cooking.

“Almost,” Clete tells me. “You just watch out.”

I do that. I watch.

Abercrombied and Fitched and Hollistered and Gapped and Ed Hardied from head to toe, the Mexicans stroll in and out of the Hidalgo Pulga, our local flea market here in deep South Texas, speaking loud, perfect Spanish, without a care in the world. The Women: heavy, sparkly earrings; lacquered, hieroglyphed nails; Saran Wrap jeans; prancing about in bright high heels. The Men: tight-shirted; suave and Matador-faced; one, two, three cell phones holstered onto their hips like guns. More and more pretty foreigners pass us by in droves. Clete gives them El Ojo—the Evil Eye—until the Pulga swallows them whole.

My brother stands and I wheel my chair in front of the muddiest car around next to an F-150, Texas Ranch Edition, “TREVINO” stickered on the rear windshield below a sun-peeled Dallas Cowboys’ blue star, rotating spinners on twenties, a pair of pink plastic bull balls sagging below the rear fender.

“Time to see where this one’s from,” Clete says. He zips down. He cranks his mushroom out. He lets it loose.

“Aaah,” he sighs.

His stream rumbles across the rear fender, explodes into hundreds of somersaulting drops, gives in to gravity, cascades down onto the sizzling asphalt below.

“Veracruz,” Clete shouts, smiling like a villain.

Down the license plate mud avalanches. XTC-91-78. On the upper-left corner of the license plate a block-faced, thick-lipped Olmec head, just like on the History Channel, grimaces beneath my brother's torrent. Looks up at me with blank eyes.

Clete finishes. He gives his flesh bat a wiggle. He tucks it back in and zips it up.

"Done," he says as if nothing's happened. "I'm starved. Let's get some tacos."

I shake my head. When I turn my wheels my palms get wet.

"Shit," says Clete, laughing. "My bad, carnalito. Here," and he stands in front of me and lets me wipe my hands on his jersey. He pushes me from behind and we make for the Pulga entrance. I look back. The Olmec head drips. Grimaces. Cries.

Giving Luvy the ankle bracelet the same day I hit a bases-clearing triple to win the game. The day after her birthday. The day after she turns sixteen. Because Jehovah's Witnesses can't receive presents, she's saying. Something about John the Baptist, his head, all of it in Luvy's south-of-the-border-across-the-Río-Grande Spanish. The kind Clete hates and calls "fresa" Spanish, real preppy Spanish, and it's turning me on something crazy. She's making me agree the ankle bracelet is not a gift but just something I'm wanting to give her. "Not the same thing," I'm asking, and she's saying no, no. She's wanting me to say it. "Say what?" That it's not a gift—"Que no es un regalo, Tito." Her voice. It gets the popcorn machine in my stomach popping. The Astros, the crack of a homerun, Mom's fresh flour tortillas—her voice is everything I love rolled into one sound. If Luvy's body is fire (which it is—delicious, brown all over, café con leche, man; with a big plump pair and pretty toes and long bleached hair with dark roots showing like the flowers sprouted by weeds), her voice is the heat that matters. Me,

saying it's not a present. Two times to sound convincing. The ankle bracelet bouncing. Sparkling. Luvy modeling it. My Luvy. "Happy birthday," I'm saying, smiling like an idiot. She's pursing her lips. She's thumping me with her Ed Hardy purse. She's pulling my ear.

We have our reasons, Clete explains, and he hammers them into me one more time. I toss him pebbles behind out trailer. He whacks them with that sweet stroke of his.

"Number three," Clete starts, "they dress like they're better. Fucking Fresa Beans. Like they're rich or something. Shit. Mexicans aren't rich. They're poor."

And Clete rips one, chipping bark off the old encino by the flaky fence.

"Two. The Spanish. They don't mix it con Ingles like you and me and everyone else born on this side of the Río Grande. Why? They're not from here, that's why. We're Americanos. We're better. More improved."

Clete strokes the next one solid and it clears the fence. Don Saturnino's pit bull yelps, loud.

"Hate that fucking dog," Clete says. He eyes my legs. "And I don't need to tell you reason number one."

He turns away and plays it off with a few downtown swings, bending his knees, lifting the bat up high close to his right ear. Waiting.

"Look," he finally lets out. "What's done is done. You gotta stop going back there—you hearing me?"

Heavy, the bag of pebbles.

Clete swinging hard: “You think I don’t know? Think I haven’t seen you stalking your ex down at the Hole? Yep. I know. She lives with her grandma on Ébano since her parents croaked. But it wasn’t your fault, Tito. Like all other Beans, man, they thought they were driving back in Mexico where traffic lights don’t mean shit and they fucked up and they got dead. Simple as that.” Clete spitting. “Don’t know why the fuck they buried them at the Hole. They should’ve been wrapped up like tacos. Shipped back to Mexico where they belonged.”

Clete laughs at his own words, keeps swinging, breathes loud, showcases his perfect, two-out, opposite field, roundhouse swing—his normal swing is more like Griffey’s, top to bottom—slashes the air, reminding me of the way we sliced mosquito clouds swarming at us after Hurricane Dolly. We sliced and sliced, I remember, and still they came.

Still they came.

“You can’t use your legs no more, carnalito,” Clete goes on. “What about *your* future? *Your* plans? UT and the Bigs? Gone. Think *she* feels sorry for you?”

Next to where Clete thrives a thick worm out of the dry dirt wriggles, soy milk its color, its body undulating like it just swallowed a wave. My brother sees it and, ruthless, drives his heel down. Looks at me. “Shiit,” blows through his teeth. His shoe against a half-buried cinder block he scrapes and he laughs at the green ooze.

“Any more in there,” he asks with a new hawk and spit.

I toss Clete a new one. His eyes widen and follow. He zones in. He lifts his leg, drives his body forward, brings the bat around, quick swoop, lands it, all sweet spot. The rock breaks in two and the pieces scatter.

“Madres,” Clete says.

*Train screeching into the morning quiet...whistling loud...tink-tinking away...
The Hole is El Hoyo in Spanish. What Mom calls it. Where everyone ends up in the end.
Some sooner than others. Some because of me. Greenest grass. Ballpark grass.
Fenway. Minute Maid. Nah. Wrigley Field. Hundreds of named stones bird, butterfly
bases. Ducks, tiny, baseball-cap heads, parading in the wide, yawning resaca. Leaning
in, trees along the edge, like drowsy umpires. Crowd, Luvy. Past the resaca in the
faraway distance. Shoes of charol. Stockings wet-dream white. Knees wrinkled; grubby.
And her chest, her chest heaving beneath a black Sunday dress. And her face, half her
face, her face shiny because I erased some of it on her parents' death day. A stump for a
left hand. And her eyes, her eyes' stare the earthen holes, the shiny coffins with her
parents inside, the thick stones in front of her, penetrating. And flowing. Eyes.
Everyone's. Luvy's. Mine, even.*

Spit. Hawk. Burn on inner cheek. Spit it all out.

Clete cracks up, takes his chaw like a champ. He lets me roll on the sidewalk while he straddles the curb.

“What’s up, man,” he taunts me. “You forget already? Can’t take it anymore, carnalito, or what? When they got your legs, they get your balls too?”

Clete rolls his chaw inside his mouth a few times. “Watch,” he says. “Let me remind you how it’s done.”

He hawks—long, loud—and out comes the blackest, glistening comet I’ve ever seen. It rises and arcs, the street lamps granting it a momentary sparkle and splendor, fascinating me, reminding me of Luvy’s ankle bracelet, until it dies flat a few feet away.

Clete wipes his chin. “Hell yeah,” he says.

We make it to the alley behind our trailer park where old Don Saturnino’s pit bull is mean as fuck. She barks at anyone and anything passing by, but really goes crazy when we come around. I don’t blame her for that. We gave her and her race every reason in the world to hate us the day I stood by and let Clete show how hateful he could be.

It happened about a year ago, couple months before the accident, while Luvy and me walked home from practice. She was telling me about Jehovah in her pretty Spanish—*Jehová* this, *Jehová* that— when, all of a sudden, we caught Clete chasing after a mulleted, Mexico soccer jerseyed kid running for his life. I’d never seen him before. Clete caught up to him, no problem with his speed, and clamped onto the kid’s red-white-green jersey. When Clete brought him up to where Luvy and me were he told me what the kid had done: the kid’s pit bull had gotten away from him and chomped on Clete’s leg. The kid shouted and tried to squirm away and that’s when Clete shoved him in my direction and told me to follow him. Luvy didn’t like the idea and said so, but Clete ignored her like always. I told her not to worry (*No te preocupes*). That everything would be all right (*Todo va a estar bien*). Thinking back, I should’ve told her to go home instead.

As we walked I tried my best to inspect Clete's legs and, for the life of me, couldn't even find a scratch on them. No bleeding, nothing. I asked Clete where the dog had gotten him, but he just kept trudging along without saying a word.

When we got to the empty baseball field I found Chucho, our right fielder, picking his nose in the dugout and taking in the Astros game on a small handheld radio. I was about to ask him the score when I noticed the dog inside the batting cage. The colossal animal was nearly twice the size of the kid I held onto. No wonder he got away from him, I thought. The looped chain around the black pit's thick neck was on so tight it was nearly invisible beneath his muscled folds of skin.

"Fuck these Beans, man!" Clete finally said in a determined voice. "Think they can get away with anything. Not with me. They need a lesson, that's what," and he reached into his gym bag and pulled out his Louisville Slugger.

Luvy, the kid, me—we all gasped—and Chucho giggled while his radio snapped and popped between Milo Hamilton's voice calling the game.

My brother leered over at the panting dog inside the cage. The kid in front of me screamed in wild Spanish. Some of the things he said I still remember: "*¡Puto! ¡Suéltame! El perro no, cabrón ¡El perro no!*" But even with all of that, knowing he was right, that the bat scared the crap out of me, too, I couldn't let the kid go. I was frozen. "No!" Luvy joined in the protest, glowering over at me, jabbing at my shoulder, pretty, her feet shuffling and ankle bracelet hula-hoop bouncing, my hands gripped tight around the dirty-faced kid like uncontrollable vices. She started to cry, frantic. She called out to Jehovah—"¡Jehová! ¡Jehová!"—and I felt bad. But by the time I let the boy go and realized what was about to happen, it was too late. Clete locked the cage door

behind him. The kid rattled the fence like a mad man and rolled out more curses in Spanish than I had ever heard. My brother just laughed. He hawked a good wide one on the ground. He brought the bat up high, ready to swing away.

The pit, meanwhile, lounged on the hot asphalt with his two front paws on home plate. He slavered and at all of us batted grey, oblivious eyes. As harmless as Tía Nena's Chihuahua he looked. No sign of the wild animal that had supposedly attacked my brother earlier. The dog hung out his tongue like a stuck, pink pendulum and twitched his stub of a tail and cut ears.

Clete stood in front of the pit. "Dog bites, dog dies," he decreed, repeating it in Spanish and deepening the kid's, Luvy's, my frenzy. My brother straightened up and took a deep breath—just as if he'd been summoned off the bench to pinch-hit in some great cosmic game—and we all watched him swing from his heels. The dog yelped and Clete said, "Madres," and the dog thumped down and his left eye flowed, flowed with Chucho's radio still popping and searching furtively for a stable AM sound. Three more mighty whacks and the dog twitched on the asphalt floor and now my brother panted, his practice jersey sprinkled and his bat smeared red. "Oh, shit!" Chucho chortled. The kid finally scampered off, hands in the air, crazy in his loss. I turned to Luvy but she flared her pretty nostrils and pushed me away; and it would be two weeks before she forgave me or even talked to me again.

So, in the present, at first sight of us, old Don Saturnino's pit, Tamara he calls her, wide-shouldered, massive, back lumped like an overgrown tamarind pod, she jumps on her hind legs and gnarls and rattles the chain-link fence and cracks her canines and slavers over her torn, bloody tongue. Echoes, her powerful bark does, off bent, back-

alley trash cans waiting for the next day's empty. Pink-black spit oozes down diamond-shaped holes. High on the fence, where Tamara can't get to it, old Don Saturnino has a sign—WACHALE CON LOS DOGS.

“¡Tu madre, hija de la chingada! Fuck you!” Clete yells, hurling his chaw at Tamara, kicking the fence with all his might.

And so they both rage on in the darkening alley behind our trailer park. Tamara: chafing, ripping her nose against the coarse fence; filled with a colorblind, instinctive memory—an innate, almost vengeful memory—with my brother and me (the accomplice) the ultimate black-and-white prize; her bare teeth tinged pink with blood and saliva; guttural sounds; on and on, as though our past cruelty to her kind spurred her very essence, her rage towards us, on. Clete: unafraid; unrepentant; unrelenting as a rope of a line drive; laughing like always; scooping up pebbles, side-arming them through the diamonds at the furious, four-legged, back-alley queen.

But I'm not laughing. I've never laughed. Never fought back, either. I'm hoping old Don Saturnino will hobble out of his shack, see what Clete's up to, tell him off once and for all. But he never has. No reason to think he will. Or maybe Mom, for a second at least, out here without her apron, without her silence; that stupid, pious silence I inherited when it comes to my brother and everything he does and hates. But nothing. No one comes. Alone Clete and me remain. As loud as the moonstruck alley is empty is Tamara's rage.

Reading the label stuck onto one of Mom's scented candles in front of her altar to the Virgen of Guadalupe. Reading promises of forgiveness for anything after burning for

nine successive days. Wondering how many people beside Mom have bought into that, gone matchstick crazy for the entire novena, and are now living in peace with nothing weighing on their souls but little, everyday white lies. Wondering if it's that easy; that easy washing all your sins, even the worst of them, away.

Sucking in the humid air through my short-haired nostrils. In the early dawn the trailers in our park like cradled seagulls resting. Far away, over rooftops, Sacred Heart thrusting her crucifix into a resurrecting, cauliflowered sky.

At the Hole tar-feathered ducks dancing in the resaca, nine of them, long-billed, dipping yellow beaks in turquoise water, then heads, coming back up, shaking dry, doing it again, wagging metronome tails, floating, sounding a quack-quack cadence, posing periscope necks against the morning sun stretching out across the water until—

TORPEDO SPLASH!!!

The ducks scrambling up and away.

Sleepy-eyed kids with mullets, rocks in tight fists, pointing, not too far away. Yelling at them. Flipping me off—"Pinche cripple," one of them shouting—and watching them steal off like the wind.

Hearing Tamara, old don Saturnino's pit queen, raging in her alley at trash men doing their job in the distance. Grinding my teeth. Willing to take a chance once and for all. Willing to tell Luvy, my Luvy, that, if I could, I'd sacrifice the rest of this body if it meant I could bring her parents back to life.

"Luvy."

She's standing close, on the opposite bank of the resaca, hair sweeping back like a sunflower's wind-brushed petals. The sky is opening. Opening. And from that perfect, day-game sky ducks descending, plunging back in again, Luvy's sandaled feet and her heavenly ankle bracelet splashing.

And me. I'm hoping. Hoping. Hoping she forgives them.

THE LIGHTHOUSE

That all three swore on the Virgin of Cobre to set out the night prior to the start of the season did not bother Lázaro. Other things did. That they were setting out on a Wednesday, for instance, the day belonging to Oyá, and neither brother took the time to visit the Old Ceiba in Regla for their ebó's, their offerings. That neither of them wore blue, Yemayá's color, as he'd instructed them to, for safe passage across the ocean waters. Worst of all, upon posing the question, that the brothers teetered on the brink of the ultimate of all sins: neither brought the statuette of the Virgin of Cobre, the patroness of all Cuban rafters.

Lázaro flung down his bag with everything he owned—his catcher's mitt, a few shirts and shorts, an old compass—and sounded his frustration on the dark beach beneath shuffling palm arbors.

“Relax, Compay,” Bárbaro said. The elder brother leaned into a bicycle pump and inflated the tire tubes beneath the raft, while the muscles in his massive arms bulge with each reprimand and downward thrust. “Relax. Teresita's got la Caridad. She'll be here soon.”

Lázaro's tongue went numb. Pedrito, near the front of the raft, dropped the pair of paddles he carried. They'd all agreed: no one was to know they were leaving.

Lázaro felt betrayed. All his years as high priest, as babalawo, to the Orishas had taught him one thing: the gods knew arithmetic well. His ebó earlier had been for three

men only. He panicked. He thought if he raced up the sand, back across the Malecón's winding sea wall, past the prostitutes and pimps and salivating tourists; and if he sweet-talked Yeya out of one more dove and a quart of rum and didn't answer when she asked where he was going; and if he ripped the tiny throat on the way, let the blood flow down that sacred ceiba; and if he spurted those tired mists and prayed: *Oyá...Orisha of the Wind, of Wednesdays...Forgive me...I did not know...One more, please...* then Oyá, She would be appeased.

He turned to go, determined to make things right, but not before Teresita came shuffling down the dune. The young mulatta glided wide hips to a stop in front of Lázaro, a blue muscle shirt, no bra. The sweat on her coconut pair was the glare of stadium lights off batting helmets. Her lips the stitches on new baseballs after cheating pitchers chewed on the seams for better grips. She looked far from the lipstick-crazed prostitute both brothers bedded on winning nights. Her almond eyes jumped on Lázaro, to the muscled hills of Bárbaro's up-and-down thrusts, to Pedrito staring hard near the front of the raft. She carried nothing else with her but the small statuette of the Virgin in her hand.

"Here," said Bárbaro, taking the idol from the girl, handing it to Lázaro. "Time to go." He tossed the pump into the raft and motioned to Pedrito. The two moved to the rear of the raft. "Come on, Compay." Bárbaro said.

And Lázaro attempted to exercise the gift his Orisha, Shangó, had granted him after years of devotion and service. He tried to freeze that moment in Time. He'd done it once before. On that memorable night, the Havana crowd roared inside Estadio Marrero the way a ninth-inning crowd should, a one-run lead, a bases-loaded jam, a rookie pitcher

on the mound, losing his gas. Like all youngsters, the boy wanted to show off his recta, his fastball, and blow the batter away. But Lázaro flashed his taped fingers, and he called for el cambio, the changeup, instead. The pupil listened. The ball lofted home. The batter swung, missed. The championship was won.

While his teammates romped the field and the rookie, Lázaro splayed himself wide on the red clay behind home plate instead, face up, mask still on, the ball in his mitt, the Havana crowd howling into the cosmos.

And he lived in that moment until he was pleased.

But there was a chill on the shoulder of the present moment, like the regrets that linger after a lost revolution, so that Lázaro felt a weight shoe-strung around his heart like heavy cleats. He thought of Yeya, of course. He pictured her in the pen in their backyard, feeding the pregnant doves.

“Compay,” Bárbaro said.

Lázaro turned to Teresita. He noticed how she sunk the tips of her toes into the easy sand, stretched her neck out, as if the swelling blackness that was the vast ocean could be looked over like some backyard wall. She wore Yemayá’s color, blue. She’d even brought the idol. All of that means something, he thought. He thumbed the Virgin, over and over, just to feel the sand rasping over the hand-carved idol. He imagined other balseros. He wondered whether their own abandoned deeds tortured them on the way out, too.

And, still. That chill.

“You coming or not, Compay? What’s it gonna be?”

Lázaro sighed. He stuffed the Virgin in his pocket. He reached down, swung his bag into the raft. He eased between the brothers and the three pushed the raft into Yemayá's domain.

He dreams this:

He is staggering in for a mug of guarápo after five consecutive 0-for-4 nights. The sugarcane juice is warm and feeds his tired limbs. Yeya tries, but she is unable to nudge him into conversation. He decides on the mud-laden back roads back home. He is hoping the change of scenery brings back his game, and fast.

He is trudging along with his cleats still on, who cares. He is wracking his brain for the hole in his swing. Stormy whispers live in the palms. The tocororo is late-night caroling. Pulsing croaks from the river frogs beneath a hazy, metronome moon. There is a tap on his shoulder. He is turning. Caked feet. Thin ankles and knees. A lush coño. Her mamey-sized breasts. The mist of her breath. She is wrapping her arms around him, and she is making herself heavy, and into the mud she is pulling him, on top of her. Like a worm with cleats on he feels, wriggling out of his uniform, digging in, loving her in mud and muggy grass. He is biting her neck and the mazo around it. The thin jostle of the red-beaded ildes on her wrists. She is moaning, she is chanting, she is urging—*¡Así!* *¡Así!* *¡Eso!* On top of her, he is thrusting to a rhythm. The moon is blurring. Cool pinpricks diving onto his shoulders. His rhythm. *Mfff.*

Changing. *Mfff.* Faster. *Mfff. Mfff.* The sky is rolling. The sea inside him is overflowing and breaking. *Mfff! Mfff! Mfff! AAAAHHHHH!!!*

It rains.

Days later, on puddled fields, he is unstoppable after five consecutive 6-for-6 nights. “Shangó! Shangó!” Yeya is celebrating. She is taking her mazo, her ildes, wrapping them on his neck and wrists. She is kissing him. She is pulling on his wrists. She is rushing him over to Shangó’s altar, and she is showing him the Orisha’s dance of praise.

Gagging sounds. Lázaro opened lazy eyes to a throbbing sun. The taste of salt lay thick on his tongue. He reached for his canteen and swallowed the taste away.

Across from him, Teresita retched. The girl leaned over the side of the raft and emptied her stomach into the sea. Pedrito kneeled next to her, whispered in her ear. The girl giggled and paid no attention to the trail of drool clinging to her lower lip.

Bárbaro awoke with a bellow for a yawn. He stretched his trunkish legs beside Lázaro, raised his bat up off his chest with recharged arms. For three consecutive years, Lázaro had witnessed that black piece of *Pinus Caribbeae* sock forty-plus homeruns into the pavilions of every stadium from Pinar del Río to Santiago, only to go home to an empty shack filled with rationed rice and rats and second-hand posters of Palmeiro, Martínez, and the Hernández brothers. Bárbaro even had a nickname for his bat—“El Pinguo”—which was what you called any man with a long one between his legs.

Hearing his brother, Pedrito scrambled back to his spot. Teresita corralled her curls and wiped her chin. She placed her hands on her stomach and pressed her eyes out onto the ocean.

“Can’t wait! Can’t wait!” Bárbaro started, his bald head glimmering like fresh-fried boniato. “Everything’s arranged, Compay. We get to the States, get the asylum from los Americanos, and Chito’s cousin, the lawyer, he helps us. Chito said he’ll have us playing in the Majors in a few weeks. Believe that? Just like Livan, Compay. Like El Duque, chico. Hah!” He soaked in his dreams for a bit. “You didn’t tell her, did you?”

“Shove it,” Lázaro said.

“I told you to tell her.”

“I told you to shove it,” Lázaro said.

“Fine. Forget it,” Bárbaro said. “Glad you didn’t. Better this way. You’re so much happier. I can see that.” His smile slurved. “Bah. Just forget her, Compay. You’ll see. We’re gonna get so much coño playing with the Yanks, we’re gonna smell so much like bacalao, they’re gonna want to trade us to the Marlins in the National League. Hah!”

“Look!” Pedrito’s voice stole Bárbaro’s laughter. The brother pointed out into the water at a white, soggy mass floating on a parallel wave.

Bárbaro shoved a hard foot—“Get it, coño!”—and Pedrito reached out, brought the object in with his paddle, gave it to his brother, who tore into the plastic bag. He pulled out ten strips of sugarcane, each coiled with hair. A photograph next. A group of men, women, children, all smiles, on a beach somewhere, ready to cast off.

Lázaro gazed out far in all directions. Nothing but silent, sapphire waves.

“What the hell?” Bárbaro said.

“Ebó,” Lázaro responded.

“But,” Pedrito said.

“Put it all back in and tie it all up,” Lázaro said. “This isn’t for us. It belongs to Yemayá. Give it back to her.”

Bárbaro chuckled. “Sure, Compay.” He shook his head, tossed the bag and its contents on Pedrito’s lap. “Here,” he said, leaning back again, closing his eyes, laughing some more. “You’re the pitcher. You throw it.”

Pedrito swallowed. He tied the bag back up again. He tossed the bundle back out into the ocean.

Through it all, Teresita sat silent, concrete. She seemed to Lázaro as any one of those hungry-eyed children slouched in line at the government stores back in Havana on his way to the ballpark, waiting for their rations. He watched her and Pedrito follow the sacred bundle for the next sun-soaked hours until it dissolved and drowned away.

He chewed the way hogs did. Lulo’s ready-to-burst hogs. The hogs everyone tried stealing the days leading up to Año Nuevo for their own celebrations, so that Lulo decided to hack off their legs and overfeed them. Those hogs. The hogs which grew to enormity and chewed loud and got so fat Lulo hired Lázaro just to roll them into their pens. The hogs Lázaro struggled to get into the pits for roasting, the smoke still pluming from the bullet holes in their gigantic heads.

A glance at his compass, a few strokes with the paddle, and Lázaro continued his study of Bárbaro finishing the last of the hard plantain. He wondered if Bárbaro ever

paid attention to the way he chewed. The slugger reached for his canteen, gulped it all down, his Adam's Apple thumping to each swallow. He reached into a burlap bag next, pulled out a handful of nuts. He motioned to Pedrito who shook his head. He tried Teresita, only to have the girl turn and empty more of her insides into the waters that bore them.

"Coño," Bárbaro started. "Didn't you say your father was a fisherman? You're throwing out more than I've seen you eat since leaving Havana." He tossed nuts in his mouth, set hard teeth to them, and laughed. He poked the small of the girl's back with El Pinguo. Teresita fought back with hawks and lurches.

"Leave her alone," Pedrito said.

And the brothers' eyes met; Teresita's spit and hawks the glue.

"Broder," Bárbaro said, swallowing with an unnerving calm. "I talk to her any way I want." He rolled El Pinguo in his hands. "She's sick, eh? Feel sorry for her? She knew how it'd be out here. I told her. She chose to come anyway." He reached into a different bag—"Teresita—Here!"—and he tossed a plantain that got the girl in the back, rolled away. Pedrito rushed to pick it up, but not before El Pinguo cut in between.

"Leave it," Bárbaro ordered.

Teresita wiped her chin. She reached for the plantain. She locked watery eyes on Bárbaro and bit down, hard.

"¡Hijo de puta!" Pedrito shouted. "Everything goes your way, doesn't it?"

"Yep."

"You're just lucky. Lucky we left Cuba before—"

"Before what?"

“Before the season. I—”

“What you gonna do?”

“I—I would’ve struck your ass out!”

“I’d hit you from here to Holguín any day,” Bárbaro said.

The quarrel thickening, Lázaro focused on the girl. He noticed how she nibbled on the hard tostón and gazed at the brothers. She chewed in soft, regular motions. Like Yeya, Lázaro thought. Her hands slithered from her neck, down the sides of her breasts, and finally came to rest on her center. She smiled for an instant before catching Lázaro. She slid her knees up to her chest and hid her face.

“Three fastballs—y mira,” said Pedrito, three-finger flashing. “¡Ponchao, broder!”

“Dream on,” Bárbaro shot back.

As catcher, Lázaro was no stranger to arguments between pitchers and batters. But he’d never played on a liquid field before. The brothers inched closer. Lázaro cut between them, just as Bárbaro flicked El Pinguo to show he was in charge, and the wood got Lázaro on his wrist. The compass jettisoned from his hand and the ocean swallowed it whole.

“¡Mierda!” Bárbaro shouted. He recoiled, ready to jump in, but Pedrito latched onto him, until an elbow back forced the brother to let go. Bárbaro tried it once more, but not before Lázaro clamped onto both of his arms.

“¿Que coños? You too, Compay? We need that compass!”

“By Shangó,” shouted Lázaro. “Look!”

Bárbaro turned. A red sun skidded the faraway horizon. He went flaccid. A pair of shimmering triangles like miniature masts zigzagged on the blue-green a few feet away from them. Like three Cohiba cigars meant for gargantuan gods, the sharks circled in the universe of water below.

“Forget it,” Lázaro said, letting go.

“What do we do now?” Bárbaro asked.

Pedrito wiped the blood from his mouth. “The stars,” he mumbled.

“The stars,” Lázaro said.

“The stars?” Bárbaro repeated.

And they all plunged back into their places and waited for the night.

He remembers this:

Drums. Rattles. *Shhhhhhhh*. Shells.

Sunday is Shangó’s day. Hollow rhythms in a humid shack; and Elegua, Yemayá, Oggun, Oyá, Shangó, all of Them, plunked on their altars. Shots of rum. Scented candles. Fat, steaming cigars. The Negro babalawo stretching his crescent smile into leafy smoke, whispering to the Ancients. Thick chants from Yeya, from the others—“*Bajan los seres o suben los seres.*”—over and over, drumming their feet. The warm cock’s blood, trickling down his face.

The Orishas taking over. All of Them. A force from Heaven. A burning and a bearing up and away. And soaring, soaring. Up and over decrepit, salt-tempered tenements and monuments raised in reverence to

the Revolución; and over sugarcane, tobacco fields, and thronging stadiums with rice-rationed, horse-fed, carnival crowds. Over fleecy-foamed oceans. Then, diving into Yeya. Through her skin and legs. Through her moist, spidered entrance, straight to her center. To a pitching mound of a rocky shore. And a lighthouse. The Lighthouse. With its light-soul burning, brimming, moving—ALIVE!

The sky, falling. The wind, wisping his skin like a lover's razor-tipped tongue, and howling. The Lighthouse extinguishing. And darkness.

Awake. Asking the Negro what it all means. The babalawo, eyes rolled over white with tiny red rivers inside, grinning, swallowing his brimstone-tipped cigar whole.

“Which one, Compay?” asked Bárbaro, gazing up into the night sky. Pedrito stared up in awe. “So many of them,” he said.

“But Compay knows. He's babalawo, right? He knows these things.” Bárbaro moved closer to Lázaro. “Which one? Compay. C'mon. Tell us.”

Eyes that earlier cursed each other, eyes that refused to believe before, now looked to Lázaro for answers. Across from him, Teresita stared too. Like ptichers' stares back home, he thought, prompting him for the perfect pitch to throw. So the catcher ruminated, and jumbled thoughts began to pinball through his brain and flash images without direct meaning, as if in a dream. He thought about a lot of things. He pondered the logic behind the designated hitter rule, and spitballs, and the regulations set down in

Lucumi, right down to the specific number of feathers preferred by each Orisha. He thought of red, Creation-day clay behind home plate following rainouts that caked in his cleats. The slimy cool of the tobacco juice on his palms before an at-bat. The *awo merindilogun*, the sixteen sacred cowrie shells, the ones he'd consulted before setting out, the ones that had warned of a storm. The tiny lumps around Yeya's widening areolas that, when last he sucked on them, gave off the taste of fermented apples.

Lázaro swayed, sifted through the waters of all he knew, but he couldn't recall anything about navigation. He felt small in the universe. Powerless. Like a makeshift raft set against a vast ocean.

But their eyes kept at it, nudged him from the inside for a choice. He looked up. He found it. He pointed. He chose the first diamond that pulsed thick to the syllables in Shangó's name.

"You sure, Compay?" Bárbaro asked.

"How do you know?" Pedrito said.

"That's it." Teresita spoke for the first time, and her voice made its way into Lázaro's ears with the soft lapping of the waves behind him.

"And how do *you* know?" Bárbaro asked her.

"I'm a fisherman's daughter. I...I know the stars."

But her eyes. They confused Lázaro. From behind the plate, so many times, he'd received those surefire nods from pitchers, only to have to scramble after the balls were thrown. Forkballs for fastballs. Changeups instead of sliders. Lázaro prided himself in always being ready for anything thrown his way. But with the girl, it wasn't only as if

she knew what pitch she'd throw. It was as if she knew the outcome of the game as a whole.

Bárbaro, satisfied, clapped his hands. "We follow that one, then," he said eagerly. "No use arguing with a babalawo *and* a fisherman's daughter. Hah!" He left his spot, slid over to Lázaro. "Move over," he said, "next to Teresita, Compay. I'm rowing tonight." Lázaro eased in next to the girl. "And you be careful now, mami," diddled a high-spirited Bárbaro. "You, me, Pedrito—we've all seen Compay on winning nights. He's got his heba back in Havana, but you tell me he tries anything, O.K.?"

"I don't care about that," Teresita said.

"You don't, eh?" shot Bárbaro, returning to his normal self. "Sick bitch. What I get when I try and be nice to you. Don't know why I brought you along. We'll see what you care about when I'm hitting 'em out of Yankee Stadium. We'll see."

His proclamation amused him so much, that he laughed and sang out loud for the ocean to hear—"*La mujer cuando se agacha, se le abre el entendimiento.*" He kept with the phrase, over and over, with Pedrito right across from him, stewing a quiet rage in his stare.

"You're babalawo?"

"I am. Do you follow Lucumi?"

"My father did."

"The fisherman, yes."

"You know things, then?"

"Like?"

“Will we make it to América?”

“I hope so.”

“All of us?”

She gazed up at him. Tears on her concave cheeks. Pain in her stare. Clear as El Pinguo’s pine tar stains.

“Will we? Make it to América?”

And he understood. He pictured her, younger, curious, far away on that Cueto pier, lying on cool, smooth planks, not caring to learn the stars, preferring to pull on her plummy nipples, and dreaming of black, veiny pingas, while her father fondled the fish on his skiff along the quay. Her. Dreaming up into the summer stars, connecting them, forming her perfect man, willing him down onto her like late-night dew.

But he trusted in his Orisha. He couldn’t believe Shangó would choose to grant him an unreliable star. Not his god. He would protect him, and all those with him.

“All of us,” he said to her.

She sat up and sighed. She rubbed her center. “Thank God,” she said.

Luminous mists. Cool, muzzled calls. Like the morning horn of the sugarcane mill in his hometown.

“What?” she said, startled.

“Whales. Far away,” he told her.

“Lázaro. Compay. I...I picked the star because...”

“I know. Sleep.”

Her second smile.

“Compay! Wake up! Wake up!”

That a giddy Bárbaro hadn't existed since the news of the slugger's third batting crown sounded on the Havana radio stations was of no consequence to Lázaro. Or that the catcher willed his crusty eyes open, only to find the brawny brother balancing himself on the center of the raft, shuffling into a groggy Pedrito's hair, pointing out with El Pinguo in front of him.

“We're here! We're here!”

Other things preoccupied Lázaro. His stiff back. That taste in his mouth again. Teresita pressing warm into his ribs, sleeping soundly through the ruckus.

“To the paddle, chico!” Bárbaro shoved wood his brother's way. “We're here, I tell you! Row! Row!”

Lázaro straightened up, looked out as far as he could. A shade danced inside the widening sun.

Pedrito, panting, rowing hard: “We're going east.”

Bárbaro, digging long, smooth strokes: “Eh?”

“The sun. We're heading east.”

“That's la Florida, chico,” Bárbaro huffed back. “I followed the star all night. Compay's, Teresita's star. We drifted a bit last night, maybe. We're just coming in sideways.”

“No houses, buildings either,” Pedrito added.

Bárbaro, shark-like: “¡Me cago en diez, cabrón, carajo! You don't see a stadium either, but you know it's out there. More than one. Over there! Our dreams, broder! Row, chico! Row!”

“Where...” Teresita asked, waking. Bárbaro typhooned in before Lázaro could answer. “Here, mujer! No more Fidel or rationed rice or that Comunismo shit.” He giggled like a schoolboy. “Only freedom! American freedom! Get ready, Teresita, ‘cause we’re eating American steaks tonight, in an American restaurant, American beer, with Chito’s American cousin. Get ready for American baseball, and American dólares!”

Lázaro laughed. The taste in his mouth sank away. In the midst of other wide grins made up of malnourished teeth, for the first time, the laces seemed to loosen around his heart. He breathed easier. He imagined Yeya, with the doves again, this time holding the letter he’d send her—*I made it, Mami. I’m playing, making money. I’m coming to get you and little...*—and he imagined her thrilled, smiling, praising Shangó with her swollen face, fingers, legs. Her thoughts for a name. “Lázarito” still a possibility.

It was at that moment the monument fizzled out of the morning mist for the first time and jutted into plain sight. The laces tightened again. The cleats around his neck bore the weight of the oceans. Lázaro stumbled forward a bit. Plunked in the distance, the lighthouse loomed before him like the last rotten tooth in the mouth of Freedom.

Bárbaro, restless, hurdled into the water first, sloshed up the shallows, El Pinguo gripped tight. Lázaro helped Pedrito push the raft ashore. They brought Teresita down. She sank her soles in the sand. The ocean came up to lick her toes.

They each took their bags and followed Bárbaro. The sand gave way to a barren, rocky terrain with sparse undergrowth that crunched beneath their tired steps.

The sun pounded a hot rhythm on Lázaro’s shoulders as the lighthouse slowly clawed its way ever higher into the cumulus sky. Teresita followed as best she could next to him, until her pace slowed and, finally, she could go no further. She caught her

breath, bent forward, braced her stomach. Bárbaro stopped, turned to the girl and cast stones at her with his eyes: “Mujer, again? We’re not on the raft any more. You don’t get seasick on land.”

“The trip,” Pedrito defended her, helping Teresita to the ground.

“Go...,” the girl feebled out. “Just...tired. Be fine...Go.”

“Let’s go,” Bárbaro said.

“Leave her?” protested Pedrito. “Are you crazy?”

The girl locked her caramel pair on Lázaro, insipid save for their color, so that her eyes resembled those wads of spit tobacco on championship dugout floors no one ever paid attention to. No one but him.

“Go. I’ll stay,” he said.

“I’m here. Rest.”

The sun died for an instant, then rivuled with life again through massing clouds. Lázaro heard a crackling nearby, reminding him of the squish from the seashells he once gathered for talismans back home. A drop in the rocks, and he found the gull nearly gone. He recognized the type. The same that loitered the Malecón wall, gawked at prostitutes and vendors on good-hair, good-business days, and stained the armchair umps arguing ceaselessly over the best Cuban players of all time—Luis Tiant, Germán Mesa, Tony Pérez and others. The gull’s feathers molted in rot. And crabs, everywhere. They dashed off sideways with snippets of flesh and drowned into dark, wet holes at first sight of Lázaro. By the gull’s rear, bits of shell, stuck in pooled, putrid ooze.

A growing gale brought with it grains that stung Lázaro's face; a thousand tiny pains on his skin and eyes. A distant swell. A seaweed silence. Teresita's hand slipped coolly into his.

"How far along?" he asked her.

"Four months," she said.

"The father?"

The sun fainted for good. Behind the clouds, Shángo clapped His majestic hands.

"Shit on ten!"

"It's right here," Pedrito motioned to Bárbaro, crouched at the base of the lighthouse. "I told you."

"Impossible!"

"Bárbaro, mira," and Pedrito read out loud the scribbling on the weathered face:

ADELMIS NORIEGA

TOO FAR BRODER

WELCOME TO CAYO SAL

"¡Mierda!" Bárbaro fumed. He swung wide with El Pinguo at the empty air. The sky thundered along with him. He shot a hard glance at his companions. "Follow the stars—eh, Compay? The brightest one, Pedrito? I learned the fucking stars from my fucking father!"

He shoved Teresita to the ground, hard.

"¡Hijo de puta! Leave her alone!" Pedrito yelled out.

Bárbaro's nostrils flared, and he held up El Pinguo for his brother to see. "I told you, broder—I say what I want, to whoever I want, whenever I want! I got wood. You got nothing."

"You could never hit what I throw."

"Still with that, eh? Prove it. Right here. C'mon!"

"Fine!"

"Fine," Bárbaro said, and he turned to Lázaro. "Get your glove out, Compay. This ends right here and now."

"But, the storm."

"Looking at it," Bárbaro said. He took a few practice swings, moved to a patch of ground he liked, settled into his stance, dug in.

Those pinpricks on Lázaro's shoulders. He peered across at Pedrito caught up in medium strides, measuring those sixty-feet, six-inches, his glove and cap on already. He watched him turn round and spear his stare at Bárbaro through the growing rain.

"Let's go," Bárbaro said.

Before the battered lighthouse, before Teresita, before himself, Lázaro found himself digging deep into his bag, bringing out his mitt. He slid it on, nice, just as always, and the glove felt warm, welcoming. Moist on the inside, even, where he twiddled his fingers to make sure he was alive. His legs wobbled with that same old anticipation. He listened to his barking knees and crouched down.

"Ready," Bárbaro said.

Pedrito went into his windup, lifted a long left leg, looped it down, and delivered something fast and wicked, right past Bárbaro's roundhouse swing. POP! The ball exploded warm into Lázaro's glove.

"Good one," said Bárbaro, rolling his shoulders. "Warming up, chico. Just warming up."

Pedrito flashed a clever smile, stared in with revolution in his eyes. He went into his dance again, curled up like a fetus propped on one leg, and birthed a pitch even faster than the one before. El Pinguo chopped into nothing but the wet air.

Bárbaro barked—"¡Pinga!"—and cracked his thick-veined neck to the left, to the right. He stepped out for a moment. He wiped off El Pinguo as best he could.

The sky rolled, jumbled into floating, paunchy clams. Lázaro found Teresita. She sat where Bárbaro had cast her, on the sidelines of that impromptu contest, head and hands back, legs tucked in, open-mouthed to the rain. As lively as ever; as if gazing over at her from the batter's box during a Sunday game at Parque Colón. Behind her, that weathered, forgotten dome at the top of the lighthouse, floating over her head like a crown. Teresita. Her third smile.

Bárbaro stepped back in. "C'mon!"

And on the third day the third ballet, and Pedrito let the ball fly. Lázaro lost sight of it, it traveled so fast, until—THWACK!—Bárbaro managed to put El Pinguo on the ball. "Hah!" the brother huffed. Pedrito ducked for dear life, afraid the ball might come his way. But the ball lasered to the right instead and struck Teresita in the face, splashing her back like a fading wave.

And the torrent began.

They raced over. Pedrito, wide-eyed, trembling. Bárbaro, dripping like the jagged stone of a waterfall, staring down with Lulo's New Year's Day, plenty-of-hog-left-over eyes.

The sky snapped, spit, cursed. Lázaro tried his best to fight it. His insides contorted, and his body ached where he stood, and his gullet funneled leafy smoke up onto his tongue and mouth, so that the hairs in his nostrils smoldered, and he bit down, gnawed on his tongue, over and over, and savored the taste of his own blood. Like a uniform They slipped him on, the Orishas, and he felt them squirming inside him like sacred worms. They pulled, clawed in unison, and rolled his eyes back into veiny whites, so that he was able to see both ways. Inside, the Orishas, huddled and laughing. On the outside, the brothers, colorless in the deluge.

Lázaro cast off his glove. Like a twig he snatched El Pinguo from Bárbaro's grasp. Like a god he glowered down upon the brothers. Like a god he struck them down.

He scrawls:

LÁZAR—

Stop.

He finds the wad. The wad that's a foamy stain, like the froth on guarápo, at the foot of the lighthouse door. The wad that sits like a whipped island of spit on the cool stone floor. The wad by his feet where the crabs come at night to snip at his toes.

His stomach bays. He lays his head on his mitt. He thumbs the Virgin in his pocket, her face and crown nearly rubbed away. The

staircase winds up and up and into the trills of the tocororo's song. Into brilliant, puddled fields. Into plump, pregnant doves.

APPENDIX

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT PAUL MOREIRA

Storyglossia, Issue 38, February 2010

Robert Paul Moreira's short story, *Scores*, appears in Storyglossia 38. Here, Robert takes a few moments to discuss the story's origins, South Texas, baseball in fiction versus baseball stories, narrative structure, and what he's currently working on.

Anne Valente: Where did the premise for this story come from?

Robert Paul Moreira: *Scores* started out as the simple story of a South Texas baseball team after the Border Wall cuts through their field. The present version of the story turned out much different, though. As is the case with most of my fiction, the story seemed to take on a life of its own in subsequent drafts, complicated itself, and somewhere along the way, *Scores* became a tale of loss and redemption.

AV: Your writing includes such great details—I can feel this Texas, this heat and environment. How did you pull this off so well?

RPM: South Texas is definitely a feast for the senses, and the senses feed all of my fiction. This unique region is seldom explored by writers on the outside, this tip of Texas that pokes into Mexico like a tongue and savors on the medley of foods and

people and customs from both sides of the border. I'm originally from L.A., the product of a Cuban father and Mexican mother, but it took relocating to South Texas to learn to embrace diversity in my writing—physical, emotional, geographical—and make it work on the page. *Scores*, I hope, is not only a testament to the importance I give to characters and their plights (as every well-crafted short story should, of course), but to the vital role setting can play. How did I pull this off so well? I guess my answer would have to be that I used it all—"this Texas, this heat, and environment" and I allowed it to bring my characters and my story into being.

AV: How did baseball fit so naturally into the story told here?

RPM: I'm glad you made the distinction between a "baseball story" and a story that includes baseball. The greatest baseball stories aren't about baseball at all, to be honest, and they survive only because they shed some light on those universal themes that inspire, haunt us as humans. In *Scores*, baseball served as a great conduit for the tense relationship between Clete and Tito. It also represented that one, all-American activity that separated the brothers from their Mexican neighbors. Finally, it worked on a psychological level, since baseball was ultimately responsible for both the mortal rift between Tito and his girlfriend, Luvy; as well as Tito's strong desire for redemption throughout the piece. Baseball gave me the title, too.

AV: The narrative moves in and out, between more stream-of-consciousness sections and present-day narration. Why did this structure feel right for the story?

RPM: Poppa gave me the structure for *Scores*, no doubt about it. *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* is one of my favorite stories of all time, and this was my tribute to that masterpiece, I think, even though I chose first-person over third. The way Hemingway introduced Harry, then employed those beautiful stream-of-conscious flashbacks to deepen the reader's sense of his struggle, along with all the profound subtext—all of that compelled me to try the same with my own story and younger characters. I wanted Tito to tell his story, so first-person fit quite naturally. Present-tense felt right for *Scores* because it granted the entire text that same sense of urgency inherent in Tito after the accident. The nonlinear structure of *Scores* represented the prism of grief through which Tito perceived the world after his fall and subsequent struggle towards absolution.

AV: What are you currently working on? Any stories forthcoming that we can point readers to?

RPM: Got a story, *Cobb and Me*, forthcoming in *Aethlon: the Journal of Sports Literature* later this year. Along with *Scores* and other stories dealing with identity, immigration and baseball, these works will be included in my MFA thesis, which I'm currently wrapping up, and which I hope to submit as a manuscript for possible publication in the near future. Got an idea for an anthology of Latino/Latina baseball literature too, as well as a novel. And I'm waiting for word from a few English Lit/Creative Writing Ph.D. programs I applied to late last year.

INTERVIEW OF DR. SCOTT PETERSON, FICTION EDITOR, AETHLON:
JOURNAL OF SPORTS LITERATURE

E-mail Interview, February 25, 2010

Robert Paul Moreira: As editors of sports-centered literary journals, what makes a “good” story, specifically a good baseball short story/nonfiction piece?

Dr. Scott Peterson: Stories that capture the essence of baseball while also being about the game in a larger sense (i.e. more than just play-by-play) are the strongest.

RPM: What specific elements accentuate good baseball stories?

SP: Strong characterization, plotting that is both aware of and enhances baseball fiction formulas

RPM: What elements hinder bad ones?

SP: Unacknowledged or unchallenged use of formulas, stereotypes, or cliché elements.

RPM: Organized baseball has served as a great microcosm of America for baseball fiction authors, encompassing everything from assimilation to identity to immigration. In

your opinion, why hasn't this allure captured the interest of Latino/Latina authors? With the strong presence of baseball in the Caribbean and Latin America, as well as the World Baseball Classic recently, why aren't more Latino/Latina authors using baseball in their stories/novels? Can you list a few Latino/Latina baseball fiction authors you've read/published recently? What are these authors saying? How are these voices contributing to contemporary baseball fiction? Is there a future for Latino/Latina baseball fiction? Why or why not?

SP: Other than yourself, I cannot think of any Latino/Latina authors that I have published recently. I am not sure why Latino/Latina authors have not been drawn to baseball as a source of their fiction. The few contemporary authors I do know tend to take advantage of the mythopoetic aspects of the game to blend with magical realism (again, like yourself).

RPM: According to Cordelia Candelaria's *Seeking the Perfect Game: Baseball in American Literature* (1989), Ring Lardner's "narrative realism...transformed the sport from a casual motif in juvenile stories to a formal nuanced metaphor serviceable to serious literature." I tend to employ realism in my own fiction to bring my characters and their plights to life. In your estimation, did the jump from pulp variety stories to the use of realism help/hinder baseball fiction?

SP: En route to becoming the subject for "serious literature," the turn toward realism helped baseball fiction become suitable reading material for the middle class audiences of the *Saturday Evening Post* and other mass market magazines.

RPM: Does this literary device, as Candelaria posits, guarantee "serious literature"?

SP: It didn't guarantee "serious literature," but it was an important ingredient in getting upper class intellectuals to take baseball and writing about the game seriously.

RPM: Along those same lines, what did Malamud's use of magical realism accomplish in *The Natural*?

SP: Magical realism works with the mythical levels of *The Natural* to turn it more toward the romanticism of popular fiction (i.e. gangsters and betting and the melodrama of the Judge trying to run Pop out of baseball).

RPM: In contemporary baseball fiction, what other literary devices are authors using to grant their works more literary weight?

SP: Contemporary authors often blend baseball with other genres: Michael Bishop, *Brittle Innings* (baseball and Frankenstein), Henry Garfield, *Tartabull's Throw* (baseball, werewolf, time travel, young adult, romance).

RPM: In my story, *ManRam the Great*, I comment on the use of performance-enhancing drugs (PED's) in Major League Baseball, as well as the disillusionment of fans with their baseball heroes. With the admissions of Alex Rodriguez, Manny Ramírez, and most recently, Mark McGwire, has PED use affected baseball fiction in any way?

SP: Not that I've noticed.

RPM: Do you think it will?

SP: Perhaps, once we get some perspective/distance on the issue.

RPM: More specifically, can you recall any Latino/Latina authors broaching this subject?

SP: No.

RPM: Where do you see baseball fiction going in the next, say, twenty years?

SP: Continued blending of baseball fiction with other pop lit genres due to the difficulty in finding an adult audience for serious baseball fiction.

RPM: Do you think Latino/Latina authors will play a part in the growth/demise of the genre?

SP: There is no reason Latino/Latina authors couldn't play a role in the growth of the genre.

RPM: As editors and scholars of sports literature, what message would you give to Latino/Latina authors who intend to enter the realm of baseball literature?

SP: Plenty of room for all--especially those with a fresh take on baseball fiction.

INTERVIEW OF DR. TIMOTHY MORRIS, NONFICTION EDITOR, AETHLON:
JOURNAL OF SPORTS LITERATURE

E-mail Interview, February 23, 2010

Robert Paul Moreira: As editors of sports-centered literary journals, what makes a “good” story, specifically a good baseball short story/nonfiction piece? What specific elements accentuate good baseball stories? What elements hinder bad ones?

Dr. Timothy Morris: A good story has energetic, lively language and a problem or tension that keeps you reading to see what will happen next. Baseball games are hugely formulaic, so the problems and tensions they create are going to have to be interpersonal to keep the story intriguing. A technical baseball problem isn't going to cut it.

Something outrageous often helps: some of WP Kinsella's very best stories *Lumpy Drobot* or *The Dixon Cornbelt League* are Twilight-Zony, and Stuart Dybek's *Death of a Right Fielder* has a lovely offbeat attitude toward death and mourning. It's almost a cliché that the best baseball stories are magical-realist; there are certainly uninspired baseball stories that plug in fantastic elements. But baseball is in some ways such a bland sport that its best stories counterpoint that blandness with a lot of outrageousness.

RPM: Organized baseball has served as a great microcosm of America for baseball fiction authors, encompassing everything from assimilation to identity to immigration. In

your opinion, why hasn't this allure captured the interest of Latino/Latina authors? With the strong presence of baseball in the Caribbean and Latin America, as well as the World Baseball Classic recently, why aren't more Latino/Latina authors using baseball in their stories/novels? Can you list a few Latino/Latina baseball fiction authors you've read/published recently? What are these authors saying? How are these voices contributing to contemporary baseball fiction? Is there a future for Latino/Latina baseball fiction? Why or why not?

TM: I know of very few Latino/a authors who have written baseball stories, but that may just be my own ignorance. Although I read Spanish, I don't keep up with contemporary fiction except for a few authors. I would hate to generalize. As I said above, magical realism has been a big part of baseball fiction in English, and even to some extent in Japanese (Haruki Murakami, Yoko Ogawa), but despite the fact that magical realism was basically invented in Latin America, authors like Garcia Marquez haven't been much interested in baseball, so there isn't a high-canon example to point to (as there is in the US, with Philip Roth, Irwin Shaw, John Updike, Robert Coover, and others).

RPM: According to Cordelia Candelaria's *Seeking the Perfect Game: Baseball in American Literature* (1989), Ring Lardner's "narrative realism...transformed the sport from a casual motif in juvenile stories to a formal nuanced metaphor serviceable to serious literature." I tend to employ realism in my own fiction to bring my characters and their plights to life. In your estimation, did the jump from pulp variety stories to the use of realism help/hinder baseball fiction? Does this literary device, as Candelaria posits,

guarantee “serious literature”? Along those same lines, what did Malamud’s use of magical realism accomplish in *The Natural*? In contemporary baseball fiction, what other literary devices are authors using to grant their works more literary weight?

TM: My answer will seem a little offbeat, but I think that most good baseball fiction plays in a parodic way with pulp and juvenile conventions. That's especially true of *The Natural*, and also of Lardner's fiction, and continues in Roth, Coover, Greenberg's *The Celebrant*, and Kinsella. "Realism" in baseball fiction always confronts the problem that "telling it like it is" is a sportswriterly artifice to begin with.

RPM: In my story, *ManRam the Great*, I comment on the use of performance-enhancing drugs (PED's) in Major League Baseball, as well as the disillusionment of fans with their baseball heroes. With the admissions of Alex Rodriguez, Manny Ramírez, and most recently, Mark McGwire, has PED use affected baseball fiction in any way? Do you think it will? More specifically, can you recall any Latino/Latina authors broaching this subject?

TM: There has been some fiction lately about engineered bodies (see Louise Marley's *Diamond Girls*, in *Absalom's Mother* (Auburn, WA: Fairwood, 2007). But on the whole, there hasn't been much PED fiction. I think the topic smacks too much of temperance fiction. Nobody wants to write fiction that's blase about drug use, but nobody really wants to play Carrie Nation either :)

RPM: Where do you see baseball fiction going in the next, say, twenty years? Do you think Latino/Latina authors will play a part in the growth/demise of the genre? As editors and scholars of sports literature, what message would you give to Latino/Latina authors who intend to enter the realm of baseball literature?

TM: This is really hard to say. To extrapolate from the last 20 years, I think that new trends in general and Young Adult fiction will continue to resonate in baseball fiction, but the appeal of the Big Game archetype and the Bildungsroman structure will always be present. I would imagine that Latino/a authors will get interested, but it may take a single writer, or 2 or 3 independent pioneers, to set the stage (much as Frank O'Rourke and Mark Harris did in Anglo writing in the US).

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Robert Paul Moreira was born in Bellflower, California and grew up in Los Angeles. In 2004, he relocated to South Texas. In 2007, he received his Bachelor of Arts in History and Anthropology at the University of Texas – Pan American. In May 2010, he received his Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing – Fiction.

His written works have appeared or are forthcoming in [*Aethlon: the Journal of Sports Literature*](#), [*Storyglossia*](#), [*Bartleby Snopes*](#), [*Dark Sky Magazine*](#), [*Breakwater Review*](#), [*Interstice*](#), [*The Quay*](#), and [*The Acentos Review*](#). He is an Editorial Assistant for [*Hobart: Another Literary Journal*](#) and Assistant Fiction Editor for [*Dark Sky Magazine*](#). His short story, “Cobb and Me,” forthcoming in *Aethlon*, won the 2009 Best Graduate Fiction Award from the Texas Association of Creative Writing Teachers (TACWT).

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