

The Value of Baseball

I.

Harvey rolled like a pinball. In 1934, four months after leaving school at sixteen, he worked twelve hours a week unloading flatbed produce trucks at Patruli's Deli. During his off time, Harvey leaned against rusted piers under the Market Street bridge with the other men — German, Slovak, and Lithuanian immigrants — groping for steady work. Interchangeable, expendable men slouching fifty feet below the bridge and just outside the yards, clad in filthy, drab work clothes and boots of worn leather with their steel-toe caps peeking out here and there like patches of gray primer beneath chipped paint, smoking cheap tobacco in hand-rolled cigarettes and green Lucky Strikes and hitting off hazy homemade booze until it did not much matter that the bearded Croat in the booth had posted the *NO* sign for the fourth day that week; and until it did not much matter that even when the man did give the order to insert three or four guys to this mill or that yard, that the Croat would not so much as spit at you if you were unfortunate enough to carry no vouchers from those already inside; and until it did not much matter that even mill work was unlikely for a two-bit punk like him. And so, blunt and vagrant, time passed for Harvey, and just when he figured he could stand under that bridge no longer, just as he was about to abandon ideas of mill work, to hit the open road, to pick up and jump trains to California, or Texas or somewhere different, to slip out of the mill before ever slipping in, Harvey caught a bone. A bone tossed by a grimy man with forearms bigger than Harvey's thighs who saw Bud's kid brother walking to Patruli's and remembered his face from when they used to skip rocks at him until he would run away, and from when they used to wet-willy him until he would cry; and thus, the next morning, Harvey walked aside this man, aside this heavy plate and black iron worker who looked just as filthy that morning as he did the night before; aside this stoic figure of labor who casually wore a

leather tool belt over his shoulder and who carried a dented and scratched lunch pail — an industrial knight so long clad in the armor of the trade that Harvey could not have imagined him looking any other way; aside this progenitor of scarred and bruised children who ran wild in the streets jumping free rides on the back of milk trucks and playing football with an old soup can before belly-flopping into the murky Mahoning River; aside a worker so unaware of leisure, happiness, and holiday that he clustered the concepts with that of death and tossed them all down to be trampled by duty and obligation; aside a grown son whose own father had incinerated in a coke furnace during the long-shift; aside his precursor; and, indeed, from seven o'clock that drizzly Wednesday morning until three-thirty in the afternoon forty-seven years later, between which time begetting three children from a wife who broke vertebrae after slipping on bathroom tile, between which time cultivating a dry hacking cough which eventually would lay him to rest, between which time enduring two severed fingers and the unstable knees of a laborer, between which time learning how to hide flasks in toilet tanks and tool box drawers, between which time tattooing welts on his forearms with the leaping embers that accompany the welder, Harvey worked sheet metal. When Harvey crossed the threshold that last afternoon, he wore a gold-plated watch presented to him by the owner, he carried a pension booklet passed to him from the shop steward, and, most importantly, Harvey held the memory of that summer afternoon, in 1956, when he spoke to his eldest son, my father, about an apprenticeship in the trade and hooked my father into that same shop that entrapped so many good men into three bedroom homes and American automobiles, into little leagues and booster clubs, into Florida vacations and Fourth of July cookouts, into black coffee and tomato juice, into Sunday Mass and visits to Catholic cemeteries, into twilight double-headers and high school football games, into cheap domestic beer and cigarette coupon booklets, into January first kielbasa in sauerkraut and wedding tables covered with platters of kolachi and pizzelles, into a way-of-life, a structure, out

of which a man develops pride, loyalty, security, perseverance, and comfort, and it was these qualities that turned good men into pigeons, that blinded the prophets and sages, that allowed the structure to crumbled upon them as the mills collapsed and their understanding of how the world worked, of order, of logic, of life, ceased to exist like a flame extinguished, like an alarm silenced, like a scream muffled; and these men watched Youngstown wrest into a ghetto of aimless middle-aged workers by US Steel and Republic Steel, and even Bethlehem Steel, one by one shutting the gates of their antiquated mills and leaving for Asia, Mexico, and the south-western United States where trade unions carried the stigma of greedy workers and ruined industry; but my father, who somehow stayed afloat while his comrades sunk into ruin — lost their homes, their families, their dignity — refused to abandon Youngstown, refused to extract our family and float south where skilled welders worked for half of his wage and felt lucky. The shop somehow prevailed over the erosion which surrounded its dilapidated buildings and sweaty men. My father still worked, and thus he was still able to believe in honesty and loyalty and the creed of the worker — if I work harder, if I work longer, if I do a better job, I will prosper — and so much did my father believe in these ideals that even in 1981, well after the mills had abandoned the valley, well after the lifeless ex-workers ceased to be angry and settled into the despair of shattered existence, when the shop, which once operated six days a week with three shifts of forty men crews, was operating merely one shift of ten men — a ghost town of five B workers, four foremen working labor on the floor, and a one-armed shop superintendent — my father declined an opportunity to quit and open his own sheet metal company — risks demeaned prudence. Instead, he followed his creed and held strong to his belief that the shop would be there for him, but beliefs and creeds are intangibles which have never spoken with a strong enough voice to throw down a crooked owner increasing profits and ignoring deferred maintenance, forlorn buildings, and antiquated equipment; and who alone dropped the company so deep

into a chasm that after thirty-five years of physical labor, my father lost his job, and the bank sold the foreclosed property that was what I had always known as the shop to developers who dreamed of a trendy Mahoning River district, and who left one building standing amongst piles of rubble when they drifted away in the night.

II.

Harvey and Bud were yin-yang brothers. Bud's yin pulled him to the pastoral lands of Bill's forty-two acre farm, to six apple trees and a slate roofed barn, to a Case tractor and feed mill gossip, to an overweight brown and white pony named Babe and four male peacocks from which Bud always gave feathers to the children on Christmas day; and although then traveling to Bill's farm was only an annual tradition, driving a Model A over dirt roads, the visits were the highlights of Bud's childhood, they were his secret pilgrimages; and although Harvey horsed around with the pitchforks and loose piled hay, he did not respect the scene, he did not understand the milieu; and thus, with Harvey gravitating toward urban factory life, Bud, looking through prophetic lenses, refused to even wade in those polluted waters, and although Harvey told him he would regret the seven day work week and the small returns, being at the mercy of the weather and the lack of a retirement pension, and although Harvey told him all the reasons for not being a farmer, tried to sell him all the lines that he himself was buying, when Bill died, Bud took over his small-time operation, and over the years as Harvey gave his youth to the Man, Bud gave his to the earth, and the two drifted apart, each intuitively longing for his other half, but each called in different directions, and although Harvey and Bud never meant to sit across from each other at the holiday table and have nothing to say, that is what they did, and as the years and the drinks flowed, Harvey and Bud's opportunities slipped away, and their shared history eventually came down to an old photograph of two boys on a sled, Bud sitting in front between Harvey's legs with his feet on the steering bar, and Harvey, bigger,

behind his brother with his arms wrapped around Bud's waist, and it took the two of them, trading off, to raise my father who was only searching for one solid man and instead received two troubled brothers, and Harvey and Bud would both die as they had lived--fragmentary men.

The only stores Bud ever patronized were pawn shops; thus, for my father's graduation from high school, his Uncle Bud gave him a pair of gray field glasses he had rummaged from a back-street shop a week earlier. Years later, sitting in the rain at old Municipal Stadium, my father told me that Bud's real name was Conrad, however, he could not explain the derivative, Bud; but none of this mattered then, in 1956, when his Uncle Bud accepted my father's hand, outstretched in gratitude, not only for the binoculars, but for the drafty farm house with its hand-pumped water that Bud had opened to my father when Harvey's drinking turned my father's father into a maimed and odorous grizzly who struck with ugly black claws; for the ticket to game three of the '48 series where Larry Doby's third inning home run landed just a few rows from their bleacher seats; for the rhubarb pies Aunt Lena, Bud's second wife, sliced across the middle and split between my father and her husband as they recovered from August afternoons cross-stacking bales of green alfalfa in dusty hay lofts; for the Guernsey cream, skimmed off the top of wide-mouth gallon jugs, in which his Uncle Bud suggested my father drown his pie; for the rope-frame bed and the rag mattress to lay on it that his Uncle Bud salvaged from St. Catherine's basement after receiving the blessing of Monsignor Kleese; for the grape soda his Uncle Bud had purchased for my father after the deflated crowd, they amongst them, moved away from the black and white television sets in Strauss' downtown store, still disbelieving that Wertz could hit a ball over four-hundred feet and Mays could catch it; for the lessons learned on those cold morning milkings when ice skims would form over the full buckets before my father could empty them into the tank; for being a man; and for all that remains unspoken, even unthought, but known, known the way the apple

knows its seeds and the locust knows its boughs; and so all these stories, this familial history, I learned from my father, not all at once, but in fragments and antidotes told during thirty years of ballpark talk, for nowhere else did my father and I fit together, nowhere else did we stand on even ground. I, with my linguistics classes and rhetorical research, with my two story condominium and bohemian goatee, with my passion for Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, with my amateur sculptures of nude bodies and mad dogs, with my fallen-Catholic agnosticism and forgotten photos of old girlfriends, with my soft-hands and smooth baby-face, with my cerebral leanings and abstract conundrums, with my Miles Davis *Kind of Blue* and Kerouac beatitudes, with my graduate school moratorium and fears of commitment, with my dead-end psychoanalysis and reflective scrutiny, found little to say to a worker, to a man who washed after work instead of before, to a man who has too many projects to know the beauty of a snowy Saturday afternoon wasted reading Chekov's stories in an avant-garde coffee shop, to understand the liberation of sitting all day in front of Caillebotte's *Paris: A Rainy Day* at The Art Institute of Chicago, to listen to the wind while standing on your head in the Wyoming desert, to waste time; to the man who knows how to fix a broken furnace, a wrecked car, a noisy dryer; to the man who lives in antidotes, who disparages complexity, who sees a messy oak tree where I see a primeval archetype; to the man who answers riddles pragmatically. And I too once wanted to do those things, I too want to see that way, I too tried to do what he did, but I could not, and thus, with he embarrassed for me, and I embarrassed at his embarrassment, we have passed awkward holidays and strained birthday parties, and have managed the best we could, and yet, the ballpark is where we talk, the ballpark is the frame of our only real relationship, and it was there, in old Municipal Stadium, that my father told me about those aforementioned binoculars and about that September day, nine years later, before my father would beget me, his only child; before the first season since '59 that the Indians would finish ahead of the Yankees,

when, after climbing onto the old barn's slate roof, after losing his footing and falling thirty feet, his Uncle Bud, lying in a rented hospital bed in the farmhouse dining room, with wiry chin hairs needle-like below his dentured mouth, shirtless and doughy, attired in threadbare blue pajama bottoms strapped at the waist and matted brown slippers, called my father a son-of-a-bitch bastard and lobbed a feeble fist at his sagging brown eyes.

III.

Harvey's hood was flat black industrial. When I was a child, I played with it. The head band, even in its smallest position too open for my skull, webbed over the top of my head like an old bucket. With the hood's dark green glass down over my eyes, I was a blindman, an alien, a robot wandering through the yard and visualizing my location, and if today I were asked to recreate that boy in his grandfather's welding hood, I would drop a five gallon bucket over my head and navigate around the room to everyone's enjoyment, but my father would not find it funny, he would consider it silly and degrading, a man with a bucket over his head, why? I can even hear, in my mind, his protest to this subjunctive construct.

I wore this same hood at twelve, when, in a long-sleeve flannel shirt and blue jeans, wearing gloves so big on my small hands that I could barely grip the whip, I stood beside my father in his heavy work shirt tucked into his dungarees, in his worn boots and wide leather belt, in his turned-around baseball cap and welder's hood, and listened to him, like a novice listening to a master artist, teach me how to weld. And it all seemed doable, the process he displayed seemed possible, seemed simple; but, with the hood down, I could not see to start the arc, and sparks jumped whenever the rod inadvertently made contact with the metal plate, and after many false attempts, I eventually pushed the rod forward into where I guessed the weld should be, and magically the opaque lens of the hood turned transparent against the triumphant

white light of the arc I was creating, and in that glorious light I became spellbound, mesmerized, narcissistic. Afraid of ruining the moment, I did not draw the rod across the plate: I feared that any movement of my hand, any attempt to direct the magical arc I had created, would only break the connection. Then there were too many sparks, the arc was not advancing, I was not drawing the light down a line, I was frozen, burning through the metal, the hum was not there, and I pulled the rod off the plate and all went black again. When I lifted my hood, a dastardly hole large enough for my ring finger to slip through, glowing hot at the edges, peered back at me like Oedipus' gouged socket — repulsive, abnormal, sickening: I had ruined the plate, abused the canvas. When my father welded, the hum and the crackling were melodious, the rod's constant contact with the plate lit the stage and the black curtain was lifted, and in wonderment I watched the molten line he created, and saw the theatrical nature of his performance. I reached a second time for the whip and again I could not advance the arc once struck, again there was only the chaotic shower of sparks which allowed me to see that metal stage, upon which my father so masterly performed, only in glimpses. Again I burned through the plate. A third time, a third lewd hole, tears of frustration rolled down my face in lines, and I was ashamed to lift my hood. I dropped the whip. The rod popped loose and rolled across the concrete floor. My father lost his patients, and it was on that one chilly Saturday morning, beside the portable welder in the garage, that my mettle was tested, and I failed, and, now, with my awards and honors framed on the wall in my cluttered office, with my academic accomplishments and artistic successes, I can not help but think back on that day as the day I realized that I would never be a man, the day I realized that all my accomplishments from there on out would be nothing but the contrived conveyance of self-assurance within an insecure world of intellectual ramblings, assurance that what I am doing is good, is honorable, is dignified, when deep down I know it is not. My father attached metal plate to metal plate. He built things. He looked at what he did, not as the work of art

that it was, but as a task, an assignment, a responsibility, and now I go to museums and look at work without function, work which we teach ourselves to appreciate, but which has not the intrinsic value of the industrial production, work which was created by people like me who not only make it, but can also articulate why it should be accepted as valuable. Yet, Harvey would want to know how the nude sculpture on my coffee table advances the world, and he would not accept my aesthetic theory, he would object to art, not because he would not see its beauty, but because he would not understand its departure from work; he would not understand beauty without function, and like primal beings, he is the more spiritual, he is the one who would call for, who would insist upon, a union between art and life — a destruction of barriers — who would detest the entire abstract notion of going to an art museum, and deep down I think he would be right, and deep down I know that all those men in all those dilapidated mills, in all those cruddy shops, in all those greasy garages, are the real artists, under appreciated, unsung, and I know that I and all those like me are simply commentators who cannot see through the dark green lens of a welding helmet and strike the arc.

Once the shop closed, my father never worked again. The union offered him an itinerant position, but he turned away from the trade. The noisy shop that Harvey blamed on his forgotten memory was gone, and no longer could my father hear the clanging of sheet metal echoing around those brick walls and those cracked and mottled concrete floors, never again could he nod his head and drop his hood and become, not my father, but a worker, an artist, a man in an industrial mask; and now, beside Harvey's hood in my father's garage, like the beginning of a collection of African art, my father's hood hangs on a sixteen penny nail, and, in a way, forms the only connection he had to Harvey.

IV.

Baseball is fair because there is no clock, no time limit. The end, regardless of time spent, pitches thrown, batters faced, errors committed, or runs scored, comes only after the losing team records their twenty-seventh out. The batter could foul off pitches forever. The home team could fail to get out of the top of the first. The bottom of the third could never end. Baseball is fair because ties are not acceptable. Extra-innings are forced, the teams must play to a decision, the effort must be judged, there must be a winner. Baseball is fair because the defenders have the ball — the power. The batter can only do what the defense allows, can only take advantage of the defender's mistakes, can only hit the pitch the pitcher did not want to hang, can only steal the base on a slow delivery and an errant throw. Baseball is fair because crossing the plate is one run regardless of the effort, regardless of being walked in or having to collide with the pitcher, regardless of a squeeze play or a passed-ball error, regardless of a five-hundred foot blast or a sacrifice fly, the ground-rule double or the two-base RBI. Baseball is fair because no man is an island; yet, all batters stand alone in the box and try to pull the middle-in fast ball and fail more times than not; yet, the right fielder is on his own judging his leap for the fly ball heading toward the wall; yet, there will be an error recorded beside his name in the books if the third baseman drops the routine pop-up, if the pitcher boots the comeback-grounder, or if the first baseman cannot take the throw on the short hop; and later, when the veteran hangs up his glove, when his knees will no longer carry him around the base path, when his shoulder will no longer allow the ninety-seven mile-an-hour fastball, when even the DH is too grueling, we can sit back and print out his stats and commemorate his feeble efforts — his three hits out of every ten at bats, his one-hundred-fifty-two career errors, one hundred and six coming from second base, the rest from later, when he was converted to a first baseman; and we can not only hold him accountable, we can use these numbers to back up our claim. Baseball is fair because of the old-time lazy Sunday afternoon doubleheader were a guy could sit in the sun for six

hours drinking draft beer from plastic cups and dropping peanut shells at his feet, where a guy could settle into the flow of the thrown ball, the labored pace of the pitcher, the beauty of the diamond, and forget his job, his debt, his dying father, his leaky sink, his life; where a guy could claim sanctuary, become part of the crowd, the community, the congregation and not be the foreigner he has become, where the followers worship and yell for their heroes, their deities, and collectively express their distraught and their frustration, their jubilation and their triumph. Baseball is fair because there at the ballpark, at old Forbes Field or Three Rivers Stadium, at old Municipal Stadium or Jacobs Field, my father is not a worker and I am not an academic, no, there we are a sect, together, unified without boundaries.

Harvey never cared for baseball, but Bud followed it passionately, and just as Bud took my father, my father has taken me to the ballparks of Pittsburgh and Cleveland. My childhood ballpark memories are intricately wrapped up in these steel and concrete structures. But, Bud was not Harvey, he could not be my father's father, and so the games of my father's childhood were not what the games of mine are to me. My father needed a different connection, a different tie, and perhaps I too would have worked through my ineptitude, my feebleness, and strove to become a heavy plate and black iron worker, a master welder who at fifty-six could lie on his back on a filthy floor and back-weld above his head, if it were not for those fields, those players, those occasional days at the ballpark, if it were not for my father releasing me from the circle, and I wonder if he knows what he did. When the father, frustrated and angry, beats his son, humiliates his son, antagonizes his son into killing the erne, the son becomes a man. I wonder if the father knows what he did. When the coach, fed-up and pressured, rides the player's back till the fires of hatred burn in the player's eyes and the player moves beyond the ordinary, the player becomes the star. I wonder if the coach knows what he did. I wonder if my father knows what he did. During all our ballpark times, I have never asked him.

My grandfather Harvey and my father never managed to pound out much of a relationship, and Bud never understood why my father took that apprenticeship at that shop and worked beside Harvey for all those years, but I know why my father worked there; I know why he hid his face behind the black glass of his hood; I know why he refused to give up his creed, refused to move on; and for that very same reason, I now sit at Jacobs Field and look through those old binoculars, and beside me, protected from the sun by a blue cap, sits my beaten father, and when we watch Kenny Lofton chase down a fly ball in center field, I know my father does not need his uncle Bud's binoculars, that he has never needed them; I know he can see Willie Mays, Larry Doby, Uncle Bud, and his father as plain as day.