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Class of 2017

The Baseball Condition

Creative Nonfiction

It used to be pearly white, freshly unwrapped, “Wilson” gleaming on the cowhide. Wilson, like a companion on a desert island. You could paint a face on it. Or go to the beach, aim for the horizon, see how far you can throw it. But you shouldn’t throw your friend, not into the ocean. You’d have no one to talk to. And you can’t afford the luxury of losing a brand new baseball, not while it’s still pearly white. You’ve got to give it a chance to make something of itself.

I don’t know where this one came from, lying around the house, but it’s had its share of chances. Some would say it’s a little long in the tooth, but that’s just love, love I’ve never known for a hockey stick or a pair of high-tops. When a ball really gets smacked, we say it got “tattooed.” Every tattoo tells a tale, like the indelible story of your first career grand slam. And the crack of the bat that inked it is the sweetest sound, two finely-tuned instruments, born to play that song. So no tattoo is a blemish. Just as the ball wears its marks forever, so will the hitter. Chad Harbach writes that baseball, “an apparently pointless affair... somehow [seems] to communicate something true or even crucial about The Human Condition... basically, that we’re alive and have access to beauty, can even erratically create it, but will someday be dead and will not.” Beauty, like that first grand slam, forever remembered as such. Surely Lou Gehrig never forgot his first, but had no idea number twenty-three would be his last. Instead, he cherished them all.

In an oblong loop of dark red stitching, laces protrude on all sides. This is braille for a pitcher, his medium for communication. A famous one named Mark “The Bird” Fidrych would whisper secret orders to the ball before his delivery. That worked for The Bird, soaring through his Rookie of the Year campaign, but other pitchers fail to find success with such unorthodoxies.

Most rely on the laces. Stitch by stitch, a crimson railroad, they send the ball careening like a locomotive to station in the catcher's mitt with a pop, leather's polite applause. Slider, curve, or freight train fastball. Strike three, the batter stands there, still, like a house by the side of the tracks.

Laces betray their secrets, though, when you've glimpsed them just right. Braille be damned; Ted Williams, they say, used to read "Wilson" on its way, clear as day, like newsprint. The last .400 hitter, with Pearl Harbor lurking, Teddy knew all the secrets. Laces hid nothing. A dot of red means twelve-six hook; wait on it. Go the other way, move him over. Weightless at your swing's caprice, the feeling you hardly feel and eternally chase. The great paradox, solved: take a round bat and a round ball, and hit it square.

It would be wrong, all pearly white, now. What was once crisp leather, encrusting a mantle of yarn and a core of cork, eroded with age. Scented stains of Spring, pine tar and a fresh mow, invoking every pleasure of the game, every struggle, the sharpest tang of memory. You know what they say about baseball: it's ninety percent mental and one half physical. Stitch it all together, with red.