

## Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

Tom Sheehan

### Caught up in Baseball While Waiting for Football and Hockey – or Grabbing Pieces on the Run

*Poems and Reflections, the Preface to a Phantom Book on the agony and the sweat and the boundless joy of sport.*

#### A Few Words Up Front

To go back part way or all the way in my memory, to the fields and confines of all my youth, is to color or discolor those most real situations, is to make more pleasant the quick reverie of triumph, is to soften the seeming indignity of loss. There was a point in time, which seems had no beginning nor an end, when I grew with heroes, lived and died with them in their joys and agonies, when I hurt at their fading, saw them one step slower, one ounce weaker, the dream going down the hill. Oh, thus I come and thus I pass.

Not all of the heroes were nova stars leaping at me out of infinity, though some had singular qualities that for times took them above journeyman status. There was the endless and dominant hustle of Red Sox outfielder Al Zarilla, the bulldog determination of early Patriot halfback Larry Garron, the laboring graces of Tommy Holmes who belonged to the people of the pasture in old Braves Field right field, and the near-journeyman substitutes who waited out the interminable times to make one dream move. There was marathoner Johnny Kelly running forever and a sub lineman on the Boston College 1941 Sugar Bowl team who mustered an unquenchable desire and not such great talent whom I shall leave nameless for the knowledgeable. (But I was born an Eagle then, in spite of all other loves).

I remember, radio-wise, alone, couched in a darkened room with but a dial's pink glow, crying out my sledge-hammered sadness when the Duke Blue Devils, whom I had never seen, lost a Rose Bowl game 3-0. That association is still unfathomed, its cause or its coming, though the pain of those moments lasted for years, and brings still a hollow feeling in the chest something else has not yet filled.

Through all those aggregate times of joy and pain, the quick winds of exhilaration, being crushed by an odd score for a span of hours or days, the names and the deeds came and went, comets afoot in the universe, loose in the void; Sweet Jim Lelani, Hurryin' Hugh McElhenny, Sweetness himself, kneeless Kyle Rote, the Robustellis and Marchettis, Len Ford "who was gotten even with," Toz throwing a crushing rolling-body block in the Tennessee secondary, Iron Mike Harrington and Shipwreck Ed Shipulski and Bazooka Bob Burns right in my own backyard, Nyle Kinnick leaving the grainy grass of Iowa for all of America, Choo-Choo Charlie Justice chugging away, my destiny to be slighter in body than desired and finding Davie O'Brien way out there in Texas and second basemen all over the planet who were no bigger than I was, or would ever be.

They came and did and went, and they left the sounds behind, the incantations, the melodies of their names, the alliterative power that nouns and adjectives had suddenly amassed around the Splendid Splinter, Jar-rin' John Kimbrough, The Kitchener Kids (the Kraut Line), the Galloping

## Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

Ghost, the Donora Greyhound, Joltin' Joe, the whole orchestral arrangement that simply said, "Babe and Lou."

Oh, I remember there was the guttural impact of Hammering Hank Toczykowski. Frankie Sinkwich, Bronco Nagurski, Forest Eveshevski, Mike Holovak, Red Schoendeinst, Babe Dahlgren, Dizzy and Daffy Dean, the Chicago softballer Stash Kujawski; the endless impact of Tank Younger and Night Train Lane and Jackie Robinson; and long before some announcer would say, "Holy Cow," or "Whoa there, Nellie," there was Bill Stern bringing all the inside scoop on sports.

In my own small sphere, of minor talents, feet fitted with snowshoes on occasion, to have mixed with some of the great ones, to have come away from the contest with even the smallest sense of achievement or joy, is immeasurable. These I have done: shared the field with Harry

Agganis, Art Spinney, Mel Massuco and Walter Belardinelli; joyed finally at the bright light coming back in Jimmy Piersall's eyes; saw Bobby Orr's first game at Boston Gardens; shared a few beers with Stan Mikita in the long bar across Causeway Street, saw Hondo Havlicek falling down and away at the buzzer and the shot going in the basket; watched the dominance of Bill Russell and the inadequacies of others; saw Larry Bird steal the ball and dish it off to DJ for a basket; screamed as Gino Cappelletti, with one second on the clock, lift one over the crossbar to take out Houston Oilers 25-24; touched Smilin' Jimmy Henigan's wreath from the '31 Boston Marathon; read sports reporters Jerry Nason and Bill Cunningham and The Colonel and Curt Noyes and Bill Cahill and breakfasted on Saturdays with Ernie Roberts; near died at the end with the Red Sox in '46 and '67 and '75 (when it seemed the whole earth must have been up all night long), and again in '78 and '86; finally seeing World Series games at Fenway Park in 2004 and 2007; and being ushered by two sons into the high iron fields of TD Garden for Game 6 of the 2011 Stanley Cup series. Each of them is part of it, a place I make for myself, my very own, and I always move the color around.

It was my father who took me to my first baseball and football games, who kicked the can open for me, who slipped me under his coat past a winking Boston Gardens ticket-taker more than eighty years ago. A few things he said to me, in manly confidence, ring in my mind forever:

Crow a little bit when in luck. Own up, pay up, and shut up when you lose.

**F**ishing is the great solace in sports. It's for the mind, not the hook. It's the time when you measure wins and losses in the truest angle of all, a slant of unbearably beautiful sunlight through morning's alder leaves, a water's whisper of confidence on rocks you think you can hear later in the night, the pointed miracle of a trout beating you at his game, letting you know the wins and losses do come and do pass by. It's like the game of golf or a game of pool; the green is highly coincident.

And early in the games, at the edge of my first failure, marked by the touch of his hand on my shoulder, "You come into life with two gifts, love and energy, and baseball and football and hockey are going to take both of them for all you've got and whatever else you go at." I think his heart

## Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

remembered a loss, his knees their pain. When they took his leg off, the pain did not leave him.

Here then, in these pages, is the spectrum, the substance of my memories, the composite of momentary joys and bitter sadness, minute impressions of my time, of those I have touched and been touched by, or in truth have created out of all the touching; and while every battle fades further away and the stars grow dimmer, the times were real. And I am still in love with the agony and the sweat.

*Ted Williams*

*Nothing can grab this old soldier as much as seeing  
Teddie Boy, pilot, warrior, hitter, stealing the thunder  
of the All-Star Game, Fenway Park, the year 2000,  
and recalling with vivid clarity of a mindset that will  
never move, the day, the hour, the temperature, the way  
the sun slashed into a whitened valley in Korea in 1951,  
and the artillery's Forward Observer, in a hole with me,  
saying of the Marine flight strafing over us, out in front  
of us, bugging down the valley only after every round of  
ammunition was spent, "That's Ted Williams and his gang."*

*Eyes, wrists, stubbornness, all put together in one machine,  
and you rode that little pill over my head behind the bullpen  
sucking on Budweiser; and that other machine, winged, blue-  
borne, high over a Korean hill where I sucked on my guts and  
dreamed of the infield tarp being pulled back on a cloudy day,  
one day soon.*

### Five Picture Postcards from Fenway Park

*Ted Williams*

*The longbow of a man rounding third,  
head down, studying his knees and how  
they pump like a twocycle engine  
out to sea where the fish wait for him,  
the electric tarpon, the wily bonefish,  
the great unknowns testing ultimate  
test line, the lost RBI's interred  
beneath the dreams water spreads;  
Theodore, loping home after a homer,  
longlegged like a newborn colt,  
pretending the crowd at a frenzy  
is but one more wave, faceless  
in the seagreen decor all the way  
to the tidal wave standing in left field.*

## Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

*Pudge*

*Catcher Fiske, thirty feet down the line,  
bodyEnglishing the ball inside the foul pole  
standing like a thermometer atop left field wall  
and measuring the madness springing from  
the hearts and the throats and the dreams that  
thirty thousand dreamers had subwayed  
into an October night of 'Seventyfive,  
freezing the Cincinatti in his place,  
a long way from home in alien Boston,  
too noisy, too raucous, too literate  
for the rampaging Midlanders, two bits  
of thank yous into the blind man's cup  
on the way out of the hysteria of stadia.*

*Yaz*

*The Long Islander of Potatoes, the Yazman,  
the shortstop, centerfielder, left fielder,  
interim first baseman, old timer, antique,  
TriTrophy Winner in the Wonder Year,  
popping one up to a nondescript third baseman  
as the Yankee Yeti of October Fastballs  
threw his arms into Boston's airborne misery,  
pronounced the kill, thundered his Alpine roar  
that went meekly beneath the clutter of Boston.  
A one game season the wrong way to third base.*

*Tony C.*

*Near here, bent, miraculously not broken,  
adrift on a foreign sea, moving in fog,  
grasping for the stiffness of the bat  
in his hands, tunneling his eyes toward  
a nearly familiar pitcher on the mound,  
dreaming again like a Swampscott boy  
of being where he had already been,  
Tony slept the partial sleep, the taste  
of batting still in his mouth, still, still.*

## Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

*Billie-Bud*

*High in the right field stands, chaired  
with wheels, knowing he can never, will never,  
feel the grass beneath his feet, never feel  
the chalk lines go like clouds under foot,  
never face a foreign pitcher, or dare a steal,  
a boy of bright eyes and sad legs lets go:  
he tries to measure the speed a fastball has,  
the gyrations of a knuckleball or a dipsydoodler.  
Only when he feels weights of his father's tears  
does he smile. The scoreboard never shows it  
or the box score in the next paper, but one man  
remembers, two rows back, three seats over,  
forever.*

There is a short story that starts like this: (find it in Wilderness House Literary Review archives)

“The Boy Who Got Stuck under the Warren Avenue Bridge”

The only thing between me in Charlestown and Eddie Shore and the Bruins and the Boston Garden back there in 1935 was the Warren Avenue Bridge. It was a squat, short chunk of iron that stood in my way every time I snuck my way out of the borough to see No. 2 play in the Garden. When it came to hockey there was nobody like the rambunctious hitter who years later had his number cast up in those high and glorious fields of iron, the heavens of the old Garden. Later, per chance, there was Bill Russell of the Celtics and Bobby himself and a handful of others who made my time and their times so memorable. Along with the Depression, low wages, long hours, hunger extending the long hours, the secret ways in and out of places, and crowded places where a lone boy could lose himself.

*I Have Seen the Falcon Soar*

*I have seen the falcon soar,  
(around the net comes Bobby Orr),  
Graced, winged of wind and wonder,  
(in his stick the sound of thunder).  
In clouded valleys of the sky,  
In peakings of the mountains high,  
In air that is freer than  
All the atmospheres of man,  
He soars.  
(In the confines of the ice  
where grace alone will not suffice  
and guts and muscles are tools that get  
him all the closer to the net,  
he scores!!)  
In all the angles of the earth*

## Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

*From near the moment of his birth,  
The peregrine is darting clear  
and shows his signs, the least is fear.  
(In the corners by the boards,  
where any defenseman least affords  
the slightest respite in his turn,  
the rushing forwards he does spurn.  
He digs, he jams, he spirals in,  
heedless of the wooden din,  
heedless of the slashing sticks  
and all the forwards' ancient tricks.)*

*And then, with the Garden wild,  
With the screaming of each mannish child,  
He starts that graceful, rink-length flight  
As if he, the peregrine, were at azured height.*

*I have seen the falcon soar,  
And Oh! that young Bobby Orr.*

---

### *First Game Celebration*

*In that first year when  
we saw Bobby against the Hawks,  
and later, quenching thirst in that long bar  
across Causeway Street,*

*we shared a few beers  
with Stan Mikita. We asked him  
about the new kid on the block  
and how he shaped up.*

*He smiled and looked  
down at those devil-besticking  
hands, gnarled like limbs  
of an old oak tree.*

*I thought he looked  
like Michelangelo must have looked  
gazing down on the marble block  
before David began.*

And there is a novel that begins like this: (Murder at the Forum (find it for Kindle at Amazon, Danse Macabre)

Misery comes in short order, and sometimes murder is right behind it. Or the other way around. It might be a black cloud on a sunny day, an old ache, the death of an old friend. Or someone or something not known before.

## Wilderness House Literary Review 11/3

*Murder, it seems, is not particular.*

*They didn't know it then, Harry Krisman and his girlfriend, Maxine Humdroph, as they sat in the New Molson Center in Montreal, hockey's new Mecca, but other things hockey were moving against them, and against the good Brother Pierre in his Laurentian cabin reading old newspapers and magazines and fixing old cars. Even then, as they watched the game, other things hockey had permanently moved against two old-time French-Canadian hockey players down in the States. More than passes and good scores were being made. More than solid checks were being followed up to climactic conclusions.*

That novel ends like this:

*At St-Cyrille-de-l'Islet, Gabon Gabby Prideaux, Canadian hockey's Everyman, of whom there must be a thousand replicas across the country in a thousand rinks from Charlottetown, PEI to Bannf in the West, finally tiring of the long hours, the inestimable amount of joy which crowded his late life, was put to rest beneath the flag he had served under on four continents.*

Hockey would sleep in Canada, but only for the shortest span of a summer day.