

Fair Territory

Poems by Jilly Dybka



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Acknowledgements

The Beatles Play Shea Stadium For The First Time. Elysian Fields Quarterly: The Baseball Review. Vol. 18 / No. 3 (2001)

Big Ed Delahanty. Spitball: The Literary Baseball Magazine. Issue #58 (2004)

Dock Ellis Pitches A No-No While On LSD. Elysian Fields Quarterly: The Baseball Review. Forthcoming 2004.

Mudball. Spitball: The Literary Baseball Magazine. Issue #58 (2004)

Layout by Jeevan Rose

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Table of Contents

Page 1.....	Mudball
Page 2.....	Big Ed Delahanty
Page 3.....	The Beatles Play Shea Stadium For The First Time
Page 4.....	Greer Stadium, Nashville
Page 5.....	haiku
Page 6.....	haiku
Page 7.....	Dirty Ball
Page 8.....	Brushback
Page 9.....	Pine Tar Bat
Page 10.....	The Personnel Athletic and Recreation Program WWII
Page 11.....	Opening Day
Page 12.....	Grand Slam
Page 13.....	New Haircut
Page 14.....	Two On, Two Out
Page 15.....	Night Game
Page 16.....	The Quickening
Page 17.....	Fly Ball
Page 18.....	Extra Innings
Page 19.....	Blowing My Stats
Page 20.....	Dock Ellis Pitches A No-No While On LSD
Page 21.....	On Deck
Page 22.....	The Cubs Win The World Series

Mudball

*Here is some (dirty little) baseball lore.
It's Lena Blackburne Baseball Rubbing Mud.
Used in each ump's pre-game ball-prepping chore.
Comes in a jar. It is top secret crud
from a river bottom in South Jersey.
Guess it's better than the dirt from home plate.
Taking the shine off the ball is the key,
so every ball since 1938
has been a mudball. A muckball—all smudgy.
Come high summer, they are harvesting goo
and they age it so it's good and sludgy.
Then the gunk is ready to dip into.
They rub stuff on baseballs. It has a weird name.
It is used in every Major League game.*

Big Ed Delahanty

*The Swat King was solidly sauced again
so the conductor kicked him off the train
near Niagara Falls. The last words he said:
“Don’t care if I’m in Canada or dead”
and headed across the bridge, staggering.*

*He could knock a ball in two with his swing
but on the road Big Ed’s Mom came with him.
(He liked to cry “suicide” on a whim
and one time he even turned on the gas.)*

*Delahanty was a pain in the ass
but he didn’t deserve to be found drowned
at the bottom of the Falls. His renown.*

*One of the big mysteries in baseball.
Was he pushed from the bridge or did he fall?*

The Beatles Play Shea Stadium For The First Time

*The spare stage sits on the infield, the throb
of the crowd is keen. The neat grass has not
seen hysteria until this mod mob.
Beatle boot boys jockey for a good spot,
girls rend and scream with preteen tears of love.
Far, the prim order of foul and fair,
of batter up, of safe, bat, ball, and glove.
This night, the game's lines are skewed by long hair
and Love Me Do. The stadium is too
big for the game. For the first time, baseball
is small. The green diamond does not shine true
under rows of cop's feet. Fans climb the wall
to tear at the turf. The lads are revealed
and the rock and roll band takes to the field.*

Greer Stadium, Nashville

*there's talk of building a new stadium
but I like the one we have as it is
though it is falling apart at the seams*

*tucked in a neighborhood south of downtown
no bad seats in the house
and pretty good parking
if you get there early
to watch them play fungo*

*the stadium is leaky and creaky
scoreboard doesn't work right
since that bad thunderstorm
if you pay attention
you know the score anyway*

triple-a ballpark

toddlers

run the bases

beer and cut grass

the smell of June sunshine

Dirty Ball

*Perhaps it's the umps always making sure,
or the prim field that makes baseball appear
incorruptible. Primevally pure.*

*We are profoundly shocked when we hear
of the cheats. The gamblers. The Androstene.*

Desperate tools to establish an edge:

Stolen signs. Corked bats. Nail files. Vaseline.

Any means to achieve an advantage.

Hollow accomplishments, but effective.

*Sometimes the wrong is too grave to absolve but
frequently, fans have been fast to forgive.*

A slow burn moves through the news when found out.

It's an abomination—a scandal—

when ball players resort to dirty ball.

Brushback

*The starting pitcher is a headhunter.
He throws brushback pitches, inside and high.
If you are a slugger or a bunter,
no matter, you can kiss your butt goodbye.
Yes, a ball hits the batter—the crowd gasps.
He throws down the bat and charges the mound.
Players pour from the dugout like mad wasps.
Some pros pull punches, some mill around.
Then, the officials get it together
and the pitcher heads back up on the hill.
The hurler starts working on the leather
as part of his opening warm-up drill.
That pitcher throws a patented beanball—
come prepared for a bench-clearing brawl.*

Pine Tar Bat

It was one of baseball's infamous days.

A weird one for the highlights and replays.

You can see why he went on the attack.

It didn't count, though it went the distance.

And it took half his team to hold him back.

They ruled it right into nonexistence.

Stole his run. Turned his hit into a miss.

The umpires were a bunch of grinchies.

So George Brett had a right to be amiss.

I think they measured it in inches.

And you know how the officials are,

but that's the rule. There's no in-between.

They said that his bat had too much pine tar.

He went berserk! Mad as I've ever seen.

The Personnel Athletic and Recreation Program WWII

*After the surrender, they were waiting.
They were waiting for a chance to go home.
But it would be months, although the fighting
was done. For the brass, this was troublesome.
It might cause crass insubordination.
A rebellion. They told the engineers
to build ball fields for the occupation.
That way, the gripes would be replaced with cheers.
In Washington, the War Department gave
over 100,000 baseball gloves,
bats and balls to make the GI's behave.
Something to soothe their battle-shattered nerves.
Hitler had spouted his absurdities
in the place that they played their World Series.*

Opening Day

Here's some weird trivia that I have found:

*Though George Bush used to be a pitcher,
Clinton was the first to pitch from the mound
and make all the way to the catcher.*

*All that sex didn't hurt his performance,
his April throw made it over the plate.
Perhaps it was helped by a little romance.
Maybe the night before, he had a date.*

*The first pitch is thrown by the President
and a fair new season is underway.
It was fat Taft who set that precedent
in the Spring of baseball's opening day.*

Grand Slam

Missed a grand slam once because I had to pee.

I was in the bathroom when I heard the cheers.

It was bad timing you have to agree—

or probably just one too many beers

for my finite bladder to fit.

After I had made it back to my seat

I found out Kirk Gibson had rocketed it

to right. We won but it was bittersweet

for me. I haven't seen another since.

Well not in person, only on the tube.

Maybe a fan only gets that one chance

and I blew it. I was a capital boob.

New Haircut

*The instruments are laid out:
a towel, scissors, her pack of cigarettes.
Soon I have hairs down my neck and
Mom squints through her
blue smoke,
frowning at the open
family circle magazine.
The days are shriveling.
Soon school will start.
Already I have new pencils,
the smell of yellow,
perfectly sharpened.
Ernie Harwell,
the sound of summer here,
Is announcing a Tigers game
somewhere over the radio.
I am small on the chair and
my veins are filled with tiny gravel.
Sweet Lou just hit a home run, and
now it's time to look in the mirror.*

Two On, Two Out

I can do better than that, and I'm fat!
That's what you said when he went down swinging
with two on and two out at his at bat.
Crap. The Tigers aren't doing anything.
That was the summer of my senior year,
each Saturday in the bleachers with you.
In the sun, drinking that cheap bleacher beer.
15 years and I still don't have a clue.
They found you dead in your dad's Cadillac.
You had gassed yourself inside the garage.
Whenever I see a game I flashback
to those bright Tiger Stadium teenage
terminal afternoons. You're there, you're loud—
I can almost pick you out of the crowd.

Night Game

*The air is sticky like the dugout floor,
and the fans in the stands are so quiet.
The pitcher has just thrown ball number 4—
you can hear the breaking ball meet the mitt.
That thrown note—the tick-tock of the game.
Underneath the stadium lights, moth-clouds,
and average perfect moon: I am not the same.
The end of your presence is lost in crowds
but baseball's sphere of order doesn't ease me.
I bleed on the field, stumble from the seats,
mutter vacant mantras once we were 'we,'
that we was 'us' and I wander the streets,
wonder at the stars, wonder what to do.
The air is calm. Always thus without you.*

The Quickening

*I hold my breath, the plane's wheels under me
still suspended in the minutes after
takeoff, when the planet's brute gravity
statistically can cause a disaster.*

*We are flying low enough that I scan
civilization in miniature.*

*Blue pill swimming pools, and roadways that fan
out like ribbons in the wind. On the sure
crust, too, a baseball diamond. Young boys race
across the tilted surface, mute and small,
kicking up red dust. First base, Second base,
Third Base, Home. We ascend into nightfall
and beneath the broken stars one kid bunts.
I remember I was a rookie once.*

Fly Ball

*There's nothing more full of expectation
than a big sweeping swing at a baseball.
That's why fly balls are such a frustration.
The fans can feel their anticipation fall
with the ball right in the glove. Second out.
The center fielder was right under it.
The next slugger is up and takes a cut.
Fouls back in the crowd and mouths dammit.
(The camera always catches when they curse
or when they pick their nose or spit or scratch.
Baseball's ballsy, for better or for worse.)
The third out comes on a warning-track catch.
The relief pitcher's retired the side.
Bottom of the ninth and the game's still tied.*

Extra Innings

*It starts with a leadoff stand-up double.
You know that can't be good. It's tied in ten
And it's the heart of the lineup—trouble.
Another pitcher comes from the bullpen—
And soon the hurler has loaded the bases.
One out. Oh-and-two. A swing and a miss.
That fastball really sank. Then he faces
Another hitter. He was made for this.
Now it's a sharp ground ball to third—two outs.
Infield just missed turning the double play.
Sloppy. The crowd second-guesses the scouts.
The players get it together OK
For out number three—a play at the fence.
Now it is time show off the offense.*

Blowing My Stats

Ump's playing fast and loose with the strike zone.

Calls balls strikes and strikes balls.

I know a strike or a ball when it's thrown.

Tonight I don't like any of his calls.

Starting to dig myself into a ditch.

Every out is going to be real tough—

I guess I'll have to take it pitch by pitch.

The relief pitcher might be on his way—

falling behind in the count at each bat.

Coach is coming to the mound for a chat.

Dock Ellis Pitches A No-No While On LSD

The ball's big—like lobbing a bowling ball.

And the batter's box is so far away.

Tiny ball, red ball, white ball, rainbow ball.

I didn't think I had to play today.

The batters are whiffing in slow motion

because the strike zone is seven miles wide.

The catcher is wavy like the ocean.

Before my release, have to time the tide.

Straight bat, bendy bat, big bat, little bat.

Feels like I'm pitching inside of a dream.

I'm flying high as an acrobat.

My fingers can feel every stitch in the seam.

I wonder what all the fuss is about?

I am just trying to get the guy out.

On Deck

*The camera shows the next at bat. I watch
him in the on-deck circle, wound up tight.
Adjusts gloves. Props up the bat with his crotch.
This always makes me laugh out loud. He might
as well pull out his wang and let it hang
out, it's so obvious. Freud would have fun
with baseball—balls, bags, bats—the whole shebang.
Or maybe it's me—I'm the only one
with a dirty mind. The batter on deck
looks for the signs, kicks the clay off his cleats
and he velcros and un-velcros the heck
out of his gloves. Wants to swing for the seats.
Finished with his pre-batting ritual
he steps into the box and takes the first ball.*

The Cubs Win The World Series

*The pigs in Hades have to dodge the new
icicles when flying in that prison.*

*The Devil's in one cold snowy snafu—
hell has frozen over 'til next season.*

*Hellfire has done gone out until the umpire
dusts down home plate on Spring's opening day.*

The Cubs have made the goat curse expire.

*The flying pigs and the holy cows lay
down together like the lion and the lamb.*

*Satan is mad, but he masks his disdain
with hope for the brawling beanball Goddamn*

Yankees. So the shivering Devil waits in his pain.

Pacing, his cloven hooves click on the ice.

What if the Cubs win the World Series twice?



Jilly Dybka lives in Kingston Springs, Tennessee, with her jazz musician husband Darryl. Her poetry has appeared (or is forthcoming) in Michigan Quarterly Review, Elysian Fields Quarterly, Spitball, and other literary magazines. She roots for the Nashville Sounds Triple-A Minor League team.

