



## Baseball's Opening Day Ode

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Baseball keeps trying to kill itself, but the angel of death is a lefty with a drinker's paunch, crudely tattooed, from a north Florida trailer park who spends most of his day thinking up new names for his penis and wondering whether the caramel-skinned blonde in the cut-off shirt drinking a beer and sitting in section 4 is actually a man. Baseball is the reedy sound of an old super-8 film, the pop of vinyl, the simmering of heat bugs, a can flattened underfoot, a bullhorn, lotion belched from a tube, sneaker pebbles, warm tires, Kansas, Bob Dylan, California Jam. Baseball is the pleated pillow between hockey's cold oval and football's arid plain. It is orange juice and Youpee, divergent foul lies, poofery and verse, and a bent sunlit arc refracted in your grandmother's sunglasses who wore an old Mets cap to the ballpark – any ballpark – and ate hotdogs out of cardboard boats with candystripe tissue. Baseball is the best of America and the worst of America. It is fat unhealthy men versus synthetic boys; beer versus chemistry; cars versus tractors; cocaine versus cigarillos; Dodgers *vs.* Dodgers; the dead ball versus the double steal; yesterday *vs.* today. Baseball is the incessant tapping of water droplets leaking on flagstone from the nozzle of a broken hose collapsed over its plastic wheel like a drugged viper before being cranked to life by a smoking barefoot uncle in his undershirt for whom the springtime means war against grass coloured anything other than green who has Jays-Yankees brbbrrrrbbring on his back deck radio which he ignores almost entirely until a dark and lithe second baseman raised by twelve aunts doinks a single off a pitcher undoubtedly named Martinez who jolts the 12,000 fans to their feet and gooses the organist who suddenly remembers why he was born to play bits of "InaGaddadaVida" at this not wholly insignificant moment. Baseball is Lorenzo, my six-year old son, who has ignored bats and gloves but embraced light-sabres until a few days ago when, perhaps sensing Opening Day, he grabbed the plastic yellow wifflebat from his weapons bin and swung it straight and clean through the imaginary strike zone as if he were the bastard child of Mark Grace and John Olerud, the ex-Jay who, because of a childhood head injury, was forced to wear a batting helmet in the field, and for whom an errant jackrabbit grounder – we were told – would mean the difference between living and dying. Baseball is the grayscape of shit, cigarette butts and McDonald's wrappers produced by melted snowbanks that give way to pretty sod fields where men in dress shoes and women in cool band t-shirts arrive slugging lumber on bicycle paniers and milk-crate baskets to play a soft game understood by few but loved by many: the obese, the infirm, the drunken, the shy, the free. Baseball is the seasonal reward after the slog of winter; a vacation companion; a summer novel; a charming sitcom repeat; dad's game; mom liked it too (no fighting); Jerry Mathers; Walt Whitman; Roy Hobbs; Oil Can Boyd; Ken Burns; Joltin' Joe; Fergie Jenkins; and Robbie Alomar, the kind and soft-faced second baseman whom I met in the Jays dressing room before a nothing game in 1994, and who kept talking, then talking, then talking some more about life and baseball and women and home and music so that he missed batting practice and, very nearly, the opening pitch. Baseball is Warren Cromartie, Crow, who sang "Tom Sawyer" at Le Studio in Morin Heights, Quebec, with Rush, and then ended up coaching the Samurai Bears of the Golden Baseball League, trying to right a broken-down marriage to a beautiful Quebecois airline stewardess and bide time between Japanese TV ads, where, in 21st century Tokyo and beyond, he strutted alongside a pair of Sumo

wingmen while Asian nubile girls threw themselves at his cleats. Baseball is Giulio Glorioso, who, while attending an Italian sporting banquet, was asked by a soccer official: "In baseball, what kind of horses do you use?" Baseball is Eddie Gaedel, the dwarf, who was hired by Bill Veeck to hit in the wartime campaign, four balls to first base before giving way to a pinch runner. Baseball is Blue Moon Odom, who barricaded himself in his home with his wife after getting busted for selling cocaine at the shoe factory where he was forced to work in his post dream-life; or Doc Ellis, who dropped LSD, threw a no-hitter, and survived to preach the shit; or Bill Lee, who, after hearing what Sparky Anderson said before Game 7 in 1975 at Fenway – "No matter what happens, my pitcher (Don Gullet) is going to the Hall of Fame – responded: "No matter what happens, I'm going to the Eliot Lounge"; or Tim Lincecum, who pioneered the headfirst slide to protect the vial of coke in his hip pocket; or Ron Santo, who furtively smoked in the dugout; or Reggie Jackson, who upbraided me for calling him "sir," telling me to save it for the courts and the jails.

Baseball stares out of its window at night, presses a gun to its head, and cries a feeble cry, but just as it's about to squeeze the trigger, a flurry of sparrows executes a backwards S that dances against the purple sky, where stars bubble and burst, hounds climb trees, and a carnival is erected in seconds flat to the pulse of a Bruce Springsteen song. Baseball is saved by its sense of the amazing despite the drugs, the deceit, the scandal, the scorn. Baseball bests the cynic, who, in his perpetual disbelief, is left unkissed by magic, and even though his opinions are real and mathematically accurate, they are expressed with the underlying fear that the kind of longing that a baseballess world would bring would be a terrible price to pay for ignoring blind faith and love, because that's what it is – love – and no one should feel too 21st century to say it. Me, I fell in love with my wife at the ballpark: all of those long dull hours with no one to turn to but each other; those endless innings where nothing would happen until, suddenly, the stars burst and sparrows appeared, and we knew that whatever it was we were seeing, we were seeing it together, so, instead of abandoning the slow, 19th century game for the couch, television, email, discos and text messaging, we learned that the nothingness of baseball was its something. Taoism. Opera. Stephen Wright. Harold Pinter. We waited and waited. Then, we waited some more.

*For more baseball from db, check out his story on Warren Cromartie, anthologized in [Dingers: Contemporary Baseball Writing](#).*