

Safe At Home

He stood in the practice box drawn in the dirt
with brick wall for backstop
before these days of batting helmets.
His sight was slightly askew and the
non-diagnosed dyslexic drain had kept him from
even a single hit at the all-dirt Little League field.

It also secured him a spot in the
mediocre reading group at school.

But that didn't matter enough for him to ask
for help, for friendly advice, for tips, for some practice
like *this* with the "Black Beauty" bat;
symbol of dreams and (just lately) frustration.

Cocking into stance with mock confidence
and yank on brim of cap he stared
first down at the tin pie-pan home plate
and then out toward makeshift mound
where his father stood smiling and softly so relaxed
for this rare moment in the sun

Out of working uniform, the tail of his Dad's plaid shirt
puffed and furled like a flag of truce in the light breeze.

The elder cradled a worn ball in an ancient
Goose Goslin glove - pulled from sanctuary;
icon of innocence from his own boyhood.

Three pitches came through the zone
hard enough and wafted at
as a frustrated flail began in his back,
twisted the shoulders,
flung through thin wrists, and
followed-through with only eyes-closed hope.

The first simple words of encouragement were a flood
of the companionship he had longed for
- soft shelter the real or imaginary sneers.

The fourth pitch came in high and hard.
He ducked too late and the hide hammered his temple.
Both ball and bat fell mute.

He could see stars while slumping into the sandy soil.

Running and stretching with fear to half-catch
his boy going down, the father held his son's head in a
cross-legged lap - looking first in terror and then relief
as their eyes met and hands and words tangled in a web of
reassuring one another....the boy trying to hold and the father
deftly compressing this,
his first blood's first smack of inside fate.

Biting back on his tears to prove himself the boy
looked up to see his fathers eyes stain red and moisten with relief.

With precious grace the man cradled the boy's head in his hands
and kissed his brow while gently rocking him for a prolonged moment
that seemed simple enough
- but meant everything.

The panic passed like the billowing of dust
from clothes during their brushing off.
They stood and caught their breath.
With few words the boy stood in again as his father pitched.
The lesson was resumed.

As the season and the years went by
the boy would get some hits.
Just his share. Nothing fancy.
The instruction was forgotten and became a blended
part of admittedly limited talent.

But as the boy grew and eventually worked other, later basepaths
he would remember that day and sometimes stare into the stands
for his father who was not there.

That one embrace and forehead kiss remained vivid
reminding him that
If ever, when ever he was
picked off
caught in a rundown
run into a force
caught stealing
tripped and fell
got tagged or
hit by someone else's wild pitch
or was just plain called out in some inevitably unsuccessful slide,
He could always feel the warmth of that day long ago
get up - dust himself off -
and still feel his old man's love
no matter what.