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Ten Dreams of Softball

by J. Weintraub

The bat's too heavy. It's a thick-handled #5 Mickey Mantle rather than my lean #4 Johnny Bench, which I must have split the week before, and its leaden weight deadens my muscles, aggravates the soreness of my joints. Following a few clumsy swings, I drape it over my shoulders like a yoke and approach the plate, eyes on the turf. Gripping the bat at the base of the handle, I'm unable to control its balance, the tip falling to the ground with a thud. I shorten my grip and with difficulty lift the bat to my shoulder, and as I step into the box, I look up to find playing the field against me the entire army of the People's Republic of China equipped with mitts the size of peach baskets.

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I'll never get my chance to bat. I feel strong, and despite my countless practice swings, my stroke remains clean and smooth, sharp as a butcher's knife. But I was one of the last chosen, and I've lost track of the number of outs, the number of runs across, and the number of batters in the lineup ahead of me. When I ask for the inning or the score, the captain informs me it's still the first quarter and we're only a touchdown behind, but I know that no matter how many quarters we play, no matter how many touchdowns we score, I'll never get a chance to bat.

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The preceding are probably vestiges of daily frustrations sublimated into dream. Here are four more, equally monotonous, all vaguely unpleasant.

The muddy field: fly ball overhead, turf the consistency of a peat bog, runs ringing up against us like the score on a pinball machine while the ball bounces far behind me and conceals itself in the mud.

The receding infielder: often in tandem with the muddy field; my cutoff man decreasing in size, fading so far from me I can hardly spot his glove. "Whassamatter?" he shouts. "Why donchya throw it? Canchya reach me? Throw it! Throw it!"

The heavy ball: often in tandem with the receding infielder. "Whassamatter? Why donchya throw it? Canchya reach me? Throw it! Throw it!"

The heavy bat: often in tandem with the heavy ball and, on occasion, the entire army of the People's Republic of China.

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I've been struck in the face by a ball before -- a bad-hop grounder, an unanticipated warm-up toss -- and I'm acquainted with the fearfully helpless moment between understanding and concussion. This is a dream that would descend upon me just as my will surrendered its power to my subconscious. Was it some sort of safety net, preventing me from falling through sleep into something deeper, much darker? In any case, my body would twitch, my limbs jerk outward, and my wife, who occasionally falls asleep leaning against me, would whimper accusingly, "You hit me. You hit me." I'd bend over and gently tell her to go back to sleep, and in the morning I'd be grateful she'd forgotten having been awakened by her husband's terrified efforts to protect himself from the phantom softball hurtling toward his face.

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Some seasons ago I broke my ankle sliding into third base, and when I dreamed about the slide, I would see my foot bend back against itself and crack in half at the joint. For the rest of the afternoon, I would sit across the foul line, dusty and with tears in my eyes, desperate to fit my foot back into the empty socket left in its place. There would be no pain, only a wrenching sadness, as if I'd committed some irreparable offense against myself, as if I'd blown my brains out with a shotgun and survived just long enough to regret the act, just long enough to want to cram the debris back into whatever remained of my skull. I suspect that this dream had nothing whatever to do with my broken ankle or the game of softball.

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My ankle never fully healed, and now I swim on Sundays or bicycle through the park rather than play softball with younger men and boys half my age. I turned my glove over to my nephew, who promptly lost it in the stream that runs behind my sister's home. But a few nights ago, I dreamed that my ankle was sound and that when I came to bat I could swing my #4 Johnny Bench with an ease I hadn't experienced for years, and when the new ball -- hard and glistening white against the mid-afternoon sun -- floated across the plate, I uncoiled from my stance like Stan Musial in his prime and swung through it clearly and without effort, my body in perfect balance, the stroke as true as a carpenter's level. Only the wooden ripple against my palm hinted that contact had been made at the fat, and when I looked up, the center fielder's back was toward me and the ball a bright speck soaring over his head, over the elm trees that lined the perimeter of the field. I awoke just then, with the image of the center fielder's back receding before me, and for all I know that ball may never have returned to earth.

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