Dale Ritterbusch

World Series, 1968, Southeast Asia

On the other side of the world
it don't mean nothin' –
the slow tedium of the pitcher
holding the ball in both hands
rubbing it as if it were a talisman
that could save his life,
and if the charm didn't work
to lose it, just another game lost
in the box scores, a minor loss
buried in history; and the batter
tries to stay alive waiting for that one pitch
knowing there's another one out there
that has his number on it.
Men lose their gods at a time like this:
the unthinkable, that gods die,
that men can kill them, 1,2,3, just like that.
It's never the same.

I turn away from the TV,
order another scotch and soda,
await the quiet ambush of the sweet drink
mixing the dream of Asia, new gods
charged with destruction
destroying the old gods, because, why not?
And losing it all doesn't matter
as the game dies like the loss of a friend
one has no time to mourn and that so easy anyway

in a game where deaths are recorded like outs
and neither the dead nor the living keep score.

Nothing moves in the heat, the alcohol stupor,
the wait. Lying back in the hotel room
I watch geckoes cling to the ceiling,
the only friends I trust now as I study,
dispassionately, the gods carve themselves
into pieces, and one of them turns and says,
"Who's next? What about you?" and laughs.

On the playground the ball
wants to be hit, to make everyone move
in the summer stillness, sunlight
curving through space
folding a fly ball into the deep
field of sky, then falling back, under it,
waiting, watching the beautiful arc,
the beautiful white of the ball
against the beautiful blue of a cloudless summer.

This is no dream for a soldier
in times like these, the routine fly,
the line drive hit hard, but right at him
so he doesn't move a step as the ball
slams into his glove with the sound and feel
that everything makes sense.

On the long flight back,
fields show certainly through the clouds,
the bases white as always, outfields still green
but so far away they're not worth coming home to,
not worth what it takes to get back.

To know this before returning
is the game one has to play,

the hard won price of admission,
the accords one can never live up to.
It could have been Gibson on the mound
who held the ball too long, could have been
Cash or Kaline who stepped out of the batter's box
whatever, it doesn't matter, the game slowed
past all time that matters in this world.

Something Like A War

Ty Cobb said baseball is something
like a war, as if coming in with your spikes
sharpened and high were the equivalent
of flesh shredded by a fragmentation grenade
or a booby trapped 105 round. But the metaphor
doesn't hold. Even if Albert Belle broke a shortstop's
nose, dislocated his shoulder, and raked his spikes
along the bone from ankle to knee as Belle ran
out of his way between second and third,
it wouldn't be even a mild skirmish between two friends
drunk on a Saturday night and looking for trouble.
Any good player could always pick himself up,
dust his uniform off, and play the next day—
baseball is nothing like a war.

Playing Baseball in the Army: Company Picnic, 1967

We practiced for weeks
before playing the NCO's
at the company picnic,
and the colonel warned,
They've got a pitcher, Sergeant Simms,
who will put a spin on the ball
so tight all you'll do is pop up
to the infield – nine times out of ten.
And we did; we met Simms' arrogant proficiency
the way we met the ball,
one easy pop up after another –
until, in the middle innings,
I cut it hard, sent it bounding over third
and waltzed in for a double.
I looked at him and grinned.
You won't do that again, Lieutenant, he said,
but I did: Only I went the other way,
hit a sucker pitch
between first and second – had to slide
as the right fielder broke in on the ball
making it a close one, and the hard tag stung,
leaving a welt for a week.
Simms didn't say anything, just stood on the mound
rubbing the ball into his glove,
but he handed me a beer after the game,
and we talked of the great games we'd seen,
the ones we'd played, of players who made
impossible plays. When he didn't come back
to his wife and son, the son he played catch with
after a long day on the ranges training recruits,

I remembered our company picnic, the game
we'd played that afternoon, and I still think
of those hard grounders, his pitches fast,
burning across the plate, nicking the corners
except that one easy mistake, chest high,
seeming to hang like a grenade
daring me to hit it. And I still call out
to the mound, *Pitch it to me Sarge,*
make it a good one, come on, pitch to me.
The air, the fading sun, hangs heavy over the plate.

Behind the Plate

Always the dumbest and fattest
kid played catcher—so slow
to first he was an easy out
even on a well hit grounder.
You had to be dumb, we thought,
to play that position—always the chance
of being hit with a foul tip
stinging face, hands, ankles
no matter how much protection,
and we didn't have much.
And, too, it was best to be somewhat heavy
with thick arms and lumbering thighs
to take the bruise of an errant curve ball
sliced sharply off the plate
or a fast ball bounced wickedly into the groin.

So we were lucky to have someone
who wanted to catch,
and when the ball hit his knee with a hard crack,
he never complained. Always he would
walk it off, rubbing the sweat off his brow
with his sleeve. It was just part of the game,
like blocking the plate or taking one for the team.

Years later, if we ever thought about it,
we could still see him in his crouch
behind the plate, still see him going back
to the screen, ripping off his mask,
making certain catches of those high fouls
easily lost in the sun. And when he got his weight
into a pitch, he'd drive it deep,

broke a neighbor's window once
with a line drive so far back
no one even tried to make the catch.

And because he was dumb and slow
he worked for a year after high school,
got married, was drafted and sent to Asia
to play in the big leagues—a utility player,
one of the boonie rats sent to catch
the hardest game we'd ever played.
When he got the *Dear John* from his wife,
he called for a fast one high and tight,
and just like always he got hit,
the sting so sharp, so deep,
he wouldn't even try to walk it off.