

Judy Johnson, Hall of Fame 1975. "Sure-handed third baseman from the sandlots of Delaware . . . key player in the Negro Leagues . . . good instinctive base-runner . . . line drive hitter with an excellent batting eye . . . a smart, soft-spoken and well-respected player," an athlete whose intelligence set him apart.

If I were a professional ballplayer, these are attributes I'd hope to display. William Julius Johnson. Judy. What an honor to bear his name. But I'm not that Judy Johnson. I'm an English teacher, ordinary fan, mother of three children who love baseball. One of those kids slept peacefully in my arms on a long escalator ride to the top of Candlestick Park in August 1986. My firstborn son was six weeks old, and I had to show him the game, and the visiting team. I had to show him my Mets. Three summers later we sat in 95-degree heat, 8 rows from the tippy top of Shea Stadium, all sticky with Dove Bar and beer. My boy was with me on the night that Number 8 kept Game 6 alive. When it was all over, I jumped up and down on the bed - "They won! The Mets won!" - and twirled my baby around the room, screaming, "I can't believe they won!" A few months later that tiny child spoke one of his first words: *Mookie*.

I cannot boast vast quantities of baseball knowledge or memorabilia, but a few Mets items have taken up residence in my home: a plastic chip-and-dip plate in the shape of a baseball glove molded in orange and royal blue. A 3x3 black-and-white photo of Ron Hunt, snapped on April 12, 1965. He's walking back to the dugout on a dreary opening day. Few fans are in the seats at Shea. We're two hours early, Dad and I, and my sisters, ages 5 and 7. On my writing desk, a ball signed by Tom Seaver, another by Ed Kranepool, together with an 8x11 portrait of Cleon Jones, his arms outstretched, body leaning forward, knees slightly bent, eyes looking up, hands coming together - and his

graceful signature in bright blue *permanent* ink. I own an exquisite library full of great books - classical, English, American, postcolonial; Dante, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare; the OED complete 13-volume set, precious editions of Austen and Woolf, a slim folio signed by T.S. Eliot. Prodigious intellects lend *gravitas* to my collection: the Jameses, both Henry and Bill, plus those of a different order: *Kiner's Corner*; *Straw*; *The Bad Guys Won*; *Wherever I Wind Up*; *The Complete Game*, by Ron Darling; *Great Moments in Baseball*, by Tom Seaver, *Miracle Man*, Nolan Ryan; *Ya Gotta Believe!* and *100 Things Mets Fans Should Know and Do Before They Die*. I like the fact that John Donne keeps Tug McGraw company on my shelf. I need the words of baseball. I feel this as an intellectual and spiritual need, romantic and physical.

I've followed the New York Mets for 50 years. How can this possibly be? How can I be *older* than a ball club? I've endured longer than Shea Stadium did (by a decade), a fact that saddens and amuses me Rooting for the Mets as a child in the 1960s was a perfect way of preparing for life's and baseball's disappointments, failures, losses, and dysfunctions. Long before I heard the cliché, I understood viscerally that *baseball is a game of failure*, because I lived that truth with the early Mets. They taught us not to set the bar too high, until along came an expertly coached team of men who showed us the difference between mediocrity and grandeur. I rooted for the Mets because they were my dad's team. Their abysmal debut season 40-120 felt like a huge win to me, because I'd discovered an amazing game at the tender age of 7 and delighted in every part of it. Baseball didn't begin with souvenirs, t-shirts, and a lot of food; it started with names, sounds, and rhythms in our home. It began with words. My father was a Dutch Reformed minister who worked 7 days a week and many evenings too, but when he came

home and spent time with me, baseball asserted itself as language, and this is how the game felt most real. My dad spoke two languages, scripture and baseball, his words rooted in love, with phrases that became deeply embedded in my young psyche: “3-2 count,” *Love is patient and kind*, “in the cellar,” *my rock and my Redeemer*, “6-4-3 double play,” *and the Word was made flesh*. The game’s magical vocabulary - metaphor and idiom, syntax and rhythm, diction both poetical and crude - was the highlight of our daily conversation, a joyful mode of thought, a language that I loved. While learning to speak English in increasingly complex ways during my school years, the splendid lexicon of baseball was a key part of the curriculum, while the New York Mets felt like something basic and fundamental - as normal, natural, and necessary as speech itself.

Baseball is a physical thing, of course, and I loved the grit of it long before Title IX and Little League finally opened the gates to young women. I played ball with Tunis Van Peenen and Michael Minervini every day after school on the JFK playground. Traveling across the monkey bars, I sang my song of the '66 Mets, their names forming a happy litany: *McMillan, Hunt, Luplow, Jones, Bressoud, Kranepool, Grote, Swoboda*. The Mets kept me company long after the real boys went home. My best friend Janet VanderGoot gloated about Mantle, Maris, Murcer and Ford, while I defended Danny Napoleon and Choo Choo Coleman. Baseball began with the names of men chanted on the playground, sung in the kitchen, playing on the radio out on the screened porch on summer nights, and read in the quiet of my closet while I studied many slim pieces of cardboard. The beginning of baseball was the word: *Edward Emil Kranepool. 6' 3". 205 lbs. Bats: L. Throws: L. Bronx, NY.*

My eyes traveled slowly from one horizontal line to the next until a few diminutive letters stopped my breathing and changed my life. Born November 8, 1944, exactly ten years to the day before I arrived on the planet in New Brunswick, NJ. A random aspect of fate linked my existence to his in a coincidence that seemed too good to be true, endeared me to him, and linked us forever, whether he knew it or not. The discovery of one small fact on Topps No. 566 in 1964 was without a doubt the happiest event of my young life. A Met birthday endowed my own existence with greater meaning, though I doubt that my parents viewed it that way. I skidded down the hardwood stairs screaming like an idiot, as my mom came running, thinking I was in some kind of danger: “Mom! Mom! We have the same birthday! Ed Kranepool! 1st base! The Mets!” I danced around the kitchen, hyperventilating, waving his card in midair, and holding it to my heart. I was only 11, but as I did the math, calculating how old I’d be when we got married - say, he at 35 and I at 25, the ratio seemed just about right. I could hardly wait.

“Okay, here we go! Christie, Cleon Jones, you’re in left, No. 21. Patty, 4, Ron Swoboda. Beth, Bud Harrelson at short. I’ll be Kranepool.” I was taking care of things on the GW playground in Ridgewood, NJ. We were supposed to be playing field hockey in gym class, but I turned my stick into a baseball bat, took swift cuts at invisible curve balls, set the lineup and assigned positions to be played on the perfect diamond that my imagination superimposed upon a rugged surface of middle school crabgrass and dust, living the physical game in the only way I could: disorganized baseball. But we were in 9th grade, and this idiosyncratic behavior wasn’t sustainable. The sweet summer of ’69 and October’s jubilation gave way to football season, and we were cheerleaders now, in

maroon and white *Fight Fight*, practicing monotonous chants by day and reading *The Scarlet Letter* at night. I didn't really need those Mets any longer. Plus, I had a big boyfriend, defensive tackle, No. 79, and more importantly, I had literature. For the next 20 years there would be literature and it was powerful, and it supplanted the Mets in a change that was profound, almost irrevocable. I abandoned the Mets for *Paradise Lost*, *Middlemarch*, the Iliad and *Henriad*, Othello, Lear, Keats and Yeats. With a PhD in hand and a wedding ring on my finger, I took the Number 4 bus way down and across town to Manhattan's tony Upper East Side, where I taught *Wuthering Heights* and *Washington Square*, then commuted back home to Washington Heights, not far from where Ed Charles may have been writing poetry. Not once did I take time to dine at Rusty's, nor did I watch a single ballgame for five straight years. I didn't need those Mets any longer - how could Art Shamsky or Wally Bachman measure up to the intellectually nimble Harry Prince of Wales? I abandoned them - Seaver, Hodges, Staub, and all the rest. But something was missing, and for a long time I didn't even realize it, until one evening while standing in the kitchen of a California bungalow, I paused while cooking dinner to change the channel on our tiny Zenith television. The camera captured around a tranquil scene; a field gradually took shape; a gigantic black scoreboard. I stepped closer and stopped breathing. "Joining me in the play-by-play," he said, and *Oh my God*, I said, and there they were: Ralph Kiner and Lindsey Nelson, smiling in the shade of the press box. Bob Murphy was on the radio, and the Mets were in my kitchen. The timing was excellent: July 1986. Baseball had come back to me. I began to watch their games again, every single night.

Two years later, the Mets were in our living room. We read our respective texts, my husband and I. *JBJS, Vol 69, no 6. Heparin-induced thrombocytopenia and thrombosis syndrome. Hip arthroplasty in patients with systemic lupus erythematosus. Type IIIC Tibial fracture: Salvage or amputation.* A large facsimile edition of *The Waste Land* sat on my lap, heavy with a poet's obscure allusions to Dante, Marlowe, Kyd, Baudelaire, Ecclesiastes, and Sanskrit, disparate fragments of poetry that might soon make sense to my students, intelligent Silicon Valley girls who drove BMWs to school and ate artichokes for lunch. I looked up from "The Dry Salvages." They were in the middle of a West Coast road trip – the Mets, that is, just up the street, in fact, and we listened to them in stereo. Mookie leads off with a sharp line drive to left, then advances to second on a balk. Teufel grounds out to short. Wilson scores the first run of the game when Hernandez singles to right. *You gave me hyacinths a year ago; They called me the hyacinth girl.* Strawberry singles to right field. An intentional walk to Kevin McReynolds loads the bases. Gary Carter hits one in the gap, scoring Hernandez. Howard Johnson belts one to right, and McReynolds crosses the plate. Elster's line drive to shallow center adds two more runs, and a call to the bullpen brings in Joe Price whose teammate Atlee Hammaker has just given up 7 runs in one-third of an inning. *These fragments I have shored up against my ruins.* Gooden strikes out and with the Mets batting around again, Mookie hits his second line drive, this time to center field. Johnson scores. Teufel doubles and Elster scores. Hernandez reaches on an infield error, E4. Teufel comes home. Strawberry flies out to end the inning. 9R, 8H, 3E, 1 LOB, Mets 9, Giants 0. *Shantih shantih shantih.* I close my book and drop the poetry to the floor. "I'm goin' to Candlestick. I have to see this game. They just scored nine runs in the top

of the first! Don't you want to come?" *Hurry up Please it's time.* I'm hoping for a yes, but tonight I'm on my own. *Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies.* Something was tugging on me forcibly that night as I drove north toward San Francisco, wondering if there was something psychologically wrong with me. Forty minutes after dropping T. S. Eliot to the floor, I eased into a box seat eight rows behind the Giants' dugout with a perfect view of Keith Hernandez, who chatted amiably as usual with the runner on first.

Some will say I chased the game, and maybe I did. But it wasn't all my doing - something from elsewhere was tugging on me, just as Jim Bouton says it does, and it kept happening, very often in the form of literature. On commencement weekend in South Hadley, Massachusetts, I revisited a bookshop I'd frequented as an undergraduate. Bypassing handsome signed copies, elegant anthologies, semiotics, deconstruction, and feminist lit crit, I traveled upstairs to a remote corner, looking for nothing in particular when a curious spine caught my eye. *Heat.* Hardcover. Fine. Title page signed by the author, Dwight Gooden. \$14. The only book in the store I wanted to own. Word of the Mets found me again one quiet morning north of Boston, moments after my children left for school. In the bright light of a new day, I sat at our kitchen table and opened the NYT: *Tug McGraw, 59, Is Dead.* All strength went out of me. Trembling, I dropped the paper to the floor and stared at shafts of light: I saw a pitcher tapping at his heart with a glove. Headlines are so physical and words too real, but in the end they are all we have. Just ask Johnny Bench, who paid tribute so eloquently to Gary Carter a few weeks ago, quoting Pythagoras in Palm Beach Gardens.

My sister and I showed up early at camp this year. We beat everybody else to it, with no expectation of seeing a game. To see a field, any green field, would be enough, but what we saw wasn't an empty field at all. Roger Dean Stadium, 6:55 pm, Coach shakes the hand of every Sailfish player gathered out in right field; his orange jersey, bold number 8, hangs limp in the dugout; he takes a final ride on the cart, and we wave – about 400 of us in all – we wave goodbye to the Kid as he circles round home plate for the very last time. The Mets, they have a way of coming back to us, don't they? They have a curious way of colliding with ordinary moments in our lives, and when they depart, others step in to take their place. A Billerica hockey player named Glavine gave my son hitting lessons in a cold warehouse while a blizzard and sirens raged outside; two days later Mike Glavine left for St. Lucie with hopes of backing up Mo Vaughn at first. A kid named Matt Harvey caught the eye of scouts 3 summers ago in my home town. Another future Met showed up at our front door in a soggy Cape League uniform on a stormy July night, soon after the game was called in the bottom of the fifth. The Mets' third-round pick in 2011 out of Baylor, 101st overall – now a Sand Gnat in Savannah (slider, changeup and a fastball that maxes out at 95). We fed him meatball subs and shared baseball stories, Logan and my kids and I, until one o'clock in the morning. The Mets have a curious way of showing up in my kitchen.

Six years ago, I sat on my bedroom floor after all the stuff was split in half and my 25-year marriage was declared officially over. Inside one final carton I found my green vinyl 6th-grade autograph book with silly rhymes penned by TVP and JVG and a kid who wished me luck with Ed Kranepool. In that same book, a big-league autograph: Den Ribant. And another, accompanied by two simple words: “Best Wishes, Jerry

Grote.” As if Number 15 somehow understood, way back in 1966, that I might need those good wishes someday.

On the final day of MLA conference Seattle 2012, all the great books were on sale: Oxford University Press, Harvard University Press, Yale, Cambridge, Columbia, University Press of Mississippi, and many more. An indie house was offering free books in return for business cards, so I reached for one of mine: “You write about baseball? Ohmygod, I love baseball, I’m from New York, ohmygod, I love the Mets!” My head was crowded with thoughts on Milton’s heresy and socinianism, Subversive Epistemology, Donne’s rhapsody, Hemingway’s olfactory sense, Women’s Dystopia Fiction, Ecocriticism, Contingent Realities, Heroic Idiocy, and Epic Sex, but there I stood with another female fan, sharing bittersweet Mets memories. A bedraggled scholar wandered over, and he finally spoke: “This is the most interesting conversation I’ve heard all weekend.” What is it about academics, writers, poets, and baseball? R. A. Dickey, Miguel Batista, and the glorious Ed Charles, beloved glider and poet laureate? Why is baseball our most literary game? With all due respect to the NFL, NHL, and NBA, there really is no canon when it comes to hoops, no literature of the puck, nor is there - as I see it - the same intensity of *intellectual* passion. Baseball’s idiosyncratic language offers rhythm, syntax, imagery and story – every story eliciting another; narratives on and off the field, in dugouts and clubhouses, in newspapers, books, blogs. The game makes room for so many, invites us in, as we each seek a piece of it; accommodates disparate voices and numerous layers of discourse from dissonant, colloquial yammering to erudite historical analysis and breathtaking lyricism. "Look at how it takes up all this space in my soul," writes Dana Brand in *The Last Days at Shea*. I never met Professor Brand and

will never enjoy the privilege of watching a game with him, but I feel blessed to have made his acquaintance in September 2010. Ours was a friendship rooted in the common ground of literary studies and the sincerity of good baseball conversation. The earliest Mets were, for better or worse, the essence and true joy of our respective childhoods. Eventually, we both studied literature and earned PhDs in atmospheres that many might consider more rarefied than Shea; yet for all the erudite works we examined so intensively during college and grad school, baseball was the subject that engaged our hearts and filled a remaining void. My conversations with Dr. Brand took place, surprisingly, in the form of Facebook messages. He lifted the mundane activity of electronic messaging to a higher plane of discourse. I wouldn't be standing here today were it not for his deeply felt, elegantly crafted reflections:

Judy, I just got back from a joint-birthday weekend with my wife on Block Island and it gave me great pleasure to come home, turn on the computer and find your message I am particularly happy to hear from other people with PhDs in literature. When I was in graduate school, I took a seminar on the poet Edmund Spenser, taught by A. Bartlett Giamatti. Giamatti was a terrific teacher - animated, funny, and smart. As everyone at Yale knew, he loved baseball passionately, and every once in a while he would write about how something in baseball reminded him of something in Renaissance literature. Whenever I ran into him on the Yale campus, he would stop and talk with me about baseball. I loved these talks on windy New Haven street corners. They weren't particularly deep, but they established a connection between us. On the day it was announced that Giamatti was going to become the new president of Yale, I told a lunch table full of graduate students that I was sure that someday he would be the commissioner of baseball. I'm glad I did that. I have witnesses. "See, his real love was baseball," some might say. No, his "real" love wasn't baseball. He loved baseball and he loved Renaissance literature. Not only is there no contradiction here, there's a real connection. Both are particularly appealing to people with a lot of imagination. Even when focusing on the most arcane issue of strategy or statistical analysis, baseball fans are always looking for any excuse to break into their lyrical voice Baseball is friendly to the fan's experience of contemplation. You can sit in the stands of a baseball stadium and realize things about your life, like whether or not you want to have a kid, or whether to ask somebody to marry you. Baseball is riveting, but it has pockets of time built into it, air bubbles that allow emotion and imagination to breathe. I was heartbroken when Giamatti died after only five months as commissioner. He was a fluke, a very lucky break; but he died of a heart attack when he was a year younger than I am now, died as I

was driving down from Connecticut to New Jersey, listening to Mike and the Mad Dog who turned their whole show over to this horrible, unhappy event that ended this terrific story.

When baseball friends like Dana Brand can no longer be with us, or when they're permanently gone from the stadium, words are what we have left, and literature keeps the game alive. Ballplayers and books keep us company. They bring a lot to the table, especially if the table is set for only one. Like literature, baseball steps in as a friend and soul mate when real companions fail us, maybe because we often expect too much of them. Both pursuits offer transcendent moments when raw materials of craft become art: a perfect game, Sonnet 29; a walk-off win, a sestina; a miracle season like '69 or '86, an ode to joy. Baseball and Literature: we get to have both, just as we value Mays *and* Mantle, Seaver *and* Koosman, Carter and Strawberry, blank verse and play-by-play, Keith Hernandez and George Herbert. We get to have both, and we are better for it. We write, those of us who play the game and those who never will, because it's how we connect – player and fan, journalist and subscriber, scholar and student, pitcher and catcher, analyst and audience, teammates with each other, and virtual friends. Baseball is nothing if it's not about the human connection. The vitality and wit of baseball conversation invests our ordinary days and nights with meaning they wouldn't otherwise have. For me personally, Virginia Woolf often comes to mind: "It is only through words that I can make it real." So does Yogi: "It was impossible to get a *conversation* going; everybody was talking too much." And Bill James, who thinks about baseball virtually every waking hour of his life; and the other James, who writes in his magnificent Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*: "There is really too much to say."

I see poetry in baseball. Many may ridicule me for such a sentiment, but I don't apologize for it. I'm in awe of those who dwell in the realm of complicated numbers and elusive facts, but I see poetry in these endeavors too – because they're all attempts to measure the value of a large idea, to get at the truth of a complicated experience that has a lot to do ultimately with love.

Baseball is the honeysuckle in right field.

“Don't ask me about runs, hits, errors, or OPS,” a Met once said. “The best memory of Winter Haven was not any game or particular play, but the sweet aroma of honeysuckle near both bullpens. You could smell it in the outfield when I played left or right. It was amazing on a quiet summer evening.”

Fifty years later, from Agee and Grote to Santana and Wright, it's the poetry of baseball that lingers in my mind - the imagery, emotion, mental brilliance, physical grace, and engaging language of *so many* New York Mets. It's baseball's poetry that lifts us up and brings us to our knees, just as Cleon Jones knelt one bright October afternoon in Flushing and put the finishing touch on a stunning work of art.

“Come on down, baby,” he said, “come on down. It's all over.”

Hofstra University
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