

Poem to the Shade of Hemingway

If Papa Played Ball

Hey, hey Coach, I know that you know what I mean.
He met suffering, that brilliant corduroy wake, throbbing;
invited it in, sucked its marrowed heart
And sent it away, away from its insulting folly.
But he was younger then,
younger than fruit trees yet to bear but one sweetened meat.
With time, it returned on gaming heels played,
welcomed then, carefully, craftily.
One day he'd make sense of it,
embracing it's long tendrils seeking.
He'd understand the reasons that could never
lighten the darkened field when all the stars had gone.
After the press have filed their reports,
he'd write his own essay, standing, eyelids straining,
still feeling the soaring pain of blistered soles,
muscles that twitched and tore
never chancing to lie, knowing that before there'd be an end
they would hit him, again, the groans folded into playbooks, poems,
helmets and pads.

Could that've been reason enough, within his bootstrapped dream,
within the drumming thud of each bloodied shoe that landed?
Each singing its own pedal blues in sync with a heart
that soared and filled and sang like a freed slave,
beating to the four corners, end zones and quartets.
He's known kicks and jabs sweetly, with the reason
lying there, just under his sweaty skin, in the shifting sands of words,
in the pre-season where the players snapped each other with wet towels
and league finals were a lifetime away.

The athlete might know of hour-glassed seasons, thin white lines
chalked in the pale grass of winter's thinnig howl. But his life is measured
out on the scoreboard, seconds and quarters and then a signal gun sending
him on his way, waving like a king to a blurred mass of men,

cheering desperately. And that spotlight moment, made legend,
must carry him until a chosen six carry him again
then lay him down finally,
muscles bargaining, bellowing into the next life
unless... he could make the lines dance alive.

People thought he did it for grades, for cars, women or fame.
Maybe he did it to parry The Man's charge that night out in Cosmos Park,
where he beat the odds with words and wit that would carry him well
beyond the slumming parks of the inner-somewhere. And maybe he knew
that wives and jobs and kids wrote a solid score
but a fourth quarter interception begets a chiseled stone in time,
some vainglorious battle, a fielded coronation.
He'd pound and see that moment until it fit his shape in the bone of memory,
an anvil in story counting each cheering decibel,
the pig skin smooth and secure in his royal hands.

Who else can ever know how it feels
or what it did with its whips and chains and golden glory?
The player lives always in that chasm world between the lure of fortune's
glow and the raw certainty, the light of the present.
Forever the man must carry the ball and body,
on his back in flight, arcing, landing,
At times soundless, others caving in sand.

You ask if it was worth it, those years, sliced thin as rice paper,
with bodies slamming leather, slamming earth,
if it hammered knowledge into flat, dullen shadows?
And he answers in verse--How lovely the blue skied aesthetics?
Can one ever tire the rose, the song,
that sweet clamoring and clinging to each high winding trail,
each pat on the back from a brother?

The blisters have healed now the bright blood sent into the stadium of
mind, cheers for prosody, leather for quills, Nietzsche for Nike.
Who can know of the black nights, the empty stadium
gone quiet and sleeping while the fine grass still grows, still and weedy
over the track, its marching advance swallowing years
and the man-child circles whistfully, limpingly.

There is no shame in passion or the excellence laden with tough love,
only grace in denying that chalked Rubicon in the road sumblime.
It will not fade away in the wickless candle that must be,
that is always enough
for one more run at verse in time.

Bang. You carry the fucking ball. I'm going, I'm gone.

S.T.