

The Diamond Alphabet

BASEBALL IN SHORTS

★ GEORGE BOWERING ★

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FIRST EDITION

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Cover image after Matt Dorfman's design for "I Love Dollars," by Zhu Wen, Penguin 2008

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ANAHEIM

Thea was going on thirteen, and if I didn't get her to Disneyland this year, it would be too late. Fourteen-year-old daughters don't let their fathers take them to Disneyland.

So we waved goodbye to Angela and got into the fairly new Honda and headed south. Aha, the open road, we both shouted, enacting one of our many rituals.

On the way down the I-5, after we got out of the range of the CBC, we managed to tune in a constant run of old fogey stations. Thea managed to sing along quite often, because I had taught her how to sing the standards off-key. "Gee, but it's great, after staying out late."

In San Francisco we stayed in the North Beach motel her mother and I had stayed in twenty years earlier. She was afraid to venture out because of earthquakes and the Zebra Killer.

In Tijuana she wouldn't accept an ice cream cone because her mother had told her to watch what she ate or drank in Mexico. On the way back north we had to wait two hours at the US customs while they hassled the Mexicans and helicopters thudded overhead.

In Anaheim I splurged on a big-name hotel, and in the morning Thea was pissed off when she found out that she could have had eggs benedict instead of the buffet scrambled eggs. Then we went to Dis-

neyland. I was scared of all the rides, what a dad.

Then we went to see the Blue Jays play the Angels. It was a new ballpark for my collection. We got seats down by the left field foul pole, and settled in among the old guys with their transistor radios.

Now, my four favourite things are jazz, beer, Mexican food and baseball. With these old white guys sitting in this theme park stadium, there wasn't going to be any jazz, and the beer, being Bud or Miller, was questionable. But I figured that at least we were right up next to Mexico. The ballpark nachos would not be that stuff we get in Vancouver – some melted Cheez Whiz on triangular chips. I gave Thea a handful of that funny green money and told her to bring me some Southern California nachos, and to pile on the jalapeños.

What did I get? Cheez Whiz melted on triangular chips, and a mountain of sliced jalapeños. I ate the latter.

And I understood Anaheim.

ARTIE

When I went as writer in residence to Sir George Williams University in Montreal in 1967 they made me conduct a creative writing seminar. I think I did it for two years. In one of those classes I had as students Dwight Gardiner and Artie Gold. This was lucky. None of my colleagues in the English department had ever heard of Jack Spicer or Frank O'Hara. But these were the two favourite poets for Dwight and Artie. Dwight and Artie became well-published poets, though they would never be read by the people in the English department of Sir George Williams University.

In 1967 I published a nine-section poem entitled *Baseball*. The book was edited by bpNichol and published by Coach House Press. In the sixties Coach House was infamous for publishing books that were difficult to consume. Sometimes this was because the poems were written by Victor Coleman. Sometimes it was because they were printed in magenta letters on mint-green paper. In the case of *Base-*

ball, the writing wasn't so hard to read. An important character in the text is Jack Spicer, after all.

No, the difficulty in consuming this time had to do with storing the book. It was printed with a green cover that resembled the artificial turf to be found on the playing field of the Houston Astros that year, and the Montreal Expos a few years later. When the book was opened it looked like an elongated diamond, but when it was closed it looked like a triangular pennant. If you put it in your bookshelf among the other new poetry books, it sat on a funny angle, and in little time it would get the pointed end all mashed up. Librarians and book dealers hated it. Collectors cursed my name.

Artie Gold was a famous collector. He collected glass objects, Frank O'Hara broadsheets, agates, Arthur Rakham, Bach recordings, obscure curios, and so on. Wherever he lived looked like a magician's playroom. He didn't know anything about baseball, but he was a twenty-one-year-old expert on poetry. I gave him a copy of my green triangle.

And he knew what to do with it. First he read it. Then he nailed it to the wall with his other pennants.

ASTERISK

We have been hearing about Roger Maris's asterisk for most of the decades in our lives. In that magic summer of 1961 the Berlin Wall went up and Maris and Mickey Mantle went chasing after Babe Ruth's mark of sixty home runs in a single season, the "most honoured record in all of baseball." It so happened that 1961 also saw the American League expand from eight teams to ten, new franchises established in Washington and Los Angeles. Expansion meant that the schedule had to include 162 games rather than 154.

So when Mantle and Maris went on a home run tear late in the season, the sentimentalist crowd began to fear for the Babe's pre-eminence. One of the sentimentalists was Ford Frick, the Commissioner of Baseball at the time. Frick was a good pal of Ruth, and in fact wrote

most of the newspaper and magazine articles published above Ruth's name during his career. So when Roger Maris spurted past Mantle, and registered his 61st homer in the Yankees' 162nd game, Commissioner Ford had an asterisk placed beside his total in the official record book.

It's the most famous asterisk in sports. But it never existed. The famous asterisk is only a symbol that appears time and again, as when the guy that owned some famous Barry Bonds home run ball said that he was going to brand a big asterisk in it. Maris's total of 61 has been passed numerous times, by three National League hitters juiced with steroids. He still owns the American League record, and some observers say that he should have an asterisk beside his name, indicating the only player to hit 61 home runs without chemical help.

The idea that Maris should have carried an asterisk because he had eight more games than did Ruth is pretty questionable. Don't bring up the question of expansion rotations – only one of the homers came off a pitcher new to the league. And don't listen to the smart guys that wanted Ichiro Suzuki to acquire an asterisk for his new total of 262 base hits in 2004. A lot of records have been set since 1961, and even since the Berlin Wall came down.

George Herman Ruth hit lots of late-inning homers off starting pitchers who were not, in the twenties, removed for fresh arms after a hundred pitches. He never had to bat against African-American or Latino chuckers or guys with a great circle change. He didn't have to hit under the lights and then in a park across the country the next night. The pitchers in 1927 were, on average, shorter and lighter than the pitchers decades later. Outfielders who leapt up against the fence to try to grab sure shots did not have gloves the size of suitcases. Maybe Babe Ruth should have had an asterisk.

AUGIE

Back in the day, when the Cecil Hotel was the weekly drinking pub for writers, before some sideburned guys from Surrey put in carpet-

ting and turned it into a strip joint, David Alguire used to sit in, a true friend who did not happen to be a poet or novelist, at least I don't think he was. He was also a valiant worker in the underground press.

Then he moved back to Toronto, where he got a job as a landscaper with the city. In the eighties, when I went to Toronto to do a reading or two, I could depend on Jamie Reid and Augie to be friends in the audience. I really like a person such as Augie, a guy who keeps tabs on the poetry scene without having to be a poet himself.

Every year now, Augie comes to Vancouver for his annual vacation in August. He always has a terrific tan due to the fact that he has been working outdoors ever since the snow disappeared. Augie is a good friend of the poet George Stanley, who is a good friend of mine, and has in fact lived in my house twice. So every August, George and Augie and I, and probably my wife Jean and maybe George's brother Gerald, go to Nat Bailey Stadium when the Canadians are on a home-stand.

Every year we take pictures of us in the stands, sometimes grinning, sometimes doing the Sixth Inning Chicken Dance, occasionally grasping plastic cups of beer. In a recent snap I am wearing my San Francisco Giants cap, George is wearing a Vancouver Canadians cap, and Augie is wearing what he always wears. Augie doesn't wear a cap, even under the brightest sun. He has dirty blond hair that passes through a rubber band and hangs down his back to his waist. And every time he goes to a baseball game in Vancouver he wears the tee shirt he got at Nat Bailey Stadium a decade ago. It proclaims that the Vancouver Canadians were the Division Champions. Augie is a Toronto Vancouver Canadians fan for sure.

I think it is the same way he is a poetry fan. It is unlikely, I would venture to say, that he knows who Johnnie Logan played for. He probably couldn't give you a title from the works of Lorene Niedecker. But I like going to baseball games with Augie, and I like it when he comes to a poetry reading.

AUSTRALIA

One of the worst periods of our life was the 232 days between August 12, 1994 and April 2, 1995. The major league players went on strike because the team owners wanted to institute revenue sharing and a salary cap. The millionaire players thought they were going to be screwed by the millionaire owners. Of course the National Basketball Association has a salary cap, and it has actually brought the owners and players together: the owners finagle the books to get under the salary cap and pay the players thousands of dollars a dribble.

This was the fourth strike action in 23 years. The kid's dream of baseball as an alternative world was just about shattered. The morning newspaper was just about a pointless experience without the box scores. There was no post-season play in 1994. When play, I mean work, ended, the Montreal Expos had the best record and the best outfield in baseball. They were slated to face the Yankees in the World Series and beat them. We Expos fans had been simmering with excitement for weeks and weeks.

When the world stopped, I think a lot of Expos fans suspected that the US American players and owners had got together to put the kibosh on a Montreal championship.

In February of 1995 I went to Melbourne for a conference on Canadian studies. One of the things I had to do was sit on a panel about sports, with Alan Lawson, the Australian professor and rugby enthusiast, and Brian Edwards, Australian professor and golfer/fisherman, and Alison Gordon, the dandy Toronto crime fiction author. Alison used to be a baseball reporter, covering the Blue Jays for the *Toronto Star*. Then she wrote a series of murder mysteries with a female baseball reporter as amateur detective. Mystery writers look for snazzy titles, and Alison started with one of the all-time best: *The Dead Pull Hitter*.

Alison was feeling the loss of the postseason, too, and when we found out that Melbourne's ball team the Waverley Reds were play-

ing in the semi-final playoff against the Sydney Blues, we persuaded the wonderful Beryl Langer, Australian expert on North American popular culture, to drive us to the ball park. No one knew where the stadium was.

“Look for lights in the sky,” I said. “I’ve done this lots of times.”

We drove and drove around Melbourne, and saw the lights in the sky, and arrived in time for the bottom of the 7th inning. Alison was ecstatic. Her husband Paul bought her a hotdog and a beautiful red teeshirt with an image of some animal eating a baseball bat. Our Reds won 7-4 and advanced to the Australian World Series. I don’t know how Alison felt about the Sydney uniforms – they were modelled after the Blue Jays uniforms, with those modernistic letters and numbers.

Next day we all went to the beach and had a game of beach cricket. Alison sat in a beach chair, so I whacked two pitches in a row past her head. I was trying to impress the baseball writer with my bat control.

COLOPHON

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