

NICK BROWN

Westley Water Tower, 2012
Oil on Panel, 34 x 42 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

DAVID L. ULIN

Day Game Talking Sports and Poetry

It's a bad idea that turns into a good one, this notion of playing hooky on a Wednesday, two days after Labor Day, middle of a short week in which fall has wasted no time asserting itself and summer (which really was, this year, a summer in the best sense: space, quiet, time enough, although there is no such thing as time enough) has evaporated as if never there. When I agreed to go, I wasn't thinking about the work week; and yet here I am, leaving my house at eleven, driving to Eagle Rock to meet Richard, then heading down to Dodger Stadium where we enter the park to the strains of the national anthem and are in our seats before the first pitch at twelve ten. The stadium is empty, of course—*it's two days after Labor Day!*—maybe ten thousand people scattered like punctuation marks across the yellow ocean of unoccupied seats. *I wonder if the players like games like this or not?* Richard asks, and I think about cross-country travel, the nature of the getaway day. Once, I would have known the answer, but I don't follow the game so closely any longer, and I have no idea of the teams' schedules. Are they heading off to the East Coast, to start a series tomorrow night in New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh? It doesn't make a difference anyway. It's a hundred degrees on the field, and the sun is round as a robin's egg in high and open sky—which is as blue as a piece of Delft china, and with those subtle striations of white. When I played (beer ball, Saturday pick-up games, letting the kids run wild in the outfield while we talked trash to one another), that sky used to confound me, the ball as hard to pick up as a satellite. With two out in the bottom of the ninth, we see the principle in action: the tying run scores when an outfielder loses a routine fly in the sun. By then, we've been sitting for three hours, talking sports and poetry, taking note of the people around us: father and his young daughter, elderly couple in full Dodger regalia, gaggle of young guys in their twenties, the outliers, the detritus, the people without day jobs, or those (like me) privileged enough to blow those day jobs off.

This is why I love weekday baseball and always have: the illusion that it offers of having stepped, for a moment, outside time. This is why I agreed to come to this game, with a guy I like but don't know well, to take a pause from the relentlessness of *everything*, to carve out a brief window of space for myself. Or no, not myself; this is not about me: the day before, I hadn't wanted to go, feeling pressed

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by deadlines, by the book I am writing, by the start of the semester, the demands of everything I need to read. *I really don't have time for this*, I'd told Rae; but now here I am, checking my phone periodically to make sure the outside world remains quiet, but for the most part sitting back beneath the overhang, feeling a flat breeze on my shoulders, letting time take its uneven and often jerky course. That's the line on baseball: that it exists beyond time, with no clock, no real limitations; that even the dimensions of the field are part of an unending geometry of distances; that the foul lines extend, if we follow them far enough, all the way around the world. It's a cliché, but like all clichés, it has some basis in reality, which this game also proves. We leave after the tenth, Richard and I, four hours into a contest that shows no sign of ending, in which runs are hard to come by and every score is answered, or thwarted, in some way. There is that dropped fly ball in the ninth, and a half inning before that, a game-tying two-run homer; in the bottom of the tenth, the Dodgers load the bases with one out but cannot win the game. I listen to a few innings on my way home—downtown to Eagle Rock to mid-Wilshire, all of it through the density of rush hour; it ends at five forty, with the Dodgers losing in the fourteenth. By that point, I am back at my house, comfortably drinking a beer, cleaning out my e-mail in-box. Getaway day, indeed.

I want to say I feel like a kid again, but that's not true. Not even like I'm in my twenties, which was an age when I used to go to a lot of weekday baseball, taking the 4 train from SoHo up to Yankee Stadium, in another city, another life. My role model (in this, at least) was my grandfather, who from the 1930s to the 1950s closed his medical office early most days and went to Ebbets Field: three o'clock start, game over by five thirty, home for dinner—an era when time appeared more ordered and compressed. I recall one Wednesday afternoon, so hot the air felt like a solid clot of gauze. That game, too, went extra innings, Yankees winning in the tenth on an infield single, cloud of dust so thick around first base that it took a minute to figure out what had happened on the play. These are the things I remember, the secret stories, khakis pressed with sweat to blue plastic seating, relieved to get out of the sun. Back then, I would never leave a game early, would stay for hours—fifteen, sixteen innings, perseverance like a badge of honor—in the same way I once finished reading every book I began. I had a different relationship with time: if not my friend, exactly (I have always been aware of its relentless ticking, ticking), then it was not, at least, my enemy. Last week, I was talking to some people in their twenties about motivation; when they asked what motivated *me*, I answered, *Time is running out*. Not yet, not instantly, but I can't help thinking about it, checking off the seconds—every choice, every decision a narrowing of possibility: not just a thing that I am doing, but another thing that I will never do.

What does this mean in terms of baseball? It gets to how you want to spend your time. For my grandfather, the Dodgers were like a religion, and he lost his faith after they left Brooklyn almost six decades ago. One afternoon, during the last years of his life, when Alzheimer's had largely claimed him, I mentioned that the Dodgers were in the playoffs. (This must have been 1985 or 1988.) For a moment, he struggled to make the association. Then his eyes, milk blue behind the glaze of cataract, appeared to sharpen, and he growled, *There are no Dodgers anymore*. Did he know what I was talking about? Had he all of a sudden returned to the present; or was it, for him, 1974 or 1965 or 1959 or some other mixed amorphous territory, one I couldn't recognize? In a novel I read not long ago, the experience of Alzheimer's is evoked with eerie exac-

itude: *His real self wasn't hiding in there waiting to be sprung for a day of freedom. This was his real self now*. And yet, how do we make sense of this, we for whom story is a means of making meaning, who define ourselves through the continuum of memory? The answer is we can't, just like we can't make sense of anything, we don't know what will happen at any time. Continuity, narrative, these are assumptions—essential assumptions without which we couldn't get up, work, raise our children, but assumptions all the same. We need them, even as we know that in the end they will not, *can't*, sustain us; that they are fairy tales. Baseball is like this also, with its string of associations, its obsession with its own history...or maybe the obsession belongs to us. Either way, to spend a few hours in the ballpark in the middle of the working day is to find not consolation, but something more elusive: let's call it a sense of here and now. The fleeting nature of the experience is the point; the memories it triggers may be reassuring, but they cannot save us from ourselves.

This is what Richard and I talk about as we watch the game—the idea of being in the moment, not thinking too much. He is a visual artist, and this is part of his practice, just as it has become, increasingly, the lens through which I write. He mentions an essay by William Stafford, in which the poet offers a similar point of view. *A writer*, Stafford suggests, *is not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them. That is, he does not draw on a reservoir; instead, he engages in an activity...* This reminds me of those twentysomethings, discussing motivation as if it were more than mere abstraction—as if it were a journey, a way of framing out the dark. Desire does not necessarily (or even often) predict outcome, which means motivation is a crashshoot, as easy to lose sight of as a fly ball in that high and open sky. *It's amazing they make the play as often as they do*, Richard says as the ball skips off the heel of the outfielder's glove and the tying run comes around from first to score. This, too, is what I like about (have always liked about) going to the ballpark, that if you sit there long enough—years and years in my case; decades, really, since the first game I ever went to—it teaches you to set aside your expectations, to let go of (yes) your assumptions, and that you have no other option than to *be here now*.

As it happens, my grandfather makes an appearance (in ghostly fashion) at Dodger Stadium just as he would have, on another coast and in another century, at Ebbets Field. Around the sixth, I receive a text from my brother, who is also at the game: *Ben Borkow day in LA...* Ben Borkow was my grandfather's name, and my brother has inherited his baseball mania, going to games with the drive, the motivation, of someone who wants to get away. *Getaway day*—I've never asked him about this, but it puts a different gloss on the concept, bringing back the idea of ballpark as sanctuary, at least for a few hours on a Wednesday afternoon. My brother and I do not see each other; it's too much trouble—he is in a different section, on a different level—but we text for an inning or two until he leaves. *True BB experience*, he writes, now back in the world while I linger, and I am reminded again of all that divides us as well as what brings us close. I have a story in my head about how life is meant to operate—the closeness between siblings, the interplay of generations—a narrative that makes sense; that reveals a pattern, even if it has previously been obscure. I have that story, and then I have my understanding of the world. It's been a long time since I was sentimental about baseball (about *anything*, really), but what better way to spend an afternoon? My grandfather is dead, and my experience here has little to do with him; but I sit in the stadium until time comes back, drawing comfort from it just the same.

David L. Ulin is the author, most recently, of the novella *Labyrinth*. His other books include *The Lost Art of Reading: Why Books Matter in a Distracted Time* and the *Library of America's Writing Los Angeles: A Literary Anthology*, which won a California Book Award. He is book critic of the *Los Angeles Times*.