

## Catch

One of us would say “Let’s play catch”  
and we’d all grab our oil-treated gloves  
and a hardball and go jouncing down  
the bumpy hill in the big brown beat-up  
Buick with loose suspension  
to the town park on Long Island Sound.  
The grass was new-mown in rectilinear patterns  
or overgrown, feather-soft and dandelion-strewn.  
We’d spread out and shout “Liner,”  
“Drive me back,” “High fly,” “Grounder,”  
“Send me wide,” and Dad would  
comply unerringly.  
Homer’s heroes had nothing  
on the Dodgers we imagined being:  
fleet-footed Amoros and strong-armed Furillo  
or the Duke, prowling center so confidently  
he’d make the toughest play seem a snap.  
Not us. We’d make the easiest seem hard  
to show off all our stuff,  
leaping high to snag a fly  
a little overhead or diving for a line drive  
close by and rolling to a stop.  
Even on cloudy days I’d cup my eyes  
with both hands waiting for the ball to drop  
out of a blinding sun in the nick of time,  
then turn to fire home, where Dad would  
wince in mock pain to show how much it burned  
or pretend to be Campanella tagging out  
the winning run sliding to the plate.  
Or he’d clap his hands silently  
in the distance. What bliss!

It's funny, I don't recall my father  
giving me advice about girls and sex  
or how to be a man or deal with loss.  
All we did was toss a ball.  
I don't remember sharing dreams  
or secrets with my brother.  
Catch was how we talked to one another.

## *The Good Humor Man*

The perfect end of a perfect summer day  
Came with beckoning bells from blocks away,  
Near the half-hidden sign that read Children At Play.

I was a typical ten-year-old  
For whom death was a rumor, sickness a cold,  
At the perfect end of a perfect summer day.

I'd run through the humid, cicada-stitched air,  
With branches of weeping willows brushing my hair,  
Toward the half-hidden sign that read Children At Play,

A dollar flapping in my upraised hand,  
Where I was greeted by Jerry, the Good Humor Man,  
At the perfect end of a perfect summer day.

He called me Smiley and my brother Red  
And always warned us to do as our parents said,  
Near the half-hidden sign reading Children At Play.

One evening when he wasn't there I asked,  
"Where's Jerry?" to be told, "Son, he's passed."  
There were other nearly perfect summer days  
But I was no longer among the children at play.

## Words

I'll tell you the world's worst word,  
Cousin Robert Shear whispers,  
if you swear never to say it aloud.  
Cross my heart and hope to die,  
I answer as he looks around  
and breathes into my ear  
a harsh, unfamiliar, fearful sound  
that might be from the Haggadah  
Grandpa, a stoop-shouldered, unsmiling  
man who can barely speak English  
after more than forty years here,  
recites in rapid-fire Hebrew,  
bending back and forth,  
not caring that we don't understand  
or even listen to him but talk about  
baseball or the price of things:  
houses, new cars, wedding rings.  
From my six-year-old point of view  
freedom came not from Egypt  
but from Brooklyn with a Jewish  
exodus to suburban lands where  
grass turns green not yellow,  
trees aren't wizened or imprisoned  
in wire cages at their bases  
and some become all red in fall.  
On holidays we drive back in serried ranks  
of Buicks, Oldsmobiles and Cadillacs  
with big tailfins and small windows  
like squadrons of invading tanks,  
and I learn to read by saying aloud  
the signs along the way that sometimes

rhyme or nearly do: Tailor, Shoe Repair,  
Hair Salon, U.S. Mail, or if not, are still  
beautiful to hear like Stationery Store.  
This Passover when Grandpa finishes  
and we can finally eat the dry baked  
chicken and fried potato latkes  
Grandma makes (like hockey pucks,  
my dad jokes), then gives out,  
based on grades, newly minted silver dollars  
she has saved (I always got the most),  
I fly, pockets jingling, through  
ancient peeling hallways with cracked  
black and white floor tiles that reek  
of stale cooking grease and pee,  
down the street from the public school  
to the small wooden shul where  
Grandpa spends his life,  
shouting as loud as I can:  
fuckfuckfuckfuck  
fuckfuckfuckfuck...  
All ceremony stops, windows open wide  
and dumbstruck heads are stuck out,  
While I turn back and, breathless, yell  
fuck...fuck...fuck...fuck...  
fuck...fuck...fuck...fuck...  
realizing for the first time that words,  
chosen well, can cast a magic spell  
that holds the world in its fast grip.