ABOUT THE AUTHOR•ABOUT THE AUTHOR•ABOUT THE AUTHOR•ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Donald Hall was born in 1928. He is a poet and essayist, and the author of many collections of poetry, as well as books about poetry. In addition, he has written Dock Ellis in the Country of Baseball, Fathers Playing Catch With Sons: Essays on Sport (Mostly Baseball), *and* The Farm Summer 1942, *a children's book based on his childhood experiences growing up in New Hampshire.*

Fathers Playing Catch with Sons

My father and I played catch as I grew up. Like so much else between fathers and sons, playing catch was tender and tense at the same time. He wanted to play with me. He wanted me to be good. He seemed to *demand* that I be good. I threw the ball into his catcher's mitt. Attaboy. Put her right there. I threw straight. Then I tried to put something on it; it flew twenty feet over his head. Or it banged into the sidewalk in front of him breaking stitches and ricocheting off a pebble into the gutter of Greenway Street. Or it went wide to his right and lost itself in Mrs. Davis's bushes. Or it went wide to his left and rolled across the street while drivers swerved their cars.

I was wild, I was *wild.* I had to be wild for my father. What else could I be? Would you have wanted me to have *control*?

But I was, myself, the control on him. He had wanted to teach school, to coach and teach history at Cushing Academy in Ashburnham, Massachusetts, and he had done it for two years before he was married. The salary was minuscule and in the twenties people didn't get married until they had the money to live on. Since he wanted to marry my mother, he made the only decision he could make: he quit Cushing and went into the family business, and he hated business, and he wept when he fired people, and he wept when he was criticized, and his head shook at night, and he coughed from all the cigarettes, and he couldn't sleep, and he almost died when an ulcer hemorrhaged when he was forty-two, and ten years later, at fifty-two, he died of lung cancer.

But the scene I remember—at night in the restaurant, after a happy, foolish day in the uniform of a Pittsburgh Pirate— happened when he was twenty-five and I was almost one year old. So I do not "remember" it at all. It simply rolls itself before my eyes with the intensity of a lost memory suddenly found again, more intense than the moment itself ever is.

It is 1929, July, a hot Saturday afternoon. At the ballpark near East Rock, in New Haven, Connecticut, just over the Hamden line, my father is playing semipro baseball. I don't know the names of the teams. My mother has brought me in a basket, and she sits under a tree, in the shade, and lets me crawl when I wake up.

My father is very young, very skinny. When he takes off his cap—the uniform is gray, the bill of the cap blue—his fine hair is parted in the middle. His face is very smooth. Though he is twenty-five, he could pass for twenty. He plays shortstop, and he is paid twenty-five dollars a game. I don't know where the money comes from. Do they pass the hat? They would never raise so much money. Do they charge admission? They must charge admission, or I am wrong that it was semipro and that he was paid. Or the whole thing is wrong, a memory I concocted. But of course the reality of 1929—and my mother and the basket and the shade and the heat—does not matter, not to the memory of the living nor to the bones of the dead nor even to the fragmentary images of broken light from that day which wander light-years away in unrecoverable space. What matters is the clear and fine knowledge of this day as it happens now, permanently and repeatedly, on a deep layer of the personal Troy.[1]

There, where this Saturday afternoon of July in 1929 rehearses itself, my slim father performs brilliantly at shortstop. He dives for a low line drive and catches it backhand, somersaults, and stands up holding the ball. Sprinting into left field with his back to the plate, he catches a fly ball that almost drops for a Texas leaguer. He knocks down a ground ball, deep in the hole and nearly to third base, picks it up, and throws the man out at first with a peg as flat as the tape a runner breaks. When he comes up to bat, he feels lucky. The opposing pitcher is a side-armer. He always hits side-armers. So he hits two doubles and a triple, drives in two runs and scores two runs, and his team wins 4 to 3. After the game a man approaches him,

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1. Troy: ancient city of Homeric epic, discovered in 1873 by Heinrich Schliemann under the layers of later cities.

while he stands, sweating and tired, with my mother and me in the shade of the elm tree at the rising side of the field. The man is a baseball scout. He offers my father a contract to play baseball with the Baltimore Orioles, at that time a double-A minor league team. My father is grateful and gratified; he is proud to be offered the job, but he must refuse. After all, he has just started working at the dairy for his father. It wouldn't be possible to leave the job that had been such a decision to take. And besides, he adds, there is the baby.

My father didn't tell me he turned it down because of me. All he told me, or that I think he told me: he was playing semipro at twenty-five dollars a game; he had a good day in the field, catching a ball over his shoulder running away from the plate; had a good day hitting, too, because he could always hit a side-armer. But he turned down the Baltimore Oriole offer. He couldn't leave the dairy then, and besides, he knew that he had just been lucky that day. He wasn't really that good.

But maybe he didn't even tell me that. My mother remembers nothing of this. Or rather she remembers that he played on the team for the dairy, against other businesses, and that she took me to the games when I was a baby. But she remembers nothing of semipro, of the afternoon with the side-armer, of the offered contract. Did I make it up? Did my father exaggerate? Men tell stories to their sons, loving and being loved.

I don't care.

Baseball is fathers and sons. Football is brothers beating each other up in the backyard, violent and superficial. Baseball is the generations, looping backward forever with a million apparitions of sticks and balls, cricket and rounders, and the games the Iroquois played in Connecticut before the English came. Baseball is fathers and sons playing catch, lazy and murderous, wild and controlled, the profound archaic song of birth, growth, age, and death. This diamond encloses what we are.

This afternoon—March 4, 1973—when I played ball and was not frightened, I walked with the ghost of my father, dead seventeen years. The ballplayers would not kill me, nor I them. This is the motion, and the line that connects me now to the rest of the world, the motion past fear and separation.

Responding to What You Read

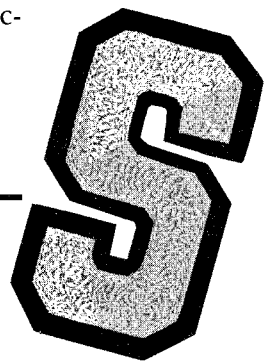
1. What do you think Donald Hall means when he says that "like so much else between fathers and sons, playing catch was tender and tense at the same time"?

2. In what way does Robert Francis use mountain climbing to illustrate both a young person's and an older person's characteristics?

3. What is "that dark other mountain"? What clues in the poem tell you?

Writer's Workshop

In a short essay discuss the ways in which father-and-son relationships are remembered in these two selections. To organize your thoughts, consider these questions: What tone of voice is used in each selection? What mood is conveyed? What point does each author make?



Alternate Media Response

Illustrate these selections. Draw pictures or collect photos from newspapers and magazines that convey the subject and mood of "Fathers Playing Catch with Sons" or "That Dark Other Mountain."