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Take Two, Hit to Right, and Lie About Your Batting Average

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Bryan Di Salvatore

Take Two, Hit to Right, and Lie About Your Batting Average

The world thinks of Dick Hugo as a fine poet who played softball. That's jake. It lets me remember him as a fine softball player who wrote poems. Each spring, for decades, the English Department of the University of Montana has fielded an intramural men's softball team. The years I played we called ourselves the Stark Ravens, and we more than held our own. A collection of undergrads, grad students, faculty and strays, we fended off squad upon squad of grim, too-muscled, flange-headed fraternity boys and off-season intercollegiate football and basketball players.

Though cunning and innate ability played no small part in the Stark Ravens' success, we might well have been relegated to mediocrity had it not been for the more-than-occasional advice—both practical and abstract—from Dick. He would stand on the sidelines, scowling and grumpy, cigarette in hand. He would thrump and mutter at our miscues and thrump and mutter praise when we played well. We drank his mutterings, never slaked.

The roster ebbed and flowed, of course, and eventually enough alumni existed to form a team that began playing in the Missoula City Leagues. That team's name has evolved over the years: Eric's Hippies, Construction Concepts, Eastgate Liquor Store and Lounge, The Carousel Lounge, Arrow Graphics, and, for the last eight years, The Montana Review of Books.

Free agency has long been in place, as all good fans know, and the rosters have reflected that, but always they have included MFA students and former MFA students, Lit majors, newspaper reporters, magazine writers, novelists, poets, essayists—as a

French journalist once decided, "wild penmen of the plains." We suited up, always under our *noms de guerre*: Doctor, Coach, Suds, Pa, Moon, Hi-Test, Tweed, Gabby, Scooter, Buddha, Vegas, Batman, Rojo, Barn, Lasko, Bez, Guntz, Flash, Zoop.

One mystery for the ages: Why, generally, do poets station themselves in the infield, while the prose writers prefer the greensward?

Dick has attended the majority of these city games—a few from the dugout, a few from behind third base, usually with colleagues and friends from town—Kittredge, Welch, DeMarinis, Ganz—a few with visiting firemen. But most of them he has watched from his vantage point in St. Mary's Cemetery, across Turner Street from the home field, Northside Park.

The clobberings, the surgeries, the upsets, those games that end without having established a form at all. The blown eleven-run lead in the bottom of the seventh in 1987; the eight-run comeback in the bottom of the same frame in 1990; the rat-eyed grounders that slip past the nets; the mangled relays; the missed signals; the double plays—*snap snap*, fast as the eye; the hurrah-tally squibs from the bottom of the order; the pennant races over within a fortnight; the pennant races that weren't over until the last week; that championship season, 1984, when gasping and sore, we beat our old rival, Eight-Ball Billiards, under a punishing August sun.

Do the dead speak to us? I think not. But we have, over the years, received communications, suggestions that sometimes solve those "ancient problems" that, Dick knows, come to focus in the heat: *Move right field over and in, this chump is peeking; Second breaks right every pitch, he's a slave; First is a statue, poke to the hole; His cannon's gone stone, move the cutoff man out.*

And after: *Nice grab on that shot to left. Good game. Good game.*

What is a team without an editor? Not too damn much.

Oh, 1980 was one long year: the first win didn't come until the afternoon Mount St. Helens arrived; the last win made five in all—and this a thirty-game season, plus another dozen or so practice and tournament contests. Three of us—two players and a loyal fan—patched together a poem, read it at the post-season party. A moment of silence, a raised-beer hurrah and a lone cry: "Wait'll next decade!"

Ha!

Soon enough, we got the poem to Dick. He scanned it. Scowled. Thrumped. *Not too much damage here.* Hung on to it.

Ah!

Degrees of Gray at Northside

by Kenny Briggs, Bryan Di Salvatore, Lora Jansson (1980)

You might come here game day with a hangover.
Say your arm went dead. The last good hit
you had was years ago. You run these bases
laid out by the fit, past fielders
who never err, cans of corn, the tortured try
of huddled fans to accelerate their lives.
Only appearances are kept up. The left fielder
turned forty this year. The only sub
is always on the bench, not knowing what he's done.
The principal supporting business now
is rage. Hatred of the various teams
the car agencies send, hatred of the ump,

the Infield Fly Rule, the street-smart fans
who leave each game by the 6th. One good
liquor store and lounge can't wipe away the tears.
The 1980 season, the three-game winning streak,
a diamond built on slag—
all memory resolves itself in daze,
in panoramic blue the entire team in despair
for thirty games that won't quit finally trying.

Isn't this your life? That fall-short rally
still burning out your eyes? Isn't this defeat
so accurate, the cemetery simply seems
a pure announcement: lose and everyone watches?
Don't empty bases wait? Are grit
and faith sufficient to support a team,
not just this roster, but bleachers
of towering blondes, good jazz and booze
the world will never let you have
until the team you came from makes the last out?

Say no to yourself. The whole team, twenty strong
when the season started, still laughs
though their lips collapse. Someday soon,
they say, we'll go straight home after a game.
You tell them no. You're talking to yourselves.
The cooler you brought here still chills.
The money you buy drinks with,
no matter where it's mined, is gone
and the sport who serves you dreams
is softball and her memory melts the snow.