

# Thinking Tremolo and Backflip

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I was sitting in the campus cafeteria wondering how to introduce this issue when two Japanese students approached with a questionnaire on health and fitness—part of their English-language training. Question 3 was “What is the greatest benefit of physical activity?” They are probably still puzzling over my ready answer: “It fosters an ability to appreciate poetry.” “Oh,” they said smiling demurely, “that’s a good answer.”

Just before the shy questioners appeared, I’d been reading and re-reading Robert Kroetsch’s “Listening to the Radio: For Michael Ondaatje.” Kroetsch recreates a time when “Hockey Night in Canada” was pure sound, sound only, and the poetry of hockey was only a listening. Listening is an imagining. What we hear when we pause from strenuous physical activity is the power of poetry:

Morenz makes a breakaway down the ice.  
He fakes to the left; he draws out the goalie.  
He stops. He blushes and says, to all  
of the Montreal Forum: Emily Carr, I love you.

If there’s a more amusingly resonant moment in English Canadian writing on sport, I have yet to find it. Of course, Emily ultimately blushes in return, and Carr and Morenz marry in a ceremony that inevitably is “divided into three periods / of twenty minutes each.” Hence one of Canada’s greatest male athletes—two-time NHL scoring champion—is united with one of Canada’s greatest female artists. It could only happen in a poem.

“Play is older,” Johan Huizinga tells us in *Homo Ludens* (1944; trans. 1950), “and more original than civilization.” Reasoning—a bit playfully

perhaps—that “childplay” is play in “its veriest essence,” Huizinga compactly summarizes the essences:

[Play] is an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion.

And then immediately following this description—we might imagine him exulting in Kroetsch’s riddling the rules of the ghazal while dreaming an improbable love affair—he asserts the equation essential to literature: “the definition we have just given of play might serve as a definition of poetry.” Play and poetry perform a compelling paradox: it is “beyond seriousness,” but yet a “vital function,” absorbing the seriousness of the sacred and festive.

It surprised me when we first thought of doing this issue to realize that in our fifty years we have not done such an issue before, indeed have seldom touched on the topic. Roy MacGregor’s valuable article “Sports Writing” in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada* speculates, contrasting American and British examples, as to why “Sport in Canada has so rarely been effectively lifted from the ice and the playing fields and dropped into the pages of Canadian literature.” So, this special issue makes a second start, when the lifting has perhaps become more effective, and with essays whose focus will in turn surprise many readers familiar with the works MacGregor discusses. Our writers challenge immediately any easy assumption about the limits of the topic. Political cricket and identity soccer rather than hockey or lacrosse; the challenge to consider bpNichol as a triathlete; the recovery of Mike (later Michelle) Duff from obscurity and the reassessment of autobiography as speed writing; Terry Fox’s heroism newly framed and newly interpreted. And still—I couldn’t quite help myself—the issue begins and ends with hockey.

Hockey one night a week on the radio has become multiple twenty-four-hour sport channels. In homage we bring you from the *Canadian Literature* Sports Centre, tonight’s Top Ten, our sport-in-Can-Lit highlights:

**Number 10** Much of the secrecy and bonding inherent in a game rests in its special vocabulary. Pasha Malla’s story “Dizzy When You Look Down In,” from his first collection *The Withdrawal Method* (2008), bounces and feints with basketball jargon. The unnamed first-person narrator sits in a hospital waiting results of amputation surgery being performed on his diabetic brother Derrek, nickname Dizzy. Across the room is Brad Bettis, enthusiastic former jock, who ten years earlier had played high school basketball against Dizzy and his brother. “Dizzy Calder,” Bettis enthuses, “Man, that kid could *play*.”

The narrator hesitates to encourage the conversation, to pick up the jock talk or to reveal much about his brother's failed post-high school basketball career. Soon Bettis abandons his attempts at gossip, his talismanic rolled-up copy of *Sports Illustrated* falls to the floor, and he gives completely devoted attention to his wife's recovery from cancer surgery.

At this point, the reader realizes with some surprise that all the basketball jargon we've been immersed in comes not in dialogue, but in the narrator's remembering his relation to his younger brother. Jargon is the crutch on which he rests to avoid thinking amputation. The lingo that used to keep them together now keeps him *from* Dizzy. The dizzying basketball chatter takes over, drugs him, allows him to live an imagined life where he need not confront the gap between Dizzy's politics—Che Guevara is his hero; he does community work in Cuba—and his own career as pharmaceutical salesman. He can only get as far as the door of his brother's recovery room: there he stands dizzy, looking down, imagining the healing visit he cannot bring himself to make.

**Number 9** Sadie is a speed swimmer and a lit student in Angie Abdou's novel *The Bone Cage* (2007). The story of her preparation for the Sydney Olympics, and of her love affair with Digger, an Olympic wrestler, draws on Jane Austen, Dickens, *Paradise Lost*, and Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel*. Fitzgerald and Browning shape the novel's resolution. The novel is a study in emotional and physical kinesis, patiently attentive to recording the fine details of tedious athletic training. Abdou reaches toward the possibility of self-deception as physical form. Sadie acknowledges the importance of falsehood, which is also to say fiction: "We athletes are experts at lying to ourselves and believing it. It's the one thing we practice every day." Abdou focuses on the politics and perception of the body, turning her story on "the paradox of the athletic life: listen to your body but don't listen to your body."

**Number 8** Paul Tallard, the Canadien who comes to dream in English, is Hugh MacLennan's version of what Canadian uneasily means. MacLennan defines Paul's emerging twelve-year-old citizenship as his enjoying of multiple sports: football (by which MacLennan presumably means European football), boxing, cricket, some clandestine baseball. And, of course, hockey, to which Paul and MacLennan devote by far the most attention. MacLennan's accounts read now a bit awkwardly and predictably, as if in imitation of much tabloid sports journalism, but he's at his best evoking the instant of silence after a whistle, before the face-off—the period when the game *is not being played*.

Paul loved these moments when the game paused and he was able to get the whole feel of it: the full exhilaration of the air coldly still in the sunshine, the teams poised . . . the sticks twitching nervously and the sweat warming on the face . . .

The magic, as with Morenz halting in mid-breakaway, is in the waiting not the doing, in the wholeness, the sensory alertness, the anticipatory readiness.

**Number 7** From “Baseball, a poem in the magic number 9”: “In the beginning was the word, & the word was / ‘Play Ball!’” That was 1965, just a few years after this journal was founded, and George Bowering, while writing so much about so many worlds, has never stopped writing his baseball poem.

**Number 6** Arley McNeney’s *Post* (2007), opens on the eve of Nolan Taylor’s hip replacement surgery. A member of the Canadian women’s wheelchair basketball team, Nolan must now imagine herself into a new life and a new identity with and beyond her sport. *Post*, driven by a sustained teasing of the pun bawdy-body, concerns what comes after. In big wheeling sentences, McNeney turns through the mind’s following the body turning; this excerpt is less than half of the single sentence from which it comes:

Tony continues to play me despite my flailing, my failing and as I push across the court after the play my arms move in their ritual, my fingertips against the smooth push-rims, the movement just another link back through my body and round and around again and everyone is shouting at me different words until they form a scum, a churned foam of noise, dirty as the Fraser, and now the wind has shifted and here is the scent of sewage from the open door, and here is the froth of words building like rapids over me, my arms trying to arc like bridges, and here is another shot scored on me.

**Number 5** Cecelia Frey’s poem “Running” relies heavily on monosyllables to convey the steady pounding of feet against ground, a version of drumming that transforms running into spirit quest:

me deer swift free  
.....  
I leave behind all others  
and you, partner  
where are you

**Number 4** The hockey references in Michael Ondaatje’s “To A Sad Daughter” feel quite incongruous in a poem that is mostly a love poem delivering fatherly counsel. But it is just such incongruity—“Belligerent goalies are your ideal”—that measures the cultural distance between *like* and *love*, between sweet sixteen and I-wasn’t-expecting-this. The poem is high on my highlight list because I’ve turned to it often to find ways to tell my own children how much they matter:

You step delicately  
 into the wild world  
 and your real prize will be  
 the frantic search.  
 Want everything. If you break  
 break going out not in.

I wonder if Kroetsch had this poem in mind when he addressed “Listening to the Radio” to Ondaatje?

**Number 3** Roch Carrier’s “Le Chandail de hockey” “The Hockey Sweater.”

**Number 2** Michael Kusugak’s *Northern Lights: The Soccer Trails* (1993). The students in my course titled “Literature and Sport” were puzzled by *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, surprised by the baseball lingo in *The Brothers K*, and passionate about Sherman Alexie. But they were most moved by the story of Kataujag, who reconnects with her dead mother playing on the sea ice with “a soccer ball . . . of caribou skin . . . stuffed full of dry moss and fur” and watching the aurora borealis, “thousands of strands of light looked like they were all running around after each other chasing a soccer ball.” They agreed that the one book on the course they would not be looking to sell back to the bookstore at the end of the year was *Northern Lights: The Soccer Trails*.

**Number 1** Icarus, as interpreted by Don McKay in “Icarus,” is the top athlete in Canadian literature. Icarus makes of his falling—he has rehearsed it in song—an exuberant flight and a diving. No existential angst for this athlete:

Icarus is thinking tremolo and  
 backflip, is thinking  
 next time with a half-twist  
 and a tuck and isn’t  
 sorry.

As Huizinga proposes, “playing is no ‘doing’ in the ordinary sense.” You don’t *do* play or *do* a game. You can only *play* at playing. When sport drops into the pages of Canadian literature, it does so most exhilaratingly with a half-twist and a tuck. And isn’t sorry.