

TOM HAWTHORN / Bowering on-deck

You hear the voice before you see the man. A booming, brassy sound with a hint of grade school wisecrack, it is a noise unavoidable at any baseball park in which George Bowering has purchased a ticket. It can be directed at the umpire, the batter, the pitcher, the vendor, or some hapless fan in the stands. Bowering is a fan in the original sense. The word *fan* began appearing in newspapers in the late nineteenth-century as a shorthand neologism to describe baseball fanatics.¹ (The origins live on today in the smart-alec Muppet-like mascot from Philadelphia known as the Philly Phanatic.) Bowering has received official approval from the Vancouver Canadians, a minor-league team, which declared him their “Official Loudmouth Fan.” They issued him business cards stating the same.

To sit with Bowering at a ball park, as I have done in Vancouver, Victoria, Seattle, Havana, and lesser Cuban cities, is to be sore-eared sidekick to Foghorn Leghorn. His voice has an umpire’s command, able to cut through the hubbub of today’s ball parks, where the action (such as it is) on the field is secondary to contests, promotions, and scoreboard exhortations, not to mention the purchase of foodstuffs and beverages. Whether sitting in the lower box seats at bucolic Nat Bailey Stadium in Vancouver (where his heckling can be heard by players), or in the upper deck at monumental Safeco Field in Seattle (where his quips amuse fellow nosebleed habitués high above home plate in Section 334), or in the hard concrete terrace of Estadio Capitán San Luis in Pinar del Río, Cuba (where his shouted *bon mots* are lost for not being in translation), Bowering cannot help but deliver a loud, aural verdict on the play before him.

It is not a rare thing for a writer to be enamoured of baseball. The rule in sports writing is the slower the sport, the better the writing. Golf has a literature. Cricket has a literature. Hockey? Too frenetic. Baseball is so slow, the action so deliberate, every single pitch can be recorded, which was the case long before the advent of computers. (Baseball has a lot of pitches—more than 200 in a nine-inning game, 162 of which are played every season by the major leagues’ thirty teams.) Baseball

1 The etymology of *fan* in sports is in dispute, some sources citing the word as a contraction of *the fancy*, or the group who cheers for a particular corner, especially in prize fighting, *the fancy* stemming from *fantasy* in the sense of desire.

offers more than a century of games in which the circumstances of most every at-bat can be recreated.

Nevertheless, save for Michael Lewis's *Moneyball*, a lone example of statistical literature, most serious baseball books indulge a historic—leaning towards nostalgic—look at a sport whose origins harken to a rural pastoral time.

Baseball fiction tends towards the mystic mumbo-jumbo of W.P. Kinsella and his field of dreams from the novel *Shoeless Joe*, or Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* about a fallen prodigy and his magical bat, Wonderboy. The difference in Bowering's writing is baseball is never an affectation, or a marketing come-on, or a mere stage. It is elemental, as much a part of everyday life as food and sex, and nearly as much fun. His baseball writing has infield dirt on the sani-socks (preferably worn high, with stirrups showing) and sweat on the inner brow of a cap. It is not a stretch to imagine Bowering enjoying the crisp crack of bat striking ball.

Bowering looks like a ball player. He has a large head (cap size 7 7/8), a square jaw, and, when younger, the lean, fluid motion you'd expect of an infielder, though his running style has been compared to that of a bobbin on a sewing machine. Given his opinionated nature, it is not a surprise to know he has pronounced rules on heckling umpires ("avoid obvious jokes about sightlessness") and the wearing of ball caps (never backwards, unless you're a catcher). He considers the New York Yankees to be Satan's servants disguised in pinstripes. He remains a purist as a fan, preferring the distractions of venerable baseball discussion over the ceaseless noise that passes for entertainment in today's ball parks. Earlier this year, the Canadians' in-stadium DJ placed a call for requests on Twitter during a game. The club's Official Loudmouth Fan replied: "I have one. Turn down the sound."

Bowering grew up playing sandlot ball on hard dirt fields under the baking Okanagan sun in Oliver. "We didn't have hockey because there was no ice," he told me. "We didn't have football because there was no money." Baseball was more a dusty, primal struggle than the mythology of farmers leaving their fields on the Sabbath to frolic on the greensward. He remembers watching his father's great exertions as he ran the bases in some forgotten amateur game, recollected in the poem "Desert Elm":

Rounding the bases his neck became red as
a turkey's but it was a home run, every
one like me has to see his father do that

once, fearing his father is like him, not
as good.

Red as a turkey neck, his eyes bulging,
his heart already something to frighten
the young boy, was it something she said
as this other says now to me playing my
guerrilla ball. I dont want you collapsing
& dying on the field. It is a playing field,
I say, I can feel my blood running red
under the skin.

Later, as an adult visiting a cavernous stadium in Cleveland, which was home to
the team for which his father cheered “for no known reason,” Bowering reflects on
his place as a Canadian outsider in “Municipal Stadium 1988”:

My companions were born to this;
I had to earn it, a boy in Okanagan sand,
now sitting in baseball’s biggest park,

old as the century, old as the league, old
as Hart Crane, throw me a lifesaver.

Bowering’s poetry is littered with baseball; it is everyday, common, part of the
pattern of life. This reflects baseball in his own life.

As a boy, he studied the newspaper sports pages as though they were holy text.
He wrote letters to the players whose exploits were described in *Baseball Digest*.
(The great Ralph Kiner replied, “I am pleased that you chose to write to a Pirate
even though your favorites are the Dodgers and Red Sox.” These letters have been
pasted into a scrapbook, which Bowering still has.) As a young father, he took to the
field with the poets and painters of the Granville Grange Zephyrs in Vancouver’s
legendary Kosmic League, where grass could be found in the dugout as well as on
the field and a batter hitting a likely triple or double may cease running at first base
should that be where a token was on offer. In middle age, he was still patrolling third
base for a Twilight League team on the sandlots of East Vancouver, his most potent
weapon a needling patter in which he would cajole younger (and, sometimes,

drunk) opponents to make bonehead plays. (In baseball parlance, Bowering was a bench jockey, and a good one.) A couple of line drives to the face and a broken hip convinced him to hang up his leather glove, bringing what he would insist was a premature end to his playing days.

Freed from a weekly schedule of games that had tethered him to the city, Bowering embarked on baseball road trips, taking in big-league stadiums and minor-league parks dotting the North American landscape. He also witnessed baseball in Latin America, where the game is a bigger religion than Communism in Cuba. The road trips with Jean Baird and an account of his own playing career are detailed in *Baseball Love* (Talonbooks 2006). A memoir and travelogue, the chatty book reads as though Bowering were an especially erudite seatmate sharing stories while watching a slow-moving game. The countless asides are amusing, such as Bowering coming up with a nickname for West Coast painter Gordon Payne, a fireball-throwing right-hander. He settled on Excruciating Payne. Another teammate was known as Engledink Birdhumper. At home, Bowering maintains diaries from his playing days, describing quips and incidents from games long purged from everyone else's memory. He was scouting his own games.

Nabakov had his butterflies; Bowering has baseball, from Frank Smith, an amateur player, in the historical novel *Caprice* to countless poems employing baseball imagery, or describing a player from fact or fiction. (Fact: Ted Williams, aka the Splendid Splinter, aka The Kid, aka The Thumper, aka Teddy Ballgame, aka The Greatest Hitter Who Ever lived, is Bowering's favourite all-time player.) His two poetry collections about baseball are *Poem and Other Baseballs* and *Baseball: A Poem in the Magic Number 9*, the latter a pennant-shaped volume originally issued in 1967 with a felt cover. He has edited a collection of short baseball stories (*Taking the Field*). In 2011, he went deep into his depth chart to complete *The Diamond Alphabet: Baseball in Short*, which includes five stories for each of the twenty-six letters. (Each section is decorated by the image of a baseball cap sporting the appropriate letter, from the Almendares Alacranes to the New Orleans Zephyrs.) The U section includes entries on Umpires, Uniform, Up (as in "being up at the plate"), Utica (where the team is known as the Blue Sox) and Uzbekistan, which allows Bowering to survey the state of baseball in other U places such as Uruguay, Ulan Bator, and Upper Volta. Not much baseball is played in U places.

As described in the baseball memoir, Bowering and Baird were driving across the prairie in a Volvo when they crossed the frontier southeast of Estevan,

Saskatchewan, where they were greeted by an American border guard in aviator glasses and a sidearm. Bowering was asked his occupation. Just this once, he thought to himself:

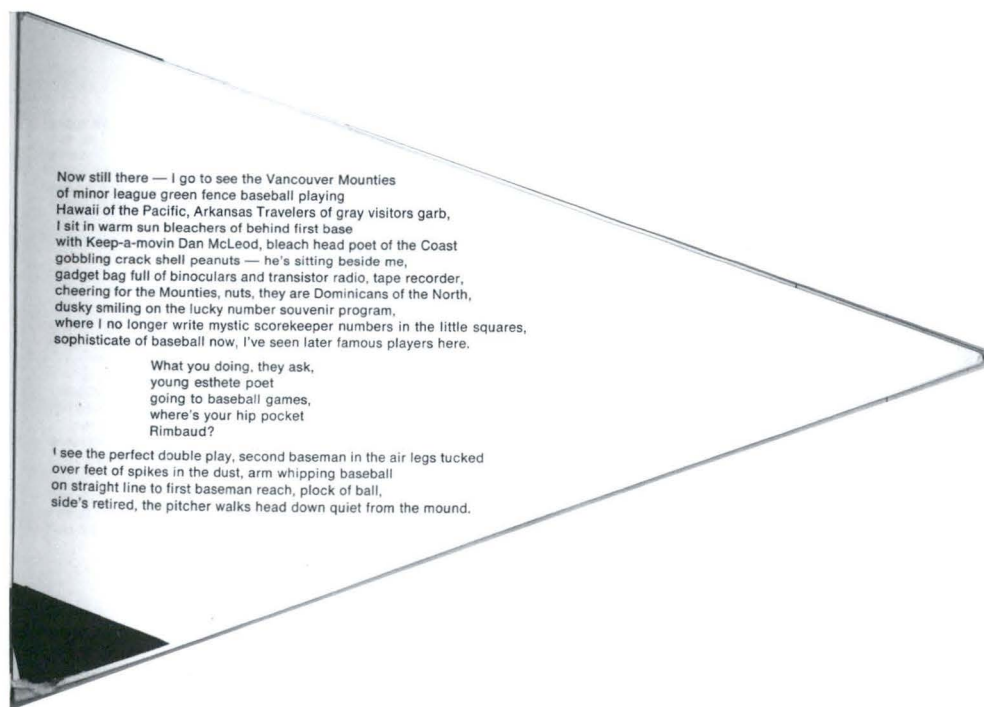
"I'm the Parliamentary Poet Laureate of Canada," he announced.

The guard had him step from the car and open the trunk, which held a box filled with books trimmed to a triangular shape. These were fresh-off-the-press copies of the Coach House reissue of *Baseball: A Poem in the Magic Number 9*. With pride, Bowering informed the guard he was holding a copy of his latest book.

The guard turned the oddly-shaped, thin, 24-page book over in his hands,

"You call that a book?"

Everyone's a critic.



from *Baseball: A Poem in the Magic Number 9* (Toronto: Coach House, 1967, 2003)