

Henry Aaron, April 8, 1974

Dayn Perry

All those years ago in Down the Bay and Toulminville
He hit bottle caps with broom handles,
Which steered him to bat cross-handed,
Left on top of right,
The way he wasn't supposed to.
They trained it out of him at Eau Claire,
But you can still see the remnants in
The way his bat dives and then levels out,
As though it has fallen off the dinner table
He never should have put it on in the first place and
Rolled across the floorboards (You'll wake the baby),
As though he had been training himself to
Turn the gears of a siege engine.

Those wrists, still snakebite quick after 40 years,
Repulse the pitch from Downing, just above the belt
The ball makes for the north, spans the dirt, and then
The grass, and then the fenceline in left.
We think it settles into someone's glove
In the bullpen and turn our eyes back to him.
So we don't see the ball
Bend up at the last instant
And keep going out of the stadium.

Yonder beyond the plate his mother,
Arms knotted around his neck,
Kneaded out of him what she could.

Not the cotton he picked,
Or the three dollars a game for the Black Bears,
Or the colleges he didn't go to,
Or the buried twin,
Or the contracts shoved at him across walnut desks,

By men more respected than respectable,
Who mistook his silence for assent
And did not know
His lungs were the bellows.

But maybe the letters scrawled by dire devils
And the 16-ton baseball he had just hit
Over the parking lots and then Fulton Street
And then Interstate 20 and its blueprinted sundering
And then the scarlet lines on old mortgage maps
And then Sweet Auburn.

It crossed great rivers, arced over their waters, and then
Rose over all the things forged in plunder —
The steel girder bridges, town-square monuments,
Concertina wire edging the untold prisons —
Until far away it struck with the force of a thrown Bible
And turned again
The great wheel of mountain stone.

Dayn Perry is a poet and a baseball writer for CBS Sports, and he also writes a newsletter about the St. Louis Cardinals. His poems have previously appeared at *FanGraphs*, *Baseball Genres*, and the Best American Poetry blog, and he's the author of two non-fiction books, including a biography of Reggie Jackson. A Mississippi native, he now lives in Chicago with his wife, son, and dog.