

Mopping Up

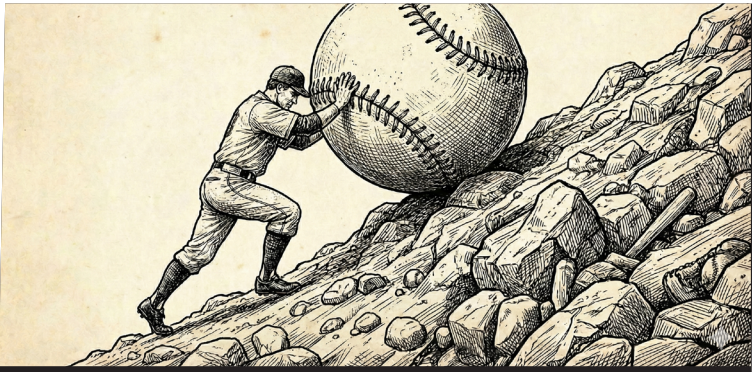
William Loizeaux

Imagine you're a mop-up pitcher. You're near the end of a ballgame, say, the eighth inning. By the seventh, when you came in to relieve the horror-show of a starting pitcher and two middle relievers, your team, the home team, was already down 9-1. It's mid-September. Your team is in last place. For almost two long innings, you've tried your best, thrown your best 87 mph fastball, your best curve, and when those pitches went anywhere near the strike zone, they'd all been clobbered. You've already walked three men, hit a batter, given up two moon-shot home runs, and what outs you recorded were screaming line drives that nearly tore off your infielders' gloves. Years ago, you were a promising prospect. But let's face it, you're now a washed-up pitcher who doesn't have his stuff anymore. Your manager isn't about to put you out of your misery by taking you out of the game. Your job, your "duty," is to absorb innings, to just keep pitching, to take a beating if that's what it takes, and try to get this game over with.

So, at the end of the eighth, you rise again from the dugout, trudge across the first base line, then the infield grass, and, in a couple of steps, you climb up the pitching mound, which seems steeper with each inning. As always, your catcher tosses you the ball, and you throw your eight warm-up pitches. With his broad bottom toward you, the umpire bends down and brushes off the plate. He puts on his mask and gets into position behind the catcher. The batter steps into the batter's box, takes a few practice swings and gets into his stance. It's the same as it's always been. The same old rituals and rhythms. You stand, glove on one hand, ball in the other, both shoulders facing the batter. You peer in toward the catcher and get the sign. You nod. You bring your hands together at your chest, the ball in your right hand, hidden in your glove. You adjust your grip on the ball. You feel its smooth hide, its stitches like the nubs of a zipper. You take your short rocker step and plant your pivot foot against the pitching rubber. You are about to wind up, rear back as best you can and throw the ball.

But you don't.

There's an odd quickening. In your blood? In your soul? It's like an unexpected change in the air, like the scent of rain, though the sky is baby blue. It makes you stop and look around. Except for a few drunks in the bleachers, everyone has left the stadium. For all intents and purposes, the game is over. The



Jason Wendel, Pitcherphus, 2026. Artwork created using Gemini.

season is over. It's hopeless. On your little mound, you're the center of no attention. No one cares. And if no one cares, why should you?

So, what am I doing here?

You're supposed to be pitching. But if you do, the other team will again hit single after single, triples after doubles, scoring run after run. In boxing, the trainer of a bloodied and beaten boxer "throws in the towel." In baseball, the mop-up man *is* the towel, the signal of surrender in a match that's decided but doesn't end with surrender. In theory, this game — this inning! — could go on forever if all the required outs aren't recorded. In horror, it hits you: *I could still be pitching here years from now, an old man with varicose veins, compression stockings, an enlarged prostate, and a shriveled arm unable to throw even a knuckleball. What, by then, will my life have amounted to, this life just a second in the ages of time, here then gone beneath a mound not much different from the one I'm standing on?*

Camus on the Mound

"At any streetcorner" — and on a pitcher's mound, I'd add — "the feeling of absurdity can strike a man in the face," Albert Camus famously writes in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in J. O'Brien's 1955 translation. It's a moment of stark contradiction, when our desire for meaning, reason, order, clarity, or unity collides with the indifference and inscrutability of the world and the meaninglessness of our mortal lives. "One day the 'why' arises" and is answered with silence. "Suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger." All he's done and might do seem worthless. He can't even wind up and pitch.

To my knowledge, there's no evidence of American baseball players reading Camus on dugout benches, in grubby bullpens, hotel rooms, or on planes and busses between games. And sadly, there's no evidence that Camus played or even thought about baseball — in his youth, in France, he was a soccer goalkeeper. Nevertheless, he may have something important to say to our mop-up pitcher.

On the off chance a mop-up pitcher *did* find a copy of *The Myth of Sisyphus* on the seat of a Greyhound, he might have learned or been reminded that in Greek mythology Sisyphus is a king who, for his many misdeeds, is banished by the gods to the underworld and forced to roll a giant rock up a hill, release it near the top, follow it down and roll it back up — again and again into eternity. For Camus, Sisyphus is the mythical incarnation of life's absurdity, its "futility and hopeless labor." Camus imagines — he can practically see and feel — Sisyphus ...

straining to raise the huge stone, the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched ... At the very end of his long effort ... the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward that lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit.

A moment ago, I wrote, "Sadly, there's no evidence that Camus played or even thought about baseball." It's sad indeed. For if, by some miracle, Camus had come across American sports pages in Algeria where, from roughly 1937 to 1941, he was writing *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he might have read about Al Smith of the last place 1938 Philadelphia Phillies who, in 36 relief appearances, allowed nearly two base runners per inning. Or he might have read about Nick "Jumbo" Strincevich of the next-to-last place 1940 Boston Bees (soon to be renamed the Boston Braves) who, in six innings of mop-up duty in a late-season game, allowed 9 runs on route to a 14-0 shellacking. There are many such examples. In short — and especially in an era when mop-up men pitched as many as six innings — Camus might have found in the mop-up pitcher an iconic and *living* example of The Absurd. His book might have been called *Mopping Up* and, in addition to liberal arts college bookstores, been marketed to a large and hungry baseball readership. Yet even as it stands, Camus' *Sisyphus* describes the mop-up pitcher with uncanny accuracy. With a dose of poetic license, one might even say that Sisyphus *is* a mop-up pitcher. And vice versa. Whether their own or others', they mop up after gross misdeeds. With a hard, round object, they toil up and down a hill. Their "whole being," as Camus writes of Sisyphus, "is exerted toward accomplishing nothing."

Can we really imagine a mop-up pitcher or Sisyphus “happy”? In a fully conscious absurd life, is a heroic and hopeless struggle enough to fill the heart?

In the nearly empty stadium, our mop-up pitcher is still standing alone on the mound. Stricken by his sudden and heart-rending sense of the meaninglessness of himself and the world, he can't pitch. So how, after his team trainer has escorted him off the field and his manager has put him on the 10-day Injury List, a respite from baseball ... how will he respond to The Absurd? What will our pitcher *do*, if and when doing is possible?

He could just quit, clear out his locker, throw his sweaty uniform into the hamper, and never set foot on a ballfield again. If we take baseball to be “a metaphor for life,” as so many do, then quitting would be baseball's equivalent of suicide, which Camus takes seriously — and objects to strenuously. For our pitcher to quit would be, in Camus' eyes, a cowardly removal of himself from a hapless game and his situation as a mop-up pitcher. It would be a cop-out.

A better option might be the assertion of hope born of faith in the supernatural or religion. Baseball players are known for their superstitions about what might bring them a higher batting average, a lower earned run average, or another game in the win column. On their journeys between the mound and dugout, pitchers never step on the foul line. Others don't shower after victories. Wade Boggs always ate fried chicken before games. Some batters kiss or lick their bats. Richie Ashburn slept with his.

For some players, there may be a short leap between, or a confluence of, superstition and religious faith. Many players give witness to their faith on websites and podcasts like *A Lamp Unto My Cleats*, *Faith on the Field*, or *Baseball4Christ.com*. And how many wear a cross (a few wear a star of David) on their jingling necklaces or point toward the heavens in apparent gratitude when they do something extraordinary, as does my homerun-hitting hero, Aaron Judge?

At home on the Injured List, our mop-up pitcher might rediscover meaning and purpose through hope and faith, a way out of Camus' “problem” of absurdity. *There's a reason I'm here*, he could think. *I'm meant to pitch!* Add in some strength training, and he might get his fastball back to a modest 90 mph — a reborn pitcher! — and in the process rack up innings toward a more pleasant afterlife than rolling a rock up a hill.

To all this, Camus says No Way. Inevitably our pitcher will again stand alone on the mound with that odd quickening, or that slap in the face, and that silent stadium all around him. Hope, Camus writes, is “the fatal evasion.” It will not free our mop-up pitcher from the absurdity of his life and world. Will anything?

From Homer to Kafka, writers have focused on Sisyphus’ immense effort to push the rock up the hill, as have painters (e.g. Titian’s “Sisyphus” in the Prado), sculptors, and illustrators. Again and again, we see Sisyphus as Camus describes him: every muscle straining, back bent, face clenched, legs braced against the slope, arms and shoulders braced against the rock, the rock often larger than he. Even musicians have gotten in on it. On Spotify, you can listen to a “Songs of Sisyphus Playlist,” featuring tunes that evoke nothing if not a long and laborious climb.

In the end, however, it isn’t the climb that matters most to Camus. “It is during that return, that pause [after he’s released the rock] that Sisyphus interests me.”

I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness.

For any mop-up pitcher, that hour is compressed into less than a minute, as he turns and walks down off the mound after one of his fielders has caught a line drive, ending another dreadful half-inning. We see him with his own heavy yet measured step, moving toward his dugout, a tomb-like place carved out of and mostly under the earth. This is dispiriting. But as Camus would have it, midway between the mound and the dugout, something in him changes and doesn’t. None of his discouragement is gone. What changes is another sort of quickening. Our mop-up pitcher might realize that, though wobbly, he is walking *willfully*. Like Camus says of Sisyphus, “His fate belongs to him.” And the next inning and the next, game after game, he will throw pitch after pitch and give up run after run, and all the while he will be nearing that day when the tomb and its nothingness will come. *But I*, he now understands, *am moving toward it. I’m doing the walking up and down and the pitching.* He hates the absurdity of this, and he will always want a better fate, but he can’t and won’t avoid this one. Instead, he vows to face, and without hope, defy it unceasingly, and in that struggle, he will own and embrace it. *I will keep mopping up and never give up!* This, for Camus, is the answer, the only way to respond to and live with The Absurd: scornful acknowledgement, bitter defiance, heroic yet hopeless struggle. And that is enough, Camus writes triumphantly at the end of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

Really?

Let's think about it. If we are to believe Camus, a mop-up man, like Sisyphus, would come to understand the above during "that return, that pause," that "breathing space," when he walks *downhill*. But don't we all know that it's one thing to ponder your life while striding down a slope and quite another while toiling up, especially if you're pushing a huge rock? What is Sisyphus most conscious of *then*, even with his newfound awareness of his agency? And what would a mop-up pitcher be most aware of when, after his team has made three quick outs, he climbs the dugout stairs and the mound yet again? His legs wobble. His pitching arm feels like meat in a casing. As he climbs, does his consciousness of The Absurd and the struggle it entails make them easier to bear? Does awareness of the problem solve or diminish it? Can we really imagine a mop-up pitcher or Sisyphus "happy"? In a fully conscious absurd life, is a heroic and hopeless struggle enough to fill the heart?

The Folly Floater

It's the afternoon of July 24, 1970. I'm sitting in my parents' living room in suburban New Jersey, paying sporadic attention to the first game of a Yankee-Indian doubleheader at Yankee Stadium on our grainy black-and-white TV. I've recently finished my junior year of high school, and I'm irked by and impatient with a lot of things, including gorgeous Barbara McFarlain, who won't give me the time of day — and Yankee losses. The top of the ninth inning is about to start. The game is already over, the Tribe up 7-1. The Indians' "Sudden" Sam McDowell (he of the tranquilizing windup and blistering fast-ball) has mowed down the Yankee batters, and the Yankee pitchers have gotten creamed. It's a disaster, a blowout. The whole thing is absurd, a waste of time. Why in the world am I watching?

After the between-innings advertisement, Steve Hamilton, now a mop-up pitcher, a lanky lefty, 37 years old in the twilight of his career, appears on the screen — you can see it all on YouTube. On the mound, he's completed his warmup pitches. The batter, Tony Horton, a 210 lb. slugger who'd belted three home runs against the Yankees in a game the month before, stands in the batter's box, his short sleeves showing off his beefy arms. Hamilton leans in to get the sign from his catcher, Thurman Munson. Beginning his wind up, his arms swing back as he rocks on his right leg. His arms swing forward, and up they go over his head as he pivots, all his weight on his left leg. Now his right leg rises, knee bent, while his trunk twists. His left arm rears back like the backswing of a whip, and, as his right leg extends, his left pushes off the pitching rubber, powering him toward the batter. Finally, his left arm, elbow flexed behind him, accelerates up, around, and forward as all his momentum and energy — his whole being — drives forward and unwinds toward the tip of the whip, that hard little ball in his hand.

Then, strangely, an instant of hesitation. That first odd quickening? That gob-smack of The Absurd? Maybe. But Hamilton doesn't stop his motion. He doesn't stand there smitten and just look around. Instead, it is me in my parents' living room and all the bored fans in Yankee Stadium, waiting for this useless game to end and the next to begin, who snap to attention, wide-eyed, and breathless. We may have heard about it but have never seen it. In that instant, with Hamilton's arm fully extended upward to release his best fastball, it decelerates, almost stops, like the upstretched arm of someone waving to a loved one far away in a crowd. And in that instant, Hamilton releases the ball so softly, tenderly, as if it's a sparrow or a dove. It's magical, beautiful, and funny somehow. Against the grim Bronx skyline — tenement buildings, billboards, an old water tower — the ball floats like a soap bubble in a slow, high, graceful arc, way higher than any softball pitch — a rainbow! — toward the plate and Tony Horton.

As Hamilton's wife, an English teacher with a fondness for alliteration, dubbed it, the pitch was her husband's "Folly Floater," a lob that any 6-year-old could hit. Hamilton was not the first pitcher to throw some version of it. Various websites list about 40 pitchers, not all strictly mop-up pitchers, who have done so. While scholarly debate still percolates, "Rip" Sewell of the 1940s Pittsburgh Pirates is generally credited with inventing what a teammate called the super-slow "eephus" pitch, eephus probably deriving from the Hebrew עפס for "nothing," which is right up there with "hopeless" and "struggle" as favorite words of Camus'. Indeed, we might think of the Folly Floater or eephus pitch as a statement about our nothingness, the folly of our ambitions in a meaningless world, their tragic arc, the inexorable weight of gravity and time. But while *eephus* is the usual term, the pitch, aside from "Folly Floater," is called a "balloon ball," a "parachute," and a "blooper ball," among other more light-hearted monikers. My favorite is the Red Sox's Bill "Spaceman" Lee's "Leephus" pitch that's said to "cross time zones" and, regarding its effectiveness in getting batters out, "60 percent of the time, it works every time." Lately, the Folly Floater so captivated fans that the poignant, quirky Indie film "Eephus" (in which Bill Lee makes a cameo appearance) has played to unexpected acclaim at movie theaters around the country.

So, what's going on here? What's this all about? Some other approach to The Absurd, it seems, than scorn and hopeless, endless struggle.

A Fantasy

In another living room on July 24, 1970, just 30 miles down Route 206 from my parents' home, a man is watching the same game on his family TV — and with about the same sporadic attention as me, because for years he's been irked by and is still wrestling with something a touch more sophisticated than my teenage concerns: Camus' conception of and response to The Absurd. The man is Thomas

Nagel, a brilliant 33-year-old associate professor of philosophy at Princeton University, who would go on to be one of the most influential and wide-ranging philosophers of our time. As I do, he knows the game is hopeless. As I do, he watches Steve Hamilton wind up and throw that same pitch, while he hears Phil Rizzuto, the excitable Yankee TV announcer exclaim, “Oh! And there’s the Folly Floater!” Nagel watches the ball float toward Tony Horton, and in that instant, in the mysterious way that batting slumps end or pitchers all at once “put it all together,” Nagel’s thoughts about Camus crystalize. He knows what he must do. He snaps off the TV. He drives to campus, sprints up the stairs of ivy-covered 1879 Hall, gets to his office, shuts the door, sits at his desk, feeds a sheet of paper into his electric typewriter, and writes:

Most people feel on occasion that life is absurd, and some feel it vividly and continually. Yet the reasons usually offered in defense of this conviction are patently inadequate: they *could not* really explain why life is absurd.

Thus begins Thomas Nagel’s essay “The Absurd,” published in the *Journal of Philosophy* in October 1971, 14 months after that game in Yankee Stadium. It’s an essay our mop-up pitcher is unlikely to have read, though it might have profoundly interested him. So, let’s pretend he’s reading it while sitting in the bullpen and waiting for his first assignment after returning from the Injury List. In the essay, Nagel agrees with Camus that life *is* inescapably absurd, though not because of the collision of our need for meaning with a meaningless world, but because of “a collision within ourselves” arising from our ability to be “spectators of our own lives.”

... humans have the special capacity to step back and survey themselves, and the lives to which they are committed, with that detached amazement which comes from watching an ant struggle up a heap of sand. Without developing the illusion that they are able to escape from their highly specific and idiosyncratic position, they can view it *sub specie aeternitatis* [from the perspective of the eternal] — a view that is at once sobering and comical.

... Yet when we take this view and recognize what we do as arbitrary, it does not disengage us from life, and there lies our absurdity: not in the fact that such an external view can be taken of us, but in the fact that we ourselves can take it, without ceasing to be the persons whose ultimate concerns are so coolly regarded.

This is dense reading, but it comes down to this: For Nagel, our absurd situation, and that of Steve Hamilton and our mop-up pitcher, arises from what we can do that an ant can't, from "our capacity to transcend ourselves in thought." In other words, we can see ourselves as we climb up while sliding down our heaps of sand. And the absurdity of what we see is "sobering," yes. But importantly for Nagel, it's also "comical" and doesn't radically affect our sense of ourselves.

Comical. It's a stretch to associate that word with Camus' Sisyphus. All his urgent, endless, hopeless struggling is just too much for Nagel. It's way more — or less — than "enough." Why forever resent the absurdity that results from "our most advanced and interesting human characteristic," as Nagel puts it? Why go to the trouble? It must be exhausting.

With this, our mop-up pitcher nods as he waits in the bullpen.

"Our absurdity," Nagel goes on, "warrants neither that much distress nor that much defiance." "It need not be a matter for agony, unless we make it so." It might not even be a problem.

Intrigued — in my fantasy — by Steve Hamilton, Nagel is providing a rationale for reactions other than Camus' to the absurdity of mopping up and of life in general. What The Absurd warrants is a knowing smile, a laugh, or some other bemused recognition. "We can approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair," he concludes. We know our lives are absurd. We're here then gone, usually with few and never with everlasting traces. Still, we keep going on regardless of that knowledge. We keep climbing up and sliding down our hills of sand ... *as I've been climbing up and down the pitcher's mound, going nowhere*, our mop-up man might say. *I'm like that struggling ant. Sad but funny. So, what will I do when I'm called to mop up again and we're ten runs behind? Do I keep trying to intimidate batters with my bush league fastball? Or, if there's comedy in all this absurdity, will I do something else?*

In that game in July 1970, Tony Horton took a mighty swing at Hamilton's first Folly Floater and fouled it into the crowd. As for the second Folly Floater, immediately after the first, I'll let Phil Rizzuto call the play-by-play with my interjections:

Here it is! Look at this! ... [Horton swings mightily.] And he fouls it again!!! ... [Only this foul is high, straight back, in the field of play behind the catcher, who races after it.] **And Munson makes the catch!!!!** Holy cow! What a play by Thurman Munson!!! [Horton is out.] [Now walking back toward the Indians' dugout,] Horton throws the bat in the air and then his helmet ... and then his hands in the air ... and listen to the crowd go wild!!! [Meanwhile one of the Indians at the end of the visitors' dugout waves a white towel in mock surrender.] And Horton crawls into the dugout!! What a show he's put on!!!

As Camus would remind us, that instance of relief, as when Sisyphus releases the stone or Hamilton releases his Folly Floater, is an instance and not an escape. It's but a spark within the larger absurdity of life, which is not, after all, a game.

There are those who connect Horton's response to this moment with his reported "emotional disorder" after the end of that season and early retirement from baseball. There could be some truth in this. But it's at least equally true — as it appears on the video — that Horton joined Hamilton in putting on "a show" that delighted the fans. Beginning when Hamilton released his first Folly Floater, they shifted in seconds from torpid disinterest to stunned amazement to wild excitement *while still in a meaningless inning*, in a moment of absurdity. The game was over, nothing at stake, yet the crowd leapt to its feet — a standing ovation — cheering like crazy and chanting, "Folly Floater! Folly Floater!" In the face of The Absurd, in the very midst of it, Hamilton created infectious comedy. "Everybody laughed at it," Hamilton says of the Folly Floater in a 1992 interview with the Society for American Baseball Research. "Everybody got a kick out of it ... It was fun."

In the past decade, position players (infielders and outfielders) and designated hitters have increasingly been deputized as mop-up pitchers, making for ridiculous mistakes, more fun, and downright absurdity. They throw pitches that sail over the catcher or fall short of home plate like shot pigeons. They walk multiple batters in a row. They balk. On August 3, 2019, the Washington National outfielder Gerardo Parra threw 25 pitches, allowing four walks and five earned runs without recording a single out, thus achieving an earned run average of infinity. On August 7, 2021, Brock Holt, a Texas Ranger infielder, unleashed the slowest pitch ever recorded at 31 mph, well under the average national speed limit on unpaved roads. And on April 12, 2025, after the Cubs were ahead 7-0 at the end of seven innings, shortstop Miguel Rojas, with an arsenal of Folly Floaters, entered the game to mop up for the Dodgers. Four outs and four runs later, Rojas grinned at his teammates in the dugout and, with the rest of his pitches, imitated (with hilarious exaggeration!) the windups and deliveries of four Dodger pitchers, even as the Cubs kept circling the bases and the Dodgers went on to lose 16-0, the worst shutout loss in their history. Were he among the few left in the stands, Thomas Nagel would have stood and cheered.

The Hippy-Hippy Shake

I began by thinking that Camus has something important to say to mop-up pitchers. He does. Like Camus' Sisyphus, they can embrace the absurdity of their situations with scornful and heroic defiance. Think of Al "The Mad Hungarian" Hrabosky (of the Cardinals, Royals, and Braves) with his long, wild hair and Fu Manchu, who late in his career did some mop-up duty. Remember that way he psyched himself up, storming around the infield, pounding the ball into his mitt before climbing up the mound? Remember his tirades and brawls? He seemed to be in a constant state of rebellion against batters, umpires, managers, the media, the game, and the universe. I imagine a heavy stone, not a chip, on his shoulder. Defiance seemed to feed him.

As it turns out, however, some mop-up pitchers, like those in sympathy with Nagel's rationale, have something important to say to Camus. We can meet The Absurd with absurdity, with humor, playfulness, and nonsense, which is the time-honored strategy of absurd comedy. In a game that prizes 95-100 mph fastballs, you can throw 30-40 mph Folly Floaters. In a rule-bound game that's called a "metaphor for life," you can make fun of the game's strictures and expectations, and, perhaps, the seriousness with which we take the norms and regulations governing our lives.

And there may be a related strategy at work here, that of — the pun is intended — comic relief. The shock and weight of The Absurd, like the darkness of tragedy, can be lightened or deflected by moments of levity or beauty. It's a relief to smile, laugh, or be pleasantly awed as you pitch through or witness the last dreary innings of a drubbing.

But as Camus would remind us, that instance of relief, as when Sisyphus releases the stone or Hamilton releases his Folly Floater, is an instance and not an escape. It's but a spark within the larger absurdity of life, which is not, after all, a game. At the same time, we know that, however small, that spark — call it human energy, curiosity and/or creativity — is essential. The Folly Floater. We aren't ourselves without it.

So, where does this leave our mop-up pitcher? Having returned to active duty, what will he do when he's called to mop up for the last time in this essay?

Again, the slope of the mound feels steep. His team is still in last place. It's the top of the eighth inning. The game is decided. When he's taken his warm-up pitches and his catcher, the batter, and umpire are ready, he gets the sign and is about to begin his wind up. He stops. There's that quickening. Again, he seems at the center of nowhere, and again it knocks him for a loop: the nearly empty stadium, his fielders slumped in the late-summer heat. Then he wonders how he might appear to them. Or, come to think of it, how he might appear to himself: a gawky guy in a billed cap, alone on a mound, with a little ball in his hand and wearing what could be striped pajamas. *I'm ridiculous*, he says to himself. *This job is ridiculous*. He takes in a breath. *But this is who I am. This is what I do*. He says it with neither defiance nor despair, but with something quite different, a wry acceptance and an inward smile.

He pulls himself together. He faces the batter, winds up, and in the middle of it, while balanced for a second on his back leg, he wiggles his hips as in a sexy dance. The hippy-hippy shake! It's preposterous, but it feels so good. It makes him laugh aloud, even as he knows that when this merciless inning is over, he'll have to climb up on the mound again.

William Loizeaux is an award-winning writer of short stories, essays, three novels for children, a novel for adults, and two memoirs, one of which, *Anna: A Daughter's Life*, was a *New York Times* Notable Book. His novel *The Tumble Inn* was a New York Book Festival winner. His stories have appeared in anthologies and journals, including *The Kenyon Review*, *The American Scholar*, *The Gettysburg Review*, and *TriQuarterly*. His *SL* essay, "Sin and Baseball," was cited in *The Best American Essays 2020*. In what might seem a contradiction, he is both a Yankee fan and an admirer of those, like mop-up pitchers, who take a beating and muddle through. Find more at www.williamloizeaux.com.