"I CAN SEE THEM THERE, AT FENWAY PARK – ANDRE DUBUS AND HIS GOOD FRIEND GOD..."

PATRICK SAMWAY, S.J.
Saint Joseph’s University

"Writing is exciting/and baseball is like writing."
(“Baseball and Writing,” Marianne Moore)

Yes, I can see them there, Andre and his good friend God, because I was right along side them. The three of us, together with 33,097 others, were at Fenway Park on July 25, 1998, and from our vantage point high in the grandstands overlooking first base, where Andre could easily situate his wheelchair, we watched the Red Sox beat the Toronto Blue Jays, 5-3. Andre had arrived with his daughters Suzanne, Cadence, and Madeleine from his home in Haverhill, north of Boston, in a stretch limousine, his vehicle of choice in those days since he could swivel in and out of the back seat with relative ease. Accompanied by my nephew, Stephen Miss, and his friend, Lake Day, both graduate students at the University of Georgia, we caught up with Andre as planned. Aside from the occasional taunting of Mo Vaughan, whose popularity was declining because of his comportment in a contract dispute, the game moved slowly until Nomar Garciaparra’s game-winning two-run home run in the eighth inning broke the 3-3 tie. Bret Saberhagen finished on a strong note as he retired the last ten batters before ceding his place to Derek Lowe and then Tom Gordon. Throughout that sunny, late Saturday afternoon, Andre followed the game intensely, merging in his mind the records and statistics of the past with the actual event before our eyes.

For Andre Dubus in his “biped” days (as he called them), running and baseball were passions, and either could well serve as a metaphor for his life. Running, even running in the presence of others, is, like writing, a solitary activity demanding motivation, planning, and endurance. For Dubus, as he mentions in essays such as “Running” (Broken Vessels), “A Country Road Song,” “Autumn Legs” (Meditations From a Movable Chair), fifteen years of running in New England, often down a dirt road near Lake Kenoza in Haverhill, allowed him to bilocate mentally. After
a certain distance, his endorphins would kick in, freeing him to continue on automatic pilot and begin the process of composing a story that soon gathered its own momentum and proceeded at its own pace. As Dubus writes in “Love in the Morning,” he merely had to let a story come to him, receive its gifts, as the characters began appearing and their faces and bodies came into focus. “I do not start writing a story,” he wrote, “until I see the people and the beginning of the story” (Meditations 134). Even when the interior cadence was off – horns sounding dissonant and the drum beat erratic – he knew that all he had to do was wait, and at the appropriate moment reply “I’m here” (“Witness,” Meditations 210).

Baseball, however, was altogether different for Dubus. Like A. Bartlett Giamatti, he delighted in knowing that baseball is played on a diamond where the object is for the batter to arrive where he started from, that is home plate. Baseball is “part of America’s plot,” writes Giamatti. It is a version of the “tale America tells the world,” that we are “free enough to consent to an order that will enhance and compound – as it constrains – our freedom” (83). While the structural principles grounding this game include squares containing circles containing rectangles, where precision counterpoints passion and order compresses energy, it is interesting to note that pitcher, batter, catcher, and umpire all share the same sight line. Theoretically, as in life, the foul line (or is it the fair line?) extends to infinity, just as the game itself, as originally conceived, can go on and on, not unlike many fictional narratives that continue asymptotically once the story has seemingly concluded. “Let be be finale of seem,” poet Wallace Stevens reminds us. After three outs the teams, equal in numbers, change sides, and the conflict begins with renewed energy as those in the field reposition themselves for each new batter, who knows from experience that failure is highly likely. No one can predict in advance what the players – or protagonists – will do, how they will interact with one another, as “patterns of repetition force a tale, oft-told, to fresh and hitherto-unforeseen meaning” (Giamatti 90).

It is no wonder, then, that baseball serves as an entrée into the life and career of Andre Dubus. “For me,” he once wrote, “baseball is real in a deeper way than much of what I do” (“Brothers,” Meditations 75). Writing, exercising, receiving Communion, and watching baseball seemed to provide, for Dubus, analogous moments of concentration. As he mentions in his essay “Under the Lights” (Broken Vessels), he first encountered professional baseball players as an eleven-year-old boy in Lafayette, Louisiana, when the Lafayette Brahman Bulls began play as part of the Class C Evangeline League. Because Andre’s father (also named Andre), then the district manager of the Gulf States Utilities