

Our Secret Language

By Vincent Toro

I never learned the language of my grandmother's motherland.

The one I have been taught never seemed to do its job in bringing us closer,

But my father and I, we speak in tongues, juggling jargon of RBI's and ERA's,

With the power of strikeouts and dugouts

We dug out the artifacts of our ancestor's empathy

From underneath the rocky hillsides of our relationship.

My father would speak of the next triple-crown winner

Like a preacher pondering the second coming of Christ.

Dad never believed in God, but it was as if he had seen him once

Grazing in the outfield grass of the Polo Grounds.

We would practice the relay throw from Center to Short,

While Pop relayed stories of Gibson vs. Seaver in 1969.

In my household, the Mets winning the series that year was

An event more culturally significant than Woodstock or

Armstrong's first steps on the face of the moon.

Each day for two hours he would throw fastballs as hard as his aged arm could hurl them.

Every 5th pitch aimed at my head until I was no longer afraid of being beaned.

Then curveballs for two more hours. He'd say to me,
"You ain't never gonna be a man until you can hit a curveball.
Life's a series of curveballs thrown at you, see.
But occasionally the pitcher will miss the plate,
He'll hang it on you, and you got to be ready for it,
Ready to crush his mistake opposite field, you hear!
You go down swinging. You go down swinging.
Don't let me hear you got caught looking."

I'd return the pitches with my 31 inch Louisville slugger
While reciting in my head the words of Tug McGraw in '71,
"Ya gotta believe! Ya gotta believe!"
And during our games of catch on the front sidewalk,
I'd wait for pops to put his guard down, then
I'd replace our Rawlings baseball with my heart and throw it back.

I was never taught to keep my elbows off the dinner table,
But you better believe I was made to keep them up and
Over the batter's box, to step in to the pitch,
To always keep my head in, and follow through.

I never learned the language of my grandmother's motherland,
But my father and I, we had our own secret language,

Coded in speech of Squeeze plays and Double plays,
Because when we would toss statistics across the room
Like splitfinger fastballs on the inside part of the plate,
The ice between us would chip away enough
So that we might be able, if only for a moment, to look
Into each other's eyes without the fear of catching frostbite.

Constantly he would test me, evaluate the work he'd done,

“Who was the last .400 hitter?”

(Translation: “I love you.”)

Proudly I would reply, “Ted Williams in 1941.”

(Translation: “I love you.”)

“And how many career Home Runs did Willie Mays have?”

(Translation: “I love you.”)

“660. Third all-time behind Hank Aaron, 755, and Babe Ruth, 714.”

(Translation: “I love you.”)

Each number, each name, an “I love you” that could not be presented

Between us by any other means,

Because he was not taught the language of his father's motherland.

He was not taught to speak in the tongue of mothers and poets.

Thus, my father's blue-collar heart was broken when soon

I chose Poe and Whitman over Maris and Mantle.

He could not believe that I could deliver a metaphor
With more accuracy than I could a 3-1 fastball,
Or at least he did not want to,
Because without Tony Gwynn's on-base percentage to discuss,
The most profound abyss would be drawn between us.
For when the field lights are dimmed and the last out is called,
The only language common between us is that of silence.

I never learned the language of my grandmother's motherland,
But my father and I, we have our own secret language,
A language, that though it seems trivial to others,
I cannot seem to give up.
We speak in the dreams of baseball,
A language that,
For us,
In its own peculiar way,
Forever speaks of love.

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