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Preface

In December of 1988, when I was forty-one, I contracted a virus that targeted my brain and left me in neurological tatters. I couldn't write, and struggled to understand the simplest sentences I read. My memory systems were wrecked, leaving me unable to store new information or reliably find and assemble old information. I had difficulty learning things and was easily lost. My word-finding and concentration powers were compromised, abstract reasoning and the capacity to form structures were damaged, IQ diminished nearly twenty percent. I walked with a cane for the next fifteen years.

At the time I got sick, I'd been publishing poetry for twenty years, short stories for fifteen years, and had completed the manuscripts of two novels and most of a third that would all appear in the 1990s. My poems were generally short, lyric pieces, tightly structured. My fiction, also tightly structured, emerged from characters and their voices, with minimal plots (and minimal readership). I'd never written personal essays or memoir. My only nonfiction writing was book reviews and memos or position papers in my work as staff to various governors or legislators or corporate management.

Illness silenced me for a year. What returned first were scattered images and phrases I would jot down in bedside notebooks quickly, before they vanished from short-term memory. Soon I had pads and index cards and post-it notes everywhere, because I could never risk waiting till I could locate one. It was two years before I tried to write anything more sustained than a short poem, before I could begin to piece together the notes jotted down here and there, and find something like coherence among them.

I needed to write about what was happening to me, but realized

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that poetry, as I was capable of writing it, wouldn't allow the scale of exploration I was after. Without the capacity to make structure or develop abstract thoughts, working in snippets of a few minutes at a time, proceeding with little idea of where I was heading, I had to come up with a new way to write at length. And to my genuine surprise, the genre I turned to was memoir.

The impulse to write fiction had vanished along with the voices that used to trigger it. The lesions on my brain, holes scattered throughout the cerebral cortex, were where I believed those voices had gone. In their place, it seemed, was my own voice, distant still but demanding that I tell my own story. By writing about it, I began to combat an illness that seemed determined to silence me.

In a way that sounds melodramatic but is true, the memoir, in its flexibility and formal openness, saved me as a writer. It allowed me to give full voice to my experience, fragment by fragment. The process enabled me to put shards of memory back together, create some sort of window into my past, so I could see who I was and connect him with the person I had become.

Fiction was not an option, but even if it were, I don't believe fiction would have worked for me. I needed to tell the truth, without making anything up, because it was the only way I could understand what I was going through. I needed to find out how the pieces I'd jotted down fit together, work I could only do by writing, by putting them on the page, seeing what I had, and discovering where it led. Thinking, with my limitations, would not work.

The Wink of the Zenith is the fourth memoir I've written in the twenty years since getting sick. But it's the first that isn't about being sick, or reassembling myself in the aftermath of a neurological calamity, or finding my way back into the world as a disabled man. It's about the shaping of a writer's life, about the forces that made me the sort of person who could only deal with what happened to him by writing about it.

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The book's first half concerns external influences within the family, close friendships, community, popular culture, or experiences which bear upon the formation of character, sensibility, and habits of mind. The second half concerns how that sensibility gives shape to the life being lived, making sense of the random, often disconnected facts of experience.

I didn't know what *The Wink of the Zenith* would be when I started writing it. As with all the work I've written in the last two decades, there was no plan or outline, no governing concept, only the gradual discovery of how pieces fit together. In the wake of brain damage, I'm simply not capable of the sort of thought or organization, the conceptualization, that would be required for such an approach. To theorize about how I became a writer, and how writing shapes my life now, requires levels of abstraction and reasoning that are beyond my abilities. But by making brief notes, capturing shards of memory or thought, writing out specific scenes, I began to discover what they meant and how they might cohere. So this book enacts the process it describes, the shaping of a writing life.

I

Going, Going, Gone

I was standing in the bedroom of our Brooklyn apartment with my ear pressed to the radio. It was dark outside, a spring evening in the mid-1950s, and through the open window I could hear people talking in the courtyard four stories below. I was eight or nine years old, and my brother Philip, a teenager, was sitting at his desk bent over homework. That explains why the radio's volume was turned so low. Philip couldn't hear it over the courtyard chatter or else he'd have told me to turn it down.

I'd succeeded in losing myself to the world of baseball, and could hardly stand still as I leaned farther into the radio. If you could see me shuffling in place, cheek-to-cheek with a console the same size that I am, arms gripping its sides, you might think we were dancing.

My father had taken me to many games at Ebbets Field, a few at the Polo Grounds, even one at Yankee Stadium. I'd collected baseball cards since I was six, played punchball and stickball and baseball for hours in the spring and summer, invented games to play by myself with baseball cards on the apartment floor, read baseball magazines and books, studied batting statistics. So I knew what I was listening to. I also knew what I was waiting for.

If it was a Yankees game on the radio, I was waiting for Mel Allen to call out "Going, going, gone" when a home run was hit. If it was

a Giants game, I was hoping Russ Hodges would scream “Bye bye baby.” And if it was a Dodgers game, which is most likely, I wanted Vin Scully’s curt “Gone!” I was homer-happy. But it was the announcer’s call, not the hit itself, that captivated me.

When it came, when the batter’s sudden triumph was described in language so potent with loss, I was never able to keep silent. *Going, going, gone.* To realize such success required bidding adieu to what made it possible, *Bye bye baby*, and the delight in the announcer’s voice counterpointed with his actual words packed an emotional wallop I found overwhelming. The ball was *Gone!* for good and so was my last vestige of composure.

Philip would get up, cross the room, turn the radio off, and stalk back to his desk. He may even have socked me on the shoulder. But I’d have had what I wanted: a moment when arrival and departure were poised, when the offense’s joyful achievement was mingled with the defense’s sad failure in phrases and tones that acknowledged the whole knotted experience.

My connection with these Dodgers of the 1950s felt deeply personal. The players and their families lived in Brooklyn, could be seen on the streets, on the subway. They were known to us by intimate names, Campy and Robby, Junior and Shotgun, Duke and Rube. When my brother at age seven was hospitalized because shards of glass had slashed his right eye, the Dodgers’ shortstop and captain, Pee Wee Reese, came to visit him. Pee Wee sat on Philip’s hospital bed and gave him an autographed baseball. Also two tickets to a double-header in early September, as incentive for steady healing. Why, Pee Wee was practically family! So was Gil Hodges, since I had a Hodges-model baseball glove, a big trapper’s mitt used only by first basemen. Because I was so small, the one position I’d never play was first base, but I admired Hodges for his calm, quiet ways, his steady power, the etched glower with which he stared at an opposing pitcher. I wanted

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to be like him, and when I wore the glove that bore his name, I almost was. Then, when the young pitching star, Karl Spooner, hurt his arm and was unable to play again, I placed his baseball card on my desk in tribute, and surrounded it with clippings from the newspaper like a shrine for a lost relative. Soon enough, a twinge developed in my own arm from the torque of imaginary curve balls. Carl Furillo in right field was nicknamed Skoonj, for his love of conch: *scungili*. Skoonj sounded a bit like Skloot, so I imagined that we were related too. Somewhere back in the old country, I decided, his family and mine had once lived in the same village, somewhere near the sea, where we all developed our passion for shellfish. Then his family moved to Italy and mine moved to Russia, their names got rearranged, and we didn't come together again till we both ended up in Brooklyn. That explained it.

Living in Brooklyn and rooting for the Dodgers felt so natural that it was unquestioned, like my affinity for raw clams (!) from Sheepshead Bay, or chicken from my father's poultry market. But then came October 1957. The publicist for Brooklyn Dodgers announced on October eighth that the team was moving to Los Angeles. They'd played their last game in Brooklyn the month before; the Brooklyn Dodgers were no more. And the next week the Skloot family was moving too, leaving Brooklyn on October fifteenth. I always felt the two moves were connected, regardless of what my parents said.

I remember two formal farewells to Brooklyn. I was ten, and we were going to live in Long Beach, off the south shore of Long Island, and nothing I could say would change that. My parents' key promotional points—that we'd be renting the top half of a private home instead of living in an apartment, that we'd be living just a few hundred yards from the ocean, that I'd have all new friends and new places to play with them—meant nothing to me. I knew my way around our Brooklyn block. I had friends in the apartment building and at school, and could find places to go when my parents raged. But Long

Beach and its ocean were like the surface of Venus to me, covered in dense clouds, unknowable, alien. I had a map of the heavens on my bedroom wall and already knew all I cared to know about hostile environments. I didn't like visiting Long Beach when we were looking for our new home, and couldn't imagine adapting to life there. It just did not make any sense to me, which is why I never believed the official family explanations.

Nonetheless, we were moving on Tuesday. My father had sold his kosher poultry market and agreed to begin working for my mother's brother, managing a dress-making factory; my mother had been looking for new furniture with my aunt, who was an interior decorator; my brother had graduated from high school and was attending New York University, complaining about how much worse his commute would be when we moved; my toys and clothes and books were packed in cartons, everything except my baseball card collection, which would travel to Long Beach with me in the car, like my mother's jewelry and my father's cigars.

The first formal farewell occurred just before school let out on Monday. My fifth grade teacher asked me to stand and face the class so everyone could say "Good-bye, Floyd," in unison, as though pledging allegiance to the flag. Except they broke into laughter afterward.

Then I was in the fenced playground outside the school building, standing where home plate was marked in fading white paint, and my friends were spread out in their usual positions for our daily punchball game. I bounced the red rubber ball five times, as always, threw it a few inches in the air, and punched it over the left fielder's head. As I ran, I decided to keep going till I scored or was tagged out. All-or-nothing now in my final turn as a Brooklyn punchball star. I wish memory's highlight reel ended there, with my ten-year-old self flying around the schoolyard bases in a last mad dash toward home. But I remember the play simply coming to a halt as I stopped dead,

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halfway between second base and third, sobbing, gasping for breath. I sat abruptly on the asphalt, shocked, unable to control my crying. Everyone gathered around me as though I were hurt, giving me room but watching until an older boy who lived in my apartment building stepped forward to help me up and walk me home.

The day we moved, I had the Asian flu. My fever began Monday night and by Tuesday was 103 degrees. As I lay in bed that night in a room that no longer looked like my own, with everything packed away and the walls bare except for a few errant strips of dark scotch tape, I kept remembering myself a few hours earlier on the schoolyard, collapsed in tears between bases. Who was that person? Had the event really happened, or was it all a fever dream? If it had happened, maybe the flu had caused it. My imagination and memory consorted in that now-strange bed to form something new, something surreal and never to be lost, an image of myself as I could not imagine myself being.

I wasn't able to go to school for the first week we lived in Long Beach. But one afternoon when the fever was almost gone, my teacher came to visit us at home. This was something new, too, a teacher in my home, in my room, and I wasn't sure I liked it. The visit confirmed what I already knew: Long Beach was going to be a strange place. To make matters even odder, my teacher was a man. Mr. Lee was tall and heavy and Chinese, and my whole world seemed to be re-forming as a fever dream. He brought me a couple of schoolbooks and sat on my desk chair. He even picked up my stack of last year's baseball cards, removed the rubber band, and flipped through them. I could see that nothing was sacred around here.

By the time he'd come to visit, my room was set up the way I wanted it. I'd surrounded myself with baseball cards, back issues of *Sport* magazine, and my dice baseball game paraphernalia, which included a thick notebook of statistics for every player on every team. He

touched it all. He leafed through the notebook, then looked over at me. I could tell that he thought I was strange too.

“So,” Mr. Lee said, “you like baseball?” When I nodded, he added, “maybe you can give us a report on it in class.”

That sounded exceptional. So I modestly informed him of my related scholastic interests: “I’m pretty good at punchball and stickball too. And football. I could give a report on that also.”

“Tackle or touch?”

This was very promising. A teacher who could talk about sports, who came to your house to welcome you, who knew how to handle baseball cards and talk at the same time. Even knew the right terms to use when talking about football. Maybe I could forgive him for handling my things.

On my first day as a fifth grader in Mr. Lee’s class, I got into a fight with Big Eli Haas during recess. He kept calling me “new kid” and pushing me when I went to field a ball, which made me lose my balance and miss the catch. People would think I was a lousy fielder, something I couldn’t bear, so I finally turned on Eli and tackled him. In a flash, Mr. Lee had picked me up by the belt and lifted me away. It was as though he knew something like this was going to happen, and had been watching out for it.

My punishment for fighting was extra homework: I had to write that composition about baseball. Punishment as reward! When he saw me smile, Mr. Lee made sure I understood that my other homework had to be done first.

On the school bus going home, I tried to decide who or what I’d write about. My favorite player? I didn’t want to offend Pee Wee Reese by writing about Gil Hodges, or vice versa, even though Hodges had been an All-Star in 1957. Jackie Robinson was retired. Roy Campanella was getting old and had just endured a poor season, something I didn’t want to mention to anyone in case they didn’t already know about it. There were the other Dodgers All-Stars, Gino Cimoli and Clem

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Labine, one new to the team, the other an old-timer already, players with curious names, almost as memorable as George Shuba's. And there were the young pitchers, Don Drysdale and Sandy Koufax, but I hadn't yet decided between them, even though Koufax was Jewish and therefore also part of my family. No, clearly I would have to write about something other than my favorite player.

When it occurred to me that I should write about the Dodgers moving to Los Angeles, I almost had my second public crying fit of the month. I didn't know if I could manage it, wondered if I should wait until I didn't feel so unhappy about the subject. Nah, better to face the truth.

After I finished my other homework and ate dinner, I sat at my desk and tried to write. My family thought I was playing dice baseball, as usual, and left me alone, but I couldn't even begin my assignment. The problem was how to get past the phrase "The Los Angeles Dodgers" in the first sentence. So I wrote about my baseball card collection instead of the Dodgers' relocation, explaining in great detail how hard it was for me to find a 1957 Ed Roebuck card to complete my set, because I'd lost mine during our move, the season was over, and 1957 cards were no longer for sale. I think I was hoping Mr. Lee, who clearly admired my collection when he'd visited, might have an Ed Roebuck card of his own and be moved to give it to me.

There was a tall, thick oak tree across the street from our house in Long Beach. Its trunk was the ideal width to represent a strike zone when I played wiffle ball with my neighbor, Jay Shaffer.

One of us stood by the wiffle ball tree, bat cocked, while the other stood across Coolidge Avenue at the top of my slanted driveway, ball in hand, ready to pitch. If the batter didn't swing and the pitch hit the tree, it was a strike. If it missed the tree, it was a ball and the batter had to go chase it down the street.

Pitching well with a wiffle ball required craft and dedication. The

hollow plastic ball, with its pattern of eight oblong cutouts, could be made to curve and dip, to rise, to dart toward or away from a batter. But it was difficult to control the movement. The art of wiffle ball pitching revealed itself as I realized that the slower I threw a ball, the more it moved. Gripping adjacent holes with thumb and index finger, twisting my wrist as I threw, I could make the ball swoop and plunge like a crazed hawk. I worked hard to master a pitch that reversed directions in midair, practicing for hours against the garage door, each pitch leaving a small smudge on the white paint.

After 1958, I was always aware that behind the garage door, resting against the far wall, was a box containing torn and bloody clothes belonging to my father. He'd been wearing them as he stood behind his Buick, about to open the trunk and change a flat tire. A green Ford careened off the road and smashed into him, pinning his body between the two cars and crushing his legs.

The box, I'd been told, contained evidence for a trial that would occur some day. I was not to open it because the air or my fingerprints would ruin the evidence. But I knew I was not to open it because it would be horrible to see what was inside, which meant that I couldn't stop imagining it.

I opened the box in November 1959, when I was twelve and alone because my mother was visiting my father in the hospital. My father's trousers were on top, a black heap crusty with dried blood, and I didn't touch them. Couldn't touch them. Poking out beneath were the toes of his brown wing-tip shoes, striated with more dried blood, the tails of his white dress shirt looking as though they had been dipped in blood as well, and his dark stiffened socks scrunched against the side of the box. The only item in the box that I picked up was an envelope which had been stuffed beside the socks. Inside, I found three black and white photographs of my father lying on the ground behind his crumpled white Buick. He was on his back, glasses gone, forearms raised as though warding off more blows. I

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wondered who had taken these photographs. A passerby? A journalist? The driver of the other car?

Every time I threw the wiffle ball at the garage, I felt as though I were throwing it at that man who'd injured my father. I knew his name was Mr. Pincus and that he owned a delicatessen at the west end of town. The garage door handle was Mr. Pincus's heart. In time, I could make the crazed hawk attack that heart at will.

My father spent most of the two years after his accident in hospitals. First, he was in a ward at Queens General Hospital, near the site of the crash, as his massive injuries healed. Then he came home for a month, sleeping in a rented hospital bed, before entering Long Beach Hospital for surgery to re-break his legs, which had healed wrong. A child, I wasn't allowed to visit him. When he finally returned home, in early 1960, his hair had turned gray, his skin sagged from his face, he smelled strange, and he couldn't get out of bed. It took another half year for him to be mobile enough, using a wheelchair and then canes, to return to work in the dress factory.

Every Monday morning, he would be driven into New York by my brother, who was also working in New York City, selling adhesive-backed papers. They would stay together in a midtown hotel during the week and return home on Friday evening.

I would always contrive to be outside, playing with Jay or by myself, waiting for their car to arrive. Jay and I, using the inflexible arrangement of house, tree, street, and sidewalk, had designed a wiffle ball "stadium" that included my front porch, jutting into the playing field like short bleachers in left field. It made sense to us because the real Dodgers were now playing in a Los Angeles stadium that contained left field bleachers only a short distance from home plate. We decreed that any batted ball landing on the porch and managing not to roll off under the railing was a home run. So was a ball hit onto the house's roof. If it struck the house above the garage but below the living room window, it was a double; above the window, it was

a triple. A ball the pitcher couldn't catch was a single; anything the pitcher caught was an out.

In early November 1961, as we played an important contest between the Dodgers and Giants in the dwindling light before dinner, my father and brother arrived home. The car's horn sounding when they turned onto Coolidge Avenue signaled the impending end of our game. Jay and I waited till the car was parked, then began one final play, which my father as usual watched from the porch.

It was the last time I remember seeing him alive. He stood in the bleachers, one hand gripping the rail, his canes perched against the wall of our house, his other hand moving toward his face for another puff of cigar. He smiled down at me. When I socked a pitch over the roof above him, he waved and called out congratulations: "Atta boy!"

He and my mother left later that evening, in the dark, for a Veterans Day holiday at a resort upstate. He died there, in the swimming pool, at the age of fifty-three. When I recall the telephone ringing to bring us the news, the scene flashes back two days. I have just stroked Jay's fastball—a straight and easy pitch to hit, a gift from my best friend—onto the roof and turned my head to find my father haloed in smoke, laughing now, saying "Atta boy!"

My brother woke up early on the morning of his wedding. We lived in an apartment house again, having moved to a smaller and less expensive place after our father's death. My brother was twenty-four, I was sixteen, and we still shared a room. So I woke up early too. He lit a Kent and told me to get dressed.

It was June 21, 1964, the last day Philip and I would live together. It was also Father's Day, for the last three years a day of sadness to us. Also a day of confusion, since Philip now sometimes acted like a brother, sometimes like a father, and our relationship had taken on a new tension.

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Through the apartment's open window, we could hear seagulls bugle above the breakers. The sound always seemed comical to me, a scavenger's cackle, but that morning I heard it as plaintive, almost forlorn. I couldn't sort out my feelings. For two or three years, I'd been looking forward to this day, but dreading it too. Finally, a room of my own! An end to Philip's constant cigarette smoke and pre-dawn coughing spells, access to all the Velveeta in the refrigerator, freedom to sleep or wake when I chose. An end to his teasing about my obsessions with dice baseball and rock 'n' roll, our combat over the tidy way I kept my half of the room, his efforts to sidetrack my homework. But I knew I'd miss him. His sudden generousities, his advice, his willingness to play with me. We wouldn't be watching quiz shows together on the small television beside his bed, trying to be the first with an answer; we wouldn't play games of Careers on his bed or go out for Saturday lunch at Nathar's and see who could eat an ice cream cone faster despite the headache it induced. We wouldn't play touch football anymore with my friends in autumn or softball in summer.

The two of us together could keep our widowed mother at bay. I wasn't sure I could do that solo. Since our father's death, she had been even more volatile than ever, charging at us as we sat in the living room, slapping at our faces for imagined infractions and indignities.

In the last year, she had begun dating. She had also begun working as a travel agent and taking advantage of complimentary travel opportunities, especially cruises, trying to meet her next husband. It was a time of changes in our family, but even at sixteen, when I woke up that first day of summer in 1964, I knew my life was about to be transformed beyond anything that had happened so far.

Philip threw a tee shirt and jeans onto my bed. "Move it, kiddo. We're going to play stickball."

I'd guessed that was what he'd want to do on his wedding day. So I was prepared for him. Stickball was something we'd grown

up with on the streets of Brooklyn. We'd played in the apartment's courtyard, on the schoolyard, against any wall we could find. Some of my earliest memories of life with my brother are memories of facing him as he wound up to throw a pitch, or of watching as he swung at a pitch of mine.

In the mind of most kids growing up in 1950s New York, stickball was associated with Willie Mays. The Say Hey Kid! Mays played baseball with sheer joy, and his array of all-around skills seemed unmatched by any other player. We all knew that Mays loved the sport so much he was willing to hang around after a Giants game and play stickball with the kids in upper Harlem. According to George Plimpton, in his essay "Did Willie Hit It for Five Sewers?" there's a legend that Mays had hit a red rubber Spalden ball eight hundred feet on the fly, playing in the street rather than against a wall.

Stickball was freedom. It was improvisation. We could play the game anywhere, and we could use almost anything as equipment: a baseball bat, a sawed-off broomstick, or a mop handle, and an official Spalden or an old tennis ball with the fuzz worn away. Stickball could be played with just the two of us, or we could team up against other duos.

My brother's brand of stickball combined raw batting power, pitching finesse, a pool shark's sense of angles, and psychological acumen. In the street or on the schoolyard court with a stick or ball in hand, everything came together for him. Cigarette between his lips, right eye half-closed as smoke rose in front of it, he could hit or pitch with grace. Sometimes, if I was at bat first and hadn't yet had a chance to pitch to him, Philip would set the tone for our game by hitting me with his first pitch. Thrown hard enough, a rubber ball stings and leaves behind a circular welt like a stain. Then he would hit me with the second pitch too. And the third. In theory, this put him in a jam because now the bases were loaded, with no outs. But in practice, he didn't worry about baserunners, figuring he could

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score against me at will. His fourth pitch would hit me as well, granting me a 1–0 lead.

So as we drove from our apartment to the schoolyard, I knew what to expect at the start. But Philip didn't know I'd been working on a hard curve, throwing against the wall of our building in the late afternoons to perfect the pitch before he got home from work. I thought I could begin the bottom half of the first inning by throwing one right at his head, and laughing as he backed away from a pitch that broke into the strike zone.

That was the plan. A going-away surprise from his baby brother, just to say, *don't worry, I'll be okay*.

There was a brief home movie commemorating this June twenty-first game. I can't remember who took the film, but the view was from over my shoulder as I stared at Philip in the distance. If I watched the film closely enough, I could see the cigarette in my brother's mouth moving up and down: he was talking to me, razzing me as I wound up to pitch. Then he uncoiled and walloped whatever it was that I offered him, not fazed by my fast ball or new curve, and the final image showed him leaning back against the wall for balance, head up, laughing as he watched the ball vanish in the distance.

I remember a recurring dream in which I played center field for the Brooklyn Dodgers, wearing my white-and-blue pinstriped pajamas as a uniform, and was able to run the bases or chase after long fly balls without my feet touching the ground. I was so fast that I flew, though the dream never included my scoring a run or catching a ball.

To adults who asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, as a child I automatically said *center fielder for the Dodgers*, believing that it was important to specify a position if my intentions were to be taken seriously. I kept saying *center fielder for the Dodgers* even after the franchise moved from Brooklyn, though I no longer rooted for them, and even after I began to play second base for my high school's freshman team instead of center field.