

The Fathers and Sons

Cricket Match

for LFM

At deep mid-on, in summer heat
I watch two boys walk out to bat
and guess the codes inside each brain:
Foot to the ball! Don't lift your head!
I hear in mine, *Now watch your back.*
Don't mess things up in front of all his pals.

The morning slows. A wicket falls.
Then runs and clouds begin to flow
with drowsy dove-song in the trees,
a droning plane, a small hard ball
that skids and bumps across the grass
into the deep-aired noon of cricket time.

Sun-dazed, endless, a slow free-fall,
until faint yells, from pitch and stand
snap back a science-lab, chapel, field.
Got him! Out plods a snick to slip,
shoulders sagging, dragging his bat.
His collar up, in strides new hope, a son.

The fielders clap, mid-off crowds in
as he takes guard, inspects the pitch
and pats the red smears on the clay.
He wanders back, adjusts his gloves
and hunkers down, his bat half-raised,
his head and helmet turned to face the ball.

He looks so young, so self-assured,
there comes a fierce, alarming urge
to laugh and cry and wave at Mum.
But then my heart begins to thump
as if I crouched there at the crease.
Danger! the father genome in me yells.

Did this mute cry evolve on plains
when cricketers were hunter-bands
and predators picked off the young?
I rub my back, puzzled how rules
so stiff and strange could come to tame
a bunch of touchy hominoids with clubs.

An alpha-male, now bald, runs in
and hurls the ball right at his toes.
As quick as a mongoose the bat
slams down. I hide my huge relief.
Looks like you've got a winner there!
the cattle-farmer at mid-wicket chirps.

I watch him tug his helmet straight,
then walk back to the boundary rope
and turn and look back at the pitch,
bemused to feel so tense and proud,
so strangely blithe, so held and free.
I hear again, far off, the murmur in the trees.

Love's here, is breaking out again,
I think, love, grace, enlightenment
call it what you will, is edging out
in brains and minds across a field,
is striving, striving once more to get
a rough and troubled animal in its grip.

