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Book Review - Fair Territory

Phil Billings

Fair Territory by Jilly Dybka. Bear Shirt Press, Kingston Springs, TN, 2005. With a half-dozen or so exceptions, the formal territory that Jilly Dybka lays out for herself in this chapbook is that of the Shakespearean sonnet. She has given herself a tall order. First, just getting all the technical stuff right takes real craft. Then it takes not just craft but art to make such a rigid little form somehow reflect as well as relied upon a game which, despite its love for structure on one level, actually plays out more like sprawling free verse. So, I give Jilly Dybka a lot of credit for her efforts in Fair Territory. She makes a lot more outs than hits, but as we all know every batter does.

Sometimes her failures involve glitches in meter and rhyme. At the end of "Dirty Ball," for instance, we get: "It's an abomination—a scandal— / when ball players resort to dirty ball." Ouch! More often poems go afoul not in their regular rhymes or rhythms per se but in the way that the need for those tricks traps the poet into a weak rather than a walk-off conclusion. Take the first poem, "Mudball." It starts promisingly with "Here is some (dirty little) baseball lore. / It's Lena Blackburne Baseball Rubbing Mud." But all the poem finally has to say on the wonderfully ironic fact that, despite the sentiments of "Dirty Rail," we don't really want our baseball too pure is this: "They rub stuff on baseballs. It has a weird name. / It is

used in every Major League game."
Or take "Play Ball." Early on it claims
that "fly balls are such a frustration. /
The fans can feel their anticipation
fall / with the ball right in the glove."
But finally it ends not with Ms.
Dyhka's words putting a reader
through something like that same
frustrating fall of anticipation but with
her offering only "The third out
comes on a warning-track catch. / 'the
relief pitcher retires the side. / Bottom
of the ninth and the game's still tied."
Besides the anti-climax of it all,
there's a problem with meaning, too.
If that's your home team coming up to
bat now, that deep fly ball was
anything but a frustration.

What are the real hits in Fair
Territory? There are several, as I said,
and they happen more often as we
move through the book. The deepest
one is "The Quickening," which
begins with the narrator describing
her lift-off in a plane. When it has
finally risen high enough for the
speaker to survey "civilization in
miniature," the best part of it down
there "on the sure / crust" is a baseball
diamond: Young boys race across the
tilled surface, mute and small, kicking
up red dust. First base, Second base,
Third base. Home. \ We ascend into
nightfall and beneath broken stars one
kid bunts. I remember I was a rookie
once." I like how "red dust" reminds
me of the derivation of "Adam." I like
how the poem defies logic in (in some
impossible but real way that the plane
defies gravity and the field does the
tilting. I like how, through Dybka's
telescoping inner-eye, the picture gets
bigger instead of smaller and firmly

seated now in her memory, we travel to the time when man of us first played baseball. A non-player might complain that there's no real connection between being a rookie and bunting, she just made up one of those lines to rhyme with the other. A real player, however, or at least one who learned the game in the old-style neighborhood way, remembers how the littlest kid might well get picked for a team because the sides had to be even or the rule was that no one gets left out, but also how the big kids often instructed the littlest one to do the only thing that could avoid a sure strike out. And who knows, it might even win the game.

One more thing. "We ascend into nightfall / And beneath broken stars" You don't have to know anything about baseball, you only have to live into adulthood and have an ear for language to know that those lines are both beautiful and true.

In Fair Territory Jilly Dybka has done a lot more than verbally bunt. She clearly loves baseball, loves words, and has the courage to keep taking those big public swings; so, the improvement we see in these pages will surely continue. I look forward to her next poems, whatever their subject. (Phil Billings) [Spitball: The Literary Baseball Magazine](#)