BARRETT SWANSON

CALLING AUDIBLES

"The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."
—Ludwig Wittgenstein

On the afternoon of September 11, 2001, I was at football practice. Unlike Americans who lived in cities and thus feared their own buildings might be attacked, residents of Brookfield, the suburb of Milwaukee where I grew up, harbored no such immediate concerns. While folks in New York hunkered down with loved ones or attended mass vigils, my teammates and I were suiting up. Our locker room was a chamber of institutional gray, rife with damp tile and cold metal benches, muggy with odors that only teenaged boys can manufacture. I'm sure there was some talk of what happened, but all I remember is the weird reverential silence, which was disturbed only by the susurrus of practice jerseys getting pulled over shoulder pads and the blunt staccato of cleats on the hallway tile as we trotted out of school, toward the practice fields.

Our coaches probably had some elaborate pedagogical justification for their decision to hold practice, one that had little to do with preparing for Friday's game against West Allis (a team with a scrawny offensive line and an anemic defense) and more to do with distracting us from the nonstop montage of blazing skyscrapers and people jumping to their deaths that we all watched on classroom TVs that morning.

Our varsity coach was an old leathery man with a newscaster's coiffure of dime-colored hair. As he patrolled the practice field and surveyed our efforts, his default expression was that of someone who has just eaten a gas station hot dog and now regrets it. Suffice it to say that he took absolutely zero in the way of shit. Unlike the passel of assistant coaches who tried to buddy up with us by shit-shooting and cracking-wise, Coach never ingratiated himself with his players, preferring instead to hang back and win our respect with his frosty disposition. But halfway through drills that day, Coach tweeted his whistle and sent us for water break, which was the only time during practice when we were allowed to remove our helmets and take a knee. Such was a jarring moment. For two hours, you regarded your teammates through bulky gladiatorial masks, which gave their appearances a dark predacious aspect, but during water breaks, the helmets would come off and out came these doughy innocent faces—an

album of big kind eyes, zit-greased miens, cheeks that sprouted sporadic facial hair. It was like you all of a sudden remembered that these guys had moms at home who kissed them goodnight and laundered their underwear.

I remember kneeling there and swilling water in the end zone—the ground torn up and cratered from our cleats—when Coach corralled all of his assistants over to the goal post, saying "Com'ere, boys."

Wearing ball caps and beer guts, the coaches tottered over, their brows furrowed with curiosity. Reluctantly, they congregated near him, like disciples around a lesser prophet. He pointed up at the limpid blue sky. "Boys, there's not a single plane in that sky tonight."

I followed Coach's finger, the significance of his statement kindling my spine. It was true: the sky was empty, showed nothing, seemed endless. It was as if the national tragedy had somehow reversed our course and sent the heavens back to its antediluvian status, bare of contrails, emptied of planes. It was a scene Norman Rockwell might have painted: *Tableau of American Football Coaches Contemplating Sky with Boyish Wonder*. I stayed there for a long time, kneeling on the green provident grass, gawking at the amber sunset, preoccupied to the point where I missed the second whistle and didn't notice the other guys jogging back toward the practice field for wind sprints and a team breakdown, until all of sudden Donaldson trotted over and jolted me out of this trance by smacking me on the ass with harnessed momentum and apparent feeling, saying, "Come on, Swany. Look alive, brother."

That Friday, before our game, our coaches decided to set aside the bitter rivalry and have both teams walk onto the field together, with each team's captain up front and clutching one end of the American flag. It was meant to serve as an eye-watering moment of patriotism, a purely American scene—corn-fed Midwestern boys sticking it to the terrorists by playing America's game only three days after what happened. Our school's drumline escorted us into the floodlit stadium, the curt patter of their snares lending our pageant the attitude of a funeral. In our snazzy uniforms and glinting helmets, we marched through the end zone, heading for the fifty-yard line, passing a trio of referees who were stationed on the sideline and whose eyes went crystalline as we approached, their mouths squiggled with some queer mixture of pride and grief. Squadrons of cheerleaders waited for us at the fifty-yard line, their eye shadow lurid and abundant, their hairdos lacquered and complex. The stadium was otherwise silent. Fans stood in the bleachers, a hushed tribute to our arrival. A photograph of this moment made the city papers. I'm three players back from the front, and you can just barely make out my face over one of my teammates' shoulder pads. My eyes are cast sidelong and

have little black hyphens drawn underneath them, and my face is terribly boyish despite the feeling I had at the time, which was that I was a man who could grasp every hue and nuance of what happened.

It's difficult to overstate the effect this moment had on me. On some level, I was aware that we boys were supposed to stand as riveting symbol of the American idea, a reassurance to a shaken community that life as we knew it could—and would—return to normal. Of course, this was theater, a sleight, a distraction. Nothing about teenaged boys (some of whom were old enough for military service) playing a child's game on a temperate September night would rinse the fans' minds of those harrowing pictures we all saw only a few days earlier. In our plasticine suburb, far from the smoldering ruins of Ground Zero and the stark silhouette of the New York firefighter, we served as unprepared understudies for the role of an American hero. Standing there on the dew-glittered field during the National Anthem, holding the calloused hands of my teammates, watching the big lamp-lit flag flutter in the south end zone, I felt that our small town had channeled all its grief into the game, as if what were being enacted here wasn't the age-old pastime of boys at play but the early stirrings of battle.

Toward the end of that month, while firefighters, police officers and volunteers were still clearing away rubble from the ash-confected streets of Manhattan, the NFL began a quiet campaign to purge the language of war from its broadcast commentary. Within days of the attack, seasoned sportscasters like John Madden and Al Michaels were already making public vows to avoid militaristic diction in their play-by-play:

> "You'd never want to stray into an analogy like a 'hijacking.' But I'm not concerned we'll fall into that trap." (Michaels)

> "The first thing I thought about, seeing people run out and the firefighters and police go in, was, I'll never use the word 'tough' again to describe football players." (Madden)

One hopes that on-air semantic choices wasn't actually the *first thing* Madden thought about—one hopes he reflected on the victims' families or the geopolitical ramifications for our country, anything but the narrow imperatives of his professional life. Still, despite their maddening inelegance, what these pledges underscored was the extent to which we relied on the lexicon of combat to describe our nation's game. Consider, for instance, that most defensive schemes include a "blitz," which is a truncation of the German word *blitzkrieg*, meaning "lightning war." Or that West Coast offenses typically line up in "shotgun" formations in order to execute "aerial assaults." Receivers snag "bullets" in the red zone while linebackers "blow up" draw plays. Quarterbacks are often extolled as "field generals" who can "marshal" their teammates toward victory. And linemen are said to battle in the "trenches."

These are obvious examples; how about more insidious ones? A "huddle" was initially meant to resemble the German military's "Leitungsbesprechung," a method of coordination developed in nineteenth century by Prussian war theorist Carl von Clausewitz, whose book *On War* has influenced leaders of all political stripes—everyone from Mao Zedong to President Eisenhower—and allegedly sat on Vince Lombardi's bookshelf. Interestingly, the huddle wasn't incorporated into the game of football until the 1890s, when Paul Hubbard—the quarterback for Gallaudet College, a deaf school in Washington DC—instructed his teammates to encircle him before calling plays so the defense couldn't read what he was signing. In other words, the huddle was meant to facilitate communication.

It's easy to see why, in the fevered weeks after 9/11, the NFL decided to recalibrate its vernacular. News networks were humid with forecasts about the coming war, and hordes of young Americans were filing into recruitment offices and pledging their lives to the revenge effort. Soon, these men and women would be dispatched to perilous frontlines, and for the League to continue comparing football to these sacrifices would have been grossly inappropriate. "It's a matter of common sense," said commissioner Roger Goodell.

Such linguistic upheavals didn't trickle down to the youth level. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, the years I played middle school and high school football, the barbed nomenclature of war continued to pervade our semantic imagination, even after the Towers fell. Our team T-shirts were emblazoned with phrases from gangster rap, heavy metal and, of course, the argot of war—expressions like "Seek and Destroy," "Band of Brothers," and "Let the Bodies Hit the Floor." We wore this apparel at practice, around town, until it was yellowed at the armpits. Even now, I can recall walking down the hallways of my high school after the last-hour bell and hearing the squelched reverb of electric guitars emanate from the weight room, where bands like Rage Against the Machine, Alice in Chains, and Marilyn Manson played on steady rotation. Invoking scenes of anarchy and mayhem, this music was belligerent and fuming, supplying us with anthems for our years of gridiron glory.

It's difficult to deny the longstanding romance between football and war. As Steve Almond notes in his trenchant manifesto, *Against Football*, the game was first spawned by college students on the east coast during the 1820s, although it was known by a variety of names. Harvard students

called their version "Bloody Monday," which functioned as a form of hazing that sophomores inflicted upon their freshmen classmates (a much harsher initiation rite than what was practiced in my own glory days—namely, the porcelain swirly or the atomic wedgie). Princeton termed it "ballown" while Dartmouth played "old division football." In these various incarnations, the game was invariably gory and enfeebling, a mongrel of rugby and wrestling, with offenses marching downfield by standing side-by-side, fastening their elbows, and ramming their unhelmeted heads into a similarly postured defense. Collegiate coaches—including Yale's Walter Camp and Harvard's Percy Haughton—scoured military texts for strategies on spurring men toward such martyrous action. Injuries were so rampant and the violence so ghastly that, by the early 1860s, Yale and Harvard banned the game, though the prohibition wouldn't last long. By the end of the decade, the sport would return to college campuses revamped and somewhat tempered, having evolved to include kicking, running, and lateral passing plays. Yet despite these amendments, football continued to be treacherous, oftentimes yielding gouged eyes and snapped necks, as was the case in the 1894 contest between Harvard and Yale—dubbed the "Hampden Park Blood Bath"—during which four players suffered paralyzing injuries. During the 1905 season, 19 players died and over 150 others were critically injured.

News of these events eventually drew the attention of the White House. Theodore Roosevelt—whose son played for Harvard—convened coaches and administrators from sixty schools for a symposium on eliminating the game's "brutal features." A self-professed fan of the sport, the president was responding to critics who wanted the game outlawed after the grisly 1905 season. As John J. Miller reports in his book, *The Big Scrum: How President Roosevelt Saved Football*, "There's this social and political movement that rises up to outlaw the sport. It's led by the president of Harvard and a number of other well-known figures. They equate football with homicide and think it has no place in civilized society and they just want to get rid of it." While the fatal consequences of the game may have been incontrovertible, they did little to dampen the enthusiasm of its fans. Even though the sport was new to many Americans, stadiums were routinely crammed with upwards of fifty thousand people and oftentimes resembled, in both volume and ardor, Roman coliseums bewitched by Nero's amusements. In the 1890s, riots would occasionally break out on days when tickets to collegiate championship games went on sale, since students could hawk them for five times the original cost. The sport wasn't just lucrative for enterprising undergraduates, though. College administrations soon took advantage of the game's jaw-slackening profitability, as when, in 1903, Yale's football team netted almost $110,000

in revenue, a value roughly equivalent to the combined income of the university's law, medical, and divinity schools.

Aware of the sport's popularity and its economic potential, Roosevelt had little incentive to abolish the game (plus, his son's involvement in the sport made him a partisan, not to mention the fact he did not have legal authority to forbid play). Instead, Roosevelt called for new rules that would decrease potential dangers while ensuring the game not be played "on too ladylike a basis." Roosevelt, a champion of the outdoors and an avid big game hunter, was no prancing ninny or foppish wimp, going on to say, "I believe in outdoor games, and I do not mind in the least that they are rough games, or that those who take part in them are occasionally injured." The burly machismo of Roosevelt's statements reflects the prevailing cultural ethos at the time, which was that football could be a venue for men to parade their brawn in a post-frontier America that offered few opportunities for such displays. As many sports historians have noted, the new industrial economy forced men to toil inside dimly lit factories, denying them the chance to complete the manhood-confirming demands of agriculture. As a result, they sought out gladiatorial sports like football as a way of quenching their feral urges.

Among the 1905 changes was the eradication of "flying wedges" that often resulted in player deaths. The committee also instituted a neutral zone, a series of downs, and the use of a forward pass, all of which would lift the game out of its terrestrial chaos, spreading out offenses and dispersing players who once used the turmoil of scrums to conceal illegal, injury-inducing tactics. Now teams would be arranged across a larger swath of the field and forced to execute coordinated plays, which would supposedly make the sport less violent, adding agility, grace, and beauty to a game that had formerly been the province of teeth-clenching mammoths. As Almond notes, "A game heretofore restricted to one thudding plane was suddenly, miraculously, bestowed a z-axis." In the intervening century, we've seen the sport take ever more precautions to reduce the dangers of play—the use of helmets and shoulder pads, penalties for unnecessary roughness, plus new rules meant to reduce the number of concussions and career-ending injuries.

And yet war has continued to serve as the prevailing metaphor for the sport throughout the twentieth century. Here's Jim Otto, who played for the Oakland Raiders during the 1960s and early 70s, explaining the costs of his career: "I know that I went to war and I came out of the battle with what I got, and you know, that's the way it is . . . we battled in there, and this is the result of it, sitting right here, looking at you." Vintage NFL Films from the 1970s are overdubbed with gravel-voiced narrators who explain that "the meek will never inherit this turf, because every play

is hand-to-hand and body-to-body combat . . . in the pit, there is more violence per square foot than anywhere else in sport." Other titles from the NFL Films oeuvre include *Linebackers: Search and Destroy*. In 1987, the University of Miami football team arrived in Phoenix for the Fiesta Bowl dressed in military fatigues. And during the 1990s, the NFL advertised its contests with bellicose semiotics, as evidenced by the opening sequence of Monday Night Football, which culminated in two helmets colliding and shattering into little incandescent bits. (Note: head-to-head tackles are now illegal tactics).

In the end, the post-9/11 attempts to reconstitute the language of football were short-lived. After the Towers fell, sports writers continued to draft paeans to players who supposedly embodied a kind of front-lines valor. Here's a snippet from Frank Deford's elegiac tribute to Johnny Unitas in a 2002 *Sports Illustrated* article entitled, "The Best There Ever Was":

> They didn't have coaches with headphones and Polaroids and fax machines then, sitting on high, telling quarterbacks what plays to call. In those halcyon days, quarterbacks were field generals, not field lieutenants. And there was Unitas after he called a play (and probably checked off another play when he saw what the ruffians across the line were up to), shuffling back into the pocket, unfazed by the violent turbulence all around him, standing there in his hightops, waiting, looking, poised. I never saw war, so that is still my vision of manhood: Unitas standing courageously in the pocket, his left arm flung out in a diagonal to the upper deck, his right cocked for the business of passing, down amidst the mortals. Lock and load.

Journalists aren't the only custodians of this indecent cliché. Even now, NFL players call upon the tropes of combat when describing their own careers. Recall the 2003 season, when Kellen Winslow, the tight end for the University of Miami, explained why he loomed defiantly over an injured opponent by saying, "I'm a fucking soldier." As recently as 2010, New York Giants safety Antrel Rolle compared fans heckling NFL players to citizens booing US soldiers returning home from war. "When soldiers come home from Iraq, you don't boo them. I look at it the same way. I take my job seriously."

Such statements invite fans of the sport to consider a few pertinent questions: are football players fundamentally dumb? Are they oafish and insensitive? Do they mean to trivialize the service of our uniformed men and women, what Lincoln called "the last full measure of devotion," or do they just suffer from a stuttering ineptitude when it comes to dealing

with the press? I'm inclined to think that these are facile conclusions and there's perhaps something deeper and far more disturbing about this language than we might care to realize. Maybe when NFL players compare themselves to soldiers, they are actually revealing their knowledge of a fact the NFL has worked hard to keep football fans from learning: like our uniformed men and women, who risk their lives on the battlefield, these athletes know they could potentially die from their involvement in this sport—either from an injury incurred while on field or from the long-term effects of concussive and sub-concussive hits, which the average pro will endure roughly 130,000 times during his career. While there's obviously much to be said about the differences between dying for the sovereignty of your country and dying for the entertainment of its citizens, the effects of violence can be distressingly similar. So much so, in fact, that the NFL is now using military-grade helmet sensors to monitor the neurological status of players who suffer big hits on Sundays. The Army created such devices to measure the brain trauma sustained by our soldiers, either from roadside IEDs or rocket-propelled grenades.

Autopsies of former NFL, college, and high school players' brains reveal that simply participating in the sport can cause Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), a form of permanent neurological damage that stipples the brain with clusters of the tau protein, which increases the incidence of dementia-like symptoms, such as depression, memory loss, aggression, and suicidal ideation. For nearly fifteen years, the NFL has whitewashed this research, fearful that public knowledge of the link between football and CTE could imperil the future of the sport. In the PBS *Frontline* documentary, "League of Denial," Dr. Bennet Omalu—the Nigerian-born neuropathologist who first discovered CTE in former Pittsburgh Steeler Mike Webster's brain—recalls a League representative explaining to him the implications of this research. "[The representative] said if ten percent of mothers in this country would begin to perceive football as a dangerous sport, that is the end of football."

Or maybe not. It's breathtakingly naïve to think that a few of neurological studies will effect much of a chink in the NFL's shield, especially when it's fortified by profits of eight billion dollars a year, when the ethos of the sport so thoroughly decorates the American psyche. This is a country where the Super Bowl functions like an official holiday, where congregants schedule Sunday church around kickoffs. Like 1905, the game needs to redress the brain-shriveling dangers, but such amendments will not be made unless we forge a new way to describe the sport, with metaphors no longer rooted in war imagery and violence.

Language shapes thought, which then molds behavior. In the ambit of linguistic philosophy, this is known as the "Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis,"

which contends that the language we use and the linguistic habits we practice not only demarcate the boundaries of our cognitive functions but also shape our perception of the world and our actions within it. Developed by the American linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf and his mentor Edward Sapir, this theory holds that:

> . . . human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and that language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. . . . Even comparatively simple acts of perception are very much more at the mercy of the social patterns called words than we might suppose. . . . We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation . . .

My point, then, is that the language we use to describe the game actually ends up shaping both its public perception and its course of play. If we exalt its brutality, if we extol its players in militaristic terms, then we as fans become ever more willing to condone crippling, career-ending violence as nothing more than the tragic but unavoidable by-products of a savage sport in which informed athletes voluntarily participate. The truth is that, despite all the war metaphors and brothers-in-arms camaraderie that colored my adolescent experience with football, the most compelling aspect of the game—and what still fascinates me about it today—is a more tenuous transaction that takes place between players: not brutality, but communication.

Like most accomplished prep athletes, my career was monitored by my dad. I'm aware of the stereotype: the sullen patriarch barking admonitions from the stands. You've probably seen this type before. These small disgruntled men in Nike tracksuits who haunt gyms and practice fields. Who range up and down the sidelines with crossed arms, chewing gum and shouting rebukes at their sweaty downcast children. Dad wasn't like this. He had been a standout athlete in his youth, which meant that he didn't need me to live out any of his unconsummated dreams. His athletic élan flourished most conspicuously on the basketball court and would ultimately take him to Marquette University, where he played under Al McGuire. (Part of the reason why I never excelled at basketball

was that Dad was so much better at it than I ever could be. As a boy, I once encountered a sneaker ad in *Sports Illustrated*, or maybe *ESPN: The Magazine*, that listed goals every aspiring basketball player must accomplish on his rise toward stardom—things like: *learn to shoot; learn to layup; beat your brother in one-on-one; beat your dad in HORSE; make JV; make varsity; win state; get recruited . . . etc.* Of course, if your dad played D-1 basketball and could stand in the driveway and drain nineteen three-pointers in a row while you and your brother stood there watching with popped eyes and slackened jaws, the prospect of ever beating him in HORSE was like nil. His jumpshot was so formidable that our special family sobriquet for him was "The Machine." I don't think I ever aced him. During the eighteen years that we shared a hoop in the driveway, I maybe got a game of PIG on him. Maybe). All of which is to say that Dad's athletic shadow was long and broad, and though he would never force sports upon me, I would always detect an ambient pressure to live up to his reputation.

Though sports was the mortar that held us together, Dad and I never quite figured out how to talk to one another. We never went on camping trips where we might have a Folgers moment around a fire. Nor was he the type to regale me with stories about the good old days while quaffing cold foamers.

So instead of talking, what Dad and I would do is go out in the yard after dinner and work on my mechanics. There was something spiritually nourishing about playing catch with my father, and those evenings still live on my nerve endings with impeccable fidelity: the fresh loam odor of the yard; the pebbled leather against my fingers; the thin whistle of the ball as it zipped between us. Dad and I would spend hours out there. He'd scrutinize my throwing motion with forensic care, making sure I hoisted the ball to my shoulder after the snap, monitoring my little tap dance of three- and five-step drops. To ensure that I kept my eyes downfield during rollouts, he'd stand twenty yards away and flash random numbers with his hands, which I was supposed to call out before chucking him the ball. I'm sure there were retributions if I bellowed the wrong number, but I don't remember them—pushups, probably.

We hardly talked during these études but would adopt a coded shorthand for the things I needed to work on. "Eyes up." "Plant and release." "Follow through." If my father and I shared a language—a diction and syntax that could approximate our feelings—it was this patois of quarterbacking. After a shitty day at school, still wounded by some girl's rejection or a friend's betrayal, I would throw sharp darts at my father's chest, stamping his ribs with watercolor bruises he'd show me the next day. If I spent the afternoon listening to Nirvana on my Walkman and was

thus clouded with ennui, my throws would be sluggish and uninspired, slow torpid lobs that would gull against the wind and flutter. Somehow the trajectory of the ball authored sentiments that would have otherwise gone unexpressed between us. Every pass was a physical manifestation of the connection I hoped to establish with him but that our paucity of words ultimately denied.

And yet when I entered high school, this makeshift language of ours began to erode and break down. Like most Americans who grew up in the late 1990s and early 2000s, most of my social interactions took place online, guised by screen names meant either to obscure one's identity (sportsfan18) or glorify it (bigpimping69). Now, given the frequency with which we communicate via Facebook and Twitter, this distance is a commonplace, part of our dialogical landscape. But at the time, as a fifteen-year-old boy, the detachment offered by digital interaction was a revelation. Instant Messenger functioned like alcohol, lowering my shame quotient to nothing. It was as if AIM had suddenly become the dank basement party at which I'd had too much to drink. I was abruptly garrulous. I'd strike up conversations with screen names that signified individuals whom I'd never actually talk to in real life, and like any good barfly, I'd spew nonsense about current events and recent gossip, maundering on and on with a haughtiness and verbosity I wouldn't dare display at a cafeteria table or during passing hours.

In hindsight, it's easy to see how this type of communication was adolescent—the other person here hadn't manifested as a vivid, living being with a nervous system as complex and sensitive as my own. On AIM, the other person was just a soundboard, a literal screen on to which I could impress my thoughts and feelings. Whereas I was alive, animate, and incarnate, other people seemed two-dimensional, flat, an encoding of 1s and 0s, an audience to my oratory, a witness to my construction of a self. I wasn't speaking to someone else. I was talking *at* her.

This ultimately carried over to the ways in which I started to interact with my dad. After a while, I began to reject his help, preferring to practice my throws in solitude, which, for a quarterback, given the nature of the enterprise (i.e. throwing a ball to a moving receiver) is a kind of insane strategy to get better. To compensate for the absence of a receiver, I spray-painted a X on the crenellated bark of a tree at the far end of our lawn. I would stand twenty or thirty yards from it, crouch down, call hike, and drop back to pass, firing a spiral across the gathering dusk, watching the ball carom off the tree in wild directions, clipping off a confetti of bark with its explosive force. I would do this for hours. The ball's brailled leather was soon scuffed and scratched, like the hide of an abused whale. In hindsight, it saddens me to think about how many hours I devoted to this activity. I imagine my frumpy septuagenarian neighbor inside her living room, trying to read *TV Guide* or *Ladies Home Journal* but constantly getting interrupted by the crack-prone adolescent tones of a boy calling audibles to no one in the dark. I imagine her pulling back a drape to watch the fifteen-year-old version of me, attired in sweatpants and cleats, roll out on the flush vernal lawn, throwing a ball against a maple tree as hard I could. I must have looked deranged or lonely—maybe both.

But it wasn't until Christmas that year that I truly betrayed my father. With one swift consumer purchase, I denied him the only expressive activity we shared. Topping my Christmas list was a piece of sports equipment called a Dual-Sport Canvas Catcher, a contraption that consisted of a blue canvas sheet stretched across a large metal frame. Painted white on the navy tarp was a semion of a football player, a cartoony approximation of a wide receiver, but instead of a stomach, it had a mesh net into which I would deposit my passes. During the remaining years of my football career, I used this thing all the time, hauling it out to our backyard and positioning it at different distances and angles to resemble the various routes a receiver might run during a game—a corner fade, a fifteen-yard out, a streak. Hour after hour, I'd stand in the yard, chucking the ball at this flat, two-dimensional object—a crude mockery of a receiver—when only feet away Dad was inside the house, languishing in front of the television after a long day at work, more than willing to play catch with me. It pains me now to think of him sprawled on the lumpy couch, tie loosened, holding a postprandial Diet Coke poured into a small tumbler, a mist of carbonation sizzling above the glass, and hearing through the window the dull metronomic thud of my passes hitting the tarp. *Thump. Thump.*

Perhaps it was a stroke of cosmic irony that the more I practiced with the Dual-Sport Canvas Catcher, the more my accuracy suffered. Because I was working with a stationary object, my throws during games were always errant, landing a little behind my receivers, tempting cornerbacks and safeties to jump the route and intercept the pass, which occurred during my junior year with a frequency that still makes me cringe. Later, at home, while icing my knees or scrubbing paint from under my eyes, my parents treated these on-field flops with euphemistic caution—graciously dubbing them "struggles" or "tough games"—when the truth was that I had played like total shit. By the end of that year, Dad realized that the sunken resentments between us were now burbling up to the surface and blighting my progress as a quarterback. What he did next strikes me now as a breathtakingly generous act of fatherhood, but at the time I just thought it was downright bizarre.

During the summer leading into my senior year, Dad outsourced

his role as trainer/confidant to another man, enlisting his close friend, Dean—a cheery guy who coached youth football and who was downright gregarious compared to Dad—to take me to parks and fields near our house where we'd work on mechanics and rap about life. Dean was a convivial, widely-berthed Greek man who maintained the solar disposition of a talk-show host. It was hard not to like him. He had a jaw-dropping story, too. Apparently, during his early twenties, he woke one morning to discover he was paralyzed from the neck down. There was no triggering event, no seismic crash or contortionate injury to explain this abrupt stultification. Doctors were flummoxed. There wasn't even a word for what happened to him, he said. He was in the hospital for months. Days were spent meditating on missed opportunities. As he lay there, immobile as stone, his mind audited his every regret: not crossing the room at a raucous college party to talk to a girl so gorgeous he and his friends actually bit their fists when she swiveled past them; not taking a gamble in his professional life that might have yielded a swift windfall; not believing in himself when he was an athlete in high school. Eventually, after a couple months, he regained mobility and, with the help of physical therapy, his body returned to full functionality. Now, he said, he wasted no time worrying about the past or what might happen in the future. He simply tried to do right by the present moment. Eckhart Tolle he wasn't, but these bright pontifications helped me. It was a plangent lamentation of *what might have been*, except I didn't hear it as a ballad of a scarred middle-aged man. I took it as an injunction to get better as a quarterback. Rarely had an adult male talked to me about my feelings, whereas Dean would drive me to McDonald's before our workouts, treating me to soggy egg sandwiches and asking about my non-football interests—the girl I liked, the status of my friendships, what I wanted to study in college—topics that would have fallen squarely within a father's jurisdiction.

By all accounts, Dean was a standup guy. I don't know whether Dad paid him for these training sessions, whether they worked out some handshake arrangement, or if Dean was simply drawing from a quarry of intrinsic kindness. I suspect he was like a lot of grown men who can no longer play and thus enter into coaching for the vicarious pleasure of being around a young man who still can. Such middle-aged men trail behind the young athlete, like vassals behind a prince, and monitor his trajectory with the hope that he will later praise them in interviews with ESPN. They're "difference-makers." They want to contribute. They want to be listed in the acknowledgements of some best-selling sports memoir.

The following autumn, my senior year, I became the starting quarterback for Waukesha Catholic Memorial. The school was a few birch-lined blocks away from Carroll College, which is where, in 1906, Bradbury Robinson—

the quarterback for St. Louis University—threw the first legal forward pass in the history of the game. Our team finished the season with a winning record, but we were knocked out of playoff contention during our last game, after which I shed genuine tears in a locker room where displays of fraternal love were both rugged and abundant.

But there were moments during that season when I completed passes that would have been impossible a year earlier, when the full scope of my repertoire consisted of chucking darts at fixed, inanimate objects. It is difficult to describe the peculiar beauty of a completed pass. Let's first acknowledge that, during the course of any given passing play, a quarterback is rushed by colossal lineman whose sole telos it is to knock him down. The second he calls hike, he invites the prospect of his demise. Let's also acknowledge that football is not a game of stasis but of variables in constant flux—wind/rain/snow, physical balance, the swift diminishment of throwing lanes, the discordant patterns of defensive backs, the snarling aggressions of linebackers, etc. All of which means that the QB can't simply stand in a vacuum and toss the ball at some inert object. No. The magic of a truly great pass is that, amid the turmoil of the pocket, the quarterback must anticipate where his receiver will be, which requires him to send the ball toward empty space. The leather projectile revolves at dangerous rates toward a space unoccupied by anyone at all. There is blind trust, a brittle faith, in this action. It's the little divinity of the game that only a quarterback ever experiences. This is the sadness of your position. For that single dark instant when you throw a pass, before the receiver makes his cut, you seem to be alone, throwing to absolutely no one. But this is a necessary deception, the game's intrinsic feint and dodge, because soon the receiver finishes his route and emerges from behind the linebacker or cornerback, and sprints into green open field, snagging the ball out of the air with a practiced deftness, a nifty grace.

There's something utterly gorgeous about this exchange. If a prayer is nothing more than an earnest transmission directed at someone whom you can only hope will be there, then I submit that leading a receiver into empty space is a kind of prayer. In down after down, with marmoreal goliaths hurtling toward you, you cannot pay attention to where your receiver is, but must devote all your imagination to where he'll be. Forget the raw data, the ugly unyielding material of the moment. Step outside the exigencies of the self and enter your receiver's head. See what the receiver sees. It's only then that the ball can enact the connection its trajectory describes—linking one player to another. Despite the chaos all around, you have connected, understood each other, somehow.

It wasn't until after I stopped playing football that I learned to describe the game in such fumy terms. In college, like an alcoholic who swaps ice cream for booze, I replaced my addiction to the game with a compulsion

for studying. Instead of spending hour upon hour in the weight room or on the field, I became one of those blanched, misanthropic-looking guys you were apt to see scuttling out of the college library on Friday nights while shoals of other undergrads were migrating to the next house party. College is an opportunity for self-invention, an occasion when you're finally unfettered from the social taxonomies of your high school identity, and after giving up athletics, I decided to let myself explore some of the intellectual concerns that had preoccupied me during my adolescence but that I had suppressed for the sake of becoming a top-flight athlete. Such were the circumstances under which one spring day I found myself lounging on the manicured plaid of the union lawn, reading a text for my philosophy class, a book by Martin Buber called *I and Thou*. It was an odd, slender volume, chocked with aphoristic prose that sometimes sounded more like poetry than continental philosophy. Here's a random example:

> I consider a tree.
>
> I can look on it as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or a splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background.
>
> I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on a clinging, pressing pith, suck of the roots, breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air—and the obscure growth itself.

Surely such verse crinkled my brow, at least initially. But over the course of the book, it became clear to me that Buber wasn't simply bombarding his readers with abstruse balladry. Instead, he was attempting to describe our relationship to the world, providing us with a glossary of terms for a category of perceptions that, to me anyway, had always seemed ineffable and therefore invisible. Central to his thesis is a distinction between what he calls "I-It" and "I-Thou" relationships. When we take part in "I-It" relationships, we regard other people as detached things—predictable objects that can be manipulated for our whims and predilections. In such cases, other people exist only in our experience of them. By way of example, imagine an unctuous womanizer telling a female that she's pretty, not to proffer an objective claim or make the woman feel good about herself, but to inveigle her into giving this Lothario something that he wants, which in this case is probably some form of sexual gratification.

By contrast, "I-Thou" relationships occur when we enter a state of mind where the material illusions that separate us from other people—namely, our bodies, our selfishness, our in-born habit of seeing ourselves as the center of the world—dissipate and where we begin to regard the Other as another "I." In such mental states, the borders between us become

permeable and we are drawn speedily into a system of spiritual relation where difference evaporates and outliers diminish, where, like Emerson says, "contrary and remote things cohere, and flower out from one stem."

Such frothy concepts may seem impertinent to football, but as I lay on the university lawn that day, with coeds swiveling down the sidewalks and hemp-clad hippie types playing hackey sack under auburn elms, I discovered in Buber's weird gnomic prose a comprehensive description for what it felt like to play quarterback. When you drop back to pass, you suspend the limited itineraries of the self. You must regard your receiver as another "I," someone who accompanies you in a world of play where every movement is connected, contingent, consequential. If this aspect of game feels spiritual to me—and can at times assume the metaphysical frequencies of art—it's because it enacts and seems to solve one of the most basic problems of existence itself: how do I minimize the window of the self and see the world from someone else's eyes? How do I escape my inborn subjectivity? For Buber, such a task involves practicing habits of perception that force you to remember that the interior lives of other people are as complex and sensitive as your own. And for me, the sport was a way to do that. Every completion between me and my receivers—between me and Dad—was a vital dramatization of a real connection. It's not for nothing that Buber refers to "I-Thou" relationships as "dialogical." Nor is it accident that when a quarterback misfires and overthrows his receiver, broadcasters are apt to call these flubs "miscommunications."

One would be hard pressed to claim that every facet of the game perpetuates this brand of thinking. Certainly one cannot find it in the chest-thumping hubris of post-game interviews nor in the rash of noodly touchdown dances. But I've been trying to suggest that certain aspects of the game ascend to a spiritual register precisely because they ask its participants to aim for communion. Anticipating the movements of your receiver, laboring to see what he sees, and trusting him enough that you can throw the ball to a spot on the field before he has even made a gesture toward heading there—the perceptual habits of making a pass train the mind for other-directed thinking.

Buber's *I and Thou* anticipated some of the main communicational questions we as a culture face right now, when our most ubiquitous form of interaction happens via digitized screen. At a moment when our culture is fixated on narcissism and the breakdown of communication, when the ease and frequency of "connectivity" is often privileged over the more hard-won skills of empathy, perhaps the most potent metaphor for our national sport is one that calls attention to that rare miracle of connection between two individuals.

Make no mistake: I'm not suggesting that football is the panacea for our

impoverished perceptual habits, nor am I saying that the game is a treasury of sensitive, other-directed messages. I'm merely trying to describe why the game is gorgeous to me and why the language of communication—of true connection, of love—might be applicable to a sport so often associated with grisly violence, gross egos, and oozing machismo.

As an NFL fan, it's been interesting to watch the evolution of broadcasting language since 9/11. Commentators have mostly abandoned the brutish vernacular of war only to adopt the starchy jargon of capitalism. No longer do we have quarterbacks as field generals who marshal their platoons into enemy territory. Now, we have "game managers" who understand the "costs" of risky throws, who eek their offenses out of "point deficits." Recently, New Orleans Head Coach Sean Payton, when asked to describe what he looks for in the consummate NFL quarterback, said, "I mean, you gotta be able to sit down with these players after watching production on tape and feel like you're talking with the CEO, and if you don't feel like you're talking with the CEO, or someone that potentially could be, then uh, it's tough."

Does this symbolize a shift in the game? Perhaps football, which once served as a metaphor for manhood, is nothing more than a brass-tacks venture, where valor and victory loses precedence to the bulk of one's paycheck? Can this account for our wolfish interest in trade deals, salary cap adjustments, and other fiscal concerns?

Still, old habits die hard, and war metaphors have slowly encroached back into our vocabulary. As recently as September 2014, *ESPN: The Magazine* ran a feature-length profile of Belhaven University coach Hal Mumme, who pioneered the "Air Raid Offensive" that many college and most pro teams deploy. The article was accompanied by a portrait of the coach wearing a cheap imitation of a military helmet, a plastic green shell blotched with camouflage. Bridled to Mumme's head by a loose nylon strap, the contraption looked ridiculous, as if it had been swiped from the novelty aisle of a children's toy store. It seemed especially odd that ESPN was celebrating the godfather of the "air-raid attack" only a week after the White House announced coordinated airstrikes to foil the advance of ISIL in the Middle East.

We end up mobilizing this terminology only to invoke the old American verities—courage and grit and indefatigable spirit. This sort of language glorifies the game's violence, encouraging fans to cheer for an opera of collisions, cracks, whumps, and crashes. So perhaps we need a new vocabulary to describe football, a language that asks us to appreciate aspects of the game unrelated to the molar-loosening hits and the pugilistic combat.

The other option is obsolescence. We might readily imagine a time when the NFL will collapse under the weight of evidence that links the sport's violence to neurological damage, when enough concerned American parents will direct their children away from the hashmarked gridiron between goal posts and steer them instead toward the less perilous turf of the soccer field; when the sport will become a bloody novelty, an activity future generations will regard with the same nail-biting apprehension most of us now reserve for ultimate fighting. However naïve it may be, my hope is that the game will undergo a 1905-like revolution and the powers that be will amend the game to ensure players' neurological safety.

Whatever shape such reforms take, I hope they preserve moments like this: Christmas morning of 2013 when, after coffee and homemade breakfast and all the grandkids opening presents, my dad and I step out to the driveway under Californian sunshine and find my nephew's Nerf football lodged behind the lawnmower. We trade a wordless glance and it's in this moment I realize that my father has become much older than I ever thought he could be—his mortality has finally assumed discernible qualities: craggy face, silvered pate, hobbled posture (though he's still quite handsome). He ambles out to the end of the yard on achy hinges, stopping under the fronds of an efflorescent palm tree. I'm twenty-eight-years old, and my father is almost seventy, and we're going to play catch with a neon foam football. The sun is out, and the grass is a lurid, flashing green, and Dad brings a hand over his eyes, almost like he's saluting me as he waits to receive my pass. He's been living in California for a couple years now, helping my brother raise his kids, so the two of us don't talk much, except for the occasional catch-up call or laconic text, the types of interactions where our expressions are scrubbed of any real feeling. And as the distance between each phone call grows longer and as the rhythms of our conversations get more deeply entrenched, it becomes harder and harder for me to talk to my dad, to somehow overcome whatever barriers the plight of being father and son have been erected between us. It is difficult to swallow the cliché and tell him before time runs out that everything I've done in my life has been in some way an effort to make him proud of me. Even here, like this—with this fickle, crumbly language—it feels almost impossible to say it.

It's maybe been a year since I've thrown a pass, and the Nerf football is squishy, foam, and light. Unconcerned about the silliness of this performance, I crouch down and bark out in sonorous baritone an old Crusader cadence, "Blue 18, Blue 18," raising my leg swiftly as if to send some phantom fullback in motion, just to make Dad laugh. But when I drop the charade and glance across the lawn, I see that Dad has broken into a run. It's a slow, lumbering route, though he still displays a great

athlete's eternal coordination and native grace. He's headed across the street, weaving through parked cars, trotting through long pools of tree-shade, but somehow he starts moving through decades, shedding wrinkles and paunch and gray hair, speeding up as time reverses, his legs gaining virility and youth as he gets farther and farther away from me. Soon, we're back in that drab Wisconsin yard, the one with uneven footing and the rampant patches of dandelions and crabgrass, the lawn of my boyhood, and Dad is going long. He's nearing the edge of our property, a distance that requires a degree of strength I'm not sure my young arm can summon. But I hear him calling out to me across the partial dark. It is a voice that the distance between us has rendered deserted sounding, somewhat desperate, bereaved, seemingly, and fearful that I might lose him, I raise the ball to my shoulder and try one more time to lead him out into the open.