Catch as Catch Can

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Locking onto the target, I crumple my paper cup into a compact wad and toss it with the insouciance of Jerry West launching his beyond-half-court buzzer beater in the 1970 NBA finals.

Swish.

Or a wastebasket's nearest approximation thereof. I'm mightily pleased by that and, despite being a functioning adult, am unashamed of taking advantage of every opportunity for long-range trash disposal. Pleasure, says Aristotle's *Ethics*, is not a thing in itself but the by-product of an unimpeded exercise of our natural powers. As my favorite expositor of Aristotle says, it is "the active enjoyment of being what we are."

One thing we humans undeniably are: uniquely adapted with joints, ligaments, and tendons that make possible fast, accurate overhand throws. (Chimps fling stones and poo underhand, for short distances, without much precision.) Our ancestors have been hunting for two million years and for the first million and a half had no better weapons than rocks and sharpened sticks. Acquiring the ability to throw them was a crucial stage in in our evolution; it allowed a species of weaklings to hunt physically superior prey—and also, it's been argued, shaped the evolution of our brains and even the development of language.

We learn throwing by imitation and do it without knowing precisely how. (Excess thinking has hobbled the career of more than one Major League ballplayer.) Occasions for procuring dinner with sticks and stones having dwindled, competent throwing seems widespread only in baseball-playing countries, which leads to episodes of found comedy: European rioters have been flinging paving stones for generations but still throw like girls. (The growth of women's sports has filled the US with girls

who don't throw like girls.)

A throw is active and explosive; the whip action of a hard throw generates the fastest motion our bodies can perform, rotating the humerus bone at 9,000 degrees per second. A catch is reactive and unfolds gradually, like a piece of choreography. It's also unnatural. The natural response to an incoming projectile is to get out of its way or, if that's impossible, deflect it with wild flailing. What would an early hominid *want* to catch? What advantage could a flair for catching give in war or hunting or finding a mate?

Throwing begins with desire: bring down the antelope; feed the tribe. Catching begins with fear, the classic posture of a boy trying out his first baseball glove: the arm stiff, aiming its gloved end uncertainly at an approaching ball while the rest of him does its best to lean away, wishing that the arm could detach at the shoulder and handle the matter itself. Instruction can help: don't swat at a ball, but cradle it; use two hands, so you can't dance out of the way. But no verbal formula can initiate anyone into the mystery of catching a fly ball—the sublime experience, as a friend said to me, of "drifting back and drifting back on a long fly ball with never any doubt that I would be there when that ball came down."

How fielders manage to do so has been investigated and disputed for at least 50 years. Baseball lore credits good fielders with an implausible superpower: to predict, at the crack of the bat, where a ball will land. The main problem with that is a complete lack of evidence—either that humans have the necessary perceptual and cognitive equipment or that they act as though they do. There *is* evidence for explanations that amount to algorithms for anti-missile defense. One is the method of Linear Optical Trajectory, which corresponds well to the practice of skilled players (and of dogs chasing frisbees), and confirm the wisdom of the Sundance Kid: "I'm better when I move." In essence, the very act of chasing a ball tells you how to go on chasing it.

No human being (or dog) can consciously perform Linear Optical Trajectory, which demands:

Continually adjust field position so as to null the curvature of the baseball's optical trajectory. But the body, by repeated correction from loops of doing/failing, can learn how. Delegating to the wisdom of the body is a liberation: Let me be me! Which makes failures feel like self-sabotage. I still remember, mortified, a fly ball dropped in the Lubbock Texas Men's Slow Pitch Softball Championship of 1977.

A throw is the inciting incident in a drama that is thereafter, literally, out of your hands. A catch is the climax of a drama in which you've been engaged throughout—and therefore, I'm convinced, lodges more firmly in memory. A career in sandlot, intramural, and rec league ball has provided a rich supply of easily embellished reminiscence. I remember shagging flies before a pickup game and, while chasing a long one, sensing imminent collision with a trash bin, dodging around the bin, regaining a bead on the ball, and making the catch. (Yessss! Me being me!) I remember losing a pop-up in the sun and gamely parking where I thought it might land, glove open and positioned to protect my face, as the ball bounced off the top of my head. (Me too.) I can summon up just one really memorable throw: a first, and wisely never repeated, attempt that sailed a football cleanly through both holes in the upper half of the monumental Barbara Hepworth sculpture, "Four Square (Walk Through)." Tight spiral.

I humblebrag a basic competence at catching and throwing as a gesture, or pretense, of solidarity with the working-class immigrant neighborhood where I grew up. Which is not where I wound up—in the New Class of "symbolic" workers, full of persons who may understand Linear Optical Trajectory but will treat an incoming baseball like an alarming insect and won't be trustworthy patrons of any trash bin more than two feet away.

"Fathers Playing Catch With Sons," the title of an essay by the former Poet Laureate Donald Hall, has become a stock image of the generations bonding. It didn't apply in my old neighborhood. Factory work was tiring and the streets were full of other kids to play with, no father required. (Though mine, uninterested in any sport except bowling (if that's a sport), bonded in his own way, which included piling our family into the station wagon once a year for a one-day excursion to Yankee stadium, five

hours each way. When he's canonized, those trips will be noted as pre-mortem warm-up miracles.)

You can play catch to limber up. Professionals do. So do kids at a playground waiting for a pickup game to happen, where anyone can ask a stranger "Throw?" without the fear that surrounds asking a girl to dance. It's democratic; differences in skill don't much matter.

You can also play a *game* of catch, which has no score, no winner or loser, and no predefined place to stop. It can indeed be a way for father to pass torch to son. It can also be a conversation between equals, with the tropes of conversation. There's goofing around—such as making, or attempting, catches and throws behind the back. There's teasing—such as throwing short hops that, if not fielded cleanly, can rattle off your partner's shins. And there's the comfort of ritual, of always knowing what is now to be done, the rhythmic alternation of prehistoric inheritance with anti-missile defense. A game of catch has no purpose other than itself. It is an exercise of art for art's sake. Which is to say, following Aristotle, that its purpose is pleasure.