

it to be as if we had known each o

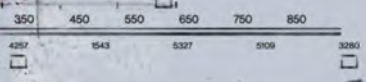
Among the ten of us who sit together and leaf
players by name, I know
you and he were lovers
the sweater he brought to



askatchewan kid who lay in the
dark earth dreaming in a crown of thorns
of his sweater he brought to



The almost
sock 'cm
with his
and his



HOCKEY POEMS NEW & REVISED

We need
Canada's
a million
it's each
Canadian
it has played
face the camera
his ribs, CANADA

RICHARD HARRISON

Among the ten of us who sit together and leaf
heart because once you and he were lovers
How you



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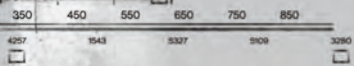
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Wolsak & Wynn

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🍷 For Lisa

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INTRODUCTION

This book got its start with a poem that began,

Taking a small picture of myself, I cut out my face,
paste it over Brett Hull's face in a photo of him
and Bobby at some charity hockey game in
Duluth. I send you this as further proof that I
played with Bobby in '76 when I was scouted
by the Jets for goal.

This was 1989, and I was at play: with heroes, with fathers and sons, the mythology of the game and with the language of hockey, which is intimately connected to the Canadian vocabulary as a whole. I enjoyed what I'd made. I thought there might be a suite of poems there.

Then I went travelling, and in Abidjan on the Ivory Coast I encountered the rink that did triple duty for figure skating, curling and hockey in the Hôtel Ivoire. Hockey had arrived before me. I skated on that rink, and the words of the game had meaning in a place I'd never imagined the game could be experienced. I felt a new love there for hockey the way you feel love for your home when some part of it you left behind surprises you in a foreign land. There was more to write.

A few people thought that hockey would be the last thing I either would, or should, write about at the time. I was one of them, too, despite all that attracted me to the work. Marja Jacobs, then one of the publishers at Wolsak & Wynn to whom I showed an early manuscript, remembers me as shy about it. Hockey didn't fit with the poems I had written before, attending to the sensitivities of our lives, and to all the social ills that work against all that's vulnerable in us. Hockey, loud hockey in the image of the NHL with its fraternal brutality and commercialism and celebration of power and our joy in its display, ran counter to the politic with which I had defined myself and my poetry.

But even though appreciating sport is different from appreciating art, it's a false difference if it's thought of as a mutually exclusive one. I've known all my life that the athlete and the poet have much in common. My father was a sportsman and a soldier, and those two parts of him were irreversibly joined. He had his finest athletic moments on the track during the games

the British Army held for the troops in Southeast Asia. He was also, as I tell everyone, deeply in love with the poetry he memorized both in his school days and after. The recitations of poetry that came from the voice within that athletic body of his, with its strength and aggression, and the timing of a great throw, those recitations made loving the poet in him and the athlete in him all of a piece.

In the hockey players whom I've met because of *Hero of the Play* – Maurice Richard, Bobby Hull, Jean Béliveau, Gordie Howe, Tiger Williams, the list goes on – I have found that same love of both the body in action and the words that raise themselves to art describing it. For all of those players, the poems about their sport gave them back something of their own vision of its meaning. With each of them, I was able to talk without the wall between fan and hero, not as if I, too, had played, but because the poems knew the game as one who had.

Over the years, this became true for more than just those players who could see themselves in the poems because they were there by name. I have seen it in high school students – usually, but not always, young men – who generally played on their school teams, and who perked up to listen to “Stanley Cup”: “At the centre of the circle of the champions of the world / Mario Lemieux hoists the Cup.” For them poetry class was least of their learning because poetry showed them little or nothing of their own lives. But this poem and its fellows showed that poetry, as the first poets taught, is language that, if it is successful, immortalizes, and if it is not, still says that what it speaks of should not disappear. Athletes respect that, and I think it's because athletes respect words even more than poets do. Poets always have more. There's always another page, but for a kid on the bench, there is no more powerful poem than when the coach stands beside them and says, “You're not playing tonight.”

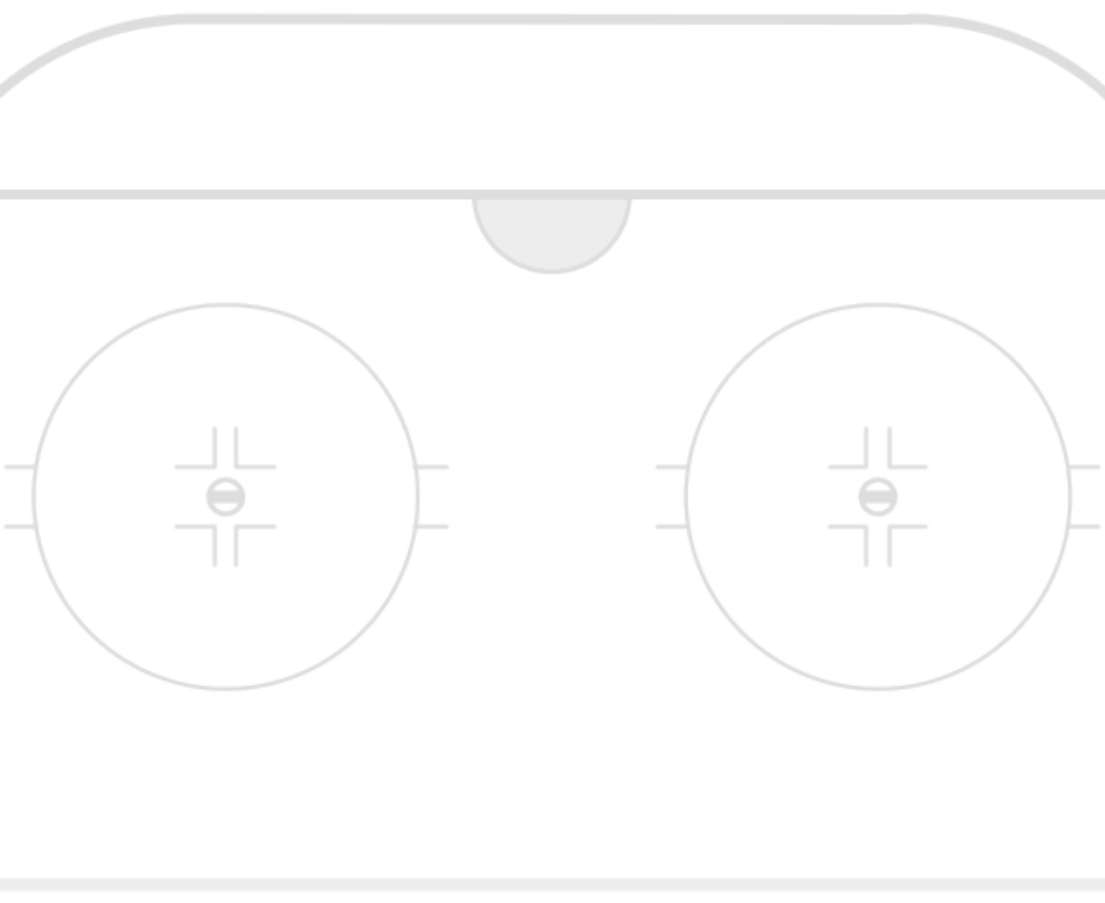
Hockey is a game of speech. Listen to both teammates and opponents talking to each other as the game progresses. Listen to the commentators on TV, or the broadcasters on radio, creating a story out of the swirl and clash of players before them. Even without seeing Henderson's goal in game eight in Russia, we can feel its excitement in Foster Hewitt's crackling gramophone voice declaring, “Henderson has scored for Canada!” – one of the greatest moments in our national play-by-play. And listen to fans talking, creating worlds of hockey talk – analysis, jokes, puns, historical references, wordplay.

That is the foundation of the poem, the love of language not for what it's telling, but for the play of it, how it joins us in that play. That is what I

found myself on the edge of entering in the late 1980s and early '90s when I was beginning what I knew by then would have to be a book. I had used hockey metaphors in a few poems. I had written about a few hockey stories and built them, as you do with fantasies, around the real-life connections and conflicts to which they leant a rich imagery. Hockey may be life for some, but for most of us it is a source of occasional and vivid metaphors.

So I went in, determined to test the language of hockey. It was built for the game, but it applied beyond it. Could I get *everything* into it? Everything about which I wanted to write? The answer was no. But my attempt found its limit after going much farther into my own life and the experiences of others than I ever thought it would. I did have the idea at one point that my hockey book would be the one at the greatest distance from me. If sport was an escape, writing about it could be, too. It's an easy mistake, and one I'm happiest now, twenty-five years after *Hero*, to have realized I didn't make. As my friends – thank you, Noelle Allen, Jamie Dopp, Paul Martin and especially Lisa Rouleau, among others – have shown me over the years, the hockey poems have drawn from my life – and worked their way back into it – as much as any poems I've written. I didn't know it. At the time, I was focusing on each poem the way you focus on the handful of seconds in a play that you actually have the puck. But that, too, is a portrait of the poet as athlete, the athlete as artist: you don't know the meaning of the game as a whole until you've played to the end. Then you open the book you've made one poem at a time, and there it is.

Richard Harrison, June 2019



RESTING PLACES

In memory of fighting men Bob Probert and Ralph Harrison

Bob Probert's brother poured Bob's ashes
into the penalty box at Joe Louis arena,
the perfect resting place
because Bob did a lot of time there
for pummelling men so thoroughly,
they became afraid of hockey.

And a former student of mine,
drafted by the Bruins in the late '80s,
when he came back from winter camp, he said,

*I fought Probert! Want to know how?
I pulled his sweater down like this,
held his arms –
and yelled Ref!!*

There they go,
slow dancing down the ice:
gigantic Bob knowing the slick plays he made in junior
would never earn him a spot
in the hockey lore,
or the All-Star Game,
or protecting the captain on Detroit's top line;
and my student knowing he'd never make pro.

Bob died the way a lot of enforcers die –
cells falling lights out into his brain
like grains of dust filling a music box.

Still, his brother gave his ashes to the rink.

We love best the circles we complete.

In a few months,
I will go to Oxford and
read from a book with my father in the title.

I will take a small jar of his ashes
to leave behind because years ago,

when I was in the running
for a place at the most sacred school
in the Empire of my father's army,

he looked at me like he'd won the war,
and said,

Oxford! –

the old fighter still in awe of
the citadel he'd defended, standing now,
full of doors,

none of which opened for him.





THE GREATS

These are the figures of my escape: men who could fly, bend steel, come to life each month in my eager eyes, my flight from my father's face. Determined men I watch cross and recross the comic-panel lines that mark their play; these are my figures, the Greats. A sheet of ice puts a man in motion at impossible angles for the physics of the shoe; an ink-filled brush over thick paper . . . *I can move like you.*

MY FAVOURITES (THE NATIONAL GAME)

This one from the summer of '88 when I picked up the habit of cards and my father called from Victoria, collecting with me . . . *I've got Bobby Hull*, his voice soft, proud, my father at his best. It's Bobby at his peak as a Black Hawk rounding the boards in his own end with the puck for another breakneck rush up ice. Then this one of Bobby as a Jet – after the divorce, the time he says he lost his hair before the world. Here his scalp is stitched through with brass and goals no one counts except in brackets. This one – Luc Robitaille, *Best left-winger ever born in Quebec*. Marc gave him to me hidden in a bowl of popcorn, tattered and folded the way teenagers love and reject the selfsame thing. And this one you sent me in the mail because you lived in Regina and I lived here. Brett Hull, poised, intent, waiting for the pass.





REUNION, OR GRIEVING

Taking a small picture of myself, I cut out my face and paste it over Brett Hull's face in a photo of him and Bobby at some charity hockey game in Duluth. I send you this as further proof that I practiced with Bobby in '76 when I was scouted by the Jets for goal. Bobby is proud of his son, the pride coming only now into the light of the arena where they are perfectly again husband and child together. Many will say this is cheap, ask where was he when Brett was growing up waiting for Bobby to appear in the almost-empty stands of junior. Today I got the news: months ago my place was vacant at my stepson's wedding. *How could you?* the face beneath my face moves my mouth and asks me.

WHY THE PETERBOROUGH PETES WON THE MEMORIAL CUP

It was the first time
we undressed for each other,
and when she took off her shirt,
and I pulled off mine,
I heard music
and cheering
from far away.
She undid her bra,
and we both
heard it then.

The noise got louder
as we took off our jeans,
and louder still
as she slid off her panties.
By now we were both naked
and laughing
on our side
of the front door,
and the cars rolled by
and the band played
and the drummers
drummed like hearts.

As we held each other,
the fans cheered,
Go! Petes! Go!

And the city celebrated
the triumph of its team,
while we kissed each other
all over,
we kissed each other
all over
our lips in a revel
everywhere we kissed.



LOVE AND THE HOCKEY POOL

1. Draft Day

Among the ten of us who sit together and draft players by name, I know only Robert because once you and he were lovers. Now you are friends: there it is. I want it to be as if we had known each other from the days of table hockey when each of us was complete and right with himself as instinct. When the games begin, my pick Bourque goes down with a shoulder, and Ricci, my horse for Rookie of the Year, the kid from my adopted hometown junior team, he breaks a hand trying to grab a slapshot. Robert calls me up and leaves a message: *Your team SUCKS!* he says, and laughs, and we become close. But when Messier, his main man, falls to the ice and cannot rise without his teammates' help, the iron box of his face unhinged, *oh no oh no* going through his mind, his leg curled like a baby's, I feel no *there but for the grace*, only the gain of my own leg on the scoresheet. Now we are closer.

2. Ice

About the surface. Counting. Hard-edged things. Like ice and pennies; in the face-off circle, a skate cuts *R loves L, R loves L*. The beginning of the story is the theory of jealousy, the game about everything except the goals and assists, the colourful, public men we pass between us, your name unspoken. This is the meaning of victory – a puck sliding over ice into the bag of cords that holds a man to his duty – that I should be the one, the winner, how I come to love him, hate him, the mirror your love brings me to face.





THE PRAISE OF MEN

To their faces, it escapes me, words for the praise of men.
To a man I admire, to whom I would say, You have real
talent and my envy, all that comes out is, *You're good,*
and there I remain, fatherly, in charge of words by *not*
saying them. Give me these players whom I will never
meet to hoot and holler out my deepest riskless love that
finds no softer words, no shame or venture, merely
a game, the bargain sealed with a seat in the blues,
my naked face a dab of camouflage, hiding my praise
in the open.