

Double Play

SL Short

Michael Downs

Joyce stubs her cigarette into the sidewalk, tucks the butt in her dungarees' pocket. A week 'til the Orioles open, so when asked she pulls on a mitt, takes her spot on Sefton Avenue, readies herself for the hard ball's twist and smack.

Softball, she tells her neighbor, who paces off an easy distance—driveway to driveway along the level curb. Thirty years ago, Joyce prowled third base. The hot corner. The ball fast and cruel, Joyce on her toes, the glove quick. "My ashes are getting buried at Double Rock Park," she says, "under third base."

That morning she'd been mowing, keeping the grass tight enough for a ball to skip across. She'd still rather be cutting clean lines through a lawn, even as her neighbor hums the Rawlings into her glove, six, eight times. She returns it with a lazy arc. Shoulder tight and maybe arthritic, no twist of the torso, no step into the toss. Sixty-two damn years and for the first time in her life she throws like a girl.

Then the ball zips high, she rises on her toes, and were it an older better world, the ball would be hers. But this one glances off the leather, and she teeters, goes down without the ball, without a fight, without grace. Asphalt scuffs skin from her bare shin, *a raspberry* her teammates would have called it, and for more than a week the scabs will remind her how far she is from third base, and how near.

Michael Downs' books include *House of Good Hope* (University of Nebraska Press), winner of the River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Prize, and *The Greatest Show* (Louisiana State University Press) a collection of linked stories featuring the Hartford Circus Fire of 1944. A former newspaper sportswriter, he has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Maryland State Arts Council, and the Mid-Atlantic Arts Foundation. He lives in Baltimore.