

REQUIEM FOR TIGER STADIUM

Nostalgia is a cheap, dishonest emotion. Like a slick salesman, it tries to seduce us until it has encased our personal histories in low-grade aluminum siding. Whenever possible, I avoid such pining. So why was I committing such an overtly nostalgic act as attending one last baseball game in Detroit's Tiger Stadium, before it shuts down at the end of this season? I guess I thought that after a century of fly balls and foul tips, the place had earned one last visit.

While Tiger Stadium shares the title of the oldest in baseball, professional teams have played on this site since 1896. In the year 2000, the stadium will be replaced by a smaller ballpark, like those recently erected in Cleveland, Baltimore and other cities. Of course, nostalgia permeates the word "ballpark" itself, conjuring images of peanuts and lemonade and polite, mustachioed men wearing straw boaters. The Texas Rangers don't even have a name for their home field; it's simply referred to as the Ballpark at Arlington. To me, nostalgia seems so perversely un-American—looking backwards instead of forwards—that it's ironic the national pastime should milk it so vigorously.

As you pass by Tiger Stadium, few signs reveal that it houses a baseball team at all. Its white concrete walls provide no glimpse of the interior, not even of the scoreboard. It has all the architectural character of a canned ham lying on its side. It's not open and graceful like Wrigley Field, nor quirky and lovable like Fenway in Boston. There is nothing elegant or pastoral about this setting.

But once you buy your ticket and pass through the turnstiles, you're immediately transported into a cloister for the national pastime. A lush expanse of green takes over your senses, commanding your attention. Within the windowless walls, the stadium sustains a dull roar that seems left over from previous games, like the eons of spilled beverages that have given the walkways their sleek gray shine. The purpose of this place catches you immediately and fills you with anticipation. You have come here not to enjoy hot fajitas or watch the Jumbotron or admire the city skyline. You're here to watch a ball game, so let's get to it.

This directness perfectly suits the locale. Detroit is not a sentimental city. Perhaps this lack of mistiness is a byproduct of the auto industry, which focuses so expectantly on the next model year. The city can't afford to be very sentimental, either. Ever since the riots more than 30 summers ago, Detroit has struggled to stay a place worth living. This hasn't been for a lack of ideas, or a hesitation to demolish. If an old building or a patch of a neighborhood is sitting on land that someone thinks could be put to better use, out comes the wrecking ball. This has left the physical city with a chilling lack of continuity, as well as acres

and acres of empty lots. There's so much vacant land within the city limits that a few years ago, someone seriously suggested keeping such lots empty and encouraging wildlife to relocate from the woods and farmland in surrounding counties. A desperate plan? Maybe, but you have to admire its directness.

Next season, the Tigers will inaugurate their new ballpark, named, as they all are, after a corporate sponsor. I'm happy that it's being built downtown, which may be slowly turning a corner toward revitalization. But while the old stadium resembles a whitewashed airplane hangar, the new park will look like a misplaced chunk of Las Vegas—in fact, Siegfried and Roy might find it a tad garish. No type of Bengal-related ornament has gone unused. Growling, light-up tigers will prowl the scoreboard, tiger-head spotlights will illuminate the exterior. Even the outside brickwork will be striped. The park will feature a Ferris wheel with baseball-shaped cars and a carousel sporting, you guessed it, tigers to ride. Now, I'm all in favor of attracting younger fans to the game; I'd just prefer it wasn't done with a venue apparently designed by a twelve-year-old buzzed on Dr. Pepper.

As I sat in the old stadium a week or so ago, with my knees securely jammed into the seat in front of me, I watched the crowd as much as the game. In this swansong season, great old friends have reconnected with each other. Sons have accompanied fathers on pilgrimages. Stadium aficionados from all over the continent have reveled in their own type of religious experience—sort of Motown as Medjugorje. To my surprise, I didn't wander through memories of my childhood heroes. I didn't feel nostalgic. The place didn't invite it.

Instead, I enjoyed a night of baseball like I haven't in a long time. Simple, basic and straightforward, in a mammoth stadium that's still so intimate you can hear the second baseman slap his glove and talk pepper with the pitcher. For 103 years, through wars, depressions, and riots, here at the red brick intersection of Michigan and Trumbull, men have been playing baseball. Though it sounded ridiculously like bad Hemingway, the thoughts in my head kept repeating, "This is a good thing, this is a right thing." And soon, baseball won't happen at this spot in this tough, unsentimental town ever again. All nostalgia aside, that's just a rotten shame.

