

Nonfiction Passage

***“Before Jackie: How Strikeout King Satchel Paige Struck Down Jim Crow,”* provided by the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History**

Satchel Paige was pitching in the Negro Leagues in California when he got the news he had been anticipating for two decades. Brooklyn Dodgers president Branch Rickey had just signed a Negro to a big-league contract—the first Negro in modern times. Word tore through America’s clubhouses and grandstands that October afternoon in 1945: a black man was going to be in the minors, then the Major Leagues. Jackie Robinson would topple baseball’s color bar. And Leroy “Satchel” Paige would not.

Earthshaking—almost like the emancipation of the slaves, integration supporters proclaimed. It was fitting “that the end of baseball’s Jim Crow law should follow the conclusion of a great war to preserve liberty, equality and decency,” wrote Lee Dunbar of the *Oakland Tribune*. A desecration of the natural order, segregationists shot back. “We live happier with segregation in athletics as well as all other activities,” argued Bud Seifert of South Carolina’s *Spartanburg Journal*. Bob Feller, the Cleveland Indians flamethrower with a golden arm and a tin ear, told reporters that if Jackie “were a white man, I doubt if they would consider him as big league material.”

The public listened to the cacophony of voices, but the one it wanted to hear most of all was Satchel’s. What did America’s best-loved black ballplayer—the man everyone had assumed would be first—make of the Dodgers’ historic move? “They didn’t make a mistake by signing Robinson,” Satchel said. “They couldn’t have picked a better man.” The words ate at him even as he uttered them. Not only was he being bumped, he was being bumped by his Negro Leagues teammate, an untested rookie who could not hit a curve, gun a throw to first, or land the job as the Kansas City Monarchs’ second baseman until an injury forced out the incumbent.

Other seasoned Negro Leaguers were resentful that the young slugger had never served his time in the sandlots and barnyards, eating dust and fending off slurs. Robinson had not proven himself against the best white ballplayers the way Satchel would do again that next night in San Diego against Feller’s All-Stars from the all-white majors. Rather than show deference to the old hands who had proven themselves, Jackie showed disdain. He complained about the seedy hotels. He objected to puny paychecks and uneven umpiring.

Satchel tried to be philosophical. He understood that he was aging and old-school, while the twenty-six-year-old Robinson was a college boy and Army veteran who Rickey felt could bear the ruthless scrutiny of being first. Jackie did not balk at Rickey’s plan to start him in the minors, in faraway Montreal. Satchel never could have abided the affront. Jackie had the table manners whites liked; Satchel was rough-hewn and ungovernable. Satchel realized he was a specter from the past rather than the harbinger of the more racially tolerant future the Dodgers wanted.

Still, it hurt. It was Paige who had proved during two decades of barnstorming across America and pitching in the shadow world of the Negro Leagues that white fans along with black would

come to see great black ballplayers, and that proof was what pushed Rickey to rip down baseball's racial barricades. Satchel threw so hard that his catchers tried to soften the sting by cushioning their gloves with beefsteaks, and had control so precise that he used a hardball to knock lit cigarettes out of the mouths of obliging teammates. Satchel was so dominating—especially when his teams were beating the best of the white big leaguers—that even good ol' boys like Dizzy Dean could not help but be impressed. Major League owners noticed, too. One of them—flamboyant Bill Veeck of the Cleveland Indians—said he tried to sign Paige and other blacks in 1944, a year before Rickey's deal with Robinson, but was blocked by the baseball commissioner. It was Satchel who brought this spotlight to the Negro Leagues, the amazing Kansas City Monarchs, and their first-year second-baseman Jackie Robinson.

Paige was savvy enough to know that Americans have room for just one hero at a time. If Jackie became the knight who slew Jim Crow, the roles of the real pioneers would be lost. Satchel felt sorry for all the great black ballplayers of the segregated era—from Fleetwood Walker and Rube Foster to Josh Gibson, the black Babe Ruth—and sorrier still for himself. He worried that he would be remembered as a Stepin Fetchit or worse, an Uncle Tom. Satchel never saw himself going to war over every racial slight, but he had stood up. He refused to play in a town unless it supplied lodging and food to him and his teammates, a defiance for which young civil rights workers would get arrested and lionized a generation later. Only a player of his stature and grace could manage that without getting his skull cracked open. It was painful, after all those years of hearing “if only you were white,” to be told now “if only you were younger.”

“I'd been the guy who'd started all that big talk about letting us in the big time,” Satchel wrote in his memoir. “I'd been the one who everybody'd said should be in the majors.” To be denied that chance hurt as badly as “when somebody you love dies or something dies inside you.”

When the pain ran that deep only one person could ease it: his girlfriend and confidante, Lahoma Brown. So cherished was her advice that Satchel recalled it word-for-word seventeen years afterward, when she'd become his wife and mother to his seven children. “They took that kid off our team and didn't even look at me,” Satchel told her. “He's young, Satchel,” Lahoma answered. “Maybe that's why.” “He's no Satchel Paige.” “Everybody knows that, Satchel . . . If they let one colored player into their leagues, they'll be letting others. Maybe the major leaguers'll come to you.” “They'll have to come real pretty-like. They've been puttin' me off too long to just wiggle their fingers at me now.” “Don't you go sounding like you're sour. When they come for you, you know you'll go. You've been wanting it real bad for too long not to.” “Well, it still was me that ought to have been first.”

The sense of having been wronged never left him. Satchel Paige had etched his legend as a ballplayer and performer, but he was right about the public's memory: when it comes to integrating baseball there is only one name that today's children or even their grandparents know—Jackie Robinson. Satchel Paige had been hacking away at Jim Crow decades before the world got to know Jackie Robinson, laying the groundwork for him the way A. Philip Randolph, W. E. B. Du Bois, and other early civil rights leaders did for Martin Luther King Jr. Paige was as much a poster boy for black baseball as Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong was for black music and Paul Robeson was for the black stage—and much as those two became symbols of their art in addition to their race, so Satchel was known not as a great black pitcher but a great pitcher.

Satchel Paige led blackball to the promised land of big-time baseball. He opened the national pastime to blacks and forever changed his sport and this nation.

Fiction Passage

“Fireflies”

“Once you’re in the field, make a beeline for the climbing wall,” Vivian said to a circle of girls crouched behind the cabin. “And no flashlights.”

It was Greta’s first year at Camp Kalawallah, but Vivian had been going each summer since she was six years old. As Fern 6’s cabin vet, Vivian was the one to ask about sneak-outs and socials. When it was time for the first social, Vivian made sure that all the girls knew the drill: no one dances until the oldest girls, the Sequoias, dance on their own with the oldest boys, the Oaks. Also, if a boy particularly likes you, he’ll ask early in the night for the last dance.

She also knew just what to do when, only a couple minutes into their journey, they saw a counselor’s flashlight in the distance.

“Shhh. Art porch,” Vivian whispered.

Greta and the rest of the girls followed Vivian as she veered off their course and to the art house, shuffling underneath its deck. Greta breathed into the darkness. A set of eyes seemed to pop out of the pitch black in front of her, and she nearly shrieked. In a millisecond, her mind raced between conclusions: was it a fox, a deer, the camp director, or maybe Liam?

“Hey, Greta.” There was an unmistakable squeak in the voice. It was Meredith, one of the Sequoias.

“Hey,” Greta whispered back, noticing sets of eyes younger and older all around her.

A beam of light shone from across the tennis court. It moved forward, hitting the path in front of the art house, but leaving the slope beneath the porch dark. Greta smiled. Not only had they not gotten caught, but Meredith knew her name.

Once the light was out of sight, it was a mad dash across the field, the girls weaving around each other in a sort of focused chaos. Greta was a fast sprinter, and she was the first to make it past the climbing wall to the little clearing in the woods. She was so caught up in the excitement of it all, she’d practically forgotten what she was there for.

Until she saw the boys. All twelve of them, Liam included. She sat right next to him. She tried to quiet her heavy breath and wiped the sweat from her forehead. She prayed that she’d remembered to put on deodorant.

“You’re fast, huh?”

It was the second time he’d spoken to her. The first time, she’d been balancing all the Fern 6 girls’ empty cups on her tray, bringing them to the dishwasher. Every snack time, it was a

different girl's duty to put the cups away. Her stack had just toppled on the tray, and one cup was about to hit the ground when a hand caught it in midair.

The hand rose up, placing the cup on the tray and restacking the other cups in three shorter towers. "Four to a stack. Any higher and they'll fall."

She smiled, unable to say anything more than "Thank." Not "Thank you," or "Thanks." Just, "Thank." Mortifying.

Yet, here he was, smiling at her. Maybe he hadn't noticed how weird she was being after all. She remembered that she had put on her deodorant, and she smiled back.

"Gotta be quick. The watchdogs are out."

Those eyes. Even in the dark, she could see the flash of green, and they gave her the same unbearable pang she'd felt that time in the kitchen. Even in the dark, it was too much to handle.

She looked away, down at her wrists. She played with the bracelet she had made in her arts and crafts elective, focusing on the maroon and navy threads.

"So, where are you from, anyway?"

Greta looked up. He was still looking right at her. She decided to focus on his forehead. That she could handle.

"A small town near Boston. You?"

"Do I have something...?" Liam touched his forehead.

"Um, just a mosquito. It's gone now."

"Oh. I'm from Iowa. Middle of nowhere."

"Don't they have sleepaway camps out there?" The question immediately felt stupid and rude.

"Yeah, they do, but my dad's from Maine and wanted me to get the 'real New England camp experience' like he did."

"Did he go to Kalawallah?"

"Yep. And to tell you the truth, I was pretty upset that he made me come here. My two best friends were going to a camp closer to home. I just wanted to go with them."

“Well, my sister told me that sometimes it’s best to do new things on your own. I think she’s right,” Greta said, surprised at the ease with which she was speaking. “You might feel lonely for a second, but then you can make new friends and experience new things.”

She looked around. All the other girls were there now, too, chatting and giggling. A few seemed to be staring at her. Her face turned hot.

“Anyway,” he said, so close she could feel the warmth of his breath, “I’m pretty glad I’m here now.”

Could he possibly be saying he was glad he was there because of her? No. If he really liked her, he would’ve asked her for the last dance at the social instead of dancing with Julia from Fern 7. She was a fourteen-year-old. Greta didn’t stand a chance.

“Truth or dare, Evan?” Vivian asked, bringing Greta back to everyone in the woods.

“Always dare,” Evan said with a grin.

Vivian huddled with two other girls for a minute. They erupted with laughter before turning back to the group, and everyone was eager to hear what they had come up with. Evan looked ready for anything. But just as Vivian was about to deliver the dare, a light flashed in the woods.

“Hey! Don’t move!” a voice called, the flashlight coming toward them.

“Run!” everyone seemed to yell at once, and the group took off, dispersing in the field and woods.

Greta started to run anxiously, her stomach tumbling. The nervous butterflies were suddenly gone. These were fireflies.