

## Consider the Sphere (1986)

by Douglas Blau

Men who hit baseballs for a living often describe their ideal frame of mind as a concentration so complete that it might be mistaken for a trance.

During those rare moments of heightened awareness, time appears to slow. Fastballs are said to drift rather than to dart toward the viewer at home. Minute details seem magnified: the rotation of the seams becomes visible to the naked eye; baseballs swell to grapefruit size. Sound is muffled by an internal calm. The crowd whispers, drones, is gone.

At times, baseball's vocabulary will border on the clichés of Zen. Batters speak of "being there" in order to place that sensation of focused, solitary intensity. We also hear the expression "in a groove," a musician's phrase, implying that the player is perfectly attuned, ideally engaged, completely immersed (not in what he hears, here, but) in what he sees: a lover's condition, egoless grace, a melding of the mind and the thing it seeks to grasp, to embrace. When *there*, he will view with the appraising clarity of a critic, the penetrating gaze of a sage.

Jerome in his study; Augustine at his desk – each in communion with an object, with eyes fixed, reflects. Jerome has found that groove. You can see it in the way he holds his hands or by examining his posture. Or read it in Augustine's face as he stares at some fleeting thing: a skull, dried flowers, a candle. For these few moments while pondering Time, he is unaware of its passing.

Rapture is sex for a saint; he will bathe within a vision for as long as he is able. To prolong the pleasure, he will deprive himself of food and drink until his eyes blur with fever. Tales are told of such singular men waking from their meditations to find moss or ivy growing up around them. And I remember hearing the story of a man so spellbound by the sight of a spider at work that he allowed himself to be encased within its web.

Such feats – displays of prowess indeed – belong to a world of legend. Even batters step out of the box in deference to a limited span of attention. To hold that pose for days on end, *to keep something so fragile from being broken*, one would need to be fixed in paint or chiseled out of stone.

Consider Vermeer's astronomer considering his sphere, caressing with both hand and eye the contours of an evening's sky, as daylight pours through his window.

We don't need to see his eyes to know the nature of his preoccupation; his position speaks clearly of an absolute fascination. Literally drawn from his seat by the gravity of his reflection, he is magnetized, caught in the orbit of his orb, *there*, inside: No distance lies between this viewer and the thing he eyes. Having entered fictive space, he explores a dimensionless stage, a sphere of immanent distraction.