
B N OAKMAN

THE GAME THEY PLAY IN HEAVEN

In memory of David Philips, scholar, historian, captain of rugby, Oxford University.

so many turned timid before
the rolling maul of your logic
unaware you'd played the game
where territory is not meekly yielded
where defeat befriends any who give ground
 captain, loose-head prop
(there was nothing 'loose' about your head)
hit, lock, push no slight intended
ideal grounding for academic discourse
 where history is always contested ball

we joked you were 'the worst friend in the world'
decided your telephone lacked a dial
that you were a man whose causes
too often carried you away
 but we treasure the goadings of the inflated
the floggings of the rent seekers
the interrogations of the oh-so-certain
the tutorials delivered in supermarket aisles
the portions of lectures you sang
 how we felt a little braver standing beside you

you played the big games on the big arenas
 I'm at my best in the backyard
you hastened to grave and earnest gatherings
 I tarry to refill my glass
you pursued the important, the consequential
 I wander the fringes of whimsy
but the day I was told you had died
the great library of Alexandria blazed again
propagandists tightened their grasps on the past
 and I felt abandoned to Wikipedia

few play the game
(the one they say they play in heaven)
as hard or as honourably as you
and I hope your selectors reward new talent
while I, stumbling in pursuit of the pack
struggling not to collapse in the scrum
mourn those vanished conversations
the frontal assaults of a fierce intellect
the arguments, the contests for the ball
all the matches never played

(. . .)