

Carl Erskine's Last Pitch

It was a fastball over the top
in his patented style out of the green
centerfield foliage. A new ball, maybe
not rubbed up enough. The grip tenuous,
unable to get good rotation over the top,
it could have slipped a bit, as all things
slipped that spring. Bad weather in Florida
had something to do with it,
something in the difficulty
at thirty-four of getting in shape to pitch.
At any rate, it didn't have the life
you'd come to expect of that kind
of pitch from him, riding down toward the knees
then rising as light as Christ on Easter Sunday,
light as a spirit breathed onto the wind,
looking for all the world belt high,
then lifting over the bat by a fraction of an inch,
just not quite where it appeared to be.
And fast. He was really fast.

On loan to AAA to get work, that spring
it rained for two weeks
and the bases were always loaded with nobody out.
This time the pitch was where it promised to be
to an obscure hitter from an A league,
trying to make the team,
belt-high driven up the alley in leftfield to the wall.
Three innings and five runs.
The manager didn't come to the mound. But that did it.