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Playing Twenty-One with Mark Strand

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Playing Twenty-One with Mark Strand

You were reading us a poem...was it a
William Meredith one, or a James Merrill
Poem.... anyway, you read us the poem
About a guy in his 30s playing a pick-up
Basketball game with teenagers in the
Twilight, tired of his marriage, or inadequate
In it, or his wife.... I don't remember.
You were a rising, young poet, who competed
Again and again in lectures and Workshops
With other 60s poets. Peg Carlson, was she
The best, female poet in the Workshop and
Not Catherine Davis, challenged you to a
Pick-up game of 21, that ageless basketball
Game. I thought of you telling us just before
Christmas break, how you came into that
Cellar hotel bar where we met for your class,
You told us you had taken your '56
Green and white Ford to a gas station....
How the gas station attendant guessing you
Were from the University asked what
You did. You replied you were a poet
And taught poetry and writing and he

Ruffled your mind with a parting shot.
“Oh, one of those . . . seeing how big
you are, I thought you were a football
player.”

Anyway, I got in on the pick-up game.
We played next to Peg’s apartment on
A court of cement foul lines and correct
Boundaries. While you measured shot
After shot, lay-ups, jump shots, easing
Them through the hoop like Bob Cousy,
Or Chet Walker, I stayed the closest
With you, and Peg was last. Did we play
One game or two? Yes, a couple on a
Sun washed court. Then we played a
Scratch basketball game after 21 and
You got all the rebounds, and neither
Peg nor I were in your league.

Were the clouds milk white? Did our
Breaths remain over that court? Did our
Names empty our lives out leaving
Our lives?

Where’s Peg now, who cracked
Up second semester? Where are you,
Who no longer teach at Iowa? Did
The Workshop go down the drain
When we left? Yes, we’re poets
But other poets are there now in
Workshops.

We're soft muscles playing poet, and we're muscling
Our poetry through America. OH, Christ! We are
Aging and playing 21 to us now is as green as the
Current poets in the Workshops now.

What I remember is this . . . we were on a bright
Yellow court and the sun was blinding . . .
You missed a shot, Peg missed a shot, I missed a
Shot . . . *Gimme the ball* could be heard everywhere.
The sun streaking through my name . . . yellow, it
Striped the court, and the stripes hit my back
Now and then, and now and then.