

Name Chase P. Student

Date Sometime recently

Poem Reading Sheet: One of these is due periodically—eight in all. Pick a poem from one of these collections: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections>. Pick a poem by a different author every time. Make sure to pick a poem that is at least 14 lines. When you are done, save the reading sheet and hand it in on Blackboard.

List poem title, author, and year (if known). "Old Men Plaing Basketball" by B .H. Fairchild, July 1993. (Published first in Poetry magazine and later published in a book in 1998. See below.)

Identify the collection it comes from. The Art of the Lathe. 1998. Alice James Books.

List the speaker, audience, (if indicated) and situation of poem. The speaker is watching "old men playing basketball" and wondering if it is as magical for them as it is for young men playing. No audience is stated, and we can't tell whether the speaker is watching the scene or remembering it.

Paraphrase the poem in prose lines (that is, translate it into your own words. Do not summarize it. Don't use line breaks). If it is long, paraphrase the first fourteen lines. The weighty bodies leap forward quickly, the unfunctioning or incomplete communication system of fooling and quick dribbling progress forward, romantic or idealized leap into the air to stuff the ball into the basket decelerated to a speech impediment involving rapid repetition. Their descriptive arm movements, passionate a second time with the unadulterated mathematical figures created by parabolas or semicircular shapes, move upward in the direction of the spherical orange plaything, then the arms appear to stop prematurely and return to their sides. On the wooden planes behind the baskets their "hands" and the tops of their digits shake in rigid small silent requests to God of extension and proportion. At that point, the grate of skeletal part and joint, the seized air in the lungs, the released breath, the short guttural sound of the trunk working to go into labor and have itself like a baby. In their working and majestically large arm movements, I ask myself, are they romancing the women they married just as they always did when they were young, pressing their puckered lips to the joint that joins their arms and hands on the side where their palms are, rhythmically moving the ancient flaccid boot of passion?

Discuss one thing the poem loses by being paraphrased into prose. It loses its economy. For example, "their gestures, in love/again with the pure geometry of curves/rise toward the ball, falter, and fall away" loses so much: the onomatopoeic ball, falter, fall, the driving, urgent feel the "er" sounds in "pure geometry of curves." And it loses the pace of a basketball game when "broken language of fake and drive, glamorous jump shot slowed to a stutter" becomes "incomplete communication system of

fooling and quick dribbling progress forward, romantic or idealized leap into the air to stuff the ball into the basket decelerated to a speech impediment involving rapid repetition." It loses the line breaks in the poem are gone, and the create a tension between speed and slowness: "glamorous jump shot/slowed". Finally, it's impossible for any other language to reproduce the magic that happens when they channel their younger selves and somehow become them: "A glass wand/of autumn light breaks over the backboard. Boys rise up in old men."

Discuss some of the poem's sonic aspects (that is, rhythm, meter, repetition, alliteration, consonance, assonance). Even though the line lengths are the same, there's no regular rhythm, but there is the pounding of the game "broken language of fake and drive" with the b and f and v sounds, which are all made by forcing air through forced lips (thanks, Linguistics!), the onomatopoeic sounds ("grind of bone and socket," "grunt of the body"). There's a feeling of loss when the "glamorous jump shot slows to a stutter," which you can imagine, either by the jump cut short or descending into a dribble, or the actual noise of men stuttering. And there's a contrast to that, which is the nostalgic moment when the old men feel invincible, channeling a time when they expressed love and attracted women by their grace.

Discuss some of the poem's word choices. Discuss a word or a pattern of words pulled from a surprising context. Identify the context and talk about the difference these word choices make. I like how the poem balances difficulty of aging with the lost (and momentarily recovered) grace. On the one hand "heavy, broken, stutter, falter, fall, fatigue, old, and darkening" (that last shows me that death is always out there) vs. "sigh, "kissing, dancing, desire, sing, drunken, crooning, leaning, flames, shuddering, gliding, rise, and "wings sprout." They are angels, but they are also birds--all at the same time: "Boys rise up in old men."

Title /Quotes/ Section titles. What is the relation of the title to the poem? Does it echo a part of the poem? Does it bring in a surprising new idea? Does it give you an way into the poem you wouldn't have had otherwise? In this case, the poem doesn't interpret the poem, but it does tell us what's going on so we waste no time figuring out who is doing what. Poems have secrets to reveal, but the plot of the poem should not be a mystery, in my opinion, so I liked this title right away.

Do some research. Learn something specific about the poem, its form, its historical context, and/or its author that enriches the poem for you. I read on "mypoeticside.com" that this poem comes from "The Art of the Lathe," which was Fairchild's most famous book. His father was a machine lathe operator who worked for oil refineries, so he lived in Houston, Kansas, and Oklahoma, which are all sort of bleak, I think, and oil fields are ugly. He lived among working class people. Also, he published this poem when he was 51, so he must have been feeling the pressing of old age and the nostalgia of being young and graceful and in love. He mentions the VFW in the poem, and so the men in the poem would have been veterans of WWII (when he was born) and WWI. That detail is interesting because his characters are working class and veterans, but he shows them playing and channeling a time of hope.

Also, I found out that the phrase "pick and roll" came into vogue in the 1990s and was made famous by Larry Bird, who my father always talked about, but was first recorded in the 1960s, referring to a play that Nat Holman refers to in his 1922 Book "Scientific Basketball." Holman described it as "Execution Play No. 8."



POETRY FOUNDATION



Old Men Playing Basketball

BY B. H. FAIRCHILD

The heavy bodies lunge, the broken language
of fake and drive, glamorous jump shot
slowed to a stutter. Their gestures, in love
again with the pure geometry of curves,

rise toward the ball, falter, and fall away.
On the boards their hands and fingertips
tremble in tense little prayers of reach
and balance. Then, the grind of bone

and socket, the caught breath, the sigh,
the grunt of the body laboring to give
birth to itself. In their toiling and grand
sweeps, I wonder, do they still make love

to their wives, kissing the undersides
of their wrists, dancing the old soft-shoe
of desire? And on the long walk home
from the VFW, do they still sing

to the drunken moon? Stands full, clock
moving, the one in army fatigues
and houseshoes says to himself, *pick and roll*,
and the phrase sounds musical as ever,

radio crooning songs of love after the game,
the girl leaning back in the Chevy's front seat
as her raven hair flames in the shuddering
light of the outdoor movie, and now he drives,

gliding toward the net. A glass wand

of autumn light breaks over the backboard.
Boys rise up in old men, wings begin to sprout
at their backs. The ball turns in the darkening air.

B. H. Fairchild, "Old Men Playing Basketball" from *The Art of the Lathe*. Copyright © 1998 by B. H. Fairchild. Reprinted with the permission of Alice James Books.

Source: *The Art of the Lathe* (Alice James Books, 1998)

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