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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.