

# Literature review on poetry questions

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



A. What, for you, is the basic point and the most important observations that Stephen Dunn makes in his essay "Basketball and Poetry: The Two Richies"? Discuss with reference to your own experience.

In Stephen Dunn's essay "Basketball and Poetry: The Two Richies," Dunn explains the relationship between his prime years on the basketball team and his work as a poet; for both of these sides of his life, he had two individuals named Richie who provided very important and disparate functions in relation to his own experience. Richie Swartz, a skilled basketball player, better than Dunn, caused him to reevaluate his own experiences and skills by providing competition. "The good Richie," on the other hand, was a team player, always supporting Dunn and providing him with good shots. Dunn notes the relationship between these two forces and applies this analogy between basketball and influences in the writing of poetry; "I think every poet needs two Richies - one to come up against, the other to act as a muse" (p. 46).

Basketball, as a competitive sport, is much like poetry in that it tests the skill and acumen of the person actively participating in it. There are times in which motivation stalls and when it peaks, when forces either work with or against you, and so on. "Perhaps basketball and poetry have just a few things in common, but the most important is the possibility of transcendence. The opposite is labor" (p. 46). Sometimes poets, just like basketball players, find themselves 'in the zone,' where ideas flow and everything works. However, there are also times when you are just powering through to get the poem done (or the shot made). Dunn uses these

analogies to make comparisons about the influence of motivation on the poet.

Dunn also discusses the differences between the two activities, and notes that there are distinct aspects of poetry that are substantially different from how basketball is treated. With basketball, the emphasis is on the quick, inspired move, the 'sudden rightness' that shorten the attention span of the audience of a basketball game. However, this is not the case with poetry; "Poetry teaches you to say 'yes' quietly - and at its best it doesn't let you escape from experience, from the hard business of living" (p. 47). Instead of moving on to the next play, a poem has to dwell on their work, even own up to their failures and attempt to work through them.

Just like basketball, poetry is hard work; it takes dedication and commitment, and sometimes you need the right confluence of forces to bring out the best in you - your 'Richies'. I have found that it often takes other people to push you in the right direction; I would say that, in terms of poetry, poets like T. S. Eliot or W. B. Yeats are my Richie Swartz - they are always 'better', and they push me to do better just so I can compete. However, there are also writers that I look to for inspiration, such as Allen Ginsberg and Charles Bukowski, whose writing offers suggestions and ways to do better in my own work. While not active presences in my life, they give me both inspiration and competition, which provides the proper motivation for me to improve my own poetry.

B. Personal difficulty in "Moving Again" by Matthews, "I Wish I had a Guru" by Fountain, and "The Elder Sister" by Olds.

The theme of personal difficulty is one commonly found in poems; many times, the poet is expressing the character's need to overcome adversity, which often comes from within. Typically, some of the most difficult conflicts to deal with are internal ones, and poems that tackle these issues teach us how to handle questions of the soul and our own minds. The poems "Moving Again" by William Matthews, "I Wish I Had a Guru" by Carrie Fountain, and "The Elder Sister" by Sharon Olds exemplify this theme of personal difficulty by showing the characters addressing incredible personal trials.

Matthews' "Moving Again" finds a father checking out the beautiful scenery of his new hometown with his children. It is implied that these are children of divorce, and that custody rests with their mother; "If I lived with my sons all year I'd be less sentimental about them." This helps to explain the incredible sentimentality he feels about them, which then extends to the amazing mountains and trees that he overlooks with them. The narrator's personal difficulty lies in his inability to smoothly deal with change - throughout the poem, he wonders about the future, and what will happen after he is dead; even the mountains may be different. Eventually, he recognizes the importance of memory as an anchor for his own experiences, tying him to the regrets about the divorce and losing constant contact with his children - "Memory is our root system." The narrator of Williams' poem is trying to handle loss and his own immortality, as he thinks about things that are going to change without him.

In "I Wish I Had a Guru," Carrie Fountain's speaker laments the poor decisions she has made in her life. Her personal difficulties are not explicitly

stated in the play, but they are implied to be so great that the narrator literally wishes she had a "bad" guru who "takes all the measly particulars of life and works them into one simple, fucked thing." The narrator's story implies a very stressful and arduous trip to the hospital, in which she drove herself to the emergency room, yet another in a long laundry list of failures she wishes she could wipe away. The narrator wishes for a fresh start, to be able to escape the feeling that she often makes mistakes and takes for granted the wonderful gift of life - the realization that "you are one being inside one body, sealed, exquisite, animate" This poem demonstrates the guilt and remorse people feel at their mistakes, and the desire for a fresh start we never truly get.

In Sharon Olds' "The Elder Sister," the narrator discusses the jealousy and envy she feels at her older sister for coming first - for her birth experience being the one that is shining and new and triumphant. Being younger, she feels like an also-ran, but also sees the ways in which the elder sister protected her, taking the blows that she did not. Then again, the narrator takes little comfort in this, since "She protected me, not as a mother / protects a child, with love, but as / a hostage protects the one who makes her / escape as I made my escape, with my sister's / body held in front of me." The younger sister's personal difficulty is in living in her elder sister's shadow, while at the same time the first sister gets points for taking all of the responsibilities that the younger sister did not have to.

## **Works Cited**

Dunn, Stephen. "Basketball and Poetry: The Two Richies." *Walking Light: Memoirs and Essays on Poetry*.

Fountain, Carrie. "I Wish I Had a Guru."

Fountain, Carrie. "I Wish I Had a Guru."

Matthews, William. "Moving Again."

Olds, Sharon. "The Elder Sister."