

First Game

Late winter afternoon. The gym bleachers are stuffed
not quite shoulder to shoulder with heavysset
mothers and fathers, parkas unlashed, tired haunches

roosting on the narrow benches. Walking babies zip
ponderously back and forth along the footways, clutching
soggy Fig Newtons. Eighth-grade girls cluster in a corner,

sucking up Mountain Dew and trying on each other's shoes.
Hot little boys bounce up and down like basketballs,
wishing they *were* basketballs, or basketball stars,

or their older brothers, or dragons. The hot little boys
shoot out loud dreams like BBs, bouncing up and down
incessantly, and the walking babies briefly quit

zipping and bounce up and down companionably,
and the girls in the corner suddenly scatter, inserting
themselves into tight spots next to their parents

or scooping up a walking baby and squeezing her till
she burps and drops her wet cookie onto her father's boot.
Like poltergeists, two eighth-grade boys materialize

on the gym floor wearing whistles. The rumor flies:
Nate and Scott are the refs! Sheepishly, the refs pop
layups, and the eighth-grade girls snicker sardonically.

The hot little boys clap and bounce up and down
and blow earsplitting solos on invisible whistles. The girls
drop the babies and regroup in the corner, smirking

and confabulating. And now the walking babies
shriek, “Bubby!” because here they come,
the seven fifth- and sixth-grade boys of the Harmony School

B-team basketball squad, running heel to heel, full tilt,
circling the outside foul line, glossy blue-and-white uniforms
fluttering from their narrow shoulders, rosy faces glowing,

skinny legs pumping, fluorescence sparking off bent eyeglasses:
and it’s thrilling and sad and beautiful and painfully sweet:
it’s the Charge of the Light Brigade, and the crowd’s chatter

shivers into silence because, at such moments, a parent’s
throat aches too much to cheer. It’s pride they feel,
but also sorrow, and loneliness, watching their red-cheeked

sons dash so recklessly away in their bright tunics
like they’re galloping toward the horizon.
The moment trembles, fragile as sea foam, and then

crashes and fades when the Athens B-team thunders in
from the boys’ bathroom and the Athens parents
on the other side of the gym let out their ordinary

whoops and howls, and the Harmony cavalry
recedes into a clutter of benched eleven-year-olds
slurping Gatorade, poking each other in the ribs,

and surreptitiously waving at their mothers.
On the floor, the starters fling foul shots in a hiatus
of peaceful chaos, the refs slink into corners

to try out their whistles, the crowd relaxes into vagary
until the janitor honks the buzzer, the walking babies
yelp, and the season opener erupts:

and in these first seconds, every non-baby in the gym
understands that the Harmony B-team is doomed.
Like a covey of bewildered little partridges, or Pickett's boys

innocently galumphing up a Gettysburg ridge,
our players stumble face-first into slaughter.
They fumble every pass, dribble on their ankles,

aim layups two feet below the backboard, congregate
helplessly under the basket as a fat Athens booby
nails yet another three-pointer; and even the refs'

incompetent favors can't save them. The little boys
in the bleachers scowl in starstruck disbelief,
and jaded grandparents mutter, "These boys

gotta get *tough*." Packed together in their corner,
the eighth-grade girls shout, "Idiots! Steal the ball!"
and "Oh my God, you suck!" and in that instant

an alarm, a buffalo instinct, ripples among the parents:
an obstinate, unspoken urge to circle their hapless calves,
and though the girls in the corner keep broadcasting

their brothers' ineptness, and the hot little boys
bad-mouth the scoreboard, and the walking babies
wail because they can't have the ball,

the Harmony mothers and fathers square their feet,
shift their heavy shoulders, and do what needs to be done:
they radiate a stream of loyal affection so dense and united

that the very air begins to smell of love—
not just for their own sons, but for every clumsy, familiar
body on the floor, for every boy who ever built Lego race cars

on their carpet or dug for gold in their driveway, for every Scout
who sold them bad popcorn or collected their Coke cans,
for every pain-in-the-ass they ever yelled at to stop

jumping on the beds—and it billows through the gym, this love,
like a spring mist, or maybe laughing gas, and our boys
panting on the floor glance up at their parents, goggle-eyed,

doglike in their relief. They would not be amazed
to witness their tired fathers stomping onto the court
in mechanics' pants and work boots and barricading

the Athens huns in the storage room until the Harmony boys
can even-up the score. It's not that they're expecting this miracle.
But love is a solace, though no one in the gym dreams

of speaking those words. The players are minutes
into their first game, and already everyone has forgotten
their glory. The hot little boys expound on good ideas

for squelching opponents, such as glue and trip wires. Babies
hiccup and suck dirt off their fingers, but mothers and fathers
salute every single happiness they see, even after one son

bounces a pass off another's head, even after a third son
carefully hands the ball to an Athens guard like a birthday
cake. So when Nate the ref finally figures out how to blow

his whistle and his accidental shriek echoes off the D.A.R.E.
posters like a supersonic train wreck, Harmony cheers
to beat the band. The game's already a lost cause,

but joy matters. The parents shift their weight on the hard
benches and pull wet babies onto their knees. The girls
chant, "Whis-tle, whis-tle. . . ." Athens swishes a second

foul shot. And those lead-foot boys in blue
lurching hopelessly after the loose ball?
Don't worry. They belong to us.