**“Execution” by Edward Hirsch**

The last time I saw my high school football coach  
He had cancer stenciled into his face  
Like pencil marks from the sun, like intricate  
Drawings on the chalkboard, small *x's* and o's

*5* That he copied down in a neat numerical hand  
Before practice in the morning. By day's end  
The board was a spiderweb of options and counters,   
Blasts and sweeps, a constellation of players  
Shining under his favorite word, *Execution*,

*10* Underlined in the upper right-hand corner of things.  
He believed in football like a new religion  
And had perfect unquestioning faith in the fundamentals   
Of blocking and tackling, the idea of warfare  
Without suffering or death, the concept of teammates

*15*  Moving in harmony like the planets — and yet  
Our awkward adolescent bodies were always canceling  
The flawless beauty of Saturday afternoons in September,   
Falling away from the particular grace of autumn,  
The clear weather, the ideal game he imagined.

*20* And so he drove us through punishing drills   
On weekday afternoons, and doubled our practice time,  
And challenged us to hammer him with forearms,  
And devised elaborate, last-second plays — a flea-  
Flicker, a triple reverse — to save us from defeat.

*25* Almost always they worked. He despised losing   
And loved winning more than his own body, maybe even  
More than himself. But the last time I saw him  
He looked wobbly and stunned by illness,  
And I remembered the game in my senior year

*30*  When we met a downstate team who loved hitting  
More than we did, who battered us all afternoon  
With a vengeance, who destroyed us with timing  
And power, with deadly, impersonal authority,  
Machine-like fury, perfect execution.

1. How does the meaning of the word ‘execution’ change throughout the poem? How does the poet achieve this shift effectively?

2. Note examples of imagery and their effect on the meaning and tone of the poem as a whole.

3. Does one have to understand or love football to understand this poem? Explain.