

“The Basketball Coach at Fifty”

At fifty, I suppose, it's an honor
they still let me play. My body remembers
what to do but doesn't want to do it:
the ball comes to me on a bounce my shoulder
fakes I swing around the first kid easy
spot a teammate cutting to the left and
automatic whip it behind my back
for an easy lay-up. In my mind
it's complete. Only, the ball hits my back,
deflects into the wrong man's hands
and off he goes the other way, a quick dunk
for the wrong side. A lifetime of smoking,
drinking, excesses too vivid to repeat
go with me on the court and everywhere.
But still, I love the game. In all my dreams
the baskets that I've made and missed return
slow motion in the dark, a not-so-instant
replay of those rare times when body eyes
and heart conspired to work together.
I think of heaven, sometimes, as a place
where basketball is God's elected sport—
an adolescent fantasy, no doubt—
but see, they float up and down the court
soundlessly calling encouragement and praise
in a delirium of the phantom body's
immaculate control:
the breathless wonder of its ways.