“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.