

## THE OLD MAN PLAYS SOFTBALL

Once my left hand is in the glove  
aged rust falls away and the young player  
within awakens. Muscles that never forgot  
are instantly alert. Excited feet, inside cleats,  
take me to the spot on the grass where I await the first toss.

My right arm becomes more limber after repeated tosses.  
I savor my body in the throwing motion, luxuriate  
in the aroma of fresh cut grass in the spring afternoon,  
surrender to serenity of softballs popping the gloves,  
delight in seeing my warm up partner smile as she throws the ball back.

I am excited as a foal galloping in a pasture for the first time,  
running to catch a fly ball or to gather a grounder bounding  
in my direction. I'm a young man at play when I throw  
the ball back to the infield.

What was,  
always is.

When mates and I take the field, we stand in the spots  
we've seemed to always know though we've long ago  
forgotten who taught us the skills we still remember  
through the eternity since we last practiced.

Through the innings, though the muscles remember,  
I cannot move as I once did to get the glove to the ground  
as the ball goes between my legs into the outfield.  
I am not quick enough to scoop it as it bounces along  
the outfield lines. I can move to the bag and be ready  
for the throw the glove craves from the fellow infielder.

Off the field, my hands crave the bat. I caress the handle  
as if it were foreplay before settling into the grip.  
In isolation, the body moves through the swing as I imagine  
the bat hitting the ball. But memory does not guarantee repetition.  
I don't not always connect nor hit a line drive far afield.  
I can no longer run bases with speed and balance.

Afterward, I feel the aching joints  
of the decaying body though I am soothed  
in the sweat streaming truth through the skin.

## THE LAST PITCH

It was slow, unlike the other pitches I threw.  
It did not break down and away from him  
as I wanted it to. I could see his hips shifting,  
his forearm muscles bulging, his eyes focusing

on the ball, belt high, as the fat part  
of his bat collides with it.  
The exploding crack shatters  
my sight and rips through my chest.

The ball arcs off his bat  
to the sky over left center field.  
The outfielders jog a few steps,  
then end the chase.

I can sense his leaping,  
celebrating the connection,  
pumping his fist before  
running the bases.

I turn away as the ball  
clears the fence, cast my gaze  
to the grass as I begin the longest  
walk to the edge of the field,

seeking shelter in the dugout  
to flee the teammates I failed  
and to hide my despair. I shut  
out the crowd's roar, ignore

the runners touching home plate.  
I am devoured by the sore shoulder  
and the arm that betrayed me.  
I fear it has no more pitches to throw.

### **STRIKE THREE**

I dig my rear cleat  
into the dirt of the box  
and put my weight  
on the rear leg,  
adjust the grip  
on the bat  
and set my stance.

The pitcher stares at me  
like a sniper on his target.  
He slightly nods, then turns  
and lifts his left leg,  
beginning his wind-up.  
From his stride  
and follow through,  
the ball explodes,  
from his hand,  
speeding with spin  
and tailing away.

I try to connect, to hear the crack,  
sense the solid contact.  
My body loses balance  
as the bat whiffs the air  
while the ball whizzes  
into the catcher's mitt  
with a deathly thump.