

Chronic Ills

— Paul Turner (August 1, 2002)

My Father: Don't go to sleep angry.

I.

Sunday school was not suspended this Mother's Day:
Father flipped out.

He railed against his father,
dumping a mailbag of his own foibles and his follies.
I wept and wept.

II.

I watched his shaving blunders,
and the fix-it styptic technique.

Expecting the cheap cologne,
I drew a shallow breath and ran off to the kitchen
to take in deeply the baloney and eggs.

In search of trees,
we moved out of the west Bronx into Queens,
a post-war row of houses, up and down the avenue.

In search of milk that first day,
I roamed blocks toward the turnpike, then
backtracked past the garden apartments to
the identical blocks of ivy and hedge.
I cried at the willow, where is my home?

Neighborhood kids ran after me
to echo words of my father,
and cackle and wait:

“Come straight home.”
(Breathe Paul)

Father rescued me one block off course,
and talked up the movie for Saturday,
the bridge crossing, and the walk through Central Park.

III.

Home for dinner, I brought him homework.
After chewing a bit of brisket,
father bolted to the Sunday-only car,
turned over thoughts and waited out his jag.

And what of a son who
listens to the songs of his father
and travels with him to the supplier
and stocks the shelves for him?

Father leaves for the far-off house,
And registers in suffering and in reverse.

Not getting help, he yields to the noise of other men,
or his private world in the day room.

Sitting constantly under an open window,
the right side of his face collapsed with palsy.
Between rants and pleas,
he retreated to the world of his forebears,
similarly possessed.

IV.

In the presence of an analyst
who asks about the love for the father
and is willing to wait for the answer,

My anger didn't wait for simpatico.
my ticket to understanding expired
with my father's coming home again.

Racing home to chant the news,
"School of Performing Arts accepted me,"
father greeted me at the front door, in his robe,
with a riff, no lost beat:

"What time are you coming home tonight?"
Joy—a lonely lap through halls in a lousy junior high.

V.

Back on the road, Dad visits rooms, both upstate and downstate.
At Montrose VA Hospital, he joins the veterans' band, aided by pills,
And hones a simple rant, well within the six-month run.

Our lives had lightness those months:
We needed the man, not his pain, nor his song.

“Paul, he’s coming home again, PAUL”
Sister shouted outside the shower door:
Exposing the lie and the dread.

Last hospitalization’s the longest—
Local rooms off the park with a view.

I saw him once in those six years,
Above cloverleaves, other connections,
Wherein he tamped down
A life that was led.