

SAUL TOUSTER

The Professor Has Appointments to Keep

i. The Waiting Room

Speak up. Speak up. It's Greek to him. The young
all mumble. Here, selective halos come
and go, first-naming everyone, and there
the world fast falls to fragments. No one can
keep up with it. *Don't say I'm slow: I'm calm.*
He learns the clinic's jargon, how to take
his meds, offers specimens to test
the body's grammar of humility.
Yes, he's full of piss and maybe
vinegar. Too much coming in, too fast.
He waits. Another voice. Another wait.
Another diagnosis. For him, pain
and denial—uninvited guests—linger
in the waiting room, the last to go.

ii. The Lottery

Tempted, taken in, he buys a chance on
eternity's all-expense-paid trip
to India—teeming with prior souls—
and wins! And dumped into the chanting street
where gods, adept at smoke and artifice,
lead him through a maze of trash and bone,
shadowed by mountains of discarded dreams.
This visit was supposed to be a run-through.
Not so: it's no rehearsal for ascent
at all. As herded tourist, hurried on
to Taj Mahal, he turns instead to Kama
Sutra, pulsing like a burnt-out star.
A few small things come clear: reality
is trump, and Dealer always wins.

iii. *He visits the Surgeon*

Reluctantly he asks his wife to join him.
She says, *We both are failing*. He agrees.
He doesn't hear the way he used to . . .
It takes four ears, She says, the umpteenth time.
What if he never danced again? *It's not
the end*. He fidgets, taps his feet, and when
he's called, he rises, takes her arm, and moves
her like a shadow of his waltzing self.
The news is not so good, but strangely calms.
The choice he has is not a choice at all.
Afterwards they talk it through, go back
and forth, a two-step, back and forth, and pause
and step, and pause, and dip, and swing again,
two wind-blown swaying trees, together, one.

iv. *The Sporting Green*

Entering his eighties, he's into *Sports*
again, his Body talking, Brain reacting,
keeping time, but Body stutters now
with clippings of his exploits hard to read,
attendance down, and him uncoachable.
Who'd see him on the playing field again?
He could come back, it's always possible.
Retired number, he wrestles with himself.
But still the Sporting Life runs in his blood
like ink that flows in headline history.
Young athletes think of records to be made
but he the past—remembered, devilish—
fussing over details. The stand-outs don't
stand up, the photo stills all negatives.

v. He Comes Out of Surgery

Nothing comes of nothing, except the falling.
But he does come out of it, falling free.
Color returns. He gags on air. Eyes closed,
he hears the space he's traveling through—by train,
the throbbing wheels his own. He senses hands.
The tubes do all his thinking. Will She wait?
If only bringing nurses to him. Days
to come will find him clear-eyed, picky, weak.
Later he learns the stairs and walks the halls,
his hand in hers, two odd post-doctorates
starting small, and if they think of time
they are oblivious to dreams, but learn
through everyday routines that ancient knack:
to walk on water, groundlessly assured.

vi. He Rises to Face Judgment in the Mirror

Dreamed out, he wakes and rises groggy, scratches,
furrows his brow, and sees his morning judge:
piercing eyes, grim mouth. It's no surprise.
A strong resemblance to his father . . . *ugh!*
And-have-you-anything-to-say-before . . .
Without a bailiff's hand to lead him, he
returns to his old cell to serve his term:
a basin, bowl and cot will be enough.
That he's not been drawn and quartered, or
sent to maximum security, must mean
that something's working. Still the darkening
despair is not dispelled until the smell
of breakfast toast and coffee wafts upstairs
and, shocking, brings the governor's reprieve.

vii. He Looks Both Ways

Nature bestows its gifts with strings attached,
tangling the greenery that sets his stage
and ties him down to earth. And there he wastes
away regardless of plot, tongue or music
and, looking both ways, spends his gold, and waits
because he's born to wait, and if he falters
it's because he's out of breath, anxious not
to be hurt, be out of date, be left alone.
History, that crocodile, stares him down
until the hungry creature makes its strike,
tail lashing, water splashing. *Eat*
or be eaten: words to the wise turn up
to fill his aching undernourished heart.
The wonder is that he has come this far.

viii. He Enters Physical Therapy

Rehab and healing time are not enough
to prove the body: he capitulates.
His work—he sighs—will not repair the world.
'Avoid all pain,' so say the kneading hands
he gives himself to. Must this be, he asks,
the moral maxim for the rest of life?
His wife and he lie dry as pebbles on
a beach and wait for surf to moisten them.
An imitation of himself, that's how
he feels as he begins to move: a gear
that creaks, a something to be figured out.
When *Simon says, you may take giant steps*,
he wills himself to step, but takes it small,
not very far, and slow as flesh itself.

ix. He Fails His Elegy

He can't come close to anything near death.
He thinks of rivers running dry, of birds
that sing and can't be heard. And songs of love?
They're not for me. These are old songs he hums
in time to make his patched-up heart calm down,
or bring back hours that ache, or send him west
too soon to finish what he has to do:
the process tentative, the outcome sure.
He can't do heavy lifting now, nor She.
He might repair a lamp, She mend a blouse.
Their treasures don't seem treasures any more.
Everything is background, climate, drift.
Along a stony shore, he brailles his way,
and wind lifts veils from faces never seen.

x. Epitaph for a Small Thought

The light is not quite right, the air is thick,
the birds stretch the sky tight around the earth—
bandaged like a mummy, he thinks. She, too,
is bound to sleep in winding cloth amid
the shards of broken beauties everywhere
to be discovered in a million years,
a find in someone else's paradise,
speculation's fossil, fate's quietus.
Love on a falling star might change his life
but nothing new will greet him in the vault
of absences and pain whose name is heaven.
Loaded with gifts, he slides into black holes
where all he ever dreamed of here dissolves
in sucking sounds beyond the grip of words.

