

Visiting Eli Mandel

I

Some things are truly hard.
Seeing you like this
at the Castleview Home for the Aged,
colorless, eyes vacant,

and those other pale shades
that hover about us. Is this
what Coleridge meant
by his Life-In-Death?

I wished to make more
of what they related:
your hurling food,
tearing off your shirt

baring down to the elemental
like Blake's Ezekiel,
but no,
as the orderly reminded:

"these small aggressions
of the stroke victim."

II

What should remain unsaid?
When I spoke your name
you put your hand up
as to cover your face
and I thought you were embarrassed
that I should see you, shirtless
skeleton without language,
though the nurse assured
you were beyond such caution.

And ought I be embarrassed to write this?
How much of the real, Eli,
do we let in: the sour smell
of the institution, your one good arm
darting out to grasp the dark railing:
was that the desperation
I found so attractive
in your poems
or blind reflex?

III

I swallow these images
and go back in time
to your sharp comments
on my manuscripts

your eyes flashing over the text,
displaced scribe of Kiev,
always leading me, the slow student,
into the unexpected perspective,

then, and strangely now,
now with this greatest of all puzzles
as I sit and talk to you
or to your silent presence

and make
my connection.

Kenneth Sherman