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## Poet's Manhattan memories win Bronx award

by Maya Rajamani

It took moving away from Washington Heights — the neighborhood where he grew up — for Paul “Pinny” Bulman to be able to write about his experiences there.

“Sometimes it takes a little bit of distance to give you perspective,” said the poet, a 2014 Bronx Recognizes Its Own (BRIO) winner for poetry.

Much of Mr. Bulman’s work focuses on imagery and ideas from his native New York City; his most recent project, a collection of poems entitled *old shul*, recalls his childhood in Washington Heights, at a time when the area’s once-vibrant Jewish community was moving away, the byproduct of an ever-changing New York.

“The years that I grew up there, the neighborhood had gone through a lot of transitions,” he said.

In his youth, he and his family went to the shul on 179th Street, though he recalls a dwindling membership and the vanishing of other shuls in the area. Some became supermarkets with Stars of David on the side; others were simply shells of buildings.

His poem “shadows” describes an evening of prayer at his shul.

*we godspeak to the rhythm  
of backfiring buses  
and the strains of merengue  
from the neighboring building  
to which half the empty room  
is subconsciously swaying*

In spite of the sense of dislocation older community members felt, in a neighborhood that was now mostly Dominican, Mr. Bulman says the two worlds came together for him, creating what felt like a norm.

“Their dislocation was my home,” he said. “In the dislocation, it’s possible to find beauty there, too.”

A graduate of Yeshiva University and St. John’s University who received a doctoral degree in psychology, Mr. Bulman works for a non-profit mental health agency in the Bronx.

Part of his work focuses on a program for children with emotional difficulties. The organization offers specialized, therapeutic school programs for the children with whom it works.

He spends part of his hour-long bus commute to work each day writing on scraps of paper, tucked away in his pocket, until his bus ride home. The commuter activity some would find distracting actually facilitates his writing process.



Paul 'Pinny' Bulman, a Bronx Council on the Arts BRIO winner for poetry, reads from a book of poems at his home on July 24.

Photo: Marisol Diaz/Riverdale Press

“I’ve always felt, growing up in the city, there’s a sense of privacy and anonymity that I can feel in a crowd,” he said.

Mr. Bulman has lived in Riverdale for the past seven years with his wife, Melissa. In his living room on July 24 — walls covered with artwork created by his two children, Avishai, 6, and Ariella, 11 — he described picking up poetry again — which he had only dabbled in in earlier years — after the sudden death of his father in 2002, who was also a wordsmith.

“He was a wonderful poet — a wonderful father also,” said Mr. Bulman, who described a sort of inspiration that came with experiencing such a profound loss. “Somehow his passing unlocked something in me.”

The poems he wrote after his father’s passing make up a collection entitled *Smoker*. The late Aaron Bulman, a long-time smoker who often struggled to fulfill his passion for poetry while working at an insurance company, had planned to write a long-form poem about the Holocaust and its survivors, called *Smokers*, but never had the chance.

“If there’s one poet who’s most informed me, it’s certainly him,” Mr. Bulman said.

Though the soft-spoken poet has had reservations about publishing his works, his father and a poet friend involved with a journal called *Mima’amakim* encouraged him to share his works.

“I felt the sense that if I’m writing these things... I do want to share them more broadly than that — get them out there and find them homes,” said the writer, who has had his works published in *Mima’amakim*, *Poetica*, and the *Jewish Daily Forward*’s art blog.

One of the poems from the old shul collection won a first honorable mention for the 2013 Anna Davidson Rosenberg Poetry Award.

Much of Mr. Bulman’s work is informed by his Jewish faith, influenced by biblical and Talmudic passages. The old shul collection, he says, explores what it means for spaces that were once sacred to become something other than that. Although religious themes are woven in, he is hesitant to limit the description of his poems.

“What I’d like to be doing is touching on more universal themes through the lens of a Jewish heritage,” he said.

Some of his poems combine images of Judaism and Jerusalem with memories of his father. In “music lesson,” excerpted below, he recalls his father’s passion for music. Often, his family would gather on the couch while Aaron Bulman played two different versions of the same song for his family to compare; for example, one by Bob Dylan, another by the Grateful Dead.

*long after  
the music lesson ends  
he shakes his fingers  
of rhythmic anticipation  
at a captive audience  
while smoking memory  
down to the filter*