

Three Poems by Robert Cooperman

Like Lincoln

For the three days it took his father to die—
shoved down a flight of stairs: his head
with more fracture lines than a worn-out,
birthday balloon—Sammy sat at his bedside:
tubes in his mouth, nose, and arms,
roads going nowhere, his breaths so labored
Sammy's lungs ached to watch him gasp.

“Don't try to talk,” Sammy caressed his hand,
but his father kept repeating the old family joke:
how much his face resembled the crags
that carved President Lincoln's features.

“I guess I'm going to find out,” he wheezed
like a bellows with a hole in it, then, silence.

Years later, over our old-friend-reminiscing-
and-regretting beers, Sammy sighs and shrugs,

“He didn't curse fate or try to identify
the suspect, as if he'd been waiting
from the moment he was born for some perp
to shove him; at least he went peaceful.”

If Sammy and I believed in the other side,
maybe we'd say that President Lincoln
will welcome his dad as a twin or blood brother.
But all we have is the certain knowledge
that this life is a dream that always ends badly,

and all we have is the fragile, creaking stairway
of families and old friends.

A Good Fast

“A good fast,” I wish a friend,
Yom Kippur starting tonight;
what my father used to wish
his brother when I was a kid:
meaning you don’t pass out
in synagogue heat, your stomach
doesn’t grumble for other
congregants to hear;

you’re not tempted to break
your fast early, or sneak water,
though your lips are cracked as the Gobi;
that you think of repentance,
not that glass of orange juice,
that slab of buttered challah
with which you’ll end your fast,

nor do you think—as I did
as a teenager—about the Syracuse
game I didn’t get to watch
before returning to shul—
even if I bled Syracuse orange
and would’ve carried Ernie Davis’
helmet to the far ends of the earth,
would’ve opened a vein
when he was diagnosed with leukemia;

or so I told myself, when all the good
fasting, prayer, and repentance
in the world couldn't have saved him.

Three Times: Dreams of World War II, the European Theatre

Three times, Great Aunt Greta
dreamed Uncle Frank was in danger;
she'd awake sweating, moaning,
ready to throw a black shawl
over her head and keen
for the last of her lost boys.

Days after those dreams,
the War Department telegraphs
informed her that her son
had been wounded in action.

Each time, he was returned
to the necessity of killing,
and like a lot of combat vets,
he never talked about the war
after Frank finally came home:
safe, three raised scars, like medals,
adorning his chest: Great Aunt Greta
just thankful to have one son left.

Still, those dreams became part
of the family folklore: whispered
by nieces, nephews, and grandchildren,
especially when whiskey flowed

after Frank had moved away
and Great Aunt Greta had passed
into whatever gathering of souls
there is, or just the grave silence:
infinitely huge or utterly small.

Robert Cooperman's latest collections are *Little Timothy In Heaven* (March Street Press) and *THE Lily Of The West* (Winbd Publications). His work has appeared in *The Sewanee Review*, *Slant*, and previously in *The Homestead Review*.