

Robert Cooperman

At Manhattan Beach

Before our parents let us walk down to the ocean,
I was told to hold my little brother's hand and not let go,
though at ten, my thick-as-crockery eyeglasses
were tucked safely inside my mother's beach bag.

Jeff and I staggered past the maze of sunbathers,
families, kids horsing around or playing cards,
couples who were all hands and mouths.
At the water: seaweed hula-danced in the tide,
along with the small slimy bags we took for jellyfish.
Still, we swam, then tried to find our parents' blanket.

I squinted at blurs of women with kids, young men
preening in their sweaty strength and agility;
old men with white-fur chests, smoking cigars,
lost in their racing forms; old women knitting,
reading bestsellers, kids playing catch.

While I Boris Karloff-Mummy-lurched—
certain, in my blindness, we'd never find our spot—
Jeff, six, but a sense of direction like Lewis and Clark,
retraced our steps, assuring me he knew where he was going.

Mom handed us beach towels, Dad grabbed her hand,
and ordering me to watch out for my little brother,
they walked stately as visiting royalty to the water.

Jeff found us cooler-sandwiches; I wiped away
the tears of my terror at being lost, and fumbled on
my eyeglasses: the responsible older brother again,
almost an adult, ready to protect Jeff against all perils.

The Cleaning Ladies

When friends visited, Beth and I used to spring
into frantic action with dust rags, mops,
buckets of water that turned muddier
than puddles drought-desperate animals lapped up,
our moods slightly more foul than grizzlies in spring,
and of course we'd fall asleep over dinner.

Now, we hire a pair of maids once a month or so:
young ladies who bubble away in the Spanish
I wish I understood, not so much to confirm
they think me more useless than a bristle-less broom,

but to hear their joys, sorrows, to surprise them
with congratulations, commiserations,
us three sharing beers, their spilled complaints
about their boss, husbands, boyfriends, families,
and if they can go home, or if it's too dangerous,
and how do they like it here, what their dreams are,

unless America has beaten their dreams out of them,
the way it seems to do to everyone but the superrich,
who own everything, thus happier, cleaner
than the rest of us, though to those two young ladies,
Beth and I must seem millionaires, even if slovenly ones.

Barney's Daughter—the Lottery Ticket

This stranger claimed to be a friend of my father,
who doesn't speak to me, for marrying out:
reason enough to tell this guy to join my old man
in taking a swan dive off the Brooklyn Bridge.
But he said he had something for me from my father,
and for an instant a boney hand gripped my heart
that Dad was dead, smiling that I had to feel guilty
forever, for marrying Sam, who'd have converted,
but Dad smirked, "He'll convert his color?"

In a fury, I told the old fart that when he apologized
he'd be my father again; until then he was deader to me
than a stepped-on cockroach; Sam gasped, begged me
to apologize. "Like hell!" I shouted, and stormed out.

I reluctantly told this guy I'd meet him at a coffee shop;
he spotted me in a back booth, thanked me, and pushed
an envelope over. Inside, ten one-hundred dollar bills.

"From your father," he said, "he won it in the lottery
and wanted you to have it." Yeah, right; he'd make me
beg like a lap dog, then spit, "For your gang banger husband,"
and tear it up, Sam a math professor, a loving husband
and father, unlike my all-too-often absent mobster father.

"You one of his goons?" I demanded, though he looked
more like an accountant than a bagman.

"He doesn't know I'm here," he blushed,
"We go to lunch and he wanted me to have it.
I was hoping it'd be the first step," he trailed off.

"Give it to charity," I slid the envelope back.
If only it had really come from Dad. If only.

Derek Boogard, Hockey Enforcer, Dead at Twenty-Eight, Gets a Second Life

That junior league hockey game,
fed up with getting checked and tripped
and with his own clumsy play—
never a threat to be the next Gretsky—
fifteen-year-old Derek snapped and took out
the opposing team and its coach.
Scouts salivated over what an animal
he could be in the NHL, goon extraordinaire,
nicknamed the Boogeyman, the beast
who'd skated out of a Super Villain comic book.
Fans roared for his gloves to come off
so he could splatter an opposing enforcer
all over the ice: play-by-play guys screamed
at the punches thrown, as if for Ali and Frazier.

He was the League's dirty secret: needing
more and more painkillers to get out of bed,
and finally overdosing, ruled an accident,
the coroner shocked at the dementia ravaged
neural pathways that resembled branches
ripped off trees by giant twisters.

The next time around, he ran a plant nursery,
a thumb green as the Jolly Green Giant,
a smile big as a banana leaf or elephant's ear,
showing customers how to coddle plants,
his fingernails gritty, but sweeter than the blood
and raw skin on his scarred and busted knuckles.
He'd have dinner ready for his wife—a sociology
professor at the local college—who kissed him
and gushed what a dear man he was, while he smiled,
trying to convince himself he really deserved
this peaceful, happy-ever-after second life.

Robert Cooperman's latest collections are *Draft Board Blues* (FutureCycle Press) and *City Hat Frame Factory* (Kelsay Books). Cooperman's work has appeared previously in *Homestead Review*, as well as in *The Sewanee Review*, *The North American Review*, and elsewhere.