

States of the Union

RACING THROUGH CHILDHOOD

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

*And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodlands I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.*

—A. E. HOUSMAN

HOUSMAN, to be sure, was always a bit dotty—at age 13 an avowed pagan, at 21 a faithful atheist and from that point on a self-confessed “pejorist” (he believed things were getting worse all the time). It wasn’t any wonder that by age 50 Housman and his poetry had taken to wandering through snowy woodlands, glorying in the grimness of it all. The half-century mark is hell on pejorists.

For myself, the approach of a 50th birthday has prompted a more cheerful senescence. I’ve been remembering some random scenes from my early childhood, small happenings that occurred at our house on Linwood Avenue when I had seen but six or seven Springs; and I’ve been jotting down these mild recollections in a notebook, hoping they may arrange themselves in ways that will please children and not bore adults. What I have here, then, are the ramshackle beginnings of a work-in-progress.

It was, to judge from my notes, a regrettably conventional childhood, circumscribed by hearth and family, lacking both drama and trauma. The only “identity crisis” I suffered back then was a comically literal one, and it lasted three seconds.

*That new boy across the street,
Gram says. He looks a lot like you.
I go to the window and watch the
boy.
He is leaning against a black tree.
No. He’s not me.*

Mostly what I recollect are the thousands of hours spent with my brother Phil, four years my senior, who seemed always close by; then I think of the bedroom we shared, of the dark that filled our room and of certain lights that penetrated our common nights; finally, I recall running running running, always running. Like the wing-footed Hermes, more boy than god, I was a compulsive racer. I even raced myself.

*Once I ran like blazes
into a clanging green lamppost,
and something small fell on the
grass.*

*I picked it up and spit blood.
When my tongue found the hole,
I started to cry.
Then I thought:
To knock out a tooth
you have to be very fast.
Never mind, they said,
it’s just a baby tooth.*

The Hermes reference comes naturally. Thanks to my brother’s athletic imagination, he and I staged our own Olympics, just the two of us, by the side of our house. It was the year that Jesse Owens struck a blow for democracy by beating all the Aryan runners in Berlin, and probably the only moment in my childhood when, among all my fantasies, I pretended to be a black man. (I never identified with Joe Louis—perhaps because he was too stereotypically “colored”; but I felt close to him on one occasion when the mother of a gentile friend of mine, thinking to praise me, told my mother that I was “a credit to the Hebrew race.”)

*Brother’s got
a Mickey Mouse watch
that ticks off seconds
with a red needle.
We race out back.
I crouch down by the garage.
Get ready . . . get set . . . go!
I’m pumping down the driveway,
hands clenched, eyes squinched,
the pavement a gray blur.
Exactly forty-nine seconds.
All morning I churn out new
records.
Legs shaking, side aching,
I hold out a hand.
Let me time you.
No. You’ll break the watch.*

Right from the start, I understood that the race was to the swift. But being a small brother, I wasn’t always able to cash in on the insight.

*Hot day.
Brother and friends
run to hook up sprinkler.
Wait for me, brother.*

*Hose breaks.
Brother and friends
run to someplace else.
Wait for me, brother.*

*Can't chase.
Brother and friends
run out of sight.
Wait for me.*

*Barefoot on the hot sidewalk,
I sulk homeward,
toppling anthills.
I stomp the running ants.*

The fear of being left behind, and therefore alone, is certainly a small-brother curse. I kept chasing my future, in the person of Phil, and I thought I would never catch up. But looking back, I'm astonished now at how patient my brother was and how willing he seemed to include me in his games and affections. He managed to confer a kind of romance on my small, humdrum life that I appreciated even then.

Our bedroom became part of that romance. It overlooked a wide, green bluff at the bottom of which wound the mighty Mississippi. We couldn't see the river but we knew it was there, and that pleased us. Closer by lay the rails of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul, and these were plainly visible, as were the orange and silver trains they carried—the Hiawatha and the Pioneer Limited. We knew their schedules, the precise moments they were supposed to whiz by, and also their stops between St. Paul and Chicago, towns like Red Wing, Winona, La-Crosse, New Lisbon, Tomah. At dusk we would sometimes go outside and tie wagons to our bikes—in my case, a trike—and recapitulate the entire Hiawatha itinerary, clattering up and down Linwood, even going as far as Avon Street, our “Milwaukee.” We kept to a tight schedule.

At night the trains beneath our window seemed to pull us, to induct us into their own swift glow. Suddenly we were all one.

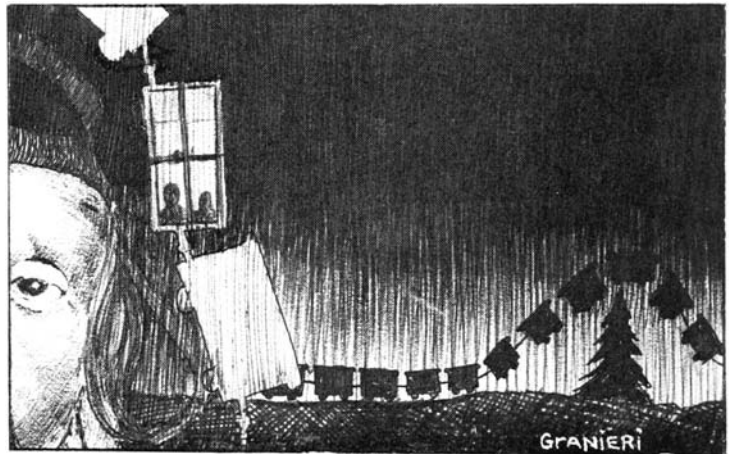
*In my brother's bed
we watch the Hiawatha*

*glimmer down the long valley.
The passengers,
they're in bed, too,
wondering if we're watching.
We are all moving.
We are all night eyes.*

WE LIVED IN A land-locked town, a thousand miles from the nearest ocean, yet our bedroom sported a nautical motif. It was Mother's doing. She bought wallpaper splotted with anchors, a lamp with a shade that looked like the sail of the Santa Maria and another lamp featuring a ship's wheel for a switch. Neither Phil nor I cared about boats, but we appreciated the loving dé-

*A pink blob of light
floats through my head,
right to left, right to left:
New York.*

So many of my memories seem to be from the indoors looking out. We were not what you would call an outdoorsy family. When my parents wanted to enjoy nature, they took us on polite picnics in Como Park, where we could water-bike upon the glassy waters of a perfectly round, artificial lake. Camping was not our style. Occasionally, though, we would venture as far as the woodlands of Wisconsin, where we would build a fire and roast “wienies” on pointed sticks. It was there, 44 springs



cor just the same. What we liked best in the room, though, was our radio, a small, black contraption that we kept on the nightstand between our beds. Actually, it belonged to my brother, and he played it with his customary romantic zest. Once in a while the darn thing got on my nerves.

*In the middle of the night
loud trumpets awake me.
My brother's new radio,
the one he got for all A's,
shines green and red in my eyes.
“Listen,” he hisses.
“It's New York.”*

*Oh, for Pete's sake.
I duck under the pillow.*

ago, that I spotted two deer gamboling near the St. Croix River. I remember very clearly thinking they must be brothers.

*Here by the river
I found two deer.*

*Two deer by the river
meandering near.*

*Near by the river
they romped and reared.*

*Reared by the river
and disappeared.*

*Disappeared by the river
disappeared forever
my two deer.*