

States of the Union

POEMS OF A SMALL BROTHER

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

“IT is through fraternity that liberty is saved,” observed Victor Hugo—and, in my case, that poetry is written. Here are some poems shaped from memories of my small-brother childhood. They are part of a sporadic work-in-progress (see “Racing Through Childhood,” NL, April 9, 1979) that is coming along at about the same rate I did some 40 years ago. Slow but steady.

NOW THAT I AM

*Before I was
my brother was an only
He ran alone,
not knowing he was lonely
Before I was
my brother had no brother
He slept alone,
not dreaming of another
Now that I am
we run and dream together,
imagining
no other kind of weather*

SOUPS AND JUICES

*Did you hear about my big brother?
The lucky stuff is sick
All day they bring him soups and
juices
When he calls, they come running
They keep puffing his pillow
I'm supposed to stay out*

*but tonight I peeked in
He was asleep
The dumb kid
had kicked off his blankets
so I went and covered him up
He looked small*

TWO WHEELS

*I told you I won't It's too hard
I told you I can't It's too hard
Didn't I tell you?
My feet, they won't reach
My hands, they won't steer
It's too hard*

*Watch out—I'm tipping
Don't let go—I'm falling
Please I give up*

*Not so fast, not so fast
I don't like this
Stop stop stop stop*

*Hey, I can't stop
Hey, I'm riding, I'm riding
Hey hey hey hey hey*

*Did you see me?
What did I tell you?
It was easy*

ALL MY HATS

*All my hats
are hats he wore
What a bore
All my pants
are pants he ripped*

What a gyp

*All my books
are books he read
What a head*

*All my fights
are fights he fought
What a thought*

*All my steps
are steps he tried
What a guide*

*All my teachers
call me by my brother's name
What a shame*

ONE PURPLE EVE

*One purple eve in June
our dinghy tips
and I fall through the glassy lake
Down down down down
sleepily down a jellied slope
Hold my breath Hold my brain
Hold everything
Up up up up
dreamily up a murmuring tunnel
The sky bursts The air shouts
In the glare I kick hard,
stretching toward my brother's hand*

UNCLE JULIUS

*My Uncle Julius died
His hands were bony
and his chin was rough
He gave me a dollar once
When our telephone split the dark
I could see the sound
saw-toothed lightning
Then I opened my eyes
and heard Gram crying
“Juliekin, my Juliekin”
Long ago they lived together
He was her little brother*

DINNERTIME

*Slowly slowly
glides his hand beneath the table
I see his fingers
clutch a corner of my napkin
Gently gently
slides the napkin off my lap
I pounce
Gotcha!*

*You two better stop that
Stop what?
Stop whatever it is you're doing
We're not doing anything
Then stop whatever it is you're not*

doing
Geez
Slowly slowly
glides my hand beneath the table
My fingers grope
Gently gently
slides the napkin

QUESTIONS

Are you asleep yet?
Sort of
Do you ever think of weird things?
Like what
Like the stars and planets and stuff?
Sometimes
How did they get started
Don't know
Are we all whirling around and
around?
Think so
What keeps us from falling off?
Gravity
Is gravity like God
Sort of
Then what keeps God from falling
off?
Are you asleep yet?

REGRETS

The time my brother
got his jacket hooked
along the crossbar
in the playground,
flopping like a puppet,
yipping like a puppy,
all his friends
just stood around and laughed
I should have kicked them

MELISSA

Melissa is my brother's girl
I see them walking home from school
The thing they do a lot is giggle,
him and his Melissa
Whenever no one else is home
he calls her on the telephone
You ought to hear the way they
croon,
him and his Melissa
Tonight as we lay in our beds
I told him I was good and mad
He didn't hear a word I said
Hum and his Melissa
Some day, I guess, I'll find a girl
who wants to walk me home from
school

She'll giggle like my brother's girl—
me and my Melissa

A JULY GOODBYE

Take your duffel bag and go
I'm tired of tripping on
that stuffed July of yours
the pocket knife, the bent canteen,
those scratchy woolen blankets for
your bunk
What junk
You'll be in the movie now,
the one Mr Finster flashes every fall
against our kitchen wall
We'll watch you squinting in the sun,
hiking the woods, shooting the rapids,
while old Mr Finster's film machine
hums and hums
Flicker flicker wave wave
Who will your bunk mate be?
Don't tell me
I have other things to think about
these fourteen unstuffed days
(Fifteen, if you count the day we
bring you back)

BENEATH THE DISTANT STARS

Beneath the distant stars we sleep,
back to back, deep to deep
Beneath December clouds we glide,
sled for sled, slide for slide
Beneath the buttonwood we fight,
nose to nose, spite to spite
Beneath the river bank we swim,
he to me, me to him
Beneath the smiling sky we ride,
mile by mile, side by side

BIG BROTHER SPEAKS

Brother, brother, hold my hand
Keep the dark from leaping in
Space between us can be spanned
Brother, brother, hold my hand
Can't reach
Brother, brother, turn around
Keep the light from leaking out
Pain between us can be downed
Brother, brother, turn around
It's cold
Brother, brother, hear my call
Keep the cold from seeping in
Ice between us can be thawed
Brother, brother, hear my call
Too sleepy
Brother, brother if you can
Keep the sleep from creeping in

Night between us needs a friend
Little brother, hold my hand
Well ok

CATCH

In this old mitt my fingers feel the
wrinkles
Smack
Those stingers tickle
My hand is either falling off or going
numb
Smack
Those hummers hum
Oops
There goes another ball we'll never
find
My palm won't mind

HOMEWORK

Where can I find a rain forest?
Where it's wet
What if it's only misty?
Who was Julius Caesar?
A Roman
Romans are only history
How do you spell Alaska?
Like it sounds
Sounds like an icy mystery
How do you do division?
Short or long?
Long's fine—if you're not too busy
When will I be smart?
When you spell
When you divide
When you conquer
When you can see the rain forest
for the trees
I'm getting dizzy

THE BOXER

My brother loves
his boxing gloves
Not me, not me
He ties them tight
so he can fight
Not me, not me
He points his toes
and aims his blows
at me, at me
He hits my eye
but I don't cry
Not me, not me
He drops his guard
I slug him hard
That's me