

# 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