

1

One evening, a man and a woman, parents to two daughters, watch *Oliver Twist* (1948), go to sleep, and in the morning, name their only son Oliver. The family rejoices (even though they are industrious refugees who previously celebrated nothing) and for several years buy him gifts, feed him sugar.

The eldest daughter resembles her brother until she wakes up one morning from a dream in which he lay in ermine, holding tightly to a scepter.

Soon after, her hips widen, one lone hair grows in her armpit. Sometimes the daughter feels like a son. Sometimes the son feels like a shadow.

"You can't draw inside the body," he says to his first grade teacher. "So why try to draw what's inside the body at all?"

2

If one has no brother, then one used to have a brother.

There is, you see, no shortage of gain and loss.

Let's admit without embellishment what we do with each other. When the daughter begins to walk, it is apparent that she ambles pigeon-toed. A doctor tells her alarmed parents that no surgery is needed, just some rollerskating. Each day after work, the father helps his daughter stay upright on her skates.

If you have a father, then you also have a son.

A child has difficulty weaning from nursing bottle to glass of milk. Concise in her expression of impatience, the mother pours a gallon of milk over the girl's head.

A tiger came across a donkey and having never seen a donkey before, mistook it for a god.

After everyone has gone to bed, an eldest child hoists her younger brother over her shoulders, then a sheet over his shoulders, and they sway as one into the middle sister's room.

Who is weak and who is weaker and what does relativity have to do with it?

3

Let me tell you a story about refugees. A mother and her dead son sit in the back seat of his car. It's intact, in their garage, and he is buckled in; she brushes the hair behind his ear. This is the old country and this is the new country and the air in the car is the checkpoint between them.

Let me tell you a story about seat belts. While driving her children to the local pool, a mother enumerates to her children their failures. *There was a mother, she says, who put her children in a car, sewing their seat belts so they couldn't unbuckle them, who drove them off a seaside cliff.*

A boy on a unicycle goes round and round a lighthouse, dodging tourists, ridicule, and awe. He doesn't go up, he doesn't fall down.

Son, says the mother, meaning child not her husband. Son, says the father, whose name is Son. Sister, says the son, lying in a coffin. *To hell with family,* says the rest of the family.

4

A brother is a brother when he has at least one sibling. The brother believes he is not a brother but one in name only.

When the brother meets a couple his parents' age, he takes the time to tell them he's an only child and an orphan. The three of them agree that one must not be without family, that there must be at least two in a family, that three is even better. They embrace and the couple encourages the brother, the brother waiting for the other shoe to drop. Whose shoe? His or the couple's?

Five pairs of shoes dangle from the pole of a traffic light. Over time, birds make a nest in each hollow, each separate space.

5

"Your hat is Mexican . . . ?" asks a sailor in Côte d'Azur.

"No, it's Moroccan."

"Are you from Japan?" asks a Moroccan shopkeeper in Marseille.

"No, I'm American."

Is belonging and fulfillment possible without family? No. Is it possible with family? No.

You cannot connect if you keep answering no.

You cannot keep your brother alive if you keep your mouth shut.

You cannot keep your brother alive.

At camp, some counselors take the kids on an excursion into the woods, leading them in a game of hide-and-seek. One boy, a deaf child who was also going blind, hid so well that they couldn't find him and he didn't find his way back. He had done everything right—

Nabokov says, "The lost glove is happy."

Is the lost brother happy?

6

A man lies in an open grave after a body is taken out of it. This practice is said to lengthen life expectancy. The brother imagines his bed is a nest in which his body is removed.

There's a story about a man galloping by another man who asks, "Where are you going?" "Ask my hearse," says the man.

"I was never lost in the jungle," says a father, "just looking for a way out."