The 3 Roberts

ON CHILDHOOD



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July 21, 1984 Axletree Coffee House, Toronto

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Robert Zend In Memoriam

About a year ago Robert Zend invited me to join the Three Roberts. But in a characteristic fashion he qualified the invitation. "You can never be a full member of the group," he explained, "because Robert is only one-half of your given name. Still, you can be a half-Robert and read with us from time to time if you want."

I did want, or at least I agreed to participate in an upcoming Toronto-area reading because I enjoyed the work of all three Roberts and admired their collective audacity in forming a group to perform their lively poetry. But to my sorrow the reading of the three and one-half Roberts never did take place. Now it never will.

With Robert Zend's death on Thursday, June 27, 1985, a light in the literary cosmos blinked out. Such lights are always blinking out, but this light was very special. It came from very far away, it throbbed and twinkled quite unlike any other star, and it illuminated odd little nooks and crannies of the planet Earth. What does light do? It "travels." Robert Zend's light beamed and danced its way across the cosmos and the printed page.

I never did ferret out from Robert the year he was born, but I always felt that the year in question was of little significance. What was of significance was the year of his rebirth. That took place in 1956 when he left Budapest and settled in Toronto. It took him some years to come to terms with the English language, or it took the English language some time to come to terms with his poetry, so he remains a relatively youthful poet — if not a poet of childhood, then a poet of youth.

Robert will be missed by a great number and variety of people. From time to time I will give a poetry reading or deliver a talk. Afterwards someone from the audience will approach me. It will usually be an odd, interesting-looking person. He or she may be young or old, but the person will invariably be youthful-looking. "Mr. Colombo," the person will say, "we have a friend in common..."

And before the person can name that friend, I will say, "Yes, I know we do. He is Robert Zend."

Introduction

My name is Phillip Snowman and I am the host of the Axletree Poetry reading series. Tonight, I have the pleasure to introduce to you 'The Three Roberts on Childhood'.

This is the third performance of The Three Roberts and it is also a launching party of a book called *Premiere Performance* which documents their first reading at Grossman's Tavern, a half a year ago.

I am holding the book in my hand now, and as I look at the section entitled 'About the Authors', I wonder how I can present each of them to you individually, in a manner that would convey — at once — their special, individual characteristics.

Robert Priest, for instance, is a poet who writes for both children and adults. I find this fascinating. Does he write as a grown-up to children? Or vice versa? I've read his book, 'The Man who Broke Out of the Letter X', and look forward to the liberation of those people trapped in the rest of the alphabet.

Robert Sward, on the other hand, is another case entirely. I read here that his fertile imagination has given birth to fourteen books. Fourteen Books! I wonder if he's heard of Planned Parenthood. Incidentally, one of those books is called 'Half a Life's History'; I can't wait to read how the story ends.

And as for Robert Zend? I read here that as a C.B.C. Radio Producer, he interviewed the world famous French mime, Marcel Marceau. There's a curious thing: did Marceau mime the answers for him? Or did they both just quietly intuit each other's questions and responses by means of thought-transference? In any case, Robert Zend is admirably suited to tonight's readings about childhood, as many maintain that he is, in fact, a child in disguise anyway.

And now, let's hear from the Three Roberts, themselves, who will recite their poems on childhood: their own childhood, their children's childhoods, their children's childhoods, and so forth...

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How "The Three Roberts" Came To Be

Many people have asked me this question and I can no longer avoid answering it. There were many reasons, but I'll start with the very first one. To do that I have to go back to our childhood, what's more, to our babyhood. To be exact, to our fetushood.

Robert Priest's mother wanted a daughter. She was absolutely certain that she'd have a daughter. Her favourite name was Roberta. Therefore it was obvious that her child's name should be Roberta. Since she had never considered the possibility of having a son, it had never even occured to her to choose a name for a boy. When, in spite of her expectations, she gave birth to a son, she looked at him unbelievingly. Someone asked her the name of the baby. Since there was only one name in her mind, she just performed a little editing on it, and called her son, Robert.

On the other hand, Robert Sward's mother liked the letter R. It was a family tradition to give the boys names starting with the letter R. One of her uncles was called Ralph; her cousin Rudolph, her nephew Richard. But she was too proud to copy any of these names for her own son. What then should be his name once he'll be born? She was hesitating between Raphael and Randolph and Ruprecht and Rupert and Reuben and Robin and Rubin and Romeo. Yet, all these names were extremely extravagant, so finally she decided to call her son a fairly common name: Robert.

On the other hand, my mother was so sure that she'd have a son that she had left it entirely for my father to pick a name. My father was a poor clerk with little imagination, so he planned to call me James because his father was called James. In those times and in Hungary, James was a rare and ancient-sounding name which had gone out of fashion about three generations before. That was the reason why my mother's oldest brother, uncle Dori, rushed to my help although I wasn't even born yet. He was an aggressive businessman with a good practical sense. Everyone in the family was afraid of him because he was rich and rude. "Are you out of your mind? Everyone will make fun of that miserable son of yours and he will hate you!" he informed my father. "Give him a contemporary, common name like Joe, or John, or Jim, or George, or Steve, or Leslie, or Tom, or Peter, or Paul!" But my father abhorred the idea of his distinguished son having a common name, so uncle Dori proposed to him the name Robert which in those times and in Hungary was a modern, but very rare, almost exotic name. My father readily agreed because his favourite composer was Robert Schumann. Had he known that I would spend most of my life in North America where every second male is called Robert (or even Bob!), he wouldn't have compromised so easily.

I hope you understand my point. If the favourite name of Robert Priest's mother had been...Victoria — and if Robert Sward's mother had a more extravagant taste — and if my father's favourite composer hadn't been Schumann, but let's say Bach...then today the three of us would be called Victor Priest, Romeo Sward and Johann Sebastian Zend. Consequently, the group of the Three Roberts couldn't exist.

So, this is the story, or rather the three stories which explain the VERY first reason of how we started off. As for the other reasons...maybe another time.

SWARD 10

Stork Party

For Cathy and the First Island Baby of 1984

"It's for women only. It's tribal and the focus is women," says a woman, "and there are these gifts like rattles and bath tables and olive oil and safety pins, and someone bakes an incredible cake and a stork shower is like a wedding," she says, "where the only guests are women."

"I was seventy-two hours in labour."
"Mine came one, two, three, just like that."
"It's real sisterly," says one woman.
"Like a pajama party," says another.

And the stork, a divine messenger, stands in readiness on one leg, its neck outstretched, its eyes like small buttons, like gem stones, its white befeathered body like an over-size muscular walnut.

A shower of pajamas, a shower of negligee, sweater sets and candles, pears, cheese and wine, jig-saw puzzles, jam jars and honey pots, splash-on cologne, scented soap, bottle-warmers, handkerchiefs and address books, a crystal bowl filled with baby's breath and ivy to which dollar bills are twisted into the semblance of buds.

A stork shower is when you have a shower of storks bearing gifts for a mother-to-be and the lace-clad sacred ibis with dark shining cheeks flies from room to room, enclosure to enclosure in a jungle somewhere under a canopy of palm trees, and only the women have the eyes to see the bottle-warmers, the hand-made bonnets and flower petals, the ritual that, says one mother, is worth being pregnant for, to open, to open up in this way, to be a princess again, to be a mother, to stand in the shower of love as Cathy is today.

ZEND 12

A Love Letter

Someone seeks being.

We say, No.

Someone struggles to become. We say, No.

Someone daydreams in our eyes. Someone drums with our fingers. Someone itches our mouths. Someone throbs in our groins. We say, No.

Someone knocks on our doors, raps on our windows, hammers on our walls.

Inside the warm nest of our inertia and habits and comfort and superstitions, we do not budge. We, the murderers.

Someone out there is freezing on the snow-fields of white non-existence.

Dark ages

birth

nothing is ordained
the infant stifling in the cot
does not predict
veins rising
through ancient hands
the child upon the pendulum
hooting for joy
predicts nothing

the past at least is certain

i am face to face
with my origin
my mother's grim face
her sweat upon the pillow
the long-forgotten house of blood
forever closed to me

on this cold hearth writhing in the oracle of the scar i speak my first shrill prophecy

Meeting My Classes

My wife has given birth to a son, I say.
There is a five minute standing ovation.
I pass around two- and three-foot cigars,
And stand there wearied, overwhelmed with pleasure.
You can learn from no one who is not present,
Altogether in love, laughing, affirming you —
They have understood this for some time.
What is it to fly? they ask. That too is clear,
For we have all of us taken hands,
Reverentially, and are in flight
In and out of classrooms, down the halls, out
The windows, over football fields, tennis courts,
The thing happening, out of hand,
Let it go —
Ascension, commitment, perfection, love.

ZEND

An Interview with a Newborn Baby

CAST:

The Press Robert Sward
Interpreter Robert Zend
Baby Robert Priest
Mother Janine Zend

The Press: Good morning, Sir. When did you arrive on our planet?

Interpreter: Aw? Awawa? Wawa? Wa?

Baby: Mammam Mammamma. Mammammam.

Interpreter: He says that he arrived via his mother, doesn't exactly remember when, but his stomach-acids require some protein-rich liquid.

The Press: What is your opinion about the present political situation? Do you think we should vote liberal or conservative? Which party, in your opinion, can assure a better and brighter future for our beloved country?

Interpreter: Gugu? Gigu? Gugi?

Baby: Yayyayyayyay, Yayyay, Yayy.

Interpreter: He thinks that these questions don't make too much sense. We can't accept a radical change of society in the near future! After all, the situation has been constantly deteriorating during the last 5 million years of history. The liberals or the conservatives will follow identical policies, only the names of the leaders will be somewhat different. In his opinion, it would be more purposeful to concentrate on the present and most urgent needs, namely to breast-feed him without delay.

The Press: How do you like Canada?

Interpreter: Nya-nya-nya?

Baby: G...g...g...Uh. Dj! Dj! Dj!

Interpreter: In his opinion, Canada is a country which is engaged in an unrelinquished search for its "Identity", and — due to this fact — it is quite impossible to determine whether one likes it or not. How can anyone like or dislike a territorial unit which doesn't even know whether it exists or not and if not, why, and if yes, why not? In fact, Canada as such is not very different from any other country in the world. After all, they all have newborn babies who are starved and need instant breast-feeding.

The Press: What specifically, in your opinion, is the most acute globally economical problem and how do you propose to solve it in the most efficient way?

Interpreter: Eng-eng? Ing inga? Gunga?

Baby: Oaa...oaaaaa...oaaaaaaaa...

Interpreter: According to his carefully conducted observations, the most prominent global problem is the uneven distribution of food-supplies. A minority of the population possesses the majority of the

reserves and henceforth they have the privilege of preventing a just division of food supplies among the needy. One of the most outstanding examples to illustrate the above thesis is the swollen breasts of new mothers — a tension which could effectively be relieved by allowing their newborn babies to suck them. Legislation announcing this new project would at once alleviate the dissatisfaction thus postponing a potentially tragic outcome for both parties. He is willing, what's more, anxious, to be instrumental in initiating such an endeayour.

The Press: What measures should we take to eliminate the increasing unemployment and the growing inflation coupled with the sharply rising bank-interest rate?

Interpreter: Igabuga?

Baby: Go go go go! . . . go go go!

Interpreter: The first thing we have to do is to curb the influence of the Press which, due to sheer sensationalism, mystifies the issues and instead of orienting the interest of the public toward the most urgent tasks, keeps asking superfluous questions, thereby distracting the attention of the interested parties from the primary problems of paramount importance. One of these imminent problems is to feed the hungry babies instead of interviewing them.

Mother: (comes up on stage and starts feeding Baby)

Baby: M m m m m m m

Interpreter: After having arranged a long-desired dialogue with his mother, he came to the conclusion that the present interview has, as it were, superceeded its allotted time and he would be pleased if the Press would stop showering him with further questions. This, of course, does not exclude, whatsoever, the possibility of continuing this interview when the presently ongoing breast-feeding session with his mother will have been finished, and perhaps, also after he will have had a chance to study the questions in question more thoroughly, that is, let's say in thirty years or so, if it is mutually convenient.

The Press: Gaga...gaga...

Interpreter: He says that the date set seems to him too late. By then, he will be even more senile than now.

Eggshell Children

Eggshell children are one of our most precious resources. If they can grow they are found to be great diviners, trekkers to water, discoverers of fabulous new lyrical machines. If they can grow into human reeds there will be a white kind of moonlit magic again. But with even the most tolerant of parents an eggshell child is in constant danger. You see eggshell children want to last forever. They want to be free and always have their own way. They scream and cry at amazing volumes and cannot be dissuaded in any way from expressing rage, terror, despair. Sometimes everything seems unfair to them and though they excel also at having fun, at bringing delight there are times when the parents feel like rough handling them. Usually much violence has been done to the parents in their own childhoods but these are big meaty people, solid people not delicate instruments of music like the eggshell child. Only great patience and love can succeed in rearing these fragile beings. One fist could cave them in completely and they would lie dying and broken into fine blue shards. This has led to a proliferation of Forums on how not to hit the eggshell children. Here are some of the most basic rules on how to handle eggshell children. When they are born do not hold them upside down by the feet and smack their bottoms to wake them up as this will ruin their little eggshell arses. Do not deliberately put them in rocking cradles on window sills in the breeze. Watch your subconscious urges with them, don't suddenly forget and go to clap them on the back. Do not throw them a rock, a hard ball, a spoon. Do not grab their hands when they try to run away from you. Don't pull their teeth out with strings and doorknobs and finally do not slap eggshell children's faces in anger as this can not only completely ruin their cheeks but also crush leagues and leagues of delicate diamonds in their eyes.

SWARD 18

For My Son, Michael

Washing dishes in the darkness With a hose, I spray off the few remnants Of spaghetti onto the oysters

In their beds below.
Inside the single room
There is no running water —
only the green hose
On the deck of our floating home.

We secure the lines,
Bathe and sing.
I reach out in the darkness
Hearing my son brushing his teeth
To borrow his toothbrush.

I cannot find my own:
It is tasting
my fourteen-year-old son's
Mouth inside my mouth.
Then we find more dishes

And, as the moon rises and the lines go tight, continue scrubbing and drying silverware and plates

Like two dishwashers reading braille, mad beachcombers in the night.

- Lasqueti Island, B.C.

When A Child Emerges

When a child emerges after having come through the long dark tunnel which may be the same as the one stretching at the end of the road - - -

when a child emerges
and lies motionlessly
in the depth of its cradle
sleeping,
its face radiates heavenly wisdom,
it seems to still remember the secrets of the Cosmos
from where it densified into a body,
intensified into a human:
the face is an image of a god who knows everything.

When a child emerges, it is always a new Adam or a new Eve basking in the blissful Garden of Eden: consciousness has not yet distorted its face, problems have not yet carved wrinkles in its skin, the rat-race has not yet clenched its hands into fists, it doesn't harm anyone, no one harms it.

When a child emerges, everyone surrounds it, everyone caresses it, cuddles it, delights in it, everyone loves it because it reminds us of what we all were like when we emerged.

Four-and-half-billion around the surface of this globe, do not raise your eyes to the skies for salvation, do not study books to find the solution, do not play with the arts in search of beauty, just look at a child who has just emerged and you'll find the salvation, you'll know the solution, you'll be filled with beauty.

Let the children come to you all.
The children which hide in you all:
they have smooth faces,
innocent eyes
and open hands - - Let them all come to you
and let them place back into you
the Garden of Eden which was chased out of you
by the Cherub of Years holding high in his hands
the sword of fire.

Isabella

She is an oversize pink mouse with wings and hazel, gray-green eyes

a pearl-like, gurgling and laughing newborn, toothless astronaut

this infant made of light and dressed in a white, hand-sewn flying suit.

She picks up and chews her squeaky green rubber dragon with its black nose,

reptilian scales and long, horn-like whiskers. Her own tiny, transparent,

stainless head-of-a-pin nose is moist and shines while sunlight

glistens on three golden strands of her dark, red, chestnut-colored hair.

Then her eyes shut, her mouth's agape. She is like a roundish, pale-skinned

mushroom. Dear orbitting dragon-eater: you are the very sky you float through,

that inside sky you look out from, you Isabella, you are yourself

that sky, limitless and blue.

22

Slight Exaggeration of a Childhood Incident

when i was two a garbage man gave me a trumpet

it was a small silver winding dirty trumpet

and shrieking at my own thunder like any other prodigy mad with energy

i bellowed down Thames Street levelling buildings, knocking down churches

with my blasts. Of course the neighbours complained, prodigy or no prodigy

they were having no such slumbers as their very precious own

disturbed by little manic urchins such as i was

but my mother in her arrogant way defied them and sat severely on the porch

watching with pride my short pants parade go boastfully by

it was the police finally who had to silence me

arriving on bicycles with bells and blowing whistles

i was standing on a post in a circle of my peers

and when the bobby said, 'eaaah ooze makin' oowl 'at noise 'en!?'

the circle opened magically before me and they all pointed and said

'it's him it's little Robert Priest.'

Hannah

(This delightfully gruesome little Willie poem offers another approach to child-rearing:

Little Willie drowned his sister Mabel In the well behind the stable. Mother said while drawing water, "My, it's hard to raise a daughter."

Anon.

I have one of my own about having breakfast with a two-year-old child on a train ride between Vancouver and Winnipeg. Its title is: "Hannah.")

Her third eye is strawberry jam
has a little iris in it
her eyelids
are red
she's sleepy
and the milk
has gone down
the wrong way.
I've just had breakfast
with the smallest person in the world.

Walks On . . .

My six year old daughter, Natalie (a bilingual-English and French speaking child of a French mother and a Hungarian father), flew to Paris today, with her mother, to celebrate Christmas and New Year with one of her families. I drove them to the airport this afternoon. Sitting in the car between my wife and me, while I held my left hand on the steering wheel, she placed her left hand into my right, and her head on my chest. "I will miss you, my Dada-Dudu, for 3 weeks," she said.

Half an hour later, departure-time. A last kiss and hug. She has almost tears in her eyes. Then, they enter the gate, she puts her handbag onto one end of the counter, goes through the short X-ray corridor and picks up the bag on the other end. I knock on the glass door. She waves to me, throws kisses and walks on. Dancing, cheerful, happy, looking forward to the flight, to see Grandpa and Grandma and the aunts and the cousins, she walks on, dancing and hopping, toward new adventures, at once forgetting her Toronto friends, her home, her school, her English language, her cat, her babysitter, the whole city and lonely me in it...

A melancholy voice within, says to me: "...and this is how she will walk on toward her life, after you die..."

But, in the next moment, another, a happy, hopeful voice replies: "...and this is how she will walk on toward her life, after you die..."

The Child Came In

The child came in from unexpected adventures — mountaintops suddenly thrust up beneath him and huge rivers to cross.

He came in from wild africas of the night where a continent of gulls moved over him on a savannah where he had to wait day by day for the arrival of a caravan, or another boy on a bike, something to drag him off.

Now he returns

from comets, from last stands in the moonlight, the songs of crickets acapella in the grass.

He had been detained for questioning Something about a far-off planet A secret river that flows through

night-time directly into boys.

He rode this river and he came by black stallion to a land of dogs, to a road where wild eagles lead him deeper into a country of lions, straddling fences and rivers as he went

The lianas were uncurling

There was a window opening up in a distant castle and some young princess was just looking through right into his eyes

when

the child came in

finally

bringing in a breath of twilight and danger that his mother and I expel with relief waiting for him to mount the stairs before we ask him

[&]quot;Where on earth have you been?"

Elementary Fire Alarm

For Nicholas (age 5)

If you don't leave, your shoes catch on fire. Everyone has to turn off the lights and put on slippers and go outside and not play in the schoolyard. You have to wear slippers, but slippers are smooth and they catch on fire. Then we go back inside and do our homework. We have to do whatever we're doing and there are no flames in the school. And the firemen don't come. There's no smoke. All you have to do is go outside. You know why you have to go outside? So you won't get burned up! Fire goes in. That's why you go out.

A Memory

Once, at fifteen, I made my poor, old dad so mad at me

that he chased me around the table till I caught him, finally.

Mommies

the prime minister has admitted
he needs his mommy
he is down on the floor of the house of commons
crying like a child
in agreement for once, the leader of the opposition
has likewise admitted
that he needs his mommy
and the two of them are hoping
with the mingling of their griefs
to heal the world

so now the streets are filled with people who claim to need their mommies — the flower lady needs her mommy the fish man needs his mommy the bus conductor needs his mommy it seems like everyone whether he had one or not needs his mommy

dejected,
great breasts sagging
dry to their navels
all the mommies
are trying to hide
they are worn out with births
their faces made featureless
with so many rough kisses
their limbs are flat
their hands are empty
and their souls are tired

but it is too late for them laws are being passed the prime minister is unhappy the leader of the opposition is unhappy the flower lady, and the fish man and the bus conductor are unhappy 'let their daughters serve time for them in factories and bars,' they cry

meanwhile, rounding up suspects the mounties go from door to door with earnest looks and a mirror saying 'Do you recognize this woman?'

30

Waldheim Cemetery

We are in Chicago's Waldheim cemetery.

I am walking with my father.

My nose, my eyes,

left pink wrinkled oversize

ear

My whole face is in my armpit.

We are at the stone beneath which lies

My father's mother;

There is embedded in it a pearl-shaped portrait.

I do not know this woman.

I never saw her.

I am suddenly enraged, indignant.

I clench my fists; I would like to strike her.

My father weeps.

He is Russian; he weeps with

conviction, sincerity, enthusiasm.

I am attentive.

I stand there listening beside him.

After a while, a little bored,

but moved,

I decide myself to make the effort;

I have paid strict attention;

I have listened carefully.

Now, I too will attempt tears;

they are like song. they are like flight.

I fail.

"Madeleine"

"I like this name," I said to Gisele, my favoured sister-in-law, while we were sitting on a bench in a Paris park, near her home, while Janine, who is both my wife and her sister, visited her childhood-friend, Madeleine, whose name I liked, but whom I couldn't stand, that's why I stayed rather with Gisele whose name I couldn't stand, but whom I liked.

"Why?" asked Gisele.

"Because" I said, "Madeleine was the name of that cookie which inspired Proust to write his great novel."

"Who is Proust?" asked Gisèle.

"You don't know who Marcel Proust is?"
I asked, quite shocked.
"What kind of a French patriot are you?
He was one of the greatest French writers who, at the age of forty, when by coincidence, was offered a madeleine, after thirty years of not eating any at all, the flavour of that madeleine made his childhood-memories rush at him with such a force that he began writing the book called "In Search of Time Lost" and the rest of his memoirs, totalling about 15 volumes."

"That's interesting," said Gisèle.
"I studied economy,
then worked in real estate,
then had three children,

I am not as cultured as you are."

This conversation took place one and a half years ago, in the summer. - - Three days ago, my wife, Janine, came back from Paris, after two and a half weeks of Christmas holiday, and brought me a Christmas gift from Gisele, a big metal box containing madeleines, baked by Gisele's own hands especially for me, thus rewarding me, perhaps, for my love of French literature.

When I ate the first madeleine. I remembered the time when, at 15, I first read Proust, I remembered our old apartment in which I'd read his books, the yellow house in which the apartment was, the curvy little street in which the vellow house stood. the city of Budapest in which that street curved, the spell of that city, the age in which I lived, the magic of my youth, my mother, my father, my friends and my loves... When I ate that first madeleine. I knew that Marcel, more than half a century ago, felt exactly the same flavour spreading in his mouth, and I began to remember his memories too. as he described them in his magic books - - -And the flavour of his madeleine made both his and my memories rush at me with such a force that I almost began to write my memories, totalling about 15 books to be called "In Search of 'In Search of Time Lost' Lost". Thank you, Gisèle.

Memories of My Father

(Excerpt from an Unpublished Manuscript)

My father could bear no sign of what he called "arrogance" in me. Frequently and without warning he would slap me or punch me, shouting "Get that bloody arrogant look off your face." Somewhere along the line I was eroded. I became for a time a grinning shit-eater. Polite, and when alone with myself, dangerous. I remember once, after one such incident, having been wrongfully assaulted and sent to my bedroom. I was biting my lips, gnashing at the bedroom sheets in my rage, tearing at my own body in my fury, when suddenly the scream burst out of me. "YOU PRICK!" And what a huge, bloody, raw-throated holler it was. Not only did it seem to shake my own being, but it must have also shaken the very foundations of our house. In the split second before I heard my father's ferocious "WHAT!" I lay there with a surprised grin on my face, loving myself supremely.

Then the stampede started and my father burst into the room, his eyes nearly popping out with rage and began to punch and wallop me in a frenzy. I felt caught in the centre of a storm. This mad berserker might kill me. After a time it stopped and all was silence. He went off, that man who is so much like me. He went off still full of rage and probably terror at what he might have done. He went off to his private place, raging and shaking and thinking who knows what tormented thoughts and left me there in the silence of myself.

My own rage was expressed. I had mollified myself with that scream. I could still believe in my own soul. What he felt he would have to tell you himself. I am no reader of closed books.

Now like a dagger my mind lunges into another memory and quivers there before me in dizzying reverberation. It is like a strobe light flash into a dark cubed room. My brother, my sister and I are there. We are small and helpless. I am grinning my sick lop-sided grin.

The vision that is flashed in on me, freeing us from the timeless stasis of Forget is my father with the kitchen knife. He is standing with his belly thrust forward sweating and shining in the twilight like some kind of obscene Buddha. Poised above his belly gripped tight and trembling in his two hands is the knife. He is shaking with strange unknowable passion and there is in his eyes a look of desperation and — and how shall I say it? Longing? There is a look in his eyes that still stares up from the bottom of my soul in dreams and yes, I will call it longing. I will call it fear and fury and desperate deprivation. He is showing us this look that is burning into us and branding us and shouting as the knife quivers in his grip — "DO YOU WANT ME TO? DO YOU WANT ME TO?" And his voice — it is as though twisted from an old rag. A worn imploring statue might grind out such a voice. An aging grey oak might talk in such a voice.

"DO YOU WANT ME TO? DO YOU WANT ME TO?" And we are saying nothing. Not daring to look at one another. Not daring because I am thinking to myself. "Well gee, dad, you know, it's up to you." And if I look at my brother I might giggle.

"Ted!" my mother screams. "TED!" and black opiate blood streams down over the window, the house falls, time slants sideways and I am there and I am here and I am here.

Chicago Public Library

I am downtown. I am wearing sunglasses, phony nose,
And big inch-and-a-half-long false teeth;
I have them jammed on over
My other teeth.
I have the look of unabashed stupidity.
People comment on it.
Some hoodlums jeer at me, throw rocks at me.

It is raining. Also, it is snowing. There are carols. It is December, late December, Nearly Christmas.

Old men and women are huddled in the corridor Of the Chicago Public Library.

I go there and huddle too.

I keep on my sunglasses and nose.

People like them. They admire them.

Then they look at me. They look closely,

And huddle against me. They pick my pockets,

my pubescent blackheads,

My father's watch chain.

One of them, a dwarf, takes me by the hand.

We go walking, just the two of us.

After a while, we begin to fly;

We fly very slowly and low

And toward the Lake. And then back.

I fall asleep. I have bad dreams; I awaken — Waldheim Jewish Cemetery, The Outer Drive, Stainless steel florist shops, The traffic lights, Red, amber and green.

I enter off Montrose Avenue. Slowly, slowly I begin the long swim to Michigan.

Cosmogonies

for Aniko

Every child is a little Einstein, Freud, or Moses — earlier today my daughter Aniko, 12, told me how she sees things:

Maybe the world is a reflection in a mirror.

Earth is flat: if we walk to the ends of the earth, we stop short at the silver part.

Beyond that we can see nothing, but behind it all there lurks the real world where left is right and right is left, and those who peer into the mirror in front of them can see themselves reflected there, but behind the glass there is nothing and that is what we really are.

But it is also possible (she added without pausing) that some time ago there was a stage-play and that the actors entered so fully into the spirit of their roles that they really killed one another, really fell in love, really begot children and grandchildren and grandchildren, so that today nobody knows anymore what the whole thing was originally about.

At first I was delighted, but after some careful consideration I decided these fantasies were about as silly as those in the Bible.

By The Swimming

By the swimming The sand was wetter The farther down you dug; I dug: My head and ear on top Of the sand, my hand felt water... And the lake was blue not watching. The water was just waiting there In the sand, like a private lake. And no one could kick sand Into my digging, and the water Kept going through my fingers slow Like the sand, and the sand was water too. And then the wind was blowing everyplace, And the sand smelled like the lake, Only wetter. It was raining then: Everybody was making waxpaper noises, And sandwiches, kicking sand And running with newspapers on their heads; Baldmen and bathinghat-ladies, and naked people. And all the sand turned brown and stuck together Hard: and the sky was lightning, and the sun Looked down sometimes to see how dark it was And to make sure the moon wasn't there. And then we were running: and everybody was under The hotdog-tent eating things, spitting very mad And waiting for the sky, and to go home.

ZEND 39

Administrative Error

The plane was late, very late, too late.

Three or four times the father approached the ticket counter, each time the friendly stewardess asked him politely to wait. Wait, waiting, waited.

Then over the loudspeaker he heard the announcement that there had been a disturbance over the ocean, at 3:25 a.m. radio communication had failed,

a few airplanes were heading for that part of the ocean to circle over. The father was then asked to step into an office.

There were about thirty men and women there — weeping, crying, flailing about, in a dead faint.

He listened quietly to the heavy words.

When the office had finally been cleared, he approached the man with the glasses,

and in a calm voice said: "This is an administrative error."

The man gave him a questioning look.

The father answered: "Because the girl was only ten."

The man frowned and said: "So...?"

"You don't understand," he replied with a forced smile: "Only ten.

This is her first trip to Europe...to see the Eiffel Tower,

to see the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Lorelei,

Gibraltar, and all the fjords, and if she doesn't get her senior matriculation,

she can't go to university. She didn't have a chance to fall in love.

Nobody had kissed her on the lips. She hadn't even given birth to a child.

Hadn't felt real pleasure. Nor pain. Hadn't thought of committing suicide.

Hadn't grown old. Hadn't any grandchildren. Just like that? It's a mistake.''

By now he could barely hear the man with the glasses:

"Unfortunately there's no mistake. All seventy-five are dead."

The father waved his arm in the air at the sheer stupidity of the man to assure himself that this was indeed a madman.

Then he cross-examined him: "I see, and when's the funeral?"
"Funeral?" The man stiffened. "There won't be a funeral."
Now he was certain the man with the glasses was incurably insane: if she had really died, there would be a funeral, there was always a funeral when someone died, if there was no funeral, she couldn't really be dead—
it was obvious as...the sun reflecting on the wing of an airplane. "No funeral? What then?
What will there be then?" The man gestured. "Nothing, Nothing

What will there be then?" The man gestured. "Nothing, Nothing at all."

This time he lest all petiones and finelly burst out.

This time he lost all patience and finally burst out:
"Is that all? Just like that? Somebody dies — just like that?
I should go home now? Is that it? Think about it — she was only ten!"

But then it occurred to him that he really meant to cross-examine the man,

he had almost forgotten this, but now that he remembered, he calmed down....Oh, why should he waste his time here with this narrow-minded official who couldn't even count to ten, who had never even seen the bright sun reflected on the wing of an airplane...but he would show him!

He waved his hand scornfully and left the man with the glasses behind.

slammed the office door, turned into a giant, and with his Seven
League boots

waded into the ocean. The waves were cold but not too cold, the clouds were clustered around his head, entering his nostrils and mouth.

He didn't care, but just took giant steps to the spot where it was 3:25 in the morning, 3:25 in the darkness,

while there was daylight everywhere else, and he would soon be there,

with his fist he would scare off all the stupid airplanes circling above the spot,

would kneel down in the water, fish her out, hold her in the palm of his hand to dry out,

- and would stand up straight, and on tip-toes would reach out toward the man with the glasses, a giant before another giant,
- and would shove her under his nose: "Here she is! You see, I was right,
- you see, you stupid idiot, you crazy, straight-faced liar...!

 Did you think it was possible, just like that, without the Eiffel

 Tower?
- Without a kiss? Without a child? Without old age? Without a funeral?

I told you, didn't I, but you wouldn't believe me...
I'll reach her soon, very soon, as soon as....'

42

My Father's Hands

PRIEST

My father had so many hands. He had almost three. My father had almost three hands but not enough to touch me once gently. O my father had so many eyes. He had so many blue eyes. He had almost three. But not enough to see me once perfectly. O my father had but one mouth and one heart to lift those bales and bales at the factory. O my poor father of fists and fists and fists beating on the wall, beating at his brow, beating at his children. My poor factory father, lined and fat-bellied now, tranquilized and happier, made smaller by so many sons. The winds gave him only one heart and they said, 'Here, spin it, make it the hole in rock we whistle shrill through. Grit your teeth and count your children.' He wonders what to do with hands now. Where to put them. These tender lined things that ache for sons. O my father we are here, the prints of wanting emblazoned on us like radioactive brands. O my father had so many hands and he waves them now ashamed a little. Looking puzzled as we leave at the movement from his wrist as if he wondered now, What are they when they are not fists?

The Kite

I still heard Auntie Blue
After she did not want to come down
Again: she was skypaper, way up
Too high to pull down. The wind
Liked her a lot, and she was lots of noise
And sky on the end of the string:
And the string jumped hard all of a sudden,
And the sky never even breathed,
But was like it always was, slow and close
Far-away blue, like poor dead Uncle Blue.

Auntie Blue was gone, and I could not
Think of her face; and the string fell down
Slowly for a long time. I was afraid to pull it
Down. Auntie Blue was in the sky,
Just like God. It was not my birthday
Anymore: and everybody knew, and dug
A hole, and put a stone on it
Next to Uncle Blue's stone, and he died
Before I was even born; and it was too bad
It was so hard to pull her down; and flowers.

ZEND 44

My French Family

Because I have always been a little bit psychic, even in my early youth I remembered my future. This phenomenon is generally called: ESP, specifically: precognition. For instance, I had always felt that, when I grow up, I will have a French wife. When I did grow up and married a Hungarian girl, I was quite astonished and began doubting my psychic powers. Some years later, however, I divorced Hungary, then I emigrated from my first wife and re-married a young French girl, called Janine.

In my youth, I loved only my friends because I *chose* them and disliked my relatives because they were *given*. There was only one exception: my 24-year old cousin Elizabeth with whom I was in love when I was 17, and even dared to confess it to her with the following words: "Elizabeth, I love you as much as though you weren't my relative!" As it appeared, the only problem was that she deeply loved her relatives, with one exception: me.

By leaving my native land, I succeeded to leave behind *my* family, but after having married Janine, I inherited *her* family (that is her father, her mother, her older sister with a husband and three children, her younger older sister with two children, her older younger brother with a wife and two children and her younger younger brother with a wife and who knows how many children to come.)

I like this new family of mine much more than my own in the old country, firstly because I did choose my wife and there is a strong resemblance between her and her family; secondly because they speak French fluently and I don't, therefore we have no disagreements for we can't communicate; and thirdly because we live in Canada and they live in France, and it's a well-known fact that distance helps people to like and miss each other (or, perhaps, to like missing each other).

Janine visits her family every year. I like to visit them every ten years. Therefore, we compromise and I go with her to France every five years. During the month we usually spend there, each member of the family kisses both of my cheeks every morning in French and I kiss them back in Hungarian. Or, they speak to me in English with a broken French accent, and I try to answer them in French,

with a Hungarian accent broken by English. In high school I learnt German; my father-in-law knows that, so he speaks to me in German which I don't understand because I have long forgotten German, but my father-in-law doesn't know that, so I answer him in Latin or Italian which I still remember, and he pretends to understand it because he thinks it is German.

When we all sit around (or rather asquare) the long table in the garden, according to my last census a year ago, we total 19 souls. More precisely: 18 French souls and one Hungarian soul. The 18 souls speak French. They speak French — fast. They speak fast French — loud. They speak fast and loud French — all at the same time. While eating breakfast. And lunch. And supper. The one soul is silent in Hungarian.

This summer, my wife is going to visit them again. Of course, she wants me to go with her. But I am not going. She is hurt because she thinks I don't like her family. This isn't true: I like them very much. I try to explain to her my main reason for not going. Last year, something happened at the dinner-table. This is what happened:

One of my nephews told a joke to the family. They laughed. I turned to my bilingual daughter, Natalie, and asked her: "What are they laughing about?" They laughed again. Natalie told me the French joke in English. I laughed. Now they laughed again because I laughed. Then my father-in-law, who is slightly deaf, turned to his wife and asked her why everybody laughed. Upon hearing his question, a thunderous laughter broke out around the table. My mother-in-law explained to my father-in-law that everybody laughed because I asked why everybody laughed, and she also told him the original joke. My father-in-law laughed. Then everybody laughed again because he laughed.

"This means," I concluded my defense-speech, "that if I go to France with you, I'll have to hear every joke three times, and after every joke I'll have to hear seven laughs. A single joke takes about 15 minutes away from my life. We'd stay there for 30 days, they'd tell approximately five jokes every day, so all together I would hear 150 jokes 450 times, accompanied by 1,050 laughs during my summer holidays. In Toronto in 15 minutes I can hear 15 jokes and laugh 15 times. In France I would spend $37\frac{1}{2}$ hours listening to 150 jokes. During $37\frac{1}{2}$ hours in Toronto I can hear 2,250 jokes, including

laughing-time. It is simply more economical for me to stay here," I said and put away the calculator.

How did my wife react to my reasoning? She laughed. For the eighth time at the same old joke, although we couldn't even remember what it was. But, at last, she accepted my reasoning for not going with her. It is becoming a good marriage. From now on we are going to share. She goes to France. And I'll have a holiday.

PRIEST

Halters

Our family was one of those which had a halter made of leather which the entire family could get into and wear. This was team work, my mother, my father, my brother, my sister and I all strapped in and dragging the house through the gravel pit. Of course my little sister wasn't much help as she was so small and my mother was always suddenly bleeding at the eyes so this made our progress harrowing, but at times my brother and father and I were excellent huskies, going on long past endurance up the aisles and alleyways of Emotion city, a silver sheen of feeling caked in on the unclean streets, stuff you could slide in and be covered, a lament sinking in. Intense loneliness sinking in as you have your hour on the porch watching the strings of other houses going by, wondering why you don't have any friends. At night my brother and I would sleep, we would wrestle and fart in our rooms while my mother and father went at it deep into the night, dragging til they fell asleep, winding up all the toy t.v.'s, toasters and even the clocks which would all too soon wake them up.

II

I wanted to break out of the family halter though. It was too stuck into my heart and I was treated as just an animal - a work horse. I wept into the leather of the halter. I bit at the halter always swearing to be free, to run off at last without this house in the suburbs on my back and the school books and the cups on my back, just to cut it all loose, let it slide behind me. Aaaah the dives, the glides, the whips the whirls I would do once I was free, cut loose in downtown rooms, lying in til I liked. But you need allies. There are always other halters waiting in the streets — industrial corsets, old educational buildings, trick flowers that will trap you and have you howling, caught on treadmills in the wind. You need allies. You need friends with sharp tongues, a book, a thought, a look that can cut like sharp hot steel. Slash open the veins of these halters, let us break out like marine animals from nets. Beware of lunging desks which will exert tendrils and capture you, pulling you screaming down to safe jobs and a home in the country. There are strange halters creeping over the meadows, startling old nuns and annoying sad professors, people caught up in suction hats, held down by heavy cloaks and gloves which manipulate. You must be very careful of the vases and countertops which can capture you - wild carpets and paintings on the wall. Army sergeants and teachers may come. Governments and employment schemes. Watch out for the religious texts with halters attached. Do you want to drag all the large institutes of revenge behind you. Do you want the domiciles and dormitories of murder — of insanity — the large blue wheel of education and ignorance? Break out of the halters of philosophy and standard usage, busting them up like dove-bits in the tightened air. You have to take a deep breath, fill the chest, the guts right up and shout like a trumpet that shatters itself with the first true blast —

'FUCK YOU YOU BASTARDS'

48

Uncle Dog: The Poet at 9

I did not want to be old Mr. Garbage man, but uncle dog Who rode sitting beside him.

Uncle dog had always looked To me to be truck-strong Wise-eyed, a cur-like Ford

Of a dog. I did not want
To be Mr. Garbage man because
All he had was cans to do.

Uncle dog sat there me-beside-him Emptying nothing. Barely even Looking from garbage side to side:

Like rich people in the backseats Of chauffeur-cars, only shaggy In an unwagging tall-scrawny way.

Uncle dog belonged any just where He sat, but old Mr. Garbage man Had to stop at every single can.

I thought. I did not want to be Mr. Everybody calls them that first. A dog is said, Dog! Or by name.

I would rather be called Rover Than Mr. And sit like a tough Smart mongrel beside a garbage man. Uncle dog always went to places Unconcerned, without no hurry. Independent like some leashless

Toot. Honorable among scavenger Can-picking dogs. And with a bitch At every other can. And meat:

His for the barking. Oh, I wanted To be uncle dog — sharp, high fox-Eared, cur-Ford truck-faced

With his pick of the bones. A doing, truckman's dog And not a simple child-dog

Nor friend to man, but an uncle Travelling, and to himself — And a bitch at every second can.

The Solution

Here is the solution for the problems of the world: We have to learn to play.

With words, with ideas, with people, with life, with our selves.

We shouldn't take seriously those who take everything seriously, mainly themselves.

Humankind, learn from my daughter, she will be seven years old, the day after tomorrow, she plays all the time and she is always happy.

All of you around the surface of this globe, turn into seven-year old children!

This is the solution.

This is the salvation.

Yes, we must learn to play again and change the Earth into a gigantic playground instead of the battlefield that it was made into by our common enemies, the grown-ups.

Robert Priest

Robert Priest is a poet and singer-songwriter who writes for both children and adults. Born in England he emigrated to Canada at an early age and attended school in Toronto. In 1979 his first book of poetry, *The Visible Man*, was released by Unfinished Monument Press to widespread critical acclaim.

Of his second book of poems, Sadness of Spacemen, (Dreadnaught Press, 1980) Poetry Canada Review wrote: 'Priest is a perfect poet of the eighties.'

His next project was the writing of a series of children's poems which were put to music by composer Bongo Herbert and eventually became a children's space opera called *Summerlong*. Together with Bongo Herbert and the illustrator Rudi McToots, he then formed a performance group for children – The Boinks.

In 1983 while writing the poems for his third book, The Man Who Broke Out of the Letter X (Coach House Press), Priest recorded his first solo project: The Robert Priest E.P.

At present Robert is working on a novel - The Disappearance of the Invisible Man.

OTHER WORKS

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Robert Sward

Writer-in-Residence at the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, at Cornell University and at the University of Victoria, Robert Sward now lives in Toronto and is an Associate Fellow at York University's Stong College.

A freelance writer, book-reviewer and contributor to the Toronto Star, Canadian Forum, Paris Review, New Yorker Book of Poems and The Oxford Book of American Light Verse, he has also prepared such features as 'Poetry As Performance' and 'Spiritual Poetry in Canada' for the CBC radio program, 'Anthology'. He is active in the Artists in the Schools program and is working on a new book of poems for children.

Sward is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship for Poetry, Canada Council and Ontario Arts Council grants plus the D.H. Lawrence Fellowship. Author of 14 books, his most recent publications include: Half A Life's History, Poems: New & Selected (1957-1983), Aya Press, Toronto; The Toronto Islands, an illustrated history, Dreadnaught Publishers, Toronto; and Movies: Left to Right, South Western Ontario Poetry, London. Impulse to Art, a collection of interviews with writers done in collaboration with Pat Keeney Smith, will be published in 1986.

Earle Birney has written that Robert Sward is 'one of Canada's finest poets. Energetic, adventurous, versatile, he is by turns the surrealist, whimsical lyricist, meditative Swami, family man, and hardfisted satirist'.

The New York Times Book Review calls Sward's work 'fierce, new-minted and convincing . . . he has a voice and a range'.

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Robert Zend

Robert Zend, who was born in Budapest, has lived in Toronto since 1956. He received his B.A. from the Péter Pázmány Science University in Budapest in 1953, his M.A. from the University of Toronto in 1969.

In 1958 he joined the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation where he has worked as a shipper, film librarian, film editor and radio producer. He has researched, written, directed and produced over one hundred radio programs with Northrop Frye, Glenn Gould, A.Y. Jackson, Norman McLaren, Marshall McLuhan, Harold Town, Isaac Asimov, Robert Easton (the Mr. Higgins of Hollywood), Richard P. Feynman (Nobel Prizewinner physicist), Immanuel Velikovsky, Marcel Marceau, Andrei Voznesensky, Jorge Luis Borges, Princess Martha de Ruspoli, the Dalai Lama, etc. His series 'The Lost Continent of Atlantis' was broadcast not only in Canada, but also in the United States, Great Britain and Australia.

As a visual artist, he won Fourth Prize in the International Photo Contest, 1968, Budapest, and has had works exhibited at the International Craft Show at the Ontario Science Centre. In 1969 he received a grant from the Canadian Film Development Corporation to produce a film, and a scholarship from the Italian Government to study in Italy for his PhD.

He writes in both Hungarian and English. His literary work has appeared in the following Hungarian-language publications: Hungarian Life, Mirror, Hungarian Panorama, Menora, Toronto Mirror, Literary Gazette (Paris), New Horizon (Munich). He is also a contributor to the Anthology of Hungarian Poets Abroad (Vienna).

He has published in the following English-language publications: The Tamarack Review, Canadian Literature, Performing Arts, Chess Canada, Earth and You, The Sunday Star, Canadian Fiction Magazine and The Malahat Review. The excellent literary quarterly Exile has published excerpts from his longer visual works: Oāb, A Bouquet to Bip, A Bunch of Proses, Limbo Like Me, and Type Scapes: A Mystery Story.

He is a constant contributor to *Rampike*, a forum for postmodern expressionism within a thematic format. He edited *Ariel and Caliban* by Peter Singer (Aya Press).

The following anthologies feature his work: Made in Canada, Volvox, The Sounds of Time, The Speaking Earth, To Say the Least, The Poets of Canada, In Praise of Hands, Colombo's Canadian Quotations, The Maple Laugh Forever, Lords of Winter and of Love, Shoes & Shit – Stories for Pedestrians, Tesseracts (Canada); A Critical Ninth Assembly, Stellar 6: Science Fiction Stories, Peter's Quotations, The Writer and the Human Rights (U.S.); Blue Umbrellas (Australia).

He has given poetry readings at the Eglinton Gallery, The Royal Ontario Museum, Harbourfront, the China Court Café, the University of Toronto. He has given poetry readings all over Canada and was invited as writer-in-residence at the Writer and the Human Rights congress (Toronto), the 6th and 7th Great Canadian Poetry Festival (Collingwood) in 1981 and 1982, the David Bohm Symposium (Carlton University, Ottawa) and at Trent University (Peterborough) in 1983.

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