

New & Selected
Poems

1957–2011

Robert Sward

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New & Selected Poems: 1957–2011

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Gloria in Excelsis

My children and grandchildren: Cheryl, Kamala, Michael, Hannah, Nicholas–Aaron, Robin, Maxine, Heron, Fjord

* * *

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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.

HELLO POEM

Hello wife, hello world, hello God,
I love you. Hello certain monsters,
ghosts, office buildings, I love you. Dog,
dog-dogs, cat, cat-cats, I love you.
Hello Things-In-Themselves, Things Not Quite
In Themselves (but trying), I love you.
River-rivers, flower-flowers, clouds
and sky;
 the Trolley Museum in Maine
(with real trolleys); airplanes taking
off; airplanes not taking off; airplanes
landing,
 I love you.

The IRT,
BMT; the London subway
(yes, yes, pedants, the Underground)
system; the Moscow subway system,
all subway systems except the
Chicago subway system. Ah yes,
I love you, the Chicago El-
evated. Sexual intercourse,
hello, hello.

 Love, I love you; Death,
I love you;
 and some other things, as well,
I love you. Like what? Walt Whitman,
 Wagner, Henry Miller;

a really
extraordinary, one-legged
Tijuana whore; I love you, loved
you.

The *Reader's Digest* (their splendid,
monthly vocabulary tests), *Life*
and *Look* . . .

handball, volleyball, tennis;
croquet, basketball, football, Sixty-
nine;

draft beer for a nickel; women
who will lend you money, women
who will not;

women, pregnant women;
women who I am making pregnant;
women who I am not making pregnant.
Women. Trees, goldfish, silverfish,
coral fish, coral;

I love you, I
love you.

MARRIAGE

I lie down in darkness beside her,
this earth in a wedding gown.

Who, what
she is, I do not know,
nor is it a question the night
would ask. I have listened—

The woman
beside me breathes. I kiss that,
a breath or so of her, and glow.

Glow.
Hush now, my shadow, let us . . .

Day breaks—

depart.
Yes, and so we have.

CHICAGO'S 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.

**SOCRATES AT THE SYMPOSIUM
(SONNET FOR TWO VOICES)**

Of Love, my friends (after such sophistry
and praise as yours), may one presume? Well, then,
let me begin by begging Agathon:
Good sir, is not your love a love for me?
And not a love for those who disagree?
Yes, true! And what is it that Love, again,
is the love of? Speak! *It is the love again
of "Socrates."* Love then, and the Good, are me.

Explain! Is Love the love of something, or
the love of nothing? *Something!* Very true.
And Love desires the thing it loves. *Right.*
Is it, then, really me whom you adore?
Or is it nothing? *O Socrates, it's you!*
Then I am Good, and I am yours. *Agreed!*

REPORT FROM THE FRONT

All over newspapers have stopped appearing,
and combatants everywhere are returning home.
No one knows what is happening.
The generals are on long distance with the President,
Surveying the planet from on high.
No one knows even who has died, or how,
or who won last night, anything.
Those in attendance on them may,
for all we know, still be there.

All over newspapers have stopped appearing.
Words once more, more than ever,
have begun to matter. And people are writing
poetry. Opposing regiments, declares a friend,
are refusing evacuation, are engaged instead
in sonnet sequences; though they understand, he says,
the futility of iambics in the modern world.
That they are concerned with the history and meaning
of prosody. That they persist in their exercises
with great humility and reverence.

Half A Life's History

1983

ODE TO SANTA CRUZ

—for Sandy Lydon

You want a sunrise? asks the poet,
I'll give you a sunrise. Eggplant cirrus clouds,
pinky smoky blue and gray,
pink, moss pink, pink nether flower
sunrise, sunrise
yellow white silicon chip
foghorn, windchime, no-color haze.

Sunrise sunrise
O City of Mystical Arts and Live Soup,
Antique bathhouse, casino
Riva Fish House,

A busload of German tourists
applauding (*applaudieren!*)
the sunrise.
clam chowder, O scrubbed blue light
melon balls and watermelon shooters,
arcade, pink neon, roller coaster heart-shaped mirror.

KA-BOOM! House begins to dance,
land moves in waves three and four feet high,
weight machines swaying, mirrors rattling,
a sidewalk of broken glass,
a street filled with jewels.

FOUR INCARNATIONS

Foreword:

Born on the Jewish North Side of Chicago, *bar mitzvahed*, sailor, amnesiac, university professor (Cornell, Iowa, Connecticut College), newspaper editor, food reviewer, father of five children, husband to four wives, my writing career has been described by critic Virginia Lee as a “long and winding road.”

1. Switchblade Poetry: Chicago Style

I began writing poetry in Chicago at age 15, when I was named corresponding secretary for a gang of young punks and hoodlums called the Semcoes. A Social Athletic Club, we met at various locations two Thursdays a month. My job was to write postcards to inform my brother thugs—who carried switchblade knives and stole cars for fun and profit—as to when, where and why we were meeting.

Rhyming couplets seemed the appropriate form to notify characters like light-fingered Foxman, cross-eyed Harris, and Irving “Koko,” of upcoming meetings. My switchblade juvenilia:

The Semcoes meet next Thursday night
at Speedway
Koko's. Five bucks dues, Foxman, or fight.

Koko was a young boxer whose father owned Chicago's Speedway Wrecking Company, and whose basement was filled with punching bags and pinball machines. Koko and the others joked about my affliction—the writing of poetry—but were so astonished that they criticized me mainly for my inability to spell.

2. Sailor Librarian: San Diego

At 17, I graduated from high school, gave up my job as soda jerk and joined the Navy. The Korean War was underway; my mother had died, and Chicago seemed an oppressive place to be.

My thanks to the U.S. Navy. They taught me how to type (60 words a minute), organize an office, and serve as a librarian. In 1952 I served in Korea aboard a 300-foot long, flat-bottomed Landing Ship Tank (LST). A Yeoman 3rd Class, I became overseer of 1200 paperback books, a sturdy upright typewriter, and a couple of filing cabinets.

The best thing about duty on an LST is the ship's speed: 8-10 knots. It takes approximately one month for an LST to sail between San Diego and Pusan, Korea. In that month I read Melville's *Moby Dick*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Thoreau's *Walden*,