

Keep Well, and Keep Writing: An email exchange with Bob Lax

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I had heard Robert Lax's name in connection with Thomas Merton, but in January 2000 Jim Forest, with whom I had been sharing poetry and letters for two years or so, e-mailed me a poem of Lax's entitled 'Acrobat's Song'. It so struck me that I went online and found a few books; one they had in stock and could ship immediately—the most recent, *A Thing That Is* (1997). So I read it, and felt the power of something really original and stripped to its essentials. I was also able to obtain a copy of the old 1959 edition of *Circus Of the Sun* from the same source. There was 'Acrobat's Song' and so many other visionary poems. Not outside the Psalms perhaps is there anything that breathes the same spiritual and delightful quality for me.

That year, thanks to Jim Forest, I made contact with Lax and carried on an all-too-short email correspondence with him that lasted for only the remaining seven months of his life, but for me a lifetime and an eternity. In it I shared with him my then current work in poetry, which Lax had already highly influenced. I was so struck by how willing he was to spend time talking, as if to a long-time friend, to an almost complete nobody in the field of literature. And that, in turn, points to so many other admirable qualities Lax had, and to what a great gift our short exchange was. Indeed my own poetry had taken on the style that Jim Forest said was 'thin as cigarettes but healthy to inhale'.

After Jim Forest had sent some of my poems to Lax, he replied: "I'm much, much honored by Matthew R. Brown.... The poems are beautiful-wonderfully visible. Think I can (& will) learn from his non-punctuation. Thank him again for me. & Thank-you."

On a cold night in late 2000, after my shift at a machine shop where I worked had ended, I sat in the car facing the corrugated wall of the building, but also with a view of the Saginaw River and the old willow

trees beside it. It had been about a week since I heard the news that Bob had passed away, after a long voyage back from the island of Patmos, where he had spent the latter part of his life, to his family home in Olean, N.Y. I had some imagery in my head that came from my lunch break that night, sitting next to the river. With that I began what turned out to be a tribute poem to Lax. I sent the poem off to Jim Forest, who wanted to use it in the publication *In Communion*—but before that could happen, our mutual friend David Athey, to whom I had copied it, said he wanted it for another publication, *Seeds in the Black Earth*, an annual arts magazine of the Dreyfoos School of Arts in Florida. David was on the English faculty there, and editor of the publication. *Seeds* was an unusual school journal, in that it included not only the work of students, but by invitation that of other artists and writers in the world at large. My work appeared in three different issues in all, including one in which one of Lax's poems also appeared. Here is my poem:

To Bob Lax

I made it a note
to look very carefully
later
at the light
that the moon
scattered
in groups and webs
on river waves
where vine leaves
and elm leaves
paper the thin sky.
I didn't reckon
that the moon would
pass on, taking all that
circus with her;
leaving only a point
of reflected, man-made light
winking like a buoy.
I made it a note also
to talk with you about
the tricks you do

in the ring of poetry
in the ring of faith
in the ring of living
but you have moved on.
We had two words
and now you are gone.
All your circuses are over;
all your circuses have just begun.
You are the one
who goes to the big top show
and notices how
the grasses crane their necks
to see the spectacle.
I am the one
who saw the goblets
of elm trees brimming
on the way to the game.
We are brothers;
we have sailed off
all the same,
yet taken with us
those we left
through prayer and song.
And now your circuses are over,
And now your circuses have just begun.*

In August 2003, I received the following email from Jim Forest:

Dear Matthew, Here's a poem by Bob Lax that I found while trying to bring order to a corner of our home office. This was sent from Patmos on the 14th of December 1988. The layout is more than I can reproduce by email—seven columns with about 15-16 lines per column. —Jim Forest

And my reply:

Jim, Thanks so much for the poem. It's almost as if Bob were still here. His planet reminds me of a monastery where all really do live the Faith. Thanx! Thanx! Thanx! —Matthew

