

## A VISIT WITH ROBERT LAX

"ARE YOU A VISITOR?" asked the dog. "yes," i answered.  
"only a visitor?" asked the dog. "yes," i answered.  
"take me with you," said the dog.

ON PATMOS, as on most of the Greek islands, arrivals tend to be straight forward and brusque. The noon-day ferry from Piraeus usually docks at the harbor town of Skala very late at night, and the passengers—especially those who knew no better than to board ship directly upon landing in Athens after long flights from abroad—are loudly roused by the crew a few minutes beforehand and pressed to collect their bags and wits while the deck hands busy themselves with casting off lines and shouting to the harbor police below. If you are visiting Patmos for the first time, you will probably want to remain above decks some short while for your first glimpse of the place, but few make this mistake twice. By the time the rickety electric winches start to lower the big steel ramp in the stern, you had better be standing there in the hold, ahead of the Fiats and the Peugeot and the impatiently idling diesel trucks full of yoghurt and beer and pistachios and yesterday's papers, because the Aegean is clotted with islands and clogged with ships and the Greeks know far better than any American commuter that if you miss your stop there's no telling where you will end up. So you hurry onto the wharf as the traffic slides past you and the police wave you along and whole families mistake you in the darkness for somebody's cousin or brother and tourists and priests and remarkably calm old ladies and men push against you to board the still-emptying

ship until she finally lifts her ramp again and casts off and the floodlights are killed and there is nothing left on the dock but milling crowds and boys hawking hotel rooms. The whole process takes about 10 minutes. I made my first trip to Patmos in the company of an efficient friend who understood the logistics of island travel pretty well, so knowing when to get off and where to go wasn't much trouble. At our hotel in Athens, we laid out all the relevant schedules, maps, and tickets in advance. Among them was a postcard from Robert Lax, whom we were going to Patmos to visit. Like most everything Lax wrote, it was succinct and friendly.

Am sending you this fast bird to say that everything has been arranged.

I will meet you on the dock, juggling tennis balls.

"He sounds like a character," I offered.

"He's a poet," my friend sensibly observed. "He has an unusual way of putting things."

In point of fact, Lax was a juggler and had spent several years traveling with circuses in North America and Europe, although I did not know this when we first met. The smiling goateed figure who shook my hand on the dock eight years ago looked more like someone who would hear confessions than swallow swords, although he did have the wiry physique of an acrobat. There was no mistaking him for a Greek—he was tall and lean and much too fair—but his features had that same weathered look that comes with years of heavy sun and sea air.

The Maximum Capacity  
of this room  
is 262 people  
262 people

The Maximum Capacity  
of this room  
is 262 people

"Well, that's fine," he said after I had been introduced. "You made it. Good, good." He looked about, a bit nervously, at the trucks and mopeds lumbering and whizzing past us, then spoke as if he had found a sudden idea.

"Why don't we step over to your hotel? This looks like a good place not to be."

Robert Lax is one of the great enigmas of American letters. A classmate of John Berryman and a mentor of Jack Kerouac, his poetry has been admired by writers as diverse as John Ashbery, William Maxwell, James Agee, Allen Ginsberg, E.E. Cummings, Richard Kostelanetz, and Denise Levertov—yet he remains very largely unknown, even among the editors and academics who make their livings tracking and hunting fresh literary game. None of my professors at Columbia, either in the College or the Writing Program, had heard of him, and neither the Gotham nor the Strand held even one of his titles in stock when I began assembling an anthology of his work in 1995. I had only learned of him myself through a Columbia friend whose father, as it happened, had been a Columbia friend of Lax's in the mid-1930s and had worked with him on *Jester*. He had not seen Lax since their college days but spoke of him with an unusual, almost familial, affection. It was an attitude that, later on, I was to encounter frequently among people who had known Lax—a somewhat protective fondness, the sort of feeling one would

have for a younger brother or a favorite son.

Sometimes grammar is more than a writer needs

The years that Lax passed at Columbia coincided with one of the most brilliant periods of the College's history, during which an exceptionally talented array of students were brought together under the tuition of what may be the most remarkable college faculty ever assembled in one place. It was the zenith of the Butler years, and although Nicholas Murray Butler's administration is often remembered now for the intellectual short-sightedness that drove away many of the freshest minds of the day (neoscholastics such as Mortimer Adler and Richard McKeon, not to mention the European refugees who eventually settled the New School), there was enough room for Lionel Trilling and Jacques Barzun, for Richard Hofstadter and Moses Hadas and—most important of all for Lax—Mark Van Doren.

There was a man who said,  
"Why eat cake when all you  
want is bread? Why eat frosting  
when all you want is cake? Why  
eat cake and frosting when all  
you want is bread and candy?"  
The man was accounted very  
wise, and he thought it was a  
true account.

Today Van Doren's fame rests largely upon his reputation as a critic and a teacher, but in the 1930s he was considered a poet of some note, and from all accounts he possessed a poet's taste for the vivid and the unusual, even among his students. He always attracted more than his share of the perennial undergraduate eccentric—the sort Fitzgerald would characterize as "wild, unknown men"—whose intellectual

vehemence and apparent lack of purpose invariably drive most academics to despair, and he was just the man for Lax, who published his first poem at the age of 11 and claims to have been 28 before he understood what salt was for.

Van Doren served Lax well as a life-long mentor, critic, and friend (in his later years, he kept up an increasingly far-flung correspondence with his old student). He also did him the favor of introducing him to Thomas Merton, who soon became Lax's closest companion and confidante.

To name Robert Lax in another way, he was a kind of combination of Hamlet and Elias. A potential prophet, but without rage. A king, but a Jew too. A mind full of tremendous and subtle intuitions, and every day he found less and less to say about them, and resigned himself to being inarticulate. In his hesitations, though without embarrassment or nervousness at all, he would often curl his long legs all around a chair, in seven different ways, while he was trying to find a word with which to begin. He talked best sitting on the floor. (Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*)

Most people who have heard of Lax know him mainly through Merton's recollections in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Still the best account of Merton's life ever written—far better than any of the numerous biographies and studies that have been published in the years since his death—Merton's memoir of the crooked path that led him from Europe to Columbia to the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in the Kentucky hills also provides one of the best portraits of American college life since *The Education of Henry Adams*, and Lax is one of its central figures. It was Lax who let the Hindu yogi Bramanchari live in his room in Fernald. It was Lax

who organized the contests to see who could write the fastest novel and grow the fastest beard. It was Lax who brought Merton and his friends up to his brother-in-law's cottage in Olean, NY for summer vacations. It was Lax who suggested to Merton (in all seriousness) that he ought to become a saint. And it was Lax who, only a few years after Merton, had himself baptized a Catholic.

The silver morning shifts her birds  
From tree to tree;  
Young green fires burn along the branch;  
The river moves but each wave holds a place,  
Pattern of knives above the juggling tide.  
Now in the south, the circus of the sun  
Lays out its route, lifts the white tent,  
Parades the pachyderm,  
And pins the green chameleon to the cloth.  
Coffee-mists rise above the gabbling cook-tent;  
Aerialists web above the tumblers' ring;  
Behold! In flaming silk, the acrobat,  
The wire-walking sun.

After Columbia but before Greece, Lax rarely stayed put for very long. In the 1940s and 1950s he spent long periods abroad, mainly in Paris (where he helped edit *NewStory* magazine), Marseille (where he tried to open a hospice for the poor), and Canada (where he traveled with the Cristiani Family Circus), but in those days he always eventually found his way back to New York and flitted like a moth around the flame of one magazine or another. There was *The New Yorker*, there were *Time* and *Parade*, there was—most important of all—*Jubilee*, started up by his friend Ed Rice in 1953 and remembered today (by a happy few) as perhaps the most distinguished Catholic publication ever produced in the United States. Rice, another old *Jester* hand, knew better than

to try to chain Lax to a desk and appointed him *Jubilee's* Roving Editor, thereby allowing him to travel on assignment more or less at will. It was a happy arrangement, but Lax left for good all the same in 1964, when he went to Greece and settled on Kalymnos, a small island near the Turkish mainland.

Nowadays Kalymnos (like Patmos) is on the main line of the tourist circuit, but then it was known only, if at all, as the center of the Greek sponge trade. Peace and quiet would not have been in short supply and, with houses renting for \$50 a year, it was within even a poet's means. Lax had visited Greece briefly on assignment for *Jubilee* a few years before and had liked it, so now he went back, thinking to spend "about three months" there. He spent 10 years in Kalymnos, and has been on Patmos for the past 25. Except for a few short visits, he has never returned to America.

Greece is a deeply Christian country, although it maintains its Christianity in a style that few Americans can comprehend. The Greek Church is established by law, but it is not much of a political force or even a moral agency. It is upheld above all by the custom of centuries and the daily habits of the Greeks themselves, most of whom see the Orthodox faith as a birthright rather than a theology. To be a Greek is to be a Christian, plain and simple, and there are constant reminders both great and small that the advent of tourism has not fully diluted the presence of religion within public life. Church marriages in Greece must be arranged through government agencies. Religious emblems are ubiquitous in shops and taxicabs, and roadside shrines are common in the islands and may even be found on busy corners in Athens. Priests

are an inevitable daily sight in just about any setting, from airports to bookshops to cafés.

To some degree (and with some justice), Greeks look upon Christianity itself as a Greek invention, and they take as great a proprietorial interest in the ancient Christian sites of their land as they do in the ancient pagan ones for which they are better known. There is no shortage of them, after all—from the ruins of the Athenian agora (where St Paul once preached) to the monastic republic of Mount Athos (where no woman has set foot since the 11th century) to the Cycladic isle of Tinos (famed for its miraculous icon of the Virgin, the *Panagia Evangelistria*). Perhaps the holiest site of all is Patmos, the ancient penal colony where St John wrote the *Book of Revelation* at the end of the first century.

Patmos itself is a rocky place, mountainous and extremely dry. Nearer to Turkey than to the Greek mainland, it is remote but far from desolate and has been a center of pilgrimage at least since 1080, when the Monastery of St John was built hard by the cave where the beloved disciple, "in exile for the Word of God," wrote out his *Revelation*. The monastery still dominates the island physically and imparts a peculiar tone to the place. Just beneath its ramparts, the old hill town of Chora looks down across the entire island; farther below, the shabbier port town of Skala stretches out across the waterfront. Lax lives in Skala, half way up the hill that overlooks the harbor and well within earshot of the poultry farms on the outskirts of town.

rooster  
rooster  
rooster

rooster  
with your  
head cut  
off:  
what  
are you  
thinking  
now,  
you rooster,  
what are you  
thinking now  
of the bloody  
morning?

In Chora you are sure to get lost. The little cubist houses that sit beneath the monastery form an impossible labyrinth of blind alleys and cul-de-sacs, designed to thwart pirates but serving just as well to insulate the expatriate publishers, curators, and academics who have lately taken up residence. In Skala there is a better chance of finding your way around, although you still may need—as I once did—to climb to the top of the Post Office tower and have the Customs Officer point out Lax's house to you in an approximate sort of way.

"You are a friend of Petros?"

"No, Robert. Robert Lax. Roberto?"

"Yes, yes, Petros. The American. He is right there. A poet. A very good man."

Quite a number of people travel to Patmos to visit Lax, although he is in none of the guides. Most of Patmos you can do in a day. If you're a daytripper, disembarking from one of the cruise liners early in the morning—and, outside high season, you probably will be—you should be able to make your way through the Cave of the Apocalypse and that wing of the Monastery open to visitors in four hours or so, which leaves you time for a decent lunch at Stofilis or Pirofani and a couple of beers at the Arion

while you wait for your ship to make it through the queue to the dock.

But if you come to see Lax you will probably land with the ferry late at night and end up in one of the cheap little hotels, like the Rex or the Australis, that are run by friendly old ladies who only lose their tempers when you put paper in the toilets or ring the bell to be let in at 2 or 3 in the morning after all the bars have closed. The toilets are easy to catch on to, but the hours are not. Patmos is a long way from Mykonos, but during the summer it's a sociable place and people stay out late.

On my first visit to Patmos I spent most of my evenings in Lax's little house above the bay, chatting amiably over cakes and tea. I was rarely the only guest. Lax used to have visitors nearly every night during the summers. Some made their way to Patmos for a few days, some stayed for months or even years. A few have never left. Today he is more retiring, but he still corresponds with the various students, academics, psychologists, and priests who have found him out at one point or another. He will enclose a drawing or a poem with his letters, which are prompt but rarely very long and always signed with a yellow dot.

"What's the dot for?" I asked him, after a few years.

"Nothing at all."

Lax is essentially simple and devoid of secrets Lax is not really averse to direct questions: It would be more accurate to say that he is immune to them, and just as well, too. Young college graduates who have not yet settled themselves will look for oracles in stranger places than Patmos, but they will certainly look for them there. The island has a sizeable colony of expatriates, after all,

who have dropped out of various societies and careers in some more or less vivid way, and an even greater number of visitors who would like to try. Many of these find their way to Lax's door at some point and step over the fish bones that have been picked clean by all the stray cats of the neighborhood to ask his advice.

If they are emotional and melodramatic, as the young often are, they are likely to be disappointed by Lax's demeanor and puzzled by his verse, for Lax is essentially simple and devoid of secrets. This is, in fact, a rarer quality than clairvoyance—so much so that it is difficult to recognize at first. And if they are clever, they may well be thrown into confusion over the absence of rationale in Lax's scheme of things—which in reality is eminently practical.

Sometimes grammar is rather more than a writer needs. Sometimes a narrative is superfluous. If you want a poem, look out the window. If you want a world, relax. There's one already here. That is how Lax thinks and lives, and it's not as strange as it may sound. Why write a poem about the afternoon, when the afternoon is making a poem of itself?

river  
river  
river  
river  
river  
river  
river  
river  
river  
river  
river  
river

Now in his 80s, Lax has spent the better part of his life abroad. He has managed

to elude the fame which most writers equate with success, although he has developed a kind of cult of his own. On Patmos he is a familiar figure, but this is no real distinction on an island of fewer than three thousand souls. More remarkable are the numbers of travelers he has attracted across the various seas and continents he has placed himself behind. Many read his poems and came. Others had merely heard of him. Some had simply come to Patmos, the Jerusalem of the Aegean, and discovered him once they arrived.

reading of lovely Jerusalem,  
lovely, ruined Jerusalem.  
we are brought to the port  
where the boats in line are  
and the high tower on the hill  
and the prows starting again  
into the mist.  
for we must seek  
by going down,  
down into the city  
for our song, deep into the city  
for our peace.  
for it is there  
that peace lies  
folded  
like a pool.  
there we shall seek:  
it is from there  
she'll flower.  
for lovely, ruined Jerusalem,  
lovely, sad Jerusalem  
lies furled  
under the cities  
of light.  
for we are only  
going down,  
only descending  
by this song  
to where the cities  
gleam in darkness,

or curled like roots  
sit waiting  
at the undiscovered pool.  
what pressure  
thrusts us up  
as we descend?  
pressure of  
the city's singing,  
pressure of  
the song  
she hath withheld.  
hath long withheld.  
for none  
would hear  
her.

JAMES J. UEBBING (class of 1982) is poetry editor of *Kirkus Reviews* and a graduate of both Columbia College and the Columbia Writing Program. His anthology of Lax's poetry and prose, *Love Had a Compass*, was published by Grove Press in 1996. All poems are copyrighted by Robert Lax, appeared in various compilations of his work including *A Thing That Is* (Overlook Press, 1997), *Journal F* (Pendo Verlag, 1997) and *The Hill* (Pendo Verlag, 1999), and are used with his permission. His latest, *Circus Days and Nights*, will be published by Overlook Press later this fall. This piece first appeared in a Colombia University magazine.

---

To name Tao  
Is to name no-thing.  
Tao is not the name  
Of "an existent".  
"Cause" and "chance"  
Have no bearing on Tao.  
Tao is a name  
That indicates  
Without defining.

Tao is beyond words  
And beyond things.  
It is not expressed  
Either in word or in silence.  
Where there is no longer word  
or silence  
Tao is apprehended.

*The Way of  
Chuang  
Tzu*