A busy life

*Notes for the Next Robert Lax*, Robert Lax (Guillemot Press)

It is always hard reviewing Robert Lax's work, hard to articulate how his poems work. Why, for instance, does this move me?:

 light

 on

 the

 sea

 like a

 lowered

 glance

The first verse is a simple statement, without any details, the second a simile. The poem is imagistic, but also has the effect of slowing the reader down because of the lineation. It thus becomes more than the sum of its parts.

Much has been made of the visual layout of Lax's work, with some critics placing him in the tradition of concrete poetry. Others have discussed him as a mystic because of his subject matter (nature, spirituality, God) and perhaps his friendship and correspondence with Thomas Merton.

Perhaps more important is the clarity and simplicity of his work. Lax brought a clear-sighted point of view to his life and work, letting his gaze linger on the world around him and showing, through representation, word play, and his own minimalistic poetics, what he saw. We should not forget his sense of humour too:

 four

 sea

 sons

 makes

 for

 a

 bus

 y

 life

 says

 the

 tree

is more like a riddle or zen koan than anything else, it is *witty* in the real sense of the word.

Guillemot have produced an exquisite, spacious and well-designed book of unpublished poems 'from handwritten, single page texts found loose among materials in the Robert Lax archive'. Hidden within these pages is a simple confession or manifesto that may tell us the impossible reason which made Lax write:

 realized he'd been trying

 to write a poem all these

 years that would justify

 man's way to God.

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