

**Laughter Before Sleep**, by Robert Pack. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011, 160 pp., \$18.00 paperback.

## The Love That We Bear

**Gary Margolis**

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Almost fifty years ago, a sophomore at Middlebury College, I walked into a professor's office on the first floor of Monroe Hall. A friend of mine, an English major, had told me, "You have to meet my teacher." I stood in his doorway, unannounced, with nothing to say. He looked up from his soft swivel chair and said, "You look familiar. Do you play football?" I nodded. He invited me in. After a few words, he handed me three poems. Frost, Yeats, and Stevens. He suggested I read them and return for conversation.

A week later, by appointment, we began a life-long conversation. A month later, he asked me if I wrote poetry and slowly I told him I had been privately writing poems since high school. I kept them, metaphorically, in my gym bag, and never showed them to anyone, especially in those days, to any teammate in our locker room. We have been exchanging poems for almost fifty years, in what we call our *poetry express*.

My comments on Robert Pack's new collection, *Laughter Before Sleep* include the objectivity of friendship, the subjectivity of criticism.

All of Bob's lifelong themes are embedded, displayed, and sung in these poems: random occurrence and human will; nature's beautiful indifference; death's abiding reality; our necessary capacity to grieve and celebrate, to cry

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and laugh; our ability to recall and name; and, above and under everything, our human impulse to care, that is, to empathize with all of life's creating and destroying ways—the personal and impersonal at once. He writes in “At Number Seven”:

He said you must discover for yourself—  
It will reveal the paradox of what  
enables you, at once to be yourself  
Unique, or anyone at any time.

All of Bob's stories are newly told, expressed, and revealed in these poems: the loss of family members, nations' wars against each other, the disrespect for and denuding of our earth's breathing environment, and, with all this, the capacity for self-reflection as well—to laugh with and at ourselves, to take a moment to pause (a favorite word and practice of Bob's poetry), to see ourselves reflected in a pond's mirror, a dinner table's bowl.

While Bob would not be considered a religious poet, he religiously attends to those moments when beauty is perceived and apprehended, that moment of vanishing and igniting light. A Buddha moment, I would call it. For example, he writes in “Alive”:

And now my earth-bound life  
composed everything within  
the widened circle of my sight—  
I swoop, I rise, I dip, I dive;  
now I am pure awareness that I am  
aware; I live composed now in lush  
exultation that I am alive!

Read these lines again, preferably aloud, and you'll also hear, as you will in every one of these poems, the music that goes beyond each individual word, the chosen rhythm sound makes when it's written into poetic lines. Space between words and at the end of lines is the silence, “stop,” and “rest” that makes music possible.

Bob has known this for a long time. It is embodied in the last stanza of “Clouds”:

I'll let all introspections go—  
 My April hopes, My August memories—  
 To watch blank space define the trees,  
 And moonlight merge with spectral snow.

Listen, too, for Biblical and Shakespearean meter, rhyme, and near-rhyme, and how God appears as a domestic and celestial character in some of his lyrical narratives.

Watch how serious play coexists, time and again, in what we sometimes too lightly call punning: august in August, for example. It's no surprise Bob admires Freud for his philosophy and psychology, and his writing as well—for his mantra that a meaningful life is "*zu lieben und zu arbeiten*," to love and to work.

And these poems, with effortless effort, show and share Bob's feeling mind, the poet's relationship to what's then and now, there and here, and how we're in relationship to relationship itself—to a friend, a lover, and, sometimes, the air. He writes in "Seasons":

Needing to free my mind from thought,  
 From words that carry me away from now,  
 My eyes remind me nearly to observe—  
 To watch arched snowdrops push  
 Their way above the melting snow,  
 And now again you're here, emerging  
 From white morning mist, to tell me so.

Bob has been one of my cheerleaders. Isn't that part of being a teacher? Seeing the poet in the athlete. Calling out the poem in the cheering. Playing by a game's rules, isn't it the unexpected we are thrilled to wait for, to see? He writes in "Seasons":

I see the whirling cheerleaders as  
 if exulting in their pleasure to exult  
 suspended in their twirls, poised perfectly—  
 though not for me—yet surely there  
 for anyone at any time or any place,  
 in the enclosing purple evening air.

*Laughter Before Sleep* begins with “Late Mountain Spring,” a poem that announces each of the other poems as it leads us to its last. It questions what in this moment’s life of the planet, in this moment of the poet’s life is meant to be taken personally, is meant to be read and felt as nature’s and human existence’s inevitable ways of being. The poem imagines the poet’s imaginary afterlife, in which he is still able to bear sorrow, still able to offer himself to the love that the Universe contains:

I look into the leafless air as if  
its blankness were a prophesy,  
and I can see the late Bob Pack  
bearing our species’ natural remorse  
in desperate behalf of everyone he loves,  
ascending toward another galaxy  
whose aged inhabitants reach out  
across light years to welcome,  
to embrace, to comfort him.