

Lax in Stuttgart

By Jim Davis

He's not going to read
that poem.

He's not going to read
Black and White
to all these people
is he . . .

He sure is.
He's going to read
Black and White
to all these Germans
in Stuttgart, Germany.

He began . . .

Black
Black
Black

White
White
White

I looked around.
Five minutes
had gone by.

People were squirming
in their seats.

I was squirming
in my seat.

Black
Black

White
White

He kept it going.
He beat his foot.

The poet
kept it going.
He beat his foot.

White
White

Black
Black

Philadelphia
came to mind.
I had recently
moved to
Center city
Philadelphia.

North Philadelphia started
just across the street.

Ten square miles
of blacks.
Across the street.

I'm from a small town.
No blacks.

I thought . . .
North Philadelphia.
what poverty,

What tension . . .

Main line Philadelphia.
White Philadelphia.

What wealth,
what beautiful homes.



Jim Davis and Robert Lax

Jim Davis grew up in Olean, NY with Jack and Marcia Marcus Kelly and now lives in Marco Island, FL. His first remembrance of Robert Lax was as a young boy when he wandered next door and saw Lax sitting in the yard typing something on an old typewriter. "I asked my mother what he was doing. She said he was writing a poem about a circus."

Never saw
anything like
Main Line
Philadelphia
in my small town.

What a contrast,
Black Philadelphia,
White Philadelphia.

Black
Black

White
White

The poet
was still
going.

Why did I
start to think
about Philadelphia?

Stopped squirming.

Just thinking.

Good times
in my life,
bad times
in my life . . .

White
White

Black
Black

Looked around,
Audience not squirming
now.

Must be
thinking,
now.

Black
Black

White
White

Were they
thinking about
good times and
bad times
in their lives?
What
was going on
here?

Black
Black
Black

White
White
White

What
was happening
to me?

Was this a poem?
This black and white.
What was it?

Fifteen minutes
had gone by.

Fifteen minutes
of black and white.

I had thought
of many things.

Good things,
bad things . . .

Even thought
of God
for a moment.

Was there a God,
I mean
a personal God?

Were others
thinking
like me?

I didn't care,
I was enjoying
the moment.

It was my poem.
Black and White
was my poem.

I decided
it was just
for me.

It was a moment
just for me.

Bob Lax
had written
a poem
just for me.

I listened,
and thought.

I was sure
no one thought
Black and White
was a poem.

But for that moment
I thought
it was a poem,
a poem
just for me.

I was enjoying
the moment.

White
White
White

Black
Black

White
White

He stopped . . .
It was over.

I felt sad,
it was over.

There was
no sound
in the auditorium.

I squirmed,
I felt embarrassed again
for Bob.

He sat quietly,
not embarrassed.
Someone started
to clap,
others joined in.

Soon,
all were clapping,

then they stood
and clapped,
and clapped,
and clapped.

What were they thinking,
those Germans
in Stuttgart, Germany?

What
were they thinking
about Black and White?
Did they all think
Bob Lax
had written
a poem
for each of them . . . too?

Bob spoke in English,
they spoke German.

I guess
you don't have to know
much English
to understand
that poem,
or whatever it is.

Maybe it is a poem
for each person.
Maybe that's
what it is,
a poem for each person that
Black and White.

A poem for each person, that
Black and White.

Is that why they
stood
and clapped
stood
and clapped?

Must be why they
stood
and clapped.

I thought
it was just for me.

They must have had
their own
Black and White.

* * * * *

I wandered
into another room
of the museum
in Stuttgart, Germany.
I wanted to see
the black pictures
one more time.

Bob was there
by himself
sitting on a bench.

How do you like
the pictures,
I said.

Oh . . . they're great
aren't they . . .

Bob . . .
do you think
Ad Reinhardt
would like
the show

Oh, yes
to see them
all together
like this . . .

Black and White
was great,
I said.
Do you think
it went OK?

The people liked it . . .

Some wanted
to crawl
out the window,
he said, with a chuckle.

No, not at the end.

It was just
very different
for them.

Bob looked up.
Did you like it?
Yes, very much .
Good.

Your mother's picture
fits in well
with the other
black pictures.

Yes,
it's the smallest,
but it finally
found a home.

That's good,
he said . . .
Finally found a home,
that's good.

All was quiet.

We sat together
looked at
the black pictures.

It reminds me,
he said,
of sitting in
Notre Dame Cathedral, sitting
with these
black pictures.
Sitting in
Notre Dame Cathedral . . .
What do you mean?

The black pictures
are so calming,
so still, he said.

They just draw you in. There is
nowhere else to go.
They are the end . . .

The end?

To me,
they are the most
religious pictures
ever painted.

I sat quietly
and looked
at the pictures.
Bob always seemed
to do that to me
create new thoughts
where there weren't
any thoughts
before.

It seemed so easy
for him,
new thoughts,
that is.

I guess they weren't
new thoughts
for him,
just new thoughts
for the rest of us.

I never
thought about
black pictures
being religious pictures.
Did you?

Bob Lax did.

As I sat there
I began to see
what he was
talking about.

Looking at the black pictures
wouldn't let me go
anywhere.

My thoughts
couldn't move away
from them
into something else.

As Bob said,
they were the end.

What about
your poem
Black and White?
Is that the end?

Oh, I guess that's
up to you.
He chuckled,
again . . .

Was Black and White
a religious poem
like Ad Reinhardt's
Black pictures?

I guess that's
how you feel
when you hear it.

I've heard
Ad Reinhardt's pictures
described
as the absence
of everything.

He smiled.

I guess
when you take away
everything
you have nothing
left but God.

A funny thought, I said.

Where are we going
for dinner?

I don't know, I said.

Marcia
will have something
planned.

Thank God for Marcia,
to keep us organized.

We left the Black paintings . . .

* * * * *

I thought a lot about the
Black paintings
and about the
Black and White poem,
that night
and many more nights
after that.

Take away
all the shapes
and forms
that remind us
of the world
around us,

then take away
all the colors
that remind us
of the feelings
we have,
and you have
a black picture.

A picture
that won't let you jump
anywhere,

a picture
that makes you look deep
into a black void,

a picture
that clears your mind
of everything else.

Stand there,
look at one,
for quite awhile.
It clears your mind.
Can you then accept God,
when your mind is clear?

It's hard to accept God
when your mind is filled
with today's clutter.

I think it is, anyway.

The world is full
of religious clutter.

The world is 5,000 years old,
no it's 4.5 billion years old.

Man evolved
from other life forms,
no man was just created
in a single moment.

This piece of land,
this temple,
is ours.

No, it's ours.

Let's go to war
over it,
we'll see
to whom it belongs.

Instead of going to war,
let's listen to a poem
called Black and White,
let's stand and look
at a Black picture.
I think
it's more religious
and less wear and tear.

I think
Bob Lax
would agree.