

Classic Poetry Series

Robert Lowell
- poems -

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Robert Lowell(1917 - 1977)

Robert Traill Spence Lowell IV (March 1, 1917 – September 12, 1977) was an American poet, considered the founder of the confessional poetry movement. He was appointed the sixth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress where he served from 1947 until 1948. He won the Pulitzer Prize in both 1947 and 1974, the National Book Award in 1960, and the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977.

Life

Early Years

Lowell was born in Boston, Massachusetts to a Boston Brahmin family that included poets Amy Lowell and James Russell Lowell. His mother, Charlotte Winslow, was a descendant of William Samuel Johnson, a signer of the United States Constitution, along with Jonathan Edwards, the famed Calvinist theologian, Anne Hutchinson, the Puritan preacher and healer, Robert Livingston the Elder, Thomas Dudley, the second governor of Massachusetts, and Mayflower passengers James Chilton and his daughter Mary Chilton.

He received his high school education at St. Mark's School, a prominent prep-school in Southborough, Massachusetts, where he met and was influenced by the poet Richard Eberhart who taught at the school. Then Lowell attended Harvard College for two years before transferring to Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio, to study under John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate.

There is a well-known anecdote about where Lowell lived when he first arrived at Kenyon. Before arriving at the school, he asked Allen Tate if he could live with him, and Tate joked that if Lowell wanted to, he could pitch a tent on his lawn; this is exactly what Lowell did. In an interview for *The Paris Review*, Lowell stated that he went to Sears, Roebuck to purchase the "pup tent" that he set up on Tate's lawn and lived in for two months Lowell called the act "a terrible piece of youthful callousness." Fortunately for Tate and his wife, Lowell soon settled into the so-called "writer's house" (a dorm that received its nickname after it had accrued a number of ambitious young writers) with fellow students Peter Taylor, Robie Macauley and Randall Jarrell.

Partly in rebellion against his parents, he converted from Episcopalianism to Catholicism (however, by the end of the forties, he would end up leaving the Catholic Church). After Lowell graduated from Kenyon in 1940 with a degree in

Classics, he worked on a Masters degree in English literature at Louisiana State University for one year before World War II broke out.

Imprisonment

Lowell was a conscientious objector during World War II and served several months at the federal prison in Danbury, Connecticut. He explained his decision not to serve in World War II in a letter addressed to President Franklin Roosevelt on September 7, 1943, stating, "Dear Mr President: I very much regret that I must refuse the opportunity you offer me in your communication of August 6, 1943 for service in the Armed Force." In the letter, he goes on to explain that after the bombing at Pearl Harbor, he was prepared to fight in the war until he read about the United States' terms of unconditional surrender which he feared would lead to the "permanent destruction of Germany and Japan." Before Lowell was transferred to the prison in Connecticut, he was held in a prison in New York City which he later wrote about in the poem "Memories of West Street and Lepke" from his book *Life Studies*.

Influence

In 1950, Lowell was included in the influential anthology *Mid-Century American Poets* as one of the key literary figures of his generation. Among his contemporaries who also appeared in that book were Muriel Rukeyser, Karl Shapiro, Elizabeth Bishop, Theodore Roethke, Randall Jarrell, and John Ciardi, all poets who came into prominence in the 1940s. From 1950 to 1953, Lowell taught in the well-reputed Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, together with Paul Engle, Robie Macauley, and Anthony Hecht. Later, Donald James Winslow hired Lowell to teach at Boston University, where his students included the poets Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. Over the years, he taught at a number of other universities including the University of Cincinnati, Yale University, Harvard University, and the New School for Social Research.

During the late 1960s Lowell was active in the civil rights movement and opposed the US involvement in Vietnam. His participation in the October 1967 peace march in Washington, DC and his subsequent arrest would be described in the early sections of Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*. In that book, Mailer wrote, "[Lowell spoke] in his fine stammering voice which gave the impression that life rushed at him in a series of hurdles and some he succeeded in jumping and some he did not." He also wrote that "all flaws considered, Lowell was still a fine, good, and honorable man."

In 1964, Lowell stated, "The poets who most directly influenced me . . . were

Allen Tate, Elizabeth Bishop, and William Carlos Williams. An unlikely combination!. . .but you can see that Bishop is a sort of bridge between Tate's formalism and Williams's informal art."

By 1967, he was the most public, well-known American poet; in June, he appeared on the cover of Time magazine as part of a lengthy cover story on American poetry in which he was praised as "the best American poet of his generation." Although the article gave a general overview of modern American poetry (mentioning Lowell's contemporaries like John Berryman and Elizabeth Bishop), Lowell's life, career, and place in the American literary canon remained the article's focus.

Relationships

Lowell married the novelist Jean Stafford in 1940. Before their marriage, in 1938, Lowell and Stafford got into a serious car accident, in which Lowell was at the wheel, that left Stafford permanently scarred, while Lowell walked away unscathed. The couple had a tumultuous marriage that ended in 1948. The poet Anthony Hecht characterized the marriage as "a tormented and tormenting one." Then, shortly thereafter, in 1949 Lowell married the writer Elizabeth Hardwick with whom he had a daughter, Harriet, in 1957. Later, the press would characterize their marriage as "restless and emotionally harrowing." After 23 years of marriage to Elizabeth Hardwick, in 1970, Lowell left her for the British author Lady Caroline Blackwood. Blackwood and Lowell were married in 1972 in England where they decided to settle and where they raised their son, Sheridan.

Lowell had a close friendship with the poet Elizabeth Bishop that lasted from 1947 until Lowell's death in 1977. Both writers relied upon one another for feedback on their poetry (which is in evidence in their voluminous correspondence, published in the book *Words in Air: the Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* in 2008) and thereby influenced one another's work. Bishop's influence over Lowell can be seen at work in at least two of Lowell's poems: "The Scream" (inspired by Bishop's short story "In the Village") and "Skunk Hour" (inspired by Bishop's poem "The Armadillo").

Illness

Lowell suffered from manic depression and was hospitalized many times throughout his adult life for this mental illness. Although his manic depression was often a great burden (for himself and his family), the subject of that mental illness led to some of his most important poetry, particularly as it manifested

itself in his book *Life Studies*. When he was fifty, Lowell began taking lithium to treat his mental illness. The editor of Lowell's *Letters*, Saskia Hamilton notes, "Lithium treatment relieved him from suffering the idea that he was morally and emotionally responsible for the fact that he relapsed. However, it did not entirely prevent relapses. . . And he was troubled and anxious about the impact of his relapses on his family and friends until the end of his life."

Lowell died in 1977, having suffered a heart attack in a cab in New York City on his way to see his ex-wife, Elizabeth Hardwick. He was buried in Stark Cemetery, Dunbarton, New Hampshire.

Writing

1940s

Lowell's first book of poems, *Land of Unlikeness* (1944), did not receive much attention. In 1946, Lowell received wide acclaim for his next book, *Lord Weary's Castle*, which included five poems slightly revised from *Land of Unlikeness*, plus thirty new poems. Among the better known poems in the volume are "Mr Edwards and the Spider" and "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket." *Lord Weary's Castle* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1947. Randall Jarrell praised the book, writing, "It is unusually difficult to say which are the best poems in *Lord Weary's Castle*: several are realized past changing, successes that vary only in scope and intensity--others are poems that almost any living poet would be pleased to have written. . . [and] one or two of these poems, I think, will be read as long as men remember English."

Lowell's early poems were formal, ornate, and concerned with violence and theology; a typical example is the close of "The Quaker Graveyard" -- "You could cut the brackish winds with a knife / Here in Nantucket and cast up the time / When the Lord God formed man from the sea's slime / And breathed into his face the breath of life, / And the blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill. / The Lord survives the rainbow of His will." He was Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 1947-1948 (a position now known as the U.S. Poet Laureate).

1950s

The Mills of the Kavanaughs (1951), a book that centered on its epic title poem, did not receive the praise that his previous book did, but Lowell was able to revive his reputation with *Life Studies* which was published in 1959 and won the National Book Award for poetry in 1960. In his acceptance speech for the award, Lowell famously divided American poetry into two camps: the "cooked" and the

"raw." This commentary by Lowell was made in reference to the popularity of Allen Ginsberg and the Beat Generation poets and was a signal from Lowell that he was trying to incorporate some of their "raw" energy into his own poetry.

The poems in *Life Studies* were written in a mix of free and metered verse, with much more informal language than he had used in his first two books. It marked both a big turning point in Lowell's career, and a turning point for American poetry in general. Because many of the poems documented details from Lowell's family life and personal problems, one critic, M.L. Rosenthal, labeled these poems "confessional." Lowell's editor and friend Frank Bidart notes in his afterword to Lowell's *Collected Poems*, "Lowell is widely, perhaps indelibly associated with the term 'confessional,'" though Bidart questions the accuracy of this label. But for better or worse, this label stuck and led to Lowell being grouped together with other influential confessional poets like Lowell's former students W. D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton.

1960s

Lowell followed *Life Studies* with *Imitations* (1961), a volume of loose translations of poems by classical and modern European poets, including Rilke, Montale, Baudelaire, Pasternak, and Rimbaud, for which he received the 1962 Bollingen Poetry Translation Prize. However, critical response to *Imitations* was mixed and sometimes hostile (as was the case with Vladimir Nabokov's public response to Lowell's Mandelstam translations). In the book's introduction, Lowell explained that his idiosyncratic translations should be thought of as "imitations" rather than strict translations since he took many liberties with the originals, trying to "do what [his] authors might have done if they were writing their poems now and in America."

His next book *For the Union Dead* (1964) was widely praised, particularly for its title poem, which invokes Allen Tate's "Ode to the Confederate Dead." *For the Union Dead* was Lowell's first book since *Life Studies* to contain all original verse (since it did not include any translations), and in writing the poems in this volume, Lowell built upon the looser, more personal style of writing that he'd established in the final section of *Life Studies*. However, none of the poems in *For the Union Dead* explicitly addressed the taboo subject of Lowell's mental illness (like some of the poems in *Life Studies* did) and were, therefore, not notably "confessional." The subject matter in *For the Union Dead* was also much broader than it was in *Life Studies*. For instance, Lowell wrote about a number of world historical figures in poems like "Caligula," "Jonathan Edwards in Western Massachusetts," and "Lady Raleigh's Lament."

In 1964, Lowell also tried his hand at playwrighting with three, one-act plays that were meant to be performed together as a trilogy, titled *The Old Glory*. The first two parts, "Endecott the Red Cross" and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" were stage adaptations of short stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the third part, "Benito Cereno," was a stage adaptation of a novella by Herman Melville. *The Old Glory* was produced off-Broadway in New York City in 1964 and won five Obie Awards in 1965 including an award for "Best American Play." The play was published in its first printing in 1965 (with a revised edition following in 1968).

In 1967, Lowell published his next book of poems, *Near the Ocean*. With this volume, Lowell returned to writing more formal, metered verse. The second half of the book also shows Lowell returning once again to writing loose translations (including verse approximations of Dante, Juvenal, and Horace). The best known poem in this volume is "Waking Early Sunday Morning," which was written in eight-line tetrameter stanzas (borrowed from Andrew Marvell's poem "Upon Appleton House") and showed contemporary American politics overtly entering into Lowell's work.

During 1967 and 1968 he experimented with a verse journal, published as *Notebook 1967-68* (and later republished in a revised edition, titled *Notebook*). Lowell referred to these fourteen-line poems as sonnets although they sometimes failed to incorporate regular meter and never incorporated rhyme (both of which are defining features of the sonnet form); however, some of Lowell's sonnets (particularly the ones in *Notebook 1967-1968*) were written in blank verse with a definitive pentameter. In the flyleaf to *Notebook 1967-1968*, Lowell explained the timeline of the book:

The time is a summer, an autumn, a winter, a spring, another summer; here the poem ends, except for turned-back bits of fall and winter 1968. . . My plot rolls with the seasons. The separate poems and section are opportunist and inspired by impulse. Accident threw up subjects, and the plot swallowed them--famished for human chances.

Steven Gould Axelrod wrote that, "[Lowell's concept behind the sonnet form] was to achieve the balance of freedom and order, discontinuity and continuity, that he [had] observed in [Wallace] Stevens's late long poems and in John Berryman's *Dream Songs*, then nearing completion. He hoped that his form . . . would enable him 'to describe the immediate instant,' an instant in which political and personal happenings interacted with a lifetime's accumulation of memories, dreams, and knowledge." Lowell liked the new form so much that he reworked and revised many of the poems from *Notebook* and used them as the foundation for his next three volumes of verse, all of which employed the same loose,

fourteen-line sonnet form.

1970s to the present

The first book in Lowell's Notebook-derived trilogy was *History* (1973) which primarily dealt with world history from antiquity up to the mid-20th century (although the book does not always follow a linear or logical path and contains many poems about Lowell's friends, peers, and family). The second book, *For Lizzie and Harriet* (1973), describes the breakdown of his second marriage and contains poems that are supposed to be in the voice of his daughter, Harriet, and his second wife, Elizabeth. Finally, the last work in Lowell's sonnet sequence, *The Dolphin* (1973), which won the 1974 Pulitzer Prize, includes poems about his daughter, his ex-wife, and his new wife Caroline Blackwood whom he had affectionately nicknamed "Dolphin." Notably, the book only contained new poems, making it the only book in Lowell's sonnet trilogy not to include revised poems from *Notebook*.

A minor controversy erupted when Lowell admitted to having incorporated (and altered) private letters from his ex-wife, Elizabeth Hardwick into poems for *The Dolphin*. He was particularly criticized for this by his friends, fellow-poets Adrienne Rich and Elizabeth Bishop. Bishop made an eloquent and thoughtful argument to Lowell against publishing *The Dolphin*. In a letter to Lowell regarding *The Dolphin*, dated March 21, 1972, before he'd published the book, Bishop praises the writing, saying, "Please believe that I think it is wonderful poetry." But then she states, "I'm sure my point is only too plain. . . Lizzie [Hardwick] is not dead, etc.--but there is a 'mixture of fact & fiction' [in the book], and you have changed [Hardwick's] letters. That is 'infinite mischief,' I think. . . One can use one's life as material--one does anyway--but these letters--aren't you violating a trust? IF you were given permission--IF you hadn't changed them. . . etc. But art just isn't worth that much."

Lowell published his last volume of poetry, *Day by Day*, in 1977, the year of his death. In May 1977, Lowell won the \$10,000 National Medal for Literature awarded by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, and *Day by Day* was awarded that year's National Book Critics Circle Award for poetry. In a PBS documentary on Lowell, Anthony Hecht said that "[*Day by Day* was] a very touching, moving, gentle book, tinged with a sense of [Lowell's] own pain and the pain [he'd] given to others." It was Lowell's only volume to contain nothing but free verse, and for fans of Lowell's work who were disappointed by the uneven "sonnets" that Lowell had been re-writing and re-packaging in volume after volume since 1967, *Day by Day* marked a return to form. In many of the poems, Lowell reflects on his life, his past relationships, and his own mortality.

The best-known poem from this collection is the last one, titled "Epilogue," in which Lowell reflects upon the "confessional" school of poetry with which his work was associated. In this poem he wrote,

But sometimes everything I write

with the threadbare art of my eye

seems a snapshot,

lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,

heightened from life,

yet paralyzed by fact.

All's misalliance.

Yet why not say what happened?

Lowell's *Collected Poems*, edited by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter, was published in 2003. The *Collected Poems* is a very comprehensive volume that includes all of Lowell's major works with the exception of *Notebook 1967-1968* and *Notebook*. However, many of the poems from these volumes were republished, in revised forms, in *History and For Lizzie and Harriet*. On the heels of the publication of *The Collected Poems*, *The Letters of Robert Lowell*, edited by Saskia Hamilton, was published in 2005. Both Lowell's *Collected Poems* and his *Letters* received overwhelmingly positive critical responses from the mainstream press, and their publication has since led to a renewed interest in Lowell's writing.

"To Speak Of Woe That Is In Marriage"

"The hot night makes us keep our bedroom windows open.
Our magnolia begins to happen.
My hopped up husband drops his home disputes,
and hits the streets to cruise for prostitutes,
free-lancing out along the razor's edge.
This screwball might kill his wife, then take the pledge.
Oh the monotonous meanness of his lust. . .
It's the injustice . . . he is so unjust--
whiskey-blind, swaggering home at five.
My only thought is how to keep alive.
What makes him tick? Each night now I tie
ten dollars and his car key to my thigh. . . .
Gored by the climacteric of his want,
he stalls above me like an elephant."

Robert Lowell

After The Surprising Conversions

September twenty-second, Sir: today
I answer. In the latter part of May,
Hard on our Lord's Ascension, it began
To be more sensible. A gentleman
Of more than common understanding, strict
In morals, pious in behavior, kicked
Against our goad. A man of some renown,
An useful, honored person in the town,
He came of melancholy parents; prone
To secret spells, for years they kept alone—
His uncle, I believe, was killed of it:
Good people, but of too much or little wit.
I preached one Sabbath on a text from Kings;
He showed concernment for his soul. Some things
In his experience were hopeful. He
Would sit and watch the wind knocking a tree
And praise this countryside our Lord has made.
Once when a poor man's heifer died, he laid
A shilling on the doorsill; though a thirst
For loving shook him like a snake, he durst
Not entertain much hope of his estate
In heaven. Once we saw him sitting late
Behind his attic window by a light
That guttered on his Bible; through that night
He meditated terror, and he seemed
Beyond advice or reason, for he dreamed
That he was called to trumpet Judgment Day
To Concord. In the latter part of May
He cut his throat. And though the coroner
Judged him delirious, soon a noisome stir
Palsied our village. At Jehovah's nod
Satan seemed more let loose amongst us: God
Abandoned us to Satan, and he pressed
Us hard, until we thought we could not rest
Till we had done with life. Content was gone.
All the good work was quashed. We were undone.
The breath of God had carried out a planned
And sensible withdrawal from this land;
The multitude, once unconcerned with doubt,

Once neither callous, curious nor devout,
Jumped at broad noon, as though some peddler groaned
At it in its familiar twang: "My friend,
Cut your own throat. Cut your own throat. Now! Now!"
September twenty-second, Sir, the bough
Cracks with the unpicked apples, and at dawn
The small-mouth bass breaks water, gorged with spawn.

Robert Lowell

Children Of Light

Our fathers wrung their bread from stocks and stones
And fenced their gardens with the Redmen's bones;
Embarking from the Nether Land of Holland,
Pilgrims unhouseled by Geneva's night,
They planted here the Serpent's seeds of light;
And here the pivoting searchlights probe to shock
The riotous glass houses built on rock,
And candles gutter by an empty altar,
And light is where the landless blood of Cain
Is burning, burning the unburied grain.

Robert Lowell

Dolphin

My Dolphin, you only guide me by surprise,
a captive as Racine, the man of craft,
drawn through his maze of iron composition
by the incomparable wandering voice of Phèdre.
When I was troubled in mind, you made for my body
caught in its hangman's-knot of sinking lines,
the glassy bowing and scraping of my will. . . .
I have sat and listened to too many
words of the collaborating muse,
and plotted perhaps too freely with my life,
not avoiding injury to others,
not avoiding injury to myself--
to ask compassion . . . this book, half fiction,
an eelnet made by man for the eel fighting

my eyes have seen what my hand did.

Robert Lowell

Epilogue

Those blessed structures, plot and rhyme--
why are they no help to me now
I want to make
something imagined, not recalled?
I hear the noise of my own voice:
<i>The painter's vision is not a lens,
it trembles to caress the light.</i>
But sometimes everything I write
with the threadbare art of my eye
seems a snapshot,
lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,
heightened from life,
yet paralyzed by fact.
All's misalliance.
Yet why not say what happened?
Pray for the grace of accuracy
Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination
stealing like the tide across a map
to his girl solid with yearning.
We are poor passing facts,
warned by that to give
each figure in the photograph
his living name.

Robert Lowell

Falling Asleep Over The Aeneid

An old man in Concord forgets to go to morning service. He falls asleep, while reading Vergil, and dreams that he is Aeneas at the funeral of Pallas, an Italian prince.

The sun is blue and scarlet on my page,
And yuck-a, yuck-a, yuck-a, yuck-a, rage
The yellowhammers mating. Yellow fire
Blankets the captives dancing on their pyre,
And the scorched lictor screams and drops his rod.
Trojans are singing to their drunken God,
Ares. Their helmets catch on fire. Their files
Clank by the body of my comrade—miles
Of filings! Now the scythe-wheeled chariot rolls
Before their lances long as vaulting poles,
And I stand up and hail the thousand men,
Who carry Pallas to the bird-priest. Then
The bird-priest groans, and as his birds foretold,
I greet the body, lip to lip. I hold
The sword that Dido used. It tries to speak,
A bird with Dido's sworded breast. Its beak
Clangs and ejaculates the Punic word
I hear the bird-priest chirping like a bird.
I groan a little. "Who am I, and why?"
It asks, a boy's face, though its arrow-eye
Is working from its socket. "Brother, try,
O Child of Aphrodite, try to die:
To die is life." His harlots hang his bed
With feathers of his long-tailed birds. His head
Is yawning like a person. The plumes blow;
The beard and eyebrows ruffle. Face of snow,
You are the flower that country girls have caught,
A wild bee-pillaged honey-suckle brought
To the returning bridegroom—the design
Has not yet left it, and the petals shine;
The earth, its mother, has, at last, no help:
It is itself. The broken-winded yelp
Of my Phoenician hounds, that fills the brush
With snapping twigs and flying, cannot flush

The ghost of Pallas. But I take his pall,
Stiff with its gold and purple, and recall
How Dido hugged it to her, while she toiled,
Laughing—her golden threads, a serpent coiled
In cypress. Now I lay it like a sheet;
It clinks and settles down upon his feet,
The careless yellow hair that seemed to burn
Beforehand. Left foot, right foot—as they turn,
More pyres are rising: armored horses, bronze,
And gagged Italians, who must file by ones
Across the bitter river, when my thumb
Tightens into their wind-pipes. The beaks drum;
Their headman's cow-horned death's-head bites its tongue,
And stiffens, as it eyes the hero slung
Inside his feathered hammock on the crossed
Staves of the eagles that we winged. Our cost
Is nothing to the lovers, whoring Mars
And Venus, father's lover. Now his car's
Plumage is ready, and my marshals fetch
His squire, Acoctes, white with age, to hitch
Aethon, the hero's charger, and its ears
Prick, and it steps and steps, and stately tears
Lather its teeth; and then the harlots bring
The hero's charms and baton—but the King,
Vain-glorious Turnus, carried off the rest.
"I was myself, but Ares thought it best
The way it happened." At the end of time,
He sets his spear, as my descendants climb
The knees of Father Time, his beard of scalps,
His scythe, the arc of steel that crowns the Alps.
The elephants of Carthage hold those snows,
Turms of Numidian horse unsling their bows,
The flaming turkey-feathered arrows swarm
Beyond the Alps. "Pallas," I raise my arm
And shout, "Brother, eternal health. Farewell
Forever." Church is over, and its bell
Frightens the yellowhammers, as I wake
And watch the whitecaps wrinkle up the lake.
Mother's great-aunt, who died when I was eight,
Stands by our parlor sabre. "Boy, it's late.
Vergil must keep the Sabbath." Eighty years!
It all comes back. My Uncle Charles appears.

Blue-capped and bird-like. Phillips Brooks and Grant
Are frowning at his coffin, and my aunt,
Hearing his colored volunteers parade
Through Concord, laughs, and tells her English maid
To clip his yellow nostril hairs, and fold
His colors on him. . . . It is I. I hold
His sword to keep from falling, for the dust
On the stuffed birds is breathless, for the bust
Of young Augustus weighs on Vergil's shelf:
It scowls into my glasses at itself.

Robert Lowell

For The Union Dead

<i>Relinquant Ommia Servare Rem Publicam.</i>

The old South Boston Aquarium stands
in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.
The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.
The airy tanks are dry.

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
my hand tingled to burst the bubbles
drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish.

My hand draws back. I often sign still
for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom
of the fish and reptile. One morning last March,
I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized

fence on the Boston Common. Behind their cage,
yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting
as they cropped up tons of mush and grass
to gouge their underworld garage.

Parking spaces luxuriate like civic
sandpiles in the heart of Boston.
a girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders
braces the tingling Statehouse,

shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw
and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry
on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief,
propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake.

Two months after marching through Boston,
half of the regiment was dead;
at the dedication,
William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe.

Their monument sticks like a fishbone
in the city's throat.
Its Colonel is as lean

as a compass-needle.

He has an angry wrenlike vigilance,
a greyhound's gentle tautness;
he seems to wince at pleasure,
and suffocate for privacy.

He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's lovely,
peculiar power to choose life and die-
when he leads his black soldiers to death,
he cannot bend his back.

On a thousand small town New England greens
the old white churches hold their air
of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags
quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic

The stone statutes of the abstract Union Soldier
grow slimmer and younger each year-
wasp-waisted, they doze over muskets
and muse through their sideburns...

Shaw's father wanted no monument
except the ditch,
where his son's body was thrown
and lost with his 'niggers.'

The ditch is nearer.
There are no statutes for the last war here;
on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler Safe, the 'Rock of Ages'
that survived the blast. Space is nearer.
when I crouch to my television set,
the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons.

Colonel Shaw
is riding on his bubble,
he waits
for the blessed break.

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
a savage servility
slides by on grease.

Robert Lowell

Harpo Marx

Harpo Marx, your hands white-feathered the harp—
the only words you ever spoke were sound.
The movie's not always the sick man of the arts,
yours touched the stars; Harpo, your motion picture
is still life unchanging, not nature dead.
I saw you first two years before you died,
a black-and-white fall, near Fifth in Central Park;
old blond hair too blonder, old eyes too young.
Movie trucks and five police trucks wheel to wheel
like covered wagons. The crowd as much or little.
I wish I had knelt... I age to your wincing smile,
like Dante's movie, the great glistening wheel of life—
the genius happy...a generic actor.

Robert Lowell

History

History has to live with what was here,
clutching and close to fumbling all we had--
it is so dull and gruesome how we die,
unlike writing, life never finishes.
Abel was finished; death is not remote,
a flash-in-the-pan electrifies the skeptic,
his cows crowding like skulls against high-voltage wire,
his baby crying all night like a new machine.
As in our Bibles, white-faced, predatory,
the beautiful, mist-drunken hunter's moon ascends--
a child could give it a face: two holes, two holes,
my eyes, my mouth, between them a skull's no-nose--
O there's a terrifying innocence in my face
drenched with the silver salvage of the mornfrost.

Robert Lowell

Home After Three Months Away

Gone now the baby's nurse,
a lioness who ruled the roost
and made the Mother cry.
She used to tie
gobbets of porkrind in bowknots of gauze-
three months they hung like soggy toast
on our eight foot magnolia tree,
and helped the English sparrows
weather a Boston winter.

Three months, three months!
Is Richard now himself again?
Dimpled with exaltation,
my daughter holds her levee in the tub.
Our noses rub,
each of us pats a stringy lock of hair-
they tell me nothing's gone.
Though I am forty-one,
not forty now, the time I put away
was child's play. After thirteen weeks
my child still dabs her cheeks
to start me shaving. When
we dress her in her sky-blue corduroy,
she changes to a boy,
and floats my shaving brush
and washcloth in the flush....
Dearest I cannot loiter here
in lather like a polar bear.

Recuperating, I neither spin nor toil.
Three stories down below,
a choreman tends our coffin's length of soil,
and seven horizontal tulips blow.
Just twelve months ago,
these flowers were pedigreed
imported Dutchmen; now no one need
distinguish them from weed.
Bushed by the late spring snow,
they cannot meet

another year's snowballing enervation.

I keep no rank nor station.

Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small.

Robert Lowell

Homecoming

What was is ... since 1930;
the boys in my old gang
are senior partners. They start up
bald like baby birds
to embrace retirement.

At the altar of surrender,
I met you
in the hour of credulity.
How your misfortune came out clearly
to us at twenty.

At the gingerbread casino,
how innocent the nights we made it
on our Vesuvio martinis
with no vermouth but vodka
to sweeten the dry gin--

the lash across my face
that night we adored . . .
soon every night and all,
when your sweet, amorous
repetition changed.

Robert Lowell

July In Washington

The stiff spokes of this wheel?
touch the sore spots of the earth.??

On the Potomac, swan-white?
power launches keep breasting the sulphurous wave.??

Otters slide and dive and slick back their hair,?
raccoons clean their meat in the creek.??

On the circles, green statues ride like South American?
liberators above the breeding vegetation—??

prongs and spearheads of some equatorial?
backland that will inherit the globe.??

The elect, the elected . . . they come here bright as dimes,?
and die dishevelled and soft.??

We cannot name their names, or number their dates—?
circle on circle, like rings on a tree—??

but we wish the river had another shore,?
some further range of delectable mountains,??

distant hills powdered blue as a girl's eyelid.?
It seems the least little shove would land us there,??

that only the slightest repugnance of our bodies?
we no longer control could drag us back.

Robert Lowell

Man And Wife

Tamed by Milton, we lie on Mother's bed;
the rising sun in war paint dyes us red;
in broad daylight her gilded bed-posts shine,
abandoned, almost Dionysian.
At last the trees are green on Marlborough Street,
blossoms on our magnolia ignite
the morning with their murderous five day's white.
All night I've held your hand,
as if you had
a fourth time faced the kingdom of the mad -
its hackneyed speech, its homicidal eye -
and dragged me home alive. . . . Oh my Petite,
clearest of all God's creatures, still all air and nerve:
you were in your twenties, and I,
once hand on glass
and heart in mouth,
outdrank the Rahvs in the heat
of Greenwich Village, fainting at your feet -
too boiled and shy
and poker-faced to make a pass,
while the shrill verve
of your invective scorched the traditional South.

Now twelve years later, you turn your back.
Sleepless, you hold
your pillow to your hollows like a child,
your old-fashioned tirade -
loving, rapid, merciless -
breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head.

Robert Lowell

Memories Of West Street And Lepke

Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming
in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning,
I hog a whole house on Boston's
"hardly passionate Marlborough Street,"
where even the man
scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans,
has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate,
and is "a young Republican."
I have a nine months' daughter,
young enough to be my granddaughter.
Like the sun she rises in her flame-flamingo infants' wear.

These are the tranquilized *Fifties*,
and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime?
I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,
and made my manic statement,
telling off the state and president, and then
sat waiting sentence in the bull pen
beside a negro boy with curlicues
of marijuana in his hair.

Given a year,
I walked on the roof of the West Street Jail, a short
enclosure like my school soccer court,
and saw the Hudson River once a day
through sooty clothesline entanglements
and bleaching khaki tenements.
Strolling, I yammered metaphysics with Abramowitz,
a jaundice-yellow ("it's really tan")
and fly-weight pacifist,
so vegetarian,
he wore rope shoes and preferred fallen fruit.
He tried to convert Bioff and Brown,
the Hollywood pimps, to his diet.
Hairy, muscular, suburban,
wearing chocolate double-breasted suits,
they blew their tops and beat him black and blue.

I was so out of things, I'd never heard

of the Jehovah's Witnesses.

"Are you a C.O.?" I asked a fellow jailbird.

"No," he answered, "I'm a J.W."

He taught me the "hospital tuck,"

and pointed out the T-shirted back

of *Murder Incorporated*'s Czar Lepke,

there piling towels on a rack,

or dawdling off to his little segregated cell full

of things forbidden to the common man:

a portable radio, a dresser, two toy American

flags tied together with a ribbon of Easter palm.

Flabby, bald, lobotomized,

he drifted in a sheepish calm,

where no agonizing reappraisal

jarred his concentration on the electric chair

hanging like an oasis in his air

of lost connections....

Robert Lowell

Mr. Edwards And The Spider

I saw the spiders marching through the air,
Swimming from tree to tree that mildewed day
In latter August when the hay
Came creaking to the barn. But where
The wind is westerly,
Where gnarled November makes the spiders fly
Into the apparitions of the sky,
They purpose nothing but their ease and die
Urgently beating east to sunrise and the sea;

What are we in the hands of the great God?
It was in vain you set up thorn and briar
In battle array against the fire
And treason crackling in your blood;
For the wild thorns grow tame
And will do nothing to oppose the flame;
Your lacerations tell the losing game
You play against a sickness past your cure.
How will the hands be strong? How will the heart endure?

A very little thing, a little worm,
Or hourglass-blazoned spider, it is said,
Can kill a tiger. Will the dead
Hold up his mirror and affirm
To the four winds the smell
And flash of his authority? It's well
If God who holds you to the pit of hell,
Much as one holds a spider, will destroy,
Baffle and dissipate your soul. As a small boy

On Windsor Marsh, I saw the spider die
When thrown into the bowels of fierce fire:
There's no long struggle, no desire
To get up on its feet and fly
It stretches out its feet
And dies. This is the sinner's last retreat;
Yes, and no strength exerted on the heat
Then sinews the abolished will, when sick
And full of burning, it will whistle on a brick.

But who can plumb the sinking of that soul?
Josiah Hawley, picture yourself cast
Into a brick-kiln where the blast
Fans your quick vitals to a coal—
If measured by a glass,
How long would it seem burning! Let there pass
A minute, ten, ten trillion; but the blaze
Is infinite, eternal: this is death,
To die and know it. This is the Black Widow, death.

Robert Lowell

My Last Afternoon With Uncle Devereux Winslow

1922: the stone porch of my Grandfather's summer house

I
"I won't go with you. I want to stay with Grandpa!"
That's how I threw cold water
on my Mother and Father's
watery martini pipe dreams at Sunday dinner.
... Fontainebleau, Mattapoisett, Puget Sound....
Nowhere was anywhere after a summer
at my Grandfather's farm.
Diamond-pointed, athirst and Norman,
its alley of poplars
paraded from Grandmother's rose garden
to a scary stand of virgin pine,
scrub, and paths forever pioneering.

One afternoon in 1922,
I sat on the stone porch, looking through
screens as black-grained as drifting coal.
Tockytock, tockytock
clumped our Alpine, Edwardian cuckoo clock,
slung with strangled, wooden game.
Our farmer was cementing a root-house under the hill.
One of my hands was cool on a pile
of black earth, the other warm
on a pile of lime. All about me

were the works of my Grandfather's hands:
snapshots of his Liberty Bell silver mine;
his high school at Stuttgart am Neckar;
stogie-brown beams; fools'-gold nuggets;
octagonal red tiles,
sweaty with a secret dank, crummy with ant-stale;
a Rocky Mountain chaise longue,
its legs, shellacked saplings.
A pastel-pale Huckleberry Finn
fished with a broom straw in a basin

hollowed out of a millstone.
Like my Grandfather, the décor
was manly, comfortable,
overbearing, disproportioned.

What were those sunflowers? Pumpkins floating shoulder-high?
It was sunset, Sadie and Nellie
bearing pitchers of ice-tea,
oranges, lemons, mint, and peppermints,
and the jug of shandygaff,
which Grandpa made by blending half and half
yeasty, wheezing homemade sarsaparilla with beer.
The farm, entitled Char-de-sa
in the Social Register,
was named for my Grandfather's children:
Charlotte, Devereux, and Sarah.
No one had died there in my lifetime ...
Only Cinder, our Scottie puppy
paralyzed from gobbling toads.
I sat mixing black earth and lime.

II

I was five and a half.
My formal pearl gray shorts
had been worn for three minutes.
My perfection was the Olympian
poise of my models in the imperishable autumn
display windows
of Rogers Peet's boys' store below the State House
in Boston. Distorting drops of water
pinpricked my face in the basin's mirror.
I was a stuffed toucan
with a bibulous, multicolored beak.

III

Up in the air
by the lakeview window in the billiards-room,
lurid in the doldrums of the sunset hour,
my Great Aunt Sarah

was learning Samson and Delilah.
She thundered on the keyboard of her dummy piano,
with gauze curtains like a boudoir table,
accordionlike yet soundless.
It had been bought to spare the nerves
of my Grandmother,
tone-deaf, quick as a cricket,
now needing a fourth for "Auction,"
and casting a thirsty eye
on Aunt Sarah, risen like the phoenix
from her bed of troublesome snacks and Tauchnitz classics.

Forty years earlier,
twenty, auburn headed,
grasshopper notes of genius!
Family gossip says Aunt Sarah
tilted her archaic Athenian nose
and jilted an Astor.
Each morning she practiced
on the grand piano at Symphony Hall,
deathlike in the off-season summer—
its naked Greek statues draped with purple
like the saints in Holy Week....
On the recital day, she failed to appear.

IV

I picked with a clean finger nail at the blue anchor
on my sailor blouse washed white as a spinnaker.
What in the world was I wishing?
... A sail-colored horse browsing in the bullrushes ...
A fluff of the west wind puffing
my blouse, kiting me over our seven chimneys,
troubling the waters....
As small as sapphires were the ponds: Quittacus, Snippituit,
and Assawompset, halved by "the Island,"
where my Uncle's duck blind
floated in a barrage of smoke-clouds.
Double-barreled shotguns
stuck out like bundles of baby crow-bars.
A single sculler in a camouflaged kayak

was quacking to the decoys....

At the cabin between the waters,
the nearest windows were already boarded.
Uncle Devereux was closing camp for the winter.
As if posed for "the engagement photograph,"
he was wearing his severe
war-uniform of a volunteer Canadian officer.
Daylight from the doorway riddled his student posters,
tacked helter-skelter on walls as raw as a boardwalk.
Mr. Punch, a water melon in hockey tights,
was tossing off a decanter of Scotch.
La Belle France in a red, white and blue toga
was accepting the arm of her "protector,"
the ingenu and porcine Edward VII.
The pre-war music hall belles
had goose necks, glorious signatures, beauty-moles,
and coils of hair like rooster tails.
The finest poster was two or three young men in khaki kilts
being bushwhacked on the veldt—
They were almost life-size....

My Uncle was dying at twenty-nine.
"You are behaving like children,"
said my Grandfather,
when my Uncle and Aunt left their three baby daughters,
and sailed for Europe on a last honeymoon ...
I cowered in terror.
I wasn't a child at all—
unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina
in the Golden House of Nero....
Near me was the white measuring-door
my Grandfather had penciled with my Uncle's heights.
In 1911, he had stopped growing at just six feet.
While I sat on the tiles,
and dug at the anchor on my sailor blouse,
Uncle Devereux stood behind me.
He was as brushed as Bayard, our riding horse.
His face was putty.
His blue coat and white trousers

grew sharper and straighter.
His coat was a blue jay's tail,
his trousers were solid cream from the top of the bottle.
He was animated, hierarchical,
like a ginger snap man in a clothes-press.
He was dying of the incurable Hodgkin's disease....
My hands were warm, then cool, on the piles
of earth and lime,

a black pile and a white pile....
Come winter,
Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color.

Robert Lowell

Sailing Home From Rapallo

[February 1954]

Your nurse could only speak Italian,
but after twenty minutes I could imagine your final week,
and tears ran down my cheeks....

When I embarked from Italy with my Mother's body,
the whole shoreline of the Golfo di Genova
was breaking into fiery flower.
The crazy yellow and azure sea-sleds
blasting like jack-hammers across
the spumante-bubbling wake of our liner,
recalled the clashing colors of my Ford.
Mother traveled first-class in the hold;
her Risorgimento black and gold casket
was like Napoleon's at the Invalides....

While the passengers were tanning
on the Mediterranean in deck-chairs,
our family cemetery in Dunbarton
lay under the White Mountains
in the sub-zero weather.
The graveyard's soil was changing to stone—
so many of its deaths had been midwinter.
Dour and dark against the blinding snowdrifts,
its black brook and fir trunks were as smooth as masts.
A fence of iron spear-hafts
black-bordered its mostly Colonial grave-slates.
The only "unhistoric" soul to come here
was Father, now buried beneath his recent
unweathered pink-veined slice of marble.
Even the Latin of his Lowell motto:
Occasionem cognosce,
seemed too businesslike and pushing here,
where the burning cold illuminated
the hewn inscriptions of Mother's relatives:
twenty or thirty Winslows and Starks.
Frost had given their names a diamond edge....

In the grandiloquent lettering on Mother's coffin,
Lowell had been misspelled LOVEL.
The corpse
was wrapped like panettone in Italian tinfoil.

Robert Lowell

Skunk Hour

(for Elizabeth Bishop)

Nautilus Island's hermit
heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage;
her sheep still graze above the sea.
Her son's a bishop. Her farmer is first selectman in our village;
she's in her dotage.

Thirsting for
the hierarchic privacy
of Queen Victoria's century
she buys up all
the eyesores facing her shore,
and lets them fall.

The season's ill-
we've lost our summer millionaire,
who seemed to leap from an L. L. Bean
catalogue. His nine-knot yawl
was auctioned off to lobstermen.
A red fox stain covers Blue Hill.

And now our fairy
decorator brightens his shop for fall;
his fishnet's filled with orange cork,
orange, his cobbler's bench and awl;
there is no money in his work,
he'd rather marry.

One dark night,
my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;
I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,
they lay together, hull to hull,
where the graveyard shelves on the town....
My mind's not right.

A car radio bleats,
'Love, O careless Love....' I hear
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,

as if my hand were at its throat...
I myself am hell;
nobody's here-

only skunks, that search
in the moonlight for a bite to eat.
They march on their solves up Main Street:
white stripes, moonstruck eyes' red fire
under the chalk-dry and spar spire
of the Trinitarian Church.

I stand on top
of our back steps and breathe the rich air-
a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail.
She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
and will not scare.

Robert Lowell

The Drunken Fisherman

Wallowing in this bloody sty,
I cast for fish that pleased my eye
(Truly Jehovah's bow suspends
No pots of gold to weight its ends);
Only the blood-mouthed rainbow trout
Rose to my bait. They flopped about
My canvas creel until the moth
Corrupted its unstable cloth.

A calendar to tell the day;
A handkerchief to wave away
The gnats; a couch unstuffed with storm
Pouching a bottle in one arm;
A whiskey bottle full of worms;
And bedroom slacks: are these fit terms
To mete the worm whose molten rage
Boils in the belly of old age?

Once fishing was a rabbit's foot--
O wind blow cold, O wind blow hot,
Let suns stay in or suns step out:
Life danced a jig on the sperm-whale's spout--
The fisher's fluent and obscene
Catches kept his conscience clean.
Children, the raging memory drools
Over the glory of past pools.

Now the hot river, ebbing, hauls
Its bloody waters into holes;
A grain of sand inside my shoe
Mimics the moon that might undo
Man and Creation too; remorse,
Stinking, has puddled up its source;
Here tantrums thrash to a whale's rage.
This is the pot-hole of old age.

Is there no way to cast my hook
Out of this dynamited brook?
The Fisher's sons must cast about

When shallow waters peter out.
I will catch Christ with a greased worm,
And when the Prince of Darkness stalks
My bloodstream to its Stygian term . . .
On water the Man-Fisher walks.

Robert Lowell

The Old Flame

My old flame, my wife!
Remember our lists of birds?
One morning last summer, I drove
by our house in Maine. It was still
on top of its hill -

Now a red ear of Indian maize
was splashed on the door.
Old Glory with thirteen stripes
hung on a pole. The clapboard
was old-red schoolhouse red.

Inside, a new landlord,
a new wife, a new broom!
Atlantic seaboard antique shop
pewter and plunder
shone in each room.

A new frontier!
No running next door
now to phone the sheriff
for his taxi to Bath
and the State Liquor Store!

No one saw your ghostly
imaginary lover
stare through the window
and tighten
the scarf at his throat.

Health to the new people,
health to their flag, to their old
restored house on the hill!
Everything had been swept bare,
furnished, garnished and aired.

Everything's changed for the best -
how quivering and fierce we were,
there snowbound together,

simmering like wasps
in our tent of books!

Poor ghost, old love, speak
with your old voice
of flaming insight
that kept us awake all night.
In one bed and apart,

we heard the plow
groaning up hill -
a red light, then a blue,
as it tossed off the snow
to the side of the road.

Robert Lowell

The Quaker Graveyard In Nantucket

Let man have dominion over the fishes of the sea and the fowls of the air and the beasts and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth.

I

A brackish reach of shoal off Madaket,-
The sea was still breaking violently and night
Had steamed into our north Atlantic Fleet,
when the drowned sailor clutched the drag-net. Light
Flashed from his matted head and marble feet,
He grappled at the net
With the coiled, hurdling muscles of his thighs;
The corpse was bloodless, a botch of red and whites,
It's open, starring eyes
Were lusterless dead-lights
Or cabin-windows on a stranded hulk
Heavy with sand. we weight the body, close
Its eyes and heave it seaward whence it came,
Where the heel-headed dogfish barks at its nose
On Ahab's void and forehead; and the name
Is blocked in yellow chalk.
Sailors, who pitch this at the portent at the sea
Where dreadnoughts shall confess
It's hell-bent deity
When you are powerless
To sand-bag this Atlantic bulwark, faced
By the earth-shaker, green, unwearied, chaste
In his steel scales; ask for no Orphean lute
To pluck life back. The guns of the steeled fleet
Recoiled and then repeat
The hoarse salute

II.

Whenever winds are moving and their breath
Heaved at the roped-in bulwarks of this pier,
Then terns and sea-gulls tremble at your death
In these waters. Sailor, can you hear
The Pequod's sea wings, beating landward, fall
Headlong and break on our Atlantic wall

Off 'Sconset, where the yawing S-boats-splash
The bellbuoy, with ballooning spinnakers,
As the entangled, screeching mainsheet clears
The blocks: off Madaket, where lubbers lash
The heavy surf and throw their long lead squids
For blue-fish? Sea-gulls blink their heavy lids
Seaward. The winds' wings beat upon the stones,
Cousin, and scream for you and the claws rush
At the sea's throat and wring it in the slush
Of this old Quaker graveyard where the bones
Cry out in the long night for the hurt beast
Bobbing by Ahab's whaleboats in the East.

III

All you recovered from Poseidon died
With you, my cousin, and the harrowed brine
Is fruitless on the blue beard of the god,
Stretching beyond us to the castles in Spain,
Nantucket's westward haven. To Cape Cod
Guns, cradled on the tide,
Blast, the eelgrass about a waterclock
Of bilge and backwash, roil the salt and the sand
Lashing earth's scaffold, rock
Our warships in the hand
Of the great God, where time's contrition blues
Whatever it was these Quaker sailor's lost
In the mad scramble of their lives. They died
When time was open-eyed,
Wooden and childish; only bones abide
There, in the nowhere, where their boats were tossed
Sky-high, where mariners had fabled news
Of IS, the whited monster. what it cost
Them is their secret. In the sperm-whale's slick
I see the Quakers drown and hear their cry:
"If God himself had not been by our side,
If God himself had not been on our side,
When the Atlantic rose against us, why,
Then it had swallowed us up quick."

IV

This is the end of the whaleroad and the whale

Who spewed Nantucket bones on the thrashed swell
And stirred the troubled waters to whirlpools
To send the Pequod packing off to hell:
This is the end of them, three quarters fools,
Snatching at straws to sail
Seaward and seaward on the turntail whale,
Spouting out blood and water as it rolls

Sick as a dog to these Atlantic shoals:
Clamavimus, O depths. Let the sea-gulls wail

For water, for the deep where the high tide
Mutters to its hurt self, mutters and ebbs.
Waves wallow in their wash, go out and out,
Leave only the death-rattle of the crabs,
The beach increasing, its enormous snout
Sucking the ocean's side.
This is the end of running on the waves;
We are poured out like water. who will dance
The mast-lashed master of Leviathans
Up from this field of Quakers in their unstoned graves?

V

When the whales viscera go and the roll
Of its corruption overruns this world
Beyond tree-swept Nantucket and Wood's Hole
whistle and fall and sink into the fat?
In the great ash-pit of Jehoshapat
The bones cry for the blood of the white whale,
The fat flukes arch and whack about its ears,
The death-lance churns into the sanctuary, tears
The gun-blue swingle, heaving like a flail,
And hacks the coiling life out: it works and drags
And rips the sperm-whale's midriff into rags,
Gobbets of blubber spill to wind and weather,
Sailor and gulls go round the stoven timbers
Where the morning stars sing out together
And thunder shakes the white surf and dismembers
The red flag hammered in the mast-head. Hide
Our steel, Jonas Messias, in Thy side.

VI

Our Lady of Walsingham

There once the penitents took off their shoes
and then walked barefoot the remaining mile;
And the small trees, a stream and hedgerows file
Slowly along the munching English lane,

Like cows to the old shrine, until you lose

Track of your dragging pain.

The stream flows down under the druid tree,
Shiloah's whirlpools gurgle and make you glad
And whistled Sion by that stream. But see:

Our Lady, too small for her canopy,
Sits near the altar. There's no comeliness
At all or charm in that expressionless
Face with its heavy eyelids. As before,
This face, for centuries a memory,
Non est species, neque décor
Expressionless expresses God: it goes
Past castled Sion. She knows what God knows,
Not Calvary's Cross nor crib at Bethlehem
Now, and the world shall come to Walsingham.

VII

The empty winds are creaking and the oak
Splatters and splatters on the cenotaph,
The boughs are trembling and a gaff
Bobs on the untimely stroke
Of the greased wash exploding on a shoal-bell
In the old mouth of the Atlantic. It's well;
Atlantic, you are fouled with the blue sailors,
Sea-monsters, upward angel, downward fish:
Unmarried and corroding, spare of flesh
Mart once of supercilious, winged clippers,
Atlantic, where your bell-trap guts its spoil
You could cut the brackish winds with a knife
Here in Nantucket and cast up the time
When the Lord God formed man from the sea's slime
And breathed into his face the breath of life,
And the blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill.
The Lord survives the rainbow of His will.

To Speak Of Woe That Is In Marriage

'It is the future generation that presses into being by means of these exuberant feelings and supersensible soap bubbles of ours.'
- Schopenhauer

'The hot night makes us keep our bedroom windows open.
Our magnolia blossoms. Life begins to happen.
My hopped up husband drops his home disputes,
and hits the streets to cruise for prostitutes,
free-lancing out along the razor's edge.
This screwball might kill his wife, then take the pledge.
Oh the monotonous meanness of his lust...
It's the injustice... he is so unjust-
whiskey-blind, swaggering home at five.
My only thought is how to keep alive.
What makes him tick? Each night now I tie
ten dollars and his car key to my thigh....
Gored by the climacteric of his want,
he stalls above me like an elephant.'

Robert Lowell

Waking In The Blue

The night attendant, a B.U. sophomore,
rouses from the mare's-nest of his drowsy head
propped on *The Meaning of Meaning*.

He catwalks down our corridor.

Azure day

makes my agonized blue window bleaker.

Crows maunder on the petrified fairway.

Absence! My hearts grows tense

as though a harpoon were sparring for the kill.

(This is the house for the "mentally ill.")

What use is my sense of humour?

I grin at Stanley, now sunk in his sixties,

once a Harvard all-American fullback,

(if such were possible!)

still hoarding the build of a boy in his twenties,

as he soaks, a ramrod

with a muscle of a seal

in his long tub,

vaguely urinous from the Victorian plumbing.

A kingly granite profile in a crimson gold-cap,

worn all day, all night,

he thinks only of his figure,

of slimming on sherbert and ginger ale--

more cut off from words than a seal.

This is the way day breaks in Bowditch Hall at McLean's;

the hooded night lights bring out "Bobbie,"

Porcellian '29,

a replica of Louis XVI

without the wig--

redolent and roly-poly as a sperm whale,

as he swashbuckles about in his birthday suit

and horses at chairs.

These victorious figures of bravado ossified young.

In between the limits of day,

hours and hours go by under the crew haircuts

and slightly too little nonsensical bachelor twinkle

of the Roman Catholic attendants.
(There are no Mayflower
screwballs in the Catholic Church.)

After a hearty New England breakfast,
I weigh two hundred pounds
this morning. Cock of the walk,
I strut in my turtle-necked French sailor's jersey
before the metal shaving mirrors,
and see the shaky future grow familiar
in the pinched, indigenous faces
of these thoroughbred mental cases,
twice my age and half my weight.
We are all old-timers,
each of us holds a locked razor.

Robert Lowell

Water

It was a Maine lobster town—
each morning boatloads of hands
pushed off for granite
quarries on the islands,

and left dozens of bleak
white frame houses stuck
like oyster shells
on a hill of rock,

and below us, the sea lapped
the raw little match-stick
mazes of a weir,
where the fish for bait were trapped.

Remember? We sat on a slab of rock.
From this distance in time
it seems the color
of iris, rotting and turning purpler,

but it was only
the usual gray rock
turning the usual green
when drenched by the sea.

The sea drenched the rock
at our feet all day,
and kept tearing away
flake after flake.

One night you dreamed
you were a mermaid clinging to a wharf-pile,
and trying to pull
off the barnacles with your hands.

We wished our two souls
might return like gulls
to the rock. In the end,
the water was too cold for us.

Robert Lowell