

Robert Lowell

Robert Lowell was born in 1917 into one of Boston's oldest and most prominent families. He attended Harvard College for two years before transferring to Kenyon College, where he studied poetry under John Crowe Ransom and received an undergraduate degree in 1940. He took graduate courses at Louisiana State University where he studied with Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks. His first and second books, *Land of Unlikeness* (1944) and *Lord Weary's Castle* (for which he received a Pulitzer Prize in 1946, at the age of thirty), were influenced by his conversion from Episcopalianism to Catholicism and explored the dark side of America's Puritan legacy. Under the influence of Allen Tate and the New Critics, he wrote rigorously formal poetry that drew praise for its exceptionally powerful handling of meter and rhyme. Lowell was politically involved—he became a conscientious objector during the Second World War and was imprisoned as a result, and actively protested against the war in Vietnam—and his personal life was full of marital and psychological turmoil. He suffered from severe episodes of manic depression, for which he was repeatedly hospitalized.

Partly in response to his frequent breakdowns, and partly due to the influence of such younger poets as W. D. Snodgrass and Allen Ginsberg, Lowell in the mid-fifties began to write more directly from personal experience, and loosened his adherence to traditional meter and form. The result was a watershed collection, *Life Studies* (1959), which forever changed the landscape of modern poetry, much as Eliot's *The Waste Land* had three decades before. Considered by many to be the most important poet in English of the second half of the twentieth century, Lowell continued to develop his work with sometimes uneven results, all along defining the restless center of American poetry, until his sudden death from a heart attack at age 60. Robert Lowell served as a Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets from 1962 until his death in 1977.

## A Selected Bibliography

### Poetry

*Day by Day* (1977)

*For Lizzy and Harriet* (1973)

*For the Union Dead* (1964)

*History* (1973)

*Imitations* (1961)

*Land of Unlikeness* (1944)

*Life Studies* (1959)

*Lord Weary's Castle* (1946)

*Near the Ocean* (1967)

*Notebooks, 1967-1968* (1969)

*Poems, 1938-1949* (1950)

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*The Dolphin* (1973)

*The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951)

*The Voyage and Other Versions of Poems by Baudelaire* (1968)

Prose: *The Collected Prose* (1987)

### Anthology

*Phaedra* (1961)

*Prometheus Bound* (1969)

Drama: *The Old Glory* (1965)

"To Speak of Woe That Is in Marriage"  
by Robert Lowell

"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."

Dolphin  
by Robert Lowell

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.

## 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:  
The painter's vision is not a lens,  
it trembles to caress the light.  
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.

For the Union Dead  
by Robert Lowell

"Relinquant Omnia Servare Rem Publicam."

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 sigh 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 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 gently 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 statues 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 statues 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.

History  
by Robert Lowell

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.

Home After Three Months Away  
by Robert Lowell

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; no 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.

## 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.

Fertility is not to the forward,  
or beauty to the precipitous--  
things gone wrong  
clothe summer  
with gold leaf.

Sometimes  
I catch my mind  
circling for you with glazed eye--  
my lost love hunting  
your lost face.

Summer to summer,  
the poplars sere  
in the glare--  
it's a town for the young,  
they break themselves against the surf.

No dog knows my smell.

Man and Wife  
by Robert Lowell

Tamed by Miltown, 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 days' 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 our 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.

Memories of West Street and Lepke  
by Robert Lowell

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. . . .

Skunk Hour  
by Robert Lowell

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 soles 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.

The Drunken Fisherman  
by Robert Lowell

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.

The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket  
by Robert Lowell

(For Warren Winslow, Dead At Sea)

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 reds and whites,

Its open, staring eyes

Were lustreless 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 its nose

On Ahab's void and forehead; and the name

Is blocked in yellow chalk.

Sailors, who pitch this portent at the sea

Where dreadnaughts shall confess

Its heel-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  
Recoil and then repeat  
The hoarse salute.

## II

Whenever winds are moving and their breath  
Heaves at the roped-in bulwarks of this pier,  
The terns and sea-gulls tremble at your death  
In these home 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 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 sailors 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 on 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 whale's viscera go and the roll  
Of its corruption overruns this world  
Beyond tree-swept Nantucket and Wood's Hole  
And Martha's Vineyard, Sailor, will your sword  
Whistle and fall and sink into the fat?  
In the great ash-pit of Jehoshaphat  
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 glad  
The castle of God. Sailor, you were 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 decor,  
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, wing'd 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 blue-lung'd combers lumbered to the kill.  
The Lord survives the rainbow of His will.

Waking in the Blue  
by Robert Lowell

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.

## Groundbreaking Book: *Life Studies* by Robert Lowell (1959)

Robert Lowell began his poetic career by studying with New Criticism poets such as Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren. He wrote rigorously formal verse and at thirty-five was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his second book, *Lord Weary's Castle*. However, his most famous book, *Life Studies*, was a radical departure not only from his earlier work, but also from the larger poetry scene at the time of its publication in 1959.

Along with W. D. Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle*, Lowell's book launched the Confessional Poetry movement. Inspired by his battle with mental illness, his marital problems, and the Vietnam War, *Life Studies* demonstrates a dramatic turn toward deeply personal work with a loosened adherence to meter and form. The poems are characterized by specific and unflinching autobiographical detail.

*Life Studies* includes many of Lowell's most famous poems, such as: "On a Mad Negro Soldier Confined at Munich," "Man and Wife," and "Commander Lowell." It also features his poem for Elizabeth Bishop, "Skunk Hour," in response to her poem, "The Armadillo." Lowell described "Skunk Hour" as follows:

"The first four stanzas are meant to give a dawdling more or less amiable picture of a declining Maine sea town. I move from the ocean inland. Sterility howls through the scenery, but I try to give a tone of tolerance, humor, and randomness to the sad prospect. The composition drifts, its direction sinks out of sight into the casual, chancy arrangements of nature and decay."

Considered by many to be one of the most influential poets of the latter half of the twentieth century, Lowell's work in *Life Studies* had an especially profound impact that is discernible not only

in the poetry of his direct contemporaries, such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, but also in the treatment of biographical detail by countless poets who followed.

## The Raw and the Cooked: Robert Lowell and the Beats

by Tina Cane

"The best obfuscation bewilders of meaning while reflecting  
or intimating or creating a structure of a beauty that we know."

—Bernadette Mayer

"The raw and the cooked" is how Robert Lowell characterized the state of American poetry in 1960 when he accepted the National Book Award for his collection, *Life Studies*. With its intense emphasis on the personal and its shorter, free verse lines, *Life Studies* was a departure for the poet. Something less fettered was happening in Lowell's poetry, and as he saw it, that something was cleaving the genre of poetry in two.

"Cooked" poetry, he contended, was "marvelously expert and remote... constructed as a sort of mechanical or cat-nip mouse for graduate seminars." Poets like Donald Hall and Louis Simpson were among its chefs. In contrast, Lowell regarded the "raw" as "jerry-built and forensically deadly...often like an unscored libretto by some bearded but vegetarian Castro." Lowell's image of a barbed Communist was meant to conjure a vision of Allen Ginsberg, whose *Howl* had, four years earlier, reinvigorated poetry for a younger generation. Ginsberg and other Beat poets, like Gregory Corso and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, were emerging from the margins, armed with open, jazz-infused songs of a whole new timbre. Champions of Whitman, the Beats celebrated themselves and their everyday lives, and took poetry from the podium to the street. By virtue of pitting the Beats against "cat-nip" academics, Lowell was publicly declaring them to be a force.

Although a descendant of the "cooked" tribe of meter and rhyme, Lowell had been writing in an increasingly confessional vein. At a crossroads in his own work, he was riled by the Beats' "raw" sensibilities. "Hanging like a question mark" between the two camps, "I don't know if it is a death-rope or a life-line," he wrote in a draft of his now famous acceptance speech.

While Lowell's characterization may strike us today as somewhat dramatic, it aptly captured the creative and cultural tensions of the time. There was a palpable "us vs. them" climate that pervaded poetry and many other aspects of the larger post-fifties society. It was optimism vs. skepticism, complacency vs. complaint, sweetness vs. dissent. The polarity between the establishment and those who opposed it intensified and culminated in the social revolutions of the sixties. By then, the Beats would be lauded as heroes of the counter-culture and legitimized as luminaries of a literature in flux.

Seventeen years after his "raw" and "cooked" proclamation, Lowell did a joint reading with Allen Ginsberg at New York's St. Marks-in-the-Bowery. The poets shared a podium—a hint that, in the interim, the battlelines had blurred. Gregory Corso rambunctiously heckled Lowell as he read his poem, "Ulysses and Circe." "Robert, you left out that great line about paranoid," Corso called out. Lowell responded with a quick "Point taken" and continued. "You treat us like a classroom," Corso shouted. Lowell responded that he, in fact, was a teacher and tried to let it go at that. The event was shaping up like a lopsided showdown when Ginsberg finally stepped forward and proposed that the crowd collectively invite Corso to "shut up." They did and Corso amicably exited, boots in hand, wife and baby at his side. To Lowell, the reading had turned into a veritable "happening." In retrospect, it signaled a reprieve. The "raw" and the "cooked" were no longer warring, and the tribes needed new names.

So what happened between 1960 and 1977? In one sense, the outsiders made it inside and the whole culture got "rawified." The media, as arbiter of popular culture, brought the Beats and the sixties' movements to the fore. "Raw" writers challenged the establishment, changed it, and then became part of it. They taught university, went on television and became counter-culture celebrities. They didn't so much as "sell out," as did the broader culture "buy in"—not necessarily to a new crop of values, but shrewdly to the appeal of those values. Popular stereotypes alternately romanticized, trivialized or criminalized the Beat lifestyle and sensibility. Still, their edgy creativity was in step with the changing times in a way that the blue-blooded Bostonian Lowell's was not. Marketers capitalized on the cultural trickle-down of the Beat image to hawk everything from peace to personal computers. Years after Jack Kerouac appeared on The Steve Allen Show in 1974, Nike would recruit William Burroughs and Ginsberg would endorse Apple Computers. Consumption is cutting edge, we all learned, if you package it as such.

You can't, however, judge a book by its cover and good literature stands the test of time. The true legacy of the raw and the cooked divide (and what Robert Lowell foresaw) is that tension forced the canon to open up and accommodate a broader range of work. Poetry is, as a result, more vigorous and varied today than it was in 1960. Any contemporary American poetry course worth its salt today will include Ginsberg, Corso, and Lowell, alongside Lucille Clifton, Richard Wilbur and John Ashbury. Split factions persist, but in civil coexistence.