

# 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.

Notes:

The epigraph of this poem was originally omitted in the changeover to the new website. Because of this, reciting the epigraph is optional for the 2019-2020 Poetry Out Loud season.

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Source: *Life Studies* (1987)



The most celebrated and ambitious American poet of his era, Robert Lowell transformed the particulars of his prominent New England family's background and turbulent private life into controversial art. Lowell's book *Life Studies* (1959), which reveals his struggles with madness, alcohol, and marital infidelity, gave rise to the so-called "confessional" school. In subsequent works he explored political issues and historical figures while extending his experiments in verse technique.

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