Skunk Hour

By Robert Lowell

(For Elizabeth Bishop) Dedication Lowell’s poem is modeled on Elizabeth Bishop’s poem “The Armadillo,” which Bishop had dedicated to Lowell.

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 lobstersmen.
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.


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Source: Life Studies (1987)