



Skunk Hour

By Robert Lowell

Nautilus Island's **Nautilus Island's** Lowell once remarked, "The first four stanzas are meant to give a dawdling more or less amiable picture of a declining Maine sea town." 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 **she's in her dotage** Echoes "the world is in its dotage", from Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766)..

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 **A red fox stain covers Blue Hill** Lowell wrote, "The red fox stain was merely meant to describe the rusty reddish color of autumn on Blue Hill, a Maine mountain near where we were living."

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 **One dark night** Echoes The Dark Night of the Soul by St. John of the Cross, a Spanish mystic (1542-1591). In his talk "On 'Skunk Hour,'" Lowell stated, "I hoped my readers would remember John of the Cross's poem. My night is not gracious, but secular, puritan, and agnostic. An existential night." , my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull **hill's skull** "When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus" (Luke: 23:33, NRSV). Both "Golgotha," in Hebrew, and "Calvary," from

Latin ("Calvaria") mean "skull";

I watched for love-carsI **watched for love-cars** "watching the lovers was not mine, but from an anecdote about Walt Whitman in his old age" The notes in *Robert Lowell: Selected Poems* (2006) explains the anecdote: "In the early 1970s, Elizabeth Bishop told Frank Bidart that the source of the anecdote was Logan Pearsall Smith's *Unforgotten Years* (1939): Almost every afternoon my father would take Walt Whitman driving in the Park; it was an unfailing interest to them to drive as close as they could behind buggies in which pairs of lovers were seated, and observe the degree of slope towards each other, or "buggy-angle," as they called it, of these couples; and if ever they saw this angle of approximation narrowed to an embrace, my father and Walt Whitman, who had ever honored that joy-giving power of nature symbolized under the name of Venus, would return home with happy hearts. (p. 99) . Lights turned down, they lay together, hull to hull,
where the graveyard shelves**shelves** Slopes down on the town. . . .
My mind's not right.

A car radio bleats,
"Love, O careless Love. . . ." "**Love, O careless Love. . . .**" A popular blues song of the time written by W.C. Handy and performed by **Bessie Smith** (1925), in which the narrator threatens to kill his or her wayward lover. The song was performed with slight variations of lyrics by many musicians before Lowell wrote this poem in 1959, including **Fats Domino** (1956). I hear my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
as if my hand were at its throat. . . .
I myself am hellI **myself am hell** An echo of Satan speaking in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell" (Book 4, line 75);
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 spars**spar** Nautical term for a mast spire
of the Trinitarian Church.

I stand on top
of our back steps and breathe the rich air—
a mother skunk with her column**column** Figuratively, a military formation 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)



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.

More By This Poet

July in Washington

By Robert Lowell

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

Living

Nature

Social Commentaries

Epilogue

By Robert Lowell

Those blessed structures, plot and rhyme—
why are they no help to me now...

Arts & Sciences

More Poems about Living

Dragons

By Devin Johnston

We gathered in a field southwest of town,
several hundred hauling coolers...

Living

Mythology & Folklore

How to Triumph Like a Girl

By Ada Limón

I like the lady horses best,

how they make it all look easy,...

Living

Nature

Social Commentaries

BROWSE POEMS ABOUT LIVING

More Poems about Nature

How to Triumph Like a Girl

By Ada Limón

I like the lady horses best,
how they make it all look easy,...

Living

Nature

Social Commentaries

Sestina in Prose

By Katharine Coles

It was like climbing a mountain to those of us who'd climbed one. To the others, it was like, I suppose, something else. In other words, we let everybody find her own figure of speech....

Activities

Arts & Sciences

Nature

BROWSE POEMS ABOUT NATURE

More Poems about Relationships

Trace Evidence

By Charif Shanahan

When I say *But mother, Black or not Black,*
Of course you are polyethnic, your look does not change...

Relationships

Social Commentaries

"Un Tintero," Inkwell

By Desirée Alvarez

Anger is the other person inside
mi garganta, my throat....

Arts & Sciences

Living

Relationships

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