



Robert Lowell

(1917-1977)

Skunk Hour (1959)

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 chalky-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.

ANALYSIS

"The last poem in *Life Studies*, 'Skunk Hour' has been one of Lowell's favorite poems at poetry readings. Like 'Waking in the Blue,' it is a painfully personal poem that both shocks and repels. Hugh B. Staples, in *Robert Lowell: The First Twenty Years*, writes of 'Skunk Hour': 'Here the flatness of the diction, the irregular rhythm and the short declarative phrases of the opening lines at first suggest that this is prose arranged in stanza form. As the poem develops through the remaining seven sestets, however, we notice that Lowell has ordered the elements of the poem by means of an intricate pattern of rhyme and partial rhyme; the scheme of each stanza is a slight variation on that of the first. His purpose in introducing the elderly eccentric, the ruined millionaire and the "fairy decorator" (all evidently residents of Castine, Maine, where the poet has a summer home) is at first unclear, until we see that they too are a part of the failing New England tradition; each of them is in some way a symbol of artificiality, loss and perversion. The nearly neutral tone of the opening stanza gradually gives way to a mood of deepening horror.... All this, however, is to prepare the reader for a realization of the poet's turbulent frame of mind'."

James E. Miller, Jr.
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