

Signs of Life in Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour"*

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Our colloquial phrase "signs of life" presupposes signs of death, and plenty of them, in the midst of which, or despite which, signs of life emerge. In order to detect any in Lowell's poetry, where illness and death threaten to prevail, we need to become textual exegetes, rogue semiologists, and adepts in sign reading ranging from biblical typology to textual phonology. In this article I will be linking textual phonology with three of Lowell's master tropes that participate in a contested formation of signs of life in "Skunk Hour": falling/rising/standing, hands/touch, and hunger/food/eating.

Illness and death pervade *Life Studies* (1959), and as Part IV progresses, heading toward "Skunk Hour," Lowell shifts attention to his own recurrent manic-depressive illness. "Waking in the Blue" adverts to a stay in "a house for the mentally ill" (183) that was neither his first nor his last. The following poem, "Home After Three Months Away," depicts his homecoming as a "cured" mental patient, "Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small" (186). The sylleptic play on "cured" here at the end harks back to the "gobbets of porkrind in bowknots of gauze" that were tied on a tree to feed hungry sparrows in line 5. The poet's bouts with mental illness reach a climax in "Skunk Hour," in which "the season's ill" (stanza 3), the speaker's "mind's not right" (stanza 5), and he hears his "ill-spirit sob" (stanza 6). Furthermore, the phoneme cluster *ill* infiltrates the entire poem, creating an acoustic chamber of *ill*-ness, until in stanza 7 it is consumed in an ameliorative

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debkearful0232.htm>>.

trope of hunger, food, and eating, thanks this time not to sparrows but to hungry skunks.¹

Ill first makes itself heard as a phoneme cluster in the opening line, “Nautilus Island’s hermit,” followed in stanza 1 by “heiress still,” “her sheep still,” and “our village”:

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.

Ill as an acoustic sign is augmented orthographically by *age* in “village,” which joins “cottage” and “dotage” in an *age*-ing weak rhyme. At the outset, “us” follows the phoneme cluster “ill” in “Nautilus,” which also harbors an acoustic play on “Naut” / *naught*. The incorporation of *ill* in “still lives” fashions a sign of ongoing life that gives credit to the hermit heiress’s pertinacity, however “ill” she may be. In “Skunk Hour,” the terminal poem in *Life Studies*, the hermit heiress is the terminal “life study” of a dying New England aristocracy, to which Lowell himself belonged.

The opening stanza resounds with *ill* and is occupied by *her*, the “hermit / heiress.” Everyone and everything are hers. Her cottage, her sheep, her farmer, her son fill designated roles—pastoral, agricultural, political, religious—within the mock-feudal domain of this lady of the manor. “Her sheep still graze above the sea” is the only line that does not end on a falling rhythmical note, and within it “above” rises. For a nostalgic, idyllic moment we are transported into a changeless pastoral world, a “still” world of *otium* and timelessness.² Little do they know it, but the sheep also inaugurate hunger, food, and eating as a trope that skunks will appropriate in the final stanza.

In stanza 2, the *hermit heiress* seeks to preserve her best of all worlds by removing visual signs of a new order, the “eyesores” facing “her shore”:

Thirsting for
 the hierarchic privacy
 of Queen Victoria's century,
 she buys up all
 the eyesores facing her shore,
 and lets them fall.

The phrasal verb "buys up" and the verbal phrase "lets fall" team up to invert the primal trope of falling/rising/standing that endows Lowell's poetry with signs of life restored. Pitch first rises—"she buys up all"—then falls—"lets them fall." The theme of the poem thus far might be summarized *ill all fall*, which also encapsulates the doctrine of original sin, that congenital spiritual "illness" which we all inherit. Puritan schoolchildren learned this while learning the alphabet as a rhyming system of religious signs in *The New England Primer*. Thus the letter A: "In Adam's Fall / We sinned all" (355). "Skunk Hour" adds, homophonically, the "I-sores" in "eyesores." But it is not just eyesores that disturb the hermit heiress, she also thirsts for "the hierarchic privacy / of Queen Victoria's century." "Skunk Hour" needs to be read against the foil of Cold War cultural, political, and legal issues that merged in major Supreme Court decisions regarding privacy.³

The phoneme cluster *ill* becomes a full-blown predicative adjective at the outset of stanza 3:

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 long dash imposes a pregnant pause after two iambs, "The season's ill," before the verse spreads to iambic tetrameter in line 2. "The season's ill" was also the first line of an early draft of "Skunk Hour," which suggests the salience of "ill" in Lowell's poetic thinking during his composition of the poem.⁴ After the pause, it immediately infects "our summer millionaire," whom we have "lost." Did his "leap from an L. L. Bean / catalogue" anticipate a subsequent "leap," to be fol-

lowed by a fall?⁵ Did he act upon what Philip Hobsbaum calls “the Death Wish” lurking in this and other stanzas (94)? I share Stephen Yenser’s view that “the stanza intimates that ‘the summer millionaire’ was a suicide” and that “the means of suicide is implicit in ‘leap’” (161). “His nine-knot yawl / was auctioned off to lobstermen” suggests that he has abruptly gone to meet his maker, leaving behind a *yawl*, that joins an *all / fall / ill* keening chorus, with “yawl” taking on its function as a verb, to wail.⁶ Acoustically, “L. L. Bean” is not precisely “*ill ill been*,” but is close enough for the alert textual exegete to take aural notice. The tone of the poem at this stage is complex, and simply to refer to it as “elegiac” would miss the boat. Lowell’s fellow poet Richard Wilbur got the tone about as right as anyone has: “the humor grows more emphatic in stanza III, at the expense of a deceased conspicuous consumer who looked, when alive, like a sporting-goods dummy, and whose death is a blow to the summer resort’s economy and distinction. At the same time, we are half aware in this stanza of accumulating ideas of death and decay: to the addled heiress and the collapsing eyesores we must add the dead millionaire, the passing summer, and the decline of a fishing port into a vacation town” (85-86).

Wilbur’s evocation of the summer millionaire in his dummy perfection summons up Lowell’s image of himself in “My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow,” the inaugural poem in the “Life Studies” sequence, which introduces the theme of pervasive illness and death: “I was five and a half. / My formal pearl gray shorts / had been worn for three minutes. / My perfection was the Olympian / poise of my models in the imperishable autumn / display windows / of Rogers Peet’s boys’ store below the State House / in Boston [...]” (164). This first self-representation of Lowell standing in *Life Studies* comes to life by association with lifeless dummies standing in the windows of a traditional store favored by proper Bostonians for themselves and their suitably accoutred male offspring.⁷ The last self-representation of himself standing, having resisted a suicide impulse, will initiate the final stanza of “Skunk Hour.” In the meantime the

lobstermen provide a sign of life more vigorous than the hermit heiress who "still lives." Not infected by "illness," they fulfill their life-sustaining, traditional vocation of providing succulent food for the hungry.⁸ Summer millionaires may come and go, but they remain, now making productive use of the yawl, which I fancy they acquired at a knock-down price in coordinated bidding.

That doesn't stop *ill* from infiltrating a rhyme-word at the end of the stanza, which moves back to the present tense of the opening line: "A red fox stain covers Blue Hill." The line progresses deliberately, slowly, sounding six even stresses and seven different vowels, one per word: "A red fox stain covers Blue Hill."⁹ "Red" initially modifies "fox," but spreads to "stain" before encountering a "Blue Hill." "Stain" bears within itself etymological traces of Old Norse *steinen* = "to paint," as a deranged sort of expressionist painting suggests itself, one in which a blue (= "despondent") hill (infected with *illness*) is covered with blood, thus evoking the "blight on the countryside" topos of the classical elegiac tradition (see Race 109-10). Taken together, "The season's ill" and "A red fox stain covers Blue Hill" form a rural New England pendant to Ezra Pound's haikuish two-line "In a Station at the Metro." There are no petals on a wet black bough in Lowell's poem, but the "stained" New England fall foliage is emblematically appropriate. The season's ill, a sign of which is that leaves are "ill" and dying, as they turn from green to orange to red.

The New England fall motif continues on into stanza 4, now as a decorative orange:

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.

The line-break construction "fairy / decorator" replicates the "hermit / heiress" construct of stanza 1, but whereas "hermit / heiress" pulls

a surprise, “fairy / decorator” delivers a type figure to make sport of. His “cobbler’s bench and awl” echoes the idiomatic phrase something-or-other “and all,” connoting a motley assemblage. Whereas a red stain covered Blue Hill, orange covers his cobbler’s bench and awl. Orange thus tastefully applied harmonizes with the orange cork that fills his fishnet. Lowell does not actually argue, in sync with enlightened thought of the times, that homosexuality is an illness, but echoing the pervasive *illness* of the poem, *ill* acoustically occupies “filled.” Within the socio-economic frame of the poem, the decorator is at home neither in the mock-feudal world of the hermit heiress, nor in the wheeler-dealer capitalist world of the summer millionaire: “there is no money in his work.” The humorously crunched off-rhyme “cork” / “work” makes a jest of his plight. A parting shot, “he’d rather marry,” rhythmically echoes “And now our fairy,” with which the stanza began. The “fairy” / “marry” off-rhyme adds a final sarcastic note. William Doreski also has a bit of fun in juxtaposing the desperate straits of the summer millionaire and the gay decorator: “wealth leads to loneliness and death, homosexuality leads to thoughts of marriage” (90). A fate worse than death?

All this is, of course, good clean fun, at any rate in 1950s terms, before gays could tie the knot and homosexuality was still, charitably viewed, an illness. But if there is something ill in the state of this New England town, there is also something ill within Lowell’s persona. Various critics have indeed found connections, homosexually inflected or otherwise, between the poet and the “ill” characters he sketches, all isolated figures: the hermit heiress, the summer millionaire, the fairy decorator.¹⁰ The poet’s own illness becomes life-threatening in stanza five:

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.

"One dark night" evokes the opening line ("En una noche oscura") of St. John of the Cross's mystical poem "The Dark Night of the Soul" (38) and thus harbors a potential sign of life. But we should not get our hopes up. Lowell later wrote: "I hope my readers would remember John of the Cross's poem. My night is not gracious, but secular, Puritan, and agnostic. An existentialist night. Somewhere in my mind was a passage from Sartre or Camus about reaching some point of final darkness where the one free act is suicide" (*Collected Prose* 226). The headlights of the love-cars are dimmed this dark night, as if to ward off the canonical *night / light* rhyme that Dylan Thomas resoundingly employed as the governing *A* rhyme in his classic villanelle "Do not go gentle into that good night."¹¹ Lowell's rhyming response to "night" is "My mind's not right." In his second tercet, Thomas himself works a *right / night* variation on the seeded *A* rhyme, but as an affirmative, "dark is right." Lowell's mind is not. Lowell's "dark night" ends with a sign of illness, "My mind's not right." Blue Hill morphs into "hill's skull," evoking Golgotha, from Hebrew *gulgōleth* for "skull," a verbal sign for the shape of the hill on which Jesus was crucified. A "hull to hull" rhyme with "skull" moves toward a "graveyard" that "shelves on the town." "Shelves" as an intransitive verb signifies "to slope away gradually, to incline," but "shelves on" sounds somewhat sinister, as if the graveyard were purposefully, gradually moving closer to the "ill" town.¹²

The love-cars' lights are turned down, but one radio is turned up enough to be heard:

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—

What Lowell's persona hears, however, is less the bleating of "Love, O Careless Love" than the sobbing of his own "ill-spirit": "I hear / my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell."¹³ The *ill* in "ill-spirit" may denote

illness, but it can also be taken in the sense of “hostile,” “harmful,” or “pernicious,” as in “ill will,” or “it’s an ill wind that blows nobody any good.” Never speak ill of the dead.

The speaker’s agon with his “ill-spirit [...] as if my hand were at its throat” evokes a tradition of debate poems between body and soul such as Andrew Marvell’s “A Dialogue between the Soul and Body,” in which the wretched body speaks of itself as “A Body that could never rest, / Since this ill Spirit it possest” (ll. 19-20). The diabolical associations of “possest” suggest that the soul, itself possessed, in turn possesses the body. In Marvell’s poem the soul is indeed figuratively imprisoned in a prison cell within the body, and it complains of its ill treatment.¹⁴ In “Skunk Hour,” the poet’s ill-spirit possesses each blood “cell,” which in turn imprison the ill-spirit.¹⁵ Lowell’s line “as if my hand were at it is throat” also brings to mind, however, “your life is in your hands,” the sign of life that brings closure to “The Exile’s Return” in *Lord Weary’s Castle* (1946). The idiomatic phrase now acquires a new twist: your life is in your hands, and it is there for the taking. Lowell’s persona in “Skunk Hour” is on the verge of following as best he can the satanic directive in “After the Surprising Conversions”: “My friend, / Cut your own throat. Cut your own throat. Now! Now!” (62).¹⁶

The diabolical associations of “possessed” in Marvell’s no-win debate poem, in which the “ill Spirit” is imprisoned within the body, become more dire in Lowell’s next line, “I myself am hell,” as the speaker’s voice is usurped by Milton’s Satan: “Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell” (*Paradise Lost* 4.75). Lowell’s “one dark night” culminates, unlike John of the Cross’s, in a self-identification with the archetypal “ill spirit,” for whom *hell* is his own private *cell*. Lowell’s virtuoso rhyming and off-rhyming conjoin “cell” and “hell”; “hear” and “hell” alliterate; assonance links “bleats” and “hear”; and the homophones “hear” and “here” sound a rich rhyme. The one end-word that acoustically sticks out painfully on its own is “throat,” which rang out in Satan’s call to “cut your own throat” in “The Surprising Conversions.”

The long dash after "nobody's here" would seem to leave the isolated poet-speaker on the verge of taking his own life, but it turns out to be a bridge leading in the next stanza to a change of place and to a vision of life persisting:

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.

Whatever symbolic weight the skunks heft as they "march on their soles up Main Street," *ill* and its off-rhyming symptoms are nowhere to be heard.¹⁷ Instead hunger/food/eating—earlier associated only indirectly with sheep and lobstermen—begin to emerge as the dominant trope of the last two stanzas, bringing closure to the poem and to *Life Studies*.

The skunks find what they are looking for in the final stanza, while the poet, standing "on top / of our back steps," now views them instead of love-cars. The graveyard gives way to the poet's backyard, and standing supersedes earlier tropes of falling. The poet himself stands:

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.

This is one of Lowell's several representations of himself standing, his own erect figure constituting a battered sign of life. In this instance, the back steps serve as a pedestal for his monumentalizing self-representation.¹⁸ He also stands on top of the stanza, whose opening line—"I stand on top"—rhythmically counters the iambic dimeter—"and lets them fall"—that concludes stanza 2. In "Summer Tides,"

completed three weeks before Lowell's death, the back steps become a gradually rotting "bulwark where I stand" (853). I read "Skunk Hour" and "Summer Tides" as responses to the injunction "Stand and live" in "Where the Rainbow Ends" (69), the terminal poem in *Lord Weary's Castle*. There it is accompanied by remedial tropes of hunger/food/eating and of exile/return.

The spatial transition from the hill's skull, to Main Street, to the poet's backyard where the skunks head, has been rapid. Their march had an end in view. The skunks put in, as it were, a guest appearance, designed for the poet's viewing.¹⁹ He is no longer a voyeur of "love cars," but a witness to an emblematic scene, a sign of life that is as much olfactory and acoustic as visual. The phoneme cluster *ill* which has spread through the poem like a virus is, finally, swilled by a trope of hunger, food, and eating when the mother skunk with her column of kittens "swills the garbage pail." Surrounding sound patterns, also symptoms of *illness*, are simultaneously swilled. Pail, a homophone of "pale," harbors "ail" and off-rhymes with *ill*. But having been swilled, *ill* is converted into *will*, a sign of life. As a modal verb, *will* is, admittedly, part of a negation, "will not scare," that is potentially both transitive and intransitive. A reader who activates both grammatical senses ratifies an easeful mutuality: the mother skunk will not scare the poet and she will not be scared. She and her kittens will not run away, nor will he. But still the reader must choose, either / or, between two senses of "will": as staunch determination or, quite simply, a serene statement of fact. A reader who consciously opts for the latter joins in the formation of a healing fiction.²⁰

On another level of twoness, there are now, thanks to "Skunk Hour," two indomitable mothers in *Life Studies*, and two families, one dysfunctional, the other marvelously functional. Hunger, food, and eating are recurrent tropes in *Life Studies*, and the family dinner that brings closure swills, as it were, those earlier family dinners that Lowell endured as a child, "absorbing cold and anxiety from the table" (147), as he puts it in "91 Revere Street." The dysfunctional family theme enters the closing "Life Studies" sequence at the very

outset in "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," which begins with a family dinner (163).²¹ In "Skunk Hour" it ends with one. Thanks to a family of skunks, Lowell as an adult can now stand and live, breathing "the rich air." For the reader who has been keenly attentive to acoustic signs and their askew suggestions, the poem comes homophonically full circle. The hermit heiress is now superseded by a rich heir, as Lowell's persona, himself a "dotty" isolate, is reanimated.²²

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NOTES

¹David Kalstone draws passing attention to "[s]yllables [...] from the start [...] beating insistently through the poem" (51). His examples, confined to stanzas 1 and 3, include a few of the syllables that I foreground in conjunction with the phoneme cluster *ill*. John Frederick Nims remarks: "Rhymes and off-rhymes run from stanza to stanza: 'all'—'fall'—'yawl'—'skull'—'cell'—'pail,' etc" (88), but he does not associate them with "ill." Michael Toolan's linguistically oriented stylistic analysis of "Skunk Hour" shares none of my phonological concerns. Jackson Barry's "Robert Lowell: The Poet as Sign" contends that "in Lowell we find a very complex sign function where a physical signifier, the figure chosen, stands for a cluster of meanings attributed to but not inherent in the actual person" (180). Barry does not mention "Skunk Hour," and our essays in no respect overlap.

²Whenever I read "her sheep still graze above the sea" I hear in the background John McCormack singing "Sheep may safely graze" ("Schafe können sicher weiden"), aria 4 from Bach's Cantata No. 208. For a sign of Lowell's interest in Bach, see Mariani 213.

³See Deborah Nelson's chapter on Lowell in her *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War Culture* (42-73). Nelson reads "Skunk Hour" as "an epochal poem poised at a generational and temporal shift. The opening two stanzas of the poem register uneasiness with the upheavals in contemporary life occasioned by the loss of a certain kind of privacy" (47). Nelson traces the privacy issue throughout the poem.

⁴The draft, titled "Inspiration," is reprinted in Axelrod, *Robert Lowell: Life and Art* 250.

⁵Today one cannot leap from but may consult an online catalogue at www.llbean.com. I remember when Brooks Brothers ads and L. L. Bean ads in *The*

New Yorker would clearly be appealing to the same clientele. A New York or Boston businessman accustomed to wearing a Brooks Brothers suit could don his L. L. Bean outdoorsman's gear for use at his "summer place," quite often in Maine. The company was founded in 1912 by Leon Leonwood Bean in Freeport, Maine. For a fascinating history of the company, see the Wikipedia entry on L. L. Bean. In "Flee on Your Donkey" from her collection *Live or Die* Anne Sexton records: "I carried a knife in my pocketbook—/ my husband's good L. L. Bean hunting knife. / I wasn't sure if I should slash a tire / or scrape the guts out of some dream" (8).

⁶I have been asked: "Is there anything in the text that suggests he died and did not simply lose his money?" This query prioritizes one hypothesis as the obvious one, takes for granted that there is something "in the text" to justify prioritizing it, and leaves the hypothesis standing as one which will remain "true" as long as it cannot be disproved. I cannot disprove the hypothesis that the millionaire left town because he suddenly went bankrupt. Nor can I say what "in the text" grants it prioritized status. As for my own hypothesis, I grant that "the text" provides no explicit evidence that death, death by his own hand, was the "real" reason we have lost him. It doesn't provide any such indication for any other hypothesis, either. It could be that our summer millionaire just up and left after the summer was over, eager to get back to work and earn more millions. What else would one have expected of him after summer was over? He's gone, but why is never spelled out. "We've lost our summer millionaire" is phrased in the laconic manner of a Maine countryman's oral speech which Lowell adopts, using the communal "our" just as he does for "our fairy decorator." Perhaps "millionaire" is humorously hyperbolic, but the "our" suggests that he was a regular summer visitor, now never more to return. Did he suddenly go bankrupt during the summer? "Mebbe yes, and mebbe no" (to try to put it in rural New England speech). My hypothesis underscores a contrast between him and the pertinacious hermit heiress, made of sterner New England stuff, who "still lives." It also responds to the aura of mystery about the millionaire's departure and the auctioning off of his yawl to lobstermen. I don't want to invoke Wolfgang Iser's notion of "gaps" in a text for the reader to fill in, but Lowell often leaves open to the reader how to "fill in" a key line or phrase for which "the text" provides no clearly determined answer. Take, for example, the unidentified "kind hands" in Lowell's "The March 2" (546) and how the poem thematically hinges on the reader's construction of whose hands they are; see my article on "The March 1" and "The March 2." Textual exegesis, including exegesis of biblical passages, may call for a good deal of filling in gaps. The very absence of a stated "real" reason "in the text," combined with the laconic speaking manner assumed by the poet, helps form my hypothesis. In "Skunk Hour" the speaker resists a suicide compulsion, but during Lowell's lifetime five poets who were students of his or friends didn't: Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, and Delmore Schwartz. Lowell foregrounds suicide in "A Suicidal Nightmare" (865), "Suicide" (724-25), and most chillingly in "After the Surprising Conversions" (574). *Life Studies* includes a poem "To Delmore Schwartz (157-58) and "Words for Hart Crane" (159), who committed suicide by leaping from a ship. None of this "proves" that the millionaire joined the crowd,

perhaps following Crane's example, but it may subconsciously affect my reading of what is and is not "in the text." It also reinforces my reading of "Skunk Hour" as, among other things, a celebration of the poet's triumphant resistance to a suicide impulse, thanks to some skunks.

⁷The "Marry the Man Today" number in the 1950 musical *Guys and Dolls* immortalized Rogers Peet as the place to send a gentleman in the making: "Slowly introduce him to the better things / respectable, conservative, and clean. / Readers Digest! / Guy Lombardo! / Rogers Peet! / Golf! / Galoshes! / Ovaltine!" (qtd. from Jones 185). Nostalgic fans of Rogers, Peet & Co. should consult <www.ivy-style.com/better-things-rogers-peet-co.html>, which offers numerous illustrations of Rogers Peet advertisements from times past, including for boys' wear. Its sartorial cousin, Brooks Brothers, still lives, but Rogers, Peet & Co., founded in 1874, gave up the ghost in the mid-1980s. I vaguely remember the store that Lowell refers to, at 104 Tremont Street.

⁸The best lobsters in the world are Maine lobsters. And the most expensive, although a current glut in lobster stocks due to global warming of waters off the Maine coast means that Maine lobstermen are earning catastrophically less despite consumers still having to pay premium prices; see Jess Bidgood, "Some Wary as Lobstermen Unite," *New York Times* 20 Oct. 2013, 14 April 2014 <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/21/us/some-wary-as-lobstermen-unite.html?_r=0>. A textual clue to the poem's setting as Castine, Maine, where Lowell frequently spent summers, is given at the outset, "Nautilus Island," which is at the head of Castine Harbor in Penobscot Bay.

⁹I cannot read the line without associatively thinking of Winslow Homer's painting "The Fox Hunt" (1893, now hanging in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts). Nicolai Cikovsky's *Winslow Homer* provides a large reproduction (115-16). In the painting, fall has already turned to winter in Maine.

¹⁰Helen Vendler comments: "The manuscript suggests that all of these are figures for the poet himself. Whereas the final version says 'There is no money in his work, / he'd rather marry' about the 'fairy decorator,' in the draft the poet says this about himself: 'There is no money in this work / I'd rather marry.' Lowell inherited his house in Castine, Maine, from his aunt who lived there, but he only went there in summers, like the 'summer millionaire.' No longer living in one of the roles proper to his Brahmin lineage—hermit, or bishop, or landowner—the speaker has declined into the unvirile role of the artist, comparable to that of the man whom the town contemptuously calls the 'fairy decorator'" (56-67). By indicating that it is the town that has given the decorator his label, Vendler leaves Lowell off the homophobic hook. Taking a deeper plunge into Lowell's psyche than Vendler ventures, Lawrence Kramer maintains that "the homosexuality of the decorator exposes a deep current of early childhood (Oedipal) homosexuality in the autobiographical speaker" (242). Kathleen Spivack, who knew Lowell well, writes insightfully of his publicly expressed homophobia as "protective coloration" in mid-century Bostonian cultural contexts (122). Ian Gregson does not touch upon "Skunk Hour" in his well-considered chapter on masculinity as a

recurrent topic in Lowell's poetry ("Men and Mermaids: Robert Lowell's Martial Masculinity and Beyond," 12-38).

¹¹St. John of the Cross was stuck with "luz," Spanish for "light," and uses "inflamada" ("inflamed") in line 2 to rhyme with "oscura" in line 1. His English translator Willis Barnstone uses "light" at the end of the second stanza to parry "night" at the end of the first, so strong is the pull of the "night / light" rhyme, whereas John of the Cross uses "segura" ("sure" or "surely"). Lowell also identified two German poems as sources for his "One dark night" stanza, Friedrich Hölderlin's "Brod und Wein" ["Bread and Wine"] and Annette von Droste-Hülshoff's "Am letzten Tage des Jahres" ["On the Last Day of the Year"], both of which he quotes in German (*Collected Prose* 228). Droste-Hülshoff's grim meditation employs six-line stanzas, beginning and ending with rhyming iambic dimeters, as in stanza two: "'s ist tiefe Nacht" (literally, "it is deep night") and "Einsam durchwacht" (translatable as "lonely, awake throughout"). Lowell quotes the entire second stanza and the beginning of the third.

¹²A "scull" is a boat, and as a homophone of "skull" it adds to the nautical imagery of the passage. Given the nautical context, the "love-cars" bring to mind, at least mine, the "love-boats" that in the good old days passed through a darkened "Tunnel of Love," giving an impetuous teenager a chance to steal a kiss before the boat emerged into the amusement park light of day. A tunnel-of-love cartoon in *The New Yorker* 28 Oct. 2013: 55 takes things a bit farther in the direction of "Skunk Hour." On the left, a couple in a boat is about to enter a darkened tunnel, over which a sign reads "Tunnel of Love." On the right, a lone male wearing a baseball cap, also sitting in a boat, is about to enter at the opposite end of the tunnel, over which a sign reads "Tunnel of Voyeurism." By line 7, transformed into boats, the love-cars lie together "hull to hull," as if beached, while "shelves" may awaken associations with sandbars.

¹³The "love-cars" provide dubious service as a sign of life for the speaker, and the song that "bleats" from the interior of one of them—the grazing sheep of stanza one felt no need to bleat—conveys signs of illness and of death. The editors of Lowell's *Collected Poems* cite lines from Big Joe Turner's February 1941 recording of "Careless Love": "Love, O Love, O careless love [...] / You worried my mother until she died / You caused my father to lose his mind / You worried my mother until she died / You made my father lose his mind" (1046). In connection with the "privacy" theme (see n3), Deborah Nelson remarks that "from the first elegy in *Life Studies*, Lowell had figured himself as a voyeur: 'unseen but all-seeing, I was Agrippina / in the Golden House of Nero' ('My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow')" (166). One need not assume, however, that Robert Lowell was himself a voyeur given to haunting lovers' lanes. He notes that "watching the lovers was not mine, but from an anecdote about Walt Whitman in his old age" (*Collected Prose* 228). The editors of Lowell's *Collected Poems* quote Lowell's source, Logan Pearsall Smith's *Unforgotten Years*: "Almost every afternoon my father would take Walt Whitman driving in the Park; it was an unflinching 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 they ever saw this angle of separation 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" (99; qtd. from Lowell, *Collected Poems* 1046).

¹⁴Marvell's opening lines, spoken by the soul, inaugurate the topos: "O Who shall, from this Dungeon, raise / A Soul enslav'd so many ways?" The rest of the ten-line stanza elaborates on its ill treatment by the body. The body replies in the next stanza—beginning "O who shall me deliver whole, / From bonds of this Tyrannic Soul?"—with its own complaint about its ill treatment by the soul. Neither body nor soul wins the debate, each is in effect the prisoner of the other. David Reid observes that Marvell "develops the contradiction between the two sides of the one being to express, with every appearance of levity and control, an unbearable state of discord" (213). An emblem book illustration from Herman Hugo's *Pia Desideria* (Antwerp, 1624) depicting a soul imprisoned in a body can be found in Rosalie Colie's book on Marvell. The body is a skeleton whose ribs form the bars of the cell within which the soul, a rather hapless creature, is incarcerated (Illustration 2, facing 238).

¹⁵In his biography of Lowell, Charles Mariani reports on Donald Junkins's visiting Lowell in his "locked cell at McLean's" mental asylum in December 1957 (262).

¹⁶"After the Surprising Conversions," in *Lord Weary's Castle*, is a verse epistle closely based on the ending of Jonathan Edwards's letter known as "Narrative of Surprising Conversions" (November 6, 1736). A note in the *Collected Poems* quotes portions of it, including: "And many who seemed under no melancholy, some pious persons, who had no special darkness or doubts about the goodness of their state—nor were under any special trouble or concern or mind about anything temporal—had it urged upon them as if somebody had spoke to them. Cut your own throat, now is a good opportunity. Now! Now!" (1023). One inevitably thinks of the last line of Lowell's "Waking in the Blue," "each of us holds a locked razor" (184).

¹⁷Given the "dark night of the soul" evocation of the previous stanza, I grant that it is hard to ignore a latent pun on "soles" and "souls." These skunks' soles / souls are not "ill," and when they "march on their soles up Main Street," all *ills* are flattened. Far be it from me to point out that a cobbler's awl, such as may be found in the decorator's emporium, might be used in repairing soles. For punning turns on "awl" / "sole," see Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* 1.1.

¹⁸On the monumentalizing impulse in Lowell's poetry, particularly with reference to "For the Union Dead," see Guy Rotella (41-80).

¹⁹Elizabeth Bishop dedicated "The Armadillo" (83-84) to Lowell, and he dedicated his "Skunk Hour" to her. Lowell also sneaked a bishop if not Bishop into his poem: "Her son's a bishop." In a 1978 interview conducted by Eileen McMahon, Bishop sought to minimize affiliations between the two poems and the significance of the dedications. She also reports on Lowell's, and her, rather humdrum

encounter with the skunks in Lowell's backyard at Castine: "I visited Lowell in Castine, Maine in 1957 when I was up from Brazil with a Brazilian friend of mine. The skunk business then was going on at the back door, where we saw it with a flashlight. Then he wrote 'Skunk Hour'" (109). On the impact of "The Armadillo" on Lowell and "Skunk Hour" in particular, see Thomas Travisano (225-33). Bishop rhymes "night" and "height" in her first quatrain, before turning on the "light" in the next. Lowell's "dark night" is at least partially illumined by "moonlight" in the present stanza.

²⁰Stephen Matterson focuses more on the poet's primary role in the creation of what I call a healing fiction: "*Life Studies* has explored the failure of the imagination to give order and meaning to objects and experiences, the failure to transform reality. Yet in the end Lowell's survival is engineered by a fiction, by the temporary restoration of his lost esemplastic power. The line "My mind's not right" and the following sentence represent a nadir. But then Lowell introduces the skunks, suggesting the presence of disinterested care in the world, and providing a kind of reproach for the introverted narrator. Thus Lowell interprets the skunks' actions in a self-conscious way, giving meaning to them. This ability momentarily transforming reality through language and imagination becomes fused with the ability to endure. The skunks are fictions" (68).

²¹Steven Gould Axelrod analyzes the "opaque, swirling linguistic signs" of the poem, in which "home becomes a nexus of isolation, paralysis, impoverishment, discord, and death. It is revealed as the most unhomelike space of all" (255). Home nevertheless was not short of garbage cans. In "91 Revere Street" we learn of three family garbage cans, each inscribed "R. T. S. Lowell—U.S.N" (148) to identify them as the property of the feckless head of the house, a former naval officer.

²²The "Life Studies" sequence traces Lowell's family history from 1922 to 1957, with family members dying off one by one, leaving him as an heir of two distinguished but played out New England families, the Lowells and the Winslows, whose credentials go back to the Mayflower. "I [...] / breathe the rich air" resuscitates "I breathe the ether of my marriage feast," a line with religious and mystical import in "Where the Rainbow Ends" (69). Vereen Bell is not sanguine about any reanimation: "Breathing 'rich air' is not likely to contribute much more regeneration than a pang for one who is a hell to himself and whose ill-spirit is threatened by his own hand" (69). Adam Beardsworth thinks otherwise: "As the speaker watches the skunks, he breathes 'the rich air,' indicating that in the actions (and foul odour) he finds a sense of redemption, even within his own hell" (112). Richard J. Fein writes of Lowell as "a family heir in *Life Studies*" who attains "a reclamation in the 'rich air' of the self" (72, 48). Sandra M. Gilbert extends the salutary working of "the rich air" to the rest of us: "At the end of his poem Lowell pauses on the 'back steps' and breathes 'the rich air.' The air of 'Skunk Hour' is rich indeed, rich with the seething of ancient powers, rich with moiling Modernist and Postmodernist anxieties. Rich, most of all, with what is finally, odd as it may seem, a kind of nourishment for poets and their readers, a nourishment as necessary to us as the 'sour cream' is to the skunks" (78-79). One could add that even

the phonic "air" in the "Trinitarian Church" has been refreshed by the rich air and that the *fairy* decorator can breathe more easily. By contrast, in "The Prodigal," Elizabeth Bishop's ironic rendition of the prodigal son parable, pig-sty stink remains stink: "The brown enormous odor he lived by / was too close, with its breathing and thick hair, / for him to judge" (54). I think that "The Prodigal" may have been nearly as much of an imaginative influence on "Skunk Hour" as "The Armadillo." The personal illness to which Bishop's poem relates is alcoholism: "*The Prodigal* was suggested by my stretch with psychoanalysis—that, and the actual incident of being offered a drink of rum in a pig-pen in Nova Scotia at 9 o'clock one morning" [from a letter to May Swenson, Sept. 6, 1955] (806). Her use of "stretch" brings to mind the length of a prison sentence.

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