III. Oltre il Modernismo

ROBERT LOWELL (1917-1977)
*Skunk Hour*
(for Elizabeth Bishop)

Nautilus Island’s hermit
heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage;
his 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 how 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.

(1959)
ROBERT LOWELL (1917-1977)

Memories of West Street and Lepke

Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming
in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning,
I hog a whole house on Boston’s
“hardly passionate Marlborough Street,”
where even the man
scavenging filth in the back alley trash cans,
has two children, a beach wagon, a helpmate,
and is “a young Republican.”
I have a nine months’ daughter,
young enough to be my granddaughter.
Like the sun she rises in her flame-flamingo infants’ wear.

These are the tranquillized Fifties,
and I am forty. Ought I to regret my seedtime?
I was a fire-breathing Catholic C.O.,
and made my manic statement,
telling off the state and president, and then
sat waiting sentence in the bull pen
beside a negro boy with curlicues
of marijuana in his hair.

Given a year,
I walked on the roof of the West Street Jail, a short
enclosure like my school soccer court,
and saw the Hudson River once a day
through sooty clothesline entanglements
and bleaching khaki tenements.
Strolling, I yammered metaphysics with Abramowitz,
a jaundice-yellow (“it’s really tan”)
and fly-weight pacifist,
so vegetarian,
he wore rope shoes and preferred fallen fruit.
He tried to convert Bioff and Brown,
the Hollywood pimps, to his diet.
Hairy, muscular, suburban,
wearign chocolate double-breasted suits,
they blew their tops and beat him black and blue.

I was so out of things, I’d never heard
of the Jehovah’s Witnesses.
“Are you a C.O.?” I asked a fellow jailbird.
“No,” he answered, “I’m a J.W.”
He taught me the “hospital tuck,”
and pointed out the T-shirted back
of Murder Incorporated’s Czar Lepke,
there piling towels on a rack,
or dawdling off to his little segregated cell full
of things forbidden to the common man:
a portable radio, a dresser, two toy American
flags tied together with a ribbon of Easter palm.
Flabby, bald, lobotomized,
he drifted in a sheepish calm,
where no agonizing reappraisal
jarred his concentration on the electric chair
hanging like an oasis in his air
of lost connections. . . .
(1959)
ELIZABETH BISHOP (1911-1979)

The Armadillo
for Robert Lowell

This is the time of year
when almost every night
the frail, illegal fire balloons appear.
Climbing the mountain height,

rising toward a saint
still honored in these parts,
the paper chambers flush and fill with light
that comes and goes, like hearts.

Once up against the sky it’s hard
to tell them from the stars –
planets, that is – the tinted ones:
Venus going down, or Mars,
or the pale green one. With a wind,
they flare and falter, wobble and toss;
but if it’s still they steer between
the kite sticks of the Southern Cross,

receding, dwindling, solemnly
and steadily forsaking us,
or, in the downdraft from a peak,
suddenly turning dangerous.

Last night another big one fell.
It splattered like an egg of fire
against the cliff behind the house.
The flame ran down. We saw the pair

of owls who nest there flying up
and up, their whirling black-and-white
stained bright pink underneath, until
they shrieked up out of sight.

The ancient owls’ nest must have burned.
Hastily, all alone,
a glistening armadillo left the scene,
rose-flecked, head down, tail down,

and then a baby rabbit jumped out,
short-eared, to our surprise.
So soft! – a handful of intangible ash
with fixed, ignited eyes.

Too pretty, dreamlike mimicry!
O falling fire and piercing cry
and panic, and a weak mailed fist
clenched ignorant against the sky!
(1957, 1965)
ELIZABETH BISHOP (1911-1979)
First Death in Nova Scotia

In the cold, cold parlor
my mother laid out Arthur
beneath the chromographs:
Edward, Prince of Wales,
with Princess Alexandra,
and King George with Queen Mary.
Below them on the table
stood a stuffed loon
shot and stuffed by Uncle
Arthur, Arthur’s father.

Since Uncle Arthur fired
a bullet into him,
he hadn’t said a word.
He kept his own counsel
on his white, frozen lake,
the marble-toped table.
His breast was deep and white,
cold and caressable;
his eyes were red glass,
much to be desired.

“Come,” said my mother,
“Come and say good-bye
to your little cousin Arthur.”
I was lifted up and given
one lily of the valley
to put in Arthur’s hand.
Arthur’s coffin was
a little frosted cake,
and the red-eyed loon eyed it
from his white, frozen lake.

Arthur was very small.
He was all white, like a doll
that hadn’t been painted yet.
Jack Frost had started to paint him
the way he always painted
the Maple Leaf (Forever).
He had just begun on his hair,
a few red strokes, and then
Jack Frost had dropped the brush
and left him white, forever.

The gracious royal couples
were warm in red and ermine;
their feet were well wrapped up
in the ladies’ ermine trains.
They invited Arthur to be
the smallest page at court.
But how could Arthur go,
clutching his tiny lily,
with his eyes shut up so tight
and the roads deep in snow?
(1962, 1965)
SYLVIA PLATH (1932-1963)

Black Rook in Rainy Weather

On the stiff twig up there
Hunches a wet black rook
Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain.
I do not expect a miracle
Or an accident

To set the sight on fire
In my eye, nor seek
Any more in the desultory weather some design,
But let spotted leaves fall as they fall,
Without ceremony, or portent.

Although, I admit, I desire,
Occasionally, some backtalk
From the mute sky, I can’t honestly complain:
A certain minor light may still
Leap incandescent

Out of the kitchen table or chair
As if a celestial burning took
Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then —
Thus hallowing an interval
Otherwise inconsequent

By bestowing largesse, honor,
One might say love. At any rate, I now walk
Wary (for it could happen
Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); sceptical,
Yet politic; ignorant

Of whatever angel may choose to flare
Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a rook
Ordering its black feathers can so shine
As to seize my senses, haul
My eyelids up, and grant

A brief respite from fear
Of total neutrality. With luck,
Trekking stubborn through this season
Of fatigue, I shall
Patch together a content

Of sorts. Miracles occur,
If you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait’s begun again,
The long wait for the angel,
For that rare, random descent.
(1960)
SYLVIA PLATH (1932-1963)

Electra on Azalea Path

The day you died I went into the dirt,
Into the lightless hibernaculum
Where bees, striped black and gold, sleep out the blizzard
Like hieratic stones, and the ground is hard.
It was good for twenty years, that wintering–
As if you never existed, as if I came
God-fathered into the world from my mother’s belly:
Her wide bed wore the stain of divinity.
I had nothing to do with guilt or anything
When I wormed back under my mother’s heart.

Small as a doll in my dress of innocence
I lay dreaming your epic, image by image.
Nobody died or withered on that stage.
Everything took place in a durable whiteness.
The day I woke, I woke on Churchyard Hill.
I found your name, I found your bones and all
Enlisted in a cramped necropolis,
Your speckled stone askew by an iron fence.

In this charity ward, this poorhouse, where the dead
Crowd foot to foot, head to head, no flower
Breaks the soil. This is Azalea Path.
A field of burdock opens to the south.
Six feet of yellow gravel cover you.
The artificial red sage does not stir
In the basket of plastic evergreens they put
At the headstone next to yours, nor does it rot,
Although the rains dissolve a bloody dye:
The ersatz petals drip, and they drip red.

Another kind of redness bothers me:
The day your slack sail drank my sister’s breath
The flat sea purpled like that evil cloth
My mother unrolled at your last homecoming.
I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy.
The truth is, one late October, at my birth-cry
A scorpion stung its head, an ill-starred thing;
My mother dreamed you face down in the sea.

The stony actors poise and pause for breath.
I brought my love to bear, and then you died.
It was the gangrene ate you to the bone
My mother said; you died like any man.
How shall I age into that state of mind?
I am the ghost of an infamous suicide,
My own blue razor rusting in my throat.
O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at
Your gate, father – your hound-bitch, daughter, friend.
It was my love that did us both to death.
(1959)
SYLVIA PLATH (1932-1963)

Lady Lazarus

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it—

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy,
Do I terrify?—

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.
It’s easy enough to do it in a cell.
It’s easy enough to do it and stay put.
It’s the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

‘A miracle!’
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart—
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair on my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—

You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.
(23-29 October 1962)
SYLVIA PLATH (1932-1963)

Daddy

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time—
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic
Where it pours bean green over blue
In the waters off the beautiful Nauset.
I used to pray to recover you.
Ach, du.

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine,
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—

Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
In the picture I have of you,
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot.
But no less a devil for that, no not
Any less the black man who

Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.

But they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I’m finally through.
The black telephone’s off at the root,
The voices just can’t worm through.

If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two—
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There’s a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.
(12 October 1962)

ANNE SEXTON (1928-1975)

Her Kind

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.

I have found the warm caves in the woods,
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods;
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:
whining, rearranging the disaligned.
A woman like that is misunderstood.
I have been her kind.

I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor
where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind.

(1960)
ANNE Sexton (1928-1975)

The Double Image

1.

I am thirty this November.
You are still small, in your fourth year.
We stand watching the yellow leaves go queer,
flapping in the winter rain,
falling flat and washed. And I remember
mostly the three autumns you did not live here.
They said I’d never get you back again.
I tell you what you’ll never really know:
all the medical hypothesis
that explained my brain will never be as true as these
struck leaves letting go.

I, who chose two times
to kill myself, had said your nickname
the mewling months when you first came;
until a fever rattled
in your throat and I moved like a pantomime
above your head. Ugly angels spoke to me. The blame,
I heard them say, was mine. They tattled
like green witches in my head, letting doom
leak like a broken faucet;
as if doom had flooded my belly and filled your bassinet,
an old debt I must assume.

Death was simpler than I’d thought.
The day life made you well and whole
I let the witches take away my guilty soul.
I pretended I was dead
until the white men pumped the poison out,
putting me armless and washed through the rigamarole
of talking boxes and the electric bed.
I laughed to see the private iron in that hotel.
Today the yellow leaves
go queer. You ask me where they go. I say today believed
in itself, or else it fell.

Today, my small child, Joyce,
love your self’s self where it lives.
There is no special God to refer to; or if there is,
why did I let you grow
in another place. You did not know my voice
when I came back to call. All the superlatives
of tomorrow’s white tree and mistletoe
will not help you know the holidays you had to miss.
The time I did not love
myself, I visited your shoveled walks; you held my glove.
There was new snow after this.

2.

They sent me letters with news
of you and I made moccasins that I would never use.
When I grew well enough to tolerate
myself, I lived with my mother. Too late,
too late, to live with your mother, the witches said.
But I didn’t leave. I had my portrait
done instead.

Part way back from Bedlam
I came to my mother’s house in Gloucester,
Massachusetts. And this is how I came
to catch at her; and this is how I lost her.
I cannot forgive your suicide, my mother said.
And she never could. She had my portrait
done instead.

I lived like an angry guest,
like a partly mended thing, an outgrown child.
I remember my mother did her best.
She took me to Boston and had my hair restyled.
Your smile is like your mother’s, the artist said.
I didn’t seem to care. I had my portrait
done instead.

There was a church where I grew up
with its white cupboards where they locked us up,
row by row, like puritans or shipmates
singing together. My father passed the plate.
Too late to be forgiven now, the witches said.
I wasn’t exactly forgiven. They had my portrait
done instead.

3.

All that summer sprinklers arched
over the seaside grass.
We talked of drought
while the salt-parched
field grew sweet again. To help time pass
I tried to mow the lawn
and in the morning I had my portrait done,
holding my smile in place, till it grew formal.
Once I mailed you a picture of a rabbit
and a postcard of Motif number one,
as if it were normal
to be a mother and be gone.

They hung my portrait in the chill
north light, matching
me to keep me well.
Only my mother grew ill.
She turned from me, as if death were catching,
as if death transferred,
as if my dying had eaten inside of her.
That August you were two, by I timed my days with doubt.
On the first of September she looked at me
and said I gave her cancer.
They carved her sweet hills out
and still I couldn’t answer.

4.

That winter she came
part way back
from her sterile suite
of doctors, the seasick
cruise of the X-ray,
the cells’ arithmetic
gone wild. Surgery incomplete,
the fat arm, the prognosis poor, I heard
them say.

During the sea blizzards
she had her
own portrait painted.
A cave of a mirror
placed on the south wall;
matching smile, matching contour.
And you resembled me; unacquainted
with my face, you wore it. But you were mine
after all.

I wintered in Boston,
childless bride,
nothing sweet to spare
with witches at my side.
I missed your babyhood,
tried a second suicide,
tried the sealed hotel a second year.
On April Fool you fooled me. We laughed and this
was good.

5.

I checked out for the last time
on the first of May;
gratitude of the mental cases,
with my analyst’s okay,
my complete book of rhymes,
my typewriter and my suitcases.

All that summer I learned life
back into my own
seven rooms, visited the swan boats,
the market, answered the phone,
served cocktails as a wife
should, made love among my petticoats
and August tan. And you came each
weekend. But I lie.
You seldom came. I just pretended
you, small piglet, butterfly
girl with jelly bean cheeks,
disobedient three, my splendid
stranger. And I had to learn
why I would rather
die than love, how your innocence
would hurt and how I gather
guilt like a young intern
his symptoms, his certain evidence.

That October day we went
to Gloucester the red hills
reminded me of the dry red fur fox
coil I played in as a child; stock-still
like a bear or a tent,
like a great cave laughing or a red fur fox.

We drove past the hatchery,
the hut that sells bait,
past Pigeon Cove, past the Yacht Club, past Squall’s
Hill, to the house that waits
still, on the top of the sea,
and two portraits hung on the opposite walls.

6.

In north light, my smile is held in place,
the shadow marks my bone.
What could I have been dreaming as I sat there,
all of me waiting in the eyes, the zone
of the smile, the young face,
the foxes’ snare.

In south light, her smile is held in place,
her cheeks wilting like a dry orchid; my mocking mirror, my overthrown love, my first image. She eyes me from that face that stony head of death I had outgrown.

The artist caught us at the turning; we smiled in our canvas home before we chose our foreknown separate ways. The dry red fur fox coat was made for burning. I rot on the wall, my own Dorian Gray.

And this was the cave of the mirror, that double woman who stares at herself, as if she were petrified in time – two ladies sitting in umber chairs. You kissed your grandmother and she cried.

7.

I could not get you back except for weekends. You came each time, clutching the picture of a rabbit that I had sent you. For the last time I unpack your things. We touch from habit. The first visit you asked my name. Now you stay for good. I will forget how we bumped away from each other like marionettes on strings. It wasn’t the same as love, letting weekends contain us. You scrape your knee. You learn my name, wobbling up the sidewalk, calling and crying.

You can call me mother and I remember my mother again, somewhere in greater Boston, dying.

I remember we named you Joyce so we could call you Joy. You came like an awkward guest that first time, all wrapped and moist and strange at my heavy breast. I needed you. I didn’t want a boy, only a girl, a small milky mouse of a girl, already loved, already loud in the house of herself. We named you Joy. I, who was never quite sure about being a girl, needed another life, another image to remind me. And this was my worst guilt; you could not cure or soothe it. I made you to find me. (1960)

**Anne Sexton (1928-1975)**

*Sylvia’s Death*

*for Sylvia Plath*

O Sylvia, Sylvia, with a dead box of stones and spoons, with two children, two meteors wandering loose in a tiny playroom, with your mouth into the sheet, into the roofbeam, into the dumb prayer, (Sylvia, Sylvia where did you go after you wrote me
from Devonshire
about raising potatoes
and keeping bees?)
what did you stand by,
just how did you lie down into?
Thief --
how did you crawl into,
crawl down alone
into the death I wanted so badly and for so long,
the death we said we both outgrew,
the one we wore on our skinny breasts,
the one we talked of so often each time
we downed three extra dry martinis in Boston,
the death that talked of analysts and cures,
the death that talked like brides with plots,
the death we drank to,
the motives and the quiet deed?
(In Boston
the dying
ride in cabs,
yes death again,
that ride home
with our boy.)
O Sylvia, I remember the sleepy drummer
who beat on our eyes with an old story,
how we wanted to let him come
like a sadist or a New York fairy
to do his job,
a necessity, a window in a wall or a crib,
and since that time he waited
under our heart, our cupboard,
and I see now that we store him up
year after year, old suicides
and I know at the news of your death
a terrible taste for it, like salt,
(And me,
me too.
And now, Sylvia,
you again
with death again,
that ride home
with our boy.)
And I say only
with my arms stretched out into that stone place,
what is your death
but an old belonging,
a mole that fell out
of one of your poems?
(O friend,
while the moon’s bad,
and the king’s gone,
and the queen’s at her wit’s end
the bar fly ought to sing!)
O tiny mother,
you too!
O funny duchess!
O blonde thing!
(February 17 1963)