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ROBERT LOWELL

A MANIA FOR PHRASES

A VOICES & VISIONS FILM

TRANSCRIPT

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ROBERT LOWELL: This poem is called "Fall 1961," and it appeared when the Cold War got quite hot and there was a Berlin crisis and there were peace marches in London and Bertrand Russell was making statements and if an airplane flew over your house in New York you shuddered a little bit.

R O B E R T L O W E L L

(title on screen)

"Fall 1961"

Back and forth, back and forth
goes the tock, tock, tock
of the orange, bland, ambassadorial
face of the moon
on the grandfather clock.

All autumn, the chafe and jar
of nuclear war;
we have talked our extinction to death.

A M A N I A F O R P H R A S E S

(title on screen)

A father's no shield
for his child.
We are like a lot of wild
spiders crying together,
but without tears.

Nature holds up a mirror.
 One swallow makes a summer.
 It's easy to tick
 off the minutes,
 but the clockhands stick.

Back and forth!
 Back and forth, back and forth--
 my one point of rest
 is the orange and black
 oriole's swinging nest!

Those lines about the spider are curious, that my daughter who was aged about five, I think, at the time, happened to be listening to a radio program and Anton Webern's music came on, and I said, this is music you won't like, it's difficult and for grown-ups, and asked her what it sounded like. And she said, it's like a lot of wild wolves through the woods walking, then she said it's like wild ants, red ants. And then she said this amazing thing, that it's like a lot of wild spiders crying, but without tears. And that isn't her language, it just was some curious -- something that hit an intuition, and I stole it from her.

I'm going to read "Skunk Hour." I suppose that's my most popular poem, and I'm rather sick of it, but it's about a little -- roughly about a little Maine town where I go in the summer. And the summer's ending, and the town is in decline, the village is in decline, and the first four stanzas sort of describe examples of the decline. Then the poem shifts rather in mood and stiffens and gets more dramatic, and the speaker goes out in his car, which is a Tudor Ford, spelled T U D O R, means T W O. And then the hero goes through a mood of Calvinist, or existentialist despair, and then he sees the skunks.

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.

FRANK BIDART/Poet: Let me read you a passage from a letter which
 I got about a year before he died. He says, "I gather from your
 phone call this summer has had some very hard moments for you. It's
 miraculous, as you told me about yourself, how often writing takes
 the ache away, takes time away. You start in the morning and look
 up to see the windows darkening. I think the ambition of art, the
 feeding on one's soul, memory, mind, etc., gives a mixture of glory
 and exhaustion. I think in the end there is no end, but a lot of
 meat and drink along the way."

JOHN THOMPSON/Writer: Freud said, what is pleasure? It is a release of tension between something buried and troubling and the conscious mind. When there's a spark between the two, that is pleasure. Now we get that pleasure in immense ways from Lowell. It purges us, as Aristotle said, of pity and terror.

ANTHONY HECHT/Poet: The humor, and the gentleness too, appear in the poetry rather suddenly. LORD WEARY'S CASTLE is a stern, difficult, in some ways almost forbidding book, but by the time we get to LIFE STUDIES, a great warm sense of humanity enters the poetry. And off and on remains there up until the very last book, which is, I think, as warm a book as any that he wrote, DAY BY DAY. A very touching, moving, gentle book, also tinged with a sense of his own pain and the pain that he's given to others.

ROBERT GIROUX/Editor: The manic phases were not productive. Whenever he went into a manic phase he couldn't write. One of his most memorable statements, in all the years I knew him, was his saying that it's terrible to think that all the suffering I've gone through, and all the suffering I've caused, was due to the fact that I didn't have enough salt in my brain.

ROBERT HASS: He made family life available as a subject for American poetry. A lot of the greatest works of American art are about the family. "Long Day's Journey into Night" is about O'Neill's family life. I'm sure that "Death of a Salesman" is about Miller's family life. THE SOUND AND THE FURY is about Faulkner's family life. The roots of some of the most powerful American works of art are about family life, and it's a subject that poetry, if it were not dramatic poetry, simply hadn't touched.

DEREK WALCOTT/Poet: Lowell was continually trying to be America. Not just to keep up, but to get into the core of what it was to be American, what was the sound of American speech. I mean, now, okay, you may say that at the beginning of his writing, in "Lord Weary's Castle" and the other poems, that where is the Americanness in them. But he's writing out of a tight biographical pressured situation. As he got older, expanded and got restless, and sort of fed up with the drive of the pentameter, he looked for something that would have the immediacy of the everyday thing. Like a simple poem like just walking along on a grey day, maybe, the shore of Jersey.

ROBERT LOWELL: This is about my home city, New York. And it's called "The Mouth of the Hudson." It's rather hideous. You look across into the cliffs of New Jersey and probably nothing, it's industrial land, nothing is so godforsaken except the Negev Desert in Israel.

DEREK WALCOTT: The poem in a way pays a tribute to somebody who's on the Jersey shore, who is William Carlos Williams. In other words, the poem is not a tribute to Williams, but by that time he had taken in whatever he could use from Williams. Also, the line itself, the feel of the poem, it has an arc, a kind of casualness, as if someone were holding a rod, and the line at the end of the line can pick up anything that's in the river.

ROBERT LOWELL:

A single man stands like a bird-watcher,
and scuffles the pepper and salt snow
from a discarded, gray
Westinghouse Electric cable drum.
He cannot discover America by counting
the chains of condemned freight-trains
from thirty states. They jolt and jar
and junk in the siding below him.

He has trouble with his balance.
 His eyes drop,
 and he drifts with the wild ice
 ticking seaward down the Hudson,
 like the blank sides of a jig-saw puzzle.

The ice ticks seaward like a clock.
 A Negro toasts
 wheat-seeds over the coke-fumes
 of a punctured barrel.
 Chemical air
 sweeps in from New Jersey,
 and smells of coffee.

Across the river,
 ledges of suburban factories tan
 in the sulphur-yellow sun
 of the unforgivable landscape.

That's a little Wordsworthian nature poem.

DEREK WALCOTT: I remember asking him about -- admiring a line, you know, a simple ordinary line like "Westinghouse Electric cable drum." He and Harriet were walking and she got jumping on some old drums, and she just kept saying, "Westinghouse Electric cable drum," and he picked that up as part of the meter. Then the sound of the poem too. If he said the word "coffee," it wouldn't be coffee. He had a very -- it was like smoke almost, the end of it, rather, so it was very delicate, very soft, very Southern in a way. You know, "coffee."

JOHN THOMPSON: You know, I suppose, the famous story of how Ford Madox Ford met him in Boston or somewhere, and Lowell said, I'm going to be a poet, and with whom should I study? Ford said, Allen Tate. Tate very politely wrote back and said, oh, I'd love to have you come, but it's just so crowded here now that you'd have to live in a tent. And the next thing they knew, they looked out on the front

lawn, and here was somebody pitching -- and urinating in the bushes first -- and then pitching a pup tent on the lawn. And Tate, like everyone else, immediately recognized his genius and indeed they even let him in the house!

ROBERT LOWELL: I never knew I was from New England until I was about twenty and was living in the South, and everyone described me as a Yankee. And for the first time James Russell Lowell seemed to be an asset, not a burden, even though he wasn't the most popular poet among the Southern fugitives. But I suddenly got a historical sense of being from New England and being different from the Southerners. And when I first began using New England scenery I was living in the South, in Tennessee. And it took some sort of distance to realize it. And I was actually earlier obsessed with the idea of the Puritans, and what succeeded them, and some sense of history.

Harvard didn't mean so much to me. I stayed there a year and a half, and I wanted some exemplar of modern poetry and couldn't find one there, and got rather bored with what I was taught in a somewhat foolish, arrogant way. And then I transferred to Kenyon College and I studied with John Crowe Ransom and lived in his house. And I think that just saved my life, really, and it gave an environment for me. And I learned a good deal in class, I think, but even more outside in casual conversation and gossip.

JOHN THOMPSON: You couldn't imagine two poets more different. Ransom was a rather small, apple-cheeked, cheerful Southern gentleman who was full of the utmost courtesy at all times, and Cal was a rather boisterous young man. Randall Jarrell came at the same time, and he was our house mother. They called us "the poets."

Milton, I think, was somewhat his ideal, and in a way he was rather like Milton. He was scholarly, very scholarly, and everybody knew it, there was no question -- we knew he was going to be a great poet.

ROBERT LOWELL:

The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket (title on screen)

A brackish reach of shoal off Madaket--
 The sea was still breaking violently and night
 Had steamed into our North Atlantic Fleet,
 When the drowned sailor clutched the drag-net. Light
 Flashed from his matted head and marble feet,
 He grappled at the net
 With the coiled, hurdling muscles of his thighs:
 The corpse was bloodless, a botch of reds and whites,
 Its open, staring eyes
 Were lustreless dead-lights
 Or cabin-windows on a stranded hulk
 Heavy with sand. We weight the body, close
 Its eyes and heave it seaward whence it came,
 Where the heel-headed dogfish barks its nose
 On Ahab's void and forehead;

ROBERT HASS: When I was a student, I studied with Yvor Winters at Stanford, who was a friend of Lowell's teacher Allen Tate. And Winters was still, as an old man, grumbling. Lowell was of course not young to me -- he was in his forties and Winters in his lectures always referred to him as "that young Lowell," and I remember him saying, when he was speaking about earlier English poets who enjambed lines badly, he grumbled and said, young Lowell has got a bad enjambment and I think he learned it from Allen Tate. It's a brilliantly bad enjambment if it is one. And you get it here, for example:

Had steamed into our North Atlantic Fleet,
 When the drowned sailor clutched the drag-net. Light
 Flashed from his matted head and marble feet,

Things being cut off, ended too soon, ended at a place where they lurch on and begin rhyming and near-rhyming which feel to me like somebody kind of shooting furiously at a target, not caring whether they hit it or not. Just shooting at it, the angry energy of shooting.

ROBERT GIROUX: I first met Robert Lowell in 1941, through his wife, Jean Stafford. I was her editor, and she was working on her first novel, AUSTIN ADVENTURE. She had married Lowell, I think, just a few years before that, '39 or '40. And he was a very quiet, very intense person, and he presented me with a copy of his very first book, which was privately printed, THE LAND OF UNLIKENESS. Jean said, Cal has a new book of poems. And it was LORD WEARY'S CASTLE. And I guess you can't really say that LORD WEARY'S CASTLE was a bestseller, but it was a very very big seller, and one of the most successful books of poems I myself was ever involved with.

ROBERT LOWELL:

Sailors, who pitch this portent at the sea
 Where dreadnaughts shall confess
 Its hell-bent deity,
 When you are powerless
 To sand-bag this Atlantic bulwark, faced
 By the earth-shaker, green, unwearied, chaste
 In his steel scales: ask for no Orphean lute
 To pluck life back. The guns of the steeled fleet
 Recoil and then repeat
 The hoarse salute.

ROBERT HASS: The poem is a political poem, and it's a poem about World War II, though the war doesn't really enter into it. The full title of the poem is "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket: For Warren Winslow, dead at sea." Warren Winslow was Lowell's cousin, a young man who was an ensign in the Navy and went off to war and lost his life. The rage of the poem is partly the rage at that

loss, at the senselessness of the loss of sending generation after generation of kids off to fight in a war, from Lowell's point of view, a fruitless war. The astonishing thing about the poem, the kind of brilliance of the conception of the poem, was making it a poem not about World War II, but about whaling.

ROBERT LOWELL:

Sea-gulls blink their heavy lids
Seaward. The winds' wings beat upon the stones,
Cousin, and scream for you and the claws rush
At the sea's throat and wring it in the slush
Of this old Quaker graveyard where the bones
Cry out in the long night for the hurt beast
Bobbing by Ahab's whaleboats in the East.

ROBERT HASS: What he sees permanently in the Atlantic, what anybody sees permanently in the Atlantic after they've read this poem, is some revised Lowell version of Melville's *MOBY DICK*, in which the whale is always out there crying, wounded. And of course that hurt beast begins to echo and rhyme with the hurt self of the tide, which is the hurt of Lowell himself, which is the hurt that the nation is doing to itself in war, which is the death of its young. All of those things come together, and where do they go, where do you take this violence?

ROBERT LOWELL:

To Cape Cod

Guns, cradled on the tide,
Blast the eelgrass about a waterclock
Of bilge and backwash, roil the salt and sand
Lashing earth's scaffold, rock
Our warships in the hand
Of the great God, where time's contrition blues
Whatever it was these Quaker sailors lost
In the mad scramble of their lives.

In the sperm-whale's slick
 I see the Quakers drown and hear their cry:
 "If God himself had not been on our side,
 If God himself had not been on our side,
 When the Atlantic rose against us, why
 Then it had swallowed us up quick."

ROBERT HASS: It's some version of himself who's lost. And then in the sort of dazzling extensions of the poem, because great poems do that, mean in so many different directions. The sailor Warren Winslow, the innocent victim, also becomes the sacrificial lamb; he becomes a figure for Christ. And the problem of the poem, which is the problem of Lowell's religious belief, is: is there anything that can redeem this violence? Is there anything at all that can redeem this violence? And I think that must be what drove Lowell to Catholicism.

ROBERT LOWELL:

But see:
 Our Lady, too small for her canopy,
 Sits near the altar. There's no comeliness
 At all or charm in that expressionless
 Face with its heavy eyelids. As before,
 This face, for centuries a memory,
Non est species, neque decor,
 Expressionless, expresses God: it goes
 Past castled Sion. She knows what God knows,
 Not Calvary's Cross nor crib at Bethlehem
 Now, and the world shall come to Walsingham.

ROBERT GIROUX: Jean Stafford was already converted to Catholicism. I don't think it was that which had an influence on Lowell. I think it was the direction in which he was then headed.

ANTHONY HECHT: His relationship to Jean Stafford, his first wife, was a very tormented and tormenting one. And it began, rather hideously, with an automobile accident before they were ever married

in the first place, in which her face was terribly scarred, and scarred for life, scarred in ways from which she never recovered. And the facial scarring was only a sign of some other kinds of scarring. And Lowell walked away from that accident unscathed. And walked away, some people think, from the marriage, unscathed. Though I don't think this is true. There are too many indications in the poetry itself that he never completely forgave himself for what happened.

ROBERT GIROUX: Lowell met Elizabeth Hardwick at Yaddo, at the writers' colony at Saratoga Springs in 1948, or thereabouts, and they were married a year or so later.

ELIZABETH HARDWICK: It's hard to remember that in 1950 you didn't fly. So we went on a freighter.

ACTRESS: Buon giorno.

ELIZABETH HARDWICK: Mary McCarthy had never been to Europe until I think it was '49, and we hadn't been. First there was the Nazi period, and then the war. We had decided to go to Florence, although some people say, why did you go to Florence, especially people who live in Rome. And anyway, we did, and we wandered around, and those were much easier times than now, and everything was very cheap, and found an apartment on the Arno. As I look back on things, it seemed very beautiful. In Florence I remember the Easter service at the Duomo, and all the old prelates in their rather moth-eaten velvets and moth-eaten furs, and they let a dove out from the high altar. Once you're there, that's your idea, to take in and experience as much as you can. And you do read about the paintings, you read a lot of art history.

ROBERT LOWELL: I think the arts are connected with power in a peculiar way, but it's an oblique way, and often comes when the power is faded. That is, the great period of Italian painting somehow is a period not exactly of power but of deficiency. It's no accident that Florence was a sort of Pittsburgh of its day, when the great Florentine painting came.

(Silent text on screen from "Florence")

Oh Florence, Florence, patroness
of the lovely tyrannicides!
Where the tower of the Old Palace
pierces the sky
like a hypodermic needle,
Perseus, David and Judith,
lords and ladies of the Blood,
Greek demi-gods of the Cross,
rise sword in hand
above the unshaven,
formless decapitation
of the monsters, tubs of guts,
mortifying chunks for the pack.

Pity the monsters!
Pity the monsters!

ELIZABETH HARDWICK: Well, Holland, I thought it was very hard living there, and we did go and it was a very wise and useful and interesting and happy experience. But that was Cal's insistence. He had always wanted to go to Northern Europe, and I do think that was -- he had tremendous interest in Dutch painting and Dutch history, and then there's the great Bostonian historian, Motley's RISE OF THE DUTCH REPUBLIC, which he had read as a youth. He wasn't writing much then, perhaps trying to, and that was worrying to him, so there was a kind of lull, and a bit of a depression about his work, of what to do next.

DEREK WALCOTT: I remember having a nice quiet conversation with him once in a restaurant in New York, and we were talking about painters, and what painters resembled what kind of poets, and I asked him what kind of painter would he like to -- he imagines his work to be like. And he said Vermeer. LIFE STUDIES, for instance, is an artist's term, studies from life. You go into a situation as if you were entering a painter's studio, in which everything is there. You see the shavings in the sculptor's studio, you see the brushes in the painter's studio, and all the fragments are there. All his knowledge, everything he knows, everything. His reading, his life, his past, everything is right there, and comes to him line after line without a conscious intention of making something as serene and as heraldic as, say, poets in their middle age. It's not like Yeats, saying Yeats has found a sound. Lowell never settled on one sound.

ELIZABETH HARDWICK: We were in Rome, and that was a tremendous year in Rome. It was one of the great holy years, being 1950, and they announced the dogma of the Assumption of the Virgin into heaven. And I guess that had not been dogma until 1950.

ROBERT LOWELL: The poem is about several things, but its main subject is that it's supposed to take place on a train going from Rome to Paris. So the train literally goes over the Alps, and the poem is about people who go beyond nature, Mussolini, or the Pope. And I've always regarded the poem as a declaration of my faith or lack of faith, and what it means theologically, I think, is impenetrable.

Beyond the Alps (title on screen)

ROBERT HASS: "Beyond the Alps" is clearly an announcement that something is changing in LIFE STUDIES. The poem still recognizably belongs to the style of the earlier poems, but that style, so clotted

and so intense, had to change. There was no way that anybody could write a poetry at that pitch of intensity and stay there. A young man starts out at a shriek; he's got to find a way down to another tone of voice. And as he does, he also turns from Catholicism as a form of salvation to his own art as a form of salvation, which is really what he believed in all along.

ROBERT LOWELL:

Reading how even the Swiss had thrown the sponge
 in once again and Everest was still
 unscaled, I watched our Paris Pullman lunge
 mooning across the fallow Alpine snow.
O bella Roma! I saw our stewards go
 forward on tiptoe banging on their gongs.
 Life changed to landscape. Much against my will
 I left the City of God where it belongs.
 There the skirt-mad Mussolini unfurled
 the eagle of Caesar. He was one of us
 only, pure prose. I envy the conspicuous
 waste of our grandparents on their grand tours--
 long-haired Victorian sages bought the universe,
 while breezing on their trust funds through the world.

ROBERT HASS: The poem has an almost loony-tune quality, and it begins to have something that Lowell brilliantly had for the rest of his career, the ability to take stuff out of the newspapers, out of the headlines, set it down in the context of other things that are going on, and make a kind of symbol out of the most bizarre dailiness.

RADIO ANNOUNCER: Bombastic Mussolini, the sawdust Caesar, comes to his end in the gutter. He led his country to ruin when he threw his lot in with Hitler. A fitting climax to a life of treachery and double cross.

ROBERT LOWELL:

When the Vatican made Mary's Assumption dogma,
 the crowds at San Pietro screamed Papá.
 The Holy Father dropped his shaving glass,
 and listened. His electric razor purred,
 his pet canary chirped on his left hand.
 The lights of science couldn't hold a candle
 to Mary risen -- at one miraculous stroke,
 angel-wing'd, gorgeous as a jungle bird!
 But who believed this? Who could understand?
 Pilgrims still kissed Saint Peter's brazen sandal.
 The Duce's lynched, bare, booted skull still spoke.
 God herded his people to the coup de gráce.
 the costumed Switzers sloped their pikes to push,
 O Pius, through the monstrous human crush...

ROBERT GIROUX: LIFE STUDIES was a watershed book for Lowell. His early poems, of course, were very concentrated, very inward. In LIFE STUDIES he adopted a much more conversational, freer style, the so-called -- I hate the word -- confessional style. But of course it was the result of his having worked for three or four years on his autobiography, and going over his past, his childhood, his parents.

ANTHONY HECHT: Lowell early wrote poems about knocking his father down, at one point it appears in LORD WEARY'S CASTLE. And this sense of rebellion figures in a great number of poems, not only regarding his own actual father, but in all paternal figures and all authority figures. In sending a letter to the President of the United States announcing that he would not fight in the war, and there are other less demonstrative and less self-aggrandizing ways of refusing to fight.

ROBERT LOWELL: It was a time when Churchill and Roosevelt met and said, we intend to burn something and ruthlessly destroy, and we're saturating Hamburg and the northern German cities, the civilian population. And they announced their policy of unconditional surrender.

Well, then it seemed to me we were doing just what the Germans were doing. And I was a Roman Catholic at the time, and we had a very complicated idea on war. It was called the unjust war, which was impossible to define. But it's obviously a possibility that there'd be two kinds of war, one that merges into the other. This seemed to me clearly unjust. So I refused to go to the army, and was sent to jail. I went to something I think's called the West Street Jail in New York. A sort of clearinghouse. It had all kinds of people. Two sort of labor pimps, Bioff and Brown, very powerful people who'd leave the jail everyday with their lawyers. But the most famous inmate was Louie Lepke, who was head of Murder Inc. And it did just that. You paid Murder Inc. something and people would disappear, forever.

Memories of West Street and Lepke (title on screen)

JOHN THOMPSON: Poems are always about two things. They're about whatever they're about, and they're about language. Lepke was real, Lowell was real, and he's writing about what he remembers about that. This poem is obviously about two different experiences. It begins as he is recovering from an illness, a stay in the mental hospital, as he explains. He's talking about himself in the beginning, in his house in Boston. "Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming." He wouldn't say just hanging around and reading or something. It was "book-worming."

ROBERT LOWELL:

Only teaching on Tuesdays, book-worming
 in pajamas fresh from the washer each morning,
 I hog a whole house on Boston's
 "hardly passionate Marlboro 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?

JOHN THOMPSON: These are the prosperous fifties or sixties. He's got a whole house on Marlboro Street, surrounded by wonderful furniture, his daughter. His wife is taking care of him, he's well-fed, well-clothed, well-housed. Somehow he remembers the time years ago when he was, as he says, "a fire-breathing Catholic C.O."

ROBERT LOWELL:

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,
 wearing 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 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 . . .

ELIZABETH HARDWICK: He had a breakdown in Boston, he couldn't write, he was very unhappy over that, and he was sort of thinking of writing these things about Uncle Devereux, and so on, which he actually wrote in prose. And I said, well, why don't you just write it in prose? He kept some of it and made "91 Revere Street" out of it. And then there was the hospital, and he was always very humiliated, and disturbed for a long time about those episodes. And I did say, well, why don't you just write it down? It wasn't long before he was breaking it up and putting it into poems.

ROBERT LOWELL:

My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow
 (title on screen)

"I won't go with you. I want to stay with Grandpa!
 That's how I threw cold water
 on my Mother and Father's
 watery martini pipe dreams at Sunday dinner.
 . . . Fontainebleau, Mattapoisett, Puget Sound. . . .
 Nowhere was anywhere after a summer
 at my Grandfather's farm.

ISABELLA WATTS: Well, this is the house where Bobby used to stay in the summer. I lived in the house across the street, and used to lend him books. And the books were about adventures, boys would have ad-

ventures, and found pirates and smugglers. And his mother didn't like his reading about that, because he liked to pretend he was a smuggler or a pirate, and went off on his rowboat. And she brought all the books back and said, please don't lend Bobby any more books. They give him ideas!

ROBERT LOWELL:

I picked with a clean finger nail at the blue anchor
 on my sailor blouse washed white as a spinnaker.
 What in the world was I wishing?
 . . . A sail-colored horse browsing in the bullrushes . . .
 A fluff of the west wind puffing
 my blouse, kiting me over our seven chimneys,
 troubling the waters. . . .
 As small as sapphires were the ponds: Quittacus, Snippituit,
 and Assawompset, halved by "the Island,"
 where my Uncle's duck blind
 floated in a barrage of smoke-clouds.
 Double-barreled shotguns
 stuck out like bundles of baby crow-bars.

JOHN THOMPSON: --No matter how casual in seeming it is in LIFE STUDIES, how throw-away these lines seem to be -- they're not constructed as his earlier lines always were, my god, out of granite! -- still, they were created language.

ROBERT LOWELL:

My Uncle was dying at twenty-nine.
 "You are behaving like children,"
 said my Grandfather,
 when my Uncle and Aunt left their three baby daughters,
 and sailed for Europe on a last honeymoon . . .
 I cowered in terror.
 I wasn't a child at all--
 unseen and all-seeing, I was Agrippina
 in the Golden House of Nero. . . .
 Near me was the white measuring-door
 my Grandfather had pencilled with my Uncle's heights.
 In 1911, he had stopped growing at just six feet.

While I sat on the tiles,
 and dug at the anchor on my sailor blouse,
 Uncle Devereux stood behind me.
 He was brushed as Bayard, our riding horse.
 His face was putty.
 His blue coat and white trousers
 grew sharper and straighter.
 His coat was a blue jay's tail,
 his trousers were solid cream from the top of the bottle.
 He was animated, hierarchical,
 like a ginger snap man in a clothes-press.
 He was dying of the incurable Hodgkin's disease. . . .
 My hands were warm, then cool, on the piles
 of earth and lime,
 a black pile and a white pile. . . .
 Come winter,
 Uncle Devereux would blend to the one color.

ROBERT LOWELL: It's terrible if you're bound to the photograph of
 your past, which I think I was in LIFE STUDIES. But I don't reject
 that that's all right, that's a decent book, but I don't want to write
 another LIFE STUDIES, another photograph. And that's quite a problem.
 Of course you cheat and change things, and it's supposedly an exactly
 true story of your mother and father, but on the whole it seems
 as though it exactly happened in that kind of language. It's a real
 problem getting around the things that won't seem as though they
 exactly happened, even though you're bending them. This is called
 "For the Union Dead." And it's a good deal of embarrassment if you're
 a New Englander that the writing in the South has been so superior
 to ours in this century, I think. And they go to town on the Civil
 War. Many of my closest friends have been Southerners, and we've
 had this bone to pick between us. And it certainly hasn't done great
 things in literature, that modern Southern writing, particularly
 Faulkner, but others. And I've never done this kind of thing before
 and I don't think I will again. But it was read on the Boston Public
 Garden last spring. There's a great monument in Boston, our finest
 monument, done by St. Gaudens, Henry Adams' friend, of Shaw on his

horse and his regiment marching with him. And it faces the State House. And when it was unveiled William James spoke at it, and Justice Holmes spoke at another ceremony, so that this is deep in tradition. And the day when Shaw and the Negro regiment marched through Boston, I think it was 1863, two months later Shaw and about a third of the regiment were dead, attacking a fort off Charleston. "For the Union Dead."

For the Union Dead (title on screen)

The old South Boston Aquarium stands
in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.
The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.
The airy tanks are dry.

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
my hand tingled
to burst the bubbles
drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish.

One morning last March,
I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized
fence on the Boston Common. Behind their cage,
yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting
as they cropped up tons of mush and grass
to gouge their underworld garage.

Parking spaces luxuriate like civic
sandpiles in the heart of Boston.
A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders
braces the tingling Statehouse,

shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw
and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry
on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief,
propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake.

Two months after marching through Boston,
half the regiment was dead;
at the dedication,
William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe.

Their monument sticks like a fishbone
in the city's throat.

Shaw's father wanted no monument
 except the ditch,
 where his son's body was thrown
 and lost with his "niggers."

The ditch is nearer.
 There are no statues for the last war here;
 on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph
 shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler Safe, the "Rock of Ages"
 that survived the blast. Space is nearer.
 When I crouch to my television set,
 the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons.

Colonel Shaw
 is riding on his bubble,
 he waits
 for the blessed break.

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,
 giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
 a savage servility
 slides by on grease.

DEREK WALCOTT: Lowell saw the Boston Aquarium stand in a "Sahara of snow now." The word "snow" contains "now" in it. Snow, now. It also implies, for the moment it stands in a Sahara of snow, but underneath the snow there is a Sahara. So there's like a prediction of the bomb. And what you feel is that the Aquarium, which is going to be dry, that that's a condemned building, to a kind of doom that's possible from the atomic bomb.

ROBERT LOWELL: I don't see why anyone would want to intend pessimism or optimism, but you don't want to think of that. And you want to think of what you feel. Then you're very astonished that what you feel falls into a groove you maybe didn't intend.

NORMAN MAILER: Our next guest is a man who many speak of as the greatest poet in America, but I have a better introduction for him,

which is, he was intimate to an invitation from the White House for an intimate tea and ceremony. But Robert Lowell is a poet and let me enforce upon you one notion: poets come rarely from the middle class. They come from the top and the bottom. Now I want to introduce Mr. Robert Lowell, who if I were to fulfil this in true spitass MC fashion, would have to be announced as coming from the top.
Lowell.

ROBERT LOWELL: We're all very different, our styles are different, our points are different, and our poetry is different, and...

ELIZABETH HARDWICK: Cal said to me, he said, you know, it's so funny, here in Boston they think I'm Norman Mailer, and in New York they think I'm Robert Lowell. And this was Norman Mailer's, you know, wife-stabbing period, and so forth. I mean, in Boston he's felt to be so sort of outrageous and unpredictable and sort of awkward. Whereas in New York people think he's a gentleman.

ROBERT LOWELL: These terrible events of the last three months perhaps are the strongest tribute I could give to my friend Senator McCarthy about why he's so necessary. They're three short poems. One has something to do with the Columbia outburst, the second, an elegy to Senator Kennedy, and the third has directly something to do with Martin Luther King's death.

FRANK BIDART: A lot of sonnets were coming very quickly. And he let them come. I think he felt he didn't altogether choose for this to happen. They were lines, clumps of lines would come banging through his head, and he had to get them down and make some order out of them. Things that he had been thinking about, reading about, musing about all his lifetime suddenly he could get into a poem. Cato, Cleopatra, a translation of a sonnet about Hannibal, there was a kind of explosion

of the possibilities of what could actually get into his work.

ANTHONY HECHT: And then there are passages borrowed from the writings or conversations of others, letters, for example. These appear in DOLPHIN, for example, that put him in a very embarrassing light. There were a lot of people who advised against that.

FRANK BIDART: The reception of the DOLPHIN, and the controversy about the DOLPHIN before it came out, reflected an extremely naive sense that somehow this book was going to be simply a record of the breakup of his marriage to Elizabeth Hardwick, and marrying Carolyn Blackwood. But of course Elizabeth Hardwick doesn't write letters in iambic pentameter, and when he says in the poem "Dolphin" that the book is half fiction, he means it. I mean, the book is by no means a record of what she said or wrote to him in any one moment, and even the plot, the structure of the story, is not at all the plot and structure as it happened in life. It's a work of art. He writes in a letter in 1936. "Dear Frank, So good to hear your voice. I've just been talking to Lizzie, and felt a rush of health. My recovery's been easy in most ways, but I'm weighed down by the new frequency of attacks. How can one function if one is regularly sick, shades of the future prisoner? But all is well for the present. The doctors differ somewhat, but are optimistic. So am I. We sit by the fire paying bills. Carolyn has written three chapters of a novel. I've written a short heartfelt poem.

ROBERT LOWELL: Now I want to end on a dying beat. Not too hard to do. Little poem that's an epilogue to a long sequence.

Epilogue (title on screen)

Those blessed structures, plot and rhyme--
why are they no help to me now
I want to make
something imagined, not recalled?
I hear the noise of my own voice:
The painter's vision is not a lens,
it trembles to caress the light.
But sometimes everything I write
with the threadbare art of my eye
seems a snapshot,
lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,
heightened from life,
yet paralyzed by fact.
All's misalliance.
Yet why not say what happened?
Pray for the grace of accuracy
Vermeer gave to the sun's illumination
stealing like the tide across a map
to his girl solid with yearning.
We are poor passing facts,
warned by that to give
each figure in the photograph
his living name.

Thank you.

ROBERT LOWELL

(1917-1977)

(titles on screen)