

POETRY

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Robert Lowell: patrician poet and pacifist

In November 1967, while patrolling near Quang Tri, Vietnam, my squad came upon a batch of badly printed English-language leaflets, scattered by the Viet Cong. The leaflets, complete with photographs and quotes, told about the march on the Pentagon only a few weeks earlier. One of the names listed as having participated in the demonstration was Robert Lowell, the distinguished poet who died of a heart attack in New York City in September.

Nineteen years old, with five months still to serve in Vietnam and my whole world coming apart, I hated those leaflets. I hated Vietnam, and the Viet Cong and the demonstrators—including Robert Lowell. But I have learned a great deal in the last ten years, and one of the things is that Robert Lowell was a man to be respected, admired and thanked—and not just for the gift of his poetry.

One can hardly imagine a more unlikely political dissident than Lowell. Schooled at St. Marks and Harvard, tutored by Richard Eberhart, Allen Tate and John Crowe Ransom, he was the inheritor of a aristocratic Puritan tradition stretching back to the Mayflower. Edward Winslow, Josiah Winslow, General John Stark, Amy Lowell, James Russell Lowell were his ancestors: ten generations of bankers and justices, academics and generals—Yankee bluebloods.

Lowell never got out from under the shadow of that past. Indeed, it was probably too vast for any human being to escape. But he never felt fully comfortable with it, and his life was punctuated by remarkably independent actions.

Unhappy at Harvard, he transferred to Kenyon College in 1937. In 1940 he converted to Roman Catholicism. Though at the outbreak of World War II he had successfully attempted to enlist in the navy (his father had been a career naval officer), by 1943 he had come to the conclusion that Allied bombing of civilian populations in Europe was morally indefensible. Denied conscientious objector status, Lowell was convicted of failure to obey the Se-

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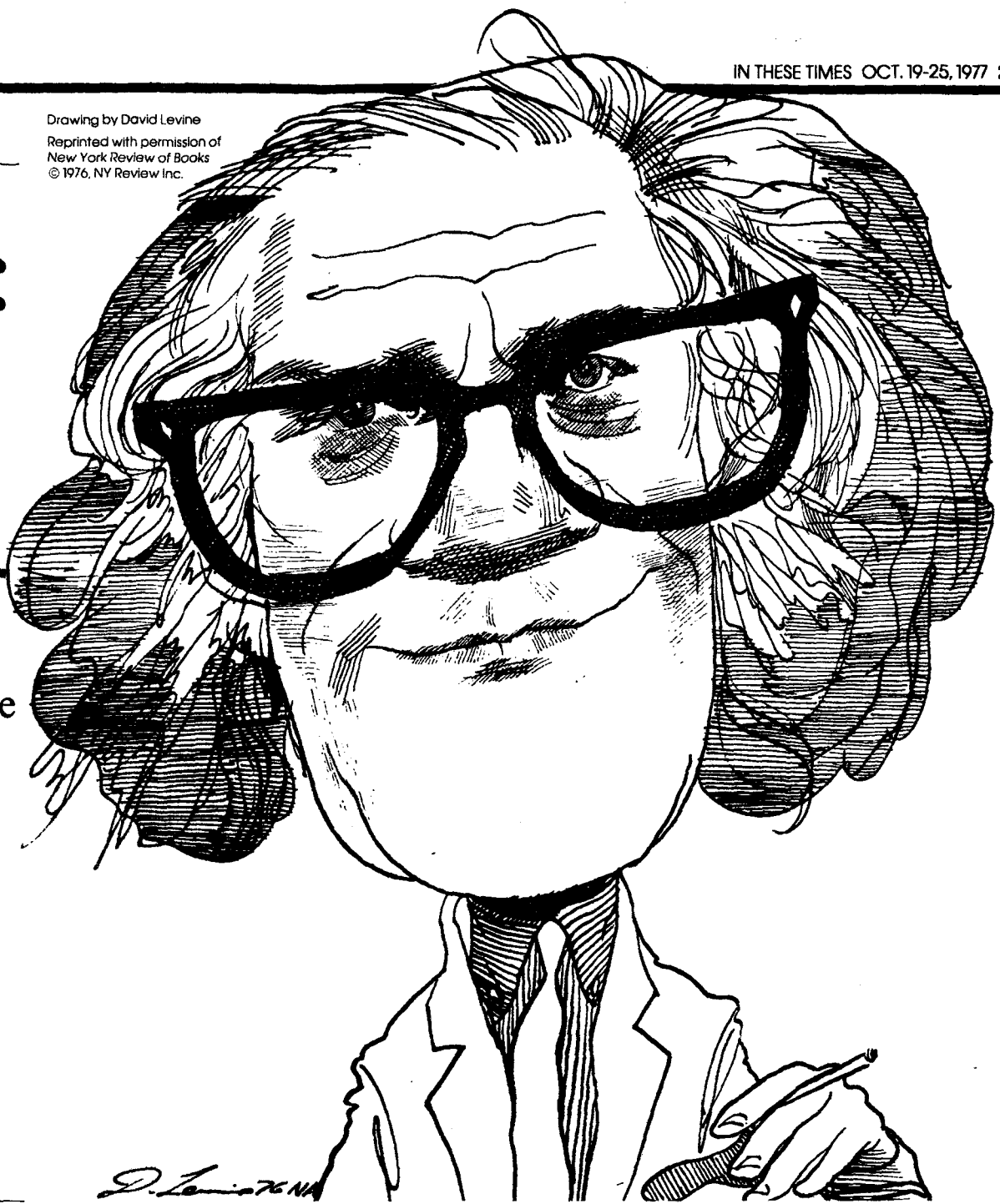
lective Service Act and served four months in Danbury federal prison.

Later in the '40s, with a growing reputation as a poet, Lowell was a member of the committee that awarded Ezra Pound the Bollingen prize. Pound was not exactly popular at the time, and the decision required more than a little courage and integrity.

In 1965 Lowell refused Lyndon Johnson's invitation to a White House dinner, wiring that he regarded "our present foreign policy with dismay and distrust." He was the only major figure to decline that invitation. That was two years before I enlisted in the Marines.

Several years later, at the Ambassador Theatre in Washington, D.C., Lowell received a standing ovation for the poetry reading he had just given to a largely student anti-war audience. Leaving the stage, "Lowell did not seem particularly triumphant," wrote Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*. "He looked modest, still depressed, as if he had been applauded too much for too little."

The next day, Lowell was in the front rank of the marchers on their way to the Pentagon, matching strides with Benjamin Spock, Jerry Rubin and Dave Dellinger. Surely the staid patri-



BOOKS

The facts of (fish) life

THE ART OF FISHING WITH WORMS (And Other Live Bait)
By Harold F. Blaisdell
Alfred A. Knopf, \$10

*You may talk of gnat and hackle
When you're sortin' out your
tackle
And the plans for the excursion
are still firmin'
But when it comes to fishin'
Ye'd best leave off silly wishin'
And set about the lowly art of
wormin'*

Harold F. Blaisdell could not be expected to subscribe to such cynical sentiments. To hear him tell it in *The Art of Fishing with Worms (and Other Live Bait)*, there is nothing lowly about worming at all. It is just another method of catching fish, and one requiring its own vast measure of competence.

He is probably right about the competence. As the only downright bad fisherman in a family of virtuosos, I can testify that no aspect of the art is simple or uncomplicated: it just looks simple to those of us who couldn't fill a creel in a struck hatchery.

But I do not think Blaisdell is going to persuade many of us that worming is actually a noble calling. There is something unkindly, and maybe even inhumane, about his effort in this direction. He reminds me of all the genital technicians who seek these days to promote sex without guilt. Half the fun of worming, like twofifths the joy of sex, is in the guilt. I'm not going to surrender all that pleasure to unadorned reason.

The reason, however, is of a very high quality.

"This book is dedicated to the proposition that the fisherman's

main objective is to catch fish. Its purpose is to help him succeed," Blaisdell writes in his very first paragraph. "It is true that many pleasant spinoffs accrue to fishing: the chance to observe nature, rapport with the outdoors, and many more. Yet when all in this vein has been said, as it has many times, none of the fringe benefits can compensate for the lack of success."

Blaisdell, who lives in a small hamlet north of Rutland, Vermont, and has been writing about fishing since before the Second War, is reverent to the point of superstition concerning the sensibilities of fish. He contends that worms, and all other bait, must be presented as naturally as possible, so that fish will not suspect that the bait is on a hook. I do not believe this myself; it flies in the face of what science has discovered about fish. But it is a fact that the people who share Blaisdell's reverence catch more fish by far than those who consult the latest scientific opinions regarding the fish's brain pan.

I was somewhat surprised to discover that there is less to worm fishing technique than I had expected. Blaisdell offers a new trick or two, and is wonderfully persuasive on the joys of bait fishing with ultra-light tackle. But mostly his book stresses the familiar essentials, repeating them and spinning tales around them for emphasis.

The art is all, I gather, in the execution. Which is reason enough to go back to the brook for another seance.

—Patrick Owens

Owens is a regular columnist for *Newsday*.

Concord

TEN THOUSAND Fords are idle here in search Of a tradition. Over these dry sticks—
The Minute Man, the Irish Catholics,
The ruined bridge and Walden's fished-out perch—
The belfry of the Unitarian Church
Rings out the hanging Jesus. Crucifix,
How can your whited spindling arms transfix
Mammon's unbridled industry, the lurch
For forms to harness Heraclitus' stream!
This Church is Concord—Concord where Thoreau
Named all the birds without a gun to probe
Through darkness to the painted man and bow:
The death-dance of King Philip and his scream
Whose echo girdled this imperfect globe.

From *Lord Weary's Castle*, copyright 1946 by Robert Lowell.
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cian must have felt awkward in such company, alien even. But he was there.

None of this is to say that Lowell was a flaming radical, for certainly that was not the case. Not long before Lowell died, Louis Simpson, writing for the *Saturday Review*, correctly said of him that his "life has been much too sheltered. He has kept the best company, he has made his political protests under the best possible conditions.... He can have very little understanding of the kind of people who make up the mass—the poor and unlucky and obscure."

But to a sadly marked degree, most of us are the products of where we have come from. Within the terribly confining limits of his heritage, Lowell did what he could and at times when too few others were doing anything at all.

A few days after Lowell's death, I got a letter from Jan Barry, one of the founders of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. "Lowell I will always remember," he wrote, "not for a particular poem, but for quietly being there at so many peace demonstrations." Peace—

*After the planes unloaded, we
fell down
Buried together, unmarried men
and women;
Not crown of thorns, not iron,
not Lombard crown,
Not griled and spindling spires
pointing to heaven
Could save us. Raise us, Mother,
we fell down
Here hugger-mugger in the
jelled fire.*

("The Dead in Europe")
Most people will remember Robert Lowell for his poetry. But though I have come to admire his poems very much, I will remember Robert Lowell because, on a day when I hated him, he was trying to save my life.

—W.D. Ehrhart

W.D. Ehrhart is co-editor of *Demilitarized Zones*, an anthology of anti-war poetry by Vietnam veterans, and author of two books of poetry, *A Generation of Peace* and *Rootless*.

My Tennis Partner Was an AGENT!



I knew Connie as a quiet, soft-spoken person...

By Jeff Cohen
I first met Connie Milazzo in the summer of 1975. We were both members of the Campaign for Democratic Freedoms (CDF), a Los Angeles-based group dedicated to "mobilizing against the developing police state." We both professed a disgust for police spies and infiltrators. We both expressed contempt for a system whose response to economic recession was always more cops, and never more jobs.

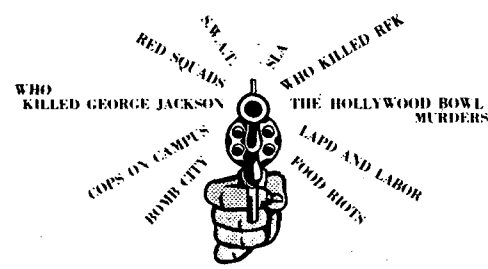
But there was a major difference between us: Connie was a member of another organization on the side—the Los Angeles Police Department.

It came as a mild shock, paging through the *Los Angeles Times* last month and noticing a tiny article, "Suspect Cleared—She's Policewoman."

Connie had been arrested with 19 others at a demonstration that turned into a brawl. The story said that she had infiltrated the Progressive Labor party, which had called the rally to demand unconditional amnesty for undocumented workers. Rioting charges were dropped against Connie and she is expected to testify against the others.

From our work together in CDF, I remember Connie as a quiet, soft-spoken and good-natured woman. She was an excellent listener. Connie always knew what was going on in the organization, but did not ask too many questions—of the group

LAPD THE TRUTH ABOUT THE NEW CENTURIONS



A CAMPAIGN FOR DEMOCRATIC FREEDOMS CONFERENCE
10 AM to 10 PM — Saturday, August 16, 1975

PLACE: CARPENTERS UNION HALL
2200 WEST 7th ST., LOS ANGELES, CA.

TELEPHONE:

Connie designed CDF's most provocative leaflet, advertising a one-day conference on police abuses. At another meeting she gave a talk on the trigger-happiness of police during the '65 Watts rebellion.

or of individuals. She was not a leader and did not try to be. But she did make her contributions.

Because she had an artistic bent, Connie often assumed responsibility for the leaflets advertising our teach-ins and conferences.

Our most provocative leaflet advertised a one-day conference on the LAPD. It was Connie's work. Below the boldface heading, "LAPD: The Truth About the New Centurions," the reader stares down the barrel of a revolver, while relevant phrases radiate from the gun like spokes: "Red Squad," "Cops on Campus," "The Hollywood Bowl Murders," "SWAT."

It must be remembered that the Campaign for Democratic Freedoms was a legal, civil liberties organization. The group was established to expose police state practices of the LAPD, as well as the alphabet soup of federal offenders—FBI, CIA, NSA, DEA, IRS, etc.

The group existed for about ten months in 1975. Its activities consisted of several teach-ins, appearances on local talk shows, a couple non-violent marches and petitioning before the Police Commission.

I would love to hear the LAPD's justification for using tax money to infiltrate and spy on such a group.

Invasion of privacy.

Members of CDF are discussing the possibility of suing Connie and the LAPD for invasion of privacy.

One of Connie's main projects was the assembly of a darkroom at CDF head-

quarters. She took pictures at many CDF functions. Where are the photos now, in the "subversive" files of the LAPD? Have these photos been shared with the FBI?

I certainly feel that my privacy has been invaded. After a friendly tennis match this summer, I blabbed to Connie about some of my disagreements and dissatisfactions with a couple of my political co-workers. I had no intention of seeing this information end up in a police file.

Since it is next to impossible to keep police spies out of such an open, broad-based organization as CDF, the best policy is to make sure each member carries his/her workload. Connie certainly did her share of work. At one teach-in, she addressed the throngs on the trigger-happiness of the LAPD during the 1965 Watts rebellion.

Connie did not confine her "political" activities to L.A. In the summer of 1975 the CDF set up a sister organization in the San Francisco Bay Area, and a major conference was held in Oakland in November. Camera in hand, Connie attended the conference. As an L.A. police employee, wasn't she venturing beyond her jurisdiction?

Circulate on the left.

After CDF folded, Connie began to circulate around the left in Los Angeles. She was more confident now that she could use her association with CDF as a calling card when meeting other activists or groups.

She attended meetings of the Democratic Socialists Organizing Committee, the L.A. Women's Union and the *L.A. Vanguard* newspaper. She attended classes at the socialist school run by the New American Movement. She was generous enough to contribute one month's dues to the National Lawyer's Guild. She was working with the Progressive Labor party at the time of her "bust."

Had we been more alert to certain contradictions in Connie's talk about herself, we might have been able to expose her in 1975.

The CDF member who was closest to Connie once asked her how she could keep up with her rent payments, car repairs and law school tuition when she wasn't working. Connie replied that she was receiving financial aid from a rich uncle, whom Connie strongly suspected of being connected to the Mafia. As it turned out, Connie did have a rich uncle, but it was the LAPD, not the Mafia.

A few questions for Connie.

I hope one day to bump into Connie for a friendly chat. (She has temporarily disappeared. Two days before the *Times* reported that her cover had been blown she packed up her belongings and moved, telling her landlord that she was getting married and that her fiancé was taking a job "up north.") There are so many questions I'd like to ask her, like: What does she think she accomplished by spying on groups like CDF? Does she really consider us a threat to "freedom" or the "free society?"

I think Connie would have trouble answering these questions. She strikes me as a liberal-type person who must have been internally torn by the realization that leftists don't have horns on their heads, or bombs under their arms.

I'd also like to ask Connie about her present employer. How does she feel about her boss, Chief Davis, who is proud to address a Birch Society banquet, but is afraid that his men will be contaminated by "germs" if forced to work with gays? What about an organization that can kill 30 unarmed citizens a year, and then lambast KABC-TV for raising the issue? How can she condone the LAPD's spying on such dangerous groups as the Beverly Hills Democratic Club?

Ultimately, I'd want to ask Connie whether she feels that activists on the left represent a bigger threat to "free society" than the ever-growing rightwing, anti-democratic elements in the LAPD, whose only response to criticism is to surveil its critics.

Jeff Cohen is an L.A. writer and activist.