An Eelnet Made for the Eel Fighting:
Layers of Obscurity and the Continuous Present
in the Space of Robert Lowell’s Poetry

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Notions of failure plague Lowell’s poetry, and even a quick glance at his sprawling body of work reveals his willingness to acknowledge moments of defeat. He admits harm done to himself and to others (“Dolphin”) and expresses disappointment that he “never wrote something to go back to,” a piece that could satisfy him upon later review (“Reading Myself”). Increasing age and the inevitable end to his career augment this sense of deficiency. “I haven’t said what I wished to write in poems, the discordant things I’ve tried. It isn’t possible, is it?” he reflects in 1977, a few months before his death. Always restless in his writing, he admits to having “spent hundreds and hundreds of hours shaping, extending and changing hopeless or defective work” (“After Enjoying” 290, 288). Packed with unfinished sentences and shifting revisions, dashes and ellipses that elide out conclusion, Lowell’s work denies itself coherence and a refined plot. He cultivates and abandons styles, writes Near the Ocean in Marvell’s eight-line stanzas and then for several years produces only sonnets. But Lowell never settles his work into a finished product. Of his agitated writing, Helen Vendler says, “[M]omentum, yearning, journey, climax, epiphany, vision[:] Lowell refuses them all,” (Part of Nature 158). These are elements that establish in a work of art a stable shape. Within such structures, one event can cause another, the significance of all events can converge in one moment, or a realization can illuminate the past and guide the future. They are elements that mark a crafted and closed piece, a work in which material is linked in a progression toward conclusion. Lowell forgoes the narrative and unity that would allow his poems to follow the course of a journey; to reach the pinnacle of a climax; or to serve as prophecy, moral directive, or source of definite knowledge.
Yet when Vendler says that Lowell *refuses* climax and vision, she leaves open the possibility that he accepts, or at least does not reject, other goals. With this possibility in mind, I look at “Epilogue,” in which Lowell declares his failure to make the product he wants using the writer’s devices of plot and rhyme. What he wants, and what he claims to have been unsuccessful at in using these devices, is to preserve the continuous present on his page, even though the ink itself may be dry. He does not want to describe the observed world – the world of facts, dates, names, and events shared with others as the common space of life; nor does he want to disfigure it with conclusion or paralyze its movement and flux. He faces the paradox of sustaining movement in a work whose material production, the inscribing of letters on a page, places it in the perfect past of completed actions.

In this essay I undertake to describe how the continuous present might persist on Lowell’s page. I move from “Epilogue” first to a Heideggerian critic, Adam Kirsch, and then to Heidegger, whose theory of language establishes a space where the continuous present is always possible on the page. But here, where Heidegger says it should succeed, language proves insufficient for Lowell. Lowell exposes his own failure to shape his material using literary devices like journey and climax. His attempts to align his writing with visual media allow his specific literary failures to become sites of the successful preservation of a continuous present.

I. **Accuracy, Imagining, and the Living Name**
The relationship between the observed world and a poem’s created world suggests whether or not the conditions are appropriate for the continuous present. In “Epilogue,” Lowell states that he “want[s] to make/ something imagined, not recalled,” and through his praise of Vermeer’s particular accuracy, he indicates that he must reach into a realm unseen in order to craft his poems into more than mere descriptions. The painter manages to preserve a sense of movement on the canvas because he bestows the accuracy of the imagined realm upon his subjects. The poet then establishes the living name as his own tool through which he may be able to preserve movement on the page.

In order to examine himself against the admired painter, Lowell translates his own work onto a continuum of crafted visual pieces. Dissatisfied with what he has written, he admits that sometimes his work

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\text{seems a snapshot,}
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\[
\text{lurid, rapid, garish, grouped,}
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\[
\text{heightened from life,}
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\[
\text{yet paralyzed by fact.}
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Far from preserving movement, the snapshot distorts and paralyzes a scene. The figures crowd in front of the camera, forcing smiles and awaiting the flash. After the picture is snapped, they drop their grins, break apart, and return to their halted activities. The flash pricks pupils red, washes the foreground too bright, and clouds the background in dusty shadow. This coarse scene is unfamiliar because it finds the subjects displaced from their actions and grouped in front of the lens, posed as they would not otherwise be. The snapshot’s conventions level
the figures to the same position and expression, stunting their claims to their individual existences beyond the lens. The snapshot offers little information about the subjects’ identities.

Immediately when a camera’s shutter release is depressed, light passes through the threshold of the lens and lands on the negative; because the camera exposes the scene so rapidly, the product is taken as an objective perspective, a real moment captured on film. The snapshot’s distortion is two-fold: first the snapshot denies the figures their natural dispositions, and then it presents a false objectivity that claims its legitimacy from the hurried, though still conventional, composition and exposure.

Lowell recognizes in his work a similar distortion of the observed world. “All’s misalliance,” he says of his paralyzed and heightened figures. This line bears a weight of finality not just because it is short and end-stopped but also because it is here, at the fourteenth line, that Lowell’s hundreds of sonnets end. Instead of closing the poem, he allows only the breath of a line break before posing the question, “Yet why not say what happened?” Where he could settle on the failure of the snapshot, he instead inquires whether there may be a more successful way to transfer the observed world of fact and lives into the frame of an artwork.

The poet responds to this question with an imperative: “Pray for the grace of accuracy/ Vermeer gave” to his subjects. In praising Vermeer, Lowell offers the painter’s vision as an alternative to the camera’s distorting lens. Because the painter’s vision is able to handle the light as the lens cannot, the painter is capable of preserving movement on the canvas. “The painter’s vision is not a lens,/ it trembles to caress the light,” Lowell reminds himself. When light passes through
a camera lens, it bends at a precise angle and finds a negative on which it imprints its presence. The painter’s vision may include the lens of his eye, but it remains distinct as vision because perceived light rays are filtered through the mind of the painter, allowing for the sensing touch that “trembles to caress the light.” This caress implies gentleness and response that the camera lens cannot give to light.

It is this touch that makes possible on the page the movement the snapshot paralyzes. With his painter’s vision, Vermeer is able to produce a scene that leaves room for a subject’s claim to individuality and preserves its movement. On the canvas, “the sun’s illumination/ steal[s] like the tide across a map.” By placing the illumination on a map, the painter brings the intangible light into closer proximity with the charted, observed world. But because maps cannot actually control the flow of sunlight, Vermeer allows the light its natural movement. This is the “accuracy” that he gives to his scene. It differs from the snapshot’s fact because it leaves room for variation within the frame. There is no static conception of a tide stealing across a map, even a tidal map – there are no tides that steal across maps – so the connection of sunlight to water to map refuses to be reduced to anything other than this very image. Lingering on the canvas is the notion that the sunlight is shifting and swelling, with no sanctioned image or conventions claiming to be an objective authority.

Alongside presenting the problems of the snapshot-poem and instructing himself to pray for accuracy, Lowell writes that he now “want[s] to make/ something imagined, not recalled.” He must undertake the process of imagining in order to reach Vermeer’s accuracy. The painter begins his admired process by observing what is present – the sun, the tide, a map – and extends it into a realm
not constructed of perceived, tangible facts – where the sun can be a tide that rolls across a map. Recalling does not permit the continuous flux of the imagined tides; recalling requires that a subject return to a former state. The recaller must summon a subject back from where it has strayed, and its former state, or even just the memory of it, serves as the standard against which it is measured. Like the snapshot, recalling leaves no room for movement within the frame because it requires measurement against a fixed gauge. It limits and stills its subjects. Imagining, on the other hand, can enhance understanding of a subject.

Charles Simic’s definition of poetic imagination helps clarify the particular way in which Lowell uses the concept in his poem. Simic, commenting on Elizabeth Bishop’s work, notes Bishop’s ability to craft a new understanding of the material world out of facts. “[S]he was against mixing fact and fiction in unknown proportion” and so combined the two into imagination, “the role of [which] was not to create something out of nothing, but to bring another, previously unperceived dimension to the experience” (Simic). Though Bishop and Lowell ultimately disagree on the use of fact in their work, Simic’s comment does demonstrate how Lowell’s painter’s vision might handle light. The trembling and caressing do not merely reveal what has been covered up; they bring a new dimension to the experience, just as Vermeer gives to the sun’s illumination the grace of accuracy. The stress on what the artist adds independent of what is at first observable is crucial because it highlights the necessity of the painter’s touch in the process. It is not that the camera lens must be angled differently in order to snap something unseen from higher up or further back; the painter must actually handle the light in order to transfer it to the canvas. As well, it helps clarify the difficult task the artist faces in making
new what is already present in the observed world. The painter’s particular handling must preserve what is already there and not supplant it; Vermeer must preserve light as the sun’s illumination while simultaneously bringing to it a congruous notion of tidal flow. This image of the illumination is accurate because it harmoniously blends the observed world with the space in which new perspectives can constantly enrich notions of light.

But Lowell’s snapshot-poems are misaligned, and he has failed to write with this delicate accuracy. His subjects are perverted away from their identities in the observed world, so the work cannot extend into imagining and enhance understanding of those identities. Set against the snapshot, the photograph refines away this coarseness and distortion and positions itself closer to the more crafted mode of painting. If Lowell could write a photograph rather than a snapshot, then perhaps he could achieve what Vermeer does. When *photograph* is translated from its Greek roots, it becomes *writing with light*, combining notions of the written realm and the visual realm and so situating Lowell’s verbal works within the visual realm.

A poem written with light carries with it the possibility of achieving what the snapshot cannot. The snapshot is stamped on the negative and frozen there, while writing with light suggests the constant movement of illumination. It is uncertain what exactly a poem written in light looks like or how it functions because Lowell is combining two things that are not combined in the observed world. The medium may allow the same movement that the light-as-tide on a map does. No objective standard exists for what a poem written in light should be, so within that medium is the possibility that the subject will not be paralyzed either, as it is not being recalled to adhere to a previous conception.
The conditions for accuracy emerge in the concept of the writing-with-light when Lowell articulates the task of identifying its subjects:

We are poor passing facts,
warned by that to give
each figure in the photograph
his living name.

In the observed world, an individual is attached to facts, here meaning perceivable data such as birth dates and eye color – marks that can sometimes distinguish one person from another. But we are “passing,” as well, the present participle indicating the continuous occurrence or happening of our passage. The continuous present establishes the subject as existing. A label that identifies with accuracy must encompass the two attributes, and the living name exhibits both the present and the factual.

Names are data grounded in the observed world. They can distinguish their bearers from the rest of a group. Yet names can be repeated within a group, or a person can change her name; by qualifying his desired label as a living name, Lowell extends it beyond its common, fixed mode of identification and into the realm of imagination and Vermeer’s dynamic accuracy. The present participle again allows the name to exist in a continuous present, along with us, we who are passing. As a subject changes and passes, as it must through time, the markers identifying it as distinct from others can change in the same continuous moment. The living name opens time into a continuous present, avoiding
paralysis and permitting movement, but it remains rooted in the observed world along with birth dates and ages.

The living name, in combining the continuous present and the data of the observed world, suggests that it could achieve Vermeer’s accuracy, which consists of enhancing understandings of the observed world with harmonious, new perspectives. The poem written with light emerges as the mode through which the poet could bestow the living name. Because the material for Lowell’s poems comes from the observed world of facts and events, his poem written in light would remain anchored in this realm. And this writing-with-light neither distorts nor paralyzes the subjects because the fluidity inherent in the illumination provides constant flux. The living name is a product of imagining, the process that opens up from the observed into the uncut continuous present. The poem written in light seems to offer Lowell the chance to achieve Vermeer’s accuracy and to bestow the living name.

II. Names and Beings in Heidegger’s Realm of Language

This task of bestowal remains vague because it is unclear just how a poem could be written in light yet present in ink on the page. These difficulties of the delicate relation between the observed and written worlds – namely, how a poet could preserve life’s flux rather than paralyze it – lead me to Heideggerian critic Adam Kirsch. Kirsch defines a type of poet who seeks to write the world without distorting or paralyzing its mysteries. This poet, the “poet of the earth,” wants to align her work more with observation than with construction. She is able to preserve the unknown on the page because, as Heidegger’s theory of language
claims, language is capable of creating on the page stable boundaries of identification. For Kirsch and Heidegger, language can achieve what Lowell claims it does not.

In his essay “The Taste of Silence,” Kirsch argues for the influence of Heideggerian metaphysics on contemporary poetry. Employing poets such as Simic, Seamus Heaney, and Billy Collins, Kirsch indicates a common inclination to observe the world rather than to create a world. Attempting to “make us notice what we usually ignore” (344), these poets are “concerned with […] displaying a particular being and reality” (343) and “with seeing nature so intently that it seems to yield up secrets” (344). This is poetry of the earth, according to Kirsch, because it deals with writing what is beyond the “historical human context in which we work, suffer, and hope,” which is called the world (342). For Kirsch, the earth consists of what remains unperceived by humans throughout their lives and so what does not mark their historical realm of time and civilization. The tasks of the poet of the earth, in making us notice what we ignore, accomplish something similar to what Vermeer’s accuracy does – they combine the observed world with a new and congruous perspective.

Kirsch cites part xxix of Heaney’s “Squarings” as an example of this poetry of the earth:

Scissor-and-slap abruptness of a latch.
Its coldness to the thumb.
[...]
Which is a music of binding and of loosing
Unheard in this generation, but there to be
Called up or called down at a touch renewed.
In articulating this idea, Heaney has directed attention to the movement and sounds of a latch otherwise overlooked as familiar. Heaney seems to be carrying out Lowell’s imagining because in his poem he situates himself in the observed, common world of door latches but has brought to it the new, “unheard” perspective of the “scissor-and-slap abruptness.” Both poets want to take stock of what happens and both want to extend their visions beyond catalogued fact by allowing the unfamiliar to have a presence in the work.

It is tempting to simplify this task of Kirsch’s poet in order to bypass the complication inherent in writing what is veiled from perception. It would seem that writing about the latch, articulating its yet unacknowledged sounds, would annul its unfamiliarity, similar to how Lowell’s snapshot-poems, in exposing isolated moments onto film, have paralyzed the subjects. But Kirsch emphasizes that the poet of the earth does not drag each thing fully into the world where it could be perceived in its entirety. Instead the poet deals with a very delicate space “where every being is allowed to be simply and wholly itself” without interference (345). Her names call attention to the unfamiliar but also preserve the concurrent mystery, the earthiness, of the subject. She does not transcribe the earth, transferring it from the realm of the unperceived to the realm of the perceived; rather, she reveals in the commonplace the presence of the unfamiliar. The subject remains rooted in the earth, and while she can say “that the earth itself appears to shine,” “recording that radiance is the farthest [she] can go” in writing about it (345). Thus in naming subjects, the poet of the earth will accurately identify them as belonging to the realm which bears upon the human and as possessing a mysterious character. This way of writing enriches
understanding of the subject. She achieves a balance of label and mystery, and in doing so, she avoids declaring her vision a perfected or authoritative description. She has carried out the task of “giving things their proper names” (344).

Despite their similarity, the proper name and the living name remain crucially different, as the present participle living indicates the movement Lowell desires, while proper connotes the conclusiveness he wants to avoid. Stable, proper names yield the unknown for Kirsch, while they are exactly what paralyze it for Lowell. But why Lowell fails to achieve what Kirsch says a poet of the earth can achieve remains unclear. Both conceive of two divergent realms – world and earth, observed and imagined – but their different notions of the functioning of language indicate that mediations between those realms are essentially different. Kirsch draws his terms from Heidegger’s theory of language, particularly from “The Origin of the Work of Art,” so I now move to this and other essays of Heidegger’s to establish on firmer ground how this theory sets up language as a successful way to identify a subject. Seeing how Lowell and Heidegger differ regarding language’s ability to mediate between the known and the unknown will help clarify what it would mean for Lowell to write with light and thus how he might write the two realms in a way that allows the living name.

For Heidegger, language, and language alone, measures out the realms of earth and world, the unfamiliar and the familiar. Because of the sufficiency of words here, it is possible to articulate through language the stable, proper name. It is naming that brings subjects into the world: “Language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance” (“Origin” 73).
Nothing is recognized and perceived until it is brought out of the earth, where it is concealed from humans, and given a name, which places it in the world and allows it to be present within human perception. Only in the world do things gain a presence in time and in relation to all other beings. If the dimensions between world and earth are measured correctly – and this can only be accomplished through language – then a thing can establish itself in relation to other beings and in relation to the unarticulated realm.

Heidegger’s proper measuring means establishing the boundary between earth and world so that the full nature of the earth remains unknown, though the realm’s presence is manifest. In order to show how earth can be present and concealed, he gives the example of a stone: No matter the attempts made to measure, weigh, or otherwise examine a stone, its “weight’s burden has escaped us” (“Origin” 47). The stone’s heaviness does not exist merely in a quantified relation to other masses; there is a deeper aspect of its nature we cannot understand. When any attempt to understand what about a stone’s burden is distinct from that of other heavy, carbon-based things, some feature still “withdraw[s] again into the same dull pressure and bulk” and defies complete comprehension (“Origin” 47). Like the stone whose burden is perceivable but unknowable, the earth can appear as itself, as a realm that remains unknown beyond apprehension of its presence; it is “by nature undisclosable” (“Origin” 47). If the earth were to open itself up for study and comprehension, it would no longer be earth.

World, on the other hand, is what bears upon human lives. “[W]orld is not the mere collection of the countable or uncountable,” Heidegger explains. “World is the ever non-objective to which we are subject as long as [...we are
part of] Being. Wherever those decisions of our history that relate to our very being are made,” a world establishes itself (“Origin” 44). Along with the objects, people, and places we encounter, the entire expanse of cultures, minds, creeds, and concepts that bear upon human life make up the world.

Essential to having a bearing on human life, says Heidegger, is recognition of existence, and this recognition comes only through language. It is language that brings things into world, which Heidegger also calls the Open. In this clearing things emerge into their identities because only here can they relate to each other. “Language alone brings what is, as something that is, into the Open” (“Origin” 73). A thing must be understood as existing, as something that is, in order to obtain the label of present existence, being, and this can only happen within the world. Placement within the world is coincident with bestowal of the label being because this label gives the thing a presence in time, and presence in time can only occur in the realm of the world. Walter Biemel, addressing this difficult issue, explains that naming is the “becoming accessible of beings as beings” and “is the condition necessary for [beings] to be recognized and used as determinate beings” (Biemel 76). Beings are only understood as existing when they are within the realm that bears upon human life, and reception of a place in language, a name, is necessary to enter the world.

Heidegger speaks of language when it is working according to its original function of “projective saying,” a “saying which, in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable as such into world” (“Origin” 74) and
allows these things to emerge as beings.\(^1\) Poetry is language that is “spoken purely,” meaning it is concordant with the original functioning of language (Hofstadter xiii). Its utterances articulate what is known and reveal the presence of the unknown. Poetry measures how the openness of the world relates to the impenetrableness of earth.

This revelation of the presence of the two realms is at the heart of truth in identification for Heidegger because the boundary established becomes the standard against which being is meted out. These dimensions allow the things to relate to each other and to relate to the shadowed unknown. Constructing these dimensions is the way “by which man first receives the measure for the breadth of his being” (“Poetically” 222). Only by seeking to understand the space of his life in relation to the known earth and mysterious sky can a person emerge into his nature, or being. “Only insofar as man takes the measure of his dwelling in this way is he able to be commensurately with his nature” (“Poetically” 221).

Poetry, because it is pure language, is the fundamental measure-taking and articulates how the known relates to the unknown; therefore it is the primary means to articulating and emerging into being.

The emerging identities are accurate, for they are based on the nature of the essential relationship between earth and world. It is this relationship that allows truth to emerge. Referring to Van Gogh’s image of peasant boots, he claims that “truth happens in Van Gogh’s painting [not because] something is

\(^1\) Heidegger notes that often language is used for something other than its original function of bringing a thing into being. At these times, it “serves for verbal exchange [...] of what is to be communicated” (“Origin” 73). This inauthentic language, as Hofstadter calls it, is a passive vehicle rather than an active creator. But Heidegger does not concern himself very long with such perversions of language; he speaks only of poetry.
correctly portrayed,” but rather because “that which is as a whole – world and earth in their counterplay – attains to unconcealedness.” In this counterplay, “the self-assertion of their natures,” the rawness of the field and rigor of the labor grow clearer (“Origin” 56, 49). The painting, in setting up the dimension between earth and world, enhances understandings of the isolation of the field and the harshness of a peasant’s life.²

Despite the battle, there is an inherent stability in the boundaries. He speaks of it as a “unitary repose of self-support” (“Origin” 48). The clash provides the chance for each realm to establish itself as itself, and so within the battle is the stability of either realm’s existence. Heidegger uses the artwork of a Greek temple to show how stillness exists within battle. The temple stands on a cliff of rock, and “[t]his resting of the work draws up out of the rock the mystery of that rock’s […] support” (“Origin” 42). At the base of the temple, where earth juts up against world, the hardness of the rock emerges. A storm that crashes against the temple “first makes the storm itself manifest in its violence” because that violence can take shape when it hits the boundary of the marble (“Origin” 42). The clash allows each realm to reveal their natures to different degrees. As each pushes harder into the other, the other pushes back, and their boundary grows stable under the opposing pressures.

Language, for Heidegger, shapes a realm in which stillness and motion are balanced and things are continually growing into their true beings. By saying

² Why Heidegger uses painting and, later, architecture to demonstrate that language in the pure sense – verbal poetry – establishes boundaries and is the happening of truth is a complication I cannot attempt to address here. See page 74 for Heidegger’s explanation that building and plastic media function within the realm that language has already established.
that it is language that establishes presence in time, Heidegger never runs into Lowell’s problem of paralysis within poetry. Language itself brings things together into the continuous present of being.\(^3\)

**III. Fragments, Rubbish, and Failing to Catch the Current**

A critical difference between Lowell and Heidegger arises here, as they both try to understand how language can mediate between the known and the unknown. Heidegger, writing about how language should function, proclaims that language is sufficient to cultivate the continuous present of being; Lowell, wrestling with the flood of words issuing from the immense body of his work, experiences failures of language that prevent accuracy and thus the bestowal of the living name. For Lowell, poetry does mediate between the realm of the unknown and the world that is perceptible to humans, but he finds that the process of composition often disrupts, paralyzes, or otherwise distorts the continuous present he desires. Hoping to avoid the certain literary conventions of structure that have lead to his failures, Lowell begins to write in a way that

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3 Though I emphasize the -ing here, I must note that the present participle does not translate that smoothly into German. Hofstadter has translated Heidegger’s *Dasein* into *being*. *Dasein*, constructed from the infinitive *sein*, “to be,” and made into a noun by adding the capitalized, definite article *Da*, would translate more directly into a thing’s “thatness” or its “that it is.” For a more complete explanation of the grammatical difficulties of translating Heidegger’s peculiar use of German into English, see the translator’s note on page 71 and his introduction, pages xviii-xxi. Despite the fact that *being* does not have an immediate present participle equivalent in German, I continue to use it (as Hofstadter does, as well) because I believe that Heidegger *does* indicate the continuous present in using the idea of “thatness,” which is constantly contingent upon the present moment.
might keep some lines, words, or ideas illegible – that is, away from the literary conventions that, while they help structure ideas, may also paralyze them.

Lowell attempts to put into words an incredible expanse of material. Composing forces him to choose some subjects and leave out others. When the lines of the poem pull from the expanse only fragments, or when narrative severs actions and time, Lowell is failing to achieve the continuous present. He is attempting to “swallow the world whole” in his work but he can only offer “a landscape haunted by the failure of our earlier desires, hopes, ambitions” (Bidart, Foreward xiii). The hundreds of sonnets of History span Genesis to John Berryman’s death, overflowing at both sides, packed thick with data, but even here he cannot catch it all. He compares his task of writing to carving out a figure from marble. In a note prefacing History he says, “I hope this jumble or jungle [of Notebook] is cleared—that I have cut the waste marble from the figure.” Writing a poem means dividing the bulk of material, structuring it, and severing its continuity.

This extensive material from which Lowell draws often appears as the ocean, and I will use this particular metaphor for the moment to focus on why his poems sometimes accumulate data but cannot offer the continuous present. Composing poetry becomes the process of fishing from the water. The ocean encompasses the inexhaustible bulk of the universe, from motes of information and falling empires to the intractable passage of time, the current. This realm is of “unilluminating depth” (“Lost Fish”); neither can a person see the expanse of what the ocean holds, nor does the water offer guidance for humans. The lines of poetry become fishing lines used to reel subjects from the water. The poet casts “the lure of personality” into the depths, waiting for the fish to bite the lure
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(“America”). Lowell will pull the baited fish into the realm of personality, above the water, where the fish can now have a bearing on human life. In “Dolphin,” Lowell calls his book of poems “an eelnet” in which he can catch the poetic subjects. The black lines of a poem become the matrix of the net in which the ocean’s fragments are caught. Lowell trawls his poem-as-net through the expanse of the ocean, transferring the catch from the unknown depths to his pages, where the subjects can be transcribed, read, and comprehended.

The net has the same capacity to catch soda caps and algae as it does living dolphins and fish. Lowell’s compositions, then, present in their lines a huge accumulation of minutiae and the quotidian rubbish of life. Incalculable numbers of fish or six-pack rings might drift through the net’s holes and remain in the ocean. Adam, Eve, Harvard, and New York show up in the lines of “Dawn,” but Abraham and London do not. The accumulation in the net is arbitrary and must leave certain things to float away. In “For John Berryman I,” Lowell watches a stream whose “out-tide flings up wonders: rivers, linguini,/ beercans, mussels, bloodstreams.” What swells up to the surface is dependent on the current rather than on an object’s significance. The water, the unilluminating depth, recognizes no distinction in value between linguini and bloodstreams. But no matter the randomness of what the current sends up, Lowell still lifts it from the water – these items are all wonders. “We are poor passing facts,” he says, and these fragments – addresses, litter, letters penned – are the facts of a life, the debris of an identity.

4 I acknowledge the complication of this metaphor in which the lines of the poem catch the subject of the poem. I will address the reflexivity of Lowell’s work later.
Lowell does salvage these fragments and catches facts, if not the continuous present of their *passing* quality. By noting his daughter’s name and birth date in a poem titled “Harriet, Born January 4, 1957,” he distinguishes his daughter from the Harriet Winslow after whom she was named and from various other Harriets. The date also marks this poem off from the three other poems in the five-poem, *For Lizzie and Harriet* sequence that use the girl’s name in their titles. But as Lowell clings to numbers, the gaps between these fixed pegs grow deeper and deeper. Lowell continues by adding more measurements of time to his daughter’s life:

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\text{Half a year, then a year and a half, then ten and a half—the pathos of a child’s fractions, turning up each summer. Her God a seaslug, God a queen with forty servants, God—you gave up...things whirl in the chainsaw bite of whatever squares the universe by name and number.}
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The numbers step up unevenly, leaving a glaring ten-year gap in Harriet’s short life. Even the jump from half a year to a year and a half saws out a portion of her life. The space between the ages is smaller but no less significant, indicating that any measurement by fractions, no matter how small the fraction, results in a sliver of life discarded.

Regardless of how many events or numbers crowd the poem, no complete moment or image of who Harriet is can emerge. The sonnets multiply, and each new fact or number marks one boundary of a newly formed gap. Harriet is first
“ten and a half,” but in “2. Harriet” she is nursery-aged, and by “5. Harriet” she is a “[c]hild of ten, three-quarters animal, / three years from Juliet, half Juliet.” The numbers accumulate in this sequence of poems, but even as more pegs against which the girl can be measured are set up, Harriet can never claim a complete, uncut presence. Her age bounces down and then up again, and she herself is divided into quarters and then into halves, always split and never allowed to be living in a continuous present.

The violent chainsaw bite Lowell associates with this process emphasizes just how much a poem might fragment the continuous present. Shifting away, in this sequence, from the poem-as-net, he realigns poetic composition with cutting away from a solid mass. The sonnet must be squared into a rigid block. Even “turning” must be sawed in half to “turn-ing.” The enjambment splits the action, denying it its temporal continuity, in the same way as he cuts and measures Harriet into fourteen lines, and then into three blocks of fourteen lines, that deny her the temporal continuity of her missing years. Even though these facts of her life, the precise date and the legal name, are snagged in the poem, the time connecting the years, the continuous present, floats through the line breaks along with the action of turn-ing. The turning, passing, and living that connect the girl aged half a year to the girl at ten and a half whirs into the unsquared blanks of the pages, leaving the scars of severed action.

Heidegger would insist that language is functioning correctly when it lets some things stay in the murky unknown. But an important difference in the functioning of language emerges when Lowell returns to the idea of the poem-as-net. This correct functioning for Heidegger means that language builds a
boundary against which being can be measured; for Lowell, language measures out nothing stable within the ocean. The pliant lines can catch bulky rubbish or even fish flung from the current, but they cannot trap the current itself. It is that current – the movement of the water and the continuous present – that leaves rubbish behind but cannot be caught. The wave of a current consists of energy moving through water, not the water molecules themselves; it is this intangible energy, as both tide and illumination, that Lowell seeks but cannot hook. The instability of Lowell’s language would mean that the conditions for Heidegger’s being are not possible, and not that Lowell simply writes incorrectly or produces bad poetry.

Stable boundaries essential for Heidegger’s being are not possible for Lowell. He writes in “Ice,” “angrily we skate on blacker ice,/ playthings of the current and coldfish—.” The skaters glide across the smooth surface of a body of water, but at the same time they are subject to the current below; the boundary is not firm. They are the current’s toy, and they cannot or do not push back against its pressure. Lowell is subject to these moving forces and cannot measure the dimensions of his being. He continues,

Cro-Magnon, dinosaur...

the neverness of meeting nightly like surgeons’
apprentices studying their own skeletons,
old friends and mammoth flesh preserved in ice.

This space skews timelines and notions of significance, and no standard emerges against which one can take measurements. The regularity of the nightly meetings
is negated by their neverness. With mammoth flesh next to old friends, the progression of evolution, which could never deposit the two beside each other in the earth’s sediment, is obscured in this ice. In this condition, old friends are given the same significance as mammoth flesh; when everything is leveled to the same worth as random fossils, labels no longer distinguish extinct flesh from the people one has loved.

Nor is knowledge through intimacy or close study possible in this poem. Nightly meetings are fumbled, their neverness implying absence and the negative rather than achievement of any knowledge. The bodies are blocked in ice, the cold preventing intimacy or romance. The figures, who are apprentices rather than experts, study themselves instead and reach nothing except the limit to self-knowledge. Only death can result from a gruesome dissection of the self. Tossed around by the current and preserved in the frozen water, the figures are unable to measure themselves; they cannot emerge into their beings in the space of Lowell’s poetry.

Elsewhere the reflexive nature of poetry complicates measurements. Lowell finds his body “caught in its hangman’s-knot of sinking lines,” entangled in the very poems he has composed (“Dolphin”). He has been fishing his subjects from the ocean, and by inscribing so many lines based on his personal history, has hooked himself on his own lures. The body caught in sinking lines leads back to “The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket,” in which a “drowned sailor clutched the drag-net” of a boat (“Quaker Graveyard” 4). Lowell is wrenched back into his 25-year-old poem and becomes the subject he has written about. His own work tugs him simultaneously between the writer and the written.
The net that Lowell has made, “the eel-net” of his book, obscures even the divisions among poet, poem, and subject. The mesh is woven from the black lines of his poetry, but as “eelnet,” it seems it could also be made up of eels, themselves snaking, black lines. The net is woven from the material it is intended to catch. The inseparability of the poem and the poem’s subject denies opportunities for measurement. Relationships among poet, poem, and material are uncertain and in flux. Even when the lines themselves are metered, they provide no stability once twisted and entangled into the greater net of Lowell’s work.

In the straining between the ensnared poet and his own work, there is no repose as there is in Heidegger’s conflict between realms. No knowledge emerges when self-studies are attempted; instead the poet falls deeper into the material of his poem. That which does end up in the poem has been sent up by the current, which discerns no differentiation in value; loved ones, linguini, and trash are all just as likely to appear or never to appear at all. Poetry provides no measure against which Lowell can determine his being: he is simultaneously above and below the waterline, casting and biting. Rubbish and bulk are trapped, but the current – intangible energy – flows through. Language cannot provide stable measures and so cannot catch the intangible continuous present that slips through like a current or a tide of light. If measuring is not possible, then Heidegger’s being cannot emerge. Lowell fails to cultivate the continuous present using a writer’s devices not because he is writing incorrectly but because language is not functioning as Heidegger says it should.

IV. Refusing Transcendence and
Abandoning the Insatiable Fiction

Lowell must avoid the certain literary devices of structure and their threats of paralysis if he is to achieve the continuous present. An ordered progression through time that could string together a journey dissolves when neverness comes to characterize what is nightly. The details that Lowell can pull into his poems are fragmented from their wholes, and he cannot find a way to retain the continuous present of the current within his poem-as-net. He has failed to craft momentum, journey, and climax into his work, and attempts to do so means he fails to bestow the living name. But as Vendler states, he *refuses* these literary devices (*Part of Nature* 158); at some point he chooses to stop striving for them. Indeed, he comes to feel that “[e]ven the best writer in his best lines/ is incurably imperfect, crying for truth, knowledge,/ honesty, inspiration he cannot have” (“Last Things, Black Pines at 4 a.m.”). Language will always leave holes through which the continuous present slips, for it cannot shape a perfect whole. Having learned this, Lowell stops trying to craft that complete figure with language alone. Instead he strives to use words in a way that defy certain literary devices; he wants to write something illegible, creating a space in which the fullness of the continuous present is possible.

In “Mermaid I.” he concedes to the impossibility of achieving this continuous present in words and phrases alone:

> Failure keeps snapping up transcendence,
> bubble and bullfrog boating on the surface.
> belly lustily lagging three inches lowered—
> the insatiable fiction of desire.
He has wanted to lift from the water the intangible movement of the current, as well as the fish and rubbish it flings up, but he cannot transcend the waterline. He cannot transfer the energy that creates the current above the surface. The bubble and bubbled belly of the bullfrog hang just at the surface of the water, teasing Lowell with the notion of transcendence. The bubble is a water-walled capsule that holds air, a successful combination ocean and surface. It can float underwater or drift through the air, a closed and perfect sphere. Lowell says of those who have sunk into the mermaid’s realm: “None swims with her and breathes the air.” He acknowledges that a subject cannot survive both above and below water. But the bubble can move between the realms, as the air inside allows respiration that is otherwise hindered in the ocean. The bubble transcends what he cannot.

The poet’s desire to transcend creates an insatiable fiction. In attempting to lift the fish and the current into his poems without distorting or paralyzing them, he has relied on literary devices: fiction, plot, rhyme. But failure has always snapped up his attempts – plot and rhyme end in failure when actions are severed. These literary devices, all under the heading of “fiction” in this poem, are insatiable. They can never be completed and closed off into a perfect shape. Lowell has tried using language to transcend, but language fails. The mermaid can gorge herself on the failures, for “[d]eficiency served her,” but no one else can be satiated with an absence. He has “learned what he wanted from the mermaid” and her realm, and he accepts that his attempts to combine both realms within the structure of fiction cannot succeed.
Plot and climax will never be able to hold the continuous present of the
tide; the living name will always defy the pegged facts of the observed world. He
admits these failures: “The line must terminate,” he writes in “Fishnet.” “Yet,” he
continues,

my heart rises, I know I’ve gladdened a lifetime
knotting, undoing a fishnet of tarred rope;
the net will hang on the wall when the fish are eaten,
nailed like illegible bronze on the futureless future.

He does not stop at the point where he refuses journey and climax. Plot has
proved incapable of holding the writhing moment without stilling it, so he
slowly pushes his poems away from certain types of structure and order to see
what he can accomplish when his language abandons some of its own devices;
seeking the continuous present in order to bestow the living name, he tries to
preserve illegibility within his poems. It is the energy of the tide that Lowell
wants, not an accumulation of severed details.

V. The Poem Is an Event

If the poem is to avoid severing actions and to achieve the continuous
present, it should not delineate, denote, or explain. The poem “is an event, not
the record of an event,” Lowell once told a lecture class (Lowell in Vendler, Part
of Nature 167). It should be a site of happening.\(^5\) If Lowell can write so that his

lines refuse to delineate or describe, then perhaps they can happen. If something in his poems could remain illegible, if it could refuse to communicate a certain message, then it could not be a record of an event because it would not denote what happened. In making the poem an event, “[t]he important thing is the presence of ‘exciting or strenuous writing,’” Vendler has Lowell saying (167). The present participle exciting indicates that within this writing is the happening of the continuous present. There is push and pressure creating strain on the page.⁶

When Lowell packs his poems thick with dates, fragments of information, and historical and literary allusions, he is putting strain on the timelines of public and private history. As with the title Notebook 1967-68, Lowell sets up confines of time but quickly spills over the limits. Instead of delineating a neat chronicle of a year in this book, he places his own nighttime horrors (“Night Sweat”) next to King David and Abishag (“King David Senex”); he writes of a 1967 war protest (“The March”) and then “Nantucket: 1935”; he categorizes sometimes by month, sometimes by theme. The span of 1967-68 seems inexhaustible and for Lowell is linked to more than its own string of days and nights.

Any set measure of time indicated by 1967-68 is further scrambled when Lowell reworks this book into Notebook. He then tears apart this second volume and redistributes the pieces, heavily edited, cut, and augmented, across History and For Lizzie and Harriet. Both books appeared in 1973, along with The Dolphin. What begins under the auspices of a chronicled sequence of months refuses to

⁶ Writing in this quotation inches away from the gerund and toward its homonymic present participle, suggesting more movement and happening on the page. But because Lowell does not pursue this directly, I will not either.
adhere to its suggested limits and levels the historical and literary with the mundane details of the personal. At times Lowell attempts to shape and clarify; he says in his note to History, “I hope this jumble or jungle [of Notebook] is cleared.” The titles of History’s poems do trace a loose chronological thread from roughly the Old Testament through the Roman Empire to “Last Night.” But even so, this chronology exists in the titles, and no firm timeline limits the span of each poem. Abel and Lowell are both present in the first poem; “Napoleon” starts with Lowell’s travel between Boston and London before reaching the French leader.

Reworking previous poems does more than tangle chronologies. When the lines of one poem are refashioned into a new product, the meaning of the words grows muddy. “Water” first appears in For the Union Dead as eight four-line stanzas. Lowell revisits those lines in History’s “For Elizabeth Bishop (twenty-five years) I. Water,” but now the lines have been revised into long lines of a sonnet. The line and stanza breaks of the earlier version allow Lowell space to drift back into memory and to pull the reader along. Because the later poem packs the words in tighter and denies these pauses, Lowell loses the wave-like lapping of stanza and space, and there is little time in which Lowell can prod his own way back toward the Maine town. “For Elizabeth Bishop” is too crowded and rushed to show how, as in “Water,”

[the sea drenched the rock
at our feet all day,
and kept tearing away
flake after flake.
In the later version, “[t]he sea flaked the rock at our feet, kept lapping the matchstick/ mazes of weir.” These extended lines do not even leave space for Lowell to link “kept lapping” to its subject in a grammatically correct way. The revised version is a condensed and hurried memory; the first version opens up the space of the town, allowing Lowell to coax the listener back with him to Maine, to watch the water with him, and to see each individual flake float away. The poems show contrasting workings of memory.

Two different experiences of the same scene are presented, but one does not merely erase the other. Frank Bidart, writing about Lowell’s revision process, explains that with some pieces, “the two versions [of a poem] refuse to be joined” (Introduction xii). There is no way to mediate between the two versions because they pull the words in two different directions. “For Elizabeth Bishop” does not fix a flaw in “Water,” nor is it an addendum meant to clarify the earlier version. The two are different poems, yet they remain inextricable because of the material shared in common. Though Bidart is referring to revisions of “Waking Early Sunday Morning,” his comment also applies to the difficulty brought about by the two versions of “Water.” Bidart says that though he finds the revised “Waking Early” better on the whole than the first, he “can’t escape the haunting memory of the first” (xii). The first version hovers in the space around the second and refuses to be erased. Lowell replies to Bidart’s conflict over revisions saying, “They both exist” (xii). Instead of having each revision replace the previous version, clearing away the first lines in favor of the later ones, Lowell piles on new lines that lay claim to the same space and material that the old lines do.
With the same words and phrases straining apart toward different meanings, Lowell refuses to allow a single and comprehensive explication of his lines.

In Lowell’s sonnets and other late poems, strain is high even in single lines, which often trail off mid-sentence, and Lowell never returns to complete these thoughts. These fragments leave ideas unconcluded and images half-formed, so the numerous potential, unuttered half-sentences remain wrestling in the space of the dashes and ellipses. The second half of “Dolphin” reads:

I have sat and listened to too many
words of the collaborating muse,
and plotted perhaps too freely with my life,
not avoiding injury to others,
not avoiding injury to myself—
to ask compassion...this book, half fiction,
an eelnet made by man for the eel fighting—

my eyes have seen what my hand did.

Though Lowell could be saying that he has plotted too freely to ask compassion, the dash after “myself” interrupts the cause-and-effect relation of the two ideas. The dash almost implies that he abandons his statement about plotting and injury and starts a new phrase that begins with “to ask compassion,” which in turn trails off. He then starts another phrase at “this book,” but the subject has no verb, only the qualifying clause about the eelnet. Lowell refuses to alleviate the strain of fragmented ideas. He presents the eelnet, which, as it is Lowell’s own
creation, has an uncertain relation to fishnets and other types of real nets. The net could be for the action of “eel fighting.” But because Lowell does not hyphenate these two words into a single noun, the eelnet could also be for the eel that is currently fighting. Lowell avoids settling on either of these options for certain and overflows the fourteen-line sonnet structure, leaving in the stanza break a space in which the various meanings and partial phrases strain to fill the holes. This last line lands as a firm assertion on the page, but it is removed from the images of dolphins, eels, and the ocean, leaving the uncertainties of the eelnet and the request for compassion dangling.

Each time Lowell kinks the standard timeline of history, uses the same words to articulate different ideas, or abandons an unconcluded idea, the poem becomes more a site of straining than a coherent denotation of an event. A return to the poem-as-net finds Lowell weaving and tangling the lines until they form an imperfect bulk rather than a grid or matrix. He is “knotting” the “tarred rope” of his poetry so it will not straighten out into lines tracing narrative, journey, or any other imposed structural plan. These parts that cannot be smoothed over or entirely explained clot into illegible marks in which multiple meanings are straining rather than a single one petrifying.

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7 Lowell’s later work is full of instances in which he complicates meaning by breaking grammatical rules and abandoning sentences. Cf. the fly “wrinkling to fulfillment” in “Harriet,” in which the verb demands its own, modified definition because nothing has ever wrinkled toward anything before. Cf. also the skewed orientation of the prepositions in “Artist’s Model 3,” which closes, “I come on walking off-stage backwards.” I do not have space to address the many ways in which Lowell cultivates strain between meanings and readings and refuses to settle into a firm structure of plot or narrative.
Lowell, always rehashing his ideas, recasts this net across the sky at the end of *History* and finds in “End of a Year” a new image of what this cluttered and clumped space looks like. He has reimagined his net to be a typewriter’s used carbon paper.

A year runs out in the movies, must be written in bad, straightforward, unscanning sentences—lines, words, letters nailed to letters, words, lines—the typescript looks like a Rosetta Stone....

One more annus mirabilis, its hero *hero demens*, ill-starred of men and crossed by his fixed stars, running his ship past sound-spar on the rocks....

The slush-ice on the east bank of the Hudson is rose-heather in the New Year sunset; bright sky, bright sky, carbon scarred with ciphers.

Lowell’s revisions and rewrites are stamped one on top of another, creating the palimpsest of the carbon paper (note to “End of a Year,” *Collected*). The space of his poetry is dense and packed with contorted lines. The title does not specify a certain year to which it refers. It could be *Notebook’s* 1967-68, which breaks its chronological boundaries and is then reorganized into other volumes. Or the year could be 1973, crowded with new and reworked lines from three published books, lines grasping at Eden and his lost wives alike. It could also be the time span of *History*, perhaps his own measurement of a year.
On this carbon paper, lines crumble into words and then into letters, which are nailed together rather than written back into words and lines. What had been typed sequentially now loses its relation to that progression. The once-coherent messages are clumped into unreadable blots. Lowell again uses dashes and ellipses to fragment the lines and to busy the space of the poem. The result is nailed-together ciphers that converge into something that looks like a Rosetta Stone but is not the Rosetta Stone. The lines are scrambled and coded without the key to translation and comprehension that the actual Rosetta Stone holds. The lines are still ciphers that have no decoding legend and remain imprinted as scars, marks connected to no symbol.

By refusing clarity in his work, by refusing to sort out chronologies or to allow a single, comprehensive meaning of his poems, Lowell preserves an obscurity in his lines. He no longer tries to transcend the complications of writing a comprehensive and chronological history and instead writes his own History, showing in its last poem that something remains in ciphers. He presents the reader with the product of a failed transcendence: a group of words that does not communicate a message. The presence of what cannot be straightened into narrative or simplified into single explanations signals the event within a poem – the happening of the continuous present. These illegible marks cultivate the conditions for the imagining, accuracy, and living name that Lowell desires.

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8 Of course, much of Lowell’s work is legible – his lines run left to right across the pages and stack vertically top-to-bottom. Grammar and syntax anchor his poems, though he does often break the rules. What he succeeds at is preserving an illegible layer beneath or within legible phrases: allowing conflicting meanings to coexist and offering accumulations of dates and names that shape nothing whole.
VI. Mixing Media to Achieve the Continuous Present

Since they refuse certain attributes of the written realm, Lowell’s thick knots and ciphers begin to function as a visual instead of a verbal presence. Like the sun’s illumination that moves like the tide across a map, the unsettled phrases retain their reach into the realm of the imagined. The carbon paper held up to the sky, allowing light to pass through where the typewriter has punched at the page, seems to do what a photographic negative does. Here emerges Lowell’s writing-with-light, his own imagined product that reformats the visual photograph into a work in which words are imbued with illumination. The writing-with-light can resist the stillness of inscription and nurture the continuous present of Vermeer’s canvas.

The ciphers have lost their relation to sequence, so the page can function spatially rather than linearly. When the carbon paper is held up to the evening sky, the moon shines through the scars and projects a picture down upon the sea and land. Now it is possible that Lowell’s words could avoid the stagnation encountered in snapshots; depending on the position and brightness of the moon, the picture projected below changes. The image will also change according to the contours of the surface below. The projected image is in a constant state of flux.

The continuously changing image projected through this carbon-scarred sky provides little guidance to a ship on the water below. The poem’s hero demens is “ill-starred of men and crossed by his fixed stars,/ running his ship past sound-spar on the rocks….” The stars, often a guide for ocean navigation and fortune, map out nothing in this poem. They frustrate and betray the hero when
they should be firm points against which he can judge his route. They provide navigation neither across the water nor astrologically. Ill-starred, the hero begins with perverted or skewed signs; he directs his ship astray near the shore because again he cannot read a steady course. Like the illegible parts of Lowell’s poetry, which are made up of words but offer no comprehensible message, these stars guide nothing. They resist the order and structure that might paralyze them.

This image in which the carbon paper as negative projects the illusion of stars demonstrates how Lowell’s poetry might succeed in the spatial realm even while it fails in the literary realm in which plot and narrative function. Still, it remains unclear how his poems could claim a place among physical, crafted works of art. He wants more than to talk about the capacities of his poems in a figurative or abstract sense. Just as his poems are actual sites of certain failures of language rather than abstract discussions on the topic, they can also be happenings of certain successes. His poems can be a material product which functions both verbally and visually. The carbon paper against the sky can be reimagined as a star chart. The moon no longer shines through the paper’s perforations to create the illusion of stars, but nevertheless the paper still bears those marks. Reading his work as a star chart resituates it as a material object in a visual realm, and the preservation of space for the living name is still possible.

This space of imagining remains unclear, though, since its existence depends on its undefined and fluent presence off the page. However, this movement to the star chart connects smoothly to Bishop, whose poem “The Map” successfully adds fluidity and flux to a charted diagram. I use Bonnie Costello’s interpretation of how Bishop’s poem functions as map and the map as poem to help clarify what this newly charted space of Lowell’s poems would be.
The combination of poem and map as described in Costello results in a mix of media I will call the imagined map. This map “possesses illusionistic as well as diagrammatic properties,” charting shores and mountains but also providing space for fluctuation within that chart (Costello 235). The viewer approaches the map “as a beholder of a picture” at the same time as she is “a reader of signs,” so the map is “subject to the play of a beholder’s interpretive glance” (235). When the map takes on properties of a poem, it gives up its authoritative delineation of the earth. “[D]oes the land lean down from under,/ drawing the sea unperturbed around itself?” Bishop asks. The present participle drawing indicates that the boundary where land holds the water is not fixed because the action is continuous. It also suggests the present creating, the very etching, of the illustration. This poem-like map “loosen[s] relations of dominance” that stake a traditional map in place as a precise diagram of where land and sea meet (235). Bishop’s map is “a vehicle […] of imaginative engagement, a way of seeing in and through time” (235). The viewer can see in time because the map establishes relations among topographical features of the earth. But because Bishop’s map does not chart the region with categorical authority, time can expand, even on the still surface, to include the continuous present, the happening, of the land leaning down and drawing up.

A comprehensive explanation of just how an imagined map functions remains elusive because the imagining must happen in the realm not bound by absolute or unwavering description. A 1650 engraved map of Morocco (Appendix B) possesses several key characteristics of the imagined map; it

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9 Cf. Bishop’s “The Imaginary Iceberg.” This poem brings up issues of the visible, the real, and the imagined, but I do not have time to address it in full here.
displays on the page what remains harder to extricate from the concept of poem-as-map. The map is rotated 90 degrees clockwise from the orientation of a standard map, the top of the page pointing west rather than north. Like the land in “The Map” that seems to dip down continuously to lift the water, here north pushes back against west while on the page west remains in place. The ships in the open space of the Atlantic are arranged as if they are the eyes and mouth of a face. The shores of Morocco, Spain, and Portugal trace the cheeks, and the Strait of Gibraltar narrows into a neck and then widens into the torso of the Mediterranean. The geographical features are labeled correctly according to accepted political names, but they function as the outline of a body, as well. The authoritative demands of a standard map loosen as the shift in orientation adds a sense of internal agitation to the image and as the same material is pulled among topography, face, and ships all at once. The scale, too, contracts and expands on the page since the map puts the human face on the scale of the Atlantic while situating cities and borders against the same geographical features. This map demonstrates at least some features of the imagined map, the type of visual and written work in which Lowell might achieve the continuous present and thus cultivate the living name.

Lowell wants his poems to function within the visual realm, and so when he rejects sequence in favor of illegible marks, the poem functions spatially in some ways, mixing the facts and movement of the imagined map. It is within this medium that the living name emerges as a specific and non-figurative type of poetic achievement. The layering of letters on words on letters in “End of a Year” clutters any progression of composition that could be traced and so forces the marks on the carbon paper to be viewed spatially rather than sequentially. In this
space, Lowell’s inexhaustible volumes lose their linear movement across time and pile into the dense space of the imagined map. His histories and events come to exist in the same moment and trace no direction, arc, or ordered progression of years. If facts and phrases ever sketched stories or plots, those sequences are scrambled and given no significance or primacy. The same stars, the stamped words, constellate ever-shifting perspectives on events and figures. These stars map no myths or navigable routes. Imagining is possible because these stars remain pegs or points, like names and facts, over which the movement of living can flow. The typing poet is always drawing new constellations, always bringing new perspectives to the facts that have been stamped there.

Lowell’s refusal of certain literary devices could be easily seen as a failure to craft narrative. Importantly, though, Lowell does not allow his work to solidify as the ruins of settled failure. His failure never ends in stillness. He cultivates strain in the fractured parts, making the poem the site of constant striving and failing instead. This wrestling of unfinished phrases refuses to denote anything, for the lines cannot stay still long enough to say one thing certainly. The straining words thus claim a visual presence over a written presence. When the poems – whether thought of as scarred carbon paper or an imagined map – cluttered with unreadable marks, they provide the space necessary for the continuous movement of tide, the imagining of light-as-tide, the accuracy of the “illumination/stealing like the tide across a map,” and the living name as a constantly precise and necessarily individual label.

VII. Lowell’s Persistent Vacillation
I have offered in this paper a way to approach Lowell’s work to recognize it as achieving a continuous present denied by literary devices such as plot, narrative, or epiphany. But it would be careless of me to argue that the end of Lowell’s work lies in spreading words across a spatial rather than sequential chart or in rendering the poem more like a painting. To say that Lowell achieves an ultimate end would negate the complications inherent in his work. It must be emphasized that Lowell’s poetry still resists giving itself up to any certain explanation, even one that gives it space to remain partially obscure. It resists comprehensive analysis and will not be summed up or explained entirely by the imagined map or alternate forms of success.

A response to the question, latent beneath the issue of illegibility, of why Lowell continues to write even when he finds language insufficient, affirms that his poetry does again slip free of exhaustive classification. Lowell keeps returning to the tools of the writer. By titling the very poem in which he states his admiration of Vermeer’s vision “Epilogue,” Lowell broadcasts his use of literary modes. But this persisting link to the literary becomes a manifestation of the strenuous writing Lowell insists is necessary in preserving the continuous present. If Lowell were able to conquer the vacillation that drags him back and forth between the written and the visual, the strenuousness would disappear. The scarred sky of his poetry “looks like a Rosetta Stone,” and the strenuousness here is dependent on the constant pull between the written and the spatial or illegible. The marks could be decipherable code or random scratches. The possibility of decoding through language is there, but because this is not the Rosetta Stone, so is the possibility that there is no encoded message at all. Were Lowell to reach a point of repose where he no longer needs to fight against the
literary force that straightens his words into lines and stacks them top to bottom on the page, were the obscure marks of his poems to settle and harden as symbols of the unknown rather than as actual subjects resisting comprehension, his work would lose its essential writhing and straining – its happening and living. Lowell cannot abandon language for the visual, nor can he work entirely within language’s limits. To do either would be to annul the success of opening up space for the continuous present.
Appendix A

Poems Cited

Many of the poems I refer to in my essay are included in this appendix. I have chosen to omit certain ones whose full content is not needed here, according to the context in which I use the poem.

All poems, unless otherwise noted, are from Lowell’s *Collected Poems*.

**America**

*from “Leaving America for England”*

My lifelong taste for reworking the same water—
a day is day there, America all landscape,
ocean monolithic past weathering;
the lakes are oceans, nature tends to gulp....
Change I earth or sky I am the same;
aging retreats to habit, puzzles repeated
and remembered, games repeated and remembered,
the runner trimming on his mud-smooth path,
the gamefish fattening in its narrow channel,
deaf to the lure of personality.
May the entertainment of uncertainty
help me from seeing through anyone I love....
Overtrained for England, I find America...
under unmoved heaven changing sky.

**Dawn**

The building’s color is penny-postcard pale
as new wood—thirty stories, or a hundred?
The distant view-windows glisten like little cells;
on a wafer balcony, too thin to sit on,
a crimson blazer hangs, a replica
of my own from Harvard—hollow, blowing,
shining its Harvard shield to the fall air....
Eve and Adam, adventuring from the ache
of the first sleep, met forms less primitive
and functional, when they gazed on the stone-ax
and Hawaiian fig-leaf hanging from their fig-tree....
Nothing more established, pure and lonely,
than the early Sunday morning in New York—
the sun on high burning, and most cars dead.

**Dolphin**
My Dolphin, you only guide me by surprise,  
captive as Racine, the man of craft,  
drawn through his maze of iron composition  
by the incomparable wandering voice of Phèdre.  
When I was troubled in mind, you made for my body  
captured in its hangman’s-knot of sinking lines,  
the glassy bowing and scraping of my will. . . .
I have sat and listened to too many  
words of the collaborating muse,  
and plotted perhaps too freely with my life,  
not avoiding injury to others,  
not avoiding injury to myself—  
to ask compassion . . . this book, half fiction,  
an eelnet made by man for the eel fighting—

my eyes have seen what my hand did.

End of a Year

These conquered kings pass furiously away;  
gods die in flesh and spirit and live in print,  
each library a misquoted tyrant’s home.  
A year runs out in the movies, must be written  
in bad, straightforward, unscanning sentences—  
stamped, trampled, branded on backs of carbons,  
lines, words, letters nailed to letters, words, lines—  
the typescript looks like a Rosetta Stone....  
One more annus mirabilis, its hero hero demens,  
il-starred of men and crossed by his fixed stars,  
routing his ship past sound-spar on the rocks....  
The slush-ice on the east bank of the Hudson  
is rose-heather in the New Year sunset;  
bright sky, bright sky, carbon scarred with ciphers.

Epilogue

Those blessèd 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.

Fishnet

Any clear thing that blinds us with surprise,
your wandering silences and bright trouvailles,
dolphin let loose to catch the flashing fish...
saying too little, then too much.
Poets die adolescents, their beat embalms them,
the archetypal voices sing offkey;
the old actor cannot read his friends,
and nevertheless he reads himself aloud,
genius hums the auditorium dead.
The line must terminate.
Yet my heart rises, I know I’ve gladdened a lifetime
knotting, undoing a fishnet of tarred rope;
the net will hang on the wall when the fish are eaten,
nailed like illegible bronze on the futureless future.

For Elizabeth Bishop (twenty-five years) I. Water

At Stonington each morning boatloads of hands
cruise off for the granite quarry on the island,
leaving dozens of bleak white frame houses stuck
like oyster shells on the hill of rock. Remember?
We sit on the slab of rock. From this distance in time,
it seems the color of iris, rotting and turning purpler,
but it is only the usual gray rock
turning fresh green when drenched by the sea....
The sea flaked the rock at our feet, kept lapping the matchstick
mazes of weirs where fish for bait were trapped.
You dreamed you were a mermaid clinging to a wharf pile,
trying to pull the barnacles with your hands.
We wish our two souls might return like gulls to the rock.
In the end, the water was too cold for us.
For John Berryman I

I feel I know what you have worked through, you
know what I have worked through—we are words;
John, we used the language as if we made it.
Luck threw up the coin, and the plot was swallowed,
monster yawning for its mess of potage.
Ah privacy, as if we had preferred mounting
some rock by a mossy stream and counting the sheep...
to fame that renews the soul but not the heart.
The out-tide flings up wonders: rivers, linguini,
beercans, mussels, bloodstreams; how gaily they gallop
to catch the ebb—Herbert, Thoreau, Pascal,
born to die with the enlarged hearts of athletes at forty—
Abraham sired with less expectancy,
heaven his friend, the earth his follower.

Harriet
from “Summer”

Spring moved to summer—the rude cold rain
hurries the ambitious, flowers and youth;
our flash-tones crackle for an hour, and then
we too follow nature, imperceptibly
change our mouse-brown to white lion’s mane,
thin white fading to a freckled, knuckled skull,
bronzed by decay, by many, many suns....
Child of ten, three-quarters animal,
three years from Juliet, half Juliet,
already ripened for the night on stage—
beautiful petals, what shall we hope for,
knowing one choice not two is all you’re given,
health beyond the measure, dangerous
to yourself, more dangerous to others?

Harriet, Born January 4, 1957
from “Summer”

Half a year, then a year and a half, then
ten and a half—the pathos of a child’s fractions, turn-
ing up each summer. Her God a seaslug, God a queen
with forty servants, God—you gave up...things whirl
in the chainsaw bite of whatever squares
the universe by name and number. For
the hundredth time, we slice the fog, and round
the village with our headlights on the ground,
like the first philosopher Thales who thought all things water,
and fell in a well...trying to find a car
key....It can't be here, and so it must be there
behind the next crook in the road or growth
of fog—there blinded by our feeble beams,
a face, clock-white, still friendly to the earth.

History

History has to live with what was here,
clutching and close to fumbling all we had—
it is so dull and gruesome how we die,
unlike writing, life never finishes.
Abel was finished; death is not remote,
a flash-in-the-pan electrifies the skeptic,
his cows crowding like skulls against high-voltage wire,
his baby crying all night like a new machine.
As in our Bibles, white-faced, predatory,
the beautiful, mist-drunken hunter's moon ascends—
a child could give it a face: two holes, two holes,
my eyes, my mouth, between them a skull's no-nose—
O there's a terrifying innocence in my face
drenched with the silver salvage of the mornfrost.

Ice

Iced over soon; it's nothing; we're used to sickness;
too little perspiration in the bucket—
in the beginning, polio once a summer. Not now;
each day the cork more sweetly leaves the bottle,
except a sudden falseness in the breath....
Sooner or later the chalk wears out the smile,
and angrily we skate on blacker ice,
playthings of the current and cold fish—
the naught is no longer asset or disadvantage,
our life too long for comfort and too brief
for perfection—Cro-Magnon, dinosaur...
the neverness of meeting nightly like surgeons' apprentices studying their own skeletons,
old friends and mammoth flash preserved in ice.

Last Things, Black Pines at 4 a.m.

Imperfect enough once for all at thirty,
in his last days Van Gogh painted as if
he were hurling everything he had: clothes, bed and furniture against the door to keep out a robber—he would have roughened my black pines imperceptibly withdrawing from the blue black cold of morning sky, black pines disengaging from blue ice—for imperfection is the language of art. Even the best writer in his best lines is incurably imperfect, crying for truth, knowledge, honesty, inspiration he cannot have—after a show of effort, Valéry and Trollope the huntsman are happy to drop out.

Lost Fish
from “Leaving America for England”

My heavy step is treacherous in the shallows—once squinting in the sugared eelgrass for game, I saw the glass torpedo of a big fish, power strayed from unilluminating depth, roaming through the shallows worn to bone. I was seven, and fished without a hook. Luckily, Mother was still omnipotent—a battered sky, a more denuded lake, my heavier rapier trolling rod bend L, drowned stumps, muskrat huts, my record fish, its endless waddling outpull like a turtle.... The line snapped, or my knots pulled—I am free to reach the end of the marriage on my knees. The mud we stirred sinks in the lap of plenty.

The Map
Elizabeth Bishop
*The Collected Poems*

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green. Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges where weeds hang to the simple blue from green. Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under, drawing it unperturbed around itself? Along the fine tan sandy shelf is the land tugging at the sea from under?

The shadow of Newfoundland lies flat and still. Labrador’s yellow, where the moony Eskimo has oiled it. We can stroke these lovely bays,
under a glass as if they were expected to blossom, 
or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish. 
The names of seashore towns run out to sea, 
the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains —the printer here experiencing the same excitement as when emotion too far exceeds its cause. 
These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods.

Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is, lending the land their waves’ own conformation: and Norway’s hare runs south in agitation, profiles investigate the sea, where land is. Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors? —What suits the character or the native waters best. Topography displays no favorites; North’s as near as West. More delicate than the historians’ are the map-makers’ colors.

Mermaid
I.

I have learned what I wanted from the mermaid and her singeing conjunction of tail and grace. Deficiency served her. What else could she do? Failure keeps snapping up transcendence, bubble and bullfrog boating on the surface, belly lustily lagging three inches lowered—the insatiable fiction of desire. None swims with her and breathes the air. A mermaid flattens soles and picks a trout, knife and fork in chainsong at the spine, weeps white rum undetectable from tears. She kills more bottles than the ocean sinks, and serves her winded lovers’ bones in brine, nibbled at recess in the marathon.

Reading Myself

Like thousands, I took just pride and more than just, struck matches that brought my blood to a boil; I memorized the tricks to set the river on fire—somehow never wrote something to go back to. Can I suppose I am finished with wax flowers and have earned my grass on the minor slopes of Parnassus.... No honeycomb is built without a bee adding circle to circle, cell to cell, the wax and honey of a mausoleum—
this round dome proves its maker is alive;  
the corpse of the insect lives embalmed in honey,  
prays that its perishable work live long  
enough for the sweet-tooth bear to desecrate—  
this open book...my open coffin.

Squarings
3. Crossings
xxix
Seamus Heaney
Seeing Things

Scissor-and-slap abruptness of a latch.  
Its coldness to the thumb. Its see-saw lift  
And drop and innocent harshness.

Which is a music of binding and of loosing  
Unheard in this generation, but there to be  
Called up or called down at a touch renewed.

Once the latch pronounces, roof  
Is original again, threshold fatal,  
The sanction powerful as the foreboding.

Your footstep is already known, so bow  
Just a little, raise your right hand,  
Make impulse one with wilfulness, and enter.

Water

It was a Maine lobster town—  
each morning boatloads of hands  
pushed off for granite  
quarries on the islands,

and left dozens of bleak  
white frame houses stuck  
like oyster shells  
on a hill of rock,

and below us, the sea lapped  
the raw little match-stick  
mazes of a weir,  
where the fish for bait were trapped.

Remember? We sat on a slab of rock.  
From this distance in time
it seems the color
of iris, rotting and turning purpler,

but it was only
the usual gray rock
turning the usual green
when drenched by the sea.

The sea drenched the rock
at our feet all day,
and kept tearing away
flake after flake.

One night you dreamed
you were a mermaid clinging to a wharf-pile,
and trying to pull
off the barnacles with your hands.

We wished our two souls
might return like gulls
to the rock. In the end,
the water was too cold for us.
Appendix B

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