

The Three Wives

ROBERT LOWELL



by
**Steven
Nester**

"There is something I am convinced in the poetical temperament that precludes happiness, not only to the person who has it, but to those connected with him."

—Lord Byron to Lady Blessington

"the lunatic, the poet, and the lover/
Are of imagination all compact."

—Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

WHEN AMERICAN POET ROBERT LOWELL died of a heart attack in a Manhattan taxi in 1977 he was on his way to nurture a growing rapprochement with Elizabeth Hardwick, his second wife and a formidable literary presence. Cradled in his arms, however, was a portrait of heiress and author Lady Caroline Blackwood, his third and current wife, from whom he'd just fled. As for his first wife, the novelist Jean Stafford, whose career had begun with Lowell's in the hothouse of academia in the 1940s, there's no mention, but the attendance of her successors somehow obliged she stand vigil with them.

For the most part, it was love of literature that

brought these three talented women into the life of a very complicated, compromised and talented man. It all should have been idyllic, these marriages of a poet to novelists—at the very least on paper—but that estimation wasn't even close. To peer inside the somewhat public marriages all one need do is read the fiction or verse of the participants, which gives an often-transparent glimpse and at times an

unvarnished eyeful of imperfect domesticity rather than Pulitzer Prize material. Those are the lives they led, at times spurred on by the presence and creative instigation of Lowell while he, teetering between genius and madness, was inspired by them to rapture and then betrayal. To know him was to be dismayed by him, or frightened by him, or even physically hurt by him. At first glance, he didn't seem the type.

Robert Traill Spence Lowell IV was a lion in a pride of New England aristocrats. His mother's people came ashore with the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock and were among the founders of Boston WASP society. His father, of equally noble stock, was a career officer in the United States Navy. Among other notable relatives Robert could count as kin poets James Russell Lowell and Amy Lowell. Born in 1917, an only child raised in privilege by an unstable mother and an uxorious father, Lowell as a man was an alcoholic and a manic depressive. He was known to friends and intimates as Cal, the nickname that was given to him in prep school and remained with him his entire life. A combination of Caliban, the subhuman spawn of a witch in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Caligula, the insane and murderous Roman dictator, Lowell's erratic and sometimes violent behavior

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was a constant challenge to friends, colleagues and loved ones.

Mental breakdowns caused him to be institutionalized many times and his reputation as being mercurial was allayed only by his brilliance. He possessed the credentials anyone with bohemian aspirations could want or hope to get close to: money, breeding, tal-

ent and creative drive. He was Hollywood handsome and few doors did not open for him. Lowell fit the public's ideal of what a poet should be, one that stretched back to Lord Byron and beyond that to Plato: He was mad, bad and dangerous to know. Jean Stafford was the first to find out how much so.

A daughter of the American West, Stafford married Robert Lowell against her better judgment. The couple persevered, absorbed in building their careers, learning the ins and outs of literary networking, getting published and maneuvering in the cutthroat world where academia meets publisher's row. In their white clapboard house on the Maine seacoast, purchased by Jean with money from the sale of her successful first novel, they must have appeared as the golden couple of a new literary generation. For a while they were, but keeping up appearances became difficult. The stress of too little money, balancing the waxing and waning of two careers and two egos, Stafford's drinking and Lowell's madness taxed the marriage beyond its vows.

Elizabeth Hardwick knew how to stand up for herself in a crowd. She was an independent woman who achieved literary success long before her marriage to Lowell. A fiction writer and critic, she taught, edited little magazines and worked behind the scenes in literary New York, slugging it out in a macho literary world before feminism was invented or, as far as she was concerned, needed. For a time, it was a fruitful union. Lowell and Hardwick could count among their joint achievements a daughter and a magazine, *The New York Review of Books*, but that didn't keep Lowell from replacing her with young and exotic women. Lowell's next marriage had the earmarks of a man searching for and in need of dramatic change as middle age encroached.

Third wife Lady Caroline Blackwood possessed the indefinable essence that drove men to create in her name. The muse of two artist husbands before Lowell, Blackwood was a documented beauty and an heiress to the Guinness brewing fortune who moved in the upper echelons of British society. While she exceeded Lowell's social standing and wealth, she was less his equal as an artist and intellectual. At the time of their marriage she tended a growing writing



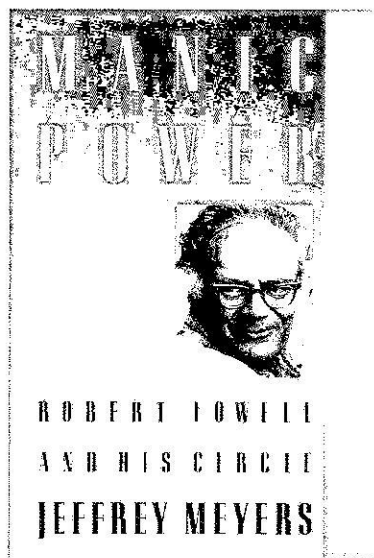
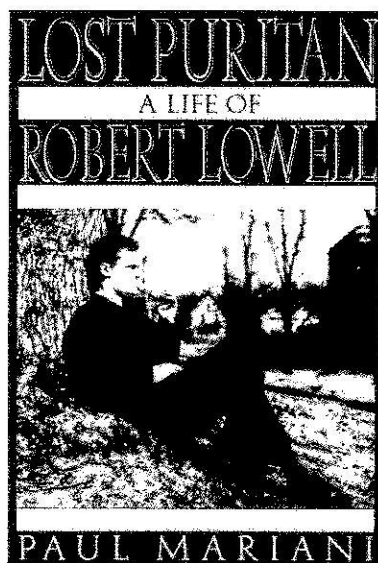
Jean Stafford,
Elizabeth Hardwick,
Caroline Blackwood.

career, publishing fiction and journalism in British magazines. More than just a companion in the arts to Lowell, Blackwood proved to be an agent of sexual rejuvenation and they produced a son, Sheridan. Domestic happiness lasted less than a decade. Unlike Hardwick, Blackwood was no rock of stability, and her drinking and lack of mental balance added further impediments to what could have been a viable union. Realizing he'd be better off with Hardwick, Lowell returned to America to rebuild their relationship, only to pull up to her Manhattan doorstep dead on arrival.

For those of Lowell's generation intent upon making their bones in the writing and thinking business there were several career choices one could make after college. The most practical was to stick around academia and apply for a teaching fellowship or a faculty position. Another was to travel to Manhattan and wrangle a position on the staff of a literary magazine or publishing house. The most heroic path was the arduous and precarious shortcut of hunkering down and writing a masterpiece, but the key to making a go of it was to be flexible.

One had to accept whatever employment the market offered. A writer can be an editor, an editor can be a teacher, a teacher can also be a slush pile reader, and all can surely report the news or type someone else's copy if money is short. With the exception of Blackwood, these are the routes taken by Lowell, Stafford and Hardwick. However, whichever choice one pursued, submitting articles, stories and poems to magazines was a constant.

No matter where they began after college, Lowell and his first two wives, along with some of the most talented figures in American literature at the time, at one point or another became involved with the mighty *Partisan Review*. A heavyweight political and literary journal founded in 1934 as the house organ of the John Reed Society, the magazine was overhauled in



Robert Lowell *Life and Art*

Steven Gould Axelrod

1937 by Phillip Rahv and William Phillips to become the premier outlet for that generation of thinkers and writers.

New York intellectuals, especially the variety that congregated at and published in *The Partisan Review*, are gently elucidated by critic Irving Howe as having "a fondness for ideological speculation; they write literary criticism with a strong social emphasis; they revel in polemic; they strive self-consciously to be 'brilliant'...[Their] social roots...are not hard to trace. With a few delightful exceptions, a tendril from Yale [Dwight Macdonald], a vine from Seattle [Mary McCarthy]...they stem from the world of the immigrant Jews."

Howe is being diplomatic: If ever there was an OK Corral for intellectuals, this was it. Anyone—male or female—who entered had better know what they were doing.

During the turbulent era from the Great Depression to the Vietnam War, when Lowell's generation was at its peak, publishing in *The Partisan Review* was a bare-knuckles undertaking, and the magazine issued no disclaimers stating that any contributors, spouses or colleagues were unharmed in its publishing a poem, story or review. Conversation was a blood sport and cocktail parties could turn treacherous as one's political and personal beliefs, artistic aesthetics, writing style, personal life—the works—were laid bare as fair game for scathing critical analysis and no-holds-barred criticism. It was, wrote Jean Stafford, a place where the "cream of the enlightened was horribly curdled and an argument would end, quite literally, in a bloody nose or a black eye." If one hadn't the intellectual brawn to duke it out with one's fellow contributors either on the page or in conversation, it was back to the sticks in a hurry—or even worse to some, to plebian publications like *The New Yorker*.

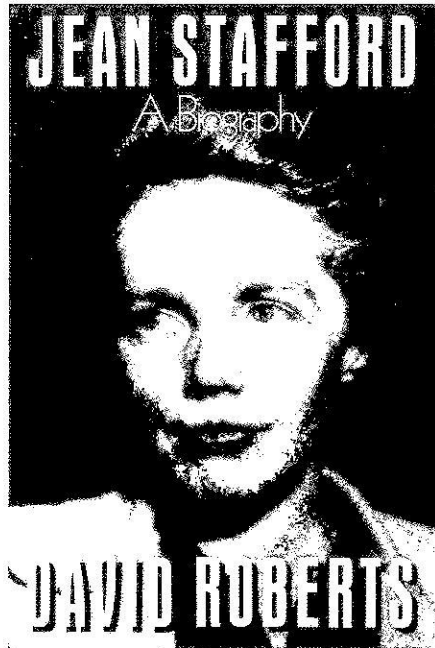
Egocentric and ruthless, tenacious in pursuit of sincerity and authenticity of expression, this group

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worked with a microscope as well as with a pen as they dissected their lives and the lives of others to create a literature undeniably autobiographical and relevant to the modern world. And as far as the muse was concerned, nothing was off limits. The public and private were conflated to the point where *belle lettres* merged perilously with poison pen letters, so murderous was the actual intent, or in other cases, so paranoid was the reader.

Poet Delmore Schwartz, perhaps the most promising member of *The Partisan Review* crowd, summed up the domestic situation in a poem with the lines, "All poets' wives have rotten lives/ Their husbands look at them like knives." This is especially true of Lowell. He put Stafford, Hardwick and Blackwood through the wringer time after time.

Jean Stafford and Robert Lowell were as unlikely a pair as one could find, and their marriage seemed a bad idea to just about everyone. The daughter of a failed Western pulp writer who slept with a six-shooter under his pillow and a mother who ran a boarding house, Stafford was born in California but raised in Colorado. She was brought up to appreciate the outdoor life, but she was bookish and intelligent



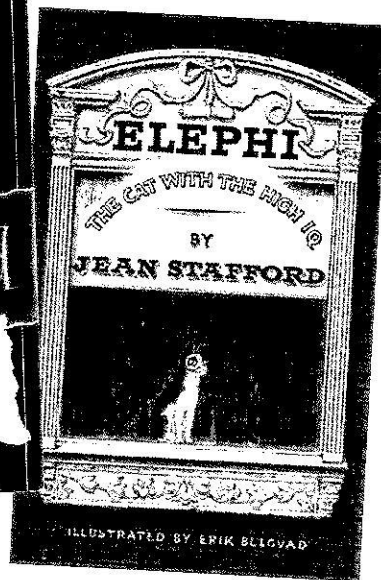
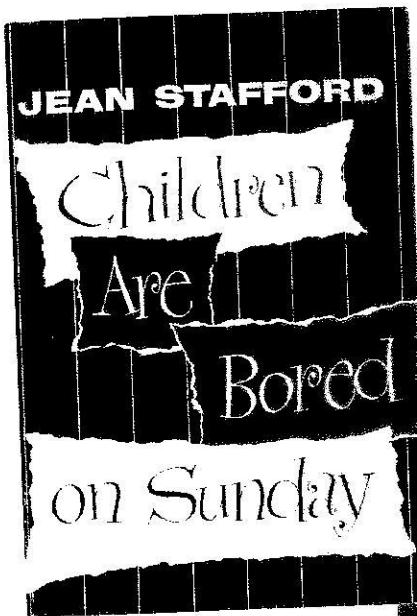
the action was back east in New York and Boston. After the obligatory trip to Europe she bounced around in search of a teaching position and found one in a small Iowa college. In 1937, she met Robert Lowell at a literary conference in Boulder. That both had received honorable mentions for work submitted should have been an omen of a shared fate. Lowell was taken with Stafford but she was unimpressed and busy. She had a lover, a man with whom she discussed marriage. But while Jean Stafford

said no, Robert Lowell heard yes.

For three years Lowell pursued Stafford ardently, obsessively and often unrequitedly. Living in a pup tent in the back yard of John Crowe Ransom, his professor at Kenyon College in Ohio, while Stafford taught college in Iowa, Lowell had to appear odd. Even with a lover and their time apart she and Lowell communicated, briefly meeting in Cleveland while she continued to Boston to a new job and liberation from her past. At that point she didn't take Lowell seriously and even considered him laughable.

According to Bill Mock, a friend of Stafford's, Lowell's letters would arrive and "amuse us both." She didn't view Lowell as a paradigm to which to aspire, nor was he the impetus for her to metamorphose from an uncomplicated Western girl to a sophisticated Eastern writer just yet. The fiction she would write, however, belied her public and private sentiments on the determined younger man. For the time being though, she possessed very strong opinions of Robert Lowell.

Tall, looming and, when quiet, Lowell was described as "Heathcliff played by Boris Karloff." He was an "uncouth, neurotic, psychopathic murderer-poet," Stafford wrote, but without a doubt he represented something that was very attractive to her. He grew on Stafford, as a romantic interest and in her imagination, and after their divorce in 1946, Robert Lowell never left her. In a story titled "The Liberation" (*The New Yorker*, 1953), the female protagonist dreams of marrying a wealthy and handsome Bostonian who will rescue her from her dull life as a



and found no romance in simple toil. Money was a problem and the family moved around, finally settling in Boulder, where she attended the University of Colorado, graduating in 1936 with both a BA and an MA in literature.

Stafford possessed literary aspirations, and knew

teacher in a Western town and the “dogmatic monotony of the town’s provincialism.”

As a novelist of manners Jean Stafford describes a certain level of society, along with the codes, speech and values of the people who inhabited that society. How characters uphold these standards and conventions or rebel against them is usually the plot line. Even though Stafford established herself on the East Coast she always saw herself as an interloper, alienated and plain, as are many of her characters who, as outsiders, enter what they see as an ideal world and search for acceptance or find reason to criticize it. Like Stafford, the narrator as newcomer or outsider has the freedom to make trenchant observations from a fresh perspective, and that’s what she did.

Whatever her aversion to Lowell, it seemed that he and the social and intellectual circles in which he travelled fed Stafford’s creative impulse, solving the problem of what to write about. Without him she might never have gained access to the rigid confines of proper Boston society, where there was an abundance of material. Stafford would find much success using it, during and after their marriage.

In the story “The Bleeding Heart,” published in *The Partisan Review* in 1948, a Mexican girl named Rose daydreams about a wealthy New England family adopting her. The Lowells, or someone whom she imagines them to be? Perhaps, but in a letter to a friend Stafford wrote early in her cantankerous courtship, she continues to evince ambivalence towards the man who opened that door for her. In 1938 she writes, “I will probably be hounded again by Cal (Caliban) Lowell who is the worst monster I know. He is laboring under the delusion that I am leading him a Romantic Chase and that in the end he will carry me home as his bride.” As this strange courtship continued it began to turn frightening.

When Lowell returned to Boston over Christmas break in 1938 Stafford relented to an evening on the town. According to a friend, an argument ensued on the way to a nightclub when Stafford told Lowell she’d never marry him. Drunk and enraged, Lowell drove into a stone wall. Stafford was severely injured and was left with facial disfigurement and pain she’d have to endure for the rest of her life. This wasn’t Lowell’s first admixture of violence and romance, and

it’s to Stafford’s credit and artistic sensibility that she could turn the car accident—minus an enraged suitor—into “The Interior Castle,” which stands among her finest short stories.

If Stafford was reluctant to walk down the aisle, the Lowells were none too thrilled with the match, either. To them she was a “hick” who refused to conform to any code of behavior expected from proper Boston society. This was the smug environment *ee cummings* ridiculed as “the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls/are unbeautiful and have comfortable minds,” and Stafford had no compunction in openly mocking it. She seemed to relish the challenge, too. In her excellent memoir *Poets in Their Youth*, Eileen Simpson, former wife of poet John Berryman, recounts a story Stafford told her of an afternoon spent in the company of Lowell’s mother and her social set. “Charlotte Lowell, introducing me to her Beacon Hill friends, would say, ‘Tell us, Jean dear, where is it you come from?’ Rolling the word around in my throat, and using my undertaker voice, I’d say, ‘Colorado,’ at which the assembled guests would turn to each other and murmur—as if I’d said I was from the upper reaches of the Orinoco!”

In 1940, against all reason, Stafford capitulated and married Lowell. One biographer, Charlotte Margolis Goodman, says that Stafford did so to satisfy a “deeply neurotic masochistic need of hers for punishment.” She was also perhaps taken by the style of living to which the Lowells were accustomed, and found it very attractive. Yet the marriage might have been a calculated decision for professional reasons.

In a drunken and cryptic letter written to her jilted lover two days before her wedding to Lowell, Stafford says, “I shall perhaps not marry him. If I do not I shall be invisible for the rest of my natural days.” Stafford seemed to know that to keep in the literary thick of things, she’d better stay close to Lowell.

The newlyweds moved about the country from Louisiana to Boston then New York, chasing opportunities for Lowell, sometimes keeping separate residences when employment or the stress of marriage necessitated it. When together, as they usually were, Stafford discovered to her consternation that the privileged and talented were also high maintenance. Her fiction writing and teaching took a back seat as she

Poets In Their Youth

A Memoir
by Eileen Simpson



Reminiscences about
John Berryman, R. P. Blackmur, Randall Jarrell,
Robert Lowell, Delmore Schwartz,
Jean Stafford and others

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found herself in the roles of income provider, housekeeper, social director, typist-of-poems and cook. Lowell was given a teaching position at Louisiana State University, while she found work as a secretary at *The Southern Review*, wholly irritated to be the menial when it was she who had experience teaching at the collegiate level and Lowell had none.

The strain of working, taking care of a husband accustomed to pampering, entertaining friends and writing a novel on the side were too much for Stafford to endure and caused much resentment. Compounding this was her personality, her self-image and her crushed nose. Always aware of her humble beginnings, Stafford was very much intimidated by intellectuals and academic insiders. Subject to spells of depression, anxiety and self-doubt, she attempted to medicate herself with alcohol, but it only made the situation more untenable. What made things worse were the manias and sometimes illogical choices of Lowell.

When he became obsessed with Roman Catholicism and converted in 1941 he pressed Jean to do the same. He approached his new religion with all the zeal and fastidiousness a newcomer possesses, taxing Stafford to the point of desperation. Tyrannical about adherence to doctrine, Lowell set up a regimen of Catholic ritual for both to follow, even getting remarried in a Catholic ceremony. In her story "An Influx of Poets," narrator Cora Savage, whose husband has converted to Catholicism, asks with stunning accuracy, "What had become of the joking lad I'd married?" When Stafford threatened to leave him if he didn't relent, Lowell gave in. Soon thereafter in 1943, Lowell received a draft notice. He registered as conscientious objector and was jailed for six months over the winter of 1943-1944—heavy irony for a man who had thrown his father down a flight of stairs and who subsequently attempted to strangle Stafford and broke her nose during an argument.

Even when Stafford found success as a writer, she was never accepted by the Lowell family nor was she shown any sympathy for the abuse she had endured

as the wife of its most famous living member. In her memoir *My First Cousin Once Removed*, Sarah Payne Stuart, whose mother was Lowell's cousin, relates a trove of personal feelings about the man and the marriage, among them the family's opinion that Jean was a bit of a wet blanket, a trait frowned upon by a family of stiff-upper-lip New Englanders.

"No one in my family had the slightest sympathy for Jean Stafford or her nose," said Stuart, "which Bobby broke in a car accident (and later, allegedly, in a fight). She was a whiner, they believed, and in my family the answer to 'How are you?' must always be 'Fine.'"

As if to add further insult to injury, Matriarch Aunt Sarah stated that it was Lowell who bore the brunt of any suffering and referred to Stafford as "that girl Bobby married just because he broke her nose." The Lowell family furnished Stafford no slack, even though

in the branch of the family she married into it was she who wore the mantle of literary achievement and breadwinner, not their beloved Bobby.

Publishing in small magazines all the while and working on a first novel, things began to happen for Jean Stafford in 1944. She was admitted to the stratosphere of *The Partisan Review* when Philip Rahv published an excerpt of that debut novel, *Boston Adventure*, and then another story in the fall of 1944. Rahv invited her to a cocktail party of staffers and contributors, but the evening was anything but welcoming. Stafford described the party to friends as a "revolting experience." The guests, most of them A-List New York intellectuals, were drunken "cutthroats" and "ambitious bourgeois frights." She felt attacked and probably was. Reduced to tears,

she nevertheless found plenty within this offensive scene to record.

Authors who write of their own milieu and circumstances like Stafford always seem to have the last say. After she and Lowell divorced she mocked *The Partisan Review* crowd in "Children Are Bored on Sundays," a short story which also happened to be her debut in *The New Yorker* in 1948. To Stafford the observer, these gatherings were a necessary evil as the

ROBERT LOWELL A BIOGRAPHY

Ian Hamilton



KATHLEEN SPIVACK



WITH ROBERT LOWELL AND HIS CIRCLE
KATHLEEN SPIVACK

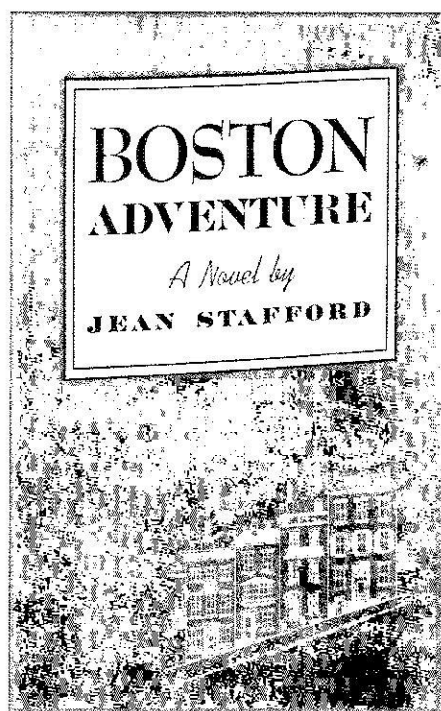
essential social lifeblood of the New York thinking class.

"These cocktail parties," Stafford wrote, "were a *modus vivendi* in themselves for which a new philosophy, a new ethic, and a new etiquette had to be devised. They were neither work nor play, and yet they were not at all beside the point but were, on the contrary, quite indispensable to the spiritual life of the artists who went to them."

As far as publishing in *The New Yorker* went, poets Delmore Schwartz and John Berryman castigated her for defecting to what they and others regarded as a lowbrow periodical. (Interestingly enough, Stafford's "defection" was part of a nascent literary cross-pollination in New York publishing. Highbrow authors such as Stafford, Hardwick and the *Partisan Review* socialist firebrand Dwight Macdonald began to migrate to this and other mainstream publications, helping to make intellectual views accessible to a wider audience.)

The literary achievements Lowell and Stafford had been working towards came to fruition in early 1944 when Stafford published *Boston Adventure*. A bildungsroman with a Dickensian flair, it tells of a poor New England girl who is whisked away from her impoverished surroundings by a wealthy Boston matron to become her companion and ward. Lowell also found success in late 1944 when he published his first collection of poetry, *The Land of Unlikeness*. Known at the time only to a small but intense circle of poetry readers, Lowell's collection was well received and planted him in the rarefied territory of high art. This territory was also sparsely peopled and little understood.

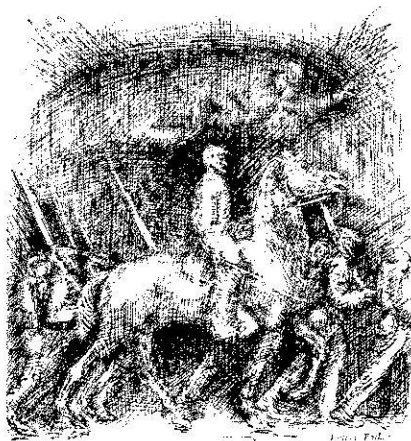
Lowell was an intellectual who wrote poetry for his own kind. To the untrained and tin-eared, his verse was unintelligible babble from an Ivory Tower. To understand it, readers not only had to be conversant with the literary esthetic upon which his style of poetry was based and all styles before that, but with the entire canon of Western literature. His literary mentor was Allen Tate who, along with John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren, founded the fugitive school of literature



at Vanderbilt University in the 1920s. These professors happened to be critics and writers who reached back to the high-born idea of Percy Bysshe Shelley that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," meaning that poets influenced—or ought to influence—the thoughts and beliefs of the age in which they lived. Added to this was T.S. Eliot's ethos that the poet should "express himself in an intellectual artifice, [and] write in an impersonal and symbolic style," according to Jeffrey Meyers in his study of Lowell and his coevals, *Manic Power*. What this amounted to was some very strenuous reading.

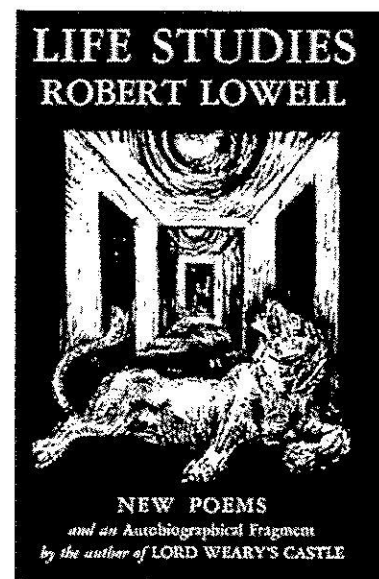
Lowell's poetry might be construed as a game of intellectual follow-the-leader—or a winnowing process to keep the dolts out of the library—but Lowell was writing to the select few who could understand how his poetry was a logical successor to previous modes of expression, and thus furthered the art form. His imagery could be as impenetrable as hieroglyphs, and sometimes even other poets and critics could

ROBERT LOWELL FOR THE UNION DEAD



not decipher them. Stafford, on the other hand, wrote in a clear and beautiful voice that was appreciated by a mass audience and by the thinkers.

Boston Adventure was a critical and a financial triumph. A publishing event that validated her as an artist, it brought Stafford celebrity and, for the first



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time, freed the couple from financial worries. It also set her up as a serious artistic rival to Lowell and produced some grudgingly administered respect from the Lowell family, forcing them to acknowledge just who buttered the bread at Robert Lowell's table—and the irony wasn't lost on Stafford. "I am more thoroughly, more icily, more deeply disliked than ever on account of my book," Stafford wrote to a friend, "even though it is generally admitted that's a damned good thing Bobby married someone who makes money writing."

Awards, fellowships and remuneration came her way, along with the ambivalence of her in-laws. They weren't too pleased that the book pilloried their world, but they did take solace in the fact that she published under her maiden name and didn't dedicate the book to their Bobby. In the summer of 1945, with the money from *Boston Adventure*, the couple purchased a rambling house in the seacoast town of Damariscotta Mills, Maine, where a frenzy of living, entertaining and creating began.

When his second collection of poetry, *Lord Weary's Castle*, came out in the fall of 1946, Robert Lowell attained the fame and recognition he had sought. He received the Pulitzer Prize, a Guggenheim Grant and money from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Flush with literary success, he turned down a teaching fellowship to become the Consultant of Poetry at the Library of Congress. A photo essay in *Life* prompted a call from a Hollywood producer, asking if he could act. This success only intensified the artistic competition between husband and wife, even though the book was appreciated only by a select and discriminating group of readers.

The anxiety and burden of a failing marriage between a novelist and a poet is elegantly and poetically described in the *roman à clef* short story "An Influx of Poets," one of Stafford's better-known stories, published in 1978 in *The New Yorker*. The dramas and insecurities of Stafford and Lowell are played out with a cast whose fictional

doppelgangers are unmistakable—including the ex-wife of Delmore Schwartz, with whom Lowell carried on an affair.

Stafford wasn't the only partner to write of the relationship. Lowell wrote of these years in Maine from 1945 to the collapse of the marriage in 1947, perhaps most famously in a poem titled "The Old Flame," wherein the former occupant of a house on the New England seacoast revisits and reflects on the new owners, the life he had led in the house and deeper issues. Lowell speaks of his contentious marriage with the lines "how quivering and fierce we were, / there snow-bound together, / simmering like wasps / in our tent of books!"

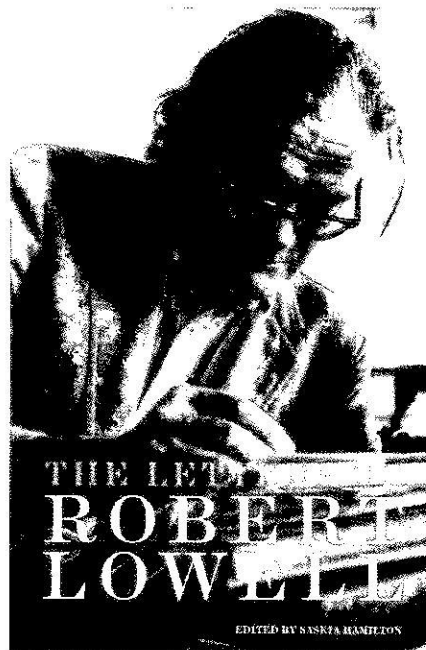
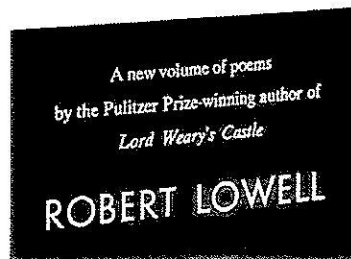
His later poem, "The Mills of the Kavanahs," written in the late 1940s and published in 1952, is a "parable" of his marriage to Stafford, says literary biographer Jeffrey Meyer. It is also an example of Lowell's literary style at the time, under the sway of Tate, to write of personal experience with extreme impersonality as "an 'objective' work of art," which, according to biographer Ian Hamilton, resulted in "cardboard characters, the dramatic monologues that all sound the same, the classical myths that don't quite fit." The poem also

draws from the many letters Stafford wrote to Lowell for its tone and voice. One of these letters touches deeply and dramatically on her feeling of inadequacy as a wife and a woman, and is evidence of Stafford's belief that first and foremost, beneath the artist, beneath the writer, there is a human being, and a woman: "I know this, Cal, and the knowledge eats me, like an inward animal; there is no worse thing for a woman than to be deprived of her womanliness. For me, there is nothing worse than the knowledge that life holds nothing for me but being a writer."

This wouldn't be the last time Lowell used the personal letters of an ex-wife for material, but it was the least discordant. While married to Hardwick, Lowell would undergo a dramatic change in poetic style due in part to her suggestions, and for this she would pay dearly.

By 1947 the marriage to Jean Stafford was over. Alcohol had exacerbated Lowell's

The Mills of the Kavanahs



manias and abusive behavior and had caused Stafford's white-knuckled grip on sanity to squeeze the life from it. The couple divorced, the trauma sending Stafford to a sanitarium and Lowell, within two years, to the altar with Elizabeth Hardwick. During their courtship Hardwick got a glimpse of what was in store for her as Lowell's mental state deteriorated to the point of institutionalization. Nevertheless, Hardwick was determined, and she proved to be a sea change from Jean Stafford. Where Stafford had wilted, Hardwick thrived.

Elizabeth Hardwick once joked that her desire was to move to Manhattan and make a name for herself as a Jewish intellectual. A Protestant who shared the Jewish thinkers' perceived "enlightenment, [...] deracination, [...] angular vision, love of learning, [and] cosmopolitanism," Hardwick possessed the brains andchutzpah to distinguish herself as a member of the first generation of female intellectuals to make their mark in New York literary circles. Arriving at Columbia University graduate school in 1940, she soon quit her Ph.D. studies to write fiction. On the strength of several short stories she was given an advance, and her first novel, *The Ghostly Lover*, was published in 1945. An introspective and opaque coming-of-age story, it's an intellectually challenging book not written for mass consumption. However, its rarefied style caught the attention of Philip Rahv, editor of *The Partisan Review*.

Rahv invited Hardwick to review for the magazine, and after some initial trepidation she found it a good fit. She flourished in the competitive intellectual atmosphere and the social world that surrounded it, and by the late 1940s had established herself as one of the journal's fiercest and most feared critics. As one of 11 children, Hardwick must have experienced a family upbringing that made the rancor of *The Partisan Review* as easy as Sunday dinner, with trading barbs as natural as passing the salt. Described by *Partisan Review* founder William Phillips in his memoir *A Partisan View*, as "thin, wiry, and flexible as a Calder mobile," Hardwick "was one of our more cutting minds, and she made us aware of our faults as well as our virtues." For a period she and Rahv (among other literary movers and shakers) were lovers, and by the time she met Lowell, himself a *Partisan Review* stalwart, Hardwick's rock-solid reputation was built on her criticism and essays rather than her fiction.

Hardwick has yet to be the subject of a book-

length biography. Therefore, her output of letters, interviews, recalled conversations, mention in the biographies of others and, most importantly, her work, must suffice.

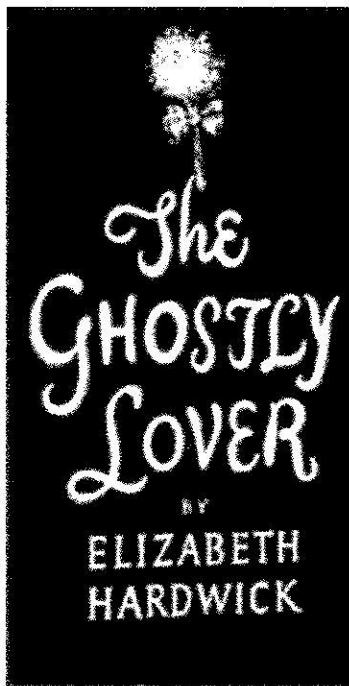
A 1998 *New Yorker* profile presented her as curious and adventurous. She "explored the margins," sneaking into evangelical meetings as a teenager and undergoing a stint as a communist at the University of Kentucky. Sure of herself, she moved to New York before being accepted by Columbia University, and for a time lived footloose in dorms and residential hotels, entering a *marriage blanc* to a gay man in Manhattan with forays into Harlem and the world of jazz. She was, she told *The New Yorker*, a single woman "amid love and alcohol and clothes on the floor."

As a native of Kentucky, Hardwick was assumed to be a Southern writer, but she didn't fit the mold or welcome the designation. Other writers pigeonholed by geography perhaps felt obligated by tradition to simmer in the brambles of gone-to-seed plantations like Faulkner or nurture their eccentricities like Flannery O'Connor. Hardwick considered the description not a fate but a choice, and one not for her. Her temperament was more suited to energetic discussion as she made a conscious decision to think out loud and participate in the conversations at the forefront of the politics and literature of the day. Her writing was varied: three novels, a plethora of essays and reviews collected in three books, two volumes of short stories and a slim biography of

Melville. For more than 20 years she was the first reader of Robert Lowell's poetry. Hardwick provided critiques of Lowell's work as he did for her but, as she states in a *Partisan Review* interview, the relationship was a bit one-sided. "His suggestions were always wonderful," Hardwick said, "But so general I couldn't make much use of them."

In his introduction to *The New York Stories of Elizabeth Hardwick* (NY: NYRB, 2010) amanuensis and confidant Darryl Pinckney relates an inauspicious first meeting between Hardwick and Lowell in 1945. Suspected of having an affair with Lowell's friend and former professor Allen Tate (which was true), Hardwick was shanghaied to a hotel room by mutual friends of wife Caroline Tate, plied with alcohol, and interrogated. The meeting was broken up by Lowell and others, and as Lowell stowed the intoxicated Hardwick into a taxi she vomited at his feet.

This seems to be the incident Lowell alludes to in the poem "Man and Wife," in which a meeting



The Three Wives of Robert Lowell

between a man and a woman takes place outside the apartment of Philip Rahv: "you were in your twenties, and I, / once hand on glass / and heart in mouth, / outdrank the Rahvs in the heat / of Greenwich Village, fainting at your feet— / too boiled and shy / and poker-faced to make a pass / while the shrill verve / of your invective scorched the traditional south."

Three years later, in 1948, they met again at Yaddo, an artist's colony in upstate New York, where Lowell began his pursuit in earnest. Like Stafford, Hardwick was well aware of Lowell's mental states, even warned by Tate that Lowell was "homicidal, deeply and subtly...You were in danger as long as you had him with you." Hardwick was unfazed.

"I didn't know what I was getting into," she later said, "but even if I had, I still would have married him....Of course I suffered a good deal in the alliance, but I very much feel it was the best thing that ever happened to me." It might have been the best thing to ever happen to Lowell, as well.

Raskin writes that the men in and around *The Partisan Review* crowd chose their mates because of their "brilliance and accomplishments." Yet as wives (and homemakers by default), emptying ashtrays and mopping floors was also part of the job. Jean Stafford took exception to domestic duties, seeing herself as a worthy literary competitor to Lowell, which she was. But for Hardwick, the roles of wife and domestic engineer, as well as literary peer, were ones she was well-suited for and even welcomed. "Far from resenting their double roles," Raskin writes, "these women gloried in their domestic control, their superb outlay of energy on several fronts at once, the richness of their experience."

Hardwick told Raskin that she wasn't the "literary baggage" that Stafford had denigrated her as. "I had started writing before I was married to Lowell, but I was not interested in having a reputation of my own." Subsumed by Lowell's work, life, family and mental illness, Hardwick nevertheless continued to write, publish and maintain her identity. "Elizabeth

Lowell," she would say, "never wrote anything."

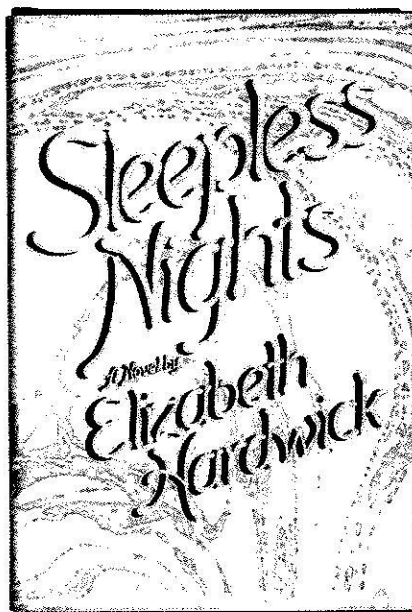
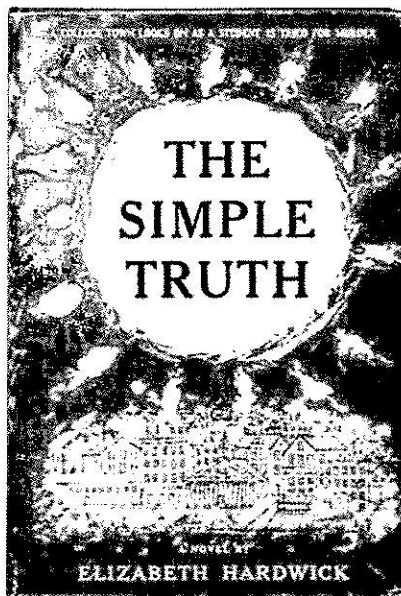
In September of 1949 Lowell was institutionalized for the first time after running amok in Bloomington, Indiana. Beaten by police, he was placed in a private hospital outside Boston, locked in a padded cell, and

administered electro-shock treatment. He described this breakdown as "pathological enthusiasm," and it would be the first of many. Prior to his release Lowell and Hardwick became engaged. They were married in September after his discharge, an event Lowell's parents and close friends attempted to thwart. Lowell slid into depression and lamented to Hardwick, "No one can care for me. I've ruined my life. I'll always be mad." The wedding ceremony was remembered as a very gloomy affair by best man Frank Parker's wife, Anne. In an interview with Lowell biographer Ian Hamilton,

she said, "The pastor's opening remarks were: 'Dear Friends, we are here for a wedding, not a funeral...'"—looking around at everyone's glum faces."

Nuptials didn't improve Lowell's condition, and he was admitted to the Payne Whitney Clinic for treatment immediately following the honeymoon. Even so, the Lowell family at large was pleased. With killjoy Jean Stafford gone, Hardwick was welcomed as a fresh start, even though they felt the couple was rushing into marriage too quickly after a manic episode. But to some Lowells it made complete sense. Relative Sarah Payne Stuart reflected in her memoir *My First Cousin Once Removed: Money, Madness, and the Family of Robert Lowell*, "Bobby fell in love in his manic states, and it was always the real thing, because, well, it *had* to be the real thing—he was a Puritan." Unfortunately, it hardly ever was the real thing, and those close to Lowell knew the indications of impending breakdowns.

One of the first signs was his hostility towards Hardwick and his renouncing their marriage in favor of another woman, and there were many: fellow mental patients; a stewardess from Paraguay; graduate students; a Latvian dancer; college undergraduates,



many of whom were professionally on the make; and a brief yet unrequited fascination with Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. But Lowell always returned to Hardwick. During their 21-year marriage, she was very patient with her infirm husband. In addition to running the household and producing copy she brought stability to Lowell's life despite his breakdowns, and his literary productivity was protean and plethoric. Plays, translations and poetry won him acclaim along with Obies, a Bollingen Poetry Award, the Pulitzer Prize and teaching assignments—all this while Hardwick diligently maintained her career.

Of her fiction, it could be said that a little goes a long way. *The Ghostly Lover* (NY: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1945) is a coming-of-age novel, the story of 16-year-old Marian, a young woman living with her brother, Albert. The two were abandoned by their parents ("warring lovers") to live with their grandmother in Kentucky and chase employment mirages throughout the country. With no filial role models Marian is alienated, finding that "Strangers did not baffle her; only her relatives." Upon moving to Manhattan she finds that the past is something that's inescapable.

Hardwick's second book, *The Simple Truth*, is a novel of ideas published in 1955. It describes a murder trial in an Iowa college town, and like her first book, it's rigorous. As with most novels of this genre, the characters are cutouts and the dialogue is so burdened with ideas that it has all the gaiety and dimension of a scolding. The trial of Rudy Peck is secondary to the effects the proceedings have on two observers, a college student named Joseph Parks and Anita Mitchell, wife of a professor at the university. Even though the evidence against the accused is overwhelming, the two observers are swayed to his side, but for different reasons.

When the alleged killer is found innocent, the two are chagrined and downright shocked. They had hoped that they were the underdogs supporting an unpopular verdict and are dismayed that a jury of their peers could possess the sophistication they do. One character sums it up by gushing, "It is unnerving to live in a world where *everyone*, just *anybody*, takes as complicated a view as the most-clever people! There's no one to uphold common sense."

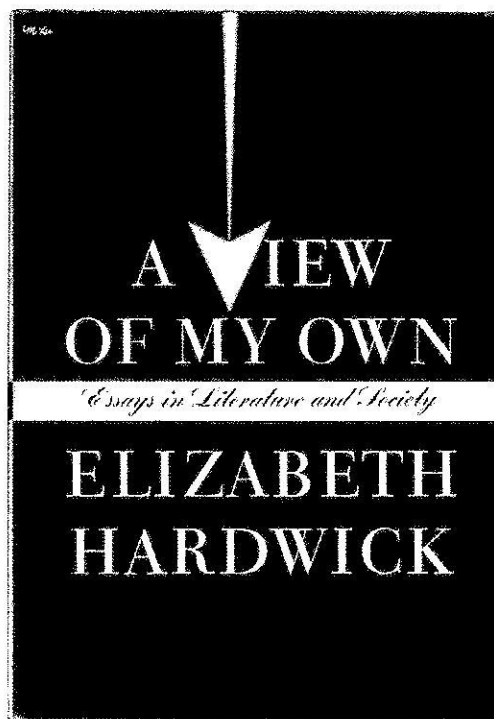
Kirkus stated that *The Simple Truth* possessed "an odd, original talent, one of tremendous subtly," a view confirmed by the dubious and cautionary compliment that the book would be best appreciated by a "special market," most likely the intellectual elite that favored the poetry of Lowell or the contents of *The Partisan Review*. Hardwick didn't publish another novel until the episodic and cerebral *Sleepless Nights* in 1979. Between 1969 and 1979 she eschewed novels and short fiction, publishing only essays, the form at which she was the most adept and renowned.

Esteemed writer and critic Cynthia Ozick commented that Hardwick's "essays have plots"—that is, they demonstrate a dynamic and a dramatic arc. Indeed, Hardwick said, "I have always written essays as if they were examples of imaginative writing, as I believe them to be." Essayist Jim Lewis put it best when he said that her essays are "swift, complex, unencumbered by setups," a leap into the deep end. Taken altogether, it may be said that the essays of Elizabeth Hardwick are captivating, imaginative and written with the intensity and compression of a poet.

The range of her subject matter is wide, as might

be expected of a curious, objective and interpretive mind, and her three collections, *Barleby in Manhattan & Other Essays*, *A View of My Own: Essays in Literature and Society* and *Seduction & Betrayal: Women and Literature*, are never dull. Hardwick expects readers to keep pace and make the logical associations and assumptions she makes, and readers must pay attention to enjoy them at every level. Because of their insight, personality and brilliance of execution, their appeal has not been eroded by changes in literary fashion or taste. One of the best hints to her life with Lowell, making good her comment that she wasn't interested in writing about herself or loved ones "except obliquely," is her self-comparison to another literary wife.

The famous and famously unhappy marriage of Victorian Jane Welsh to the mighty philosopher Thomas Carlyle is recounted in *Seduction and Betrayal: Women in Literature* (NY: Random House, 1974). Going beyond the page, but without mentioning names or making parallels, the essay explains the relationship between Hardwick and Lowell better than anything previously written.



The Three Wives of Robert Lowell

Jane Welsh Carlyle, while not an author, is known for her witty and sardonic letters written to her husband and others. Like Hardwick, Welsh was a talented woman married to an intractable genius, and like Welsh, Hardwick understood the sacrifices and investment of time required for a creative spouse to work uninterrupted and with success. Says Laskin, "Marriage to someone as sane and competent and tough as Hardwick allowed Lowell to grow up at last. He relaxed and expanded under her caustic admiration."

In 1957 Lowell and Hardwick welcomed the birth of a daughter, and in 1963 they helped found *The New York Review of Books*. Even still, his mental state was often in flux, resulting in more than 10 breakdowns during their 21-year marriage, despite Hardwick's determination "to make a really superhuman effort to improve as a wife so that your [Lowell's] home and daily life won't make you sick again." Try as she might to provide all she could for Lowell, it wasn't enough.

In an essay on letters of the literati Hardwick said, "It is difficult to think of a man except as the sum of his remarkable deeds, a statue surrounded by selected objects and symbols. Private letters are disturbing to this belief. What most of them show is that people do not live their biographies." This would be shown to be true in the most humiliating manner possible, when in the early 1970s her marriage to Lowell died and bled into another.

She was born Lady Caroline Hamilton Temple Blackwood and her lineage was fairly spectacular. Her father, Basil, the fourth Marquess of Dufferin and Ava, was a landed Irish nobleman. Her mother Maureen, the Marchioness, was an heiress to the Guinness Brewing fortune. Caroline Blackwood could count among her ancestors a Viceroy of India and Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the Georgian-era wit, playwright and MP. Sheridan, owner of the renowned Drury Lane Theater in London, was author of several noteworthy comedies of manners, including the still-performed *The School for Scandal*.

With a title, wealth and an artistic legacy, Blackwood's life should have been one of fairytale proportions and it was, but not the happily-ever-after kind. As a young girl she endured neglect, and later, as a troubled adult, Blackwood ignored her heritage and

social birthright for rebellion and the chic squalor of high bohemia and the writing life.

As members of the aristocracy, her parents enjoyed to the utmost the fruits of wealth and privilege, which left little time for the rearing of children. Along with her three sisters, Maureen was celebrated in society pages as one of the four "Fabulous Guinness Girls." Caroline, her sister Perdita, and their brother, Sheridan, were raised in their parents' shadow, on the dark

side of the fairy tale. With the parental inattention seemingly typical to the upper classes, the children were looked after by a succession of indifferent nannies in the gloom of the family castle in Clondeboyne, Northern Ireland. At age 12, the rounds of boarding schools in Switzerland and England began. The death of her father during World War Two, along with the feckless behavior of her mother Maureen, exacerbated her feelings of abandonment.

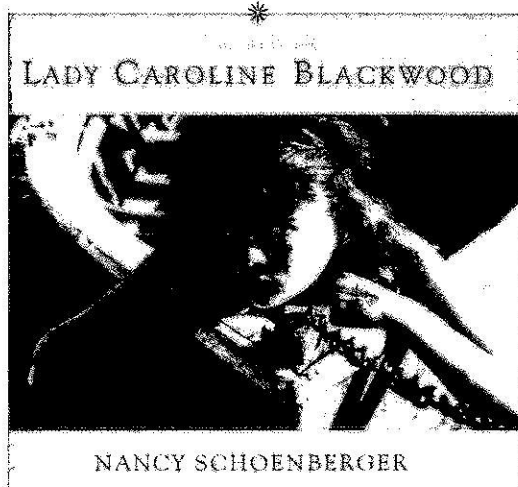
Once out of public school, Caroline saw no need for college. With the help of family friend Lady Ann Rothermere (the future Mrs. Ian Fleming), she began a career as a magazine writer for the *Picture Post*, a light-weight London magazine for which she covered a variety of subjects.

Socially, Blackwood attended balls and parties intended to introduce her to proper—and eligible—society.

Rothermere's circle of friends proved to be wide and varied. At one her gatherings, Caroline ignored the assembled cream and instead was quite taken by the pauper, and a rather brash one at that. The Queen Mother and her daughter, Princess Margaret, happened to be in attendance, and a tipsy Margaret decided to sing show tunes, albeit off-key. The guests, showing good manners (or perhaps intoxication), applauded and asked for more. Not all, however, were appreciative of the Princess's limited talents, and the impromptu recital was interrupted by hissing from the back of the room. Heads turned and revealed the culprits to be the esteemed painter Francis Bacon and the "wolfishly handsome" portraitist of London society, Lucian Freud. The unconventional Caroline was smitten. The Marchioness was not happy.

Caroline was 18 years old, Freud was 26. He was married, a father and a German Jew. Considered an

Dangerous Muse



enfant terrible, he had the reputation of being a social climber and a rogue with limited funds. Even though he was the grandson of Sigmund Freud, which should have conferred some type of nobility, Lucian was the antithesis of polite society. But to a woman with artistic aspirations who looked to rebel, he was just the thing. The couple ran off to Paris to live *la vie boheme*, and with Freud as a mentor of sorts Blackwood discovered a brief role in his world, that of the muse.

Mysterious and compelling, a slender waif with large expressive eyes, Blackwood was an acknowledged beauty. She also possessed talent as a writer, which she slowly nurtured in her young adulthood and furthered over three marriages. Becoming a muse, however, was not a role she sought or esteemed. According to her unofficial biographer, Nancy Schoenberger (*Dangerous Muse: The Life of Lady Caroline Blackwood*, NY: Doubleday, 2001), Blackwood “preferred to be the creator, not the inspirer.” Perhaps she also rejected the role out of insecurity, disdaining it just as much she did the world of Anglo-Irish upper-class society. Being a muse is a complicated endeavor, as writer Arlene Croce pointed out in her 1996 *New Yorker* article, “Is the Muse Dead?”

“It is not the man speaking through the woman; it is the woman speaking through the man.” Shy and insecure, Blackwood did have a witty and voluble side and preferred to do her own talking, usually on the printed page. Nevertheless, as an inspiration others thought she had much to say, and Freud painted her portrait a number of times. Some of these works came in handy when they were in need.

In Paris, where Freud’s name and talent carried weight, the couple hobnobbed with the elite of the international art scene. When money ran low, they made ends meet by selling one of Lucian’s portraits of Caroline. Married in 1953, they made their way back to London, but by 1956 Freud’s gambling, womanizing and general reckless carousing had taken its toll. Blackwood left him and a year later they were divorced, leaving Blackwood at loose ends.

Caroline made a half-hearted attempt at an acting career, becoming involved with the busy English colony in Hollywood. An affair with the prolific

screenwriter Ivan Moffat, whose mother was the English actress Iris Tree, became a decades-long liaison that resulted in a daughter, Ivana, whom Robert Lowell later took as his own. Her affair with Hollywood was much shorter, as the standoffish Blackwood refused to kowtow with the false ebullition required to get along—or get a part. As Moffat bluntly observed,

Blackwood possessed “a personality inconsistent with Hollywood.” In 1958 she moved to New York and continued to stay busy with men and her nascent writing career.

A platonic relationship with legendary photographer Walker Evans occupied her after Freud, but a meeting with pianist, teacher and composer Israel Citkowitz led to marriage in 1959 and three children. Citkowitz, a protégé of Aaron Copeland, ceased composing when he was no longer under the master’s tutelage and entered a lifelong dry spell that even the beguiling Blackwood could not break. Instead, says Schoenberger, the roles were reversed, with Citkowitz encouraging Blackwood in her writing while he took the role of child care-giver. An opportunity arrived when renowned British author

Stephen Spender asked Blackwood to write a satirical article on California beatniks for *Encounter*.

Experienced in the ways of London and Paris bohemia, Blackwood’s immersion in the environs of Southern California for “Portrait of a Beatnik” revealed, with the wit and deadpan for which she would become known, that this variety of nonconformist possessed none of the talent or spirituality of Kerouac or Ginsberg or Burroughs—or anyone else, for that matter. They were nothing more than bumps on a very groovy log, Blackwood found, and “Portrait of a Beatnik” turned out to be a devastating send-up that got her noticed.

Said Blackwood of the movement, “Claiming to embrace Zen, the Beatnik philosopher paradoxically rejects discipline; he therefore replaced the Zen Ideal of a total commitment to the moment by a Beatnik ideal of a striving towards a state of totally noncommitted contemplation. As a result, he often arrives at a condition very similar to the one in which the American Housewife watches her television.”

The couple separated in 1966, but because

Freud painted the portrait of Caroline Blackwood in 1953. The portrait was sold to the Tate Gallery in London and is now in the collection of the Tate Gallery.



Never Breathe a Word

The Collected Stories of
Caroline Blackwood

The Three Wives of Robert Lowell

Citkowitz knew the alcoholic Blackwood was incapable of raising their children, he continued to be a presence in her life, for a time living under the same roof after the separation. Through Citkowitz Blackwood socialized with the *Partisan Review* crowd to some extent, but it was a very tenuous association at best. She soon attracted the romantic interest of Robert Silvers, editor and co-founder of *The New York Review of Books* and friend of Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Hardwick. Silvers proved to be an important man in Blackwood's life: it was he who introduced her to Lowell, at a dinner party at Lowell and Hardwick's Upper West Side apartment.

Lowell was rude and brash, Blackwood timid and, as usual, drinking in excess to overcome her shyness. There was no magnetism that evening, but it seemed as if destiny worked to bring Lowell and Blackwood together. In 1959 he was awarded the Guinness Poetry Prize. Several days after their lackluster first meeting in 1966, in an incident of foreshadowing of the most chilling kind, a cab carrying Blackwood nearly ran Lowell over as he carelessly crossed a street. Blackwood eventually returned to England and Lowell wasn't too far behind, when in 1970 a teaching position took him to Oxford.

At a party thrown by his British publisher several years later he again met Blackwood, but this time circumstances were different: A middle-aged Lowell was seeking change and rejuvenation. Seeing the engine for transformation in the exotic and highly sexual Blackwood, he fell head over heels. With the aid of a new wonder-drug named Lithium, he was able to maintain a more consistent mental equilibrium during their relationship, but was not completely immune from manias and breakdowns. His and Caroline's alcohol abuse undermined a relationship that was tumultuous and sometimes violent. Quipped Lowell of their mental

fragility, "I'm manic and Caroline's panic. We're like two eggs cracking."

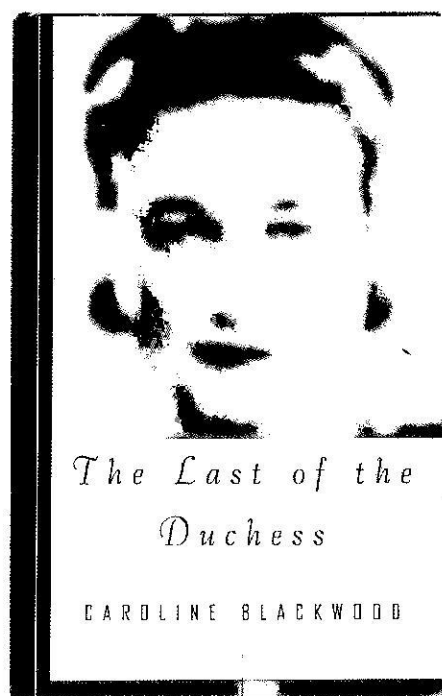
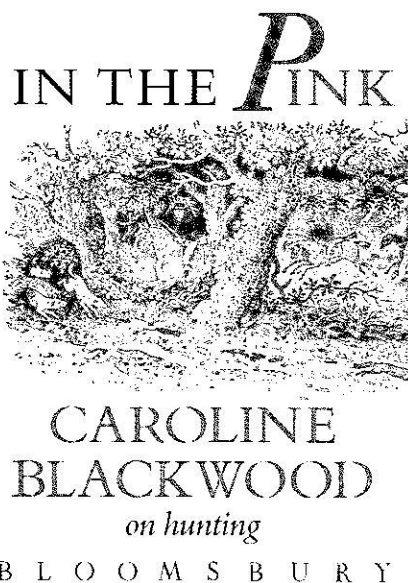
The couple almost immediately began keeping house as Elizabeth Hardwick waited in New York City for Lowell to find accommodations for the two of them. Lowell was reticent and procrastinating, and soon confessed to Hardwick his love for Blackwood and his intention to marry her. Hardwick and those who knew Lowell dismissed this as another manic infatuation, but it wasn't.

Even though he declared his love for Blackwood, Lowell wavered between her and Hardwick. When Hardwick traveled to England to assess the situation Lowell continued to vacillate, unable to make up his mind, racked with guilt at abandoning his family, and consumed in a swoon of passion for Blackwood. One person who knew exactly what she was thinking was the mighty

family matriarch, Aunt Sarah. She derided Blackwood and called her "the Countess." When Blackwood and Lowell lived in Boston in the mid-1970s while he taught at Harvard, Sarah paid a visit and sketched their living conditions as seedy and slovenly, giving Blackwood an odd compliment. "Lady Caroline," said the imperious Sarah, "Sat elegantly with an empty liquor bottle at her feet that she did not even try to kick under the couch. To me she was an aristocrat."

But earlier, when Lowell fathered a child and divorced Hardwick, Sarah disowned her nephew and made Hardwick her heir. Although Sarah seemed to have the last word on Lowell's marriage to Hardwick, Lowell was still intellectually and artistically involved in it. His manner of processing the breakup was to employ it in a way no one expected or welcomed.

Lowell and Hardwick corresponded throughout the breakup, and these letters became the basis of a betrayal of Hardwick's trust that was more devastating than Lowell's abandonment of her, his marriage to Blackwood, and his siring a son with his new wife. The letters became the



foundation for *The Dolphin*, a cycle of sonnets that depicted his failed marriage to Hardwick and the revitalization he found with the younger Blackwood. Lowell quoted liberally from Hardwick's correspondence, shocking and embarrassing her, and eliciting widespread condemnation among his friends and peers.

Fellow poets Elizabeth Bowen and Adrienne Rich condemned the book, calling it "cruel" and "a shallow book." That *The Dolphin* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1973 was no consolation to Blackwood or Hardwick. Blackwood was not happy playing the muse and felt exploited, "gutted and used." For Hardwick, this was the last straw. Lowell knew he was acting in a transgressive manner and he solicited the advice of many writers to determine if he should go ahead and publish such private and revealing poems. Hardwick ended the marriage by telling Lowell, "I never want to hear from you again," an ultimatum that she and Lowell would have difficulty fulfilling.

In England, Blackwood and Lowell seem to move on, but not before Blackwood witnessed the first of several manic episodes, one in 1971 which resulted in hospitalization, almost dashing their marriage plans. Lowell's several subsequent breakdowns put Blackwood into such a fraught state of mind that at times she would flee rather than accept the released Lowell, so afraid was she of receiving a husband she feared was not entirely cured. And when she recognized an impending manic period her normal heavy drinking became a deluge.

While Hardwick provided a "guiding and chiding hand," Blackwood at best offered a "more laissez-faire companionship." Close friend and writer Jonathan Raban recognized the codependency of the relationship and put it in perspective: "They treated each other with a drunken delicacy, and you could feel a massive amount of self-restraint on both sides, and terror—terror that if one of them flipped, the whole thing could crash."

In 1971 Blackwood bought Milgate Park, an Eighteenth-century manor house in Kent. Now with a wife whose aristocratic standing and wealth superseded any pretention or fortune the Winslows or the Lowells could ever possess, Lowell set up as a country squire of sorts—with children and pets and a staff. In 1972 the couple traveled to the Dominican Republic for two quickie divorces and marriage. While this tumultuous fairy tale possesses plenty of darkness, for

Blackwood marrying Robert Lowell was a great leap forward for her writing.

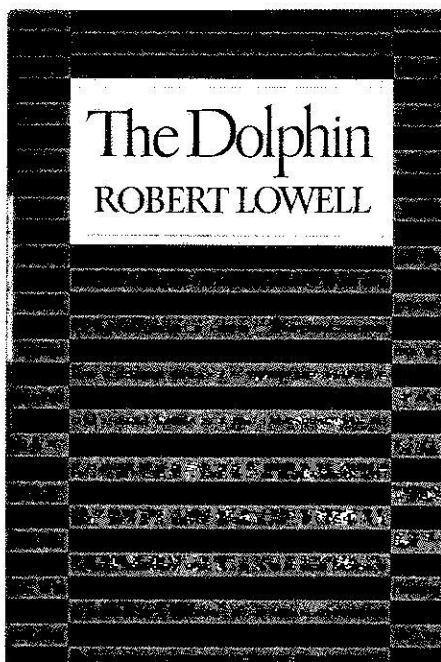
"Burns Unit," an account of daughter Ivana's accidental scalding and hospitalization, yielded a contract that resulted in Blackwood's first book, *For All That I Found There*, (L: Duckworth, 1973), a collection of reporting and short fiction. But it was with Lowell's support, counsel, and mentoring that Blackwood dove into the deep end and began to write novels, a harrowing undertaking for a woman with such vast insecurities. Jonathan Raban observed that "Living with Lowell made Caroline a writer; Lowell spotted the genius in Caroline....She was surrounded by Lowell's belief in her ability to write." The two worked in the same room, often interrupting each other by reading a line aloud and to ask advice. Codependent in their vices and mental instability, they also shared with each other the role of muse.

With Lowell's guidance Blackwood changed from a sporadic writer to a committed one, publishing two novellas during

the marriage, *The Stepdaughter* and then *Great Granny Webster*. *The Stepdaughter* (L: Gerald Duckworth and Co., 1976), is a dark psychological novel written as a series of imagined letters to unnamed recipients. The narrator, known only as J, composes these letters in her head, and as such a lengthy interior monologue. The book is a claustrophobic venting story of a young teen girl, Renata, who's been abandoned by her father, Arnold, a wealthy international lawyer, and foisted on his soon-to-be-ex-wife, J. Nothing, however, is as it appears. J makes herself out to be the victim, but it's the overweight and lonely 13-year-old Renata, "a humpty-dumpty of a girl," who is the stoical heroine of this story.

Reflective yet harried, J understands the changes Renata's presence has made in her, but there is also the desperation of a woman scorned, and the resentment of being treated as nothing more than a convenient babysitter. Thinking "I know that something is very wrong with my mind," J understands that Renata's presence has made it "possible for me to hide from my friends—not to make a single effort to rebuild my shattered life." Aside from good reviews, the book earned Blackwood the David Higham Prize in 1976 for best first novel, giving her the approbation she longed for.

Published in 1977, *Great Granny Webster*



The Three Wives of Robert Lowell

(L: Gerald Duckworth and Co., 1977), is a barely concealed retelling of Blackwood's unhappy days at Clandeboye, and reads like *Downton Abbey* played out in a purgatory of the most excruciating kind. Renamed Dunmartin Hall, "a gloomy mysterious shrine that had been piously erected to commemorate something even more gloomy and mysterious than itself," it is here the unnamed and orphaned narrator is ensconced as she ruminates on her family members' relationships in this translucent *roman à clef*. Some reviewers thought the book too autobiographical to be called fiction, as it doesn't rely upon the machinations of plot, nor is there much human interaction. It's a series of impressions and reads very much like a memoir, as though Blackwood was somehow performing a little psychic house-cleaning and ridding herself of painful memories.


The upper class live in a stasis of gothic eccentricity which, because of their reluctance to change with the times, might appear as quaint to some. Great Granny Webster herself is stuck in the Victorian Era and "only lives in order to be correct." The rambunctious and suicidal Livinia is modeled on Blackwood's favorite aunt, her father's sister. Both the narrator's parents are deceased and she has no real or reliable memories of them, except for what others tell her. This second-hand relationship, reflects the narrator, is "like missing a foreign country which one has never visited and never would."

The final year of the marriage and Lowell's life was frantic as the strain of Lowell's manic states and Blackwood's anxiety and drunken tirades began to wear down the couple. To his credit Lowell did realize his deteriorating mental health took a heavy toll on Blackwood, but her shrewish behavior may have been a factor in a heart attack he suffered in January of 1977 in Cambridge. Hardwick visited Lowell in the hospital and the rapprochement

began, though according to Hardwick it was merely as two old friends becoming reunited. There was "no great renewed romance," Hardwick wrote to Mary McCarthy, "but a kind of friendship."

Blackwood not only saw Hardwick as a threat, but also as an affront. She was "A great leaver," according to Ivan Moffat, "and leavers hate to be left." Even so, Blackwood fought to get Lowell to return to her. He moved to New York and even traveled to Moscow with Hardwick, then spent the summer in Maine with her and Harriet. However, he needed closure with the now-betrayed Blackwood, and made a fateful trip to Ireland to visit her.

Once there, Lowell began to vacillate between Blackwood and Hardwick as he had seven years earlier.

When the drinking began the anger erupted and Blackwood left. Taking with him the portrait "Girl in Bed," said to be a gift from Caroline to Lowell as a remembrance of her, the poet boarded a jet bound for New York. As a taxi drove him from JFK to the apartment he once shared with Hardwick and Harriet and where he met Blackwood, Lowell fulfilled his prophecy of finding death by age 60. His three wives—Stafford, Hardwick and Blackwood—would survive him by decades to continue their productive lives as writers. The refined and graceful prose of Stafford, the hard-as-nails insights and criticism of Hardwick, and the humor and satire of Blackwood should not be left to gather dust in a library or the antiquarian bookshop. The words of these writers can never be considered out of step with the times. Literature, said Ezra Pound, is news that stays news, and the writing of these three authors is as fresh and fitting as the day it was created. 

For All That I Found There

Caroline Blackwood

**THE
STEPDAUGHTER**



**CAROLINE
BLACKWOOD**