

The Art of Losing | by Langdon Hammer | The New York Review of Books

In the academic world of my undergraduate and MA days, Robert Lowell was widely considered the chief contemporary American poet. But like many of my generation, I found his work generally dry, boring, artificial and — compared to, say, the rich sonorities of Dylan Thomas and street-smart raps of the Beats — hopelessly establishment. Certainly not up to the level of Eliot, whose shoulders he was said to be standing on.

I first seriously tried to read him after one of my so-called "experimental" poems won an honorable mention in the national Greensboro Awards he was one of the judges for. But none of his work, including *Life Studies* and *Imitations*, his two best-known books at that time, engaged me, and their frequent grasping for striking metaphors struck me as at best artificial.

I was even less interested in the work of Elizabeth Hardwick, his erstwhile wife, whose name, if I recall correctly, I did not even know then.

It was not until years later, after marital and academic collapses in my own life, that I began to read Lowell a little more sympathetically. I never did develop a real liking for his work or for (with the exception of Anne Sexton) that of the school of "confessional poetry" that grew up around him, and when, during the social (and my personal) upheavals of the 70s I tried to read his later books (*The Notebooks*, *For Lizzie and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin*), I found them claustrophobic when not merely whining or tedious and, always too too East Coast urban sophisticated -- and, in the case of the divorce-focused books discussed in the Bookforum review linked below, more than little self-serving and morally distasteful.

That said, I found this Langdon Hammer review in the *New York Review of Books* (which Hardwick was an integral part of until her death) worth reading not so much for its literary gossip as for its reminders of how life as lived by Lowell and Hardwick (and Bishop and McCarthy, close members of their North Atlantic circle) figured into their writing.

<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/12/19/lowell-hardwick-art-of-losing/>