I Wonder What It Feels Like to Be Drowned?

Look at my knees,
That island rising from the steamy seas!
The candle's a tall lightship; my two hands
Are boats and barges anchored to the sands,
With mighty cliffs all round;
They're full of wine and riches from far lands....
I wonder what it feels like to be drowned?

I can make caves,
By lifting up the island and huge waves
And storms, and then with head and ears well under
Blow bubbles with a monstrous roar like thunder,
A bull-of-Bashan sound.
The seas run high and the boats split asunder....
I wonder what it feels like to be drowned?

The thin soap slips
And slithers like a shark under the ships.
My toes are on the soap-dish—that's the effect
Of my huge storms; an iron steamer's wrecked.
The soap slides round and round;
He's biting the old sailors, I expect....
I wonder what it feels like to be drowned?
Robert Lowell (1917-1977)

Waking Early Sunday Morning

O to break loose, like the chinook
salmon jumping and falling back,
nosing up to the impossible
stone and bone-crushing waterfall—
raw-jawed, weak-fleshed there, stopped by ten
steps of the roaring ladder, and then
to clear the top on the last try,
avive enough to spawn and die.

Stop, back off. The salmon breaks
water, and now my body wakes
to feel the unpolluted joy
and criminal leisure of a boy—
no rainbow smashing a dry fly
in the white run is free as I,
here squatting like a dragon on
time's hoard before the day's begun!

Fierce, fireless mind, running downhill.
Look up and see the harbor fill:
business as usual in eclipse
goes down to the sea in ships—
wake of refuse, dacron rope,
bound for Bermuda or Good Hope,
all bright before the morning watch
the wine-dark hulls of yawl and ketch.

I watch a glass of water wet
with a fine fuzz of icy sweat,
silvery colors touched with sky,
serene in their neutrality—
yet if I shift, or change my mood,
I see some object made of wood, 
background behind it of brown grain, 
to darken it, but not to stain.

O that the spirit could remain 
tinged but untarnished by its strain! 
Better dressed and stacking birch, 
or lost with the Faithful at Church—
anywhere, but somewhere else! 
And now the new electric bells, 
clearly chiming, "Faith of our fathers," 
and now the congregation gathers.

O Bible chopped and crucified 
in hymns we hear but do not read, 
none of the milder subtleties 
of grace or art will sweeten these 
stiff quatrains shoveled out four-square—
they sing of peace, and preach despair;
yet they gave darkness some control, 
and left a loophole for the soul.

When will we see Him face to face? 
Each day, He shines through darker glass. 
In this small town where everything is known, I see His vanishing 
emblems, His white spire and flag-pole sticking out above the fog, 
like old white china doorknobs, sad, slight, useless things to calm the mad.

Hammering military splendor, 
top-heavy Goliath in full armor—
little redemption in the mass
liquidations of their brass,
elephant and phalanx moving
with the times and still improving.
when that kingdom hit the crash:
a million foreskins stacked like trash ...

Sing softer!  But what if a new
diminuendo brings no true
tenderness, only restlessness,
excess, the hunger for success,
sanity or self-deception
fixed and kicked by reckless caution,
while we listen to the bells—
anywhere, but somewhere else!

O to break loose.  All life's grandeur
is something with a girl in summer ...
elated as the President
girdled by his establishment
this Sunday morning, free to chaff
his own thoughts with his bear-cuffed staff,
swimming nude, unbuttoned, sick
of his ghost-written rhetoric!

No weekends for the gods now.  Wars
flicker, earth licks its open sores,
fresh breakage, fresh promotions, chance
assassinations, no advance.
Only man thinning out his kind
sounds through the Sabbath noon, the blind
swipe of the pruner and his knife
busy about the tree of life ...
Pity the planet, all joy gone
from this sweet volcanic cone;
peace to our children when they fall
in small war on the heels of small
war—until the end of time
to police the earth, a ghost
orbiting forever lost
in our monotonous sublime.