Midway through my freshman year at college, my roommate, Roger, asked if I would read a poem he’d written and tell him what I thought. I was pleased to be considered a literary person whose opinion might be valued. And my roommate, who would major in geology, had previously shown no interest in poetry. “Of course,” I said.

The subject of the poem was the death of Roger’s father, and I felt a small shock in reading it, since no one I knew had yet lost a parent. Unfortunately, Roger’s poem was a very bad poem. I don’t now remember the various ways in which it failed, but there seemed no doubt in my mind. Given the subject, however, what kind of criticism would be appropriate or bearable?

I began by expressing my condolences, and Roger interrupted quickly to say, No, his father hadn’t really died. That was just the subject of the poem. “But you can’t do that!” I exclaimed. Perhaps I didn’t actually exclaim, or even say it directly. But it was what I felt. This was wrong, a violation of some rule or code. You couldn’t do it, or you shouldn’t.

But why not? What if the poem had been good? Would I have condemned it because it wasn’t “true”? Would factual truth have been transformed into a larger “truth” (quotation marks intended), determined by literary value? This essay is an attempt to think about these questions.

Roger’s poem was called “On the Death of My Father,” a title that laid the subject out, and announced the identity of the speaker. I entered the poem with certain information, but also a series of assumptions about the truth. A somewhat similar—but finally very different—example is this sonnet by Weldon Kees.
For My Daughter

Looking into my daughter’s eyes I read
Beneath the innocence of morning flesh
Concealed, hintings of death she does not heed.
Coldest of winds have blown this hair, and mesh
Of seaweed snarled these miniatures of hands;
The night’s slow poison, tolerant and bland,
Has moved her blood. Parched years that I have seen
That may be hers appear: foul, lingering
Death in certain war, the slim legs green.
Or, fed on hate, she relishes the sting
Of others’ agony; perhaps the cruel
Bride of a syphilitic or a fool.
These speculations sour in the sun.
I have no daughter. I desire none.

The shock of the last line depends upon the reader’s assumption that the poet has a daughter, that the title, in other words, tells the truth. A more accurate title, like “Unpleasant Speculations About Fatherhood,” wouldn’t sufficiently prepare for the twist at the end. (How effective this move remains on repeated readings is a separate problem.) But there’s no doubt that the final two sentences, on a first reading, are a significant surprise, and that the surprise depends upon an assumption about factual truth. I suspect that even readers who are theoretically disposed to keeping truth inside a set of quotation marks, who believe all “truths” are inventions, would be taken in by Kees’s poem. The title is, after all, so conventional it doesn’t seem to be hiding anything; it doesn’t feel like a concept anyone would want to challenge. However wary we have become as readers, no one begins a poem entitled “For My Wife” by immediately wondering if the poet really has a wife. We can’t be suspicious of everything.

We feel manipulated by Kees but not betrayed. If the poem is at all successful, the bleakness of its conclusion also produces a kind of literary pleasure, the reward of the sprung trap. And in this way the subject of the poem enlarges to include, beyond the poet’s despairing sense of life, the nature of readerly expectation and response. Poems that correct themselves within themselves, as Kees’s poem does at the last minute, stake out a territory in which claims about the truth are important. At about the same time I came upon Donald Finkel’s poem, “Target Practice,” which begins:
On the first day good enough father and son
Went out with the new gun
And rode for miles in Iowa.

No. That spring, city-bred and new to sun,
We went out in the car in Iowa
And parked at last between
Two farms and walked, through mud, to the place.

Neither is right, the fiction
or the fact. It is as if
What happened were good enough . . .

Finkel’s “No” was a revelation for me. The poem wasn’t just about how fiction tries to improve on fact, or how memory is fiction; it was a dramatization of those concerns. The first stanza invites belief just as Kees’s title did—a story, third-person narrative, set in a real place, Iowa. Then what it gave it takes away: No. Think again. Try it a different way. After this move, the speculation (“Neither is right . . .”) feels somewhat disappointing, as if the poem were saying: Well, we’ve had our metaphysical fun, now let’s figure this out. Finkel does manage to complicate this mode, but it’s the beginning of the poem that still arrests me: the excitement of fact giving way to fiction, of the imagined trying to do the work of the merely true.

Inept as Roger’s poem about his father was line by line, its major disappointment was that it hadn’t tried to use the lie it gave itself. The elegy for the father who isn’t dead is a compelling premise. But the literal truth has to be replaced by an emotional truth. Perhaps the father is in all ways dead to the son except that he hasn’t actually died. The poem needs to find a way to acknowledge this, not because it’s an obligation to set the record straight, but because the poem doesn’t work without finding some way to expand the lie to involve the reader. Still, what if it hadn’t chosen that route and had just been written better? If I had read “Elegy for My Father” in a magazine, and I knew nothing about the poet, and I was moved, and never learned it was all an invention, would I have been wrong to be moved? If I learned the facts, would I feel betrayal, or admiration? I don’t remember when I first read Robert Lowell’s Paris Review interview, and discovered that “Skunk Hour” wasn’t altogether true, that the incident of voyeurism in the graveyard was “not mine, but borrowed from an anecdote about Walt Whitman in his old age.” When I read Lowell’s interview I was preparing
to teach the poem in the context of “confessionalism,” and all (or at least many) of the confessional poets’ anger at being so defined. (When asked in his interview in the *Paris Review* how he reacted to the label of “confessional poet,” John Berryman replied, “With rage and contempt! Next question.”)

The Walt Whitman anecdote generates useful questions for a teacher. I knew Lowell suffered from manic breakdowns, so the essence of the poem was real, and his own. Was it somehow permissible to invent small facts but not large ones? The success of the poem, and its fame, and its important position as the “anchor poem” (as Lowell says) in an immensely influential book, *Life Studies*, all combine to complicate the issue. Lowell himself complicates it further in the interview:

> They’re not always factually true. There’s a good deal of tinkering with fact. You leave out a lot, and emphasize this and not that. Your actual experience is a complete flux. I’ve invented facts and changed things, and the whole balance of the poem was something invented. So there’s a lot of artistry, I hope, in the poems. Yet there’s this thing: if a poem is autobiographical—and this is true of any kind of autobiographical writing and of historical writing—you want the reader to say, this is true. In something like MacCaulay’s *History of England* you think you’re really getting William III. That’s as good as a good plot in a novel. And so there was always that standard of truth which you wouldn’t have in poetry—the reader was to believe he was getting the real Robert Lowell.

The “standard of truth” Lowell chooses for himself is not fidelity to biographical fact, but the appearance of fidelity. Lowell’s brief segue into the second person—“You leave out a lot, and emphasize this and not that.”—suggests an awareness that he knows he’s speaking in part for poets in general. Therefore the representation of the self in a poem is always a kind of fiction. No matter how rigorous the poet may be in choosing accurate facts, those facts have been selected according to a design determined by the poem. The life is long and messy, the poem short and revisable. The “whole balance” of every poem is always an invention. The poet selects from the flux of actual experience, and when that experience doesn’t provide the right example, the poet gives himself permission to borrow or invent.

But even if the poet denied himself that permission, the process of selection, balance, and arrangement are products of the imagination. Lowell’s particular
project in *Life Studies* makes the additional demand that the reader be unaware of the “tinkering with fact.” *Life Studies* claims the authority of history: “the reader was to believe he was getting the *real* Robert Lowell.”

Readers did believe, as did critics, and so “Confessionalism”—a movement no one really wanted to be in—was created. This often meant (among the weaker poets) that artistry was ignored in favor of personal revelation. Real truth would carry the day. Lowell suggests that in “any kind” of autobiographical and historical writing “you want the reader to say, this is true.” The writer who presents his work as fiction, however much it makes use of the autobiographical, tells the reader to pay attention to the work itself. The *transformation* of the personal is what’s important. By making the opposite assertion—conflating speaker and poet to present “the real,” Lowell risks personal confession overwhelming artistry, not in the making of the poem but for some readers of it.

For example, the poet Phillip Booth, who owned a house in Castine and knew Lowell, tells a story of meeting in a laundromat in Castine “a vacationing school-teacher from Bangor, a woman I grew up with.” “You write poetry sometimes, don’t you?” the woman says, and Booth admits he does. “Will you tell me,” the woman continues, “*how* a poet like Mr. Lowell can be so famous when he can’t even get Jimmy Sawyer on the right island? . . . Everybody knows that that woman on Nautilus Island [in “Skunk Hour”] never had children, and that Jimmy Sawyer keeps the farm for Miss Harris over on Holbrook Island! Now you tell me, how can a poet like that get so famous?” How could a “famous” poet get the facts so wrong? And how can we believe anything he has to say if he can’t get his islands straight? The factual truth is the bottom line for her.

Whereas the fictive immediately calls attention to form, the autobiographical is essentially shapeless. The fictive is enclosed by the apprehensible form of the poem, story, or novel. But there’s always more autobiography, and the presiding shape is the life itself. Or seems to be. Biographical detail can disguise the assertion of form, as if a life were merely anecdote and gossip, and the issue of form is at the heart of *Life Studies*.

In *Life Studies* the book, “Life Studies” the sequence is preceded by a prose memoir, “91 Revere Street,” which should be read as an essential part of both book and sequence. “91 Revere Street” (now too often separated from its book and included in Lowell’s prose) seems to provide background material, and it does. It’s lively, entertaining, and poignant by itself. But in context it asserts itself

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as a “standard of truth,” the believability of prose.

On the whole, Lowell said in the interview, “prose is less cut off from life than poetry is.” Whether or not this is true is less important than the fact that it seems to be true. Prose is diffuse, like life; poetry is a fine distillation. While Lowell’s prose is wonderfully controlled, “91 Revere Street” is designed to appear both diffuse and incomplete. It doesn’t move in a straight line but circles around, as if trying to describe or define or even uncover its real subject. Its amiability and pacing put the reader off-guard, attentive to details and anecdotes for their own sakes, lulled by the pleasures of good story-telling. Readers may complain that the prose holds up the book. It does, and is intended to.

The book’s final section escapes from “91 Revere Street.” The movement from prose back into poetry emphasizes the properties of a poem as a poem. The “truth” of experience (that is, of prose) is set in a tension with the artifice of poetry. But both are concerned with the issue—indeed the drama—of form. While working on these poems, Lowell says he came to “have a certain disrespect for the tight forms.” Regularity “just seemed to ruin the honesty of sentiment, and became rhetorical; it said, ‘I’m a poem.’”

However, Lowell doesn’t choose to abandon form as much as disguise it. The prosiness of free verse is set against the partially deconstructed architecture of rhyme and meter. In “Commander Lowell,” for example, Lowell speaks of the usefulness of “the original skeleton” of four-foot couplets. “I could keep the couplets where I wanted them and drop them when I didn’t; there’d be a form to come back to.” The ghosts of form in the “Life Studies” sequence are linked to the apparent lack of form in the prose of “91 Revere Street,” making the book as a whole about the attempts to find form—and therefore meaning—within a life, or to impose it on a life.

The structures of privilege so hauntingly displayed in “91 Revere Street” are falling apart, even as the young Lowell can’t see it happening. The mother clings to what the father cannot support, what the house and the history of the family cannot support, and what is passed on from parents to child is the desire for a structure that is always falling apart. In “91 Revere Street,” appropriately named for the place that contains them, the process leads to Commander Harkness’s crude remark at the end: “I know why young Bob is an only child.” After the brief, ominous pause of Part Three—four elegiac poems about writers—the apparent calm and comfort of anecdotal prose releases the “Life Studies” poems.
in a fury of incident, so that the individual, the poet, the real Robert Lowell we have been asked to believe in, is all but overwhelmed. The death of Uncle Devereux Winslow is followed by the death of the grandparents, then of the father, then the mother, which is followed by (or leads to) Lowell’s own madness and hospitalization, the birth of his daughter, the tensions in his marriage, and finally “Skunk Hour.”

Earlier in this essay, before the swerve into “Skunk Hour,” I asked a question I didn’t answer: If I had read my roommate’s elegy for his father in a magazine (assuming that it was a much better poem), and I was moved, and then later learned it was all an invention, would I feel betrayal or admiration? I’m still not sure how I would answer, and perhaps that’s because I’ve set up too simple a situation.

If I admired the poem before, why should the literal truth cause me to change my mind? Shouldn’t I continue to admire it as a poem? But how would I feel if, after many readings of Life Studies, I learned that Lowell had had a wonderfully happy childhood, never suffered from manic breakdowns, had always made his home in Iowa, and never even visited Boston or Maine?

Two responses spring to mind:

1) What an imagination that guy has!
2) What a fraud that guy is!

Both seem inevitable, while neither feels adequate. I could imagine thinking, I wish I hadn’t known that, the way we feel when we discover a favorite writer was a member of the Nazi party. But isn’t disappointment in the person different from concerns about his art? Why should the art change? Two responses again spring to mind:

1) Because the art does change, unless we can wholly separate it from its creator.
2) Because the allure of this particular piece of art—Life Studies—was the promise of the personal, since we were carefully led to believe we were getting “the real Robert Lowell.”

The personal, of course, was not the end, but the means. Self-revelation is a strategy. Therefore, should discovering that we weren’t getting the real Robert Lowell change anything? Should poems tell the truth? The easy answer to that
question is: Yes, but the truth of poetry is different from the truth of life. Then the interesting complications lie in the word “different.”

An early draft of “Skunk Hour” titled “Inspiration” ends with a single skunk:

My headlights glare
On a galvanized bucket crumpling up—
A skunk glares in a garbage pail.
It jabs its trowel-head in a cup
Of sour cream, drops its ostrich tail,
And cannot scare

The final version has a family of skunks:

I stand on top
of our back steps and breathe the rich air—
a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail.
She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
and will not scare.

No one would be troubled if it were shown that Lowell actually saw only one skunk, or that actually he saw a raccoon and changed it to a family of skunks for the sake of the poem. Few would be upset if it were discovered that Lowell made the whole ending up, or that it was yet another anecdote ascribed to Walt Whitman in his old age.

In the poem Lowell declares, “My mind’s not right.” And I’ve suggested that we might justifiably feel betrayed should it be revealed that Lowell’s mind was always right and his life untroubled. But this leads us to a worrisome proposition: Big things count, small ones don’t. And that may be true. But it also doesn’t feel adequate. Let’s avoid the matter for the moment by returning to Weldon Kees, whose poem asks us to maneuver among different kinds of truths, finally acknowledging itself as literally made-up. In this way the stakes of the poem are changed. The apparent subject—the horrors Kees imagines for his daughter—gives way to the act of invention, and the reader’s complicity in that act.

This leads back to one assertion, if not exactly one conclusion: that a successful poem must in some way acknowledge the reader. Young poets frequently assume
that a poem is a conversation between themselves and the words that for them embody their feelings. The reader then becomes either a sympathetic confidant—like a roommate—or someone who can make whatever he or she wants to make out of those words, which were never intended to be communicative, even as they were designed to contain the poet’s emotions. The writer essentially says, “So you thought of death rather than love with my image of the wind in the trees and the frightened porcupine. Well, that’s cool, you can read it any way you want.” But shouldn’t a poem have specific designs upon a reader’s imagination and intelligence? As Paul Valéry writes in “Poetry and Abstract Thought”: “A poet’s function—do not be startled by this remark—is not to experience the poetic state: that is a private affair. His function is to create it in others.” Yet young writers are often startled by that remark. The poem is made for the reader, and is sent out into the world to do its work as best it can, and without any intervention from the author. As Richard Wilbur has said, the poem is “a kind of machine of feeling which other people can use.” The rest is private.

So the truth of a poem is the poem’s truth. But if it uses facts from the poet’s life, it needs to manage those facts for the reader. What really happened may be of great interest to the poet and his family and friends, but the poem can’t count on that truth for its truth. And the reverse is also the case: the poem can’t count on falsehood—or, let’s say, invented truth—unless it takes the reader’s presence and responses into account. That still does not answer the question of Big Invention vs. Small Invention, a reconstituted life vs. an extra skunk or two. But I think figuring the reader into the equation may give us a way of approaching these complications.

In an interview in 1916 for the Philadelphia Public Ledger, Robert Frost is quoted as saying, “Never larrup an emotion. Set yourself against the moon. Resist the moon. If the moon’s going to do anything to you, it’s up to the moon.” The composition of a poem “must be a revelation,” Frost writes in “The Figure a Poem Makes,” “or a series of revelations, as much for the poet as for the reader.” In the 1916 interview Frost ends by becoming even more provocative. “The curse of our poetry,” he says, “is that we lay it on things. Pocketsful of poetic adjectives like pocketsful of peanuts carried into a park for the gray squirrels! You can take it as gospel, that’s not what we want. But people say to me: ‘The facts aren’t enough. You’ve got to do something to them, haven’t you? They can’t be poetical unless a poet handles them.’ To that I have a very simple answer. It’s this: ‘Anything you do to the facts falsifies them, but anything the facts do to you—you, yes, even against your will; yes, resist them with all your strength—transforms
How exactly can we think about this claim concerning the action of facts? First of all, I don’t find this to be “a very simple answer.” Nor is the question simple, which I believe Frost knew. It all seems to me a set-up, passing off sophisticated thinking as mere “Yankee wisdom.” I find it impossible to imagine any person—not to mention more than one—actually saying to Frost, “The facts aren’t enough. You’ve got to do something to them . . .” And so on. We’re tricked into agreement without really knowing what we’ve agreed to.

Another sort of trick here is Frost’s move from “poetical” to “poetry.” The writer who merely “handles” the facts can only enhance them into the “poetical,” a kind of false, pretentious language that ends up being at best comfortable and pretty rather than challenging and beautiful. This is the writer with his pockets full of adjectives to lay on the things of the world like a glittery veneer. The revelation Frost calls for requires struggle. Truth does not precede the making of the poem but is discovered in it through resistance to those truths that are too easy and predictable.

“Anything you do to the facts falsifies them.” But surely this doesn’t include changing a raccoon into a skunk, or one skunk into a family of skunks—at least not on any consequential level. The key seems to be in the reversal: “. . . anything the facts do to you . . . transforms them into poetry.” The facts—the literal truth—must be allowed to act upon the poet. The poet cannot simply accept them because they are “true” in a literal way. The making of the poem is a difficult engagement with those facts, and out of this engagement—in which what was the truth of the life becomes material—the truth of the poem emerges. Lowell’s discovery that a family of skunks enormously improved his poem over a single skunk is a good example, therefore, not of falsifying the facts, but of discovering the truth inside the fact that transforms mere incident into art.

Presented this way the issue of the “truth” becomes a matter of artistic strategy: how to best negotiate with the reader, whose relation to the poem is similar to the poet’s relation to his material. (“No surprise for the writer,” Frost says, “no surprise for the reader.”) But I’d also wish to assert a moral dimension here. I’m not thinking of a poem that we might label as “immoral” because of its subject matter, or more precisely, its attitude toward its subject matter—a poem written to advance the Nazi agenda, for example, or to defend slavery. I’m thinking of the poem’s relation to its author—that struggle with the facts. My roommate’s
elegy for his still-living father was not an immoral poem, however bad it was, however good it might have been. His engagement with the fact of the living father may simply have been thoughtless, or the result of a creative writing assignment (geared, perhaps, to point to the value of a persona). Or it may have had larger, moral consequences which remained unavailable to the reader because they were invisible to the author. If we consider the relationship between the poet and his or her materials, we enter treacherous territory, especially if we want to make claims about what that relationship should be.

What is my relationship to the claims I’m making in this essay? The poems which you, reader, trust I’ve quoted correctly (and I have), allow you the freedom to disagree or concur with whatever I’ve said. But I imagine you accepted my anecdote about Roger as true. And it’s not. Well, it’s partly true, and I doubt if the degree of truth here would change your mind about the arguments of the essay. You wouldn’t exclaim: No, you can’t do that! And I needn’t have admitted it, and wouldn’t have, except that it seemed like a nice turn at this point in the essay. Someone else in my dorm that year showed me “On the Death of My Father,” then told me his father hadn’t died. I’ve forgotten his name. “Roger” came to mind, so Roger it was. I wanted a name to make the story more concrete, even more believable. Of course I could have made the whole anecdote up. Or just kept quiet about the “truth” of it.

At some point in the act of composition, Robert Lowell must have thought it would be useful to try the “truth” of more than one skunk. Then I imagine he felt what a fine discovery that was—the way the mother and her kittens enlarge the moment, creating a family for the previously lost and desperate man who now watches them from “on top of our back steps” [emphasis mine], and who breathes an air that has become “rich” with the possibilities of survival. “Truth” becomes truth.

In his remark about prose being “less cut off from life than poetry,” Lowell certainly intends a critique of the constraints of his earlier highly formal work. To allow the aura of prose into his poems moved them closer to life and colloquial language. But it’s useful to think that there’s a value in poetry being more “cut off from life,” which returns us to Frost, who asserts the necessity of a resistance to “the facts” of one’s life, so that those facts can be transformed into poetry. True poetry for the writer is located in the act of transformation. What the reader encounters is the poem’s staged reenactment of what the poet, through resistance, once discovered.