

PARODY



Clive James

(1939- )

from "Robert Lowell's Notebook" (1986)

*Notes for a Sonnet*

Stalled before my metal shaving mirror  
With a locked razor in my hand I think of Tantalus  
Whose lake retreats below the fractured lip  
Of my will. Splinter the groined eyeballs of our sin,  
Ford Madox Ford: you on the Quaker golf-course  
In Nantucket double-dealt your practiced lies  
Flattering the others and me we'd be great poets.  
How wrong you were in their case. And now Nixon,  
Nixon rolls in the harpoon ropes and smashes with his flukes  
The frail gunwales of our beleaguered art. What  
Else remains now but your England, Ford? There's not  
Much Lowell-praise left in Mailer but could be Alvarez  
Might still write that book. In the skunk-hour  
My mind's not right. But there will be  
Fifty-six new sonnets by tomorrow night.

*Revised Notes for a Sonnet*

On the steps of the Pentagon I tucked my skull  
Well down between my knees, thinking of Cordell Hull  
Cabot Lodge Van du Plessis Stuyvesant, our gardner,  
Who'd stop me playing speedway in the red-and-rust  
Model A Ford that got clapped out on Cape Cod  
And wound up as a seed-shed. Oh my God, my God,  
How this administration bleeds but will not die,

Hacking at the rib-cage of our art. You were wrong, R. P.  
Blackmur. Some of the others had our insight, too:  
Though I suppose I had endurance, toughness, faith,  
Sensitivity, intelligence and talent. My mind's not right.  
With groined, sinning eyeballs I write sonnets until dawn  
Is published over London like a row of books by Faber--  
Then shave myself with Uncle's full-dress sabre.

*Notes for a Revised Sonnet*

Slicing my head off shaving I think of Charles I  
Bowling to the groined eyeball of Cromwell's sinning will.  
Think too of Orpheus, whose disembodied head  
Dumped by the Bacchants floated singing in the river,  
His love for Eurydice surviving her dumb move  
By many sonnets. Decapitation wouldn't slow me down  
By more than a hundred lines a day. R. P. and F. M. F.  
Play eighteen holes together in my troubled mind,  
Ford faking his card, Blackmur explicating his,  
And what is love? John Berryman, if you'd had what it took  
We could have both blown England open. Now, alone,  
With a plush new set-up to move into and shake down,  
I snow-job Stephen Spender while the liquor flows like lava  
In the parlour of the Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava.