

I N I T I A L O U T L A Y



C L I V E J A M E S

I take off my disguise and thus reveal
The man I used to be but now am not.
Surely when I made mirth I was less real
Than I am now. Before this thing I've got
Made laughter hard, I used to spread around
My sunny nature with a liberal hand:
Not overdoing it, you understand,
But eager to amuse, if not astound.

My death came very near, and out of that
I also tried to make a joke, but then
Death didn't happen and the joke fell flat,
And bit by bit I came alive again.
I still faced doom, but when that day would be
Was back in question. Thus I shared the case
Of anyone at all, since all must face
That imprecisely distant certainty.

Winter again, but low on snow and ice.
My lungs are less taxed than they might have been.
The distant thunder of the rolling dice
Grows silent, as if death had quit the scene.
At this rate I will still be here in spring,
And that will make, since I fell ill, six years
I wasn't meant to have. I could shed tears
For what I've lost, but I've gained everything:

My family built this house for me just so
That I may read and write. No doubt my last
Lines will be written here. For all I know,
That means tomorrow, but for now the past,

So vivid in my mind, suggests I might
Consider both men real, the cock-a-hoop
Rapsallion and this old crock with the stoop
Who sits and scrawls away the live-long night,

Making a neat design of penitence,
Transmuting shame into a melody,
As if the senseless paved the way for sense
Or craft made up for infidelity,
And all that heartbreak were the price for this
That I at last can do now, having learned
The truth about the cost for all concerned
Of my apprenticeship in artifice.