

NOT FORGETTING
GEORGE RUSSELL



C L I V E J A M E S

How funny, in the sense of not being funny,
It ought to be that here, on the nut farm –
A Cambridge feature Rupert Brooke left out
For obvious reasons –
In a cool morning when all except the nurses
Are tranked out of their skulls,
I haunt the kitchen reading an old essay,
Trying to find my tone again –
The one about Ernst Robert Curtius,
The only modern scholar you called great –
In praise of Dante's long love for his teacher.
You were Brunetto and I . . . Well, let that pass,
Though we, of course, were butch as panther sweat.

Ten years ago, when you were still alive
If only just, we met for one last time
When I came out to get my Hodgins medal,
The literary gong that I most prize.
It's only justice if Les cops the Nobel,
Don't you agree? They say the A380
Airbus was built for getting him to Stockholm.
When he gets given it, it might do something
To tame our literati's national sense
Of isolation that you found so foolish:
You that inhabited no other boundaries
Save those of Christendom.

From Adelaide I day-tripped to Mildura
And then by car out to Cullulleraine,
A six-house town parked in the open mulga
Where, in an easy chair on the veranda,
You lay with cling-film skin, and Isobel
Controlled the cakes: "Another Lamington?"
"There can't be more," I said. "The world supply
Is here," you whispered. Loving to be teased,
She knew that these jokes might well be the last,
As you, the master of the *ars moriendi*,
Took in, with ruined lungs, just enough air
To prove you could still smile.

"Waste no time saying what need not be said"
Was what you'd taught me, but I had a plan:
A subtle plan for doing Dante over
In English. But you had enough to cope with
Just being proud of my wife, rising star
Of the Società Dantesca,
A ruthless *cosa nostra*. The prettiest
Of all your brilliant creatures had to shoot
Her way into that place and wade in blood.

I'm sure she told you, loving you as always,
When she came out to see you. But it's time
For my Caped Hero to come bursting forth:
I, Dante, Flash of Lightning! At a cinema
Near you! I wonder if there is one. Never mind:
Books need no screens. This fanfare is a token
Of how I valued all the times we spoke:
Something to leave with you as I now leave you,
The same way you invariably left us
With some new thrill to chase up: Hindemith,
Matisse, Stravinsky . . . any works that burn
The brain like that are works of God, you said:
They speak of what He lost. And now at last
So say I, weeping, by my tears made blind,
As the nurse comes with her cup of colours
And your thin outline melts into the smoke.