

T. S. ELIOT [1888–1965]

## The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

Born and raised in St. Louis, T. S. [Thomas Stearns] Eliot (1888–1965) went to prep school in Massachusetts and then to Harvard University, where he earned an M.A. in philosophy in 1910 and started his doctoral dissertation. He studied at the Sorbonne, in Paris, and then in Marburg, Germany, in 1914, when the war forced him to leave. Relocating to Oxford, he abandoned philosophy for poetry, and he married. After teaching and working in a bank, he became an editor at Faber and Faber and editor of the journal *Criterion* and was the dominant force in English poetry for several decades. He became a British citizen and a member of the Church of England in 1927. He won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1948. He also wrote plays and essays as well as a series of poems on cats that became the basis of a musical by Andrew Lloyd Weber. The Eliot poems included in this anthology show the poet's use of collage techniques to relate the fragmentation he saw in the culture and individual psyches of his day.

*S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse  
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.  
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo  
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,  
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*<sup>o</sup>

Let us go then, you and I,  
When the evening is spread out against the sky  
Like a patient etherised upon a table;

**Epigraph:** "If I thought that my answer were being made to someone who would ever return to earth, this flame would remain without further movement; but since no one has ever returned alive from this depth, if what I hear is true, I answer you without fear of infamy" (Dante, *Inferno* 27.61–66). Dante encounters Guido de Montefeltro in the eighth circle of hell, where souls are trapped within flames (tongues of fire) as punishment for giving evil counsel. Guido tells Dante details about his evil life only because he assumes that Dante is on his way to an even deeper circle in hell and will never return to earth and be able to repeat what he has heard.

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,  
 The muttering retreats 5  
 Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels  
 And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:  
 Streets that follow like a tedious argument  
 Of insidious intent  
 To lead you to an overwhelming question . . . 10  
 Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"  
 Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go  
 Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes, 15  
 The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes  
 Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,  
 Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,  
 Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,  
 Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap, 20  
 And seeing that it was a soft October night,  
 Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.

And indeed there will be time  
 For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,  
 Rubbing its back upon the window-panes; 25  
 There will be time, there will be time  
 To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;  
 There will be time to murder and create,  
 And time for all the works and days<sup>o</sup> of hands  
 That lift and drop a question on your plate; 30  
 Time for you and time for me,  
 And time yet for a hundred indecisions,  
 And for a hundred visions and revisions,  
 Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go 35  
 Talking of Michelangelo.

And indeed there will be time  
 To wonder, "Do I dare?" and, "Do I dare?"  
 Time to turn back and descend the stair,

29. *works and days*: *Works and Days* is the title of a didactic poem about farming by the Greek poet Hesiod (eighth century B.C.E.) that includes instruction about doing each task at the proper time.

With a bald spot in the middle of my hair— 40  
 [They will say: “How his hair is growing thin!”]  
 My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,  
 My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—  
 [They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”]  
 Do I dare 45  
 Disturb the universe?  
 In a minute there is time  
 For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.  
  
 For I have known them all already, known them all:—  
 Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, 50  
 I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;  
 I know the voices dying with a dying fall<sup>o</sup>  
 Beneath the music from a farther room.  
 So how should I presume?  
  
 And I have known the eyes already, known them all— 55  
 The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
 And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
 When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
 Then how should I begin  
 To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? 60  
 And how should I presume?  
  
 And I have known the arms already, known them all—  
 Arms that are braceleted and white and bare  
 [But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]  
 Is it perfume from a dress 65  
 That makes me so digress?  
 Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.  
 And should I then presume?  
 And how should I begin?  
  
 . . .  
  
 Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets 70  
 And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes  
 Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? . . .  
  
 I should have been a pair of ragged claws  
 Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

52. a **dying fall**: An allusion to Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* (1.1.4): “That strain [of music] again! It had a dying fall” (a cadence that falls away).

• • •

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully! 75  
 Smoothed by long fingers,  
 Asleep . . . tired . . . or it malingers,  
 Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.  
 Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,  
 Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis? 80  
 But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,  
 Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought in upon a  
 platter;<sup>o</sup>  
 I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;  
 I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,  
 And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker, 85  
 And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
 After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,  
 Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,  
 Would it have been worth while, 90  
 To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
 To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
 To roll it toward some overwhelming question,  
 To say: "I am Lazarus,<sup>o</sup> come from the dead,  
 Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"— 95  
 If one, settling a pillow by her head,  
 Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.  
 That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,  
 Would it have been worth while, 100  
 After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,  
 After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the  
 floor—  
 And this, and so much more?—  
 It is impossible to say just what I mean!  
 But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen: 105  
 Would it have been worth while  
 If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,

82. head . . . platter: As a reward for dancing before King Herod, Salome, his stepdaughter, asked for the head of John the Baptist to be presented to her on a platter (Matthew 14:1–12; Mark 6:17–28).

94. Lazarus: Either the beggar Lazarus, who in Luke 16:19–31 did not return from the dead, or Jesus' friend Lazarus, who did (John 11:1–44).

And turning toward the window, should say:

“That is not it at all,

That is not what I meant, at all.”

110

• • •

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;

Am an attendant lord, one that will do

To swell a progress,<sup>o</sup> start a scene or two,

Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,

Deferential, glad to be of use,

115

Politic, cautious, and meticulous;

Full of high sentence,<sup>o</sup> but a bit obtuse;

*sententiousness*

At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—

Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old . . . I grow old . . .

120

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.<sup>o</sup>

*turned up, with cuffs*

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

125

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves

Combing the white hair of the waves blown back

When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea

By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown

130

Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

[1917]

113. **progress:** Ceremonial journey made by a royal court.