

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
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 ...
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,
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,
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;
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 of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
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
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,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair--
(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
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,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.
So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all--
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?
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
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
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.

* * *

And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
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?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head (grown slightly bald) brought in upon a platter,
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,
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,

To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"--
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,
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:
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
"That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all."

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;
Am an attendant lord, one that will do
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,
Deferential, glad to be of use,
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous--
Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old ... I grow old ...
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

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.

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
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

■ T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

¹ Now the Philistines fought against Israel; the Israelites fled before them, and many fell slain on Mount Gilboa. ² The Philistines pressed hard after Saul and his sons, and they killed his sons Jonathan, Abinadab and Malki-Shua. ³ The fighting grew fierce around Saul, and when the archers overtook him, they wounded him critically.

⁴ Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and run me through, or these uncircumcised fellows will come and run me through and abuse me."

But his armor-bearer was terrified and would not do it; so Saul took his own sword and fell on it. ⁵ When the armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he too fell on his sword and died with him. ⁶ So Saul and his three sons and his armor-bearer and all his men died together that same day.

■ 1 Samuel 31:1-6

Lately, I have been wondering what Saul made of his life at the end of it. There, standing on some hill, swaying with fatigue, pierced by many arrows—what did he think as he watched his armies drown in a sea of Philistines? What did he think in those final moments as the messenger, sweaty and breathless, came pounding up the hard mountain path to cry out the death of his sons? The end of his line? The termination of his kingship?

Did he regret it? Did he wish he'd never been found amongst the donkeys and the baggage? Did he curse the day he let the prophet pour oil on his head?

A tall man and handsome, much admired by all who laid eyes on him, he was the one who had been appointed to serve the needs of the people—and the needs of Samuel's God. Oil spilling over his hair and beard. Oil dripping on his neck and clothing. Wet as though newborn, straining for his first breath. Born of need and clasping in the darkness, born to meet needs of goats and sheep and uncles, born to rule an ornery people in an enterprise that was doomed from the start.

And now, driven by so many needs—but most of all his own needs—Saul looks out over the wrack and ruin and sees that all of the needs he had sought to fulfill were empty, and meant nothing. The one thing he needed was the one thing he had refused: to step aside and let David come through as king.

He had known all along that the ruddy little shepherd boy would take the throne. He had known from the very beginning that no more did the favour of Yahweh pour down on him like oil from a ram's horn. The oil that had soaked him now dried up, crusting his clothes and shrinking them to his withered body. Though for forty-two years he was known as King of Israel, he was to all who knew, a royal impostor.

David, the man who, by oil, had been chosen to replace him had eluded him all these years. Twice he had been humiliated by the ruddy little shepherd boy. Twice, the desert fox had been near enough to kill him, but had stayed his hand. Why? Because the boy claimed obedience to some higher principle: he would not raise his hand against Yahweh's Anointed.

Stupid boy, he might have thought. The anointing is yours! I am an impostor. You may not be able to strike down Yahweh's Anointed, but I have no such qualms. If I had caught you, I would have murdered you in the name of clinging to what is not mine. But now, as the enemy presses in and the sword at my side hangs heavy on my hip, I am tired of playing King. The crown I have grasped with much need was a millstone in disguise. And now, I drown by it.

At first he cannot. He asks his armour-bearer to do it for him, but the man recoils at the thought. Then, his eyes fixed on his own ruin, Saul presses the tip of the sword

against his bloodied chest, and falls on it. And as he dies, the irony comes clear: *“David could not lay a hand Yahweh’s Anointed, but I can, and I have.”*

I wonder now what the tragic story of Saul might mean for we who cling so tightly to the things we know cannot be good for us. Saul clung to a sham of his Kingship to the bitter end. We will never know what might have happened to him if he had been able to step aside in humility for the ruddy little shepherd boy. Perhaps Saul would have known the firstfruits of redemption in his own life, and a peace of a different kind might have returned to him.

Yet all we know for sure, is what we know from the text, and the rest is left up to our imaginations as we wonder what might have been of Saul’s life if he had learned a little—no, a lot—of humility.

I often find myself wishing that I’d learned a lot of humility earlier in my life. Maybe I wouldn’t have chased so hard after a vain image of myself that I was trying to fulfill, but it all came too easily for me not to. I too know what it means to have oil dripping from my hair onto my neck. I too, know the hand of the prophet on my shoulder proclaiming some divine appointment. It is hard not to look back on the vicissitudes of a youth spent striving and wonder, *“what if I had chosen some other way?”* And more: what if, even now, I choose some other way? Not the way of self-aggrandizing. Not the way of Saul, clinging to his paper crown. Not the way of manipulating you to believe that I’m good or wise or even humble. What if, even now, I exercised a measure of humility and learned to step aside?

Yet, step aside for what? Is there something or someone greater waiting in the wings?

Yes. There always has been. And too often, I am in the way, thrusting myself in the limelight or in front of a microphone to draw attention to myself. This is my way; yet this is not the way of Christ, who shakes his head and smiles sadly as he says *“if anyone would come after me—pursue me, follow me, chase after me like the last rays of the setting sun— if anyone would come after me, they must take up their cross—the very instrument of their deaths.”*

This is not what I want to hear. I want to hear “Jesus is my co-pilot”. I want to hear that God will grant me the desires of my heart, the little wishes for this life that I whisper when I rub his lamp. But there are whispers that reply: *“lay it down, Ed. Lay it down, and surrender. What else can it mean to attain to the resurrection unless you first die?”* But it is the dying I am sorry for, and like J. Alfred Prufrock pacing the beach with his trousers rolled up, the decision to live in a real reality is one that I must make now, tomorrow, and every day after that. For if it is true that in order for a seed to bear much fruit that it must fall to the ground and die, then let this little seed, this little man—this ridiculous Fool—rest in Christ. Let Saul fall away, for David and his Kingdom are at hand.