

T.S. Eliot, "Four Quartets"  
Part II: East Coker

I

In my beginning is my end. In succession  
Houses rise and fall, crumble, are extended,  
Are removed, destroyed, restored, or in their place  
Is an open field, or a factory, or a by-pass.  
Old stone to new building, old timber to new fires,  
Old fires to ashes, and ashes to the earth  
Which is already flesh, fur and faeces,  
Bone of man and beast, cornstalk and leaf.  
Houses live and die: there is a time for building  
And a time for living and for generation  
And a time for the wind to break the loosened pane  
And to shake the wainscot where the field-mouse trots  
And to shake the tattered arras woven with a silent motto.

In my beginning is my end. Now the light falls  
Across the open field, leaving the deep lane  
Shuttered with branches, dark in the afternoon,  
Where you lean against a bank while a van passes,  
And the deep lane insists on the direction  
Into the village, in the electric heat  
Hypnotised. In a warm haze the sultry light  
Is absorbed, not refracted, by grey stone.  
The dahlias sleep in the empty silence.  
Wait for the early owl.

In that open field  
If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,  
On a summer midnight, you can hear the music  
Of the weak pipe and the little drum  
And see them dancing around the bonfire  
The association of man and woman  
In daunsinge, signifying matrimonie—  
A dignified and commodious sacrament.  
Two and two, necessarye coniunction,  
Holding eche other by the hand or the arm  
Whiche betokeneth concorde. Round and round the fire  
Leaping through the flames, or joined in circles,  
Rustically solemn or in rustic laughter  
Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes,

Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth  
Mirth of those long since under earth  
Nourishing the corn. Keeping time,  
Keeping the rhythm in their dancing  
As in their living in the living seasons  
The time of the seasons and the constellations  
The time of milking and the time of harvest  
The time of the coupling of man and woman  
And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling.  
Eating and drinking. Dung and death.

Dawn points, and another day  
Prepares for heat and silence. Out at sea the dawn wind  
Wrinkles and slides. I am here  
Or there, or elsewhere. In my beginning.

## II

What is the late November doing  
With the disturbance of the spring  
And creatures of the summer heat,  
And snowdrops writhing under feet  
And hollyhocks that aim too high  
Red into grey and tumble down  
Late roses filled with early snow?  
Thunder rolled by the rolling stars  
Simulates triumphal cars  
Deployed in constellated wars  
Scorpion fights against the Sun  
Until the Sun and Moon go down  
Comets weep and Leonids fly  
Hunt the heavens and the plains  
Whirled in a vortex that shall bring  
The world to that destructive fire  
Which burns before the ice-cap reigns.

That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory:  
A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion,  
Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle  
With words and meanings. The poetry does not matter.  
It was not (to start again) what one had expected.  
What was to be the value of the long looked forward to,  
Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity  
And the wisdom of age? Had they deceived us  
Or deceived themselves, the quiet-voiced elders,  
Bequeathing us merely a receipt for deceit?

The serenity only a deliberate hebetude,  
The wisdom only the knowledge of dead secrets  
Useless in the darkness into which they peered  
Or from which they turned their eyes. There is, it seems to us,  
At best, only a limited value  
In the knowledge derived from experience.  
The knowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies,  
For the pattern is new in every moment  
And every moment is a new and shocking  
Valuation of all we have been. We are only undeceived  
Of that which, deceiving, could no longer harm.  
In the middle, not only in the middle of the way  
But all the way, in a dark wood, in a bramble,  
On the edge of a grimpen, where is no secure foothold,  
And menaced by monsters, fancy lights,  
Risking enchantment. Do not let me hear  
Of the wisdom of old men, but rather of their folly,  
Their fear of fear and frenzy, their fear of possession,  
Of belonging to another, or to others, or to God.  
The only wisdom we can hope to acquire  
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.

The houses are all gone under the sea.

The dancers are all gone under the hill.

### III

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,  
The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,  
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,  
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,  
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,  
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into the dark,  
And dark the Sun and Moon, and the Almanach de Gotha  
And the Stock Exchange Gazette, the Directory of Directors,  
And cold the sense and lost the motive of action.  
And we all go with them, into the silent funeral,  
Nobody's funeral, for there is no one to bury.  
I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you  
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,  
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed  
With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness,  
And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant panorama  
And the bold imposing façade are all being rolled away—  
Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations

And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence  
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen  
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about;  
Or when, under ether, the mind is conscious but conscious of nothing—  
I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.  
Whisper of running streams, and winter lightning.  
The wild thyme unseen and the wild strawberry,  
The laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy  
Not lost, but requiring, pointing to the agony  
Of death and birth.

You say I am repeating  
Something I have said before. I shall say it again.  
Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there,  
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
    You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.  
In order to arrive at what you do not know  
    You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
In order to possess what you do not possess  
    You must go by the way of dispossession.  
In order to arrive at what you are not  
    You must go through the way in which you are not.  
And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
And what you own is what you do not own  
And where you are is where you are not.

#### IV

The wounded surgeon plies the steel  
That questions the distempered part;  
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel  
The sharp compassion of the healer's art  
Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.

Our only health is the disease  
If we obey the dying nurse  
Whose constant care is not to please  
But to remind of our, and Adam's curse,  
And that, to be restored, our sickness must grow worse.

The whole earth is our hospital

Endowed by the ruined millionaire,  
Wherein, if we do well, we shall  
Die of the absolute paternal care  
That will not leave us, but prevents us everywhere.

The chill ascends from feet to knees,  
The fever sings in mental wires.  
If to be warmed, then I must freeze  
And quake in frigid purgatorial fires  
Of which the flame is roses, and the smoke is briars.

The dripping blood our only drink,  
The bloody flesh our only food:  
In spite of which we like to think  
That we are sound, substantial flesh and blood—  
Again, in spite of that, we call this Friday good.

V

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years—  
Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres*  
Trying to use words, and every attempt  
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure  
Because one has only learnt to get the better of words  
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which  
One is no longer disposed to say it. And so each venture  
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate  
With shabby equipment always deteriorating  
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,  
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what there is to conquer  
By strength and submission, has already been discovered  
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope  
To emulate—but there is no competition—  
There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions  
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.  
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.

Home is where one starts from. As we grow older  
The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated  
Of dead and living. Not the intense moment  
Isolated, with no before and after,  
But a lifetime burning in every moment  
And not the lifetime of one man only  
But of old stones that cannot be deciphered.  
There is a time for the evening under starlight,

A time for the evening under lamplight  
(The evening with the photograph album).  
Love is most nearly itself  
When here and now cease to matter.  
Old men ought to be explorers  
Here or there does not matter  
We must be still and still moving  
Into another intensity  
For a further union, a deeper communion  
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,  
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters  
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.