



little gidding | t. s. eliot



little gidding
is
the last of
t. s. eliot's
four
quartets ...



little gidding, by t. s. eliot

i

midwinter spring is its own season
sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,
suspended in time, between pole and tropic.
when the short day is brightest, with frost and fire,
the brief sun flames the ice, on pond and ditches,
in windless cold that is the heart's heat,
reflecting in a watery mirror
a glare that is blindness in the early afternoon.
and glow more intense than blaze of branch, or brazier,
stirs the dumb spirit: no wind, but pentecostal fire
in the dark time of the year. between melting and freezing
the soul's sap quivers. there is no earth smell
or smell of living thing. this is the spring time
but not in time's covenant. now the hedgerow
is blanched for an hour with transitory blossom
of snow, a bloom more sudden
than that of summer, neither budding nor fading,
not in the scheme of generation.
where is the summer, the unimaginable zero summer ?

if you came this way,
taking the route you would be likely to take
from the place you would be likely to come from,
if you came this way in may time, you would find the hedges
white again, in may, with voluptuary sweetness.
it would be the same at the end of the journey,
if you came at night like a broken king,
if you came by day not knowing what you came for,
it would be the same, when you leave the rough road
and turn behind the pig-sty to the dull facade
and the tombstone. and what you thought you came for
is only a shell, a husk of meaning
from which the purpose breaks only when it is fulfilled
if at all. either you had no purpose
or the purpose is beyond the end you figured
and is altered in fulfilment. there are other places
which also are the world's end, some at the sea jaws,
or over a dark lake, in a desert or a city--
but this is the nearest, in place and time,
now and in england.

if you came this way,
taking any route, starting from anywhere,
at any time or at any season,
it would always be the same: you would have to put off
sense and notion. you are not here to verify,
instruct yourself, or inform curiosity
or carry report. you are here to kneel
where prayer has been valid. and prayer is more
than an order of words, the conscious occupation
of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying.
and what the dead had no speech for, when living,
they can tell you, being dead: the communication
of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living.
here, the intersection of the timeless moment
is england and nowhere. never and always.

ash on an old man's sleeve
is all the ash the burnt roses leave.
dust in the air suspended
marks the place where a story ended.
dust inbreathed was a house-
the walls, the wainscot and the mouse,
the death of hope and despair,
this is the death of air.

there are flood and drouth
over the eyes and in the mouth,
dead water and dead sand
contending for the upper hand.
the parched eviscerate soil
gapes at the vanity of toil,
laughs without mirth.
this is the death of earth.

water and fire succeed
the town, the pasture and the weed.
water and fire deride
the sacrifice that we denied.
water and fire shall rot
the marred foundations we forgot,
of sanctuary and choir.
this is the death of water and fire.

in the uncertain hour before the morning
near the ending of interminable night
at the recurrent end of the unending
after the dark dove with the flickering tongue
had passed below the horizon of his homing
while the dead leaves still rattled on like tin
over the asphalt where no other sound was
between three districts whence the smoke arose
i met one walking, loitering and hurried
as if blown towards me like the metal leaves
before the urban dawn wind unresisting.
and as I fixed upon the down-turned face
that pointed scrutiny with which we challenge
the first-met stranger in the waning dusk
i caught the sudden look of some dead master
whom i had known, forgotten, half recalled
both one and many; in the brown baked features
the eyes of a familiar compound ghost
both intimate and unidentifiable.
so i assumed a double part, and cried
and heard another's voice cry: "what ! are you here ?"
although we were not. i was still the same,
knowing myself yet being someone other--
and he a face still forming; yet the words sufficed
to compel the recognition they preceded.
and so, compliant to the common wind,
too strange to each other for misunderstanding,
in concord at this intersection time
of meeting nowhere, no before and after,
we trod the pavement in a dead patrol.

the day was breaking, in the disfigured street
he left me, with a kind of valediction,
and faded on the blowing of the horn.

iii

there are three conditions which often look alike
yet differ completely, flourish in the same hedgerow:
attachment to self and to things and to persons, detachment
from self and from things and from persons; and, growing between them, indifference
which resembles the others as death resembles life,
being between two lives - unflowering, between
the live and the dead nettle. this is the use of memory:
for liberation - not less of love but expanding
of love beyond desire, and so liberation
from the future as well as the past. thus, love of a country
begins as an attachment to our own field of action
and comes to find that action of little importance
though never indifferent. history may be servitude,
history may be freedom. see, now they vanish,
the faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
to become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.
sin is behovely, but
all shall be well, and
all manner of thing shall be well.
if i think, again, of this place,
and of people, not wholly commendable,
of not immediate kin or kindness,
but of some peculiar genius,
all touched by a common genius,
united in the strife which divided them;
if i think of a king at nightfall,
of three men, and more, on the scaffold
and a few who died forgotten
in other places, here and abroad,
and of one who died blind and quiet,
why should we celebrate
these dead men more than the dying ?

it is not to ring the bell backward
nor is it an incantation
to summon the spectre of a rose.
we cannot revive old factions
we cannot restore old policies
or follow an antique drum.
these men, and those who opposed them
and those whom they opposed
accept the constitution of silence
and are folded in a single party.
whatever we inherit from the fortunate
we have taken from the defeated
what they had to leave us - a symbol:
a symbol perfected in death.
and all shall be well and
all manner of thing shall be well
by the purification of the motive
in the ground of our beseeching.

iv

the dove descending breaks the air
with flame of incandescent terror
of which the tongues declare
the one discharge from sin and error.
the only hope, or else despair
lies in the choice of pyre of pyre-
to be redeemed from fire by fire.

who then devised the torment ? love.
love is the unfamiliar name
behind the hands that wove
the intolerable shirt of flame
which human power cannot remove.
we only live, only suspire
consumed by either fire or fire.

what we call the beginning is often the end
and to make an end is to make a beginning.
the end is where we start from. and every phrase
and sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
taking its place to support the others,
the word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
an easy commerce of the old and the new,
the common word exact without vulgarity,
the formal word precise but not pedantic,
the complete consort dancing together)
every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
every poem an epitaph. and any action
is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's throat
or to an illegible stone: and that is where we start.
we die with the dying:
see, they depart, and we go with them.
we are born with the dead:
see, they return, and bring us with them.
the moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree
are of equal duration. a people without history
is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern
of timeless moments. so, while the light fails
on a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel
history is now and england.

with the drawing of this love and the voice of this calling

we shall not cease from exploration
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.
through the unknown, unremembered gate
when the last of earth left to discover
is that which was the beginning;
at the source of the longest river
the voice of the hidden waterfall
and the children in the apple-tree

not known, because not looked for
but heard, half-heard, in the stillness
between two waves of the sea.
quick now, here, now, always--
a condition of complete simplicity
(costing not less than everything)
and all shall be well and
all manner of thing shall be well
when the tongues of flames are in-folded
into the crowned knot of fire
and the fire and the rose are one.