

THE LOVE-SONG  
of J. ALFRED PRUFROCK

*“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 worthwhile,  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball?”*

~ T.S. Eliot

*retiring for the night*

St. Mary's rectory, Little Cobiton,  
Cambridgeshire, England

DIARY OF LINTON ROSS-HOWARD  
THE WINTER SOLSTICE, DECEMBER 21, 2013

*It was twenty-nine years ago when an angel kissed me so hard on  
the mouth I almost believed in heaven, and so I've spent my life  
lusting after a man I could never have, pretending to believe in  
divine intervention, but then ... I saw his wings. ~ R H*



All I can hear is the silent echo behind Professor Lennox's drumbeat words: Linton, the Uffizi ... are you going? ... New Year's Eve Gala ... are you going? ... that's your birthday isn't it? ... are you going? ... you should treat yourself ... are you going?... now that you're free ... are you going?"

So, here I am at sixty-four, approaching everlasting freedom on the longest night of the year, deep in my own midwinter when it's most fitting I pay heed to the ghosts of my regrets.

St. Mary's rectory, December 23 ~ 2013

Gentle snow was falling in the framed print of Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* as if it were a window. It hung over my bedroom fireplace, appropriately listing to the right since its original figures had shifted. The new empty space in the left side of the composition drew my attention by virtue of Venus's absence.

Other things were different too: the fauns were gone, although they'd left hoof marks in the snow; spring had turned to winter, and snowflakes dusted the bare branches of myrtle and the lone figure of Mars. He languished as before, filling the elongated rectangle with his reclining form, but now he lay fully-outfitted in his gleaming body-armour, helmet at his side, and his lance sported the orange favour of a lady. More importantly, he was now awake. His hair, white with frost, gave the impression of an old man but his face remained young.

Mars's defiant blue eyes followed me as I walked past him to the decanter of sherry on my dressing table and poured myself a much-deserved drink after an emotional day.

I eased my aching back into an overstuffed armchair by the fire, tucked my legs beneath me, and raised my glass to Mars in a toast. "Here's to war," I said.

Mars shook his head, and the crystals of frost in his hair scattered into an aura around his head, revealing his mane of dark curls, making him appear both virile and saintly. "I am thinking, love and beauty," he replied.

I was not to be patronized. "To hell with love and beauty; they fade, but the war against old-age remains constant."

He winked as he shook the last vestiges of white from his hair. "To victory then," he said.

I was too listless to care, distanced by pressing challenges. Tonight I was distraught.

I had no appetite for conversation or food. Supper was easy to forfeit after the formal tea at the faculty club. My going away celebration, decorated for the Christmas season, offered a banquet of cakes and scones and clotted cream, and mountains of dainty sandwiches.

I sat bewildered for a long time with my two cats for company, my black retirement dress shimmering on a hanger, waving like a sequined ghost. Sophie stared sightlessly through me from her own chair, and Simkin, her husband, looked like a fur boa stretched at the foot of my bed.

The curtains were open to the late afternoon and I huddled inside my robe as I moved towards the real window that pulled me like a magnet. I meant to muffle the chill that radiated from the glass where the December weather was framed as another white landscape.

It was still snowing and the weightless flakes hypnotized me, tumbling in a thick silent drop. I watched them fly, tiny white stars catching in the corners of the latticework. They drifted into each pane like crushed diamonds and settled in the elbows and bony fingers of the oak trees.

I imagined them clinging to the outstretched stone feathers of the angel statue in St. Mary's churchyard below as they draped over the countryside in a lazy blanket.

After the painting had stirred to life I couldn't shake the supernatural buzz that remained in the room. I felt moved by a strong premonition that something tremendous was imminent, and while my psychic connection lasted, I called out to a powerful animal totem both familiar and significant to me.

I held my breath, asking for a sign until, with relief, I saw the grey shape of a 'wrong-time bear' emerge from a line of rowan trees that marked the edge of my property. It lumbered through the snow, shuffling a path to the doors of St. Mary's church and disappeared.

Spotting a black bear out of season is a powerful visitation, a message to pay closer attention while momentous events conspire to settle a score with synchronicity. I was sure the trail the bear left represented my lifeline,

but I knew trying to analyse it would only result in confusion. I'd been there before and failed.

This time, I would have to remain aware in order to make a vital decision. Paths were rarely straight lines, so the church was likely the first lily pad in a string of many. The only thing I was sure of was the wrong-time bear had gifted me a last chance to follow.

For a while, I rested my forehead on the window-frame, thinking of wrong-time bears, lulled by the rise and fall of recorded Gregorian chant, feeling comforted within its respite of peace.

Chanting monks have always seemed appropriate in my house. I inherited the old rectory of St. Mary's forty years ago, and am accustomed to my back yard being an abandoned cemetery. Indeed, I relish its solace and gentle reminder of time passing, and the stone angel nestled within his own fenced enclosure has become my perfect therapist. He watches over the 15<sup>th</sup> Century church and its garden of souls and I lay my wreaths of troubles at his feet.

Tonight, the inscription on the brass plate of his plinth should have inspired me: *'Vita nuova – here begins a new life' ~ Dante Alighieri.*

But this night, under the soothing chanting, I let my mind drift on the tailwind of Vera Lennox's words, following her intriguing proposal into an old labyrinth I thought was empty. As I stood at the window, the fog my breath made on the glass wafted through my body into the room and enveloped everything in a soft mist, transforming the familiar shapes into a pleasant

phantasm. Sophie leapt from her chair and meowed at my feet.

For a moment, my formal dress hanging from the wardrobe door became a white gown embroidered with dainty orange blossoms, and I remembered the way it once hugged my legs, and how it had clung from the damp heat of recent lovemaking, crushed in foreplay.

My eyes ached from the bright flash of sunlight off Mars' silver armour, causing an aura to spin like a golden plate just out of reach to my left, the sinister side which always announced the approach of my nemesis.

The realization of an impending migraine pushed me to act. The bed came back into focus, and I pulled open the drawer of my bedside table in search of the cure. I downed two turquoise capsules with a swallow of sherry. All I needed to do was close my eyes a few minutes and let the demon pass.

Sophie sat with me while I silenced the persistent urgings of my fervent colleague, and floated with the monks and snowflakes until my vision was restored. When it cleared I realized I was alone in the room with two cats and a compelling invitation.

The nightstand was the repository of a new copy of *The Divine Comedy* presented to me as part of a retirement gift along with the crystal decanter of dark Amontillado sherry and a fine set of Edwardian sherry glasses.

My old diary with only a few blank pages left, weighed down Dante's pristine leather binding, and I faced that first to chronicle my thoughts on the last day of my career.

I splashed a drop more sherry into my glass and settled under the covers to write, patting the surface of the bedspread in the hope Sophie would join me. She was blind but she could hear just fine, and I made that kissing noise with my lips as one does to draw the attention of a cat. “Come on, old girl,” I coaxed. Nothing. She’d done her bit and was back on her chair.

Simkin raised a sleepy head for an instant to assess if food was in the offing and deciding it wasn’t, dropped back to sleep. Sophie licked her tail and paid me no mind, but the feline independent streak suited me.

All things considered, Dante’s journey through hell was not such an inappropriate choice to read on this particularly-fractious night, and taken with a tippie of sherry, it reminded me of a hellish trip many years ago when I was thirty-five and still a hopeless romantic.

Power surges from the snowstorm made the light from the bedside lamp appear to sputter like a candle. It flickered through the amber liquor beside me as the monks finished intoning their prayers.

DIARY ENTRY ~ DECEMBER 23, 2013

*Tonight is the last day of a singular purpose which has occupied my energy for forty-five years, and ironically, to borrow a hideous cliché, ‘tomorrow is the first day of the rest of my life.’*

*A lifetime effusing over great art will soon turn into the living hell I pretended would never come, and I remember an apt quote from the actress, Bette Davis, regarding old age, altering it*

*slightly to: 'retirement is no place for sissies.' All I can do is stare blankly at the wall and silently despair, NOW WHAT?*

*Perhaps old Dante will show me the way. He journeyed through hell and found peace, and Sophie, my blind guide, is here to lead the way as she has done for almost fourteen years.*

*In a few days it will be my birthday with its obligatory retirement milestone of sixty-five – a cruel number which represents the death of being valued. Tonight I was given a party of farewell meant to inspire a wonderful release from the daily grind. I gave a hesitant speech to the flutter of bright colours facing me – the dresses of red and green and gold for the Christmas party to follow. I wore black. Go figure.*

*Two days ago, a woman I've never been crazy about, shattered my dubious festivities of detachment with an announcement that left me momentarily dizzy: there is to be a New Year's Eve Gala at the Uffizi. Vera Lennox gushed the news at me. Did I know? It was perfect, she said, a double celebration to complement my new life.*

*New life. That's how she put it.*

*I couldn't wait to get home to a hot water bottle and into my bed, to put my feet up and contemplate the past – the past that begged the confrontation with Mars, tonight. It's too absurd to think of going on such a long trip at such short notice.*

*I'm not the spontaneous sort, which is odd considering the whole premise of my art history syllabus was based on venturing off into the unknown without a net.*

*My fellows gave me a 1948 edition of 'The Divine Comedy.' It's odd to think that when this book was being printed I was waiting to be born. Tonight feels the same. Waiting to be born.*

*My old tattered copy suits me, careworn as an old map which I suppose it is.*



*The sherry and decanter beside me are offerings too, so I am surrounded by genuine best wishes for a tipsy evening and a new life.*

*I sit here in my warm bed with a good read, a sweet nightcap, and Sophie, my best friend, confidante, and spirit guide. There should have been something more. I once knew what it was but I've forgotten.*

*Tomorrow I face a blank page, all dressed up and nowhere to go.*

*Now that I'm free, what's it to be? Heaven or hell?*



I glanced over at Mars, still dressed for battle. He smiled and watched me as I lifted out of my body to hover over the bed. The ceiling above me was a glorious curtain of moving crystals, and as I stretched out my arms like wings, the pattern of small cornflowers on my nightgown slid off the fabric as I slowly rotated in the bedroom's sky. They swirled around me in a delightful blizzard of fragrant blue petals, and through them I glimpsed a peripheral flash of orange disappearing from the doorway.

From down the hall echoed a loving voice softly chiding, *now that you're free ... you're free ... you're free.*

Sophie's rough tongue licking the back of my hand startled me awake.

My bedroom sanctuary surrounded me in a protective bubble like the shroud of snow outside while Sophie pranced her front feet on my blanket.

“What’s got into you?” I said.

She continued to purr her lion’s share of space on the bed, churning it into a nest.

“To bring in the new year with Botticelli would be an amazing birthday gift to myself,” I said to her. “The Renaissance is a perfect metaphor for a new life ... Sophie? ... Don’t you think?” She ignored me, yawned in my face, and crept off to wash Simkin’s ears. So much for being a feline poet.

I checked the painting. All was serene. Once more, Mars rested in perpetual springtime, sleeping naked, and Venus stared blankly with a sorrowful expression of abandonment that I understood. She’d had the poor judgement and bad timing to fall in love with a man she couldn’t have.



LOVE AMONG THE RUINS

*"When I do come, she will speak not,  
She will stand, either hand on my shoulder,  
Give her eyes the first embrace of my face,  
Ere we rush, ere we extinguish sight and speech  
Each on each."*

~ Robert Browning

*the straight way*

I snuggled down, and opened the new Dante to my favourite passage: *'In the middle of the journey of my life, I found myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost.'*

Sleep fell over me like the snowflakes covering the ancient headstones in the cemetery, but the straight way was *not* lost. Bear tracks in the powdery snow led through a windbreak of oak to the angel whose wings were now folded around his shoulders like a cloak.



Little Cobiton, Christmas Eve ~ 2013

The snow melted by noon and was replaced by lazy winter rain. From the comfort of the sofa I studied my

framed print of Botticelli's 1475 *Adoration of the Magi* hanging above the mantelpiece and the dozen miniature reproductions of his Madonnas, displayed in a grid of shining iridescent squares. Women after the same convention of soft, docile goddesses.

All the while my mind sought an answer to the conflicted Uffizi decision. Going was expensive and tiring, mostly dismissed for its confrontational aspect that would open a can of worms sealed years before. The love worms that had been buried but could still be heard from time to time squirming their way to the sun. Going or staying, too expensive, too far, but too perfect to ignore.

As I continued along these lines in a pleasant stupor, listening to the rain recede into a drowsy curtain, I saw the distinct ripple of draperies in the *Adoration* move under the glass in the frame.

My first thought warned it was the precursor to another migraine but it was different, localized in the figure of Botticelli, and unsettling enough to make me shout *hello* out loud. Sophie tilted her head to listen.

I concentrated on the apricot cloak and although it had stopped moving, I felt drawn to it. I surrendered to the feeling of floating towards the figure in the lower right-hand corner where Botticelli made eye-contact using the convention of his day, inviting viewers into his painting with a compelling self-portrait. I knew him well.

The sound of rain and the warmth of the fire seduced

me into closing my eyes and immediately my head swam with a new vision.

Sophie leapt off her chair and scratched at the front door, meowing piteously until I opened it. I stood there, wrapped only in a blanket, facing a menacing downpour, gazing after her as she disappeared into the cemetery.

I splashed after her under an umbrella. Heavy rain pounded its canopy and cascaded from each spoke as I passed the stone angel with wings outstretched as usual, in a welcoming embrace. He stood, perfectly dry, shielded from the rain by an invisible umbrella of his own, yet raindrops trickled down his face. Water flooded his enclosure in a pool that reached up to his feet, making him look as if he was standing on water, an island unto himself. "No man is an island," I quoted to him.

"Heaven knows you've tried hard enough," he replied.

Sophie led me on through the crumbling headstones towards the dying echoes of chanting which became the sound of beating wings, and we entered the open door of the church. I froze in the porch.

At the far end of the nave, three candles burned on the altar which had been replaced with a block of dressed marble. Sophie jumped on its top and shook droplets of water from her fur that looked like beads of quicksilver. She ignored the magnificent sight of the live angel levitating over her, his orange robes rippling in a gust of supernatural wind.

A gentle spray of raindrops fell from his wings as he fanned them dry, showering Sophie in sparks of light.

The rest landed as pearls and rolled towards me like a broken necklace.

“Is it really you? Why did you go? Where have you been?” I shouted.

“Even angels have to sleep,” he called as he started to fade.

I ran the length of the red carpet in slow motion, ankle deep through a river of pearls, sending my words ahead of me. “Please stay. I need you,” but he was gone by the time I reached Sophie.

The altar turned out to be the check-in desk of an airline, and the gothic interior began to blur behind a cascade of water, washing down the ornate columns and the stained-glass windows to reveal the plain walls of an airport terminal. Behind the desk hung a travel poster of Brunelleschi’s dome on the Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence, framed like a painting.

Sophie stared lovingly at me with eyes that could now see. She turned and sprang onto the moving conveyor belt behind her, looking back once before disappearing down the luggage chute.



Over the years, I’ve come to rely on my waking and sleeping dreams in which Sophie appears as a tour guide. They always reflect a subliminal truth or two and inevitably a solution to a choice I’ve been hesitant to make. In this case, she’d sent a message to call the last travel agent open for late business on Christmas Eve.



The next morning as I watched Sophie, dazzled inside the warmth of a sunbeam, chasing her tail, she took hold of it in her teeth and I was reminded of the pose of the mythical snake grasping eternity. She was, like many animal spirit guides, also a trickster. I smiled at the ironic symbolism that in the dreamtime I am emotionally blind, and Sophie acts as my far-sighted seeing-eye dog, and tapped out a white lie to my niece as if it were urgent Morse Code:

DECEMBER 25, 2013

*Dear Budge ~*

*Merry Christmas darling. Short notice I'm afraid.*

*I've been called upon to research a recently discovered portrait of Botticelli's. It's all last minute and hush-hush. I wasn't offered the assignment until the retirement party and it was too good to pass up.*

*I said yes, so if you're unavailable, the cats will have to go into a cattery. Staying with you would upset Sophie. You know how feeling around a new place disorients her. She's better off in a cage than negotiating an unfamiliar space.*

*I know I will see you tomorrow but I need to get this request sent as soon as possible as it's rather time-sensitive and your phone is turned off. Love to your mum. I simply couldn't face one of her perfect Christmases this year.*

*I know you will understand when I tell you that I feel myself slipping towards Florence rather than flying, floating towards some new place where a phantom of art waits for me like Peter*

*Pan's shadow. As such, I expect this trip to be a 'first star to the right and straight on till morning' kind of project. Meaning, it's anyone's guess where it will end up, Florence or Neverland.*

*I've been on emotional standby for far too long. Say no more. I need this. Art calls and you know how much that means to me.*

*So, here's my request. I wonder if you could house-sit and look after the cats for ten days starting December 29<sup>th</sup>. I remembered you said you were retreating into chocolate and books for New Years to get over that last dreadful boyfriend of yours, so, mi casa su casa. I'll wait for your call before I book the cattery, but I should do that tomorrow. They're busy for the holidays, so it's all fairly urgent.*

*Looking forward to Boxing Day with you.  
~ love Queenie*

I pressed send, knowing my niece could be found at her portable computer pad most any hour of the day. And in a few minutes her reply came.

*Dear Highness ~*

*A timely and perfect invitation. I am delighted to accept. A change of scene will probably save me from moping. You know me too well. I shan't want for anything but peace and quiet, Simkin and Sophie for company, and your shelves of old novels. Is tonight too soon? Just kidding. I am headed to Mum's in a few minutes.*

*I can stay overnight tomorrow, so we can catch up, and we're overdue for a game. Wow, Botticelli no less, and when art calls you must go. If you're prepared to put Sophie in a cattery it must be important. How exciting – a whole new career for you. You*



*deserve it. See you tomorrow. We can pretend your birthday is a week late. ~ love B*

Budge was referring to our ongoing tease of Scrabble, where new letters could be bought for chocolate buttons.

The best nieces, the creative ones, sometimes give their aunts nicknames. Mine was Queenie from the fact that I signed my letters RH in a flamboyant script with a surrounding flourish, which, to Budge, mirrored the title royal highness. Being a precocious child, Budge not only dubbed me Queenie but renamed herself as well. So from the age of six, and to me only, my sister's daughter, Iris Bird, became Budge.

Budge was my Little Orphan Annie in blue jeans. A tomboy with a reserve of steel impervious to her mother's continuous lure of bright-coloured dresses meant to hook her like a fish. When she first decided I was a queen, I mused to myself that I reigned as the 'virgin Queenie,' a spinster of the parish, and content to be so. I held court over my churchyard and its angel, and my only persistent fear was that I would deteriorate into a less-than-regal caricature of decrepitude like Elizabeth I. A lopsided point of view as unbalanced as my Martian painting.

At the end of the journey of my life I found myself within a dark quandary where the straight way led directly to Florence.