T. S. Eliot
Preludes

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), an American-born poet, essayist, and critic, emigrated to England in 1914 and later renounced his American citizenship. He is seen today as a central figure in the modernist movement in literature. Once in England, Eliot came into contact with noted poet Ezra Pound, who helped him publish some of his earlier works, including “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in 1915. “Preludes” was published in Prufrock and Other Observations in 1920.

I
The winter evening settles down
With smell of steaks in passageways.
Six o’clock.
The burnt-out ends of smoky days.
And now a gusty shower wraps 5
The grimy scraps
Of withered leaves about your feet
And newspapers from vacant lots;
The showers beat
On broken blinds and chimney-pots,
And at the corner of the street 10
A lonely cab-horse steams and stamps.
And then the lighting of the lamps.

II
The morning comes to consciousness
Of faint stale smells of beer 15
From the sawdust-trampled street
With all its muddy feet that press
To early coffee-stands.

With the other masquerades
That time resumes, 20
One thinks of all the hands
That are raising dingy shades
In a thousand furnished rooms.

III
You tossed a blanket from the bed,
You lay upon your back, and waited; 25
You dozed, and watched the night revealing
The thousand sordid images
Of which your soul was constituted;
They flickered against the ceiling.
And when all the world came back 30
And the light crept up between the shutters,
And you heard the sparrows in the gutters,
You had such a vision of the street
As the street hardly understands;
Sitting along the bed’s edge, where
You curled the papers from your hair,
Or clasped the yellow soles of feet
In the palms of both soiled hands.

IV

His soul stretched tight across the skies
That fade behind a city block,
Or trampled by insistent feet
At four and five and six o’clock;
And short square fingers stuffing pipes,
And evening newspapers, and eyes
Assured of certain certainties,
The conscience of a blackened street
Impatient to assume the world.

I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing.

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.