

LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE

MASSACHUSETTS LEVEL III HONORS 2009

Dear T.S. Eliot,

I can remember with perfect clarity my somber awakening in first reading “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.” My sister had introduced the poem to me with a careless gesture, throwing the words “I think you’ll like this one” over her shoulder as she walked away. I sat alone on my bed, bemused and skeptical, peering at the pages cautiously. I was unsure and hesitant, heartbreakingly so, of everything that year. And what else could I be as a shy little girl on the verge of becoming a teenager?

Those years were tough. I had risen, miraculously, from the ashes of elementary school four-square and swing sets only to find that, on looking around, the world was no greener, no brighter than before. Rather, after seeing the destruction on TV, the corruption in the news, and the unsettling violence in murders and cruelty, I decided there was something wrong with the world. The big world out there.

But there was also something wrong closer to home. My friends were changing. I could understand their physical changes, but I couldn’t understand their mental changes. I began to feel a sense of something panicky and restricting, defined by painful moments of isolation. I couldn’t understand what was wrong with my clothes, my hairstyle, my glasses. I didn’t know what was wrong, but I was ashamed of my “image.”

“Image” – that was a new word, one of many I learned those years. Others soon infiltrated their way into my naïve vocabulary of “pretty” and “nice.” My friends became “peers” who formed “cliques”; “counselors” warned about trying to “fit in”; parents were jokingly called “parental units,” and then, the cruelest of them all, the shirt my sister bought me was “slutty.”

What changed in people, and why did they act so...differently? I was frustrated then, wanting to just *understand* so badly. I thought if I could only understand people, then maybe they would like me more, maybe I would be happier.

Once, in elementary school, a teacher talking to my parents over my head said, “Your daughter is a very sweet child. She tries hard to please everyone.” And I, playing underfoot, had flushed and smiled, hearing the compliment. But even in junior high, I already realized what a curse that “virtue” was. I knew I couldn’t please everyone, but I wanted to, just like I wanted to understand. But the teachers then were no longer satisfied with my best effort. Things had to be perfect now. *I* had to be perfect.

All my activities turned into grueling examinations. Dance classes demanded straighter backs and tighter spins; piano lessons required better memorizations of Bach and Chopin. And throughout daily moments of sweaty palms and a trembling heart, I knew all my efforts to understand and live in a more perfect union with everyone else were, ironically, killing me in the end. I was afraid of being the only one in the world feeling that way.

And then I read your poem. Afterwards I quietly mused a little while. Even though I wasn’t sure what “etherized” meant or who “Lazarus” was, I felt relieved, sharing and understanding the fears of Prufrock. All I needed was that simple understanding, that kinship. I didn’t quite get the ending, even though the imagery evoked some strange, moving feeling inside of me. Still, I put that confusion out of my mind, wanting to just experience without questioning myself, the happiness at finding someone else plagued by hesitation, uncertainty, and their own painful image of perfection.

But then, a few weeks later, walking home from the school bus, I remembered the ending lines again. I slowed down, bitterly looking at the sweater I had put on over the shirt that none of my friends liked. I had already cried all I could that day somewhere in one of those hollow school bathroom stalls, so I couldn’t anymore when I realized how much I was already drowning, listening to all of those stupid, petty inner and outer human voices.

I’m not saying that your poem inspired me to become a “rebellious teenager” or to stop “conforming” to society. It wasn’t even the words so much as the feeling. It’s just, in those years, I needed reassurance the most. Now, of course, I realize just how critical you are of people like Prufrock. But to a younger and more innocently vulnerable version of me, your poem was comforting when I felt I was really alone. So thank you for fulfilling that most desperate and most human need of understanding.

Sincerely,

Wendy

Wendy Chen

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Grade 11