

*There's something about hometowns that you never can escape
The triumphs and the tragedies / The tawdry little fates
The welling of nostalgia / And the feeling kind of strange
Because despite all the little changes / The place still feels the same
And there's something about coming back to your hometown again
The place where you grew up / And where you found your firmest friends
And though none of them still live here / And I've got nowhere to go
I'm a Wessex boy / A Wessex boy
And when I'm here / I'm home*

Dear God, be good to me; / The sea is so wide, / And my boat is so small.

Men go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motion of the stars; and they pass by themselves without wondering.

I've tried so hard to not turn into my father... / But if I only ever skip out on his choices, / Will I ever choose better?

Making the decision to have a child – it's momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.

Who of us is mature enough for offspring before the offspring themselves arrive?

Children are apt to live up to what you believe of them.

I Knew Prufrock Before He Got Famous

Both tears and sweat are salty, but they render a different result. Tears will get you sympathy; sweat will get you change.

The illusions of childhood are necessary experiences: a child should not be denied a balloon just because an adult knows that sooner or later it will burst.

There is always one moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in.

The greatest form of courage is to act as if our lives made a difference.

A teacher is one who makes himself progressively unnecessary.

Life is now, every moment, no matter if the world be full of death.

*Life is about love
Last minutes
And lost evenings
About fire in our bellies
And our furtive little feelings
And the aching amplitudes that set our needles all a-flickering
And help us with remembering
That the only thing that's left to do is live...*

I think we take the First Amendment for granted at times. I don't mean that we don't appreciate it; I think / hope that all of you are deeply aware that you're pretty free to express yourself, especially here in this space. But it seems that we rarely stop to consider what that freedom entails. Oh, we'll listen to graduation speeches, write quotes on our binders, even put our favorite sayings in our yearbooks, forever identifying ourselves with a few simple words. We recognize that we are presented with an embarrassment of opportunities to speak up, speak out, and speak well.

Yet few of us imagine doing anything truly important with them.

How many of you honestly believe you'll say something **worth remembering** in your lifetime? I could be wrong, but I'm guessing a minority of you would raise your hands if I asked that question in class. You probably don't feel like your words are going to adorn a teenager's binder anytime soon, like your quotes have the potential to change a life.

But is that a reflection of your inability to summon the words, your lack of profundity...or simply a lack of confidence?

Our histories are lined with the words of men and women who had something worth saying, the skills necessary to say it, and the ability to communicate that message to a receptive audience. At some point, each and every one of those figures made a conscious decision: "I have something the world needs to hear; I know something the world needs to know; I will share this with the world and hope they can hear me."

This is why Dante crafted *The Divine Comedy*, why Orwell finished *1984*, why Dr. King wrote his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. In fact, think about King, sitting in that cell. When he penned his piece, he wasn't just giving a voice to people who deserved to be heard; when he sat down to write, he knew he had something in his heart worth sharing. It was imperative that he find a way to share it.

So he wrote. He spoke. He preached. He agitated. He fought. He defended what he knew, after many long years of study and soul-searching, was morally right. And his words changed lives, not only because he had something to say, but because he said it beautifully, and at the right time.

Understand this, and never forget: King's beliefs, his values, his convictions – they helped shape a movement.

But the way he *expressed* them helped shape a nation.

I want you to think about your parents, or your relatives – anyone who raised you. One (or both) of them probably said *something* memorable to you over the years. It may have been a speech or a sentence, intentional or no, but he, she, or they provided you with something that gave you a bit of scaffolding, that helped shape what eventually became your personality and identity.

Now imagine them sitting in a classroom at eighteen or seventeen, listening to their teacher pose the same question to them: *How many of you honestly believe you'll say something **worth remembering** in your lifetime?* Can you imagine they thought they'd have the chance to say something profound before you were born?

Sometimes, it's not the question you ask that determines the answer. It's when you ask it.

Many of you have told me you'd welcome the opportunity to be parents. I don't know that you've really thought about what that entails.

Imagine for a moment that you're at a hospital, looking through a window at your newborn daughter as she sleeps. In that moment, you're painfully aware of the fact that your child knows nothing – possesses no skills, no experience, no understanding. She has no language. What does she dream about, sleeping there alone? Does she dream of colors? Shapes? Sounds? When she cried, afraid, before she fell asleep, what did she fear? She cannot throw a ball, or pet a cat, or buckle a seatbelt; she doesn't know what a ball is, or an animal, or a car. She cannot kiss you when you hold her up to your face. Yet she'll burrow into your shoulder all the same, seeking comfort in the hollows near your neck, tiny fists clenching and unclenching the fabric of your shirt.

In that moment, you not only understand how little they know, but how much you do. For the first time in your life, you will have some real sense of the vast sea of information and experience that you process in every moment into reality and meaning, some idea of the ways you have been shaped by factors great and small, by chances taken and ignored, by fortunes and misfortunes you could and couldn't control.

You will understand that you are responsible for keeping that little life safe as it navigates this world of ours – this huge, complicated, unknown world. You will also understand that “responsible for” and “able to control” are not synonyms.

Picture your mother and father staring off into the distance after you emerged into the world, trying to figure out how they would teach you, how they would guide you – how they would get you to the place you're at today. Some of them followed those plans; others didn't. That shaped you, too.

Someday, you might that same hitch in your gut. You'll realize what it means to be responsible for the safety, the integrity, of someone else's Star. You'll realize what it means to shape it with the force of your words, your standards, and your guidance. You'll realize what it means to place expectations on someone else and hold them to them; you'll realize how powerful your words can be when you praise them or criticize them, fight with them or comfort them.

And after eighteen years with them, after eighteen years of playing with toys and bedtime and bedtime stories and clothes and food messes and pets and school pictures and driving lessons and sports teams and birthday parties and doctor's appointments and insecurities and vacations and clumsy adolescent romances and homework and friendships and tucking them in and giving them chores and holding their hands while you walk through crowds together and watching movies with them and dropping them off and fumbling for the wise words and obsessing over their well-being all the time, every day of every week of every month of every year...well, they'll never stop being your child. But they inevitably stop being your kid.

And you'll summon the strength, somehow, some way, to say goodbye to all that.

At the beginning of the year, I asked you a simple question: *What would you attempt if you knew you could not fail?*

Without going into too much detail, I'll say that those who stop to think about it – much like those who stopped to think about the Ecclesiastes quote before I reused it – can see so much of

what we've covered over the course of nine short months in that question. Everything from the SFHP and Myth/Sci-Fi courses really comes back to it – Gilgamesh, Siddhartha, Dante, Macbeth, Beowulf, Lear, Jan, Winston, John, Kathy, Tommy, Tom, Carl, Jake, Billy, all the nameless ones...if you really turn that question over in your head, in the context of everything we've read, discussed, and yes, attempted, you'd be surprised by what you discover.

You knew I wouldn't let you fail, not unless you tried very, very hard to do so. So instead of worrying about whether you'd hit the ground, you just flew.

You wrote Masters' Theses.

You stood and delivered, in fancy clothes, no less.

You rebuilt schools, rethought diplomacy, and reassessed culture.

You fell Down the Memory Hole and looked at the World Around You with some pretty amazing people.

You found there was no easy way from Earth to the stars, so you searched for a former clarity, refused to let the future blame you, sought endings and beginnings, held those who were gone close in hearts like ours, enjoyed a little revenge therapy, learned the quiet things that no one ever knows, let heroes die and angels hide, won friends and influenced people, tried to decide whether you were happy with who you were, and floated down the river when you could...all while you listened to the great song of a thousand voices.

You planted seeds in the soil we're all growing in, let your heads spin around, made islands where no islands should go, picked up pieces, got freaked out by the future, peered at blurry figures and listened to the muffled voices that echoed after doomsday...all in far less than a lifetime.

You fought dragons, sought witches, released golden birds from cages, peered into paperweights, found Norfolk on the ground and Xibalba in the stars, went to Hell and back, and reveled in the moments when everything was beautiful and nothing hurt.

You did so many things that nobody else **had** to do...and so many things that no one else **had the chance** to do.

And after all of that, after all of the loving and the losing, the only thing that's left to do is...

Well, there's just one thing missing.

Those of you who've known me for a while know I'm fond of that image of the coin flip. Think of the class as a coin, with that question as the "heads" face.

If "heads" is *What would you attempt to do if you knew you could not fail?*, I'm giving you the "tails" question today, the question that – when viewed in tandem with the other – encapsulates just about everything I've tried to do with these simple little English classes.

What would you say **if you knew the world would listen**...and how would you say it?

What does the world need to hear?

Many of you will be teachers, guides, lecturers...speakers of profound words and dispensers of wisdom. People will look to you. People will listen to you.

But no one – especially not me – can give you the words in advance.

This is **your** graduation speech, your opportunity to leave a final impression on me and those around you – your last footstep in the blog’s wet cement, with your initials carved beside it.

You were here.

You had chances, and you took them.

You mattered.

And now you’re heading out there. You’ll have more chances, and you’ll matter to different people. So while you still have time, write what you want to write to these people. To us.

The speech can be about yourself, about humanity, about the world, about something you find fascinating and are eager to share – heck, it can be about a combination of them, and I’d encourage you to try to do that!

Address this to anyone you choose. It can be to me, your classmates, your family, your children, someone you care about here, the world at large, or whoever else comes to mind.

But I want you to say what needs to be said – the words only you can write – and I want you to write them now. And I don’t want you to forget these words...because you might find yourself saying them to someone else a couple of decades down the line.

That’s the prompt: Tell us something meaningful. Tell us what you’ve always wanted to say. Be honest, insightful, creative, and clear. Write the words. Write the songs. Write the path.

Finally, while this won’t be the last time, I wanted to take a moment to thank each of you.

Thank you for listening.

Thank you for reading.

Thank you for thinking.

Thank you for writing.

And thank you for caring.

It’s been a good run, and I count myself among the lucky ones.

I’m just glad I knew you before you got famous.

Blog Title: “I Knew Prufrock Before He Got Famous,” Frank Turner, *Love Ire and Song*

Quotes and Songs from the Cover Page: Frank Turner, Breton fisherman, St. Augustine, Frank Turner, Elizabeth Stone, Peter de Vries, Lady Bird Johnson, Jesse Jackson, Marcelene Cox, Graham Greene, William Sullivan, Thomas Carruthers, Henry Miller, Frank Turner
