

A MAN WITHOUT A COUNTRY

Chris Cummings

New Topsail Beach, N. Carolina (AP)—Town officials here are contemplating new security measures for the beaches in town after an unusual incident Thursday night involving a tourist from London. Officials said the man, who identified himself as J. Alfred Prufrock, was found wandering on the beach at approximately 11:30 p.m. When asked what he was doing out so late, he casually replied that he was “listening to the mermaids sing.” He also added that he was very disturbed that they might not be singing to him. Citing possible insanity, the police arrested him immediately.

Upon questioning at the police station, Prufrock unfolded a strange tale of just who he was and what he had failed to accomplish in his life. Stating that he had come to America to live out the rest of his life walking on the beach in his white flannel trousers, Prufrock began his tale. He claimed that he was a literary figure in England who was now past his prime and was destined to be an outcast from society, for what reasons he did not know. At this point, Prufrock began mumbling something about measuring his life with coffee spoons, but, seeing his questioners’ puzzled faces, he became extremely upset at his apparent inability to communicate. Digging into his pocket, he pulled out a piece of badly worn paper and handed it to the officer in charge. Just as the officer was about to take it, Prufrock hastily jammed the scrap back into his pocket. “I can’t give this to you because it’s personal,” was his only explanation. After a little persuasion he once again handed the paper over. We include the highlights of the text here:

I am J. Alfred Prufrock, but who am I really? I want to be known and understood, but those outside me fail to comprehend what I’m trying to say. I love, I’m human, and I have feelings just like any man. It seems to me that my life is insignificant and my goals still far off. I picture myself as liquid Prufrock. I have no form, no

solidity, and not much purpose in being here. You probably think I'm crazy, and if you tell me so, I'll probably agree. Don't look for me though, because I have gone to see why the mermaids don't sing to me.

On Friday morning a psychiatrist from nearby Jacksonville was called in to make a preliminary psychiatric examination. He concluded that the man had definite suicidal tendencies which arose out of an extreme feeling of paranoia. The examiner also noted an unusually high level of introspect. He commented that "this high level of insecurity usually is the result of severe neurosis." He recommended that Prufrock be sent immediately to the state mental health facility for further observation and tests.

Meanwhile, Lester Shilton, police chief, fire marshal, and head dog catcher for this town of 425, had a different view of the incident. Shilton commented, "It's those damn hippies. It seems we have problems with them every summer about this time. He's probably just some overgrown flower child with a lot of drugs in his veins."

Shilton went on to say, "It's just people in general these days. They don't want to come out and fight reality, so they go out and smoke heroin and shoot up pot. I'm disgusted." Shilton once again reiterated his plea for stricter regulation of the beaches after dark.

In the meantime, Prufrock was issued two tickets, one for trespassing and another for creating a public nuisance. Prufrock couldn't decide whether to post the bond or stay a couple of nights on the town. Who knows, he may still be there today.

POEM

Melissa Stone

No more words . . .
of holiness
or of wholeness
For I have been cleansed of your words,
By my own blood and tears and sweat.
I have found my own holiness
. . . my own wholeness.