



CLINT McCOWN

GRADUATION SPEECH FOR MY DAUGHTERS

For Caitlin and Mallie

I.

Remember everyone you meet was once
a Chinese emperor, benevolent and wise,
revered throughout the provinces
for averting civil war.
Extend your understanding to whatever
bitter seeds you see there now.

At the dinosaur museum when
you were young, guardrails kept you
from the stacks of reconnected bones,
but you lingered,
staring through sockets of hip and eye.

Your own remains are videos
of makeshift musicals and homemade
puppet shows. You flicker on,
tight sprays of light,
dancing out your best routines
as graceful blizzards one electron deep.

There's always greatness in
the lives we leave behind.

II.

When I was two I ran away from home.
A trooper plucked me
from the highway's center line,



and told me I'd been lost since lunch.
But lost had been okay.

At seventeen I stood in Rome
beside the graves of Keats and Shelley
and swore something to myself,
although I don't remember what.

It's hard to separate the things we know
from the things we merely remember.

III.

In the twentieth century God
became the senile uncle, well-meaning
but bothersome, hair growing in bristles
from his ears, good only
for an occasional five bucks
on birthdays or at Christmas.

As a result, my soul fits crookedly
into my body. This
like a note from the teacher
bothers me.

It doesn't take much to renovate religion,
so before you send your fears to
military school, consider more
creative options. If catholicism falters
lock a vampire in a house of mirrors.
If zen needs refurbishing hang
wind chimes so the pieces never touch.
Some believe in luck.
Some believe in grace,
which is the same as luck.
Some believe in science
or in science fiction.



The chosen doctrine doesn't matter
in the end: Nature builds no
platform for opinion. The acorn
outlives the fall, pure and simple.
A good fire needs a hollow base and
always will. The rules are elemental,
but also unforgiving, so try to
think ahead: it isn't tough
to catch a tiger by surprise;
the tough part comes just after.

IV.

As intellect blooms, ask yourself
unnecessary questions:
Why are there no more mead halls?
Can the woods ever be trusted?
Is guilt a large room to yell in
or a wool coat on a summer day?
Does the size of hell matter?
Is eternal life eternal life,
even if it's only a small scattering
of heartbeats?

v.

One day I'll end up parked
at some painted stop sign
waiting for it to turn green.
That's simply how it is:
the cat meows, you drift away;
the phone rings, you don't answer it.
The eyes fail:
you squint to see
whatever comes too close.
You squint to see
whatever's in the distance.



We all pay dues in many unions—
that's the cost of
doing business in the world.
The toll mounts,
and one by one we misplace
every grave-side promise ever made.
Maybe no oath is worth breaking;
but there's no guardrail
against forgetting.

VI.

In the meantime hold on
to what you know.
Start with a bright speck—
no, more than a speck—
a pebble, say, a bright pebble
and look at it against the horizon.
That's all, just look at it.
Day is almost over, the air
is dusty with too much afternoon.
An oak tree stands
at the base of the driveway.
Light still fills the neighborhood.
Every sound is a laugh.