

Joanna Solfrian - Poetry
July 17, 2004
Commencement Speech
Stonecoast Inaugural Class

Hello, everyone.

The last time I gave a speech, I was in 9th grade, at a commencement ceremony, graduating from a school where I had learned how to read poetry. In the sincere and finite wisdom of a fourteen year-old from a town with one stoplight, I actually said “Commencement: it’s not an end, it’s a beginning.” And if memory is to be trusted (which is almost never is), we all were excited to pursue that new beginning. And three years later, we were itching to leave the stale classrooms of high school, and later still, the false adulthood that was college.

But I’m sure the Stonecoast faculty and the USM administration now understand that here, few of us actually want to move on. We’ve even taken measures to get held back. For example, Jim Sprouse has hired a Brunswick High School student who is outside right now, letting the air out of your tires. And, in an attempt to stymie the hermeneutic cycle, which explains how readers derive new meanings each time we return to a text, the poets have written their creative theses in disappearing ink.

Lastly, Jeff Foltz is going to steal one last Stone House mug to complete a set of six.

To combat this despair over graduating, I’ve decided to start a support group...the MFA-A. I imagine a man standing up in an ink-stained blazer: “Hi...my name is Stan...I’m a recovering Stonecoaster; it’s been nineteen years since I graduated...”

But seriously, even though there's greatness ahead of us, why is it that we're reluctant to go? Because, for the last two years, we've been breathing rarefied air. And the thought from being cut off from it hurts. The first sentence of Jeannette Winterson's novel *Written on the Body* is, "Why is the measure of love loss?" We're already imagining the losses we'll endure. The loss of languid cocktail hours at Helmreich House and 3-on-3 basketball games at Boody; the loss of long correspondences with our mentors, who didn't just give us their time, but time in which they could have been writing; the loss of the Stone House and those grand rooms that were, for a time, ours...these already weigh heavily on our hearts, because we *love* them so much.

In the ranked kingdom of love, the pursuit of the pure is paramount. The poetry students, and all writers, shoulder the task of this pursuit, I think...we constantly try to shape the ineffable into mere consonants and vowels. Whether we are satisfied with the results is of little importance today. (All of the poets have written work that we feel lucky to have generated, and all of us have poems that we hope no one reads too closely. Please ignore page 7 in my creative thesis.) But the point is the pursuit. In a world that's often badly bruised, the search for purity – however you want to conceive of it – isn't just honorable, it's *necessary*. Even if it's intangible, even if it's ephemeral, even if we only occasionally find it in our sometimes ordinary lives.

That leads me to another point I want to make. I know some of the students here are nervous about returning to that "ordinary life." We have nothing to be nervous

about. There *is* beauty in our day jobs. (William Carlos Williams found it.) There *is* beauty in the dirty dishes from dinner with our families, in the dog needing to go for a walk. We need to remember that if we want to keep intoxicating ourselves with rarefied air, we must rely on firmly rooted feet to get us around. If balancing the pure with the daily is difficult, that's only because it should be.

Right now, at this moment, I want every student to think about the set of circumstances that brought him or her to Stonecoast. (My story starts at age 20. I had dropped out of some classes at college because my mother had just died. I needed to make up some credits the following summer, and my father handed me a USM catalogue with the Stonecoast summer conference dog-eared.) From talking to other students, I know that the confluence of factors that brought them here also seems larger-than-life. I want us to remember this the first time we leave this place and confront a piece of blank paper. If afterwards we sigh at the gap between what the poem could be and what it actually is, that only means we are mindful of things larger than ourselves.

I was reading Yeats recently and came across a quote that seems timely for any conflict the program and the graduating students may be feeling. So, with many thanks and much love, I'll leave the last words to William Butler: "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric; but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry."

Thank you.