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The Salutatorian's Address, by Nicole Jean Turner

"JUNE FIFTH: Portland Community Clown College News Bulletin: Due to unforeseen circumstances at last night's graduation, all classes have been canceled for today. Grief counseling and burn triage is available at McMenamins Crystal Hotel. May God have mercy on us all." –The last update ever made to the Portland Clown College website, 2010.

He graduated second in his class from a top tier
clown college on the north west coast of the states.
Somewhere far from the city he grew up in
surrounded by acres of wildlife and woodlands;
on graduation day he sat at a lake
drinking moonshine mixed with maraschino
cherries and slowly melting face paint.
Walking the stage for a ceremonial pie face felt like a waste of time.
So he didn't go. He sat alone through the morrow.
He let the grimy sand of granite lake edges wash into his red leather shoes
while listening to a news report on a small flower shaped radio pinned to his suit.
Over his heart the broadcaster's words swam
through the plastic speaker petals
like snakes in the water he be before.
Someone blew up a bank in desperation this morning.
The bank had foreclosed on their home
even though the VA is supposed to take care of those who serve,
was too busy trying to finish their degree to know
student loans and mortgage bills
were being delivered to the wrong location.
Lost everything, took their life
in one final display of panic, resignation.
In Pakistan, a bus turned over and killed at least a dozen.
The wildfires consuming Siberia
should soon reach permanent uninhabitable levels of pollution.
There are also fires in Canada, California,
and somewhere in a once charming hillside of Vancouver.
The graduate draws stick figures in the sand with a slimy stick.
Maraschino cherries burn the back of his tongue, when a child runs up on him.
She points at his spry pink hair spiked in every direction,
and with wide eyes reaches
as if lifting herself to the sky to pull down a cloud worth napping on,
the child's doe eyes melt into a whimsical smile as her interstellar fingers touch down.
Gentle little carrots wrinkled with chub growing faster than the bones beneath
push his cheeks up and flatten smile lines under her reach.
"Smile Mr. clown!"
The Portland wind rattled its way past the bog,
curtsied o'er the pines and hustled around the ferns.
"Are you sad because it's too cold to swim?"
Her blissful innocence overwhelmed him.
She retracted her fingers, now sticky with paint,
and planted them palm down on the lakes edge.
He watched storms of opaque ink sprawl over pebbles,
an army of acrylic soldiers forcing against the current
to break free from her grasp, tossed like paratroopers
as she shook and splashed her hands.
He heard them screaming
under heavy fire,

felt the machine gun pops as droplets landed on his pants,
then realized the NPR reporter in his pin
had channeled to a correspondent
live somewhere in central America.
The child turned from the water, and stood in awe of the despondent man.
His legs stretched before him covered in speckles of sand, his arms in his lap,
she pondered for a moment then mirrored his image
dropping to his side with arms and legs slack.
"Do you tell any jokes?"
After a long pause of the wind whistling up the path,
the graduate pulled out his transcript from a deep breast pocket and had a laugh.
"You're not a very funny clown, Mister..."
My—um—my favorite joke is, um—ok let me tell you."
He pulled his legs up to a cross while the child rocked back and forth.
Funny bones on knees; he lifted his gaze and waited patiently.
"What's—what's black, and white, and red, all over?"
The graduate thought of racial tensions in inner cities.
Slaughtered animals at poacher's hands.
"A newspaper" he sighed.
With glee the girl jumped from her cross-legged seat
and exclaimed, "a zebra with a sunburn silly!"
Her pocket began to glow and jingle,
and as if caught eating candy without permission,
the girl opened the clamshell to her mothers beckon.
She kissed the graduate's forehead like a honeybee gently greeting a flower,
then scampered off down the bike trail behind them without a word or hesitation.
From an inside a hidden pocket he drew a slew of tissue
then fished out a banana yellow notebook.
A spotted bookmark reserved a speech
written for today that would never be heard.
"We are gathered here today," he read aloud to the undisturbed and abandoned lake
with an orotund bitter palate, "to celebrate our uncanny ability to face these dark times
with a smile on our face. Painted on daily, we as a whole are responsible for, liable by, servants of the greater good."
Somewhere a frog croaks and a twig bends under the beast's chin.
"The world out there expects us, this generation
to make magic while they drive axes into the stage.
We are not to feel pain or sorrow for any longer than it takes,
to turn it witty. We are this world's last hope at salvation.
We are necessary."

The salutarian laughs, tears the page, and bites into a soggy maraschino cherry.

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