

"The Math Campers"

The Phi Beta Kappa poem 2019

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The Math Campers

Phi Beta Kappa Poem, Harvard University, 2019

1.

A mayfly born at the break of dawn
Dies when the sun goes down;
A tortoise on an English lawn
Outlives his master's son's son's son.

An ancient shark shakes off another century;
Eerie and pristine, a fetal dolphin,
A steamship and a sea anemone
Hang near her, lifeless in the jellied ocean.

This shark read over Shakespeare's shoulder;
In her extreme old age, she'll stare
Eye-to-eye, into a skyscraper's foyer,
At gilled, amphibious corporate lawyers.

2.

The big night stares us down from space;
We figured we would have more years;
Annihilation in her prom dress
Greets her platonic date, despair;

The black-hole poses for her picture
Wearing a coronet of stars;
A glacier, like a mountain, only bigger,
Rides southward on its own shed tears;

The deserts parched for centuries
Put on their snorkel gear;
Scorpions write their obituaries;
A cactus curtsies, then disappears.

3.

And yet, in middle school, if two boys
Want to kiss, or hold hands, they can;
Sixth graders learn sea-level rise,
And march with their friends against guns;

This spring held all its dividends
Then shed them like confetti;
Home in Vermont last weekend,
I saw biofuel silos in the country,

Farmers returning to farming,
Asparagus, ramps, CBD,
New ferns along the paths unfurling,
And robins waking sleepily.

4.

The hills say there's no single way
To be, up there, this time of Spring:
Swimmable water in the valley,
Snow on Mt Mansfield still falling.

In Greensboro, rusting Saabs
Have been replaced by Priuses
Crustier than the ones in cities,
Driven by school teachers and heiresses.

On the shore of Caspian Lake, one day
Justice "Bill" Rehnquist, at his summer house
Swore Stephen Breyer in, only
A part-time village clerk for witness.

5.

The Circus Camp patches its tents;
The Farm Camp rouses on the hill:
A goat behind a cedar fence
Prepares to be clumsily milked.

Hard problems at the Math Camp wait
All winter for solutions:
Engorged sums hibernate
And dream of consolation;

A raft dry-docked all winter
Gets its feet wet and waits
For the math campers in pairs
Who kiss, and stare at the stars, and calculate

6.

The absolute value of fifteen,
And how the summer might expand
And prove eternal by division
Of days into hours, minutes, seconds;

They're factoring love in suddenly,
And wondering how the stars in pairs
Create the dark sky's bright geometry,
And how to measure their heart's spheres,

The skew-lines of who they are and were,
And how, year-over-year, you grow
By comparing consecutive summers
And expressing them in a ratio.

7.

Now, in the interval between
Dodge ball and snack, the Math Campers
Back-of-the-envelope equations
They solve to make the summer longer.

They've measured out the summer
With the math they've done so far;
If they want a longer summer,
Oh, they'll have to practice harder--

For every correct answer, one more hour;
A furlough from the changing leaves.
The daisies cheer from the bleachers,
And bumblebees gossip about love.

8.

Rationalists will say they failed.
Fall came and bulldozed the bees.
The daisies saw their heads explode,
And parents returned with their SUVs.

The raft was dragged to a frozen lawn.
The January stars withdrew
Into relations of their own.
Ice strangled the bright yarrow.

An astronaut unzips his suit
And dreams beside the turning Earth,
While distant galaxies ejaculate
In acid trips of death and birth--

9.

The universe, first in its class,
Elaborates its origin
In the enormity of space;
Light finds its lost horizon

Then vanishes in ecstasy;
A dust-cyclone undoes the sun
And kills our Opportunity;
The little rover misses its friends.

First in his class, he worked hard on
His valedictory remarks
For his own graduation:
"My battery is low. It's getting dark."