

Autumn Inaugural DANA GIOIA

I.

There will always be those who reject ceremony,
who claim that resolution requires no fanfare,
those who demand the spirit stay fixed
like a desert saint, fed only on faith,
to worship in no temple but the weather.

There will always be the austere ones
who mount denial's shaky ladder
to drape the statues or whitewash the frescoed wall,
as if the still star of painted plaster
praised creation less than evening's original.

And they are right. Symbols betray us.
They are always more or less than what
is really meant. But shall there be no
processions by torchlight because we are weak?
What native speech do we share but imperfection?

II.

Look at the trees that surround our ceremony—
These skinny saplings barely kept upright
By wooden poles and braided wire.

They constitute no stately grove of academe,
They give the merest inklings of an avenue. And yet
The skittering whisper of their leaves suggest

A promise rooted local to the soil—
To care and cultivate these slender silhouettes
Until they shade the games of children yet unborn.

III.

Praise to the rituals that celebrate change,
old robes worn for new beginnings,
solemn protocol where the mutable soul,
surrounded by ancient experience, grows
young in the imagination's white dress.

Because it is not the rituals we honor
but our trust in what they signify, these rites
that honor us as witnesses — whether to watch
lovers swear loyalty in a careless world
or a newborn washed with water and oil.

So praise to innocence—impulsive and evergreen—
and let the old be touched by youth's
wayward astonishment at learning something new,

and dream of a future so fitting and so just
that our desire will bring it into being.

DANA GIOIA, SEPTEMBER 23, 2000

Written for and read by the poet at the Founders' Circle dinner celebrating
the opening of the new Sonoma Country Day School campus.