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Senior Class Speaker
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I'd like to start with an introduction. I've been called many names, by many people. Some call me Cam, to a dear friend I'm known as CC. Given my affinity this year for red flannel and an ever-lengthening beard, I've coined myself Lumberblack. But I suppose my truest name, so to speak, is Cameron Joseph Cook.

But what's in a name? I'm told, by my parents, that Cameron was a name they just liked. Nothing wrong with that. Cook denotes the Ellis Island journey of German immigrants that became my father's lineage.. And my middle name, "Joseph", is for my mother's father whom I never knew. In my name, he lives on, and I live on in his.

I wanted to introduce myself this way to reference a speech my dear friend Rachel Jackson gave at the beginning of this year. In it, Rachel talked about the importance of treating names with care. And it seems most fitting today, a day when all of our names are to be read out loud as we walk across this stage, to remember that. Because names themselves are really just short stories. Stories of family and love, of immigration and diaspora, of pain, of histories, and of futures to come. I urge us all, as this long ceremony continues, to pay attention to these stories of how we came to be here and who we came here with, as we continue on into wherever we are going.

In preparing this speech for today, what I wanted to do was share some stories. And I thought, and reflected, and wrote some down. But it is so hard to think of stories that can best summarize my and our time here at Pomona; there are just too many, and some I'm sure I don't quite remember. And while I'm incredibly grateful to have been chosen to speak, I can't possibly speak for all of the amazing classmates graduating today. Your stories are yours to tell, and yours alone. Our job will be to listen. Listening, after all, is something I'm much more used to; listening to teachers, listening to friends, listening to the noises and voices that make up the music of our lives.

So since I can't speak for all, or even any of you today, I thought I might instead speak to someone. In thinking about today as a culmination of years, decades even, of learning, I found myself wanting to speak one last time with all of my teachers; visiting the offices of my favorite professors, having conversations with my closest friends. But over and over again, there was one person who I kept coming back to, whose been speaking to me in some form or another for over 10 years.; someone who may have dropped out of college because they were always late for registration, but they did eventually graduate. They got me through my 808's and heartbreak, and this beautiful dark twisted fantasy that is Pomona College

So, for the rest of this speech, I present to you: An Open Letter to Kanye West; or: The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance.

Dear Mr. West,

Can I call you Kanye? We've never met, but you've been in my life for years. You were my middle school soundtrack, the music I turned to when my vision was first obstructed by the color-line of racism. Your music was what I drowned myself in during the lowest moments of my depression sophomore year at Pomona College. Your lyrics were the ones that scratched my throat as my best friend and I drunkenly yelled them late at night, unsure if we were laughing or crying.

As I've been approaching graduation, I've been returning to your music ever more frequently. You see, in your first album, you dedicate multiple skits to decrying the uselessness of degrees; that accumulated degrees won't keep you warm when you're dead (your words, not mine). And as I stand here today ready to complete one degree and begin another, I can't help but wonder if you're right.

You see, my senior year at Pomona College started with Ferguson and is ending with Baltimore. Fellow students in Mexico and Kenya have died pursuing their education. And as I've worked and sweat here, I've felt so, so guilty. I keep returning to your words in "Power", when you say this:

I just needed time alone with my own thoughts
Got treasures in my mind but couldn't open up my own vault
My childlike creativity, purity and honesty is honestly
Being crowded by these grown thoughts
Reality is catching up with me
Taking my inner child I'm fighting for custody
With these responsibilities that they entrusted me
As I look down at my diamond encrusted piece
Thinking No One Man should have all that power

I've been so conflicted and confused. You see, They say we live in a bubble; a campus removed from the real world. And now, as we're graduating, it feels that the bubble is about to burst upon contact with reality. But what scares me more than the bubble is the fact that the bubble doesn't exist. That is to say, being at Pomona, and college in general, granted us immense privilege and power. But Pomona *is* the real world. It's a part of the real world that's supported by labor of all kinds, some made more visible than others. Our gorgeous campus is supported by labor. Our clean residence halls are supported by labor. Everything that happens on this campus, good and bad, is inextricably tied to the world beyond these gates, and vice versa.

But don't get me wrong; I'm conflicted because Pomona College has also changed my life. Pomona is where I met the most amazing people; seriously. The faculty, but also the students; students who are friends, teachers, warriors, activists, fighters, reformers, jokesters and more.

To echo Kulsum's speech yesterday, Pomona is where I learned to practice community. Pomona is where I learned to love myself.

And so maybe it's ok to feel a little guilty; it's a reminder of the charge I've been given. And this time is, after all, one of celebration. To celebrate ourselves, our accomplishments, our communities, our families. We did it.

And maybe, Kanye, you're right about the degrees; maybe they are meaningless. Or maybe their meaning is only what we make of it. Maybe what's more important is the stories these degrees represent; the triumphs and struggles, the loves and futures.

Maybe--no *wait--definitely*---Toni Morrison got it right in her Nobel Prize Lecture. In it, Morrison recounts the story of an old blind woman, an oracle of sorts, possessing immense wisdom. Some young people come to her, hoping to stump her by saying "There's a bird, in our hands; is it alive or dead?"

Because she can't see the bird, they believe she's unable to answer their question. And, in fact, she answers with silence. Frustrated at her non-answer, they admit that there was no bird in their hands to begin with. And they grow angry: angry that she can't bequeath to them knowledge about this bird, which comes to symbolize their questions about identity, mortality, life.

Only then does the woman respond. She says, "Finally I trust you now. I trust you with the bird that is not in your hands because you have truly caught it. Look. How lovely it is, this thing we have done - together."

You see, in the children's furious desire for knowledge, they came to know themselves, without necessarily realizing it. And perhaps that approximates what we've done here at Pomona College. That in our quests for knowledge, our greatest discoveries have been ourselves.

So, no, Kanye, I don't think I know what to do with this degree now that it's in my hands. I'm not sure I ever will. But, to borrow your words one last time: Until I do know, fuck that, the world's ours.

Thank you.