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High School in Reverse

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(Rowman & Littlefield Education, August 2011). More information about Pflaum's projects can be found on his website, www.JeffreyPflaum.com, the BAM Radio Network blog, www.bamradionetwork.com, and www.Edutopia.org/blog.

High School in Reverse

Blue sky rains black mortarboards,
orange tassels like the tails of rare birds,
and the flat caps boomerang back
into two hundred some-odd hands.

Matching hands lower diplomas.
Eyes look away. All through the crowd
brief flashes zip back at light speed
into Canons and Fujis, Minoltas and Sharps,
into Razrs, iPhones and Curves.

Black-robed teens, their smiles
flat-lining, their pulses dying down,
regress up and across the dais, and hand
back the calligraphic square, thinking

how they don't really deserve it:
how in English class they always read
the endings first and made their points
before formulating a viable thesis;
how in Social Studies they scribbled

their notes in disappearing ink
and retracted every thoughtful thing
they ever said; how in Bio they built
from vivisectioned parts perfectly whole
frogs and earthworms and squids;

how in Geometry they found reasons
before proofs; and how on weekends,
breaking Newton's third law,
they unpuckered lips and refused to kiss,
unclasped hands and kept their distance

from the girl or boy they were feeling
steadily less in love with. And now,
back in the crowd, beneath the black robes
their young bodies absorbed sweat

and their bladders no longer felt the need
to pee. The summer seemed to be growing
further and further out of reach.
And June became May, and May April,
and in their yearbooks, the sentimental

notes of friends erased themselves one by one,
and on a certain day they handed the yearbooks
back to the yearbook staff, who boxed
them up and shipped them off to the printer
to be unbound, unset, deleted.

Before they knew it, senior year had started,
and they all would have been stressed about
applying to colleges, except that summer
was coming, and then junior year.
And they all wished they could stay on that path,

back and back, through middle school
and elementary school and kindergarten,
all the way to the warm, dark womb
and the great unknown, because life,

as exciting as it was, was scary, too,
and time never stopped and they'd learned
there was a thing at the end of it all
that might be full of promise or empty of it,
and once they were there they could never go
back.

- Gary J. Whitehead

Gary J. Whitehead teaches English at Tenafly High School. His third book of poetry, *A Glossary of Chickens*, was recently published by Princeton University Press. New work is forthcoming in *The New Yorker*.