High School in Reverse

Gary J. Whitehead
Tenafly High School

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 vivisected 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