

## The End: The Beginning

Staring down the hall, with the lockers darkening at every square,  
running my hands over the papers that once caused me so much despair,  
I look at the driveways of classmates who once were,  
and into the windows of their lives now scattered.

Some of them I no longer speak to.  
Some have passed.  
Some are behind bars.  
Some are acclaimed researchers in cities I'll never live in.  
And yet, once, we all knew each other's names.  
We all shared the same halls, the same small-town streets,  
the same early-morning bus rides,  
the same lunchroom chatter.

There is something almost sacred about it,  
the intimacy of growing up here,  
where everyone's story brushed against everyone else's,  
even when we didn't notice it.  
Even when we were too busy being ourselves  
to see the fragile thread holding us together.

And now, graduation nears.  
And it is unbearably sad.  
Not just because we are leaving,  
but because leaving means knowing  
that the next time we return,  
it will not be the same.  
The streets, the buildings, the hallways:  
they will not hold us the way they once did.  
And we will not be the same.

I think of the classmates I have lost:  
some too soon, some to choices I cannot understand,  
some who rose above everything I knew.  
I think of the shared beginnings,  
the awkwardness, the small victories, the quiet sorrows,  
and I feel the weight of all that was once common  
and will now be separate.

There is beauty here,  
in the way we started together,  
in the way a town can hold a life so closely,  
even when it cannot hold it forever.

And there is grief, too,  
a quiet, twisting grief,  
for the people we loved in ways we barely understood,  
for the innocence of knowing each other's names,  
for the inevitability of moving on.

I linger in the hallways a moment longer,  
listening to the echoes of voices that are not mine,  
tracing the empty seats, the worn floors,  
remembering that once,  
we were all together here,  
and that we will never be again.

## Crown

Every morning, my hands trace the strands  
as if mapping the lines of a map I didn't draw.

The mirror asks for perfection:  
straightened, braided, combed, smooth, neat.  
No kink out of place, no curl escaping,  
because standing out is not an option.

For them, standing out is power—  
a sparkle, a shout, a victory.  
For us, standing out can be fatal—  
a glare, a whisper, a warning.

There is pressure in every tug of the comb,  
in the shine of the oil, in the quiet hours spent  
making my hair something safe, something acceptable,  
something worthy of passing without comment.

I am taught early that my crown  
is never just mine, it is armor,  
a shield, a mask, a performance.  
Sometimes I want it wild,  
to let it curl like rivers, like storms, like freedom,  
but freedom is dangerous, and survival is expected.

The hands that braid me carry whispers of history,  
of mothers and grandmothers who shaped their own crowns  
to survive, to please, to belong.  
I carry their patience, their pain,  
their insistence that beauty is also survival.

And every time I step out,  
my hair speaks before I do.  
It says I belong.  
It says I am careful.  
It says I am enough, if only I follow the rules.