Operational Truths

There is a strange, quiet friction to the threshold,

a stillness that arrives when the ache of homesickness finally dries,

yet leaves no taproot in the soil.

The city you left behind no longer wakes you at midnight with its phantom horns,

its salt breeze or its familiar rooms fading into pale watercolor;

yet this brick, for all its daily kindness,

has not quite knitted itself into your bones.

You possess the operational truths of the place.

You know which door sticks when the afternoon heat swells the wood,

which corridor offers the coldest draft at midday,

and exactly how many minutes it takes to run from the gate to the second floor

without completely losing your breath.

You know whose face belongs to which name,

who will wave to you across the courtyard with genuine ease,

and which counter serves the tea fast enough to beat the bell.

By all measurable accounts, you are an insider.

A stranger could ask you for directions,

and your hand would sketch the air with unerring precision.

Yet sometimes, walking the main avenue at dusk,

a soft detachment slips between you and the ground.

It is not sadness. It lacks the sharp, weeping edge of exile;

it carries none of the hollow heaviness of loneliness.

It is simply a transparent pane of glass

lowered between the spectator and the scene.

You watch your friends lean into each other with ancestral comfort,

as though they were born of these very stones,

while you stand among them like a well-treated guest

welcome at the table, fluent in the dialect,

handed the warm mug without having to ask,

yet acutely aware of your own coat still hanging near the door.

To almost belong is to live in the vestibule of a life.

It is the odd sensation of turning your room's key in the lock

and feeling neither trapped nor arrived

just safely housed inside an ellipsis.

You are an inhabitant without the folklore;

a citizen of coordinates, but an observer of myth.

Perhaps this suspended air is not a failure of rooting,

but an honest, quiet territory of its own:

the neutral grace of passing through,

where the world is entirely familiar,

and you are lightly, peacefully,

just visiting your own existence.

The Margin of Use

We only open our mouths when we need leverage.

Nobody stops in the red-brick heat just to ask how you're surviving.

You learn that by October of freshman year.

Every smile has an angle, every soft greeting across the courtyard

is a down payment on a reading pack,

a desperate bid for someone's summary notes at midnight,

or a contact for an internship spreadsheet someone hoards like contraband.

If you don't have utility, you don't have a name.

You are just background noise, another breathing body taking up a library desk.

The currency here is simple, ugly, and unspoken:

grades, access, past papers, social clout.

If you can't grease the wheel of someone's sprint to a 3.8,

they look straight through you like you're made of cellophane.

I watched people calibrate their warmth.

I watched people calculate in a split second whether walking with you

increased their stock before they decided to smile back.

We built an entire ecosystem out of extraction,

a quiet, bloodless market humming beneath the arches,

where human beings are weighed, measured, and stored in the margins

until a crisis makes them valuable.

We sit shoulder-to-shoulder in the lecture halls,

breathing the same chalk, dodging the same cold calls,

yet keeping our fingers pressed firmly against our ledgers.

And when you sit alone on the curb with your tea,

watching a hundred people trade greetings like counterfeit coin,

you have to wonder:

once we've stripped everyone down to what they can offer,

what is left of us that anyone could ever actually know?