

## A Second Breath

There is a photo in the corridor.  
She resembles me.  
Same hair, same eyes.

Everyone keeps telling me that,  
but she is not me.

I asked once, when I was little.  
Mum replied, "That's your sister."  
Her voice became softer after that.  
Dad changed the subject.

I don't ask anymore.

I sometimes see mum standing in front of the picture, stiff as a post.  
She wipes the frame clean, but never approaches the glass.  
As if she's scared.

Scared that she'll smudge her memory.

They never say her name, not properly.  
Quick mentions. Half-smiles.  
Then silence.

Silence that loiters in the room like a person.

I once found a box in the back of Mum's closet.  
It smelled like baby powder.  
There were tiny socks. A hospital bracelet.  
A name written in pen, frayed around the edges.

Not mine.

Mum caught me holding it.  
She didn't yell at me.  
She just took it from me and said, "Some things are hard to explain".

I believe I was born in silence.  
Not a secret — just something too heavy to say.  
Sometimes I feel like they look at me and see her.

Like I remind them of something they lost.

Dad hugs me like he is scared that I'll disappear.  
Mum stares at me for too long sometimes, and then blinks as if she's far away.  
I don't think they do it on purpose.

I know they love me.

But it's strange.  
Strange to grow up in the shadow of someone who never grew up at all.  
Strange to feel close to someone I never met.

She's always older in my dreams.  
She talks to me as if she's in charge, even though I'm the only one here.  
Sometimes we just sit.

No words. Just knowing.

I wonder who she'd be.  
I wonder if she'd love music.  
If we'd fight over clothes.  
If she'd do my maths homework or steal my snacks.

Would we even like each other?

I don't know.

I'll never know.

But she crosses my mind more often than I like to admit.

There's this sensation, sometimes, that I'm a second chance.

A bandage on something too deep.

A start that came after an end.

She never could breathe.

But I can.

And I feel, somehow, I'm breathing for both of us.