

HONORABLE MENTION

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The Not Silent, Silent Room

It's like clockwork.
I know where to go,
I know what to do.
I'll sit in my corner
silent.
Except it's not silent.
Everyone's trying and failing
to control their breath.
The glow of someone's phone illuminates the room,
someone shifts in their spot,
clothes rustling.
Someone else bumps a chair with their foot.
Such a small noise sounding impossibly loud
in the not silent, silent room.
What's even the point?
No one takes these things seriously.
That's the problem too.
In real life I'd play dead
because that's the only chance I have to not be.
We know whose footsteps echo through the halls.
We text our friends "I'm bored" not "I love you".
If this were real we'd be dead
and then there would be no one controlling their breath,
and at last the room would be silent.
The keys shake in the handle.
We're released from the lockdown.
Like clockwork we go back to our seats.
Teachers go back to teaching,
students go back to complaining,
and the not silent, silent room
remains.

Judge's remarks:

Poets sometimes take on the task of sharing an experience that is not common to all and making it universal through sensory experience—in this case sound. This poet takes us inside a school lockdown in the days of ever-present threats of gun violence. This is a drill, a rehearsal for the real thing. The poet lets us hear what sounds remain when human interaction stops. The poet also manages to convey what it is to live in a world where preparation for violence is necessary, when a pretense of boredom holds back fear. While this has all the specificity of a particular time and place, it's impossible to read it without being aware of the ways in which all manner of citizens conjure the same sorts of denial to keep fear at bay.