

On Listening to Your Teacher Take Attendance

By Aimee Nezhukumatathil

Breathe deep even if it means you wrinkle
your nose from the fake-lemon antiseptic

of the mopped floors and wiped-down
doorknobs. The freshly soaped necks

and armpits. Your teacher means well,
even if he butchers your name like

he has a bloody sausage casing stuck
between his teeth, handprints

on his white, sloppy apron. And when
everyone turns around to check out

your face, no need to flush red and warm.
Just picture all the eyes as if your classroom

is one big scallop with its dozens of icy blues
and you will remember that winter your family
took you to the China Sea and you sank
your face in it to gaze at baby clams and sea stars
the size of your outstretched hand. And when
all those necks start to crane, try not to forget
someone once lathered their bodies, once patted them
dry with a fluffy towel after a bath, set out their clothes
for the first day of school. Think of their pencil cases
from third grade, full of sharp pencils, a pink pearl eraser.
Think of their handheld pencil sharpener and its tiny blade.

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