

The Rooms

Phil Kingston

We unstack the brittle formica tables
as if we are lifting bodies. Their colours
were bold in the 70s. We work in silence.

The room has plastic chairs, whose metal legs rattle,
and some padded ones, rubbed by many arses,
mended with duct tape, now frayed and grubby.

The room is plain and overused
like the spare coat they lent you at school,
the ugly one that no one ever owned.

There's a pitted cork noticeboard
where a laminated safety card curls
against sunbleached shadows

and a poster whose faded hipster reassures,
with his floor length cardy and curly staff,
'esus's ove aves!', so long as you're a sheep.

The stains on the carpet have turned to maps,
the smell long gone, the evidence remaining
of irrevocable accidents in a public place.

There is always tea and digestives, sometimes custard creams,
once a multi-pack of Kit -Kats (but that was stupid)
sometimes cake but it's controversial, hard to share.

The room is at the end of Station Road
where the fence is woven with bindweed
whose white flowers trumpet every spring.

In the room people talk, and cry, and work themselves up,
and laugh, ruefully and briefly, and smoke
or kill time until they can. Or just turn up.

The room looks out on the backs of terraces
full of washing lines and neat allotments and kid's bikes
and hundreds of unknown, ordinary lives.

And once, stunned by an autumn dusk,
I saw each one, and knew that at the heart
of things was an extraordinary space and stillness.

Back in the room someone is speaking,
long past the point they should have let it go.
But it's what they need to do, so we listen.