

# This Is Not a Drill

Category: Poems

written by Daniel Becker | November 3, 2017

**Daniel Becker ~**

At work there are three kinds of drills: fire, earthquake, shooter.  
During a fire drill the building empties into the parking lot  
where crowds kill time and blame the fire marshal.

The smokers want to smoke but don't.  
A doctor talks to the 2:40 patient and tries to stay on schedule.  
If communication is the heart of medicine,

diligence is its best habit. Then he looks for the 3:00 patient.  
In a 5th floor office the photograph of a storm-tossed schooner  
is 10 degrees off plumb because that wasn't a drill.

Nor was it a backhoe unburying the storm drain it buried last month.  
The walls shook while everyone wandered around looking for direction.  
The Director said *This isn't my fault*. Then the world returned to normal.

As instructed, people keep quiet during the shooter drill.  
They stare at the floor. They don't share funny looks.  
Not only is it bad luck to reveal where you'd cringe, it's unthinkable.

But if you look out the window and take a fire-escape moment  
to consider all your options, you have to admit—  
the inescapable fact of existence—

there's no corner small enough, no air thin enough, to disappear in.  
Upstairs, when housekeeping straightens the photograph,  
the Director restores the commemorative tilt.

The photographer spoke seven languages  
and in a Tower of Babel accent recalled the wars he escaped  
and the evil he didn't. Meanwhile, that ship is beached.

That sky is gray, that tide is lost, that storm is spent,  
those sails are torn and empty. The poet's recurrent dream  
is a sailboat that floats on air and travels in time.

He tacks back and forth over the old neighborhood.  
Everyone looks the same. They look up, smile,  
wave hello—goodbye—see you later. He'd wave back,

but one hand for the tiller, one hand for the sheet.  
Even in a dream it's easy to spill the wind.  
Even in a dream it takes practice.

**About the poet:**

Daniel Becker practices and teaches internal medicine at the University of Virginia School of Medicine in Charlottesville, where he also directs the Center for Biomedical Ethics and Humanities.□

**About the poem:**

“This poem makes public, for the first time, my favorite dream.”

**Poetry editors:**

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