

Drawing Blood by Kathryn Downie

She wraps the arctic blue tourniquet tightly,
like the knot in my belly, or
a rattlesnake squeezing light from its prey.

These new turquoise sneakers are
hurting my feet, but I'll break them in real quick
picking up all these extra shifts.

Her gloved finger prods my arm, hunting
for a juicy target, a quick win.
Looks like the lil guys are feeling shy, she gushes.

I hate blood draws, she (or was it they?) says
as if that makes her unique. Lucky for her I've been
bowling strikes today, pinning rolling

I always ask for the person who's best with kids
cuz my veins can be tricky, but
wish she'd ditch this cutesy shit and talk straight.

veins without complaining about my cranky
uterus practicing its somersaults (fingers crossed
I remembered to pack a spare tampon).

I hear the crack of a disastrous step on a frozen lake,
feel a band of heat bloom against my elbow.
Let's see if this makes them pop a little bit more.

I have to get poked a lot, she repeats.
I muster a nod, tired of this parade of clenched
fists attached to bodies that recoil from

My gum has turned from spearmint to Tupperware
but I keep chomping, because my jaw is
one of the only things I control in this chaotic body.

my touch like I'm a predator. Shoot,
I'm out of Kleenex. When tears fall, I remind
myself I'm not the enemy and focus

I pretend my arm's detached, turned to stone, safe
from the wildfire overtaking my—
Found one, this will be over before you know it.

on doing my job before I trigger a silent
alarm and she slams those sleeves down. Bingo!
Thank God. It's a pain in the ass when they

The caustic scent of an alcohol wipe fills my nostrils,
triggers a Pavlovian response, panic
spiking like a glass thermometer plunged into lava.

faint, or fight. I prep the spot, pumped
about beating Kat's high score for consecutive one-stick
draws. She's gonna be so annoyed, lol!

I pinch my leg, split the attention of a cracked brain
that flags a quick prick as inferno
All set! I told you that would be easy, she gloats.

Did you get it? Is blood flowing? she cries.
I release the tourniquet, relieved she didn't launch out
of the chair—she's wound up as tight as

I'm too dizzy and well-trained to act up, but
ache to scream her script is bullshit and
this is one stitch in a sprawling tapestry of tears.

these damn shoes. I force a smile, try to ignore
the cries of smooshed toes and period pangs. Only
two jabs until lunch and a lot of ibuprofen.