

Straight Up

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Shirley is the punch line who holds the joke
while we wait like pieces on a game board
in the line that wanders
from the classrooms, through the halls,
around the walls of the gymnasium,
all the way to the dreaded shot station.

Holding dollar bills and marked slips—
diphtheria, polio, tetanus—
we rub arms we know will ache at recess,
and watch the thin dishwater girl
with mottled skin
who always looks like she's been crying.
She does cry in the shot line, quietly at first.
When she spots the doctor—
his erect collar and white coat, how he holds the needle up
to check the level of pink serum—
she sobs, agitates our blood with screams,
and tries to bolt.
Remembering that she kicked the doctor once,
they hold her arms and legs,
force into her rigid arm
the medicine that's good for her.

Standing in twos and threes,
we laugh. We trust our times tables,
which way is north or south.
We read in groups, not alone
in a back pocket of the classroom.

Every year we let her pantomime our fright--
watch her do what we would do
if we dared,
or had reason to.
After she is gone, the great room calm,
our elementary hearts heaped
with something new,
we focus frozen eyes on those who held her down,
and take it in the arm,
straight up.