

Antibodies

Category: Poems

written by Shanna Germain | September 12, 2008

Shanna Germain

At twenty, I started working the HIV
ward, midnight to morning. Left my husband
sleeping, mouth-open to the air, to
drive through the dark body of the city.

Every shift, the warning about infections.
Me sliding on booties, disposable
gown and gloves. Even through the mask,
you could smell decay, the way viruses

swept through bodies. I did what was needed:
held hands through double-gloves, took blood
or confessions when I could, told off-white lies
to thin cracked lips that knew the truth.

Once, a year or so into it, I stuck
myself, pointed red end of an IV needle
left in a lab coat pocket. So small a thing
it almost didn't hurt going in, only

leaving, small pop and smear of two bloods mingled.
I put the wound to my mouth and sucked before
I thought. Fear rising, rinsed my tongue with soap,
spit someone's dark blood into the white scrub sink,

then gave my own blood to one of the other nurses
to be tested. At dawn, I roused my husband awake
with my newly tainted tongue, let him slide bare
into me, as though nothing was between us.

I tell this all like it was an accident:
someone else's lab coat, a needle forgotten
in a white pocket, three seconds of married
passion so strong my lips did not say, at risk.

But no. This was after I caught the cliché
of my life: his red scrawl across receipts hidden
in a desk drawer, the smell of lilacs in
his sleeves, the cleaving across the bedsides.

The things we do in fear are the things we don't
say. Hidden and rampant as a hotel room stay
on a credit card, or a string of genes
in a coat of protein, destined to repeat.

About the poet:

Shanna Germain is a poet by nature, a short-story writer by the skin of her teeth and a novelist-in-training. Her poems and short stories have appeared in publications such as the *Absinthe Literary Review*, *American Journal of Nursing*, *Best American Erotica*, *McSweeney's* and *Salon*. You can see more of her work on her website, www.shannagermain.com.

About the poem:

"This poem came about because I was thinking of all the things that we do to protect ourselves, not just in the medical field but in life. Not just healthwise, but also to protect our hearts, our souls. And how easily that can all be undone—by someone else's actions or by our own. And how we live with those repercussions after. Or don't."