

Mrs. Carter appears in the broken-paned window,
another black eye, and pulls down the blind.
My mother had called Mrs. Carter to ask if
she'd come over and blow cigarette smoke into her ears,
she'd read somewhere that it helped.
But Mrs. Carter said sorry, she couldn't leave the house.
I'd yelled at my mother then why didn't she go
to a doctor, I slammed the door and was sorry.
Now I'm sitting on the step, biting the polish
off my nails. I don't like my coat, it's reversible
and has imitation fur. The snow edging the empty street
looks like coal. Next year Mr. Carter will go

to the electric chair for killing an old man
and his wife and hiding their pieces in his car trunk.
One night I'll forget to kiss my father goodbye
before he drives off to the factory with just one
taillight working, and I'll shudder to sleep seeing that,
certain he'll die. I pray for goodness
and mercy every night, I want too many things.

DREAM NEAR EXTINCTION

I'm sitting in the gravel road that leads
to my grandmother's, moving my bare feet
in a basin of dust soft as talc.

It's late afternoon. The wind is slow and laced
with the tar my grandmother is cooking, stirring
in a rusted barrel down by the house.

The tough grass clumped along the road
has dried stiff and sharp as razor blades.
A milk snake bellies through it blind.

My grandmother's stray dog, black as pitch,
watches me from the shade of the tool shed,
his breath pressing fast against his ribs.

The cattle are gone. The pond has gone
thick and shiny and dark in this sun.
I'm pressing my handprints into the dust.

I lie down on my side and trace letters into it.
My dress is the same thin yellow as the dust,
and the tar I'm breathing is all we have left.

INSTINCT

Winter was running out before I was ready—
gray clouds scudding flat-bottomed above
the cornfields and small huddles of houses,
the cold low-roofed light breaking open.
There wasn't any work. I took longer walks.
One day I boarded a bus and stepped off here
with two suitcases and my last twenty.

I found a room in this house, three floors
of women keeping out of each other's way.
Lucille, the rickety shadow above me,
has rented her attic room for life.
She scrubs our kitchen sink every morning,
a ritual with rubber gloves and cleanser,
and water boiled in white enamel bowls.

A cellist has moved into the room below me.
She practices at odd hours, scraping
bow against strings, irregular, urgent—
rasping pitches of some mental schism.
It's a quiet house except for her, except
for the undertones of pipes, doors closing,
phones ringing in rooms with no one home.