

The Maiden Ladies

They were plentiful once—
black hatted in Museums of Natural History staring
into yellowed dioramas of jerboas and plumed basilisks,
swaying slightly so as not to be confused for the displays.

They paid their dimes on rainy afternoons
to sit with ten-year-old boys watching films of Brazilian
snakes and Madagascan bats, and didn't scold
rambunctiousness except with powerful telepathy.

We could count on them to inform shop clerks
of frightful declines in the quality of *x*, the availability
of certain undergarments and cuts of meat including
livers, tongues, and hearts. And if their footsteps mapped

a day that only neighbors a floor below might know—
from kitchen to desk and back, from sofa to the door—
we suspected okra pills, ancient tennis gear, beetle jewelry
and seamliness at bedtime.

And then hats went out of style.
Shop clerks started talking back and the maiden ladies
died. Glints, tropes, moral resistance to rust—
all gone. They're not found even in museums.