

Masthead Logo

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Instinct

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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.

I hung a bird feeder from a metal railing
outside my window, but they haven't discovered it yet.
It's not a place birds would think to land.
I watch that little house swinging in gusts
of north wind against a backdrop of brick.
I'm considering South Dakota, Alberta.
Everywhere you move people ask you why.

As far as I know this is part of the story,
these slight intersections of contiguous lives.
The cellist's song rises like the undersides
of memory, the migratory calls of a flightless
creature. Lucille hangs a sign on the basement doorknob
whenever she descends with trash or laundry,
Dont lock this door I am down there.