

The Minks

By Toi Derricotte

In the backyard of our house on Norwood,
there were five hundred steel cages lined up,
each with a wooden box
roofed with tar paper;
inside, two stories, with straw
for a bed. Sometimes the minks would pace
back and forth wildly, looking for a way out;
or else they'd hide in their wooden houses, even when
we'd put the offering of raw horse meat on their trays, as if
they knew they were beautiful
and wanted to deprive us.
In spring the placid kits
drank with glazed eyes.
Sometimes the mothers would go mad
and snap their necks.
My uncle would lift the roof like a god
who might lift our roof, look down on us
and take us out to safety.
Sometimes one would escape.
He would go down on his hands and knees,
aiming a flashlight like
a bullet of light, hoping to catch
the orange gold of its eyes.
He wore huge boots, gloves
so thick their little teeth couldn't bite through.
"They're wild," he'd say. "Never trust them."
Each afternoon when I put the scoop of raw meat rich
with eggs and vitamins on their trays,
I'd call to each a greeting.
Their small thin faces would follow as if slightly curious.
In fall they went out in a van, returning
sorted, matched, their skins hanging down on huge metal
hangers, pinned by their mouths.
My uncle would take them out when company came
and drape them over his arm—the sweetest cargo.
He'd blow down the pelts softly
and the hairs would part for his breath
and show the shining underlife which, like
the shining of the soul, gives us each
character and beauty.

Toi Derricotte, "The Minks" from *Captivity*. Copyright © 1989 by Toi Derricotte. All rights are controlled by the University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, www.upress.pitt.edu/~press/. Used by permission of University of Pittsburgh Press.

Source: *Captivity* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989)



Born in Michigan, Toi Derricotte is the co-founder of the African-American writers retreat, Cave Canem, and Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. A two-time poetry fellowship recipient from the National Endowment for the Arts, her literary memoir, *The Black Notebooks*, won the 1998 Annisfield-Wolf Book Award for Nonfiction.

[See More By This Poet](#)