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.

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