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Signals

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Signals

When we were thirteen
we lived by signals.

Yours, a rag doll
slung over your father's
porch rail; mine, slow
steps across the field
between our houses,
skeletons of ice
crunching
under my boots.

When he wasn't there,
I could feel
the hands that pulled
the blue plate
from the oven,
the lips that scowled
at the chicken
in cream sauce,
peas boiled to mush.

I thought
you were indifferent.
You didn't care
about dances

or black fishnet stockings.
You didn't want
dimestore lipsticks
dropped like coins
on your bed.
When he said
he wanted to be
first, when he
called you night
after night
into his dim bedroom,
pulled back the sheets
and commanded you to lie
down—what were you
thinking? The only
world I knew
was my parents'
fenced acre, the house
built from a blueprint:
four children,
Sunday school,
picnics in the meadow.

By summer, you told me
and I told no one,
afraid he might press

a knife to my throat.
What I wrote into my white diary
those nights was this:
Today Father mowed the lawn.
Mother finished her canning.