

## Coded Language

a soft knock on the wall at two a.m. means  
the retreat of a bad dream: my daughter's code  
to *please come check on me*. when I'm there  
she's supine, looking up at neon stars stuck to the  
wood slats of the top bunk, her sister inciting  
the low grind of teeth above. the stars  
unstick over time, we find constellation parts  
in bedsheets, on the bottoms of shoes:  
carried by the upward drift of  
school and dance and a young prying brother.  
*I had a nightmare*, she says. I lay next to her  
and draw squares on her back, a thing she learned to  
love from her mother, who learned it from her mother.  
my wife taught me when I met her and I've drawn  
squares on backs for 18 years now:  
in a dorm room in Flagstaff  
in a worn farmhouse outside Madison  
in a suburb of the valley where the kids  
grow too fast. I know where I'll draw them  
next but it's hard to say when. we've always lived in  
code like this: drawing squares, knocking on common  
walls at night, three squeezes of a hand when we  
can't speak. if all isn't code then it's close,  
and as she falls back asleep I whisper  
this night's coda: *don't hesitate to knock*.  
don't curse the stars  
falling around you.