The Raccoon

At first we saw her tracks: scattered scads of scat around the yard's perimeter and trails of little paw prints, seemingly fossilized in drying mud. Then we heard her, trapped in a metal trash can, rattling the scraps of suppers long forgotten and snacks of chips with salsa; chocolate chip cookies; midnight omelettes. Eventually, we saw her hours beyond dawn, raised on hind legs, head in the garbage again. Some said she must be dangerous—maybe rabid—
to be out in daylight, and they wanted to call the parks department or the sheriff, but we believed different, understood what a cruel god hunger can be, demanding we find food no matter what risk. And yes, I've dined and dashed. Twice. The first time I was 18 and cool:

exit through the glass door of the diner
I glimpsed only for a brief interlude the counterman's countenance—part dismay, part rage. And the lady

I collided on the sidewalk? Her shocked Oh fused with the whoosh of the door closing and together they cloaked whatever he may have said as I vanished among the other leather coats across the avenue in Needle Park. A decade later

I returned and tried to decipher the paisley patterns of grease painted on the waiter's apron, tried to read in the erosion of his face
if he had been there that Saturday evening.
What could I do but pay
double then, seemingly without reason. The second time I ran
from a restaurant's register, I was older and poor.
I left a cigarette building its ceremonial mound
in a golden glass ashtray. I admit: I felt no shame

nor guilt, just a slight second of empathy
for the waitress, who may have cursed me the remainder of
her day,
even when starting her seven year old station wagon

that evening, stomping the accelerator twice
before turning the key. She didn't see me
on a bench across the street—my camouflage

of tobacco smoke. Or she chose
to ignore me, much like that raccoon we saw daily,
night or day, which ignore the tires of too close Kilgore Ave.

and suffered the misdemeanors of the flesh.
And yes—I fed her; everyday
I hefted a bowl of sweet cereal, left it beside the door

and watched through a window
as she ate the red, green, and yellow rings.
I carried that bowl out

despite complaining neighbors—despite, even,
the continuation of raids against my trash.
I carried that bowl in my supplicant's fingers

like a present or an offering
for benevolence. I carried it forward
as if it were sacred.

Gerry La Femina