

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:

exiting 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 with on the sidewalk? Her shocked *Ob*
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