

Raccoons, A History

We watched him last summer by flashlight,
moonlight, sharp paws flickering,
thick-furred body anxious and upright—
Quick, quick, he'd dive at the cat food,
then feint and check for danger. Now it's January,
raining, death swells in the walls—
he must have come home to die last fall,
slunk off into the crawl space.
First we noticed the sweetness,
the something-not-quite-clean here.
Was it a squirrel, a mouse? we wondered.
Weeks passed, and it didn't diminish—
Could we take the boards off? No, too old,
they would splinter. And we didn't know
for certain where the dead thing was.
So my husband climbed on to the roof
to shovel ten pounds of quicklime into the crawl space—
and found the other raccoon, the little female.
Shivering and scrawny,
she tried to squeeze into the hole,
but he blocked it with his body.
He said, "She looked sad. She turned away."

Last spring they were born in the walls,
where my daughter slept in the guest room bed.
We heard them scrabbling, squeaking.
"It's beasts," I said, "are they dying?"
But she laughed like she laughed when she was little—
"Mom, listen to them, they're snuggling, they're happy."
They grew and climbed out from the roof,
played with their mother and dug through the compost,
pawed at the screen on the kitchen window.
We loved them. Then the big one

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started to fight the female, scratching and snarling.
Plenty of food for both of them,
but he'd snap and slash till she cowered on the deck
with her one filched piece of cat food.

Sometime in the fall, the mother vanished.
For the big one and the female, was it sickness? Poison?

—January, raining, first came the stench,
then quicklime dusting down from between the beaded boards,
then snow, and the smell diminished.
Now lime-floured flies
drawn forth by the warmth of the kitchen
dot the walls, caress the light globes, circle and hover like ghosts, stunned.
I vacuum them up, they're easy targets,
but wave after wave they emerge from the door jamb.