

Survivor

by Anne Richey

*—The evolutionary lineage of the Virginia opossum, common
to the Southeastern U.S., dates to the extinction of the dinosaurs . . .
PLoS One, 2009*

Then the possum—

after the school boys had flung their backpacks
into the rear of their mom’s SUV, after the dog
walkers a.m. duty, after the joggers, the trash pick-up,
after the street had become a landing strip for robins—

then—in the morning stillness settling over this neighborhood,
its speed bumps and potted ferns—

Aren’t they nocturnal?

Finger-sore from weeding (the so-called plastic “weed barrier”
crumbling beneath an over-lay of rocks), I was cursing

the former owners’ lack of respect for dirt when it came limping
across the yard. No sign it saw me (or cared if it had). Its gait

arthritic, painful to watch, each step slow and deliberate.
Strung with long dirt-crusted hair, poor thing looked like a weed

itself. Its rat-like body was hard, thick, as if ready-stuffed for display
in a diorama of the soon-to-be extinct. The word for possums’ lives

is “iffy”—an average two-year lifespan in the woods. Maybe longer among these edged lawns and scentless knock-out roses.

Lucky them, assuming we discount our penchant for hulking pick-ups and SUVs. Years I’ve swerved around their gore on rural roads,

and occasionally on city streets: one more possum not “playing possum”—a go-to joke that helps to settle my stomach. This zombie possum

spooked me. I feared a turn my way where the bottlebrush blocked its path. But it shambled on through the spiky branches

as if they were nothing.

