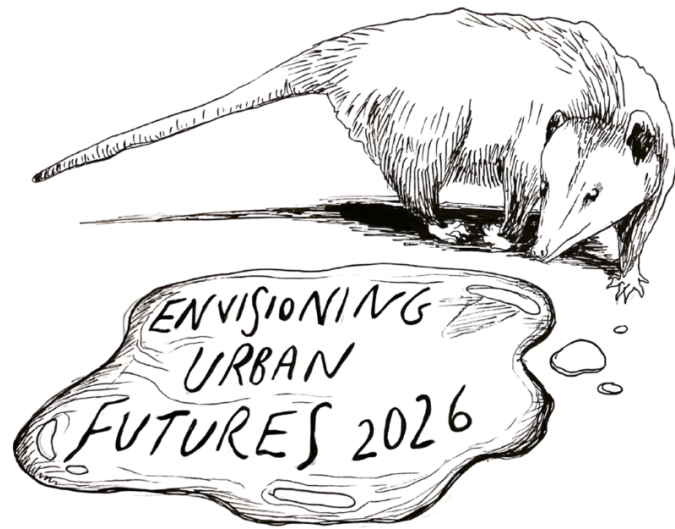
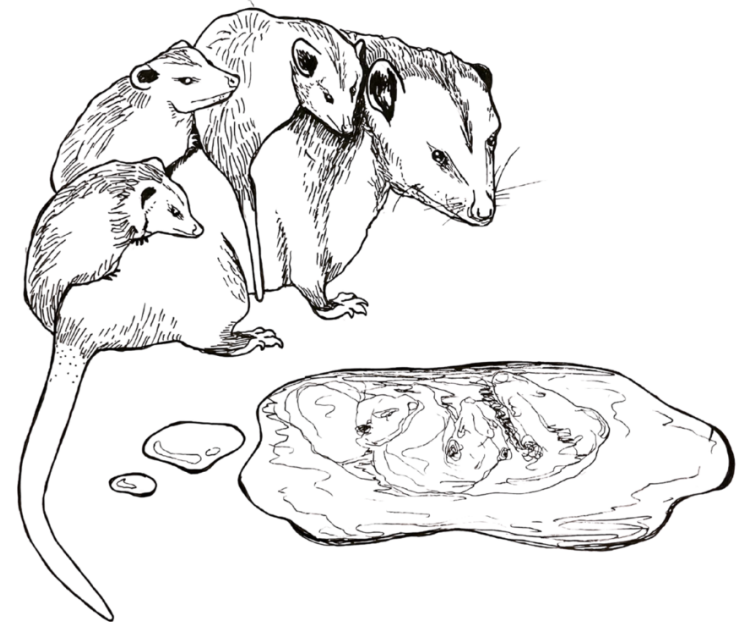




artwork by L. Ciccone

Gospel from the Book of Future Roadkill

by Max Franciscovich



Some of you will die in the road.

Some-not-all. Our folks've been around since before roads

the pavement crunch

burnt rubber

big wet eyeshine in the dark

leg lock

stutterbreath

freeze

and freeze

and freeze

And get up, if you're lucky.

Some of you will die in the road. I know that like I know the
wind through the night trees clacking branches together like bones. I
know it 'cause it's just a numbers game. But some of you won't. Some
of you will get smart. Get fed. Get big the way the roads got big,
city-sound sprawl. Get mean. Get fat. Get into trash cans. Get good at
knowing when to drop and roll.

they throw feasts through rolled-down windows never
knowing. I'll show you how to shuck life from the crinkling foil,
grease-wet bag

how to peel away the layers down to crusts and bun and burger
rinds

and when that great roar bears down

whole ground shakes

that howl that rush that big wet headlight eye

You freeze. Drop. Sleep.

Some of you will get up.

and I curled my tail 'round the closest branch, looked down, and you
 know, I'll be damned if people's hands don't look like ours. No fur,
 five fingers, five nails. Splay toes. Climb trees. Grip tight. When you
 get something you hold it hard. When it noses back to life you let it go.
 I let all my litters go and I don't miss you, 'cause I trust you know to
 prowl as good as me

mouth open

teeth shine

ducking from the light.

Most of our folks see just two springtimes. I want three. I want
 to hear the hawk chicks sing again. When I get scared I freeze, drop,
 sleep it off. I find small places. I find quiet. I find stars. In the dusk
 time, prick your nose for coyotes, for hounds off the leash. Don't talk
 to nobody slobbering foam. Sometimes the death comes on you from
 the inside, curls you up and hurts like hell and no one smells it coming.
 For me, I know what's coming, more than like. I know the cling of
 pavement under claws, the gravel ditches

apple cores

sweet rotten in the road glare

There's a lot of you now. There won't be next spring. A year's
 a funny thing. The beavers off the creek trail say the cicadas come
 singing every seventeen. But that's the beavers for you. They get old.
 Our folks don't get seventeen. We get cicada crunch between our teeth.
 We get all the screaming days of summer. The world's louder these
 days. Smaller. Tighter. Dusk light hurts. Edges clatter. Hard to hide.
 Sometimes you go reaching for the dirt and hit concrete

dead

cold

nowhere to burrow nowhere to cling

all the roads roaring up to the sky

but we move different, our folks. We move in the dark. We have prowl
 time

moon high lone time

mouth slivered open showing teeth

even in the city it gets quiet at night if you know where to hide from
 the streetlights, and God, ain't it pretty when you sneak sight of a star.
 We keep moving, our folks. Slow swaying steady. We don't walk a
 straight line but we get where we need.

Listen close, yeah? I won't have you long. I like quiet, lonesome. So will you, when you grow up. First I saw you, you were all writhing pink. None of you bigger than the caterpillars I licked off the honeysuckle last spring. I held you in the burrow of my body where the fur and skin and warm make a home and now I hold you on my shoulders along my back down to the tail. Hold close. Grip tight. Go solo soon. Get big enough to walk. Get it, then, why we like nights alone. The hawks whose babies beg-cry in the spring say they can see the whole big city from up there, all sprawling out and eating land like kudzu does. Down here we get the leaf litter and dirt. What I know's underbrush, the cracks of things, the rich dirt smell, the edges and the seams. What I know's down low, belly brushing pavement. You splay your paw and you can count to five. You count your springtimes and you won't get to five. Our folks live short and we live hard and the end comes fast and bright. When the raccoons clattering in the cans ask why we spend so much time faking dead, you tell them it's called a goddamn rehearsal.

Some of you will make it. I know that. You're not my first litter and you won't be my last. It's a numbers game, but if you sniff around enough dumpsters you're bound to hit the cat-food jackpot. I'm no catechist, but here's my best: Stay low. Hold close. Flash teeth when you get cornered. When something bigger than your bite comes running, you don't flee. You freeze, drop, sleep like the dead. If you're lucky you're not. Dogs don't like deadsleep meals. Cars don't care. If you open your eyes, you say, well, there's dying down once. Get up. Get ready to do it again.

Hold close. Dig nails. Cling on tight. My momma said people don't think about us. People move in straight lines

bright lights

hard stone turns

not like how we ramble and sway. My momma said people don't think about us and she chewed up dead rats off a garage floor and died twitching with her belly full. It's only half true, they don't think about us. I've dropped down dead in front of half a dozen dogs. Woke up with their spittle ringing collars round my neck where their teeth couldn't get through. Once they bayed me up a scabby old-field pine