

## Nocturnal Visitors (A Widow's Lament)

by Phillip Howerton

The yellow Labrador died in her sleep  
of old age last week. She passed  
in her favorite place, a hole  
she had dug in the soft dirt  
under the manure spreader parked  
in the shed. Now the wild comes closer  
each night. First, it was a possum,  
rattling the cats' pan on the back step,  
licking away whatever had accumulated  
there. Then a skunk, fearless and dainty;  
and tonight, as I stand in my darkened house  
watching by porch light, three adolescent  
raccoons arrive. Finding nothing  
in the food dish, they sniff my tracks  
leading from the wash house and peep  
through the crack under my storm door.  
Growing bored, these young toughs shove  
and punch one another; one may hold the flame  
of a Zippo to another's butt, and the three  
tumble together wrestling with quickened  
chatter. Then, they pause suddenly alert  
and immediately refit their masks of coolness.  
They throw a destructive glance at my mailbox  
and try the latches of all the outbuildings.  
I don't recognize any of them, although  
I have probably met their parents in passing.  
I hope that some night when they smell  
death under my door, they find  
the manners not to ring the doorbell  
before they run into the woods laughing.