The Oldest Living Thing in L.A.

By Larry Levis

At Wilshire & Santa Monica I saw an opossum

   Trying to cross the street. It was late, the street
   Was brightly lit, the opossum would take
   A few steps forward, then back away from the breath
   Of moving traffic. People coming out of the bars
   Would approach, as if to help it somehow.
   It would lift its black lips & show them
   The reddened gums, the long rows of incisors,
   Teeth that went all the way back beyond
   The flames of Troy & Carthage, beyond sheep
   Grazing rock-strewn hills, fragments of ruins
   In the grass at San Vitale. It would back away
   Delicately & smoothly, stepping carefully
   As it always had. It could mangle someone's hand
   In twenty seconds. Mangle it for good. It could
   Sever it completely from the wrist in forty.
   There was nothing to be done for it. Someone
   Or other probably called the LAPD, who then
   Called Animal Control, who woke a driver, who
   Then dressed in mailed gloves, the kind of thing
   Small knights once wore into battle, who gathered
   Together his pole with a noose on the end,
   A light steel net to snare it with, someone who hoped
   The thing would have vanished by the time he got there.