Mount Keira by night

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Mount Keira by night

Frank Russo (University of Sydney, Australia)

The smell of post-rain ozone and forest spores
sharpen air as we make our way past Mount Keira.
Escarpmment climbs and plunges either side.
By the highway’s edge three Rusa deer
appear through evening’s fog,
headlights reveal their grey-brown forms.

Unfazed by the winding cars, a pair of hinds
flank a stretch of road, browsing veldt grass
by the verge. Soon what began as a vigilant watch
for stray deer, becomes a game of spot the herd
as it emerges through stands of ironbark.

At the next bend a buck chews, scornful
of the fabled deer of poetry and story—
always a switch of tail,
an apparition by a lake, a sudden flash
observed through a kitchen window—
but not these,
moored to the grassy ledges
like nesting island birds.

It’s us, hurtling past,
that are the sudden flicker,
the glint and spark
that quickly fades.
Tonight they forage quietly,
belying their image as the jumpy patrons
of accidents, of unexpected things,
though last week, one was hauled
fifty metres by a truck’s cab—
    fur and bones shed
like October antlers on the forest floor,
and the heft and bulk of a nervous buck
has sent more than one of us
to oblivion or nirvana.

Ascending Mount Ousley, headlights pan
like spotlights. A giant stag peers out
as we steer the bend—
    neck extended, its spiky crown
unfurled like a skeletal fern,
and beyond this, the chain of fog lights
ignite the forest like a lantern-string trail,
a path of luminescent crumbs
to guide us back towards the city.

* Mount Keira is part of the Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation Area of New South Wales. Rusa Deer were introduced into nearby Royal National Park in 1906 as an attraction for visitors, and spread to the escarpment.