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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. Escarpment 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.

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^{*} 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.