



feral feminisms

Hacking the Anthropocene:
Do-It-Together (DIT)

issue 10 · fall 2021

On the Verge

Deborah Wardle

“On the Verge” is short fiction exploring difficult questions about human interventions in animal lives. Contrasting views on roadkill are braided together to show the impacts of divergent human decisions. Stephanie, a wildlife conservation research student and Zeb, a lost man at the end of his tether, collide over roadkill. Zeb and his dog, Spud, need food and bait. A submerged log in the reservoir at Zeb’s fishing hole ends Zeb’s life. The story ends with Stephanie, and her research supervisor, Carmen, musing on fear and the role of science and collaborations amid the life and death dilemmas of ecological collapse.

Double-blazed spotlights from an oncoming vehicle blind me. I duck the glare, grip the steering wheel, white-knuckled. My car skews on the narrow backroad. A flash of black darts in front. No space to swerve: don’t brake. Booboomp. A grizzled thud, my stomach pitches. I suck in breath like I’ve hit the bottom of a fast elevator descent. I pull over, nauseous. No place to vomit on this borderland stretch. The wind whistles, trees groan as I peer into dwindling light.

I venture back along the road to see what I’ve hit. A large black cat oozes blood from its ears and nose, lifeless. A gust whips up leaves and twigs, stinging my bare legs. Gagging, I poke the corpse off the track with a stick, leaving a wine-red smear in the dirt. A branch crashes to the ground. I jump, stifle a cry. A skerrick of cat fur ruffles on a wet stone. The corridor of collisions bristles. I scuttle back to the car, climb into warmth. I notice farmhouse lights in the distance, and drive towards the pinholes in the dark.

Better tell the owners about the death of their much-loved moggy. And to keep their cats indoors. I still feel sick. A pot-holed driveway leads towards the house. The smell of fresh cow manure wafts, a bovine bellows, deep and sad. A skinny man in overalls appears on the veranda under a moth-scattered light. He seems surprised to see a young woman appear as if from nowhere, looks from my close-cropped hair to my boots.

“Sorry to tell you, but I just hit your cat. Out on the road. And you should ...” I’m interrupted by his guffaw.

“Don’t worry, a bunch of ferals live down the mineshafts around here. You’ve done us a favour. Hopefully it was the tom.” Smells of cooked cabbage seep from the doorway.

“You don’t want to bury it?”

“No way, love. The foxes will pick it over before I get there.” He rubs his bristled cheeks and chin. “Too damn busy for that.” His face shows all the signs of hard work and tiredness.

“Cows must be a lot of work.” I shuffle my feet on bare veranda boards. The lameness of my comment shifts my prior indignity to awkwardness.

“Yeh.” He spots the university sticker on my car. No longer interested, he turns away, shuts the flyscreen behind him. “You’d know. See ya.”

“Uh, good, then.” I wear his cursory dismissal, kind of shamed. I leave the veranda feeling cool drafts rise from the gaps between the stairs.



Back in the car, I gulp the gag stuck in my throat, swallow the vacuous hole that lingers from the moment of the cat's death. "Should be glad," I mutter, torn between knowing the murderous destruction cats wreak on wildlife and feeling like a murderer myself. Cocooned again, I drive on towards my research site, headlight beams flashing flying insects. Many splatter onto the windscreen. The box-ironbark woodland is sparse. Fire trails cut through spindly regrowth and the mayhem left by gold mining. I lower the window, letting in a blast of cold air.

"Enter this perilous zone at your own risk," I holler into blustery air, my voice straining, releasing tension. I want to warn off any creatures listening. Mostly I want to be wild, independent. I'm keen to reach my pocket-handkerchief campsite, but don't want to hit anything more.

I coax the vehicle through wheel ruts, scan ahead into the deepening gloom. I brake to miss a scuttling possum, swerve around a fallen branch. Since leaving my place in the city, I'd counted three flattened rabbit pelts, two stiff-legged kangaroos, and a bloated wallaby corpse on the roadside. Tires thud over corrugations as I lean into sharp bush track bends, careful now. Carmen had lectured me this morning as she handed over the keys to the science department's four-wheel drive. "Don't drive too fast out there, Stephanie. You never know what'll leap out."

Carmen, my PhD supervisor, is a nearly-retired professor of ecology, always cautionary, takes the wide view. My research on yellow-footed antechinus was dragging on. Carmen looks kind of similar to my rat-like marsupials, with their rounded ears and twitchy faces. She lives the scholarly life, all books and thinking.

She regularly gives me the lecture on the importance of research for conservation.

"I know, I'm lucky to be doing the work."

"Think yourself privileged, not just lucky. It's the antechinus who are reeling in all this." She eyeballs me and suggests three more readings to add to my list.

"Ok." Chagrin at my gaff makes me blush. "I know, it's about the antechinus." I am held to my task. The slippery uncertainty of science compounds my still limited understandings. I'm too daunted to enter the debates with my sharp-witted supervisor. We both know that antechinus numbers are declining. Sentimentality doesn't sit with the data, she regularly says. Loss of habitat and predation, most are killed by foxes and cats. I just want to make a difference to their survival.

My campsite is a vague clearing in the depths of the bush. A network of habitat boxes, cameras, and sound recorders are strapped to trees that I have plotted on maps. Tonight, the eucalypt canopy is swishing. My tent tries to escape on every gust of wind. It glows ruby-red, a pulsing dome, as I squat to pee. I'll start the monitoring tomorrow. I turn out my torch, nestle my sleeping bag to my chin, listen to the flap of eucalypt leaves falling on the fly. Images of black cats with ferocious yellow eyes haunt my dreams.

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Zeb wakes, stretches. His bulk fills his tiny bubble caravan. The walls are greasy, the bed sheets grey. The dog, Spud, licks his hand, needs a feed. He scoops cold sausages and limp chips, his uneaten leftovers, into Spud's bowl. She's sleek and shiny. No one would want to call her a mangey flea-bitten mongrel. Her wide-jawed face cheers him, especially on hot days when her long pink tongue lolls as she pants.

Zeb picks at his coffee-stained teeth. He runs a hand over grey stubble, smooths his receding ginger-coloured hair, jams a green beanie low over his ears. He pulls a red-chequered



fleecy coat over his blue singlet. He plans to throw in a line down at the waterhole to temporarily toss off his mate, melancholia. Fishing gives rare reprieve, a distraction of tickles and flicks of possibilities on the end of the line. Might catch a redfin, something bigger.

His fishing rod, a bucket, and his last frozen worms clatter into the back of his yellow Kingswood ute. Spud leaps up, leans out grinning. He fondles her ears, clicks her to a chain. A clear line of mucous drips from Zeb's nose. He hardly knows the weight of his sadness. The car registration is due, and the caravan park owner is grizzling about unpaid rent. The dog always needs a feed. Lost his job at the meatworks six months ago. Now robo-debt collection letters are mounting unopened. He belches. Heartburn makes him irritable.

The reservoir is steep sided, fringed with cumbungi reeds and fallen logs washed to shore in recent storms. Frogs call, an egret stalks the shoreline. Three hours later he trudges back to his car empty-handed.

He drives to the pub, slumps on a stool at the end of the bar. His thick fingers trace lines in the condensation on his beer glass. He hears staccato comments shoot around him as men shed their daily burdens. Talk bounces from the drought, to jobs in the mines drying up. And the meatworks is laying off more people.

"It's not our fault," one bloke says.

"Global ore prices drop, they close the mines. Don't know what's happening at the meatworks."

"They're making money somewhere. Whatever the cost."

"We're the collateral damage, and they don't want to know."

"Don't care."

Conversations jump from bleak to bleaker. The man next to Zeb raises the problem of roadkill and car damage. Most are worried about their duco.

"Roads around here are smeared red," someone states.

"Street art, they call it. Local colour."

"Some people eat it."

Some shake their heads, some nod.

"Why not make use it. Better than feeding crows," a hopeful voice along the bar suggests.

"Wake up, Thommo, they're full of worms," a burly feed-lot cattle farmer who everyone knows feeds his stock growth hormones and pulped chicken carcasses stands and puffs his chest.

Zeb grunts, keeps his head low. Instinct tells him not to get involved. Knowing when to duck had mostly kept him out of trouble. Didn't stop him being broke, worrying about his next job.

Voices grow louder. The barman turns up the music, hits of the 80s. Zeb lets cigarette smoke curl up his face. He remembers that Spud needs a feed, she's waiting outside. He decides he'll try for a roo for her. He gulps his beer and slides a few coins across the counter for a takeaway tinny.

Darkness hangs on the brink of a crimson horizon. Zeb turns up Black Sabbath full blast as he drives away from the pub into the surrounding forest. A wallaby darts across the road, head low and frantic. He swerves towards it, wheels spraying stones. Missed. He watches it disappear into the scrub. A cigarette teeters between his teeth; beer can in one hand, he steers with the other. Out here he's in charge of his own kingdom, shielded in calm separation from life's uncertainties and failures. The cab separates him from the wild out there. At the same time, he feels some security in his connection to his fishing hole and to the bush. He speeds up,



into the dark. Spud strains on the chain on the back of the ute.

Panicked eyes, leaping form, thump. The roo bar does its thing. He skids to a stop, reverses to collect the carnage. Headlights frame a dying kangaroo. A scuffle from the roo, its last involuntary spasm. Zeb smells fresh urine as it kicks air, strikes its spirit free. Spud whines.

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Rubber whacking over corrugations stirs me from a deep sleep. Gears grind, an accelerating motor roars, a loud bump, tyres skidding on gravel. I lurch upright. A car door slams. Something's hit, possibly a roo, sounded too big for a possum. Crawling out of my tent, shivering, I pull on jeans and boots, no socks. Car spotlights silhouette the eucalypts. I slip a jumper over my head. Leaf-litter crunches underfoot as I creep towards the vehicle lights. Would the driver know to check the pouch for a joey? Silver moonlight ebbs behind a cloud.

"Are you alright there?" I call. "Hey, what are you doing?" My voice cracks up a pitch. A figure bends over a dark, furry corpse. He raises a gleaming machete. Thickset and slouched, his red-chequered coat and green beanie are illuminated in the headlights. He lowers the machete, mouth agape at the unexpected interruption. A bullish dog leans on a chain on the back of the ute.

"Who's that?" The man's gravelled tones don't hide his shock at seeing me.

My kneecaps lock, my stomach pitches, I taste the metallic edge of adrenalin in my mouth. I gulp and clench my fists, waiting a second till I can trust my voice.

"They're protected here you know." Words rush from my mouth. "The rangers collect the dead ones, count them," I stumble on.

"Leave it kiddo, this one's mine. It's for the dog," he adds. The dog growls. He steps from his headlight beams, the machete dangling at his side. He throws what looks like a kangaroo haunch into the back of the ute. The dog lurches on its chain.

"Did you check the pouch, might be a joey in there?" My voice squeaks. My legs won't carry me towards the front of the mud-splattered bull bar. Cold air hits my neck, sweat trickles down my back.

"I said, leave it be." The man can see me now.

"I'm just, ... doing research..." I blurt, then clamp my mouth shut.

"Why don't you and your friggin' research fuck off to wherever you come from? Leave me alone." He shuffles forward, raises the machete, throws it into the ute. The dog snarls. I leap away.

My mind freezes. Half-baked possibilities stutter: memorise the numberplate, it's too dark to see; call the cops, no phone reception; yell at this blockhead that butchering road-kill is illegal. Nothing comes, ideas flee. Petrified, I quash the urge to bolt. I back off stiffly.

"Let it go, girlie." With a glance towards the dismembered roo, he climbs into the ute, spins it around on the narrow track, wheels spitting dust. Headlights glare through the bush, momentarily blinding me. I wait for the red taillights and rumbling engine to recede.

Blackberries on the roadside scratch my legs. Silence. Even the bush crickets are too scared to creak. Pulse still racing, I creep to the mutilated kangaroo. Dark plum blood pools, smears and stains the earth. Female, another nocturnal life blinded, struck by steel. I gulp air, roll the torso over and feel for her pouch. I'm trained for this but I always hold my breath. Among belly fur, into the pink-edged fold, my fingers find a fistful of life, wiry legs pushing at my hand.

"Shit, shit, shit. Hell."



I run back to my tent, collect my pocketknife. A mopoke has resumed its calls. Still jittery, I invert the pouch and, carefully holding the hairless joey aside, cut the nipple from tummy skin, keeping the lifeless comforter wedged in the joey's mouth. I wrap the squirming, nut-coloured ball under my jumper, tuck it close to my body warmth.

Back in the protection of my tent, I wait for dawn, not wanting to drive, risking more night roadkill. Will the murderer return? Trees creak in the wind. The joey pushes against my stomach, its tender life full of potential. I fear squashing my new adoptee.

Bird choruses finally herald the new day as I hastily pack my gear. There is still a chance the joey might live. I hurtle back along the dirt road, meet the highway and head towards the city, cradling the fragile life on my lap.

At home, I mix formula and sterilise a special joey teat. He's male, long claws, loose skin hanging over protruding bones. Every two hours throughout the afternoon and night, I offer formula to the tiny face. I cocoon him on my chest, share the life-giving beat of my heart. I wish he'd open his eyes. He's weakening.

I phone the local Department of Environment to report the incident: the machete, the dismembered roo, the stolen limbs.

"I heard him accelerate. It was like he meant to hit it." My voice wavers.

"Sure you didn't get the number plate?"

"No, too dark. He was... it was all shadowy. The ute was yellow. There was a dog." I pause, remembering my fear, unable to describe my terror.

"Thanks for letting us know." The wildlife officer hangs up.

At the five-a.m. feed he doesn't respond to the teat, by six a.m. he is cold, angular, and without breath. I hold the lifeless form to my cheek, smell centuries of forests in his dusky skin. I carry his body out into the cool, dawn light and bury him at the end of a row of miniature graves marking other failed animal rescues. In the treetops, red wattlebirds cry out in harsh rasps, like latches on old doorways catching on rust. I tamp his mound of earth gently with my boot, fold my arms across my chest.

"Rest well," I whisper hoarsely. "Bugger." I suck in a deep breath, blow it out, rub my eyes and turn away. In the kitchen, the peach-glow lamp softens the corners of the room. I prepare a cup of tea, a time-honoured solace in the tender moments of passing lives.

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Apricot and pinks flood the sky, the last hoorah to the sinking sun. A pair of rosellas head home to roost. Zeb parks his ute on the deserted edge of the dark, rippling lake. He has left Spud in the van, come out to the water for some peace. He looks for his deep fishing hole, where he imagines the biggest yellowbelly skulk and hang about. Skeletons of drowned trees stand stark and silent. He scans the rose-coloured water for signs of life. A brilliant blue fairy wren lands on his bull-bar and pecks at a moth. His face softens. Being waterside always melts an inside part of him, a part that he doesn't need the words for. He rubs the aching spot in his chest, muses on the bitter and the sweet; the memories of violence that haunt him and the recollections of his mother's eyes that watered up when he used to visit her in the nursing home. He fed her that hospital stodge till the end. Better try to catch a feed myself, he thinks, shrugging off the nostalgia before he turns to mush. He kicks empty beer cans and take-away food wrappers from the cab. They scatter across the ground, blow away. His strongest rod and reel is fitted with heavy tackle. He threads a hook through a bloodied strip of roo haunch. Wind tugs at his jacket.

"This ought to get me something big," he mutters, trudging towards the water's edge.



He glances across grey and white waves lapping onto cumbungi reeds, where sepia-coloured foam rises in the muddy stalks. A long shadow shapes the swell of a log in the shallows. “Maybe eels,” he muses. He hurls the rigging into the depths. Not far enough. His rod bends, willow-like, as he winds in. He steps deeper into slurry to cast his lure again. His feet and legs are numb with cold. Beneath the surface, a forked branch on the long-dead trunk traps his ankle, wedges his boot fast. He topples. Under his weight, the submerged log rolls, dislodged from its perch on the steep edge of the man-made reservoir. Swirling mud gives way as the log, with Zeb trapped in its grasp, descends into murky depths. Water hits Zeb’s thighs, swallows his chest. He cries out, lurching. Fishing rod flies in the air. One thrash, one guttural cry on the wind before the log drags him beneath the gloom. His green beanie floats to shore.

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Four days later I am poring over my research data at the kitchen table. There’s a sharp knock at the front door. I stride up the hallway, peer through the frosted glass pane, turn the doorknob.

“Stephanie McNamara? We’re investigating the disappearance of a fisherman at the local reservoir, presumed drowned.” A police constable flicks his badge. “Yellow Kingswood was found abandoned, remains of roo legs in the back.” He squints at his notepad. “You reported seeing what might have been this ute out in the forest.”

I nod. “Umm, yes, I was camping, umm, for my research. Saw this guy out in the middle of nowhere. Yep, yellow ute. A dog.”

The officer waits, scribbling notes. “Yep, the caravan park manager found the dog. Deserted, barking.”

“It was like, he hit the roo, like on purpose. Hacked its legs. With his machete. There was a joey.” I am suddenly dry-mouthed. I recall the red-eyed man in the headlights, machete glinting in his hand, the tender skin and concertina legs of the joey on my chest.

“Can you recall anything about the man you saw?”

“He seemed on the verge, sort of a tipping point. Sad too.” I thought about him looking bear-like, soft but murderous at once.

“Fishing gear? Found a rod in the reeds at the Res. A green beanie?”

“Didn’t notice. Yes, a beanie. I didn’t really talk with him.” I cover my mouth. Couldn’t say how he waved that machete at me too. How I had to back off. I feel myself flush, avoid the shiny-faced officer’s stare.

“Seems no one spoke with him.” The constable flicks away his notebook. “Let us know if you think of anything else.” He struts to his van. I slump at the kitchen table, head in my hands.

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The following day I meet with Carmen in her office on campus. I recount my trip: the cat, the machete-wielding goliath, and the visit from the police officer.

“That guy who killed the roo is probably dead, drowned,” I say.

“Yes, your evidence indicates it was probably him.” Carmen leans forward in her chair and searches out the window, as if there’s something there.

“They’re simply navigating their territory.” I’m thinking of the roos, the possums, the antechinus, the cat.

“A lot of people don’t think of things like that, the animals, when they’re in a car.”



Carmen turns her pen, a slow propeller motion. It's her thinking gesture.

"Maybe he met his fate. Is it Karma?" I ask. "Makes me wonder. Some weird reprisal, nature's revenge. He was pretty full on." I clench with the memory.

"No such thing. Revenge is never sweet. Life on the verge is never simple." Carmen flicks her pen, which flies across her desk, scattering papers on the floor. I bend to pick them up. Her wall clock ticks.

"Dead cat, mutilated kangaroo, that weird guy. And his poor dog." I examine the spider web in the corner of the bookshelf. "And I couldn't save the joey. Like, death happens. I know."

Carmen nods, waits for my next line.

"Am I too disconnected, too scared? I feel deficient. I mean, when my actions, like, on my own, aren't enough." I'm searching the air for answers. Carmen sips her coffee.

My words tumble. "I'm just trying to save antechinus, collect data. One simple idea. This species could float away if we don't act. Can't do it on my own."

"You are acting on your ideas. You're here, you're finding out new things. Telling the world is next. Your research will have impacts."

"Is saving tiny marsupials enough? It's all too complicated." I sag. "I was terrified." Suddenly anything I think I know about native animal rescue and efforts to reduce animal extinctions seem to leach away into an indeterminable swamp of ideas.

"What's courage anyway? You could say, what's any action worth when the planet is veering towards catastrophic extinctions?" Carmen takes a deep breath. "Ecological connections will remain in some shape." She looks straight at me. "Nothing wrong with fear. It's what you do with it, how you build collaborations that counts. Choose your colleagues wisely." She pauses. I can tell she's thinking on how to proceed. "In a broad context, you and your work are always in relation to others."

My chair creaks. "Always in relation," I repeat, holding my head in my hands. "What relation did I have with that guy who died?" I sort of jerk as I sit upright. I feel more separate than ever, and in the same moment connected to the deaths that had fluttered near me over the past few days. Even that lonely, angry man. Sunlight hits the desk, shines on the antechinus tat on my forearm.

"Just take one day at a time. There's an election coming." Carmen rises, continues gazing out the window.

I stare at the ceiling, hear the background drone of suburban traffic. I arrange my papers, shrug.

"Where were we up to?" Carmen nods at my report.

"According to my latest data, the numbers of antechinus being taken by feral cats is increasing at a new, higher rate. I am wondering about recommending containment strategies. Lock them up." I rub my hands through my hair. I spot a blue-tongued lizard peeking from a drainpipe in the garden outside. It flicks its tongue, testing the air.

"Lock up who?" Carmen's face twitches.



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DEBORAH WARDLE has stories and peer-reviewed articles published in Australian and international journals including *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *The Big Issue*, *Meniscus*, *Mosaic* (Canada), *Fusion*, and *Animal Studies Journal*. Deborah teaches literature and sustainability subjects at RMIT and creative writing at University of Melbourne. Her PhD thesis explores the ways climate fiction expresses groundwater's potency and vulnerability in Australian narratives. **More info at:** deborahwardle.com and <https://www.linkedin.com/in/deborah-wardle-3790a121/>.