

Habitat Mosaic

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Abstract: In this creative work a young fox and a hunter's daughter negotiate the emotional and physical landscape of a rural Australian property.

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Beneath a canopy of black sallows with their trunks olive and stripped, the fox steps across wood shavings, bark, leaves, and twigs. Underneath his paws, what remains of the grass is frozen. In the sunlit field before him, three scavenging magpies lift off.

He knows where he woke up after his nap. He knows where the land leans down, sinks down into mossy valleys and, eventually, turns to dark pools of water. He can hear the river.

His attention is drawn west to a car hurtling towards the buildings.

He sits down to watch it, his tail curled around so the tip nears his neat paws. He searches the landscape with his fixed gaze, his hearing, his nose pointed towards the object. He is in the heart of his first winter alone. The rabbits have left this paddock, and all the paddocks around the house. He turns towards the airstrip.

Leigh is washing her mug in cloudy sink water when the researcher arrives. The car comes towards the house and she hears it, out of sight, stop behind her father's. There is the sound

of a car door shutting, shoes on gravel, her father jolting up behind her amongst the pages of his newspaper.

Her father walks to the mudroom, on the other side of the kitchen wall. He opens the front door before the researcher can knock. They are on the landing as they introduce themselves in the most minimalist of ways.

Leigh keeps her hands submerged but stops washing so she can hear.

‘Hi! I’m Claire,’ the researcher says. Her voice is bright.

‘Vito,’ her father says. ‘The key.’

‘Thanks.’

‘It’s unlocked. Everything you need to know is in the book on the table.’

Lukewarm dishwater spills over the edge of the sink onto the front of Leigh’s jumper, turning cold against her tummy. She hears the researcher’s car start up again.

Her father returns and says, ‘I think she might be a bit of a Greenie.’

Leigh doesn’t respond. She takes the towel and starts drying and putting away the dishes.

‘What’s she studying?’ Leigh asks.

‘Foxes.’

‘What about them?’

‘Young ones,’ Vito moves onto a magazine, shakes it so the pages separate.

‘Steer clear.’

Beyond the window, up at the hut, the researcher disappears inside with a duffle bag and then comes back out. She sits on the bottom step and adjusts the fold of her socks between her boots and the hem of her khakis. Crunchy frost waits on the paddocks that stretch stark up to the national park, where the trees turn a dense, dark green. Several wallabies graze. Burnt trees frame the very crest of the hill.

Leigh can't make out her face, but Claire looks younger than the usual lodgers. Her hair is tied back into the stubbiest ponytail possible.

She stands and, pulling a small backpack over her shoulders, walks down the bald slope that stretches between the house and the hut. The wallabies watch her: two leap away and the others remain alert. The bush absorbs her at the other side.

She looks naked, leaving like that. It's not until Leigh turns around and sees Vito, sitting at the end of the table with an enamel mug of coffee and a hunting magazine that she realises why the researcher looks naked. No rifle.

Elsewhere on the property, the fox encounters another fox. They scamper and tumble in the long grass and head towards the horse paddock. The big old horse is eating, his mouth in the drum. His ear registers the foxes with one backwards flick. The foxes trot towards the drum and put their slender faces inside. Warm, soft air drifts from the horse's wide nostrils and blows the chaff around. The horse gives a cursory shove in their direction, but only once. This horse gets rich molasses pellets and he shares.

If a person isn't there to witness it – to say 'aw, how sweet' or 'bloody foxes, stealing the Old Timer's food' – does it truly happen?

Leigh often sees foxes trotting on the edges of barren tracks and calls them 'littles'. Marooned in the dullness of the just-turned-double-digits stretch before adolescence, she reads foxes as free and resilient. Living on a property bordering a national park verdant with native animals, keeping chickens and ducks at risk of being savaged – for everyone else these things seem to rouse a clinical view of the need to do away with the foxes.

But the only foxes Leigh knows properly are dead ones, literary ones, ones that duck into the grass and elude her out riding in the bush. She's familiar with the fur on the pelts her father preserves, which she compulsively rubbed between her finger and thumb as an infant. She thinks of *Fantastic Mr. Fox* and *the quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog*, not knowing why that jingling pangram should endear her to its subject.

She likes the way the foxes move. Fluid, darting away from a scent. Looking like they are going to run away and then stopping to watch you across a clearing.

A few days later, it rains too heavily for the researcher to go out into the bush. Leigh puts on a raincoat. Claire, wandering under the shade of a university-branded umbrella, catches her pushing a wheelbarrow of scrap wood to the chicken pen.

‘You look like you have a project in mind,’ she calls out.

Leigh shrugs as the distance closes between them. She hasn’t seen Claire up close before: she is broad-shouldered and sporty. Watching this woman as she bangs her boots together on the porch or passes the windows in the hut, Leigh tries to imagine her life. She sits on the porch talking on her mobile phone in the evening, smiling. She spends a lot of the time listening to whoever is on the other end.

Leigh’s father has told her not to bother Claire, but he’s out hunting 90 kilometres away. He’ll either come home joyous with achievement or aggressive with failure and today it will have little to do with Leigh’s history of latching onto lodgers.

Here is this person, voluntarily initiating a conversation with her.

Leigh gestures to the wood and the chicken pen. ‘It’s the best way to work out where the leaks are, to do it in the rain.’

Claire offers to join her, spotting and plugging leaks in the roof of the chicken house. The two of them kneel in the cramped stinking space with the smooth heads of nails in between their lips and the knees of their pants wet from the cold dirt.

The chicken pen is a big old wooden shed Vito’s friend had given them after his skeletal pigging dogs were seized by the RSPCA. When they got the doghouse, there had been holes at the back where the dogs tried to stash what little food they’d been given and it had turned to bone.

Close to Claire, Leigh is self-conscious and forgets how to move naturally. She bats the head of the hammer against the nail heads in short, blunt swings that sometimes miss their mark. The hens and the two roosters scavenge for worms and talk to each other in crescendos that rise and ebb around them.

Narrow overcast light threads its way through the gaps between the rough wood slats. The rain is loud inside. Raindrops keep landing on the lenses of Leigh's glasses and she knows better than to smear them.

Claire lifts a piece of scrap wood and lets out a yell, tossing it a metre away. A big, healthy huntsman scurries away from them. Claire sits back on her heels and Leigh laughs. Claire grins.

'These girls have around thirty different calls', Claire says about the chickens, raising her eyebrows in play. 'To talk to their young, and so on. What do you think they're saying?'

Leigh wants to spar but can't come up with anything witty. She watches these hens mutter to each other in the afternoons, sits cross-legged in the pen to study their small plush wings as they squat over eggs and take dust baths and assemble around her feet, excited and bold in their hunger. That she might understand their language beyond pitch seems unnecessary.

When her father first purchased a phone with a camera, the first thing Leigh filmed was a clip of three of her oldest chickens who would dance if she played *Put the Lime in the Coconut* from a tape recorder. Those chickens died and this lot were stubborn in their apathy towards rhythm. She wants to show the researcher the video, but it's stored on a PC in her catastrophically messy bedroom and there's no way she'll let Claire in there. So she shrugs and says, 'Maybe they're talking about food. They like food'.

'Everyone's gotta eat,' Claire nods.

'Your dad's away today, isn't he?' Claire asks when they crawl out of the pen. They rush under the back porch, the side of the house a shield from the chilly wind. They stand with their hands

on their hips, surveying the chicken coop, satisfied of the chooks' improved quality of life. 'Have you eaten?'

Leigh frowns. She's trying to find a polite way to say she doesn't need to be cooked for, but Claire keeps talking. 'I'm going to go buy some groceries in town if you want me to grab you some lunch?' she offers.

She's gone for an hour and a half and returns with hot-turned-cold chips and burgers. Leigh's set the table – sparsely, as she knows how – but they take the chips and the burgers out under the awning in their styrofoam boxes instead. Claire sits with her legs apart, her elbows resting on her knees, scoffing a burger filled with a potato scallop instead of a meat patty.

Leigh tries to imagine Kerry at the chicken shop reacting to that request.

'Why are you looking at foxes?' Leigh asks.

'Well, there's about six million of them in Australia,' Claire wipes barbecue sauce from the corner of her mouth with the back of her hand. 'They do well everywhere but they do best in environments where there's different types of land, like around here where there's been recent disasters and things to change the habitat. Different stuff like grasses, farmland, native bush all together. It's called a habitat mosaic.'

This doesn't really answer Leigh's question, but she pictures the farm from above like the hand-painted hexagonal tiles on the mosaic walls of the toilets at school, except instead of aqua blues and oranges it's shades of dun green and, at this time of year, grey and brown.

'Do you see many foxes?' Claire asks.

'I see their poop next to my horse's feed trough.'

Down at the airstrip, the fox moves through the shadows. Two yearling cows have left their mob in the cow paddock and come through the fence alone. They throw their back legs into the air and dance. The two rabbits that were out duck back into their burrows as these great shadows romp across the space.

The country here is clear and closer to the bitumen road. The fox has found dead animals on the side of the road before. He's likely to find other foxes, vixens.

Two nights after they fix the coop, Vito makes a big fire in the forty-four-gallon drum in the yard and stands around it with his friends. The researcher is en route back to the hut, wearing a beanie, a headtorch and a down jacket, and Vito waves her over. It's nearly midnight and Leigh is up because it's the holidays and because one couple has brought their kids.

Leigh and the two girls, a few years younger than her in school and so not really friends, sit hunched around a smaller fire in a half drum. The adults are drunk, but a good kind of drunk where they lean back into their loud laughter and make fun of one another. The wives barely speak and the men are practically hollering. Leigh and the girls have marshmallows on long sticks they've scavenged from around the place and now they dangle the ends of the sticks into the fire, watching them singe.

The chickens cluck softly in their pen, asleep in their straw beds.

Claire disappears into the hut and returns with a mug of coffee. She stands around with the adults, shifting her weight on her feet. Her face is flushed near the flames and she takes her beanie off. Her hair stands out in all directions and she runs her hands through it like she's trying to scrub out shampoo.

'Who is she?' the girl beside Leigh asks.

'Our lodger,' she answers. 'She's studying foxes.'

'My dad traps foxes,' comes the reply.

Leigh knows her father traps animals too, deer and foxes, using spotlights. He tried to make her come when she was little, but it kept making her stop eating meat so he lets her stay at home now. She imagines eyes snapping towards the light, dimly lit bodies and hair, escapist in their first impulse. But she also imagines – because of the way her father hammers her about not touching the guns, about how they can go off any second, how kids have died just picking them

up, just looking at them – that guns have a mind of their own and that her father is just brave enough to pick them up and studious enough to point them away from himself.

She can still remember being so young she didn't know what kind of thing could possibly be inside something as strangely shaped as the canvas gun bags under her father's bed and leaning up against the work bench in the laundry. They were abstract monster bags, ugly stained khaki with snagged zippers. The bullets on the bench were incomprehensible too. Those she had touched, wasn't afraid to hold in her hand, because they were separate from the guns: how could something so small and smooth kill something? If she threw it in the air at someone, would it have the same effect?

She's looking at the marshmallow, going black on the end of the stick when she hears her father's tone turn. He stands too close to Claire. 'So your lot think we should do nothing then?'

The rest of the adults fall silent. Claire cocks her head in a gesture of contemplation, smiling gently. Leigh finds it hard to believe someone could truly think with all these people staring at her. Does Claire not sense that Vito's mood can turn as fast as a horse on its haunches?

Claire is elfin beside Vito and lets a beat pass. 'I'm not really making that type of argument. That's not my agenda.'

Her father is someone to lean away from. Leigh watches it happen all the time, the tiny almost imperceptible shift in weight onto the heels, so that a person has slightly more distance to keep an eye on Vito. He does this to university people all the time. He calls them 'the knowledge fauxconomy'.

Leigh finds herself backing away from the girls. She's on the landing behind the door, ready to disappear if she needs to. Leigh can't make out what Claire says as she continues speaking but, somehow, Vito is pacified.

Claire catches her eye and points to her as an explanation, stepping away from Vito. As soon as he is behind her, Claire's smile disappears. For a minute, her mouth remains open in a kind of grimace. The adults start talking again.

Once she reaches Leigh, Claire plasters another, sweeter smile across her face and perches on the edge of the brick ruins that used to be the landing. The fire makes her hair appear golden. It's freezing out – frost has wrapped itself around the barbed wire on the fences – but they are all insulated from it, wrapped in coats and glow.

Claire holds her coffee with one finger hooked around the handle, the mug pressed into the ball of her palm. How old is she? Everyone under twenty is a babysitter, everyone between twenty and thirty is someone's new parent, and everyone over thirty looks the same.

'Doesn't that keep you up at night?' Leigh points to the mug.

Claire smiles. 'I work in a coffee shop. You get desensitised to it.' She sets the mug down and puts her beanie back on. 'Guess what I saw tonight.'

In the bush, she found herself surrounded by foxes in a forest clearing. She identified them by their eye shine under the roving spotlight of her torch. Claire, buzzing with the experience of it, leaves Leigh to go write notes. As she pushes off the landing, she gives a thumbs up and nods to the chicken coop. 'Still looking good.'

Later, trying to fall asleep, Leigh's imagination runs away with the image of the foxes in the bush: the far apart eyes, the yellow tinted circumspection in their gaze, closing around the researcher in the darkness under the canopy of trees. Slow moving spheres of vision doubling back on themselves, spinning like when her science teacher turns the lights off and lays a new slide into the overhead projector and it casts images of planets against the walls in the seconds before he rights it. She imagines eyes the shape of bullets.

When Claire left that night, she sat the mug on the edge of the step. Leigh waited for her to glance away and shoved the mug inside her coat.

The next morning, waking smelling of fire smoke and seeing the mug on the old table she uses as a desk, Leigh feels so much shame about taking something that actually belongs to her household anyway that she buries it beneath the calico scraps in her art drawer. Then she takes it out again and writes 'FOX' on the side in permanent marker, and shoves it back in the drawer.

Later, she rides Sherman bareback along the fence line, right up the back of the farm where a land-cleared overgrazed track rings around the base of the mountain.

A fox is suddenly ahead of them on the track by about fifty metres. It's the first time she's seen one alive since the researcher has come. He – and Leigh imagines the fox is a he, for him to be a she and be so untethered by family is unthinkable – walks stretched out long, his tail swooping with every stride, his rhythm so constant he is basically gliding. From this distance, he is an auburn feline womanly thing, the white tip of his tail impossibly cartoonish. The wind is blowing from him towards Leigh – he can't smell her.

Leigh feels her pony notice the fox: the miniscule hesitation in his stride, his ears, and with them his gaze, locking onto the small moving shape.

'Sherman, I'm just letting you know,' Leigh sings softly, watching his right ear flick back to listen, 'there's a little fox up there. You don't have to worry, I've already seen him and he's fine.'

Because the fox and the horse keep their pace, the fox keeps receding and Sherman relaxes. They follow him until the fence turns a corner and the fox slips under the wire, vanishing into the long tussock grass on the other side.

The researcher leaves the next day. She stands in the foyer while Vito writes her a receipt. Afterwards, in town for groceries, Leigh gets Vito to leave her at the library where she reads about foxes. One writer says there are few animals as appealing as the fox. In the photos, their expressions are unruffled, a kind of sharp serenity deliberate in its focus and not performative in its composure. The fox is a trickster, a shrewd ruffian, a reviled loner. This is what they say.

On the first day of school, Leigh wakes early to an unfamiliar soundscape. The world beyond the house and the yard seems the same: kookaburras, birds whose calls sound like sunlight cracking through clouds. But her home is held in an orb of silence. In her bedroom, Leigh can hear only her breathing and feels like an astronaut. This is all wrong.

By the time she reaches the back door, she's layered on polar fleece and parachute parka. In the second before she lifts her eyes from the doorjamb she thinks of Claire stretching on the deck of the hut. Her own movement as she casts her arm out makes her think of it, finds this stranger reflected back to her from within her.

She steps off the porch and feels her chest tighten and fizz. Her steamy breath spreads into the hush as she crosses the yard. She imagines herself arriving at the foot of the chicken coop before she gets there, instinctively knows to approach the coop and nothing else.

In the pen at the back of the yard, beyond the chequered items that hang stiff and wet from the clothesline and the rusty flooded wheelbarrow of scrap wood, all sixteen of the chickens are dead. Their bodies lie amongst russet feathers. She can see one rooster and his royal green, twisted and naked and broken at the neck, and the foot of another chicken cast across his cheek. Their eyes are open and horrified. Those eyes that anticipate the food she casts onto the dirt for them, that had woken yesterday to sunlight.

And then she sees the little fox.

He's seen her coming and backed himself into the corner where the chicken house meets the back of the pen. He's trying to make his body smaller and smaller, a sight so unfamiliar he looks almost unreal.

Leigh looks around: he cannot get out.

Of course he can't get out. Overnight he came into the pen hungry and cannot leave full.

She's never seen a fox this close. She's never seen a fox in the same spot for this long. Even when they turn back and watch from across a clearing, they are always the first to withdraw.

If she were alone she would've had to deal with it, and how she would deal with it would be to open the door and walk away, let the quick red fox jump over the dead chickens and out into his habitat mosaic. But she stands there too long, transfixed, unable to swallow, trying to melt the emotion that lay heavy across her sternum.

She is scared for him, but he has killed all of her chickens: why has he done that? Could he not have taken just one? A random memory of the chickens pecking at the red nail polish on her toes flashes into her mind, little protein-fiends thinking it was blood. Everyone eats.

The gate screeches open and her father enters the yard with an armful of linen from the hut.

He says, 'Shit.'

Then he goes inside and comes out again.

The fox stares at them and Leigh sees his aliveness, is struck by his animateness. The way he shifts his position, the tiny movements where the bones inside his body would creak. He, too, stretches. Skinny like a dingo. Cute like a half-grown kitten. Human gazes outnumber his, not bullet eyes like in her dream but half-dog, half-cat eyes that communicate a pulsing psyche behind a narrow face.

As an adult, Leigh will learn that what he did is called surplus killing, that the fox did not kill the chickens because he was stuck in the cage but that he killed all the chickens and found himself stuck in the cage after the fact. She will say to her father, when age forces him into passivity, that she doesn't think what he did was fair. And he will say that there were millions of foxes in Australia and one wasn't missed. She will say, yes, but on the other hand and with a big picture lens the same size as his grandiose statement, killing one will make no difference to their destruction and so we could have just let the fox go or found the fox a home or called anybody else who may have known what to do. He will say he was trying to avenge the death of *her* chickens anyway and she will say, 'Yes, exactly, they were *my* chickens!' and get up and leave the room. She will learn that a fox den has five or six exits and that the chicken pen, by design, has none. One day, stuck in traffic on the motorway, impatiently playing drums on her thighs, she will realise that the fox must have got in via one of the holes the pigging dogs had dug to store food. She will wonder across many years whether Claire was studying foxes in the context of their pestilence, in the name of some kind of government policy that would advocate for their removal. She will find Claire's PhD and learn she was studying the *idea* of land management: the idea that we think we can manage feral populations in the same landscape

where we stock riverine systems with introduced trout, where ski traffic kills hundreds of wombats and wallabies a year – where young foxes are free to mate and multiply from their first year of life. She will like Claire even more, for this.

Her father lifts the rifle. Leigh has run one finger over the shiny wood grain butt of it before, terrified it would go off. In this instance, and she realises in practically no instance but rare freak accidents, the gun doesn't go off: her dad makes the gun shoot.

Her father wipes his sleeve on his forehead and lowers the rifle. He starts to apologise, not about the fox but about the chickens, and goes to place a hand on Leigh's shoulder.

She ducks out from under it and marches back inside. She locks the door of her shambolic bedroom and snatches Claire's mug from the art drawer. She sits on her bed with her knees drawn up to her chin and her back flat against the wall. The mug still smells of coffee, and her palm covers the permanent marker where it says in all capital letters, 'FOX'.

Down in the far paddock, a fox drinks from a puddle of water. This could be a proper dam if the landowner knew anything about catchment. Instead, water glides down the slopes when it rains and settles until it dries up: for now, bark floats on the silty, dark water. The fox knows where to find water troughs, but this will do.

The fox yawns, licks her mouth. All around her, the trees have burnt. She can see further now that the understory is gone. Soon, she will have cubs.