Persona Non Grata

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Abstract: This essay tells the story of the authors' relationship with a rescued marsupial raised from a baby in Aotearoa New Zealand, in sections interspersed with an account of this species' history in our country. This animal belongs to a species designated a noxious pest here, a population subject to an especially sustained, thorough, and popularly-supported campaign of vilification and destruction, even by the standards that apply in New Zealand, where the dominant environmental ideology is very intensely focussed on eradication of introduced species. So in deciding to take responsibility for this creature, the authors committed to keeping her both hidden and captive. This raises some intractable questions: is it in this animal's best interests to be enclosed, or should she be allowed to take her chances on the roads and amongst the traps and poison? how can her captors offer her the best life? what relationship should they have with her? The essay also describes the intimate relationship the two authors have developed with this animal, through nightly interaction, and touches on some of the phenomenological questions she presents: what might it be like to be an arboreal, nocturnal, marsupial mammal instead of a terrestrial, diurnal, placental one? What might it be like to have four legs (or

perhaps five, if we count the extraordinary prehensile tail) that are simultaneously arms, rather than two arms and two legs?

In New Zealand the overwhelming hostility to this species makes it nearly impossible to recognize or consider its members as living sentient beings. Our primary aim in this essay, therefore, is to convey as directly as possible the emotional and physical experience of being in relationship with this particular animal, while succinctly situating that experience within a relevant environmental context. We didn't want to use this animal's story merely as a pretext for exploring larger histories or topics in human-animal studies. For this reason we have chosen the genre of creative nonfiction, and refrained from engaging with discussions by human-animal studies scholars that would be required in a research article.

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I usually go to see her at night, for half an hour before bedtime. Before my bedtime, I mean, because at that point in the evening, she's only just woken up. Almost always she's waiting for me, sitting on the plastic chair, peering around the side of the window, or hanging upside down from the ceiling. She faces the door expectantly. As I undo the latch to come in, she comes forward to meet me.

How different we can be from those we love! I'm a bipedal, terrestrial, diurnal, placental mammal; she's a quadrupedal, arboreal, nocturnal, marsupial one. Considering the differences, it's a wonder we recognize each other at all. Of course, her kind knows mine, immediately, as a source of violence – as a pervasive threat of death by road, by bullet, by trap, by poison. She only exists because a long line of her ancestors survived by spotting members of my species first and getting away, quickly and quietly. Which makes it all the more astonishing that she is able to regard me as *not* being a threat to her; that she can regard me instead as a companion. Yet she remains terrified of any human being she doesn't know.

So in I go, each night, to her aviary. She recognizes me well before I can see her. (I wonder how. By sight? By the sound of my step? the rhythm of my breathing? my approaching

scent?) Of course, she knows me as a provider of food: I've been that as long as she can remember. But she also knows and appreciates me as a warm body to climb, sit on, cling to.

I have two legs with feet and two arms with hands; she has four legs that are also arms (she can use them both for walking and for climbing and reaching) and four feet that are also hands (unlike paws, they are capable not only of holding her up but also of holding onto things: in fact her back ones have opposable thumbs, like primate fore-feet, enabling her to stand upright on two legs, gripping a branch with only these 'hind-hands').

But really, although she's officially a quadruped, she actually has five limbs. The fifth is her tail, which also works as both arm and leg, both foot and hand. As her species' common name implies, it is bushy, brushy. The dense fur on it is about three centimetres long, making a fuzzy, curling cylinder longer than a cat's tail and much thicker – about the circumference of a tin of beans. Except the fur doesn't go right around: the underside of the tail, from about halfway down to the tip, is bare. If you look closely you can see the rings of muscle that tense as the tail curls. When she sits on a branch facing me the tail hangs down straight beneath, the line of pale skin down the middle contrasting with the dark fur. As soon as I place my hand against the underside of the end of her tail, it curls around my fingers. The skin, slightly ridged, feels almost sticky as it wrinkles over the contracting muscles. The resulting hold is easily strong enough to bear her weight, so if I lift my hand, with her tail wrapped round it but without my needing to exert any grip myself, she will lift right off the branch and hang by her tail, comfortably and calmly, from my hand. At other times, she will drop off a branch in front of me and dangle by the end of her tail – for the sole purpose, as far as I can tell, of inviting me to tickle her extra-soft belly fur and stroke the unexpectedly soft skin on the soles of her back feet.

Often, too, as she sits on my knee, eating the fruit or leaves I've provided, she curls her tail around my hand, even when she doesn't need the extra grip for balance. I find this touching, perhaps because it seems automatic – a reflex of trust and connection, like a child unthinkingly taking an adult's hand as they cross the street. Aside from our pets, almost all the animals we humans encounter do the opposite: their instincts and learned responses cause their bodies to

flinch away from ours, or to flee, even to attack. So it feels like an honour, every time it happens, to have a non-domesticated animal hold my hand with such an assumption of trust.

Without doubt, she is neither domesticated nor tame. She has a wild animal's ferocity in the face of anything she doesn't choose. If I try to hold her still, she struggles, hisses, and scratches fiercely to be released. She doesn't come to the name we've given her and she can't be tempted with food to do anything but what she chooses, at the time of her choosing. On the rare occasions when anybody other than the few humans she knows and trusts has tried to enter her enclosure, she has run amok around the walls, shedding fur in great clumps, refusing to be calmed – so we don't let that happen anymore.

So it's been her decision to accept me as a playmate and grooming mate. She's happy for me to scratch her stomach and shoulders. I take her fur between my thumb and forefinger and rub it vigorously, which she seems to like. In return she insists on grooming me: sitting on my shoulder she licks my ears and scalp and hair assiduously, sometimes for ten minutes at time, till I stop her out of fear that she'll produce a bald patch, something no man of my age wants to risk. If she encounters my cheek or chin, she stops grooming and instead pulls at my stubble with her teeth. Perhaps she wants to pluck my skin bare to assist her licking, or perhaps she thinks she is ridding me of dermal parasites. Either way, it hurts, and she won't let up until I push her away.

Despite her wicked claws – five scimitar-shaped blades, sharp as needles and leveraged by a set of powerful knuckles – she's remarkably gentle. When she takes my hand in hers, turning it over and over to smell and inspect, all I feel is the soft skin of her palms and fingertips against my own. I know this gentleness is deliberate, because I've also experienced her formidable weaponry in action. For the first eighteen months of her life, she never showed the slightest aggression. But that changed, and now, occasionally – two or three nights out of each month – she will seize hold of my arm, biting and scratching ferociously. This is a genuinely alarming experience, and the only thing I can do is to shake her off and leave her alone until the next day. She never attacks my face or hands or any exposed skin, and I always wear heavy clothing when I'm with her, so no serious damage is done. It's the cloth she attacks, as if she's

inflamed with rage at the sleeve itself. But she takes it seriously enough to deliver, through the layers of material, some bite marks and scratches that are sufficiently deep to bleed.

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She has a rich, complex, and troubled genealogy on both sides of the Tasman Sea. Her forebears feature strongly in Australian Aboriginal dreaming stories and rituals, occupying a special place as the ancestors of Indigenous people near Alice Springs. In that Country they are characterized as busy, mischievous, and kind (Kerle). Across the Australian continent they are known by different names: wayuta, walert, tuan, meedin, comal, kumal, booroomin, and many others. Traditional hunters in the southeast located them by looking for the scratch marks they made on their way up and down trees (Cahir et al.). If the hollows they slept in were close to the ground they were pulled out and their heads smashed against trees; if they were higher up, hunters scaled the trees with the help of climbing bands, or toe holds cut into the trunks. When it was too difficult to catch them by hand, they were smoked out by fire, or poked out with long sticks twisted into the fur (ibid). Their flesh was eaten, and uses were also found for other parts of their bodies including skins, fur, teeth, and sinew. In the region now occupied by Sydney, Aboriginal people made their fur into clothing or personal decorations, such as net bands tied around the forehead, and waistbands worn by young girls (Attenbrow). When the fur was spun it could also be used to make ceremonial objects. In southeast Australia elaborate cloaks were made from skins sewn together using sinew. During winter these coats were worn with the fur to the inside, while on the outside the skins featured carefully drawn narratives about Country and clan (Couzens).

It wasn't until the European eighteenth century that her species entered Western scientific taxonomy as *Trichosurus vulpecula*: the genus name is Greek for 'furry tailed'; the species name is Latin for 'little fox'. Hundreds were killed and collected for zoological research during the early years of European colonization in Australia, and they continue to be today. Colonists were also quick to find a profitable use for them, setting up a fur industry in Australia where skins were sold as 'Skunk', 'Beaver', 'Opossum' and 'Adelaide Chinchilla' – a commercial enterprise that continued well into the twentieth century (Kerle). At the time white

settlers first arrived in Australia, her relatives were plentiful across the entire continent. Now, just a couple of centuries later, due to the destruction of bush habitat for farms and cities, numbers in the wild have declined considerably and distribution is limited to Tasmania and some other offshore islands, along with certain northern, eastern, and south-western regions of the mainland (Kerle). On the other hand, her folk are resilient and adaptable, and have found ways to survive within major metropolitan areas that once held native forest.

For at least a century, Western zoology has classified marsupials according to differences occurring in dental and pedal patterns. Her species is a member of the largest Order of extant marsupials – *Diprotodontia* – a term referring to the anatomy of her mouth in which the first pair of lower middle incisors (used for biting) are enlarged and practically horizontal. As well as these prominent front teeth on her lower jaw she possesses three pairs of upper incisors, tiny canine teeth, and sharp-edged third premolars. *Diprotodontia* is also characterized by 'syndactyly', the fusing together of digits, which gives her the 'opposable thumbs' on her hand-like back feet, enabling her to climb and hang onto branches with such strength and ease (Meredith et al.). These aspects make her tracks readily identifiable, especially because she walks on the ground with her hind feet turned out (Kerle).

Within her Order she belongs to the family *Phalangeridea*, nocturnal arboreal folivores (leaf-eaters), a categorization connected to another distinctive aspect of her anatomy: a very large caecum. This pouch-like first part of the large intestine produces bacteria that aid in the digestion of highly fibrous plant material (Crowe and Hume).

Add to the features above a prehensile tail, with which she can grasp onto and hang from branches as she forages and moves in the trees, and she needs only one more thing to make her perfectly equipped for a night-time life in the forest: her exceptional night vision.

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Her eyes are large, round, somewhat protuberant, and dark brown. In torchlight they give out the reflective radiance that characterizes the eyes of many nocturnally active species – cats, dogs, wolves, and so on – the same 'eye-shine' that has spooked humans for millennia, ever since our ancestors started lighting fires and saw across them, from the darkness beyond, paired points of

light staring back at them. I know that my own eyes don't reflect light that way, because my species doesn't possess the *tapetum lucidum*, a layer of cells in the retina that maximizes available light by reflecting it back towards the fovea. That's also the reason why my eyes, and those of all my conspecifics, see so poorly at night. By contrast, her eyes penetrate the darkness as easily as daylight. Yet in other ways eye-shine serves her folk badly: it's the very thing that enables night-time human hunters to locate their targets by directing a torch beam into the trees.

Seen during a daylight encounter, her eyes turn out to have an extravagant outwards squint; to be blunt, she is exorbitantly wall-eyed: her irises and pupils are directed at an angle of about forty degrees outwards from the parallel. This must give her a visual panorama much more extensive than my own: I guess she also has a more generous area of focus in the area of overlap. Perhaps she sees her nocturnal world like a panoramic painting or one of those strange artificial photographs in which everything is in sharp, detailed focus – all foreground, nothing blurred into mid-ground or background. I don't think it would look anything like the space revealed by human technologies such as night-vision goggles, which reduce everything to a grainy, fuzzy greyscale. And now that makes me wonder: can she perhaps see things at night *in colour*? And if so, what do those after-dark colours look like? Maybe there are night rainbows accessible to her, whole palettes of hues and tints we'll never know about.

A good deal of my time with her is also spent wondering what it must it be like to inhabit arboreal rather than a terrestrial space. I can only navigate my world as a two-dimensional plane, while she moves through her universe fluently in all three dimensions. I exist at any given moment at the centre of a merely flat circle of possible directions. I can go upwards or downwards if that flat circle is inclined one way or the other, for example by a stairway or a hill slope. But while she is among trees, she exists at the centre of a sphere of possible directions. Depending on the affordances of the branches surrounding her she can, with no discernible difference in effort, follow an infinite number of vectors. It's only when she finds herself on the ground, confined to just two dimensions, that she seems awkward, suspicious and uneasy. Walking on a flat surface, she curves her feet outwards before bringing them to the ground, accustomed as she is to placing each foot around opposite sides of a branch. Out of the

trees she's like a sailor ashore, adopting a rolling gait that takes into account a dimensionality that's no longer there.

As for food: she knows exactly what she needs to eat at any given time, as wild animals always seem to. This means that something she relishes one night will be passed over without interest the next. But she has some reliable favourites. These include banana and orange kumara, but only if they are sliced (thinly but not too thinly). She won't touch red kumara, no matter how it's prepared. Berries of all kinds are always acceptable, but the darker the better. Feijoas, yes, but not kiwifruit; mandarins, but not oranges. Eggs or any other animal protein have never interested her as an adult. Her most reliable favourites are the gifts of a tree her species can't have encountered until a couple of centuries ago: the English Oak. She goes wild for both its yellow-green new leaves in spring, and acorns in late summer and autumn. Wondering if I could get some sense of her delight in these foods, I've tried them myself while sitting with her. Acorns, even when ripe, are bitter and grainy: I don't recommend them, and didn't even finish the one I tried. However fresh spring oak leaves have an unexpectedly heady flavour. I'm not sure I'd eat them again from choice, but I can imagine why she loves them: the ones I tried left me with a tangy aftertaste that was kind of exhilarating.

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She and her kind communicate with each other in a variety of ways. These include an extensive range of vocal expressions – hisses, grunts, clicks, rattles, often combined into sentences. As amongst humans, these vocalizations can signal caution, act as warnings prior to antagonistic interactions, or they can signify cooperative exchanges and the maintenance of familial contact (Biggins). They are surprisingly loud – and startling for humans if heard at night, unexpectedly, from trees overhead – because most of the time, individuals of this species prefer to keep their distance from one another. With the obvious exception of mothers with young offspring, they are largely solitary, and they must be good communicators because direct physical aggression is very rare. Of course, like so many animals they communicate in multiple dimensions at once: using a variety of scent glands along the sternum, on the chin, and around the cloacal opening, as well as judicious placement of dribbled urine and faeces, they leave secretions on branches and

leaves and rocks that convey messages about individual identity, territory or den ownership, and sexual interest. Familial smells also help to keep mothers and babies connected (Maclean).

Personality studies of the species in the wild have revealed a wide range of temperaments: they can be bold or shy, more sociable or less; some are more aggressive while others are more laid-back. Such studies are now being used both to improve survival of the species in the wild places where humans say they are allowed to be (Mella et al.), and at the same time, to ensure their more relentless trapping or poisoning everywhere else (Warburton et al.).

The main reproductive difference between our kind and theirs lies in the role of the *corpus luteum,* the yellowish mass of endocrine tissue that forms from the ruptured Graafian follicle immediately after ovulation. In eutherians (mammals who produce placentas, such as humans) the corpus luteum persists in pregnancy in order to prolong foetal development and prevent expulsion from the uterus by producing the hormone progesterone. In marsupials (mammals who possess pouches for raising young) the *corpus luteum* is short-lived and the young must leave the uterus and move to the pouch. While eutherian foetuses rely on exchange of nutrients across the placenta in order to grow, marsupial foetuses break from placentas and begin very early to obtain food for their growth from the mother's teats inside the pouch. Within a couple of weeks of conception, tiny pink skinned foetuses around 0.2 g in weight and 13 mm in length make their way, independently, out of the uterus and over their mother's fur to her pouch, in which they hope to find a teat. Around eighteen per cent are lost on the journey (Kerle). They climb upwards with a swimming motion, heads moving from side to side while their forelegs advance in alternate strokes (Gemmell and Nelson). This journey is assisted by an already well-developed sense of gravity, smell and touch, but they cannot see, hear, taste, or balance – these senses will develop only once they reach the pouch (ibid). After forty days they have grown tiny prehensile tails, and fur is forming on their bodies; they remain constantly attached to their mother's teat for the first eighty days. By one hundred days their eyes have opened. At around four months the youngsters begin to venture out the pouch and into the outside world for short periods of time while their mother remains near. At around 145 days they leave her pouch permanently to ride upon her back. At 270-350 days females develop

pouches while at twelve to fourteen months males develop testes and sperm. Fully grown joeys leave the family den between seven to sixteen months: males head off earlier than females (Kerle 83; Gemmel and Nelson).

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For the first few months of her life with us, she was so small we had to feed her milk from a syringe. We could only do this when she was well wrapped in a blanket, as though in a pouch, because it was only then she would completely give up her fear of us and relax, and feed and sleep. Whereas when we tried to handle her freely, unwrapped, she would scratch, hiss, struggle to escape. In the end we hung a kind of pocket made from a piece of blanket in her cage, and lifted the whole thing out, with her still ensconced, when it was time for a feed. We also found we could tuck her up in a backpack and get around the house doing our work and chores, in which case she slept soundly no matter what. The pack might get bumped, jiggled, reversed, thrown from side to side as we walked, bent over, climbed stairs; there could be loud and alarming noises all around us – music, traffic sounds, our own voices or those from TV and radio, even those of our large, loudly barking dogs: none of it affected her at all. Once inside her artificial pouch she renounced all fear, and all responsibility for her own safety. Opening the backpack even after it had been strenuously jerked about, or pawed by a barking dog, we'd find her still curled up, deeply asleep, grunting or whistling slightly as she dreamed of who-knows-what.

Some months later came a moment that made her biological sex abundantly clear. Tickling her belly as she dangled by the tail in front of me, I accidentally slipped a finger inside her pouch – I mean her *own* pouch, the one on her body. Startled, afraid I might have hurt or frightened her, I snatched my hand away, but she was completely unconcerned. The same thing has happened a few times since – an odd sensation, as if my fingers have somehow delved into her insides. It feels warm, slightly sticky but not wet. She never shows any sign of being bothered by this intrusion, or even noticing it.

But I notice, and each time it happens, I'm confronted again with the greatest puzzle – or the best opportunity for thinking differently – this little animal presents me with. What is it

like to be a marsupial, rather than a placental mammal? How different might things be for us humans – how different might be our sense of ourselves and the world – if we grew up as her kind does? Imagine if our early lives – right up to, say, the age five or six, or even older – were spent enclosed in a warm, protective capsule: first entirely, and then whenever our explorations of the outside world made us hungry or frightened or tired or overstimulated. If, for the rest of our lives, we could remember what it was like to return, whenever we felt like it, not to the womb exactly, but to a warm, flexible, mobile version of it, a safe pouch we could take refuge in or leave as we wished. What would it add to our emotional constitutions, to have had this extended period of access to the loving shelter of the pouch, before we had to learn to be independent, naked, separate, differentiated beings-exposed-to-the-world? What would happen to our culture's ingrained misogyny, which so often reinforces itself by imagining a congenital trauma produced by ejection from the safety of the womb into a hostile world? Would our society still manifest such a pervasive and powerful sense of exile from a nurturing sanctuary, such a vengeful drive to dominate and quell the nonhuman world, to subdue the environment on a vast scale in the attempt to diminish that sense of abandonment – or would more of us, perhaps, be more content with, better at finding, and at coming and going from, small spaces of comfort and seclusion, spaces no more capacious or opulent than our bodies require?

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Today, in their native Australia, her relatives occupy a paradoxical position: they belong to a species at once protected under the Wildlife Act of 1975 *and* targeted for pest control. Which category an individual or population occupies depends on where they are found (in the wild or in a human home) and what they are doing (climbing a tree in the forest or running over a roof in the city) (Power).

Where we are, across the Tasman Sea in Aotearoa, there is no such paradox. This small animal, like every member of her species in this country, is Public Enemy Number One, *persona non grata* – not merely unwelcome but actively despised and persecuted (Potts). There is a very widely supported and government-funded crusade that aims to kill off every one of her relations. This attitude is due partly to the supposed foreignness of her kind, and partly to an

intense scapegoating of this particular species for the many and extensive detrimental impacts European colonization has had on the natural landscapes and native species of this country (Potts et al.). In New Zealand it is considered ethical and environmentally responsible to wear her species' fur, and their meat is exported for human consumption to some Asian countries under the label 'Kiwi Bear'.

She is viewed, then, as an 'invading predator' here – with almost no acknowledgement of the fact that these terms are devoid of historical or scientific accuracy. The term *predator* is applied for ideological reasons without biological justification: her kind are primarily folivorous, although they do indulge in opportunistic consumption of insects and perhaps – although researchers have struggled to prove conclusively that this occurs in the wild very often, if at all – birds' eggs or even chicks (Cameron et al.). Moreover, far from invading, this animal's forebears were actually captured and forcibly brought from Australia to Aotearoa several times in the nineteenth century until the first successful liberation was celebrated in Southland in 1858 (Druett). Our companion's captors were determined to establish a lucrative fur industry in this newest of British colonies. From the start, therefore, her ancestors' existence here was framed in terms of exploitation and profit. Hundreds of further releases of her relations into forests around the country were supported by successive New Zealand governments. The Auckland Acclimatisation Society argued at the time that 'we shall be doing a great service to the country in stocking these large areas with this valuable and harmless animal' (cited in Potts et al.). For a brief period in the early 1900s her species even enjoyed protected status under law. They flourished in both the native and exotic forests of New Zealand, feeding on young leaves and shoots of trees, finding the temperate conditions, and the absence of their natural predators, apt conditions for flourishing. However, this paradise was not to continue: in 1922, after protests from farmers, the government outlawed further legal releases; 32 years later the species was labelled a 'noxious animal'. In the 1980s, in response to both the growing environmentalist movement and the highly influential agricultural sector, which blamed them for the spread of bovine tuberculosis, the government mounted a vigorous propaganda campaign against their continued existence on these islands. This campaign set out to socially manipulate New Zealanders into despising an entire species, and it has been extremely effective (Potts et al.).

Originally viewed as assets and resources, her kind now bear the most invidious of reputations, so that harming or killing them on sight – even in the most painful ways – is both socially and legally condoned. On the other hand, it is unlawful to protect or offer treatment that might sustain the life of any member of the species. Veterinarians – even the SPCA – are legally obliged to destroy any that are brought to their attention.

An analysis of the ideologies that government and environmental campaigns have employed to incite widespread hatred of the species reveals a lot about how both historical and scientific fact can be distorted to powerful effect, in ways all too familiar from the scapegoating of human populations in the past. Deliberately portrayed in conservation propaganda as 'foreign invaders', they are held responsible for threatening what makes Aotearoa unique (Potts). Accordingly, both conservation policy and its communication make extensive use of military tropes, representing the nation as being at war with this population of small, standoffish marsupials, issuing repeatedly a call to arms and to public action, the bloodier and crueller the better, against an all-pervasive invader who threatens everything the nation stands for (McCrow-Young et al.).

The rhetorical overkill at work in this campaign becomes all the more exaggerated because, in reality, everything about this animal would seem much more naturally likely to elicit empathy, identification, kindness, and concern. She and her kind are fundamentally attractive to humans. They are furry, have large appealing eyes, soft round ears, and big fluffy tails. Far from being dedicated predators – unlike the cats that are so adored by the human population of Aotearoa – her kind are actually gentle, timid, retiring herbivores. It takes a very insistent and sustained propaganda campaign to ensure that people, and especially children, do not view them as worthy of empathy rather than destruction.

There is something alarming, surely, about the very success of the concerted campaign to distort a spontaneous impulse to love and protect into a learned impulse to hate, hurt, and kill. Because there is no doubt that throughout New Zealand today, there exists a widespread and intense feeling that this species deserves all the poisoning, trapping, shooting, stomping, and bashing they get. It has become considered an emphatic – indeed, one of the most emphatic –

signs of patriotism to do everything in one's power to kill them. A current government-sponsored campaign, 'Predator-Free 2050', which is being expensively and intensively promoted, gleefully promises to exterminate every one of her species by the designated year. The promo to the campaign describes it as 'an ambitious goal to rid New Zealand of the most damaging introduced predators that threaten our nation's natural taonga (treasures), our economy and primary sector' (Department of Conservation). This campaign is supported, at times quite fanatically, throughout the land, and any attempt to question its historical, ethical, scientific, or ecological contradictions is met with an aggressive refusal.

Yet no ideology is ever immune to resistance or doubt. Empathy can always break through, at least sometimes, at least for a little while. So it often happens that a baby found inside the pouch of a dead mother – not infrequently by the same hunter who shot her – will be taken home to be raised until the youngster reaches maturity, at which point they will be released in the wild to provide a future target for traps, guns, or poisons. For the adults, though, there is no mercy.

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She is the product, then, of a population that has been subject, for over a hundred years, to a sustained and intensifying war of elimination. By bullet and poisoned bait and bludgeon, by leg-hold trap, by electronic-sensor-activated compressed-air bolt, they have been unnaturally selected. The lamer, the weaker, the slower, the friendlier and more trusting, the more sociable and confiding, the more affable, and the less intelligent have all been weeded out. It follows that the creature I am companion to, thanks to her ancestors' ability to survive a densely booby-trapped wilderness, must possess more wits, strength, ferocity, and agility than many of her ancestors, and perhaps more than those of her kind back home, in the country where her species first evolved. Her inborn temperament must be angrier, quicker to take offence, less inclined to trust or show affection than that of her forbears, or many of her relatives across the Tasman. Which makes the gentleness and love she shows to me all the more remarkable.

Especially because I am the person who keeps her captive. When she first came to us as a baby, we kept her in a cage; then I bought and assembled a metal kitset aviary, which I furnished with a floor of bark chips, a small grove of intersecting branches, and a snug nesting-box full of fleecy blankets. In time, as she grew larger, I fenced off an area under the deck and supplied it with more branches, more bark, and a tunnel back to her aviary. She appreciates all these spaces: as soon as she was released into each one, she explored every branch and corner, top to bottom, as fast as possible. Each night she refreshes her claim on her little territory, using the scent gland under her chin to mark protrusions vigorously, and generously secreting a sticky musk from her rear end. In these ways she makes herself at home. But she also climbs the wire mesh and explores its seams, clearly seeking a way out. And at the end of my nightly visits, she often waits by the door, ready to leave with me. But I don't let her.

The reason for this, of course, is that the whole country she lives in, and our neighbourhood in particular, is liberally supplied with an increasing number of death traps designed specifically for her. Down the road, our local primary school teaches pupils as young as six how to set up and maintain backyard kill-traps for 'predators'. On National Radio every weekday afternoon, the affable host routinely offers tips on trapping, including suggestions for varying baits, and the merits of different lethal methods. New Zealand car drivers have for decades swerved to hit her kind on the roads, while tourists to this country have been encouraged to do this when they pass through Customs or hire cars. And at the top of our street, which terminates in a non-residential hillside, lives a smallholder who boasts about her success in picking off feral animals of various species with her .22. On my morning walks up there, I often encounter corpses, victims of poison or bullet or vehicle.

So she remains captive for her own good, as we like to say – although it's we who decide what 'good' means for her. It helps that she belongs to a predominantly solitary species, so I can hope she doesn't pine for company of her own kind. Still, I question what we're doing every time I close the door on her, gently stopping her from following me out. Over time, I've arrived at a compromise in my own head. I figure it this way: if I let her out one night of every fortnight, she can enjoy at least some time as a free animal, but she's completely safe for the other thirteen nights, so the risk of her encountering a trap, car, or gun is very considerably

reduced. At the same time, the fact that she returns of her own volition reassures me that she doesn't hate her life in protective custody too much.

So I'm always happy when, the morning after she's had a night free, I open the door of her aviary and put my hand in the nesting box and feel her warm body there, sleeping soundly, back in her pouch. But there are also times she spends the whole night out, and settles down to sleep the next day somewhere else, somewhere outside that I can't locate. On those occasions I have to wait until the following evening. Then I go outside after dark, and she's there waiting, sitting on the fence, or up the top of the lamppost by our letter box. I lean against the post and she climbs down and onto my shoulder. Together we go back into her enclosure.

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