

# Predation

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*Sue Hall Pyke*

If looks could kill, Maggie, the black and white cat who lives around here, would be long dead. What a glare I give her when she does that insouciant late afternoon wander down the hill, heading for her evening feed of the birds and insects who live near me. Get out. She pauses, a swing to her pregnant belly. Make me. Ecologists would call Maggie feral, a pest, or an introduced threat to the environment. My mother, who is a bird lover, is on their side. She says one aspirin in a saucer of milk would do the trick.

Cat lovers would call Maggie either a free-ranging cat or an outdoor cat. They might also call her a name. I am happy to whack a name on Maggie, but not likely to usher her into the world of human rules that include the following: wearing a bell, staying inside at night, and possibly taking a pill or undertaking invasive surgery so she stops carrying those heavy babies.

I have done some of this cat control in my past. The first kitten I knew, black with a tuft of white under his chin, was given to me by an elderly neighbour. It gives me uncomfortable pause now, that this soul was granted to me as an apple might be picked from a tree for my appeasement. I was five or six years old and frightened to tears after walking a few kilometres through late afternoon to past sunset. Dusk was falling into night, and I was only halfway along the bush track to meet my father, who was due back from milking. The shadows got longer, then disappeared. I was too deep into the bush to make my way back out. I stood in front of the only house anywhere around, comforted by the glow of its internal house light. I was spotted and brought into the home. My rescuer was probably the age I am now, with liver spots and trussed up grey hair. Her husband was thin, shy, and supportive of her welcome to this novel stray. I played with a kitten and he was gifted to me. I called him Wildcat.

Wildcat had an untreated gluey eye that got worse until it covered up. A quick twist of two hands around a cat's neck was the usual treatment for such a malady, and the squeamish used hessian bags and a cow trough. Vets were for city people, or the richest of those in town. Wildcat was also unneutered and soon grew old enough to disappear, balls swinging, sometimes for days. When he returned, his ears were scabby with blood. A few years after that, Wildcat disappeared for good. My guess is he went down fighting.

Not long after Wildcat left, my mother bought home a soft-eyed tortoiseshell kitten, talking up the work he would do to deal with the mice. Kimbie was a town cat, softer than Wildcat, with a sweet hunker down spirit. The mice thrived and Kimbie died. People drive fast on this road.

Someone's always in a hurry.

The last cat I manipulated into dependency looked like Maggie, and she walked with that same wary capability cats get when they live on their own terms. I don't remember her name so I'll call her Maggie Senior. I worked with the younger of my two older sisters to tempt Maggie Senior from fright to mere nerves with saucers of milk and offcuts from the animals we used to eat. Slowly she trusted my sister, and then me. In time, she came when we called. *Here pussypusspusspusspuss*. Maggie Senior allowed us to pat her, her body taut as a young dog on a lead ready to run. She was nothing like Kimbie, who purred loudly as soon as I was within earshot, nor was there a hint of the confident claims of Wildcat who leaned into me whenever he was in the mood for a detailed massage according to his specifications.

A year or two later, after my sister and I had left home, Maggie Senior was found dead on the roof. Eating poisoned rabbits, my father suggested. Not aspirin. My mother was horrified anyone would think she'd carry through on that threat.

Maggie had her babies. I saw them as a group only once, three kittens playing between the seats on the west-facing veranda and the hydrangeas to the south of the house. Wildcat Junior was black like the first cat I loved. Kimbie Junior was grey and white like the second cat that made his way into my heart, and Maggie Junior was black and white, just like her mother and Maggie Senior.

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It's the scattered robin redbreast feathers that turn me mean. There's no sign of Maggie, or Wildcat Junior or Kimbie Junior, not a mew. But, often, there is Maggie Junior, and often, feathers of small birds, often and often again.

I've been coming to this moment for months. At first, I was merely inhospitable, barking like a furious dog the first time Maggie Junior didn't skedaddle when she saw me. She spun gravel, running away in full fright. Before long she took my "rararaff" as a greeting.

One day Maggie Junior came all the way out to the back of the paddock, where I was disturbing birds by weeding out blackberry brambles. She looked at me conspiratorially. I was outraged. This had nothing to do with an easy feed for her. This was about conservation, not predation. It was uncomfortable, having the irony of my work revealed. Maggie Junior, the blackberries, and I were all invasive species, pests, ferals. But then again, we were also free-rangers, outdoor domestics and potential companions.

Maggie Junior began to frequent the sunny spot under a slab of wood balanced on cinder blocks, watching out for whoever she was looking to eat. Birds, bees, butterflies. I often sit on that plank of wood on cold sunny days, preparing to reap life from the veggie garden in my own

disruptive way. Sometimes it looked like Maggie Junior was waiting for me, as a human-controlled cat might wait. It made me wonder if she was done with working so hard to live, if she was one of the undomesticated cats I'd been told were being fed by humans up the road.

I've researched this approach. It doesn't slow the bird kill at all. Cats need the chase.

An email from PETA arrived at about the same time as that spread of red feathers, stating that unhoused cats are malnourished and suffer slow hungry deaths. Their advice was clear: trap them and put them out of their misery.

That was it. There would be no more putting it off. It had been two months since I rang the council and I only managed that two years after being advised to do so by my oldest sister's partner who makes his living with Landcare. I had downloaded the council's by-laws, the Pest and Problem Animals advice, and the Cat Trapping Protocol and Conditions of Cage Hire form. I knew the drill. Five nights of fishy treats and then bam. Slam goes the cage gate. Off to the pound, and that never ends well.

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The small sign points to a side road off the highway just before town. Animal Pound. The word combination suggests animals subject to corruptive capital, and animals subjected to brutal beatings. I drive to the pound building, past the tractor shop's back paddock, but before an unpleasant operation run by the abattoirs. There are two shiny utes parked on the circle of gravel at the front. One has a large yellow sticker on the driver's side that says Compliance. The sticker on the other says Local Laws.

I am a compliant person who follows rules and regulations. I enter reception.

I am so beside myself I've forgotten the cash deposit. The woman in reception waives the fifty bucks. Her fault, she says, because she should have reminded me when I rang about cage availability. She tells me to take the cage, and jokes in her kindly rough voice that she has my address and she can make sure I'm good for the return. A younger woman to her left is being trained, and an older woman to her right is doing the books. Witnesses.

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I set the trap while my beloved cooks dinner for my brother and my parents. It's busy. Perhaps tomorrow will be better. No. That's procrastinating. This is not unprecedented. I have set traps for mice, releasing them up the road to ensure they wouldn't return. Then I learned this leaves them homeless, and leaves them easy prey. Last time I saw a mouse in the house my beloved and I guided the skittering jump of fur out with a broom and a mop. A better outcome.

I go inside, sit down to a hand of euchre with my family. The timing is peculiar. We haven't

played this game in years. My brother reminds me the elderly woman who gifted me Wildcat was legend of the local euchre tournament. Slightly spooked, I look out the window. Three fairy wrens float to the back lawn. The male is a bold blue colour, and the two Jenny wrens are a gentle brown. The cat trap behind them is set for their survival. If they live, so too will many more feathered generations.

And yet, it doesn't feel right at all.

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I wake just after midnight. The wind is gusty, hoisting in from the west as it does at this time of the year. I think I hear rain and get up but it's clear. The waxing moon is bright, turning its part of the sky indigo. Wisps of clouds brush over the roil of it. A night ripe for all kinds of terrors.

I walk quietly to the trap at the rear of the shed, where the cage is sheltered from the back veranda's light and from that wind, and I turn on my phone torch. There's Maggie Junior, her black and white pelt pressed against the metal of the cage.

I am appalled by what I have done.

I turn on the shed light and find a cloth to ease her panic. She's out of the wind but it's an unsettled night. It might rain, perhaps it's better to put the cage inside the shed to help her sleep. I try to lift the metre of it and Maggie Junior throws herself into the mesh. I place the cloth over the cage like a shroud and she settles. My scant kindness reveals the abyss of cruelty I have entered.

It takes me a long time to get to sleep. What I have done, am doing, will do. The churn in my belly rises to a tightness in my chest. I drop into thinking of something else and feel this distraction's reprieve when Maggie Junior's capture comes back into my mind's eye. The churn and tightening starts all over again. A heavier blanket? Some kind of waterproofing? No, she needs to breathe, she needs the smell of the night.

There's only one thing that will right things and I don't do it. I fall asleep and if there's rain, I don't hear it.

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I wake to morning breaking and a dryness in my throat that suggests the thirst that comes from canned food. Butterflies, bees and birds don't have added salt. I do my best not to disturb the material covering the cage as I edge a jar lid filled with water through a small slit in the sliding opening, onto the lift of metal that was Maggie Junior's downfall. I'm as taciturn as any jailor. I return moments later and push in the other small tin of food. No one else is going to eat it.

Dead fish. More murder.

I sneak into the bedroom to get the car key. My beloved wakes, sees my face and offers to take her in. No, I tell him. It's my decision. I need to wear it, and if I go now, I'll have her at the pound when it opens. The website says the less time locked up the better.

Not that there's anything to look forward to when she's taken out of the trap. Nothing at all.

We lift the cage into the boot together. It's light with his help, making her transit smooth. No movement, just weight inside the cage, under the cloth. It's been a cold night, and she's been enclosed for the first time in her life. The fright and the shock of it. Unable to raise the cloth myself, I ask my beloved to do this work. She is very much alive, apparently.

Oh the Judas of it. Driving towards town I read my actions through Marjorie Spiegel's work, *The Dreaded Comparison*. I am transporting a cage full of life to certain death. I am breaking my heart.

I go through the side door into reception. The woman who swapped my address for the cage isn't there, and a young man has the seat of the younger woman who sat behind her supervisor. The bookkeeper turns from her keyboard and gives me a congratulatory smile. I try to smile back politely and manage a wince.

The young man asks me to meet him at the front of the building. As I exit, a leggy dog with greyhound eyes hurtles his terrier-shaped torso on the metal gate to my right. He's got a wiry white pelt with tufts of light tan, and no collar. He's a captive of the pound. His tail is wagging, he's anyone's to love, with a gaze to melt the hardest heart. I could wrap my arms around his lean shoulders and weep. I turn away from the desperate rattle of his nails, hooking into the steel mesh, and make my unsteady way to the front of the pound to wait in the weak sun. The wind picks at my cold bones.

The roller door cranks open and the young man comes out with a customer service smile. He walks to my open boot, and lifts the cloth like a magician. Maggie Junior sits there, compliant. Half pink nose, a small ball of black and white charm. Tiny little paws. Thin, even after eating two servings of cat food. I look at the empty tins and tell myself that's the work of a cat so famished she'll eat even when full of fright.

He lifts the cage out. There's a little wet patch on the cardboard box I've used to line the boot. It's from the water I gave her. It doesn't smell.

She's very beautiful, I tell him, as if it's not obvious. Hopefully she'll find a home? I think about the handwritten sign I saw the day before at the local supermarket. Black and white kittens for \$50.

Is it a feral?

It. The pronoun is sealing her fate. My words rush out — a neighbour told me someone was feeding cats up the road; she could be tamed; she's very gentle.

The cage lists to the side as he carries her away and Maggie Junior piddles a spray of fear. The young man walks more quickly and places her on the concrete just inside the shed with a small bang. Maggie Junior scrabbles from corner to corner. There's doors to each side of her, where the kill might take place. There's a fire extinguisher, more cages, and a snake bite kit. Everything about this place speaks to human control.

The bookkeeper has come out to ask if I need the cage back. I shake my head, get into the car and drive off and here comes a hack of raspy high-pitched jerky sobs. No one to blame but myself.

I get home and my beloved folds me in his arms. Tells me, again, he could have done it, tells me he'll do it next time.

The whole day I feel her missing.

The evening light catches my eye as I close the house to stay warm for the night. I look out to the veggie patch and see three fairy wrens are just a hop beyond that warm winter seat, feasting on creatures exposed by my weeding, free as birds.

Who am I to choose who eats who? I leave snakes free to eat all the birds they want. I am undone. My methods are unsound.

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Autumn, a year later. My beloved hired a cage, once, and loaded it with the cheapest cat food he could find. Nothing to interest anyone in that, not even Maggie, who's still coming by on the occasional late afternoon, tiptoeing along the ridge of the front stone wall. I see she's pregnant again, and then there are two black kittens playing under the car. A little later, there they are, slightly bigger, near the front fence. Then, one late afternoon, I see one of them is already a young cat, about the age achieved by Maggie Junior. He's panther-stalking on the south side of the house, which is the only cool area around here when the March heat hits.

The little birds love a derring-do flit along here on a hot day. They dash down low, from the hydrangea bushes, one two three four, heading for the fuchsias, one two three, to hang upside down and sip at the sweet nectar held in those delicate pink cups. Why wouldn't a young cat take a wander along this flowered green all aflutter with temptation? I watch him walk on by, willing him not to stop.

My nephew's friend, an ecologist, visits. He's about to begin a four-year study on feral cats. I tell him to come back when he knows the answer. He says he already does, and there isn't one. I tell him I've heard that mob have the solution.<sup>1</sup> The ecologist says he's spent time with a number of Indigenous nations in the centre and north of so-called Australia, and has been taken out to hunt cats for dinner. They're very hard to catch, he ate possum instead. He says any kind of program won't make much of a difference. A person can work on cat eradication for a lifetime and cats will still prevail. It's the same conclusion I've just read in Alexis Wright's *Praiseworthy*: coexistence is the only choice. Already, too much killing. As Wright makes clear, the invaders, such as cats, donkeys and YTs like me, are here to stay, and we will continue to make a mess of things until the resurrection of 'Aboriginal Sovereignty,' (Wright's ancestor-favoured character in *Praiseworthy*, doubled up in this brilliant novel as an urgent call for reinstated Indigenous governance).

I tell him about Maggie Junior and those twelve murderous hours. He nods, says traps are traumatic. Yes. More than once I've imagined my body in a cage not much bigger than me, and the pain in the press of metal gridlines.

A gun is best, says the ecologist. It's quick, no lingering torture. I know a few shooters who live close by. There's a charming Ned Kelly lookalike not far to the south, a soft thin version of Wal from *Footrot Flats* a fair way to the east, and a shy third cousin to my immediate north. If I had to be blown to smithereens, I'd choose one of them. They are the caring kind, yet practiced enough to be good shots.

But shooting is not an activity I could bear to encourage, and other approaches are even worse. Baiting is absurd. Anyone and everyone can eat that muck. I've seen a baby rat writhing with the pain of Ratsak, and Maggie Senior is still stiff on the roof in my mind. Sterilisation? I'm not sure it's ethical, even if it is an easier fix than it was when Wildcat was a lad. Also, cages would be involved. A tranquilliser sting, a gentle twilight sleep into the end? Given the right circumstances, I'd make that choice for me, but who am I to do such a thing to a little black cat? I might as well set a trap.

I tell the ecologist about a friend in animal studies who posted that planting lots and lots of trees is the best way to minimise the negative ecological impact of cats. Yes, he says, keep planting them. It's the best way to give the small birds a fighting chance. Other ecologists

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Paltridge et al., "Is Cat Hunting by Indigenous Tracking Experts an Effective Way to Reduce Cat Impacts on Threatened Species?," *Wildlife Research* 47, (2020): 709-719, <https://doi.org/10.1071/WR20035>.

concur,<sup>2</sup> a complex well-built habitat is just what's needed. Doing what I'm already doing is a much more comfortable choice than hiring a cage, getting a gun, putting out poison, or administering a deadly dose. I love planting local trees, shrubs, and grasses, watering them in, weeding around them. It's hard work, and too many of them die but when they thrive it delights me. If a status quo like that is the solution that's ideal.

Yet still there's emotional work to do, and it slays me. Two weeks ago, I was walking the curve of a long gully in an area I hope to put under trust to keep its habitat as complex and stable for as long as laws may live and fires might stay away. There lay a curl of cat, small, black and dead, stiff in the first cold snap towards winter. His coat messy, wet, and bloodless. Perhaps a snake. Perhaps bait from further afield. Perhaps he's fallen from a tree. I leave him be. Three gullies later I see a large fox. That corpse will be gone in days, if not hours.

Not long after, I see the other young black cat. He doesn't move when I come close to his crouch under the leafless cherry tree but his green eyes blink slowly. A few days later he gives me the same steady look when I walk past a clump of dockweed he's hiding in, south of the fuchsias. Next time I see him, oh no, he's lifting himself up to the sunlit front veranda, his two back legs dragging behind him like a trailer. I talk to my oldest sister about sterilisation, and suggest to my beloved that we could keep him safe and fed.

On the night of a massive Australis Aurora everyone is out late, even me, and even my son, who is painting an exterior wall in the near dark. Me and my brood, anchoring in our family invasion. We hear two cats fighting. The heavy-legged youngster might have been one of them. I haven't seen him since.

This afternoon I saw Maggie heading from the veggie patch, her belly broad and low to the ground. This evening, I watered in some new woolly tea trees. Tomorrow I'll give the seedling she-oaks another weeding. Soon I might see Maggie again but right now I'd say she's busy, working on her own labour of love.

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<sup>2</sup> Gavin J. Trewella, et al., "Habitat Structure Facilitates Coexistence of Native and Invasive Mesopredators in an Australian Tropical Savanna," *Wildlife Research* 50, no. 12 (2023): 1058-1070, <https://doi.org/10.1071/WR22078>.

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