

A bird in a burnt forest

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Charcoal: All that remained of his bushland property stained his work boots black. His home, his land, engulfed by fire and left charred with soot. This land, once his childhood sanctuary, succumbed to nature and her wishes.

It was a week after fires raged across the Victorian highlands in what would become known as 'Black Saturday'. He had returned to his only home. The land, once a symphony of sounds which rose and fell with the seasons turned empty, accompanied only by the rustling of dead and charred leaves. The light streamed darker and bleaker than before, interrupted by the flurries of ash which continued to fall even now.

The tang the smouldering earth left in his mouth parched his lungs and brought tears to his eyes. His boots reluctantly tapped off the soot and continued on their way, occasionally stumbling as they went. Hands stung as they grazed the puckered bark of the trees surrounding him. Branches and trunks, ghostly distorted from the flames. Dust and soot covered his legs. Charcoal blood clung to his hands.

The rasping call of a Speckled Warbler sounded across the mute silence. The bird, once among many of its kind, was alone. It quickly sought out the man, eagerly flocking to the only other form of life. Its small form came to rest on a low hanging

branch, meters from him. Head and body cocked downwards, scrutinising the stranger. For the Warbler, it was the only other living thing encountered on the property.

The bird abruptly flew away, disappearing in the ash peppered air. Without its presence, stillness returned. It deafened him, roaring in his ears as his eyes closed. It was in this stillness that he was transported. Mind and body returning to the past, entering a vivid memory.

He found himself standing in the same place, a few inches shorter. His thoughts more naïve, clothes were different, and life still not lived. He was within his childhood body.

Australian green stretched before him, alight with the sun kissed glow of the afternoon. Cracked ground stretched under his feet, topsoil moving to present the iron rich clay and rock beneath it. Trees enveloped him, their bark unblemished with the scars of fire, and leaves chattering as if they danced above. The sounds forced him to be still, quiet. Daring him to interrupt the voices of light and nature which intertwined around him. The resounding squawk of the bush birds, crackle of eucalyptus leaves, hums of the insects hidden amongst the foliage, all layered into one underlying sound, pulsing from the land like a heartbeat.

The Warbler returned, he heard it once more as it arrived before him. Its cry now returned ten-fold, echoing from the canopies of each ancient tree. Birds descended, accompanied in parties of four or five. Their acute beaks, probing for insects, scavenged among the leaf litter which coated the undergrowth like a film of sticks and bark.

Their cries turned into a musical whistle as the party weaved among each other. Copper feathers glowing in the speckled sunlight. He nudged himself forward.

Shadows lengthened; light grew dimmer. Clouds overhead abruptly covered the sun, darkening the dirt and dappling eucalyptus leaves grey. The world was a kaleidoscope of colour. Each shade adapting and synchronising with the movement of the wind and sun.

Wind pushed against him, strong enough to pull his clothes and warm enough to scorch his face. The wind curbed once he had placed himself on a log. Toes curling into the dry soil as they sifted through the sticks and rocks.

The memory stayed there, among the trees. The child, the man, resting up against a fallen log. Body idly sitting, listening to the song of the land. The space with all its warmth and sound was content in this brief moment, whole.

He was pulled to reality when the lights mellowed, and the sound disappeared. Limbs of flesh and wood wilting and returning to their damaged state.

Blinking it all away, the man was left again in the present. No longer welcome in the past which had defined him so strongly and comforted him all these years. It was gone now. Silence once again stretched across monochrome hills. Piercing through the skeleton trees, piercing through his core — its ache ringing in his ears. Pounding through his skull with a shriek much like that of a Warbler. But it wasn't the bird.

Watery eyes looked back down towards his boots. Their soles, sticky with the tobacco coloured tar which remained underfoot. Khaki green canvas drowning in the stain of black which, he assumed, would not come out for quite some time.

Having exhaled a sharp breath, he turned and retreated. What trailed behind him were paths of crumpled sticks and misplaced rocks, broken with the finality of his departure.

Abandoned once more, the place was still. Emptiness and silence were evidence of the final goodbye the man had given to the place.

The land was still. The only one now left behind was the Warbler. Not knowing whether to follow or remain.