

# Birdsong in the Bardo

Margi Prideaux  
Dark Mountain, *Requiem*  
Issue 19, Spring 2021 (pp 38-45)

The sky was deep black. Not the distant, ethereal black of night with cloud shadows and pinpoints of starlight but a sombre, clawing, heaving noir that hung like a blanket over the Earth.

It has been said that once you master being alone, you are ready for the company of others, but I felt an urgent need to flee from the people in the clubroom, into that blackness. Their pain, shock, and anger were amplified by flickering fluorescent lighting and incessant screams from mobile phones.

Escaping into the dark space, at the moonless centre of the oval, the manicured grass beneath my feet caught my attention; perfect grass without weeds or beetles—a prideful symbol of society's control over nature; a homogenised surface at odds with the brutality of winds that whipped and turned and thundered around me. The tempest was fierce; a beast of smoke, ash, and debris that blasted my face and scratched my squinted eyes. Above the manufactured stillness of the grass, the storm stretched the tolerance of the trees surrounding the oval. I stood in a space of conflicting realities—humanity vs the Earth.

Despite the discomfort of the thick clawing air, I inhaled deeply, reaching hopelessly for internal equilibrium far from the knowledge of this night's event; for the night to be a bad dream.

Pale white flashes appeared ahead through the smoke. Spectral forms careened and twisted through the treetops. Turning back again towards the clubhouse, my eyes rested on my husband, Geoff. Under the stark, bright lighting, bent forward to shield his phone from the wind, he delivered calm, careful words to people not here. How would our loved ones respond to news of this magnitude? Grateful he had accepted this perverse task, I turned back to the ghostlike pirouettes.

As my eyes adjusted, the flashing treetop motion was revealed as a flock of corellas. It was a mesmerising sight, until their mournful shrieks broke through the howling storm. Their cries cut through me and I froze, feet suddenly anchored to the ground.

Despite their sounds of palpable pain, the logical, denial-laden voice in my mind leapt forward, cataloguing their behaviour, concluding it was the wind and debris which agitated these birds—their intellect unable to stretch to an event of this scale. Then another, lesser-heard voice rose from my core in angry defiance of this quick, all-too-human justification; a recognition that unleashed a soul-deep wail in my mind—a roar from the universe in mournful harmony with the flock's wail.

Jolted towards a reckoning, I sank into the grass; mortified by my brutal realisation.

The night passed as if there was another force guiding my actions. Gingerly I moved around Geoff. We couldn't talk.

In the morning we walked in the quiet circles of our minds each consciously deciding to take tentative forward steps into an unknown.

When the sun was high in the sky, we travelled homeward through a countryside of blackened trees that had been torched from side to side, north to south; an apocalypse-scale event. Ash gently billowed across the road; flames still licked the base of trees ring-barking a vast landscape. A forest of black and grey; a landscape rendered monochrome. Nothing stirred. Not a bird, not an insect. The only sound was a hollow breeze, the crackle of fire, and the drone of the car.

That colourless world moved past the windows at speed, while our minds stepped through a door into a bodiless chamber. Although physically together, the journey through this intangible, unworldly place would be passed alone. Behind eyes welling up with soft tears, I hoped—with painful desperation—I would find Geoff again on the other side.

It would be easier not to know the risk; to live in ignorance.

*I never imagined.*

Approaching the scene of the firestorm's core, the desolation of the night before rushed forward again. A coroner lay sheets over two firefighters—violent deaths that ignored the natural order of life. A loss so great that an entire community would be impacted. Cold hands of pain and suffering pressed into my heart at these brave men's sacrifice.

*They had never believed the fires would be virtually unstoppable.*

And for kilometres around, thousands upon thousands of animals—cows, horses, sheep, wallabies, kangaroos, possums, and eagles—had perished together in choke points as they fled the fire and the heat of the stormfront's lethal wave. Hundreds of animals mummified in flight, now lifeless charcoal statues portraying final moments besieged by smoke and gripped by fear.

In the days to come we would learn the names of the firefighters. Shocked whispers and gasps of a community sliding into deep sorrow would echo around burnt buttresses.

Then the air would ricochet with the gunfire of farmers ending the lives of animals who had survived but were so damaged they faced tortured, short weeks of life—a staccato rhythm under a sombre landscape-level oratorio of pain. Sheep with udders burnt away. Cows no longer seeing the world; their hides melted from their bodies leaving angry, violent red that screamed with silent pain. Possums, wallabies, and koalas, eyes glazed, fur burnt from their bodies, the bones of their spines exposed in perfect white lines. And feet, so many feet gone, leaving only bony stubs.

These would be the scenes and sounds of the coming days.

On that first day, from inside our reckoning space, we did not look away from the brutal, tragic scene.

We bore witness.

We absorbed it all, and onward we travelled.

After two weeks of relentless firefighting, the island's biggest fire—Ravine—escalated into an unnatural inferno that simultaneously reached the island's north and south coasts. Firefighters and earth movers risked their lives to build breaks to halt the fire front. Three days later, on January 3, 2020, it broke through their containments, formed a pyro-cumulonimbus cloud that sent a fast-moving firestorm of lethal, super-heated air and

flame in all directions. This previously rare phenomenon incinerated farms, animals, and infrastructure, setting alight decades-old plantations like candles, and overrunning vast ecosystems and the wildlife those precious systems contained. Ravine became so hot and so uncontrollable; it literally devoured the landscape. Fire trucks, shielded under halos of water, witnessed lethal lightning inside the cloud. A weather station positioned centrally between the island's north and south coast registered temperatures of 428°C with 140km winds before it stopped transmitting—the fire itself still kilometres away. Aluminium that melts at 660°C pooled across shed floors. Firefighters took refuge where they could or fled from the front. Day turned to deep night, hours before the sun had set. Animals—sheep, cattle, horses, kangaroos, wallabies, koalas—ran in panicked mobs and perished together in tortured heaps. Even big, fast-flying birds succumbed to the fire, sometimes in mid-flight. Stunned and confused, wildlife had nowhere to hide.

Ravine burned eastward for another two harrowing weeks, taking more homes, farms, and wildlife in its path. When finally declared contained—but still active—it had burnt more than 2115 square kilometres of agricultural land, plantations, and wilderness—nearly three times the area of New York. Eighty-nine homes were reduced to ash and 332 farm buildings destroyed, many with tools and equipment collected over generations. Almost 60,000 farm animals and 830 beehives were destroyed. Our island suffered 75 percent of the nation's farm animal losses. We will never know the exact number, but millions of wild animals perished on Kangaroo Island, a fraction of the three billion wild animals that died across the whole country during the Black Summer fires.

*I should have known.*

Fire is part of our lives in this landscape, but never had Kangaroo Island experienced this phenomenon. Never had Kangaroo Island been so dry and the relative humidity so low, so early in the season. This fire, and the devastation it caused, drew its genesis from Earth's changing climate. But how had this happened here? While I could witness, I could not cope the implications of this knowledge the day after the firestorm. I had slipped into an ethereal space of reflection that would confront me for months.

Our physical and spiritual journey has brought us to our destination for the first day of reckoning. Standing on our farm on January 4, I am looking at the ashes of our charred house and sheds in heaps behind me; the vegetable garden and fruit trees that had sustained us now smouldering to ash. The whole landscape is rendered desolate, monotone, silent. I strain my hearing for signs of life. Wind whistles and ash billows. Not a bird, not a hum. Not a single living sound, save Earth's sad sigh. The giant trees along our creek line stand as tall, blackened skeletons from their toes to their tips. At my feet lie the remains of an eagle's charred bony frame. I can see its beak, vertebrae, and the bones of one shoulder. I knew this soul. With its mate, it had circled above our heads most of the days we have lived here. We saw their fledglings launch from their nest perched, high in a giant swinging tree. We marvelled at the power of their wings—both the young and the wise. This eagle probably died mid-flight, falling to the ground before its body was consumed by fire. There are hundreds of smaller birds scattered across the paddock. Tangled in fences, the twisted, tormented remains of wallabies, koalas, and echidnas are too many for my heart to contemplate.

Geoff slowly climbs the hill beside me. Bending as he steps, he reaches out to touch his blackened grape vines. His movement is tentative, careful, and gentle; aching to console these vines he treasures. Then he stops. All energy drains from his limbs. Motionless he stares ahead, while his expression turns distressingly inward. I feel his silent howl vibrate across the hill. This vineyard has been hard labour—and love. It was a beacon of better, quieter days ahead after a life of tireless work. To witness its wounds is hard.

My inner voice proclaims this isn't hell. It's worse. It's the world of our making laid bare.

I force my ears, desperate to hear something alive. A call on the wind? Nothing. Only the sound of my charcoal-stained sleeve wiping away tears.

Perhaps I am in the Bardo, the Tibetan Buddhist transitional or liminal state between two lives. I had always thought this was a state between the passing of one's life, through death, into the next through birth; but maybe the Bardo can open at a moment of profound reckoning.

What is that reckoning though? Is it the loss of life? The evidence of death? Is it the loss of our material world; our house, our farm? It has the texture of something more; something those two extreme events force me to confront—the loss of my belief, direction, and purpose. Maybe this is a form of death.

My life has been one devoted to conservation—thirty years as an activist and professional on the environmental frontlines fighting the boardrooms of power. For most of these years, conservation has been my exclusive focus. I am climate-aware, conservation-tuned, well-read, and seemingly hold a sophisticated level of knowledge about most environmental issues that beset our planet. Yet, even with this knowledge and armoury, I was cloaked in denial.

The Bardo mirror confronts me on this first day and for many months afterwards, revealing a truth to me. It is already too late to save the world as we know it. The tools society has fostered are for a time already past. The fire revealed that no level of physical protection can defend an ecosystem from extreme climate change events. Campaigning for parks and protected areas is for naught. Fighting to end trade in endangered species while flying to meetings on carbon-emitting planes is duplicitous. Negotiating emissions 'trade-offs' is dishonest. Anything other than localised catastrophe planning is morally negligent. I feel myself change. I no longer believe in the conservation movement in its present form. I no longer believe that politics, with the right pressure, can rise to the challenge. The global community—our entire lives—is so deeply entrenched in a soulless economic growth frame that it cannot be unpacked in time. Even as fire raged across Australia, Europe, Northern Asia, and the Americas, fossil fuel companies cherished the perverse support of governments to explore for more oil, more gas, more coal. The forked tongue of reality is galling when laid bare.

Gradually the Bardo mirror reveals there is only one direction forward—radical adaptation. Now. But to speak these words out loud is to commit myself to a marginalised and dismissed fringe. I am reticent. And so ... I am stuck. If all the data and analysis turn out to be misleading, and society continues without incident for the coming decades, then I have harmed my standing in a movement I have committed a lifetime to

serving. If the predicted collapse comes within the next decade, then anything I say now is moot.

Unable to articulate my thoughts, I unreasonably sever ties with colleagues around the world. Despite my withdrawal, their messages of love and hope keep coming. I owe them friendship, knowing their lives are filled with all the pain and trauma of life and death, and a global pandemic. Yet I am powerless to respond because I am somewhere else.

The Bardo is painful because it hurts to let go. My reckoning is to cast away everything I have; everything I am; everything I know.

For months I am lost in the depths of despair, contemplating self-destruction. My whole life's effort rendered useless.

Until it is not.

Slowly the reflection begins to change. Somewhere, deep inside this process of pain, I recalled a Buddhist teaching, 'In the space between past and future, having and losing, knowing and not knowing, lies an opportunity for awakening.'

That perfectly formed prose reflects another life.

Not my old existence. It's a radical new life in a parallel space populated by more and more people every year. As climate change rips the veil of denial from population after population—as it destroys our homes, our crops, our worlds—more of us stand naked and aware. Life now is about making the abrupt and dramatic changes necessary for survival. Life is about preparing for the collapse of industrial society where our normal or expected modes of sustenance, shelter, security, identity, and meaning are stripped away. Here, we are IN nature and can feel it struggling alongside us. We are not outside of what is wild just looking on, like those in New York, or London, or Brussels.

We are not in this climate chaos existence because we want to be. Nor is nature. Nor is Earth. Yet, I know, this chaos is the actual world. All the busyness—meetings, campaigns, emissions trading, environmental laws—is a hope-soaked simulation designed to keep people quiet. A giant distraction from the truth. Hope will not stave off the approach of climate change. Climate chaos is already seated alongside us, and it is here to stay.

Gradually I come to accept that radical, deep adaptation means humanity needs to prepare for fundamental collapse of our social, economic, and political systems. Embracing deep adaptation means accepting the abrupt transformation of the world around us. This understanding must become the starting point for every decision from today.

For too long, profound silence cloaked the landscape on and around our farm. After the mournful song of the corellas called to my soul on the fateful fire's eve, it was weeks before I heard the first ballad drift across our ashen hills. Now, slowly, birdsong returns as birds from unburnt islands of forest spread out in search of food and the familiar. A new thread of music almost every day, gradually adding cherished parts to nature's endless symphony. I step back from the cliff's edge in my mind and towards into the doorway to a new place. Not the simulated life. Real life. Geoff stands beside me. The

solo voice of a rainbow lorikeet becomes two and then ten. Their choir reaches into the Bardo and beckons us to move forward, together.

Then comes the rain, and a black world turns green. New lambs are born. Tiny seeds germinate under towering trees. Today some songs are still missing. They may never return. The two cherished eagles that soared above our heads are gone. Their individual absence feels like missing texture in the air. Their souls have left this world, but two more appear this morning. I watch them circle and soar through a well of thankful tears.

Standing now, in the harsh light of reality we can see the land has changed and we have changed, too. We have emerged from the Bardo, together, into an actuality that exists in counterpoint to the simulation. Our world view is different. We see the futility of so much human activity with painful clarity. We grieve the death of our innocence and talk frankly of wanting little more than a safe, meagre existence. One we hope will carry us through the collapse we know is coming. We don't know enough of this genuine world to fully see the future. Only small steps are visible. Next year the vegetable garden and fruit trees will be planted in a sheltered space where fire won't destroy them. It takes too many years for these plants to grow, and we have too little time to risk their loss again. Geoff tends to the vines that have survived and plans to replant those lost during the coming winter. For now, a season of grape harvest lies ahead. In time we will have a home again.

While we learn how to live in this new place, writing and publishing, and growing our own food, fills each new day with purpose. There is little more to say because we don't know this life well, except that the songs of birds are woven into this life's fabric and simple dreams are our compass.

Our lesson from the Bardo has been to accept the passing of our other life—what we had, who we were, what we knew—and to live fully in this real life, investing what time remains in leaving something beneficial for the generations to come; tangible offerings for those who will build the whole world anew.

Outside, the trill of a young rosella calls us into the sun.

## BIO

Margi Prideaux has written about wildlife, international politics, and wildlife law almost every day for the past 30 years as an activist, international negotiator and independent academic. Her forthcoming book *FIRE: A Message from the Edge of Climate Catastrophe* will be released by Stormbird Press in 2022.