

The Clyde Bushfire: Before and Aftermath

By Jesse Rowan January 2020

No Champagne

No dawn chorus greets this New Year's Day.
Smoke haze hangs in eery silence
suspended in the morning stillness,
the aftermath of the Clyde bushfire that heralded in 2020;
no happy celebration of champagne clinks at midnight
only hoses and buckets in hand,
taking turns all night to watch over flames licking up trees
near unprotected homes (only a few of us stayed)
a line of flames spreading gently,
quietly crackling through dry leaves and undergrowth.



Relief.
Still alive, our street intact.
Relief, and yet not.
Still the smoke chokes the sun in pale pink
thickness
Still fires burning out of control heading for
other towns,
other homes,
other fearful defenders,
or perhaps back our way.



Suspended Normality

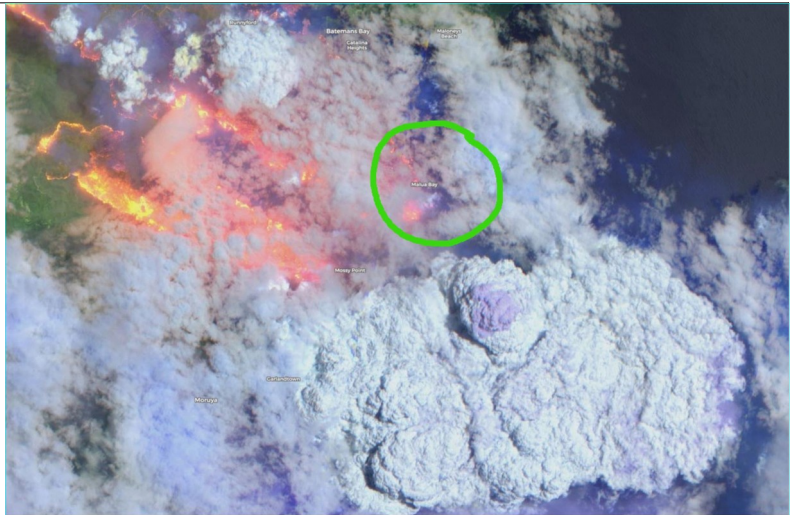
A distant dream of another life.
Memories of a carefree frothy cappuccino
on a clean blue-sky day,
smell of fresh bread still warm under my arm.
Summer swim in clean clear waves
and fresh air.
Was it only months before
this raging inferno of unprecedented fire season of smoky fear?
Watching Fires Near Me
and daily news of expanding fire grounds,
merging megafires
death and destruction
waiting,
waiting,
getting ready
for the disaster burning towards us.
Stomach churning, wondering,
“Am I brave enough to face this ravaging dragon of destruction?
Is it worth the risk?”

An Unprecedented New Year's Eve

New Year's Eve 2019,
about 11:00am in Malua Bay.
Hell's fury minutes away,
hoses loaded, breathing through wet nappies
the terrifying roar grows louder,
adrenaline surges
as a skyload of smoke thickens, churns and
darkens,
glimpses of the sun a strange ball glowing red.
Flames crest along the ridge above us
stretching high above the crowning spotty gums.
A sickening panic.
We're on our own.
Communications cut.
Maybe we should have evacuated.
Too late!

Fire descends in a semicircle through dense forest
towards our street
slowing on the steep slope...
closer, closer,
too high and hot for mops and buckets yet.
The sudden Southerly change, predicted,
whips up flames
churning, stirring,
blowing the fire back on itself
then abates
leaving manageable burning
outside back fences
where hoses and buckets can reach at last.

Next day a welcome water-bombing helicopter
dropped loads of ocean water
beyond our hose's reach.
Our family waved joyful thanks from our deck.
The pilot waved back.
Bone-tired, smoke-smearing Malua Bay firies
inched their truck
down the steep newly bulldozed firebreak
dousing remaining flames
ready for the next possibly catastrophic Saturday.



Above: The Clyde Mountain bushfire impacting Malua Bay and surrounding areas. Sentinel-2A image, at 11:02am, December 31, 2019, processed by @andrewmiskelly. Used with permission.



Days of waking to ominous grey haze
Towels and clothes smell of smoke that swallows our lives.
Keep the windows and doors shut,
our only smoke-free air.
Melted fridge and no hope of power for weeks.
Hundreds of power poles burnt.
No petrol, no cold food without ice,
scarce communications or media:
weak signal on a high hill.
Plenty of baked beans...
Neighbours daring to return share melting food
and news gleaned, huddled on the street -
there's party ice at the IGA... all gone;
try the Woolies servo in town.
Coles is open for a few at a time;
a long nervous line trails down the street.



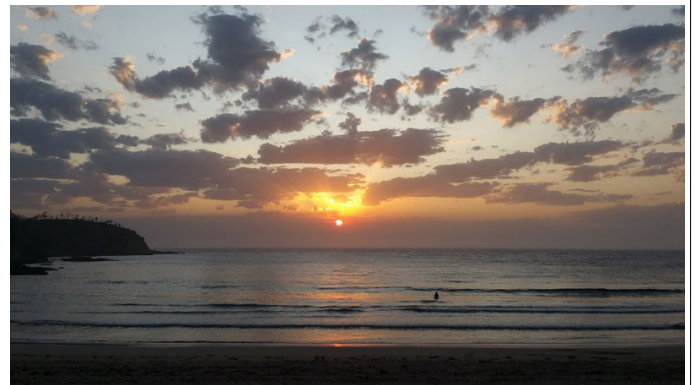
Scrabble by makeshift microphone stand camping light
starting word 'surreal'. Yes!
No computer games,
no movies to escape in.



Our windows display a new strangely beautiful scene at night:
sparks and flames burning up trees and red hot stumps
waiting for a wild wind
Still tethered here by day and night
on guard within our fire hoses' meagre reach.
Taking turns to drive to a hilltop for signal to read the news,
connect with family and friends,
piece together the paths of the mega fires.



Surprise! A day of clear air
amazing smoke-drift sunrises over the ocean
a smoke-filled wind change chokes again.
Rush to a hill to check warnings of a new fire front.
Ominous burnt black leaves spiral out of the sky
on nervous windy days.
One live spark might fall...



Our lives no longer safe or predictable
Illusion of a future shattered.
This is only 1.5 degrees of global heating.

Sleepless

Rage at the Coalition government's inaction on the climate crisis,
waking several times a night to quench eager flames
In the sleepless quiet I write letters by hand to politicians.
Use this anger so it doesn't eat me.

Letterboxes ripped out;
my hand delivery to Andrew Constance,
our state member
tucked under a windscreen wiper.
His neighbours lost their homes.
No reply, even after sending a copy to his office.
It was neatly written, and polite.
Too heartfelt.

An unprecedented Summer of raging firestorms,
of climate heating unaddressed by federal governments.
This quiet Aussie joins the protests...
Surely now they will act! I wait to hear...

The response:
'Now is not the time to speak of climate crisis.
People are suffering. Focus on recovery.'

but hope is part of recovery...



Grief and Loss

I hear from shattered friends
that blue wrens littered the ground
in the last minutes
of a once-beautiful garden;
their home now rubble.
A rain of dead birds dropped out of the sky
still perfect
their tiny fragile bodies of blue perfection
cut short in searing heat and choking smoke.
Tiny wings
could not outpace the unstoppable destruction
they heralded.
The Armageddon of fossil fuel corruption.
The climate crisis is already NOW.

Surreal. That Scrabble word.
In my air-conditioned car
I drive deserted familiar yet unfamiliar streets.
Shock seeps in.
Heart-stunned, weeping loudly:
measuring devastation
that could have happened to many,
risking all to defend our homes.
Saved by a ridge, a wind change
and preparation.

My camera documents the evidence
before it's cleaned up,
ignored again.

In days to come
the newly-homeless will sift through the white ashes
for anything,
for memories that were real.
Homes now blackened piles of bricks,
or collapsed wreckage.
A family's every day life
reduced to unexpected fragments
from the heart of the home -
ash-covered broken china, pattern recognisable,
a tin bucket still whole: how?
nickel silver forks bent and blackened in a jam jar
sad muffin tin
red colander, familiar friend.
The charred copper kettle
full of memories...
balancing hearty brews of tea
on the arms of a verandah of adirondack chairs
with time-honoured friends and family.

View of McKenzies Beach on an innocent blue-skied day
now framed by blackened landscape.
Waves crash, leaving a tidemark of burnt debris.



A brick chimney still standing;
no more earnest conversations
beside this friendly crackling fireplace in winter,
drinking comfort from earthen mugs,
and listening hearts.

Grief for homes in ruins, of life times of memories
in places shared by generations
hangs in the smoke.

For loss:
of beauty
of normal
of dreams for the future
of safety
of creatures,
of nature,
of our very habitat.

Forests of charred soldiers,
blackened trunks in a thick layer of white ash
unable to breathe for us.
The ground burnt clean of undergrowth, warmth still rising,
No food, no hiding places,
no homes for creatures
that might have survived that holocaust.
Trees and logs still flame or smoke -
the next windy day could whip up a shower of hot embers,
sparking on the newly dropped canopy of dried leaves
carpeting the forest floor,
to be sucked high up into the vortex of wind
and dropped kilometres away.
Still plenty of surrounding unburnt fuel load.
It's not over yet.

34 people lost their lives
3500 homes decimated
3 billion animals killed or injured
18,736,070 hectares burnt across Australia
in that long hot season of firestorms.

I thought '**Unprecedented**' would be the Word of the Year. Or '**climate grief**'.

Merriam-Webster's Word of the Year for 2020: '**pandemic**'.

The Oxford Dictionaries 2020 Word of the Year announced '**Words of an Unprecedented Year**':

Covid-19, pandemic, WFH, lockdown, circuit-breaker,
support bubbles, keyworkers, Black Lives Matter,
moonshot... and bushfires.

Bushfires and the climate crisis upstaged by the
pandemic...

no time to heal together
isolated by lockdown.

The government hides its failure to act on the climate crisis
behind pandemic fear and pandemic economics.

Wish I could sleep...

