

## *Renewal*

The journey into the wilderness was short and simple, the beauty of the ancient landscape deeply merged within its solitude and captured in the olive greens, the soft shoots of snowgrass emerging from the otherwise fire blackened landscape. Along the length and breadth of the expansive valleys, were sudden surges of life as if spring for once, arrived before winter. But already, signs of the coming snows, the heavy frost, the ice catching on shadowed limbs of trees, the mist folding around the soft shoulders of peri-glacial terraces - ancient battalions dwarfing the tiny alpine streams - meant that in less than a week, the first flurries of winter would fall. Now, the muted sun sets to the west, throwing long shadows on the jagged outlines of the range to the north and to the south, the majestic profile of the Big Bogong, even more magnificent in the fading light.

I know this journey is special, the last chance to capture the scent of autumn freedom, the cry of sub-alpine cockatoos and the smooth movement of black and grey wallabies, gliding like Gondwanaland gazelles over alpine glens. And, ringing in the aftermath like mournful echoes, the distant call of solitary birds, lost in the vacant snow gum forests after the great explosion of fire.

Now, night comes in a sudden shock of black. Then, bursting into the frosty sky, myriads of stars, the Milky Way curved in a cascade of tiny lights spanning the southern sky like stellar flags of hope. And, from time to time, a lone star pulls my vision into its orb of joy, perhaps more than a simple star, a galaxy once lost now found, its spiralling arms synchronous with space and time. Then, a satellite shows its form, steadily working its way from north to south on the wondrous backdrop of the stunning sky.

I wait, unwilling to abandon the celestial wonders but the first frost falls and beckons me to shelter. Once inside, the Maestro's song, Moonlight Sonata suffuses the night with subtle sounds, a solemn serenade under a moonless sky. There is nothing to do apart from wait, until once again, night surrenders to day, the dawn rising with the morning mists, sun softening and melting the dew sodden soils. Here, but a few fens gather the drops, the tiny streams, their edges exposed, the sphagnum bogs, burnt and now dead. And far away the majestic dam, her ample shores and winding hearth, emptied; devastated by drought. Still, despite the dry and deathly fire, clusters of gum hold the soil, bedecked beneath by native grass. Otherwise, when the rains are strong, nothing is left, only lines of silt, waterborne soil, once stable, now gone. I look and listen, but there is nothing to hear. No animals, no birds, the bush is dead.

In the morning, on the mighty mount, I search for signs that the bush will live. Not all of the trees will survive, some are long dead, and some will revive. But here there is life where, from the base of gums and along their limbs, tiny shoots surprise, evergreen, strong. But all around, the ash is thick and from time to time, whole hillsides fall; the earth scorched and from all life, some soils are cleansed.

On the way here, I saw a farmer, patiently moving his flock of sheep. The sheep moulded on a cast of hardy hooves and snow-proof fleece, move as if they know the path better than he. Together, and as one, they cross the firmly tarred road, passing the wooden yards, unpainted and greyed by wind, sleet, snow and sun. He looks up, his hat folding across a weary brow, absent with worry that the fences have taken months to rebuild after the savage fire, and still, they remain down. His wife, indistinguishable

from the man, clothed like he, calls softly to the dogs, urging them up and over into the high tray of the truck, loosely parked beside the bales of mournful hay now strewn and waiting by vacuous yards. I noticed the farmer and his wife and so at the time, wait, pausing, hoping that they won't see me until the sheep are safe, across the strip that connects them with the once-thriving tourism town.

This morning, I see more than sheep. Lost in the park are a herd of cows, their calves by their sides, eyes curiously wide. I laugh, unexpected for sure, in this wilderness park, abandoned like me, a mob of red cows. I set out from the camp graced by stock, then, without warning, find a weathered old fence. Further along, the fence is down, the bottom of posts burnt, the rusted wires loose. I look for a tie, and struggle to hold, the fence burdened by fire, now laying low. Later, I return, and seeing the smoke cross that fence into a farm. I had hoped to find the farmer to tell him I'd found his cows, but the land, like the other side of the fence, is empty and quiet. I continue on until I reach the smoke, then, more amazed than alarmed, stamp out the fire. And again, spotting smoke, perform that strange and stamping dance. Curiously, I look for the source, but eventually see that a peat burns underground, slowly, invisibly and often, unfound.

Again, I cross back to the park, then make my slow way through the fire-seared, now empty land. I know it's hard, but one must finally see, that although intense and cruel, fire in its own way is refreshing and kind. This land will rebound, it's just a matter of time, but equally clear, the soil is now fragile and loose. I think of the farmer moving his sheep, the cattle lost and fire burning peat. Nevertheless, I have the wisdom to see the time is too soon to put stock on any high country lease. There are costs to this fire, and those costs must be borne, but not by farmers or nature alone. This winter and more, let's let all visitors pay, for labour at least, to put back the fences and find feed for the stock. Give the farmers a hand; just make this our plan. No one can control epic climate change, but at least understand this, from this earth each day, most of us will take, something to eat. Our water is precious and so too is this land.

I leave the olive hued valley, dissected by time in deeply carved streams. The road stretches upwards and onto heavily timbered ridges. The views, stunning and sacred stretch into an adjoining valley, and still, the peat-fed fires smoke into the dusk. Then, the majestic sweep of the Eucumbene Dam once again opens in a stunning vista of man-made hopes, the winding shores once clothed in green now broken by brown and limbless trunks, magnificent trees, once crowned and now drowned. The mighty Snowy, it's waters diverted, feeds this dam, but now, the great river stumbles sadly southwards and meanwhile the drought bites more deeply into the dropping reserves of the majestic subalpine dam. Whilst the farmer laments lost cattle and sheep and his fences stay down, the hills remain bare, the soils steadily slipping into already silted streams. And in Canberra, when the water wars start, there is no one to see the olive-green hues, the forgotten farmer or the fire-scorched land.