

## Fire

*Stephen Muecke*

When the fires came to Kangaroo Island,  
we were in *Dhilba Guuranda*—Innes,  
having Christmas dinner. Kate was serving up  
in the Manager's house, all going well.

We smelled the smoke and went outside, the fires  
were glowing across the sea predicting  
disaster coming, disaster waiting  
for its turn to visit, touch, and test our  
ragged emotions: happy Christmas all.

As the KI fires burned on until new  
year, into January, February,  
others began to quantify the violence,  
the slow violence that just crept up on  
us, who didn't know, didn't feel, didn't  
know how to feel, or even think clearly.

Catastrophe, apocalypse; go to  
Greece to parse those words that craft a story.  
(And the island of Evia burned there too).  
A story of firey alchemy and  
metamorphosis: water, fire and...

Who could forget the fierce will of the gods?  
Did we forget to placate them with blood?

You will say this is all fancy, this story  
Of pagan spirits in plants and animals

When the true story is objective and  
rational, and yes, even numerical.

The numbers of dead animals, dead trees?  
But what of the slow violence that crept  
up on you, asleep, dreaming of Goya:  
'in the sleep of reason, monsters are born'.

The firey sky is sublime, Turneresque.  
But the monsters are lurking. Only they  
can frighten you enough to pay respect,  
once more, to nereids and Prometheus,  
gods of water and fire in sacred places  
protected by your irrational fear.

But know, know this: these plants and animals  
have life, sparks of life. Who will protect them?  
The numbers? The plain, objective facts?

We need gods and heroes, larger than life.  
Scientists, firefighters, war veterans,  
Voyagers returning to their homelands,  
Like the man who returned to Evia:

Giannis Afedras, retired seaman,  
Came home to Evia this year after  
thirty-eight years sailing the wine-dark sea,  
to restart his life there, in the highest mountain  
village where he was born and had spent his childhood.  
Home to his family and ancestors.

The fires engulfed Evia, with hot roaring winds.  
It started at midnight. 'I was the last person  
to leave the village; the fire was really close.

I have seen many fires before, but this  
was terrifying. That night was horrific:  
I will see the ghosts of the dead forest  
for a long time,' he said, and tipped the last  
few drops of his retsina on the ground.

Us humans, heroes or not, can only do  
so much in our thin bare skins, we are not  
extremophiles, beings who love the heat  
or extreme cold, waiting to burst into  
life: plants have other intelligent options.

The Banksias on Kangaroo island  
Are really smart, with serotinous cones:  
'Fire-induced serotiny', it is called.

Inside the Banksia cone is a resin  
sealing the cone scales shut. The seeds sleep there  
for years, until extreme heat melts the resin.

But wait, the seeds don't always drop, not yet.  
There is more plant intelligence: Banksias  
know what kind of world they live in. Inside  
the follicles are winged seed separators.

They block the opening, preventing the  
seed from falling out. The follicles  
open after fire, but seed release does  
not occur. They are waiting for the rains.

The cone dries, but when it is wet the scales  
expand and contract. The seed separator  
acting as a lever against the seeds,

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working them out of the follicle,  
as wet and dry cycle over and again.

Banksia logic ensures that seed  
release does not occur just with the fire,  
but in response to the onset of rains  
following fire. How do they know all this?

Human terror faced with the supernatural  
strength of fires makes us seem out of place,  
strangers to its mysterious beauty.  
Yet, rational beings, we fear nothing  
until it is too late, forgetting the

wisdom grown in the ancient Banksias,  
co-existent, co-evolved, with fire and  
rain. These banksia men are pagan spirits,  
fearing yet welcoming the lightning bolts

of Zeus and Mamaragan in concert  
Greek and Aboriginal gods of the sky  
Frowning, straining, to hear our plaintive song.

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