

Settle

Up the valley, under a dome of green sky, she lit a fire. It wasn't the right season - too dry, too hot - but this far from town, this late, nobody would notice.

It was land she had worked beside her father and then, after drifting a while, a husband. None of those relationships had been easy. The earth was spread gaunt over bedrock from five generations of misuse, and farming it was hardly worth the meagre comfort and ever-thinner profits it produced. The men, the same.

Earlier, she'd ripped a break with her grandfather's tractor, then siphoned the diesel to run the water cannons off the pump at the dam while the sun went sluggish to the horizon. Back up in the yard, she'd lugged armloads of junk to the verandah. Splintered chairs, stained tablecloths, a tub of creosote, pinup calendars crackling at the edges, boxes of accounts and photos. A few matches and the fire took off, hungry as it always is for old and broken things.

Ghosts of long-abandoned gardens shuffled uneasy against the weatherboard. Lumpy camellia and misshapen hawthorn, strung through with kikuyu. Never belonged; send them back to the dirt. Further out, paddocks bristling with thistle. A decade since they'd run cattle: the drought, then no money to fix the fences. Rabbits. But in the last few years she'd found herself watched by wallabies, ears flicking flies as they browsed where bracken tilted towards the gorge.

Currawongs had brought her out to the eastern boundary this morning, white wing tips like breadcrumbs in the trees. Crossing over, she'd met the busy quietness of insects and

fairywrens, felt the quickening familiarity of bark crunching underfoot. Faint tracks - maybe wombats, maybe paths through an older history. Rock, rough and solid, falling to the gorge. And, above it all, the whispering grey of box leaves. Memory and possibility.

The sky melted to purple as fire fully embraced the house, burrowing deep into the floorboards of the sagging hallway, spitting through the lino kitchen and ripping into spring mattresses propped against bedroom walls. She found the spot with reception up beside the old tank stand and made the call, laconic against the background roar. Half an hour for the trucks to arrive. Long enough for the bones of these buildings to sink to the ground, to start clearing that five-lifetime ledger.

It was too hot now, the air unbreathable with tyre fumes, thick with hand-me-down trauma and sparks. She'd thought of making a symbolic contribution: a black and white aerial photo of the property, her father's flaking boots, the title deeds. Burnt already. No decision needed. A relief.

In the dark beyond the gorge, clouds were massing. She went out that way: walked through thistles that flickered orange, across the firebreak and down to the fenceline. Slipped through the wire between farm and bush. Breathed in. Listened.

Ahead, the wind spoke of a cool change. Behind, the flames sounded almost like water.