

IN THE AFTERMATH of 2020 – a year that outstripped description, so broad and deeply felt were its tragedies and crises – I stood on the foreshore of Pambula Lake looking out across the water at wavering gumtrees. Rows of molluscs crosshatched the shining water, their culinary destinies having been delayed by a zoonotic virus that put pause to their apex predator and slowed the steady increase of carbon emissions that threatened their habitat. The sun was high and hot. Men carried fishing rods to boat ramps and a young family picnicked on the hill behind me. There was no visible wreckage here, no demonstration of how small and disparate communities, economies, environments and ecosystems relate to one another in and through crisis.

It had been two years since I was last on the lake – perhaps the last time I'd felt uncomplicatedly happy. Back then, I'd travelled up the coast road to Pambula from Melbourne to learn how to oyster farm. Oysters were a recent and fierce obsession. Oysters with wine and conversation. Oysters as a guilt-free food source, devoid of nervous systems and high in iron. Oysters as filtration systems, filtering pollutants through their small bodies. I was dreaming up a story about oysters that detect and digest a pathogen deadly to humans. I was simultaneously dreaming up a standard Australian sea change: that my love and I might move somewhere close to water and find the happiness that seemed so elusive in the city. That we might find a new life somewhere rendered vivid and simple by distance.

Mark – the farmer who took me on as an 'old intern', sceptically and under duress from his wife – showed me how to turn the bags, sort the sprats by size, chip rogue bivalves off the rusty frames that trellised their growth and, my favourite task, smash ugly shells with a hammer to sculpt a restaurant-quality aesthetic.

On our second morning together on the lake, back in 2019, Mark shucked an oyster and I ate it standing waist-deep in water. We talked about notions of the good life. About escaping poor decisions. About holding on to and letting go of love. About what family means.

We talked about climate change, too. Mark wasn't convinced. It all seemed a bit overblown from his place on the lake. Despite difference, our talk was easy and revealing. We peppered differing points of view with music fandom and disdain for self-deception. It reminded me of anthropologist Kathleen Stewart's call to 'imagine how finding oneself on the side of the road could become an epistemological stance',

her description of talk that ‘rises to the surface to overwhelm the merely referential with a rush of poetic forms and the living phantasms of a sociality embedded in remembered drama’.

5 At the end of each working day, I’d take a dozen oysters to a holiday rental up on the hill and eat them overlooking the water they spawned in. How’s the farming? my love texted. Would I like it? I wasn’t sure. I wasn’t sure what he liked anymore – other than partying as retreat from the harder, meaner parts of life. He might, right at that moment, have been missing me, yearning for this utopia and simultaneously glad it (and I) were too far away to disappoint.

10 In less than a month he would be dead from an accidental drug overdose. And then, for two whole years, the world would wrap around me tightly, a choking quilt of stitched-together catastrophes both personal and comprehensive.

15 In 2021, in the aftermath of this and more, I watched Mark punt across the gleaming lake in his flat-bottomed boat. The water, the boat, the sky all looked exactly the same as they had before. Mark tied off, hauled a muddy oyster bag onto the dock.

‘Fuck,’ he said, deadpan. ‘Nothing’s changed since you were here ay?’

‘You reckon?’

‘Nah,’ he said. ‘I’m joking. Nothing is the same.’

20 I followed him up to the shed. There was new equipment everywhere. Investments made to stay competitive, he told me. He hadn’t sold wholesale since Covid hit.

‘Lucky I had enough space to keep them in the water. Lots of farmers had to sell at whatever price. That’ll be me in a year if things don’t pick up.’

25 Mark joked, but he looked rough. You can get to know a person in five days on a lake. We stood in his small shed – maskless, too close, shooting shit. Out on the Broadwater, COVID-19 had existed primarily as a set of economic challenges. The catastrophe that framed Mark’s year occurred months before, when fire tore up the coastline.

‘You couldn’t see the lake through the smoke,’ he said.

30 He described how young blokes took mattress-strapped boats out to sleep on the water, but even that low down they couldn’t breathe. Mark’s feisty youngest kid bragged that she wanted to get evacuated, but when it came time to go, she just screamed. There were people in sleeping bags lining the road to Merimbula.

Windscreen wipers on full couldn't cut through the ash. Mark and his family got to return home pretty quickly, but lots of people didn't.

And then we were all locked in.

'You didn't even have time to take a breath,' I said.

5 'Nah, and it's not over. I'm a bit, what's the word...'

'Resilient?'

'Nah, I was gonna say stupid. Like I can't get my head around it. I've got a lot of mates who are still messed up from it all. They had some concert for the fires in Sydney and thought it was over but it's not.'

10 I nodded like I understood, but as I drove south on the highway I wondered what he was referring to. The fires? The clean-up? Recouping the economic cost of COVID-19? The sense that even the good life might burn?

What's not over and what hasn't even begun?

AFTERMATH AS DEPICTED in utopian and dystopian fiction is often a beginning.
15 Disaster and catastrophe are utopian forces. A wake-up call. A chance to 'clean house'. Surviving couples – mostly white and always straight – line up for the shuttle to another planet, another life, utopias distant and vivid. A voice-over might declare the time of after in which there is mourning but also simple happiness. Edenic return. Simplicity as atonement for some wrong turn taken. We all yearn for this.

20 'Mrs O'Leary's cow did Chicago a big favor,' writes Martha A Bartter in her 1986 article 'Nuclear Holocaust as Urban Renewal' of the purported catalyst for Chicago's 1871 Great Fire. 'The earthquake of 1906 did the same for San Francisco. Ideal communities, we somehow believe, could exist if only our world were renewed as a better place.' For this reason, Bartter argues, fiction depicts atomic war (if she were
25 writing now she might include ecological crisis, too) 'as obvious disaster and as secret salvation' and this covert message 'powerfully influences our cultural subconscious'.

We wait for aftermath so that we might be renewed. But renewal, Bartter points out, is a process, not an end point.

30 These fictional aftermaths reframe our present as a crisis we are now only dimly and ineffectually aware of producing. We might notice rising temperatures. Might read the predictions. Might consider how diminished habitat could prompt a species' migration and even spread a disease. We will breathe in smoke and watch fires on TV

as though they are not one and the same. We will shop and drive and eat and travel.
We will live and die.

In Kim Stanley Robinson's 2012 novel 2312, this present is The Dithering, a period from 2005–2060 in which we fail to intervene in our own crisis. This designation
5 begs another question: what is an ideal community, a good life, if nothing is renewed, if we are working in and through catastrophe with only what we have now and in the face of what will be?

As I drove south down the highway from Pambula, I couldn't help but feel a deepening sense of dread. I hadn't seen this landscape in two years. Near Boydtown,
10 a stretch of charred forest flanked an ad-hoc roadside COVID-19 testing centre. I felt like speeding up to get past the blackened bush and bald hills. But I knew the better choice was to linger. Can we try to think in and with what remains? Can we see our damage, as Ann Laura Stoler, Willy Brandt Distinguished Professor of Anthropology and History at The New School, might wish we could, as 'a provocative challenge to
15 name the toxic corrosions and violent accruals of colonial aftermaths, the durable forms in which they bear on the material environment and on people's minds'?

IN THE AFTERMATH of my partner's death, I took a tourist bus from Fujikawaguchiko to Aokigahara – thirty square kilometres of gnarled, moss-covered forest at the base of Mount Fuji in Japan. In Japanese mythology, this forest was
20 home to yūrei, the spirits of those who died violently, unexpectedly, whose funeral rites were not performed correctly or who had unfinished emotional business tying them to the physical plane.

In contemporary myth-making, the area is host to different kinds of ghosts – the decaying bodies of suicides committed deep in the trees. Acts that have earned the
25 area the macabre nickname 'suicide forest'.

I wanted to sit in the suicide forest surrounded by yūrei and feel something profound about death. I was in mourning and wanted to be in a place chosen for grief and loss. I wanted to sit at the edge of desperation. Come to some conclusion. Write a poem maybe, who knew what else? Afterwards, I wanted to emerge renewed. With some
30 new insight, or something purged.

I paced the perimeter looking for a way in. I'd followed a map on my phone, crossed a paddock and ambled down a desolate stretch of road, but still the forest seemed impenetrable. Plunging in was like diving off a rock wall into water. Sudden.
35 Immersive. Sea of Trees – another name for Aokigahara. I staggered around on the spongy ground. The dense network of grasping roots covered in moss and detritus, sown in the hardened lava of a centuries-old volcanic eruption. I clambered around, low to the ground, arms out, feet falling into ditches and holes. Very quickly my

motivation ceased to be some profound reflection on death and became instead the desperate avoidance of injury.

5 I barely breached the boundary, but if I'd gone deeper I might have noticed how easy it would be to get lost in this forest. High-iron soil messes with GPS signals. I might have seen red and blue string snaked between the trees – fairytale maps for those who enter fearing (or hoping for?) a sudden change of heart.

10 In his bestselling 1993 book *The Complete Manual of Suicide*, Wataru Tsurumi describes Aokigahara as the perfect place to die. It is the faultless quiet, the supreme monotony that makes it so. There is no official English-language version of Tsurumi's book, but snippets of unofficial translations exist on the internet. In the preface, he writes:

We are all unlucky. We were born on this stage of past events... We tolerated the nervousness caused by the terrifying ordinary life, in return for the ridiculous 'calm and bright future'... 'Future! Future!' It's useless even as it's convincing.

15 In the aftermath, grief can make it impossible to imagine the future. I became reactive, a taut wire running through a high voltage of present. I felt stupid, couldn't get my head around anything. I could only focus on lessening injury, making it across a perilous terrain.

'Life,' writes Tsurumi, 'is as fragile and as unimportant as can be.'

20 At the edge of the forest I tried to balance myself on a net of grubby roots and contemplate finitude, death and time and survival. I tried to formulate an idea of aftermath. What was it generally? What could it be to me?

25 The moment was contrived. It lost me. I dusted off my jeans. Dragged my legs out of mossy craters and back to the solidity of the highway, where I stood blinking in the sun. The atmosphere was lighter; I heard the welcome sound of distant traffic.

Fragile life. All we have to work with. At least as precious as it is unimportant.

30 IN THE AFTERMATH, narrative matters. A 2005 study published in the journal *Epidemiologic Reviews* shows that media framing and reporting of -disaster contributes to the medium- and long-term health impacts after the event. The repetition of images, separation of mental and physical health outcomes, and coining of new disorders such as 'World Trade Center syndrome' can produce psychosomatic illness and compound traumatic response. As the authors of that 2005 study write:

After a disaster or a risk-event occurs, a variety of social actors, including the media, are involved in a struggle to define what happened and why, and what can be expected in the future. Their goal is to frame the problem: to propagate a specific problem -definition, causal interpretation, moral valuation, and problem-solving recommendations.

Narratives in the media and elsewhere can create hype and worsen anxiety. But they can play a positive role, too. They can help us place events into context. In 2019, The Guardian and other news outlets changed their style guide in relation to reporting about the environment. The gentle, easy to assimilate 'climate change' was replaced with 'climate emergency' or 'climate crisis'. The argument was simple: language matters. These changes in the way language is used create context, signify the implicit connections between environmental phenomena such as heating, species die-off and food shortages and even events such a global pandemic. They insist on the ongoingness of the situation.

'After' can only be assigned by establishing fixed points. Which is the most significant event? What are the discrete consequences? But events imbricate and accrete. In the aftermath of climate change there will be more climate change, whether we survive it or not. Disaster can't be a force of renewal if it destroys societies without changing the networks of power that produced it in the first place. We want to go back. We want the simplicity of distance. But we have to sit here, in these forests, growing from and towards fire.

As I write, a coalition of news outlets is preparing to run a series of stories under the umbrella of 'Living Through the Climate Emergency'. Here, one crisis informs another. The Guardian's website points to media coverage of COVID-19 that 'chronicled its devastating impacts, called out disinformation, and told audiences how to protect themselves' as instructive in reporting climate emergency.

I think back to Mark's comment. It's not over. You can have a concert. You can make a donation. But it's not over. In the shed, in the aftermath, he told me he believes in climate crisis now. Believes in lots of things he was sceptical of before, though sometimes it's hard to wade through the more seductive misinformation. Sometimes your space on the side of the road becomes a point of departure, or connection.

'All my mates in Sydney are into conspiracy theories. Some of it's, I don't know, if you think about it too much it starts to make sense. I went pretty deep. It messed me up,' Mark had told me. His wife put her foot down. No more social media. And especially no more social media and weed or beer.

I remember how in the aftermath of my grief I drank in bed and tried with all I had to believe in heaven.

We are like oysters. We filter everything through our bodies. Sometimes it renders us inert, paralyses our nervous systems, makes us food for bad ideas.

IN THE AFTERMATH, survivors of tragedy and catastrophe are told they will never be the same again. They will be transformed – stronger perhaps, but also new.

5 Survival becomes a utopian ideal. I read this rhetoric in the news after the fires and during the pandemic. I could see, of course, how this kind of hopeful framing might be helpful, but it rankled me. I thought of all the communities who have worn their damage for years. Borne ‘toxic corrosions and violent accruals of colonial aftermaths’ with strength but not without trauma, anger, scars. Aftermath insists there are end
10 points; it ignores that which is not yet over. Aftermath, it strikes me, is not an ethical construction.

In the middle of the aftermath: more event.

Between the first and second waves of COVID-19 in Victoria and their attendant lockdowns, my father’s physical and mental health deteriorated, and he too died,
15 intoxicated and in his sleep. I could see how the isolation he endured in what was already a very isolated life contributed to his end. As a writer, I worked hard to keep my feelings about this in check. In Victoria, we had taken collective action and it worked for more people than it failed. But the crisis is ongoing, existed before the pandemic and will exist afterwards. I remember those desperate weeks trying to get
20 an in-home aged-care package set up for Dad. The strain that an already inadequate and largely privatised health system was under. The long under-resourced areas of aged care, addiction and mental health, now so close to breaking.

In the aftermath I began – and stopped – a dozen essays about this. I wanted to say something about the damage wrought from a long-term crisis, which predates
25 anything our current cohort of politicians has ever said. Couldn’t the fact of this public-health crisis be a wake-up call? A chance to clean house? But I was angry, too. I could see how easily I’d get lost in this dense forest of event, consequence and tragedy. I could see how my story could be looped through someone else’s conspiracy theory. I followed the thread of my thinking out of the tangled overgrowth. I needed
30 to sit silently with this grief for some time lest it become food for bad ideas.

In The Sense of an Ending, literary scholar and critic Frank Kermode writes that we construct endings in order to make sense of our own lives, lived always in ‘the
middest’; chronos, the time of waiting. To create order, we dream up kairos, the time
35 of crisis. The time when ‘the foundations of life quake beneath our feet...a point in time filled with significance, charged with meaning derived from its relation to the end’. We are yearning for an aftermath. Kermode writes, ‘the belief that one’s own

age is transitional between two major periods, turns into a belief that the transition itself becomes an age, a saeculum.'

But damage occurs in the midst, too. Crisis, it seems to me, is always produced while we are waiting, dithering.

- 5 We imagine rising from the ashes. A new bird. But if anything rises it's the same bird – burned, some feathers at odd angles, some never to grow back. We can mourn the old bird, or the new. But perhaps it's better to really see this malformed creature. Better to care for it, listen to it, heed its 'remembered drama', however disordered.

- 10 IN THE AFTERMATH in which I find myself writing this essay, I am attempting some version of an Australian sea change. I've leased a house by a bay; it sits between a 'wastewater treatment plant' and a 'correctional complex'. At my cracked windows, lorikeets chirp for food over the drone of prison announcements. There are signs by the beach warning swimmers to stay out for two days after rain. The next bay south, where once people ate oysters off the rocks, is currently closed due to
15 asbestos in the water.

- Still, it's beautiful here. Every day I take long walks along the coastline, snaking between the McMansions, the yūrei and the violent sea, tracking the cargo ships and dolphins, arguing with the golfers who see public land as personal property. I try to picture what this place would have looked like before, but the enormity of violent
20 accruals exceed me.

I'll live in this house for six months, and then it will be demolished. It's a brief utopia. Far enough from what came before to appear vivid and simple, though I'm well aware of the illusion. 'When we survive,' Kermode writes, 'we make little images of moments which have seemed like ends; we thrive on epochs.'

- 25 I am in an aftermath, but we are in the midst.

- When these walls fall, I won't step out into the world renewed. I will have had some space to think, mourn, digest; to try and arrive at some temporary epistemological stance. I'm resilient but I still feel stupid, can't get my head around things. When this house is demolished, the land will become townhouses where affluent families will
30 live with ocean glimpses, double glazing, air-conditioners and probably no more than a glancing concern for what was here before. I'll be somewhere else by then of course, in some future I still can't quite imagine.

- The people that pass, pass through us. The events we survive, survive with and beyond us. Nothing is over. We reflect, act and continue from this space, in this
35 crisis, now.