This book is for all those who suffered loss during 7 February 2009 and its aftermath.
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It is late evening, still warm, and the dogs have stopped barking. I am reading one of Andrea Camilleri’s Inspector Montalbano mysteries. Searching among his papers for a lost receipt, the Inspector is constantly distracted. Letters, notes and photographs he finds as he searches re-familiarise pasts for him, and the resultant reveries protract his task. As Camilleri makes clear, this is something many of us experience as we search through our things. I remember such occasions as mixtures of joyful remembrances and melancholic regrets. Moments when a letter or photograph reminded me of a friend or lover, and then of good times, and sometimes of lost possibilities. Most poignant are the items – a photograph or a card, for instance – from those no longer alive. Coming across such things brings back to you, if only for a moment, those who have gone. As I read of Montalbano’s searching, I am aware that such an action will not balm nor bother me again for a long time. The bed I lie upon is not mine, and the room I am in is being lent to me by kind friends. It is their springer spaniels that have just stopped barking. Apart from my laptop, and a small crumpled plastic shopping bag of the clothes I wore on the day, none of my possessions in this room belonged to me before 7 February 2009. The Montalbano is one of the few books I now possess. I bought it
a week before, about two weeks after the fire. I had driven over to my property in a car I had borrowed from my sister. The smell of fire was still overpowering. It is a stench you feel has settled forever into the lining of your nostrils. Indeed, in small ways the fire lingered that day. You could see it smouldering in the trunks of trees. Oddly most of the canopies of the trees remained unburnt. The day after the fire, they were still green. But any sense of life in those leaves was illusionary. In the weeks that followed, they slowly turned brown, as if in response to the autumn that had come. But these were not deciduous, they were grey box eucalypts. The leaves had not burnt, they had been cooked. Walking that day through the debris of the house, dominated by twisted roof metal, attempting to pick out anything still recognisable, looking for some trace of my cat, with the ground black or brown or white – the various colours of ash – I stopped suddenly and looked around me. There was nothing salvageable. There was hardly anything recognisable. And the very few things that were, were not in position. They had been thrown around in the maelstrom of flame. I could not go on searching. The resilience, brought by adrenaline, that had begun soon after 3 pm on 7 February vanished. I felt alone, powerless, small. Most of all, I felt angry. At who? At the air, at the sky, at the ‘authorities’. But overwhelmingly, I was angry at the place. This place, I said to myself, had destroyed everything of mine, even my memories. And, in that moment, I needed to be rid of it. To be rid of the gaping reality of loss. Held by despair I walked out of the rubbled house and climbed back into my sister’s car and drove down to the gate. I pulled the gate closed and chained and padlocked it to the fragile, ashen gatepost, aware of how futile this was – the fence either
side of the gate was no more than fired wire twisted along the ground, half buried in ash. If I had had the means, I would have placed a FOR SALE sign on that gate, to tell the world, or at the least its local representatives, my neighbours, that I was rid of it, that I would have it disappear from my life. So I drove, not knowing to where. I wanted to get away from anything familiar, for all that was familiar was charred ruin. So I drove, at first towards Kyneton – beyond that was Melbourne – but that was toward another familiar. I turned east suddenly into Watchbox Road, bizarrely thinking I would leave the charred zone behind, but I found I had turned to follow the path of the fire that day. Every turn to get out of the blackened zone only led me deeper into it. Men on the roadsides repairing destroyed fences were the only life I saw. Eventually I drove out of the zone of blackened earth and trees. Inadvertently, I had toured the extent of the fire. Perhaps there was an unconscious intent driving me to realise that my little patch was only part of a bigger fire, only one moment of a catastrophic day. I know only that the continuous charred and sometimes still smoking land added to my despair. It was the first time I felt what I would often feel over the next two years. A sense that every turn led me back to destruction. Eventually I found myself on the road to Lancefield, beyond the extent of the fire. I parked in that town’s wide main street, calmed by the unburnt gardens around me. There was a bookshop nearby, Red Door Books. I went in. I don’t even know why, possibly I had the idea that books could lead me into worlds beyond the one I was in. It had the feel of a good bookshop, run by people who knew and cared about books. Without much thought I wandered to the small history section and found to my surprise copies of my recent book on
the shelf. Seeing them broke the tension within me. It was as if a friendly hand had taken mine and drawn me away from anger. There was an existence beyond the destruction. I browsed some more and found the Montalbano, one I hadn’t read. I bought it, and a book on gardens.

Fire. When I think that word now I see a crazed red dancer surging up the slope, at whose feet I train the hose of spraying water to no effect. Its dance mocks me. As I face it, it has personality. Wilful. Contemptuous. It is the enemy at my gate. Literally at my gate, for I am standing at the gate of the high metal fence that protects the north side of the house. I can feel the searing heat on the parts of my face not covered by mask or goggles. It is as if this fire knows me. Its smoke has turned day to night. And the flame producing the smoke provides the only light. A dreadful light. The wind pushes heat into me. All there is is this fire and, behind me, my house, and inside that house my cat. The rest of the world has gone. For all I sense, this fire has consumed it all. I alone battle the fire. But the flaming wind and ineffectual water are too much. I have to retreat. It takes all the strength of my body to push the gate shut against the wind-driven flame, conscious of how much what I am wearing is protecting me. The metal is hot enough through the thick leather gloves and my clothes – without them my skin would burst at its touch. I finally secure the gate and can see the flames above the fence. I am in a fairly enclosed area on the north side of the house, the metal fence between me and the fire, a large concrete water tank and another metal tank on a stand to
the one side, an old caravan to the other and the house itself opposite the gate. There are three exits from this area: the metal gate, obviously only offering death at this moment; a passage between the house and the caravan to the front garden to the east; and a passage between the tanks and the house to the back garden. For now, the metal fence is holding the fire from me, but embers toss about in wind trapped in the area. I direct the hose over the house, watching the water spurt high up onto the roof. I have adjusted the nozzle to the consistency of steady rain. I think to move around – the hose is long enough – to the back of the house, the west side, to spray more of the roof. Then the water stops. It just stops. The hose goes limp. I look over at the pump. It is dead. The fire is only a metre away; its tips taunt me above the fence. I am forced suddenly to think. The heat is too intense for me to start fiddling with a machine full of petrol. (Only later do I realise it isn’t, that it has stopped because the petrol has vaporised in the heat.) I look at the hose in my hand and shrug, You’re no use to me (everything has become anthropomorphised). I drop it. The only thing is to retreat into the house where I hope I can hide from the rampaging enemy.

Of course I know the fire is indifferent to my fate. But the relationship between fire and humanity is more than ancient, it is essential. We can stare in calm meditative reverie at the behaviour of flames in an open fireplace. We take fire for granted when we cook, or heat our shelters. Little wonder we feel it such a treacherous beast when it goes wild. Indeed the very term ‘wildfire’ evokes the language of opposites. A wildfire
is one escaped from tamed domestication. As that great knower of fire Stephen Pyne has pointed out, in the modern world we can be oblivious to how ubiquitous domesticated fire is. Internal combustion engines move us about and power a myriad of machines, from mowers to generators to fire-fighting pumps, but we are for the most part unconscious that it is fire that propels us. What travels through powerlines, that which heats our food and water and houses, is fire metamorphosed, always ready – in a flash! – to revert to flame. Those light bulbs above us burn. The gas-jets on the stove we might not equate with fire at all until the cooking oil catches alight. Humans are children of fire. From around the world mythologies of how humanity obtained fire often stress that it was stolen from the gods, an act that marks a rift between the gods and humans, and with that the potential for human independence from the gods. This theft is the original sin of many peoples, and the great liberator.

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In the south-east Australian summer, fire puts you constantly on guard. It is hazardous enough on most hot, dry days – which can run continuously through months; it is a particularly acute threat on the Dangerous Days. On such days the heat sucks dry the plants; sucks dry the soil; sucks dry the air. On these days, the hillsides lie under light so stark, there is no colour left. And when the wind comes, as it inevitably does on such days, it blasts any surviving moisture from each crevice and shadow. Not that there are any shadows. The sun is omnipotent. The sky no more than glare. When such days come you can be certain that the grasses have been dead for months, by now they are brittle down
through their roots. You look at the paddocks, and wonder why they don’t simply burst into flame. The slightest spark, say from a slasher-blade hitting stone, will ignite this vista. A cigarette butt will do it quicker. But a match is best of all. You cross your fingers. You cross yourself – just in case some spirit is watching. 7 February 2009 was all this, and more.

There have been warnings all through the week that the conditions will be among the worst recorded, worse than Ash Wednesday, the day in 1983 when fires spread throughout Victoria and South Australia. The warnings come from the Premier, from the Country Fire Authority (CFA) Chief, from the Bureau of Meteorology. We are told to be ready with our fire plans, not to travel unnecessarily. But the morning comes innocently enough. The kind of innocence that lulls you into thinking the predictors are wrong. Then in the late morning the temperature rises, and so does the wind. Indigo, the dog I share with my ex-partner is with her, and she is at Mt Macedon. I can see Mt Macedon in the distance from my ridge. I think perhaps the dog would be safer with me because Mt Macedon is one of the most dangerous fire places on earth. It was devastated on Ash Wednesday. It is not that I do not think a fire is possible where I live; it is that it is pastoral country, with only thin, short grass after more than a decade of drought. There are no longer cattle on it because there is nothing for them to eat. It is not forest as Mt Macedon is. (Yet I am not complacent – I never forget the son of the previous owner of the property, my guide when I first moved in, looking out over parched paddocks with
virtually no grass, and responding to my statement that there was nothing to burn with: It’ll burn, don’t worry about that.) By midday the sky starts to silt over. I hope it is high cloud, the harbinger of a cool change. But, outside, I know such thoughts are a fool’s consolation. I can smell it is high smoke. Smoke from a distant fire. The smell puts me on a higher level of alert. There is something terrible about that smell on such a day even if you know it is from a distant fire. I go inside and turn on the radio but it tells me nothing. Online I see there are fires in the Wimmera – a few hundred kilometres away but the wind, now ferocious, carries the smoke and its smell across the state. In the early afternoon the smoke grows thicker, darkening the day. The temperature is in the mid-forties and rising. Every now and then I check. It is still distant smoke. At three o’clock I go out, expecting to be relieved by seeing only the high smoke, but there is other smoke now, a too distinct huge column, darkly billowing up from behind the back ridge of my property, to the north-west, one or two kilometres away, directly upwind from my house.

The Great Dividing Range runs south parallel to the east coast of Australia, curving west in parallel with the southern coast in Victoria. It varies from the truly mountainous to high, by Australian standards, undulating country. In the eastern half of Victoria it is known as the Australian Alps, but in the west it is far more modest highlands dotted by occasional peaks such as Mt Macedon. All the river systems of eastern Australia relate to this range. On the coastal side the rivers are relatively short and flow into the sea, on the inner side south of Queensland they
flow into what is known as the Murray-Darling Basin, after the two biggest rivers of the system. The Darling River is itself a tributary of the Murray, although deciding which river has prominence is more a product of history than geography. The Murray empties into the Southern Ocean off South Australia. For much of its route it forms the border between Victoria and New South Wales. The basin is characterised — or at least was until recently — by wet cold winters and long, hot dry summers. It is predominantly flat country, drier the further inland you go. In Victoria to the north-west of Melbourne the range is mainly rolling highlands. Among the many inland-running streams that have their headlands here are two rivers, the Coliban and the Campaspe. These rivers flow parallel to each other north out of the highlands separated by a ridge. West of the ridge, the Coliban makes a way through low hilly country. East of the ridge, the Campaspe flows through a broad valley bordered on the other side by another rise of hills. As it progresses, the Campaspe has formed a gorge in the valley that deepens until the valley itself falls away into lower country. Through this, the Campaspe continues on towards the Murray River some 300 kilometres away. Not far into this country the ridge separating the two rivers dwindles and the Coliban joins the Campaspe. At least that is what happened in the past. Now both nominally flow into an artificial body of water called Lake Eppalock formed by a dam across the Campaspe about twenty kilometres south-east of the city of Bendigo. The property called *Wandana* originally occupied about 450 acres of the eastern slope of the ridge that separates the Coliban and the Campaspe, about fifteen kilometres up from the rivers’ junction. *Wandana* means ‘great distances’, and from the property you can see out over the
Campaspe valley, south-east to Mt Macedon, and north-east to Mt Ida and the plains that stretch up to the Murray River. The family that owned this farm subdivided it in the nineties into farmlets of 50 to 70 acres. The block I bought had the old farmhouse on it, so it retained the naming rights. Wandana’s present western boundary is at the crest of the ridge. On the eastern side of my back fence the water runs down to the Campaspe, on the western side it feeds the Coliban.

What do I feel when I watch that column of smoke? If I am honest, it is the moment I come closest to panic that day. I want it not to be. As simple as that. I am willing to believe anything, anything at all, that will tell me it isn’t what it so obviously is. But what doesn’t occur to me is to leave at that moment. Partly it is that my fire plan has always been in such situations to stay and defend, and to suddenly change it is impulsive, and thus dangerous. I am not unprepared, and most of my life is in this house, library, paintings – my own and those by others – manuscripts, notebooks, sketchbooks, correspondence, photographs, family heirlooms. Anything I can grab in a rush would be minimal, tokens. I would, I think, have felt very differently if I had not been alone with only the cat. Then I would have seen others, say a family, as the priority.

This is Taungurong country, which runs north to beyond Bendigo, east to the Victorian Alps, south near Mt Macedon.
The Taungurong were one of the peoples that formed the Kulin alliance of central Victoria (including Melbourne); it was with representatives of this alliance that Batman negotiated in 1835. The Taungurong consisted of nine clans. Redesdale is close to the western edge of Taungurong country, near where it meets with the country of the Jaara people, somewhere west of the Coliban River, and the clan most likely to have occupied the area was the Leuk-willam. This has been Taungurong country for tens of thousands of years. The first official European entry into it was Thomas Mitchell’s expedition of 1836 (although it is not unlikely that other European adventurers had come up this way from the burgeoning settlement of Port Phillip, which already stretched up close to Mt Macedon). From Mitchell’s description and maps it seems that he crossed the Coliban, which he named the Barnard, on 3 October 1836, a few kilometres south of where Gibbons Bridge on the Redesdale Sutton Grange Road now crosses it. Hearing the fall of water, Mitchell rode upstream to find a picturesque and dramatic river fall that he called the Cobaw Falls but are now known as the Coliban Falls. Mitchell thought these falls akin to a beautifully composed painting (they are two kilometres or so due west of Wandana, over the back ridge, although difficult to visit because they are now on private land.) After camping overnight on the east bank of the Coliban, Mitchell’s party continued east and came to another stream, which Mitchell named the Campaspe. He found it difficult to find a place to ford this river, since either one bank or the other was too steep, which would seem to indicate that he was very much in the area of the present town of Redesdale. But he eventually found a way and proceeded. Mitchell spoke in glowing terms of this country. He wrote of ‘grassy vales’ and
‘the rugged crests of a wooded range’ (which may have been my ridge). Fine grassy slopes through forest so open ‘we could see each way for several miles’. Mitchell does not mention meeting the Leuk-willam, despite the fact that the illustration of the ‘The Fall at the Cobaw’ in his published journals includes two generic ‘native’ women fishing. He does mention his guide Piper finding an old native encampment a few miles to the east of the Campaspe in which they found an English razor. Mitchell wrote: ‘In this wild region, still so remote, from civilised man’s dominion!’ Perhaps. The razor could have been traded up from Port Phillip or sealer encampments on the coast. Or it may not have been a native encampment at all, but a European one. Mitchell was so concerned to be known as the first ‘civilised’ man in these areas that he tended to exaggerate his own priority (as have many since).

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I rush inside to look at the CFA website; there is nothing there. The ABC is likewise useless. I phone triple zero. Finally I get through. The operator tells me a fire has just been reported on the banks of the Coliban. I hope trucks have got to the fire. It is only grassland between the column of smoke and my house. They might be able to contain it. Surely they will be able to contain it. Part of me wants to believe this so much that it calms me. But, fortunately, another part knows what the weather outside and the proximity of the smoke mean. I go out to look again. The column is wider and closer. A kind of resignation flows through me: I must do what I need to do, what I have planned to do. Overwhelmingly I wish I didn’t have to, but I know I do.
I check that the fire-fighting pump is working. Then I go to the back door and change into the clothes I keep there. I have been wearing a T-shirt, shorts, sandals. I change into a thick cotton shirt, denim jeans, woollen socks (though for a moment I wonder if these will really be necessary and fortunately decide they will), work boots with heat resistant soles, a thick fleecy cotton pullover. I have leather work gloves, goggles and a pack of P2 masks. They tell you to wear a wide-brimmed hat but I know that will blow off immediately and opt for a woollen beret pulled down over my ears. Because it is grass, and very short grass, I think I have a good chance of defending the house. Now I know I have no time to pack anything. Now my only choice is to stay. Adrenalin has taken over and I have no sense of being overdressed in the heat. I rattle a box of cat biscuits which brings Zepa the cat running to the house. I put some in the bowl in the kitchen and decide she will be safer inside. Dotted around outside of the house are plastic garbage bins filled with water, particularly under the tanks. I make sure I know where the buckets and a mop are (all by the back door). I go to the window and watch having decided that there is no point in splashing water around – it will evaporate almost immediately. I still hold hope that the fire will not come. By now it is black as night outside. Suddenly I see a flash of crimson in the paddock down the slope from the house. But it seems to go as soon as it comes, and I convince myself I have imagined it. Then there is another flash of crimson, which doesn’t disappear. It ignites the ground as if it is spilt gasoline and heads towards the house. Then I know.
The land itself is lightly wooden grasslands running over the slopes of the ridge down to the roadway, beyond which the land is flatter. Winter creeks carry water, after it has filled the various dams, off to the Campaspe about three kilometres away. There were cattle grazing it when I bought it. The farmer’s cattle. The farmer was the son of the previous owner who had died recently. The trees, mainly grey box eucalypts, were well spaced. It was clear some were very old and predated European settlement. It was winter when I moved in. Green and wet. I was a city boy who had to get used to the country. But it was not long before I became addicted to the space. Getting up each morning, watching the sun rise over the hills about twenty kilometres away on the other side of the valley, became something that never failed to animate me. I was conscious of fire as a danger and was pleased that I had found a place that wasn’t too wooded, and I felt sure the cattle would keep the grass down. They did in places but in other places the grass was up to my waist. As spring turned into summer and the grass turned from lush green to ochre to grey straw, and turned the hills to a kind of suede, I concentrated on keeping the grass down in the vicinity of the house. I felt confident of handling a grassfire. I had many buckets and bins that I kept filled with water on dangerous days.

It was a naïve city man’s conceit. One hot day in my first January, I sat in the room I had made my study, blinds drawn against the sun, trying to decipher the handwriting of nineteenth-century missionaries – an irritating task at the best of times, made worse by the heat. Sometime in the middle of the day, as if the heat wasn’t distracting enough, a helicopter began flying about. Helicopters passing over were not uncommon, but this one annoyingly kept coming and going. After trying
to ignore it, I went out to investigate. Down in the valley, just across the road from my front gate, smoke rose from a racing grassfire. The helicopter was bombing it with water. Trucks were attending it. It was not much more than a kilometre from the house. The wind, not that strong, was carrying it away from my place, but winds can change. Reality dawned. I watched in shock. This thing was devouring grass indifferent to the efforts to kill it. I was not equipped to fend off that.

The next day I went into town and bought a petrol fire-fighting pump and a mass of aluminium fly wire. I set the pump up on the north side of the house and attached it to a tank. I had a twenty-metre fire hose with a fog nozzle. Water was not an immediate problem. One of the attractions of the house was that it had eight tanks around it, all either concrete or steel. I tested the pump. It sprayed water high up over the house. The fog nozzle could aim a powerful thin stream of water over a great distance, or, turned to its extreme, create a misty fog. I put the fly wire around the base of the house to stop embers getting underneath and attacking the brittle, dry flooring. I also assembled some emergency clothing by the back door. Denim jeans, woollen socks, fire-rated work boots, leather gloves, thick cotton shirt, pullover, masks and goggles and a wide-brimmed hat. From that day on they sat at the back door throughout the summers. I would not be writing this if they had not.

A grass slasher had hit a rock. The spark lit the grass. That’s all. The CFA brought it under control before it reached the farmhouse otherwise in its path. It destroyed a shed and twenty
hectares of grassland. I heard a rumour later that the wife of the farmer who had been working the slasher was so distressed she committed suicide. You don’t have to live long in the country before you realise the underlying hardness.

Visibility is extremely poor but I see no fire front come down from the ridge. The flashes across the slopes are ignited by embers. The flame is moving faster than anybody could run. The pump starts smoothly. Water shoots powerfully from the nozzle. So powerfully the hose becomes an animal to control. Holding it firmly, I un latch the gate. It swings open violently. Beyond it is the flame. I can’t even think what is fuelling it. The tree canopies have not caught alight and the grass is only two or three centimetres high, and thin amongst the dust. Indeed the paddocks are almost bare. But these flames reach above my head, as if they don’t need fuel. I know that the fire front will not take long to pass, and what I must do is keep the flame from igniting the house, and of course save myself. The stream of water I aim at the base of the fire produces brief bursts of steam. The flames die for a moment or two. Then burst back. This is achieving nothing. It is then I retreat through the gate and push it shut. I need to concentrate on the house, with the metal fence protecting me. (Years before I had thought of getting rid of this ugly fence, which blocked some of the view, but as I began to dismantle it, I suddenly realised what it was there for. It was there for this day, and now this day is here.) After the pump dies, I go around the back and see that the fire is already in the garden, attacking shrubs and the almost non-existent grass. Proof of the
efficacy of the fence, for the metal does not continue this far around. The fire’s behaviour is wild, jumping from one thing to another. Embers whirl and tangle, dart up in the air, dive to the ground. They are tiny, no more than a square millimetre. Yet they manage to set alight anything flammable they touch – that is, anything organic. I make it to the back door, sneak in and slam it shut. Now, I say to myself, not without irony, we’ll find out how true it is that a house can protect you from the fire front.

Once – before modern science redesigned the idea of the elements, most fundamentally in the nineteenth century with Mendeleev’s Periodic Table of Chemical Elements – the physical world was comprised of four elements: earth, water, air and fire. In many Mediterranean understandings of creation, at the beginning, the four elements existed, indistinct, as chaos. In Ovid’s Metamorphoses, for instance, which is drawn from centuries of Greco-Roman understandings, the act of creation consisted first and foremost of the separating of the elements and the placing of them into a state of harmony. Earth became surrounded by water, the air rose above both and, in the sky, fire manifested itself as the sun and moon and stars. Similar stories, although not necessarily involving the system of the four elements, abounded in Mediterranean societies. In the Judaic story of creation, the earth is presented as a place of disorder to which the Creator-god brings harmony by separating the land and water and placing an atmosphere above. The first act, however, is to bring light – ‘Let there be light’ – the Hebrew
word used, אֹר, can also be translated as ‘fire’. In the Greco-Roman understanding, which would be taken into the Western European thinking, the four elements worked in harmony within living creatures, including humans. The solidly physical in humans was earth, their fluids water, air permeated the body, and fire was the life-force. For Aristotle, fire was the most active of the elements; indeed, fire itself was the product and instigator of action. Aristotle’s successor, Theophrastus, began his study of fire by describing it as the element with the most special powers, one that could both generate and destroy itself, but one that came about almost exclusively as the result of force: of stone hitting stone, or the result of wind. Fire was the life within each creature. This idea lingers in our metaphors: passions burn within us, we are fired by ambition, we begin with the spark of life. Since everything has a fire within it, anything can burst into flame given the right impetus. With the coming of modern science from the seventeenth century, fire became recognised as something very different. Not only was it no longer an element, it ceased to exist as a thing in itself. So it is not to be found in the Periodic Table. Fire is now understood as a chemical process that needs three components to take place: oxygen, fuel and heat. How it comes to ignite and how it behaves after ignition is the subject not of ‘fire studies’ but of thermodynamics. When we talk of fire leaping a roadway, for instance, as if it were something alive, we are in fact referring to a process by which an ember (heat) has been blown by wind (which both moves the embers and brings to it oxygen) onto grass or leaves (fuel) to create a new flame.
But as I watch two-metre high flames rise from apparently barren earth and turn water into steam in the raging wind, I know the four elements are in frenzied reunion; they have negated creation and returned the world to chaos. I see the shrubs in the garden through the kitchen window catch light and seem to disappear in flashes of flame. Then the fire hits the house. It seems to shudder at the impact. Red flames lap at the windows. I see myself at that moment standing in the kitchen, amazed the window glass is holding, captain of a ship in a storm of flame and smoke, rocking at each wave on the bow. All I can see beyond the windows is chaotic flame and smoke. I check the phone. It still has a dial tone, I dial triple zero, again. It rings and rings. I put the handset down and leave it ringing. They will at least have the number to trace the address. Then I see the cat door flapping in the gusts. Each gust brings embers. They settle into the doormat, spread. I stomp them out and slide the cat door shut. Then Zepa appears from within the house, complaining. Well you might complain, I say, Don't panic, we're safe here for the moment. More from hope than conviction there doesn't seem much point in not having hope. But I do not believe the house will save us. I can't imagine that some window won't break, that a flame won't find some means to get under the house and come up through the floor, or sneak under a door. Or simply turn the house so hot it bursts into flame. So I am almost baffled as I go around the house, from room to room, bizarrely going around the same house I have lived in for ten years – the bed, the sofa, the tables, the chairs, the things on the walls, through each room's windows only fire and smoke – and find the house is holding the fire at bay. I don't think I'm in Redesdale anymore. But I'm certainly
not bound for Oz. I am bound for something much grimmer. Out the windows is the Inferno, and one of the lower reaches at that. I rush from room to room, again and again, to make sure everything is holding. Still astounded that the ship hasn’t broken up in the waves of flame battering it, sweeping over it. And what will I do if it does break up? Find some gap to run through the flames to where the fire has already been? It will be a matter of taking whatever opportunity or chance that comes. At the worst moment in the house, I have a sense of being completely enclosed, trapped within the house in which I have put so much faith. The noise is so powerful. When, every now and then, a gap appears in the smoke and flames and I can see a few metres beyond the windows to solid ground, even though this ground is smoking ash, I am reassured. There is still something solid outside. The house remains on solid ground. At some point I pick up the phone receiver again, it is dead. The electricity has likewise died. I think – maybe I even say it out loud with an incredulous laugh to the complaining Zepa – Well maybe the house does save you! Amid the sound and fury, I can see outside garden shrubs in their final moments, as the flames take their fill and leave them as ash. But the crowns of the trees have still not caught fire, despite the flames licking around their trunks, as if trying to find a foothold by which to climb. Then, I realise, I am watching these things. The flames and smoke at the windows has dissipated. The front is passing. How long I have watched flames at the windows, I don’t know. A few minutes? In my memory it seems both a very long time and a moment swiftly passed. The inferno I have been watching through the back windows has stopped. Outside small fires burn here and there, the front has passed, and Zepa and I are alive, unscathed.
Conventional domestic building in Australia was developed on the frontier of North America. Its prototype originated in the Midwest in the 1830s. It is a light wooden frame made possible by the mass production of wire, which in turn made possible the mass production of nails. Timber frame buildings before this were post-and-beam constructions of heavy timber with mortised joints that demanded considerable woodworking skills. Nails allowed the use of light timber stud walls. The light timber could be easily produced with steam driven saw-mills. The light timber-framed house, for all its simplicity, is a product of industrialisation. In so many ways, this technique was brilliantly suited to frontier settler societies. It demanded a minimum skill compared to post-and-beam construction, and was very quick. Unskilled settlers could build dwellings for themselves with comparatively few tools. In Australia, as in the USA and Canada, the timber used predominantly was douglas fir, imported across the Pacific from western USA and Canada, and known in Australia as oregon after the north-western American state. As settlement increased and steam driven saw-mills were established in the forests of eastern Victoria, this was replaced with local eucalypt – usually mountain ash. Originally the roofing of these dwellings was timber shingles, or in more basic dwellings flattened bark (a technique probably learnt from Aboriginal builders). From the 1850s corrugated iron roofing, imported from England, and no doubt providing ballast in the ships coming to pick up wool and gold, became standard. It also was a material that required little skill to use. The foundations of a dwelling began with stumps taken into the ground to sit on.
the more stable subsoil. (This soil was often reactive clay that meant considerable movement with different moisture levels. One of the advantages of the light timber frame is that it can absorb a good deal of movement without its structural integrity being jeopardised.) These stumps are traditionally of red gum, an exceedingly hard eucalypt that resists both moisture rot and termites. On top of these stumps ‘ant caps’ are placed which restrict the termites getting into the less resistant timber above. Across the stumps, bearers, usually 10 by 10 mm hardwood eucalypt timber, are laid. There is usually 450 mm gap between the earth and the bearers to allow air to circulate and avoid damp getting up into the building. At right angles to the bearers, timber joists, usually of 50 by 75 mm are placed at 450 to 600 mm intervals. At right angles to these, floorboards are attached. Over the floor structure stud wall frames are constructed, again made of timber studs of 35 by 75 mm at 600 mm intervals, with a top and bottom ‘plate’ also of timber. At approximately the centre height of the wall, noggins, of the same timber as the studs, are placed between the studs to keep them in place. At each corner and wall junction, two studs are used separated by offcuts from the same timber. These combine as a strong post. The whole wall is then braced. This used to be done with thin timber pieces cut into the stud. Nowadays metal strips nailed diagonally across are used. While the comparatively light timber pieces seem insubstantial in themselves, combined they form a strong and stable wall. The timber used more recently, in place of the hardwood mountain ash, is plantation grown radiata pine, originally from California and one of the few conifer timbers that can be grown successfully in Australian soils. It is a less strong timber but easier to use and a strong timber is not
needed in light constructions. On the top plates of the walls, ceiling joists are placed. If the room span is great, hanging beams are introduced, these are large pieces that lie at right angles across the top of the joists from wall to wall, to which the joists are attached, and therefore ‘hang’. This is to avoid the beam intruding into the space of the room below. Attached to the joists and top wall plates are the frames for the roof, also made of light timber. In recent times these timber ceiling pieces are pre-made trusses which form both the ceiling joists and the roof frame. By careful design and utilising the inherent strength of the triangle, thinner and thinner timber can, and is, used in the trusses. Across the top of the roof frame, timber battens are nailed — these hold the frames in place in relation to each other and provide support for the roofing material, usually sheet metal. On the exterior of the walls traditional weatherboards would be nailed as cladding, usually made of a soft wood painted to protect it from the weather. On the inside, up until the 1940s, plaster and lathe were used, the lathes being thin timber battens. Or the walls could be clad in timber lining boards. In more recent times, the internal cladding is usually plasterboard, which consists of two sheets of paper between which is held a layer of gypsum. On the external walls in Australia, asbestos cement sheeting was also often used through the mid-twentieth century as an alternative to weatherboards. It was also commonly used in the ‘wet’ areas of the house as internal cladding, that is, in the bathroom, laundry, kitchen. Until recently there was nothing in the cavity of the walls except circulating air. The same was true in the ceiling cavity. Many of the older houses have since had insulating batts, fibreglass mainly, put into the ceiling. Both wall and ceiling cavities are particularly well designed as living areas
for a myriad of pests including mice, rats, wasps, possums, birds, snakes, even feral cats – anything that can get in and is looking for a secluded home close to the feast of human habitation. The newer insulation adds to the attraction by providing comfortable bedding. All this light timber and circulating air means the conventional Australian home is a perfect pyre.

What was unconventional about this house was that the materials were a throwback and yet the latest developments of the time. Built in the late 1940s, its frame was entirely oregon pine – by then an expensive imported timber, and, given the period of construction, no doubt subject to post–World War II rationing. But this large house with its apparently expensive frame was clad on the outside in economic asbestos cement sheeting. The paradox continued on the inside. The living room and kitchen were lined with hardwood panelling that also looked expensive. The rest of the house was however lined with masonite, cheap cladding made of compressed sawmill waste that began to be manufactured in Australia in the late 1930s. The house was painted white and pitched on a natural terrace about two-thirds up the slope to the ridge. I’d been looking for a place in the country for a while, waiting to experience some buzz of recognition that this was the place. I wanted something with a bit of land, say five to ten acres. The agent had shown me the brochure for Wandana, which had just come on the market, but it was 120 acres! I said what would I do with 120 acres? He said it was on two titles, and they might accept an offer for just one title. He told me to drive out and have a look from the
roadway. If I was interested, he would arrange an inspection. So I drove out to a place I’d never heard of, Redesdale. What I saw from the roadway was this white house on the hill, and I felt that sense of recognition. I drove over to the small hamlet of Redesdale. It had a bluestone pub, which had been a Cobb & Co. staging post; a magnificent bluestone Catholic church; a couple of unused shops; and a post-office general store that sold petrol. All the essentials were catered for.


We are not used to fighting for our lives, living with imminent harm. The most dangerous thing we do as a norm – and far more dangerous than most of us appreciate – is to go out on the road. Otherwise we live secure lives, mainly in cities, buffeted by a common and relatively benign humanity and a built environment. We see wars and natural disasters as aberrations, unfair distortions to the norm, present for the most part only on news screens. Yet if we look at the bigger world we live in and at the rhythm of the past, it is peace and security that are the aberrations. Most people, past and present, battle for a good deal of their lives to survive either against each other or against storms, floods, earthquakes and fires, not to mention famine. There are places in the world where you can buy AK-47s in the market place. But the weapons with which I go out to battle my enemy, to fight for my life, to try to save my house, are redolent of the secure life from which I have come: a mop and a bucket of water. I open the back door, mask, goggles, gloves back on. Small fires abound near the house. I close the door behind me, to stop embers getting in, but also to shut Zepa safely in. There
is no apparent fire in the house, except that beyond the screens I have put around the base of the house, some tiny embers have managed to lodge just under the house. I go around and throw water at them through the aluminium screen. This is how small the embers are, they can pass through the insect screening. There are other small fires adjacent to the walls. I attack them with the water-soaked mop – I have a garbage bin under the tap of a tank, the tap is kept running although much of the water blows away in the wind. From the full bin I am able to dip a bucket in, though I lose my first bucket when I put it down empty and it flies off in the wind and into flame. I am having some success, but it is not easy. When we say a fire has hit, we are not speaking of a simple thing. We are referring to a confluence of factors: dryness, heat, a spark and most of all wind, air, oxygen as important to fire as fuel. I watch the confluence. Often I throw water on a burning object, the flame goes out, steam rises, the steam turns to smoke and the smoke to flame. What do I have to do? Persist. And I do feel I'm getting somewhere. Then my mobile rings in my jeans pocket. It is friends from down in the valley, who can see the fire on the ridge, at my place. Where are you? Ute asks. In my garden trying to put out a fire, I answer. It is hard to hear in the roar of wind and fire. I am not sure what is said next, something like, Better let you get back to it (she is an experienced firefighter), and a yell in the distance from the husband, Dave, also an experienced firefighter: I'm on my way. (Later I find that he did try to get to me, but was diverted by the CFA to help save my neighbour’s house – my place was deemed too dangerous – and then he had to head off because his own house was under threat.) I get back to it.