



THE
RAVEN'S
SONG

ZANA FRAILLON AND BREN MACDIBBLE



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AN OLD BARN BOOK

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Old Barn Books Ltd
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Follow us on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter @oldbarnbooks

Email: info@oldbarnbooks.com
Web: www.oldbarnbooks.com

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To Mum and Dad – for magic mice, fairy trees,
wishing boxes, ghosts, and the stories that made
me a writer. And to all those future ancestors
fighting to save the world – we hear you. –ZF



To the young hearts and minds whose beautiful
stubborn optimism will change the future. –BM





THE RAVENED GIRL OF THE BOG

(An old local folk song)

*Upon one moonlit night she came
Down hillside steep and rocked
Into the place of inbetween
The Ravened Girl of the bog*

*Not of this world, nor of the next
In cloaks of mist and fog
She lay herself to rest in both
The Ravened Girl of the bog*

*Listen, listen, listen, she sang
And all through the night she spoke
In whispers long forgotten
As the souls around her woke*

*And in the morn they left her there
Deep down in the dark of the quag
And there she rests, and there she waits
The Ravened Girl of the bog*

*Never truly dead, they say
Yet never again to live
She lies and waits in waters deep
Old whispers for to give*

*Can you hear her as she calls for you?
Through time's great swirling fog
Listen, listen, listen ...
Sings the Ravened Girl of the bog
Listen, listen, listen ...
Sings the Ravened Girl of the bog.*



Just once I'd like to sleep in. Just once.

There's barely a glow behind our honoured hills. The sun hardly lights my room. 'No need for curtains,' Da always says, 'coz we're up the moment our part of the world turns to the sun.' Just once though, I'd like to not be up with the sun and not coz I'm sick or nothing but coz it's nice to lie in the cool before the day heats up.

'Girl!' Da yells like he never learned my name.

'Uh?' I yell back like I never learned his.

'Girl, I need you to check the fence line before you go to school. Kashvi's lost a sheep to something.'

I haul myself out of bed and pull on my work clothes. I dunno how Da's already talked to our neighbour Kashvi and decided it's our section of fence what's got a gap, not unless Davy's already been along his section while I was lying in bed, ignoring Da's yelling, dreaming bout sleeping in. At least I'm not the only kid up to do work before school.

The door cracks open and Da pokes his head in. 'You hear me, sleepy bones?' he asks.

'Five times,' I say and give him a thumbs up.

'Good.' He shuts the door.

I wipe the sleep from my eyes and tromp out to the kitchen where Da's holding out a drink bottle in one hand and the bag with the pliers and wire in the other. I sling the bag over my shoulder and slide the drink bottle in on top.

'Nice and tight like I showed you,' he says, and musses my short hair. 'Let the chickens out on the way.'

'Uh!' I say and head out the back door, shove on my sunhat and slide my feet into my boots. I duck into the combustion loo on the way and, while I'm sitting down anyway, I do up my boots. Multi-tasking.

When I step out, Davy's hanging over the fence. 'Hey, Shel. Want me to come with you?' He looks over to the kitchen window where Da's standing. 'Kind morning to you, Mr Jones!' he yells.

'Din't you already climb up and walk your section of fence this morning?' I ask.

'Yeah, mostly with a torch. The thing woke me early, growling and roaring.'

'Like a monster?' I ask, all excited for a story.

‘Like a lion or a tiger!’ Davy says. ‘I don’t wanna see you go up there alone.’

‘They just et a sheep,’ I say. ‘They won’t be hungry for a scrawny kid.’

Davy laughs. ‘I read that some beasts kill and store food for later. You wanna be all dead and stuffed in the crook of a tree?’

I frown. I don’t think there’s lions or tigers up there in the honoured jungle above both our farms, but it’s still dark enough to be spooky. ‘Come on then,’ I say and head off across the paddock to the chicken shed. I stop to slide the door open and hens leap from the perches, squawking like they’s surprised the world turned back to the sun today, and run outside into our fields in a clucking, flapping horde. It’s a race to the grass, even if they was out yesterday and the day before and all the days before that in their short little lives.

We climb our hill to the tall jungle fence line that runs along the back of our property, both of us puffing a bit, sweat on our cheekbones. Ours and Davy’s land being outermost this side of the township, this fence is our responsibility. If anything from the honoured and natural world outside gets in, that’s on us.

Our section runs from here right down our hill to the

riverbank, where a dam controls the flow of water so we've always got some for our township. Our honoured river runs on under the fence into the wilderness. A cliff on the other side of our river follows it for ages and does the job of a fence. Anything from the natural world outside starting down that cliff will find itself smooshed at the bottom pretty quick, no matter how honoured it is.

There's a fence down on the flats, which is Mr Hajji's responsibility. It keeps the scrubland animals from coming to eat his wheat. The next township is beyond that fence line, bout two hundred and sixty kilometres south of us. I sometimes sit up here and think bout that township, wonder if there's another girl running an egg farm with her da over there. I'd like to talk to that girl one day. But two hundred and sixty kilometres is a long way to walk, even if we was allowed out there. And the doctor has the only phone on our seven hundred, just for emergencies and government business, so I can't see it ever happening.

Each township has three hundred and fifty people on seven hundred fenced-off hectares of land. No more people than that. No more or less land. These is the scientific numbers that lets the land support us and that lets us care for the land. Three hundred and fifty-one people and

we start to go hungry, not if it's a little baby of course, but maybe when it gets bigger.

Davy's almost a year younger than me, his birth being approved when my ma died after I was born. Davy replaced my mother to bring the number back to three hundred and fifty, but I don't hold that against him. I guess life is hard without a mother, but life would also be hard without a best friend like Davy. And I know Davy. I didn't ever get to know my mother. So when kids at school ask if I'd swap Davy back for my ma, I stomp on their toes.

'Did you have breakfast yet?' Davy asks and sits down on the hillside looking back over the township. He pulls out a lunch tin from his bag and inside is four eggy muffins full of feta cheese and veggies.

'Your mas is amazing.' I grab two and sit down in the tall tickly grass beside him. I'd be twice as scrawny if it wasn't for his mas' understanding that kids need a lot of food. Da ain't much one for cooking.

The township's waking up like a little toy town below us. The windmills turning, the cottage doors thrown open to catch the morning breeze, the flash of solar ovens being turned to the sun. The line of Mrs Nguyen's dairy cows heading out to new grass with their younger calves, and just reunited with their older calves who's galloping

and bucking, happy to be free after being shedded overnight to stop them being greedy little guzzlers, and her old dog Hiro making sure they all go in the right direction. Each pasture is edged by wildflowers and nut trees, like a colourful fringe on a blanket. Mrs Wang's beehive roofs is dotted through them, mostly tucked under the bigger nut trees in the shade. Her bees will be up early too, buzzing in flowers.

Our teacher, Miss Drinkwater, is outside the Walter Ticerat Community School sweeping the yard. She put in for retirement three years ago, but no word of a replacement from the government yet.

Mr Hajji leads his mules to the water trough and fetches their harnesses. Maybe he's getting ready to plant into the wheat stubble in his paddock from where it's been cut. We all got a week off school to help with that harvest. He'll stop before midday and let the mules lie bout in the shade. They's getting old, his mules, but Mr Hajji says he don't wanna train young ones so he don't mind that the government's not sent him new mules. Edith and Eddie know his land, he says, they know when to pull and when to wait patiently and it'll be a sad day when they get too old to work.

Davy points. The doctor is strolling across the field below us, heading on a direct path away from the trees

around the dam back towards her house. 'Why's Dr Geraldine been to the dam so early? Me and Ma usually check the dam on Fridays.'

I shrug, and shove the last of my second muffin into my cheeks as I get up. 'Leth's find that hole,' I say around my mouthful.

We walk the fence for a while, me sucking at my teeth to get at the last of that eggy muffin, and we spot the gap from a long way off coz it's edged in white wool snagged from the sheep that got pulled through.

Normally gaps in the fence is ground level where the wire's rusted from sitting in the soil and some honoured critter's pushed up under it, but the gap we find looks like it was cut straight up in a line through the strong wire so a man bent double could push it open and squeeze through.

'Who cut it?' I ask.

Davy rattles the fence. 'Is the wire faulty?' Coz no one from our township would cut a perimeter fence, ever.

I hunt around the ground and find a couple of the links that've fallen from the fence and show Davy the wire where it's been squeezed and snipped. 'Cut!' I say.

Davy takes a link and turns it every which way and shakes his head. 'Who'd do that?' he asks. 'A perimeter fence!'

‘At least we know the wild dog went back through.’ I point at the clumps of wool on the wire and the blood smears either side of the fence.

Davy nods, checks out the fence up close and plucks some dark yellow fur and some black fur. ‘Tiger.’

‘Twasn’t no tiger, Davy. Ain’t no tigers round here.’ I set to work with the pliers, wrapping new wire round and round to close up the gap between each link. ‘The honoured and natural world is native animals only. A tiger in there with all them fat wild fowls and critters and things? Government would’ve hunted it down with drones a hundred years ago when the fences went up.’

Davy shakes his head. ‘Twasn’t no wild dog that drug a whole sheep up this hill and through this fence. This bit of land is different to what you read in schoolbooks,’ he says. ‘This bit’s fenced off from the honoured and natural world. It don’t connect to the rest.’

‘How do you know?’ I ask.

‘I saw it when I went into the dam to help Ma clear the township water supply. There’s a fence that connects near the dam fence. Not just any fence, it’s real tall with barbwire on the top and signs saying *Keep Out*.’

‘Why would that be?’ I ask.

Davy shrugs. ‘I dunno. I tried asking but no one

knows. Ma made me promise to never go in there and when I asked her why, she said, "Could be all manner of dangerous beasts in there." Like tigers, Shelby Jones.' Davy makes his eyes wide and lifts up claw hands. 'Tigers!'

A gust of cool air whispers out of the honoured trees and licks at my throat. I wipe it off with the back of my hand before it sets me shivering. 'She's just trying to keep you from getting in trouble by poking around in the good and natural world,' I say. 'She knows you's a sticky beak.'

Davy gives me a shove in the back for my cheek. Then he goes all quiet and pulls himself up against the fence, staring off up the trail made by the sheep getting dragged into the honoured jungle. 'Yeah? If this is part of the honoured and natural world, what's that?' Davy pokes a pointing finger through the fence links.

The wind gusts cool again, making the jungle leaves swish like something's brushing against them, making my hot skin goosebump.

I look where he's pointing, deep into the shadows under tall glossy-leaved trees that don't grow anywhere else on our seven hundred or on the other borders.

Tied around a tree is a wide white ribbon with a posy of wildflowers stuck through it. Dangling from them, spinning on a string in the breeze, is a disc-shape thing

bout as wide as a saucer with a hole in the middle. The sun bounces off its shiny mirror surface, making rainbows slide and flitter over the leaves all around it. Me and Davy twist our heads, chasing the darting rainbows as they vanish and start up new back at the disc.

‘Wow!’ Davy whispers.





There's a raven standing next to Phoenix's bed. A giant raven, big as a man. It's wearing bright red sneakers, and is holding a black candle and a dripping wet sack. At least, Phoenix *thinks* it's a raven. He only got a quick glimpse before snapping his eyes shut tight, but it has one white feather right on top of its head, and Phoenix has never seen a raven with a white feather before, so maybe it isn't a raven at all. To be fair, he has never seen a man-sized raven before, or a raven in sneakers, or a raven carrying candles or sacks, so the feather is probably, on the whole, not so important.

The raven leans closer, nudging Phoenix with its beak. Phoenix tries not to move, tries to pretend he's deep, deep asleep. If he's asleep, the raven will leave him alone. He'll take his candle and sack of whatever's wriggling and dripping and go back to wherever it came from, and Phoenix can tell himself it was just a dream. A hallucination even, brought on by the everyday stresses of

being twelve. Giant ravens are *not* real. Logically, it makes no sense. Those wings could never lift a body that big, not to mention finding shoes to fit over those claws – but dreams and hallucinations don't drip, and this one is making Phoenix's head quite wet.

Just keep still and it will go away ... The raven does not go away. It stamps its foot and snaps its beak and the air cracks like lightning, the noise growing to a rumbling, and the whole house shudders.

Phoenix sneaks a glance at his little brother Walter, still fast asleep in his bed. He takes three long, deep breaths to try and calm his mind like the doctor told him to, but even as he does he knows it will do no good. It never does. Ever since he was little, Phoenix has seen and heard things that other people don't. *It's not real. It's not real* – has been Phoenix's mantra for as long as he can remember.

'Emotional reactivity to trauma,' the doctor calls it.

'Rubbish,' Auntie Josie calls it.

'Your sixth sense!' Gran calls it, and she talks about a great gift passed down through generations of their family. 'Just like your grandfather, and his mother, and her mother before her!'

But there is no gift to waking up to a giant raven in sneakers. It's just creepy. Phoenix wishes it would leave him alone and go be a gift to someone who wants it. Like his

sister Ida. She's right into all that magicky stuff. But the strange happenings aren't going away, and lately, they've been coming more often than ever.

Like on Monday, when the day turned dark as night and steam rose from the kitchen floor and small specks of fire and light danced in the air around them and Phoenix was sure it was a sinkhole opening up to devour them whole. And outside, Mum stood at the window, staring in and tapping the glass, even though she's been dead for years. No one else noticed a thing. His three older sisters were all there, and they just kept chatting and making sandwiches, and after a bit the lights faded and the steam swirled in on itself and his mum turned to a smudge on the glass, and the day just went back to being a sunny, ordinary, everyday day and all Phoenix could do was tell himself over and over again, *It's not real.*

But that panicky little voice in Phoenix's head keeps whispering – *what if... what if it is real?* What if all *that* was the raven's doing too, steaming up the earth to get attention. What will the bird do if it's ignored for a second time? Maybe it'll send a real sinkhole so large it devours the whole house. The whole suburb. The whole city even. That would be a lot to be held responsible for. Phoenix opens his eyes and sits up, dragging his covers over his chin.

'You're not real,' Phoenix whispers very quietly.

‘Probably ... I have a very overactive imagination. All my teachers say so ...’

The raven clicks his beak and turns his head to look at Phoenix with one pale, beady eye, and then turns his head again to see him from the other.

Sweat breaks out across Phoenix’s face and chest and he tightens the cover across his throat. ‘Just a little, probably?’ The raven jiggles the muddied sack and nods sharply and Phoenix nods quickly back. What is he even agreeing to? He stops nodding.

‘Raaaarrrrk?’ The raven leans low over Phoenix and whispers, and the noise of that bird whisper is the sound of leaves rustling and mud gurgling and rain trickling. Outside, the wind slams at the windows. ‘Frrmshfrk? Bmrble!’ He shakes his head and ruffles his feathers. ‘Brrrbkreik!’

‘Um ...’ Phoenix wants to tell the bird that he can’t understand. He wants to say how the wind and rumbling and shaking will wake Walter – who’s only just turned four – and frighten him, so if his Birdship doesn’t mind, could he stop it very kindly please and thank you. He wants to ask why a raven is wearing bright red sneakers anyway, and also, can he be careful with that candle because the wax is dripping and making an awful mess and ...

But then the raven puffs up tall and monstrous and his eyes grow dark and wide. Phoenix scrambles away. His back hits the wall. His heart slams his ribs and he can't get enough air into his lungs.

'KRRRKSHKKK ARRRRGHK!' the raven screeches and the window cracks right down the middle.

Phoenix freezes. The raven's beak is level with Phoenix's face now. The beak opens wide, and then the raven places the sack gently onto Phoenix's bed.

'KrrIsknoskyelkj.' He clicks his beak. A crackle of dry thunder booms across the sky. The raven gestures around the room and out the window, his wings spread wide like he wants to scoop up the whole city. He looks so sad. What could be so terrible as to make a giant raven cry?

The raven rests his wing across Phoenix's eyes, soft and heavy and smelling of night just before it rains. The candle crackles and dies, and the waxed smoke tangs at Phoenix's nose. The raven leans close, his breath warm across Phoenix's cheek, and everything is quiet.

When Phoenix opens his eyes, the raven has gone. Phoenix's black dressing-gown is hanging from the hook on his wardrobe, right in the shape of a man-sized bird. Phoenix breathes a sigh of relief. It was just his imagination after – oh.

There, on the bed, is the sack, wet and wriggling. And there are muddy sneaker prints on the carpet, and a single mark where the candle wax dripped.

What will Auntie Josie say? She's very particular about her carpets. *Shoes off! Shoes off!! And wipe your feet on the mat! How many times do I have to say?*

Outside, the sky is turning that orangey red of morning. Soon the others will be awake. Soon the house will be full of breakfast-making and radio-blaring and *No telly in the morning! No screens at the table!* and kettle-whistling and feet-up-and-down-stairs-stomping and backdoor-banging and hinges-squeaking and girls-arguing and Walter-laughing and Wolfy barking to be fed.

Soon the quiet and calm will be gone and all the thoughts in Phoenix's head will jumble and rush together and Josie will bundle them all out the door because it's summer and there's no staying indoors in the summer so *get going, get going, get some fresh air into you and give me some peace for once, why don't you?* Phoenix wishes the early morning quiet would last for longer.

He reaches for his phone. If only Charlie wasn't so far away, they'd know what to do. Charlie always knows what to do. Best friends are good like that.

- **You awake?** Phoenix taps.

The ping comes back almost immediately.

- **It's 4 in the afternoon here ...**

- Oh yeah. So guess what? A giant raven in red sneakers woke me up in the night. He tried to tell me something but I don't yet speak bird. He was pretty upset.

And messy.

- **Wow. That's kinda random. Even for you. Are you sure it wasn't the girls playing a trick? Frankie?**

- I wish.

- **I've only been gone three weeks and you're already seeing giant birds! Why doesn't this stuff happen when I'm around?! I would have jumped on its back or something. Told it to fly me to the moon! I bet you didn't even ask for a ride.**

Knowing Charlie, that's exactly what they would have done. Phoenix glances quickly at the foot of his bed. The sack is, unfortunately, still there. And it smells. Dank and muddy and mouldy. The wet of it is seeping through the doona and onto Phoenix's pyjamas and sheets. It will leave a stain, that wet. He'll have to wash the doona and dry it and get it back on the bed before Auntie Josie sees and complains about more work and *isn't it hard enough with two jobs and looking after five kids and Gran, without adding to the washing and do you know how hard it is to wash a doona?* As though it's Phoenix's fault that a giant raven decided to pop in for a visit.

- He gave me something in a sack.

- ?!

- I haven't opened it yet.

- **What are you waiting for?**

OPEN IT!

- Should I? It's MOVING! It could be anything!

- **You know what they say – jump off the cliff and grow wings on the way down!**

- I don't know anyone who says that.

- **DO IT!!!!**

A piece of bogweed curls from the sack like a tentacle. Phoenix watches the sack wriggle, and his head fills with river monsters and beaks and fangs and claws . . .

Walter is still softly snoring. Downstairs Gran is in the kitchen.

- **P?! Are you there?! WHAT IS IN IT?!**

Phoenix takes hold of the rope wrapping the sack shut tight.

- **P?!**

The rope is thick and rough in his fingers. He unwinds, once . . .

Twice . . .

- **Phoenix?**

Three times around.

The *thing* has stopped moving.

Phoenix reaches his hand inside.



‘Shelby Jones! Are you a child or a shrubbery?’ Miss Drinkwater says the moment I step into the Walter Ticerat Community School. Miss Drinkwater seems to put some importance on appearances. I’m unkindly wishing her replacement will arrive soon.

Kids that bothered with combs and clean clothes look at me, waiting for me to look embarrassed or whatever. Easier to stay clean if your family works the weaving loom or makes soaps or furniture. Truth is, me and Davy was so late getting down that hill after seeing that ribbon and posy and little mirrored rainbow maker on the tree, we only had time for me to change the fence-repair bag for my schoolbag, and for Davy’s ma to run down to the gate to swap empty lunch tin for full, so both of us is here in our grubby work clothes, our short hair clingy and foreheads wet with sweat.

I’m annoyed that Davy’s not copping it along with me,

coz he's been in his work clothes since before dawn, but I'm not bout to dob on him. Three other kids have come off food-growing holdings like me and haven't bothered to change since they fed pigs or watered cabbages. All of us standing in a row in the cloakroom for a turn to wash our hands and get nails checked by Miss Drinkwater. All of us with the same short hair, in shorts and T-shirts and dusty work boots we'll have to kick off before we're allowed into school in our socks. I run my fingers through my hair trying to flatten it in one direction. 'I can't see why it matters,' I say.

Miss Drinkwater shuts her eyes and takes a deep breath. 'Tidy body, tidy mind, Miss Jones! I can't teach an unruly mind.' Miss Drinkwater is older than my da. In mule years, she'd be older than Edith and Eddie most probbly. I think Miss Drinkwater wishes she lived in a time when folks could dress fancy and not work at all if they was rich enough. Miss Drinkwater always pulls her short hair up on one side and pins it with antique hairclips with bugs or flowers on them and she always wears an antique necklace or brooch, most likely handed down from her grandmother.

Me though, I couldn't wear precious things out in the chicken sheds. I'm co-owner of an egg farm with three hundred and eighty hens and twelve roosters. I'll never get a sibling coz of my da not wanting another partner even if

one was allowed to come here, no matter how many times I tell him to ask, so one day this township will rely on me for all its eggs.

Not every family has kids to take over their jobs. Milly, whose family makes shoes, is learning to milk Mrs Nguyen's cows. Me and Davy is gonna learn bee-keeping from Mrs Wang next year. I'm looking forward to having honey and wax to barter as well as eggs when I'm older. Everyone likes honey and candles, so I'll be picking up a cake a day from the bakery once we take over the bees. Da has a big credit at the bakery already but he don't like to run it down coz chickens go off lay a few weeks every year and that's when we use our credits with them.

There's nothing I don't know bout chickens and there's nothing the Walter Ticerat School can teach me bout chickens. Luckily school's only four mornings a week or I'd probbly not even show up.

Thing is, Miss Drinkwater don't seem to understand that I'm a chicken farmer first. I look like any kid what's been working before school. And I'm way stronger and faster than any of them. Mind you, there's only twelve school-age kids in this whole township so it's not such a brag. No babies even been approved to be born for five years straight, so it's not gonna change anytime soon.

Miss Drinkwater does this thing where she puts her pointer finger up in the air, her middle finger on one eyelid and her thumb on the other and moves her eyelids back and forth. It sends a message, maybe. If Miss Drinkwater just up and yelled at me, that would be better than this fingers on eyelids rubbing like her brain's in pain and she wishes the government will send a replacement soon.

'Go kindly on this honoured earth, child,' she says like there's no more she has to say on the subject, so we wash our hands, kick off our boots and move inside to maths and then literature. Then we break for morning tea in the playground. Me and Davy share his snack. This time it's two flatbreads wrapped around grated carrot, beetroot, and cabbage in garlic yoghurt dressing, and a half apple and hunk of cheese each. Mmm mmm.

We swallow the flatbreads and cheese down and take our half-apples to play handball for ten minutes until it's time for the next session. The next session is history. It goes like this at our school: maths, literacy, history, art; maths, literacy, history, science; maths, literacy, history, sport. I dunno if Miss Drinkwater is hooked on history or if this is how all the other townships have it, but this is a lot of history!

Yes, I know people in the old days lived in giant

mega-cities smothered in dirty clouds and had lots of technology and lived unsustainably and used fossil fuels and drowned the world in plastics and pollution and parts of the honoured and natural world died and the seas rose and we invaded the wild areas and new diseases took hold and killed most of their children and now we have to stay in our townships and keep our hair short and our hands clean and not make a peep of pollution and not increase our numbers even by one coz we would need to expand our range, and the honoured and natural world needs hundreds of years to recover and rebalance the planet or we won't survive. I'm twelve years old. I've had so many history lessons I know to my core this is how we have to live now. Three hundred and fifty kind, ethical, truthful people on seven hundred hectares or not at all.

I get that. It's fine. We been told over and over we're the generation that waits for the world to recover. We endure the heat. We endure the storms that blow up out of nowhere, giant bacteria-stained clouds that roll and boil green at the edges, the wrecking floods that wash through, the long droughts, the days of smoke as fire burns outside our fences, coz this is what the honoured earth does when she's trying to recover.

We're not the generation who lived easy lives in huge

houses, or travelled the world on aeroplanes, or the generation that died at the hand of strange new diseases and famines. We're the ones who get to live and we live kindly and work hard upon this honoured earth. Our hard work keeps us all fed, even if it's only on our seven hundred hectares with our three hundred and fifty people for the rest of our lives. We endure.

The real history I wanna learn from Miss Drinkwater is what this land was once used for. Why is there a creepy jungle at the back of our township that has extra fencing, strange signs and might have tigers and definitely has someone who tied a ribbon and a posy and a round mirrored thing to a tree?

'Miss Drinkwater?' I ask. 'What used to be where the honoured jungle is now, up the back of our land?'

Miss Drinkwater just looks at me. 'What difference does it make, Shelby?' she asks me. 'Whether it was a city or a barren farm? Whatever it was, it's in recovery and we need to leave it alone.'

I look over at Davy and he looks at me, making his eyes huge. Neither of us ever considered there could once have been a city right on the edge of our farms!

Did it reach to the clouds? Is it dead and black from pollution? Is there ancient treasures waiting to be found?



Gran and Auntie Josie are in the kitchen. Phoenix stands on the stairs tucking himself into the shadows. They're talking about him. He knows by the look on Aunt Josie's face. He's the only one that makes her face scrunch up like that. Like she can't understand one bit of him. To be fair, he can't understand one bit of himself either, so he can't really blame her.

The raven has left a trail of muddy footprints all the way through the hall, down the stairs, into the kitchen and out the back door, and why couldn't the bird just have gone out the window? Phoenix knew the huge thing was too heavy to fly. How on earth is he going to explain this one?

Auntie Josie is scrubbing at the footprints, the *ssshck-*ing of the brush against the tiles scrubbing over her words, scribbling them out from the air. Phoenix catches snippets hissed at Gran between scrubs.

‘Sleepwalking again *sshck shhsh, shhhck shhsh, shhhck*
A lock is *sshck shhsh, shhhck shhsh, shhhck*
need *sshck shhsh, shhhck shhsh, shhhck*
wrong with *sshck shhsh, shhhck shhsh, shhhck*
boy? *sshck shhsh, shhhck shhsh shhhck*
I can’t *sshck shhsh shhhck shhsh shhhck*
Just *sshck shhsh*
too
sshck shhsh shhhck shhsh shhhck
much.’

Phoenix leans against the cool of the brick wall and watches the mud turn to bubbles. Gran looks up. Auntie Josie stops scrubbing.

‘Morning, Phoenix! What’s that you’ve got there?’ Gran eyes the sack in Phoenix’s hand.

‘I can explain,’ he starts. ‘Well, not really, but—’ Phoenix opens the sack and a toad leaps out and plops onto the wet floor.

‘Oh my! What on earth?’ Gran asks.

‘Toads! You’ve brought toads into the house! Of course you did. Where did you—’ Auntie Josie throws her arms in the air and glares at Phoenix.

‘It’s only *one* toad.’ Phoenix mumbles. ‘The rest of the stuff is—’

But Gran is already scooping the toad into her hand. ‘Well, hello. You aren’t perhaps a prince in disguise, are you? Waiting for a kiss?’ Gran peers at the toad then kisses its head.

The toad croaks. Even Josie snorts back a laugh.

Then the girls and Walter are galloping down the stairs *like a herd of elephants!* already yelling and talking over the top of each other. Walter’s dragging Splinky the Socktopus behind him, and squealing when Frankie steps on a tentacle by mistake.

‘Well, carry him properly then, Walter!’ Frankie says.

‘Did you hear that lightning last night?’ Ida says.

‘And thunder!’ Frankie adds. ‘Wolfy was hiding under my bed!’

‘Does that mean the drought is over?’ Walter asks, rubbing Splinky’s squashed tentacle, ‘How can it thunder without rain?’

‘Was it thunder? I thought it was police helicopters again,’ Scarlett says.

‘Of course it was thunder! That wind was howling fierce!’ Frankie says in her no-arguing-with-me way – and then they all stop and stare.

‘Gran, is that a toad?’

‘Yes, and she’s just been kissing the disgusting thing too,’ Josie grumbles and the girls go ‘Euuuugh!’ and Walter squeals, ‘I dreamed about frogs raining and now here is a frog! Did I dreamed him into real, Gran?’

Gran smiles. ‘I guess so, Walter!’ and Walter beams with his own magic. Gran looks at Phoenix and the girls all turn, taking in the sack and his mud-caked legs, and all at once they scabble to get a look at what else he’s got in the sack.

‘Where did you get all that stuff, Phoenix?’

‘Did I dreamed all that too?’ Walter asks.

‘*Why* did you get all that stuff?’

‘For goodness sake, it’s dripping on the floor, Phoenix!’ Auntie Josie says.

‘Why would you go collecting a horrible old toad anyway, Phoenix?’ Frankie asks.

‘Toads are a very important part of the ecosystem,’ Scarlett says to Frankie, and turns to the front window. ‘Hey, Horizon, tell Frankie why toads aren’t horrible,’ and the window darkens and pictures and diagrams of toads appear on the glass. ‘*Frankie. Horrible is an adjective meaning unpleasant or bad. Is this the word you wanted to use? Toads do taste horrible. This is to protect themselves from predators. Some toads are fatal if consumed. In some*

*cultures, depictions of **toads** are of **horrible**, evil creatures associated with witchcraft and bad omens, but in others the **toad's** transformation from tadpole to maturity is frequently used to symbolise resurrection and rebirth. Other beliefs see the **toad** as protector of the earth, and guardian to thresholds ...'* Horizon continues listing toad facts in the Mickey Mouse voice that Walter programmed it to.

'Really, Phoenix, what were you thinking?' Aunt Josie thumps the brush against the floor.

*'Ancient Egyptians believed the **toad** brought children into the world while guiding the souls of the deceased into the world beyond ...'*

'I didn't—' Phoenix starts. He looks at Gran and lowers his voice and his words all tumble-gush out on top of each other. 'I woke up and there was a, there was a, a giant, well, a giant raven. All feathers and sneakers, he had red sneakers and—'

*'Old practices involving **toads** that some people say are **horrible** include the dissection of living **toads** to remove stones thought to be carried in a **toad's** head. Such stones were used as antidotes to poisons and thought to prevent—'*

'Oh for goodness sake! It's not this "troubled child" rubbish again, is it, Phoenix?' Aunt Josie snaps and the girls and Walter all hush and still and Ida swipes the front

window to silent. ‘We just do not have the money to pay for another round of doctors to investigate your little ... flights of fancy!’ Her cheeks have gone red and her lips thin.

Phoenix tries to swallow the ache in his throat and the bubble growing inside his chest.

‘Maybe if your mother had thought to have some sort of insurance,’ Josie mutters and Gran glares at her. ‘Well, I’m sorry. But really! Five children and not a thought for how to provide. My little sister never was one to think ahead, was she?’

No one answers. There’s a stillness to the house now. All the burbling tangle of noise, gone.

‘Phoenix,’ Gran says quietly. ‘Did you say sneakers?’ Her eyebrows knit together. ‘The kind with laces?’

Phoenix looks at the ground and nods.

‘I just don’t understand.’ Gran shakes her head and Phoenix’s chest squeezes tighter. ‘How on earth would the poor bird tie his laces?’ She smiles and it’s like she is wrapping Phoenix in a big warm hug. The girls burst into hoots of exaggerated laughter and Frankie splurts loudly, ‘A raven in sneakers!’ and howls even harder.

‘Oh now, Frankie,’ Gran says, and she isn’t smiling anymore. ‘Not everyone is able to see things as they really are, you know. That’s why we’ve to listen to those that can.’

‘Oh stop it, would you! It’s your fault, Mum!’ Josie hisses at Gran. ‘You encourage it! It’s not healthy. It’s not right for a boy his age to be ...’ She glares at Phoenix, stuck for words, then huffs, ‘His teachers say he is forever off with the fairies!’

‘I know,’ Gran replies. ‘Isn’t it wonderful?’

Walter comes up and squeezes Phoenix’s hand. ‘It’s okay, Phoenix. I believe you.’

But that just makes Phoenix feel even worse. He doesn’t want to believe. *It’s not real. It’s not real. It’s not real.* The toad croaks his disagreement.

‘Phoenix,’ Walter whispers, scratching at the rash on his arm and wiping his nose on Splinky. ‘Did your raven have a white feather?’ He tugs at his fringe. ‘Right here?’

Phoenix stares at his little brother. ‘How did you—’

‘Phoenix! Get that toad out of my house this instant!’ Josie bellows. ‘If it’s not gone in thirty seconds, I’ll flush it down the toilet myself!’

‘Josie! You can’t!’

‘You can’t flush a toad! It’ll block the drain!’

And Horizon ripples into light. *It is prohibited to flush animals, living or dead, into domestic waterways. Animals flushed down waterways can cause extreme—*

‘Enough, Horizon! Rightio, Phoenix, go release Mr Toad over the fence and into the floodplains.’ Gran gives Phoenix’s shoulder a squeeze. ‘He can hop into the stormwater drains and make himself at home.’

Walter tugs again at Phoenix’s hand. ‘I need to show you someping.’ He stops to wipe his nose again.

‘Phoenix! The toad!’ Josie’s face is even redder than before.

Phoenix leans down to Walter. ‘As soon as I get back, okay?’

‘Hurry!’ Walter whispers as Phoenix dodges the muddied prints and kicks open the screen door. He steps outside, then freezes, heart pounding and breath stopped short. *There’s a perfectly logical explanation.* But Phoenix can’t for the life of him think why thirteen black ravens would happen to choose this very morning to settle on the back fence. They look at him and all at once they start to caw, the noise growing in a demanding, deafening wave. All of them staring right at him with their bright white eyes, as though he’s to understand.

‘More!’ Walter cries, coming up behind Phoenix. ‘More little moon eyes! What are they saying, Phoenix? There’s one ... two ... three ... four ...’

Phoenix’s legs tremble and the ravens ruffle their

wings and sharpen their beaks on the fence. Then Gran is at his back, her strong arms wrapping his shoulders, keeping him solid and real. ‘Well, would you look at that? I wish I knew what it was they were trying to tell us.’

‘It’s just a coincidence,’ Phoenix says. ‘They’ve probably come for the toad. Right? Ravens probably eat toads. It doesn’t matter that they haven’t come before because we haven’t had a toad before. Right?’

Gran kisses his head. ‘Who knows? All we can do is keep our eyes wide to this strange old world, right, Walter? Eyes wide, Phoenix, eyes wide,’ she says and goes back inside and Phoenix keeps his eyes open and staring until they blur and burn and he can’t stand it any longer. He blinks, and the birds have gone.





Lunch is the main meal of the day, all of our township operating on solar ovens or solar-powered electric ones, coz even woodfire smoke is pollution and we're proud of our near-zero pollution. Although it's been a long time since the government drone's delivered us extra supplies as a prize for our efforts so I'm guessing all the other seven hundreds is just as good.

The drones used to arrive at least twice a month, bringing chocolate, fabrics, medicines and seeds for the doctor to share out and newsletters telling us how great we were doing and how the natural world was healing. Miss Drinkwater would read them out in school and we would all clap and feel good. I miss those newsletters. It's probably been a year since we had one. Anyway, school gets out at lunchtime and bread gets put on shelves at the bakery just before.

We all race home for the main meal of the day.

Well, me and Davy race down Su Road and then slow to a trudge up Maiava Drive coz it's steep and the sun beats on our backs.

All our roads, and our school even, is named after people who was at the very start of the last great pandemic. I don't remember what all of them did, but it was the beginning of the change that shut down cities and made humans focus on being kind to our planet. Because of that we named our streets and schools after them.

Walter Ticerat for instance, I think he was a man who first discovered the last great pandemic. They say that one was a bird disease. An ancient disease that disappeared and then came back into the world somehow, from where it was hidden under melting ice or something they thought. Like how anthrax came back from old deer carcasses buried in the Arctic. Cept the bird disease was stronger and spread faster, going straight from ancient creatures to people.

I leave Davy at his, and short-cut across the field to my own back door, and splosh water from the rain tank onto my face.

Da, he's not so into main-meal making. Mostly what we have on our solar stove out the back door of the cottage is what Davy ate the day before, or eggs from our chooks

frying on a pan. I don't mind. I love eggs and Da cooks them in so much grease they's super-crunchy around the edges and runny in the middle. He cooks old bread in just as much grease so that my lunch is usually bread-chips and eggs. I love to dip bread-chips in egg yolk. And like I said, people don't realise how much food kids need. I mean, up at dawn to fix fences, school, then trudging home up our hill in the heat of the day to eat, then just a little break before cleaning out the barn and collecting eggs, feeding the hens and the chicks, shooing the young roosters up into the old pine tree to fend for themselves so they's not causing trouble with the old roosters, and locking the hens up in the evening. This is hard work.

Da, he's watering and mending and washing eggs and packing and taking them off to the store for credit and trading for grain and food we might need. If I din't do what I do, he'd be working day and night. This really is a job for three people, not two.

'Da,' I say when we're sitting in the shade on the back step eating lunch. 'Do you think you'll ever put in for a new partner?' He misses my ma. I see him talk to her photo sometimes.

'Girl,' he says. 'Do you really want someone else here, ruining the quiet?'

‘I guess it’d be okay, if they was nice to me and could help with the work.’

‘Well, that’s good, coz I already put in a request,’ he says, and smiles. ‘I got Dr Geraldine to send off my description and compatibility form to the central government to match me up.’

I’m so surprised I drop my plate into the dirt. I’m sitting there with the crunchy bit of bread in my hand I was bout to mop up the last of the yolk with. I point it at him. ‘Really?’

‘Really. Last year,’ he says.

‘Why din’t you tell me?’ I say.

Da laughs. ‘I didn’t want you to get your hopes up. I mean, we’re three hundred and forty-seven and Daisy and Joe have put in for a baby too, and other people are also looking for partners and babies.’

‘And mules,’ I say. ‘And a teacher.’

He shrugs. ‘There’s probbly better offers than a sunburnt old scruff and an egg farm, coz I haven’t heard back.’

‘You’re not a sunburnt old scruff,’ I say.

He musses up my short hair for me. ‘I was talking bout you, girl.’

I laugh and bump him with my shoulder. ‘You haven’t heard anything, or did they say they’s looking?’ I ask.

‘See, this is why I didn’t mention it. You’re getting your hopes up. I haven’t heard anything. And Daisy, she says she hasn’t heard anything either even though you don’t have to convince a baby to come here, just make one.’ He shrugs. ‘So there’s nothing to be done. It’s you and me for the foreseeable future, girl.’

I go over to Davy’s for apple pie and cream before the earth turns from the last of the light. We sit on the back step and try to figure out what we do bout the posy and rainbow disc we saw. We already decided not to tell anyone else, coz they’d just tell us to stay away, but that don’t mean there ain’t someone living in the honoured jungle at the back of our holdings. Someone who might have a dog and definitely cut our fence.

‘I don’t think there’s anyone knows what used to be there,’ Davy says.

‘Then we gotta go figure it out for ourselves,’ I say.

‘What? Go through the perimeter fence?’ Davy asks. ‘But that’s there for a reason. We can’t be out there making trails or scaring wildlife or anything that affects the honoured and natural world, and if it was a city, then won’t it be full of poisonous pollution and diseases?’

‘Nah, if we go out into the natural world just once.

Just to see what we can see, that's not gonna do much,' I say. 'Just footprints. What if someone is trapped out there by accident with dangerous tigers and whatnot? Wouldn't you wanna make sure they's okay?'

Davy shakes his head. 'Not if there's "dangerous tigers and whatnot",' he says.

I don't understand how there can be dangerous tigers out there, but Davy thinks there is. So I don't have a choice. I say, 'Well, I'm going out. Friday afternoon after chores, when Da thinks I'm swimming in the creek or down in the township. That's when I'm going. You don't have to come.'

Davy nods. He knows me enough to know I'm serious. 'I'll bring a big knife,' he says coz he can't let me do anything dangerous alone. Coz he's a good friend. The best. And to tell the truth, I don't wanna go out into that spooky jungle without him.



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Bren MacDibble was raised on farms all over New Zealand. She backpacked the world in her twenties, stopped off in Australia on the way home and stayed. She lived in Melbourne for twenty years, then travelled Australia living and working in a bus, and now runs holiday villas on the stunning coral coast of Western Australia. Her first books, *How to Bee* (2017) and *The Dog Runner* (2019), won multiple awards including a Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year and New Zealand Book Awards. *Across the Risen Sea* (2020) was also shortlisted for multiple awards and nominated for a CILIP Carnegie Medal. All three novels are 'eco-fiction' adventures, set in an imaginary climate-changed world. Bren hopes that her stories give her readers courage and the language to talk about the future they'd like to see.

Bren's novels are published in the UK by Old Barn Books, in paperback and as eBooks. Reading resources are available to download from our website. www.macdibble.com



Zana Fraillon is an internationally acclaimed, multi-award winning author of books for children and young adults. Her work has been published in over fifteen countries and is in development for both stage and screen. Zana was born in Melbourne, but spent her early childhood in San Francisco. She is a three-time Carnegie-nominated author, and her 2016 novel *The Bone Sparrow* won the ABIA Book of the Year for Older Children, The Readings Young Adult Book Prize, the Amnesty CILIP Honour, and was chosen as the IBBY Honour Book to represent Australian children's literature. Her other books, which include *The Ones That Disappeared* (2017) and *The Lost Soul Atlas* (2020), have also won multiple awards, including the New South Wales Literary Award and the Aurealis Award. Zana now lives in Melbourne with her husband, three children and two dogs, and is currently undertaking a PhD at La Trobe University.

www.zanafrailon.com

This is the first time that Old Barn Books has had the honour of publishing Zana's work and we are thrilled to be able to bring her voice to our list in this stunning duet with Bren. We hope this won't be the last time they work together!

Also by Bren MacDibble and available from Old Barn Books:

HOW TO BEE

Nine year-old Peony dreams of becoming the best 'bee' the farm has ever seen, scrambling through the fruit trees to pollinate by hand with feather wands. She has love, she has food and if she could just become a 'bee' she'd be super-cherries happy. But her mother wants her to live in the city, where all the fruit is sent. Torn between two different worlds, Peony fights to protect her family and the world she loves.

Quirky, original and heartfelt, this is an all too plausible dystopian adventure, exploring themes of family loyalty and the environment' –The Bookseller

THE DOG RUNNER

Nominated for the Carnegie Medal

Ella and her brother, Emery, are alone in a city that's starving to death. If they are going to survive, they must get away, up-country, to find Emery's mum. But how can two kids travel such big distances across a dry, barren and dangerous landscape? They hitch their five big doggos to their dry-land dogsled and go mushing. But when Emery is injured, Ella must find a way to navigate them through rough terrain, and even rougher encounters with desperate people!

The Dog Runner is a tense, thrilling adventure story full of close calls and peril, but it's also glowing with heart... The all-too timely reminders about the importance of the environment and food security, Bren MacDibble's distinctive writing style, and the delicious sense of threat make The Dog Runner hard to resist.' –Booktrust

ACROSS THE RISEN SEA

Nominated for the Carnegie Medal

Neoma and Jag and their small community are 'living gentle lives' on high ground surrounded by the risen sea. When strangers from the Valley of the Sun arrive unannounced, the two friends find themselves drawn into a web of secrecy and lies that endangers their whole way of life.

A bold, clear-headed call of a possible future world, beyond climate disaster and pandemic. It offers humanity options, from trade and politics, to community, bartering and practical skills. Hope, menace, mistrust and wisdom lie in this bruised future...It leaves us all with an urge to 'go gently' –Bookwagon blog

'This is how we have to live now.'

Shelby and her best friend Davy live quiet low-tech lives in a closed community that is made up of exactly three hundred and fifty kind, ethical people living on exactly seven hundred hectares.

When they climb through a hole in the perimeter fence to venture into the surrounding jungle, what they find is more astonishing than anything they could have imagined.

And when Shelby realises the terrible danger that is unfolding, it will take all of her daring and determination to ensure the past does not repeat itself.

Intriguing, absorbing and spine-tinglingly good, *The Raven's Song* is a brilliant novel by two extraordinary contemporary voices in Australian children's fiction.



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