

***Into the Green Heart Flowing:
A Women's Midlife Journey in Nature***

by Wendy Sarkissian



Watching the Fire

GURRUNG SEASON 1

Gurrung is the hot Build Up season, generally from August to September, when both temperature and humidity increase. There is increasing cloud but little rain. Both days and nights are searingly hot and relief from the heat will not arrive until the rains begin. Fire is now sweeping the land, scorching the earth. Fiery sunsets can be seen through the smoke haze. The red flowered kurrajong is blooming and most of the animals have retreated to hollows and burrows to escape the day's heat.

... for generations people have gone to the wilds to find and seek their Perfection, their true nature, their inherent goodness, wholesomeness, and simplicity. We also go to the wilderness to seek the Perfection of the extended body of creation of which we are a part.

Joan Halifax



Deep Creek, 19 August 1991 10 pm

Dear Clare,

The bush at Deep Creek burned on Saturday —two days ago — triggering all my grief and pain. It's a shock and an education: too much at once.

The fire transformed that barren and inhospitable piece of bush into an absolute wasteland and reawakened my fears that I cannot live here -- in this frightening place. I feel so undefended, unprotected. My God! What am I doing?

That frightening day began at breakfast time with Mica and me shivering in the cool air in the shabby beer garden of the café beside the Humpty Doo petrol station. We sat with Shesha, his friend, at a scarred wooden table, drawing sketches of my bush house on paper napkins. Lingering over our iced coffee and scrambled eggs. We'd spent most of the previous day carefully measuring out my house site, scratching maps in the dry earth. I loved that spot, with its small grove of xanthostemon trees and the two pairs of palm trees, like two couples dancing. Close to Mica's place, yet safe and protected. The house I was imagining looked a lot like one of the houses at Camp Concern in the mid-seventies: about ten feet by ten feet.

"This is great, guys," I enthused. "It's a simple design but I reckon it'll work. And I agree with you: I'll have to have an earth floor because of the risk of polluting the creek with a concrete one." The two men looked relieved.

"The builders are already stockpiling recycled materials for your house," Mica chimed in. "It's going to take them about a week to do the building, depending on the weather. November is very unreliable, Wendy. It's the Build Up. Could be rainy; could be dry. Certainly hot. But we are making progress. You'll be settled in here before you know it—at *Two Couples Dancing*."

I smiled back at him, buttering my toast. "I do feel better with a real site. I am a planner, after all."

Mica laughed. My planner-side was an issue between us: "Boss-Wendy," he called me.

Returning with a second coffee, Shesha stopped in the doorway. He'd spotted a cloud on the horizon to the south. He frowned and signalled to Mica to join him in the carpark. Mica stiffened at the sight of smoke and I sensed a sudden anxiety in the two men. Then Mica came running back to the table and grabbed his sweater.

"That'll be paperbarks burning because of the dark smoke," he yelled to Shesha, who was already making his way to the car, rolling a cigarette as he went. Soon we were thundering down the corrugated dirt road to Deep Creek in Mica's station wagon. On the way they speculated. "Bloody hell, it's mid-August — almost the end of the Dry. A late-season fire. Could be very destructive, very explosive because of the strong winds and the dry grass," Mica yelled. Shesha nodded.

I couldn't believe what I saw. A fire burning to the east—separated from the community land by the road and a wide firebreak. We could smell it as we approached the

gate. It was racing through the dry grass and woodland, flames six or maybe nine metres high. I gasped at its awesome roaring and crackling.

“You be careful, Wendy,” Shesha called from the front, turning to look at me and pounding his fist on the back of his seat. “This is your first fire. Right? You stick to Mica like glue and you’ll be right.”

We dropped Shesha on the firebreak road to follow Mica’s instructions yelled out the window above the fire’s roar: “Break a green branch that won’t burn from one of those woolly butts and see if you can keep redirecting the fire with it. And try to deal with the floaters coming across the firebreak. Got that, Shesha?” Later Shesha said he tried but the fire got in there, too. Working alone without water he had Buckley’s, no chance at all. Boosted by a strong wind, the fire leapt 35 metres of road and cleared firebreak in one go, sending Shesha scurrying for his life. Then it broke into the high school’s conservation study area on the neighbouring land to the north.

As the car neared Mica’s twenty-acre block, we saw our worst fears realised. The fire had already been and gone. My heart sank. The cherished milkwood tree, Mica’s driveway landmark, scorched to its top leaves. On both sides of the driveway blackened earth stretched as far as my stinging eyes could see. The ground was completely bare, all grasses and leaf litter consumed: not a single patch of green.

In the middle distance I spotted dark smoke rising above a wall of orange. The horizon, formerly hidden by a rich woodland understorey, trees and shrubs, now expanded for acres, revealing the scarred landform’s idiosyncrasies: stream banks, hillocks and depressions. Scattered across this moonscape were burning and smoking stumps, charred skeletons of acacia, woolly butt, kapok bushes, ironwood, carallia, billy goat plums, some without leaves or branches. Only the tallest retained a thin green canopy crowning their blackened branches. The black, twisted stumps of leafless cycad ferns like amputated limbs. Large birds I’d never seen before spiralled overhead, wheeling and diving on insects and small animals seeking refuge at the fire’s margins.

And the sound of it: the tearing and thudding of huge trees crashing into the earth.

I shuddered to imagine the denser creekside vegetation: pale, fragile paperbarks and glistening, spiralling pandanus palms twisting from its banks. My mind registered only disbelief: struggling to undo all that was now destroyed: years of backbreaking work, the conservation research experiment, the community’s thirteen-year project of excluding fire from their land. Mica’s land, his dreams.

Up in smoke.

As we rattled onto the rough track into Mica’s property, the land was flat and dead, the homes of many creatures devastated in minutes. Creatures I hadn’t even met, could never identify. Their histories, ancient lineages, obliterated. I was numb with shock. . Couldn’t let it in. My mind in a vain effort to make it un-happen.

Too raw for feelings.

We were relieved to discover Rebecca and Tom, Mica's only son, also in shock. But unhurt. Mica slammed on the brakes and jumped out of the car. Tom explained, shaking that they had saved the two cars and the donga—the bush shack—with a wet sarong and the garden hose. Mica sat down in a chair on the porch and began to roll a smoke.

“Jesus, Mica,” said Tom, dabbing at his eyes. He looked like he wanted to hug his father but refrained, sensing Mica's awkwardness.

Caught in mid-fuck, the young lovers did their best. “We saved the cars but we had no warning, Mica, nothing at all. A wall of flame just passed through. That was it,” Tom stammered. Rebecca hung back, busying herself in the shack. She looked startled, exhausted and grimy; like the small creatures scurrying everywhere, she couldn't look at us.

“Well, at least you're not in any more danger,” Mica reassured Tom. “It's bloody cold comfort but it's true. There's fucking nothing left to burn here.”

We heard another fire engine tearing up the road, siren blaring, as we picked our way on foot through fallen trees, ash and debris to Mica's shack. The narrow path, worn by Mica for a dozen years, wandered through the scorched landscape, pale and curiously unblemished. Near Mica's metal shack an intense feeling of death choked my breathing.

“We'd better check the garden, Wendy,” Mica instructed. I often found his language quaint: ‘garden’ as a term for 320 acres of untamed bush.

The garden was eerily silent, swept clean of birds and small scampering animals. The large pandanus had lost her skirt. Small fires smouldered everywhere. On the front porch, Mica put out a fire blazing in some fabric and an old book on top of the rubbish bin. The burning pages fluttered to the earth floor, black ash fluttering away. I rushed to extinguish them and stopped: there was nothing left to burn.

Reaching the back porch, I found files piled in the wheelbarrow blazing like a barbecue.

“Mica!” I screamed. “Quick! Your house is on fire.”

He was yelling and I was giving orders and then we reversed roles.

“Give me a hand with the hose, Wendy,” he cried. We were standing so close to each other and we were screaming—like an emergency crew. “Fuck it! Hurry, Wendy!”

Together we untangled the garden hose. Then he disappeared and I put out the wheelbarrow fire alone, aiming the green snake to the side so I could read the pages. A wheelbarrow of dreams and memories: Mica's patient printing—now silvered—on scores of black notebook pages. His journals and academic treatises containing notes about global warming (and cooling), desertification, insect populations, sphagnum moss reappearing in the creek. I knew these were the only copies and I couldn't save them. Years of documentation of the local ecology going up in flames.

As I was retching from the fumes of radios and tape recorders burning in a rusting filing cabinet, Mica reappeared from the dusty landscape. “Quick, get a hose on that electrical stuff, Mica,” I screamed. “It’s awfully toxic.”

Mica obeyed like a zombie. I grabbed the one undamaged length of hose back from him and directed a steady stream at the wheelbarrow that had burst into flame again. Its melted tyre revealed a rusted frame, scorched red handlebars dripping black rubber. It was like a series of still photographs. One fire. Another fire. Move the hose. For what seemed like hours on that porch I doused small, individual, unrelated fires.

“Okay. Enough of that, Wendy,” Mica ordered, regaining his authority. “We’d better check on the neighbours. Saturday morning. God knows where they all could be. Probably shopping.” We retraced our steps. Tom and Rebecca had driven off, leaving a pale green patch in place of their car. We climbed into Mica’s car and were off again, crashing up the hilly track to the south. Fire was everywhere. Men I’d never seen before were running behind trucks, dragging heavy hoses, burning back, signalling and hollering. The stumbling figures looked insubstantial, silhouetted against a wall of smoke and orange flame.

Mara, only sixteen, was fighting a small fire alone with a rake on a corner of her family’s block, coughing and mopping her eyes with a red cotton scarf. “Hey, Mica,” she yelled. “Mom and dad are up the hill with the Fire Service. Could you get me a drink?”

We clanked back to Mica’s and returned with a bottle of water. Mara grabbed it, nodded thanks, gulped down a long drink and stared past us, her face tight with grief and exhaustion. She picked at the cinders with her metal rake.

I felt sick. Later, the smell of my smoky clothes made me want to throw up.

When Mica left to drive around the perimeter of the community property, I stayed behind, scuffing through ashes and charred branches as I made my way in form the road. Along the path to Mica’s shack, a tree root by the path burst into flames, sparks spurting from deep in the ground. I ran for the hose again.

Then from the smoky landscape Sara emerged, wearing a long black jersey dress. “You’re Wendy, is that right?” she called to me, hesitantly. A lot of women—and a few serious lovers—had visited Mica’s bachelor camp in the past thirteen years. I’d met Sara only once before and she was careful to confirm my identity.

“Yes, I’m Wendy. Grab that hose, will you?” I called back. Together we drenched a tree root. I dropped the hose and turned to look at her, shaking. In a dream.

“I’ve been inspecting the damage,” she spoke slowly, turning to survey the blackened porch. “Looks like you just managed to save the house.”

“The house, yes,” I replied, as I rooted around to find something to sit on. “But I couldn’t save Mica’s papers.”

The sight of the burned books and papers was too much for Sara. She collapsed into my arms, sobbing: “I thought this was a safe place.”

I held her and told her, “Yes, Sara, a lot is lost. All the research.” Then I found myself changing the subject, blurting out, “I’ve had a gutful of men who can’t cry.”

Disengaging from our unexpected embrace, Sara stood while I sat in a burnt chair. I apologised for not offering her a seat. Other than the bed inside the shack, there was not a stick of furniture left.

“I’m fine,” Sara said quietly. “I was a physio for years and we learn to stand for long periods without getting tired.

“I’m coming to live here in a few months,” I told her. She looked shocked. “Will you live with Mica?” she inquired, clearly uncomfortable at the intimacy of her question.

“Oh, no,” I lied. I shifted uneasily. “I will be here for my doctoral research. We will be in contact, of course, but I’ll be living on my own—but on Mica’s land.”

“It’ll be lovely to have you living here at Deep Creek, Wendy,” Sara replied, with a look of relief tinged with disbelief. “I look forward to getting to know you and I know Frank will feel the same way. We don’t see a lot of Mica. I haven’t been to his house for eight years. Maybe your being here will change that.” She offered me a drink from her water bottle. The water was cool and the few drops I spilled made bubbles like molten lead on the ashes on the porch floor.

There was not much more to say and, after a warm hug, Sara disappeared. When Mica came back we drove up to visit Stan and Debbie’s place, a modern architect-designed house, cluttered with the paraphernalia of a young family. Debbie was standing alone on the lawn holding her daughter, maybe two, as the man from the emergency fire service barked orders from his vehicle. Stan was out on the community’s fire truck.

As we arrived and I could see Debbie’s defensiveness by the way she was leaning beside the vehicle’s window. As I came up and introduced myself, Debbie adjusted Sophie on her hip. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you, Wendy,” she smiled, offering her hand. “I’m sorry it’s under such awful circumstances.”

“Hi, Mica,” she called out. “Glad you’re here. Can you help? The boys were in the bush when the fire started. They’ve been gone over an hour. I can’t leave Sophie and I’m getting worried.”

“I’ll look for them,” Mica replied, striding off and coo-eeing loudly. The fireman, still in his jeep, continued his rant.

“This is very wrong of you, Debbie,” he gestured through his vehicle window to small trees growing a few metres from the house. “You know perfectly well what the regulations are. You must clear a four-metre firebreak. And you with a lovely new house, too. With a shack like Mica’s, it might not matter, but this house—it’s so beautiful. You’re just plain irresponsible, Debbie—and I’ll certainly be reporting this breach of the regulations.” He hurled this from the protection of his jeep, glowering. Then he turned on the motor and noisily changed gears. Debbie and I backed away.

“It’s our community’s policy not to clear the bush,” Debbie muttered but it was too late. She buried her face in her child’s body as the jeep smashed through fifty newly planted seedlings. He circled the house, engine revving as he took another run at the hill. Then he roared off, after yelling that he’d be back after the fire to burn the land he’d cleared.

“Here, let me do something,” I offered, grabbing the sobbing child. Sophie stopped crying to explain how she’d helped her dad plant all those seedlings.

“Lophostemon,” she said, proud she could pronounce it.

“Swamp box,” said Debbie.

Then Mica emerged with Debbie’s two boys, shaken but unhurt. They ran to their mother.

“It was pretty close, Debbie,” Mica explained, reaching for his tobacco. “They nearly got caught by a back-burning operation. I hate that fire-management stuff the fire service does.”

The boys could hardly wait to describe their adventure. “Mom, it was terrible. We could hear the fire fighters yelling directions but we thought we were caught. We had to run from the wall of flames and that’s when we found Mica.”

“Or rather I found you,” Mica corrected them.

“You did okay, kids,” he continued. “Well done. You knew what to do in an emergency. You’re pretty experienced fire fighters for nine and twelve. Wish I had known that when I was your age.”

After leaving Debbie, I made my way to *Two Couples Dancing*. The special place I had come to love was unrecognisable. I sat in the ashes and stared at my house site. I couldn’t imagine it ever coming back to life. I would have to find another place to build my house.



Two Couples Dancing, 19 August 1991

Mica visited briefly there and was off again. By the time he returned from another round of helping neighbours and negotiating about backburning, I was shaking with tears, having retreated to the only surviving chair on his porch. He bent over to hold me. But not for long.

“Stop being self-indulgent, Wendy,” he chided me. “This is no time for chucking a sad.”

I snapped back. “It’s my first fire, Mica, for God’s sake!”

Despite years studying fire ecology, Mica had apparently never confronted the topic of grief and fire.

He left to prepare for his birthday party to be held at a neighbour’s house: an informal event around the campfire, with guests were expected later that evening. I’d completely forgotten. I was not in a party mood.

With a dark, smoky sky, the day slowly faded. Burning trees collapsed with deafening crashes. Behind Mica’s shack, the roots of a huge lophostemon burst into flame. I rushed back with the hose and then fussed around in the ruins of the garden, inspecting two cherished frangipani trees. Mica said their sap had sap boiled and they would not survive. Dying a painful death in front me, a reluctant witness.

Fires continued to burn everywhere. I worked into the evening aimlessly cleaning up, damping down fires that had nowhere to go. A terrible pain was growing under my ribs and my throat ached from coughing. Trapped, with nowhere to go myself, I wandered into Mica’s metal shack and examined its charred walls, the scorched fly wire. My torch revealed the whole story. How we saved it I’d never know. A minute to spare and everything would have been lost. Blankets were already burning on the bed.

I lay on the bed surrounded by death and cold, dry air saturated with smoke. Wakened by coughing, I could hear nearby trees crashing as they lost their capacity to stand. Finally, I slept. Later, fear gripped me again. I crawled out and made my way down the moonlit path to waken Shesha, who helped me douse a couple of fires, carrying buckets in the misty air from the last length of hose. The landscape glowed with hundreds of small fires, like lanterns. Dawn was not far away.

Not a single animal visited that night. Those who survived would now be homeless, forced to find a new habitat. There would be precious little food until the first rains. Destroyed were countless homes and havens: litter that sheltered tiny ones, logs that were home to larger creatures—material for nests—grass tussocks and nesting hollows in old trees. Missing their mutterings, mournful calls, thumpings and rustlings, the night wore on, punctuated by falling trees and sporadic coughing. Even the mosquitoes had vanished.

There's one good thing about fires, the local say. You can sleep without a net for a few days.