

the summer we left behind

Bushfires may have cut short her family's holiday, but for **Bron Willis** the true cost of this season of devastation is far more profound.

My washing line is heavy with the weight of our ash-ridden tent hung out to air. I wonder if the smell of smoke will ever be gone. I have no recollection of the tent being packed away – I was focused on the children, keeping them calm. All I know is that we'd never packed up a camp site so damn quickly. But then, we'd never fled a bushfire.

I have no recollection, either, of when the baby's stacking toys got thrown in with the sleeping bags. Standing here at the washing line, 900 kilometres away, I wonder: was it when the ash began to fall? Was it when our bush-camp neighbours told us of their plan to drive into the lake if the fire came close?

And when was my son's precious pipi shell packed randomly into his crumpled Santa sack, alongside torn wrapping paper and yet-to-be-tried Christmas presents? Was it after the rangers told us to leave? When they cited three fires that could threaten us, holding my glance too long to allow for the slightest misunderstanding?

Or was it before that, in summer carelessness, when sand beckoned, water sparkled and bellbird calls bounced around camp? When the hardest decision was which beach to visit. Kayak or surfboard? Pram or baby carrier?

But our decision-making abruptly turned serious. The red flame symbol on the fire app stopped us in our tracks – just like it would for thousands upon thousands of Australians spread along hundreds of kilometres of south-eastern Australian coastline that day and on many others this summer.

Throughout the year, if winter and family and work seem too much, the waters of our regular summer beach camp always sparkle in my mind. The mobile hanging in my kitchen, the one



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my boys made from seashells, takes me straight there – the place where we write names and love hearts in the sand.

The light now at home is hazy, even here. I wash the sea smell out of the Santa sack and hang it next to the tent. That tent is just a temporary home. Full as it is of memories and excitement, it can be aired, mended, easily replaced. Not like the homes of so many others.

I scrub the camping plates, still sticky from the morning we'd packed them, unwashed, in haste. We'd spoken the night before in hushed

tones through the mesh of my brother's camper trailer. The kids had fallen asleep, the camp site, too, but neon lights from phones quietly lit up tents: thumbs scrolled, fingers zoomed and eyes scoured maps.

I hang clean beach towels and think of the clothes rack we left behind, leaning on the fence as we drove away the next morning, packed to the hilt, our abandoned holiday the least of our concerns, joining others in a pilgrimage to safety, the nearest town.

At home, we unpack the last bits of camping debris from the car, remembering vehicle after vehicle in

the petrol queues we'd passed that day, as we'd arrived in town. Relief, we're safe. But how quickly the relief was replaced with worry when I opened the car door. How was this place safe when my baby was breathing acrid smoke? How was this place safe when I could not see the sky?

How lucky I was to get out, to get home, I think. We unhook the trailer, weary now from unpacking. The tail-lights remind me of our convoy out: the red glow we followed, lights in the darkening haze. For an hour, or two – fingers tight on the wheel like our hearts in our chests. Through orange skies, through smoke, smoke, smoke.

With the pipi in my hand, I mourn. Like the nation, I've been mourning for a week: for the mothers clutching children on the beaches under glowing skies, their charred homes and missing loved ones. I've mourned for the wallaby, crouching silently by the side of the smoky road. I've mourned for the land that we drove through, hour after smoke-filled hour on our journey home, leaves falling like tears from gumtrees to the brittle, barren, starved earth below. And I've mourned for the people who love and live on that land, for their future, for this country.

But now I mourn my own tiny loss: the summer we left behind. The seawater my son didn't get to splash, the fish my nephew didn't get to chase. The evening beach walk I didn't get to share with my sister-in-law. I mourn for all the broken holidays, all the lost summers across our country and for those hanging uncertainly in the future.

My beloved place did not burn, unlike so many others. But when I go there in my dreams, if winters are weary and family feels heavy, will the waters still sparkle? Will the eucalypts still sway and the bellbirds still call? •