

VANESSA BERRY
From Catastrophe

Danielle Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections on a Vanishing Future*

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In the final days of 2019 fires were moving ever closer to Danielle Celermajer's home, an area of rainforest on Dharawal country on the New South Wales south coast. To the north and south fires were burning through the forests, rapidly and out of control, causing huge destruction. In between preparations, evacuations of animals, and monitoring the volatile conditions, she wrote. This writing, from inside her experience of catastrophe, became *Summertime*.

During that summer people who were more removed from the fires, insulated by cities, had their lives changed in less critical ways. I was among those who woke daily to a smoke-filled sky and a weak red sun, noticing the incessant bitter taste in my mouth. Day after day I confronted the notion that there was seemingly a choice: I could witness the surrounding disaster and comprehend its implications. Or I could turn away.

Summertime is a profound corrective to the fantasy of turning away. Across its multiple strands of reflection, it conveys the proximity of climate emergency and the potential that arises from ethically engaged everyday thinking. Celermajer brings us close up to a daily life in the midst of crisis, when there can be no deferral of responsibility. When the fire is moving rapidly towards the place you love and call home there is no ignoring it. *Summertime* enlarges the scale of this experience and the responses it demands. If the threat is one by which all beings stand to be engulfed, and it is as close and direct as an approaching fire, what would guide your actions? Where would you place your care?

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa describes care as "that everyday thing that maintains aliveness" (26). Care is enacted in momentary and sustained ways and is as necessary in times of calm as in times of crisis. In *Summertime* the dailiness of living through the fires—a phone pinging with alerts, changes in the colour of the sky, a car packed ready for evacuation—unfolds into a philosophy of care, and of responsibility to a shared world and future. That these considerations are drawn out of momentary experiences activates the same potential within our everyday lives. A realisation of our capacity, through attention to the microcosm of how we live and think, to enlarge our sense of humanity, and what we can do for others.

Among the many animals with which Celermajer has shared her home are two rescue pigs, Katy and Jimmy. The pigs' lives and fates entwine with hers, making present the ways that animal wisdom and emotion can be perceived, even as their lives exceed our

abilities to understand them. Live with an animal, observe the animals around you, and surely there is no way one could believe otherwise. Yet routinely humans act as if this was not so, and the empathic craft of writing across species lines is one of the keenest ways to renew this knowledge.

There is no ideal form or method with which to write of the experiences of beings other than humans, but the approach in *Summertime*, in which animal perspectives are presented through close, attuned observation, respects the difference and otherness of this relationship. Celermajer's daily interactions, over years of living with her multispecies community, have built her knowledge of animal ways of being. These relationships are framed within the overarching attention that is enacted in *Summertime*, an alertness to how lived experiences connect to environmental, cultural and philosophical ways of thinking, and how this relationship might set a course for future action.

This keenness of attention is heightened by the rupture that the fires bring. Tragically, only Jimmy survives the fire that sweeps through the property of Celermajer's friend M, after Katy and Jimmy were evacuated there to what had been thought to be safety. Jimmy retreats into a withdrawn state, suffering from the trauma of the fire and the loss of Katy. To witness Jimmy's all-consuming grief is to open the way into a collective grief, grounded in powerful affective moments, one of which is the search for Jimmy in the charred and ravaged land.

Any fences that would have kept him from running off had been reduced to ash, but after twenty minutes of our calling his name he appeared, pink on the black. He was clearly coming towards us, but he paused about ten metres away and continued as we did, walking in parallel. It was as if the desire to be close could not quite break through the world in which he had been caught.

Imagining Jimmy moving through the burnt landscape, frenzied with distress, made me ache to think of his suffering. It was a similar response to when I read one of the passages from Svetlana Alexievich's *Chernobyl Prayer*, in which a clean-up worker gives an account of packing trees and earth into plastic inside the contaminated zone around the reactor:

At night, I couldn't sleep. I'd shut my eyes, and there'd be something black wriggling and twisting. Like it was alive; living rolls of earth. Full of beetles, spiders and worms. I didn't know what any of them were, didn't know their names. They were just beetles, spiders. Ants. But there were little and large ones, some were yellow, some were black. They were all different colours. There was a poet who wrote that the animals are a separate nation. I was killing them by the tens, hundreds, thousands, without even knowing their names. I was smashing their homes, their secrets. Burying and burying them.
(101-2)

Both accounts carry the complicated mesh of rescue and destruction that exists in the aftermath of catastrophe. The narrator is the perceiving and feeling instrument through which we call out a name or pull up a strip of contaminated earth, and by doing so experience complicity and care intertwined. Such accounts have a testimonial power that cuts through the elegance of their narration, and in *Summertime* such ruptures work to pull the reader suddenly closer, their effect like a sharp intake of breath.

Recounting their phone conversation after the fire, hearing M's voice saying "it's all gone," Celermajer breaks away from the scene to reflect on its writing:

I have to tell you how hard it is to write this. My fingers have stopped, and again I feel that sheet of metal down the front of my body. I very much want you to know that this is not a story. We are so damn used to stories, underscored by music and illustrated with images, that reality, hot or dead, has become near impossible to grasp.

Breath draws in, distance contracts, opens to a surging reality, that this is vital, continuing, acute. Not a story, to be related as if additional to the experience, but life itself: holding the phone and hearing the friend's voice say It's all gone.

Summertime is among those works of environmental life writing that expands the personal across time and space, where the writer is at once the perceiver of her thoughts and world, and a figure through which the reader can access collective feeling, knowledge and accountability. From the experience of the fire summer it sets out a generous and unflinching philosophy, unfolding from the most urgent question of our time: how to sustain life and future for all beings on this earth?

WORKS CITED

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