Watch and Act, Summer

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Matter of Degrees,Series

By **Susan Ballard**

At first, there are only a couple of photos. The usual places: *the Guardian*, *Instagram*, *Facebook*. I trace the fire as it creeps down and across the Southern Highlands, through the deep gullies of the Blue Mountains, and suddenly flares across the South Coast. I keep half an eye on the glistening diamonds placed carefully by the Rural Fire Service on their Fires Near Me app. They give each fire a name of its own: Currowan, Ruined Castle, Grose Valley, Green Wattle Creek. They colour them blue, yellow, red. They tell me to "watch and act." I watch, only a little afraid. I don't act.

Then there are more. I realise it is going to reach her house, again. Just like the last fires, or was it the fires before then? I know, it is hard to keep count, but I'm too scared to reach out. She won't be on the Internet right now, I tell myself. She will be too busy fighting the fire, which is now more-than-many fires. The more-than-many fires surround everything I know of this sliver of land on the edge of this island continent. The little diamonds are now accompanied by thick black lines. The lines are cutting the land up. They mark the space between burning and about-to-burn. There seems to be less and less room to breathe. They always told me it would burn. And then, there she is being embraced as she walks into an evacuation centre. "Ashen" is the verb they use.

The photos appear in my feeds more rapidly now. Others are watching. I'm curious but also numb. Some images feel more important than others. I save them. I press "power plus volume down," and my phone makes a little click. The photo flashes before me one last time and then disappears into memory. I am not sure where it goes, but it is safe. Kept.

Most of the photos are anonymous, posted to make the news seem more real. But some are from friends. Friends who mark time by holding their breath under their facemasks. Everything is hot and sticky under a facemask. "Evacuated three times." "Back now." "Here is our shed." Or more accurately, "there was our shed … at least it didn't get

to the fences.” Friends who continue with the best every day they can muster, go for a walk to the beach, and return home via a new path cleared by the fires. The images continue to circulate with a new intensity. Grief pervades every pixel of my feeds. It is hard to watch, but I can’t look away.

I read about hostile environments, uncontained environments, strengthening our defences. The verbs escalate.

Someone posts a picture of their backyard, muffled in a thick protective blanket of pink fire-fighting foam. It has even covered the washing on the line. Pink sheets, pink lawn, pink wheelbarrow. They are not sure how, or when, to wash it away, but are glad to have the protection.

I tell someone I have been asked to write about the fires. They turn to me, confused. “But you weren’t here.” It takes me a minute. It felt like I was here. Where is here, anyway?

I pick up a book. It is *Regarding the Pain of Others* by Susan Sontag. I pick it up because I know Sontag has things to say about photographs, and I have experienced these fires through photographs. I turn to her for help. She writes “Victims, grieving relatives, consumers of news—all have their own nearness to or distance from [crisis]. … With subjects closer to home, the photographer is expected to be more discreet.”**[1]** Sontag quarrels with her past self. In *On Photography* she wrote about how photographs shape “what catastrophes and crises we pay attention to, what we care about.”**[2]** Now, she reflects, “we become callous. In the end, such images just make us a little less able to feel.”**[3]** But what about *now*, I wonder?

Fire has no moments of rest or kindness. Both humans and fire need oxygen to live. We share this need. Right now, the fire wants everything it can get. I watch it suck the oxygen from the coast. People describe fighting an unpredictable monster. The beaches are sooty, littered with blistered and burnt leaves. I save the photos and a few of the leaves, but I don’t share them. I try to be discreet.

Sontag tells me that “Being a spectator of calamities taking place in another country is a quintessential modern experience.”**[4]** I struggle with this idea of “another country”. An other’s Country? Country in Australia has a specific meaning. It encompasses 60,000 years of Aboriginal care and custodianship. Country is a way of living together, it

summons deep histories. More-than-human. Country has a remarkable capacity to survive.

It is raining today. Lots of rain. It is thick with the smell of smoke. What about *now*, when the language of war is employed to talk about a disaster that once would have been labelled “natural”? What about now, when the disaster is ever-so human but not-just human? What about now, when a disaster that has fed on a diet of greed, complacency, and violence for the past 200 years, takes over the media consciousness of the planet? When people rush to tell me about the day that the smoke made it over the Tasman … when breathing the same contaminated air makes us feel connected in a new way? What about all the pictures of koalas? What about now, when the photographs that circulate across our network feed and mark more than just a single act of violence, when they fill our heads with sensation and fear? Dread. Is this what it takes to finally pay attention? Watch and act.

Acknowledgements

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[1]Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others,* (London: Penguin, 2003), 55.

[2]Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 93.

[3]Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 94.

[4]Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 16.