

COVER STORY

Fire, Water, Wind

An unnerving series of catastrophes, here and abroad, has received blanket media coverage this year. The effect can be numbing; dreadful events are sometimes made to seem unreal. Photographer Andrew Quilty experienced, first hand, the impact of Australia's most recent major natural disasters. This is his story; these are his pictures.

I wasn't present during the furious moments of Australia's recent major natural disasters: Victoria's 'Black Saturday' bushfires in 2009; the Brisbane and Lockyer Valley floods last January; and Far North Queensland's Cyclone Yasi in February. Rather, it was what was left behind in the wake of these events that I observed and documented.

In the hills north of Melbourne I encountered physical destruction and a tangibly macabre air. Two years on, the impact of these could also be seen on the faces of people from Grantham in the Lockyer Valley, west of Brisbane. They were despondent and in shock, but resilient. In Brisbane, where floodwaters rose at a tauntingly slow rate, shock was taken out of the equation.

City people – whose lives are less at the whim of the forces of nature and have, therefore, dealt less with its wrath – grieved with greater difficulty and less acceptance than those to the west in the Lockyer Valley and then, only weeks later, in northern Queensland when Yasi struck.

Like the lives of those who called these places home, landscapes were transformed and disfigured – in some cases beyond recognition. Homes, always considered a place of shelter, were incinerated, cruelly infected with the acrid rot of floodwater, or torn from their foundations like pieces of an unsolved jigsaw puzzle.

Just as in Dante's *Inferno* ("It sounded like a mighty wind/ made violent by waves of heat..."), my own passage from comfort into maelstrom, or at least its consequences, was incremental. Each phase conjured differing emotions, responses and, in retrospect, questions regarding the significance of such a multitude of natural disasters. Since Cyclone Yasi, New Zealand has experienced its worst-ever earthquake, which claimed more than 165 lives in Christchurch late in February. And then the devastating earthquake and tsunami hit Japan in March. The full extent and repercussions of the catastrophe there are still not clear.

In all cases it has been alarmingly evident that natural forces can wreak as much, if not more, havoc than anything conjured by humans, although the conjunction of these natural disasters has raised further arguments about the effects of Climate Change. Are humans responsible, or are all these events part of nature's cycle: Earth righting itself, re-aligning, balancing? Had the affected areas been less populated, the disasters might even have gone largely unnoticed. Recovery can be rapid – as I've witnessed when returning to the bushfire-ravaged areas, the landscape quickly regenerates. Perhaps it's all part of nature's own code of natural selection and we are just putting ourselves in its firing line. For now, my thoughts are mere speculation. But what is *not* speculation is what I saw with my own eyes, and through the lenses of my cameras.

‘Black Saturday’

Driving with two colleagues from Whittlesea – the hub of the Victorian fire disaster response effort – we passed a police blockade under the guise of rural firefighters (a decision we had, without need for dialogue, justified among ourselves but would later struggle with). Up the winding road towards the centre of the destruction, the land that was fertile one minute turned charred and lifeless in a breath. The world was colourless, monotonous, the sky still murky with the lingering smoke of smouldering 100-year-old tree carcasses, the bitumen fresh and black save for the white strip dividing it in two. Eucalypts were now just spindly, upright shadows – brittle and haggard. Utilitarian traffic snaked like a mourners’ procession through the slow bends before reaching the settlements of Humevale and Kinglake, then veered off the main arteries connecting towns into sullen valleys on roads littered with fallen trees and power poles.

Bald Spur Road – a meandering, single-lane, gravel trail just west of Kinglake – swooped and plunged into the contours of the ridgeline. Like tourists on some ghoulish excursion, we passed through obliterated forest and the occasional clearing, which, on closer inspection, proved to be spaces where homes had once stood. Mangled front gates and letterboxes indicated the entrances to properties. Some were already displaying crosses in memory of those who perished within; others wore the discordant but telltale blue-and-white chequered police tape draped between blackened stumps.

The day remained still and breathless, and where the ridge drew away from the central range on which Kinglake Central is perched, a sense of the scale of this inferno began to crystallise. On a clear day, the vista from Bald Spur Road is such that the Melbourne skyline is visible to the south – beyond rolling green hills and farmland. On this day, though: nothing.

Incinerated stringy-barks were left as jet-black tangles. They gave way to endless ridges in the distance, each one fainter than the last as the ashen smog settled in the valleys and sucked the colour from what must have once been a lustrous landscape. The earth from which these claw-like branches had been born was baked inches deep – still warm with residual heat from the blaze. It felt as though this had been the epicentre of Black Saturday. Nothing appeared to have survived and, as in a black hole, even sound itself had been consumed. As the faintest of breezes sprung up there was not a single leaf left to flutter on a tree, nor a bird to land on a branch. There seemed to be not even a crawling reptile in the non-existent undergrowth to add a semblance of life to this desolate scene. We dawdled back, stopping where a home used to be but where, in the cruellest of ironies, nothing now stood except for a sandstone fireplace and chimney, scattered cast-iron pots and ceramic crockery – relics of all that had become history in the blink of an eye.

Late in the afternoon, we pulled up at the main shopping strip in Kinglake. Still half dressed in rural firefighter clobber and, because of our pretence, already feeling guilty enough, we had to refuse the local bakery’s insistent offering of free food in return for our perceived efforts. We were in a hard place, justified in our own minds as to our duty as reporters and witnesses, but unwilling to draw attention to the fact. Two ABC people had already been detained for being inside the police exclusion zone after the entire fire-affected area had been declared a crime scene. Locals were taut with nervous energy. While some grieved with quiet dignity others drank and, as Australian men tend to do, repressed their pain with transparent bravado. As compassionate as we might try to be, we were still unwelcome guests at a wake.

Lockyer Valley Floods

It was nearly two years until the next major natural disaster was to befall Australia, in mid-January this year. Again, the focal point was within spitting distance of a major centre: this time Queensland's capital, Brisbane. Grantham and the surrounding Lockyer Valley was transformed into a giant stormwater drain, which was unable to contain the mass of rainwater that had collected after weeks of incessant, subtropical downpours. Simultaneously Brisbane was being inundated, albeit at a snail's pace in comparison to what residents to the west were experiencing, as the Wivenhoe Dam was opened after reaching capacity. This action ultimately caused the Brisbane River to spill over. Combined with floodwaters from the Lockyer Creek and the Bremer River (which runs through Ipswich) Brisbane's riverbanks were redrawn to include the CBD, suburban streets and family homes. I flew in from Sydney the night before the Brisbane River would peak. From the sky, the city appeared to be largely blacked out, but still an occasional twinkling streetlight cut through. A view from the air is always an eerie one, but this seemed unusually so. On the ground, residents lined the banks of the Brisbane River through the night, quick to note any rise or fall in the water level as rain continued to spit. In the morning, many streets had been transformed into makeshift boat ramps, as the roads turned to rivers. Residents and rubbernecks – **yourself included??** – surveyed the scene in tinnies and canoes.

With these once-in-a-lifetime conditions came an unsettling mood that resulted from a high degree of helplessness. At the same time, however, a healthy lawlessness prevailed: for once, common sense ruled much of day-to-day life as traffic lights failed and police were occupied in areas of greater importance. Many people were tired, irritable and fractious. Though one can't blame anyone under such duress for less than normal sociability, it's something that I found to be far more evident in the city than I had experienced before or since in rural areas.

Many residents had time to remove household possessions and vehicles to higher ground before the muddy waters swallowed their homes. But with most of the city shut down while the water levels remained high, there was little to do but idle away time before the floods began to recede. Curiously, what resulted was – on top of the restiveness – an atmosphere not dissimilar to that of a public holiday. Pubs were bulging, neighbours entertained one another on their front porches, sharing stories of what they'd seen and heard, while the round-the-clock news broadcasts echoed from within.

But what I found in Grantham and other smaller communities deep in the Lockyer Valley, such as Helidon and Carpendale, was entirely different. Whereas the water in Brisbane had risen from the ground up, the Lockyer Valley had been completely blindsided. It wasn't simply flood-affected; water had destroyed, torn and displaced anything in its path. Cars, boats and light aircraft were strewn like children's toys across kilometres of farmland east of Grantham. A semitrailer was swept up, twisted, and tossed aside like an empty beer can; houses were lifted off their foundations and plonked down the road. The railway bridge that traverses Grantham acted like a giant strainer, collecting a dozen cars under its span. Downstream, judging by scars on the colossal grey gums and the flotsam left dangling from the crooks of their limbs, the torrent must have jumped some 20 metres from its bed.

Faces were quietly defiant. Despite the fact that this complete reversal – from 10 years of drought to *this* – had claimed more than a dozen local lives, these people appeared to me to be more accepting of the forces of nature than those barely an

hour away in the city. Stories of the carnage were as common as offers of assistance from complete strangers. Farming hardware, vehicles and man-hours were donated without hesitation.

Eddie Brosnan, whose homestead sat between Lockyer Creek and the highway to Grantham, watched a steady stream of army personnel and salvage equipment (to be used in the recovery of Grantham) drive by night and day. Although he was off the authorities' radar, Brosnan was not ignored by locals who, although having never met him, rolled up and had the property in a respectable state within days. Late one afternoon, I sat under one of the surviving corrugated-iron structures drinking the frosty can of beer (that great Aussie leveller) he'd handed me. **How was it still cold??** While I was most curious about his account of the day the wall of water came charging down the creek, overshooting the banks at every turn and eventually engulfing his own property (not to mention his ensuing rescue by helicopter from the roof of his home), Eddie was more interested in recounting the stories of generosity and simple humanity that had followed.

Cyclone Yasi

Barely a fortnight later, as news crews thinned out in Brisbane and funerals in Grantham became an almost daily occurrence, reports of a Category 5 Cyclone off the coast of Far North Queensland began to surface. In the early hours of 3 February, Cyclone Yasi crossed the coast between Tully Heads and Mission Beach with winds in excess of 250km an hour.

As Cyclone Yasi petered out across the Gulf Country further west, access to the affected areas was possible only by air. After being turned back by swollen rivers south, west and north of Townsville I was effectively in the shoes of the masses who evacuated before Cyclone Yasi made landfall. But again – in a time of severe adversity, as young families camped out by the side of roads severed by floodwaters, not knowing the fate of the homes they'd left behind and unable to contact loved ones who remained inside – an air of resigned grace radiated. Most people would simply shrug their shoulders and ask: “what c'nya do?”

There was no alternative but to pay a premium fare for a half-hour flight north from Townsville to Cairns. Then, finally, I could eventually enter the affected areas by car. The first signs of disturbance appeared in the form of mangled road signs near Innisfail. In my mind, I recalled the scenes played out on the news five years earlier when the banana-farming community was riven by Cyclone Larry. Now those memories were replaced by the reality of destroyed banana plantations that stretched out on both sides of the highway. Each trunk had yielded at the same point, their sappy, viscous torsoes doubled over in defeat.

I turned off the highway that bordered swathes of broken trees and sugar cane, and drove into the seaside towns of Cardwell and Tully Heads. These towns are the last bastions on an east coast that is slowly being swallowed by obtrusive development. Aside from the incongruous Port Hinchinbrook Resort, with its modern monstrosities and sparkling 4WDs, the shores of these hamlets are dotted with humble weatherboard homes and larger, less-quaint brick constructions whose owners have not moved since they built their homes. Now I found that Cardwell's beach had been washed away. Metres of sand had been dredged by the storm surge, dispersed through the streets and swept back out to sea – leaving trees lying prostrate or teetering on the giant ballast of exposed roots.

An Australian flag flew high in a leafless tree as if snagged there by accident during the storm. It is a symbol used for so many causes – from nationalism and pride to

imprudently conceived identity. During times of disaster, however, it can become a symbol of defiance and fortitude. Although not a uniquely Australian phenomenon, it's interesting to note communities' gravitation towards the flag. And, indeed, the *community* which it symbolises at such times.

Like the chimneys that stood firm during the Victorian bushfires, similar remnants could be found in the foundations of houses along the beachfront at Tully Heads. A toilet, standing alone, looked more throne-like than ever. In Cardwell a clothes dryer stood on the beach, while a windmill adjacent to a crucifix represented a juxtaposition fit for a sermon.

Through all of this, however, I encountered that interminable characteristic of perseverance that seems endemic among rural Australians – that “just carry on” attitude. It was something I experienced on all three occasions. Under the most demanding of circumstances, the surviving victims of these disasters had the innate ability to produce, without fail, a stubby of beer from an esky full of ice.

As if everything would then be alright.

Until the next time.

Andrew Quilty is a photographer and writer based in Sydney. A member of the Oculi collective of photographers, his photographs have appeared before in The Big Issue; the 'Roving Eye' in Ed#302 featured his series on Utopia, the remote Aboriginal community. See also oculi.com.au and andrewquilty.com

[optional quotes]

(fire)

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(water)

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