



Source: AP/AFP, 'Iraqis vote on constitution aimed at defining democracy', *Sydney Morning Herald* online, 16/10/05.

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Writer/s: [Gregory Pryor](#)

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A fire of incredible intensity had flared up in the hills in January. Smoke had descended on the city that was built on the coastal plain nearby. Ash settled on all things. One morning I lay inside a mosquito-net dome that I'd erected underneath a Hills hoist clothesline and watched the ash settle on the shell that housed me—it acted as a type of filter, allowing a finer grey powder to settle on my body and the white bedclothes. Everything was bathed in an orange light as if one was looking at the world from inside a beer bottle. 'Twenty-eight parrots' (*Platycercus zonarius*) came to examine the sunflowers that had grown to a height of almost three metres. They would find a flower of appropriate size and maturity then snip it off with their beak, dexterously holding it in one claw before proceeding to eat the seeds according to the Fibonacci sequence, from the perimeter of the flower head to the centre.

In the aftermath of the fire a number of things happened. It was as if a different order was set in place. I began to place small pieces of black sugar paper out in the summer sun, monitoring the rate at which the colour faded. I wrote to all my friends who lived in other parts of the world, asking them each to send me a bottle of black ink. I visited herbariums to inquire about which plant communities had been destroyed by the fire. I was told that not only did the fire destroy plants, but it was also instrumental in allowing certain species to flourish. Only a few days after the fires had been contained and had scorched all in its path, a rare species of fungus called the 'stonemaker fungus' (*Laccoccephalum tumulosum*) had

been found pushing its cap up through the blackened earth. This rare find was thought to be 46 years old, its stem connected to its huge fungal body that lived a metre underground. Like bread dough activated by yeast and heat, this subterranean fungus needed an extremely hot fire to entice it to show its cap.

Last night I went back to the area where the bushfire had raged. It was eerily quiet. I had a slow and aromatic walk. The larger trees were sprouting tufts of bright green re-growth. The floor of the forest was a bewildering array of flowers and shrubs. It was the first time I had seen the small elephant orchids (*Pyrorchis nigricans*) with their blood red 'trunks' and 'ears'. They are usually an inconspicuous little heart-shaped leaf pinned to the ground, but like the stonemaker fungus, these little orchids require the volatile mix of fire, smoke and heat to seduce them into revealing their sexual parts.

Ink and water and blood and ash. I couldn't work out what was dry and what was wet anymore. I ran my hand over the large blackened trunk of a tree that felt like thick velvet and produced a sound that reminded me of tinsel. I picked up a small piece of charcoal. It was light and dry and felt good in my hand. The moon, approaching its full size, had blossomed from the silhouette of a charred banksia. I returned to the car and drove back to the city, thinking of milk paint and the peculiar swelling properties of paper made from the bark of *Tetrapanax papyriferum*, a plant native to the island of Taiwan.

*Adapted for performance from a story by Greg Pryor.*