

An artistic illustration of two koalas clinging to a tree branch. The larger koala is in the foreground, looking directly at the viewer with its large, dark nose and orange-brown eyes. A smaller koala is perched behind it, also looking forward. The background is a warm, textured wash of light brown and orange tones, with green eucalyptus leaves scattered around the koalas. The overall style is soft and painterly.

Finding Home

Sandra Markle

Illustrated by

Alan Marks

With love for my husband, Skip Jeffery—S. M.

For my mother, Florrie Marks—A. M.

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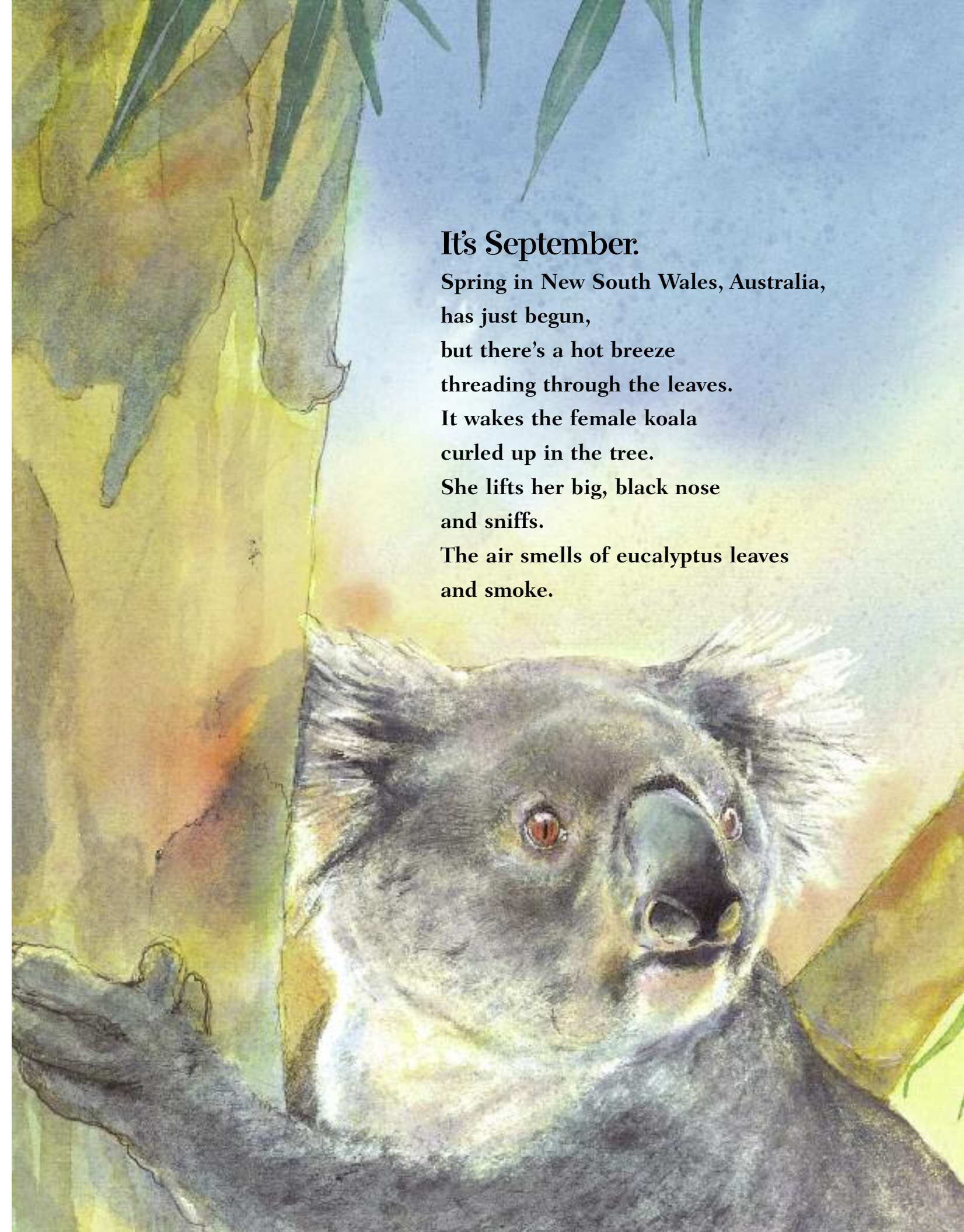
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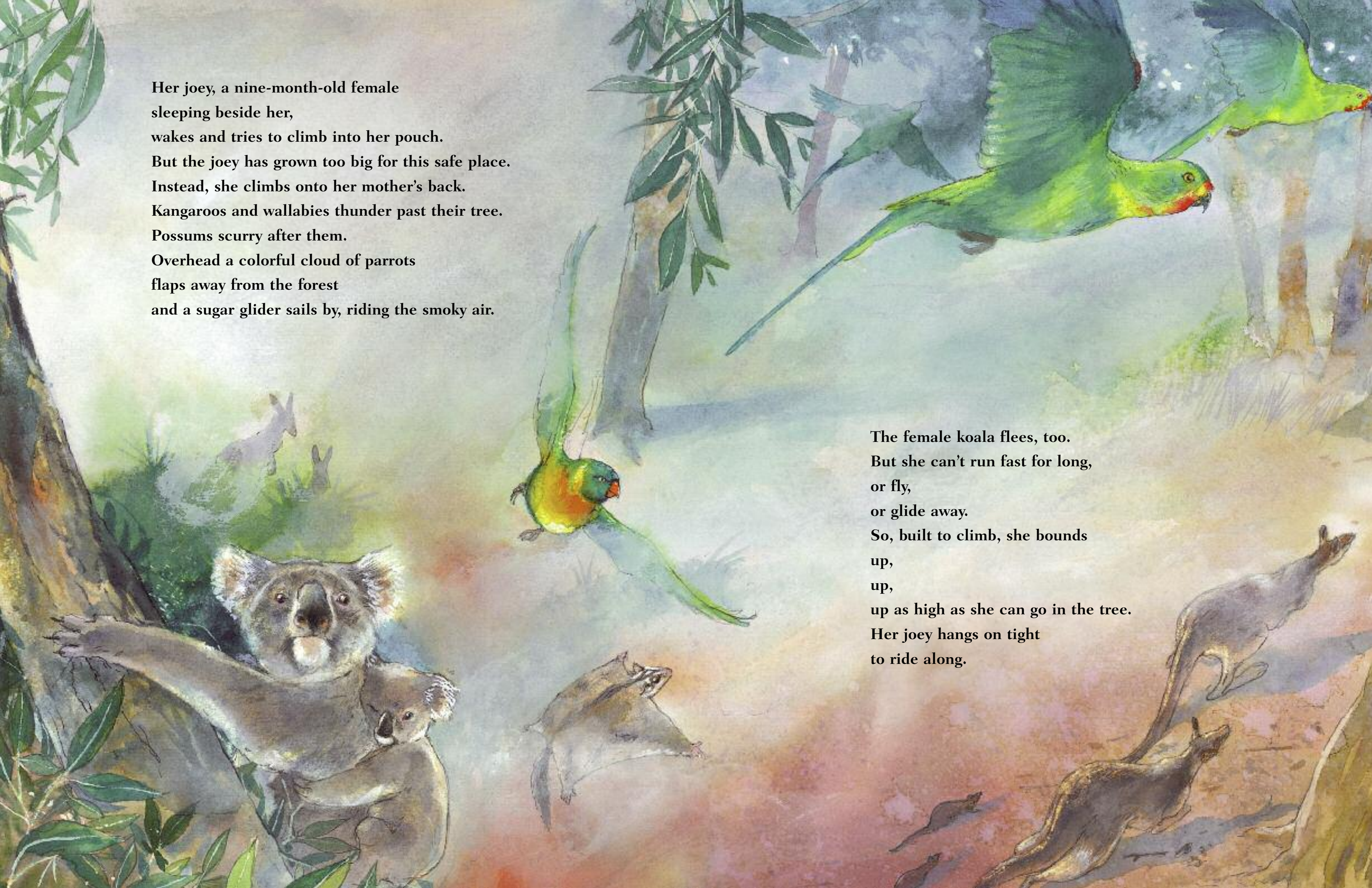
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It's September.


Spring in New South Wales, Australia,
has just begun,
but there's a hot breeze
threading through the leaves.
It wakes the female koala
curled up in the tree.
She lifts her big, black nose
and sniffs.
The air smells of eucalyptus leaves
and smoke.





Her joey, a nine-month-old female
sleeping beside her,
wakes and tries to climb into her pouch.
But the joey has grown too big for this safe place.
Instead, she climbs onto her mother's back.
Kangaroos and wallabies thunder past their tree.
Possums scurry after them.
Overhead a colorful cloud of parrots
flaps away from the forest
and a sugar glider sails by, riding the smoky air.

The female koala flees, too.
But she can't run fast for long,
or fly,
or glide away.
So, built to climb, she bounds
up,
up,
up as high as she can go in the tree.
Her joey hangs on tight
to ride along.

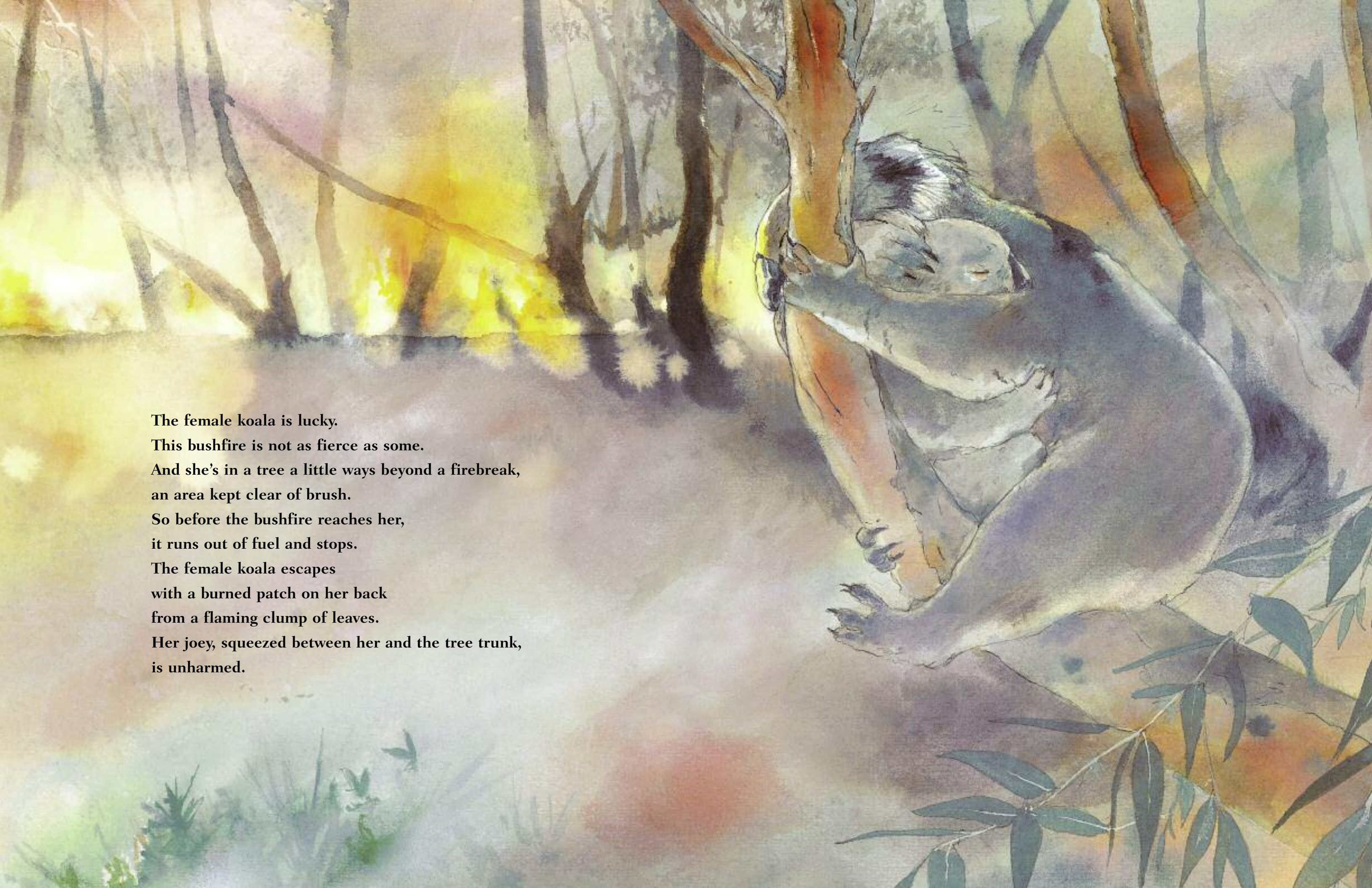


Fire sweeps through the forest—
crackling,
snapping,
roaring.

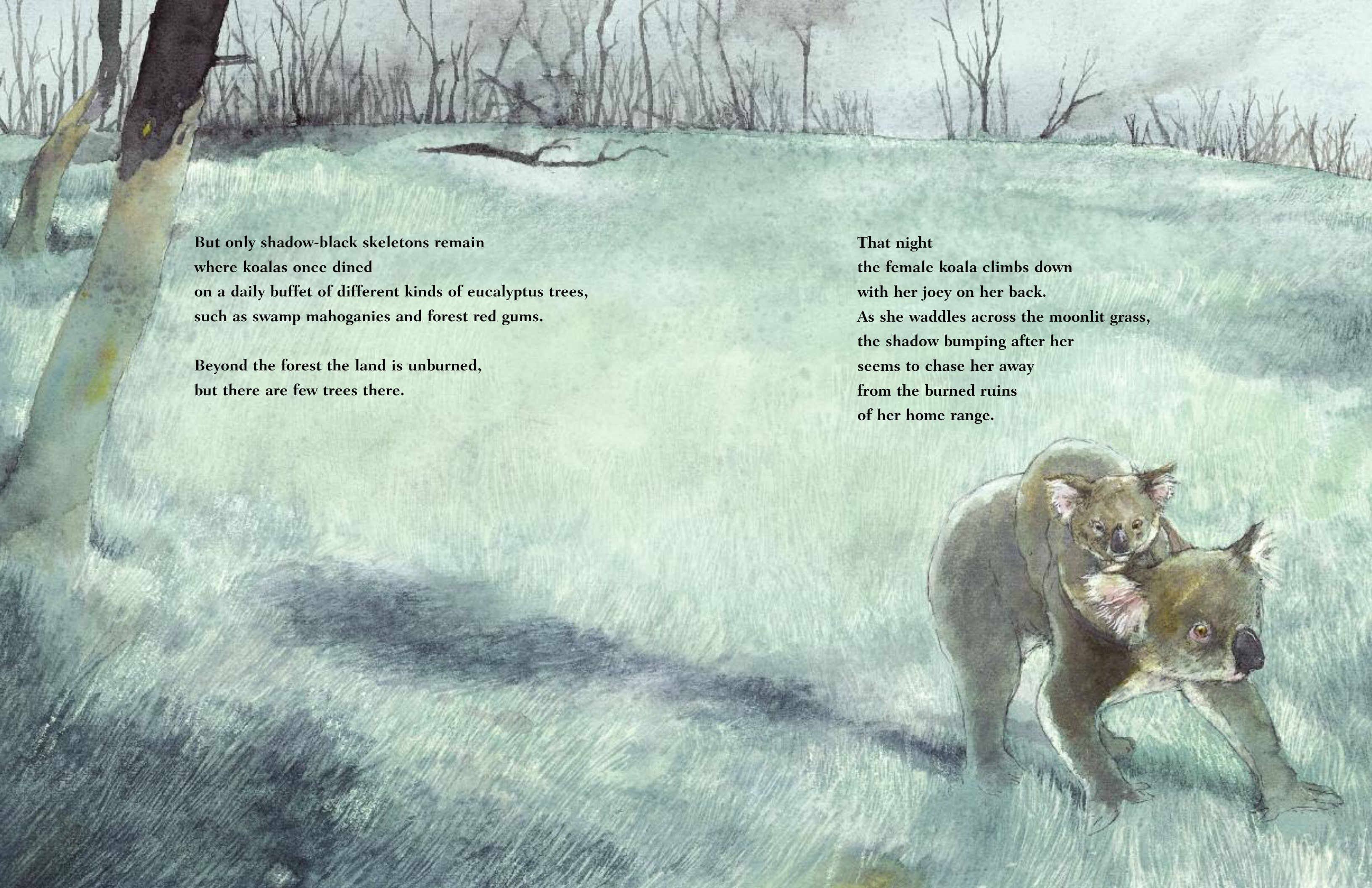
Waves of flames roll over brush,
crawl up tree trunks,
and leap through the air,
eating every leaf they touch.

Higher still—
as high as the huddled koalas—
swirls the mud-black smoke.

And through this thick cloud
swarms of sparks
fly, land, and
sting.



The female koala is lucky.
This bushfire is not as fierce as some.
And she's in a tree a little ways beyond a firebreak,
an area kept clear of brush.
So before the bushfire reaches her,
it runs out of fuel and stops.
The female koala escapes
with a burned patch on her back
from a flaming clump of leaves.
Her joey, squeezed between her and the tree trunk,
is unharmed.

A painting of a koala mother and her joey in a grassy field. The mother koala is in the foreground, walking towards the right, with her joey clinging to her back. The background shows a field of tall grass and a line of charred, skeletal trees under a pale sky. The style is painterly with visible brushstrokes.

But only shadow-black skeletons remain
where koalas once dined
on a daily buffet of different kinds of eucalyptus trees,
such as swamp mahoganies and forest red gums.

Beyond the forest the land is unburned,
but there are few trees there.

That night
the female koala climbs down
with her joey on her back.
As she waddles across the moonlit grass,
the shadow bumping after her
seems to chase her away
from the burned ruins
of her home range.

A little farther on, the female koala
lifts her big, black nose and sniffs the air.
She needs to eat leaves,
but not just any kind will do.
So when her keen sense of smell doesn't detect
any promising scents,
she waddles on.

Hour after hour,
the female koala searches for a meal.
Sometimes, when the burden of carrying her big joey is too much,
she shakes her shoulders.
The joey slips off and tags along
until the female koala stops to sniff the air again.
Then the joey quickly climbs back on to hitch a ride.

