

FOX

MARGARET WILD

and
Ron Brooks



THROUGH THE CHARRED FOREST,
OVER HOT ASH, RUNS DOG, with a bird
clamped in his big, gentle mouth.
He takes her to his cave above the river,
and there he tries to tend her burnt wing;

but Magpie does not want
his help.

"I will never again be able to fly,"
she whispers.

"I know," says Dog.
He is silent for a moment, then he says,
"I am blind in one eye,
but life is still good."

"An eye is nothing!" says Magpie.
"How would you feel if you
couldn't run?"

Dog does not answer.
Magpie drags her body
into the shadow of the rocks,
until she feels herself
melting into blackness.

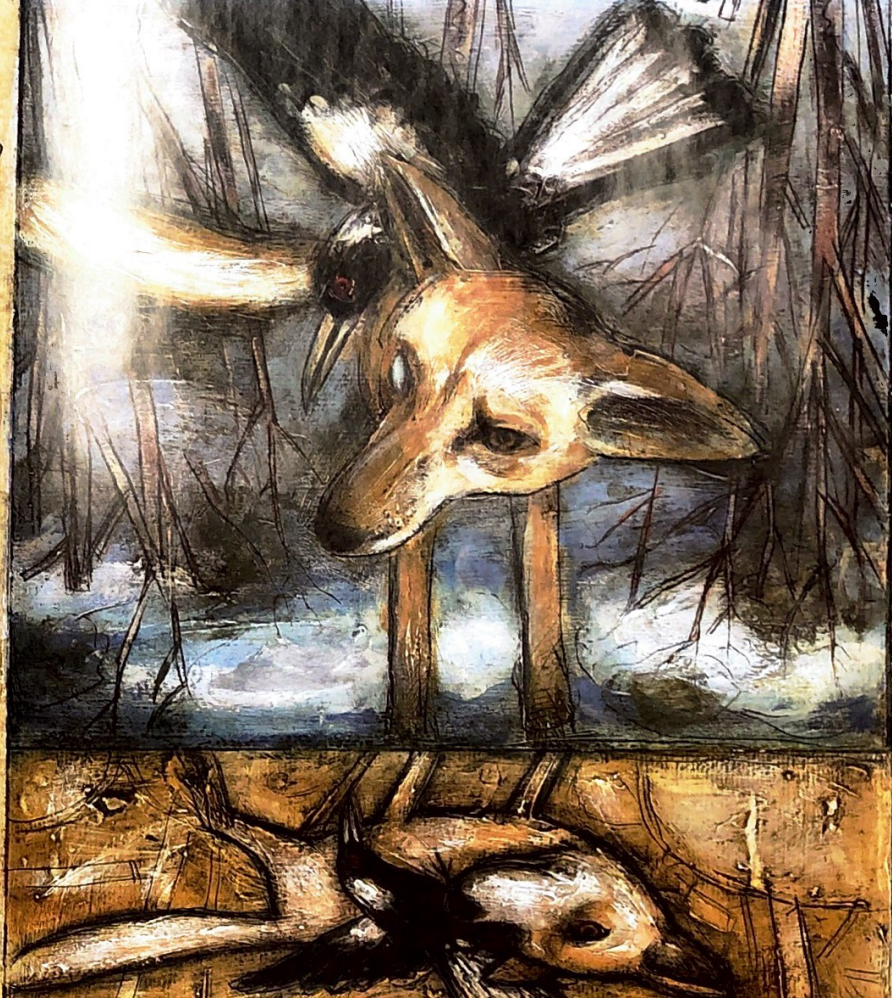


DAYS, perhaps a week later, she WAKES with a rush of grief. Dog is waiting. He persuades her to go with him to the riverbank.

"Hop on my back,"
he says. "Look into the
water and tell me
what you see."

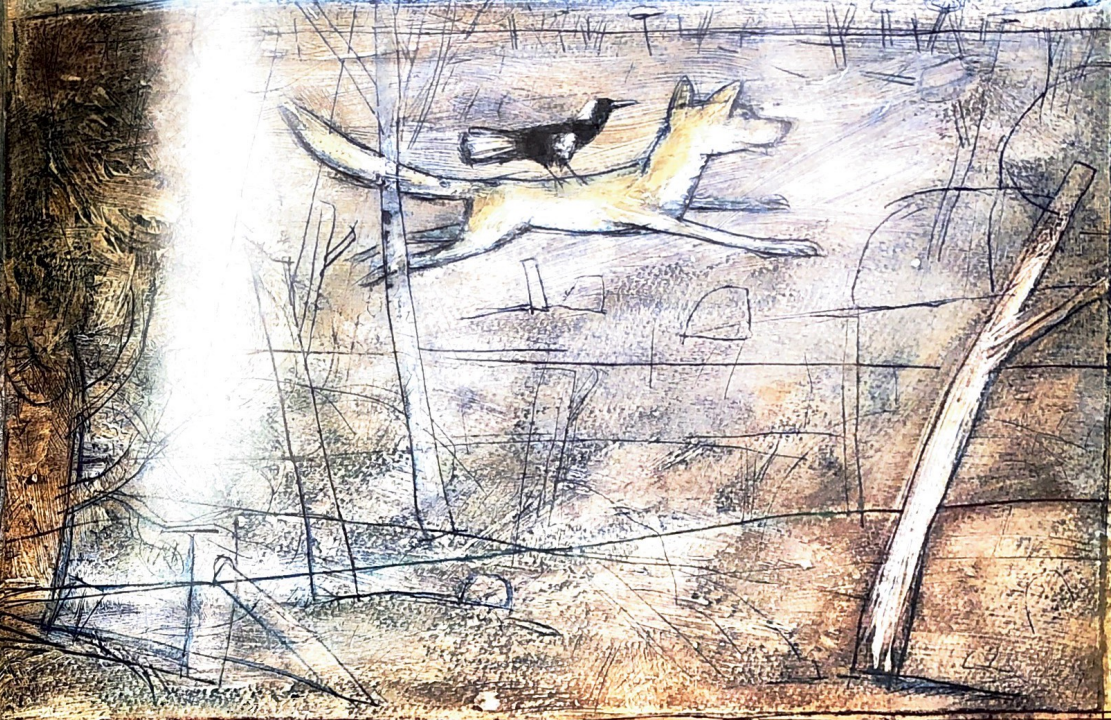
Sighing, Magpie does as he asks.
Reflected in the water are clouds and sky
and trees — and something else.

"I see a strange new creature!" she says.



"That is us," says Dog. "Now hold on tight!"

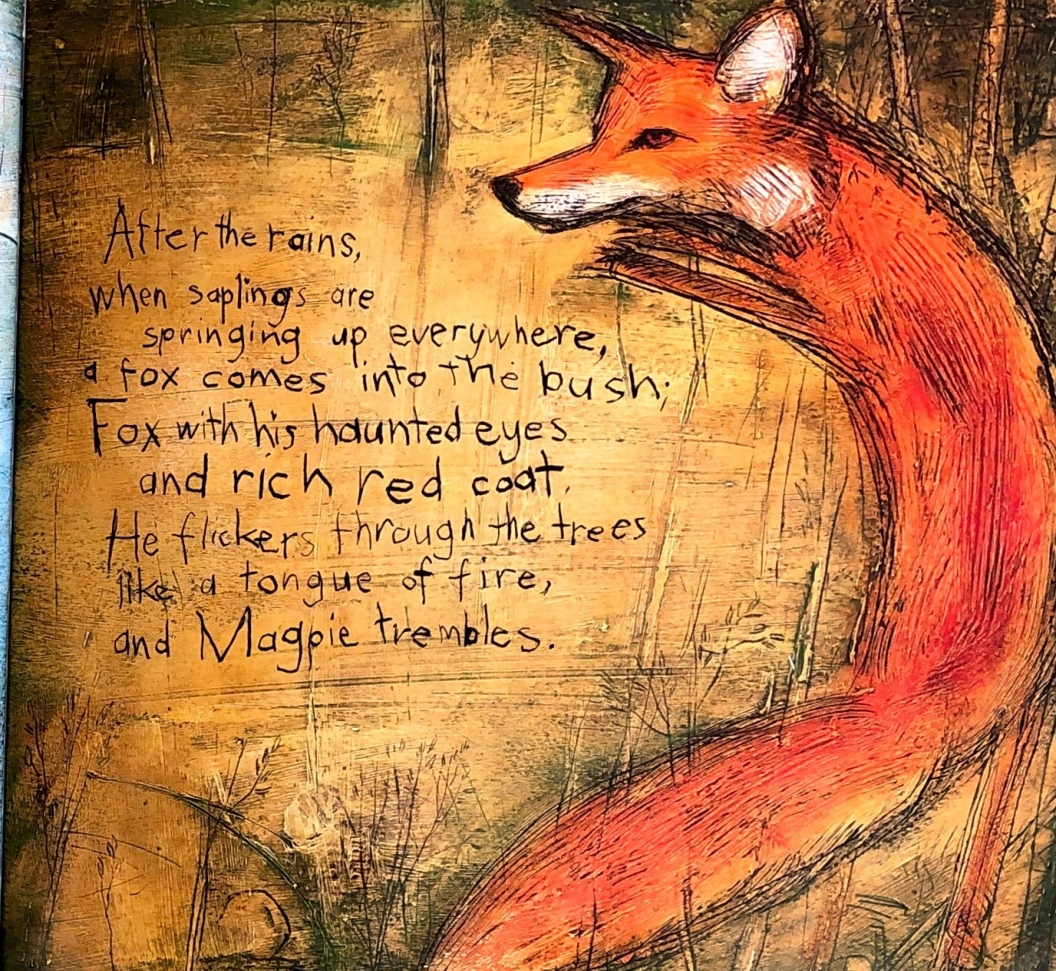
With Magpie clinging to his back, he races through the scrub, past the stringybarks, past the clumps of yellow box trees, and into blueness. He runs so swiftly, it is almost as if he were flying.



Magpie feels the wind streaming through her feathers, and she rejoices. "FLY, DOG, FLY! I will be your missing eye, and you will be my wings."

An illustration of a light brown dog running to the right. A black magpie is perched on its back, facing forward. The dog's mouth is open, and its eyes are wide. The background is a textured, brownish-green wash with dark, sketchy lines suggesting a natural setting.

And so Dog runs, with Magpie
on his back, every day,
through Summer, through Winter.

An illustration of a red fox standing and looking to the left. The fox's fur is rendered in vibrant shades of red and orange, with dark outlines and cross-hatching for texture. The background is a textured, brownish-green wash with dark, sketchy lines suggesting a natural setting.

After the rains,
when saplings are
springing up everywhere,
a fox comes into the bush;
Fox with his haunted eyes
and rich red coat,
He flickers through the trees
like a tongue of fire,
and Magpie trembles.

But Dog says, "Welcome.
We can offer you food
and shelter."



"Thank you," says Fox.
"I saw you running this morning.
You looked extraordinary."

Dog beams,
but Magpie
shrinks
away.



She can feel Fox staring at her burnt wing.

In the evenings, when the air is creamy with blossom,
Dog and Magpie relax at the mouth of the cave,
enjoying each other's company.

Now and again Fox joins in the conversation,
but Magpie can feel him watching,
always watching her.



And at night his smell seems to fill the cave—
a smell of rage and envy and loneliness.





Magpie tries to warn Dog about Fox.
"He belongs nowhere," she says. "He loves no one."
But Dog says, "He's all right. Let him be."



That night, when Dog is asleep, Fox whispers to Magpie,
"I can run faster than Dog. Faster than the wind.
Leave Dog and come with me."
Magpie says, "I will never leave Dog. I am his
missing eye and he is my wings."

Fox says no more that night,
but the next day when Dog is at the river,
he whispers to Magpie, "Do you
remember what it is like to fly?
Truly fly?"

Again Magpie says, "I will never leave Dog.
I am his missing eye
and he is my wings."

But later that day, as Dog
runs through the scrub with
Magpie on his back, she thinks,
"This is nothing like flying.
Nothing!"

And when at dawn
Fox whispers to her
for the third time,
she whispers back,
"I am ready."






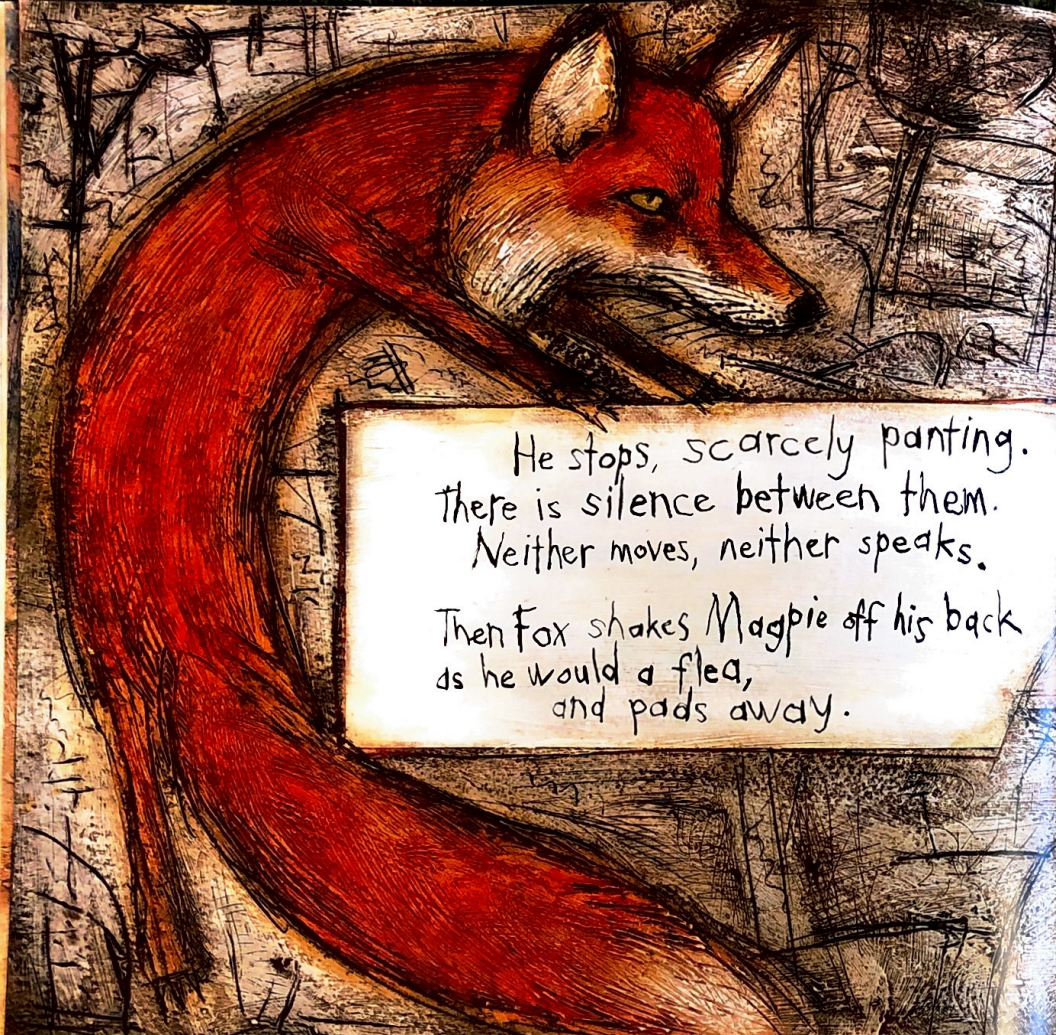
While Dog sleeps, Magpie and Fox streak past coolibah trees, rip through long grass, pelt over rocks.



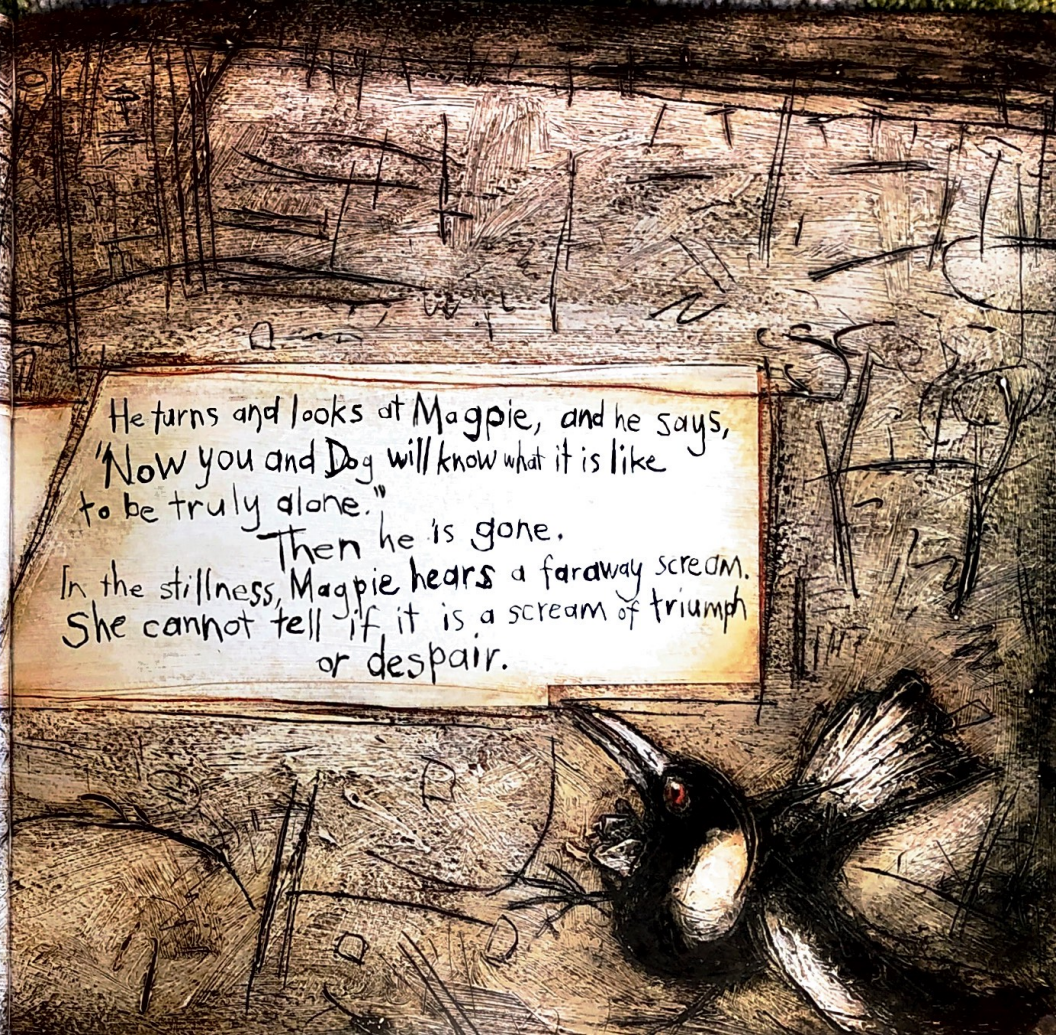
Fox runs so fast that his feet scarcely touch the ground, and Magpie exults, "At last I am flying. Really flying!"



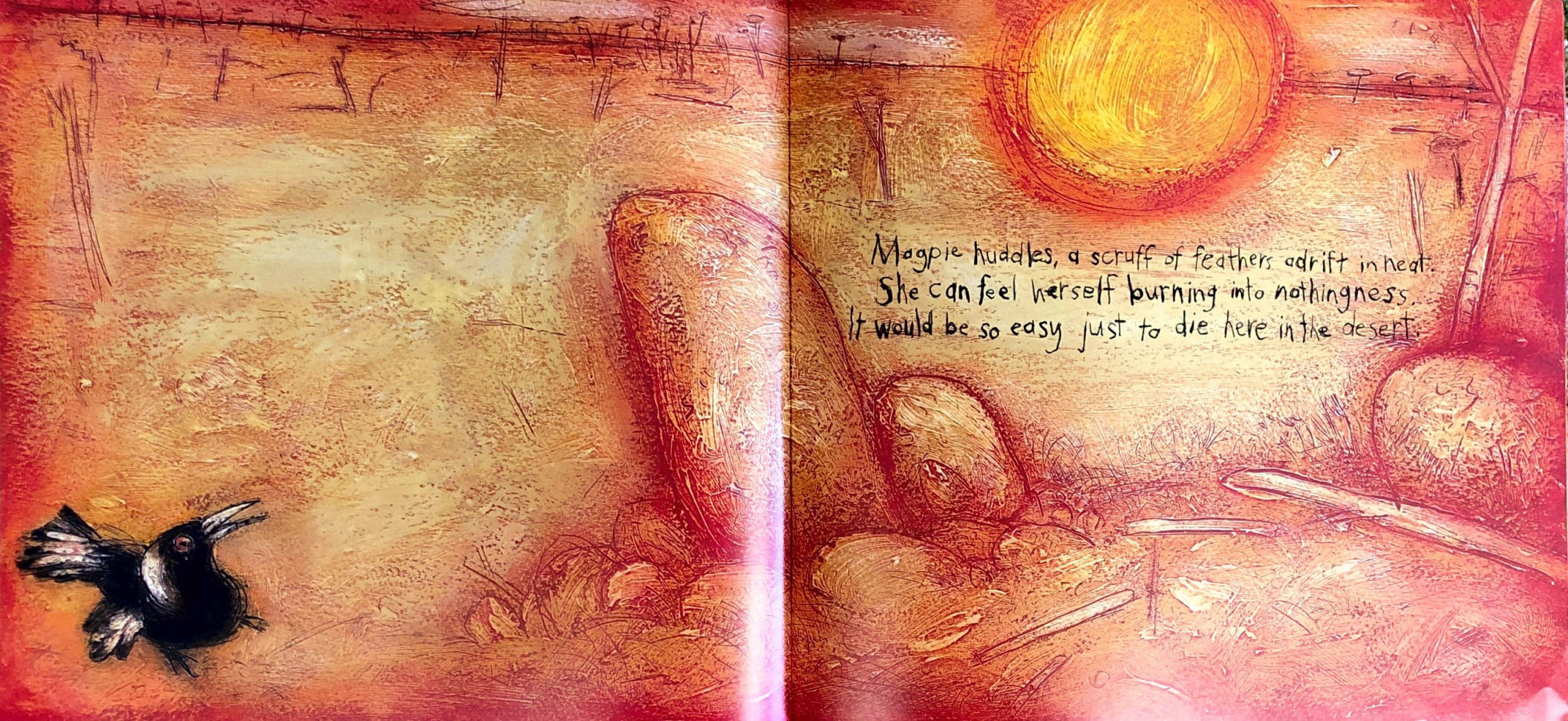
Fox scorches through woodlands,
through dusty plains, through salt pans,
and out into the hot red desert.

A detailed illustration of a red fox with a long, bushy tail, looking towards the right. The fox is rendered in shades of red and orange, with white fur on its chest and muzzle. The background is a dark, textured brown with black scribbles representing trees or a forest.

He stops, scarcely panting.
There is silence between them.
Neither moves, neither speaks.
Then Fox shakes Magpie off his back
as he would a flea,
and pads away.

A detailed illustration of a black magpie with a white breast, standing on the ground. The magpie is rendered in black and white, with a red eye. The background is a dark, textured brown with black scribbles representing trees or a forest.

He turns and looks at Magpie, and he says,
"Now you and Dog will know what it is like
to be truly alone."
Then he is gone.
In the stillness, Magpie hears a faraway scream.
She cannot tell if it is a scream of triumph
or despair.



Magpie huddles, a scruff of feathers adrift in heat.
She can feel herself burning into nothingness.
It would be so easy just to die here in the desert.

But then she thinks of Dog waking to find her gone.





Slowly, jiggety-hop,
she begins the long journey home.

