
THE RAVEN'S SONG
ZANA FRAILLON AND BREN MacDIBBLE



ZANA FRAILLON
AND BREN MacDIBBLE

Old Barn Books

AN OLD BARN BOOK

First published in the UK by Old Barn Books Ltd 2022

Copyright © Alexandra Fraillon and Bren MacDibble 2022

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

Old Barn Books Ltd
West Sussex
Follow us on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter @oldbarnbooks

Email: info@oldbarnbooks.com
Web: www.oldbarnbooks.com

Distributed in the UK by Bounce Sales and Marketing Ltd
Sales@bouncemarketing.co.uk

ISBN: hardback edition: 9781910646816
paperback edition: 9781910646854
eBook ISBN: 9781910646861

The right of Zana Fraillon and Bren MacDibble to be identified as the authors of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with the Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Cover and text design by Joanna Hunt
UK typesetting and design by Sheila Smallwood
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

First UK edition

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Here at Old Barn Books we are big fans of writing from Australia. Visit our website to discover more award-winning and bestselling Australian authors, including Paul Jennings, Carnegie-shortlisted Glenda Millard and First Nations author Lisa Fuller, whose spooky YA debut *Ghost Bird* draws on her deep-rooted relationship with family and the land of her ancestors.

MIX
Paper from responsible sources
FSC® C171272



To Mum and Dad – for magic mice, fairy trees, wishing boxes, ghosts, and the stories that made me a writer. And to all those future ancestors fighting to save the world – we hear you. –ZF



To the young hearts and minds whose beautiful stubborn optimism will change the future. –BM





THE RAVENED GIRL OF THE BOG

(An old local folk song)

Upon one moonlit night she came
Down hillside steep and rocked
Into the place of inbetween
The Ravened Girl of the bog

Not of this world, nor of the next
In cloaks of mist and fog
She lay herself to rest in both
The Ravened Girl of the bog

Listen, listen, listen, she sang
And all through the night she spoke
In whispers long forgotten
As the souls around her woke

And in the morn they left her there
Deep down in the dark of the quag
And there she rests, and there she waits
The Ravened Girl of the bog

Never truly dead, they say
Yet never again to live
She lies and waits in waters deep
Old whispers for to give

Can you hear her as she calls for you?
Through time's great swirling fog
Listen, listen, listen . . .
Sings the Ravened Girl of the bog
Listen, listen, listen . . .
Sings the Ravened Girl of the bog.



Just once I'd like to sleep in. Just once.

There's barely a glow behind our honoured hills. The sun hardly lights my room. 'No need for curtains,' Da always says, 'coz we're up the moment our part of the world turns to the sun.' Just once though, I'd like to not be up with the sun and not coz I'm sick or nothing but coz it's nice to lie in the cool before the day heats up.

'Girl!' Da yells like he never learned my name.

'Uh?' I yell back like I never learned his.

'Girl, I need you to check the fence line before you go to school. Kashvi's lost a sheep to something.'

I haul myself out of bed and pull on my work clothes. I dun no how Da's already talked to our neighbour Kashvi and decided it's our section of fence what's got a gap, not unless Davy's already been along his section while I was lying in bed, ignoring Da's yelling, dreaming bout sleeping in. At least I'm not the only kid up to do work before school.

The door cracks open and Da pokes his head in. 'You hear me, sleepy bones?' he asks.

'Five times,' I say and give him a thumbs up.

'Good.' He shuts the door.

I wipe the sleep from my eyes and tromp out to the kitchen where Da's holding out a drink bottle in one hand and the bag with the pliers and wire in the other. I sling the bag over my shoulder and slide the drink bottle in on top.

'Nice and tight like I showed you,' he says, and musses my short hair. 'Let the chickens out on the way.'

'Uh!' I say and head out the back door, shove on my sunhat and slide my feet into my boots. I duck into the combustion loo on the way and, while I'm sitting down anyway, I do up my boots. Multi-tasking.

When I step out, Davy's hanging over the fence. 'Hey, Shel. Want me to come with you?' He looks over to the kitchen window where Da's standing. 'Kind morning to you, Mr Jones!' he yells.

'Din't you already climb up and walk your section of fence this morning?' I ask.

'Yeah, mostly with a torch. The thing woke me early, growling and roaring.'

'Like a monster?' I ask, all excited for a story.

'Like a lion or a tiger!' Davy says. 'I don't wanna see you go up there alone.'

'They just et a sheep,' I say. 'They won't be hungry for a scrawny kid.'

Davy laughs. 'I read that some beasts kill and store food for later. You wanna be all dead and stuffed in the crook of a tree?'

I frown. I don't think there's lions or tigers up there in the honoured jungle above both our farms, but it's still dark enough to be spooky. 'Come on then,' I say and head off across the paddock to the chicken shed. I stop to slide the door open and hens leap from the perches, squawking like they's surprised the world turned back to the sun today, and run outside into our fields in a clucking, flapping horde. It's a race to the grass, even if they was out yesterday and the day before and all the days before that in their short little lives.

We climb our hill to the tall jungle fence line that runs along the back of our property, both of us puffing a bit, sweat on our cheekbones. Ours and Davy's land being outermost this side of the township, this fence is our responsibility. If anything from the honoured and natural world outside gets in, that's on us.

Our section runs from here right down our hill to the

riverbank, where a dam controls the flow of water so we've always got some for our township. Our honoured river runs on under the fence into the wilderness. A cliff on the other side of our river follows it for ages and does the job of a fence. Anything from the natural world outside starting down that cliff will find itself smooshed at the bottom pretty quick, no matter how honoured it is.

There's a fence down on the flats, which is Mr Hajji's responsibility. It keeps the scrubland animals from coming to eat his wheat. The next township is beyond that fence line, bout two hundred and sixty kilometres south of us. I sometimes sit up here and think bout that township, wonder if there's another girl running an egg farm with her da over there. I'd like to talk to that girl one day. But two hundred and sixty kilometres is a long way to walk, even if we was allowed out there. And the doctor has the only phone on our seven hundred, just for emergencies and government business, so I can't see it ever happening.

Each township has three hundred and fifty people on seven hundred fenced-off hectares of land. No more people than that. No more or less land. These is the scientific numbers that lets the land support us and that lets us care for the land. Three hundred and fifty-one people and

we start to go hungry, not if it's a little baby of course, but maybe when it gets bigger.

Davy's almost a year younger than me, his birth being approved when my ma died after I was born. Davy replaced my mother to bring the number back to three hundred and fifty, but I don't hold that against him. I guess life is hard without a mother, but life would also be hard without a best friend like Davy. And I know Davy. I din't ever get to know my mother. So when kids at school ask if I'd swap Davy back for my ma, I stomp on their toes.

'Did you have breakfast yet?' Davy asks and sits down on the hillside looking back over the township. He pulls out a lunch tin from his bag and inside is four eggy muffins full of feta cheese and veggies.

'Your mas is amazing.' I grab two and sit down in the tall tickly grass beside him. I'd be twice as scrawny if it wasn't for his mas' understanding that kids need a lot of food. Da ain't much one for cooking.

The township's waking up like a little toy town below us. The windmills turning, the cottage doors thrown open to catch the morning breeze, the flash of solar ovens being turned to the sun. The line of Mrs Nguyen's dairy cows heading out to new grass with their younger calves, and just reunited with their older calves who's galloping

and bucking, happy to be free after being shedded overnight to stop them being greedy little guzzlers, and her old dog Hiro making sure they all go in the right direction. Each pasture is edged by wildflowers and nut trees, like a colourful fringe on a blanket. Mrs Wang's beehive roofs is dotted through them, mostly tucked under the bigger nut trees in the shade. Her bees will be up early too, buzzing in flowers.

Our teacher, Miss Drinkwater, is outside the Walter Ticerat Community School sweeping the yard. She put in for retirement three years ago, but no word of a replacement from the government yet.

Mr Hajji leads his mules to the water trough and fetches their harnesses. Maybe he's getting ready to plant into the wheat stubble in his paddock from where it's been cut. We all got a week off school to help with that harvest. He'll stop before midday and let the mules lie bout in the shade. They's getting old, his mules, but Mr Hajji says he don't wanna train young ones so he don't mind that the government's not sent him new mules. Edith and Eddie know his land, he says, they know when to pull and when to wait patiently and it'll be a sad day when they get too old to work.

Davy points. The doctor is strolling across the field below us, heading on a direct path away from the trees

around the dam back towards her house. 'Why's Dr Geraldine been to the dam so early? Me and Ma usually check the dam on Fridays.'

I shrug, and shove the last of my second muffin into my cheeks as I get up. 'Leth's find that hole,' I say around my mouthful.

We walk the fence for a while, me sucking at my teeth to get at the last of that eggy muffin, and we spot the gap from a long way off coz it's edged in white wool snagged from the sheep that got pulled through.

Normally gaps in the fence is ground level where the wire's rusted from sitting in the soil and some honoured critter's pushed up under it, but the gap we find looks like it was cut straight up in a line through the strong wire so a man bent double could push it open and squeeze through.

'Who cut it?' I ask.

Davy rattles the fence. 'Is the wire faulty?' Coz no one from our township would cut a perimeter fence, ever.

I hunt around the ground and find a couple of the links that've fallen from the fence and show Davy the wire where it's been squeezed and snipped. 'Cut!' I say.

Davy takes a link and turns it every which way and shakes his head. 'Who'd do that?' he asks. 'A perimeter fence!'

'At least we know the wild dog went back through.' I point at the clumps of wool on the wire and the blood smears either side of the fence.

Davy nods, checks out the fence up close and plucks some dark yellow fur and some black fur. 'Tiger.'

''Twasn't no tiger, Davy. Ain't no tigers round here.' I set to work with the pliers, wrapping new wire round and round to close up the gap between each link. 'The honoured and natural world is native animals only. A tiger in there with all them fat wild fowls and critters and things? Government would've hunted it down with drones a hundred years ago when the fences went up.'

Davy shakes his head. ''Twasn't no wild dog that drug a whole sheep up this hill and through this fence. This bit of land is different to what you read in schoolbooks,' he says. 'This bit's fenced off from the honoured and natural world. It don't connect to the rest.'

'How do you know?' I ask.

'I saw it when I went into the dam to help Ma clear the township water supply. There's a fence that connects near the dam fence. Not just any fence, it's real tall with barbwire on the top and signs saying *Keep Out.*'

'Why would that be?' I ask.

Davy shrugs. 'I dunno. I tried asking but no one

knows. Ma made me promise to never go in there and when I asked her why, she said, "Could be all manner of dangerous beasts in there." Like tigers, Shelby Jones.' Davy makes his eyes wide and lifts up claw hands. 'Tigers!'

A gust of cool air whispers out of the honoured trees and licks at my throat. I wipe it off with the back of my hand before it sets me shivering. 'She's just trying to keep you from getting in trouble by poking around in the good and natural world,' I say. 'She knows you's a sticky beak.'

Davy gives me a shove in the back for my cheek. Then he goes all quiet and pulls himself up against the fence, staring off up the trail made by the sheep getting dragged into the honoured jungle. 'Yeah? If this is part of the honoured and natural world, what's that?' Davy pokes a pointing finger through the fence links.

The wind gusts cool again, making the jungle leaves swish like something's brushing against them, making my hot skin goosebump.

I look where he's pointing, deep into the shadows under tall glossy-leafed trees that don't grow anywhere else on our seven hundred or on the other borders.

Tied around a tree is a wide white ribbon with a posy of wildflowers stuck through it. Dangling from them, spinning on a string in the breeze, is a disc-shape thing

bout as wide as a saucer with a hole in the middle. The sun bounces off its shiny mirror surface, making rainbows slide and flitter over the leaves all around it. Me and Davy twist our heads, chasing the darting rainbows as they vanish and start up new back at the disc.

'Wow!' Davy whispers.





There's a raven standing next to Phoenix's bed. A giant raven, big as a man. It's wearing bright red sneakers, and is holding a black candle and a dripping wet sack. At least, Phoenix *thinks* it's a raven. He only got a quick glimpse before snapping his eyes shut tight, but it has one white feather right on top of its head, and Phoenix has never seen a raven with a white feather before, so maybe it isn't a raven at all. To be fair, he has never seen a man-sized raven before, or a raven in sneakers, or a raven carrying candles or sacks, so the feather is probably, on the whole, not so important.

The raven leans closer, nudging Phoenix with its beak. Phoenix tries not to move, tries to pretend he's deep, deep asleep. If he's asleep, the raven will leave him alone. He'll take his candle and sack of whatever's wriggling and dripping and go back to wherever it came from, and Phoenix can tell himself it was just a dream. A hallucination even, brought on by the everyday stresses of

being twelve. Giant ravens are *not* real. Logically, it makes no sense. Those wings could never lift a body that big, not to mention finding shoes to fit over those claws – but dreams and hallucinations don't drip, and this one is making Phoenix's head quite wet.

Just keep still and it will go away... The raven does not go away. It stamps its foot and snaps its beak and the air cracks like lightning, the noise growing to a rumbling, and the whole house shudders.

Phoenix sneaks a glance at his little brother Walter, still fast asleep in his bed. He takes three long, deep breaths to try and calm his mind like the doctor told him to, but even as he does he knows it will do no good. It never does. Ever since he was little, Phoenix has seen and heard things that other people don't. *It's not real. It's not real* – has been Phoenix's mantra for as long as he can remember.

'Emotional reactivity to trauma,' the doctor calls it.

'Rubbish,' Auntie Josie calls it.

'Your sixth sense!' Gran calls it, and she talks about a great gift passed down through generations of their family. 'Just like your grandfather, and his mother, and her mother before her!'

But there is no gift to waking up to a giant raven in sneakers. It's just creepy. Phoenix wishes it would leave him alone and go be a gift to someone who wants it. Like his

sister Ida. She's right into all that magicky stuff. But the strange happenings aren't going away, and lately, they've been coming more often than ever.

Like on Monday, when the day turned dark as night and steam rose from the kitchen floor and small specks of fire and light danced in the air around them and Phoenix was sure it was a sinkhole opening up to devour them whole. And outside, Mum stood at the window, staring in and tapping the glass, even though she's been dead for years. No one else noticed a thing. His three older sisters were all there, and they just kept chatting and making sandwiches, and after a bit the lights faded and the steam swirled in on itself and his mum turned to a smudge on the glass, and the day just went back to being a sunny, ordinary, everyday day and all Phoenix could do was tell himself over and over again, *It's not real.*

But that panicky little voice in Phoenix's head keeps whispering – *what if… what if it* is *real?* What if all *that* was the raven's doing too, steaming up the earth to get attention. What will the bird do if it's ignored for a second time? Maybe it'll send a real sinkhole so large it devours the whole house. The whole suburb. The whole city even. That would be a lot to be held responsible for. Phoenix opens his eyes and sits up, dragging his covers over his chin.

'You're not real,' Phoenix whispers very quietly.

'Probably … I have a very overactive imagination. All my teachers say so …'

The raven clicks his beak and turns his head to look at Phoenix with one pale, beady eye, and then turns his head again to see him from the other.

Sweat breaks out across Phoenix's face and chest and he tightens the cover across his throat. 'Just a little, probably?' The raven jiggles the muddied sack and nods sharply and Phoenix nods quickly back. What is he even agreeing to? He stops nodding.

'Raaaarrrrrk?' The raven leans low over Phoenix and whispers, and the noise of that bird whisper is the sound of leaves rustling and mud gurgling and rain trickling. Outside, the wind slams at the windows. 'Frrmshfrk? Bmrble!' He shakes his head and ruffles his feathers. 'Brrrbkreik!'

'Um ….' Phoenix wants to tell the bird that he can't understand. He wants to say how the wind and rumbling and shaking will wake Walter – who's only just turned four – and frighten him, so if his Birdship doesn't mind, could he stop it very kindly please and thank you. He wants to ask why a raven is wearing bright red sneakers anyway, and also, can he be careful with that candle because the wax is dripping and making an awful mess and …

But then the raven puffs up tall and monstrous and his eyes grow dark and wide. Phoenix scrambles away. His back hits the wall. His heart slams his ribs and he can't get enough air into his lungs.

'KRRRKSHKKK ARRRRGHK!' the raven screeches and the window cracks right down the middle.

Phoenix freezes. The raven's beak is level with Phoenix's face now. The beak opens wide, and then the raven places the sack gently onto Phoenix's bed.

'KrrIsknoskyelkj.' He clicks his beak. A crackle of dry thunder booms across the sky. The raven gestures around the room and out the window, his wings spread wide like he wants to scoop up the whole city. He looks so sad. What could be so terrible as to make a giant raven cry?

The raven rests his wing across Phoenix's eyes, soft and heavy and smelling of night just before it rains. The candle crackles and dies, and the waxed smoke tangs at Phoenix's nose. The raven leans close, his breath warm across Phoenix's cheek, and everything is quiet.

When Phoenix opens his eyes, the raven has gone. Phoenix's black dressing-gown is hanging from the hook on his wardrobe, right in the shape of a man-sized bird. Phoenix breathes a sigh of relief. It was just his imagination after – oh.

There, on the bed, is the sack, wet and wriggling. And there are muddy sneaker prints on the carpet, and a singe mark where the candle wax dripped.

What will Auntie Josie say? She's very particular about her carpets. *Shoes off! Shoes off!! And wipe your feet on the mat! How many times do I have to say?*

Outside, the sky is turning that orangey red of morning. Soon the others will be awake. Soon the house will be full of breakfast-making and radio-blaring and *No telly in the morning! No screens at the table!* and kettle-whistling and feet-up-and-down-stairs-stomping and backdoor-banging and hinges-squeaking and girls-arguing and Walter-laughing and Wolfy barking to be fed.

Soon the quiet and calm will be gone and all the thoughts in Phoenix's head will jumble and rush together and Josie will bundle them all out the door because it's summer and there's no staying indoors in the summer so *get going, get going, get some fresh air into you and give me some peace for once, why don't you?* Phoenix wishes the early morning quiet would last for longer.

He reaches for his phone. If only Charlie wasn't so far away, they'd know what to do. Charlie always knows what to do. Best friends are good like that.

- **You awake?** Phoenix taps.

The ping comes back almost immediately.

– It's 4 in the afternoon here ...

– Oh yeah. So guess what? A giant raven in red sneakers woke me up in the night. He tried to tell me something but I don't yet speak bird. He was pretty upset. And messy.

– Wow. That's kinda random. Even for you. Are you sure it wasn't the girls playing a trick? Frankie?

– I wish.

– I've only been gone three weeks and you're already seeing giant birds! Why doesn't this stuff happen when I'm around?! I would have jumped on its back or something. Told it to fly me to the moon! I bet you didn't even ask for a ride.

Knowing Charlie, that's exactly what they would have done. Phoenix glances quickly at the foot of his bed. The sack is, unfortunately, still there. And it smells. Dank and muddy and mouldy. The wet of it is seeping through the doona and onto Phoenix's pyjamas and sheets. It will leave a stain, that wet. He'll have to wash the doona and dry it and get it back on the bed before Auntie Josie sees and complains about more work and *isn't it hard enough with two jobs and looking after five kids and Gran, without adding to the washing and do you know how hard it is to wash a doona?* As though it's Phoenix's fault that a giant raven decided to pop in for a visit.

- He gave me something in a sack.

- ?!

- I haven't opened it yet.

- What are you waiting for?

OPEN IT!

- Should I? It's MOVING! It could be anything!

- You know what they say – jump off the

cliff and grow wings on the way down!

- I don't know anyone who says that.

- DO IT!!!!

A piece of bogweed curls from the sack like a tentacle. Phoenix watches the sack wriggle, and his head fills with river monsters and beaks and fangs and claws…

Walter is still softly snoring. Downstairs Gran is in the kitchen.

- P?! Are you there?! WHAT IS IN IT?!

Phoenix takes hold of the rope wrapping the sack shut tight.

- P?!

The rope is thick and rough in his fingers. He unwinds, once…

Twice…

- Phoenix?

Three times around.

The *thing* has stopped moving.

Phoenix reaches his hand inside.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Bren MacDibble was raised on farms all over New Zealand. She backpacked the world in her twenties, stopped off in Australia on the way home and stayed. She lived in Melbourne for twenty years, then travelled Australia living and working in a bus, and now runs holiday villas on the stunning coral coast of Western Australia. Her first books, *How to Bee* (2017) and *The Dog Runner* (2019), won multiple awards including a Children's Book Council of Australia Book of the Year and New Zealand Book Awards. *Across the Risen Sea* (2020) was also shortlisted for multiple awards and nominated for a CILIP Carnegie Medal. All three novels are "eco-fiction" adventures, set in an imaginary climate-changed world. Bren hopes that her stories give her readers courage and the language to talk about the future they'd like to see.

Bren's novels are published in the UK by Old Barn Books, in paperback and as eBooks. Reading resources are available to download from our website. www.macdibble.com



Zana Fraillon is an internationally acclaimed, multi-award winning author of books for children and young adults. Her work has been published in over fifteen countries and is in development for both stage and screen. Zana was born in Melbourne, but spent her early childhood in San Francisco. She is a three-time Carnegie-nominated author, and her 2016 novel *The Bone Sparrow* won the ABIA Book of the Year for Older Children, The Readings Young Adult Book Prize, the Amnesty CILIP Honour, and was chosen as the IBBY Honour Book to represent Australian children's literature. Her other books, which include *The Ones That Disappeared* (2017) and *The Lost Soul Atlas* (2020), have also won multiple awards, including the New South Wales Literary Award and the Aurealis Award. Zana now lives in Melbourne with her husband, three children and two dogs, and is currently undertaking a PhD at La Trobe University. www.zanafraillon.com

This is the first time that Old Barn Books has had the honour of publishing Zana's work and we are thrilled to be able to bring her voice to our list in this stunning duet with Bren. We hope this won't be the last time they work together!