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Fireⁱ

Lauren Tynanⁱⁱ and Vanessa Cavanaghⁱⁱⁱ

Butane and flint combination sparks into a flame,
That eagerly assumes the dry grass,
For a few moments, its slow build is the only light.
It builds. Faces emerge from the darkness,
The silhouette of my kids, their shadow cast across my body.
As they wait, mesmerised, captured.
We are burning Country, in the quiet still night.

Before the sparks and the shadows, there were only the stars,
“Oh don’t you just *love* the desert stars!”
The clarity of those sky stories dancing above,
The negative spaces, the darkness between stars, holding court.
I will to burn that image into my mind, commit it to memory,
What I see clear, in the darkness,
What I feel, what I am, here, in the darkness.

Even for the few minutes since we’ve switched off our torches,
And switched more into our own senses.

The flames are being spread with a stick my boy holds,
Light shifts from quiet warmth, to a hum
Of little fires in the night.
Being tended to, cared for, watched.
A mindfulness with Country, fire holds your attention,
Against a backdrop of dark.
The peripheral world drawn in, into the light.
With my back to the shadows, with my kids burning Country.
(Vanessa Cavanagh, 12 January 2021)



Figure 1. Little fire in the night (L Tynan 2019)

To know fire and how to do fire the right way, has nothing to do with fire. It has everything to do with Country and knowing Country intimately.

We can tell you about fire. About the way it trickles like water, responds to our emotions, dances in the shapes of spirit-beings. We can tell you it is nurturing, healing, cool and calm. Do you believe us? We talk of the right fire, the good fire for Country. This may not be the fire you know. To believe it, you need to see it, be with it, stroll beside it.

You might be familiar with other fire, rumbling, roaring, wild fire. We know this fire too, but it's not part of our old stories so much. It is a new story. A story of Country and settler-colonial mismanagement. To know fire and how to do fire the right way, has nothing to do with fire. It has everything to do with Country and knowing Country intimately.

Come, we'll teach you about fire. First, we learn about the grasses, the soils, the insects. The parent-trees, the systems, the family structures of this place. The logging, the farming, the mining here. The run-off, the creek, the moisture in the tussock grass when you dig your fingers deep. Where are the wallabies? Can you find any worms? Someone should be picking up these branches for campfires! African lovegrass, scotch thistle, lantana – they don't belong here. Fire? Nah, we gotta know Country before we know fire. Fire is the easy bit, learning Country takes *thousands* of generations.

Watch the spiders scamper up trees, how many can you count? What sort of beetles are here? We can tell a lot about the health of a place by how many insects crawl out of the leaf litter, only to return five minutes later when the ash is cool and their homes are renewed. Think of it like sweeping your house clean – only we use fire and clean out the houses of millions of beings who call that patch home.

Firestick farming, cultural burning, hazard reduction, mosaic burning, ecological burn, cool burn, blackfulla fire – “there is only one fire and that is the right fire and fire for your country”.¹

Much of the Country you see now is a shadow. It's not meant to look that way. Too thick to go for a bush walk? Prickles hooked to your jeans? Stagnant water? These are the shadows of a Country that was teeming with life, a Country that was our supermarket aisles, with ancient grains being ground by the stones of our grandmothers and the hands of our bakers.

White, clean smoke dancing in the leaves of the trees and licking the skies, prodding the stars, these stars who are our fiery ancestors. What sort of fire ancestors will we be? Will we hand our children the firesticks and let them make little fires in the night?

¹ Steffensen, “Line of Fire.”

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ⁱ Lauren Tynan and Vanessa Cavanagh. (2021) "Fire." *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts*, <https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

ⁱⁱ Lauren Tynan is a trawlulwuy woman from tebrakunna country in northeast Tasmania. She is a PhD candidate in the Discipline of Geography and Planning, Macquarie School of Social Sciences, Macquarie University <lauren.tynan@hdr.mq.edu.au> ORCID 0000-0002-6098-158X

ⁱⁱⁱ Vanessa Cavanagh is a Bundjalung and Wonnarua woman. She is a PhD candidate in the School of Geography and Sustainable Communities, University of Wollongong <vanessa@uow.edu.au> ORCID 0000-0002-7213-8370