

# The Sound of Burning

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**First prize, Non-Fiction: 2025 Marysville BookNest writing competition**

Fire sounds like laughter.

Well, no. Not the flame. It sounds like a breath of wind, occasionally roused into a crackle when fed a dry piece of bark or incensed into a spit when introduced to a drop of water.

The laughter comes from friends and family, gathered around the glowing pit. It is hard to be ill tempered as bread toasts over a merry blaze. As stories are told and riddles are pondered. Sometimes, a tent lurks in the darkness. Sometimes, a lake, but you cannot see either beyond the dome of light.

You sit on a log, a deck chair, a rock, basking in the mirth of your gathering. A gathering which upon further consideration need not be composed of any friends or family. A fresh acquaintance may become a friend around a fire. A hated rival, family.

Men serve the blaze, attune to its quietest request. Smoke is in your eyes, but you can tolerate the stinging because the alternative is moving into the cold.

I was eleven when I built an intolerance to smoke. I hated the feeling of it in my lungs. The sickly sweetness. The heaviness.

It stuck in my throat as I ran around the golf club, fishing pieces of melted silver from the hollows. It pricked my sinuses as I picked through rubble, in search of an eye bead from a teddy. It soaked into my skin with the charcoal that cloaked every piece

of wood I touched. I'd shut myself in the car for hours to keep out the smell which never seemed to go away.

Still has not gone away.

It is strongest in autumn when the leaves of the maples and oaks look like they are on fire.

They are not the ones which are burning.

The eucalypts are.

The air is hazy today. The sun, fluorescent. Smoke billows up in rolling grey clouds. My washing smells of burning, and now, so do I. Smouldering eucalypt leaves rain into the yard, blown by a hot wind.

If I lived in the northern hemisphere, something else might be falling from the sky in February.

I knew a tree which belonged in the snow. A Japanese cedar. Its branches hung so low and tight that when you crept behind them, you had to be careful of cobwebs.

The webs clung to the needles – ancient things that were more like cotton than thread. It was dark and cool, even on a hot day. Within, you became invisible. A secret which only the tree knew about.

I used to wonder if I would ever outgrow the secret passageway. If my head would get so high that it would knock against the lower branches and the dusty cobwebs.

I needn't have worried.

I remember pulling up to the yard for the first time. Seeing the blackened skeleton of the Japanese cedar. It stood taller than each of the three chimneys – solitary sentries in beds of rubble.

Gone was the sandpit tree with seeds that spun like helicopter propellers. The hairy bush that hid the balls. The honeysuckle on the archway. The archway.

The earth was in its mourning colours. I thought everything would look bigger without the trees, but it didn't. It looked very, very small.

There was nowhere to hide now.

My mother took me in her arms. Pointed to a forest of tiny trees barely bigger than my hand. I had not noticed them at first. All I saw was black.

She told me how the earth was healing. How it would all grow back. She gave me a ribbon. I was to tie it around whichever tree I liked. We would look after it. We would watch it grow.

I made my selection very carefully. Upon the blue ribbon, I wrote a name for the tree. *Leaf*. I stroked his perfect green hands. Gave him a water. Told him what a big, beautiful tree he was going to be one day. Then, I had to say goodbye.

As the night grows, the fire moves closer. I can see it climbing the eucalypts, forming a wall of flame that reaches high above the little house at its base.

That house survived the fire which took so many others. In a display of loyalty, builder and home protected each other through the hellish night. It stands alone now.

Sparks crackle into the sky. Hot air rips the leaves free and tosses them high. The trees are squealing. Their armour must be searing their delicate skin.

My tulip tree's armour got burnt away, leaving its flesh exposed to rot and burrowing insects. At its base, long ago, my father found a tiny creature, mouth open in what might have been a choking gasp or a final scream.

The possums are silent tonight. Usually, by this time, I can hear the brushtails crashing through the trees. Hear the ringtails chattering in shrill voices, piercing enough to be mistaken for bats. I hope that they do not live in the squealing trees. A bush explodes. Boots crunch within the flame. I begin to hear other sounds. Sounds which would belong around a campfire but could not exist within this inferno. My face burns without the aid of heat.

I wonder if the eucalypts grow tired of wearing black. If the animals grow tired of running. It can't be easy losing a home and building a new one.

I stare into a forest that has no secrets. It is stamped of the last of the embers and emptied of the little creatures not quick enough to run. Suddenly, I am thinking of Leaf. Of how I arrived a few weeks later to find his hands dead and brown. The same fate had befallen each of his brothers and sisters who had the misfortune of growing two metres within the border.

Maybe a big, strong fence could have barricaded his little body from the poison, but destructive things do not often stop where they are meant to.

I hear the sad refrain of a currawong. The earth is dry underfoot. Something is missing. Not the charcoaled trunks. There are plenty of them. Not the severed rounds of wood, the limbless shrubs, or the blackened earth.

Where is the green? The thousands of tiny trees, woken from their seeds by the heat and smoke?

I should be able to watch them grow above my head as I did back then. I should be able to weave through a maze of foliage, pretending to be Bear Grylls, navigating a dangerous terrain. I should see the bushes grow back and the blackened earth overtaken by grass and flowers.

But all I see is a reminder of why I never picked another Leaf.

All I hear is laughter.

It echoes in my head, just as it did that night while the forest was hurting.

The sound of a big group of men with crunching boots enjoying their fire.