# Gifts and Ghosts

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By **Kate Wright**

I'm seven years old dancing to Buddy Holly on a red rug. The warm crackle of the stylus on the vinyl rhymes with the burning wood hissing on the open fire. Carbon, once captured and condensed into living forests, is rapidly escaping its cellulose confines. A grammar of branches crumbling in the intensities of flame punctuates the staccato words vibrating in our lounge room, each wooden pop and bang a wild loose comma accentuating the rhythms of the song. Dad turns the volume up and red wine swirls in his glass as we dance and sing *Peggy Sue, Peggy Sue, pretty pretty pretty pretty Peggy Sue, oh-oh peggy, my peggy sue-oo-oo.*

The windows are full of frost. When Dad opens the door to smoke his pipe I peer out into the diamond night. A thousand new moons rise and fall while distant blue hills settle in my memory, like an old dog curling up by the fire.

There are so many rhythms that bring us out of the cold and the dark—that create a hearth—a stream of order in an ocean of chaos.

I haven't set foot on the soils of Anaiwan country since May 2019. It's the longest I've been away. I miss the gum trees, how they howl and dance in the wind at night. I miss my mum. I miss the easy way people yarn with one another—the slow and laconic voices and movements. I miss the birdsong and the deep quiet of the bush, the smell of the air before it rains—all those effortless pleasures of home.

It is winter in Munich and I walk to work in the fog. In this dense mist, my footsteps become uncertain—I can't see more than a metre ahead. On my phone, I compulsively reload the Fires Near Me app to check if my parent's property is close to any uncontrolled flames. I'm 16,000 kilometres away, blanketed in sleet and snow, and still, I'm looking for fires near me.

We carry places inside us. And they carry us too—they keep us like family. We need the living world to know ourselves. We need rivers to fathom the ebb and flow of our lives, rocks and trees in which to store our love, our grief. Something deep inside me is at stake in these faraway fires. What if I lose the little girl who sings Buddy Holly, whose footsteps I follow whenever I run through the bush?

Caught up in the imminent threat of a new blaze, I'm closer to home than I've been in months—so close I can feel the heat. One day, I'm scrolling through Twitter and see these two images together and the past flashes through the smoke and fog, like lightning.

The term haunted derives from the old French *hanter,* which means to frequent, visit regularly; have to do with, be familiar with; indulge in, cultivate. In everyday parlance, a haunt can signify a place one has often dwelled in: "my old haunts." Somewhere that is haunted is also understood as a place inhabited by a past presence that remains, a ghost causing trouble, disturbing the present order. I want to think all these hauntings together.

The land I know best, the place I feel most at home in the world, is haunted by unspeakable colonial violence, shrouded in darkness and silence. There are many massacre sites in this country—most have not been memorialised. And though the dead are disavowed, their graves unmarked, there remains blood on the wattle, blood on *every* wattle.**[2]**

Because dispossession is not a historical event, but a structure, the colonial occupation of Aboriginal land is a process of socio-environmental domination that circulates through the metabolism of living ecologies. To haunt—to dwell in—to cultivate—to frequent—is also to leave memories in soils and atmospheres, in the genetic make-up of plants and animals, in the organic layers of forests.

In contrast to myths of pristine, untouched wilderness, pre-colonial lands were intensely managed, and Australia's present-day ecologies have been shaped by 65,000–80,000 years of Indigenous custodianship. Through the skillful use of fire to make plants and animals more abundant, Aboriginal peoples created and maintained disequilibriums, extending the range of pyrophytic plants that require fire for their reproduction. As communities were violently dispossessed from their homelands, intricate co-evolutionary ties between cultural practices and ecologies were twisted and broken.

Successive colonial governments and corporate lobbyists have recklessly disregarded the power of the environmentally embodied memories of this continent. Ongoing dispossession has extinguished the “fire-stick farming”**[3]** that would have mitigated fire risk, while at the same time Aboriginal lands have been pillaged for the coal, oil, and gas that is fueling the climate crisis, creating hot and dry combustive environments.

Settler-colonial occupation of place can also be considered an occupation of time that unleashes ancient lithic ghosts and violates ancestral law. The grid of colonial fences and roads that territorialises this country is changing the way the past moves through bodies and environments, disfiguring the future.

Her body was mangled and charcoaled, tangled up in a barbed-wire fence. Her eyes were closed like a sleeping child, her teeth exposed where her lips had burned off. She’s tried to jump and the metal has pulled her down, I thought. Was she following her mother? She must have struggled against the searing hot wire of the fence in the flame.

As a child, I spent hundreds of hours walking the fence line of the property my parents bought in 1982. Dad would drive me and my brother out to the edge of our 35-acre block in a rusty, white ute to collect kindling while he was chopping up fallen eucalypt trees for firewood. I remember carrying sticks back to the truck, my small body tilting with the weight of large branches. I remember sitting on top of all the cut wood in the back of the old Holden as it bounced across the land, feeling like an excited cattle dog with the wind in my hair, the smell of sawdust on my fingers, and splinters of sunlight flickering through the trees.

When I saw this image online of a baby kangaroo—a joey that had burned to death caught in a fence, just like the fences I climbed as a little kid, I was called to witness the death and devastation produced by the demarcations of white belonging. In the face of this protracted moment of unbelievable suffering in the country that keeps my childhood, I came undone. At a breakfast table in Munich, I was reduced to tears.

On New Year’s Day, 2020, Rose Fletcher took a photograph of a bushfire sunrise on the Hindmarsh River in South Australia. The sky, blackened from smoke with the sun rising up to paint shades of red in the darkness, mirrored the Aboriginal flag. People said it seemed like the sunrise was a haunting message from the earth, a recollection of tens of thousands of years of custodianship and care, flashing up in a moment of danger.**[4]**

In Aboriginal philosophy, ancestral and spiritual forms are understood to be embodied in place, in a state of powerful rest. Studies in evolutionary biology also tell us that the past does not disappear, but is woven into the present and the future. Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan explain that life continues by preserving the past and binding time, creating intricate and vast temporal and spatial patterns to rescue complex systems and structures from entropic disintegration.**[5]** On our polyrhythmic planet, a little girl dancing to Buddy Holly is moving together with the pulse of air and atmosphere, the rush of carbon escaping branches and bark, and the wheeling cosmogenic stars.

Because we fall asleep, dream, and wake inside living history, time is not an abstract milieu in which we are arbitrarily situated but a powerful force that we actively make with others. This nation's failure to tend to its deep Indigenous past and urgent demands for social and environmental justice is transforming ancestral gifts into ghosts, ensuring that the future of this country is haunted by waking nightmares.

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**[1]**Lyndall Ryan, William Pascoe, Jennifer Debenham, Stephanie Gilbert, Jonathon Richards, Robyn Smith, Chris Owen, Robert J Anders, Mark Brown, Daniel Price, Jack Newley and Kaine Usher, "Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia," University of Newcastle, 2017-2020, Funded by **ARC: DP 140100399**. **http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1340762**.

**[2]** Bruce Elder, *Blood on the Wattle: Massacres and the Maltreatment of Aboriginal Australians since 1788*. (New Holland Publishers: French's Forest, 1997).

**[3]** Rhys Jones, "Fire-Stick Farming," *Fire Ecology* 8 (2012): 3–8.

**[4]** Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History, 1940* **https://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html**

**[5]** Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *What is Life?* (Berkely and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995): 86.