



It might as well be petrol, Kinglake

Extract from *Kinglake-350* by Adrian Hyland

He gets out of the car, crouches down, runs a hand through the litter on the ground. Picks up a handful and lets it fall. Leaves, bark, twigs, crumbled branchwood drift away. The leaf litter is a world unto itself. Wattle seeds, gumnuts, parched bones. A dragonfly's glassy wing. Creatures too small to be seen with the naked eye. Dry leaf mould. Layer upon layer of it, fifteen or twenty centimetres thick in places. All of it crumbling into the great cycle of death, decomposition and birth that is on the forest floor. It's thicker than he's ever known it to be. And the rock-hard earth below it hums with stored heat.

The litter is a frightening sight for anybody who's observed with a knowing eye its steady, remorseless accumulation over recent years. It's more than just debris: at this time of the year it's an accelerant. Might as well be petrol.

As he watches those parched fragments trickle through his outstretched fingers, Wood thinks about the interwoven influences of nature and humanity that have brought the bush to such a state. That simple handful of litter bears testament to years of drought, devastating climate change, an environment, already the most flammable in the world, tormented and stretched to breaking point.

All those falling leaves — what do they mean? The trees are in trouble, they're like a ship on a reef, jettisoning cargo, struggling to survive.

The rainfall in the past year has been the lowest on record: in January 2009 only 0.6 mm of rain fell, the driest start to a year Victoria has ever recorded. The water storage is lower than it's ever been: Melbourne's dams started the year at a fearful 34.7 per cent capacity and by now they must be at rock bottom. Groundwater levels, soil moisture, fallen logs and stumps are all severely affected. They're all connected, all indicators of danger: the lower the moisture level in the soil, the more ready the bush is to burn.

The drought reached its nadir in the three brutal days of over 43 degrees a week ago. Eleven consecutive days of 30-plus, conditions not seen in 160 years of white settlement. Temperatures like that cure the land, dry it out, prime it.

And today?

Jesus wept. The worst of all. Scorching heat, negligible humidity: less than 10 per cent predicted. The humidity is important. The lower the moisture in the atmosphere, the closer things are to ignition. The wind already feels like a gale blown up from the bowels of hell. And it will get worse as the day wears on.

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