

# Cultural burns *are cool*

## Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land and waters and we respect Aboriginal Elders, past, present and emerging. We celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to Country across NSW.

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This publication has been prepared by Local Land Services for use as an educational resource using basic Cultural burn knowledge provided by Firesticks Alliance. Local Land Services is grateful to Firesticks Alliance and we acknowledge Victor Steffensen and his Elders for sharing their knowledge and enabling this resource to be developed.

This resource may be distributed for any educational purpose as long as Local Land Services is recognised for developing the concept. We hope it provides users with increased knowledge and basic awareness of how and why Cultural burns can benefit, improve and maintain healthy landscapes for our community.

## Acknowledgements

Written by Toby Whaleboat and Jane Lloyd-Jones in consultation with the Hunter Local Land Services Aboriginal Community Advisory Group.

Illustrations have been prepared by Visual Art and Design students from Hunter River High School (HRHS) in consultation with the HRHS Junior AECG (executive members pictured on the back cover) to ensure Cultural Protocols have been followed regarding authentic Aboriginal perspectives and student voice.

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School play was piloted by students from St Brigid's Primary School, Raymond Terrace.



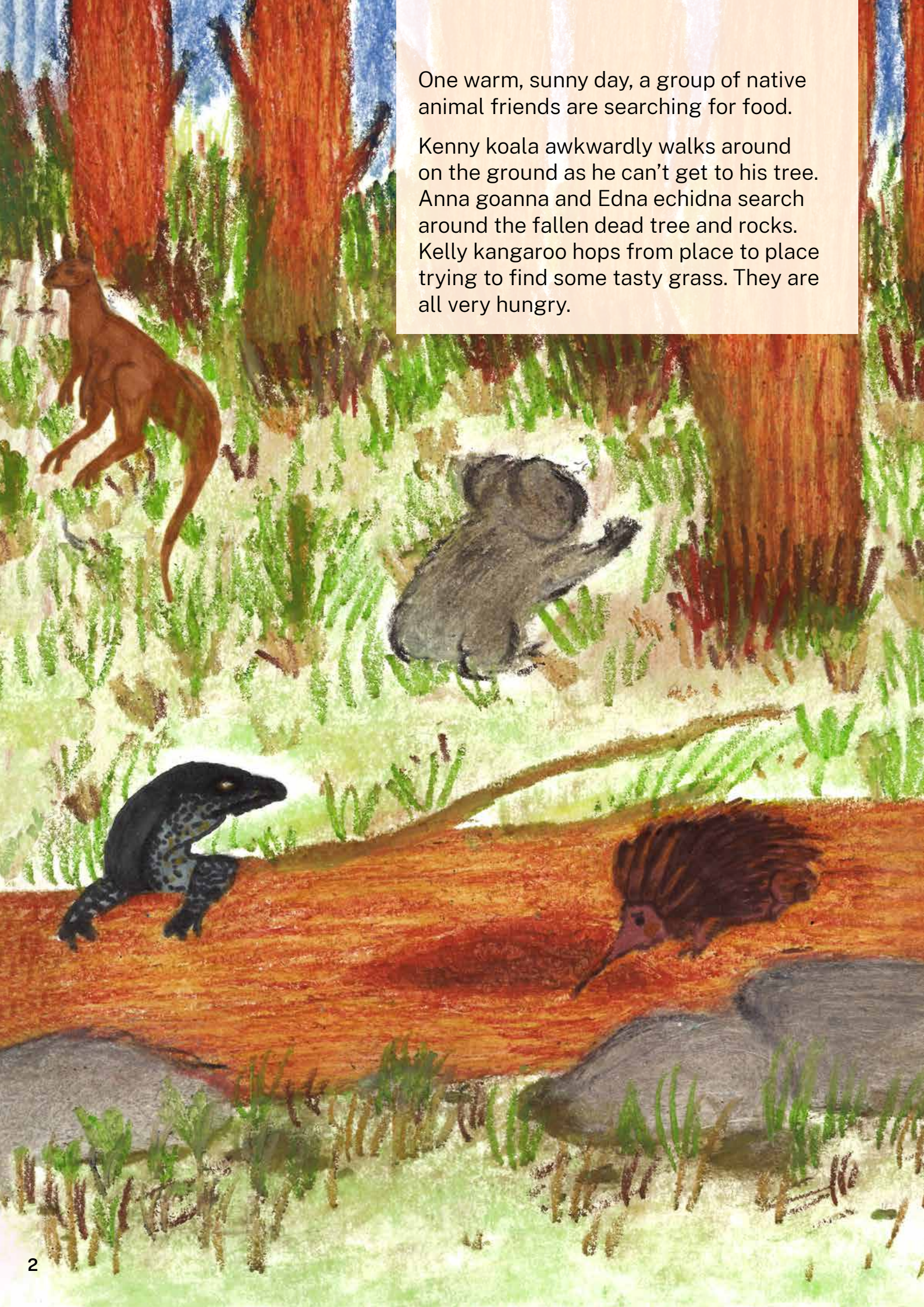


# Cultural burns are cool

Story. Facts. Play.







One warm, sunny day, a group of native animal friends are searching for food.

Kenny koala awkwardly walks around on the ground as he can't get to his tree. Anna goanna and Edna echidna search around the fallen dead tree and rocks. Kelly kangaroo hops from place to place trying to find some tasty grass. They are all very hungry.



Larry, a local farmer, walks up to the hungry animals to see what's going on.

"Oh Larry, I'm so glad you're here," said Edna. "I've been looking for food but can't find ants here anymore."

"Yes, I'm starving too," exclaims Anna. "I'm thinking of moving somewhere else where there's more food."

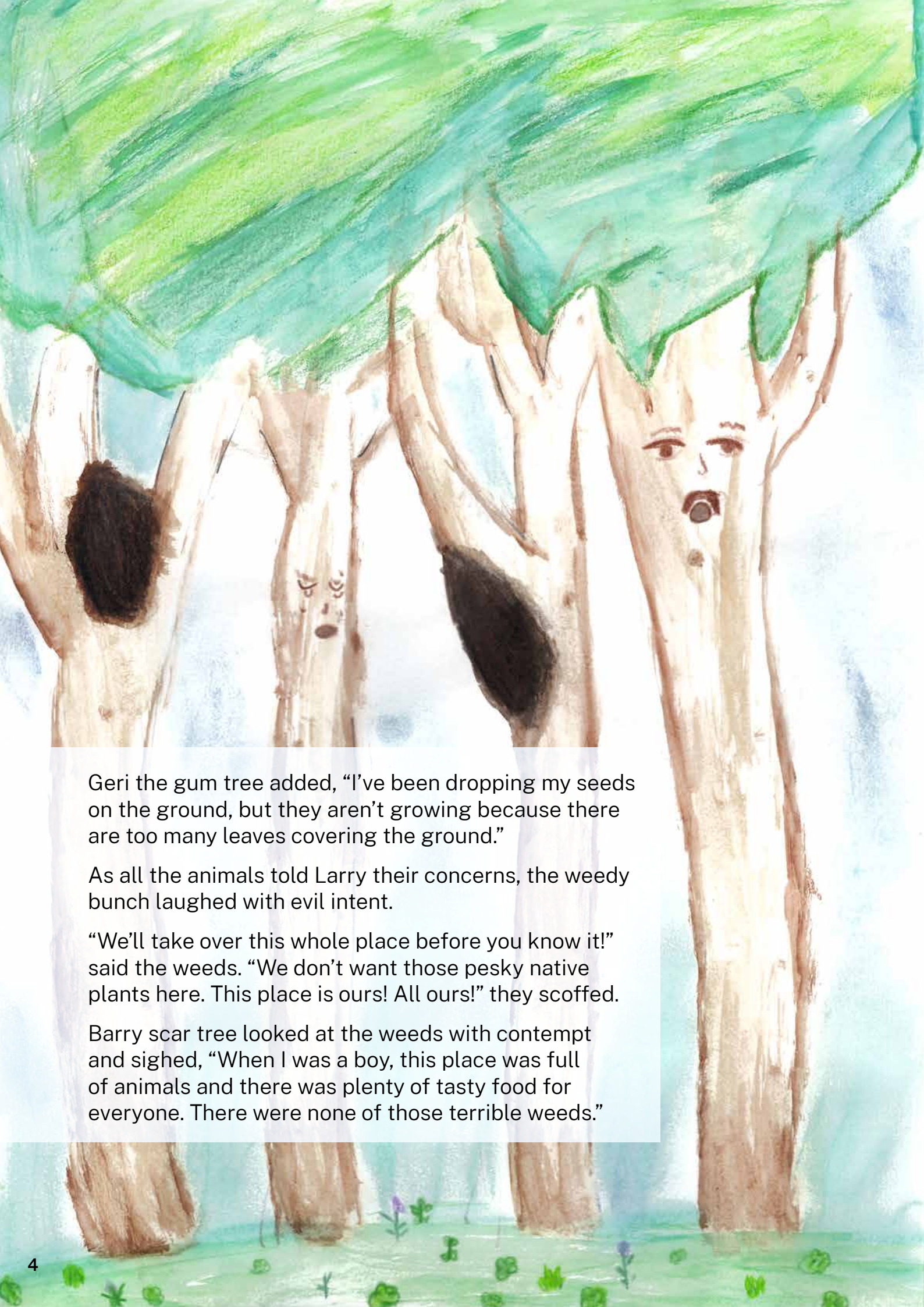


Kenny koala sits down on the ground and moans, "It's hard for me to get to my tree because there are too many weeds in the way."

"The grass here isn't tasty at all," said Kelly. "I might have to go and eat the nice grass growing next to the road, but I'm worried I'll get hit by a car."

Larry was very sad to hear this, as he loved having native bushland friends on his farm.





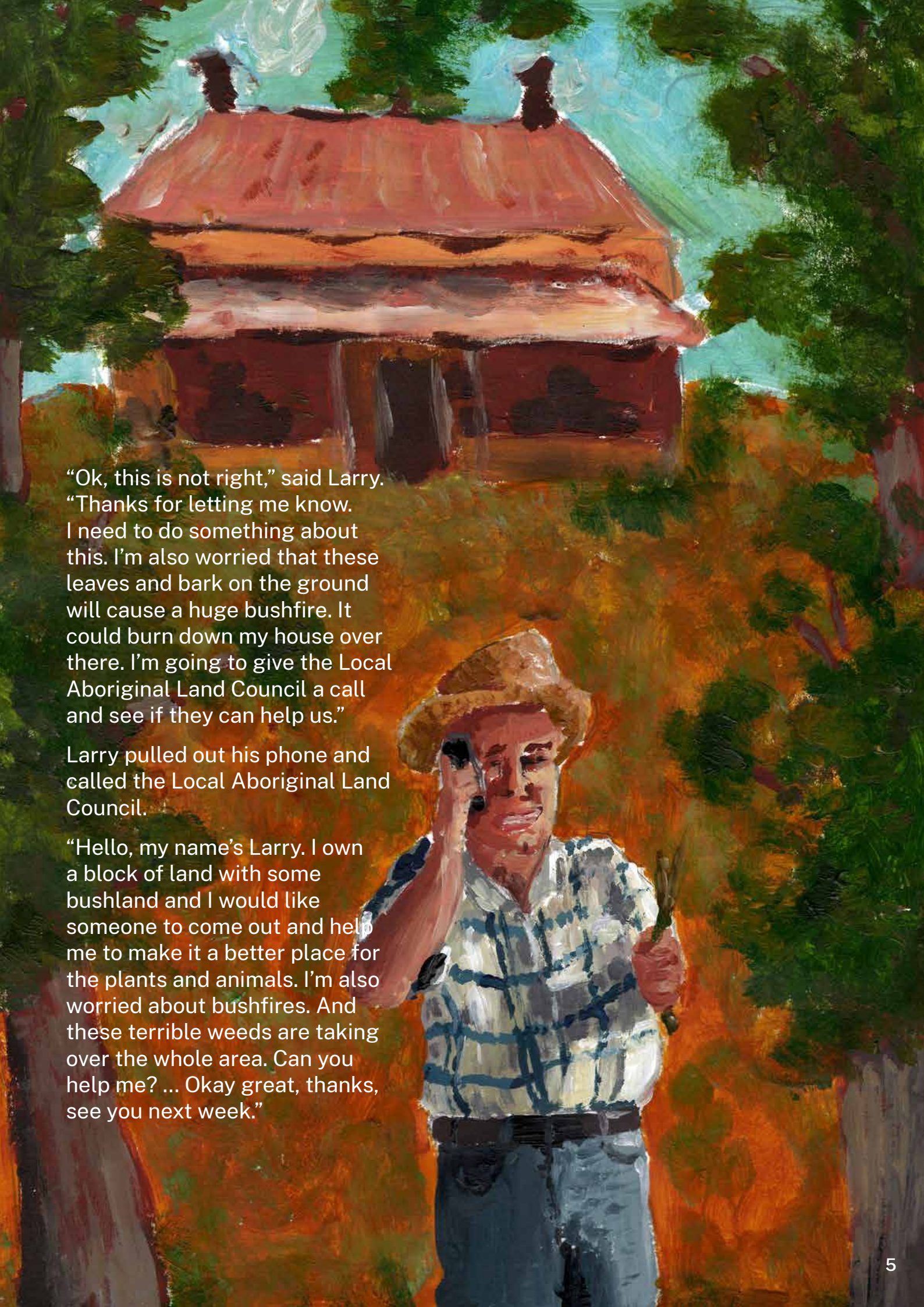
Geri the gum tree added, “I’ve been dropping my seeds on the ground, but they aren’t growing because there are too many leaves covering the ground.”

As all the animals told Larry their concerns, the weedy bunch laughed with evil intent.

“We’ll take over this whole place before you know it!” said the weeds. “We don’t want those pesky native plants here. This place is ours! All ours!” they scoffed.

Barry scar tree looked at the weeds with contempt and sighed, “When I was a boy, this place was full of animals and there was plenty of tasty food for everyone. There were none of those terrible weeds.”





“Ok, this is not right,” said Larry.  
“Thanks for letting me know.  
I need to do something about  
this. I’m also worried that these  
leaves and bark on the ground  
will cause a huge bushfire. It  
could burn down my house over  
there. I’m going to give the Local  
Aboriginal Land Council a call  
and see if they can help us.”

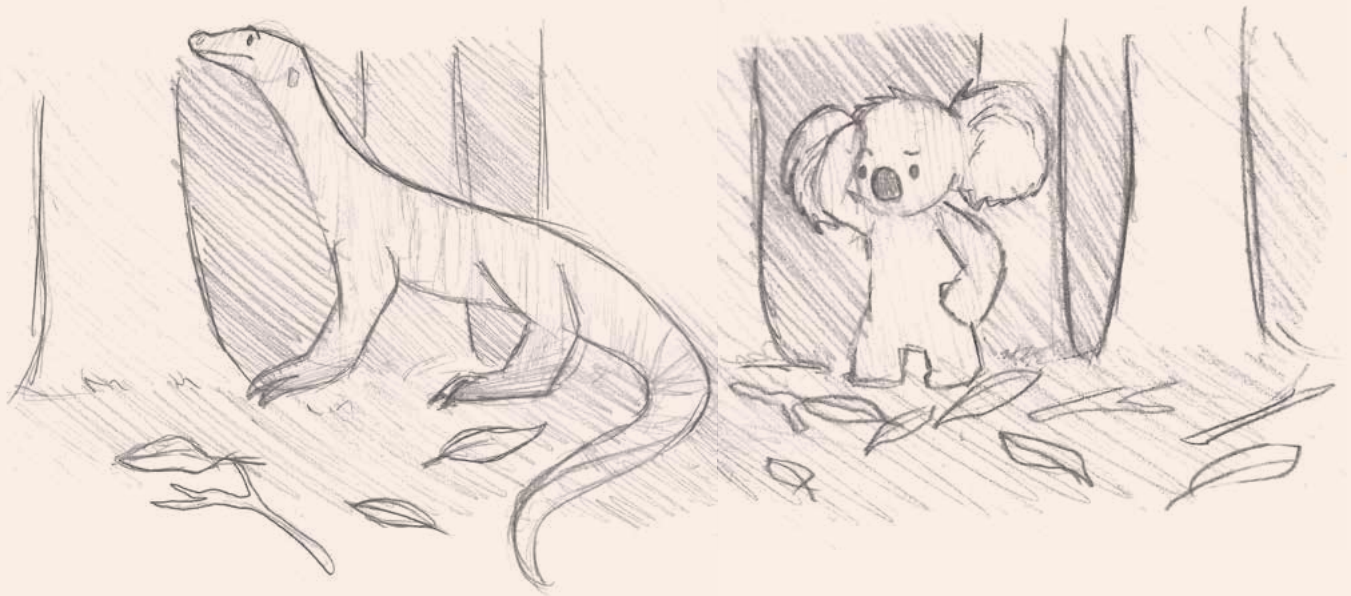
Larry pulled out his phone and  
called the Local Aboriginal Land  
Council.

“Hello, my name’s Larry. I own  
a block of land with some  
bushland and I would like  
someone to come out and help  
me to make it a better place for  
the plants and animals. I’m also  
worried about bushfires. And  
these terrible weeds are taking  
over the whole area. Can you  
help me? ... Okay great, thanks,  
see you next week.”









The following week Larry and Uncle Norm, a local Aboriginal fire practitioner, walked through the bushland and stopped at the old trees. All the animals rushed to them, speaking over the top of one another, crying out for help.

“I’m really hungry,” cried Edna.

“Are you here to help?” asked Kelly.

“Can you help my seeds grow? This land doesn’t seem to be healthy anymore,” said Geri.

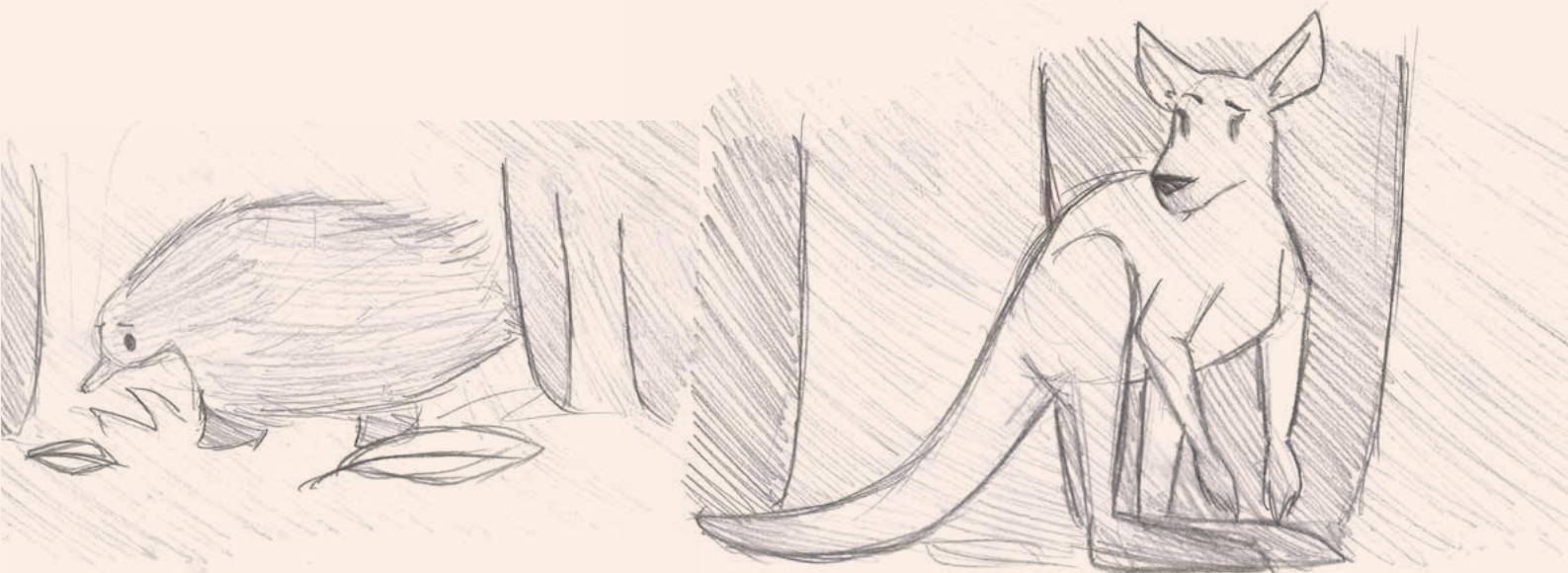
At the same time the weeds yelled out, “Go away, you’re not wanted here. This place is ours. We’re taking over!”

Larry puts up his hands to quiet down the mob. “Can everyone please calm down? This is Uncle Norm, a local Aboriginal fire practitioner.” He then turns and asks, “Uncle Norm, is there anything we can do?”

“Yes Uncle Norm, can you help?” asks Kenny.

Old Barry joins in, “I’ve been here for hundreds of years and this place has changed, but not for the better.”

The weedy bunch call out again, “Go away, Uncle Norm! You’re not needed here!”







"Okay, I think I can help," said Uncle Norm. "This is what I'm going to do. I'm going to burn this area. It's called a Cultural burn. This will heal the land and make it a healthier country for you."

"A burn?" exclaimed Geri in fear. "I don't want to be burnt."

"I'm an important Cultural object, I can't be burnt!" shouts Barry.

"Yes, I don't want you to burn my home," said Kenny. "And Penelope possum has her home in that tree over there."

"Don't worry," said Uncle Norm, "the fire will be so low that all of the trees will be protected."

All the ground animals had questions too that Uncle Norm calmly answered.

"But what about us? Where do we go while you burn?" asked Edna.

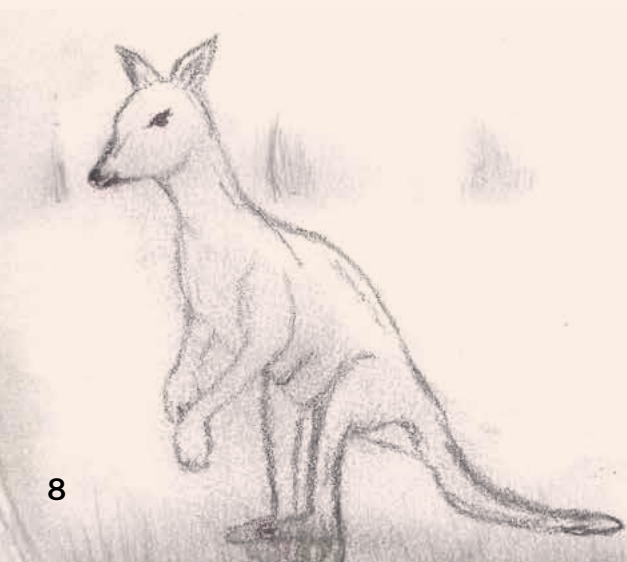
"The fire will be burning so slowly that you can stay here and just keep away from the flames," replied Uncle Norm.

"But won't the fire be too hot for us to stay here?" asked Kelly.

"No," replied Uncle Norm. "A Cultural burn is a cool burn. It doesn't get too hot."

"Won't the smoke make us sick?" asked Anna.

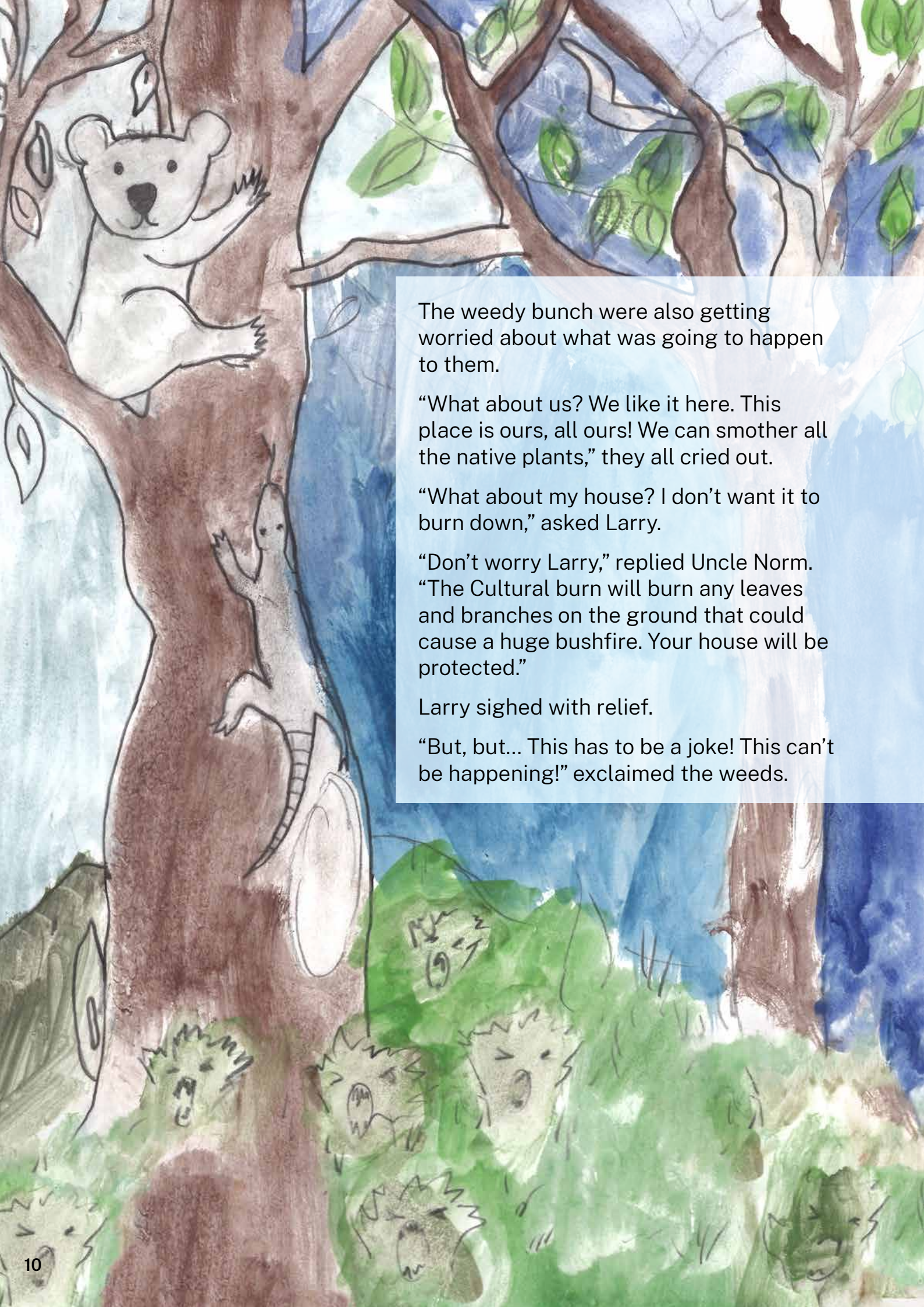
"No," replied Uncle Norm. "There will only be healthy, white smoke."











The weedy bunch were also getting worried about what was going to happen to them.

“What about us? We like it here. This place is ours, all ours! We can smother all the native plants,” they all cried out.

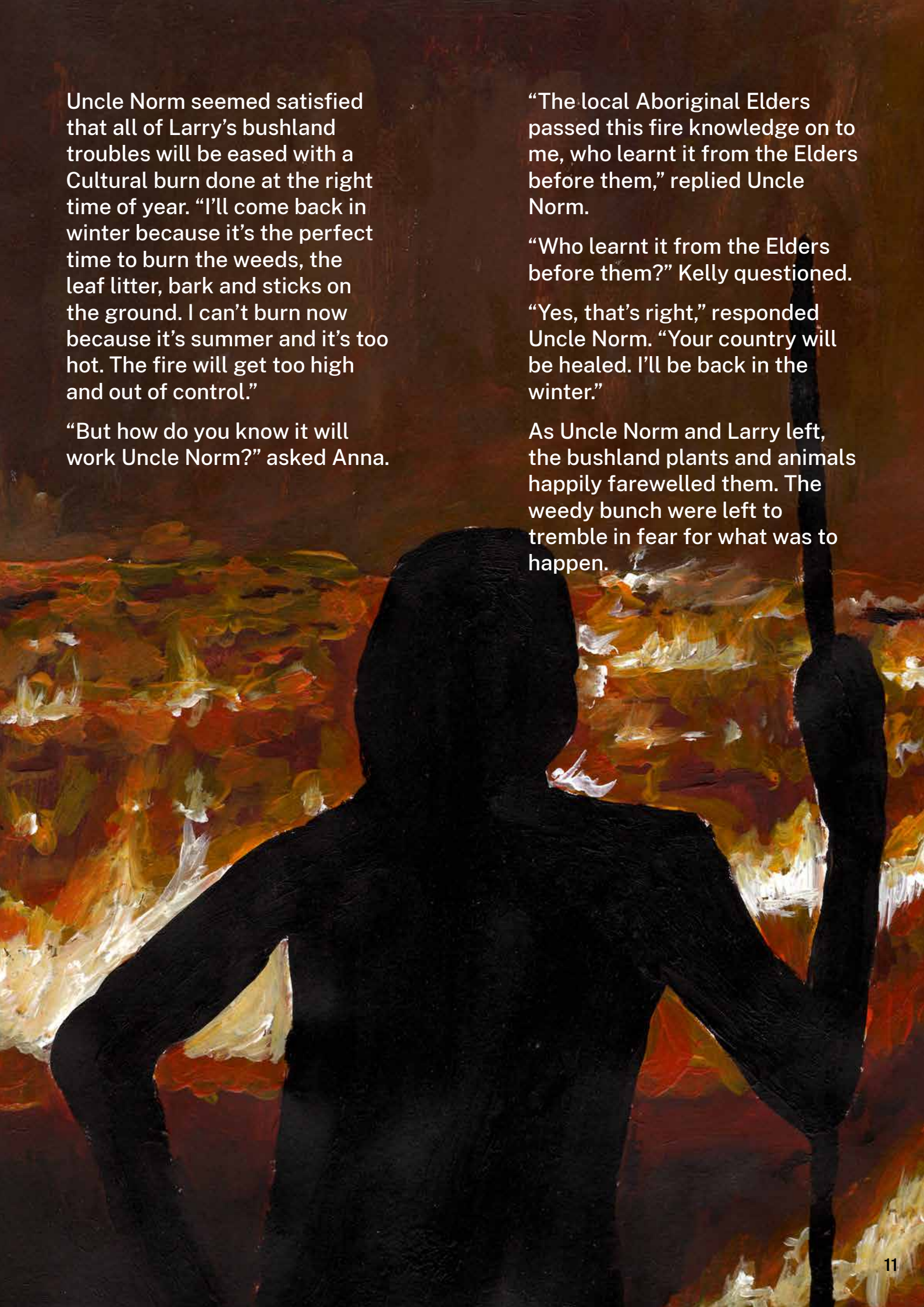
“What about my house? I don’t want it to burn down,” asked Larry.

“Don’t worry Larry,” replied Uncle Norm. “The Cultural burn will burn any leaves and branches on the ground that could cause a huge bushfire. Your house will be protected.”

Larry sighed with relief.

“But, but... This has to be a joke! This can’t be happening!” exclaimed the weeds.





Uncle Norm seemed satisfied that all of Larry's bushland troubles will be eased with a Cultural burn done at the right time of year. "I'll come back in winter because it's the perfect time to burn the weeds, the leaf litter, bark and sticks on the ground. I can't burn now because it's summer and it's too hot. The fire will get too high and out of control."

"But how do you know it will work Uncle Norm?" asked Anna.

"The local Aboriginal Elders passed this fire knowledge on to me, who learnt it from the Elders before them," replied Uncle Norm.

"Who learnt it from the Elders before them?" Kelly questioned.

"Yes, that's right," responded Uncle Norm. "Your country will be healed. I'll be back in the winter."

As Uncle Norm and Larry left, the bushland plants and animals happily farewelled them. The weedy bunch were left to tremble in fear for what was to happen.



Winter has settled across the landscape and Uncle Norm has returned to help Larry bring his bushland back to life with a Cultural burn. The animals gather around, curious about how this burn will work.

“Is today the day Uncle Norm?” asks Edna.

“Yes, Edna,” replies Uncle Norm. “Today is the perfect weather for a Cultural burn. It’s not too hot or windy or wet.”

“Uncle Norm, what should we do?” asks Kelly nervously.

“Just act normally. Pretend I’m not even here,” says Uncle Norm calmly. He then turns his attention to Larry, “Okay Larry we need to prepare the area.”





“We can start by raking away this long grass from under the trees, so the tree branches don’t catch fire,” Larry says to Uncle Norm.

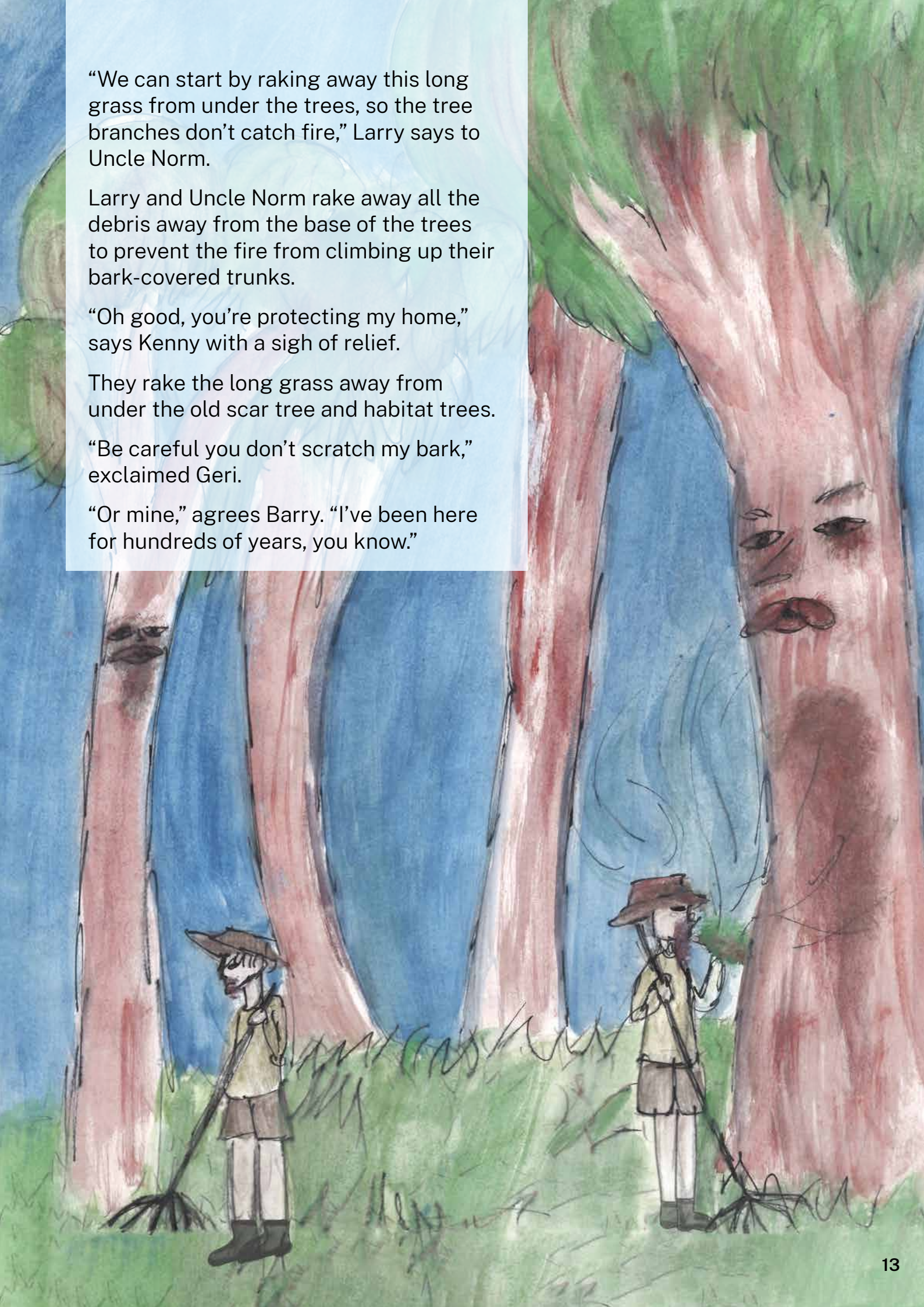
Larry and Uncle Norm rake away all the debris away from the base of the trees to prevent the fire from climbing up their bark-covered trunks.

“Oh good, you’re protecting my home,” says Kenny with a sigh of relief.

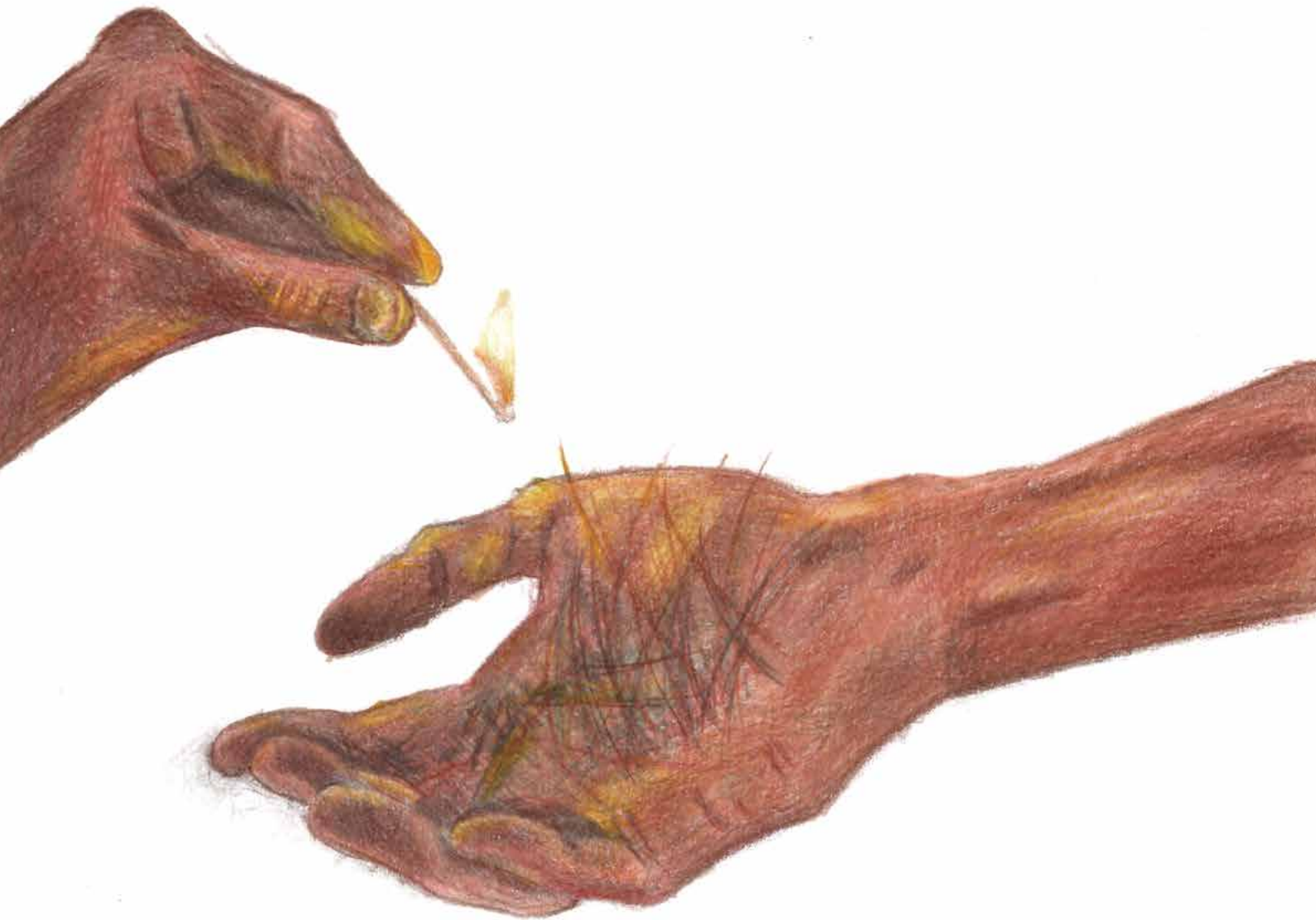
They rake the long grass away from under the old scar tree and habitat trees.

“Be careful you don’t scratch my bark,” exclaimed Geri.

“Or mine,” agrees Barry. “I’ve been here for hundreds of years, you know.”







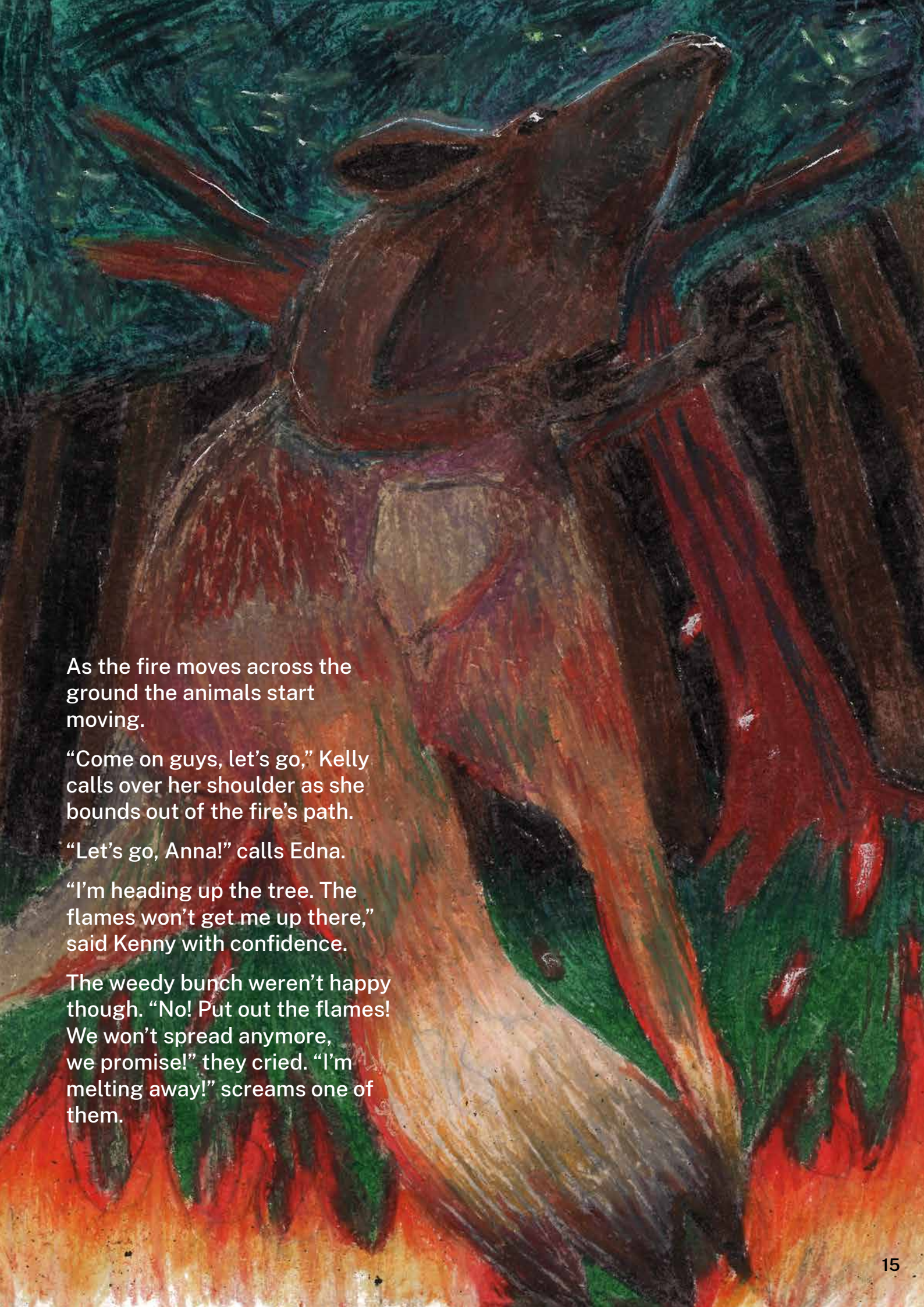
“Ok, now we’re ready to start our burn,” Uncle Norm informs everyone.

Still a little anxious, Kelly asks, “What should we do Uncle Norm?”

“Once I start burning, you will see the fire coming but you will have plenty of time to move away, so don’t stress,” Uncle Norm reassures her.

Uncle Norm lights a match to burn a handful of dry grass. He uses this bunch of burning grass to get the rest of the burn started. Slowly the flames begin to rise and flicker across the leaf litter and grasses.





As the fire moves across the ground the animals start moving.

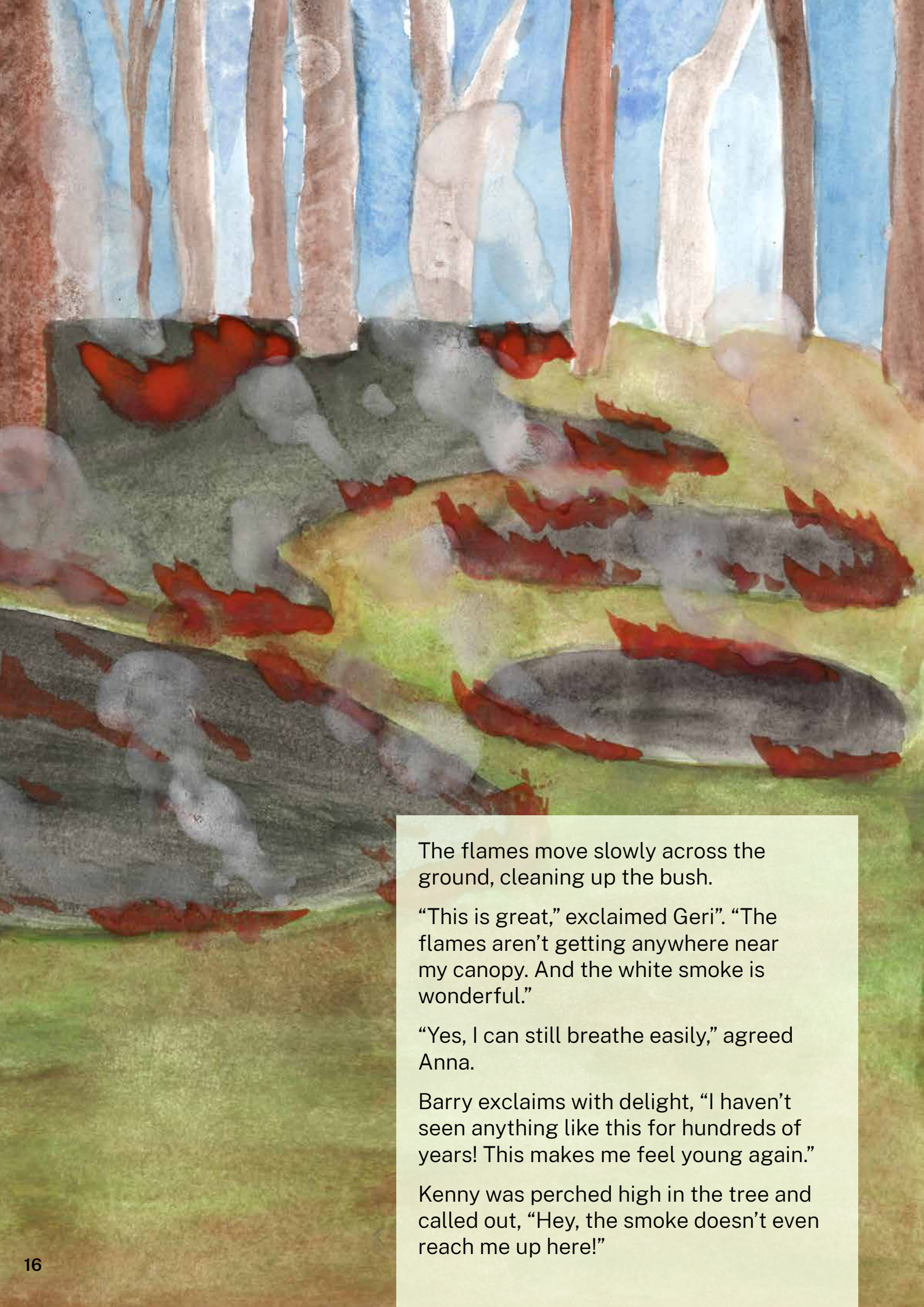
“Come on guys, let’s go,” Kelly calls over her shoulder as she bounds out of the fire’s path.

“Let’s go, Anna!” calls Edna.

“I’m heading up the tree. The flames won’t get me up there,” said Kenny with confidence.

The weedy bunch weren’t happy though. “No! Put out the flames! We won’t spread anymore, we promise!” they cried. “I’m melting away!” screams one of them.





The flames move slowly across the ground, cleaning up the bush.

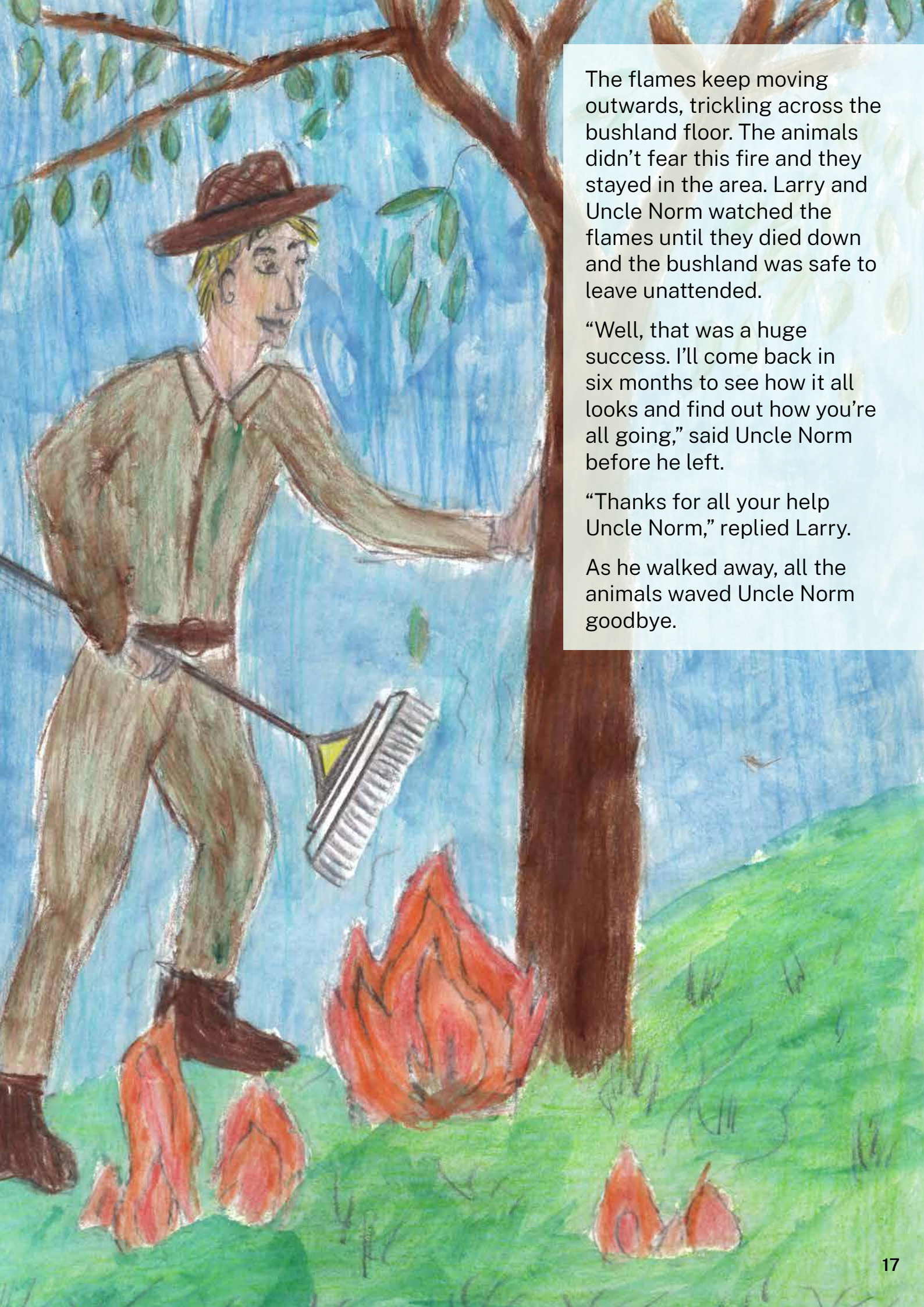
“This is great,” exclaimed Geri”. “The flames aren’t getting anywhere near my canopy. And the white smoke is wonderful.”

“Yes, I can still breathe easily,” agreed Anna.

Barry exclaims with delight, “I haven’t seen anything like this for hundreds of years! This makes me feel young again.”

Kenny was perched high in the tree and called out, “Hey, the smoke doesn’t even reach me up here!”





The flames keep moving outwards, trickling across the bushland floor. The animals didn't fear this fire and they stayed in the area. Larry and Uncle Norm watched the flames until they died down and the bushland was safe to leave unattended.

"Well, that was a huge success. I'll come back in six months to see how it all looks and find out how you're all going," said Uncle Norm before he left.

"Thanks for all your help Uncle Norm," replied Larry.

As he walked away, all the animals waved Uncle Norm goodbye.





Six months later Uncle Norm and Larry returned to see how the bushland had responded to the Cultural burn. They were pleased to find the plants and animals all happy in their rejuvenating habitat.

“Isn’t this great, Anna?” said Edna. “Since the burn, there has been so much more food here.”

“It sure is Edna. I’m never hungry anymore,” replied Anna.





There are some new visitors to the bush, Bill and Shirl the kangaroos.

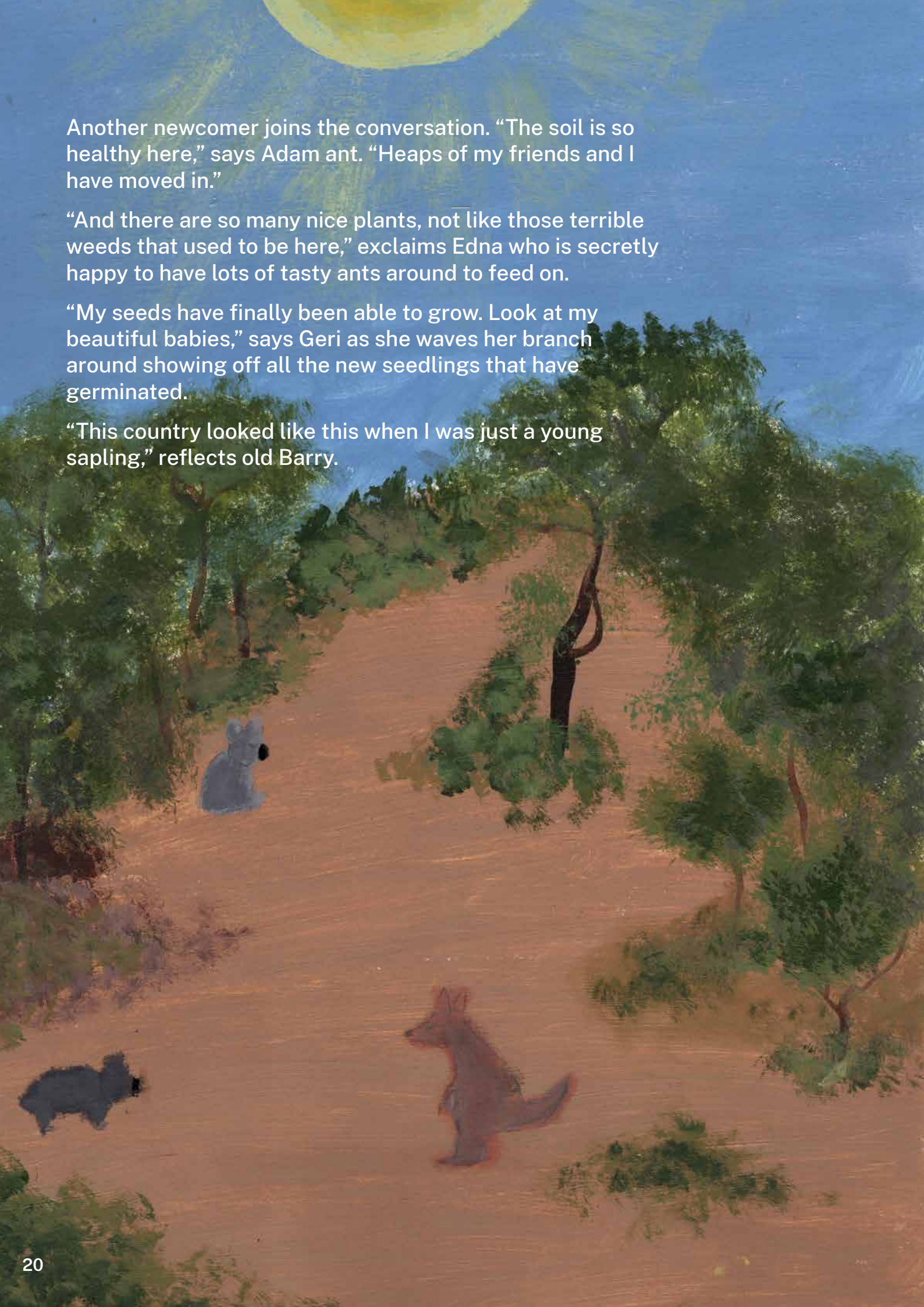
"Is this a nice place to live? Is there room for us here?" they ask.

"Oh yes," replies Kelly. "The grass is very tasty and there is plenty to go around."

"Yes. I only moved here recently, and it is much better than the bush over the hill," said Wanda wombat.







Another newcomer joins the conversation. “The soil is so healthy here,” says Adam ant. “Heaps of my friends and I have moved in.”

“And there are so many nice plants, not like those terrible weeds that used to be here,” exclaims Edna who is secretly happy to have lots of tasty ants around to feed on.

“My seeds have finally been able to grow. Look at my beautiful babies,” says Geri as she waves her branch around showing off all the new seedlings that have germinated.

“This country looked like this when I was just a young sapling,” reflects old Barry.

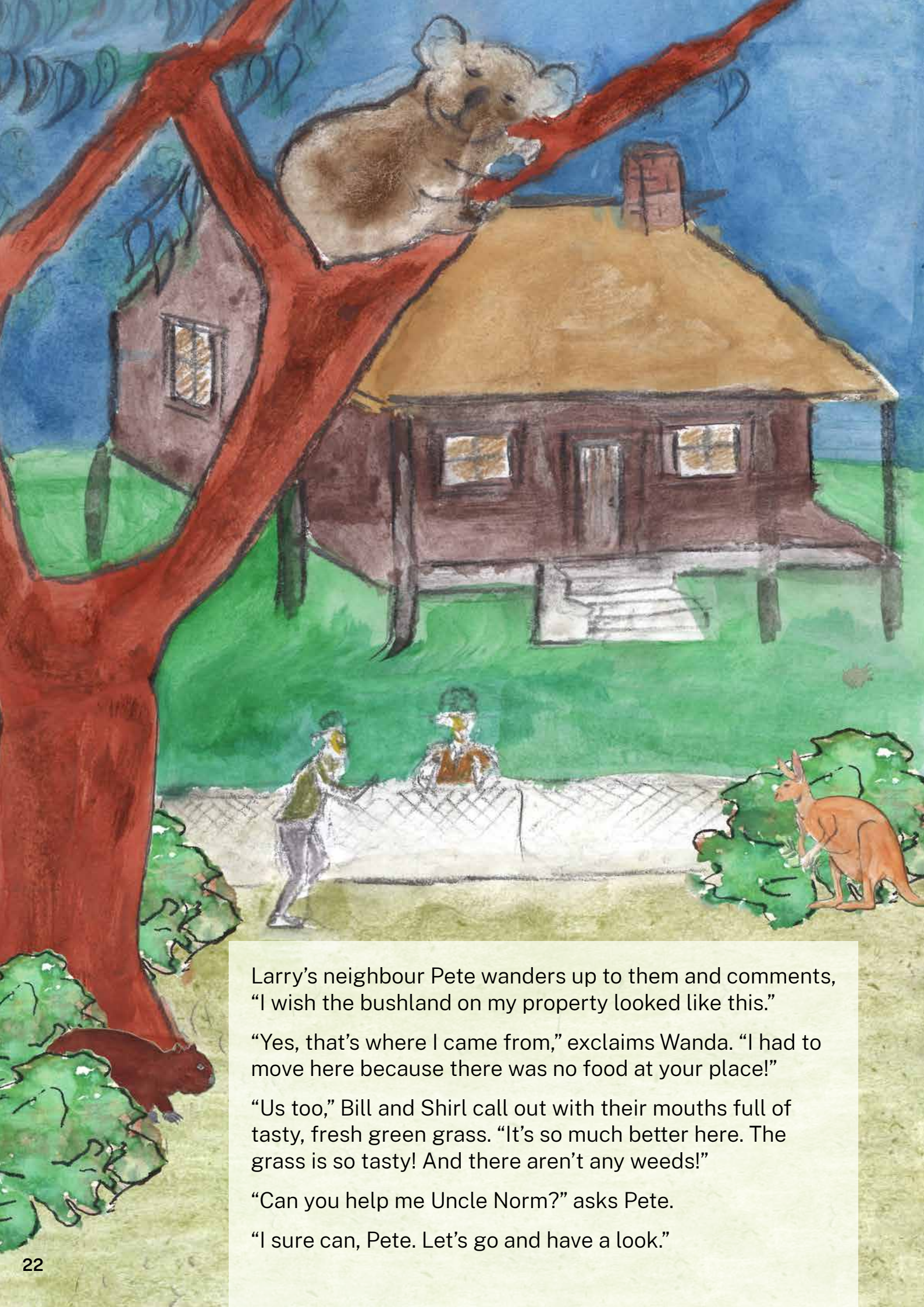




“This is amazing,” says Uncle Norm as he looks around the landscape. “The land is much healthier. The weeds have all gone, there are more animals here than before, and the native plants are growing.”

“Yes, the Cultural burn has healed the land. I also feel much better now that my property is protected from a big bushfire,” said Larry.





Larry's neighbour Pete wanders up to them and comments, "I wish the bushland on my property looked like this."

"Yes, that's where I came from," exclaims Wanda. "I had to move here because there was no food at your place!"

"Us too," Bill and Shirl call out with their mouths full of tasty, fresh green grass. "It's so much better here. The grass is so tasty! And there aren't any weeds!"

"Can you help me Uncle Norm?" asks Pete.

"I sure can, Pete. Let's go and have a look."



## Cultural burning facts

Cultural burning is a deeply sophisticated Cultural practice that is performed by Traditional Owners for a whole series of reasons:

- One of the net impacts of Cultural burning is to reduce landscape fuel loads and to promote native bush foods and grasses.
- Australian ecosystems rely on Cultural burning and Traditional knowledge.
- Our fear of fire has come from detaching ourselves from the landscape. We need to reconnect to Country.
- Aboriginal/First Nations people have a Cultural obligation to care for Country.
- Coming to know and understand Cultural fire requires guidance by Elders and Indigenous fire knowledge holders through various stages of Cultural learning on Country.
- Traditional Ecological Knowledge helps to ensure fire management is applied in the right place, at the right time and the right reasons to support resilient functioning ecosystems and maintain biodiversity.

The devastation caused by the 2019-2020 bushfires is a reminder of the importance of Cultural burning as part of looking after the Australian landscape.

## Local Land Services Cultural burning program

The Local Land Services Cultural burning program is important for local communities and the natural environment for the following reasons:

- Reviving ancient practices and knowledge systems.
- Connecting communities back to Country and restoring their Cultural identity.
- Providing critical training and capacity building opportunities for Aboriginal communities in the Hunter region.
- Fire practitioners are now involved in high level conversations and planning around various threatened species and Threatened Ecological Communities.
- Cultural burning will be implemented in threatened species habitat throughout the Hunter region in partnership with Local Land Services, Firesticks, National Parks and Wildlife Services, Council, DPE Water, Local Aboriginal Land Councils/ Traditional Owner organisations and community.

Local Land Services has demonstrated how government agencies can support Aboriginal communities and invest in Indigenous-led programs and projects.

## YouTube Videos



Cultural burning on  
Box Gum Grassy  
Woodlands



Cultural burning at  
Curricabark: Walking  
together in conservation



Cultural burning  
at Biraban



# Caring for Country with fire

## A SCHOOL PLAY

### Setting the scene

Larry has a patch of bushland on his property that is full of weeds, is overgrown and poses a bushfire risk to his home. The animals and old trees don't like it either and ask Larry to help them. Larry calls upon an Aboriginal fire practitioner from the Local Aboriginal Land Council who is going to help them heal the country with a Cultural burn.





# Characters

Characters	Scene 1	Scene 2	Scene 3	Scene 4
<b>People</b>				
Larry the farmer	●	●	●	●
Uncle Norm the local fire practitioner		●	●	●
Pete, Larry's neighbour				●
<b>Animals</b>				
Kenny koala	●	●	●	●
Anna goanna	●	●	●	●
Edna echidna	●	●	●	●
Kelly kangaroo	●	●	●	●
Bill kangaroo				●
Shirl kangaroo				●
Wanda wombat				●
Adam ant				●
<b>Plants</b>				
Geri gum tree (eucalypt)	●	●	●	●
Barry scar tree	●	●	●	●
Wally weed	●	●	●	
Wilbur weed	●	●	●	
Wendy weed	●	●	●	
Simon seedling				●
Sally seedling				●
<b>Fire</b>				
Fred flame			●	
Freda flame			●	
Felix flame			●	
Willa white smoke			●	



# Scene 1

**Kenny, Anna, Edna and Kelly are in the bushland, scratching around looking for food, telling each other that they are hungry.**

**Larry walks on stage.**

**Edna, Anna and Kenny rush up to Larry.**

**Edna echidna:**

Oh Larry, I'm so glad you're here. I've been looking for food, but I can't find ants here anymore.

**Anna goanna:**

Yes, I'm starving too. I'm thinking of moving somewhere else where there's more food.

**Kenny koala:**

And it's hard for me to get to my tree because there are too many weeds in the way.

**Wally weed:**

Yay! Ha ha.

**Wendy weed:**

We'll take over this whole place before you know it!

**Kelly the kangaroo hops up**

**Kelly kangaroo:**

The grass here isn't tasty at all, I might have to go and eat the nice grass growing next to the road, but I'm worried I'll get hit by a car.

**Geri gum tree:**

I've been dropping my seeds on the ground, but they aren't growing because there are too many leaves covering the ground.

**Wilbur weed:**

We don't want those pesky native plants here. This place is ours! All ours!

**All Weeds:**

Yeah, ha ha!

**Barry scar tree:**

When I was a boy, this place was full of animals and there was plenty of tasty food for everyone. There were none of those terrible weeds.

**Larry:**

Okay, this is not right. Thanks for letting me know. I really need to do something about this. I'm also worried that these leaves and bark on the ground will cause a huge bushfire. It could burn down my house over there. I'm going to give the Local Aboriginal Land Council a call and see if they can help us.

**Larry takes out a mobile phone and dials a number.**

**Larry:**

Hello, my name's Larry. I own a block of land with some bushland and I would like someone to come out and help me to make it a better place for the plants and animals. I'm also worried about bushfires. And these terrible weeds are taking over the whole area. Can you help me?

Ok great, thanks, see you next week.



## Scene 2

*One week later...*

*Larry and Uncle Norm walk out into the bushland.*

*All the animals rush up to Uncle Norm and Larry, talking over each other.*

**Edna echidna:**

I'm really hungry

**Kelly kangaroo:**

Are you here to help?

**Geri gum tree:**

Can you help my seeds grow? This land doesn't seem to be healthy anymore.

**Wilbur weed:**

Go away, you're not wanted here

**Wally weed:**

This place is ours. We're taking over

*Larry puts up his hands to quiet down the mob. He then introduces Uncle Norm.*

**Larry:**

Everyone, this is Uncle Norm, a local Aboriginal fire practitioner. Is there anything we can do Uncle Norm?

**Kenny koala:**

Yes Uncle Norm, can you help?

**Wendy weed:**

Go away Uncle Norm!

**Barry scar tree:**

I've been here for hundreds of years and this place has changed, but not for the better

**Wally weed:**

You're not needed here Uncle Norm.

**Uncle Norm:**

Ok I think I can help. This is what I'm going to do. I'm going to burn this area. It's called a Cultural burn. This will heal the land and make it healthier country for you.

**Geri gum tree:**

A burn? I don't want to be burnt.

**Barry scar tree:**

I'm an important Cultural object, I can't be burnt!

**Kenny koala:**

Yes, I don't want you to burn my home. And Penelope possum has her home in that tree over there.

**Uncle Norm:**

Don't worry, the fire will be so low that all of the trees will be protected.

**Edna echidna:**

But what about us? Where do we go while you burn?

**Uncle Norm:**

The fire will be burning so slowly that you can stay here and just keep away from the flames

**Kelly kangaroo:**

But won't the fire be too hot for us to stay here?

**Uncle Norm:**

No, a Cultural burn is a cool burn. It doesn't get too hot.

**Anna goanna:**

Won't the smoke make us sick?

**Uncle Norm:**

No, there will only be healthy, white smoke



**Wilbur weed:**

What about us? We like it here.

**Wendy weed:**

Yes, we can smother all the native plants

**Wally weed:**

This place is ours, all ours!

**Larry:**

What about my house? I don't want it to burn down.

**Uncle Norm:**

Don't worry Larry, the Cultural burn will burn any leaves and branches on the ground that could cause a huge bushfire. Your house will be protected.

**Wendy weed:**

But, but...

**Wally weed:**

This has to be a joke!

**Wilbur weed:**

This can't be happening!

**Uncle Norm:**

I'll come back in winter because it's the perfect time to burn the weeds, the leaf litter, bark and sticks on the ground. I can't burn now because it's summer and it's too hot. The fire will get too high and out of control.

**Anna goanna:**

But how do you know it will work Uncle Norm?

**Uncle Norm:**

The local Aboriginal Elders passed this fire knowledge on to me, who learnt it from the Elders before them.

**Kelly kangaroo:**

Who learnt it from the Elders before them?

**Uncle Norm:**

Yes, that's right. Your country will be healed. I'll be back in the winter.

***Uncle Norm walks off stage as the animals and weeds call out.***

**Animals:**

Okay. Bye Uncle Norm. See you then!

**Weeds:**

But, but, you can't!!! No! Wait!



## Scene 3

*It is now winter. Uncle Norm and Larry walk out into the bushland.*

*Flames are lying flat on the ground.*

*All the animals gather around Larry and Uncle Norm.*

**Edna echidna:**

Is today the day Uncle Norm?

**Uncle Norm:**

Yes, today is the perfect weather for a Cultural burn. It's not too hot or windy or wet.

**Kelly kangaroo:**

What should we do Uncle Norm?

**Uncle Norm:**

Just act normally. Pretend I'm not even here.

*Uncle Norm turns to face Larry.*

**Uncle Norm:**

Okay Larry, we need to prepare the area.

**Larry:**

We can start by raking away this long grass from under the trees so the tree branches don't catch fire.

*Larry and Uncle Norm rake debris away from around the trees.*

**Kenny koala:**

Oh good, you're protecting my home.

*Larry and Uncle Norm rake away the long grass from under the scar tree and habitat trees.*

**Geri gum tree:**

Be careful you don't scratch my bark.

**Barry scar tree:**

Or mine. I've been here for hundreds of years, you know.

**Uncle Norm:**

Ok, now we're ready to start our burn.

**Kelly kangaroo:**

What should we do Uncle Norm?

**Uncle Norm:**

Once I start burning, you will see the fire coming but you will have plenty of time to move away, so don't stress.

*Uncle Norm lights the burn with a match.*

*One by one the flames start to grow. They move out in a circle and stay low to the ground.*

**Kelly kangaroo:**

Come on guys, let's go.

**Edna echidna:**

Let's go, Anna!

**Kenny koala:**

I'm heading up the tree. The flames won't get me up there.

**Wendy weed:**

No! Put out the flames!

**Wally weed:**

We won't spread anymore, we promise!



***Flames keep moving slowly and stay low to the ground.***

**Geri gum tree:**

This is great. The flames aren't getting anywhere near my canopy. And the white smoke is wonderful.

**Anna goanna:**

Yes, I can still breathe easily.

**Wilbur weed:**

I'm melting away!

**Barry scar tree:**

I haven't seen anything like this for hundreds of years! This makes me feel young again.

***Willie white smoke flies around the stage.***

**Kenny koala:**

Hey, the smoke doesn't even reach me up here.

***Flames keep moving outwards, animals stay in the area, Larry and Uncle Norm watch the flames until they go off set.***

**Uncle Norm:**

Well, that was a huge success. I'll come back in 6 months to see how it all looks and find out how you're all going.

**Larry:**

Thanks Uncle Norm.

**All animals:**

See you later Uncle Norm.

***Larry and Uncle Norm shake hands and walk off stage.***



## Scene 4

**6 months later.**

***Plants and animals are happy in their rejuvenating habitat.***

**Edna echidna:**

Isn't this great, Anna. Since the burn there has been so much more food here.

**Anna goanna:**

Sure is Edna. I'm never hungry anymore.

***Bill and Shirl hop in and talk to Kelly.***

**Bill kangaroo:**

Is this a nice place to live?

**Shirl kangaroo:**

Is there room for us here?

**Kelly kangaroo:**

Oh yes. The grass is very tasty and there is plenty to go around.

**Wanda wombat:**

Yes. I only moved here recently, and it is much better than the bush over the hill.

**Adam ant:**

The soil is so healthy here. Heaps of my friends and I have moved in.

**Edna echidna:**

And there are so many nice plants, not like those terrible weeds that used to be here.

**Geri gum tree:**

My seeds have finally been able to grow. Look at my beautiful babies

**All seedlings:**

Hi mum!

**Barry scar tree:**

This country looked like this when I was a just a young sapling.

***Larry, Uncle Norm and Pete, Larry's neighbour, walk on stage.***

**Uncle Norm:**

This is really amazing. The land is much healthier. The weeds have all gone, there are more animals here than before, and the native plants are growing.

**Larry:**

Yes, the Cultural burn has really healed the land. I also feel much better now that my property is protected from a big bushfire.

**Pete:**

I wish the bushland on my property looked like this.

**Wanda wombat:**

Yes, that's where I came from. I had to move here because there was no food at your place!

**Bill kangaroo:**

Us too. It's so much better here.

**Shirl kangaroo:**

The grass is so tasty! And there aren't any weeds!

**Pete:**

Can you help me Uncle Norm?

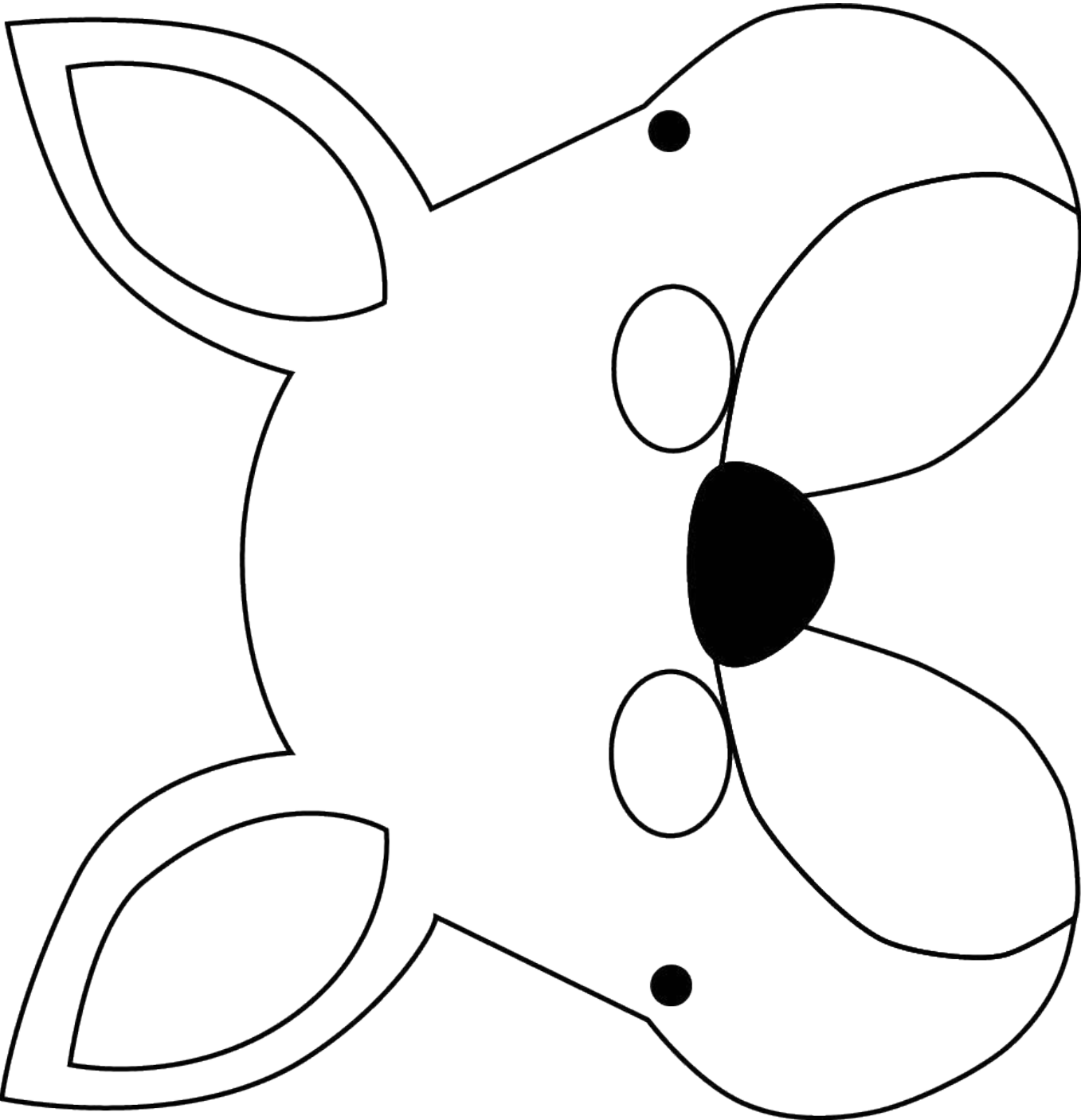
**Uncle Norm:**

I sure can, Pete. Let's go and have a look.

***Larry, Uncle Norm and Pete walk off stage and leave the plants and animals all happy.***

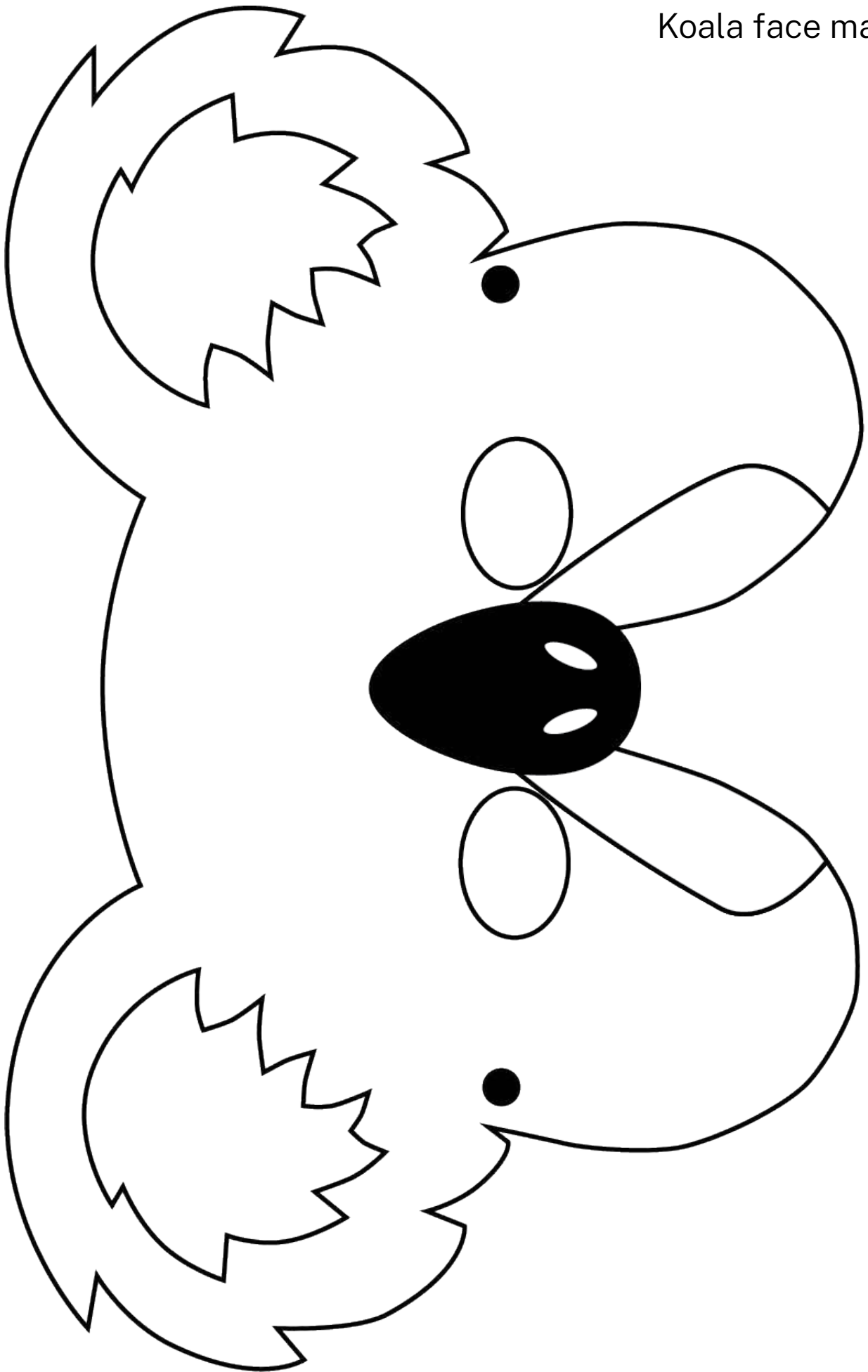


Kangaroo face mask



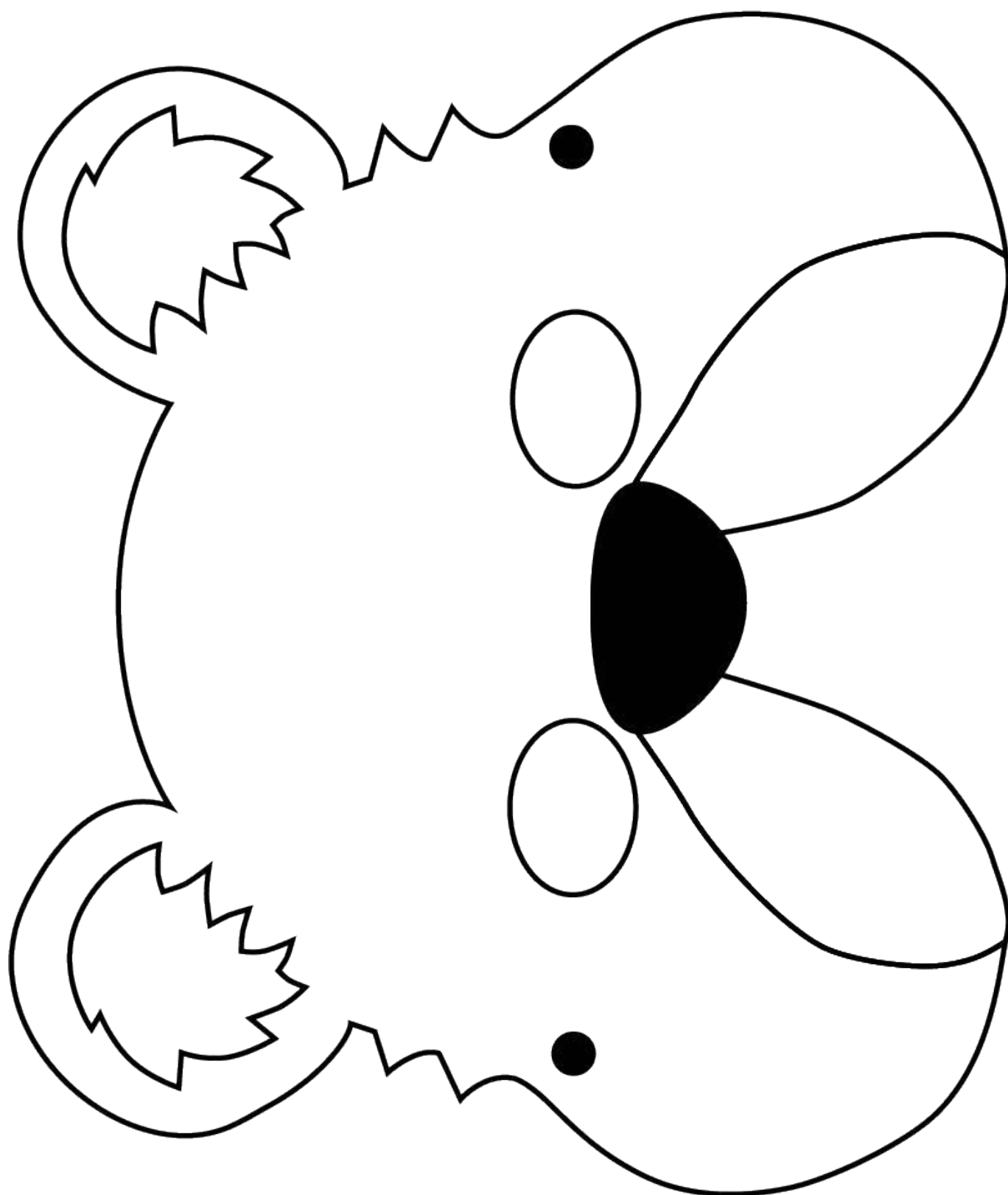


Koala face mask



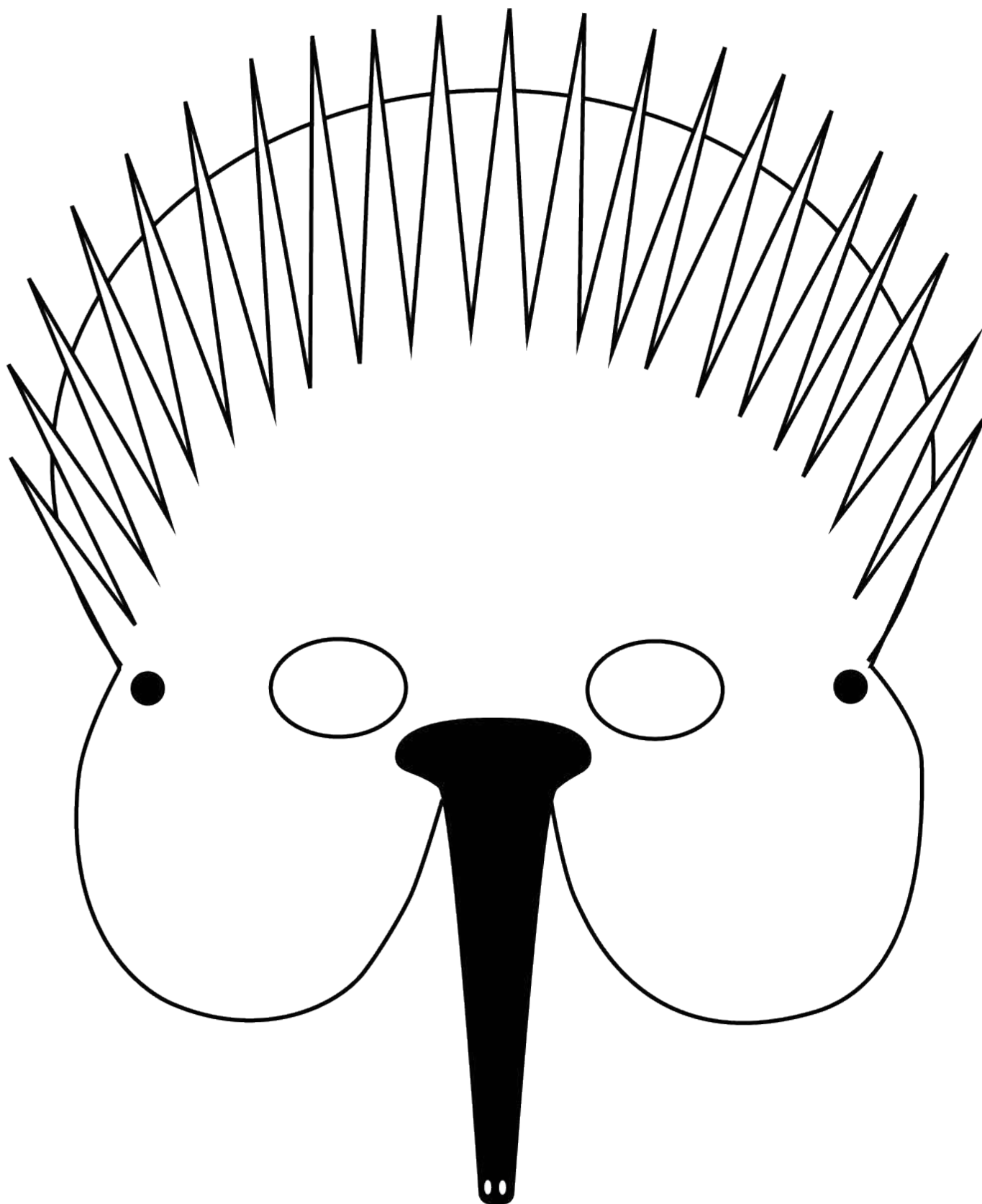


## Wombat face mask



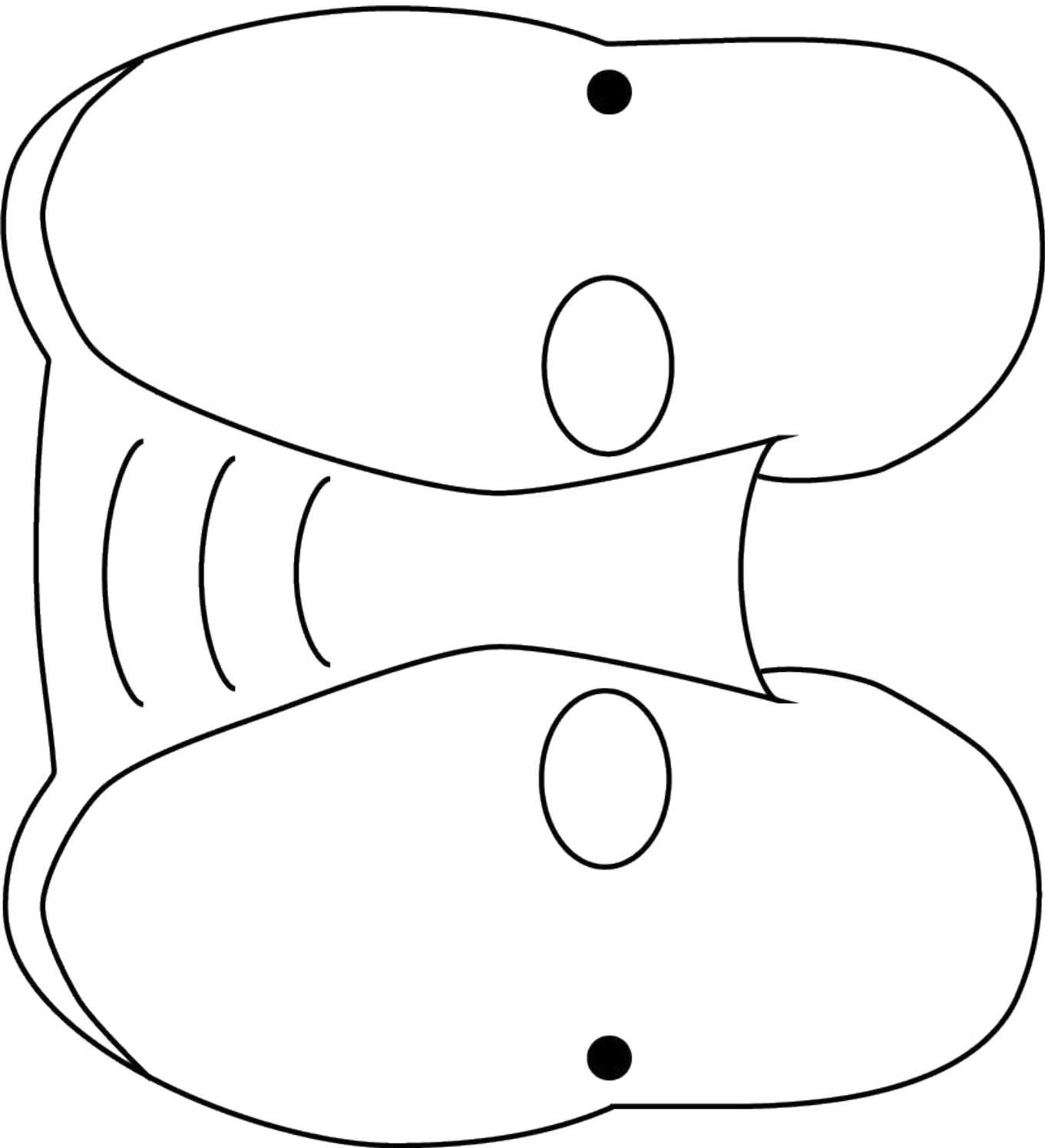


Echidna face mask



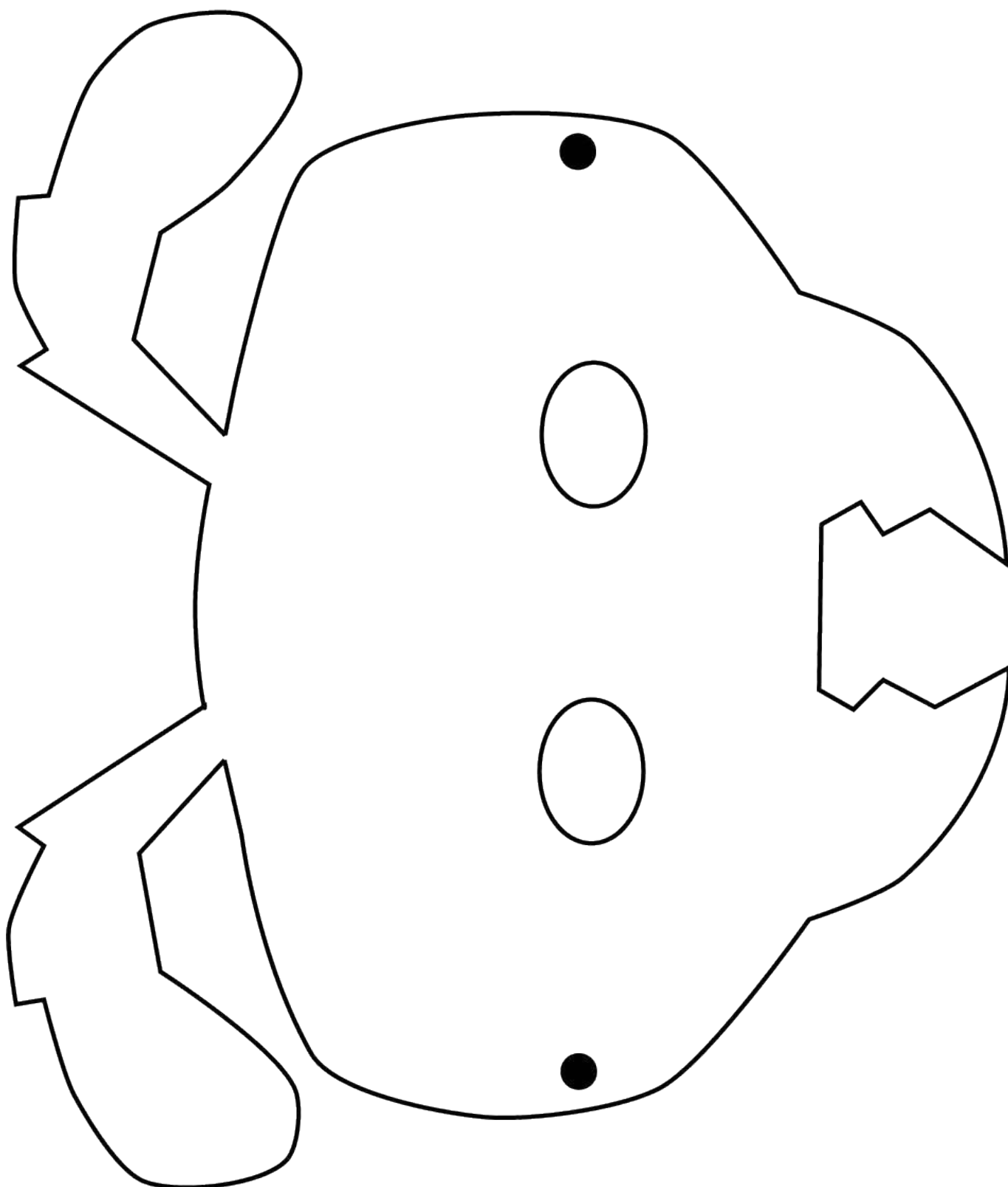


Goanna face mask

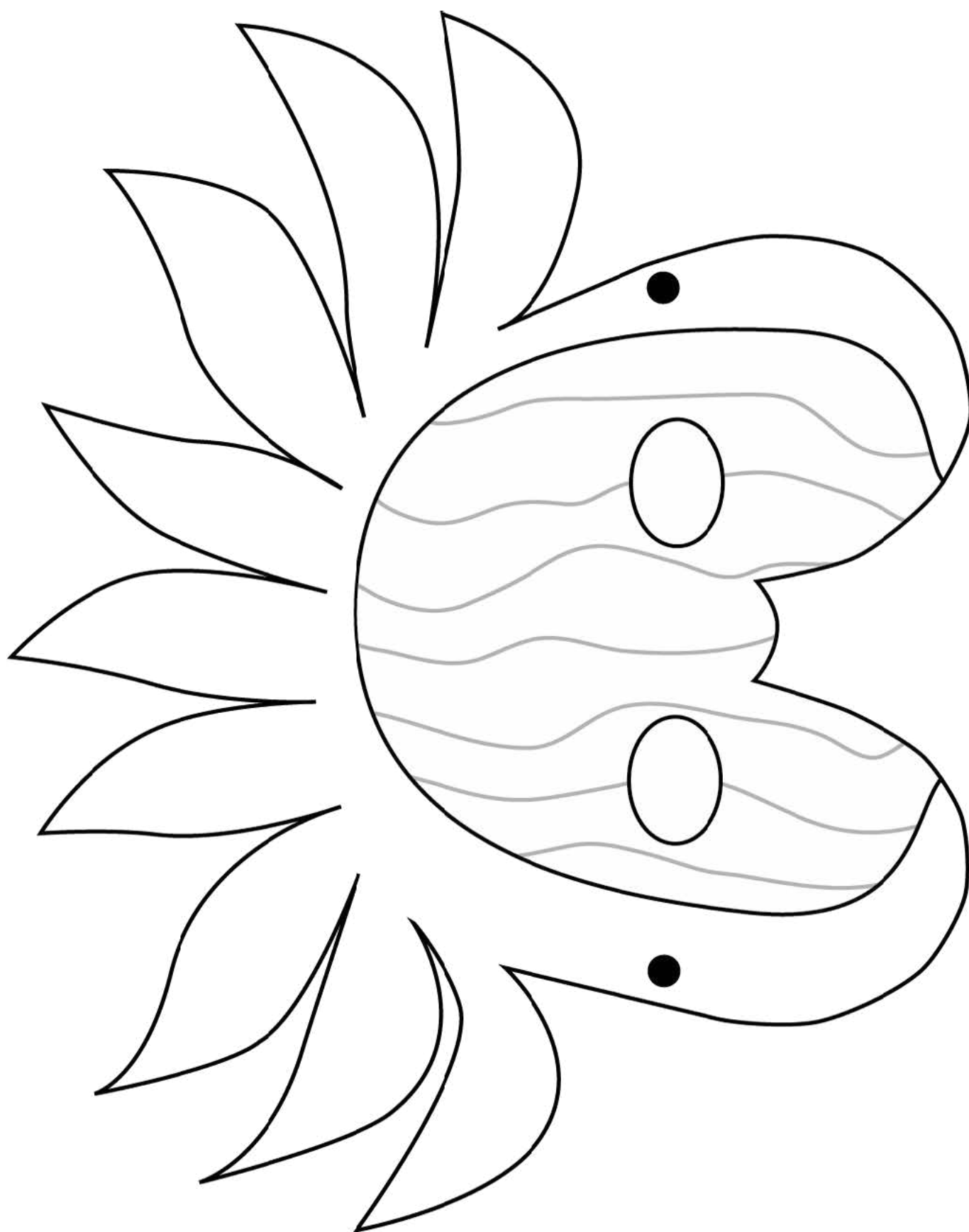




## Ant face mask

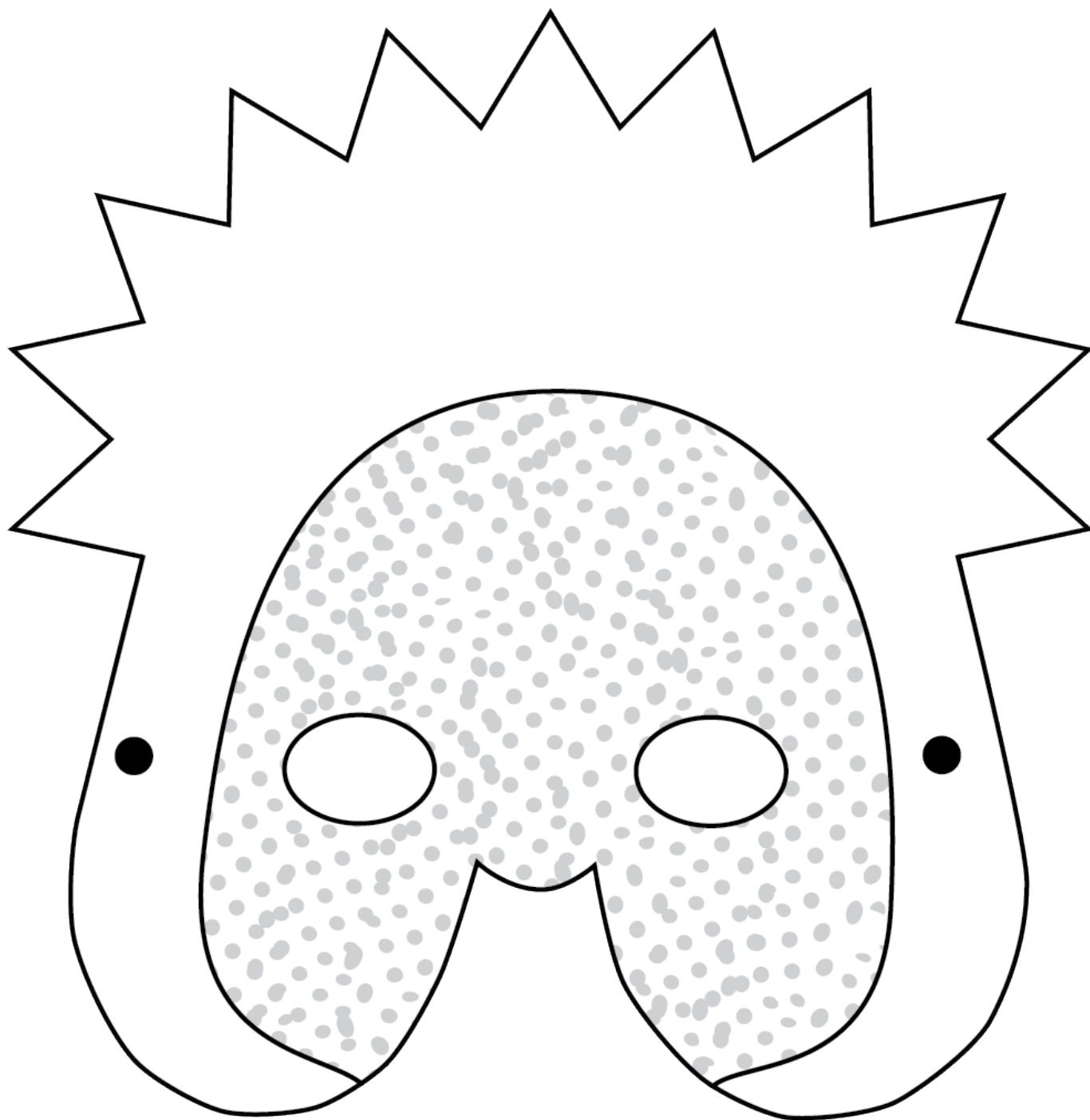


## Tree face mask

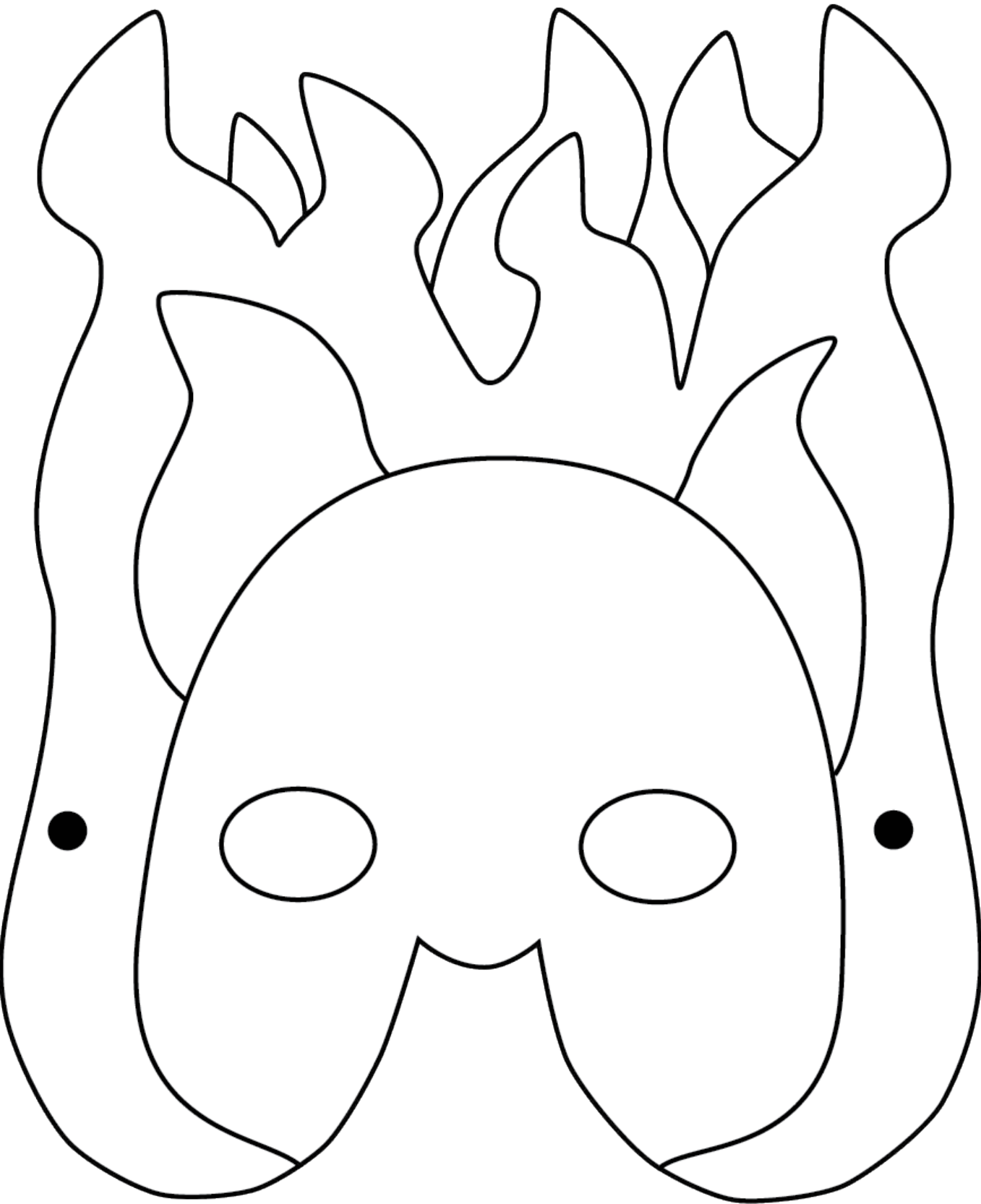




## Weed face mask



Fire face mask





## Smoke face mask





**Illustrations created by Hunter River High School (HRHS) Visual Art and Design students, in consultation with the HRHS Junior AECG. Pictured are the executive members.**

**(L to R) Maximus Ellis, Xanthiah Roach, Kye Jenkins, Madeline Lilley, Angel Hudson and Lillianah McNab.**