

9-24-2018

Cariboo Fires, 2017

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Recommended Citation / Citation recommandée

McCaslin, Susan, and Mark Haddock. "Cariboo Fires, 2017." *The Goose*, vol. 17, no. 1, article 44, 2018, <https://scholars.wlu.ca/thegoose/vol17/iss1/44>.

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SUSAN McCASLIN (POETRY)
AND MARK HADDOCK (PHOTOS)

CARIBOO FIRES, 2017

In July 2017 one of the many raging summer fires in the Cariboo Region of BC swept north from Ashcroft, eventually forcing many residents to evacuate the area. My husband's family has had a cabin at Young Lake since the early sixties. Our cabin was spared due to the valiant efforts of firefighters, but the boathouse, dock, motor boat, and canoe were demolished, along with many of the trees on the property, and 192,000 hectares of surrounding forests. In October of that year, we came back to survey the damage. This photo-poem sequence is our collaborative reflection on the devastation of the natural beauty of the bioregion due to the effects of human carelessness, land management, and climate change.

“The increase in forest fires, seen this summer from North America to the Mediterranean to Siberia, is directly linked to climate change, scientists say. And as the world continues to warm, there will be greater risk for fires on nearly every continent.”

– Nicola Jones, science journalist, Pemberton, BC¹

¹ Jones, Nicola. “Stark Evidence: A Warmer World Is Sparking More and Bigger Wildfires.” *Yale Environment* 360, October 2, 2017.



before Heraclitus sang
the world is fire

fire honed the words
we breathe

flame, again we meet you—
but what a sharpening edge



charcoaled matchsticks
clutched in wildfire's wake

lone pine's Jean d'Arc curves
staked against a furnaced sky

blackened trees, some standing
one half fallen

against a backdrop of burnt limbs—
filigree



pine beetles gathered on warming winds
inscribed pinpoints in ponderosa pine bark

nineteen million hectares of forest
died in stages—green, red, grey, gone



a transfiguring wind
quick-piercing

fanned astonishment
through skinned stick-limbs

our human ways
hapless, malformed

infernoed the common air



a sizzling forest across the valley

heaved heat waves far
to make tinder of a forest here—

death by long-distance scorching



near our spared cabin—
melted boathouse flattened

odd paraphernalia strewn
oxidized roofing, nails

hacksaw blades
composed

as a Jackson Pollock abstract



at lake's edge
the boat's wrack

a shattered coracle
bears no passengers

to loon's spellbinding cry



monkish cow
sentinels a spindly grove

not much to munch
against a stark blue sky

passerby stares
cow stares back



ragged sylvans
never signed up for this gig

in a land of ruined choirs—
dirges instead of hymns



soon after flames died
loggers came scavenging

ghost wood for profit
freebies for companies

all in the name of cleaning up



tender crestfallen trees
play airs in A minor

burnt orange patches
scribbled on pine bark

imitate autumn leaves—
such wild colour in an ashen world



city slickers in camo gear
rifles slung across backs

stride dirt roads
scanning for moose

no camouflage for critters

hunters scrutinize moose tracks
in needle-strewn ash

back tomorrow



fireweed will regenerate
but the forest?

controlled burns help
by devouring kindling

yet what of woodland Caribou—
lichen-starved

snakes and frogs scrambling?



picnickers who once fingered
mysteries of pine's puzzle bark

now enter strange new saturnalias
singing a forest's darkened beauty



as when Dante
heard the whoosh of dark wind

knew fire inverted
cut from Imagination's flames—

so here
a severed music

ice below
wincing flames above—

a dis-unity of elements



return, first fire
you who cannot sing a single hair—

hone our bones
in regeneration's choir

Poems by **SUSAN MCCASLIN**, poet and author of *Into the Open: Poems New and Selected* (Toronto: Inanna Publications, 2017).

Photographs by **MARK HADDOCK**, who has enjoyed the beauty of the Cariboo region since childhood.