

CALIFORNIA BURNING 2017-2018

I am thinking back to October 9, 2017
around 4:30AM in North Oakland
My window was open
and it smelled like someone barbecuing
or burning wood
It was the Tubbs Fire igniting
Santa Rosa, Napa and Lake counties
caused by Eucalyptus trees,
an Australian import
When one fell into a PG&E power line
it fulfilled their firebombing menace
Friends of mine had to evacuate
with their fourteen month old
and a second on the way
Another only had time to grab her dog
and put him in the back of her pick-up truck

The smoke followed me to my classroom
at Berkeley City College
At Kaiser Permanente
patients at internal medicine wore masks
They did so at the lab as well
At the end of the day
I walked with my neighbor Valentina
and her Border Collie/Australian Shepherd mix dog, Menta
in the landmark Mountain View Cemetery
In spite of the sun's brilliant red
San Francisco was barely visible in the distance from the haze
She is a restaurateur whose employer planned to send her
to replenish stock at the Sonoma wineries
She was not sure the trip would happen
Later on she reported that some of her co-workers
lost everything in the Tubbs Fire
I think about how that hot, dry October of 2017
was not like October of 2016
when we got early relief from the rains

The Ranch Fire, Lion's Fire, Hot Creek Fire,
Owens Fire and Donnell Fire
make up some of the seventeen fires
that arrived early in 2018
as some of the most destructive
in California history

To aid the firefighters' planning logistics
they name each new fire
Two combined into one
named the Mendocino Complex
has become the state's largest ever recorded
Its still burning after two weeks
forcing tens of thousands
to leave their homes

The fire has acquired consciousness
"It has created its own wind"
Much of Yosemite National Park is closed indefinitely
due to the Ferguson fire
sending vacationers to Mammoth Lake,
Sequoia and King's Canyon National Parks instead
The giant sequoias at Mariposa Grove
that I walked amongst in 2012 are threatened
We may lose these thousand year old "wonders"
Fire warnings even reach the Lake Tahoe area
The Carr fire in Shasta County,
caused by a car failure,
is the deadliest fire of 2018
My middle school teacher, Gloria,
who lives in Redding, reports on Facebook
that she is okay
although smoke surrounds her
It is 113 degrees and there is no humidity
People's eyes burn and tear from the haze,
their noses bleed and they cough
Asthma conditions have worsened
Even cats are not immune
Cars are dusted in ash
When smoky air reaches the East Bay
people choose daily walks around bay trails
because the air quality is better
than in the hills
Governor Jerry Brown calls this the "new normal"
Trump tweets that water that could be used
to fight the fires is
"foolishly being diverted into the Pacific Ocean"
He suggests that the water run from the ocean to the mountains?

When an early morning dagger of red light
cuts through my curtains
I think of what I want to save
in case I have to evacuate

