

**Bushfire Moon** by Ron C. Moss (2017, Walleah Press, Tasmania, Australia). 45 pages, perfectbound. ISBN 978-1877010767. \$14.50 from [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

*Reviewed by Robert Epstein*

Ron C. Moss's latest book of poetry and prose begins with his inimitable cover, depicting a blackened house in flames as a partially obscured moon overlooks the grim scene. With deep red overtones, *Bushfire Moon's* cover art is beautiful, but it is a terrible beauty, which only a firefighter/artist could so vividly portray.

For all our civility and modern advancements, uncontrolled fire has lost none of its ferocity since Neanderthal times. Most of us, if we are fortunate, live comfortably removed from the devastation that uncontained fire can wreak. The opening haiku is deceptively domestic, only hinting at, or foretelling, the danger that lurks closer than we think:

fire duty  
the newly ironed shirt  
still warm

Turning the page, readers follow the Sandfly Brigade volunteer firefighter into the intense heat, grime, and smoke of a fast-moving fire. Tasmanian poet Moss has brought us with him into the stark, frightening scene where he finds himself isolated from his crew member. What could be more unnerving, even for a seasoned volunteer officer? The harrowing haibun concludes with the following haiku, giving rise to far more than a sigh of relief:

between heaven and hell  
the touch of a friend's hand  
on my shoulder

Firefighting isn't fundamentally about ego-driven acts of courage or heroism. It is about endurance and friendship, deep caring,

and holiness (the kind one spontaneously encounters out-of-doors, unaccompanied by liturgy or scripture).

summer wildfire  
a burning scarecrow  
on the cross

Could anyone mistake the airborne rescue team alluded to in the haiku below punctuating another frightening haibun?

smoke and ash  
flying tin angels  
work the skyfall

In so many places around the globe there is drought. Fires thrive in such conditions. It is no wonder that rain appears again and again in these pages. Is the rain due to a fetish for repetition or editorial neglect? I think neither. The recurrence of rain, like the recurrence of the moon, is no accident in this carefully crafted work of art.

passing car  
a tiny hand opens  
to the rain

Rain is life. Children know it innocently, firefighters respond to it instinctually, Mother Earth receives it naturally.

On the recurring presence of the moon: In traditional Japanese poetry, the white circle in the sky often symbolizes spiritual enlightenment or self-realization. It can also represent immortality, and much more.

Though a dedicated volunteer firefighter for more than twenty years, Moss has the emotional integrity to acknowledge that the work, when seen through the eyes of *small mind* (a Zen term), can be exhausting. Such burnout or compassion fatigue could prompt a weary volunteer to contemplate retirement or totter on despair. Not so for Moss, who taps into *big*

---

*mind* (another Zen term), drawing renewed strength from...  
you guessed it:

tired of this world  
suddenly moonlight  
through the window

Curiously enough, Moss does not include a famous poem by the 18th-century Japanese poet, Mizuta Masahide, but it readily comes to mind:

barn's burnt down  
now I can see  
the moon

Moss is a poetic descendent of Masahide with one qualification: The author of *Bushfire Moon* deeply appreciates the full catastrophe that is this life of fire-and-moonlight. He knows only too well that wildfires cause incalculable devastation and loss yet, even so, humanity finds renewal like redwood seeds that germinate in soil warmed by a windswept blaze. By the light of the moon, we behold this regeneration and rebirth and celebrate the resilience of the Earth and our species.

A longtime Zen student, Moss has wisely chosen the path of the real, rather than the surreal, and we are richly rewarded. Like the Buddha, who described himself as “awake,” Moss has awakened to the beautiful, the poignant, and catastrophic. Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the terrible Black Tuesday fires in Tasmania, *Bushfire Moon*, like *The Bone Carver* before it, is more than a wildfire chronicle from the front lines. It is a book of great sensitivity and inspiration from a firefighter, poet, and artist who implores us to see beyond tragedy to that which is sacred.