Mining the Motherlode

We are the tribe of the mother-lode aquifer.
Twelve hundred centuries, nomads have traveled here,
making their camps in the spring and the fall, seeking
shelter in canyons and washes and swales, building
hearths of caliche, and hunting and gathering
life that collected where water empowered it.
Even when drought plagued the prairie atop of it,
water welled-up from the sweet Ogallala lake
all along Yellow House Draw to the canyonland,
nourishing passersby, nomad and animal,
nourishing all who tread lightly and carefully.

Here in the land of the mother-lode aquifer,
rain’s unpredictable, even in good seasons,
never enough, but for grasses and buffalo,
never enough, but for seasonal wanderers,
never enough for the dwellings of permanence
needed for farming and ranching and industry,
never enough for the chambers of commerce. Rain
can’t be entrusted to God and the elements,
not by the tribe of the mother-lode aquifer.

Deep in the earth through the rock that encumbers it,
down to the water sand, down to the water pay,
dig down with drilling rigs, lay in the well casing,
thrust in the sucker-rod, pull it out, let it come
drawing the water up; drive it with wind-power,
drive it with gasoline, drive it electrically,
pumping and pumping and pumping ‘til water runs
shining in furrows and sparkling on summer lawns,
spewing through towers for cooling the gas-flaring,
coal-smoking power plants making more energy
pumping more water, more water, more water, all
over the land of the mother-lode aquifer.

Here are no headwaters, little replenishing
what we are draining, so little restraining how
much we are using and how we are using it,
here the great lake of the Plains subterranean
dwindles each season, each turn of the faucet, each
flick of the switch starting up the submersibles,
dwindling down ditches through siphon tubes, dwindling down
side-rolls and pivots and gated pipe, dwindling down
water gaps, water mains, water taps, water drains,
dwindling down every new housing development,
dwindling until there are farms metamorphosing
once-irrigated to dry-land and grass pasture,
letting their silos stand empty as metaphor,
testament, future-shock here in the present-tense
frailty, the fragile, the mother-lode aquifer.

Humbling enough is this waste of our own making;
here, where we once believed rain followed plow, believed
boosters, promoters, and huckster developers,
hitched-up our wagons to forty small acres, plowed
fence-row to fence-row with cash crops on bank notes, built
churches, raised children and sent them to colleges,
sent them to wars, sent them out of the hinterlands,
sent them to places that never relinquished them.
Here, from the land of the mother-lode aquifer,
people are leaving for jobs in the popular
cities, are leaving as victims of bottom-line
corporate discounters driving off businesses
started by yours and my mom-and-pop grandparents,
corporate farmers replacing the families,
swashbucklers, slashing and cutting, efficiency
chanted as mantra, while nobody’s answering
who will take care of the mother-lode aquifer?

Fear lines our pocket-books, fear comes in quarter-inch
four-by-eight plywood sheets nailed over window panes,
fear grows in weeds in the sidewalks of vacancies,
fear breeds the desperate bargaining: jobs! bring us
jobs! bring us jobs! bring us jobs! bring us anything,
bring us the worst of your wastes and your prisoners,
radioactive and toxic, the detritus,
social and otherwise, flushed from the gutter-pipes
laid from the centers of power and influence,
aimed at the weak, at the people of choicelessness,
stumbling around in the wastes not their own making,
wastes that will poison the mother-lode aquifer.

Humbling enough is this come-hither beggaring,
pleading, abasing ourselves with our appetites;
worse, still, the mother-lode aquifer’s guardians
shockingly favoring selling our water rights,
falling to pitches from old-fashioned renegades
nowadays using computers for running-irons,
nowadays using their lawyers for wire-cutters,
nowadays throwing out sound-bites for lariats,
bullying water boards into considering
selling our lifeblood at low bid, not worrying
selling tomorrow to pay for today, selling
every last drop of the mother-lode aquifer.

What will become of us when we are waterless?
we of the tribe of the mother-lode aquifer,
nomads and wanderers rooted by water wells,
cities and homesteads and farmlands and cattle spreads,
everything other than short grass and buffalo
wholly dependent on mining the mother-lode?
Far away, far away, where rain is plentiful
year-in and year-out and always predictable,
learned professors have studied the exodus
made by our people, our water, our resources,
calling our depopulation a certainty,
saying why fight it? let’s recognize lost causes
when they are lost causes, let’s give the prairie back,
back to the ruminants, back to the grasses, let’s
give us a home where the buffalo roam, where the
skies are not cloudy all day after day after
day after day where the antelope seldom are
heard for there’s no one to hear the discouraging
word when the commons belong to the buffalo—
crazy! say chambers of commerce, but who’s crazy
now, as we drink up our mother-lode aquifer?
now, as we poison our mother-lode aquifer?
now, as we sell-off our mother-lode aquifer?

Poets and dreamers, the only true realists,
live in the future, they do not imagine it,
seeing tomorrow with yesterday’s sorrowings,
seeing tomorrow as here-and-now’s borrowings,
seeing the present as future’s own history.
Poets and dreamers, the only true realists,
know that the gift is the ultimate mystery,
knowing a gift not in motion is powerless,
knowing no gift can be taken for profiting,
knowing no gift can be subject to ownership.
Poets and dreamers who live on El Llano know
what is the gift but the mother-lode aquifer?

What will we do with this gift of the mother-lode?
Pray that the poets and dreamers remember it,
pray that its guardians hold it in stewardship,
pray that we honor it, pray that we husband it,
pray for the tribe of the mother-lode aquifer,
pray for the water, the sweet Ogallala lake,
nourishing all who tread lightly and carefully,
lightly and carefully, lightly and carefully

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