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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