

Brand New Lakes

Scanning the map, I'm taken with dams
Water-walls inspire awe in the West
Here, any cup that holds, even half-full,
Is considered blessed. So this business
Of making lakes has dappled the state
With hundreds of new names to navigate between.
From Lake Casitas to Castaic Lake, there's a
Highway to take, and what was useless riverbank
Before is now scenic lakeshore:
Shasta, Trinity, Whiskeytown, Oroville, Almanor –
Their bodies sprawl like shriveled octopi, as if
Trying to crawl themselves dry
Up the side canyons.

Some are honest reservoirs, less shy to remind us
What they're for, shaking the dry years in our faces
Like a broken vase. But these fake lakes,
They rankle – Lake Berryessa, for example
With her princess name, who drowned a whole town
To fill her space.

California, land of a thousand dams
We clutch our dripping faucets
Your stopped-up streams are sippy cups
For toddlers watching the deserts turning green
And all your made lakes –
Loveland, Success, even New Lake –
Are a thousand droplets drying on a dream.

Walking Lamoille View Cemetery

just before dusk, a slow drizzle begins
I go past Gates
and stand at the stone of Ida May Drown
contemplate the full sentence that is her name
pause for moment, then begin to walk around
Peck, Pike, Peake
Dodge and Hunt, Chase and Buck
over Heath and Wood, up Hill to West
down to Mudgett and Waters
counting markers of men named for trades:
Peatman and Tinker, Baker and Washer

Sweet Riddle of Power
Sample Patch of Green Pearl
from Grow you will Low
From Low you will Lower
Fay French: Nadeau, Rondeau, Bilodeau

I pass Ruggles, I pass Balch
without an Inkel, without a Tinkham, without a Kittell
to the tall group graves I come: Gould, Gallant, Nye
I stop at a stately trunk of a monument, carved only with one word:
WAIT
around it flat headstones are spread on the ground
branches of family tree growing down

Taste of Place

Now that I'm grown, I'll be like one of those children
Who eats dirt, scooping loam or mineral grit
And smearing it into my mouth
The better to know where I am.
Now with language, I'll learn how to call
Every place that spills and stains my face:
Anderson Valley, Chalk Hill, Howell Mountain

I travel these vineyard roads, a mosaic of names
Slow-sipping into a story:
Stag's Leap over Rockpile in Wild Horse Valley
Russian River pours into Dry Creek
The tannins talk about raspberry, cigar and leather
And what the weather's been this year.
I try my tongue on some towns:
Oakville, Yountville, Yorkville
Savor environs, round on the palate
In Cole Ranch, Covelo, Mendocino
I chew on acreage, hoping to know
How the taproot lives in these parts.
With terroir stuck in my teeth, one day
I'll speak appellation; I'll know the name
Of the flavor of every location. "Hardship
Breeds Character," a wine-man tells me,
Scuffling the rough ground with his feet. Hearing this
I squat to suck the gravels of Mt. Veeder
They whisper about cedar and peat, they
Taste of privation.