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"You Must Remember This:" Nothing Lasts a Hundred Years

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In the second half of the 19th Century, John Muir walked through much of California. Muir looked upon two similar granite valleys which had existed for thousands of years in the Sierra Nevada, Spanish for Snowy Mountains.

One of the two valleys Muir saw was named Yosemite, probably Miwok for Grizzly Bear. Yosemite became one of our first national parks. The second valley was named Hetch-Hetchy, probably Miwok for a wild grass with edible seeds, or possibly Southern Sierra Miwok for magpie. Hetch-Hetchy was dammed. The snow melt from the Sierras filled Hetch-Hetchy.

By the time I lived in San Francisco in the 1960’s and 1970’s, John Muir was dead but with Theodore Roosevelt, he left the legacy of America's national parks. The water from Sierra snow melts in the Spring had filled and overflowed Hetch-Hetchy for many years. First, the falling water drove electric turbines in and below the dam which were owned by the Pacific Gas & Electric Company. Even in the 1970’s, there were still a handful of old output and requirements contracts for electric power. In these pre-Franklin Roosevelt contracts, the price of kilowatt
hours was set in gold dollar amounts.

With almost free electric power, San Francisco kept its trolleys, streetcars, and cable cars when other American cities tore up their tracks and wires and bought gasoline buses. I lived in a lovely flat on Dolores at Liberty Street where I paid a monthly electric bill of less than $15.00. After lighting my flat, the water from Hetch-Hetchy crossed California’s Central Valley through giant culverts. Then the water flowed into a man-made reservoir in San Mateo County named Crystal Springs Lake. Finally, San Francisco drank the water from Crystal Springs Lake.

Crystal Springs Lake is not an accurate or an imaginative name. The lake water is piped through hundreds of miles of culverts instead of bubbling up from pure, local springs. Crystal Springs Lake is both (1.) a cliché and (2.) inaccurate within the space of its two initial words.

In California real estate, the words “redwood grove” usually means there never were any redwood trees. The name “orchard estates” always means the apricot trees have all been cut down. All cradle Californians are born knowing that the Pacific is not peaceful.

Richard Rodriguez, like me, a cradle Californian, says about names on the California land: “[L]iving Californians – such was the genius of Spain – must yet compose a litany of sorts to get from one end of town to another: ‘Take the San Bernardino to the San Gabriel turnoff.’” Only in San Francisco would John
Locke’s 18th Century ideal, Liberty, intersect with the Popes and Holy Roman Emperors’ 17th Century ideal, Dolores, Spanish for Our Lady of Sorrows.

Add the needs of 19th Century American people to the genius of 19th Century American inventors: Early Californians became in engineering, Raskolnikovs in a New World Dostoyevsky dance to whom, “Everything is permitted.”

For two generations, the rest of the world escaped to California, secure in the notion that they would not be late to embrace the “sun kissed maid.” At twenty-six, during the Civil War, Mark Twain absconded from his Confederate sympathizing Missouri militia by deserting to California. The early film industry escaped the East Coast's icy winter weather, Thomas A. Edison's avaricious patent lawyers, and cold blooded Mafia shakedowns by fleeing to California. Many of Germany's talented Jews escaped Hitler by fleeing to Hollywood.

In fact, though, rather than in fiction, the Old World waltzed to the strains of a sharply asymmetrical – though also Russian - tune: “[A]t times . . . a man wakes up and asks himself . . . ’Can I be already thirty . . . forty . . . fifty? How is it life has passed so soon? How is it death has moved up so close?’ Death is like a fisher who catches fish in his net and leaves them for a while in the water; the fish is still swimming but the net is around him, and the fisher will draw him up – when he thinks fit.” Ivan Turgenev, *On The Eve*, 288 (trans. C. Garnett, 1906).

To us, 21st Century men and women well past the Linnean off ramp of the
freeway of animal classification, one old World variation of the 19th Century European waltz is now superficially comedic: “The spider taketh hold with her hands, and is in kings' palaces.” 30 Proverbs 28.

Consider, however, the truth of the underlying assertion. The sculpted reliefs of Assyrian King Ashurbanipal (668 – 631 BC) hunting lions from his chariot are, for now, in Room 10a of the British Museum. Scorpions, spiders, and vipers, for now, haunt the ruins of the once shining palaces of Ashurbanipal. See also Soren Kierkegaard's 19th Century, more abstract formulation of the same underlying idea: “What the philosophers say about Reality is often as disappointing as a sign you see in a shop window, which reads: Pressing done here. If you brought your clothes into be pressed, you would be fooled; for only the sign is for sale.” Either/Or: A Fragment of Life, at 25 – 26 (trans. D. & L. Swenson, Princeton University Press, 1946).

The earthquake fault notwithstanding, anonymous workers in Alta California trustingly used sticks, logs, and mud to dam Crystal Springs to receive and store the water from Hetch-Hetchy. Today, the workers' trust seems misplaced. If you look at a satellite map, you will see that the long lake runs north west sitting just on top of the San Andreas Fault

Misplaced trust or not, 10 billion gallons of water now rest on a tectonic plate, a part of the North American continent moving slowly, but inexorably north. Ten
additional billion gallons of water, for now, rest on a separate tectonic plate, a part of the North American continent moving, slowly, but inexorably, south. When they Christened California's geography, the old Spanish explorers and padres put St. Andrew on the map. The 17th Century knew St. Andrew's faults. Today, some Californians would choose a milder term, perhaps St. Andrew's dysfunctions.

The dam which holds 20 billion gallons of water was built in 1888. Richard Rodriguez titled the last chapter of one of his books, “Nothing Lasts a Hundred Years.” The old dam survived the 1906 earthquake which burned a third of San Francisco. The old dam survived the 1989 earthquake which took down the eastern part of the Bay Bridge. Nevertheless, remember, nothing lasts forever. Perhaps this essay will ring the ancient chimes in some dusty belfrys: Today, though, perhaps not.

Misplaced trust or not, when we meet Apollo or Artemis, he dancing on the edge of the world in Northern California, or she transfixed before her painted image in the Uffizi beside the Arno in Florence, we are enchanted. For a moment, our capacity for human wonder is filled, even sated. Ezra Pound wrote, “Let the Sea and the Wind speak: This is paradise.”

Crystal lake, like an aging Botoxed California girl, is beautiful. When you are in Northern California, walk or run on the paths around Crystal Lake. You will see the enamel blue lake, the lighter blue sky will be filled with the scents of bay
laurel, live oaks, manzinta, madrone, and wild oats. Flocks of gulls & pelicans will rise from the lake, circle, and land again. Be still: You will be in Ezra Pound's and Christ's Paradise of the Sea (thalassa) and the Wind (anemos).

But remember this metaphor. It's a bit but only a trifle hyperbolic: Let the Culvert, the dam, and the engineers speak. This Paradise is Artifice. Nothing lasts a hundred years. Not even John Muir's Hetch-Hetchy. Not Crystal Springs. Not even my $15.00 a month utility bill.