

SAN MATEO COUNTY POET LAUREATE



Poetry Reading *by*

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About this poem:

“First Rain”

This poem began as an explanation of California weather patterns to friends on the east coast. They live where rain comes year-round, without a regular drought in the summer months. The notion of a “first” rain of the season—and the many hallmarks of living with periodic drought—makes no sense in that context.

The more I immersed myself in recounting details of California landscape, the more I explored the interweaving of natural and cultural history, and the extent to which we are influenced by the landscape that surrounds us, especially in childhood.

A more somber realization has followed since completing this poem: that the California weather patterns from long before my childhood have begun to shift. The odd summer rain shower, once virtually unheard of, is less of an oddity. We witness changes in rain and fire seasons, and the interwoven effects of changing landscapes on our lives.

First Rain

From April on, a marathon to mid-autumn.
Clouds shower nothing but light. Most days,
though, are cloudless. Faces of blank hills

shine like medallions, scallop the monotone blue.
By summer the peaks disappear into the wide
white haze that accumulates in valleys:

Santa Clara, San Fernando, San Joaquin,
incantations in the still air of noon.
Sun-baked stucco, a tide of traffic pressed

on soft asphalt. All day the locked cars swell
in parking lots furrowed by standing heat.
No wind carries eucalyptus fumes or the full

oleander shot with pink, flushed as though
fair-skinned. The concrete curbsides
lighten like clay, while loose-shirted tourists

wander Franciscan missions, fill pergolas,
pause in archways by tiled fountains
where the pigeons' grey sheens bob like clock-

work as they drink. Sweet shade of citrus
and grand jacarandas. Gardens where aloes abut
the rose the way neighborhoods abut the brush

along foothills and fluted canyons.
The first rain comes without temperance,
scattering dust with hard drops and raising

oil in suds. It answers the inland farms
along the interstate, their thousand white quills
of sprinklers on fields of green,

the prayers of grasslands for run-off,
of reservoirs for months of showers and a sky
retold in miles of open aqueduct