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Stele

Virginia E. Baker

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Stele

- I. Mute by the count of sunsets
 on its heat-glossed surface,
 it speaks a language
 with no sound, no voice—
 only silence: words
 carved in stone and frozen there
 like fossils baked in the heat
 of centuries flaring, cooling
 in the slow and scraping rape
 of sun and moon.

Peasants work around it,
 their backs intent
 on the work ahead,
 on the bread that is made
 by the sweat in their eyes
 and the wheat that will grow
 young and green in today's sun.

The only history here
 is in tomorrow's prayer for rain.

- II. Once, there lived a queen
 who did the unspeakable:
 she was never said again—
 became unspoken, unwritten.

Vanished.

It remains her sentence in history.
 And generations after,
 though their blood
 runs more solid
 than her vanished memory,
 still hold allegiance

to whatever standard rises
to feed them
in their own dark fields,

academes, perhaps, in the wrong schools.

- III. So skeletons
have passed to dust
without the cry of clay.

Soundless words
are empty—
there are no names
without date,
without history.

- IV. Years ago, man sent to space
a capsule.
Etched on it were some shapes:
one man
one woman
nine planets and a sun
and some writings

with no sound,
no voice—
no interpretation
nor existence that is immanent.

What would be left?
What voices, written
in stone, gold, or parchment?

- V. Iraqis plow the land
around the steles,
capsules of days too foreign to speak.

Dirty children play
who cannot read their own speech,
who ring with running feet
the tongues of their ancestors,

and each are grounded
by their silence.

Around the children,
 the wheat grows
 they celebrate it,
 the oxen plow
 they take care for their path,
 the flies buzz
 and water is scarce
 and over their heads
 fly the birds of many nations,

in steel mostly,
 and speaking of wars
 that are foreign,

that vanish
 their dwellings
 to unbeing—

razing the words
 and the lives
 that made them.

How many times has the world
 passed away?

VI. In the fields,
 alone in the passage of wind
 and the sway of wheat
 and the dust of two thousand
 eight hundred years
 and children, ever children,
 the stele of Sumer stands.

Perhaps to be unwritten
 is to be told more truly.
 When it was first done
 it was done
 with living hands.

What is unwritten
 speaks the warning.

—Virginia E. Baker