Stele

Virginia E. Baker

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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,

academies, 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

Virginia E. Baker, an editorwriter with NOVELL, lives in Provo, Utah.