

# 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