

Ice Child

By John Haines

Cold for so long, unable to speak,
yet your mouth seems framed
on a cry, or a stifled question.

Who placed you here, and left you
to this lonely eternity of ash and ice,
and himself returned to the dust
fields, the church and the temple?


Was it God—the sun-god of the Incas,
the imperial god of the Spaniards?
Or only the priests of that god,
self-elected—voice of the volcano
that speaks once in a hundred years.

And I wonder, with your image before me,
what life might you have lived,
had you lived at all—whose companion,
whose love? To be perhaps no more
than a slave of that earthly master:

a jug of water on your shoulder,
year after stunted year, a bundle
of reeds and corn, kindling
for a fire on whose buried hearth?

There were furies to be fed, then
as now: blood to fatten the sun,
a heart for the lightning to strike.

And now the furies walk the streets,
a swarm in the milling crowd.
They stand to the podium, speak
of their coming ascension ...



Through all this drift and clamor
you have survived—in this cramped
and haunted effigy, another entry
on the historian's dated page.

Under the weight of this mountain—
once a god, now only restless stone,
we find your interrupted life,
placed here among the trilobites
and shells, so late unearthed.

John Haines, "The Ice Child" from *For the Century's End: Poems 1990-1999*. Used with the permission of the University of Washington Press.

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