

Silence

Almost at every moment in time, notably in the sphere of American Indian speech, some ancient and rick expression of articulate being is lapsing into irretrievable silence.

George Steiner, *After Babel*

Invisible until we throw our nets,
 Our naming web trawls from the senseless world
 Rich shoals of meaning, animates its emptiness.
 Once caught and then released,
 The mesh takes on whatever form it fished
 Out of the formlessness of silence,
 So words stand in for what is lost —
 "Dinosaur" retrieves intact, if hollowed out,
 The shape this mighty contour filled,
 Holds it like a ghostly echo,
 Breath incarnated into print.

The extinction of a word is neither here nor there,
 The breeding stock of language rallies,
 Throws out another corded noun or verb.
 Our tribe is one of busy fisherfolk
 Endlessly repairing, casting, drawing in our nets,
 So when a language dies and sinks without a trace,
 We know something of a scale of loss,
 Feel the weight of it tear through our lines,
 A world capsized, a whole flotilla gone,
 Unfished, the forms of things become invisible,
 So that we are not sure just what is real
 And what is only verbal.

The immense pelagic wealth of what there is
Can be lost so easily it seems absurd.
Mountains run through worldless fingers,
Unnamed, the density of lead goes soft as air.
Without language we are nothing, nowhere, no one,
Each time the silence claims another tongue
It seems like someone walking on our graves,
There is a haunting sense, unnerving, numb,
Of shoals gliding past us, through us, round us
Without our ever knowing.
Time reclaims the flotsam it has left,
Our beachcombing is reduced to borrowing,
Our hoards of treasures are dispersed.

Unfractured by the pitons of our words,
Our moccasins slip on the icy incline of silence's cliff face,
Which draws its gradient steeper and yet steeper yet,
Until it can be mapped by just one line,
Straight, sheer, deadening. Unclimbable.
It scores like a razor cut
Across the gentle undulations of our wordy contour maps,
Thrown like a safety net across the vertigo of being,
Our braille upon the world, a naming of the parts.
Severed, it unravels, shrinks, collapses,
We stumble dumb and blind and lost
In the seamless of terrifying silences.

Chris Arthur