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Daguerreotype

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DAGUERREOTYPE

Is this the sum of her, or was she human?
 When I unlatch the painted leather case
 And slant the metal plate to show her face
 I catch the uncertain shadow of a woman
 Standing inflexible, severe, undead.
 What would the old photographer have said
 In her excuse? She had to pose too long,
 Staring in sunlight that was overstrong,
 Until her gaze became forever set;
 Her kindness marbled in austerity.
 So through the wire of a menagerie,
 A farmyard fence, uneasy I have met
 Just such an alien target-eye as she
 Focuses uncommunicant on me.

Now that the wise have ventured to uncere
 Mummies in the museum, rays have flown
 Clean through the wrappings to the crooked bone,
 Splitting millennia to make it clear
 The young Egyptians could grow rickety
 Without their vitamins as well as we.
 Let them anatomize the shadow here,
 Whose body was not spiced nor honified!
 Flyleaf of Bible hints how piously
 She bore ten children, suffered for a year
 From an affliction of the chest, and died.
 She shared our heritage and flexed our fate;
 Now in her plushy border, hollow-eyed,
 She is but ancestress, recalled today
 As an unhappy shadow on a plate,
 Burdened with love she cannot give away.

CELESTE TURNER WRIGHT