

# Testament (complete)

*by Gary Hardaway*

I am the last to honor time before  
the scarred and angry warriors from the north  
attacked and brought their cunning, sullen gods.  
The torchlight flickers off the stone above,  
the ceiling of this ancient cave the scarred  
have not discovered yet. I write this, sure  
of nothing, in the fading letters of  
a dying language. Were I practical,  
I would use the words and letters as corrupted  
by the northern simplification  
of expression we worked centuries to make  
complex enough to capture nuance  
the scarred declare unnecessary art.

Their nouns are few and stark.  
Ours are numerous and dappled  
or subtly shaded and shadowed  
by circumstance and possibility.

They first came ashore from ships  
so small and clumsy one should call them rafts.  
They wanted gold or silver, perhaps a few  
of the fine bronze weapons they had heard  
about in Troy. They offered cheeses, wine,  
young breeding goats, and crudely woven wool.  
Or, so it was remembered, by those who met them,  
before the Calamity, long before my birth,  
before our beautiful circular city,  
north across the small finger of Sea,  
vanished under Earth's dark spit;  
before the swelling of the Sea washed away  
our Seaside ports and villages; before the plague

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that follows the death of so many together  
spread among those the swelling didn't take;  
before the five dark summers, when the sun  
dimmed and the crops died, blackened in the fields.

The cunning take the thread of fact and weave  
a tapestry that lies to their advantage.  
From the faceted complexity of Canossis  
comes a labyrinth. From our ceremony of respect  
for mindless force we can't control  
but only evade with grace and knowledge,  
a monster in the labyrinth. From a king--  
chosen, not born, nor thrust upon a race  
by murderous alliances-- a cruel tyrant  
delighting in the suffering of others.  
As we, weakened-- beloved faces reduced  
by death to less than half-- were forced to hear, recounted  
by the scarred and angry Mycenaeans.

One must learn to give the Bull the things  
it needs: space, grass and grain, his mates  
and offspring, and elude the things  
its momentary fury wants- your death  
and those of your sisters and brothers.  
One must sadly learn to treat the lion  
with similar evasive regard. But our  
diplomacy, once revered along  
all shores of the Sea, collapsed and died, rebuked.

Our ships once teemed along the shore  
like pups at their mother's teats.  
After the swelling of the Sea, the dead  
outnumbered the living and the shipwrights

died where they lived, along the Sea.  
We had looked at water and the things afloat  
and learned the happiest shapes and properties  
of hulls. Our ships swam shallow in the Sea,  
which made them quick. Our rudders thrust themselves  
into the Sea, deep enough to make us  
nimble but not so deep as to catch the weeds  
that flourish under dazzled water.  
After the swelling of the Sea, our ships lay broken,  
far inland, ribs exposed like those  
of whales ashore, rotting in the sun.

The bodies of the dead lay broken, too,  
and bloated. Who survived could not know them.  
We piled the pieces of ships and pieces of men  
and burned them. Smoke arose to dim the sun.

Perhaps the Earth, Sea, and Sky were done  
with us and chose to tatter all we were  
and leave it to the Mycenaean swords  
and fires to obliterate. What we were  
lies ruined and mysterious-- evocation  
to the unkind imagination  
of the Brute-- alive now only  
in the children of concubines and rape.

Against that, this testament, scratched  
with misshapen styluses, made  
from memory by unskilled hands,  
with a pallid memory of ink.

My daughter's sons and fathers hunt for me.  
I trust she won't disclose my likely  
hiding place, although enslaved and shamed.

But time itself is after me. I slow  
with age and pains of wear and elusion.  
The jars of brined olives, wined figs,  
pickled octopus and squid, grow fewer,  
daily. I can only write against  
my end of time and hope the parchment  
and papyrus will survive the damp  
and find both kind and comprehending eyes  
before the sun itself grows weary  
and extinguishes the last of day.

We once saw giants in the clouds and in  
connected points of stars, and named  
them, gods. We placed them in their high-halled villas,  
on the mountaintop, to game and frolic  
with our lives-- eternal adolescents.  
Once we climbed the mountain, we learned that clouds  
are insubstantial vapor and the stars  
are points of light that turn as we  
through repetitious day and night.  
The Mycenaeans sweat and slash below  
the clouds, servants of capricious gods  
and narrow, brutish appetites. They smell  
of dirt, semen, ashes, blood and dung.

Before the Calamity, the Sea took  
my husband, captain of a quick and agile ship.  
I say the Sea, although it may have been  
the savages that live beyond Iberia.  
Exchange holds risk and reward, fraternal  
twins that rise and fall at ends of the scale.  
His ship did not return. I joined the other  
widowed or solitary women at  
the House of Memory and Teaching at Malaeis.

My toddling son and daughter learned with me  
the memories and wisdom of the old,  
the passions and poems of the young,  
the triumphs, confusion and sorrows of those in between.  
We grew together. We knew the beauties and  
pomposities of neighbors, their frailties and strengths.  
Then, the cloud. The crack and rumble, like thunder.  
The sickening back and forth of the ground.  
And, later, the swell of the Sea, its unbroken  
wave, higher than the walls of the great  
House at Canossis, surging, with its death,  
a hundred ship lengths inland. Sudden cries.  
A crash of ships and houses. Then, the silence.

Who could stood up and looked and cursed their eyes.  
The cries and whimpers of the undead cursed their ears.  
Who lived breathed in the death and found their bodies  
broken in ways invisible. Salt and bitter the only tastes  
on the tongue. Decay the only odor in the nose.  
The astonishing silence and whimpering  
the only sounds the ears can hear. The cold  
of dead skin the only sensation on the flesh.  
The dark smoke of pyres the only sight.  
The rivers ran salty, dead fish and the unrecovered  
dead the only cargo floating toward the Sea.  
The undead sorted as they could, repaired  
and scrubbed what wasn't ruined, salvaged stone  
and timber, hinges and handles. Small boats fished  
and netted what they could. A pantomime  
of order, effort and routine. The songs,  
all dirges and laments. The dances but foot  
following foot unto exhausted sleep.  
Who lived were lambs, stunned by clubs before  
the knife tip bleeds the veins before the feast.

Mycenaean warriors thought us priestesses  
in thrall and service to our gods. Their superstition  
saved our lives but not our rooms and lovingly  
stored and labeled tablets, scrolls, and layered  
poem-leaves. Ours, and all the Houses  
of Memory and Teaching, restored, were burned  
to ash and broken stone. No superstition  
saved our sons and brothers. Blood and bodies  
stained the roads and courtyards.

We were a people, whole and happy, once.  
We were enamored with the repetitions  
and surprises of the world. Our bodies, first,  
and spirits, after, were broken by  
the forces that hide inside the Earth, Sea  
and Sky. Our remains were scattered, then,  
by knowing choices of joyless brutes  
who stand like men but are a cunning plague.  
We were Atlanti. We were Canossis. We were  
Malaeis, Phaestos, and Thera, city of the circle.  
We were fleet and nimble ships, the leapers of Bulls.  
We were language and curiosity, exchange  
and memory. Now, we are the stories  
scarred and angry men, insecure  
in their own leadership and worth,  
will speak around a fire on ground not theirs.

