

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 Mycenaean.

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.

Mycenaeen 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
Mylaeis, 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.

