

TESTAMENT OF FAILURE

AUDREY ALEXANDRA BROWN

We have piped, but you would not dance:
Not though we lured you with our fingers light
On every stop of the so-cunning flute—
With notes as keen as the curved blade of a lance,
Notes as sweet as honey-dropping fruit;
We cried to you in the clear morning, flinging
Our challenge on the four winds of the air—
But hill and field were bare;
Only the whitethroat tossed us back our singing.

In the young month of leaves,
Under the frosty white of the flowered cherry,
Under the house-eaves,
We called to you, clear to hear, and merry, ah merry!
“Hark,” we sang to you, “Hark—
Fields are full of the bold gold meadowlark;
Every copse is rosed with a pricking of bud
In the wakening wood;
Come out, meet spring and morning coming together—
Twine wild white violets in your loosened hair
And dance, dance, dance in the warming weather!”
Some of you stopped to stare,
A few of you listened, one or two of you smiled
Dreamily, as beguiled
With the innocent happy folly of a child.
—Ah, how life has sharpened, time has hollowed
Eyes and cheeks that once were made for joy!
How have the years been cunning to destroy!—
You heard, but none of you answered, none of you followed.

Along the uplands ran the pink flame
Of briar roses, meditatively
Wooed by the tipsy bee:
Summer came;
Endlessly the cicada's tiny fife
Wound like a steely wire from hedge and hill,
Shrill, shrill, shrill . . .
Noon of the day, noon of the world, noon of life.
And so we came and brought you a new song,
Stepping less lightly now, knowing our years
And having taken cognisance of tears
And having learned through suffering to be strong
And still go singing. We sang, "Your walls are stout—
Your houses shut heaven out—
Your roofs rear up a barrier high and broad
Between your souls and God.
You have lost touch with stars, grown strange to blossoms,
You have unlearnt to dance—
Having foregone your rich inheritance,
And carrying the world's weight in your bosoms.
Come out, follow us, follow! for we know well
Whitherward lies the land of your heart's home;
It is beyond no sea of charmed foam
Shored with sand of pearl and the pearl-shell—
It is across no hill whose purpling wall
Lies along the sunset; and thereaway
Comes no wandering foot of sin or sorrow—
For this is not the land of your to-day,
This was your yesterday, this will be your tomorrow."

Alas, poor citizens of many a city—
With the dazed eyes that know not what you seek
And shut lips that seldom smile or speak—
You were a sight for any free man's pity:
And I think you might have heard, you might have come,
But that your wouldbe-wisest mocked us, crying
"These cities are our home—
What have we to do with lands lying
Beyond these walls of wood and brick and stone?
—As to our souls, it is well known
That man's an animal, and fasts or feasts
Moved by such instincts as his brother beasts.
—As for God, if any God there be,
God is a Force, neither malign nor good,
A Power not to be grasped or understood
That slays or blesses us indifferently.
You that deck out stale thoughts in dusty rhyme,
Re-sugaring the stickiest conceits
Of Tennyson, Swinburne, Keats—
You that re-echo echoes of old-time—
If you would have us listen, speak to us
Of what has crooked our back and warped our hand;
Speak to us of the things we understand—
The swift wheels, the strong and furious
Cylinders, the piston's rhythmic thrusts—
Sing to us of our labours and our lusts."

When they had spoken thus, you mocked with them,
Shut your ears, went your way, heard us no more.

We who had only the knowledge of the dancer
And the wisdom of the singer, what could we say?
—Yet there's no flower that stars an April stem,
Yet there's no ripple creaming round the shore,
But makes you, night and day, eternal answer:

*"These the machines that measure out your lives
Are not your brothers; we, we are your kin—
And when no steel leviathan survives,
We that you never took your pleasure in
Shall heal you of the sickness of your sin."*

So it was: so it will be.

Late and long

Came the last thrush's song;
 The sumachs flamed like coral where they stood—
 The yellowing of the maples fired the wood—
 And from the standing water (which began
 Thinly to glaze at morning) sprang by night
 The sure wings, the strong ecstatic flight—
 The wild geese, envy of the heart of man.
 Then at the time of earth's transfiguring
 We came into your market-place and cried—
 "Look how the living breathing countryside
 Begins to shout and sing,
 Breaking into glory far and wide!
 The year nearing its end goes down
 Bannered and splendid to pre-resurrection—
 But you, that tread with circumspection
 The tortuous grassless alleys of your town—
 You wither towards the grave; ah, and to you
 —This anonymity your life being gone—
 Death will be nothing new,
 But only a little-darker oblivion.
 Come away, follow us, follow!—still there is time;
 The hill may be steeper to climb,
 The stream may be wider to ford; but your homeland waits—
 The country with never a hedge,
 The house that needs no wall,
 The city that has no gates."

Bitterly your leaders answered us—
 "Are you returned again, and do you seek
 To lure away our simple and our weak?
 Know that we are not to be cozened thus.
 Fly from realities you dare not face—
 Spin yourselves up in your cocoon of dreams—
 But we, who know that life is what it seems,
 Have courage to accept it as it is,
 Asking no bliss—
 Perceiving that the soiled, the commonplace,
 The brutal, all are truth, and being true,
 To the clear-eyed are beauty.

Such as you

We have contempt enough to tolerate
 While you are silent: but speak, beckon, sing,
 Be heard of men, and you shall feel our hate.
 —Make good your speed if you would save your bones,
 Escapists!" And they took up stones.

The earth darkens slowly, heading out
Into the sunless void of freezing space;
Slowly the slow season turns about;
The grass withers in your market-place—
Your streets are empty, for the night brings fire
And the days smoke: you draw precarious breath,
Knowing that at your back—nay, growing bolder,
Close at your shoulder—
Presses your icy-visaged neighbour, Death.
What shall we say to you who would not hear us?
Ah, we say nothing, for the time is past;
An hour is near, an hour is very near us
When you shall learn at last
As for yourselves your opened eyes shall see
What is and what is not reality.
The steel span swinging gossamer-frail and high
Across the towered horizon of your sky—
The thirty-storied streets, the miracles
Of dam and dynamo that ceaselessly
Rein you the wind and bridle you the sea—
The labyrinthine genius which alone
Enables you to exist hived up in stone—
. . . Look, the bright curve of a wheeling plane,
Innocent as a bird—a lever pressed—
And half your marvellous skyline's glittering crest
At once and utterly betrays your trust;
Architrave and colonnade and wall
Sway outward soundlessly and burst and fall,
Their dust inexorably returned to dust.

So many years you have held to your belief
That life was in the means by which you lived—
With what bewildered grief,
What anguish, do you see them strewn and sieved!
Go to your leaders now, what will they say—
That ruin and death are truths, and being true
Have a strange beauty? Can they strengthen you
And send you armed against the assaulting day?
—If we whom you have silenced might but cry
But once upon you in your going by,
"Courage! Keep faith!
This is the agony of birth, not death!"

The high places of the world shall fall;
Man built them fair and tall,
Yet they are but man's building after all:
With these he sought to hide his naked soul
From God; by these in time he must have perished,
Slowly built-up-about by all he cherished:
These must be broken that he may be whole.

Surely you will come
(Not by the way we would have led you) home;
You that are kin to rose and star and swallow,
You would not follow us, but you will follow
The Voice we echoed, now that we are dumb.
You shall come into haven from the sea;
The life that shatters in your hand's a part,
Only a small part, of eternity
That waits to heal the bruising of the heart.

As for ourselves, we have failed. We may rest now—
May sit awhile here in the honeyed clover,
May listen to the wind in the green bough,
And the long silence now the song's over.
We have failed: but failure may be true success,
Could we see rightly. We have this to cheer us—
We made the tune, we sang and we were strong.
It matters little that you would not hear us;
It matters that we dared to make the song.
