

RANDOLPH BOURNE

Oppenheim, James, 1882-1932

(Died December 22, 1918)

BRAVEST of us all.

And sweetest,
Dead . . .
Well, Randolph, I am going to speak from my heart
And tell about you

I remember you first when I was editing *The Seven Arts*
Just about the time we entered the war . . . '
I was shocked to see you, a cripple, hunchbacked,
With twisted ear and protruding teeth . . .
You had difficulty in making yourself heard
And I wanted to avoid you. . . .

But you handed us an article on the war,
And with it your soul . . .
I shall never forget that article, nor those that followed:
They are your immortality

And when we became friends
I found that they all lied about you:
They lied who said you were venomous,
They lied who said your soul was like your body,
They lied who said you were insincere

For you were sweet, friendly,
With a passion for humanity
Almost terrible . . .
You could never keep away from a trial where some poor rebel was being persecuted,
You held out your hand to the conscientious objector,
You hated war and hate . . .
Your soul writhed over injustice and sham and the masquerades of virtue;
And your mind--
I kept marveling at it--
Such a mind--
A vivid play over the world, a realism penetrating like a keen blade,
A sad humor sparkling along the steel,
An intellect never cold, never dry,
But burning up from the depths of emotion. . .

You lived, isolated, in a poor lodging,
Writing book reviews for a living,
All your fine friends scorning you or afraid of you
I remember how the cold of last winter drove you to my grate,
And we sat out mornings before the red coals,
Groping in the darkness of Doomsday

It was because you loved too much, Randolph,
That they persecuted you
What do the cowards want with love?
And the easy intellectuals, the liberals, those that follow the star of creative intelligence,
What do they want with truth?

For you loved, not as others love,
You loved the morning star of a better life,
You loved, and so you hated,
Hated everything that hurts humanity.

You were
A triumph in yourself,
You were a victory
I think of your body, the miserable crippled little thing,
Wheezy and malformed,
Which you had to take with you wherever you went
And exhibit in all its ugliness and humility to others,
Which loaded the dice against you, and made it for you a giant's task to meet the world
And how out of passion and imagination,
And passionate intellectual discipline,
You surmounted your body,
And made yourself a clear victory in the world,
The most delightful of comrades,
The brilliant talker in groups,
Most lovable of friends,
So that at the last those who took you to their hearts
Saw only your eyes—beautiful, wistful, the eyes of a simple child--
And so saw you with their souls,
A wonderful human being

Now we have lost you
Oh, surely this is Doomsday, and our human world is tottering and crashing to pieces
The great decayed palace of civilization, all of it, its plushy, muffled, cushioned upper rooms,
And its foul and reeking basement rotten with slums,
Is toppling into chaos. . . .
Those terrible antagonists, the oppressors and the oppressed,
Between them are pulling it down,
Devil and God in man are breaking it asunder

And in the ruins now you also, my friend, are among the dead. . . .
Here in America you stood with your back to the wall,
Cheered by a scattered handful,
But really alone, one against all of the millions . . .
Alone, unswerving, dreading and fearing prison and persecution,
Yet continuing in your own truth

Well, I know, and know intimately, how despair grew upon you,
Until at last you ceased hoping
What was there left to do, but die?
In this America, with its colossal ignorance, conceit and prosperity,
Its mass-docility, its worship of astounding phrases, its glib, smug self-content.

It is such as you who are persecuted, stoned and lynched. . . .
You, hope of a truer life here,
Bit of the dawn of a real people,
Forecast and harbinger of a better time . . .

Let it be so:
Let our strong and weak, our masters and slaves, our intellectuals and ignorant
Continue in greed and cowardice:
Let them go on in physical and spiritual comfort:
Let them surely lynch anyone who is uncomfortable:
And here, too, the whole rotten structure shall crash to ruins

Perhaps it must be so. . . .

But I, this morning,
Only know this:
That you are dead
And I come as a representative of that future people,
Who, looking back, shall remember you,
And lay a wreath of maple leaves and of early roses on your coffin
—Your light shall live through us,
And beyond us, to the new day.