

A City

900 Words

by

Robert Degama

900 words to take you to the dead land, find our hero and escape with our lives, so no time to lose. We'll dispense with the cave and its dismal guardians and three-headed dogs. He's already passed that way. He charmed them all with a song and with his daddy's (or maybe his beneficent uncle's) lyre. He's a smooth talker and an all-round smoothie, our boy, and (so far) he always gets what he wants. That lyre, for one thing, and then there's the beautiful nymph wife. You could call him a spoiled brat, but let's be kind and say he's precocious, a gifted kid who just happened to get it all on a plate. We are on the trail of Orpheus, founder of cults, composer of songs, argonaut and love-sick widower, in case you hadn't guessed. He's gone down before us to bring back his snake-bitten lover from the underworld.

745 words left, so let's get a move on. Look! Down there in the darkness, in the middle of a drab, measureless desert, illuminated by the sickly orange glow of burning tallow. A nameless city, as airless as a grave or one of those nights when you can't sleep for heat, when your mind's like a moth, beating itself to death against a seedy red lightbulb. We can make out towers and drifting smoke. The incense and the smell of burning cedar and olive wood pyres is drifting up to meet us, even before we can make out the streets that sulk between the bleached-white stone buildings. As we come closer, we can see that it's in the ancient Greek style (of course), mainly single-story structures, gathered around narrow alleyways with here and there a temple, usually with its own square and a statue to this or that god. Here is a bronze of Hypnos, the lazy-eyed god of endless sleep and Hecate, goddess of the moon and witchcraft and doorways (who'd 'a' thought?). And here is Charon, the ferryman of the dead, whose father was Erebus of the infinite shadow and his mother Nix, AKA "the night", feared even by Zeus. You have to think his career path was a foregone conclusion with parents like that. Torches burn outside his temple, but inside, it's as black as Tartarus. 514 words left.

There is strange music drifting from some of the buildings, of harps, tambourines, weird zithers and the blaring aulos. Strange but not mournful. The locals may be dead but they're not stiffs. Orpheus (remember him?) is here somewhere, learning a thing or two, let's hope. All that moaning he's been getting up to lately! The folks down here have lost everything, but they can still manage a song and a dance if either of those things is possible without a body, of course. Though some of them do have bodies. 421 words. Among the wraiths and shadows are the corporeally integrated. Conjured by the local sorcerer, they are able to continue to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh ad infinitum, although that does give rise to a bit of a stink. That's what all the incense is for, in case you were wondering, to cover up the stench of death, which ironically comes from those clinging to the more tangible aspects of life. It's this service (tolerated because it amuses the boss to have a few walking corpses around the place) that brings in the foreigners.

Bill Boroughs is sitting outside a cafe with a priapic satyr smoking a hookah, looking like death, only very slightly warmed up. Moll Dyer, La Voisin and even Alistair Crowley can be seen here from time to time, though no one talks to the Grand Wizard of Leamington Spa, who is in death as in life, a terrible bore. But it's a mostly Greek affair. Local boy Socrates is in the square in front of the palace, ready to take on Hades himself. We all know he could drive a chariot through this place; it makes no sense. But he is caught forever in the moment before speech. His punishment for being a bigmouth. You can't say the gods don't have a sense of humour. 201.

But aren't we forgetting something? Our story? Our hero? He's been fretting in these streets, looking for his wife, the disembodied Eurydice, bitten by a snake while trying to avoid the wandering hands of Aristaeus, inventor of beekeeping. One minute, you're a newlywed without a care in the world and the next, zap! You've got a leg full of venom, and you're down here for the rest of eternity.

Let's zoom out... until... at last... with only 123 words to go, we find our poet punting his beloved across the river of forgetfulness, black and vast in the endless night as it oozes out into the desert. He is taking her to the shore and then back up into the light, where she will be whole again. He has been told not to look at her until they are out, lest he lose her forever, but what are the chances of that? You know how these Greek things generally go. Just 39 words left. We'll leave them to the Fates as the sun comes up in the east and is instantly eclipsed by the moon. It rises as a dim corona and hangs in the starless sky, a gigantic black... 0.