

Excerpt from “By the Waters of Babylon”¹

Stephen Vincent Benét

That is all my story, for then I knew he was a man--I knew then that they had been men, neither gods nor demons.² It is a great knowledge, hard to tell and believe. They were men--they went a dark road, but they were men. I had no fear after that--I had no fear going home, though twice I fought off the dogs and once I was hunted for two day by the Forest People. When I saw my father again, I prayed and was purified. He touched my lips and my breast, he said, “You went away a boy. You come back a man and a priest.” I said, “Father, they were men! I have been in the Place of the Gods and seen it! Now slay me, if it is the law--but still I know they were men.”

He looked at me out of both eyes. He said, “The law is not always the same shape--you have done what you have done. I could not have done it my time, but you come after me. Tell!”

I told and he listened. After that, I wished to tell all the people but he showed me otherwise. He said, “Truth is a hard deer to hunt. If you eat too much truth at once, you may die of the truth. It was not idly that our fathers forbade the Dead Places.” He was right--it is better the truth should come little by little. I have learned that, being a priest. Perhaps, in the old days, they ate knowledge too fast.

Nevertheless, we make a beginning. It is not for the metal alone we go to the Dead Places now--there are the books and the writings. They are hard to learn. And the magic tools are broken--but we can look at them and wonder. At least, we make a beginning. And, when I am chief priest we shall go beyond the great river. We shall go to the Place of the Gods--the place newyork--not one man but a company. We shall look for the images of the gods and find the god ASHING³ and the others--the gods Lincoln and Biltmore and Moses. But they were men who built the city, not gods or demons. They were men. I remember the dead man’s face. They were men who were here before us. We must build again.

¹ Excerpted from <http://www.tkinter.smig.net/outings/rosemountghosts/babylon.htm>.

² The setting of this short story is the future after the destruction of the United States as we know it now. A tribe survives and sends its boys to the Dead Places as a spiritual journey and to gain knowledge about life before destruction. The speaker returns after visiting the Place of the Gods (i.e., New York City) to inform his father of his new knowledge.

³ ASHING are the remaining letters on a statue of George Washington. The speaker is not aware of who George Washington is, so his only knowledge of Washington’s name is what remains of the statue.

