

The House of Helle and Phrixus

Mount Vesuvius's catastrophic eruption tests the bonds of a Pompeian family.

Like clockwork, the ground shook; that much we were used to
As natural a part of life as the wind that blew
Tremors served as call to arms, a sign to start the day
And at night, a trembling lullaby, telling us to hit the hay

'Twas both a constant presence, and unsettling song
Of chaos and calm all at once, it felt right and wrong
But on the day the trembling ceased, for better and for worse
Our little family was still together, a blessing, not a curse

That morn' was much the same, beset with fitful quake
But it was hardly new at this point, soon we're all wide awake
At dawn, *Tata*, *Mamma*, and I each had parts to play
But *Avus* was tired, aching, so in bed, he had to stay

We went about our business, each tending to our chores
While *Tata* toiled at work, *Mamma* visited the stores
And I went on my way to school, to the portico near-filled
With boys and girls all restless, day's lesson unfulfilled

When time came to dismiss us, 'twas then we heard the sound
A boom, a clap of thunder, a din that shook the ground
The noise was met with silence, with shock and contained fear
And then we saw on the horizon, death rising, inching near

A cloud of grey, and ash, and rock, reaching heaven's crown
But like gods who forsake us, they quickly smote it down
Fear quickly turned to panic, and panic turned to shrieks
A Forum filled with wayward souls, set to fill Pluto's Styx

As I stood amidst the mayhem, crying, shedding tears
I saw *Mamma* and *Tata* running, shouting, "Son, come here!"
We kissed and hugged each other, relief that didn't last
'Cause soon we all remembered, our home was near the blast

Avus was left alone there, sick, aching, and afraid
So we all three rushed over, to help and give him aid

We ran, we skipped, we barrelled past friends shouting at
Mamma and *Tata*, saying, “Save *Avus*? It’s much too late for that!”

But we three were too stubborn; he was our flesh and blood
So faster back we sprinted, to beat Vesuvius’ flood
Soon, we reached our dwelling, undisturbed like before
A sign *Avus* was still inside, so we burst through the door

We called, we shouted, “*Avus*! Come, we must move fast!”
“For we may not have long to live, this home might be our last!”
But when we reached his chamber, disheveled and dismayed
Lying in bed, he was peaceful, *Avus* looked unafraid

At first, we were confused, fearing impending doom
But what he said next stunned us: “Leave, let this be my tomb.”
Terror turned into anger, we protested and refused
But *Avus* had his mind made up, “This bed won’t be disused.”

We pondered leaving quickly; he’d no need of our aid
But love and blood connect us; bonds not easily unmade
We three looked at each other, deciding there and then
We’ll stay here as a family, we won’t split up again

Avus was agitated, not wanting us to die
But we all had our minds made up, this would not be goodbye
Tata thought up a plan, quickly called to the fore
“To block death from careening in, we barricade the door!”

An unconvincing stopgap, we knew it wouldn’t stand
But although doom knocked at our door, we held firm, hand in hand
We were each other’s comfort; glad, although death was near
We’d see each other soon enough; we had nothing to fear.

