

# A Vision of Doom

By Ambrose Bierce

I stood upon a hill. The setting sun  
Was crimson with a curse and a portent,  
And scarce his angry ray lit up the land  
That lay below, whose lurid gloom appeared  
Freaked with a moving mist, which, reeking up  
From dim tarns hateful with some horrid ban,  
Took shapes forbidden and without name.  
Gigantic night-birds, rising from the reeds  
With cries discordant, startled all the air,  
And bodiless voices babbled in the gloom—  
The ghosts of blasphemies long ages stilled,  
And shrieks of women, and men's curses. All  
These visible shapes, and sounds no mortal ear  
Had ever heard, some spiritual sense  
Interpreted, though brokenly; for I  
Was haunted by a consciousness of crime,  
Some giant guilt, but whose I knew not. All  
These things malign, by sight and sound revealed,  
Were sin-begotten; that I knew—no more—  
And that but dimly, as in dreadful dreams  
The sleepy senses babble to the brain  
Imperfect witness. As I stood, a voice,  
But whence it came I knew not, cried aloud  
Some words to me in a forgotten tongue,  
Yet straight I knew me for a ghost forlorn,  
Returned from the illimited inane.  
Again, but in a language that I knew,  
As in reply to something which in me  
Had shaped itself a thought, but found no words,  
It spake from the dread mystery about:  
“Immortal shadow of a mortal soul  
That perished with eternity, attend.  
What thou beholdest is as void as thou:  
The shadow of a poet's dream—himself  
As thou, his soul as thine, long dead,  
But not like thine outlasted by its shade.  
His dreams alone survive eternity  
As pictures in the unsubstantial void.  
Excepting thee and me (and we because  
The poet wove us in his thought) remains  
Of nature and the universe no part

Nor vestige but the poet's dreams. This dread,  
Unspeakable land about thy feet, with all  
Its desolation and its terrors—lo!  
'Tis but a phantom world. So long ago  
That God and all the angels since have died  
That poet lived—yourself long dead—his mind  
Filled with the light of a prophetic fire,  
And standing by the Western sea, above  
The youngest, fairest city in the world,  
Named in another tongue than his for one  
Ensainted, saw its populous domain  
Plague-smitten with a nameless shame. For there  
Red-handed murder rioted; and there  
The people gathered gold, nor cared to loose  
The assassin's fingers from the victim's throat,  
But said, each in his vile pursuit engrossed:  
'Am I my brother's keeper? Let the Law  
Look to the matter.' But the Law did not.  
And there, O pitiful! The babe was slain  
Within its mother's breast and the same grave  
Held babe and mother; and the people smiled,  
Still gathering gold, and said: 'The Law, the Law.'  
Then the great poet, touched upon the lips  
With a live coal from Truth's high altar, raised  
His arms to heaven and sang a song of doom—  
Sang of the time to be, when God should lean  
Indignant from the Throne and lift His hand,  
And that foul city be no more!—a tale,  
A dream, a desolation and a curse!  
No vestige of its glory should survive  
In fact or memory: its people dead,  
Its site forgotten, and its very name  
A dream, a desolation and a curse!  
No vestige of its glory should survive  
In fact or memory: its people dead,  
Its site forgotten, and its very name  
A dream, a desolation and a curse!  
No vestige of its glory should survive  
In fact or memory: its people dead,  
Its site forgotten, and its very name  
Disputed."

"Was the prophecy fulfilled?"

The sullen disc of the declining sun  
Was crimson with a curse and a portent,  
And scarce his angry ray lit up the land  
Freaked with a moving mist, which, reeking up

From dim tarns hateful with a horrid ban,  
Took shapes forbidden and without a name,  
And bodiless voices babbled in the gloom.  
But not to me came any voice again;  
And, covering my face with thin, dead hands,  
I wept, and woke, and cried aloud to God!