



TRUTH-SEEKER, HALF-NAKED, AT NIGHT, RUNNING DOWN BEACH SOUTH OF SAN FRANCISCO

In dark, climbing up. Down-riding the sand sluice
Beachward from dune-head. Running, feet bare on
Sand wet-packed and star-stung. Breath in lungs loose.
Though now the tide turning, spume yet prickling the air on

My chest, which, naked, splits darkness. While on the right hand,
Palisades of white-crashing breakers renew and stretch on
Into unmooned drama and distance.—But to understand
Is impossible now. Flight from what? To what? And alone.

Far behind, the glow of the city of men fades slow.
And ahead, white surf and dark dunes in dimness are wed,
And Pacificward, leagues far, the fog now threatens to grow
While I run face-up, stars yet shining above my wet head

Before they are swaddled in grayness, though grayness, perhaps,
Is what waits—after history, logic, philosophy, too,
Even rhythm of lines that bring tears to the heart, and scraps
Of old wisdom that like broken bottles in darkness gleam at you.

What was the world I had lived in? Poetry, orgasm, joke:
And the joke, the biggest on me, a laughing despair
Of a truth the heart might speak, but never spoke—
Like the twilit whisper of wings with no shadow on air.

You dream that somewhere, somehow, you may embrace
The world in its fullness and feel, like Jacob, at last
The merciless grasp of that unwordable grace
Which has no truth to tell of future or past,

But only life's instancy, daylight or night,
While constellations strive, or a warbler whets
His note, or ice creaks blue in the Arctic white-night light,
Or the maniac weeps over what he always forgets.

So lungs aflame now, and sand now raw between toes,
And the city's glow fading dimmer, then dimmer still,
And the grind of breath and of sand is all one knows
Of the truth a man flees to, or from, in his need to fulfill

What?—On the beach, flat I fall by the foam-frayed sea
That now and then brushes an outflung hand, as though
In tentative comfort, yet knowing itself to be
As ignorant as I, and perhaps as feckless, also.

So I stare at the stars, then shut eyes, and in dark press an ear
To sand as cold as cement, to apprehend,
Not merely the grinding of shingle and sea-slosh near,
But the groaning miles of depth where light finds its end,

And deeper than ocean, or cold-crinkled earth crust,
Past silken soil-slip, past rocks that against rocks grieve,
Then at the globe's deepest darkness and visceral lust
Can I hear the *groan-swish* of magma churn and heave?

No word? No sign? Oh, is there a time and place—
Ice-peak or heat-simmering distance—where the heart, like an eye,
May open? But sleep, at last it has sealed up my face,
And last foam, retreating, creeps from my hand. It will dry,

While fog, star by star, imperially claims the night.
How long till dawn flushes a dune-top, or gilds the beach-stones?
I stand up. Stand thinking, I'm one poor damned fool, all right.
Then ask, if years later, I'll drive again forth under
stars, on night-tottering bones.

by Robert Penn Warren



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