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Death's Brother

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Death’s brother

And there the children of dark Night have
their dwellings, Sleep and Death, awful gods.
The glowing Sun never looks upon them
with his beams.... But Sleep roams peacefully
over the earth and the sea’s broad back
and is kindly to men; while Death has a heart
of iron, and his spirit within him is pitiless as
bronze: whomsoever of men he has once
seized he holds fast: and he is hateful.

Hesiod, Theogony (Origins of the Gods),
c 750–650 BC

In the fables
they are twins,
Hypnos and Thanatos,
sons of Night.
She reigned
before light breathed
upon the waters,
before electricity,
that’s sure,
Darkness primordial,
a force to be reckoned with —
for besides
Sleep and Death,
Night brought
Doom into the world,
Strife and
Retribution:
What a brood!

Sleep was the younger brother,
and as youngsters do,
he imitated his elder,
which is why
the sleeping and the dead
are look-alikes:
limbs slack,
mouths agape —
“sleeps like the dead,”
“dead to the world,”
we say of sleepers —
except that sleepers
wake back up.

In the old paintings
Hypnos snoozes in a cave,
Lethe, the river of forgetfulness,
flows nearby,
while all about
nod poppies

(even then, humankind
knew about those poppies),
and I have seen him
depicted with wings
growing out of his head.
Why wings?
Perhaps because
he’s fleeting,
ever deigns to stay
for long
(not with me, anyway),
whereas Death
holds you forever,
that iron grip of his.

An altogether gentler deity
is Hypnos,
kinder to mortals,
yet no sacrificial altars
burn to him,
no voices rise in supplication,
no Orphic hymns,
as to his fierce twin —
and isn’t that always the way it goes?
The mower-down of men
gets cast in bronze,
the nice guy never gets
that kind of esteem.
I even hear it said,
“Sleep is for sissies,”
“You snooze, you lose” —
such disrespect!
(I guess
he does look a little silly,
those wings
sprouting out of his head.)
But take care!  
Sleep has powers  
as mighty as his twin:  
the way they  
seize us,  
spirit us away  
to an underworld  
that confounds all sense  
of who we are —  
for I can say, “I die,”  
but if “I” am not there  
to say it,  
what “I” are we talking about?  
And so it is with Sleep:  
I am not “I” in sleep,  
that “I”  
I know myself to be,  
conscious, cognizant, in control —  
that self gets  
checked at the mouth  
of Hypnos’ cave,  
drowned in the waters of oblivion.

But if death is an undiscovered  
country  
from which no traveller returns,  
Sleep is a realm  
from which we do return,  
emerging dazed  
into day’s light,  
rubbing sleep from  
crusted lids,  
shuffling back into  
our mortal coils,  
knowing not  
where we’ve been  
nor how we were  
transported  
there or back,  
nor who we were  
in the time  
we were away,  
and the tales we return with  
tell more about ourselves  
than the regions we’ve traversed.

And here’s the paradox:  
that “I” —  
that wakeful self  
I pride myself on being,  
sapiens, sentient, self-aware —  
need this stupefaction:  
without it,  
I’m a tattered rag,  
with Sleep,  
I am myself again.

Men of science  
in these enlightened times  
admit that they know  
nothing,  
neither the how of Sleep  
nor the why.  
They speculate it may be  
gamma amino-butyric acid  
in concert with  
the ventrolateral preoptic nucleus  
that flips the switch,  
their terms describe,  
do not explain:  

They cannot tell us  
what goes on  
in Hypnos’ cave  
that restores us  
to ourselves  
or say how Sleep  
knits up  
the ravelled sleeve of self —  
They say  
Sleep is a mystery.

And so  
Sleep is a province  
as fit  
for philosophers  
with their imponderables,  
and for poets  
with their paradoxes,  
as it is for scientists,  
whose scrutiny  
Sleep gives the slip:

This twin of Death who  
gives the kiss of life.

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