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
brass: 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,
never 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.

Gayle Greene
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Author of Insomniac, a first-person
narrative about living with insomnia
and an exploration of the world of
sleep science.