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Death's Brother

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POETRY

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,
Lethé, the river of forgetfulness,
flows nearby,
while all about
nod poppies



British Museum Nr. 267, Henry Beauchamp

(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.

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