

SLEEPS

There was a period in the summers I spent at my maternal grandmother's that marked the best sleep I have ever had. Not that I could always fall asleep or sleep the night through--both of which were rarities--but that when I did sleep I slept well. I would have been six or seven and my first or second year of school just completed. And these would have been late June nights when the heat was stoking up. There was a large lime tree outside my bedroom window close enough that if I climbed out I could easily work my way along one of the big thick branches to the thickness of the trunk, where, at the joining, I would perch at twenty-five feet or so. In the dark the tree took on a primordial presence and otherness that seemed to trivialize the compulsions of the house. The tree was my station between not being able to fall or stay asleep and the need to find sleep, regardless of the hour.

What I liked about the tree was its size and density and the invisibility it gave me. It rose tens of feet above me, while I sat high above the weight and mass of the ground. I felt suspended, secret, buoyed among the heart-shaped leaves. Within its immensity was a cave world of night sounds and shadows and soft cool temperatures. You could climb around in it or sit still and drift. If

you were careful you could look straight up through its canopy and watch what seemed the turning of the night sky, cloud or star. If you got dizzy you had something to hold on to.

Hiding in a tree in the dark was doubtless an escape, but less an escape from sleep than from sleeplessness, which was a condition of ϕf confusion, oppression and sometimes claustrophobia, the iron railings of the bed like a jail. Climbing into the tree--or on rain nights sitting in a rocker at the window--offered me a margin of difference between insomnia and the moment, inevitably, when I would have to try to find sleep. Changing venue, so to speak, meant that in the middle of the night I could daydream, and could ease myself, in my own time, back to the rest I needed. Sitting in the lime tree or the cradle rocker I could travel or be so still I could see what I could not see in daylight; or I could memorize the day and try to think it through.

Children are notorious for hating to go to sleep, then hating, in the same cycle, to wake up. The child in the adult shares this hatred. This may be because, to the subterranean mind, the archetypal womb-tomb narrative of our extended lives feels, in the small compass of a day, metaphorically reversed. To sleep is to die, to wake is to be reborn. Yet emotionally we

in sleep
 resist falling to our deaths just as we are reluctant
 to replace the warm curl of the womb with the cold
 morning of our rebirth. It feels safer to stay
 conscious or if we must fall off to sleep to interrupt it
 as soon as possible. Insomnia is the death of sleep.
 And it is a distortion of the natural rhythm of daylight
 turning into nighttime and returning--no less so than when
 seasonal change is corrupted by a run of off weather.

Like most behavior, insomnia--the inability to go
 to sleep--and terminal insomnia--the inability to sustain
 sleep--are learned. I learned them young. Part of the
 innocence of childhood is that dealing with problems
 eccentrically is expected. The trouble with sleepless
 adulthood is that sitting high up in trees in the dark
 night of the soul is considered strange. A theme in
 my poem is that insomnia of all stripes is more general
 than we might wish to think; indeed, it is, in my
 estimation, universal--and in our time, chronic.

Childhood-learned or not, just about every adult I know
 is or has been a sleep procrastinator or waker, or will
 be, all of which is a far cry from being an early riser.
 If we lived among more holy orders, eight hours of work,
 eight hours of prayer and play, and eight whole hours
 of sleep might be possible. That may be why most people
 join monasteries and nunneries: peace of mind.

But not even sleep promises peace of mind. When Gregor Samsa wakes from a night of uneasy dreams, he finds himself transformed inside out; and that the slow nightmare he has been living has turned from spiritual to carnal--he is now, truly, a dung-beetle. When Emily Dickinson, in #1670, finds a worm "ringed with power" in her bedroom ("He fathomed me-"), she runs, and since it is a dream she flies:

That time I flew
 Both eyes his way
 Lest he pursue
 Nor ever ceased to run
 Till in a distant Town
 Towns on from mine
 I set me down
 This was a dream.

And when Walt Whitman, in his great surreal poem, "The Sleepers," wakes within his sleep he finds he must "wander all night in my vision" before he can return to sleep "and rise betimes." It is fascinating that in his night-journey dream he is compelled to visit those-- by the hundreds--who are asleep or whose own dream-life he has ~~become~~ become part of. His visitations, typically, cover a spectrum of humanity--from lovers to onanists, exiles to homebodies, lost swimmers to sailors, and memories, ,oddly and movingly, real and imagined, of his mother and Washington's farewell to his soldiers. In so many ways, this is Whitman's most intimate poem; it takes us, without misstep,

to an interior, more personal place, to the heart of the silence in his work, where, in the vulnerability of his restless sleep, he is responsible--both as a witness and an omniscience--for who lives and dies, is remembered and forgotten, redeemed and lost, and "averaged and restored." It takes us inside the sleeping-room, the unconscious, where "I turn but do not extricate myself/Confused, a past-reading, another, but with darkness yet."

But with darkness yet is the ontological condition of insomnia, even dream-insomnia. We all have a night visitor, interrupter, or postponer of our sleep. And its^s presence is not limited to the demons of technology and the cities. I am sure that the pastoralist also anticipates the hour-of-the-wolf warning of the shepherd's bell. I think there is something in our imaginative makeup, in the nightly interrogation of our hearts and minds, that makes us, like Whitman, vulnerable to memory, and so we^{are} put into the position of having to mediate, as well as meditate, with the angels of sleep. It may be bad for our bodies but it resonates with our souls: in the middle of the night we are in touch with ourselves in a way we can never be in daylight. Our insomnia brings our night to life and the night inside us.

I am suggesting, of course, that insomnia is not necessarily a sickness to be treated and cured. What if your insomnia were not caused by caffeine, noise, irregular

hours, job stress, money worries, physical pain, depression, alcohol, or medications, and any one of a number of other reductive sources: but was instead caused by nightingales (Coleridge's complaint) or the inability to distinguish between waking and sleeping (Keats's complaint) or the ice cracking on Derwent Water (Wordsworth's complaint)? What if the source of the trouble was the imagination itself, the mind whittling the wood of a possibility? What if the mind dreamed you awake or you woke in a dream demanding that you escape, by any means necessary, this prison-house? What if the night were so beautiful and variable that night after night, in some way, at some hour, you had to take notice? What if you were waiting for some sign or signal that could arrive only in stillness and darkness, when you were most ready to receive it?

In my poem I try to play the language of the science of sleep on the same lyric instrument as the language of sleep's poetry--I try to weave the narrative of the one into the story of the other. Both languages represent an allegory of longing, of lying down with ghosts and oracles and rising the wiser. I try to place the bed where it might best serve, simultaneously, the pastoral needs of sleep and the myth-making--dreaming or waking--desires of the mind. I put the bed outside on new earth, at the foliate edge, stars among the leaves. I put the bed there because in folktales the drunken father

is always coming home late and breaking into the house,
 like a hard wind blowing open the door. The whole
 shakes and forms around his awkwardness. The mother
 has lain awake anticipating that with his arrival there
 will be an argument that will live in the walls. But
 I will have taken my bed, and my lament, into the fields.

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