

Sara Levine

SLEEP APPROACHES

Also, those with inconspicuous veins, as well as dwarfs and those with big heads, are fond of sleeping.

—ARISTOTLE

Although the bulk of my accomplishments, the actions of which I would care to be known by, were accomplished in my waking hours, let's not diminish, she said, the work I've done while sleeping.

What writers want to know about other writers (not who they read or what they are writing, but) what time do they get up in the morning? How long do they sit at the desk? Do they take naps?

He throws the bedcovers off; he drags them up again, but only to his knees; he rolls to his side, then to his back, he concentrates on breathing, but the attempt to sleep in a relaxed and dignified position makes him tense; so he gets out of bed, turns on the light, and goes to work. At the desk, he slumps in his chair and falls asleep immediately.

The difference between sleeping and resting. The difference between working and dreaming. The difference between writing and telling people you're writing when actually you're lying around flattening pillows and hoping to catch half-images in sleep.

My grandmother used to rest in the middle of the day, at least on those days when my brother and I visited her. She would give us ample warning—"Grandma is going to rest now"—and then slip out of her sandals, turn the television on, and unfold her great girth onto the bedspread. We were supposed to be resting too, but after I was sure my grandmother

was still, I would go into the guest room and masturbate. My brother would go outside with his magnifying glass and burn ants.

Rest is no more essentially connected with sleep than a flashy car with wealth, or a book under the arm with learning.

The drowsiness that a writer feels during the act of composition is no indication of the work's value or its ability to interest a reader. The moment I begin to write well, I fall asleep, like those narcoleptic dogs who thump to the ground each time they're given a steak. Such sleep may not be cowardice or laziness but a way of going deeper into the subject: not a hapless fall into the garbage chute but a furtive, energetic tunneling—a deliberate means of going underground, to seize the root of the radish.

For centuries those who lay down and closed their eyes were thought to be asleep. Now we know, he who sleeps is accompanied by specific electrographic signs:



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He said, and truly he did not mean to please or encourage me: "I hate that whole eight-hour thing. Some people need *more* than eight hours, and it isn't that they're lazy." There was a pause and then he yawned without averting his eyes. It was a big ambitious yawn that stretched to the very perimeters of his face, slowly, like a balloon inflating. Any moment it's going to burst, I thought; and yet he recovered.

Types of sleep. There is the sleep of the birds, the sleep of the log, the sleep

of the dead, and better yet, the sleep of the unplugged appliance. This sort of sleep affords you a reprieve from the self. Upon waking one may feel refreshed, lightened, energized, inexplicably cleaner, holy and eager to do—or one may simply feel less tired, physically, and greet the weary self, "Back to you."

Sleeping habits should not be changed for light and transient causes.

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The catastrophe of being awake made acute by 1) the garbage spilled on the sidewalk, 2) a child in a stroller, 3) a busy signal on the phone.

Last week in a Chinese restaurant a friend and I got into an argument over whether the red snapper at the bottom of the tank was dead or resting. "Look at the gelatinous eye," he said. The hostess came over and offered to seat us. We sat down and looked at the menu, then went to another restaurant instead. There we ate chicken, which we knew was not sleeping.

Some birds sleep with one eye open (the sleep of the wary). Other birds sleep on the wing.

I believe the lucky part of humanity can be divided into two groups: those who sleep as a matter of course, dispassionately, for whom sleep is an uninteresting, but necessary, state of non-doing; and those who enter the dormant state as if it were a pleasure park recently opened. For the park visitors, sleep is not a lack of activity, a cessation of perception, or a lid placed on top of the thrumming jar of life, but a part of life itself.

Have there always been those who sleep to live, and those who live to sleep?

This little sleeper dug a well for sleep. This little sleeper bought a pillow made of Swedish foam. This little sleeper got into brain wave entrainment. This little sleeper forbade friends to call after ten and ran wee-wee-wee all the way home.

I have lost friends over sleep, and vice versa.

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For the sleeper it is evening all afternoon. In the evening there is only deepening of evening. In the morning it is morning, but it is going to be morning all morning long. No hurry; the sleeper takes it slow. Light, like the paperboy, will trample through the yard again.

Depressives love the bed, a doctor once told me. I liked this doctor; she and I were sitting in a small clean room, the blinds were down, and there was a bowl of candy on the table between us. Depressives love the bed, she said, and it was as though she were stating some biological fact about which it were possible, but not helpful, perhaps even foolish, to have an opinion. The candy bowl offered sourballs, caramels, taffy, and a deep supply of cough drops—small blue disks of unbearable smoothness. It was my habit to take one when the doctor did, although I neither had a cough nor liked the taste of them. What I liked was the two of us there working our mouths over something physical.

I take a fanatic pleasure in the anticipation of sleep, in the approaches of it, in my addresses to it. I am excited even as I turn down the thermostat, brush my teeth, change into my sleeping socks. And although I am not constitutionally an energetic person, I have been known to bustle about all day, intentionally overexerting myself, in anticipation of throwing myself, at the end of the day, into sleep's embrace.

Often I find myself clinging to the couch in the middle of a sunny afternoon, after a good night's sleep and no experience that might justifiably tire me. "Why don't you get up?" my Person will say. "You can't possibly be tired now." Or sometimes he'll say, "Are you going to take a nap?" On these occasions I either leap off the couch in an energetic manner or roll into the seam of the sofa. There is privacy in the seam of the sofa that few women know.

Certain words, having to do with sleep, excite the imagination. Especially the more clinical expressions: "shallow torpor," "hypnic jerk," "desiccation of the mouth."

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A pity that it is impossible to write without somehow, for an extended period, being alert and sentient. And yet one readily admits that one needn't be awake for all of it.

Jane Bowles: "As I look down my life I see one picture—'me in bed reading'—the only difference is that the heap under the bedclothes grew larger."

The great lazies of literature drowse at their desks, read when they write, and rest when they read. Occasionally their dreams exceed entertainment and become the work itself. Mary Shelley said about conceiving *Frankenstein*: "When I placed my head upon the pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me . . . I saw with shut eyes, but acute mental vision . . ."

Ann Radcliffe ate horrendous meals before going to bed in the hope that indigestion would stir up horrendous dreams.

Virgil places sleep not adjacent to, but within, the death realm. A description of sleep flickers by in *The Aeneid* when the hero goes down to the underworld to see his father. From the last leg of the tour of Hades:

There are two gates of sleep, one said to be
Of horn whereby the true shades pass with ease,
The other all white ivory a gleam
Without a flaw, and yet false dreams are sent
Through this one by ghosts to the upper world.
Anchises now, his last instructions given,
Took son and Sibyl there and let them go by the Ivory Gate.

Sleep was, to the ancients, an opportunity to mingle with supernatural beings. The soul might leave the body, or shades might come and visit your soul. Imagine the anxiety one must have felt before one went to sleep. Should my soul go out? Should my soul stay home? The muffs and blunders; the impulsive cross-purpose traffic; “how much veering and luffing before they make that port!” Anchises after his son finally arrives in Hades: How many times I been going in and out of that goddamned horned gate and your soul is never home!

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I like to slip into an unmade bed. There is solace in the nooks of the bedsheets, the sweet disorder of the blankets, the pockets of warmth and cold; one kicks one’s way into comfort. My Person likes to enter a well-made bed. He has ideas about how the sheets should be tucked, the blankets straightened, and the pillows divided, which he says are not arbitrary ideas but part of a design to promote the general comfort. He says when we sleep in an unmade bed, I end up hogging all the blankets.

From an American etiquette book, published in 1892: “There is no situation in which a guest can take it for granted without any hint from his

hostess that he may make his own bed. Even in a household where there is no maid, it is just possible that the hostess might prefer to make the guests’ beds herself, while her husband takes the guests for a walk or to play tennis.”

From W. H. Auden, the same subject remade, turned down: “Being one of those persons who generally look like an unmade bed, I have always felt a certain resentment when confronted by an impeccable turnout.”

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My students never tire of telling me how little sleep they get. For them I feel sorry. A colleague of mine often tells me how little sleep he got because he was “trying to finish a manuscript” or “grading a slew of papers.” The more he protests, the more I suspect him of being at home, in his apartment complex, eating Fritos and watching TV. Ungenerous thoughts! and yet this ostentatiousness about having slept too little seems to arise directly in proportion to the sense that one is getting little done.

To the enlightened mind fervid wakefulness, fetishization of alertness, signifies deficient vitality. The person who fears he is dull of wits makes a fetish of staying awake all hours—to prove his mettle.

The time had fully come to wash those sheets.

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The writer who serves a loose and dreamy god—by which I mean the writer who does not *always* regard her work with a deliberate, rational eye, but calls it part of a good day’s work to close the eye—may walk about in a constant stupor. She may forget her name, fall off curbs, bounce her head against the doors of public places. She may abuse the

meditative life, the way other people abuse the bottle. How to dream, and not get trounced by the dream?

Mystical torpor; wakeful lethargy; strange balance between stupor and study! Charles Simic speaks of the great wish to make “a poem which would be a threshold between worlds, where the poet is simply the ceremonial doorman.” All poets dream, cautioned Lamb; “the true poet dreams being awake.”

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A woman I knew used to fall asleep whenever you had something of a critical nature to tell her. As soon as it was clear what way the wind was blowing, her eyes would blink, mouth enlarge, diaphragm swell, etc.

Isn't this laziness? X asked.

I suppose so. But if it is, it's strategic laziness. A retreat of sorts. A passive response to conflicts in my environment.

When I woke up a little later, he was making a speech about it. Instead of thinking you can wield some power in your world, you go to sleep and hope that when you wake up, something will be better. If I'm upset, I have to do things. Sleep is the last thing. I get busy. I am not a woman, he said. I am not a passive fellow.

But this isn't passivity, I said. This is a state of lower metabolic activity regulated by 100 billion nerve cells in my brain.

I woke up a little later, and he was sawing the bed in half.

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I rise in the morning with no memory of my dreams, but when I return to bed, and put my head upon the pillow, the dreams come back. Not in their entirety, but in quick seizures, flashes, floods. This makes me feel like a crazy person who has failed to keep the stuffing in her head. As if the dreams have spilled like a sack of seeds and now my skin is sticking to them.

It was Sigmund Freud who dubbed dreams the “guardians of sleep.” It was Djuna Barnes who said, “The sleeper is the proprietor of an unknown land.” It was my mother to whom I first explained I was an ineffective and disorganized proprietor, hoping she would tell me her dreams spilled like a sack of seeds too. Instead she said, “Oh god. You always were so messy. Remember that time you threw away your plane ticket?”

Rose McCaulay wrote an essay called “Bed.” It consists of two parts: “1. Getting into it” and “2. Not getting out of it.”

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The summer I was twenty-one I lived with a boy in the attic of a run-down house where we would sleep long mouth-fuzzing hours and wake to a stale smell in the room. I remember that boyfriend fondly because he allowed me to sleep, was very permissive about sleep, and also because we slept closely together—the way I imagined all lovers did, until I found myself with another boy who required what he called his “own zone” and couldn't breathe if my arm was draped over him.

At a winter solstice party at my house, I gave people permission to heap their coats on my bed. I didn't want the guests in my bedroom, because I didn't like them very much; in fact I think I was giving this party in an effort to like them better; but when the last gaggle went to go, six walked into the bedroom to retrieve their coats and got engaged, quite suddenly

but dispassionately, in a conversation, standing around my bed. They burned their figures into the air. For weeks as I tried to sleep, I kept seeing them there, standing over me, just like in a seminar, talking in turn.

Okay, she said. You take the right side and I'll take the left. I *always* sleep on the right side.

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Once I rang a friend's bell in the middle of the morning. He came to the door, thick-lidded and woozy, in his underwear, supporting his slack body against the doorframe as I stated my errand and apologized for waking him. You were sleeping, I said and he protested: "No, *no*, I wasn't sleeping. I was only kidding."

Saturday morning I extricate myself from the bed at five o'clock. This is not entirely intentional. For some time I have been toying with the idea of getting up early, just to see what early looks like, but on this particular day I wake accidentally, prompted by a bird racket. Unbidden, I am awake. It occurs to me that I can conduct an experiment. The experiment is this: I get up, put on some clothes, and go downstairs. I let the strange long day begin.

Normally I rise at nine; so it's an event to have these four new alien hours. How mysterious the light, how quiet the street! A fat-bottomed raccoon slides out of a sewer; as I work at my desk, I hear the thrum of a neighbor's car. I feel newly attuned to the neighborhood, to the rhythms of community life. But round about noon I feel exhausted, as if the day will never end. I rest briefly, and then work again. A startling recognition of how productive one could be if one rose this early every day.

The next day, terrified of my accomplishments, I sleep until eleven.

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You were yawning, yes you were, and I saw the back of your mouth, lined like a drawer.

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