

Everything Awake

SAMPLER

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Sasha Steensen

EVERYTHING AWAKE

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Come, you hendecasyllables, in force now,
each last one of you, from every quarter—

—Catullus

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Hende

The opposite of wakefulness is not sleep.
Neither the day nor the night can be said to speak
without me. I open my mouth and out shines
the horizon. It hums no matter the time.
It forms the seam between dawn and dreams. No matter
the lilies or the nightshade. All we say to sleep—
please, allusive friend, freeze. All our offerings—
the sawed log, the leaped fence, the sheep. None of it matters.
Like Telemachos wrapped in fleece, sweet sleep doesn't
hold me. Obedient, I wait for radiant dawn.
I hold myself still. I lay myself down.

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Practicing in the Sleepfields

Well past twilight now.

Go your ways in the black ship,
I tell myself as I lay myself down.

Then, I take a walk.

The raccoon
circling the coop
barely looks at me.

The baby skunk
hunting grubs
in the garden
doesn't lift his tail up.

My cat
with a mouse
in her mouth.

New moon
in the distance.

Polaris.

Orion.
His armpit.
His belt doesn't fit.

I'm tired
of myself.

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I lie myself down
on the dewy ground.

*

I prefer the word
weary
how it drives
what rides me
(worry)
out past the waves
most noteworthy
and leaves me bedridden
on a glassy sea.

This is what it feels like,
the verge of sleep,
lulling up and down
gently
on what we call
the wave's trough.

There is no feed for me.
No oats.
No grain.
No hay.

Seed,
out to sea.

*

Twilight means
the great between,

but there is more to day
than dark and light

more to twi-
than half or twice.

Blue horizon,
what shall we call thee?
Intrinsic light isn't quite right,
nor is Eigengrau

Eigenlicht
own gray
dark light.

Paul tells us to fear the dark,
to wear the armor of light.

What's that, bright
in the dark distance?

The night's nightcap,
I guess.

I put it atop my windy head
and rest.

*

I write this in the early morning
ambien ambient daze
and what's worse,
that gray brain

or having not slept
in the first place?

I ask myself this until the end
of what we call day.
Nightfall, eventide, decline,
in India, cow dust time.

Thou dost sweep men away like a dream.
And the dust from their hooves
and the smoke from our nightfire rises.

I'm too unsure of my place
in the waking day
to find my way
back home with my cows in tow.

In the dream,
the image does its work effortlessly,
but upon waking,
there is no shore to be seen.

What keeps me most afloat:
the echoes of words.

*

Sitting down to work,
I almost immediately
require a nap.

For seven mornings straight
this nap occurs from 10:52 to 11:08.

This is what the Hebrews called
“the casual sleep.”

The time it takes
to walk $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile
elongated and stretched out
above the quiet house.

This morning
I heard a fly buzz
when I fell asleep
and again when I woke.

The nap:
one continuous moment.

*

Seven sleepers sleep in a cave in Ephesus
for one-hundred-nine-thousand-five-hundred-some days.
Or 309 lunar years, give or take.
The sleepers believe they've only slept
a portion of one day.

The “seventh sleeper” means:
sleeping late, being lazy,
or having faith.

The seventh sleeper
also refers
to the edible dormouse
(from the word dormire)
who hibernates for seven
months a year.

The rodent has seven teats in Italy
but only six elsewhere.

If we were ancient Romans,
we'd trap and fatten
these rodents
in terracotta pots
until plump enough for roasting.

If we were German,
we'd celebrate
not Ground Hog's Day,
but Seven Sleeper's Day.
If wet, it will rain
for seven weeks
without rest.

If we were Syrian, we'd bless
one another with the following words:
May you sleep like the people of Ephesus.

The weather and little rodents both
speak to me.

Dawn over the sea.
The boat's hull.
The husk of sleep.

If my arms could reach down
and pull you out,
if my mouth could breathe
for thee.

*

Like the jaw aching to open wide
at the sight of a yawning child,
eyes reading about sleep
grow heavy.

I bow my head to the book.

Reading.

For the insomniac,
reading is the gentle guillotine.

I want the honey-hearted sleep,
the sleep that takes the shape
of a swarm of bees
humming
longsuffering,
lovingkindness,
safekeeping,
alone in my bed
of blue poppies always in bloom,
God breathing the dream into me.

Reading.

Sleep that fans like a whirlwind
cools like a mist
set me off to sea
by way of the winds released
from goat skins.
Sleep that isn't sleep exactly
but brings me to the bed
nonetheless.
And sleep in which the sleeper dreams
she is sleeping

but can't, whatever she does,
wake herself up.

Reading.

Blocking a hole.
Stopping a breach.
Patching a garment.
The boat on a rough sea,
the olive tree,
the bed upon which Penelope sleeps.

Reading.

I know I slept.
I have a pain
in my neck,
a dry eye
that aches
to open
and an
unfinished book
by my bed.

Late May.

My fifteenth wedding anniversary.

There are children between him and me
and we roll out the bed and ready them.

*

Until my girl was a year old,
she barely slept. She
only slept
in someone's arms or
in her babyswing.

When she finally learned to sleep
in her crib, I would wake
on my floormat where I slept
when I couldn't sleep
wondering why
she wasn't crying.

I would worry that perhaps
she had died in her sleep,
but then I would tell myself,
go back to sleep
because if she's dead,
grief will prevent you
from ever sleeping again.

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*

The vigil in hypervigilant:

rising to someone who sleeps
like a dream or seems asleep
even upon waking, the misty
eyes, the talk that is itself
the words of one asleep
who assumes I know the scene
of whatever dream he's still
half dreaming.