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.


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,
cconscious, 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-butryc 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
Professor, English
Scripps College
Claremont, Calif.

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