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Excerpts from The Book of Sleep by Haytham el-Wardany (Cairo: Alkarma, 2017)

Translated by Robin Moger

The principle of hope. We bid farewell to the world knowing that it will carry on without us. Nothing will stop for our sake, nothing will be affected by our absence. We have done all we could but we've failed, everything we've done blown away in the wind, and now the day is rapidly drawing to a close. We bid the world farewell and lay our heads on our pillows. We are not sad, but full of hope, for there in the heart of darkness we shall soon encounter hope, calmly growing, growing stronger the further we forge forward into night. Hope in waking, hope that the darkness will clear, hope in the day to come, hope in a new beginning. Hope that when we open our eyes tomorrow all will be well. This hope ripens deep in the dark like a fruit, it burgeons in gloom, growing sweeter the blacker the night. Reaching this fruit is sleep's gift, for each sleep is the true practice of hope, a long training at emancipation and freedom. But what does it rest on, this hope? Most likely, on a limitless faith in the unknown, once fear of the unknown has been transcended; on a trust in absence, once we have surrendered ourselves to it. It is a limitless faith in the world we say goodbye to each night, confident that we're in safe hands. This faith is established after we lose our command over the world, we entrust ourselves to it for it to do with us as it will, which is why the hope that lies in sleep is like no other hope, but is the principle of hope. It does not spring from a desire bound to its object, but from a greater desire that transcends all objects: the desire to cross to the other bank and join the unknown.

Names. Once more the silence sprawled out. The bedroom, which had throbbed to their voices when she was awake, now lay beneath a thick silence cut only by the sound of him turning in the bed, or of a car coming down the street outside. Nothing disturbed him more during the endless nights than this silence. During the day they never stopped talking. It didn't matter whether they were fighting or making up, arguing or debating; the point was that the thread of speech stayed strung between them. By night, though, she lay beside him through the long hours while he remained awake, the eternal insomniac, unable to tell her a thing. Night after night he would peer at her, trying in vain to tell where she might have got to, then making do with tracking her honey coloured eyes as they flicked to and fro beneath their lids left just ajar. Their daily conversations were the way they loved. He would tell her something and

she would listen, then she would tell him something and he would listen. Her voice would vibrate in his body and his in hers. And if there were nothing to tell then he might fake a fight with her over the tap in the kitchen, say, or she might make up a story about something that happened with the neighbors the day before. But the torment of his sleeplessness was only made more intense on those occasions when her voice would emerge weakly from the night's long silence and she would start to call. Amid the other mutterings she made while sleeping the call was clear. Names of people some of them departed, some still present. Names of people he knew and didn't. She would call, would say, Henan! Papa! Sami! Anwar! Nevine! Mahmoud! Umm Sayyid! Samiya!, in one unvarying tone, somewhere requesting and begging. She never told them anything or asked anything of them. She only called their names, like someone summoning souls. In such moments the waking world they shared would be swept to one side, their conversation would stop and become one-sided speech, and the bedroom would fill with people. A whole world that was hers alone sprawled out inside the room and he was banished. Every night he would eagerly await his echo in her world but his name was ever absent.

Coma. If revolution—as an exceptional act, long-awaited after years of a deep collective slumber—is an awakening, then is not sleep a return to that same slumber, and a synonym for failure? The failure to reshape reality, to change circumstance, to redefine the self? However, a close look at the moment of entering sleep tells us something different, for this moment does not authorize the beginning of a failure, it just concedes it. It is the moment in which the sleeper surrenders to his drowsiness and his failure to stay awake. Failure comes first—whether the failure of the self to stay in control or the defeat of the group in the battle for change—after which comes the moment of sleep: the moment at which failure is conceded and defeat is accepted. Sleep is not the cause of defeat and failure. Individual sleep is the act of a self relinquishing control, and collective sleep is the act of a group acknowledging that the battle has been decided and that to fight on is suicide. Sleep, then, is a shield against madness or self-harm. The self that does not sleep is blind and self-obsessed, while the group that does not sleep is an arrogant group, unable to change reality because it lives disconnected from it. To restore contact with reality, to regroup, to wake, you must slumber for a while. ▶

For the sleeper who sleeps in hope will soon reawaken to reality inspired by a new dream. Failure to change reality is a failure that can be overcome and escaped, but the failure to apprehend this first failure and accept it is more complex: a coma that it is hard to come round from, rather than a sleep that will pass.

The depths of the earth. The dividing line between sleep and wakefulness are the state's internal boundaries. Along this line state authority distorts and fractures and laws unravel. When we sleep we are law-abiding citizens no longer, but members of a secret society, a group that maintains the outward illusion of citizenship while fleeing inside into the depths of the earth. How similar this group we joined in our sleep is to sleeper cells, for they too discovered the fraudulence and impossibility of citizenship and turned it into no more than a front behind which they work against state, a cover that enables one to pass unsuspected through its surveillance systems. And likewise the sleeper, who is forever vanishing into the body of the state, fleeing into his own body from the watchmen's eyes, going to where they'll never find him—though the similarities between sleeper and sleeper cell end at intention. For when the sleeper cells awake—as they must, however long they sleep—then the bomb they managed to plant in some vital nexus of the state apparatus detonates and their mission is complete. As for the sleeper his battle against the state is a long one; it will not be settled by a single blow because it is not a battle over the succession of power. The sleeper does not wish to swap one state for another, just to find the blind spots on the body of the state, those places that will remain forever out of its control.

Who is the sleeper? One member cut off from the group? A solitary self? A small group at rest? At the center of every group is an unhealed wound, its pain renewed with every part of it that is shed unseen. Yet the group always resolves to cleave to its visible parts, to privilege the living over the dead, and to gamble on the future: that the wound will heal in time. The group sees itself as a narrative of renewal and evolution and turns a blind eye to its parallel history of loss and shedding. Sleep does not turn away, cleaving directly to that same parallel history, drawn to what is no longer visible, driven on by the disaster of loss. This is why the sleeper's gaze is always trained on the departed; all they see

of the group to which they belong is that which is absent, the splits and cracks which grow day after day. The group to which the sleeper belongs is a lost group, marching toward the open wound, united not by cohesion and their forward-looking gaze, but by weakness and the gaze trained backward. Sleep does not seek to inhabit the wound that sits at the heart of every group, only to approach it. ===