

SLEEP

Sumona Roy

Sleep is an allergy, a reaction against the day's useless welfare programmes. It is alright for people to have no memory of dreams in their sleep, but to have no memory of sleeping is a nightmare. But truth be told, insomniacs sleep much more than they think they do. Only their definitions of sleep differ from the person they sleep next to. They suffer from persecution complex every night, never forgiving those who sleep well or better. Their nights are a study of deficit.

I write all this in short hand on my skinny notebook as the teacher in our Sleep Therapy class explains "11 Methods on How to Sleep Well" in bullet points.

"What's your problem?" he asks a woman in the first row.

I'm a backbencher. To me she looks like the most attentive student in class. Even her hair looks sleepy – in an obedient way – to me.

"My nights are a replay of my days. It's like watching a home video, you know – I watch myself performing the events of the day just gone when I try to sleep," she says, stressing on "performing".

"Why do you do that? Do you like watching the same movie on repeat?" asks the Sleep Therapist.

The woman shakes her head, her eyeglasses fall to the floor, she doesn't notice. It's as if her sleepy eyes are stuck to her specs. "I don't know," she says like a schoolgirl who knows she's going to fail a class test.

The Sleep Therapist walks close to where she stands, picks up her glasses and asks, "Can you do me a favour? Can you leave your eyes on the bedside table like the way you leave your glasses on it?". He is very clearly a patron of sleep.

The woman says she will try.

I draw cartoons of everyone's sleeping disorders. A woman who treats the phrase "sleep cycle" literally – I draw her riding a sleepy looking cycle (the horn is the alarm clock). The man who forgets to sleep – I make Sleep look like a librarian who scolds him for forgetting to return a book on time.

By the time my turn comes, I am bored. And who knows, maybe even a little sleepy. "What's your problem, Mr. Z?" the Therapist asks and then laughs at his silly joke. The 'z' is a play on my being the last person in Sleep class as well as the zzz sign used for sleep. The cartoonist's joke is now on me. I imagine myself being turned into a comic strip as I stand up to speak to him.

"My problem is that I don't think it's

a problem at all," I say bravely, quite aware that I'm drawing the attention of twenty nine insomniac students to myself.

"What-do-you-mean?" asks the therapist in a sudden change of accent.

"I said that I don't think it's a problem at all. I don't sleep ..."

"You don't get sleep is what you mean," he says interrupting me.

notice a lot these days.

"My wife insisted I do. In other words, she paid for this course!"

The entire class bursts into laughter, the first time this has happened in the six lectures we have attended together. Otherwise we all pretend to be sleeper than we actually are. It will help us to get better, we are convinced. Sleep is a serious thing, it's keeping awake that is

The therapist now folds his hands into a box and asks calmly, "What do you do until she wakes up?"

But before I can answer that one, he clarifies, "Besides waiting that is ..."

I want to co-operate with him but I don't have the mental furniture. So I end up sharing my most private secret. It's one I've not even shared with my wife, but I don't know what happens to me at that instant – I tell him the truth. Clarification: my truth.

"Every night a new word appears in my mind. It's like a fish that's risen to the water surface. I feel it coming out of my forehead. Sometimes I slap my forehead in despair. I don't want it there. I don't want it anywhere. It swims in my mind, inside my head, inside my brain, even inside my eyes and ears. I chase it. I don't know how I chase it, but believe me, I do. I know that if I manage to catch it, my restiveness will disappear and I will be able to sleep. Every night I fail. And so I get no sleep," I manage to say. A little later I realise that I've been speaking with my eyes closed. I feel embarrassed and open my eyes wider: it's as if I've become a surprise to myself.

"Are you sure it's not a dream – a recurring dream – that you have every day?" the therapist asks.

I've been forewarned about how sleep therapists are actually shrinks in hiding. So I say no. "No-no-no."

"Is it an unfamiliar word every day? Which language is it in?"

"It's always an English word, always."

"English?"

"Yes."

"What's your mother tongue?" a woman who must be someone's mother asks.

"I grew up in an orphanage. I'm not sure what my mother tongue might have been," I say. I am suddenly reminded of my father-in-law's face, his reaction to the same words when I first met him.

An awkward silence fills the room. Thirty people observe an impromptu silence for my deceased parents thirty three years after they died or abandoned me. I join them, pretending to be grateful.

"Which language do you use at home?" Questions begin again.

"Assamese, Hindi, English, Silence," I reply. I am irritated.

"Four languages?" the therapist asks, and perhaps reading the sarcasm on my face, asks, "What's the fourth language you mentioned?"

"Silence," I say, as if it's Spanish or

some other foreign tongue. Everyone laughs.

The therapist is clearly irritated. The muscles on his throat reveal their tectonics when he tells this to me in a near giant whisper: "Perhaps you should be practising the last when you sleep?"

I realise that this is getting nowhere, so I tell him that I'd like some time to sit and think. He looks relieved. After spending a few moments practising silence, I say, "I think I don't have a sleeping problem. I have a problem with sleep".

Everyone in the class nods. They are happy for me, happy – perhaps even grateful – that I've made this startling piece of self-diagnosis.

"What do you do for a living?" someone asks.

Worthless question, but I decide to answer. "I'm not sure whether that has anything to do with my lack of faith in sleep, but I teach writing."

I notice estimates being formed about my daily routine, my personality, my paycheques, and reasons for my insomnia from that particular declaration. A sudden surge of self-worth fills my being, I feel superior to everyone in that room, I sit down and untie my shoelaces when a woman suddenly turns back to look at me and asks, "How nice! And I'd thought no one taught Cursive Writing these days!". Her mouth curls at 'cursive writing', mine swears silently.

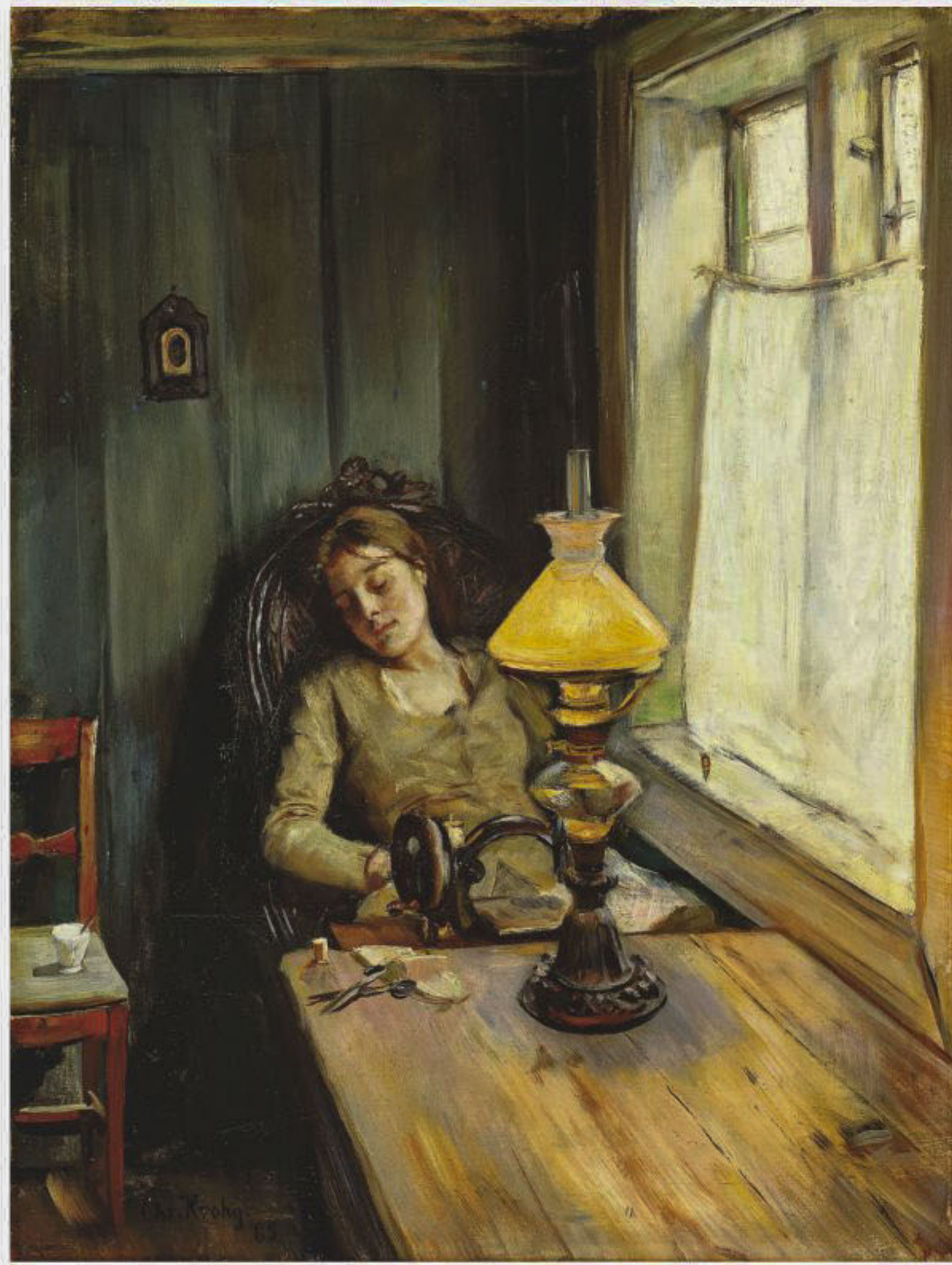
"Paragraphs. Sentences. Words. Punctuations. Voice. Tone. Things like that. I teach students how to ...," I don't complete my sentence. I've begun feeling like a word-mechanic. Perhaps I should have told them the truth, but 'Political Cartoonist' sounds so scatological sometimes.

"When was the last time you slept, slept well enough to feel happy?" the therapist intervenes. He looks at his watch; the next batch of insomniacs must be getting restless in the lobby, his face suggests.

"As I told you, sleep has nothing to do with my happiness quotient. But to answer your question, I really can't remember when I slept the last time," I say. I'm not lying. "You need to be really stupid to sleep well, you know. I don't know one intelligent person who would choose sleeping over staying awake."

(To be concluded next week)

Sumona Roy writes from Siliguri, a small town in sub-Himalayan Bengal, India.



'Trett' (Tired), 1885, Christian Keogh.

"Whatever. It's the same thing to me. I don't sleep. But I don't think it's a problem. There are many who find it difficult to keep awake during the day. If that's not a problem, why should sleeplessness be a problem?" I say, making it a point to answer with a question mark. That's my version of arrogance.

"Sure. Why did you enrol for this course then?" he asks, moving away from me, putting his hands into the back pockets of his denim pants, a coming-into-late-style posture that I

the laughing matter.

"Why can't you sleep?" probes the therapist, his tone warmer now.

I make a weird facial gesture, one that I imagine would make me look smart in the mirror. It clearly works. The class gets laughing again.

"Okay, let me put it this way. What do you do when your wife sleeps?" the therapist asks again. Clearly, he is not one to give up. That, or he values my wife's money more than I do.

"I wait for her to wake up," I say matter-of-factly for that alone is the truth.

THE POWER OF A POET

Rezauddin Stalin

Translated by: Gulshan Ara Kazi

Only poets can heroically sacrifice the golden throne
There is no parallel to the poets in their ability to spit on the face of greed and fame
And choose a simple life free of temptation
Only poets can sever the ties with comfort and wealth
And take pride in leading care free life
Like whales, the children of ocean, they enjoy their freedom

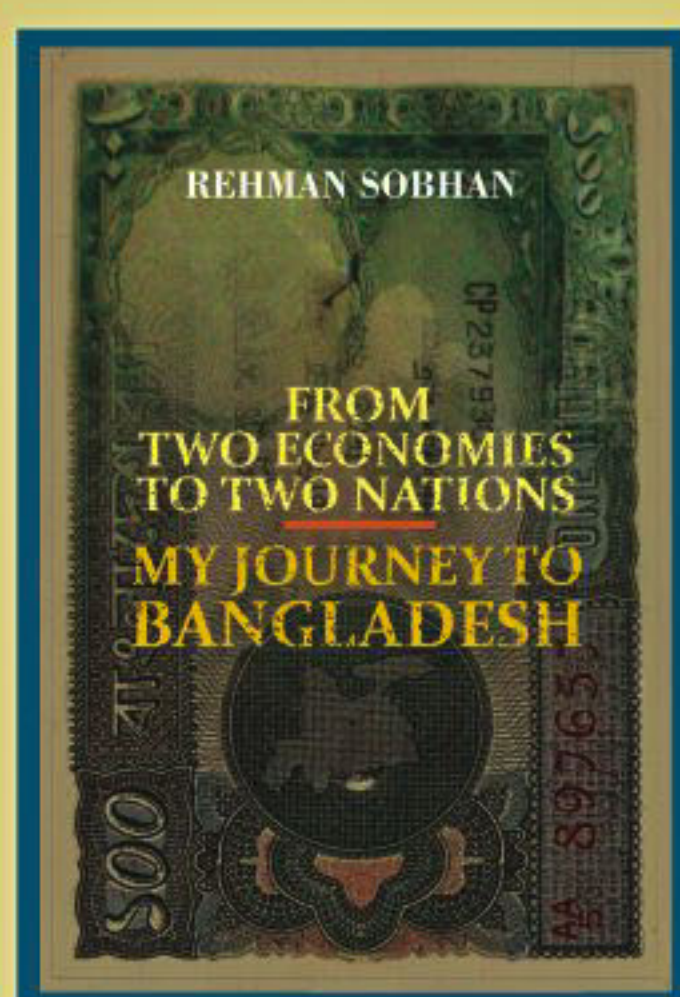
Stupid Plato was very jealous of the poets
He knew that only poets can turn his theory upside down
Only poets can brag to have the power equal to that of God
And at times, have a bird drawn on a poster fly in the sky
And if needed, they go to solitary confinement willingly and happily
No king has the power to sentence them

Just the other day Lorca Lohitav
Daringly made mockery of civilization
Scaling the height of death
Threw the gold coins of pity on the face of Ferdous Shah
And before entering the paradise
Heracles Benjamin made the white eagle of Jewesblind
Nazrul, with utmost hatred for slavery
Was totally undaunted and happily chose asylum

Poets never tear the heart of the world
With examples as their razor sharp teeth
They set up new examples with every sunrise
And fill up the blank pages of the books
With examples of sacrifices and forgiveness.




'Peace Dove Crucified' by Rabi Khan.



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