

# The Awful Truth

*Diana Hamilton*



GOLIATH BOOKS

# Write in Your Sleep

Some say we shouldn't describe our dreams.

I say: fuck that.

But saying "fuck that" won't persuade everyone.

Instead, I'll prove it with "research"

about dreams & wishes. Specifically, two:  
the wish to write, the wish to feel better.

Here's an annotated bibliography  
on how, when we dream, we write:

—if lazily, in fear or love, without credentials.

In *Venus in Furs*, "the story is set in motion by a dream

that occurs during an interrupted reading."<sup>1</sup> (So's this.)

An unnamed man tells Severin his dream

of "speaking to Venus about love while she wears furs"<sup>2</sup>

who, among her many cruelties, tells *him* that he, and his people,

"do not know what love is about." Severin listens

under a painting of the same woman—"That is how I saw her

in my dreams," the narrator exclaims; "But I was dreaming

with my eyes open," says Severin<sup>3</sup>—

---

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. Jean McNeil (Boston: MIT Press, 1971), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "Venus in Furs," *Wikipedia* [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Venus\\_in\\_Furs&oldid=780633396](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Venus_in_Furs&oldid=780633396)

<sup>3</sup> Leopold Sacher von Masoch, *Venus in Furs*, in Deleuze's *Masochism*, 148.

and recommends he read a book about it. (Good advice.)

Bob Glück, in *About Ed*, says “I slept so lightly I complained in my dreams about still being awake.”<sup>4</sup> He dreams of his lover

helping him paint the loft, buy a bathtub, Denny with an unruly dog, and as he writes the dream down, he understands it “means that Ed was giving [him] a hand with this book.” Freud says he’s nervous

he’s not a poet given how much of himself he’s about to tell.<sup>5</sup> Same. Writers should go to sleep when they need help:

Hamilton, Diana. “Onion Poet’s Dream, on the eve of her birthday.” Email message to therapist. December 7, 2013.

Hamilton dreams that she is at a party of older poets. They are collaborating on an impressive dish she does not want because she has chronic IBS.

To contribute, she makes her “specialty,” which is a big loaf of hearty bread, cut into slices with an onion spread. She demonstrates how to make it: it’s just an onion, cut in a secret way that, when unlocked, reveals units of paste instead of slices—as if you roasted a head of garlic and cut it in half. All of the older poets are impressed, and though they are from many different countries, they all say it reminds them of a food they had in their childhood and that they would rather have it than the fancy meal that is coming.

---

<sup>4</sup> Robert Glück, reading at the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church in the Bowery, December 7, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), xxiv.

In the dream, Hamilton forgets that, in real life, she stopped eating onions once she developed the IBS; i.e., her dip is a terrible solution.

Yet in her sleep, she writes a story that

1. minimizes the work women put into preparing food,
2. earns her the attention of her elders, and
3. rejects luxury in favor of sustenance.

Describing a dream is like reading the first draft of a poem aloud to a friend who didn't offer to listen:

It's rude. But it's a fine way to force someone to help you get over writer's block.

Dreams appear among Bernadette Mayer's "experiments." She says to

Write down your dreams as the first thing you do every morning for 30 days. Apply translation and aleatoric processes to this material. Double the length of each dream. Weave them together into one poem, adding or changing or reordering material. Negate or reverse all statements ("I went down the hill" to "I went up the hill," "I didn't" to "I did"). Borrow a friend's dreams and apply these techniques to them.<sup>6</sup>

I did this on accident: I wrote dream notes on a whiteboard to see what "came together," and what came together was love:

A lover was a book by me, I had written  
him, but he was still man-sized and book-sized. He wanted me  
to inscribe him to him, an act I've always hated,  
and hate requesting. For this reason

---

<sup>6</sup> Bernadette Mayer, "Bernadette Mayer's Writing Experiments," accessed May 27, 2016, [http://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Mayer-Bernadette\\_Experiments.html](http://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Mayer-Bernadette_Experiments.html)

I'll only do it when it feels urgent: I saw Bernadette Mayer in Oakland recently, and I couldn't help but ask her to sign my copy of *Ethics of Sleep* because I love her more than all poets who have ever existed and that was the book I had just bought. I told her I loved her. She laughed and asked for a sip of my beer. One thing you might not know is that Bernadette Mayer is the most beautiful human. She asked me: "So you like my work. Should I keep writing?"

I hesitated. I said, "Of course, selfishly, I want to say yes. But you should do whatever the fuck you want." She threw her head back and laughed again as she opened the beer. "You know I can't sign my name since my stroke?" She wrote "BM" in block letters. I said, "yes."

When people ask me to sign a book I feel like they are asking me to revise it, to come up with a line that was left out by mistake, and that line is the one where I would have made it clear that I love them, in advance. In my dream, the book/lover that I had written specifically asked me to inscribe him, "I love you, \_\_\_\_\_," where that blank is his name, you get it. I wrote "Dream where D is book I wrote, ILY" on the whiteboard, lived another day, went back to sleep, dreamt of another lover, who, in the dream, had my body. Specifically, I saw her belly fat hang in the same way mine hangs: stretch marks having loosened the skin such that, in any position other than lying flat on my/her back, it sags low, and, since neither me nor this dream lover is so insecure that we would

# Fear and Trembling

*Elsie Maria Kingdon*

*[I found this novella—if you can call it that—on Christmas Eve, 2016, outside of Metrograph, a movie theater in lower Manhattan. I was coming from a screening of Carol, the adaptation of Patricia Highsmith’s lesbian classic, The Price of Salt. I asked at the theater and the neighboring bars to try to track down its writer, and I performed the requisite searches, but she’s either made use of a pseudonym or written in relative obscurity (of course, coming advances in machine learning will make identifying her easier). Though, lying in the gutter, it gave the impression of having fallen out of a taxi in some sort of skirmish, the manuscript looked freshly printed, and had the phrase “FINAL DRAFT” as a running header. —D.S.H.]*

Recently, every young person I know agreed they were “very anxious.”

Life was full of dread, they said, and the body, they discovered, warded off problems by creating “meaningful,” if unhelpful, physical symptoms.

They started acting as if knowing this served some purpose, as if, to recover from anxiety, it were enough to recognize it.

Their parents having loved them too much or too little, their shits, cum, coughs, and dizzy spells, their sleeping too much, their forgetting the purpose in going to work or going for walks, their feelings of sadness and difficulty making decisions, their desire to sleep with abusers or fathers (that too-often inclusive ‘or’)—all these were not only signs of some hopefully identifiable pathology, but necessary steps.

They could not say towards what, precisely, but they seemed to imagine they were inching closer to a successfully repressive adulthood, towards their careers, or, I don’t fucking know, towards Connecticut.

Laura looked forward to telling her future children about the time she believed she was dying from watching *Avatar 3D*, from the plot’s stupid allegory, the apparent proximity of weird shapes to her face, and the two cups of coffee she had before the show—all combining to produce heart palpitations, tears, and the sense that she would never be allowed to leave the theater. When she does tell her kids this, one day, she will make it into an “incident,” safe in its isolation; she will forget, consciously or un-, how she couldn’t go to the movies for a year.

I know: Like all anxious people before them, they have suffered. Some still suffer, stubbornly; for these, the symptoms are signs only of sadness’s truth. These I admire more—though they’re worse off—than those who recover quickly: those who shat blood or fell flat on the sidewalk, bed, or veranda in order

to “move on,” and who did move on, though only in a limited sense: their bowels regained consistency as unhappy couples do (by deciding to get married to solve their problems). The binding removes only the outward sign that there is something to deal with.

The girl who stands up from her collapse in order to recover never bothers to wonder how she got there, or why, or what this terror meant, outside of a general narrative of self-improvement—she devotes herself to a set of tasks meant to produce recovery without reflection, with the post-religious zeal of a lapsed Catholic.

Instead of getting up and, whatever, “going running,” she should stay on the sidewalk where she fainted. (If she has, at this point in the story, already stood up, it is time to lie back down.) She could not be expected to do this all day, of course—that would be dull—but whenever she starts to forget that it’s impossible to stay upright, she should talk to strangers while prone, if she can bring herself to, or let herself be talked at. Cities could provide funding for such programs in order to stem the tide of productivity currently ruining the potential for new friendships and affairs, both of which are known to stimulate local economies.

Though Laura will deny herself this knowledge in her future, she had it then, or now: after avoiding the movies, after trying to get “better” by reading “books” and “taking it easy,” she tried—instead—attending as many movies as possible.

She took notes on her anxiety’s progress: “Gripping the torn-up upholstery on the armrests at Film Forum while the newly restored edition of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* plays,” she wrote, “I might vomit or worse,” the worse being her belief that the film would never end.

(As the armrests at Film Forum are actually intact, this is further evidence that the theater had become a hard drive for her fears. Laura was a bad writer, and like other bad writers, she asked description to stand in for feeling.)

At the same time, though, she was happy: unlike with the

first film-induced panic attack, this movie was great. It was worth freaking out through. She noted how contemporary special effects had inscribed themselves so successfully on her body that an identical reaction could now be triggered by sharp lighting contrasts in a 1927 silent film: the longer shots were tied to the stress produced by the awful brevity that had so specifically gotten under her eyelids before.

Realizing she could more easily leave this time, having attended alone, she didn't mind staying. Going alone removed this factor—the fear that, if she were to *become* anxious, she would to have to make an awkward exit from a date, for example—and made the anticipation of panic more experimental (“If I choose a relaxed posture, do I calm down? Do I pay more or less attention when I'm anxious? Does attraction to one of the actors make it easier?”). In a week where she had passed out daily on the way to work, she went to see *Carol* for the second time, having guessed that the presence of friends at the first screening had prevented the escape she needed, via the movie's textiles. The train-panic rose into her throat, but in the theater, she was guaranteed a seat; she considered thanking God for this comfort, remembered she didn't believe in him, and thanked the seat itself; she started to cry, exhausted from how hard she had had to work to stay calm that year, and realized everyone else was crying too, but about Theresa's impossible love; she joined them; she imagined her hands in the folds of Carol's fur; she gasped aloud at how heartbroken she was to not yet have had the love of a woman; she sank back into the seat; she stayed on edge, but every edge had another scene beyond it.

In movies, from there on, she did not find relief from her stress, per se, but she found a place to keep it. The scenes that made her panic in each film became related, so that her symptoms proved themselves able to write a new movie out of their overlaps.