

[Dear Harryette Mullen](#) [1]

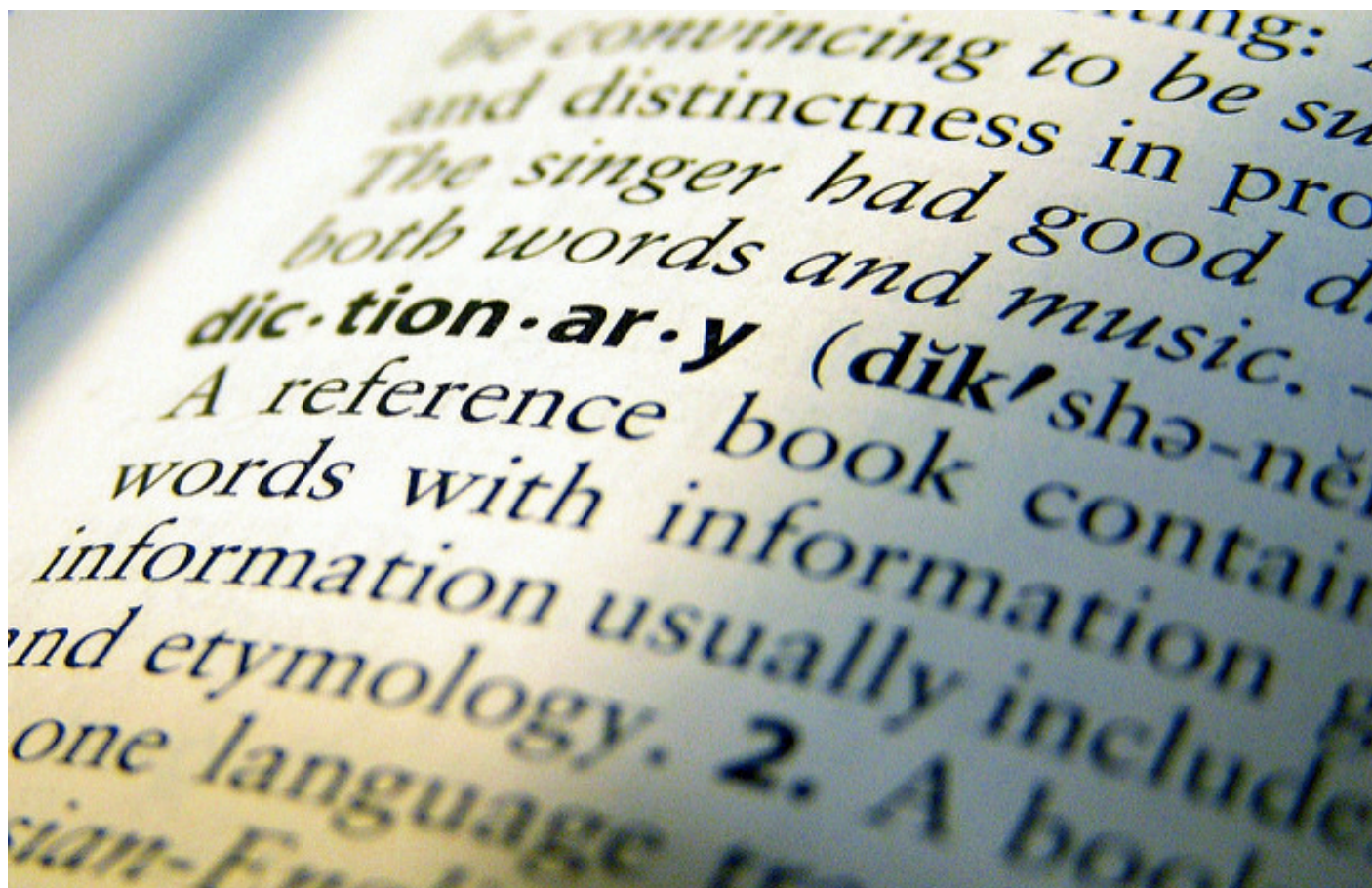
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Open Letter by Carol Dorf

Late-Night Thoughts for Another Wide-Awake Poet



Dear Harryette:

In your 2002 prose poem "Sleeping with the Dictionary," you write, "I beg to dicker with my silver-tongued companion.... [T]he dictionary is not averse to the solitary habits of the curiously wide-awake reader." You give the dictionary personality, one that takes on the full resources of language.

You're my contemporary, and we're both California transplants—me a Jew from the East Coast, you a black woman who grew up in Texas. Although we haven't met, this line—"In the dark night's insomnia, the book is a stimulating sedative, awakening my tired imagination to the hypnagogic trance of language"—feels like the beginning of a conversation. Readers and writers can talk to each other across times and cultures, and this dark night, I want to talk to you about "groping in the dark for an alluring word," which you call "the poet's nocturnal mission."

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My mother was a compelling conversationalist once, able to convince me of almost anything, but now she's on a short memory cycle. A few years ago, she could take advantage of her large vocabulary to talk about local politics or the social divides at the senior center. Instead of parking lot, she'd say, "The place where you keep a car when you go somewhere." Now, the questions repeat, until I remind her of where I live and the names and locations of my siblings.

I have insomnia tonight, too, and because my mother is losing language, I appreciate the way you draw attention to "the hypnagogic trance," though I have to say, in observing my mother's aphasia, the nouns have gone. What remains are short phrases to clutch: "we have a very pleasant life," "how are your children?" But back to your poem, Harryette—thank you for the courage to play with an impulse and allow the reader to attach meaning as she will. Your poetry reminds me that the poet's task is more than merely to name or reflect—that the work requires an agreement to be made and unmade by language.

In appreciation,

Carol

Publishing Information

- "[Sleeping with the Dictionary](#) [5]" by Harryette Mullen from her book *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (University of California Press, 2002).

Art Information

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Dear Harryette Mullen

Published on Talking Writing (<https://www.talkingwriting.com>)



Carol Dorf is poetry editor of *Talking Writing*. Her chapbook *Theory Headed Dragon* is available through Finishing Line Press. Her poetry has been published in *Glint*, *Slipstream*, *Spillway*, *Sin Fronteras*, *Antiphon*, *About Place*, *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, *Scientific American*, *Best of Indie Lit New England*, and elsewhere. She teaches mathematics in Berkeley, California.

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