In the Recitation (II)

The Praised said we sleep in this world to wake up on dying. This sleep lasts from the fourth month of pregnancy, when the Spirit is breathed into the child, until death. Our dreams during our earthly sleep lie on the boundary between worlds, where both worlds are present, as they are in the soul. Dying, we enter that boundary area to await universal resurrection and the introduction of the dead before the Judge. The day of reckoning for our debt to our Lord, which we have either returned to or failed to, is another boundary area, between the garden and the fire.

Our condition always involves such a boundary area, from which to rise up towards Spirit, approach the One, and distance ourselves from all that is other than Him. These areas are like steps on the upright path. What leaves a boundary area must enter it, what enters must have left somewhere else. This is the case with death – what dies was born. But God was neither born nor begets and every born thing is real in Him, returning as living to Him, Who is untouched by death.

This world and the other are connected by the boundary area. This is so for all the worlds: there are boundary areas between all of them, but their Lord is one. The worlds are in orders of descent and ascent. To see them all together shows the closeness of the arcs. Existence forms an integral unit made up of the arcs of descent and ascent. The One is the beginning of descent and end of ascent. Descent’s final point is in this world. Everything we see in it has descended from the unseen. Ascent is transition into the boundary area to climb the stations of the arc of return.

The boundary area is a higher level of reality than the world below it, the world above higher again. To enter the boundary area is to leave this world. The dead are in it or on a higher level of reality. The resurrected are at a higher level than the sleeping dead. If we awaken in death from our dream in this world, then it is the dream of death we wake from in resurrection.

1 Ibn al-ʿArabī and other Muslim writers cite this expression as the Praised’s, even though it is not included in the main collections of his traditional teachings. See Chittick, The Sufi Part of Knowledge, 119.
2 See Musallam, Sex and Society in Islam.
3 See Qurʾan, 53:8–9.
Resurrection to gather before the Lord for judgment is like the removal of veils that stop us finding and confessing our claims against ourselves, or the Lord’s, or the claims of all things in creation. Of the judgment, Ibn al-ʿArabi said: “God will come in order to decide and to judge; so He will only come under [the guise of] His Name, ‘Light.’ The Earth will be made radiant with the lights of its Lord, and through that light every ‘soul will know its works, the former and the latter,’⁴ for it will find them present, unveiled by that light.”⁵

Where we stand will be seen in the full light cast into the recesses of the self and it will reflect our behaviour from when we came into this world until we leave it for the ante-chamber. To have served in this world, which is to know that we only have what we have been given, is revealed as the real prize in this new order, since God is never absent, but with us wherever we are.

We think of existence as His absence, to which we have become accustomed, our movements no longer migrating from apparent to Real. When we discover His face before us always, shame occupies the self, whose essence makes known to us that single reality cannot involve two presences. Aware of being images of God, we are ashamed of our possessions, since there can be no god but God.

Shame, the desire to wane and fade from existence, is admission of the Real, as our sense of “I am” loses meaning in the face of His “I am.” This is because our feelings are just images through which the divine “I am” is manifest. The fully enlightened self encounters the opposite of what it wished in the shadows: the self-desiring self is far from its Lord, the self that wants Him returns to itself. The self saved for something other than the Lord has no desire. The answers it receives to its desires are but signs through which the desired Lord reveals Himself. The self that, in shame before the Lord, would be nothing and desires death, accepts His presence and enters life. He gives Himself as the Living.

The self realizes itself by confessing: “God, there is no god but He, the Living, the Standing. Slumber seizes Him not, neither sleep!”⁶ Three evident proofs remind us of this – first, breath, which, on arrival in this world out of mystery, we know by being and not out of conscious witness of the beginning; second, the ceaseless alternation of sleeping and so-called waking, which we know as repeating, passing into sleep from waking and returning from it; and third, death, whose certainty we know through the death of others.

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⁴ Qurʾan, 82:5.
⁶ Qurʾan, 2:255.