

# SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

**THE DEAD ARE CLOSER TODAY. I HEAR THEM** whispering in that language only the dead understand: the five-star general and the soldier with one leg, the New York designer and the Chinese girl who sewed the dress.

**I DREAM THAT PRESIDENT BUSH MEETS WITH** Saddam Hussein on his ranch in Crawford, Texas. When they look into each other's eyes, the president realizes he's been mistaken: he and Saddam have more in common than he ever imagined. Wasn't Saddam a strong leader who held together a divided people? Didn't he deal swiftly and harshly with those who challenged his rule? What an ally he could be in the war against evil. Yes, the president thinks, the Democrats will really have something to worry about when Saddam joins the Bush team.

**LAST NIGHT I GAVE GENEROUSLY TO THE DREAMERS** who came to the door. I was inspired by their commitment, I told them. It didn't matter whether they were disguised as Democrats or Republicans. With the earth revolving around the sun at thousands of miles an hour, a dreamer, even an experienced dreamer, might close his or her eyes, dream of a world redeemed, but never make it back. What risks they took, leaving their bodies behind like commuters who head for work every morning with barely a nod to their loved ones, and no guarantee they'll return. Last week, in New York, I watched people emerge from the subway in the morning, their eyes adjusting to the light, each of them burning with purpose, if only to get to the office on time. Just so intent are the dreamers who race down the hallways of night, burst through the swinging doors, and try to save a few lives.

**I'M LESS LIKELY TO JUDGE ANOTHER PERSON WHEN** I remember I'm always working with insufficient information. Just as every tree has roots that are out of sight, underground, so does every person have roots the eye can't see. It's important for me to remember, when the hanging judge enters the courtroom, that this is equally true about me.

**I OPENED MY HEART, AND THE WORLD RUSHED** in. But my heart wasn't big enough to hold the world's pain, and my heart broke. After that, I couldn't get my heart to close again: not completely, not for long.

**ON NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO'S SCIENCE FRIDAY,** an astrophysicist proudly asserts that scientists now have a "simple, well-defined model that explains everything in the universe" — or at least the 5 percent of it that can be described as "familiar matter." "Dark matter" and "dark energy," whose properties scientists barely understand, make up the rest. The show's host is incredulous. "Aren't we in the twenty-first cen-

ture?" he asks. "To say we don't know what makes up 95 percent of the universe is astounding." I, however, find these numbers vaguely reassuring. Perhaps that's because, after all the years I've spent in therapy, and all the philosophical texts I've read, and all the spiritual teachings I've studied, 95 percent of my own existence remains utterly mysterious to me.

**THEY HANDED ME A SUIT OF BELIEFS AND TOLD** me to try it on. What a perfect fit! I stood in front of the mirror, transfixed. Years went by. A lifetime.

**MY EGO INSISTS THAT THE DOOR TO TRUTH IS** down a long hallway that seems to stretch forever. *How about this door right here?* I ask. My ego says no, there's still a long way to go. Why, I wonder, can I see right through George W. Bush's lies, yet still be deceived by nonsense like this? As the spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle points out, time is useless for the one thing that matters most: realizing who we really are. He writes, "We cannot discover our essential nature — who we are beyond our name, our physical form, our story about ourselves — in the past or the future. The only place where we can find ourselves is here and now."

**I'M GRATEFUL FOR THE TEACHERS WHO INSISTED** I stop fidgeting and pay attention. If I didn't, they said, I'd never learn the alphabet. And if I hadn't learned the alphabet, how could I reach across the miles and the years with words that, amazingly, contain something of me? So I bow to the twenty-six directions; I lay a flower at each of the twenty-six gates; I chant and pray and sing and dance in honor of the twenty-six gods and goddesses who consent to chant and pray and sing and dance in me.

**WORDS, WORDS: THEY REMIND US OF WHAT WE** forget and they make us forgetful; they bewitch and betray us — and they bless us, too. I say, "I love you," and Norma's face lights up. Is it the words that make her look so beautiful, or is it what words can never express?

**I WAKE UP IN A FAMILIAR BODY ON A FAMILIAR** planet. It's still dark outside. I have every confidence, however, that the sun will soon light up the sky. How do I know this? Call me a man of faith. I believe in this spinning planet. I believe in the tides and in the seasons and in the crickets who are chirping this morning. I believe, because I just looked it up, that the chirping sound is made by male crickets rubbing their forewings together — serenading the females, I suppose. I believe in courtship. I believe in love's redemptive power. I believe that the first sound my wife will hear this morning will be me whispering her name. I believe in each and every letter that spells "Norma." I like to curl up inside the "o" as if it were home.