

# SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

**MELANCHOLY IS BACK. SHE SITS ACROSS FROM** me, legs tucked beneath her. No, she says, she doesn't want anything to eat. The music I'm listening to is fine, she assures me with a sad little smile. Yes, she's heard my favorite jokes before, all of them.

**I DREAMT THAT I WAS DYING. I WAS TRYING TO** figure out if I could transfer my frequent-flier miles to my wife, Norma. I had so many of them — maybe enough for her to visit me. No, it turned out. She couldn't visit me.

**THIS MORNING, I OPEN WALT WHITMAN'S LEAVES** of *Grass* to this line: "And to die is different from what anyone supposed, and luckier."

**I CAN'T KNOW WHAT THE NEXT MOMENT WILL** bring — only that, whatever it is, it won't last. After all, it's not just this body that's impermanent. Not long ago, a fire ripped through the offices of a small magazine I admire. They lost everything: their computers, their chairs, their desks, their desk lamps. But to live with the fact of impermanence doesn't mean worrying all the time about the terrible things that can befall us. It simply means living with the knowledge that everything changes, *everything*. That's what life is; there is no other life.

**THE REALLY IMPORTANT EVENTS AREN'T THOSE** we jot down ahead of time in our appointment books. Who makes an appointment to be disillusioned, or to suffer an incalculable loss — or, for that matter, to be inspired, or to fall in love?

**MY YEARNING FOR THE LIGHT WON'T MAKE THE** dawn arrive any sooner. Nor will closing my eyes keep the sun from lighting the sky. The earth keeps turning whether I'm awake enough to notice or lost in a dream of life standing still. *My life*, I call it, as if I could hold on to anything. All those important thoughts that drifted by yesterday like clouds, little generals with their chests puffed out: gone. The mind, too, keeps turning.

**W.S. MERWIN: "WE MUST HAVE PASSION / FOR THE** momentary / countenance of the / unrepeatable world."

**MY CAT NIMBUS SOMETIMES VISITS MY NEIGHBOR** J., so when I couldn't find Nimbus yesterday afternoon, I knocked on J.'s door. Sure enough, I heard my cat meowing. It seemed that J. had forgotten to send her home when he'd left for work. Fortunately, J. had left his door unlocked — though it didn't make a difference to Nimbus; she still couldn't get

out. To me, on the other hand, it made all the difference in the world. As I followed Nimbus back home, I wondered about certain doors in my own life; how do I know whether they're locked or merely closed? The door to greater awareness, for example: if I turn the knob, will the door open — or do I need to read one more book on being a locksmith?

**IF I PRAY FOR THE LIGHT, I NEED TO REMEMBER** that light isn't sentimental. It illuminates the smiling infant and the wormy corpse, every broken promise and every act of faith.

**THOMAS LUX, IN THE PEOPLE OF THE OTHER VIL-**lage: "They peel the larynx from one of our brothers' throats. / We de-vein one of their sisters. / The quicksand pits they built were good. / Our amputation teams were better. / We trained some birds to steal their wheat. / They sent us exploding ambassadors of peace."

**NOW THAT WE'VE BECOME THE TORTURERS, THE** sun still rises every morning. My cats still want to be fed. Now that we've become the torturers, by noon the heat is murderous. My to-do list flicks its tail, ready to pounce. Now that we've become the torturers, I still work too hard and fall into bed exhausted. As the ceiling fan turns above me, I think, *It starts with torturing the truth. The rest is easy.*

**IF PRESIDENT BUSH KEEPS TRAILING IN THE POLLS,** I wonder if he'll look for an excuse to postpone the election: just long enough to deal with an impending al Qaeda threat; just long enough to see how many Americans notice that a handful of newspapers have been shut down and a few of their neighbors have disappeared. Do I think he'll give up without a fight? Do terrorists play by the rules?

**THE PRESIDENT HAS HIS WAR WITH IRAQ. I HAVE** my war with myself. Last night, I didn't stop eating, not even after millions of hungry people around the world turned out to demonstrate. I told them I don't make decisions based on opinion polls. Then I reached for another cracker.

**SADDAM HUSSEIN AND GEORGE W. BUSH IN THE** same prison cell? Life is full of surprises. The first few years were filled with misunderstandings, but eventually they discovered that, even between them, friendship was possible. And by the seventh year, it could be said that each man knew that if one of them suffered, they both suffered; and if one of them needed to be reminded of God's mercy, his brother was there to whisper in his ear.