

# SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

**I RAISE MY HAND WHEN MY NAME IS CALLED, BUT** how much of my life am I really present for? I hurry through the day, not noticing Death walking behind me. That's right: me with a to-do list as long as God's necktie, me with so many things on my mind, and Death with only one.

**I WAS UP LATE LAST NIGHT WORKING ON THE** next issue. The work, the work: after all these years, what more can I ask for than the opportunity to return to it again and again? Of course, I'm glossing over how unhappy I feel when shoved around by another deadline: a bully who naps in the corner most of the month, then opens one eye and fixes me with a baleful gaze. He gets up. He lumbers toward me. Why do I always imagine we'll be able to talk like two rational adults? Why am I always surprised when, instead of taking my outstretched hand, he slams my head against the wall?

**WHEN I GET HOME, THE NEIGHBOR'S DOG IS BARK-**ing. When I go to sleep, my lovely wife is snoring. At five in the morning, I'm awakened by National Public Radio telling me one more thing I don't want to know. What a noisy world! And inside my head, Sy drones on and on: his plans for the future; his regrets about the past. It's still easier for me to work hard all day than to sit still for twenty minutes each morning, observing the thoughts and feelings that arise in me. How instantly I label them *mine*. How quick I am to deny or defend them.

**PABLO NERUDA: "IF WE WERE NOT SO SINGLE-** minded about keeping our lives moving and for once could do nothing, perhaps a huge silence might interrupt this sadness of never understanding ourselves and of threatening ourselves with death."

**I DREAMT THAT THE WORLD WAS ABOUT TO END.** *Only the artists can save us*, someone insisted. I didn't understand: how were *artists* going to save us? When I woke up, I quickly forgot the dream. Then, instead of spending the morning writing, I made a detailed list of everything I intended to get done this month. How wonderful to roll out the red carpet of time and step smartly into the future. Who needs art when you have a carpet like that?

**THE BILLS ARE PAID. MY DESK IS NEAT. IF GOD** took note of such things, surely he'd be impressed. But instead he keeps asking me the same questions: Was I too busy to cry yesterday? If I cried, were my tears for myself or for another? If I wept for my brother, what made me stop and turn away?

**TODAY IS FOUR YEARS SINCE THE ACCIDENT THAT** nearly took my daughter's life; four years since the phone call that yanked me out of my Sunday routine, my idiotic notion that the day would go the way I wanted it to. It was a car crash. It could have been a bolt of lightning, Zeus showing off. It could have been an earthquake: Mara lives in Los Angeles, after all. Yes, it could have been anything. We open the cellar door, miss the top stair, and the floor rushes up to greet us. We remember to blow out the candle before going to sleep, but in the middle of the night the old wiring in the wall begins to smolder. The force of the impact broke Mara's pelvis; it was months before she could walk on her own again. During her long convalescence, I sometimes wondered whom to blame for her suffering: Me, for not having been a better driving teacher? Mara, for not being more careful? The auto industry, for not building safer cars? LA, for being a city in which people have to drive everywhere? Of course, there's no one to blame — just as there's no way for parents to protect their children when they become adults. (Perhaps there never was.) Every two miles, I read recently, the average driver makes forty decisions and one mistake; once every five hundred miles, one of those mistakes leads to a near-collision; once every sixty thousand miles, one of those mistakes leads to a crash. How easy to fiddle with the radio and look up too late, or round a curve and not notice a sign we've noticed a hundred times before. "It's our knowledge of death that makes us pray," writes Michael Meade. "Every path a child takes looks precarious to the parent's eye. And it is, and *precarious* is an old word that means 'full of prayers.'"

**MY PLANE LANDS A HALF-HOUR LATE. WITH BARELY** enough time to catch my connecting flight, I sling my overnight bag over my shoulder and race to the opposite end of the terminal. I'm almost at my gate when I slam into a middle-aged woman. I didn't even see her until I nearly knocked her off her feet and sent her suitcase flying. "I'm so sorry," I say. "I didn't see you." I bend down to retrieve her luggage while she glares at me. "Are you all right?" I ask. I reach out to touch her shoulder, then think better of it. Her stare is angry, distrustful, and how can I blame her — as I rush for the next flight or the next appointment; drive through a red light or through the red light of my better judgment? I've heard about Jain monks in India who, because of their strict adherence to nonviolence, walk carefully to avoid stepping on insects and wear masks to avoid breathing them in — even as, all around them, not only insects but people, communities, entire nations get crushed. But I'm no monk. Again, I apologize to the woman. "It was an accident," I say. "I'm really, really sorry." I feel terrible about what happened, but I have a plane to catch. I glance at my watch. Then I sprint for the gate.