

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

DO I OWE MY READERS AN EXPLANATION FOR why I stopped publishing my Notebook? Do I owe myself an explanation for why I've started again? The Goddess of Language laughs at me; she's amused that, after all these years, I still can't figure out the best way to worship her. Do I kneel before her with eyes open or closed? Do I sing her praises or keep my mouth shut? Today she whispers: Inside your head is an old wooden desk. There used to be a old-growth forest inside your head, but that was long ago. Now there's this desk, and a pencil, and a stack of paper — all made from the last tree on earth. You don't remember that tree, but it remembers you. Are you sitting? Good. Don't worry about the tree. Don't think about the forest that once stretched from one end of your imagination to the other. The world is different now. The trees are gone. Just pick up the pencil and write.

I INADVERTENTLY STEPPED ON MY CAT NIMBUS in the dark this morning. I've already apologized, and she doesn't appear hurt, but I feel as if I've started the day by invading another country. Would a jury of my peers convict me for such a careless act? How about a jury of Nimbus's peers? *One misstep*, I think. *That's all it takes to disgrace yourself and the blundering human race.*

I'M GLAD NIMBUS DOESN'T START HER DAY BY reading about Shiite cats killing Sunni cats, or Palestinian suicide-bomber cats being mowed down by heavily armed Israeli-soldier cats. I'm glad she doesn't listen to some cat on NPR telling her that everything that could have gone wrong yesterday did go wrong — while completely ignoring all examples of cat cooperation; cat compassion; cats making love, not war.

I'VE GAINED TWENTY POUNDS IN THE LAST FEW months — the same twenty pounds I've been gaining and losing since I was eight and went on my first diet. Oddly enough, according to family lore, I started out as a "bad eater" who needed to be cajoled, for my own good, into finishing my meals. Apparently my mother and grandmother were afraid I'd be just skin and bones if they didn't fatten me up. My grandmother had lived through pogroms in czarist Russia; my mother had been an impoverished teenager during the Great Depression. I can understand their worry, misplaced though it was in a household whose cupboards were always full. I became chubby enough to suit them: husky, full-sized, all those synonyms for *fat*. But who makes me overeat now? I used to joke with Norma that I needed to hire an armed guard to keep me out of the kitchen at night. Now I'm trying to eat more mindfully, attentive to each bite: no newspaper or magazine in front of me, no manual on how to fix my broken childhood without power tools. Brendan Behan wrote, "One drink is too many for me and a thousand not enough." For me, one extra bite is too many, and a thousand not enough. So I turn to the warrior within, that friend of noble resolve who,

no matter how many times I've ignored him, doesn't lose faith in me. He patiently explains the basics one more time: to eat when I'm hungry and only when I'm hungry — and with the same attention I'd give to making love with my wife or listening to the words of a dying friend.

LAST NIGHT I DREAMT THAT SADDAM HUSSEIN really did possess weapons of mass destruction. He'd hidden a nuclear bomb on the moon. If it exploded, the earth would be destroyed — and the weapon was set to go off soon. I notified the proper authorities, and disaster was averted. Maybe that's why I'm in a good mood this morning, even though it turned out the Bush administration had been right about something.

I'M LIVING FROM BREATH TO BREATH, COMMUTING the same distance each day as the rest of my brothers and sisters. We breathe in. We breathe out. Even the president breathes. Even the terrorists. Isn't that a big enough clue for my inner detective, who's still trying to figure out the meaning of it all? I wonder how many more suspects he'll need to fingerprint, how many more spiritual teachers he'll need to depose. Maybe he's forgotten that what he's looking for is right under his nose.

HERE I AM, TEN POUNDS LIGHTER THAN I WAS A month ago: Nimbus on my lap, which probably feels the same to her; Norma insisting she doesn't care what I weigh; my readers unable to notice; the men in the locker room at the gym paying no attention. Even the mirror yawns. *You've got to show me something better than that*, the mirror says. *How about light pouring out of your third eye. Wounds where the nails pierced your hands.*

I WAS BORN JUST AS WORLD WAR II WAS ENDING. I wonder what war we'll be fighting when I draw my last breath. In his new book, *A Terrible Love of War*, James Hillman writes that there have been 14,600 wars during 5,600 years of recorded history. It's worthwhile to remember this the next time I throw up my hands at the warring tribes within my psyche, or berate myself for not having realized a lasting state of inner peace.

CAN I BE GRATEFUL THAT I ATE TOO MUCH LAST night after Norma went to bed? Well, I was hungry and I was fed. No, I didn't eat mindfully. But I was mindful enough to put the food in a bowl and lift a spoon to my lips. I can be grateful that no one had to do it for me. I can be grateful that, in a world where so many millions went to bed hungry, one man sat eating in his kitchen, his cat nearby, his wife asleep upstairs. I can be grateful for his great good fortune: the persimmon-colored bowl filled with fruit and nuts and yogurt; the pine trees creaking in the wind; the gravity that keeps him on this spinning planet — all of him, every single pound of him.