

# SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

**SOMEONE ASKED ME RECENTLY HOW MY NOTEBOOK** page comes together, and how much editing I do. I told him that I get up in the early-morning darkness, pour myself a cup of black coffee, then sit down to write in my black notebook with my black pen. (If I rose at noon and used a purple pen, would my writing be less melancholic?) Some mornings, I edit as I go. Other days, I storm the hill and let the wounded fall where they may; there will be plenty of time later to put them out of their misery. At the end of the month I type up the entries that seem to have some merit. Remembering that even the best words divide this seamless reality, I edit. Keeping in mind the difference between being self-revealing and self-indulgent, I edit some more. I try to honor Strunk and White's dictum that vigorous writing be concise. "This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short," they suggest, "or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell."

**AND THE PERFECT SENTENCE WANDERED THROUGH** a foreign city where no one understood a word she said.

**I WASN'T SURE HOW TO RESPOND WHEN NORMA** told me she was going to spend two weeks out of town this summer as a Red Cross volunteer. On the one hand, I was grateful to be married to a woman whose commitment to helping others went beyond lamenting how much suffering there is in the world. On the other hand, I didn't want her to go. Away. From me. I didn't want to confront the anxiety I experience whenever Norma leaves town. I need to remember that it isn't feeling lonely that's the problem; it's thinking that Norma's absence is the *reason* I feel lonely. After all, I can feel lonely when I'm with her, too. Perhaps I distract myself then by arguing with Norma, or making up with Norma, or making love with Norma. In Norma's absence, loneliness throws off its disguises and stands revealed: my constant companion for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.

**THE WOMAN IN MY DREAMS WAS TREACHEROUS;** it didn't matter. She lied to everyone; I didn't care. When she wrapped her arms around me and whispered that her husband had passed away, I didn't ask to see the death certificate. Her hair was long and dark, and her kiss was proof enough for me.

**OUR NEIGHBOR WAS AWAY LAST NIGHT, AND HER** dog kept howling. I went next door and comforted the dog, but as soon as I left, she started wailing again. It's happened before; "separation anxiety," our neighbor calls it. Maybe that's why the dog's pitiable keening reminded me of how I feel when Norma leaves town. Eventually I closed my bedroom window and put a pillow over my head. But unsettling thoughts slipped in anyway, like obnoxious guests arriving late for a party, already a little drunk. I prayed for them to leave. I prayed for my

neighbor's dog to know she wasn't really alone, that God truly loves her, that God is dog spelled backwards.

**TODAY WOULD HAVE BEEN YOUR BIRTHDAY, MOM.** But you've been dead so many years. I can't go crying to you anymore, though last night, when the wind picked up and I couldn't sleep, I wanted to. With tornadoes sweeping through the Southeast, how could I trust the Mother of All Things not to kill me as she rocked me in my cradle? In fact — and, Mom, correct me if I'm wrong here — Mother Nature's intentions are a lot less benign than you once led me to believe, back when your heart was still beating, and the thunder and lightning were, as I recall, nothing to fear.

**COME IN, MISTER DEATH. MAKE YOURSELF COM-**fortable, Mister Death. This is your home, too. Isn't that right, Mister Death? I forget all about you sometimes. I'm free to invite friends over, open a bottle of wine, make jokes at your expense. I'm free to fall in love, get married, repaint the kitchen any color I choose. But, as you like to remind me, Mister Death, it's your name on the lease. How else could I afford a life like this?

**I DREAMT THAT I WAS BEING TAUGHT HOW TO** live more wisely by "the Feminine" — not a person, but the feminine principle itself. My teacher was subtle. My teacher was wise. My teacher didn't show up as a half-naked goddess with flawless skin who knew just how I liked to be kissed — though, as my teacher might point out, there's nothing wrong with that kind of teaching. No, she says, there's nothing wrong with darkness waiting breathlessly for the sun to appear; nothing wrong with light, that tease, acting like a wave one minute and a particle the next.

**GOOD FRIDAY, THEY CALL IT. BUT ISN'T GOOD** Friday the day Jesus was crucified? Why not Bad Friday? I guess it's good that Jesus sacrificed himself for our sins — good for us, at least. Or maybe it was good for him, too, despite everything; maybe his crucifixion was the key to the door he had to open to demonstrate that his teaching wasn't just words, because his blood was real; his pain was real. At the end, did he really ask God why he'd been forsaken? Did he really expect an answer? If his flickering faith was part of his teaching, if his broken life was part of his teaching, why look anywhere for inspiration but my own brokenness? Why assume that his brokenness is holier than my brokenness — less shameful, less burdened with doubt or pride? Here they are, Jesus: a thousand footnotes attesting to my impeccable scholarship about the nature of suffering; all my canceled checks for all the books and workshops on how to be more spiritual, or, barring that, how to look more spiritual; all my careful observations about what blinded me and what I could sometimes see. And when I could see clearly, I called it a good day.