

# SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

**HERE, ON A PLANET THAT NEVER STOPS TURNING,** it's hard to stop talking, to stop thinking, to sit quietly and follow my breath. But if I wait patiently, the earth will carry me, revolving once a day on its axis, orbiting once a year around the sun. The old laws are the best laws: a season for every purpose, the winter of my life up ahead. I'm sixty-two. Last February, on a day when snow and ice blanketed much of North Carolina, I learned that the crusading Texas journalist Molly Ivins had died of cancer at the age of sixty-two. In our twenties — our *twenties!* — Molly and I both attended the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. I got my degree a year before her; we never met. But I feel as if I met her again and again in her incisive, impassioned, wickedly humorous writing. A true daughter of democracy, a populist to the core, she never hesitated to do battle with our real enemies: lobbyists in thousand-dollar suits who call themselves “government-affairs specialists” and their retinue of servants who call themselves our leaders. Goodbye, Molly. No long, drawn-out winter for you; no freezing rain making travel hazardous; no snow blowing hard against the broken fence.

**WHEN A TREE FALLS IN THE FOREST, DO THE OTHER** trees murmur, *It was such a young tree. It had so much to live for.* When it's finally time, I hope I don't take death as a personal affront, or blame the universe for making such a blunder. I hope I'll remember that the world will go on being the world without me, and without my endless attempts to turn what I know into language that will stand the test of time. And what kind of test is that, exactly? Time looks at me over the top of his reading glasses. *I guess you'll just have to wait and see,* Time says.

**THE MUSE WHISPERS: DON'T WRITE LIKE SOME-**one who fears death but puts a brave face on it, or tells a self-deprecating joke about it; the world doesn't need another borscht-belt comedian. Don't write like a man who worries that his writing isn't good enough; is it good enough to tell your neighbor there's smoke pouring out of her upstairs window? Don't sit there coughing as her house burns to the ground because you can't think of a synonym for *fire*.

**I TOOK MY VITAMINS. I PRAYED TO THE FOUR** Directions. I deleted every e-mail the devil sent. But maybe I've got it all wrong. Maybe God doesn't care what time I get up in the morning or whether I was faithful to my wife in my dreams. Maybe God doesn't care whether I'm under a tree when lightning strikes or running across an open field. Maybe God doesn't care how many years I have left and whether I spend them wisely or bet all my chips on a risky hand. *Maybe you think the hand is risky,* God says, *because you want to win. Or maybe,* God says, warming to the subject, *you think I want you to win. Maybe you think I'm your steadfast ally, your*

*silent partner, your oldest and most reliable friend. Maybe you think I want you to win for the glory of God. Think again.*

**I THOUGHT I WAS DROWNING, SO I RAISED MY ARMS** and cried out to a God I didn't believe in. And my heart, foolish heart, opened like a great white sail. And the God I didn't believe in was the sea. And the God I didn't believe in was the wind.

**YESTERDAY, AS I GRUMPILY ATTENDED TO SOME** neglected paperwork, I reminded myself that this was important work, too; that my life needs to be weeded, just like the garden; that it's all one life from beginning to end. Sure, I would have preferred to spend the morning drinking coffee and writing poetry. But, as naturalist John Muir observed, “When one tugs at a single thing in nature, he finds it attached to the rest of the world.” I wouldn't have been able to “exercise my creativity” were it not for the significantly more arduous exertions of men and women who work in noisy, smelly paper mills or on a freighter steaming toward a port on the West Coast, its hold filled with crates of rolling-ball pens. I wouldn't have been able to get high on caffeine were it not for the *campesinos* who pick coffee beans on Central American mountain slopes — not to mention those who wash the beans and dry them and hull them and grade them, who blend them and roast them, who package them and ship them. When the beans arrive in my neighborhood grocery store, is the invoice paid on time? Maybe the bookkeeper who writes the check writes poetry too. Maybe bookkeeping is only her day job. Maybe at night she meditates on perfect columns of perfect numbers, amazed at how much they can express when everything adds up.

**I DREAMT THAT I CROSSED AN OCEAN AND ARRIVED** in the land of old age. Walking toward me along a broad, sandy beach was a man who bore an astonishing resemblance to me, but was much older. Despite his years, though, his face was relaxed, his eyes were bright, and there was a bounce in his step. He winked conspiratorially, as if letting me in on a big secret, then invited me to walk beside him until we reached the outskirts of a big city. There, in a parking lot, a gaunt, sepulchral figure leaned against a shiny black Cadillac. I didn't need to be told who he was. Death waved in our direction, but my companion ignored him. “He waves at everyone,” my companion said. “You can wave back, or you can keep walking.”

**WAKING IN THE DARK THIS MORNING, I'M GRATE-**ful that the sun will soon be up; now, there's something I don't question, no matter how convincingly the light fled the night before. I'm grateful that Norma and I have spent most of the last eight thousand days together, even as the ice caps were melting. I'm grateful that the cats I adore are beside me, that God is sometimes close enough to touch.