

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

SOME READERS WROTE IN TO LAMENT THE ABSENCE of my Notebook in the past few issues. One worried that I was being pushed aside, that “they” were trying to get rid of me. I assured him there is no “they,” no coup d’état, just the inflexible rules we’re all handed: a twenty-four-hour day, a need for sleep now and then. It’s hard for me to find time to write when I’m always behind in my work. If I’m already keeping someone waiting an unconscionably long time for a reply to a letter or a decision on a manuscript, it can seem self-indulgent to sit here, hour after hour, editing my sentences to within an inch of their lives, or of my life: whichever comes first.

REMINDER TO SELF: YOU DON’T NEED TO SOUND smart, Mister Smarty Pants. You don’t need to have an MFA or a PhD. You don’t need to know the answers to the ten most difficult questions. You don’t need to know what those questions are. You don’t need to make sure that everything you write is all muscle, not an ounce of fat. You don’t need to send only your best and brightest sentences into battle. If you do send them, you don’t need to pretend they’ll win.

ONE OF MY NEIGHBORS HAS A BUMPER STICKER that reads: PEACE. Another has a bumper sticker that reads: WAR HAS NEVER SOLVED ANYTHING — then, in smaller type — EXCEPT FOR ENDING SLAVERY, FASCISM, NAZISM, AND COMMUNISM. I’ve never been a fighting man. I didn’t get drafted during the Vietnam War because I failed the physical. I had something called a “pilonidal cyst.” (You don’t want to know.) My deferment meant I didn’t have to flee to Canada or go to prison, because I had no intention of fighting in a war that made as little sense to me then as the current fiasco in Iraq does to me now. So I’ve never been a soldier, except in my imagination. As a young boy raised on movies about World War II, I used to fantasize while waiting to fall asleep that I was a war hero holding off waves of Japanese soldiers until my ammunition ran out, then crawling under enemy fire to retrieve more. These reveries ended when I discovered how to masturbate. From then on, I fantasized about making love, not war.

I DREAMT THAT I WAS THE FIRST JEWISH, BEARDED, pot-smoking leftist to be elected president. I demanded a recount.

S. TOLD ME THAT SOMEONE SHE KNEW HAD BEEN diagnosed with schizophrenia. “How do they know it’s schizophrenia?” I asked. “He’s been acting erratically and hearing voices,” she said. Later I thought, *Who doesn’t hear voices?* When I sit down to write, I hear my father’s voice warning me I probably don’t have what it takes to be a real writer. And when Norma is about to leave town, I hear my mother’s voice, though it’s hard to make out, since her back is turned and she’s walking out the door.

WE ALL CARRY THE PAST WITHIN US. DOES IT matter what we call it? I don’t refer to the boy who lives inside me as my “inner child,” but even if I did, would that make him any less real than someone mispronouncing “Safransky” makes me less real? It rained all day yesterday. And all day the boy followed me, waiting for me to acknowledge him. But I was eating raisin bread. I was petting my cat. I was sulking because of something my wife had said. The boy looked at me. Maybe he was lonely. Maybe he was cold and wet. But I was reading manuscripts. I was surfing the Internet.

EVERYONE KNOWS THAT DIETS DON’T WORK — everyone except the tens of millions of Americans like me who are always dieting. I was eight when I went on my first diet. I lost twenty pounds, then gained it back. More than half a century later, I’m still dieting, still gaining and losing that twenty pounds. Now researchers at Johns Hopkins predict that within ten years 75 percent of adult Americans will be overweight and more than 40 percent will be obese — with obesity becoming the leading preventable cause of death, surpassing alcohol consumption and smoking. If the terrorists were smart they’d just encourage us to keep eating. Why strap on a suicide vest and blow yourself up when your enemies are already blowing themselves up with artery-clogging pizza and greasy French fries?

I’M UP BEFORE DAWN READING A POEM BY ROBERT Bly when my cat Franny springs into the house with a bird in her mouth. I manage to get it away from her, but I’m too late; the bird is no longer breathing. I wrap it in a handkerchief and put it where Franny can’t reach. I’ll bury it when there’s enough light outside. I don’t chastise her — that would be like scolding a bird for hunting grasshoppers and grubs — but I feel sad for the bird: sad that all living things are chained to the food chain; sad that everything that lives, dies. I return to Bly’s book, *The Urge to Travel Long Distances*. It’s a slender volume, a mere thirty-nine pages, light as a feather.

NO COMPLAINING THAT I WASN’T CONSULTED when they wrote the laws of impermanence. No complaining that actual mileage varies from decade to decade, no matter how many vitamins I take. No complaining that death comes for us all, even if we never hurt a fly, even if we follow the commandments, even if we run five miles not three miles, score the winning touchdown, single-handedly save the world. No complaining that death is unimpressed.

MY CAT ZOOEY WOKE ME UP THIS MORNING. HE licked my hand, then stretched out beside me. Did he want to be fed? Did he want to feel loved? That’s what we all want, isn’t it? A place at the table. Room in someone’s heart. I live in a house with three cats. I live in a world with 6 billion humans. We want food. We want attention. We want our gods to wake up and pet us.