

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

IT'S BEEN HARD TO GET A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

this week. If it isn't my beloved's snoring that wakes me, it's my need to pee in the middle of the night, or a dream about my dead parents or my ex-wives or the man I was half a lifetime ago: gone, gone beyond, gone beyond beyond, as the Buddhists say. Last night it was too much coffee. Then the frogs started croaking at two in the morning. *If this is their mating call*, I thought, *no wonder they're still frogs and not princes*. I turned on the lamp and read manuscripts. I would have preferred waking Norma and opening the book of love, but I suspected she'd be less than wildly enthusiastic about reading one of our favorite chapters just then. Finally I turned off the light and tried to sleep. Moments later I heard two cats hissing and yowling. I ran outside to see our cat Franny squaring off with the neighbor's cat in a battle that was mercifully brief: no bombs dropped, no gunfire exchanged, no collateral damage except my loss of sleep. Back in bed, with Franny curled up beside me, I drifted off to the sound of her purring. I dreamt she'd been invited to appear on *Oprah* to discuss her new bestseller, *The Power of Meow*.

AFTER BARACK OBAMA HAD DELIVERED HIS ELEC-

trifying keynote address at the 2004 Democratic convention, I turned to Norma in amazement. With synapses firing like Roman candles at a Fourth of July party, I said, "That man is going to be president one day." I never imagined my prediction might come true in a mere four years. Then again, with John McCain pulling Sarah Palin out of his hat, and Secretary of the Treasury Henry Paulson ready to announce that Monopoly money will soon be legal tender, I feel anything but prescient about the outcome of the race. Say what you will about former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, his much-ridiculed observation in a 2002 news briefing that there are "known knowns," "known unknowns," and "unknown unknowns" is sound epistemology for this election. (Imagine how much more gravitas his words would have had if uttered in broken English by a Zen roshi with a shaved head.)

SOME OF MY FRIENDS WORRY THAT THIS PRESI-

dential election is our last chance for redemption; that if Obama doesn't win, the world will end. But maybe the end of the world has come and gone, and instead of acknowledging it and bearing the pain, we distract ourselves with thoughts about the future. For how many people did the world end in the holds of slave ships? In the ovens at Auschwitz? At ground zero in Hiroshima? In the jungles of Vietnam? For how many people did the world end when the doctor told them nothing could be done to save their child? The world ended for the 150,000 people who died yesterday, and the day before that. The world ended for those who breathed their last breath certain they were seeing Jesus, and the world ended for those who died searching for a glimpse of mercy in the eyes of their executioner. Henry Miller: "The world is always ending, and the skeleton gets up and walks."

I WONDER WHETHER WE'LL SOON HAVE JUST

two seasons: Hot and Very Hot. Or maybe Hot, Very Hot, and You've Got to Be Kidding. Still, didn't I vow to stop complaining about global warming? If I knew this was my last day on earth, would I spend time condemning my brothers and sisters for the mistakes we've made — or deriding myself for being just another greedy American who uses a disproportionate share of the world's resources? Maybe there was once a golden age in which humans lived in energy-efficient harmony, women doing half the hunting and men half the gathering, the sex always sacred, no carbon footprint because we flew only in our dreams. But I have no idea how to get back to the Garden. So I just want to say: Forgive us for letting the Industrial Revolution get out of hand. Forgive us for swapping the wooden hoe for the horse-drawn plow, then trading in the horse for a John Deere. Forgive me for driving to work instead of bicycling — in an old Volvo instead of a hybrid — and for being less concerned with nature than with human nature. I admit it: the environmental movement hasn't aroused as much passion in me as the antiwar movement or the civil-rights movement. Forgive me for not making the planet more of a priority, the way getting *The Sun* to the printer on time is a priority, or, let's face it, surfing the Internet and polishing the chrome on my to-do list is a priority.

NO MATTER WHO'S ELECTED PRESIDENT, DAFFO-

dils will bloom in the spring. Men and women will fall in love and, sadly, out of love. Inconsolable grief will still be inconsolable. A broken heart will nonetheless keep beating one hundred thousand times a day. No matter who's elected president, writers will write. Painters will paint. Three in the morning will still be three in the morning. The door in our psyche we don't want to walk through will still be just down the hall. No matter who's elected president, life will hand us the invisible thread that connects us all; love will hand us the needle.

AS THE ELECTION DRAWS CLOSER, I DON'T KNOW

whether we're heading for a crowning moment in American political history — a gold-leafed invitation for dancing in the streets — or an opportunity to discover how much lower the United States can sink. Even if Barack Obama is elected president, he may be unable to reverse America's slow and steady decline. Still, wouldn't it be something if he had the chance? We know what can happen on election day: not enough voting machines in predominantly African American districts; improper purging of voter lists; votes not counted or vote counts tampered with. Maybe the terrorism threat level will be raised to red the day before we vote. Maybe the dog will eat the ballots. Still, wouldn't it be something if the angelic host shines down on this young and foolish country? Wouldn't it be something if this fragile and wayward democracy is set right again?