

# SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

**NOW THAT BARACK OBAMA IS PRESIDENT, THE** cats still need to be fed. The weeds still need to be pulled. Each day still has only twenty-four hours. Each life still has only so many years. Everyone everywhere will still end six feet under, loved ones not even a president can save. Now that Barack Obama is president, Catholics still go to confession. Muslims still pray five times a day. Orthodox Jews must still obey 613 commandments, including one that prohibits any additional commandments. Now that Barack Obama is president, suffering still resists all attempts to explain it. We still need to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, and comfort the afflicted. People everywhere will continue to endure hurricanes and tornados and heat waves and earthquakes and floods and blizzards. Three things in life are still important, as Henry James said: "The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. And the third is to be kind." Now that Barack Obama is president, Americans are still only 5 percent of the world's population. The earth is still only one of eight planets — poor defrocked Pluto! — circling the sun. The sun is still only one of more than 100 billion stars in the Milky Way galaxy. The Milky Way is still only one of more than 100 billion galaxies in the visible universe, each of them containing billions upon billions of stars. Now that Barack Obama is president, the realm of the invisible remains invisible. Nature's laws remain unchanged. All night the dream factories still run at full capacity.

**YESTERDAY IS GONE. "WEDNESDAY," WE CALLED** it. So far Thursday is looking a lot like Wednesday except for one obvious difference: Wednesday is no more. Wednesday has ceased to be. Yes, Wednesday is like the dead parrot in that Monty Python skit: Stiff. Bereft of life. Just as the parrot is an ex-parrot, Wednesday is an ex-Wednesday. And if it happened to Wednesday, can't it happen to Thursday? Why study Buddhist texts on impermanence when I can just sit here and watch Thursday slip away?

**MY DAUGHTERS WORRY ABOUT ME. THEY THINK** I work too hard. Who can blame them? I *do* work too hard. I've been trying to get caught up at my desk ever since I started *The Sun*. The fact that it hasn't happened in more than thirty-five years doesn't lead me to conclude it's impossible; instead I imagine I just haven't tried hard enough. Like a stubborn bull, I keep charging the matador's cape — providing a lively spectacle, at least. Of course, my daughters see the sword hidden behind the cape. My daughters know that this performance can't go on forever; that one day the old bull will lower his head and paw the ground, not noticing that the matador's stance has shifted, his blade now extended, the peanut vendor in the stands yawning, ready to call it a day.

**YESTERDAY WOULD HAVE BEEN MY FATHER'S** ninety-fourth birthday, if he hadn't died at sixty. So, for the last

thirty-four years, nearly as long as I've been publishing *The Sun*, I haven't had a father to turn to — or to turn from, given how often we argued. But maybe he's been here all along, looking out for me, even as he tries to improve himself in one of the schools of higher learning the dead can attend for free. Maybe that's him I saw in the back of the auditorium the last time I gave a reading — still a big man, six feet two, 350 pounds, and looking pretty good for someone who's dead. I wonder where he buys his suits these days, and if he still smokes cigars. If so, I'm sure that, ever the gentleman, he refrains from lighting one if an attractive dead woman asks him not to smoke. I wonder if he's finally found the time to write and has become a widely published, if often unappreciated, dead white male writer. I wonder if, dead or alive, I'll still be writing at ninety-four, reminding my readers not to be so uptight about casual encounters between those in flesh and those out of it.

**I'VE RECEIVED SEVERAL E-MAILS RECENTLY FROM** a man who wants to buy *The Sun* so he can become its editor. To him the position seems like a natural fit. "I can write well, but my writing doesn't sell," he says. "Logically, that means I should be an editor." He admits to some ambivalence, however. For one, he doesn't want to move to North Carolina, since he prefers cold climates. For another, he understands that part of an editor's job is to work with writers, "but I'm not sure I like writers that much." I haven't gotten back to him, so I can't say if he's serious or just seriously nuts. Of course, some people believe that anyone who's serious about running a magazine must be nuts. When editor H.L. Mencken found out that his friend William Saroyan was thinking of starting a magazine, he wrote to him that he'd be sending him a six-chambered revolver. "Load it and fire every one into your head," Mencken said. "You will thank me after you get to hell and learn from other editors how dreadful their job was on earth."

Call me crazy, H.L., but there's nothing I'd rather do than keep publishing twelve issues of *The Sun* year after year. Twelve issues, no matter the state of the economy, or who's in the White House, or whether the United States is at war overseas or warring with its own citizens at home. Twelve issues because, as the Bread and Puppet Theater puts it, "Art is food. You can't eat it, but it feeds you." Twelve issues, even if the Muse says, *Not now. I have a headache*. Twelve issues because of a volunteer showing up at the right time or a donation arriving at the last minute. Twelve issues because, when we were on the brink of bankruptcy thirty years ago, a man dressed in a black cape (I'm not kidding) arrived in the middle of the night to buy our old dilapidated printing press for just enough money — the bills counted out with great ceremony — to pay our new printer and keep *The Sun* alive for yet another month. And I wondered back then, H.L., as I wonder still: How the hell did a sinner like me get this close to heaven?