

SY SAFRANSKY'S NOTEBOOK

PRIVATE SAFRANSKY REPORTING FOR DUTY, SIR.

Yes, I know I'm late again. I know that's why I never get promoted — that and what they call my "attitude problem." Yes, sir, I'm aware of my shortcomings — painfully aware, you might say, which is probably another reason I'm a sixty-four-year-old private and not a self-confident general atop his high horse. No offense intended, sir. Surely you recognize that I'm as committed as ever to the mission. When you remind us that a sentence should contain no unnecessary words and a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, I salute smartly. When you tell us we need to show, not tell, I lock and load. When you order us to attack the enemies of good writing, I charge ahead. I may be the oldest private, sir, but I love my native tongue, and against her implacable foes I take my stand.

I DREAM THAT I'M AT A LITERARY CONFERENCE

with the writer Sparrow when I have a sudden realization about the nature of reality that I can't put into words. Then Sparrow and I are whisked away to an early breakfast with God. (Of course God eats breakfast; it's the most important meal of the day.) All three of us order the Egg McMuffin with hash browns. Sparrow, perpetually broke, waits for me to pay, but when I reach for my wallet, God slaps my hand. Your money is no good here, God says. Besides, he continues, he's invited me here for breakfast to spare me the embarrassment of trying to explain the nature of reality.

THERE WAS A HUGE EARTHQUAKE IN CHILE LAST

week. Two million people are homeless; no one knows how many died. This follows the devastating earthquake in Haiti just a couple of months ago, which killed two hundred thousand people and left a million more homeless. What will it be next month? A volcano? A tsunami? The earth is our mother, but how can I love her when she slaps around my brothers and sisters and grinds them into dust? Am I supposed to remember only the sacrifices our mother makes for us and the lovely flowers in her garden? Oh, that perfume! Can you get over those colors? And soon the birds will sing. And in cathedrals up and down the length of Chile, the bells will ring.

WHAT IF PSYCHIATRISTS CAME UP WITH DIFFER-

ent language to describe the suffering of people who troop into their consulting rooms every day? Instead of diagnosing a young woman with "borderline-personality disorder," how about "lost in the realm of the fluttering leaves"? Instead of "depression," how about "buried by avalanche, still breathing"? And, just as the Inuit have different words for snow on the ground and snow in the air and snow that drifts, maybe we could have different words for tears: tears we'll forget by tomorrow, tears we never cried but should have, tears that fall from our children's eyes, tears that fall too quickly to wipe away.

AS I FED THE CATS THIS MORNING, I LISTENED

to another story on NPR about the war in Afghanistan. I don't think the cats paid any attention, but who can say what cats notice: the little human inside the radio, the big human opening a can, the armies of humans slinging weapons over their shoulders before leaving their tents to kill other humans? And who knows why, for the last eight thousand years, house cats have chosen to live with the most war-prone species on earth — whether it's merely a marriage of convenience, or whether they just couldn't contain their curiosity about the increasingly strange lives of the naked apes? Through the millennia, had they ever witnessed anything as bizarre as our new settlements, our ever-more-complicated rituals? Look how many of us there are now — humans practically everywhere you go. And the noise! And all the frantic, non-stop activity; the building up and tearing down; the way we shake our fists.

I DIDN'T WANT TO GET OUT OF BED. I WANTED

to go back to sleep and rescue the princess. I didn't want to be the kind of hero who shuffles to the kitchen and puts on the coffee as the princess cries for help. I saw where they'd taken her, high in the tower. I saw her half naked, forced to submit. I listened to the news, but the princess wasn't mentioned. I poured myself some coffee and fed the cats. And soon I'd forgotten what she looked like, what her name was, why it even mattered if the princess lived.

JUST GIVE ME THE GOOD NEWS THIS MORNING,

and let me hear it sung! I want glorious cantatas. I want soaring arias. I want the music of the spheres ringing in my ears. Single-Payer Healthcare Reform Signed Into Law! Scientists Discover Another World Hidden Within This World! Man Loses Virginity With Woman He Adores!

YESTERDAY WAS THE THIRTY-FIFTH ANNIVER-

sary of my father's death. Hello, Dad. I wonder what separates us these days: surely not this minor matter of which of us is currently breathing. Was I a good enough son? I doubt it. Were you a good enough father? Perhaps that's not for me to say. Your love meant so much to me when I was a boy. Imagining a world without you was like imagining the earth blown to smithereens and the sun extinguished. You were not only my father but my most demanding teacher, not only my most demanding teacher but my most trusted confidant, a man I loved and feared in equal measure. Well, Dad, let's meet here for a moment without the need to prove anything: two beings who walked side by side for a while in a world neither of us could comprehend, not that we haven't kept trying.