

ANTIC ANTILLEANA

No. 43 Winter solstice 2006 Francis Vincent Zappa's 66th birthday
St Augustine, Trinidad

TWO HAIKU BY FRANCIS A. STARR

[I came upon a little illustrated book of poems by Francis, dedicated to me. It is undated, but to judge by the drawings it was done when he was about eight or nine years old.]

At the forest
Catch great bugs right now
Every morning.

Dog barking, fierce, fast
In a forest
Cool creature.

Wandering COME HOME TO LENINGRAD

Last August I was back in Leningrad after an absence of two years. Wonderful. Outside of conferencing and library work, there was some time for touring. On the previous visit I had done a fair amount of political touring, but for some reason I didn't much feel like that this time, not even a quick visit to say hello Vladimir Ilich's locomotive at the Finland Station. At one point I looked on the map and realized that I was right by the Peter & Paul Fortress, but I just couldn't be bothered. I told myself I could come back to it later, but that made no sense, as it was right there, and it didn't occur to me later to return. It certainly didn't seriously cross my mind to go to the Hermitage, let alone Prince Menshikov's palace.

The reason was simple. I was too focused on subways. For some reason, I really dig riding the Leningrad subways, and I especially like the stations. On the two days that I devoted entirely to touring, I did nothing but

ride the subway, come up above ground at one or another novel station, walk to yet another novel station, and ride the subway some more.

Leningrad is built on a delta, so that much of the subway system has to be deep underground. This makes for nice long escalators. I have little use for elevators, but I do love riding escalators.

Which station in all of Leningrad has the longest escalator? The question is much more tractable than it might appear. First, there are only 58 stations (compared with Washington's 86, Boston's 133 and New York's 470, for example). Second, by concentrating on stations close to water I could narrow down the search considerably.

But how does one count the steps on a moving staircase? Fortunately, there are lights at regular intervals along the partitions between the up and down escalators, so it was a simple matter of counting a) the lights, b) the steps between one light and the next, c) the few steps below the first light, and d) the steps above the last light.

The upshot of it was that I did 25 of the 58 stations, as seen in the table below. After all this running around and calculating, the longest is my beloved Primorskaya, the station closest to home, with Chërnaya Rechka and Sadovaya close behind.

Coming home one day, just outside the Primorskaya station I came upon a couple of sidewalk vendors with apparatuses much like those for dispensing draft beer. Their signs said that they had *kvas*, 10 roubles for a 300 ml cup. Now, I wasn't entirely sure what *kvas* is made of, but I was quite certain it was ethnic, so I pulled out a 10 rbl note, and the young lady pulled on the handle and filled up a clear plastic cup with the dark red

Escalator lengths in Leningrad metro stations.

The line number is given after each station. Transfer stations have both lines indicated. An asterisk indicates a terminal. Li = number of lights along the escalator. In = interval, number of steps between lights. Ab = number of steps above top light. Be = number of steps below bottom light. Total number of steps = (Li x In) + Ab + Be. Some stations are so near the surface that they have no escalator, only stairs.

	Li	In	Ab	Be	Total
Akademicheskaya - 1					
Pl. Aleksandra Nevskogo - 3/4	26	11	15	15	316
Avtovo - 1	--	--	--	--	0
Baltiiskaya - 1	18	10	12	19	211
Pr. Bol'shevikov - 4	21	14	21	15	330
Chërnaya Rechka - 2	21	15	18	20	353
Chernishevskaya - 1					
Chkalovskaya - 4					
*Devatkinno - 1					
Dostoevskaya - 1	5	15	20	12	107
*Ulitsa Dybenko - 4					
Elektrosila - 2					
Elizarovskaya - 3	27	10	16	13	299
Frunzenskaya - 2	17	10	15	9	194
Gor'kovskaya - 2					
Gostiny Dvor - 3	17	14	15	29	282
Grazdaninskii Pr. - 1					
Kirovskii Zavod - 1					
*Komendantskii Pr. - 4					
Krestovskii Ostrov - 4					
*Kupchino - 2					
Ladozhskaya - 4	21	12	18	20	290
Pl. Lenina - 1					
Leninskii Pr. - 1	--	--	--	--	0
Lesnaya - 1					
Ligorskii Pr. - 4					
Lomonosovskaya - 3	29	10	15	16	321
Mayakovskaya - 1	20	13	20	15	295
Moskovskie Vorota - 2					
Moskovskaya - 2					
Pl. Muzhestva - 1					
Narvskaya - 1					
Nevskii Pr. - 2	23	12	20	12	298
Novocherkassaya - 4	18	15	20	11	301
Obukhovo - 3	not counted, but about average				
Ozerki - 2					
Petrogradskaya - 2	19	11	16	13	230
Pionerskaya - 2					
Park Pobedy - 2					
Pionerskaya - 2					

Politekhnikeskaya - 1					
*Primorskaya - 3	28	12	24	13	373
Proletarskaya - 3					
*Pr. Prosveshcheniya - 2					
Pushkinskaya - 1	24	11	14	15	283
*Rybatskoe - 3					
Sadovaya - 2	19	17	18	10	351
Sennaya Pl. - 4					
Sportivnaya - 4	16	15	18	18	276
Staraya Derevnaya - 4					
Tekhnologicheskii Inst. - 1/2	18	11	16	15	229
Udel'naya - 2					
Vasileostrovskaya - 3	26	10	20	12	292
*Pr. Veteranov - 1					
Vladimirskaia - 4					
Pl. Vosstaniya - 3	24	10	12	10	252
Vyborgskaya - 1					
Zvezdnaya - 2	13	11	15	12	170

liquid. Good stuff. Ever after, I made a point of having some lovely kvas whenever I came back home and sometimes on the way out, too.

Did I mention that it's ethnic to drink kvas when one is in Russia?

Outside Lomonosovskaya station, I came upon an unreconstructed old comrade selling newspapers and was delighted to find that he had *Pravda*. Christian Posthoff had asked me to bring back a copy or two, and I had had no luck finding it at ordinary news kiosks.

Having just come out of the station of that name, I was strolling along Leninskii Prospekt in a state of rare exaltation when I was approached by an old fellow who plainly wanted something. I quickly explained to him that I was a foreigner and could hardly speak Russian. Even better, he said, I would like 5 roubles, please. Well, he sort of looked like my daddy, and if my daddy was hard up I would expect folks to help him out, and besides, even if he didn't look like my daddy it was such a reasonable request, so I had no thought of saying no. I fished in my pocket to see what I had, and there was no 5 rouble piece, not even the smaller change to make up 5 roubles. I did have a 10 rouble note, though, which the old lad plainly thought was even better, so I presented him with that, and we parted the very best of buddies. I very much regret that I

will never see him again.

One day on the subway I witnessed a remarkable scene. Two young men standing right across from me were recruits in the Baltic Fleet, to judge by their uniforms. One of the two seemed slightly experienced, while the other may have had no further experience than signing the induction papers and putting on the uniform. Together with them was the latter's mother, seated. During the few stops we rode together, she gazed at her son with a mixture of pride, tenderness and concern. She kept reaching up to hold his hand, and just before they got off I was sure I detected some moisture in her eyes. It was such naked emotion that I felt like an intruder, but so gripping that I couldn't look away.

Wandering

A DAY IN THE TAIGA

My last day before leaving Russia was spent at the village of Vyritsa. My hosts, Vladilen Kipyatkov & Elena Lopatina have a summer house there, and Elena's parents, Boris & Lyudmila Lopatin, were in residence.

As soon as we got here we had a fabulous lunch. It was rather in the style of english "tea", by which I mean that in England there is a lot more to tea than just tea. So it was in this case. There were two kinds of bread, garnishable with ordinary cheese, ordinary sausage, and such things as thinly-sliced smoked squid, a peculiar kind of pink caviar that comes from a fish other than the sturgeon, and another cheese that resembled nothing so much as rubber. I mentioned this resemblance, after which Vladilen Evgen'evich and Boris Georgevich got to exercising such witticisms as "I believe I'll have a little more of the rubber." Ho ho. It was all terribly ethnic, which is to say that it was all hugely enjoyable.

After tea/lunch, Vladilen Evgen'evich, Elena Borisovna and I went for a long nature walk in the nearby taiga, or boreal forest. It was my best nature walk in the temperate zone in many years. The area is crossed by a couple of very pleasant little, slow-flowing rivers, and we walked alongside one of them for a long way. If I lived there I would want to get a canoe and explore the waterways extensively. I was moderately drunk as we headed out, as I had drunk immoderately of a sort of alcoholic kvas. That, plus being in genuine taiga, put me into a state of fine elation. We crossed the corduroy bridge over the little river -- a tributary of the Oredezh, I believe -- and this time I went ahead to look for the *Formica polyctena* colony that I had found two years before, eager to see how it was doing. And there it was, looking just as it did two years ago.

This was the only *Formica* nest I had found during that earlier visit, but this time was different. Taking a different route, we found a great many more *F. polyctena* colonies, one of *F. pratensis*, a couple of *Lasius niger*, and a *Myrmica* species whose name I forget.

There was also in abundance a linyphiid spider that reminds me of *Prolinyphia marginata*. Arriving back near the house, I found a great number of higher flies of at least five species in the flowerhead of a wayside umbellifer. I wonder what they were doing there. Later I found much the same phenomenon on goldenrod in the garden.

After many years in the tropics, there are very few things I miss about the temperate zone. One of them is crows. Crows (genus *Corvus*) are a worldwide group of about 40 species, but they are most characteristic of Eurasia and North America. The large-billed crow, *C. macrorhynchos*, a widespread east-asian species, is found all over the Philippines, but in six years there I only saw it once. The pied crow, *C. albus*, is abundant in Ghana -- the only tropical crow that I have seen in any numbers -- but there is no other species around. Although four species are found in the Greater Antilles, I don't recall having seen any of them. Quite a pleasure, then, that the contrastingly two-toned hooded crow, *C. cornix* is abundant in Russia. In addition, on two occasions in Leningrad I came upon flocks of the jackdaw, *C. monedula*. A third species, the all-black rook, *C. frugilegus*, I saw only briefly overhead on a couple of occasions. A feast of crows is one more reason to be fond of Russia.

The house was a wonderful old wooden place. As soon as I stepped inside I caught the smell and feel of many old north-american farm houses. And in the morning, as the sunlight streamed in the east-facing bedroom window, I awoke as fresh as a daisy. Of course, it was like a daisy that desperately needed to pee, for the fifth time since retiring for the night. The night before, we had more fabulous ethnic food and drink. The drink included russian vodka, dry bulgarian wine, semi-dry moldavian wine, beer for Vladilen Evgen'evich, kvas for me, and wonderfully aromatic tea. I had great fun reading the labels on the bottles of wine. Bulgarian is kind of like Russian, but not entirely, and the language they speak in Moldavia looks like Romanian or something very similar to it.

The water for the tea wasn't heated just

any old way, no, it was heated in a genuine, authentic, russian samovar. I had heard of this instrument many times, but I had never before seen one in use. Boris Georg'evich took it outside, picked up some pine cones that were just lying about on the ground and put them in the vertical middle column, fired them up, and this heated the 20 liters or so of water that were in a columnar torus around the fire.

We had many toasts and much hilarity over supper. Boris Georg'evich, a fine and hale old lad of 72, told stories of the winter he spent at McMurdo Station in Antarctica in the 1960s. He later taxed Vladilen Evgen'evich to show leadership -- he seemed to consider that Vladilen Evgen'evich, having presided over the recent congress, was not yet finished that sphere of responsibility -- and recommend exactly what should be drunk next by the company. It was all excruciatingly jolly.

After that I should have been hungover in the nighttime and the next morning, but I suffered no ill effects. However, like I said, I did have to pee like a racehorse from time to time. Now, this country house did not have indoor plumbing, which meant that on five occasions I had to get up, walk downstairs, open the front door, put on my shoes, and make my way to the outhouse. There was no sense in just lying in bed, imagining that it would go away. And I understood why almost nobody spends the winter in this village. Can you imagine being there in the winter at 60° north latitude and having to get all bundled up and trudge through the snow to the outhouse, there to expose your nether regions to the freezing cold and possibly even sit down on an inconceivably frigid seat for as long as it takes?

Geez, it would be enough to make a fellow give up drinking fluids for the winter and pray for constipation. But, as Sterling Hayden said to Al Pacino in *The Godfather*, when you gotta go, you gotta go, and right then at the very end of the summer the environmental conditions weren't such as to encourage desperate thoughts, so I just got up and went.

Coming back from the third such expedition, in the middle of the night, I found something rather wonderful sitting right in my

path. It was a hedgehog, a darling little round beast about the size of a small cat. I was delighted and stood there for a time, contemplating the creature. You see, I am well familiar with hedgehogs from english children's literature, but I had only once before come upon one. This was one day in the spring of 1966 at my boarding school in Germany. I was walking at the edge of our dormitory, when I came upon a young hedgehog by a thicket. I played with him for a bit and left it at that. That first hedgehog must have died of old age some years ago, and it didn't occur to me until the middle of the night in Vyritsa that I missed him.

Boris Georg'evich reported seeing a flock of geese flying south, remarking that the arctic winter couldn't be far behind them. And I caught a sudden whiff of serious seasonality.

The earlier plan had been to head out about noon, in order to drop me at the airport in good time. Then Vladilen suggested that we leave earlier, in order to visit some Pushkin-associated sites in the area. As it happened, we didn't leave until just about noon and went to the sites, anyway, which made me a bit nervous about the time. Boris Georg'evich came with us, while his boss, Lyudmila Mikhailovna, stayed at the house.

We first visited the little house of Pushkin's nursemaid, a serf. It is now a museum. As we went in, the keeper told us it would cost 10 rbl each. That came to 40 rbl, so I handed over a 50 rbl note, figuring I might as well pick up this one. By that time, though, the keeper had heard my accent, and the fee for foreigners was 25 rbl (I saw this on the door as we went out and remarked to the others that I could have saved 15 rbl if I had just kept my mouth shut, which amused everyone), so another 5 rbl were required. As Keith David would say, fair enough.

Next we drove to a nearby village with three things of interest. First was an old church that had been re-constructed after apparently being destroyed in the Revolution or Counter-Revolution. It was quite an impressive structure from the outside. There were many bumble bees foraging at a flower patch by the front walkway, a very attractive

species with plenty of yellow, white and rusty red. Nearby was the grave of Pushkin's ethiopian great-grandfather, Abram Petrovich -- so-called because Peter I was his adopted father-- Gannibal. And then we went to visit Gannibal's estate in the same village.

On the way to the airport we passed a substantial roadside monument on the higher land above the turnoff to Pushkin. Boris Georg'evich told me it was the site of the front line in World War II. I hadn't realized the Germans had gotten that close to Leningrad, just about 30 kmn away and within clear sight of the city. I believe they came similarly close to Moscow. This illustrates the critical importance of the Battle of Stalingrad.

Cultural Conjectures

GETTING OFF THE PHONE

It is your editor's frequent pleasure to proffer practical advice from his rich personal experience. Today's lesson has to do with getting off the phone.

You have all undoubtedly had the experience of going into an office, and the person you came to see is on the phone forever and ever, apparently quite incapable of bringing it to a close. She -- yes, always she -- looks at you, rolls her eyes apologetically, and may even gesture and mouth words to the effect that this turkey on the other end just won't shut up. This advice is not on how to deal with her. It is about how not to be like her.

The key problem is very simple. The eye-rolling party keeps feeding a conversation, compulsively, even unconsciously, after it should be over. Many people seem to think that anyone -- especially on the phone, for some reason -- has a God-given, constitutional right to keep you engaged in conversation, whether you like it or not. And they think it would be beastly rude not to say "Oh really?" or "Uh huh" or "Goodness gracious" from time to time. Nonsense. You are under no such obligation, and years of experience have shown that the conversation will languish if you don't feed it. The simplest

disentanglement tactic, then, is Go silent. It almost always works.

Occasionally, however, you have a really hard-core insensitive on the other end, one who will not take even such an unsubtle hint as silence. You need an indisputable excuse to get off the phone, something that no one will question. Say that you have to pee. "Excuse me, Prudence, but my back teeth are, like, totally floating. I gotta go." What is the chatterbox going to do? Ask you to hold on for just a few more minutes? No. Everybody understands the call of Nature, which overrides all else.

As Danny DeVito said in *The War of the Roses*, "There are two dilemmas that rattle the human skull. How do you hold onto someone who won't stay? And how do you get rid of someone who won't go." Your editor is proud to have been able to assist with the second of these.

Wandering

TWO VIEWS OF CALI

I like looking out of airplanes. As long as it is daytime, and we are not above the clouds, I am never bored watching the landscape slip past. Among other things, I am very fond of looking down on a slow river opening into the sea. The mixing of muddy river water with the clear sea somehow stirs me. And the Lesser Antilles are replete with desert islands painted onto the surface of the planet.

Only once can I recall looking down at a landscape and wishing I were walking on it, rather than up in the plane. It was almost exactly 40 years ago, and I was looking at some part of the scottish Highlands. What a grand place to go rambling.

On a recent trip to Cali, Colombia, I was fascinated by a series of small rivers, each tending in an overall straight direction, but with much meandering. I suppose the straightness must have been due to a consistent slight slant to the land, but what about this meandering? In particular, do larger rivers/streams show the same pattern on a larger scale? Or does the mid-line of a smaller

stream travel farther in relation to the straight-line distance traversed? When one is idly looking out an airplane window and has no appetite, for the moment, for the seemingly impossible task of getting one's vitreous floaters in a line, it's fun to contemplate such questions. I don't recall Darwin's explanation of why rivers meander, but I did notice that sand bars accumulate on the inner side of bends, not on the outer side, which is evidently related to the process of formation of the meander. One assumes that the Meander River in Turkey runs through a broad, slightly tilted plain and that it does, indeed, meander.

Cali sits in a broad, very flat river valley of rich-looking farmland, the Cauca. As we approached, I noted that the medium-sized Cauca River is just about the meanderingest I have ever seen.

At the end of our social-insects conference there was a performance by a folk troupe doing dances from various parts of Colombia. In one, a courtship dance from the pacific coast accompanied by nothing but percussion, the woman and man were both dressed all in white -- which was quite striking, as both were very black -- he quite simply and she more ornately, including a broadly pleated full skirt. She started out insouciant, even a bit disdainful, as he stamped and gyrated around her with a big hopeful grin. He strutted his stuff vigorously for a time, and she gradually conceded him a small and then a larger smile, coming to move more and more in synchrony with him, as he unrelentingly kept up his moves, until the two of them were moving in concert with each other and she had abandoned all pretence of being anything but wholeheartedly his. And when it reached that point he lost all restraint and turned from dancing "Please, please be mine" to purest hallelujah. As they danced off stage I sat there gasping with the thought "Damn, it's just like birds."

Wandering

SOME DAY SOON IN THE ANDES

I have had occasion to walk about in high mountains in four continents. I was never in the Andes before 1994, and they have been enduringly my favourite ever since.

Some years ago when visiting Manuel Mejía at his home in Bogotá, the conversation turned to his house up in the mountains. He told me that it is in a tongue of middle-level habitat that reaches up to the level of the páramo, with páramo within ready walking distance. Nicely isolated, with electricity and the basics. Wonderful. I would love to spend a month there, working on one or another writing project for half of every day, exploring and photographing during the other half.

The problem is the diffuse civil war that has been going on for many years. In recent time the rebels control an area about the size of Costa Rica, and of course there are areas that neither side controls. The rebels are not just bandits, but neither are they the VietCong, so that one cannot count on ideology and discipline to know where one stands. One could too easily come to grief at the hands of some teenager with more firepower than sense, which means that Manuel's house is off-limits until there is a definite, stable peace accord.

Discussing this, for the first time in my life I found myself selfishly desiring peace. Over the years, I have many times expressed myself against one war or another, but in each case it was more a matter of favouring one side in the conflict. In Angola and Nicaragua, for example, I was not so much concerned that the fighting should stop as that the good guys should win. In Colombia I just want peace. Selfishly. So I can have my month in the Andes.

Cultural Conjectures

SAUCE FOR THE SAUCY

When my sisters and I were little, our parents had recently returned from India. They were fond of spicy indian food, which of course little children are not. Later, when our palates

matured and we were ready for some heat in our food, they had gotten back into a north-american way of cooking. So it was that I grew up in a house of little spice.

This feeling of a world that something might be missing remained just that, nothing but a vague feeling until, I believe, 1969. It was then that Raymond Sokolov wrote his first column for *Natural History* magazine. It was on jalapeño peppers, and I read it with my eyes bulging. Hot peppers, hot damn. Here was a dimension of worldly experience that positively called out for exploration. So I made a mature, rational, informed decision that I, Christopher K. Starr, a white protestant anglo boy from Ottawa, would make like a Mexican and dig hot peppers.

Then the big surprise, which was how easy it was. I found that one through exercise could increase one's tolerance for the heat, and then the absolute deliciousness of the peppers came through, no longer masked by pain and streaming tears. The Starr eyes remained moist, but they was tears of joy.

So now I make my own pepper sauce and put some in just about everything. It has gotten good enough that I affix my own label to *Starr's Own SCRAMBLED PEPPER Sauce* and many are happy to have it in their dining rooms. The second nicest compliment on my cooking that I ever received came from Mark Bainbridge in Ottawa. Mark has ulcers, but he's got to have his Scrambled Pepper Sauce. I had a wonderful childhood, but sometimes one must depart from it, you know.

[The second nicest compliment came from Judy Henningson after she calmed down. She phoned me back to say that she meant everything she said in the previous heated call, except for that bit about the banana bread. True story.]

Cultural Conjectures

A LITTLE DEEPER INTO NEVER-NEVER LAND

In no. 39, you were introduced to my cardinal rules for everyday life, the Five Nevers:

1.Never eat anything whose composition is

unknown to you.

2.Never trust a black man in a necktie.

3.Never get into an elevator when you have to take a leak.

4.Never sleep with anyone whose trouble are worse than your own.

5.Never let nobody mess with your mojo.

An additional never has since been revealed to your editor:

6.Never eat barbecue or watermelon indoors.

Please be guided accordingly.

OH DEAR ME, MORE DREAMS

I am in a very big building, and I walk out onto a ledge. Then I want to go back inside, but the ledge has become narrow, uneven and with nothing to hold onto, so I am sitting on it, no longer standing, and can't see any way to get back to the safety of the main part of the building. I am safe enough where I am, but I can't just stay out there forever, and I wonder if there is any way to get the Fire Department or someone like that to come and rescue me. Really quite frightening.

And as I sit there, hugging the ledge, I realize that it is all an illusion. The building is, in fact, an insane asylum, I am deeply nuts, and the physical situation is in no way dangerous. In fact, I am rationally certain that I could just walk along that ridge in perfect safety. This certainty does no good, as the delusion holds fast, but then some solid scaffolding with people on it appears on one side, and it is plain that the episode has passed. All I have to do is step onto the broad, solid scaffolding. The people are all laughing at me, but what the hell. I know I am nuts, they know I am nuts, and there is no sense in any of us pretending.

I am at a conference, and we are supposed to move from one room to another, but the room numbering follows no clear pattern, so we are lost. I set out to find the right room. At one point I have to climb a ladder that goes up and up and up. The ladder is solid enough, and I

have good places to hold and step, but as I get way up there I feel my confidence slipping, so that I increasingly have to take a grip on myself to keep from panicking. The whole time I am thinking that I am really losing something, as I don't normally lose my composure like that, it's not part of my being. I get to the top and just collapse, feeling like it will be a long time before I can do anything. Maybe that's what a nervous breakdown is like. I wouldn't know.

I am in a train station or some similar place, where I happen to notice a female woman. Not really my type and no raving beauty, although attractive enough. Then suddenly a slightly chill, damp wind blows briefly through the station, and I get a whiff of falling in love. As a young fellow, I used to fall in love in the winter, so that there is a definite climatic association for me, and that chill wind brings it on for just a moment. And the "attractive enough" female woman suddenly seems very appealing indeed.

I am taking a train trip with Maite (the 2nd Mrs Starr), and then we are at home. I hear a rumbling outside and look out to find Mike Oatham returning a big compressed-gas canister, rolling it upright along the driveway. He has a dog that resembles a giant ant-eater, and then I notice that we have not three little dogs at home but eight. I try to get Mike's attention to ask about the supernumerary five pups, but he and the ant-eater have already hopped the stream and are walking out the gate.

I am in Henry Miller's living room, shooting the breeze with him and an unfamiliar woman. It then occurs to me that the date is after 1980, so that Miller is already dead, and therefore this must be a dream. I am definitely digging it. Miller makes a crack about "the bullfinch of desire" or something like that and then laughs merrily at this bit of cleverness. "Bullfinch" definitely figured in the metaphor.

I notice, for no discernible reason, that the word "squirrel" is quite a special one, by no

means an ordinary name. And then it occurs to me that this animal is likewise named with special style and class in French (écureuil), German (Eichhörnchen) and Spanish (ardilla). I wonder if humans throughout the world have been struck by something magical about squirrels and have given them magical names to match.

[Well, there you have it. One dream about being nuts on a ledge, one about thinking I may be nuts at the top of a tall ladder, falling in love in a train station, a casual visit from Mike Oatham and a very elongate dog, and a jolly visit with a long-dead writer. Skating pretty close to the open water, I would say.

And, regarding the names of squirrels, when I woke up I looked up the word in a bunch of dictionaries and had to conclude that the name is rather ordinary in most languages. It just happens to sound magical in the four languages for which I knew the word. Still, scoiattolo (Italian) does sound like what a squirrel might call itself.]

SCENES FROM EVERYDAY LIFE

In Pain of Sport a gentleman of the mendicant persuasion addressed me in the street: "Sir, even though my apparel is the way it is, please do not treat me like a dog, as some people do."

I assured him that I was not about to receive him with contempt, and he began by telling me that his name was Anthony, that he was originally from Tobago, and that he was 50 years old. I saw no reason why he should have to go through his customary paces, so I broke in with "Anthony, it appears that I have more money with me than is necessary for my immediate purposes. Please accept \$2 for your own use." And that was that. If I had had my wits about me, I would have asked him to sit a spell and tell me his autobiography.

On the other hand, I have had a number of such conversations with Michael Thompson, who can usually be found on Frederick Street near the electric company's office. After years and years on the street, Mike does seem to be

getting just a bit raggedy inside, but he maintains his spirit and looks healthy.

The newspapers had a public appeal for blood for a woman who had been in a bad car accident and needed repeated surgery. Well, that sounded like a good cause, and I needed to get back into the habit. I hadn't been to the blood-donor clinic since I was told that they couldn't accept my blood for six months after a trip to Haiti, and it had been more than a year since I got back from West Africa, so I had run out of excuses. After all, three units a year isn't too great a burden for a guy with plenty of blood.

So it was that I came to be in the blood-donor clinic, telling them I was there to bleed for Monica Matthews. It was quite a tedious operation, and I certainly don't like needles in my arm, but someone has to do it.

The first person for whom I gave designated blood was the trinidadian writer Sam Selvon, a long-time resident of Toronto. He fell ill on a visit back to Trinidad, and there was a public appeal for blood, so I went down and bled for Sam. And 24 hours later he died.

They had tried to airlift him out to Canada -- he had told me that the reason he resided there, far from his source of inspiration, was so that he could afford quality health care -- but it didn't work. They should have known better. After all, this was the author of *Those Who Eat the Cascadura*, so he was destined to end his days in Trinidad.

As I was thinking of getting up, I noticed a small, gracile mantis landing on the wall of the bathroom, a mature male. I went over to appreciate him for a moment, then I got cleaned up. As I stepped out of the shower, I saw that the mantis was no more. Oh, he was there, all right, but a plump pholcid spider -- mature female *Physocyclus globosus* -- was busy wrapping him. His wings were out at angles, his legs were held fast, and the only thing moving was the tip of his abdomen, feebly. So there you have it, right in my own neotropical bathroom, what Eberhard Curio called "that supreme blot on the fair face of nature: Predation." He'll soon be transformed

into a new batch of eggs.

Looking out the bedroom window as I tap, I see a little bird hopping about in some excitement. Evidently a house wren. And last night as I was preparing to retire I found Awake, the resident Cook's tree boa, on the headboard at the back of my pillow. It's such a comfort to have a snake by my head as I sleep.

The house wrens seem to have quite a presence lately up here at Obronikrom. I haven't yet paid enough attention to know how many pairs there are and where they are nesting, but to judge by the sounds they make there would seem to be at least two pairs. And Awake is alert to them. Wouldn't that be a blot on the fair face?

Most Abused Words

SUPERSTITION

Since moving to the Caribbean, my life has been blessedly free of contact with the third most odious of all human types, the American evangelist. Sure, they come down here, intent on bringing salvation to black people, but they're relatively easy to ignore.

Back when I couldn't so easily ignore them, I used to hear evangelists referring to opposing religious beliefs as "superstitions". This is not just arrogant and stupid, but flatly incorrect. A superstition is a belief that is not rooted in any coherent worldview, one that does not form part of any identifiable system. One may regard the religious views of Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims -- even Scientologists -- as mistaken, prejudicial to good earthly morality and certain to invite hellfire, but they are by no means superstitions.

Let me note in passing that paranoids are incapable of superstition. As far as they are concerned, absolutely everything fits into a system.

IN CASE YOU WERE WONDERING

It is revealed above that American evangelists are the third most odious type of human being. Readers of *Antic Antilleana* are presumably sharp enough to know who are in first and second place, but, just to make sure we are all on the same page, they are:

1. Strike breakers.
2. Television personalities.

Wandering

[For two weeks in July, your editor and his son, Francis Andrew Starr, took a driving tour of the southwestern USA, from Dallas across to Las Vegas and back to Dallas by a different route. After that we had two weeks in Boston. Here is Francis's report of his American sojourn, written just before he left the USA.]

FIRSTS IN AMERICA
by Francis A. Starr

During my trip to the United States, I acquired some personal firsts.

Places

I had been in the United States before. I was born in Georgia. Aside from California, however, this was my first trip to the American southwest. I visited the states of Arizona, Nevada, New Mexico & Texas for the first time. We also popped over into the state of Sonora, Mexico for a day.

After touring the southwest, my dad and I went to Massachusetts. Not only was it my first time in that state, it was also my first visit to any part of New England.

Food

On my last evening in Boston, our hostess, Elaine Bernard, took my dad and me to *Charlie's* restaurant. Instead of ordering my usual chicken, I had my first lobster. A live lobster was actually put in a boiling pot of water. It was served whole, shell included, so labor was required. The effort of cracking was well worth the bounty. I officially love lobster.

I had my first genuine tacos in Sonora. My dad & I stopped at this eatery, and the tacos came with a tray of condiments, including lemon, cucumber, jalapeño and radish. Not like Taco Bell at all.

Animals

My dad & I were walking around in the West Texas desert, and there was a jackrabbit passing by. We later saw more of them. I saw my first penguins at the New England Aquarium. One penguin threw a fit and tried to get in a fight with another of his kind. The other penguin didn't engage the brawl.

Weather

Arizona is a desert. The heat is like nothing I've experienced before. Trinidad is nowhere close to Arizona heat. One day, the thermometer on the rental car read 113E F. That was the hottest weather I ever experienced. It was so hot that rolling down

the car window when we drove got us a hot breeze, not cool breeze.

Haircut

In Sonora I got my first skin-close cut. The barber shaved off so much hair; I could feel the skin on my head. This haircut will last the longest, because it is so complete. My mom won't be amused. She claims baldness will give others the idea I'm a prisoner in a maximum security jail.

Watering the lizard

In Texas, it's customary to urinate outdoors, according to Kinky Friedman's *Guide to Texas Etiquette*. It's known as "watering the lizard". So we followed local custom, even at highway rest stops with indoor washrooms available. Then one day in the Panhandle, we were at the side of the road, watering the lizard on some tumbleweeds, when a passing trucker honked his approval. Kinky had said that Texans will often honk in approval when one waters the lizard, and he was right.

Wandering

[While Francis & I were touring the southwestern USA and later Boston, SuperNova Yerakina wasn't just sitting at home. No, indeed. The following is a piece she wrote for the Internet site of Cuba Solidarity here in Trinidad.]

A MONTH STUDYING SPANISH IN CUBA by SuperNova Y. Starr

This past July I studied Spanish in Cuba. I had gone on a class trip to Spain in April of 2005 and had such a marvelous time that I decided to take beginning Spanish when I began at Laurier University in Canada. What I didn't expect was that I would get so good at it and would love it so much, as learning French in high school was horrible for me. My dad was glad that I was so excited about Spanish and happened to mention this to the Cuban ambassador to Trinidad & Tobago. The ambassador pointed out that

the University of Havana has summer language courses for foreigners, and after that it was easy to make the arrangements.

So I arrived in La Habana the Sunday before registration. Monday morning I went to the office and took a placement test. There are 4 levels: beginner, beginner+, intermediate, and advanced. I started class in beginner+, but at the end of the first day I didn't think it was challenging enough, so I asked to be put into the next level up. I had class from Monday to Friday from 9 AM until 1:30 PM for the first week, and after that until 12:30 PM. That left a lot of time to explore and get to know the wonderful city of Havana.

The intermediate class was a much better fit for me. It was significantly more challenging, and we covered things that I hadn't learned before. Still, I found myself catching on pretty quickly. I got a lot of use out of my Spanish-English dictionary.

The people in my class were from all over the world: Australia, Japan, Korea, Germany, Serbia, England, Italy, Zambia, Canada, USA. Actually I guess there weren't any South Americans. I loved meeting people from all these different countries. The only unfortunate thing was that, since everyone spoke English, we didn't really converse in Spanish unless we consciously decided to. I think I would have learned a lot faster if we spoke in Spanish, but I still did learn.

At first I stayed at the Hotel Colina, very close to the university. I had expected to stay there the whole time, but in my first week of class one of my classmates, an American girl named Meranda, told me about her *casa particular*. A *casa particular* is a private home that is licensed to accommodate foreign visitors on a paying basis. Meranda was staying in a fifth-floor apartment on the roof of a building. The family had an available room for rent, so I checked it out. It definitely seemed like a much better option for me. It was the best decision I made! They included breakfast and dinner and laundry with my room. Olivia cooked the best food in all of Cuba! They didn't speak English, so I got a great deal of language practice,

absolutely a win-win situation.

The family I stayed with became my favourite Cubans. Olivia and Luis have two kids: Evelyn (15) and Luis Miguel (13), and they quickly became my family away from home. A few times I got sick during my stay, and Olivia would give me these mixtures of stuff and tell me it was Cuban medicine. They also helped with my spoken Spanish, taking care to correct my grammatical errors.

Somehow I also lost almost 10 pounds when I was there. It was quite involuntary and may have occurred since I was sweating so much because it was hot and I walked up and down those five flights of stairs every day.

When we weren't in class we would explore. We went to the beaches at Playa del Este, the best of which was Santa María. We would bargain with a cab driver to go for 10 CUC [about US\$10] per trip, although it was sometimes difficult to find one who would accept that price. One night six of us went to a jazz club called La Cuerva y la Torre. Wow! I had never really listened to jazz before, but the performance was amazing, it took my breath away. There was a cello, keyboard, drums, guitars. Each player was so enthusiastic and into the music, it was incredible to watch. The Malecón was a hot "liming" spot for my friends and me. We would buy a bottle of rum and some coke and juice and go to the Malecón, and every night we would meet interesting people hanging out there. The Malecón is an 8 km long sea-wall that lines the coast of Havana. There are always people hanging out there. Most bici-taxis play music on their ride in order to attract attention, so one night we pulled a bici-taxi over and paid him to stay and play music for us while we danced. Within 20 minutes, about 30 more people had joined us to dance. It was so much fun.

Before I visited Cuba, I was really curious as to how different life would be in a communist country. I tried to read everything I could about Cuba in preparation. My view of Fidel Castro and his government radically changed by the end of my trip. I was very wary to speak of politics

when I first arrived, but as I got to know the people there they opened the political conversations. I came to learn a lot of the good and bad of Cuban society.

The good. Havana is one of the safest cities in the world. The worst thing that could happen to you is that you're robbed. I felt absolutely safe walking in the streets at 3:00 in the morning. There is 100% literacy. Their health care system is awesome, and their doctors are very well trained. I'm not sure how representative it is to the rest of the country, but when I was in Havana I didn't see any homeless people.

The bad. Although the worst thing that can happen to you is being robbed, robbery is quite common. I was lucky and smart enough to avoid it. There is a shortage of medical supplies, food, and other necessities. If it is available, it can be quite expensive. The drivers have no courtesy for pedestrians and will run you over if you don't run out of their way.

Nonetheless, my trip was life changing. I learned a lot, and I know that now I could definitely get around a Spanish-speaking country. Most of all, I will never forget the people that I met. I expect to return some day.
