

# EATOIN SHRDLU

(formerly Antic Antilleana)

C.K. Starr's newsletter to family and friends  
No. 44 Caura Village, Trinidad 20 August 2007  
176th anniversary of Nat Turner's slave  
rebellion

## WHAT? A WHOLE NEW NAME?

It was the previous habit of this newsletter to change its name every time the editor made a substantial move. Starting as *Notes from Midamerica* (Kansas), it became *Georgia on My Mind* (Georgia, obviously), then *Far Out Far East Notes* (Philippines), *DC/AC* (Washington), *Georgia Automotive* (back to Georgia), *Tropic of Cancer* (Taiwan), and *Antic Antilleana* (Trinidad).

As it now stands, I have no plans to move from Trinidad. I expect to stay right here in the Caura Valley, quite possibly to the end of my days, after which I will repose in the Rada cemetery in Belmont. Even so, the newsletter is getting restless and wants to shed its skin once again, so I give you *Etaoin Shrdlu*. Sharp-eyed readers will recognize this as Beowulf's battle cry when he first strode forth to mix it up with Grendel, although even J.R.R. Tolkien was unable to figure out its exact meaning. Oddly enough, it is claimed that Vanna White once whispered this same phrase to a contestant on *Wheel of Fortune*, although some regard this as just a vicious Internet rumour.

Whatever its latent significance, then, *Etaoin Shrdlu* it is. Until further ecdysis.

\*\*\*\*\*

Translating is almost a reflex with some of us. Sometimes it misfires. I came upon a saying, "On n'est trahi que par les siens" and in the next instant had already consciously rendered it as "Your tits will turn you in." Such a felicitous expression, but it quickly occurred to me that it was nonsense. The word was "siens", not "seins". Such a shame.

Reading a short biography of the Brazilian author Machado de Assis, I was delighted to learn that his literary debut was a poem in the journal *Marmota Fluminense*. Delighted I was, because the name so obviously meant the *Burning Groundhog*. Quite a disappointment to find that, in fact, it is the *Rio [de Janeiro] Rascal*.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Blast from the Past

HOW PAUL REEDER  
DEMONSTRATED HIS COOLNESS ONCE  
AND FOR ALL

[This piece was composed for the proceedings volume of my Ohio high-school class's 40-year reunion this year. As it happens, the proceedings were a bust, but it's still a pretty good story. Paul Reeder was an outstanding teacher. When he taught American history, in particular, it became a very human subject. I thought of him often when I toured Jamestown and Yorktown last month. He was also in charge of our dormitory.]

I very much doubt that Paul Reeder was ever comfortable with his role as an authority figure, but neither did he shirk it. And we all held him in abiding respect and affection. (It is amusing, but fruitless to speculate how we would have reacted in those days if we had known that he played for the pink team.)

I don't believe our class of 1967 was afflicted with any acute case of senioritis. Nonetheless, we did expect to receive our props from the lower classes and were subject to displeasure when these were not forthcoming. They were definitely not

forthcoming from a certain brash freshman. He not only did not defer to his elders and betters but seemed to go out of his way to show us open contempt. We forebore it loftily for a time, but one day in the dorm a breaking point was reached.

I don't recall exactly who said "We need to do something about Dave Williamson", but there was instant unanimity. Four of us marched down the hall and burst into Dave's room, intent on teaching him a lesson. I don't think we had anything definite in mind, but something had to be done. As we entered, I had a bright idea. "Hold him down on the bed" I said to two of my confederates - - names are withheld to protect the guilty -- which they did.

And then I took Dave's pants off. And his undies. And took out my knife. And while another of our group spread Dave's legs wide, I stared him python-like in the eye and brought my knife inexorably closer and closer to his exposed genitalia. The whole time, Dave was twisting and struggling and cussing a blue streak, but the moment the tip of my knife touched his balls he lay there stock-still. He kept up the loud cussing, but he moved not a muscle. And, fixedly staring him in the eye, I gently let the very tip of the knife glide up the seam of his scrotum.

It had just come to rest at the base of his dick when the door burst open. It was Paul Reeder. Imagine the scene that faced him. Three big guys are holding down one little guy, while another big guy holds a knife to the little guy's balls. Paul took in all of this in a glance and did not hesitate. He looked Dave Williamson straight in the eye, said with utter sternness "Sir, I heard the language", then turned on his heel and walked out. He didn't look at the rest of us, much less say anything.

At that, I folded up my knife, the others released Dave, and the four of us walked out of the room. You see, Dave was just a new kid who had to be told that his language was unacceptable, but we seniors knew that Paul knew that we knew that he was deeply pissed off at us. He didn't have to tell us that, not then, not ever.

From that day forth, Dave Williamson was a changed freshman who gave us seniors our props. I'm not saying what we did was right, you understand, just making an observation.

\*\*\*\*\*

### Cultural Conjectures

#### DISCRIMINATE PHILATELY

I started collecting stamps in August 1956 and have continued, off and on, ever since. For about the last 20 years it has been mostly off, in the sense that I accumulate all the time but haven't been putting them in order. As a result, I have a big box full of only slightly sorted stamps, waiting for some time when I don't feel like doing anything else for a couple of weekends.

Postage stamps are such wonderful little objects, replete with significance if one cares to look past the manifest content. It has been my general policy that any real postage stamp belongs in my collection. Even those wretched productions with which the government of San Marino -- think about it, have you ever seen a San Marino stamp on a letter or card? do you even know anyone who has ever gone to San Marino? have you ever wanted to go there? I didn't think so -- floods the market. I have stamps with likenesses of Francisco Franco, Imelda Marcos, even Richard Milhous Nixon. They're not pretty or admirable, to be sure, but they go into my collection.

This policy of all-inclusivity admits to just one exception. Princess Diana. I bore her no ill will while she lived and didn't especially rejoice when she died, but when the news filled up with all that feeble-minded anguish and the various postal services got to churning out stamps of her, something snapped. She has no place in my stamp collection, none whatsoever. So please don't bother to send me any Princess Diana stamps. I won't have them.

On the other hand, I would love to see a stamp or two of Francis Vincent Zappa (1941-1993). I don't know of any, but it's hard to believe no government has thought

to celebrate his life.

Come to think of it, there surely must be a statue of Frank Zappa somewhere. I remember my delight, walking along a street in Mérida, Venezuela one day, when I came upon a statue of Charlie Chaplin as the Little Tramp, just standing there minding his own business. Is there any good reason why Frank Zappa should not similarly uplift one's wanderings? Still, one must be cautious. Many years ago a statue of the king of Poland trampling a turkish soldier underfoot was commissioned in Italy. When the Poles couldn't pay the bill, the poor sculptor was stuck with it. This inventive fellow made a few changes and sold it to the English as a representation of Charles II overcoming Oliver Cromwell. I am told that "Charles" still wears a turban.

This is all good, clean fun, but they had better not try to pass off a statue of, say, Sal Mineo as Frank Zappa.

\*\*\*\*\*

### A Reader's Notes

#### DISCOVERING MAUGRE

Maurice Greenia Jr, known as Maugré, is a graphic artist, musician and poet in Detroit. For more than 20 years he has put out a single sheet titled *The Poetic Express* once or twice a month. It is a wonderful little paper, and I have hundreds of issues. I believe there is a project underway to make them all available on the wire, definitely a good thing. He keeps pouring it out.

To me, most poems in the *Poetic Express* are just a pleasant read, but occasionally something jumps out and grabs me, especially those about blues and jazz. In one poem the phrase "Anything worth doing is worth overdoing." -- long a key motto of mine -- rose up off the page and slapped me in the face. No two ways about it, he is my kind of guy.

#### POEM FOR BOOKER LITTLE

[trumpet player, composer, 1938-1961]  
in the immediate world:  
some of those still alive  
actually decide to start living  
(of all things!)  
and every time their shoes  
hit the pavement  
sparks flew up,  
trees wept,  
and the most impossibly beautiful music  
floated all over,  
dreaming in the air.

#### RECIPE

We feed all our geniuses  
on a gravy made from  
cracked off parts of old umbrellas  
and yellowing envelopes.  
For later, we'd often concoct  
a soup laced with the invisible eyeballs  
of false here-afters.  
This would usually produce a burp  
confluent to the sun's wink  
at the moon.

And this, scribbled on the back of a mimeographed autobiography:

Paint  
Paint  
Write  
Draw  
Bebop ...

For all I know, I'm the only person who received it. Or, as Duke Ellington Armstrong once said, it don't mean a thing if it aint got that swing.

\*\*\*\*\*

Cultural Conjectures

YOURS IN WORD, INDEED

As may have noticed, your editor has an inordinate fondness for words. I must have swallowed the dictionary when I was a child and, like the late Ed Weeks, I am an incurable semantic. So it was that I was delighted to come upon the Word of the Day service on the Internet. Once a day, an e-mail with a new vocable, complete with definition, notes on usage, and etymology. About half of the time the word is too familiar to do me any good, but they are always well chosen, and it costs nothing.

Among the daily words that have come over the wire are two that I associate firmly with the Starr Elms family. My late father had a number of words for "prison" -- this is not to imply that he had a great deal of inside knowledge of that institution -- of which his favourite seemed to be "hoosegow". I don't believe I have ever heard it said by anyone outside of our family, although I see it written about once a decade. Thanks to the Word of the Day, I have now learned, about fifty years after I first heard the word, that "hoosegow" is derived from the spanish "juzgado". Hold onto that fact. You might be on *Jeopardy* some day.

My Uncle Stuart always called me a mugwump when I was little, and now I customarily address the kids up my valley with the same honorific. Again, about 50 years after first contact, I learn that "mugwump" is originally derived from an algonquin term meaning "big shot". The meaning has gone through various shifts over the centuries, so that in English it now refers to "a person who acts independently, whose position is distinct from all others on an issue". Even so, one suspects that Uncle Stuart applied it to me more because it just sounded good.

To subscribe go to  
<http://register.yourdictionary.com:80/cgi-bin/register.cgi> .

\*\*\*\*\*

A VISIT TO THE NEIGHBOURS

One day many years ago Karen Mary Granado -- the third Mrs Starr -- and I were at home minding our own business. I believe the year was 1995 or 1996, and the day was certainly 25 December. Karen suddenly said "Let's visit somebody." An eminently reasonable suggestion, and to make it a bit festiver I took along a big jug of sorrel and a loaf of banana bread that we just happened to have in the fridge, along with some plates, paper napkins, and cups. We drove about northern Trinidad, popping in on various acquaintances and proffering them some refreshment. We would knock on the door, hand over a slice of banana bread and a cup or sorrel, call out a season's greeting and be on our way before the people had much of a chance to reach an opinion on the matter.

That was great fun, so I figured Nova and Francis and I might do the same sort of thing this past 25 December. Which we did. The previous evening I made up a big batch (almost three liters) of sorrel and a couple of loaves of banana bread. At this point I should mention that the preparations were not an unqualified success. The sorrel was okay -- only okay, by no means outstanding - - but the banana bread failed to rise properly and was possibly the worst I have ever made. Even so, we had a plan and weren't about to choke on it.

We started near the house, with Brother Niceness and his neighbour Bibi. Then we headed down the valley to pop in on some academic types. At one household we found a fair crowd, so we dispensed a lot of refreshment. After that we headed east to Ashuk Khan's place, where we stayed longer than I had intended and finished up the sorrel. Ashuk's boss, Satie, laid out some mighty fine fare, but we made a point of partaking sparingly, because there was one household -- the Narines, further east in Sangre Grande -- where we were expected, and it would not do to arrive without an appetite. It's always a terribly jolly scene at the Narines', at least until Rajesh Ragoo

showed up. (They really need to get a better lock on their door.) By the time we got to the Andrewses in Dabadie, both the sorrel and banana bread were exhausted. Yes, I would say that was a pretty successful Kwanzaa eve.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Wandering

### WESTERN SWING

In *Antic Antilleana* no. 43 we had a report from Francis A. Starr on our trip in the American southwest last summer. I will now add a few supplementary notes.

Because this was a road trip, we wanted to have appropriate road music for those wide open spaces. My knowledgeable cousin David Roguer Stanley had made some fine suggestions regarding Texas music, and Ed Simonoff had sent us Taj Mahal's record that includes "You Aint No Street-Walker, Mama Honey, But I Do Love the Way You Strut Your Stuff". This latter became our theme song for the road. The one big disappointment was that we were unable to get any Kinky Friedman records, even though we looked for them in several towns in Texas.

In West Texas we had taken a drive out into rather desolate ranchland, just to have a look around. No people in sight, few cattle, and we saw our first jackrabbits. Climbing up onto a rocky hill, we were impressed by the utter stillness. Then Francis pointed out a twister down in the valley below and wondered what it would be like to stand inside one. Good question, and we resolved then and there to look for an opportunity to try it. In the succeeding week or so, we saw plenty of them, but always at a distance or beyond an obstacle.

Then, heading west and north from Tucson, we left Interstate 8 on a blue highway through farms near Bouse, Arizona. It was there that I noticed a twister just a few meters off the road in a field. I quickly brought the car to a stop, and we piled out and ran right into the middle of the twister. It

kept moving slowly, onto the road, with no traffic coming either way, and we stayed in it until it crossed the road and into the field on the other side, where it faded soon afterward. Yes, my boy and I danced in a real western whirlwind.

In Las Vegas we were mainly interested in one thing, to make the personal acquaintance of Robert J. Throckmorton and his boss Genie. I had been acquainted with them for many years by mail, but had never met them in person. Bob is a founding stalwart of the Amici Linguarum linguistics society. We stashed ourselves in Arizona Charlie's hotel and casino and drove around to the Throckmortons' place the next morning, where we sat in the living room and pretty much conversed on all manner of things at top speed for 6½ hours. Movies, humour, history, language, maledicta, art. That's my idea of high-quality talk. We had a substantial late-lunch break and kept right on talking.

Driving back east we were on the lookout for a particular place. You see, almost 40 years ago Christopher J. "Dobert" Starbuck had peed on the Continental Divide, so that half of his micturation eventually went to the Pacific Ocean and half into the Gulf of Mexico. When I heard about that, I resolved that I would follow Dobert's fine example when the opportunity arose. And of course Francis was down with that. We knew we would cross the Divide in New Mexico, somewhere between Gallup and Grants, so we were on the lookout. As soon as we entered New Mexico we had started drinking water, and when we came to the marker, we were ready. Yes, friends, we watered the lizard right on the Continental Divide. And as we did so we looked at a magnificent backdrop, the loveliest scene I had seen during that trip in terms of pure graphic qualities. Red cliffs rose dramatically above the plain about a mile north of our position, dappled greenly with small, round conifer trees.

We drove 5874 km on our western swing, just about the distance of a coast-to-

coast trip.

\*\*\*\*\*

### Wandering

#### TEN CITIES AND A WEDDING

by SuperNova Y. Starr

In May I went on a bit of a trip. Andriana is a classmate of my boyfriend, Iain. She moved to Canada from Bulgaria about 10 years ago, and just last year she got engaged to a nice Bulgarian boy. Since their relatives were still in Bulgaria, they decided to get married there. And we were invited. We decided that, if we're going to be spending all of this money to come to Europe, we might as well do some of our own travelling as well. Yay! Eurotrip!

I have a family friend who works for US Airways and he has always offered standby tickets to us. He gave us his last two passes of the year.

First stop, London. We arrived the day after we left, early in the morning. All of our friends had been in London a few days before us. Iain had both been to London at least twice and agreed that it was way too expensive, so we were there for less than a day. There's a nice little part of London called Camden town, similar to Toronto's Kensington Market but about 10 times larger. Like a hippie district. There are no chain stores, and everything is independently owned. I ended up finding a dress to wear to the wedding. We stayed up all day and headed over to Luton airport at the end of the night to try to get some sleep before our 6 AM flight. We hardly slept at all. By the time we got on the plane, we had spent about 2 days without rest and a change of clothes.

Second stop, Istanbul. The main reason we even planned to go to Istanbul was because it seemed to be the cheapest way to get to Bulgaria. About 2 weeks before we started our trip, we found out that we had to pay US\$60 to get a Visa into the country, so it didn't end up being all that cheap after all. We had 10 hours till our train left for Sofia.

We were starving when we arrived so we went to the closest place to eat. I had heard that Turkish coffee is a big deal, so I made sure to have some. All it was was a double espresso.

We stashed our stuff in lockers and went to explore. Iain loves *donor*. I think it's his favourite food in the world so he just went nuts when he saw it for 2.50 lira. He must have eaten 4 that day. We walked into a small pottery shop which had many traditionally painted vases and other ceramics. The man in the store showed me all the different things he had. One very interesting item he showed me was called a tear collector. It is shaped like a vase but the top of it has a much smaller opening, about the diameter of a marker. When the men went away to fight in a battle, the women would cry and collect their tears in the tear collector. When the men returned, the women would show them how much they cried for them. It was supposed to show their dedication and loyalty. Interesting, but way too strange for me.

Afterwards, we went to see the famous Blue Mosque, the second largest mosque in the world. We were there at night and the mosque had a gorgeous blue glow about it. We had to take off our shoes before entering. Women had to cover their heads. I actually liked wearing the head covering. It was just a simple blue scarf, but it felt very foreign. So we stepped inside and the first thing we saw was the biggest chandelier I have ever seen. It hung from the top of the mosque all the way down 7 feet above the floor. Every inch of the floor was covered in rugs with very complicated designs. Just gorgeous. That night, we got on the train 15 minutes before it was scheduled to leave, 10 PM. Once the train started to move, I looked at my watch, and it was exactly 10 PM. That was impressive. In Canada our trains are almost never on time, and our buses are even tardier.

Third stop, Sofia. After 13½ hours on the train, we arrived in the capital of Bulgaria.

Andriana and her fiancé, Lubo, met us at the train station. When we were first planning our trip, Andriana told us that we could stay with relatives. However, a lot more people ended up coming, so she didn't have any space for us. Iain and I were disappointed, as we were really looking forward to staying with some folks who didn't speak English and would feed us really strange food. However, all 8 of us in our group ended up staying at a hostel. My first hostel experience! I had heard a lot about them: lots of people, uncomfortable beds, huge communal bathrooms. I was disappointed to find that we were put into rooms of 4 each, the bathroom was communal, but very much like one at home, and the beds were very comfortable. Since it was low season, and there were only 3 other rooms on our floor, we were the only ones there. I was told that it was not a very authentic hostel experience.

That night, Andriana's parents had a dinner party arranged for her and Lubo's friends at a nearby restaurant. There were about 30 of us. I was the first one to start using Bulgarian words from the guide book. The waiters seemed to be quite entertained at our attempts and helped us with our pronunciation. There were many kinds of food that we had never tried or heard of. There was the Bulgarian sausage called *kebabche*, *shopska* salad was to be eaten while having a drink of *rakya*, and there was a type of tomato paste called *lutenica*. *Rakya* is like whisky and it is at around 60% alcohol. The home made stuff can go up to 70%. The *shopska* salad was a mixture of diced tomatoes and cucumber, chopped onions and sweet peppers, with a huge pile of shredded cheese that tasted like feta cheese. Then you could eat it plain or add vinegar and/or olive oil. Delish! *Lutenica* has the colour and consistency of tomato paste but is eaten like ketchup. It's the taste that is different, *lutenica* doesn't taste processed and is more tomatoey than ketchup. Those two were my favourite things to eat in Bulgaria.

The traditional Eastern Orthodox

wedding was a few days later. The whole ceremony was about 25 minutes and we stood the whole time. They walked into the church and halfway to the altar, they stopped and the priest said some things, they put on the rings and continued down the aisle. At the altar, there was some singing, lighting of candles, and crowns were put on them. That was pretty cool.

At the reception, there were some interesting traditions. There was a brass bell with flowers wrapped around it. The bride had to kick it and the flowers that fell out would tell you about the kids they would have in the future. The mother of the groom had to bake a huge round loaf of bread. About the diameter of a steering wheel and the thickness of a coffee mug. Bride and groom had to sit back to back on chairs and reach up to hold onto the bread above their heads. Then, at the signal, they had to pull and whoever got the bigger piece was the one who was boss of the marriage. Andriana got the bigger piece; we knew she was going to be the boss, anyway. There was lots of dancing. We even tried a few of the traditional Bulgarian dances. They started us off with the simpler dances which were just a few steps to the side with a few kicks. We could manage that. Then they increased the difficulty and taught us a few new dances which included jumps and twists. Iain would have won the Best Effort Award; he stayed on the dance floor longer than any of us. We had a really great time at the wedding, we talked, danced, drank, met new people. The next day, we left for Budapest.

Fourth stop, Belgrade. Our train to Budapest took us through Serbia. We had read in guide books that we might have to bribe the customs officials so they don't give us a hard time. On the contrary, the Serbian customs officials were the most pleasant ones we had encountered on our trip. They were very professional and everything went smoothly. Throughout the train ride, I saw the most beautiful scenery and smelled the most wonderful air in the world. The train tracks were lined with many flower-bearing trees

which made the air absolutely heavenly. Iain tried to pick some while the train was moving which was not such a safe idea, but he managed to get me some flowers which made the inside of our cabin smell amazing.

We had an hour to burn when we arrived in Belgrade so we got some food and took some pictures. Food was surprisingly cheap; Iain and I managed to buy enough food and drinks for three people for the equivalent of 5 euros. All of the staff inside the train station spoke English and they were all so very helpful. We got back on our train and continued the journey.

Fifth stop, Budapest. We arrived after a whole day of travelling. It was early in the morning and we passed by the most wonderful smelling bakery. So we stopped to try a few of the pastries which tasted as good as they smelled. That day, we did a three-hour bus tour of the city. There were some really interesting things we learned. No building in Budapest can be higher than 96 metres. The city's deepest point, the Danube River, is 96 metres from sea level, and that is the relevance. To decide on parliament, there was a contest and three buildings were built. The winner was a very large gothic style building. Actually, with the money spent on creating that building, a town for 50,000 people could be built.

We saw Heroes Square, some famous thermal baths, St Stephan's Basilica, and we went up to Gellert Hill. The hill is named after St Gellert, a bishop who was thrown to his death from that hill. He converted Hungary to Christianity, which was a very bloody process. The pagans didn't agree with his doings and threw him from the hill. [Editor's note: As he reads this Nova's uncle, Andrew Francis Starr, is undoubtedly yelling "Go, you hairy pagans!"]

During our stay in Budapest, we tried all sorts of food, but my favourite dish was goulash. We also went to a thermal bath. There were three different pools with different temperatures. The coldest, at 23EC, was used as an exercise pool. The other two

were at 30E and 37EC. One had a whirlpool which would push you around its diameter with really strong jets. When we switched to the warmest pool, there were about 10 middle aged and senior men playing chess in the pool. They looked just like the people in the pictures!

Sixth stop, Vienna. Iain and I split up from our friends and went to Vienna on our own. When we got off the tram, we were slightly lost, and then this woman approached us and asked if she could help us. She was pushing a stroller and was going the other way, but then turned around to help us and walked us straight to our hotel.

The next day, Iain and I were looking for a dry cleaner. Andriana got lipstick on his jacket at the wedding when she went to hug him. This woman standing nearby somehow knew we were looking for something and just approached us to help. Coincidentally, she was pushing a stroller too. She had just moved to the area and couldn't think of a dry cleaner, so she offered to clean Iain's jacket for him. Wow! What nice people we met in Austria.

We went to the Natural History museum in a gorgeous renaissance-style building. There was a simulation of how the tectonic plates of the earth have moved in the past and how they will move in the future. The plates initially formed one continent called Pangaea. The simulation showed us that 250 million years in the future the plates will unite once again and look similar to Pangaea.

I had read in guide books that Viennese operas are a big deal and that you can find cheap tickets for many operas. When we were leaving the museum, this man wearing a very old fashioned outfit from the days of Mozart, approached us with opera tickets. He showed us the program for that night's show which consisted of music by Mozart, Beethoven, Strauss, some ballet performances and of course the opera. We were quite interested but I didn't think that we could afford the tickets. He sold them to us

for 35 Euros each, which was a good deal. I was so excited! I had never been to the opera before. That day we did a lot of sightseeing. We went to the crypt where many of the royal family had been buried. We went to the Schönbrunn palace. The opera was just as great as I had expected. I absolutely loved it.

We went to the Riesenrad which is a famous ferris wheel and a landmark of Vienna. We also went to see the Roman ruins, the Spanish Riding School, the royal gardens, and we went through a labyrinth. I really liked Vienna, one of my favourite cities. I definitely want to go back.

Seventh stop, Munich, where we rejoined our friends. The train station was huge. I was looking for a washroom and it cost 1.10 euro.

I really like Europe, but having to pay to do something that comes naturally for your body is ridiculous. Washrooms and water should come free. Other than that, Europe is pretty impressive and quite advanced. Especially Germany. While we were in Munich, we went to the concentration camp in Dachau. We took a tour of it and I really learned a lot about World War II. This particular concentration camp was the first one built.

We also went to a beer garden. There are hundreds of tables and chairs set up. It is the biggest in Germany, more than one acre. There were trees hovering over top, which could protect us if it rained. We had beer, sausages, and sauerkraut.

Eighth stop, Paris. By the time we arrived in Paris, we were feeling ready to go home, but we still had a few more stops. The second night we were there was the last night for everyone else in our group. We all went out for dinner and walked along the Champs Elysées towards the Arc de Triomphe. It's absolutely beautiful at night.

Iain and I decided that we would like to go to a small town for a few days to sit and do absolutely nothing. We were looking at places online and we found this one town of 500 called Giverny. The only famous thing about this place was that it was the home of

Monet when he painted some of his famous water lilies and a Japanese bridge. There was one particular place that was on the water with a large patio and big lounge chairs. It looked like the perfect relaxing spot. Since we had gotten away with booking all of our accommodations with little or no advance notice, we didn't think there would be any problem calling two days before. However, we found out the whole town was booked weeks in advance. That definitely ate it on a stick. So we decided to go to St Cloud, which is between Versailles and Paris.

One night in St Cloud we came across a Lebanese restaurant. We had never tried Lebanese food before. The waiter gave us a little introduction of all the different kinds of food and he suggested bringing a little of everything. It was great! Lots of pita bread, dip, cheeses.

We went to Versailles and saw the royal palace. There was a lake in the gardens. I have a classmate from my time at the University of Havana who was working in Paris and showed us around the city Paris. We passed by an open air market where there was a man selling dried fruit. He gave us a sample of dried strawberries, something we had never heard of. Wow! It was the best dried fruit I ever tried. We went to a really popular *falafel* joint. It was my first time having falafel.

Ninth Stop, Düsseldorf. Iain did a German exchange in Düsseldorf a few summers ago, so we thought that we should visit his exchange partner, Sven Schnippenkoetter. Isn't that a great name? It just sounds so authentically German. Sven and his friend Chicken entertained us while we were visiting. Chicken dances in a dance company, and he was doing a performance at a school reunion. Great show. While we were there, Iain and I went to Cologne for a day. During all the bombings in World War II, Cologne was completely destroyed except for the famous Cologne Cathedral that stood tall and in one piece among the rubble. We

went to see that and the Schokoladenmuseum (Chocolate Museum).

At Sven's house, we ate lots of good meaty German food. I eat meat, but not a lot, so eating all the meat that I did in Bulgaria and Germany was a new experience. I don't want to eat the much again. We had lots of sausages, meat spreads, and meaty pasta sauce.

Tenth stop, Berlin. Berlin is Iain's favourite city in the world, not counting Toronto, so we definitely had to go. We took a four-hour walking tour of the city which was quite informative. We went to the Jewish memorial, Reichstag building, Berlin Wall, former SS buildings, Brandenburg Gate, Russian Embassy, Checkpoint Charlie, and so many other places. We passed by a famous chocolate factory called L. Fassbender. Iain had been there the year before and said that he had the best hot chocolate ever there so we definitely had to have some. The menu had 10 different versions of hot chocolate. So we had hot chocolate and a chocolate dessert each. It was very chocolatey. I really liked Berlin. However, we were only there for a day and a half.

We took the train to Frankfurt and flew back to Toronto from there. Our whole trip took 3.5 weeks. One of my favourite things about the trip was all of the train travel. We bought a Eurail pass for C\$550 and that entitled us to 10 days of travel. What that meant was that we could take as many trains as we wanted in one day, and that counted as one day of travel. So when we went to Cologne and took the train there and back, that counted as one day. We could take any train we wanted because there was no difference for us. In Germany, we took ICE (inter city express) trains. They were the fastest. At one point, one of our trains was going 250km/h!

While travelling through Austria and Germany, we saw fields of wind turbines! I was so impressed with how those two countries were making such an effort to find

alternative sources of energy. Many of the houses had solar panels on them, including Sven's house.

Seeing all of these differences in Europe made me think of all the improvements we need to make in Canada. However, there were a few things I hated. When you ask for water, they give you carbonated water. That stuff is gross. Paying for water in a restaurant is really dumb too. No matter if its carbonated or flat, water should be free! Paying for washrooms is a pain. And the worst thing of all, is all the indoor smoking that is permitted everywhere!

Overall, I really like Europe. On the surface, the culture may not seem that different, but the exoticness of being surrounded by countries with different languages and the ease of travelling and experiencing all the differences is very exciting. Some places may only differ by language, but it's the language that's so exciting.

So, as the Bulgarians say, "Nazdrave!" (Cheers)

\*\*\*\*\*

#### LIVING WITH A SHINY HANDLE

From time to time, these pages have been graced with the thoughts and reflections of the editor's darling daughter, SuperNova Yerakina Starr. Just the other day me esteemed friend Jay "Skuz" Harker asked how her name affects her in daily life. Is it a social burden to have such a flagrantly unique name?

Quite the contrary. It suits her very well, and some years ago, when she was a teenager, she sent me an e-mail saying "Oh, Daddy, thank you so much for giving me such a cool name." She gets effusive like that every now and then. So, Skuz, that answers your question, but I think you (and some others) probably have another one. How did the name come about? In *Antic Antilleana* no. 42, I expounded the two cardinal rules for naming offspring, but that's

not the same as showing how they work in practice. Here, then, is the true narrative.

Before we got married, Maite & I had a sober, rational discussion on the subject of children. After due deliberation, we agreed that we would have two, one girl and one boy, in that sequence. Fine. That was settled. Before the first of these was even conceived I had a dream, in which we had a little daughter. My buddy Robert "Karma Bob" Franklin was over at the house one day, and Maite instructed the two of us to take the little girl down to the city hall to register her name. And she told us what name to put.

So the three of us started walking toward the city center. We were about half-way there when it suddenly occurred to me that I had forgotten the name. "Say, Bob" I asked, "what name did she tell us to register?"

"Gee, I don't know" he replied, "I figured you were paying attention to that." Now, this was a real dilemma. If we went and put the wrong name on the official record there would be major trouble on the home front, but if we had to turn back and admit we had forgotten it we would look like idiots. So there we stood on the sidewalk, two doctors of philosophy, unable to remember one name.

It was then that I had my bright idea. "You know, Bob" I said, "this kid's about six years old. Why don't we just ask her her name?" Bob allowed that that was a good idea, so we hunkered down and addressed her: "Uh, little girl, would you mind telling us your name?" And, clear as a bell, she answered "My name is SuperNova Starr, but you can call me Nova."

And that, dear friends, is the true story of her name. It came to me in a dream. The middle name, Yerakina, is from a greek folk song by the Limelitters.

Let me also mention that two nights later I had the very same dream, except this time it was a little boy, who said his name was Super DeNovo Starr. Even in a dream, I knew that was a shuck and a jive, and I woke up laughing.

\*\*\*\*\*

## SHAKING ALL OVER

I have been in several earthquakes in various places and have thought they were all great fun. Someday I may experience one that is frightening, but it hasn't happened yet.

We had a test one morning last year, about 100 students in a ground-floor lab. We had just started when the room got to seriously shaking. There were many frightened looks and even a few screams, but Starr does not choke in an emergency. The building was not about to collapse, but I did worry that flourescent lights could fall on heads, so I told the kids to move away from under the lights, while my assistants opened all the doors. When the shaking didn't stop immediately, I ordered them under the lab tables. Probably quite unnecessary, but one prefers to take precautions. That was by far the vigourosest earthquake it has been my pleasure to experience. I later learned that it had scored Richter 5.5, with the epicenter just off the north coast of Trinidad.

And then, would you believe it?, it was the same scene all over again during another lab test that afternoon. Richter 5.1 this time. You know how the ground seems to keep on shifting after you get back onto dry land from being on a boat? It's the same with an earthquake. When it was all over I had to put a jar of fluid on the countertop to convince my confused senses that the shaking had truly stopped.

Ah yes, I do like an earthquake.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Scenes from Village Life

### WILD LIFE. Part 1. SAY YO TO BUGS

The great mass of humanity during much of its history lived in villages, and throughout the world many still do. Even so, to most people in our time village life is a very foreign state of being. As a rule, the members of a village know one another (often much too well) and may be demonstrably related over several generations. Some very stable city neighbourhoods mimic this pattern to an extent, and -- aside from the relatedness -- and we find something similar in some workplaces. One aspect that I first noticed while participating in traditional village celebrations in Southeast Asia has to do with roles within the society. These tend to be much better defined and more fixed than in less traditional societies.

I reside in a village up the Caura Valley in Trinidad's Northern Range. Virtually everyone up my valley lives in one diffuse community. I don't know the population of Caura Village, but I am told that about 50 or 60 of us are on the voting list, so I would guess that there are roughly 200 people in all.

In this issue I open a new occasional feature, in which I comment on features of Caura as they catch my attention. It should be quite an education to you city-slickers out there.

Villages exist at the interface between houses and farmland, and sometimes forest.

As such, they are home to a great many creatures that partake of two or more of these habitats. My place, Obronikrom, is a fine example of this. Just across the way is a lively little stream, with a substantial secondary forest right behind it. And on the hillside above the house is second-growth that I am slowly turning back into forest. There are a few fruit trees and ornamental palms around the house, and I sometimes put plants of interest in pots on the patio.

In an earlier issue I mentioned the wealth of

daddy-longlegs spiders, *Physocyclus globosus*, in the house, and there are others.

The bathroom often harbours spitting spiders (Scytodidae), which catch their prey not with silk snares but by spitting a viscous fluid from their chelicerae. I sometimes find them preying on *Physocyclus*, and on two occasions I have come upon one in the web of a *Physocyclus*, eating the occupant. This suggests that the spitting spiders actively invade the other's web, something that has not been reported in this family, as far as I know.

Obronikrom's most spectacular spider is certainly the tarantula *Avicularia avicularia*. This large, hairy spider is richly brown-black over most of its body, with a distinct red tinge around the chelicerae and at the tips of its feet. There are always several of them living inside the house and at least a couple more under the eaves. They mostly stay in their tubular silk retreats during the day and come out to hunt at night. Sometimes when I have insomnia I watch them on the prowl across the ceiling of my bedroom -- so far, none has lost its footing and fallen on my face -- and around the edges, moving with slow deliberation.

One night I was witness to a most riveting performance, a male stalking a female for purposes of reproduction (or maybe just base sexual gratification; after all, tarantulas are only human). Although I could see that she was just a couple of meters away, he didn't know where she was. Still, he had touched and smelled her silk dragline, so he knew the trail was fresh. As he got closer, moving with great deliberation, she evidently became aware of him and seemed to go on alert. Now, the dangers of mating in spiders are grossly exaggerated in the public imagination, but they are not trivial.

Spiders are all predatory, and the males is usually somewhat smaller than the female, just about right for eating. If she is already mated and is hungry, well, his value as prey may outweigh his value as a prospective mate, so he does well to tread carefully.

That's what made the whole drama so

gripping. She was skittish and potentially lethal. He behaved as one would expect of an animal caught between mad desire and terrible fear. He approached, one millimeter at a time. She stayed put, in the on-guard position, forelegs raised and chelicerae at ready. He got to stroking her, tentatively at first, then with growing confidence, as she relaxed her guard. And then they absolutely consummated their understanding. Right there in plain view in front of me. I tell you, friends, a movie of these proceedings would have rated as positively pornographic.

Obronikrom plays occasional host to many species of social insects and is the regular habitat of several more. A wealth of wasps and bees come to the fallen mangoes and the ornamental palms in flower. Several species of social wasps nest under the eaves. I have three species of stingless bees -- including the kleptoparasitic *Lestrimelitta limao* -- nesting right on the house and another on the grounds. For someone of my interests who didn't set foot in the tropics and see his first stingless bee colony until he was 29, this is quite grand. And several times a year army ants (usually *Eciton burchelli*) raid around the house, sometimes coming right inside. Again, I never saw army ants until I first went to Costa Rica in 1979, so this is always a thrill.

The other great group of social insects, termites, is also well represented. Now, I respect termites and regard them for the most part as a force for good in the environment, but I confess that I don't want them in the house and am even prepared to take unreasonable measures against any that happen to penetrate. I have to keep vigilant, because the very interesting *Nasutitermes corniger*, in particular, shows a persistent disinclination to take a hint. A while back I found that it had invaded one of my bookshelves and surreptitiously sampled quite a number of volumes, so that a general cleaning of that area was needed. At that time it was my custom to keep my copy of the Qu'ran sandwiched in between V.S.

Naipaul's *Among the Believers* and Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Shirin Haque was most amused when she learned that the termites had irreparably savaged Rushdie's book, while leaving the Qu'ran untouched. She interpreted this as divine retribution, although to me it was just an accident of material composition.

Several solitary wasps and bees also grace the premises. The spider wasp *Priochilus captivum* is especially welcome. During the nesting season I often come upon clusters of their darling little mud cells in various out-of-the-way crevices. I have now collected some hundreds of them, which have yielded a nice data-set on nest structure and primary sex-ratio, as well as enough prey to convince me that this species hunts only jumping spiders (Salticidae), at least here. Also during the right season, a spider-hunting wasp of a different family, *Trypoxylon nitidum*, nests abundantly in the bamboo trap-nests that I set out in various parts of the house. It makes the place feel that much homier to have these nice little wasps darting busily about the place.

Perhaps the most interesting solitary wasp evidently isn't really solitary. *Trypoxylon maidli* is another mud-nesting, spider-hunting wasp of a group that is characteristically solitary. However, it builds nests of many cells, usually on the outer walls of the house, that are characteristically occupied by several adult females at once. A similar habit is seen in the closely-related *T. manni*, which nests under road banks here and in other parts of Trinidad. Al Hook is studying *T. manni*, and in time he will be able to tell us just what its social organization is.

And I sometimes get orchid bees nesting in the house, even in the bedroom. This is of course much appreciated, although I would just as soon they didn't plug various crevices and orifices with their resin.

In the nighttime, many bugs come to the lights. During their various mating seasons there are swarms of ants and termites. The

nocturnal social wasps *Apoica pallida* and *A. pallens* show up often. There are beetles and a wealth of moths too. However, the most notable such visitors are probably the cockroaches. There is a lovely lithe little green one that comes and goes silently. And there is *Blaberus atropes*, is a whacking great beast, 6 cm long and 3 cm broad that is far from silent. It comes in with an unmistakable rustling, wing-flapping noise before it goes, and I'm glad it feels so good about the place. As for the kinds of cockroaches that can become household pests, well, Obronikrom is too far from neighbouring houses to receive a frequent influx, and the tarantulas and I show no mercy to the occasional one that does appear.

\*\*\*\*\*

### Cultural Conjectures

#### WATCHING THE ACADEMY

It is odd that very little of substance is written about the academic life, since it is really quite a peculiar subculture. This is true, regardless of whether one considers that the academy has any claim to legitimacy.

Now, here is something that has long struck me. Academics are supposed to be specialists in knowing things and communicating those things well, and most are probably better than average at it. Still, I think it is indisputable that very few are really outstanding communicators, and many who are quite dreadful at it not only persist in academia but feel right at home there. Everyone in my business has amazed, bemused stories about this or that learned professor, who undoubtedly thought brilliant thoughts, but who seemed quite incapable of saying what was on his mind or even of conceiving the question of whether Communication was at home in his classroom.

Furthermore, there is a more or less consistent pattern across disciplines with respect to communication. In my (extensive) experience, linguists and literary types are by

far the worst. (This amuses me a great deal.) And I believe the most communicative group, on average, is -- get this -- the engineers. How do we square this with the engineers' formidable reputation for social maladresse? How can someone be socially so awkward and yet so adept at expressing himself once he knows what he thinks?

My hypothesis -- more of a notion, really -- reflects well on engineers. It is that they are socially awkward because they don't really care to be otherwise. And they craft their expression because to do otherwise is not an option, as far as they are concerned. You can see this as a sort of quiet arrogance if you like, but I would treat as a compliment.

It is just the opposite of the specialist word-watchers. We biologists are close to the engineering end of the spectrum.

Mathematicians are the real anomaly. Socially, they seem to be at least average, but they are chronically incapable of explaining themselves to anyone outside of their speciality. It is a rare mathematician, indeed, who shows any talent to even try to tell others what numbers do and why they do are so cool. It is a deep puzzlement to me that they can stand not to spread the word, yet plainly they are perfectly content to keep it to themselves.

In future, if I can find the motivation, I may reveal to you where deans come from. You can probably figure it out for yourself, but it's not pretty.

\*\*\*\*\*