

# ETAOIN SHRDLU

C.K. Starr's newsletter to family and friends  
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## Wandering

NO MAMES, GÜEY  
by SuperNova Y. Starr

In the summer of 2007 I did a Spanish course in Mexico City. My dad had suggested Mexico, because they have a pleasant manner of speech there and the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) has a highly regarded language programme. I was really excited about being immersed again in a Spanish-speaking culture, after the previous year's course in Cuba.

On arrival, I searched the classified section at the UNAM website and found a place close to campus. It was a house with six other UNAM students, all Mexican, conveniently close to a grocery store and the metro station. Four of my roommates were guys. I wasn't sure what that would be like, but all were super friendly. They took me to different parts of the city and introduced me to Mexican food. Living in Canada, I had never even learned the difference between a taco, a quesadilla, and a fajita. Mexican dishes are usually spicy, so I decided to do as my housemates do and put on a lot of salsa verde. I wanted to be able to tolerate spicier foods. The three hot sauces that I most commonly saw were salsa verde, salsa roja, and guacamole. In Canada, I have never had spicy guacamole, so one day when I just piled it onto my tacos, I was very surprised to have a burning mouth.

My roommates loved to teach me their slang and groserías. Now, you might imagine that groserías means groceries\*, but it doesn't. It means vulgar expressions. One of the colloquialisms that I learned was "No mames, güey". It has many uses, including "Don't mess with me", "Don't patronize me" and "Stop kidding around". I had to take the phrase apart to be able to completely understand it. No means no; mames is the informal command of mama, which means to feed, usually to breastfeed; and güey generally means dude. If we were having a conversation, they would tell me which times would be appropriate to use the expressions they taught me. When I met them, I asked my roommates to correct me if I made a mistake. Some of them wanted to practice their English with me, which was fine, but I also wanted to speak as much Spanish as I could. So we came up with a way that we could do both: They would speak to me in English and I would speak to them in Spanish. To an outsider it must have seemed strange, but it was a great way to learn.

I started class at 9 every morning. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, we had class until 2 p.m., but on Tuesdays and Thursdays we had class until 2:30 p.m. The majority of my classmates were either American or Korean. It was very surprising that there were so many Koreans learning Spanish. I didn't meet any other Canadians. An interesting thing that I learned about myself when I was there was that my social skills

have vastly improved over the past few years. I realized that it was mostly due to having friends in Trinidad and Canada, going to Cuba for a month by myself, and going to Mexico. If I wanted to maintain my relationships in Trinidad, I would have to make more of an effort since I usually see these people only once or twice a year. Going to Cuba, I had classmates from every continent and I didn't come with friends, so to make the best out of it I had to make new friends. Now, coming to Mexico, I had to make friends again, unless I wanted to be alone for my whole trip. Since I love to travel so much, I love meeting people from different countries, especially ones where English is not the main language. It seems so much more exotic.

My classes at UNAM were better than class in Cuba. I actually learned things I could apply to my daily conversation. I noticed how I was able to identify those new concepts I learned in the conversation of the native speakers around me. I had a morning teacher until noon and then a second teacher in the afternoon. There were about 11 of us in the class. Both of my teachers were so engaging and interesting that I learned and understood everything they taught right away. They gave us homework every day, some obligatory and some optional. The topics we talked about in class were interesting. I learned about my classmates, the countries they came from, and about my Spanish teachers.

The closest friend I made was a girl named Dani from Hawaii. She was in my class and was living with her Mexican boyfriend for the summer. Everyone at school was very friendly, and some of them invited us to parties at their place. Even our professors went to the parties. The fun thing about Mexican parties is that if I were invited to a party, I could bring other people along without having to ask the host. It's perfectly acceptable to do that unless the host specifically tells you otherwise. So I always brought at least one of my roommates along.

I learned so much, mostly because we went for full immersion. Almost all of my classmates spoke English, but I only knew that because they told me. We never spoke in English. If we didn't know a certain word, we would describe it in Spanish to each other to see if someone else knew it. And we didn't speak too quickly, so that others could understand. In and out of class, we only spoke in Spanish. Another thing I did was buy the Spanish versions of my favourite magazines, Cosmopolitan and Glamour.

Dani and I did lots of touristy things outside of class. We went to a place south of the city called Xochimilco. The name means floating garden in Nahuatl. Xochimilco is a town full of canals. These floating gardens were made many many years ago by dropping soil in the lakes and gardening on top of that. There were so many of these floating gardens that they eventually formed canals. Now, it is a very popular tourist attraction to take a ride along the canals in a trajinera, which is similar to a gondola. There were families that rented large trajineras and had birthday parties on them. There were people selling food and refreshments, people were selling jewellery and novelty items, and there were some bands that played songs for about 25 pesos (C\$2.50). We bought a song, La Bamba.

Dani and I also went to Teotihuacán to see two famous pyramids. Teotihuacán was the capital of one of the largest pre-Hispanic empires and located there are the Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon. It's so gorgeous and interesting to look at all the buildings and structures. We decided to climb the Pyramid of the Sun first. It didn't look all that hard, but being already 2 km above sea level and climbing very steep

steps on a hot day can make you feel faint quickly, so we took our time and eventually got there. At the top, we had a wonderful view, and the windiness helped cool us off. We ventured on towards the Pyramid of the Moon and decided that if we climbed the first five steps of that one, we would still be able to say that we climbed it. So that's what we did. There were so many vendors there with all sorts of really cool gifts, so I bought an Aztec calendar.

One thing I decided while I was there was that I would never shop at Walmart again. I've always heard lots of terrible things about Walmart. They treat their employees horribly by letting them work just below the full time status so they won't get health benefits, paying minimum wage, and manipulating unions. I always thought that was bad, but then I learned that what they do in Mexico is even worse. They have a terrible strategy that has killed many small businesses. A Walmart will establish itself somewhere and the community thinks it's good because the prices are low and now more jobs will be available. However, in the beginning the prices are set so low that they beat out all the competition. Once competition is gone, the prices are raised, and the people who live there don't have much of a choice, since there is no longer any competition. This problem is most prominent in the rural areas. It doesn't really happen in Mexico City because of the size and the ease of getting to other locations through buses and the metro. Just recently a Walmart was built in Teotihuacán. Teotihuacán is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It is disturbing when businesses are established to serve themselves and not the communities.

I made sure in this trip to do a lot of sightseeing. While I did have an amazing time in Cuba, I didn't spend much time going to museums or seeing monuments, which I should have. I really loaded up on that in Mexico. Especially with my UNAM student card, I was able to go everywhere for free! I went to the Museum of Art, Museum of Anthropology, Chapultepec forest, Museum of Mexico City, a very large main square called the Zócalo, metropolitan cathedral, and lots of other cultural places.

I really improved my Spanish with this trip, so that I could hear and understand close to everything that was being said. Transitioning between the two languages is much more natural for me now, and I don't have to focus too hard on what I'm saying, so it flows nicely. Mexico is the 22nd country I have visited. I feel very lucky to have opportunities to learn outside of school and really experience a culture.

\* (Editor's note) A reasonable enough imagining, as *grosseria* is an Italian word for grocery store.

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## Cultural Conjectures

### OH NO, MORE STUFF ABOUT MOVIES

In the "Rite of Spring" segment of *Fantasia* all of the animals except one are like real animals in their movements. The makers evidently couldn't bring themselves to let *Tyrannosaurus rex* behave like a real reptile, so instead it is basically another Godzilla. And that, dear friends, is how the Japanese had a piece of Hollywood's biggest production for 1940.

English feature movies, for the most part, have a single common theme: social class. A great many american movies, on the other hand, are about government. Not just politics but the federal government. Within a week I have seen Gene Hackman and Ronnie Cox in substantial roles as the President of the United States, and several others have had that role in recent years. I don't recall ever having seen or even heard of a canadian or japanese feature movie about government, and I wonder if the Italians ever make a movie about government with which Kafka would not have felt comfortable.

Why are english and australian actors so good at switching accents? I believe there are two separate answers. Because english movies are about social class, actors have to be able to change accent with role. Compare Anthony Hopkins in *The Remains of the Day* and *Howard's End*. (And please don't tell me "Aha, Anthony Hopkins is welsh, not english." A Welshman who accepts an english knighthood has irreparably compromised his welshness. The same goes for that jiveass scottish nationalist, Sir Sean Connery.) And what kind of career would Bob Hoskins have if he were limited to his regular accent?

On the other hand, the demand for actors to play Australians must be quite limited. I think I've only seen Sam Neill act australian twice, Mel Gibson once, and Nicole Kidman and Russell Crowe never.

The Americans are getting better at this (exceptions: Uma Thurman in *The Avengers*, Keanu Reeves and Wynona Ryder in *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, and didn't William Hurt make you cringe in *Jane Eyre*?), but they can't match the English and Australians. In an american role, it doesn't much matter whether one sounds rustic, working-class or ritzy, even regional.

I cannot have complete confidence in any filmmaker who deals out neither landscapes nor interiors with a loving hand. The English seem especially good at this. Furthermore, it is preferred that light and shadows be treated with at least an attempt at evenhandedness.

Steven Spielberg's uniqueness is easily stated. He is the only major director in Hollywood who can bring himself to make an entire movie without gags. Most american movies are comedies -- even horror movies? why, yes, especially horror movies -- because the other directors don't have the nerve not to crack a joke from time to time. That is why we keep seeing/hearing gags at unexpected, inappropriate moments, like the idiotic singing and dancing in Indian movies.

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#### A RE-ORIENTING DREAM

I am watching the shooting of a movie in the studio. At the start of the scene, John Goodman is lying passively on a bed, fully clothed. Daniel Craig comes in and proceeds to undress him, using nothing but his teeth.

Okay, that's the dream, and you don't have to be Dr Freud to figure out what it means. So I sat down and sent a letter to Dan Savage. I related the dream and then said, Now, Dan, I'm not asking whether this means I'm gay, because I don't

have to. Straight guys don't dream of hunky Daniel Craig undressing fat old John Goodman with his teeth. That's not the question. Rather, how am I ever going to tell my kids, my ex-wives and the other women I have romanced over the years that, in truth and in fact, I am nothing but a great big homo?

I still haven't heard back from him, which just goes to show you that occasionally even Dan Savage can be stumped. Or maybe it's just to vanilla for him. If you're not familiar with his weekly column, Savage Love, you can get it online or in any of the various editions of the *City Paper*.

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## YOU WANT MORE DREAMS? I CAN'T IMAGINE WHY

I am a freshman at Harvard. At the same age I am now, no less. At first everything is going just fine, but then I lose the keys to my locker and dorm room, and when I go to request replacements I can't remember my number. From there the normal pace of things quickly slides into an on-and-on-and-on tale of unresolved difficulties by Kafka. I wake up thinking that the events described by Kafka are really quite ordinary in dreams, at least in mine.

I am in a strange city and need to take the bus to a particular station, from which I can walk home. There are plenty of bus stops serving various routes, and I wander and wander, looking for the right one. At first it seems that I am in London, but then I come upon a great big open square and figure I must be in Moscow. About that time I have to wade across a deep-flooded street. I get soaked almost up to my waist, which nobody else seems to notice. Then I find the right bus stop, but it turns out that what I need isn't a bus but a route taxi. Just as I get in, the taxi is full and ready to roll. I am sitting in the front seat and turn to address my buddy in the back seat. I need to tell the driver what stop we want, but I can't quite think of its name. It's one of those on-the-tip-of-one's-tongue situations. "Say, Ned" I say, "name a major battle in Algeria." He immediately replies "The Battle of Abouzin", and I say "Yes, that's it. Driver, we want to go to Abouzin Station."

When I woke up I looked up Abouzin, but there doesn't appear to be any such place. I was evidently thinking of the Battle of Aboukir, at the mouth of the Nile, where Napoleon defeated the Turks in 1799. Or maybe I wasn't thinking of that at all and just made up Abouzin, Algeria. Dreams will do that sometimes.

I am watching two or three sports hooligans mixing it up outside a stadium. And then a great big crowd of hooliganish sports fans marches up the street. What is striking is that, although their colours show that they represent two rival teams, they are intermingled and marched peaceably, as if with a common purpose. They are plainly intent on brawling, but it is all quite ritualized. The column enters the stadium and onto the field, where they get even more ritualized in the good-naturedest brawl imaginable.

A play is going to be produced. A comedy of manners, I believe. The director is none other than Gerald B. Grant. He calls all the players together, gives us copies of the play

and tells us our parts. I am to play a middle-aged woman named, I believe, Ramona. [Make of that what you can, Dr Freud.]

So I take the play home with me and read it that night, starting to formulate how I will play Ramona. I know that Gerry won't be one of those directors who refuse to entertain suggestions from the actors, and I do have a suggestion. I think Ramona should be smoking a cigarillo when she first appears. There is some concern that the theater might forbid smoking, even on stage, but I think the cigarillo will help to define Ramona. I'm eager to talk with Gerry the next day and see what he thinks of my idea.

I am dating a lady who used to be Arnold Schwarzenegger's girlfriend. Relations among the three of us are all very friendly and civilized, and in the dream Arnold and I are at the lady's beach house of a weekend. She is somewhere about the house when the two of us come in from swimming. We get showered and then I take a notion to tackle Arnold and wrestle him to the ground, show him who's boss.

Surprise is on my side, and I have him down, both of us still naked, when he cuts a wicked fart. I go into a mock rage. "Apologize!" I scream. "Apologize, you bastard!" He just laughs at me, so I yell "That does it. I'm [expletive deleted] punishing you for that unless you apologize", and I get really rough, while he responds with another fart. The fact that Arnold could toss me across the room with one arm any time he pleases makes the whole thing quite hilarious.

My girlfriend comes rushing in, sees the two of us wrestling furiously on her living room floor while I scream curses, and just stares at us in consternation, while Arnold and I collapse in laughter.

Okay, Dr Freud, let's have it. Naked wrestling with Arnold Schwarzenegger. Does that mean something?

I am on death row, awaiting execution by lethal injection, probably some time that evening. I tell the captain of the guards I would like to go out and have a last word with a few folks, and he says Go ahead, just be sure to get back before nightfall. So, I stroll over to my place or work, which appears to be the Biological Sciences Building at the University of Georgia. I wander the halls, greeting old friends, expecting them to comment on my impending execution. Oddly, no one seems to have been reading the papers, because they don't seem to know anything about it. It is all rather disappointing, actually, as I had been looking forward to basking in the notoriety. There is no sense in hanging around, so I stroll back to the jail well before dusk.

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### Scenes from Village Life

#### LAUGHING ALL THE WAY

There is a single dead-end road that runs up the Caura Valley from the populated flatlands below. Obronikrom is seven kilometers up that road. There are several methods by which one can get down the valley in the morning and return in the afternoon. Some people have cars, and some, unaccountably, actually like to drive them. There are a few bicycles around, and I have Enigma. Those who have no vehicle can always walk or hitchhike.

And there is the rural bus. This makes several regular trips up and down the valley each weekday until about dusk and on Saturday until early afternoon. On weekdays the bus stops at the foot of the valley, but on Saturdays it goes the extra four kilometers to the market in Tunapuna. One driver does the morning and another the afternoon. When the bus service first began a few years ago the morning driver was a long, skinny man with a tuft of hair at the top of his elongate head, and the people called him Pencil-Point, or Pencil for short. The afternoon driver was stockier, with a square bald head, so I named him Eraserhead, or just Eraser. Now Pencil has been replaced by an affable old lad with short hair and beard all around, to whom I have not yet given a name. I should probably take care of that, as it's quite unseemly for the folks to simply address him as Driver.

I have my motorcycle, then, and the rural bus suits me so well that I have little use for a car. At the time of this writing I haven't driven mine in more than a month. I commonly take the first trip of the day down the valley and the last trip back up. Looking out the window is commonly a magical experience each way. The road winds along one side of the valley, often high above the gorge of the stream called -- apparently with a straight face -- the Caura River, and the forested hillsides often have tentative wisps of mist clinging to them here and there. It is enough to make a gonzosociobiologist go into a trance.

Even so, the people on the bus make the two trips very different in mood. Going down the valley in the morning, the working people are focused on the tasks ahead and tend to be withdrawn, silent, even grim. On the way back up there is a great release of tension, and many people get loud, even raucous. If a couple of the right people are on board, the air rocks with ribald backchat, to which the masses respond with arcadian hoohaw. One sometimes sees mothers tut-tutting and covering their children's ears, while trying with indifferent success to stifle their own laughter.

It is on the last trip that the social workings of village life can often be seen. I will illustrate this with two anecdotes.

Ricardo Pillai -- to whom I will dedicate a special column at some time, whether he likes it or not -- is a bit of a primitive man. He is admired as a good worker and one who will always come to his neighbours' aid in an emergency, but he never attended finishing school. Because he is an adept woodsman, he is generally known as Monkey, although I find it more dignified to call him the Monk. Now, the Monk, like many up the Caura Valley, likes his strong drink, and very few of his daily activities require sobriety, so one is not surprised if he is occasionally drunk during what most folks would consider non-drinking hours. And when he is drunk the Monk is not subdued.

So it was that the Monk got onto the bus, under the influence, just as it was about to make its last run up the valley. As we rolled, he took to strolling up and down the aisle, proffering uninvited comments and fingering the women's hair. This latter, in particular, was not appreciated, and my neighbour Yolande slapped his hand away with some heat, while he laughed. Still, he took the hint and went to bother some other women, while Yolande sat their fuming. Presently she made a comment under her breath about "certain elements in the community".

Well, I know better than to involve myself in such a situation, but my mouth does not, and my mouth fairly shouted in mock amazement "Whaaatt?? It have elements on this here bus? Elements!?" and, turning to the Monk in accusatorial fashion, I declared

"For truth, Monk, you is absolutely a element." The people positively screamed in laughter, joining in the accusation and finger-pointing at the abashed Monk. My mouth was on a roll and called out to the driver, "Hey, Pencil, I thought this supposed to be a element-free bus. Since when you lettin' elements ride?", and the bus fairly rocked. By the time we got to Yolande's stop, which was also the Monk's stop, harmony had been restored, and he was helping her to carry her stuff.

I wasn't trying to be a peace-maker, you understand, it was just a matter of the Starr mouth going off in its own direction. Still, it shows that in village life it is important to maintain harmonious relations as much as possible. In a big city one can live in isolation from one's neighbours, but not here, so that people tend to avoid lasting quarrels and to be alert to opportunities to patch things up. Even so, let me go on record that the Monk -- our Monk -- is most definitely an element.

The other incident did not end peaceably. There was an old lad standing in the bus who got to needling a young fellow seated beside him. The young fellow gave him plenty of opportunities to knock it off, but the old lad was drunk and would not take a hint. He just kept on provoking, to the point where the young fellow had had it, and the two got to slugging it out right there on the bus. Now, it was a fair enough fight, but it was in a placed crowded with innocent parties, so it had to be stopped. My buddy Jackson and I reacted immediately. We tackled the two, so that they were pinned down on the floor, right in each other's faces but unable to do any harm. Then Jackson hauled the old lad forward and off the bus, while I blocked the young fellow from also getting off. Eraser wanted us to expel the young fellow, too, but that was exactly what we didn't want, and he saw the sense of it when we told him to drive on. By the time the young fellow got off it was too far to walk back, so they never did resume the fight. The old lad died a year or so later, but it had nothing to do with the fight on the bus.

What was it all about? It was about respect. The old lad was senselessly disrespectful, really stupid, and the young fellow couldn't allow himself to tolerate it. Did he really want to get off the bus to continue the fight? Not at all. As long as he was seen to be making every effort to get at the enemy, honour was served. I was in no danger at all when I stood in his way. He wasn't mad at me.

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## RENDITIONS, THEN AS NOW

There has been much in the news about the US government, which does not condone torture, turning disaffected persons over to friendly governments that, as it happens, do torture. This practice, known as "rendition" appears not to be new. Toward the end of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, set in 14th-century Christendom, a monk is being questioned before members of his abbey by the visiting inquisitor, Bernardo Gui. Present also are the central characters of the novel, the monk William of Baskerville and his acolyte, the narrator Adso of Melk. I don't have access to the english edition, so the following is my own translation.

"Bernard tortured him ..." I whispered to William.

"Oh no, not at all" he replied. "An inquisitor never tortures. The physical body of the accused is always entrusted to the secular arm."

"But it is the same thing" I said.

"It is by no means the same, neither for the inquisitor -- whose hands remain clean -- nor for the prison. When he comes before the inquisitor, the prisoner finds in him an unexpected friendly face, a balm for his pains, to whom he then opens his heart."

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## IN CELEBRATION OF REAL PLACES

One of my classmates in high school was Bobert Salov from Aliquippa, Pennsylvania. (A real place; I didn't just make it up.) One day in the fall of 1964, someone happened to mention a place called Possum Trot, and Bobert immediately declared that he would name his first-born child Possum Trot Salov. You will certainly agree that that was worth remembering, and I did remember it, so that it was a grave disappointment to learn many years later that he had done nothing of the sort. Most likely he was overruled by Mrs Salov, or perhaps he just lost his nerve.

This came back to me not long ago when that luminary of onomastics, Edwin D. Lawson, sent an item to the American Names Society membership. It was marked for our amusement and consisted of a list of curious american place names. Burn Corn, Alabama; Greasy Corner, Arkansas; No Name, Colorado; Possum Trot, Kentucky; Hungry Horse, Montana; Hell Hollow, New Hampshire; Beer Bottle Crossing, Idaho; Baldhead, Maine; Pine Stump Junction, Michigan; Hungry Horse, Montana; Truth or Consequences, New Mexico; Frog Pond, North Carolina; Panic, Pennsylvania; Camel Hump, Wyoming; and a whole lot more.

Well now, this suggested a rich possibility, which ANS member Frank Abate and I have now developed into something resembling a plan: the Onomastic Tour of the USA. Starting from somewhere not too far from the east coast, we will take a westerly trajectory, armed with a substantial road atlas and an appetite for the names of places. While not exactly boycotting Mr Eisenhower's estimable interstates, we will definitely prefer blue highways. We will stop at places with the juiciest names and take group pictures around appropriate signs. Barbershops and diners in such places will be patronized at leisure. Reaching the west coast or thereabouts, we will turn northward, then take an entirely different route back east. We might even take a swing across the border into the prairie provinces, although I don't foresee going as far north as Medicine Hat or Moose Jaw.

Ah yes, we're definitely onto something here. And now I believe I will read Stephen Vincent Benet's poem "American Names."

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## A BIT OF HISTORICAL SMOOTHNESS

The great chemist Amedeo Avogadro took part in a revolutionary movement against the king of Sardinia in 1821. The movement was suppressed, and in 1823 Avogadro was dismissed from his position at the University of Turin. However, in the official announcement the authorities were careful to omit the true, political reason for firing him. Instead, with exemplary delicacy, it was declared that the university was "moved

to allow this interesting scientist to take a break from his burdensome teaching duties in order to devote greater attention to his research." [... lieta di permettere a questo interessante scienziato di prendere una pausa di riposo dai pesanti doveri dell'insegnamento, in modo da essere in grado di dare una migliore attenzione alle sue ricerche.]

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#### A BIT OF BLACK HUMOUR FROM LONG AGO

The Italian painter Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (c1571 - 1610) was not one of your delicate artistic types. He was quite a rough character, much more François Villon than Marcel Proust, and implicated in at least two murders. About one of these there appears to be very little doubt.

On the evening of 28 May 1606 at the Field of Mars in Rome, Caravaggio got into a fight with one Ranuccio Tommasoni over a woman, one Fillide Melandroni. It wasn't Caravaggio's first involvement in woman-related violence, although this time there is reason to suspect that money and politics also contributed to the imbroglio. Each of the two men wounded the other, but very unequally, such that Ranuccio soon died of his wounds.

Caravaggio was tried and convicted (apparently in his absence) and condemned to death by decapitation. The decapitation could be carried out by anyone who met and recognized him. (The judges were no fools; they weren't about to use up valuable marshalls when the perp had plenty of enemies only too happy to execute the sentence.)

Caravaggio did exactly what you or I would do under the circumstances. He quickly removed himself and his head to another jurisdiction. For the rest of his short life he worked the various people involved in the case into his paintings. In particular, take a look at his *David with the Head of Goliath* of 1610. The head that David is hoisting is Caravaggio's own.

I wouldn't care to meet Caravaggio in a dark alley, but the guy sure could crack a joke.

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#### Scenes from Village Life

#### WILD LIFE. Part 2. BACKBONES

Having reported earlier on the outstanding bugs found in and outside my house, Obronikrom, we take a look at some of the vertebrates.

The orange-winged parrot, *Amazona amazonica*, is one of the most conspicuous birds in Trinidad. They move about in often very substantial flocks, usually in pair. Every morning around sunrise a huge, diffuse flock comes up the Caura Valley to its daytime feeding areas in the forest. The flock is spread out over kilometers, the birds flying very high above, mostly in pairs, calling loudly all the way. Sometimes a part of the flock stops for a while in a tall tree just over the road, the parrots shucking and jiving at top speed, probably talking politics. On one such occasion I went out onto the patio to have my coffee and just generally look around. The cluster seemed

uncommonly compact that day, and as I stood there on the patio of my own house in the exotic West Indies, with brewed coffee in hand, in full health in the prime of life, I had just one thought: This must be the life.

Hummingbirds are frequent but irregular visitors to Obronikrom. The one I see most often is the green hermit, *Phaethornis guy*, a relatively large hummingbird with a curved beak, widespread in northern South America. Richard Ffrench remarks that it is "a restless bird; it flies through the undergrowth at a bewildering speed." Sometimes they blunder into the house and have to wander about for a while before finding a way out. So far, none has been injured in this maneuver.

The white-bearded manakin, *Manacus manacus*, is very easy to observe once it is found. The contrastingly black-and-white males sing and dance to attract females at fixed sites in the forest understorey, throughout daylight hours for weeks at a time. If you want an example of a beast that thinks of nothing but sex, male manakins are a good choice. There is such a site in the woods just across the road from Obronikrom. I can sometimes hear the males from the house, and they never fail to strut their stuff for any visitors that I guide to them.

The house wren, *Troglodytes aedon*, is physically unexceptional, but stands out in its behaviour. It is a wonderfully lively little bird that sometimes nests in my porch or even inside the house, where I am very glad to have it. Sure, it can be untidy, with nest twigs and often baby-bird poop here and there, but one forgives a creature that overflows with such personality. It was in this very widespread species that the late legendary ornithologist Alexander F. Skutch first described the phenomenon of *helpers at the nest* (in Costa Rica in the 1930s), in which offspring remain at the parental nest for a season or two and assist their parents in rearing additional offspring. Once it was known in one species, it became much easier for Skutch and others to recognize it in others, and the phenomenon has now been recorded from a wide variety of birds.

The outstanding amphibian around the house is undoubtedly the giant toad, *Bufo marinus*. This native to northern South America has been deliberately introduced to many other tropical regions in a misguided attempt at controlling insect pests. Sure, they eat a lot of pests, but they also eat just about everything else that they can catch. In Australia, they are themselves regarded as a serious pest, as they have serious impacts on native wildlife. I very often hear their chug-chugging mating calls in the night, and they come to lights to snarf down the bugs that these attract. Even if I don't see or hear them, I sometimes find in the morning that they have left a sign of their visit.

Three lizards, all gekkonids, are common around Obronkrom. The biggest of these, *Hemidactylus mabouia*, is introduced from Africa, presumably as a stow-away on ships. These move creepily up and down the walls, often tussling with each other and making loud, angry chirping noises. The smallest, *Sphaerodactylus molei*, tends to move slowly and circumspectly, keeping out of sight most of the time. I suspect that predation by *Hemidactylus* is a real threat in its life. And the streak lizard, *Gonatodes vittatus*, is intermediate in size and to some degree in habits. Like *Sphaerodactylus*, it is relatively diurnal, possibly as an avoidance mechanism of the nocturnal *Hemidactylus*.

There was one period when the *Hemidactylus* were much less in evidence. This may have been because they were in hiding, and it may also have been that their numbers were sharply reduced. The apparent cause was a constrictor snake, *Corallus*

*ruschenbergerii*, that took up residence in my bedroom and bathroom for some months before vanishing one day. I named this snake Awake, for reasons long since forgotten, and regretted it when he left, even though his presence did seem to depress the lizard activity in the house.

And then there are the pooches, who have been with me for something over four years, I believe. I was thinking one day that it would be nice to have a dog or two about the house. Shortly afterward, I was riding the rural bus down the valley and noticed a couple of puppies by the side of the road, just outside a cardboard box from which they had evidently escaped. It was obvious that someone had abandoned them there in hopes that someone else might adopt them, or at least that they would be out of sight when they expired. I decided to collect them if they were still there when I rode back up in the afternoon. Which they were. I asked the driver to stop the bus for a minute while I picked up those two little dogs.

What I had not considered was that they might not be interested in being captured, which they were not. They faded back into the tall grass, and it was apparent that they could keep out of my grasp for much longer than the bus would wait. The next morning I went to my neighbours and asked to borrow their little boy, whom I would then drive to school. That worked out well. The pups couldn't escape us both, and we caught them in good order.

However, there was a complication. There turned out to be three of them. I only wanted two, but what can you do? That, then, is the story of how I came to acquire three genuine pedigree mongrel dogs, really low-class types that bark challengingly at anybody who walks (or even drives) by the house minding his own business. I tell you, if it wasn't for bad manners those dogs wouldn't have any manners at all.

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## ONCE AGAIN ON FAVOURITE ANIMALS

As reported in an earlier issue, we received hardly any responses to the inquiry of a while back about favourite animals. Your editor is not disappointed, as he has long since learned that very few of you out there in Newsletterland can be bothered to take pen in hand, although how anyone can prefer to read rather than write is a conundrum worthy of well-focused research. Still, your long-suffering editor will now reward you (for what?) with a partial list of his own personal favourites.

Shark The great hammerhead shark, *Sphyrna mokkaran*.

As far as I know, this species, like most sharks, is quite harmless to humans. Even so, I find endlessly satisfying the late great Hunter Thompson's diatribe after Gerald Ford issued that unfortunate pardon that (quoting from long-ago memory) "If there was any justice in this world, then right now Richard Nixon's rancid bloated corpse would be somewhere off Key West in the belly of a hammerhead shark." I have eaten hammerhead and other sharks, and I admit that I can't tell the difference.

Bony fish Mudskippers (*Periophthalmus* spp.), without a doubt.

I have spent many happy hours watching them skipping about on tidal mud flats,

their eyes bulging up like those of frogs and displaying at each other as if they were lizards. One day, after I had been watching them for a while, I had a sudden revelation: There is nothing very fish-like about them.

And then there's that wrasse, the slippery dick (*Halichoeres bivittatus*). That would make a dandy title for a very gritty jamaican crime movie of stolid moral ambiguity, *A Wrasse Called Slippery Dick*.

Frog Probably the Suriname toad (*Pipa pipa*).

It's very aquatic, with really impressive webbing.

Lizard The tokay gecko (*Gekko gekko*) or five-lined skink (*Eumeces fasciatus*).

Often in the nighttime in Southeast Asia I have had the pleasure of hearing the gecko's opening trill, followed by a variable-length series of explosive hiccups that give the beast its onomatopoeic name.

As a kid in southern Ontario, I spent much of my summers at the family cottage in Lanark County, where we had skinks in a rock wall. It was the only lizard I ever found in the area, and at that time the northern limit of its range was thought to be considerably further south. A few years ago I came upon an article on the five-lined skink and found that specimens that I had given to the national museum around 1960 still represent the known limit of its range. As far as I know, it was the first time I contributed a new fact to science.

Snake The gaboon viper (*Bitis gabonica*) or visayan cobra (*Naja samarensis*).

I have never seen a gaboon viper, but I have often seen the visayan cobra, a lovely black creature with a lemon-yellow head and neck. Someday, if you're good, I may tell the story of the escaped cobra in the museum in Leyte. And the cobra that spat venom at me.

Turtle Without question the matamata turtle, *Chelus fimbriatus*.

This native of northern South America must be the weirdest turtle of all. In my youth, Harold Parsons, Don Rivard and I had often grooved on pictures of the beast and its fabulous name, and I clearly recall the first time I saw one. It was in the National Zoo in Washington when I was 15. I stared at it bug-eyed and would have embraced the darling misshapen, alga-encrusted beast if I could have.

Bird The white-capped dipper (*Cinclus leucocephalus*), also known as the water ouzel, or any hornbill (Bucerotidae).

W.H. Hudson or one of that crowd has a wonderful piece about the water ouzel. I hope to see one some day.

I have often heard and occasionally seen wild hornbills in Southeast Asia, and I was thrilled one day in a remote valley on the northern edge of Luzon to look up and see a pair of them wafting by overhead, taking their time and definitely swinging their axes. I have often seen hornbills in West Africa, but they don't seem as strange and wonderful as the asian ones, at least in my limited experience.

Mammal The giant anteater (*Myrmecophaga tridactyla*) or the european hedgehog

(*Erinaceus europaeus*).

The giant anteater has tremendous totemic significance, and I certainly hope to see one in the wild some day.

In some brush near my high school dormitory in Germany, I once found a hedgehog. It curled up into a ball at my approach, and I found that I could carefully pick it up and carry it inside in my handkerchief, where I examined it for a while before releasing it.

Cephalopod mollusk The common octopus, *Octopus vulgaris*.

It is a thoroughly admirable beast.

Gastropod mollusk Any of the olives, *Oliva* spp.

I like cowries too, but if you ask me they're kind of over-rated.

Crustacean Soldier crabs, *Mictyrus brevidactylus*.

Many times on the beach in Batangas province, Luzon, I have watched them swarming over the beach in a tight mass at low tide. If one approaches, they quickly dig down into the sand and disappear, but they soon dig themselves back out.

Cockroach The wood roach, *Cryptocercus punctulatus*, of the Appalachians.

Termite *Hospitalitermes hospitalis* and *Macrotermes gilvus*, both of Southeast Asia.

Okay, I know what you're thinking. You think this is going entirely too far, that it's okay to hold a snail or crab in special affection, but who in his right mind likes any cockroach or termite? Well, I can't be bothered to justify myself, and I certainly won't justify my beloved *Hospitalitermes* and *Macrotermes*.

Mantis All of them, especially the very large chinese mantis, *Tenodera aridifolia*.

This species was introduced into North America long ago for pest-control purposes. I have no idea whether it ever ate enough bugs to justify the bother, but it has done well, and I often found it in Ohio in my youth. In high school Bob Perry and I had an adult female in our dorm room, which stayed on the window sill and kept the room free of flies. Any fly that entered the room would in time head to the window, and sooner or later Dr No would catch that fly and eat it in obvious relish. We used to throw her an occasional grasshopper to supplement her diet and to amaze us with her implacable predatory focus.

Beetle Pachyrhynchine weevils.

Some of these are downright jewel-like, and I never got tired of watching and collecting them. One morning on Orchid Island, east of Taiwan, I collected about 200 of them before breakfast. That was a good day.

Social wasp *Parischnogaster cavernicola* or *Polistes cavapyta*.

The first is known only from caves on the island of Samar in the Philippines. The second is common in much of northern Argentina. My very first sting south of the Equator came from a *P. cavapyta* in a cemetery in the Andes of Argentina. Right after

the event I called out hallelujah to Manfredo Fritz, explaining my exultation to him, which he found actually rather amusing.

Social bee Not the familiar honey bee (*Apis mellifera*) but two of the giant honey bees: *Apis dorsata* and *A. breviligula*.

I have seen the former on occasion in Borneo and Palawan, the latter many times in the Philippines. *A. breviligula* is one of three species of honey bees that have stung me. One never quite feels acquainted with a bee or wasp until one feels its displeasure in the skin.

Ant No question about it, spiny ants, *Polyrhachis* spp.

Spider *Nephila* and possibly *Portia*.

I'm also partial to all of the ant-mimicking jumping spiders.

Scorpion (What's this? Are you still protesting? Come on, people, work with me on this. Scorpions need love too, you know.) The giant forest scorpion (*Heterometrus longimanus*) of the Philippines.

And I would love to see the magnificent west-african *Pandinus imperator* in the wild.

Mite (Is anyone still with me, or have you all thrown up your hands in exasperation and gone home? Too bad if you have, because this one's a real doozie, as Shirley Booth would say.) Caeculids.

Far away and long ago, the late Bob Beer, who taught arachnology at Kansas, told us the story of caeculids. It had long been a mystery among acarologists what these mites eat. Nobody had ever been able to catch them in the act or to gain good circumstantial evidence of one food source or another, so that in exasperation it had been concluded that they ate rocks. After all, they were almost always found on rocks, so rocks were certainly available to them, and they didn't seem to eat anything else.

Fine. Then, some weeks later, Dr Beer came into our lab and asked me to come across the hall to see something. There under a microscope he had a caeculid, a very distinctive-looking beasts, holding another little arthropod in the vice-grips of its spiny front legs and inexorably sucking the juice out of it.

For all I know, caeculids still mainly subsist on rocks, but they supplement their diet with little bugs from time to time.

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Wandering

### AT HOME WITH THE BADDEST CAT IN ROME

As a student at the University of Georgia, long ago and far away, I lived in a house with two other jazz and blues enthusiasts. We called it the Soul Pad. Mitchell "Abdul" Feldman was a radio presenter and concert promoter. His radio show, *Cruising with Abdul*, had a devoted following among the true believers. It was he who introduced me to the great Abdullah Ibrahim (Dollar Brand), and through him I met another great, Sun

Ra. Roberto "Bobbo" Peglia, the son of one of Rome's biggest hoteliers -- please don't imagine that I am referring here to Rome, Georgia -- was there to gain an American education and fluency in English. And I was a graduate student known to the jazz and blues crowd as "Gonzo".

The saxophonist Ornette Coleman was among those regarded with awe in the Soul Pad. Bobbo's stature rose abruptly one day when he returned from a trip to Italy to show us his new record. It was grand enough that it was by the Ornate Soulman, but Bobbo had actually met the great man, who had inscribed his record with "Roberto -- Wallace Litwin tells me you are the baddest cat in Rome." I tell you true, to us that inscription was like the Nobel Prize.

We had many uproarious times in the Soul Pad. I will relate just one. One day in 1977 Bobbo came into the house, laughing his ass off, to inform us that the new pope, John Paul, had died after only about a month in office. He was mourned by all -- except for the likes of us and a few other uncouth bastards -- as he hadn't been there long enough to really antagonize anyone. It was a great disappointment to us that his successor failed to grasp the opportunity and take the name George Ringo.

Then, sometime around 1979, Bobbo wrapped up his degree and left Georgia, and that was the last I saw or heard of him.

Moving ahead to the present time, when Francis & I were planning on visiting Italy in the summer of 2008 it occurred to me that Bobbo might still be in Rome. It would be my great pleasure to re-establish our acquaintance. The Internet provides several ways to find those that are lost. I got lucky by googling Abdul, who in turn made the connection.

Bobbo no longer lives in Rome. He and his family are in a fine old stone farmhouse in the hills outside of Orvieto, in the Umbria region. I first heard of this fabulous ancient city a very long time ago in Lawrence Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*. In the first volume, *Justine*, Durrell tells of seeing a jar of Orvieto olives in a little grocery store and suddenly being struck by the desire to be on the other side of the Mediterranean. He goes in and buys the olives and eats them on a nearby park bench.

Bobbo told us we should positively come to Orvieto and stay at his place. When were we coming? About 10 August. Oooh, bad timing. He and his family always go off to Greece around the beginning of August. We would still stay in his house, raid his vegetable garden, and drive his pickup truck, but a personal get-together after almost 30 years wouldn't happen this time.

The Peglia house is called Posaragnola, meaning "Where the Spider Dwells". The spider in question is my old friend *Pholcus phalangioides*, with which the place is, indeed, well festooned. We had a glorious three days in and around Orvieto, together with Nova and her friend Maggie. For those two, it was just part of a more ambitious tour of Italy, but for us lads it was the whole visit. Short as it was, it was a real golden age. The only thing missing was Bobbo, the baddest cat in Rome.

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## Wandering

### MORE LUCK THAN ANYONE DESERVES

I was giving my neighbour Gerard a ride down the valley. From the back of the motorcycle he said something that sounded like "Are you an American today?" I wasn't sure I had heard right, so I asked him to repeat it. "I need a miracle today." The fact is, Gerard had lost his wallet, with his driver's license and a whole lot of other stuff in it the day before, and he was on his way to the police station to seek help in retrieving it.

That got me to reflecting. About a year before, I had lost my wallet. The next day, as I was getting ready to ride the bus up my valley, a self-effacing little man approached me and asked if I was Mr Starr. It turned out that I had dropped my wallet right there, he had found it, and he came back the next day at that time in expectation of meeting the guy whose picture appeared on the driver's license. So he gave it back to me, just like that, and seeing as he was of modest means and had gone to some trouble on my behalf I found it easy to persuade him to accept some monetary gratitude.

This is the kind of luck I have, have always had, and I have to wonder about it. That deserving souls like Gerard have such bad luck doesn't especially mystify me -- it just seems to be the usual way of the world -- but why do I get away with it?

This was especially evident in the jaunt that Francis & I made through Central Europe and on to Italy a year and a half ago. Any number of things could reasonably have gone wrong, but none of them did. We got to Prague and found out that the hostel where we thought we had a reservation had no record of it. Oh dear, if they were full during the height of the tourist season, wouldn't every other affordable place be full? The management made a phone call to an equivalent place just up the road, and we were set up. A couple of days later, returning to our hostel in preparation for leaving Prague, we needed to transfer from the green line to the red lined. I got off the subway, calling to Francis to follow me, but then the door closed, trapping me outside and him inside. I yelled to him to proceed to Florenc station and wait for me there. Did he hear me? I wasn't sure, and I had an anxious time waiting for him to appear at Florenc. Any number of things could have gone wrong, but we still got to our hostel, grabbed our stuff, and reach the train station in time for our train to Vienna.

In Vienna, we got to the Gasthaus Pfeilgasse about midnight, wondering if we had lost our reservation. No, they were expecting us, but they were overbooked, didn't have a double for us. We would have to take two singles at the same combined price. And then that price turned out now to be the expected 50 euros but 44 euros. The next morning we wanted to go to the Museum of Art History. We asked a local where to catch the no. 13A bus, which had brought us from the train station the night before. She told us and then asked us exactly where we wanted to go. It turned out that the museum and other interesting stuff were within walking distance, nowhere near the station. I got to see Vermeer's *The Art of Painting* (the only must-see Vermeer that remained on my list) and 13 paintings by Pieter Breugel, and Francis reveled in statues galore.

When it was time to leave Vienna, the 13A bus came along just as we got to the stop and whisked us right to the train station. A couple of stops later a very informal old lad got on, looking most wonderfully austrian, and launched into a fine tirade in his fabulous regional accent. He started by declaring that Austrians are the greediest

people in the world and went on to complain of various recent mistreatments, the word "Scheeße" figuring prominently in his discourse. I attempted to stoke the fire by asking in mock amazement if the Austrians were even greedier than Americans, but he wasn't taking questions that day. Either that or he disdained to answer someone speaking in a german accent.

We had a sizeable wait at the train station. As departure time got close, I wondered that our trip had still not appeared at the bottom of the board. I looked at our tickets and noticed that we had reservations (not necessary with a EurailPass, but a good idea) for Budapest to Bucharest, but not for Vienna to Budapest, so I went to the ticket counter to ask about this. That was a good move, because the agent informed me that our train left from another station. We scrambled outside and caught a streetcar, which brought us to the other station with about 20 minutes to spare.

Arriving in Bucharest, we weren't sure whether we already had accomodation. (On the phone from Berlin, I had found that information got less and less definite as one got further away.) A travel agent in the station recommended a very nearby hotel at 54 euros for a double. It was more than I had figured to pay, but conveniently located. When we went there, they did have room for us, but the price was 60 euros. This was annoying, but not a deal breaker, so I slapped down 120 euros for two nights and figured that was that. No, it wasn't. Payment had to be in romanian lei, which we could change at that bank over there. Now, that was a deal breaker. It was just too dumb to advertise a price in a currency that they did not accept, and we left in a huff. Good move. A taxi driver took us to a genuine hostel that was mentioned in our guidebook, where they just happened to have a vacancy. We had the real hostel experience, cooking in a collective kitchen and sleeping on bunk beds with a whole lot of real youth.

From Bucharest to Budapest, where we had a grand time, although I don't recall that any of our good luck there was unexpected. Our train was half an hour late leaving Budapest for the long haul to Venice. I figured they would shave minutes off the longer stops and thereby bring it back onto schedule, but exactly the opposite happened. We got to Venice two hours late and had of course missed our onward connection. Does that sound like a problem? I walked into the traveler-assistance office, where an efficient agent immediately saw what it was about and put us on another train leaving in 10 minutes. Direct to Orvieto, no less, without a change in Bologna.

But here is the really striking bit of luck, the one that had me shaking my head in wonder. I had not seen my little girl, SuperNova, in about a year and a half at that time. It was arranged that she and her friend Maggie were to meet us in Orvieto, but then they were in France and we were all over Central Europe, and we fell out of contact. They knew what day we were supposed to reach Orvieto, and they were supposed to get there the same day, but that was the best we knew, and none of us had a phone. So it was with some concern that Francis & I got off the train at Orvieto, unsure whether we would find Nova & Maggie at all. We walked outside to see what the place looked like, and as we did so I heard "Hi, Daddy." And there they were, standing in the italian late-summer sun, eating ice cream and wondering what was what. They had arrived just half an hour earlier. As Val Kilmer said in *Tombstone*, "Aint that a daisy?"

Maybe the Starrs are just in a state of grace.

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## Cultural Conjectures

### MAKING SENSE OF THE IRISH

One thing that truly mystifies me is the enormous disparity between Ireland and Scotland in the rational intellectual tradition. I believe it was George B. Johnston who once characterized the Irish to me as "among the most literate, articulate, and musical nations in the world". I don't doubt it, and it is at the base of my own considerable eirophilia. However, in those intellectual endeavours with a large rational component, including all of natural science, the Irish fall far short of the Scots. And this is by no means a comparison among third-raters. The rational intellectual tradition in Scotland is outstanding, probably with an even longer substantial history than that of England. This is also seen in book publishing, in which Edinburgh has been a major center for a very long time.

In contrast, throwing my mind over the history of science, I cannot think of one single figure of note in Ireland. And is there any Irish university that one could with a straight face set alongside St Andrews, Aberdeen, Edinburgh or Glasgow? Queen's, in Belfast? Maybe, but one suspects that it has a very large English and Scottish contribution to its makeup. The Age of Reason, it seems, just sort of by-passed Ireland as it swept through England, Wales and Scotland on its way to Iceland.

Yet, Scotland and Ireland seem so very similar. Economically depressed, oppressed nations through much or most of their history, both subsisting on rocky soil and some industry, and with a common ethnic-linguistic background. The one main difference would seem to be religion. Irish are mostly Catholic, and Scots are mostly Protestant. Might this plausibly account for the striking difference in rational-intellectual output? My materialist heart of hearts rebels at the very idea, but what other factor is there?

I really hope someone can come up with a better explanation.

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### LOSING MY MARBLES, GRADUALLY

Here is what I have done. A few years ago I stepped back and took a look at myself from the perspective of a life-insurance agent. How long should I be expected to live? If I take care of myself and have reasonably good luck, I give myself a fair chance of reaching my 85th birthday. (This may be a bit over-optimistic, as it assumes that I am more of a Starr than a Schlick, but let's run with that assumption.) So, I figured the number of days left to that day and bought that many marbles. Literally. Several great big jars in my office with almost 10,000 marbles among them. Every day I take out one marble and put it in the up-for-grabs jar. Anyone who comes in can take any or all of the marbles in that jar. They are gone, as far as I am concerned.

It is all about mortality, not in a morbid way but as a way of focusing on the important things. The diminishing fund of marbles is a visible representation of what is left. If someone invites me to her/his wedding, for example, I look over at those jars and figure "That's half a marble. Do I want to use up half a marble watching two people take a long time to do what they've already decided they are going to do? Not too

likely, is it?" Or if my department schedules a weekend retreat, I think "That's two of the only marbles I have left. If this retreat is anything like previous ones, and I spend of those two marbles on it, how will I ever forgive myself? There must be a way out of it."

The marbles give sharp perspective, make many decisions easier. And right now there is one less than there was yesterday.

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## PEERING INTO THE LIVING PAST

Goethe, in a tribute to Schöpflin (never heard of him) included the remark that "He was a man of that happy sort who just naturally unify the past and the present, who understand how to couple historical learning with their personal daily interests." Yes, indeed, Schöpflin sounds like my kind of guy.

And, in the Wikipedia entry on Hugo von Hoffmansthal, I came upon a rather startling, evocative and puzzling passage: "At the age of eight he took the greatest delight in the aroma of half-forgotten days ...." [Mit acht Jahren fand er den größten Reiz an dem Duft halbvergessener Tage ....] Wouldn't it be glorious every day to recall anew a day that had long lain forgotten?

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