

never be on the list of possible answers, and that, mercurial as the very Devil, materialism, in all its larval incarnations (under the deceptive names of civilization, progress, evolution, democracy, reason, science, not to mention “modern,” “responsible” or “relevant” Christianity), is, indeed, of the Devil. Therefore, yearning for the *other* is a good thing. *Killing money* is a good thing. Getting the lines of verse to *rhyme* is a good thing. Thinking about *life after death* is a good thing. Observing the play of *chance* is a good thing. Despising the *world* is a good thing.

Here he is on a midsummer’s day, in the long queue to board from Gate 22 at Heathrow Airport, watching sullenly as his fellow passengers swarm and sweat all around him. There goes the Oriental woman with carmine-red fingernails and an enormous boil on her left cheek, accompanied by a Mexican-American dwarf in a pair of black polyester pajamas. There goes the young English girl, from somewhere up north apparently, with a pasty-white face and skin like rancid butter. There goes a blue-faced man shaped like a beanstalk. There goes another, in denim shorts and a shirt that says SONY. A third waddles by, pushing on his legs with all his might, oddly reminiscent in his triumphalism of a combine harvester from old Soviet newsreels. The poet player takes it all in, remarking to himself that what lies before him is the product of genetic *lucklessness*.

Why should it be otherwise? he muses. Why is carbon so common in the universe? Or iron, or nitrogen? Why are gold, radium, and ozone less common? Is it right? Is it fair? Is it fair that Bianca Sforza should possess both a beautiful face and a pearl necklace, while others make do with carbuncles on their faces and Nike trainers on their feet? Is it just that Dostoyevsky should have both immortality and the woman he loves, while writers published by Random House have only the collective certainty of a favorable review in the *New York Times*? Is it reasonable that Shakespeare, Dante, and Gogol should all have distinctive and memorable noses in portraits, but the matinee idol Brad Pitt does not? No, chance answers for everything, and believing in this is no trammel whatever to believing in God.

Genus and *genius* spring from the same etymological source. While that which falls outside the *gens*, or family, is, by definition, degenerate, the lucky birth of one man or woman of genius per one bil-

lion genetic permutations within the human clan is the miracle that justifies the whole gamble. And, by the way, no less than Shakespeare, physical beauty is a valid payout for this streak of genetic luck, if only because it draws attention to itself so dramatically; as the genius, even when he tries his hardest to lie low, invariably does; as the opera diva, arriving at the high note of her career, compels the audience to their feet; and as the gambler, when he suddenly raises the stakes a hundredfold, thrills and terrifies the house.

Hence the *risk* inherent in the notion of genius, in its chance conception as well as in its hazardous expression, a view fully supported by the parable of the talents in the Scripture. To bury one’s talent, to stay put, to desist from playing roulette—genetic, or creative, or of the casino kind—is the mark of the wicked and slothful servant, of one who, never seeking the *other*, prefers what *is* to what *might be* and chooses platitude over paradox. Is he not the very philistine who chides the player for being a poet? Is he not the Pharisee who tells off the poet for wasting his own and other people’s money on dangerous dreams? Is he not the American taxpayer, obedient in everything, who, without a murmur of dissent, will end up sending his brothers to the death camps? Is he not the good Christian, the good Jew, and possibly even the good Muslim, of our rational modern world?

So thinks the poet player, as he boards the plane, mindful all the while that the gate number, a treacherous neighbor of 9 on the wheel, has never been lucky for him.

Andrei Navrozov is Chronicles’ European correspondent.

Letter From District 205

by Sarah J. Weber

Trick or Treat?



During my first semester as a graduate teaching assistant, I was fired from my job at a coffee shop for my inability to act phony. Anyway, this is what I suspected my particularly phony employer meant

by a “bad attitude.” I quickly found that, despite the incredibly high taxes in Illinois, my state-university stipend was slightly less than adequate. I thought about the three long and tedious years I had spent as an undergraduate and decided that I should perhaps do something that required a bachelor’s degree so I wouldn’t feel that time had been wasted. I had substitute-taught at my old high school before, but I wanted more steady employment than that institution could offer me.

Readers of *Chronicles* are familiar with the chaos that prevails in the Rockford public schools, all 48 of which are combined into one district, the infamous 205, whose numerous yellow buses plague early-morning motorists in Rockford. Not having had any personal experience with this monstrosity, thanks to my excellent and very discerning parents, who sent me to a private school, I was interested to see whether all those *Rockford Files* were really true. I have rarely found the pursuit of knowledge to be so painful.

My first step in the process was to obtain a copy of the 20-page application, complete with criminal-background survey and the requirement of a physical if I had not had one in the last 90 days. I thought I was in fine health, but, since I had not had a physical since the tenth grade and had never, in my recollection, had a tuberculosis test, I had to comply. I could have made an appointment with my family doctor, but I opted for the immediate-care clinic, which, presumably would be faster. Luckily, I had a book during my three-hour wait, which the receptionist had assured me would not exceed 45 minutes. Perhaps sensing that I was about to leave and throw out the whole plan, the nurse called me to the back and locked me in an office where I waited for about half an hour, without seeing another person. The doctor finally came in and had me breathe deeply and touch my toes and declared me to be in perfect health, if a little dazed from the waiting-room experience.

Armed with my proof of good health, my application, and a \$5.00 copy of my college transcripts, I drove again to the Regional Office of Education where I paid \$50.00 (bringing my total with the physical close to \$100.00) and walked out with my temporary substitute-teaching certificate, with a promise that the permanent copy would be in the mail. I took my collection of paperwork to the staffing service that District 205 used and asked to have my name added to the list

of substitute teachers. Then I waited.

About three weeks later, I had nearly forgotten about the whole thing, when the phone rang one morning around 7:30. Awake, but still in bed, I got up to answer it and heard myself say “sure” when asked if I could be at Kennedy Middle School at 9:45 to teach social studies (formerly known as “history”). I arrived at the main office and, after being mistaken for a student by a gentleman in a sweatshirt at the front desk, was sent back to speak to the lady who coordinated these things. She was about the same age as I and seemed very nice as she handed me the classroom key, explained the schedule, and pointed me in the direction of my classroom. As I was walking out of the office, a policeman entered, leading a little boy. I must have been staring, as I had never seen such a thing in a school before, and the man in the sweatshirt asked me, “Are you ready for this?” I said “Yes,” but perhaps I wasn’t being entirely honest.

I found my classroom easily and walked in to find a woman of about 30 who was quite pregnant, wearing two flashing jack-o’-lanterns bobbing from a headband. She introduced herself as Mrs. Price, and I, as Mrs. Weber, and she explained that she was the long-term substitute for the normal teacher who was out with an injury. Mrs. Price was to be with me for three of the five classes I was to teach, which made me wonder how necessary it was for me to be there. I quickly banished those thoughts, however, when I considered my forthcoming paycheck. Mrs. Price was arranging worksheets and copies of a scholastic magazine for middle-school children. She explained the assignment, which consisted of reading a few articles and then filling out a worksheet—seemingly, a simple task.

Mrs. Price explained that the worksheets were difficult for the students, although they looked like assignments I might have had in third grade, and that I would have to “hold their hands” through the duration of the assignment. As an alternative, I could continue playing a film, *The Mummy Returns*, that they had been watching for the previous few class periods. I asked Mrs. Price which assignment needed to be completed first, and she replied, “You might as well watch the movie . . . you don’t actually want to *teach*, do you?”

While teaching was presumably what I had come there to do, this comment, and the one about “just keeping them from killing each other,” indicated that I was

really just a college-educated babysitter. The first class, consisting of about 27 students, came in around 9:45, and Mrs. Price had to fill in for the absent music teacher during that hour, so I was on my own. Before she left, she divulged her plan to show the kids *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, “because it’s a musical.”

Having my own schoolwork to do, I gladly inserted the video, turned out the lights, and sat down to read Keats. At a few points during the movie, loud noises startled me, and I looked up to see monsters chasing people, pushing them into pits of hot lava, and beating them with chains—very educational. The movie ended before the class period, and so I benevolently told the children they could talk quietly in their seats (as they had been doing throughout the entire movie—minus the quietly part). At least during the movie, they had stayed in their seats. Now, the little monsters were running around the room, hitting one another with the dog-tag chains from the student I.D. cards that they wore around their necks. It seems they had learned something from the movie after all.

Mrs. Price came back from music class elated that the students had sung along throughout her movie. We showed *The Mummy Returns* to the second class as well. Mrs. Price promised them that, if they were good, she would give them treats, in honor of Halloween. By my estimation, the seventh graders were not being very good, but Mrs. Price went around with the candy bucket anyway.

The third class on which I sat in while Mrs. Price “taught” had one bright girl, who immediately got herself a pass to the nurse’s office, a trick I often used in high-school algebra. I was sorry to see her go,

and, as I sat in the dark, with the strains of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* echoing in the background and a migraine beginning to rear its ugly head, I started to feel sick and that I could not stay there another moment. I began to think of excuses. I could tell Mrs. Price, in front of the children, just how I felt and walk out (there was an outside door in the classroom). I could say that I was sick and excuse myself to the nurse’s office. I began to feel as trapped as the students must, but angered because I had already done my penance in junior high school. I decided to wait until the class let out, followed by an hour break for me, and then leave without telling Mrs. Price.

I have never experienced a longer 30 minutes. After the class was over, Mrs. Price told me that I had the classroom all to myself and warned me about the afternoon’s activities, then left me in peace. I gathered up my map, keys, and books, donned my coat, and walked quickly to the main office, where I told the nice young lady from earlier that morning that I was sick—the result of the students, who were some of the worst-behaved children I had ever seen. I told her that I couldn’t stand being in the institution and that there was no education going on there. I don’t think she understood my comment about everyone being right about District 205. Weak, and breathing heavily, I concluded my rant. Somehow, I couldn’t bring myself to laugh when she said, “I know; that’s why I try to avoid going out into the hall.”

Sarah J. Weber, a graduate student in English literature at Northern Illinois University, was formerly Chronicles’ editorial assistant.



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by Srdja Trifkovic

Out of Africa

But for the death and suffering it has caused to thousands of innocents, the Liberian imbroglio would have an almost farcical quality—Graham Greene meets Lehar. On one side, there was the LURD (Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy), a ragtag army of heavily armed but poorly trained and undisciplined rebels. They nevertheless have the upper hand in a 14-year-old civil war that has utterly destroyed an already dirt-poor and chronically mismanaged West African state. On the other side, there was its unspeakable president Charles Taylor, whose shrinking forces controlled only parts of the capital city of Monrovia at the time of this writing. While the two sides' "ideological" differences are unknown, their disregard for civilian lives and what little remains of usable property in the ruined country is fully shared.

The rebels said that their July offensive against the capital—marked by indiscriminate shelling of civilians—was in response to violations by Taylor's loyalists of a cease-fire announced in June. The United States wanted Taylor to resign (which he just did, as this issue goes to press) and go into exile, but Washington had also accused the rebels of violating the cease-fire themselves. Mr. Taylor had accepted an offer of political asylum from Nigeria "in principle," but he said he would not leave until international peacekeepers—including Americans—were in place. At the same time, however, he promised to fight the rebels to the "last man." Nigeria's President Obasanjo, whose soldiers are supposed to be a key component of a proposed predominantly West African peacekeeping force, has said that his troops can only be deployed if there is a firm cease-fire. President Bush appeared to suggest that the role of American soldiers would be to assist the deployment of an African force rather than to serve as actual peacekeepers. The Liberians do not trust their fellow Africans, however, and want the G.I.'s and Marines to come to impose order.

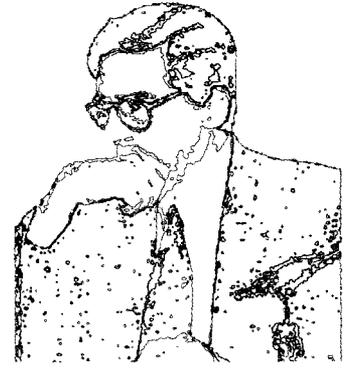
By late July, a contingent of Marines was flown in to the U.S. embassy in Monrovia to secure the compound, and Washington announced that some 4,500

Marines and sailors would be transferred to the Mediterranean for a possible role in the West African country. With the war taking its daily toll of innocents, desperate Liberians resorted to piling up the bodies of victims outside the U.S. embassy to protest the apparent reluctance of the Bush administration to deploy American troops.

To suggest that the United States has a tangible interest in Monrovia worthy of a single American life is preposterous. Africa is nearly irrelevant to the strategic, economic, or any other rationally definable interests of the United States. According to the U.S. International Trade Commission ("U.S.-Trade and Investment with Sub-Saharan Africa," January 2003), total U.S. merchandise imports from the region declined 5.2 percent in 2001 to \$21.1 billion—1.9 percent of total U.S. imports—primarily because of falling petroleum prices and decreased imports of crude oil from Nigeria. Non-petroleum imports decreased by almost one fifth and account for *less than one percent of U.S. imports*. In 2001, total U.S. merchandise exports to sub-Saharan Africa totaled an insignificant \$6.8 billion. Were it not for the bureaucratic distortions of the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), even that figure would have been smaller.

That Africa is the least important continent of them all can be disputed only if Antarctica is included. Its political instability is proverbial, and even the alleged success stories of yore—such as Sierra Leone—are ever liable to plunge themselves into Hobbesian nightmares. Many of its people are endearingly friendly and often charming, but their postindependence leaders have been among the most odious characters known to world politics (and we would do injustice to dozens of lesser-known despots by focusing solely on Idi Amin, Emperor Bokassa, or Robert Mugabe).

Africa contributes next to nothing to global science and technology. Its resources are theoretically considerable but often impossible to develop under the prevailing social, political, and legal conditions. Its share in the global economy is negligible. In 2001,



sub-Saharan Africa received just over \$14 billion in foreign investments—but over half of that sum reflected the financial restructuring resulting from the sale of a South African company to a British firm. Without that one transaction, investment flows would have totaled a paltry \$6.9 billion.

President Bush presumably knows all that, but during his first African tour, in early July, he pretended otherwise. For five days, he gushed out bucketfuls of touchy-feely platitudes—about AIDS relief, development, fresh water, democracy—from Johannesburg to Kampala to Lagos. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice set the tone when she told reporters on July 3 that the President's tour would reflect his understanding "that America is a country that really does have to be committed to values and to making life better for people around the world, that that's what the world looks to America to do."

The notion of America as the social worker of the world is silly but harmless enough as long as such words are not supported by deeds, let alone troops. Five years after Bill Clinton's long-forgotten visit, a presidential tour of Africa has developed into a ritual akin to the taxing but mercifully rare visit to a ne'er-do-well cousin on the wrong side of the tracks. You pretend that his folks' sorry state is someone else's fault and that you can and will help him sort things out; he pretends that he'll mend his ways and make a new start, if you only let him have some of your cash; gifts are distributed to the wide-eyed offspring . . . and that's it for the next 2,000 days or so. "Why am I going now? I thought it was important to go before my first term was over to show the importance of Africa to my administration's foreign policy," Mr. Bush said in an unconscious paraphrase of Sir