

EDITORIAL

THE COMBINATION OF THE TIME of year, a recent conversation with a friend, and the news coverage of North American politics has me thinking lately about the path not taken. As September comes around and a middle-aged man's fancy turns to thoughts of the new academic year, it is not surprising that I might be thinking about how else I might have been spending my time as a gainfully employed member of society had I not chosen the life of an academic. The marking of the tenth anniversary of the attacks on New York City and Washington, DC only add to the already fraught nature of this time of year.

Nothing was resolved ultimately, in my conversation with my friend on the topic of the path not taken. I did acknowledge that I'd once considered being a lawyer, until I realized that was more my parents' dream for me than my own. I've also thought that being a print journalist might be an interesting professional life, but realize that when I say "print journalist" I really mean being a staff writer for *Sports Illustrated*, which has always looked like pretty much the ideal job for someone of my abilities and interests. It's difficult not to imagine oneself doing something else and doing it exceptionally well. After all, one would prefer think that a couple of weeks of practice will have one playing the guitar like Jimi Hendrix instead of struggling through another halting rendition of "The Yellow Rose of Texas." But we must always remember that old adage about how the grass looks just over the fence. Someone I used to know had his journeyman's papers as a chef, and I spoke to him once or twice about how "great" it looked to cook for a living. He told me that unless you own your own restaurant, "you're never clean." He said you're always prepping, cutting, sweating, or cleaning up. From the outside, the job looks glamorous (at least to some), but on the inside—as with most jobs, no doubt—there is always the prepping, cutting, sweating, and cleaning up.

In *Down and Out in Paris and London*, his documentary recounting his time working as a dishwasher in several Paris restaurants and living as a tramp in England, George Orwell makes a similar point about the

unglamorous reality hidden just behind the veneer of beauty that disguises many occupations. He says that a chef looks at a cooked piece of meat the way artists look at their work, as creation but not as food. As a result, the meat is handled instead of forked onto the plate, and the chef will run a thumb around the plate in order to taste the gravy, probably more than once. He sums up by stating, unappetizingly: "Roughly speaking, the more one pays for food, the more sweat and spittle one is obliged to eat with it." He was talking specifically about Parisian restaurants, no doubt a sop to his own national biases, not to mention the obvious fact that the English are not known for their cuisine. (There must be some reason the English language imports a French word for this concept. And Orwell actually defends English cooking in one of his essays.) Leaving all of this aside, his observation draws our attention to the dramatic disjunction between what a job actually entails and what it looks like from the outside.

As I watched Barack Obama mean what he said about the importance of bipartisanship while trying to get the health care bill passed in the United States, and watch now as his attempts at reasonableness are dismissed by the press on both the left and the right of the American political argument as indecisiveness, I marvel at his level-headedness in the face of such relentless criticism. And as I watched our prime minister prorogue (a word I had to look up, so arcane is it in terms of political procedure or common usage) Canadian parliament twice, I marveled at his willingness to do the remarkably unpopular and borderline ethical in order to stay in power. The forbearance in the former case and gall in the latter have me convinced that although I sometimes have my doubts about where I did choose to spend my professional time, I can be convinced and reassured that at least I could have made a considerably worse choice. If being an elective official at the highest national level doesn't even look good from the outside, one can only imagine what such a job is really like.

A.S.