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Fiction by whit frazier

Perspectives on 50 Cent's *Get Rich or Die Trying*
and Jonathan Franzen's "The Corrections"

STRAWBERRY PRESS MAGAZINE
JULY 2003
VOLUME ONE ISSUE ONE

i gotta say, i'm pretty exhausted. ive spent the last several weeks rushing to get strawberry press magazine put together and ready to go – and now that it's finished, i'm really drained. ive been writing, reading, working on a play with the blue coyote theater people – and basically just keeping busier than someone so naturally inclined towards laziness like myself likes to do. but new york skipped spring this year, and we've just jumped right into summer – and since the bad weather's been no temptation, i guess i can't complain. the first issue of strawberry press magazine is out with the sun, and both of them are hot!

this month's issue of strawberry press magazine was put together by myself alone. my co-editor is overseas for a couple months and we haven't really been able to correspond with each other as much as we should be. consequently i wasn't really able to discuss the direction the magazine should take with him, and i was kind of left with just a deadline and a skeleton of a blueprint. since i didn't really know what type of material i was looking for, it wasn't really fair to ask writers to submit work. basically what i did – and what ive been doing – was write non-stop about eight hours a day every day, trying to slice through the refuse and find whatever gems i could in the whole mess. the result of this blood, sweat and tears is strawberry press magazine volume one issue one.

please feel free to submit work for the next issue – and enjoy!

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strawberry press

check out www.strawberrypress.net online. we publish fiction from all different types of authors and we are currently working on our second book publication – a collection of short fiction.

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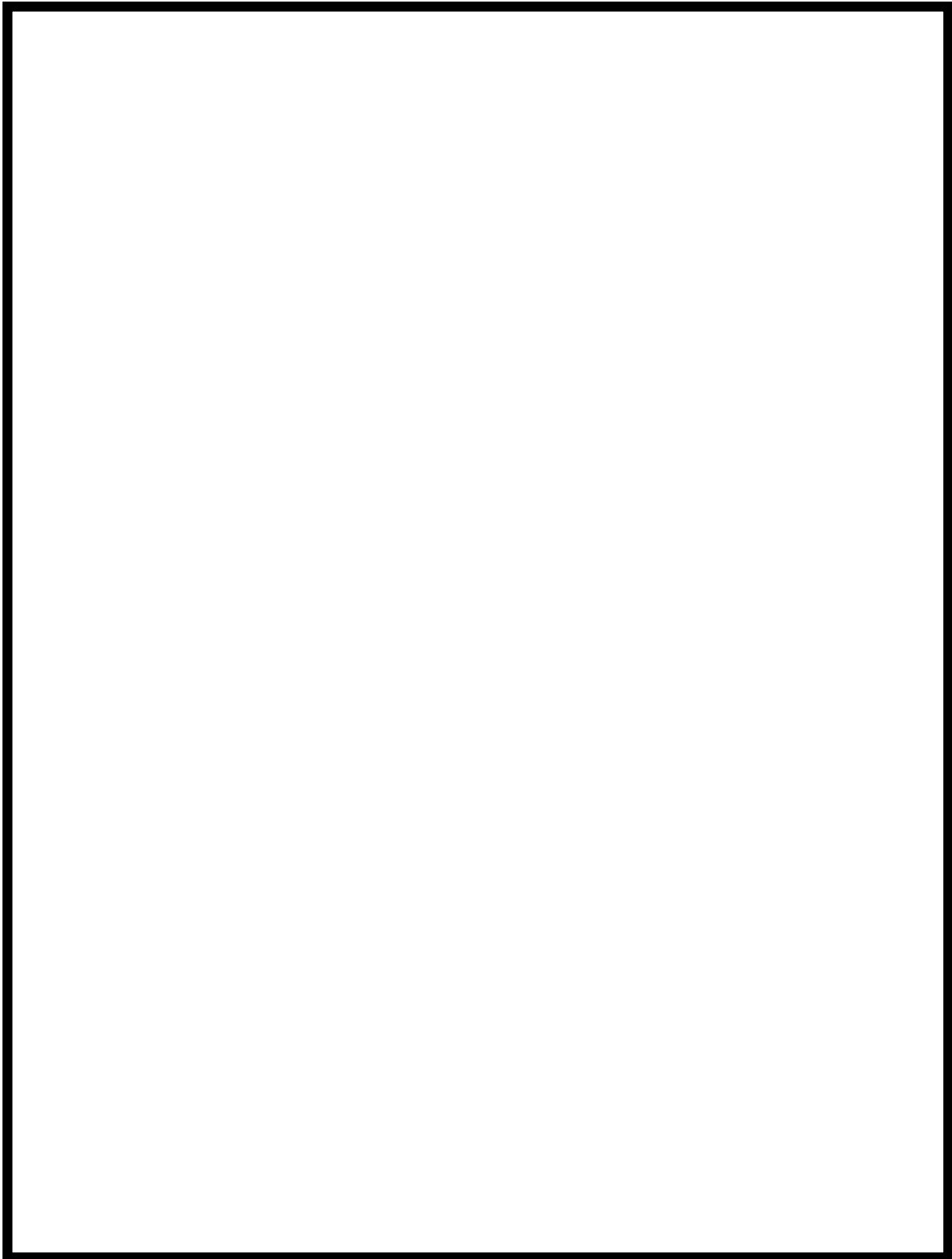
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EVERYTHING FOR A REASON

whit frazier



Sunday

It started with the church bells. He wasn't religious. He wasn't superstitious. They woke him up. The sky was gray; it was cold out. Forty maybe, middle of July – and it had been a pretty warm spring – hot even – a chill had come in with the morning. It woke him up – along with the church bells – he'd left the window open. Nothing. He closed it. All spring – nothing. Things happened just like they were supposed to. No signifiers. Everything for a reason.

Cause and effect. Early March year before a cab driver made him a proposition. You need a little extra cash? We can help you make a little extra cash. Just carry this envelope to a man in Connecticut, it's nothing. No big deal. Five thousand and it's like nothing ever happened. I don't even know who the hell you are. You a cop? Fuck you. I'm no motherfucking cop. Fuck you too, creep. Here, take my card in case you change your mind.

Everything for a reason. Christine left him sometime early April. Work was bad. Times were tough. He was drinking a lot. Fuck Christine, right? Fuck everything. Fuck life, fuck death, fuck the whole nine yards of all this shit, right? I'll call that motherfucker, take his money and get the hell out of New York.

The thing is, the guy *was* a cop. Fucking sting operation. When he got to the apartment in Connecticut about twenty cops jumped out with guns drawn. Well fuck it. On top of everything else it only made sense. His lawyer said: cut yourself a deal.

You a motherfucking snitch? In the mornings, brushing his teeth, the warm spring morning coming calm through the windows, he looked into the mirror, asking himself over and over again. You a motherfucking snitch? Fuck you. You're a fucking snitch motherfucker. Fuck you. But at least he wasn't locked up. Even if he was out on the street informing against motherfuckers. How had he got here? It just wasn't like him to turn snitch. Shit, well shit, well yes it was, cuz here he was. Cause and effect.

Besides, they were scum. The people he was going after. Fucking crooked cops, mostly. They had him tearing down their own people. Acting like he was out there working the streets, hey man, let me be out here, I'll cut you in. Look the other way. You'll get paid twice a week, I got you man. He didn't even know who he was working for. It wasn't NYPD. They never really told him – the Feds maybe – FBI or some shit –

Secret Fucking Service, who the fuck knew. It was how things were. It all made sense. No signifiers.

June came. People were looking at him crooked around the neighborhood. That was understandable. Sometimes he woke up in cold sweats. That was understandable. Christine called him, she wanted to get back together. Maybe they could work something out – did he still love her? Fuck you Christine. Fuck the whole operation. I gotta get out of here.

End of June he went to a guy he knew and got a fake ID. He had a new name, he had a lot of dirty money, and he had a lot of people that didn't particularly like him. A lot of crooks and a lot of cops and then the Feds or FBI or Secret Fucking Service or whoever, but he got out. Moved out of New York and hid out in a little town no one had even heard of, some fucking place Strawberry, boring as shit, but whatever. He was out. He'd been a snitch, a crook, a dealer, a liar, a hypocrite, but now he was someone else and everything was over and done with. You can't begin again, but you can wipe the slate clean.

The year passed slow. I am other. No one knew shit about him. No one in Strawberry really cared. He lived in a little neighborhood called Southport. It was nice. He'd spend days down at the dock, hanging out, drinking bottles of Beck's and skipping stones. Tra la la. Wasn't life grand? A year passed. The spring was warm, real warm, hot even like summer. That was nice. A little rain, but not too much. He met a nice girl named Stacy, a fucking church girl if you'll believe that shit. A fucking church girl – well, shit, cuz believe it or not, he'd become a churchgoing man himself. This new person, whoever. That old name, whoever he was, that cat was dead – shot down in New York or some shit it didn't matter. He was out of that game. Out of that whole racket. Stacy liked to cook him dinner. Shit, what had he seen in Christine? Heh. An ass that don't stop. Cause and effect.

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Monday

The church bells and the cold weather had him shook. Signifiers. The rest of the day seemed okay. So he missed church, overslept, that sort of thing happens. So he'd been drinking the night before. Too hung over to get up and go to church. So what? Heh. It was Saturday night, I guess that makes it all right – what have you got to lose? You could lose your life the way he used to live. Monday morning by the docks. It was raining, but that was alright. It was still cold out, but that was alright. Spring had been nice, too nice, just a little payback, that's all nothing more to it. Way he used to live was like rolling dice with your life. He walked down from the docks to the corner store. Let me get a pair of dice. Back up to the docks. I roll evens, it's nothing, I roll odds, I'm fucked. Shit. Best two out of three. Shit. Fuck dice. He threw them in the bay. The fuck am I doing? Signifiers. Everything for a reason.

Stacy a little angry with him for missing church. Angry again cuz he spent all afternoon at the dock in weather like this. You'll catch your death of cold. That's a rotten thing to say, Stacy. Well, I'm just worried is all. There's no reason to be worried, he told himself. Later in the day he went out for a walk. A group of young blacks hanging out on the corner. They were looking at him funny, like motherfuckers hadn't looked at him since back in New York. He looked right back at them. You think you can fuck with me? A motherfucker born and raised in Brooklyn? Fuck you. Not that he said anything. He walked by and looked right at them. The whole group got real quiet. One of them raised up his fingers like a pistol, pop! pop! Keep walking.

When he got back home he fucked Stacy like crazy. Then she cooked while he watched television. Stupid shit like *Seinfeld* and *Friends*. Shit to take his mind off things. Around eight o' clock Stacy made him watch some documentary on the history of Christianity. Brutal. Motherfuckers eaten by lions and shit. Some serious shit went on back in the old days. He fucked Stacy again before going to bed. Dreamed he was in a large grassy field surrounded by naked screaming babies. Lions stalking the whole field, devouring the little bastards; closing in on him. He woke up right before

Tuesday

Tuesday the weather had cleared up again. Signifiers. When Stacy left for work he got down on his knees and prayed. He almost cried. Jesus, he was getting soft. He turned on the television. Couldn't bring himself to leave the house. He didn't know why. He just needed

to chill out with some Jerry Springer, a little Oprah, fuck it, what the hell.

He couldn't help wanting to test himself. Late in the afternoon he threw on a light jacket and headed out for a walk. Still a little chillier than it had been all season, but the rain was gone, and a little bit of sun was starting to break through the clouds. All in all not such a bad day. Went to the corner store, bought a pack of cigarettes and had his first cigarette in eight months. Fuck it. What did it matter, really? Especially if all the signifiers were – had to stop thinking like that. Cause and effect. You have a certain mindset, you make it a reality. On the way up to the docks he saw a group of guys standing around. Not the same guys from the day before. A bunch of whites. They looked Irish, like the poor Irish over in Jersey City or some shit. Young toughs whatever. They were giving him that look. The fuck is this? Strawberry becoming some sort of fake ass thug town? They kept looking at him. He kept looking back. Walking by was intense as shit. As he passed he heard someone say, *you're a fucking snitch motherfucker*.

When he got up to the dock he looked into the bay and twisted up his face against the rippled reflection. You a motherfucking snitch? Fuck you. You're a fucking snitch motherfucker. While he was looking in the water the clouds swung up fast and blotted out the sun and the wind blew in five degrees cooler. He sat up and pulled his jacket around himself. Shit was starting to get to him. He got up and walked down to the corner store. A pair of dice and another six pack. Walked back up to the docks. Best two out of three. Shit. Right on. Okay, okay, last roll's the tie-breaker. Fuck. What am I doing? Take a walk around.

Walking back there was a young black on the corner. He was on the soapbox, with a few stragglers pausing to hear what he had to say. *I'm out here to talk about love. Love your neighbor. Like it says in the Bible. He might have a nicer house, a nicer car, nicer clothes. Be happy for him. Work to make things better for yourself. Like the saying goes, don't player hate, congratulate. Get down on your knees every morning and every evening and thank God for what you do have. A lot of people leave their homes in the morning and they don't come back at night. Get down on your knees every night and thank God for blessing you, allowing you to make it through another day. Thank Him in the morning for blessing you to see another morning. Thank Him before you eat; ask Him to bless your food. What goes around comes around. The energy you put out into this world, you can be sure will come back to you. Put out good energy. Put out love. Even when times are tough, and times are tough for us*

all at times, put out love. Trust in God, thank Him, ask Him how you can learn to help yourself, and He will bless you... People coming and going. No one paying the young man all that much mind. Something about it was touching. He walked up to the young man and shook his hand. He didn't know what to say. The young man smiled at him. A broad warm smile. All he could say was thank you. The young man said I understand. God will bless you. What goes around comes around.

When he got home he locked himself in the bathroom. He looked in the mirror. You a motherfucking snitch? Fuck you. You're a snitch motherfucker. He repeated it over and over. Looking in the mirror. Drinking Beck's. What goes around comes around. Snitch. Count your blessings. When he finally turned to leave he knocked over his bottle of Beck's. Signifiers. As he knelt to sweep up the wet broken glass the bathroom light went out.

Tuesday/Wednesday

He dreamed that night that he was fucking the young man on the street corner up the ass. His dick turned long and skinny like a pencil and started to bleed. He woke up in a cold sweat like he hadn't done for a year. It was three in the morning. He couldn't go back to sleep. What the fuck kind of fucked up dream was that? He got out of bed. Real quiet. He didn't want to wake up Stacy. He threw on the first clothes he could fumble out of the closet in the dark.

Outside it was starting to clear up. The stars were out. It was warm like a real summer night. The moon was full. Signifiers. He walked toward the dock. On the way there he saw a group of young Latinos hanging out on the street corner. They were giving him the lookdown. He didn't have the heart to stare back at them. It was late. The streets were dark and quiet. No people. Definitely no cops. You a snitch motherfucker. They were looking at him hard. He looked down. Thought he heard someone say, *that motherfucker's shook*. He turned around. They were staring at him. *You fucked with the wrong Puerto Ricans motherfucker*. He walked faster and turned the corner. His whole body was buzzing. His hands shaking. Fuck you too.

When he got to the dock he started smashing bottles and throwing them into the bay. No matter how many he shattered. Still not enough. I am other. The stars turned black beneath the clouds and the wind came in ten degrees colder. It started to rain. He ran down the docks and stood under the awning of the closed corner store. He waited an hour until the rain passed. He felt

tired again like he could sleep. When he started home he felt so sick and scared he thought he might throw up. Signifiers. The moon and the rain and the people on street corners and the bathroom light and the young man on the corner and his dreams. He wanted to walk home. He couldn't. Everything for a reason.

Sinking back into the awning of the store he saw headlights come on down the street. Who the fuck? He crouched back into the doorway, reaching down at his sides like he was packing shit, but he wasn't fucking armed. The car pulled up slow. Slower pulling up in front of him. I should run, fucking *run*. He couldn't. Deer caught in headlights shit. The window rolled down. This is fucking it. Get in the car.

Everything for a reason. That's the first thing the guy said to him. A tall Asian man. Eyes like teeth. One sheisty fucking smile. I'll break it down for you. Cause and effect. We don't make errors. Just remember that. It started last year. It's still going how it's supposed to. Don't think we didn't have this all worked out. You getting religious? You getting superstitious? Man stopped the car, looked over at him. Flashed those eyes and that smile. This is your place, right? Don't worry about the money. It's time for you to be on your way.

When he got inside he went to the liquor cabinet and drank until the sun started to come through the windows. His last memory was sitting at the kitchen table.

Wednesday

No dreams. None that he could remember. He woke up naked on the kitchen floor. Stacy had already gone to work. It was late in the afternoon. He sat up and looked for his clothes. He couldn't find them. Walked around the house naked. He wasn't really a blackout drunk. Freaky shit, man. He went to take a piss.

In the bathroom he saw his clothes balled up in the tub. The tub was filled with water and the water was red. He wasn't in any position to handle this. He went into the bedroom and got dressed. Sat down on the bed and tried to think. Tried to remember. What had the man said to him last night? Everything's going the way it's supposed to? What the fuck was that supposed to mean? He undressed and checked himself for cuts. Nothing. Was that blood, and if so, whose?

The phone rang. He looked at it. Who the fuck? He walked over to the night table and picked up the receiver. Hello? The voice wasn't familiar. *Man, were you fucked up last night! How ya feeling?* Who is this? The line went dead. Star sixty-nine the son of a bitch.

The number you are trying to call cannot be dialed by this method. If you know the number of the party you are trying to call, please hang up the phone and dial the number directly.

He hung up the phone, got dressed again and walked to the bathroom. He pulled his shirt from the tub. A white shirt, it had a pinkish color stained all over it. He dropped it back in the tub and left the bathroom. He went into the hallway and pulled down the attic door. It was time to take some kind of fucking action. He kept his small Beretta from back in New York locked up in a box in the back of the attic. Everything for a reason.

Let's see if it's all part of the plan when next time I see that motherfucker I fucking pop him. He closed up the attic, took a drink and walked outside. The moment he walked out the door the sun disappeared and the wind blew in fifteen degrees colder. It started to rain. He got a six pack and walked up to the dock. Nobody was out on the street. Nobody at all. Fucking strange. Signifiers. He drank, fondled his pistol and rolled dice until the evening when a hazy twilight came breaking through the clouds. The rain was light, just a little more than a drizzle – nothing. He walked down to the store and bought another six pack. We'll see who's running what. Cause and effect motherfucker. Cause and effect.

Thursday

He woke up Thursday afternoon on the dock. Hadn't remembered passing out. Made his way up to the corner store and bought a six pack. Coming out he saw a police vehicle pull up ahead of him, lights flashing, silent. He stepped back and to the side. He fondled his pistol. Fucking shoot this shit out.

A group of young blacks on the corner. Some sort of drama had gone down. Cops were there for them. He kept walking towards the dock. Head down. As he passed he heard the kids talking to the cops. Don't know who he was, man. Didn't even see him. Nobody did. But you catch him you let me at that motherfucker.

He walked up to the dock. Opened a beer. Shady shit going down in Strawberry, man. He started rolling dice. His nerves were breaking, what the fuck? He was armed. No one could fuck with him right now. Was he really headed for a dead end? Death? He felt nauseous. What a thing to think about. Fuck it. I'll be eighty years old. Sitting on the porch with Stacy. I'm not going out like a punk in these streets. Jesus Christ. If I'm gonna die out here like this, at least give me a sign God.

A man walked up to him. Middle aged, white, dirty. Looked homeless. Hey man. Can I trouble you for a minute? I got no change for you motherfucker. I don't want your money. Listen and you shall know: The crimes of the wicked shall be visited back upon them. Jerusalem, thou hast suffered and shall suffer again. If thou art not thy brother's keeper, thou art nothing in the eyes of The LORD. The iniquities of thy heart have damned thee; blessed alone is he who walks the path of righteousness. Yea though the wicked seek to send him wayward, he is the shepherd of The LORD. And I will execute great vengeance upon thee with furious rebukes; and thou shalt know that I am The LORD when I lay my vengeance upon thee. Ezekiel 25:17.

Late that night, drinking all night, he walked back to the store and stood under the awning. He stood there. Holding his pistol. Waiting. No one crossed his path. Around four in the morning a black cat crossed his path. He almost shot the fucking thing. I'm going home. Signifiers.

Friday

He dreamed thousands of black cats were eating him alive. Fucking nightmares, he woke up in a cold sweat in the middle of the day. He hadn't talked to Stacy in days – hadn't even seen her except for when she was sleeping. What the fuck must she be thinking right now?

He went to the bathroom. The light was still on. That was pretty unusual for Stacy. Anything's possible. Everything for a reason. The clothes from the other night were gone. He took a quick shower and felt better. Getting dressed the telephone rang. He picked it up and put it to his ear. He didn't say anything. The other end was quiet too. Who the fuck is this? he shouted into the receiver. The number you are trying to call cannot be dialed by this method. If you know the number of the party you are trying to call, please hang up the phone and dial the number directly. He hung up the phone and lifted the receiver again. Just a glitch in the phone system. That was all. Nothing more. He hit star sixty-nine. The phone started to ring. An answering machine picked up. A woman's voice he didn't recognize. Sorry I missed you last night. I couldn't make it out there. I'm sorry. I know you were out late and I realize you were all alone. I know how that can be dangerous, but at least you were armed. Everything's still going according to plan. Remember that. I knew you'd call.

He hung up the phone. Fuck, there was no one to shoot. He needed someone to shoot. A drink would help him

think through this thing. Shit. He laughed. This shit is nothing. Signifiers. Cause and effect. Everything happens for a reason. Bullshit. He tuned on the television. Oprah Fucking Winfrey. Predict this motherfuckers. He pulled out his pistol and shot the television. The screen exploded into sparks that flared and died on the carpet. Fuck you.

The doorbell rang. He held the pistol down by his side, walked over to the door and looked through the peephole. It was the young man who'd been on the street corner preaching. He had something with him.

He opened the door, grabbed the young man by the collar, dragged him into the house and held up the pistol. He shut the door and threw the young man against the wall. I saw you on the street corner the other day. You were preaching or something. The fuck is this all about?

The young man was shook as fuck. Wait! Wait! Oh my God, don't shoot! That's right, I spread God's word. I also do deliveries. It just pays the bills. I'm delivering a television. Ordered by someone named Stacy. Maybe I've got the wrong house. Please, man, don't shoot me. I've never done anything to anyone. Holy shit, man, please don't shoot me. The young man's voice was cracking. He was starting to cry.

He lowered the gun and let the young man go. A fucking television? For Stacy? Yeah. I must have the wrong house. No, Stacy's my girlfriend. What do I have to do? Just sign here. Thanks. He signed and the young man brought in a large brown box. After the young man left he closed the door and sat down on the couch. What goes around comes around. Predict this motherfuckers. Everything for a reason.

No way he could face Stacy with this mess. He'd fucked up good. Pure coincidence, right? Everything. Get a hotel room for the night. Think shit over and call a hooker. Heh. Not much chance Stacy'd be putting out tonight. When you thought about it this shit was fucking hilarious. Downright funny as hell. Shoot a television set and it will blow up. Cause and motherfucking effect. Need another one? The Lord will provide.

Saturday

Fucking hooker was a really bad lay. What the fuck was he doing? He'd moved to Strawberry to change. I am other.

He stopped at a greasy spoon before going home. He was dreading facing Stacy. On his way out of the diner

two Latinos followed him. He turned a corner to lose them. When he looked back a few minutes later they were still there. He mazed his way up to the docks, back around the border of Southport, across the docks and back towards home again. When he looked back they were gone. Five minutes later he looked back again. They were there. He put his right hand around his pistol and slumped into the doorway of a closed down store. Let the motherfuckers come.

When they passed they gave him a hard look. No words exchanged. Palm on the pistol. He wanted to start something. Fuck it. Catch me after dark. Then we'll see what's what.

He got home a little after two in the afternoon. Stacy was home. She'd already tidied up the place. She was sitting in the living room watching something on the new television set. When he walked in he just slumped his shoulders and said quiet, hey baby.

She looked at him. She started to cry. Oh my God. I've been going crazy these past couple days. What the hell is going on? He went over to the couch and held her. It's just something – a bad person from my past, baby.

He got up, walked across the room and opened the window. He lit a cigarette. I'm smoking again. But fuck it. I'm quitting again tomorrow. It's been one fuck of a week, eh baby? He laughed. I don't remember much from the other night, you know. I don't remember anything actually. I gotta stop doing this shit. You can't begin again, but you can wipe the slate clean.

The clouds were moving across the sky quick. Sunlight and shadows dipped in and out of the room. It had been pretty cold all day. All week, really. Maybe it was starting to warm up. He walked out of the living room. He kept walking. He opened the front door and walked outside. Somehow he had to make sense of all this. The dipping shadows and sunlight were following him. They followed him up the street, past the blocks where the ghosts of the black and Irish and Puerto Rican hoodlums still chased him. They followed him along the way to the store, where he picked up his six pack of Beck's. They followed him all the way to the dock where he drank and rolled dice all afternoon. And they stayed with him until twilight came blood orange through the clouds. Signifiers. When the sun went down he went back to the store and bought another six pack. He went back up to the dock and kept rolling dice. Waiting. At one in the morning he finished his last beer.

He walked back down to the store. It was closed. He ducked into the awning. The wind blew in twenty degrees colder. It started to rain. He took his usual position and waited. Sinking back into the awning of the store he saw headlights come on down the street. The car pulled up slow. Slower pulling up in front of him. The window rolled down. Signifiers. You need a ride somewhere?

He got in. He didn't even see who the driver was. He pulled out his pistol and shot. He got out of the vehicle, removed his jacket and threw it on the seat. He closed the door and walked home. When he got back home he climbed up into the attic and put away the pistol. He

took off his clothes and locked them up with the gun. He climbed into bed naked, quietly, right next to Stacy. She was asleep. You can't begin again, but you can wipe the slate clean.

Sunday

The next morning he got up with Stacy and they went to church. Everyone in their best Sunday attire. Right as the service began he leaned over and gave her the most beautiful kiss in the world. What goes around comes around. It started with the church bells and that's where it would end.

PERSPECTIVES

perspectives is a small section of strawberry press magazine where writers discuss creative art. the perspectives look like reviews on the surface, but they're more vehicles for larger ideas or perspectives on art, culture and social issues. in this issue i've tackled the new cultural phenomenon 50 cent along with the darling of the literary critics, jonathan franzen. the essays are meant to complement each other, but in all fairness the franzen essay may lose the interest of readers who haven't read "The Corrections." this is just because in order to approach it the way i did, it was necessary to comb through the book part by part – and while i tried to keep it as brief and non-academic as possible (look ma, no quotes!) readers unfamiliar with the book might still feel like they're reading a book report. fuck it, read my essay instead of franzen's book. it's shorter.

50 Cent: Self Mythologizing and American Culture – A Look at Contemporary Art and Hip-Hop

If you live in New York you've heard of 50 Cent. Even if you don't live in New York, chances are you've heard of him. Curtis Jackson, a.k.a. 50 Cent has turned a career of underground mixtapes and street violence into the foundation for one of the greatest success stories in hip-hop. *Get Rich or Die Trying* was unquestionably the most anticipated album of the year – and when it dropped reviews ran from absolutely glowing to barely lukewarm. But it really didn't matter what the reviews said. It was already decided that 50 was the hottest thing out long before his album dropped, and no critic in the world could tell New York that 50 Cent was not the future.

Once Eminem and Dr. Dre picked up 50, the shit had already hit the fan. 50's history of getting shot up and stabbed up, his connection to Jam Master Jay as a close friend, his looks, his charisma, his underground credibility and his association with Em and Dre made a brilliant set-up for success. And it didn't hurt that he could write.

Get Rich or Die Trying is a strong album even when it's difficult to listen to – a sure to be classic in the years that follow. 50 comes out on the album alternately angry, wary, tongue-in-cheek and demented, and it's not always the most pleasant or enlightening stuff to listen to. He doesn't preach like Nas, he doesn't despair like Tupac, he doesn't turn in on himself like Biggie – you wonder sometimes what it is you're listening for. Is it just to hear the ranting frenzied anger of a traumatized young man?

Well, sort of. Let's look at the giants in hip-hop: Biggie and Tupac naturally stand out as two towering figures – there's Jay-Z, Nas, Eminem, Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, etc... I could go on, but those are a handful of artists whose names are pretty well known and who have at some time or another received strong critical acclaim for their work.

Here's where this gets to be a little fun. I'm not naïve enough to suggest that these are the hottest rappers alive – that there aren't artists struggling in obscurity – or even underground acts on small labels with records you can find in a Virgin Megastore or a Tower Records that are better writers. But these are the artists that have caught the culture's attention – and when you talk about a young, burgeoning art form like hip-hop, it's what captures the culture's attention that decides which direction the form is going to take. So that there's a lot more at stake blowing up as a rapper than say, being the next Wynton Marsalis.

Then again, the outlaw, the underground artist kicking against the pricks has always fascinated Americans. Going back to the list – we look at Dr. Dre – coming straight outta Compton with NWA – how the real turning point in NWA's career came when the FBI sent them a cease and desist letter for "Fuck tha Police." After that they were selling more records than any other artist not on mainstream radio. When NWA disbanded and Dre started his own thing with Snoop Dogg, he was coming with a hot new sound. Dre was really starting to develop his skills as a producer, but the star rapper on *The Chronic* was Snoop, whose smooth delivery was reminiscent of Slick Rick and Doug E. Fresh, and who carried lyrics over beats with a humorous lilt that was irresistible. Snoop Dogg was pimp and gangsta all rolled up in one – and by collaborating with Dre, he made the two of them a cool as hell team that couldn't be beat – and was only equaled later on when Eminem (a character in his own right) came into the picture.

Meanwhile, Biggie, Pac and Nas were each coming out with their own thing – Nas was the wise observer of street life caught between being a part of it and wanting to raise himself and his people above it. Jay-Z was the playboy – a Brooklyn boy who used to sling crack and pulled himself out of the streets through his own élan. Biggie was the hundred percent gangsta – but he was a troubled gangsta. He slipped into tirades of self-doubt, self-hate and paranoia that no other famous hip-hop artist before him had slipped into. And he made it look good. Tupac, on the other hand, was coming out like Marvin Gaye, writing songs despairing of and glorifying in street life, searching for love and compassion and meanwhile living a life that kept him in constant danger from the situations he despised. He wrote songs that had people "feeling like black was the thing to be," and died early, exactly as he'd been long predicting.

The common denominator among these artists is a combination of talent and the ability to self-mythologize. A lot of artists out there undoubtedly can put verses together as well or better than any of these artists, but without the ability to self-mythologize, these artists don't have the advantage of being able to capture the imagination of the American public.

Self-mythologizing, after all, is just another element of the art – an additional aspect. It's an additional aspect to writing in general. Whenever you sit down and write something you reveal something about yourself. It's

unavoidable – and, as the joke goes, the more you try to conceal shit, the more you end up revealing shit. Which is just to say that writing is not only manipulating the words so that the audience is under your control in how they perceive the subject, but also manipulating the words so that the audience is under your control in how they perceive the writer. When 50 emerges from the underground, signed by Shady/Aftermath, he's already recorded several underground albums, and he's bringing to the table an entire mythology about himself that makes him the most exciting figure hip-hop has seen in a while.

A lot of critics went after *Get Rich or Die Trying* for focusing on the Ja Rule beef. (Where are all those people I'd see singing "*I'm not always there when you call*" now? No one wants to admit they used to listen to Ja.) 50's critics argued that the album was too violent, empty, vapid and didn't have the meat that *Ready to Die* or *Illmatic* had, that comparisons to Biggie and Tupac were unfounded. Well, maybe. But the thing about *Get Rich or Die Trying* is that it manages to be an entertaining, well written, well constructed album throughout (excluding a few tracks that could have been left out) and at the same time elevates 50's myth to the next level. By focusing on the beef with Ja Rule, 50 is essentially just writing the first chapter of the 50 Cent show. Every aspect of *Get Rich or Die Trying* is self-mythologizing. In the shout-outs 50 shouts out God first, himself second for "getting me out of the hood." When 50 was locked up overnight for being caught with firearms he recorded a track from prison. His comment on this decision was that he was "a marketing genius." Given where he's at right now, it looks like he might have a point.

Beyond marketing however, the real question comes down to *what is good writing?* Is self-mythologizing a valid aspect of strong writing? With artists like Nas and Tupac, it's easier to understand them as strong writers, because they come from a politically conscious perspective. Black American art has traditionally been a protest art in some form or another. Nas and Tupac carry on the tradition as well as anyone else out there. At the same time they maintain contradictions essential to hip-hop culture. Both artists slip into misogyny and misanthropy. Both are complex figures, torn between their upbringing and their desire for change. It's not enough that they are these contradictory uncertain characters we understand them to be: they had to make us understand them in this way through their writing.

But how about Jay-Z or Biggie Smalls? Biggie comes off, at first, kind of just like a thug. A smooth thug, to be sure, but does he really have anything to say?

Listening more closely however, reveals a character written just as complexly as Nas' or Tupac's character – a character who receives a call from himself (depending how you interpret Biggie rapping as "Pop from the Barber shop") late at night to tell himself that people he used to know want him dead because of his success. Biggie's *Ready to Die* is a montage of paranoid, desperate and violent songs relived through sharp, well-painted scenes that ends with a song that begins, "When I die, fuck it, I wanna go to Hell/ Cuz I'm a piece of shit, it ain't too hard to fucking tell."

Jay-Z, on the other hand, with his "much Versace swagger" comes from a whole different angle. Biggie blings like no one else before him, but Jay takes it to a whole new level. Jay's persona has its contradictions and its depth, but mostly he's just coming out like a playa. Most of Jay's work – especially his well-known work – couldn't on the surface be considered protest art in any way, shape or form. But he still manages to deliver good rhymes – to write this character Jay-Z into existence – and before the arrival of 50 Cent, he managed to have a lot of New York convinced that he would always be the reigning king of hip-hop. Jay brought a lot of the party back into hip-hop. He was dropping the hottest club tracks, the hottest summer jams and he had a whole lot of people without much else going for them "feeling like black was the thing to be."

So what about 50 Cent and *Get Rich or Die Trying*? There was a recent article in the Village Voice suggesting that 50's popularity was just a growing nostalgia for the 80's crack-era violence and gang wars in inner city neighborhoods. Well, maybe, but probably not. 50 certainly plays off the energy, anger and horror of gangsta rap artists like NWA, Mobb Deep and the Geto Boys, but 50's angle is a little different. From the first track to the last on *Get Rich or Die Trying* 50 flies through the album like a bipolar roller coaster. One moment he's on top of the world, the most confident artist in hip-hop history – the next minute he's terrified, bitter and struggling. Above all, he's a survivor. He's spent most of his life an underground artist, struggling, like most of us spend most of our lives struggling in obscurity towards whatever our dreams may be. He's had shit turn on him right when it seemed like things were turning around for him – like getting shot and dropped from Columbia a week before his album was supposed to be released. Most of us have felt frustration at prospects that looked like they were going to go through turn around and fall apart. 50's story is the classic American rags-to-riches, guy-against-all-odds story that inspires people. And 50 writes this character exceptionally well. 50's contradictions are as deep and

as complicated as Nas' – his gangsta swagger as vicious as Biggie's – his frailties as confusing as Tupac's – and his ability to inspire as strong as Jay-Z's.

So what is good writing? And how do we understand hip-hop writing? Is it impossible to talk about hip-hop writing outside of the context of self-mythologizing? Is it impossible to even talk about American writing in general outside the context of self-mythologizing? Socially conscious groups like The Roots do a whole lot less self-mythologizing than individual artists – and consequently their careers suffer for it. Americans have never been interested in groups so much as individuals. You can talk about Nirvana, but the star was Kurt Cobain. You can talk about the Doors, but

you're really talking about Morrison. You can talk about jazz quartets, but people want to know: who's playing? "Charlie Parker? Miles? Trane? No? Oh. Oh well."

It's the legacy of the individual that speaks to us in almost all writing – even when we don't know a single thing about the author – something about the connection established between artist and audience on that deeply personal, compassionate and human level. A writer begins to create that legacy the moment he puts the first sentence down on paper.

Vision, Image and the Corrections

I first read Jonathan Franzen's latest novel "The Corrections," last November. I was out of work and I spent a lot of time bumming around the café at the Union Square Barnes & Noble. I'd been meaning to get around to it for a while, just what with all the rave reviews and Franzen sort of being the industry cat that he is – not to mention this being the book that blew him up big.

The book has an interesting history. It came out just after the World Trade attacks amid cries that the age of irony was dead. When it dropped it was received with massive critical praise. The Village Voice asked: "Could this be the first great novel of the 21st century?" It was even picked up and praised (much to Franzen's ultimate dismay) by Oprah Winfrey. It became a national best seller. Franzen was starting to outshine his good friend David Foster Wallace as the young new voice of American letters. But then something happened. Franzen didn't know how to deal with being an Oprah celebrity. Guess he hadn't figured out his image soon enough, because, while for writers, just having any readers at all is a great thing, (and if you can make a whole lot of money going on Oprah with your book, shit, why not?) how was he supposed to maintain his status as a non-commercial writer of serious fiction – not a writer of the low-brow commercial stuff that Oprah likes – if he went on her show?

This is a really funny dilemma. Franzen writes about it in his book of essays, "How to be Alone." It's funny cuz in a way, you see his point. I mean, writers *have been* bitching about how every book Oprah likes automatically becomes a best-seller. But at the same time, to agree to go on her show and then turn around and dismiss it as a vehicle of low-brow work, for a writer like Franzen, is absurd. Keep in mind for example, that Toni Morrison's "Beloved" made Oprah's list. Whatever your opinion of her work, Toni Morrison has managed to win the highest literary award the world offers. Franzen, on the other hand just started to blow up with "The Corrections" – in large part because of Oprah. I'm not trying to tear down Franzen's character. He defends himself well in "How to be Alone" – I just want to lay down some of the background I had about the book when I sat down to read it – and illustrate some of the biases I may have had too – just because readers often come to books with biases – and then talk about the book afterwards pretending like they didn't have any prior bias towards the author or the book – that strikes me as sort of dishonest.

Lastly, I was already familiar with Franzen's work. I'd tried to read both "Twenty-Seventh City" and "Strong Motion" and hadn't been able to get through either one. This was disappointing because I had high hopes for Franzen. I expected him to be a more focused and profound version of David Foster Wallace. Consequently, I have one of the characters in my own first novel, "Strawberry Flowers of White Islands" spend the book masquerading as Jonathan Franzen.

"The Corrections" is a very readable novel. I picked it up at Barnes & Noble one early afternoon in November and was still reading it when the sun went down. I was out of work and didn't have any money, but I was engaged. So I borrowed the book. It took me about two weeks to finish the thing – a book over 500 pages. It's a good book. It really sort of unarguably is. The book has been well thought through, mapped out, and things come back and surprise you – things you the reader forgot about, but the author didn't. There are moments that are funny, moments that are moving and moments that are thought-provoking. The pacing is swift and no detail is left dangling. It is Franzen's Masterpiece.

I really recommend "The Corrections" to anyone who likes to read. But I have to say that I was ultimately disappointed by it. Every writer from DeLillo to Foster Wallace has explored the ideas the book explores, and the characters in the book aren't strong enough to make the reader feel the deep compassion you feel for characters in books that change your life. Dostoevsky's Dmitri – or Ivan – or Alyosha can change your life. Chip can't.

Well, but why compare it with Dostoevsky? Well, why not? "The Corrections" is a continuation of what appears to me to be an attempt (beginning with DFW's discussion of the fellow) to rewrite Dostoevsky's "The Brother's Karamazov." No one I've come across seems to have noticed this – or at least mentioned it – so maybe I'm just wrong. But the evidence is strong. "Infinite Jest" – Foster Wallace's epic masterpiece is the story of three children dealing with the legacy of their father – a man who'd killed himself. "The Corrections" – is the story of three children dealing with their fear of a tyrannical father who is now aging and eventually dies. "The Brother's Karamazov" is a book about three children under the shadow of a wicked and greedy father who is eventually murdered. Many of the children share similar traits between the three books. The similarities are hard to ignore. And

it's hard to believe that Franzen could have overlooked those similarities while writing the book. Which is just to say that the book, in some sense, is a conscious effort to recreate "The Brothers K." in a contemporary voice – obviously adding his own element to it.

Which is a fine idea. The only problem is that we're missing that "own element." Let's break the book down and see what we can come up with:

Part One: St. Jude

In this very short introduction the reader is introduced to Alfred and Enid – the two Midwestern parents. Alfred is a tired old man who likes to sit in the same chair all day. Enid is a nervous jumpy type who wants more out of her husband.

Part Two: The Failure

This is the part that hooked me in Barnes & Noble. Chip is a fuck-up in the vein of Dmitri Karamazov. The entire part is a pleasure to read. The biggest flaw here is that Franzen doesn't write Chip's character with much depth or dimension. Dmitri's character in "The Brother's K." challenges the reader on metaphysical, psychological and social levels. Chip's character makes you laugh and sometimes relate.

Part Three: The more he thought about it, the angrier he got.

This is one of the strongest and most challenging parts of the book. Gary's character is all over the place: on one hand a strong successful get-things-done kind of authority figure like his father once was, and on a whole other level falling apart. The distrust he feels from his wife and children is chilling. Is he depressed? Is he being manipulated? The reader wonders as much as the character does. The reader feels his annoyances, the reader runs down every nasty little corridor in the guy's mind and it's well done the whole way through. Gary is Franzen's strongest character. (Unfortunately, he's also Franzen's least interesting.) The reader gets the impression that we're supposed to be seeing maybe a young version of the father in Gary, a character who struggles throughout the book to be anything but his father. It's an interesting setup – and it plants the seeds of Franzen's psychological philosophy.

Part Four: At Sea

We go back to contemporary literary fiction's concern with consumerism and addiction. This is an idea writers have been addicted to ever since DeLillo's "White Noise." Aslan, or Mexican A, the drug here, is

actually first introduced in part two when Chip uses it with a student he's dating. It is used again here in part four by Enid, who is trying to cope with her increasingly demented husband. The question for Franzen is this: what is he bringing to the table with this Mexican A addiction/ consumerism idea that hasn't been brought before by DeLillo, by Pynchon, by Barth, by Denis Johnson, by William T. Vollman, by David Foster Wallace? Of all the parts, this one definitely drags the most, and is almost completely expendable.

Part Five: The Generator

We're given a look at Denise. We see her life via her relationships – from a disastrous affair with an older man to her more mature understanding of her sexuality as a lesbian. This feels like a continuation of Franzen's psychological philosophy. Unfortunately, the characters are more explained than presented to the reader, and the result is a weak, meandering section that can be entertaining, but is ultimately ineffective. The personalities of the background characters: Robin, Brian, and Denise's other, more minor lovers are extremely weak – which is fine when the focus is on Denise – but Denise's character is developed almost as poorly. In Franzen's defense, he was attempting to write from the perspective of a homosexual female – and as a heterosexual male, it's understandable that he may not have had certain insights. This part along with the Gary section, lays most of the groundwork for Franzen's psychological system. Using this part to lay that groundwork was probably a mistake.

Part Six: One Last Christmas

The climax of the book – alternately Chip escaping from Lithuania, and the final Christmas at chez Lambert – clips a few loose ends together nicely. Denise's youthful transgressions resurface, and the reader gains some insight into some of Alfred's self-defeating behavior throughout the children's lives – the script Chip was working on gains coherence in his mind - and the resolution that the book has been plummeting toward develops naturally and satisfyingly. This part has the most compassionate and moving passages in the book. Its best attribute is that the reader feels like the author really cares about each of the characters.

Part Seven: The Corrections

Alfred dies, Denise moves to Brooklyn to start a new life, Gary goes back to his normal life, Chip meets a new girl and lives a nice happy new life, and Enid

regains her sense of liveliness late in her life. The corrections.

&

Again, “The Corrections” is a great read. But the most notable ideas fall flat because they are either not well developed or because they are just hackneyed re-issues of ideas that everybody in Franzen’s genre has already explored. And again, the characters just aren’t developed well enough to really be life-changing. They live and breathe and have their own logic within the framework of Franzen’s novel, but drag them beyond that world and they become caricatures for a psychological system and moral philosophy of corrections that doesn’t hold water. If Franzen wants to be the great author he aspires to be, he’s going to have to challenge his abilities as a writer.

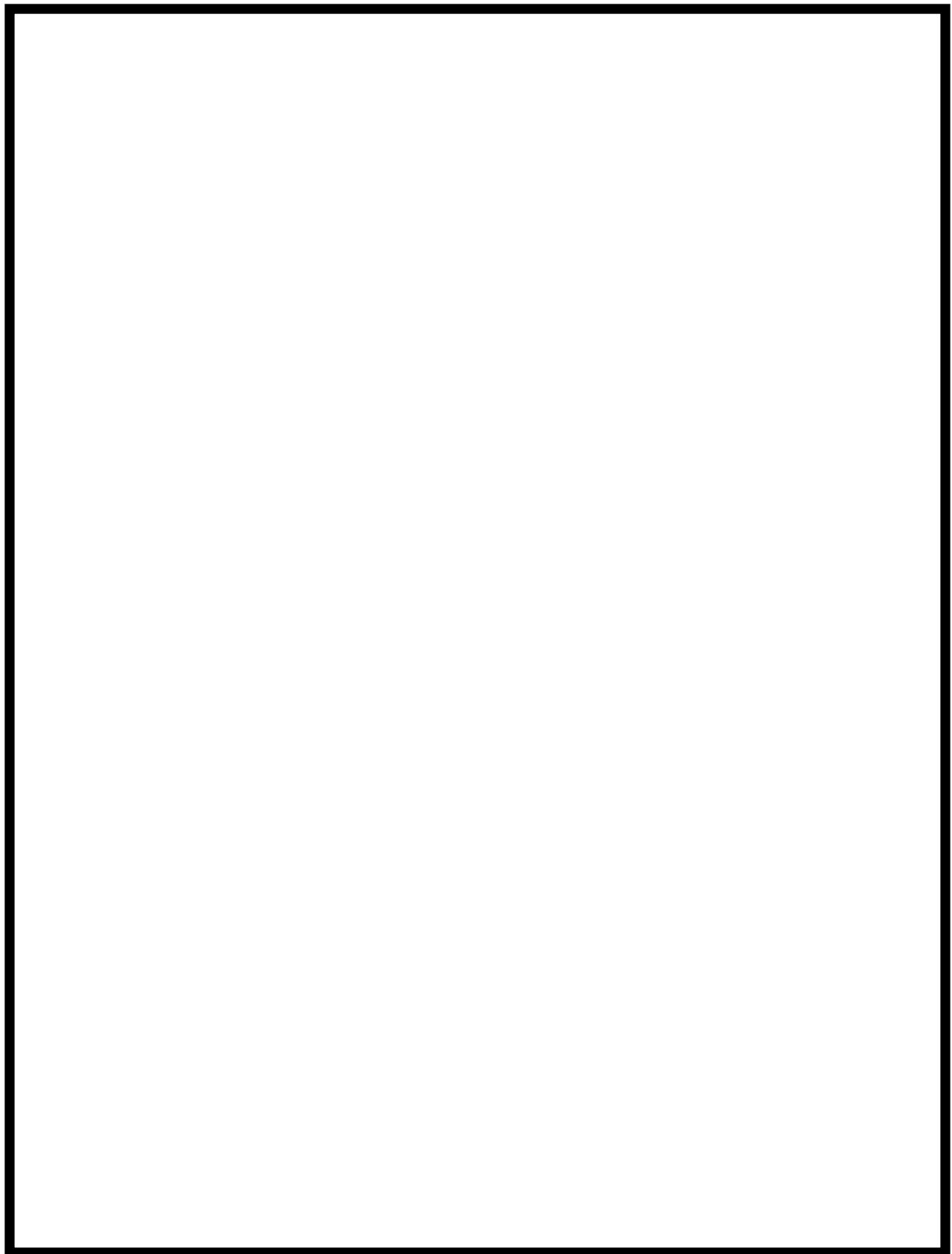
“*Make it ridiculous.*” “*Tragedy re-written as farce.*” These may or may not be central to Franzen’s concept of good fiction; but it’s clear that at the end of the book, this is the big conceptual breakthrough for Chip. It’s an idea that seems to be shared by many contemporary writers. “*Make it ridiculous!*” Well, maybe. But people have been “making it ridiculous” for fifty years now and they keep doing it over and over again in the same way. Franzen (or let’s say Chip) drops it like it’s a brand-new idea. But it’s a tired idea, and it only makes writers and writing more and more, well, shit, ridiculous. Is this supposed to be the newest “*Make it new!*” battle-cry? – amusing, *ridiculous* scenarios – tragedies rewritten as farce? They’re often fun to read, just like it’s fun to watch *The Simpsons*. But by *making it ridiculous* you lose heart, and when you lose heart everything goes out the window. All you have left is the entertainment value, and maybe some small intellectual stimulation – as any profound intellectual stimulation is impossible without heart. Smart and funny. It’s the end-all be-all of praise for a new author: *this book is smart and funny!* Well, so are some of my friends. The best passage in Franzen’s

book occurs when Denise breaks down at the kitchen sink – and there’s nothing ridiculous about it. The strongest character in the book is the least ridiculous (though he has his moments). Is it asking too much of our literary authors to step up the game a little? Can we get past “*Make it ridiculous!*” as the greatest idea conceived in literature in the past 50 years?

Franzen talks a lot about how he wanted to write a book with heart when he wrote “The Corrections” in “How to be Alone.” He explains the whole mental process he went through, and how he’d resolved at the end just to make a book that spoke to himself and hopefully other people. The problem comes back to the pesky question of image. How does he want to be looked at? Doesn’t his image already prevent him from writing certain ways? How much freedom does he really feel he has as an author? It’s an important question, because the question of image and art are linked together like never before. Especially in American culture where the two have always enjoyed a close relationship – from Mark Twain to Walt Whitman to William Faulkner to Ernest Hemingway to Jack Kerouac. But we don’t know who Franzen is. We have no idea, really – a mousy guy who got pushed around by Oprah and the literati. Consequently, “*tragedy rewritten as farce: make it ridiculous*” makes sense. Foster Wallace has his youthful image of literary long-windedness, and his vision corresponds with it. Pynchon is the overeducated recluse who writes bibliographic novels steeped in paranoia. Image and vision – even if it’s just self-image developed writing alone at night in a small room – pervade American life. American literature has definitely had problems separating the two in the past; it’s even harder today. The question is: how do we make it work for contemporary writing?

PREFACE TO A TWENTY-VOLUME SUICIDE NOTE

whit frazier



It's been time to leave Strawberry for a while now. Your mother and I haven't gotten along in years, but she calls me everyday and begs me to come back to Washington. I've been thinking about it. She says it won't do you any good not to have a father in your life. She says she's afraid. Between you and me it feels good to have her worry about me like this. We haven't gotten along for years, and I'm sorry for that. To you, I mean. I want to apologize to you. Things don't always work out the way you think they will when you're younger. If you're old enough to be reading this, I guess you know that already.

It's not easy for me to sit down and write this to you – especially because I'm writing all the time – all day every day. It's not fun like when I first got here and met Jim at the hotel and we went out for drinks and I looked at this decimated little town and thought I'd really stumbled onto something that might be life changing. It's been life changing, but just in a different way than I'd imagined.

But it's difficult to write this because of the implications involved in your actually reading this – and it's difficult to write this because if you are reading this I don't know you like I would've liked to know you, and it's heartbreaking to think about my little girl grown up and reading words written by a father that never existed.

The citizens of Strawberry are dealing with their circumstances admirably. Naturally many people have left, but a lot of people feel a strong connection to this town. There's no danger of contamination anymore, so there are relatively few environmental dangers, but Strawberry is decimated. Buildings are burned down or cleared out, the streets are empty and dirty, there are no jobs and almost no municipal services. Children go around in tatters without parents, scavenging the streets like hungry dogs. I don't know if these children know of any other reality than this depressing giant dockside ghetto. Jim tells me when Strawberry was still a pleasant little town people used to like to go up to the docks and spend long days there – lovers and families and whatnot. I try to picture it – and I can a little bit – but it's not easy to do. The dock smells like rot and dead fish, the water is a sick pale brown green kind of color, and the docks are a pretty dangerous place to hang out, especially late at night. Supposedly people dump bodies in the dock all the time – corpses are always surfacing. I saw the body of this young lady – she couldn't have been more than twenty-three or twenty-four dragged out one morning, and the girl's mother was there and got sick and started crying.

What little you do know about me you know through my poetry. Most of the books I've published have been mediocre at best. I think my publisher cut me a break

just because I'm a reporter for the Washington Post. Not that the poems are without technical merit, but I think I'm starting to see now that they were missing something – something I suppose I've been chasing after for most of my life, and I really don't know how to describe what that is. I wish I could express it a little bit more clearly.

It's amazing to see people stripped of everything. It will probably make you laugh, but when I was in college I used to think of myself as an Anarchist. It's true. I used to wear black – I even had one of those shirts – you know, with the red A with a slash through it and a black background. I think I just thought it was a cool thing to be. Later on, when I first started working at the Post I used to talk about Social Anarchy, and talk about Marquez' "Hundred Years of Solitude" and say that the little community in that book started as a perfect Social Anarchy, and it was an ideal to work towards. I'm not really political like that anymore, grown up and whatnot, but I do have values and ideas and I believe in helping other people whenever you're in the position to do so. Washington is a funny city, and it's not an easy city to be a reporter in. Especially working for the Post. The politics at that paper are tangled up enough already; and it makes you not really want to think about what's going on with all the politicians you're always writing about. I still write editorials, but I don't know if I will anymore. I don't know if I'll write for the Post at all anymore – or any paper for that matter. We'll see. I don't mean to ramble like this. I'm thinking on the page. I want you to know something about the way that I think about things.

The reason I'm bringing all this up is because Strawberry is the closest thing I've ever seen to what could really be called anarchy. During the two years of contamination, this town, which is real small to begin with, was sectioned off from the rest of the world. It was quarantined, no one could leave and no one could enter, and the town just died. Literally and figuratively. The population was decimated, the government stopped operating, the people lost hope and contact with other human beings, and now that it's become re-integrated into the world, it's a town that runs off the aggression built up between people who've suffered crimes too inhuman to consider. They still have no answers. No one knows what the plague was and no one knows how it started. Jim tells me a lot of people in Strawberry think the Federal Government designed it as a biological weapon. That they experimented its effects on a small town that no one would care about. People wonder how they were able to quarantine Strawberry so quickly. I don't know what to believe, but I see what biological warfare can do to a community. Strawberry is not a part of the United States as you or I understand it.

No one in Strawberry is safe – and yet, I feel like I’m safe. I’m treated like royalty here, coming from Washington into Strawberry, the way Americans are sometimes treated going to European countries. The women love me! It’s the first time in my life I can say *that* with confidence – except, of course, for your mother. Your mother is one of the most wonderful women in the world, and I only wish things could have been different between us. I feel like they could be now – if I were the person then that I am now, I mean – and that’s hard for me to explain to you, but it’s a moot point because it’s too late.

I’m treated like royalty, but also I believe with a certain amount of suspicion. After all, coming from Washington I’m pretty much the enemy – from the city that possibly decimated these folks’ home – and when I think about living back in Washington, with our Georgetown condo, and with the wonderful life of luxury and comfort we live in – with the taxes we pay and the money we give to Washington – and the mindlessness of being able to enjoy everything – just pay a small cost to the government so they can do whatever it is they do – if there is any merit to these conspiracy theories, how can I sit around and be the same person knowing that in some way, no matter how indirect, I’m contributing to the suffering of other people and doing nothing to put an end to it? I don’t want to get up on a soapbox here or preach to you. I know you’re smart enough to make up your own mind about things. And I don’t think people should spend their lives feeling guilty for being born prosperous. I’m just launching off some questions I’ve thought a little bit about.

I remember the day you were born. There are two days I think of as the happiest days of my life. The first is the day your mother and I were married and the second is the day you were born. I remember holding you for the first time, and that feeling – that feeling like, my God, I’m a father – like nothing else in the world, and how my whole life changed all of a sudden in a moment. And I knew I’d be a father – and we’d been preparing for it, your mother and I, but there’s nothing in the world like holding your little baby up for the first time and thinking about all the possibilities and opportunities open to this little creation of yours. Not to sound too sappy, but you are truly my most perfect poem. Okay, so that does sound sappy. Forget I wrote it.

The point is just that when I brought you into this world, I hadn’t seen anything like Strawberry. I knew the world was a place full of suffering and sadness and this and that, but I didn’t *know* it, like I know it now and I never felt like this is a world where you’re either prey or predator. And you can be a predator and never let yourself know it, but you’re still a predator all the same, and there you have it – prey and predator – and that’s just the state of nature and when you shut off the lights what you’re left with is Strawberry. The world is not the world I imagined I was bringing my child into.

There was a gang shoot-out in Southport last week and a twelve-year old boy was killed. Jim knew his family and we went to the wake a couple days ago. There were all these people lined up side by side in the church, as many children as adults – and everyone had the same look on their face. It’s a look I can’t describe, and I feel like it’s important that I learn how. The church was silent and eerie for a long moment right before the pastor started speaking and the old wooden beams leaned shadows into the pictures of Christ in the windows and nobody cried. People at the Post think I’m crazy. They say I have enough material to write my book and why am I still in Strawberry? Your mother calls me everyday like I said, and she begs me to come back home. She has a point. I need to be there for you. But I haven’t ever written poetry like I’m writing now – and in the last two months I’ve really become a poet. And it’s something – something in the faces of these people – is it the eyes – the whole expression? I don’t know. But I know that I have to stay here until I understand it.

Again, this isn’t an easy letter for me to write. Let’s hope you never have to read it – or if you do it will be some day when I’m old and gray and we’re having a few laughs maybe in Rock Creek Park on a sunny spring afternoon. It’s cheering to think about home, to think about the park and nice restaurants and to think about you, my lovely little daughter and our home and my morning Starbucks and all those other small things that I love. Kiss your mother for me. Tell her I love her and miss her and I’m sorry. Don’t be angry with me. Understand I had to do this. It’s important to me that you can forgive me. You always have my love.

for Sara