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Frazier Report

Accompanying Franz

This piece describes a book tour Frazier takes with the great (and the late) Franz Liszt (his publisher is convinced it's a good idea). Frazier admires Liszt's talent, and acknowledges that he, like a lot of other men, would secretly like to be a Liszt sort of man (artistically immortal, suave and well groomed, a "skinny, hyper musician type" who's "fantastic" with the women). However he finds him (and "Felice", the gorgeous, snotty chocolatier that joins the tour after falling madly in love with Liszt) constantly annoying, personally repellant even. For one thing, Liszt insists on humming "loudly and contrapuntally" just as his roommate, Frazier, is about to get to sleep. He eats sweet after sweet but never gets fat. He has great hair. Et Cetera. (Throughout the piece, and especially in the part I just described, Frazier affects an ironically effeminate voice). Towards the end of the tour, Frazier finally confronts Liszt. He says that, although he may be less talented than him, he has a better personality. "I am quirky." He says "That is my essence--quirk. By that I mean I'm just me, a self that is completely my own sui generis individual kind of personality. I have my own take on things, which is always slightly skewed and edgy. This is reflected in my writing, which is quirky, skewed, et cetera, as well." Liszt, for the first time it seems, takes the trouble to look him in the eye, breaks into a genuine smile, and says that Frazier is "a good egg". Instead of offended, Frazier is practically breathless, overjoyed that the famous Liszt thinks of little old Sandy.

This story's primary point is to entertain, and Frazier goes out of his way to make it funny. He succeeds, I think. Read together with his other work, the story also seems like a playful admission of his own faults— His lack of Moby Dick-size talent, his slight insecurity about this fact, his fetish for the quirky as opposed to the truly strange, his masculine jealousy, etc.

All Consuming Patriotism

"Citizen is honorable; shopper is not." Frazier states at the end of Consuming Patriotism. This piece is, more or less, a satirical proof of this statement. Frazier explains that he's fighting for president and country by heeding Bush's post 9-11 call to shop more, but having serious trouble kicking his shopping into "code red". He reports that since he picked up on the media's recent fondness for "uninhibited public crying" he's been crying too, often about his inadequate shopping abilities, often while he's doing that shopping. But he assures us that it's not all bad on the shopping front. From his consumption, he says, he gets the same sort of satisfaction the women left behind during World War I felt when they took up male jobs. He points out that women's suffrage came out of this work.

The way I see it, this optimistic comparison is right at the heart of the satire: Women were disadvantaged, but through their engagement with country and government, empowered themselves. We today are over-privileged but through our distance from a

sense of country and the workings of our government are rendered impotent. Frazier attributes this distance to the fact that our sense of country as well as our "immediate surroundings" are perceived not firsthand, but "mostly through television, whose view is not much wider than that of a security peephole in a door". Thus we grasp for things we see on advertised on TV, when we should be grasping for whoever we love, or whatever beautiful thing is in sight.

As the World Burns

A spoof of governmental Illogic. The first paragraph goes

President Bush has called for a decade of additional research on global warming, but needs more time to decide which decade it will be, assistants to the president announced today. So far, 2060-2070 "looks nice," said one insider, though other decades have not been ruled out. "We don't want to pick just any old decade," the source continued, perspiration beading on his forehead. "Finding just the right decade for this type of in-depth climate research might take as long as 10 years."

The last paragraph goes

Other members of the Bush administration who have the president's ear on energy matters refused to give out any information, including where the ear is kept when not in use. They have argued, so far successfully, that that is nobody's business, not even their own. In several recent off-the-record interviews they told the media that an excellent job is being done on national energy policy, now go away. Someone who sometimes delivers their take-out barbecue says he's seen them working really hard, but adds, "Who can formulate policy, or even think, when it's s'dang hot like it's been?" According to an individual who knows this delivery person, he believes the whole process of deciding when we might want to start thinking about global warming would function better if we didn't rush around so, but just laid out by the pool and let the ideas come.

You get the picture.

Back in the USA

This is a piece from fall 2003, apparently written in response to its epigraph (reproduced below)

The Pentagon is drawing up a new kind of bird. Code-named Project Falcon, the new "hypersonic cruise vehicle" would fly at more than 5,000 mph and drop bombs anywhere in the world in just two hours. The aircraft would allow the U.S. to launch bombing raids from U.S. soil and avoid reliance on overseas bases -- and the approval of touchy foreign governments.... The aircraft -- which has a target date of 2025 -- would carry 12,000 pounds of smart bombs, special forces operators or smaller unmanned drones.

-- The (New York) Daily News, August 4, 2003

The piece is set 30 years into the future, at a time when the US has declared war on a resistant Iceland. Our main character is Pam— mother, patriot, wife (the wife of a hypersonic cruise vehicle pilot named Randy, to be precise). In an inner monologue Pam complains about her husband's frequent absences.

“There were supposed to be just a few "touch-up" bombings to get the process to democratic rule on track. But here they'd called Randy three times already this month to re-bomb some targets they said had not been bombed in a democracy-inducing way the first time. Occasionally they'd call him to go bomb something at three in the morning. Didn't they know he had family responsibilities, too?”

It's tough holding down a home front, she tells us. Even though the family time it takes to fight a war is significantly down from WWII, she longs “for the day when pilots would fly their planes by remote control from computers on the ground.” A day when we won't have to rely on such inconvenient technology as the hypersonic cruise vehicle to do our countries duty. What is this duty? It is a responsibility Pam feels “almost personally”— to help “countries everywhere make themselves more like America, and to redirect them when they began to go wrong.”

Besting the Best-sellers

Dude, Who's Looking Out for the Lying Liars of Living History Who Stole My Country?

He starts with this statement:

“As an author, I am frequently asked where I get my ideas. The answer is obvious—I get them from observing daily life around me and by noticing other authors and what they are writing, as well as plots of TV shows and movies. When I see a book or a story line that is very successful and sells a lot of copies, I file it away in the "idea" part of my brain. Then over time I process it creatively into something I hope will be aesthetically pleasing and move some units in the marketplace.”

Then he gets to the point. He says that recently, while browsing at a book store, a serious earthquake hit. He was buried in bestselling partisan rants, diet books, self help manuals and periodicals. The rescue team tried, but they came too late: by the time they got his head free he'd already absorbed the opinions of every pundit, every guru and every hack. He enters a state of shock, in which he takes on all their opinions simultaneously, becoming, in effect, the American average, "The 3 in 5 Americans who are overweight or obese, and also the other 2 in 5 Americans who aren't fat but are just as mad.” He swan dives into to the mediocre equilibrium that slurps at the feel of everything Frazier thinks of as cool, unspoiled or authentic, everything he normally flees from. He happily subscribes to the ludicrous logic that maintains this equilibrium (e.g. “I'm especially mad at my previous weight-loss book—the one that tells you how to lose weight by being mad.”) In a fever of inspiration, he begins the writing of a political tract about Hillary Clinton. He writes in a near-trance, with no real control over his thoughts or words. Hillary haters take over for a page, or a paragraphs, or a sentence, then the Hillary

boosters snatch him back, then loose him again to the haters. Looking at the manuscript trailing out of his typewriter, he says "I glimpsed phrases I hardly remembered writing— phrases like "battles which draft dodger Bill Clinton left unfought," and "hot-button issues not beholden to political orthodoxies," and "the American Empire and its blood-drenched British henchmen," and "ultraliberal Francophile media," and "feral right-wing partisan whine." His finished book, a regurgitated mess, is sold by the pound to a notable publishing house. He says that he expects it to be a "crossover" smash" since both political camps will like it. He ends like this: "I've always considered myself an average person, and now I'm proud to be more extremely average than ever before."

Bring Peace, Bring Cookies

The piece is a fictional dialogue between Madeline Albright and the White House Press Corps, presumably set in 2000, the year it was published.

The press conference begins like any other, with a dry brief on the state of the Israeli peace process. Then a reporter, Bethany, stands up and asks\

Q: Madame Secretary, in light of recent developments -- the slight easing of tensions and the pullout of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon and so on, and your own optimistic statements about the prospects for peace in the region -- well, in light of all that, can you take us to the Willowbrook Mall?

When Albright steers the conference back towards real issues, they ask her whyyyy she won't take them to the Willowbrook mall, tell her that it just isn't Fair. When Albright changes the subject to the building of economic ties with China, they perk up and ask what her extensive diplomatic contact with the country's political and economic leaders has taught her about the overall scariness of scream 2 vs. the overall scariness of scream 1. Albright, somewhat reluctantly, falls into this question's trap, giving a well reasoned defense of the first. The conference continues in this mode, with Albright trying her best to take laughably childish questions seriously, or else to spin them to as to be able to discuss actual issues.

All in all, this is a satirical expose on the childishness that underlies a great many American things (the Press Corps, the media in general, bi-partisans, the nation's obsession with Clinton's wee-wee, etc.) . All in all it is extremely kind to Albright. The article ends like this:

Q: Oh, okay. [Holds up a plastic Tyrannosaurus rex head.] Does anybody in the State Department, or do you personally, know where the body to this is?

A: [Unintelligible; then, faint sounds of Dr. Albright weeping, ice tinkling in cocktail glass.]

By the Road

A piece from 2003, written about Frazier's life in Montana. It has two backdrops. The first is the massive snowfall that manages to bring Frazier and his reclusive neighbors into regular contact (they must park together on the main road, then walk to their houses through the snow). The second is the Bernard Goetz subway shooting, which, at that point, is just as fresh as the snow (it had not yet gone to trial).

Frazier describes the snow carefully, luxuriously, in classic New-Yorker style, then launches strait into Goetz, assuming that his readers will know who he is (in case you, reader, don't Bernard Goetz was a man (a white man, if you're interested) who, in 1984 decided he 'wasn't going to take it anymore', so to speak. He learned how to use a gun and, when a group of men (black men, if you're interested) pulled out their screwdrivers and asked him if he had any money, he tried his best to shoot them all dead.). Frazier says that everyone, even in Montana, had a definite opinion on Goetz and his actions. Especially his neighbor, who fled southern California because of "various long-cultivated dislikes and resentments, combined with a general expectation of coming apocalypse". This man, who Frazier names "Len Dodd", is "short and stocky, with a bristly mustache and narrow eyes, and he often wore a billed cap of a wild, vivid paisley pattern that suggested the scrambled contortions of the thoughts inside." Len thinks, naturally, that "the subway vigilante" is great in general. He feels the same about the stellar publicity the vigilante has given to concealed handguns. Frazier, naturally, feels the opposite, and tells us that back then he was "still young enough and game enough to argue."

Most of Frazier's pieces are loose narratives, a conversation you can enter into at any time, but this one struck me differently. It struck me as a sort of still-life, a single perfectly captured argument, placed upon a world of snow. Here is that argument:

"Len Dodd said that Goetz had had to shoot the guys, because they were threatening him and they were armed. I said that they weren't "armed"; they had screwdrivers. He said that those weren't ordinary screwdrivers, they were sharpened screwdrivers. I said—I had just read an article discussing the subject—that the screwdrivers weren't sharpened. Len Dodd gave me a narrow, in-the-know look, lowered his voice, and said, "That's not what I heard."

Frazier pauses, spends a full paragraph looking around at the Montana scenery, absorbing its sheer emptiness (beautiful yet slightly hostile). Then he looks back to Len, who by contrast has been staring strait at Frazier, and whose gaze has "became more intense, as if to convey a hidden truth to me by mental telepathy.". This is probably because he's expecting a concession or a retort, some sort of logic or directness. Instead Frazier asks "Where did you hear that, Len?" The piece ends there

I don't think this statement feels like a victory to Frazier, not even back then, when he was still young and game. His examination of the scenery was a back, a step that reveals to him the childishness at the heart of the argument. His statement was a sort of lament: He knows that the most fundamental criticism of Goetz would be to disengage, to turn the other cheek, even from Len, but he can't do this, the world can't do this. This whole piece seems tinted with sadness.

Chinese Arithmetic

This piece begins with the following quote

In the event of an erection that persists longer than four hours, the patient should seek immediate medical assistance.

—Precautionary statement in pharmaceutical ad.

The rest is a humor piece, describing the life of a man with erections that are impossible to reign in, erections “as hard as Chinese arithmetic”, erections so rugged, so extreme, that their onset sends the rest of his body into a state of shock. From the womb to the tomb this life consists of nothing but sheer suffering, naturally. This suffering is charted in the form of a medical log. 70’s style men’s pants, the log notes, were not kind to him. The advent of the thong was a virtual holocaust. “Maid in Manhattan”, starring J-Lo, sent him into severe shock, a shock he ultimately would not survive. Previous to the J-Lo incident, he tried a variety of cures. In 65 it was homeopathy. In 69 a “Hindu water cure”. In 78 Swiss astringents, then later on that year an orgone box. After the Maid in Manhattan disaster, J-Lo herself was brought to the hospital to explain that her publicity photos, videos, album covers, and those pictures of Ben rubbing lotion on her back were “intended for entertainment purposes only... not as substitute for mature relationship with appropriate partner probably very different from her.” This proves to be too much for the stories unnamed hero.

Coal Country

The first part of this article is a strait forward liberal expose on an environmental disaster— A coal company’s accidental release of mining waste into the rivers and streams of the Kentucky Appalachians. The second is a description of Frazier’s visit to Inez, a town at the center of the spill. Through the angry voices of residents, he gives a human face to the statistical destruction, and reinforces his point about the greediness of the company, the incompetence of the EPA, and the carelessness of each.

A forceful, successful, political tract.

Count on Crows

In this story Frazier is hired by “the crows”. Although “the crows” in this story are no more than crows as they exist in our world, they’ve managed to gain significant financial clout. “Pepsi-Cola is now owned by the crows, as well as Knight Ridder newspapers and the company that makes Tombstone frozen pizzas. The New York Metropolitan Opera is now wholly crow-owned.”. What they need is a good PR man, and this is why they hired Frazier. The entire piece is a PR statement for the crows of the world. Here is a typical passage:

“Whether they’re good-naturedly harassing an owl caught out in daylight, or carrying bits of sticks and used gauze bandage in their beaks to make their colorful, free-form nests, or

simply landing on the sidewalk in front of you with their characteristic double hop, the crows have become a part of the fabric of our days.”

“In order to stay competitive” Frazier tells us, “the crows recently merged with the ravens”. This was done “not only for reasons of growth but also to better serve those millions who live and work near crows.”. Ravens are now to be called Crows, says Frazier. The ultimate goal of the crows seems to be to subsume all other bird species, to turn them all into crows. Frazier is enthusiastic about this idea, more and more so as the piece goes along. His brief ends on a passionate yet folksy note: “They are going to be birds like we’ve never seen. In their dark, jewel-like eyes burns an ambition to be more and better and to fly around all over the place constantly. They’re smart, they’re driven, and they’re comin’ at us. The crows : Let’s get ready to welcome tomorrow’s only bird.”

This seems to me a general spoof of corporate ambition, and more specifically of the ridiculous language of advertising and PR.

Crunch Time

A precious little page-long piece that explores a fascination of Frazier’s: watching animals eat each other. He says that watching a ground spider fight with a bee it had captured helped him understand “remembrance of things past” as much as the text of the actual book.

Dearly Disconnected

This is Frazier’s tribute to “a vanishing American icon.”—the pay phone. First he recounts a few sentimental memories of them, then praises them for their solidness. “when the call went wrong” he says “the pay phone gave you a focus for your rage. Pay phones were always getting smashed up, the receivers shattered to bits against the booth, the coin slots jammed with chewing gum, the cords yanked out and unraveled to the floor.” He frames this solidness not as something innately positive, but as something he misses and longs for, in retrospect at least. At the same time, he says that the payphone appealed—back then at least—because it possessed a sort of transience: “you could tell that a lot of undifferentiated humanity had flowed through these places, and that in the muteness of each pay phone’s little space, wild emotion had howled.” The cell phone he says, “took the transience the pay phone implied and turned it into VIP-style mobility and speed.” He admits that this is better than a payphone on a practical level, but (by way of conclusion) confesses to a weakness “for places -- for old battlefields, car-crash sites, houses where famous authors lived.” This statement is what this piece boils down to, I’d say.

Desert Hideaway

If Frazier were to write a “Great Plains” style history about California this would fit right in as a chapter. It tells the story of Charles Manson’s Death Valley abode (a small log cabin where his cult more or less began) through Frazier’s visit to that place, the bizarreness he encounters, the people he meets, the thoughts that he has.

The essence he seeks to capture with every anecdote seems to be summed up best by the last sentence: “I saw... over all a bright-blue western sky of endless, careless possibility.” Reflected in the sky he sees the world’s complete indifference to any solid thing’s history or heritage.

Does the Mushroom Love its Plucker?

“You may already know Larry. Remember the guy in the cat-in-the-hat hat selling Indonesian jewelry at Grateful Dead concerts from New England to California? The American guy doing judo moves in that Japanese punk-rock music video back in '86 on Japanese MTV? The guy in the plant store who had just closed a deal to import 10 metric tons of Siberian ginseng from which he was going to make ginseng tea and ginseng beer? The guy selling hats his wife makes and whirligigs and braided wrist bands called pulseras at the Renaissance Fair in Moscow, Idaho, and at other crafts fairs last summer? That was Larry.”

This piece is the story of Larry, the most eccentric resident of Frazier’s adopted Montana town. Larry is not any of the things Frazier calls him in the passage above, what he is is a mycophile, a mushroom enthusiast, part of that strange one percent that “goes ape when you show them a picture of a Morel.” Frazier makes this loosely structured piece into a character study of Larry, and interweaves this with interesting facts about mushrooms (“Larry grew up symbiotic with trees himself...”). He ends with a description of the personal relationship between him and Larry. What comes out of this part is that Frazier deeply respects him, not just as an oddity, but as a human being. There’s a sort of envy in this admiration: He’s achieved true freedom, and true uniqueness, through his devotion to something far simpler than humans. Furthermore, he seems completely happy with what he’s doing, completely settled and at home. He says “Now, if I said all that sitting in an office at the biology department at the university, or in a forestry chair endowed by the Plum Creek Timber Company, do you think many people would pay attention to me? But out here on my own, dressing wacky and putting on a show and letting people see the great wild fungi from the forest — well, I think I’ve got the people’s ear.”

Dubya and Me: We’ve Got No Idea

This piece explores the humor of having a president who, although “Electronically present to more or less the whole world” can’t produce an intelligent sentence. Frazier carefully refrains from the word “humor”. To him “misunderestimated”, and the simple sight of bush’s face on a TV screen, is a “thrill”, equal parts dizziness and delight. He says this fairly unique blend is a natural reaction to our culture’s recent glorification of “the idea of the new”, the belief that an idea, a statement, an act, or an achievement is more authentic and impressive if it was not backed up by any premeditation or prior experience. George bush is appealing to many, Frazier says, precisely because he seems so raw—the idea of a little boy or a cowboy running the country with nothing but good intentions is appealing to most people. Appealing because it seems more human, but also for a darker reason. In contrast to Bill Clinton— an archetypal prodigy, a man who “held

our attention by staying one step ahead with hard-to-categorize deeds we kept having to judge and argue about”— George W. Bush is an archetypal mediocrity, “as unremarkable as the generation to which he belongs.” Frazier ends the piece like this: “It’s a generation that doesn’t have a lot to show for itself; so far, it hasn’t started a new country, ended slavery, won a world war. Maybe we will still accomplish something great. Maybe the best we can hope for is just not to do too much wrong. When I look in W. Bush’s eyes I see our clock ticking, and the chances for true inspiration slipping away.” In other words, Bush is his generations desire to revel in their own mediocrity, a turning of the proverbial blind eye towards their own flawed nature.

Field Days: the vast landscape of his boyhood was never meant to last

This ends

“Sometimes, too, as the bass vibrations of the sound system of the sealed-up car beside me pound, and the brake lights flash and the signage of the commercial strip does its usual selling number, I wonder if we were given a good country, or at least a good idea for a country, and are letting it slip away.”

In *Field Days* Frazier describes how the town he grew up in gradually sold out the institutions that made it distinctive, willfully liquefied into a banal idea of prosperity and middle class safety.

Helen Stark

A sweet, strait forward obituary for Helen Stark, the *New Yorker*’s librarian.

Here To Tell You

A violently satirical attack on Jerry Falwell and the Christian far right, most specifically on their attempts to apply fundamentalist law to modern life. In the voice of a Falwell type, He says that when Jesus says that he came to the world to bring a sword, he didn’t mean a sword specifically, he meant the most advanced weapon of his time (which the sword was back then) and that as such everyone should own an assault rifle developed in the last 50 years. He reproduces the following passage...

There were times that Dad’s pranks bordered on cruelty. One of his oil-company workers, a one-legged man he nicknamed “Crip” Smith, complained about everything. Dad and Crip’s co-workers got tired of the old man’s bellyaching and decided to take revenge. One morning Crip called in sick and Dad volunteered to send by lunch to his grateful but suspicious employee. Dad and his chums caught Crip’s old black tomcat, killed it, skinned it, and cooked it in the kitchen of one of Dad’s little restaurants. They called it squirrel meat and delivered it to Crip on a linen-covered tray. When Crip returned to work the next morning, Dad and his co-conspirators asked him how he liked his meal. They knew he would complain even about a free home-cooked lunch, and when Crip

called it “the toughest squirrel meat” he had ever eaten, they were glad to tell him why. —The Reverend Jerry Falwell, in “Strength for the Journey: An Autobiography.”

..then writes his own version.

“There were times that Dad’s pranks bordered on what your out-of-control activist judges might call felonies. One of his employees was an effeminate fellow he nicknamed “Sissybritches” Jones, who had a live-in male homosexual companion for the purposes of sodomy. Ol’ Sissy mentioned one day that since he and this guy he did sodomy with had been together for years, they had decided to go ahead and get married. Well, that did it, and so Dad and his friends decided to take revenge. This sodomite couple had an old black golden retriever, and because it was old it didn’t matter if it died. Dad and the other dads killed it, doused it with kerosene, set it on fire, hung it up in automobile headlights for a while, and then served it as dog meat on linen-covered trays in their little restaurants. When Sissy and the other one came around afterward and complained, Dad and his squad were happy to let them in on the joke. Then they shot and killed them both.”

The satire is meant to be shocking. It is very effective.

His Own Private Kingdom

This is a fictional monologue, supposedly write by a libertarian. This libertarian has decided to practice exactly what he preaches by dispensing with all government assistance. He not only grows his own food, he does all the water quality testing for the EPA. He regulates interstate trade “much more efficiently than a whole squad of ICC loafers ever could”. How does he do it? He tells us: “When I see a truck I believe is running overweight in my area, I stop it by signaling with my new customized flashers. Then I check out the vehicle, write up the fine, submit the citation electronically to the driver's company, receive payment by wire transfer, and he's on his way.”

A straight forward satire of the blatant “unworkability” of true libertarianism, and of the Dogma many people make out of libertarianism.

Hogs Wild

An article on America’s 5 million wild pigs. For a while he gives fact after fact (“of all the domesticated animals, none become feral more readily, or survive better in the wild, than the hog”... “A maker of fences in the nineteenth century advertised a new kind of fence as being "bull-strong, horse-high, and pig-tight.", etc.). He moves on to a discussion of the impossibility of killing off a population of the smart, hearty, fierce creatures. He talks about how in the old days, pigs were treated as horses, given plenty of space to run and rounded up at slaughter time. From these last two topics he fashions a sort of conclusion: We’ve always tried to crush pigs’ natural intelligence and strength, and have always failed. We will continue to fail in our conscious efforts, but if our society continues on its blind path of ecological destruction, not only many wild animals die off, but these escaped pigs too.

If Memory Doesn't Serve

Frazier's brain is that of a cluttered fifty year old. As a child, he had to remember simple things like his three favorite TV stations and his four best friends. Now, he must remember where he left the registration stickers for his car and all his son's parents names, countless pieces of information that jumble and inevitably get lost. How do you get through the H.G. Wells, Orson Wells, and George Orwells of the AA, Triple A universe without getting caught up in confusion? Scott Fitzgerald states that "the measure of a first-rate intellect is its ability to hold two contradictory ideas at the same time." Yet, don't we do that everyday, Frazier insists. Isn't marrying your spouse the best decision you've ever made and the worst decision? Another confusion is thinking of two very similar things like actresses Jennifer Anniston and Sarah Jessica Parker while still being able to note their difference. Amid the lists of Robert De Niro's and Al Pacino's, the various kinds of brownie mixes, and the overflow of technological terms, Frazier asks, does it really matter if you remember specifics? You call a dustpan a spatula. So what? Who has time for the fine details later in life? Opposing Ozick and her belles lettres, Frazier seeks to ignore the minutiae.

Invaders

This story was sparked by a statement of Osama Bin Ladin. He said that during the first gulf war "Powell and Cheney had destroyed Baghdad worse than Hulagu of the Mongols." Frazier finds it fascinating that Bin Laden assumes that everyone in the world knows who Hulagu is, as the people of Baghdad do. Frazier decides to find out who this man is. First he researches, and writes about, the Mongols as a people. He describes them, basically, as a uniquely putrid people, given to the rancid and the ugly, but also a people uniquely open-minded (they despised the closed off feeling of cities, gave rights to women 1000s of years before anyone else and "absorbed many peoples and tolerated different religions... Buddhists, Muslims, Taoists, and even Christians."). He contrasts the Mongols –intuitive primitives, the destroyers of cities— with the Islamics (sophisticated city builders). As an embodiment of this dichotomy he holds up a common tale about the first encounter between the victorious Hulaga and his prisoner, the Caliph of Baghdad. Hulaga received him in a room full of the Caliph's captured treasure. He toyed with him a bit, talking military strategy and philosophy, then called for dinner to be served. On the golden banquet platter lay even more treasure. When the caliph laughed and said that he couldn't very well eat rubies and gold, Hulagu asked him why he hadn't used his rubies and his gold to strengthen his army, to build better walls, to train more cavalry. Then he left him in the room to starve. The natural justice this tale embodies was the strength and the downfall Hulagu. This downfall occurred at the hands of the chief Khan of the Golden Horde, the army Hulaga had left behind. This Khan was a Muslim, and took extreme offense to Hulaga's treatment of Baghdad. So, when Hulagu moved on to Egypt, he seized control of much of Asia behind Hulagu's back, precipitating the disillusion of the empire build by Ghenghis Khan and Kublai Kahn. The Mongols too, were destroyed by the freedom and chaos that had made them great. Baghdad had none of this chaos in its blood, but it was bound to be swept over by something like this, simply because it's so easy to get to. Chaos collects at such natural

crossroads, Frazier says. He ends the piece beautifully, tying the story of Hulaga and the sacking of Baghdad back into current events. He does this by describing the last time he was in the WTC observation tower: “From that crows-nest vantage you could imagine seeing even farther, around the bend of the earth, to the rest of the country opening out to the west endlessly. As we stood looking, we were in America, and only there. Never for a minute did I think we were actually in the world.”

Journalism Today

A satirical panegyric on a self-involved businessman. E.g.,

“What more can I say? The man is, quite simply, a genius. He is the single most important individual of our era, and we cannot imagine what our lives would have been like otherwise. Let me put it this way: we love this man. One exaggerates only slightly, but perhaps excusably, when one declares that Mitchell Walter Mitchell is the living incarnation of God (not available at some locations). Chick Mitchell has remade us all in his image, and we are infinitely better off for the change. (Call me.) What with the contributions this man has given to humanity, he should never pay another dime in taxes. (I owe Visa in the high five figures, FYI.) Did I mention that in his spare time he paints in watercolor better than Bonnard? (Before 6:30, leave message on my machine.)”.

It is also a spoof on corporate language.

Keeping America’s Trees Safe From Small-Curd Bubble Wrap

An extension of the “bags in trees” series. Frazier tells about how he and his bag-snagging friends went down to Mississippi following a major flood, intending to snag as much flood debris as they could out of the state’s treetops. He says that snagging bags is, for him, maturation from the times he and his friends used to hit “golf balls into the water from the shoreline of lower Manhattan” and shoot the bookshelves of his girlfriends with shotguns. This is because bag-snagging is as much about the place as it is any sort of thrill. Of the grove from which they removed their strangest quarry (yards and yards of bubblewrap) he says “[it] is now permanently affixed to my own map. After we had un-bubble-wrapped the elms, we stood around admiring them. The next day we came back to admire them some more. I could have sat among them all day.”

Laws Concerning Food and Drink

A piece that derives its humor from the ludicrousness of household customs. He reveals this ludicrousness by writing about the spoken and unspoken rules of his own house as if he’s god dictating the bible (it is written in biblical speech, and framed as sections of some sort of old testament book).

Legacy of a Lonesome Death

"The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll"

An article about the Dylan protest song "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll". The song tells the story of William Zantzinger, a rich young society type who, in 1963, used his cane to kill a black serving woman named Hattie Carroll at a hotel bar in Baltimore. In the version Dylan tells, Hattie Carroll was killed by Mr Zantzinger because he "just happened to be feelin' that way without warnin'." and the judge speaks through his cloak in embarrassment when he's forced to sentence him at all (he gives him the minimum, 6 months). Frazier, while doing some reading, discovered that this story isn't quite right. Mr. Zantzinger assaulted many other hotel staff that night (not all of them black), and the judge choose to hold him responsible for her death even though it wasn't definitive that his cane blow was what killed her (the mark was not even visible, she had a bad heart condition, and when autopsied she showed many symptoms of a heart attack). Spurred on by these discrepancies, and his love of Dylan's protest music, Frazier decides to find out who William Zantzinger is. It turns out that he is, as Frazier puts it, "an amazing guy". His name is still well known in the part of rural Mississippi he is from. Everyone, white and black, seems to see him as misunderstood in their own specific way. Zantzinger's life is filled with contradictions. In the 50s and 60s his family was wealthy, but William chose to work his farm alongside his employees, and he drank with the locals, black and white, in the nearby bars. He did become genuinely corrupt, but only much latter in life, when he'd switched from farming to real estate. In the 80's, when the state repossessed some of his properties (due to his failure to keep them sanitary and up to code), he simply continued collecting rent from the poor blacks that lived there, even taking one to court and winning (he betted, correctly, that no one would do enough research to realize the property wasn't his). Frazier seems fascinated by his progressive stance in the 50's became so warped by the 80's and wonders what Dylan's song has to do with this.

The Ideas Toward a Larger Life: Make your own Steel

Frazier describes, in about 200 words, his desire to learn a bit of his grandfather's craft, steel milling, and create a single steel ingot as "as a small laugh in the face of industrial decline and the all-conquering service economy."

No Phone, No Pool, No Pets

Sandy Frazier is not a fan of the domestic interior. An outdoors man, a home to him must be filled with closets or "mudrooms" to store his open-air relics. Even when driving long distances, he doesn't stay in a motel room, but sleeps in his used car in strategic off-road locations. A motel room does not offer him enough originality. The double-poster bed, wood armoire, and flower-printed shades are repeated fixtures. In a car, conditions deviate depending on location, sunlight angle, and outside noises. Such freshness of experience contributes to a sense of invigoration. Sandy describes the car as having a consciousness of its own. It shivers and flutters and pricks its ears when other moving vehicles pass by. It even needs to know that others are sleeping around it in order to be

able to slumber. When traveling, a driver inevitably develops a relationship with his automobile, since it is his sole companion and shelter. The two are inextricably linked and when separated, it is possible for the driver to feel a sense of loss or aching. Sandy, deeply attached to his car, finds, to his surprise, that when he surrenders his automobile, he can still walk off the battlegrounds as a full-functioning, individual being. Frazier is consistently searching for a sense of freedom, adventure, exceptionality, and elation. Although sleeping in cars may not be comparable to watching the dancers in *Nicodemus*, Frazier does remark to a waitress that he is doing “just great!” after sleeping on the road for multiple days. Sleeping in cars is a way in which Frazier can relish in a solitary experience of continuous novelty and even a little danger.

Operation Constant Vigilance

In “Operation Constant Vigilance,” Frazier writes a witty satire on the federal government’s intense security program. He introduces himself as a respectable authority and instructs readers that they should be attentive because he knows his job. The article presents different ridiculous checkpoints which allow you to proceed to completion. The terrorist is described as someone who is overweight (poking fun at the high American obesity rates and fast-food junkies), uses bumper stickers, uses cell phones in an airport to say, “I’m at the airport!” and gamblers. The article’s own security color code rating is changed as you make your way through it. Encouraging the reader to be a patriotic citizen, Frazier encourages that he turn himself in if he has not passed the tests. Frazier’s goal is to exaggerate what he sees as an often overbearing citizen protection system. His writing is hysterically sardonic in its farfetchedness.

Pensees D’Automne

The focus of this article, translated loosely as “Thoughts on Autumn,” is stepping flat on acorns and crunching them. Frazier has particular stomping shoes that he wears to join in with the stomping children in the schoolyard. In the article, he loosely rambles on about the fact that squirrels are overweight like American citizens and that he, too, has to worry about how much he’s packing on his stomach. Frazier even goes into a diatribe on health insurance, rattling against paying CIGNA so that they can give more money to doctors. Yet, amid the ranting, Sandy’s aim is to call for outdoor appreciation. He explains his love for nature at its purest when he comments that he would most like to read a book called “America Before Anyone.” The gas-guzzling automobiles contrast with this pristine, untainted wilderness. And, in the end, he loses his acorn stomping accuracy because he is overtaken by angry CIGNA thoughts. Frazier describes a mis-stomped acorn as a permeating discord that thwarts the harmony of the universe. Its source is inevitably built into the frustrating CIGNA’s of the universe, the stock market parables, and the man-made humdrum. Clearly, only children understand the purity of stamping on acorns.

Pick Your Part

Frazier describes the PICK YOUR PART station at the side of a road in L.A. It is a 54-acre junk car lot with a broad array of makes and models. This masculine haven filled with guys and their brother-in-laws is the ultimate place to observe and find much needed rear-view mirrors. One of PICK YOUR PART's main features is the Aljon, a forklift that crushes the body and frame of old automobiles. Frazier's sentimentality for a man and his car, similar to a man and his dog, is voiced by the El Salvadorian he meets in the lot. The man, watching the Aljon, comments on the love that he has for the vehicle he has washed and dried and beautified over the years. The car becomes an intimate home – a place for your “throw it in the back seat” relics. A machine like the Aljon destroys that relationship. Yet, Frazier's overall goal is to describe a gender's common bond over car parts, the plight of car-loving jocks.

Researchers Say

In this article, Frazier creates a satirical research study whose thesis is “life is too hard.” Frazier identifies many of life's stressors, including the inevitability, end-all concept of death and how it unbearably challenges us every moment. He moves on to state the truly insufferable parts of human existence – when your mattress cover and sheet unravel in the middle of the night, attempting to take off a child's shoe that won't budge, and waiting for a deliveryman who doesn't show up and hasn't even called. Even though people in China are suffering extreme difficulties, these experiences are absolute in the moment. Frazier is pointing a finger at the petty complainers of the universe whose daily irritations warrant hoards of swearing.

The second section of the article is a direct attack on the pharmaceuticals industry, its bogus money-making schemes, and its accumulation of medicine for any and every purpose. Flammia Brothers Pharmaceuticals “paid somebody to say it paid for the study” and created experience-blocking drugs so that nobody would have to encounter life's obstacles. These drugs, however, have copyrighted names and notepads, but the pills don't actually exist. Soon, he notes, there will be prescription drugs for those continually afflicted by the question, “Why do I deserve this life?” Frazier's over-the-top attack on the world's fatalists and the medical industries is a call for us to all calm down and find that ultimate joy.

Square One

In “Square One,” Frazier attacks his own Democratic Party. He makes fun of the fact that they can't take a stand on anything, that they bow to the wishes of the Republicans, and that they complain unmercifully about Bush's “cowboy” behavior and ignorance. The parties other failings are that they drink and smoke too much, steal, and complain to spouses. Most important, is their lack of boldness. Kerry showed aloofness when he did not rip out a handkerchief and sincerely proceed to bawl and blubber during his campaign. It is necessary, he asserts, for the Democrats to respond democratically to the wishes of the citizen at large in a competent, no-nonsense way.

Frazier attempts to point out true Democratic inefficiencies, with a lot of exaggeration and fabrication along the way. Although a new logo, icons, and online banking won't really transform the Democrats, it is true that they need to step it up to

compete against their rivals. What better way to reach those readers both with an affinity and lack of affinity towards politics? Instead of a dry ramble about the Democrats ineffectiveness, he constructs a piece that creatively engages the reader with a “John Stewart” allure.

Techno-Thriller

“Techno-Thriller” is Frazier’s attempt at writing a brief, article-length motion picture. It plays on the cliché elements of technology-based movie dramas. Frazier creates artistic camera shots out of computer screens, keyboards, and typing fingers. He has images of the words “ILLEGAL OPERATION” and “DEFCON CODE FILES,” a satellite orbiting the Earth, a microchip, a space station, a clock running down, papers pouring from a fax machine, and ringing phones. The only sounds heard are keyboard typing, alarms, clock ticking, and loud, suspenseful music. And, of course, in scene 55 Harrison Ford and Julia Roberts engage in a tight embrace. (Ironically, Ian has played a Brooklyn resident in two ‘90s films and himself *The Way West*.)

Terminal Ice

All over the world, icebergs are breaking off from massive ice sheets in the poles and floating in oversized bundles across the arctic oceans. The world’s climate changes cause icebergs to melt and the oceans to rise by a dime’s height each year. The Iceberg, therefore, is an ephemeral celebrity, gaining notice only when it floats along with gigantic proportions or hits ships like the Titanic and then is bound to melt into oblivion. Frazier visits the Ice Center, talks to ice analysts, and even goes to see an iceberg, vividly describing its hospital white massiveness. He accompanies a member of C-CORE in his ice-gathering expedition.

Frazier is interested in the underlining message of *The Iceberg*. Subject to chemical analysis, *The Iceberg* reveals a picture of the highly variable climate and atmosphere over the past 100,000 years. It records such events as the explosion of volcanoes and the start of the Industrial Revolution with chemicals in its strata. Icebergs represent “time solidified” and at the same time, their diffusible nature represents “time erased.” The lonesome, barefaced structure is the bearer of global warming “what if’s.” What if the icebergs all melt and the high water level buries large American cities? Icebergs mark the slow pace of impending disaster, yet they also prove to be a historical landmark. The confluence of different roles allows Frazier to find comforts in icebergs as fixed parts of a landscape on this earth that we belong to, natural bearers of tidings.

The Mall of America

Although this piece is about the largest Mall in America by square feet, retail space, and customer population, Frazier chooses to draw on the Mall’s nuances. Frazier, traveling through Minnesota on book tours as a traveling salesman, finds himself in an overwhelming “endless present tense” in the Mall. Walking from store to store, he gets lost in the now. Frazier, however, with the help of his escort Tim Hedges, discovers the one part of history in a past-less structure. Within Camp Snoopy, the Mall’s amusement

park, there exists a plaque with the words “Metropolitan Stadium Home Plate (1956-1981)”. Frazier stares at the plate while ordinary mall shoppers pass over without notice. He has vivid visions of famous baseball players, outdoor stands, crowds roaring, and a ball tearing across the field, somewhere near a mall patron’s tattooed shoulder. Past and present interlock seamlessly. When Tim describes his experiences at the stadium, Frazier is taken to his own Ohio summer parties. These musings create a shared history of similar memories - memories filled with the outdoors freedom of teenage idleness and exhilaration.

Frazier describes the Mall of America as yearning to be the best, the biggest, the foremost Mall. Back in Ohio, Frazier and his classmates had wanted the best and the most. Their hopes and dreams were huge. The Mall of America holds dreams within its burgeoning amplitude, much as Ohio held promise for its teenage inhabitants, driving around in cars, ready to take the world Out There.

The New Yorker’s Mr. Shawn

This is an introduction to a tribute article about William Shawn, member of *The New Yorker* staff for fifty-five years, who became Editor-in-Chief in the early 50s. We get a glimpse of Frazier’s fondness for Mr. Shawn in Jamaica Kincaid’s introduction to *Gone To New York*. Mr. Shawn, honored always by a “Mr.” is cited as a brilliant editor whose life is buried in self-effacing anonymity. Never taking interviews, making speeches or allowing photography, he was “shy and polite” with a “small voice.” (Frazier notes that Mr. Shawn would not approve of his introduction or the consequent piece.) Yet his greatness stands in the laundry list of distinguished writers that he published, including titles that contributed to a “Cold War-era apocalyptic”. Frazier admires him for his ability to view rules carefully and break them when he felt the desire and also for his distinctly American background. Frazier himself “had convictions” but “liked defying them” and is from the “authentic America” of Hudson, Ohio. Mr. Shawn was, no doubt, a mentor for the young Frazier at *The New Yorker* in the 70s.

The Not-So-Public Enemy

This piece starts with a short anecdote – Frazier enters his local post office in North Bergen, NJ to mail a letter and finds a “Wanted by the FBI” poster of Osama bin Laden. He contemplates why the authorities think that Osama would be found in Montclair and then peruses Osama’s physical statistics. After reading what seems to be an Osama biography on the Wanted sign, he reasons that a man who was really well over six feet, stick-figure thin, walking with a cane, and holding a how to build a bomb manual would be too easily noticed in the Armpit of America.

The article goes on to discuss the fact that after this sighting, other post offices appeared to be free of Wanted ads. The post office, under strict directives, was aiming to create a retail environment with retail specialists instead of clerks and “bright, positive, clutter-free....clarity of messages, services, and information.” (Frazier, no doubt, is pointing a finger at the uniform, commercial Starbucks sanitariums.) Frazier, trying to explain his interest in the Osama ad to the Post Office authority crumbles like a ten-year-old child in a fight with his older brother. Perhaps, he consents, no matter how much he

enjoyed staring at Osama's face, Wanted ads should be left out of post offices. Mailing a letter is not the place for "America's Most Wanted."

The Positive Negative

This is Frazier's comical attempt at linguistic analysis. He first points out the accents of distinct geographical bundles across the nation. He then moves on to the vaguer usages and inflections of the English language that are not as clear cut as "Chicago-style" or a Southern accent. Often, differences exist between those with different social classes or those practicing official "TV" speech versus casual chit-chat. Ending the days of the week with a long "e" sound is one of his favorite examples (think: "Sundi" and "Mondi"). Yet, his linguistic obsession, which shows up cross-country, is the positive negative. If a customer asks the cashier whether they carry a certain cereal, the cashier, using the positive negative, would reply cheerfully, "We sure don't!" To Frazier, the positive negative makes you just that much happier. Instead of "Closed," there needs to be signs like "Nope!" NO, a lonely word, should be removed from the English language. Frazier's fixation on the positive negative is almost like the song that he can't get out of his head. When he is thinking about it, it consumes him. He finds himself a "sure don't" connoisseur. Why does he like the "sure don't"? It unifies the nation with a "shared language" and "a common space." It is a democratic phrase that makes everyone just a little bit better-off.

The Stump Speech

"The Stump Speech" is a hilarious satire of a President Bush oration. Frazier starts off with a direct quote from the president's August 2003 Healthy Forests Initiative speech. Frazier uses the phrases "it makes sense" and "commonsense" from this real-life address in his spoof to show the President's ignorance and redundancy. At several points, he marks the President's Southernness – Bush calls for a nation of decent cowboy-hat wearers and says things like "get the heck out of the way." Bush's main thesis is that we need to thin out the wilderness areas and forests in the West so that they can be used for lumber and chop-sticks in Japan. And, of course, this "makes every kind of sense – business sense, management sense, community sense, people sense, animal sense, and sense sense, if there is such a thing, as I truly believe that there is." Frazier makes sure to throw in his major pet-peeve – the President's drawn out pauses – and his issues with tax legislation, clean air policies, and Iraq War expenditure. Frazier, the caretaker of the Western lands, who thrives on rich description of the landscape and nature in *Great Plains*, makes his rivalry with the Commander-in-Chief loud and clear.

The Unsettling Legacy of General Shrapnel

A piece about British artillery officer Henry Shrapnel, the man for whom "shrapnel" is named. Mostly it is about his name. "Had the inventor of a shell like Shrapnel's been Jones or Williams" Frazier writes, "the language would not remember." "With "shrapnel,"" he says "it found a miracle of onomatopoeia: the incoming whistle of the "sh-," the explosion of the "rap-," the death knell of the "-nel." In the mouth, the word is a

minidramatization of what it describes. It's so satisfactory to say that it has become a part of many foreign languages in more or less its English pronunciation; someday it will be one of those universal words ("email," "okay") that are the same all over the world." Frazier suggestively contrasts Henry Shrapnel's name (which gained immortality effortlessly) with Shrapnel's exhaustive personal efforts, which, when he died, seemed to him and everyone else like a failure. Dramatic Irony on the grandest possible scale.

The Writing Life

This piece is the monologue of a writer who's employed a staff of 42 to help him with his novels. The following passage is characteristic.

"Like most creative and wealthy people, I can be a bit of a monster sometimes. All my writers know this, and take it into account. The ones that last develop a sense of when to keep their heads down. I have access to people and situations they can't begin to understand, and I'm dealing on a daily basis with writing problems at a global level involving amounts of words and money of which the average person could have no grasp. Let me give you an example.

No, I can't even do that. I shouldn't even have brought it up."

This character has built a beurocracy around his personal whims, neuroses and paranoia (the bone structure of a typical book). At the same time, he runs this beurocracy with all the hubris and selfishness of a typical CEO. Through the ridiculous situations that result from this set-up, "The Writing Life" chuckles at the worst of two worlds, the corporate and the creative.

They'll Take Manhattan

A piece about the Republican's attitude towards New York during their last convention. Frazier implies that this attitude is indicative of their greater flaws. In New York and in general they make fools of themselves and refuse to admit it. In New York and in general they see only what they want to see. In New York and in general they take elaborate steps to stay out of touch with reality.

Things That Go Bump in the Wild

This discusses Frazier's desire for a genuine physical frontier. He writes that when he was a child, even the yard was such a frontier, since when he pitched his tent out there and slept in it with his brother, he half expected some sort of wild animal to attack in the night. Frazier says, in effect, that the promise and thrill of both a frontier and a childhood is that primal fear is present (This fear is something that is tamed with age). He ends this rumination on a practically spiritual note:

We go to the woods, or any place out and away, for the mystery there; sometimes, for a dose of fear right below the level of toxicity. Usually the object is to restrain it. But in benign circumstances, when you don't have to take care, a case of the yips can be fun. Let

the panic stampede, let the unexplained mystery scatter your reason. You know that's what the Unknowable really wants of you. Constantly it undermines the rational stops constructed to keep it back. It wants so much for you to quit trying to figure it out, and just accept the incoherence, and come unglued. Mystery has its own ideas for you.

Trust me. In these parts, hot dogs actually repel bears.

A piece on the general topic of “bad advice”. He recounts just a little bit of the terrible advice he’s received in his life, then offers you “the one completely trustworthy piece of advice I know” it is: “Never marry a man whose nickname is The Killer.”. All in all, Frazier seems to like the fact that bad advice proliferates in our world (just as he feels a fondness for the mental junk his memory insists on retaining).

Walking Tour

A walking tour of a fictional city, which seems to be a spoof of some European capital. The tour’s text starts off relatively believable, stating that the city is very ancient, that for all of recorded history people have lived on “this gentle eminence above the mouth of the Imber River, where the "salubrious exhalations" (Stendhal) of the Pripet Marshes mingle with the cooling winds sweeping from the Alps and the Pyrenees”. By the end he’s telling us about “The Boulevard Joe Namath”, a “lovely wide avenue lined with linden trees” that was “not originally named for the American professional football star”. He says, helpfully that it was “laid out to form one of the arms of a commemorative Maltese cross (the other three arms were never completed) and that “Pope Anatoly I, "the traveling Pope," pitched his papal tent along its upper reaches in 1495”. From there it gets slightly more ridiculous, than ends.

We Report, you Decide

A brilliant spoof of Fox Newspeak. It begins: Yesterday morning at 0500, payback time, coalition forces standing tall for America pursued die-hard fedayeen militia near Baghdad. Lightly armed and mobile, these Iraqi irregulars can run but can't hide.” Latter there’s “Dawn revealed widespread devastation in this country the same size as California but not as tough,”. It continues on like this, as if it had been written by the terminator. In closing, he takes a few potshots at Bechtel Corp., then closes the piece the way he closes most of his pure humor pieces— with a spurt of pure ridiculousness:

“Bechtel is an international construction company loosely based in San Francisco. It is famous for building all or part of the International Monetary Fund, Interpol, the International Date Line, International House of Pancakes, and the eruption of the Krakatau volcano. Privately held, it is none of your business. George Shultz, secretary of state under Ronald Reagan, served as Bechtel's president for many years until he resigned to head it in another capacity. As senior counselor and a member of the company's board, Shultz also runs his own catering business and gives aerobics workouts on the side. All the people he used to know when he worked in Washington have vanished completely

from his acquaintance, as often happens when executive families relocate. He is rumored to still be at large.

Woe Is Me

In the page-long *Woe is Me*, Frazier states, sardonically, that in his youth he used to get a great deal of satisfaction out of being depressed. Now though, he has no time for it, (“Whenever I get started on a good downslope of melancholy, family concerns or pleasures ... distract me”). He describes one exception, a trip he took to Nome Alaska. Trapped by weather in a small dreary cabin, he was able to sulk to his hearts content, to “read obscure books to the sound of the rain and the waves”. He reports that when he left he was “pale, monosyllabic, and wonderfully refreshed.”