

INTERVIEWS WITH
THOSE LEFT BEHIND
(IN THE RAPTURE)

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Interviews With Those Left Behind (in the Rapture)

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Lyrics from “The Dead Flag Blues” by Godspeed You! Black Emperor

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*“I said: ‘Kiss me, you’re beautiful—
These are truly the last days.’
You grabbed my hand and we fell into it.
Like a daydream or a fever.”
—Efrim Manuel Menuck*

I. THE FLOOD

When I first woke up, I thought I was the only man in the world. It was somewhere around the first or second week of college. I can't remember much else other than that. The dorms lay bare, sullen, empty. Yet everybody's belongings were still there. Prescription glasses and prescription meds. All left behind. It felt alien. Something in me, the darkest pit in my stomach, knew. *Everybody* was gone. The bustling campus at one point was filled with students shuffling, ants flocking to rotted apples. I can't remember it anymore. Now all I have is quiet. The quiet where you can only hear the blood pumping through your heart. The wind, at a standstill. A deafening hum of nothingness. I never felt smaller in my whole life. Is that it? All I have to say?

Could you get a little bit into the process of finding out what actually happened?

Shit. I barely even know *now* what happened, let alone 5 years ago. Maybe it was 10. Who's counting. Anyways, it all felt so fast. I was rushing through the campus for any hint of being. At all. Rattling doors and windows, only to hear the lonely echo of my actions. I must have been running for hours. Before I knew it the sun was going down. Screaming at the top of my lungs for one person at least to come out and let me know what was going on. But it never happened. I stole a car from my roommate and left. Didn't even need to hotwire anything. The keys were left for me on his dresser. He was a nice kid, I think. Can't really remember shit anymore. I didn't see anybody until maybe a couple months later.

And how did that go?

I don't want to talk about it.

—John T.

They told me to rip his head back, and to stand still, so the cut was as easy and clean as possible. He had his knees on the concrete, we were in, I think, maybe Salt Lake. Somewhere in Utah. Pulled his head back as far as I could and he had his head up to the sky and his throat stretched out farther than it could go. Even today I still wonder what he could see in that sky. I hope he saw the skyline of the city. It was a really sullen and gray day outside, but there was something of hope to be found in those skyscrapers. The concrete beasts of human advancement left abandoned. A constant reminder of what was. He was shaking and I was too.

What else do you remember?

I remember his eyes. I don't think I'll ever forget those eyes. Glazed over, no sense of self left. He was exhausted, and admitted his fate. I could see it. Feels like he's been preparing for this day ever since it originally came. Who wouldn't in a situation like that. Who wouldn't be thinking about death all the time these days. It's all you can do. It's all that surrounds you. I don't know what he would have said to me if we hadn't gagged his mouth with a towel.

By the time it was done, I had to throw up. nothing came out. I had not eaten for days. The hunger pains and the nausea and the hot blood steaming up. The blood all over my shoes lost its heat, and for the hours after it was over and we had left, I was walking with cold, soggy, bloody feet. It felt like some twisted revenge. We stripped him of his clothes once it was done. One of the others tied his hands and feet together. Like a headless pig. Strewn up on the dead traffic lights. We only did it to mark our territory. Glorified goddam trail markers.

How many times did this happen?

Had to have been dozens. I've lost so many on the road with them. I still feel safe, I think; as safe as you can be these days. Being with people helps the most, but you never stick to anybody as long as you want to. You have to be impersonal. It's easy enough to do, but I miss gettin' close with folks. I miss everything. These days all I'm thankful for is that I'm not the one with my knees on the concrete. But it always feels like it's around the corner. They're always choosing someone else. I just hope I don't get blood on his shoes when it happens.

—*Anonymous (The Lumberjack)*

I think the quiet is good for me until it isn't. I've been wandering around for the past 6 or so odd months. Finding myself in gray valleys, where the air is thickest and foggiest. Seattle had enough stuff for me to forage for a year or two, but eventually I had to take everything I had and ran with it. Nowadays I can't be in any place for more than a couple days. Driving cars is useless now, the gas too hard to find, the abandoned cars on the road making blockades. Sometimes it's fun to go on a joyride though. I don't like meeting people. It always feels like a matter of life or death. I met a guy once and I'll never forget my experience with him.

I was a couple days south of Idaho, maybe somewhere in Nevada, but I'm not sure. I spent most of my time finding different cars and empty gas stations to hopefully make my way down somewhere in Mexico. Hadn't been before. Never had a passport. I found myself in a supermarket, looking for what was left of the non-perishables that haven't been stolen yet. Then, all at once, the lights in the building went down. I had thought it was just the reserve power generator turning off for the day. So I just kept going. I walked into the next aisle and felt something hard crush on my ankle. The bite left me folded like a chair, and I fell to the ground. I turned from an able bodied, yet maybe a bit meek man, to a blind and crippled toddler crawling on his knees. Even crawling was out of the question. I couldn't see it, but I felt the blood soak through my ragged sweatpants so I knew something was really wrong. I then saw a searchlight pass through. A wall of light passing back and forth through the aisles, searching for the source of the disturbance. I was being hunted with a busted, bleeding ankle. At that point I was already dead. Grabbing onto the walls of the aisle to try in any capacity to leave, but with any physical exertion, I could feel the blood pumping faster and faster out of me. Whatever got me, it must have hit something dangerous, an artery or something. I felt myself running out of time. The footsteps growing closer and closer. Trying to escape was futile. I saw his light walk down my aisle, and finally resting on my face. I let out a deep, exhausted sigh and said to him, "Whatever you have to do, you do it.

I'm done fighting. I'm done."

I could see the light shake in hesitance, before dropping over and illuminating my feet. It was a bear trap, gripping my foot. I was an animal. I was his prey. He bent over, his face cloaked in a mask. He took another look at me, and started sobbing. Sobbing so hard I could see the damp outline of his eyes pushing through. He broke down, and picked me up in his arms. He rocked me and wiped the sweat from my brow. He went from being the one hunting me to the one caring for me, in the blink of an eye. It was the biggest show of humanity I've seen since it all started. You would've thought he was the most menacing man on earth, if not for him bawling like a toddler. He had the arms of an olympic powerlifter, and might as well have been, with the way he picked me up with such ease. He walked over and over and kicked open the backdoor, flicking on the lights to the building with my head. My eyes took a little longer to adjust than was usual, from all the blood lost. He dropped me onto the deli section's meat cutting table, and pried open the bear trap with his bare hands, his utter strength of will taking me further and further aback. He stopped crying by this point, but I could still feel his melancholy as he grabbed a rope and a carabiner and made a tourniquet for my leg. Gave me some painkillers and put me on my way. I hobbled out of the building, painkillers and canned food in my pack, and as I was leaving, I heard him mutter something under his breath that I'll remember the rest of my life.

He said, "even if he's gone, there's a little bit of god in all of us."

Do you know why he went after you in the first place?

No. That's the thing that consistently stuck with me. I don't think I'll ever know.

—*Nicholas M.*

The thing that I notice most about what's different is just how worse everybody is to each other. It's like we're not humans anymore. At least not treated like them. Almost everybody is out to get each other. There's no inhibition anymore, at least when it comes to the morals of what was before. I was a religious man before all this, and ever since it happened, I've felt the presence of god in my life drift, as too with everybody else that's left here, I think. There's this vast emptiness when I look at the sky now.

How deep were you in religion? Were you devout?

I've always had this connection to god, even since I was little. I was a Roman Catholic, and usually kids born in that strict of an environment kind of grow out of it, at least a little, by the time they're teens, you know, the whole adolescent fight against traditions, wanting to be individuals. But it never really happened to me. I think I was the only kid in my school who wanted to be a pastor when he grew up.

Were you?

It's a bit complicated. I ended up going to a university for theology where I spent two years there. The thing is, you know, I was fully prepared to live the rest of my life as a devout pastor. I ended up making a series of dumb mistakes and I had to be kicked out of the school. Wasn't like I was even eligible to be a pastor anymore.

What happened?

Found a girl. Everybody does at some point, I guess. Everyone but the devout. I was completely whipped off my feet by her. She was just so smart and charming and I felt she was worth leaving it behind. So I got married.

Ah. No more being a pastor then.

Yep. No more being a pastor. Thinking about it know I probably would've been better off just going celibate. Maybe would've gotten taken with the rest of 'em.

(Editor's note: he took a long pause after this and we took a water break together. His eyes were sullen and sunk in and you could tell he was holding a lot back. I wish I knew what was going on in his head.)

We lived well for a while, as well as you could get working from job to job. But once everything hit, we were clueless and doomed. It brought out a side of her I never could've known. She was so much more weak and that air of confidence she had with her was stripped. She felt like a whole different person. Started talking about death a lot. It was all on our minds all the time but she had so much more ideation than anybody else I knew. I would always tell her how we had eachother, no matter what. I think it made me feel better but it made her feel worse. I wish I never would've said it. One day while we were in a caravan with a dozen or so other people, she tried to grab one of the others' guns and tried to shoot herself with it. The gun didn't have any bullets, and she couldn't talk to me for a week and a half because of it.

Do you know why?

She felt embarrassed. At least that's what I think. We ended up leaving them behind and fending for ourselves for a while. With that she seemed a lot happier. She was talking to me a lot and telling me a lot of stories about herself that I didn't know about before. We found an abandoned house filled with rations. Found some old corpses of doomsday preppers. Guess someone got to them first, took what they could, and left. We didn't know better than to just leave so we decided to stay there as long as we could.

They had running water and comfortable beds and generators. I had told her that I thought it was divine intervention. I had really felt that at least for now, our situation was good. On our first night there, we had sex for the first time since it all happened. She told me she was happy, and I went to sleep. I was just in that moment, filled with joy beyond compare. The world looked light for the first time in years.

I woke up alone in bed by the morning. Found her in the bathtub with her wrists slit open and a piece of a mirror she broke floating in the water. The pink water.

—*Anonymous (The Pastor)*

When everything first started to hit, I felt grateful for it, being able to sit around my house, play video games all day and just sort of fuck around in the city a lot. Gotta tell you man, not a lot of people seeking refuge in Idaho, that's for sure. But around a couple of weeks into it, I started to run out of everything. Power, food, water; it got increasingly harder and less fun to deal with as the days passed on. By the time I left my house for good, leaving everything behind, I felt overwhelmed by the responsibilities I once had before. Getting any way out of Idaho was a struggle alone, I didn't know how to drive a car and walking wasn't getting me anywhere. I had grabbed different shopping carts and used them as a sort of sled and basket combo to get me out of there. They would always eventually break down, since the wheels aren't really meant for miles of travel, but since there's supermarkets all over the goddam place, it's a pretty surefire way to get around. Once you get a lot of speed going, it's some of the most fun shit you can do anymore, if not a bit scary.

Scary? Why?

You tend to build a lot of momentum going down big hills, and little pebbles can always throw you off your path. I've gotten a couple bruises from tossing myself off those things, but if I'm doing good, I can clear miles in a matter of minutes. The hardest bit of it has to be finding food though. Most everything is cleared nowadays, and having to push around this heavy ass cart takes its toll after a while. I don't really see people around but they're always mad whenever I come across one. Got a nasty scar from nearly being domed in the head with a bullet. It's right here. (He motions to a scar on the side of his head.) 'Coulda gotten me, too.

What happened to him?

I killed him, obviously. Trapped him in a corner and smashed his face in with the cart.

Do you feel remorse from it?

Not really honestly. It's kinda what you have to do these days, but I mean, what do you really even expect? It's a crazy and fucked world we live in now. Don't get me wrong, I've killed a bunch of people, but they've always wanted to get me first. The silver lining is that you don't have to worry about any of this "remorse" shit anymore. You get your own and you get to do whatever you want. Murder isn't even that big of a deal anymore.

Don't you think you've lost some sort of humanity from it?

I mean yeah sure, things are never going to be normal again. But for me, instead of whining about every dude I curbstomp, I just couldn't give a shit anymore. It's a lot better for my mind if I don't think about it as much.

Do you have any stories in particular about people you've killed that you would like to share?

Not really, no. although there is this hilarious one that I smoked out a couple weeks ago. I was in, I think, Reno? Either Reno or Vegas. One of those casino towns. Doesn't matter. Anyway, I hadn't gone to a casino before all of this shit went down, being from dumbfuck Idaho, and I thought it would be cool to head over and see how cool and run down everything looks. Turns out there was this fuckin' guy who holed up there. You could totally tell he was full of himself too. Get this, the fuckin' guy put up a whole white tarp looking banner with all this shit on it saying like "don't enter, you will be shot on sight" which is normal, right, but heres the kicker. He put in bold letters "DARWIN'S FORTRESS" on it.

(Editor's note: he busts out laughing and doesn't stop for a solid two minutes. I think I see a couple of tears coming from his eyes. It's refreshing to know that someone can cry from laughing anymore. This whole interview

has been at least a bit refreshing.)

Like, come on, how are you going to have a “fortress” in a casino, name it after yourself, and the worst is that your name is Darwin for christ sakes. Very menacing name there, Darwin. It’s fair to say I didn’t heed this guy’s warnings because why would I want to? I’m not scared. I walked into the casino with my bolt action in hand and I left the cart outside. It was all a lot cleaner than what I had anticipated. Imagine cleaning this place all yourself. What a fuckin’ nut. There were even some games open and running, a couple of slot machines, and I decided to run some slots, toss some chips, you know, living my fantasy, right? It wasn’t until snooping around a little more that I ended up finding the motherlode, man. It was an all you can eat buffet, and it all was still fresh. I had zero idea how he kept everything as fresh as it was, or how he got new ingredients or how he did any of this shit but there it was, a full buffet right before me. I think I even said out loud that this was why he wanted to keep all this hush-hush. Then boom, right at the back of my head were the two barrels of a shotgun. Then I heard in a whispery, sort of chipmunk voice say, “Got a lot of fuckin’ nerve coming around here.” Swear to god, tried my hardest not to laugh, that guy’s voice was so much funnier than anything I would ever have expected, even from a fuckin’ Darwin. So I says to him, “Hey, that’s just the kinda guy I am. Not gonna pussy out for a guy named Darwin.” Thought I was dead right there, but I mean, if I’m gonna die for anything it’s gonna be my mouth, and I’ve always lived to that. Always ready to die, but never to lose my values. Learned it from my mom. Then I mean, the luckiest thing starts to happen. The guy starts to crack up. I mean he’s just busting out laughing. It’s at a point where I start laughing, too. Really killed all the tenseness of the situation. Look behind me and see this short little guy, I’m talking 5’3”, maybe even shorter. Little short guy with slacks and a striped button up tee. Gotta tell you, biggest laugh I’ve gotten ever since all this started. I feel like if any of this shit wouldn’t have happened I mighta’ been a stand up comedian. Maybe I’d play at one of these casinos for a bunch

of drunkards like him. Ha.

(Editor's note: he's right. Really funny guy here.)

But anyways, after all that's de-escalated or whatever, me and the guy start to walk around the casino and start to talk about all our experiences on the road and stuff. Actually a pretty cool guy once I got to know em'. He poured me a drink and I told him that I hadn't had a drink like this in ages, and ever since all this hit I've just been crushing lukewarm beers to get by. He takes the drink he poured for me, downs it in a gulp and says to me, "Well if that's the case I gotta get you something prime on your way out. No offense, bud, but there's no way you're staying here." Which is fair. Before all this shit I've gotten into my share of trouble with roommates, and don't get me wrong, I wouldn't wanna live with me either. That's why I've been on the road so much. Don't wanna bother other people. Anyways I says back to him, "You expect me to live in Darwin's Fortress? Come on man, I'd rather die." More laughs. Kinda got the sneaking suspicion that my wise mouth was the only thing keeping me alive. Who would ever get rid of this wise mouth? He takes me to the back of the casino, where all the cook guys used to be, and he takes me to the big meat fridge. Rummages through the thing for a couple minutes then sticks his tiny little head out with a good hearty bottle of wine. "Found this when I first got here. Best wine you'll ever have. Pure, 1908 bottle here. Rare shit." See, I'm not usually a wine guy, but hey, this might be my only chance to become one. I says to him, "If I'm gonna get drunk, there's gotta be a little more than just some dusty wine, bud." He says back to me "Oh, you're not gonna get drunk off this. That's what this is for." Guy pulls out an equally old whiskey, give a couple of decades or two. I nearly jump out of joy and say, "Oh Jesus, that's what I'm talking about," and do one of those Hail Mary's that you do when you're uber religious and all that. We walk around a little more 'till we settle at the bar this guy musta' been at for years before all this shit went down. Guy pours me a meager little glass, and as I start to try the

wine, he stops me in the middle and goes “No, you’re doing it all wrong, if you’re gonna want to try a wine like this, you’re gonna need to truly savor it.” Clearly this guy knows his stuff, so I play along. He goes, “Swirl it around and get the aromas of it.” I take a whiff and am instantly surprised by just how good it is. Maybe this guy does really know his shit. Then he goes, “Take just a sip, and be sure to keep your mouth open, you’re gonna want a lot of oxygen in there.” I says to him, “What are you, a wine doctor or something?” and he goes, “Yeah, basically. They got a lot of books about this stuff over here. You get bored, you read.” So I do what he says, and then bam, like that. All this rich flavor hits me at once and I’m like “Oh my god.” So good. My mouth is watering just thinking about it right now. I didn’t know that wine could ever be this rich and delicious. Hey, maybe it’s just for the sake of being a hundred or so odd years old at this point. After some more conversation and some younger drinks, we were eventually both tanked and bonded like brothers. I knew I couldn’t walk around being so drunk, with my guard down, so I asked him for a night to stay. What’s next surprised me beyond comparison. This motherfucker, right after showing him all the hospitality that was left in my body, had the balls to say no to me. This measly little fucker. I was drunk. Shit happens. Broke the wine glass and slit his throat with it. You can say I was angry, say I was out of line, but I did what I did. No taking it back. I can’t tell you how many times I went at his throat. I was really fuckin’ peeved. Always ready to die, always ready to kill, but never to lose my values. Anyways, it took a lot out of me, and I was already sloppy drunk, so I passed out by his side and by the time I woke up, there were all these little flies in and around his neck. Gross shit. Never sleeping with a dead man again. Chugged the 1908 bottle of wine, which did end up being worse than if I were to savor it, and brought the scotch, along with a bunch of leftover buffet food with me on the cart. I did do something funny though.

And what was that?

I hung him in front of his banner. Right in front of “Darwin’s Fortress.”

—*Anonymous (The Comedian)*

It was cut off by a group of more than a dozen people. I don't know how many there were besides the fact there were definitely more than a dozen. They ambushed me as I was taking a reading break. I have these little things I do to pass the time, you know? To air out my lungs and get the lactic acid out and et cetera. Had all of these little rituals and such even before everything became what it is. I was collegiate for track and field, and could've gone to the olympics too. Almost did, before everything hit. But instead of giving up everything I've worked for, I used it as an advantage. You need all you can get nowadays. In sheer stamina alone I could outrun anybody coming for me. Had to once. Went to the bathroom at a truck stop in Utah. A group of bandits decided to raid through my Camelbak, which I never keep anything in, besides the water and a couple of grain bars for energy. What these guys don't know is I'm at the top of my game here. I kicked through the door, which was loud and disarming enough to shake them up and take them off their feet, where I was just able enough to grab my bag and speed off, hoping they didn't have any guns, and if they did, hoping I could outrun them. I can go full speed for around 10 or 15 minutes without stopping, and with my legs, that can take you very far. I'm better than I ever was before all this hit. Could have even gotten a couple golds at the olympics by now, and it's something that I think about a lot. The necessity of it makes me *have* to be. Back then I was good and I knew it, but the little particulars of the world back then kept me from reaching my full potential. In all my little bouts with people it makes me feel like I'm an animal. I feel like I need to be one at this point. I'm being hunted like one.

(Editor's note: She pauses, and we both sat there for a touch, ruminating over the words just spoken. She's one of the few women I've seen here since the catalyst of everything. The thoughts of why I haven't fills me with a pit in my stomach. It was something I never really considered.)

It's what leads me to still read. I feel like it's the only thing that keeps me sane throughout all this. Keeps my head not too distant from reality. Or what was reality. I don't even think they even write books anymore.

I'm writing one.

I guess you're the thing we need most in this world right now.

I appreciate the gesture.

(Editor's note: I appreciated this more than she ever could have known, and it's something that I keep coming back to when reading over my own work. This is the one thing I really live for. Maybe it's just validation, especially from one of the rare women I've seen out here since everything hit, but this is the stuff that keeps me going. I don't like to think about why there aren't very many women anymore. It's horrifying to think what we may have done for our future.)

So what happened with the group?

I guess I have to tell you about it, don't I? They were all behind me, and two of them dove for my legs. They knew how good I was as a runner. My head flew back and hit the back of the curb and I could feel my brain slosh back and forth. Blacked out for what felt like only a second, but what I woke up to was a nightmare. They tied me up by my ankles and hung me upside down. Like a pig in a meat locker. My head was dizzy from the blood flow and I couldn't really know what was going on. I looked down at my legs. Or up. They were fine, thank god, but the circulation was being cut off my feet. They were nearly purple and blue. I can look back at it now and find some sort of humor in it.

How?

They were almost the same color as my favorite running shoes when I was in college. I looked back down and saw a man, unmasked, with a baseball bat. I don't think I've mentioned it yet, but the crowd surrounding me was all in tight black ski-masks. Except for him. Even when I was upside down I could still remember that face. I'd seen it before. One of the bandits in the truck stop. I don't know how they followed me but they did. I was too slow with myself. Paced myself just a bit too slow. That or they knew where they were going and where to find me better than I did. And I paid the price for it.

What did they do to you?

They started doing little things, like small, swaying knocks at my head with the bat. They spun me around. I was a pinata to them. A toy for their amusement. Trying to get me open for the treats inside. Maybe I shouldn't have gotten away the first time. Or at least that's what they were telling me. It wasn't long enough that I was spinning around until I finally threw up. Vomit got into my eyes and my nose. I could feel myself choking on it. Coughing only brought the chunks deeper into my lungs. They all let out a big sigh, almost all in unison. Like a hivemind. It was scary. The bandit without the mask held my head up by my hair, and let me cough it all to the ground. They let me get to any point of calm, and then they started swinging me again. Back and forth, they hit me in the chest with the bat, which ended up not being actually made of wood, and more like a firm rubber, so it didn't hurt me nearly as much. Every hit upped my momentum. I went the highest they wanted me to go, and on the way down, I heard a shuddering crack. I heard it and hit the ground before I even felt it. Maybe it was just the adrenaline. My whole foot dislocated from its ankle. I was still so dazed by the time I hit the dirt that when I looked at my whole foot, twisted on its side, I nearly instantly passed out. Maybe it was a blessing in disguise. I didn't have to feel the pain from it.

I woke up again and my foot was bandaged, although I could feel it was bandaged pretty badly. Pretty lucky that I had my own experience with taking care of my feet and joint things with all my running and such, and I was able to get it bandaged and taken care of correctly, but I just gotta tell you, the pain was searing hot. Hot to the point where I was sweating and they would occasionally wipe it off for me. It was especially shocking to see a level of hospitality like that. You'd never expect it coming from monsters like them. It made it all so much more chilling. They checked my eyes with flashlights like a specimen. Like they were doing some sort of test on me. They found my Camelbak and ripped the elastic cord out, and left all the water to bleed out the back of the bag like ripped arteries. They braced me and grabbed my right arm. I didn't want to see it happen. I looked the opposite way as to not see what I knew was going to happen. Then, before I could do anything else, I saw the shadow of a man above me. Then, swoosh.

(Editor's note: she gestures to what's left of her left arm.)

Seems not that bad of a trade off, all things considered. They could have taken your legs.

You don't understand. I was left handed. They knew. They must have known. There's a thing that runners just instinctively know about their arms, and the weight you need to put into them to *really run*, and there's this imbalance now whenever I'm running that muscle memory can't fight against.

—*Kristen F.*

I'm no stranger to walking around for long periods of time. Hell, been doing it for years now. Was my whole career it was. At least I don't have to carry lumber around with me anymore. I knew when all of the Jesus guys over at the lumber camp vanished that it was some sorta' rapture or something. But we just decided to keep at it. Were all getting a bit fuckin' annoying with the preachiness anyways.

(Editor's note: he gives a good, deep belly chuckle. Sounds like a Santa Claus or a modern day Paul Revere. I chuckle with him, and we sit in it for a bit. It's been a while since I've shared a laugh.)

You don't really talk about stuff like that when it happens. Bad luck. We didn't know it happened to the whole world, but we could feel the earth turn dead. Worms turning out the soil, the soil turning out to dust. But what always stayed was the trees. There's an old logging tale that says you never rip the roots from a tree. You never could. They reach all the way down to hell. By the time we left the forest, the trees were taller than we could ever imagine. They grew like bamboo. Maybe all the soil below just receded. Like the grand canyon.

(Editor's note: Still the most menacing guy I've ever interacted with. His arms are bigger than my chest. I can understand why he's been around for so long.)

We all left in a pack, but a group of 15 loggers foraging food only gets you so far. There's almost too much power there. Especially when it got rough. One of my logging partners gone mad. Believe it or not, the guy's bigger than me. We headed out of Coeur d'Alene. His family was in Lewiston, so we headed west.

And where's that?

Idaho. One of the last logging states left. Or was.

Ah. So when you got to Lewiston, then what happened?

Empty home. Locked cars with gas still in them and keys in the garage. He was excommunicated before all this. He hoped they were too.

So they vanished.

Either that or they left, but knowing him and his family, he wasn't wrong to assume.

So what did he do?

Flipped out. Broke through the door. Smashed near everything in the house, spare the stairs and the countertops. Screamed as hard as he could. We never walked into the house with him, and we had to leave without him. Left some bear traps to hunt and his ax at the door. We left in his wife's car and that must have fucked with him worse. Out of all the shit I done, and I've done my fair bit of shit, it's one of the main things I still feel bad about. He would near talk my ear off about the things he would've done once he got home. He never talked about smashing the place up. Couldn't have thought about it. Who would want to in a life like this?

So how'd you get your way into that big mass of people out there?

Once you see damn near a horde of people walking through Utah you don't very much consider going anywhere else than with 'em. Especially with their incentives.

Incentives? Like what?

Like the things they do to you. They try to take the life out of you. You've interviewed me and others in the horde, you should know all of this. They hunt for sport. They make us hunt for sport. They kill us just to mark we were there. Nobody knows who gives the orders. Maybe it's all of us together and maybe it's just one person, but there's gotta be a reason why we do what we do. There's safety in numbers, but you can only be so safe in there. I'm a big guy, and unlike others, I don't feel like I need a lot of food to get by. The older loggers used to tease me for it. Called me a "Paris Hilton type."

(Editor's note: he chuckled, which turned into a deep, raspy cough. I offered him water, where he accepted and drank the whole canteen. I never noticed how small it all looks in the hand of a giant.)

I started with skinning dead deer from the groups I've been with that were ordered to hunt for the pack. It got us all together in small enough of a group to get to know each other in any capacity, and told us to meet them again in a week's time, with enough food to get everybody by. Got to be almost friends with some of these guys, which is refreshing, because "almost friends" is the most you'll ever get now. Stomping my way through the forests again, you know, searching for food for your tribe, set a spark in me. It was something real and bare and animalistic, and it gave me a sense of purpose within my tribe.

You were the homemaker.

Yeah, (chuckles), I guess I was. It was pretty great. Best job you can get, better than what most have to deal with, and I got pretty good at it. By the time we got back we had more than enough for everybody and they ate good because of us for a couple of days. It was humbling to know that people depend on you that way.

So then how did you end up becoming an executioner?

Started talking too much. Talking to the wrong people. The way things go like that is that you start to feel too comfortable in positions like this and you end up in higher spirits than you should be. It's why they gave me the position that I have.

(Editor's note: he pauses, as if to choke back tears and motions to his ax, the wood of the handle dyed cherry red from blood.)

You know, I used to cut wood with this thing.

—*Anonymous (The Lumberjack)*

I think the easier question is to judge what things stayed the same. Because nearly everything that once was, hasn't. I never knew the brutality the world had to offer. Kept myself in the bubble of small town Wisconsin. I had only ever left town when everything hit, and I didn't feel safe anymore. Staying there and dying of hunger alone would have been better. I assume. I never thought hell was real until I lived it. I've been living it for years.

We all have.

I think about the people that vanished and what they're doing every day. I curse whatever left me here. It's hard to be strong. It takes everything out of you. Your body gets weaker and the shit you have to face gets harder and harder. The next time I'm confronted, I'll just forfeit. I just can't make a life out of this anymore.

I don't think we were ever made to. You just do.

You just keep fucking moving without a destination. You walk with a hope on your shoulders that the person you meet next will tear you apart. When I get to California I'm walking into the ocean. I'll float around until I can't anymore.

(Editor's note: during my stint in Utah I found myself at the Zion National Park, where I found him with a pistol in his hand and a hole in the side of his head. He was just at the top of the cliff and was looking into its numerous craters and valleys. Beside him lay a picture of a kid being bathed in a sink, and written on the ground in chalk was: "To anyone out there: please treat me with remorse. I'm just sleeping.")

—*Trevor M.*

(E)ditor's Journal:

I often do my interviews by staking out which people are dangerous or not. I have a couple of things to get me through this. One, is a big white flag I found at a general shop in Colorado. I wave it first, before anything else, some let their guard down then and we get to talking and I get to tell them what this is all about, and offer them the water I can and occasionally, if I can spare it, food. This usually works to show them that I'm not harmful, but nowadays you can bet that a lot of people aren't that quick to put their guard down. Other times they see the white flag and try to ambush, seeing me as an easy target. Most of the time I expect my kindness to be seen as weakness, and I prepare accordingly. I have a bulletproof vest I keep underneath my coat, and I wear a vintage army helmet to protect myself from head trauma. I've had both of these since before everything hit. Other than that, I try to keep myself as low to the ground as I can, and being naturally short, I'm able to duck under cover easily. I keep my journals and my pens and tape recorder in a satchel that a lot of the older and bigger guys are quick to call a purse. I'm a bit meek and slender and I don't try to make myself look intimidating. When I encounter most people I'm undoubtedly in a vulnerable position, and doing years of this stuff, it turns out to be very rare that anybody would bother with interviews. Those aren't the people I want to interview. I want to interview the people reaching out to tell a story. Ones that have a story to tell.

I feel like this book can—if I find a way to get it out in any form (which I'm willing to spend my life towards achieving)—be one of the only big accounts of this. It might be the only one. ~~I have a purpose now with this book.~~ At times I feel like the only person that's willing to seek a future. This world, this culture has been put through the gutter. You can feel the exhaustion in these people's voices. I haven't had an uplifting story here. ~~Need an uplifting story.~~ I give these people the opportunity for their voice to be heard in the future. For what's left of it, at least. ~~If there is one.~~ Some

of these people are dead. Most of these people are dead. I'm holding their last words in my bag. In my tape recorder. The thing I worry about the most is the people I'm missing. The people that are too sunken by the quicksand of the world that fighting to kill, and killing to feed, is their only instinct. It's what the brothers are all about. That instinct is by design for them. From what I've heard of them (and it isn't much), they intentionally find ways to degrade and break people to beasts. It's so easy to do that to people. We're close enough even without their help. We've turned ourselves to subhumans. Maybe God made that distinction for us.)

II. THE APOSTASY

We were actually up in the air when it all hit. I was stationed with NATO planes in operation with a couple members of the ISAF, a military mission in Afghanistan. I was stuck in a cold desert storm. On my watch it was exactly zero-hundred. We were stationed in the Al Anbar Province in Iraq. We started hearing multiple alarms go off in the cockpit followed by huge amounts of turbulence. One of the Afghan pilots went on intercom and started yelling in Farsi. I couldn't make it out, but everybody else could and in their eyes was a sense of horror I had no idea I was about to experience. It was pretty disorienting to not understand what was going on, but in hindsight I wish I would have never known. Sometimes I wish I would have died on the plane. Shit. Actually, can you strike that from the record?

Ok, fair enough. (Editor's note: I tried my hardest, and I mulled it over many times in my head, but something in me just can't muster to get rid of it.)

The Afghans who understood what was going on immediately got from their seats and packed towards the cockpit, near dying to get in. They were like rats in a trap, climbing over each other to find a way in. The rest of us were strapped into the sides of the plane as protocol, if anything like this were to happen. The turbulence was getting worse, and me and my men were expecting to hit the ground. And hit the ground hard. The Afghans were bouncing around the plane violently and trying their hardest to stay on ground and get to a seat. Their efforts were fruitless. Me and my men saw them paint the walls of the cabin with their blood. They were being thrown so violently. You could see the shifts in gravity in the turbulence by watching the herd of Afghans all at once be tossed back and forth through the cabin. Thrown around like a game of ping-pong. And all we could do is close our eyes and stuff our fingers in our ears and pretend it all goes away. But it never does.

How did you then get back to America if the plane crashed in Afghanistan?

That's the thing. It never crashed. All at once, the turbulence stopped in its tracks. The only thing we could hear now was the pained, nauseous moans of the broken Afghans piled on top of one another in the back of the plane. Sounded straight outta' hell. It was our first look at the hell that only laid before us from this point. The plane was still again. Like none of it ever happened. After enough time had passed to feel safe again, me and a couple of men got up from our seats and assessed the damage. We saw the lines of red paint and broken fingernails thrown across the doors. Once we managed to pry it open with our tools, we were shocked to find that the plane was now headed for the ocean, with nobody in the pilot seats. We thought they had just left the cockpit and decided to join the rest of the Afghans, but then we realized that the doors were stuck shut. Then our clues were out the window. We didn't know what was piloting it, whether it was autopilot, or something else entirely. I'm still a little fazed from it, honestly. The sun was setting in the west and we could see it through the cockpit windows.

—*Anonymous (The Soldier)*

It was the days that I was alone after Elizabeth died that were the hardest. I didn't want to look inside myself so I just kept my eyes outside. And all I saw was worse. I still don't have that closure, and when you're in a place like I am you'll never find it. Looking back now I had nothing to worry about. I had more than my share of rations and canned food and useful tools stowed away. Took everything I could out of that house. Even the pillow she slept on, but the smell isn't there anymore and hasn't been for years. I still have it anyway. I never had a clue of where I was to go, but I just went, and, mind you, I was in the South for all of this. The people in the North, they're a lot quieter and more depressed and sunken and you just feel bad for everyone, for yourself. What the South turned into was something different entirely. It's like they reveled in it. The carnage. The anarchy. You could hear men screaming from miles away. If you think you've got it bad up here with a bunch of lumbering idiots walking around in a big circle, you know nothing.

I've heard a lot about the South. Everybody leaves there to get up here. Half the people left here are southerners. The brothers are still a problem.

You think I don't know this?

(Editor's note: he let in a shaky sigh and muttered something under his breath. Even after listening to the tape back and forth I still can't get it.)

I just miss the music. There's nothing anymore. All the electronics are long dead. I don't see any guitars out in the wild and even if I found one I wouldn't know what to do with it. Don't remember any songs anymore. I've found some HAM radios but they never end up putting out anything but static. My heart is in my gullet.

—*Anonymous (The Pastor)*

(Editor's note: This, and other poems you'll find from this book are from an anonymous poet/graffiti artist who spray paints elaborate poems on various Utah landmarks. From what I know, these are original poems. Found this particular poem across the bottom of the Arches, where I watched the sun set across the landscape arch. I wanted to hike to the top and dangle my feet at the zenith of the rock, but I didn't want to waste any food or water hiking.)

If, and Where

and when
the bough breaks,
the serpent's apple will fall
on our heads regardless,

our brain spits
through our nostrils
and paint impressions
all over the grass.

if you took the last ounce of
what's left inside
you'd see just how
anemic
it all is,
how gray
the gray matter shows
on the concrete.

and if you look
at the dent
in the back of our heads
you'd hope to see
the sprouting beginnings
of a tree
burrowed in the hair —
who wouldn't want that?

—*Anonymous (The Poet)*

It's been too long since I've felt this sort of warmth inside me. Especially these days, but even before, with Elizabeth, there's always been a distance I haven't been able to put my tongue on. Maybe it's been all the religion and the way I was raised all my life but ever since her death, since all of this bullshit, it's been giving me a lot of time to think. We're in the rapture, you know? It's all been foretold and now it's all here. It's been the elephant of the whole room.

Where did it all come from?

Why me?

Why us?

We're in a limbo. A sort of waking half-death that we've grown to wear throughout the years. I think there's always been a part of it inside, but it's never reared its ugly head towards me. Until I saw his face for the first time. I just knew. And he did too. We bonded over both coming from the south. We locked eyes. Our fearful and weary eyes looked *into* each other. Past everything else. Past all of the fears and the inhibitions and the *what if's* and the *what buts* and the fear of god. I guess that's the silver lining of it all. Sometimes it just feels like it's only when god has left us, do we find true freedom. A true lack of inhibition. I don't feel this overwhelming pressure to subdue myself anymore. In some ways it's been the only thing that's made me feel like I was before all this. What delicious irony it has. To finally fall in love once everything's gone kaput.

Can you tell me about him?

He has soft hands and wears these long camo shorts that go halfway down his legs, closer to the ones that girls wear. The ones intended to be, instead of the ones just cut or hemmed too short. It's like I've missed the feeling of true, validating, reciprocated affection. I think we all have. And, I think I'm lucky to find any sense of an ideal of what was once before. We kiss and we shake hands and we fuck like men. It's been the most exhilarating expe-

rience of my life. There's this true connection, a true bond between guys you can't get anywhere else. We put our foreheads together and look into our eyes. Our shirts are off and our muscles shine. And we're tense and our muscles are flexed and we're holding eachothers arms like wrestlers in jest. And I hope it never ends. It's funny, you know? I think I've found god in him. Every time I look at the sky, he looks with me, and I can tell he's there.

—*Anonymous (The Pastor)*

We were in the sky for what felt like decades. Staring at nothing but ocean under you, with the rot of the dead and bleeding haunting the air, and a cockpit with nobody in it. We had thought by then that it was just on autopilot, and none of us would want to try and fly their first plane, so we went wherever it was taking us. We didn't know where we were going, and we didn't know whether or not we had enough gas to get there. Every time I took a nap, or slept, I expected to wake up at the bottom of the ocean. I imagine it's what all of us thought. Anybody who dared to sleep, anyway.

How did you end up even getting out of the plane?

By the time we saw land we had all basically come to the conclusion that if we were going to have any shot of not going down with the plane, we would have to jump. I was lucky enough to have thought of grabbing a parachute early on, in case we had to, but some of my fellow troops weren't.

What did they do instead?

They fought for what was left. A couple deadweight infantry soldiers nearly killed each other for it. One of them actually did. Him and someone else were grabbing each other and pulling their chutes off, which actually started out pretty fun to watch, but by the time it was all over, it was the last day we were in the air and nothing was fun anymore. You could see the change in their faces throughout the whole thing. What turned from a simple tag-like game, became a race against time to escape from hell.

In particular it was the last parachute not strapped to a particular soldier, and the two kids that were after it. It was an infantry soldier and a first lieutenant, but by the last day, none of it mattered. The lieutenant had it at this point. He was more of a stocky guy than the infantry soldier, so none of us thought the guy had any chance left, of course, until we saw what he

ended up doing.

So who ended up dying?

The infantry guy got behind the lieutenant with a headlock. Jumped onto his back, and had kicked the parachute off by the time the lieutenant threw his shoulders over and threw him to the ground, right in front of me. The infantry soldier tried to kick as hard as he could, but he just grabbed his legs and pinned him down, and just started beating him. Throwing rock hard fists at his face. Turning this boy into nothing but a bloody pulp. There was a point where he stopped, still on top of him, and just watched him breathe. Staring at what was left of his face and watching him try to push out a breath through his shattered nose. Then he let out what I can only call a war cry, and shoved his thumbs into his eyes, grabbed his head like a bowling ball and smashed it onto the ground of the plane. Just kept on throwing his head to the floor, until there was nothing left. Then he strapped the brace on his chest and sat back down. We all sat dead silent until we saw land.

The hatch was blocked by a mound of dead Afghans. The ones who were already dead laid on top of the living and suffocated them. What was left of the living was too injured to be thought of, with broken backs and broken legs and broken everything else. By the time we hit land, out of the ocean, we walked into the cockpit for the first and last time. One of our men had read through the instruction manual for what the different buttons do and was ordered to open up the cargo pit, and so he did. The hatch burst open and dozens of afghans went flying out, and it wasn't long until the air pressure brought us with them. Surprising as it was, it wasn't the scariest experience I had been through so far. Wasn't the scariest since, either.

So why did you set your sights for Utah?

I was stationed at Dugway Proving Ground, a couple hours down from Salt Lake.

Where they test out chemical and biological weapons?

That's the ticket.

—*Anonymous (The Soldier)*

Salt in the Baltic Sea

There's an overwhelming amount of salt
at the bottom of the Baltic Sea.

As if it separated
from the fresh waters we drink.

Where we thought was sand
we buried our cut-up feet, hands
underneath

The sting is excruciating
The salt fills our wounds
But in the end
Is it all worth it?
To keep myself dry in the sun?
To keep the waters clean?

I keep a handful of salt on the wound to this day.
But the wound never heals
And the pain never dulls.

—*Anonymous (The Poet)*

(Editor's note: this was written across a building in Salt Lake City. It was too high up to be written on the ground, so someone must have either climbed, or something else must have gone down. Crazier things have happened. There has to be something there; the most concrete lead I have is regarding the brothers, since they propagate in most if not the whole Salt Lake/major Utah city areas, and these poems seem to follow them wherever they go. One big monolith.)

I think what's changed the most is just how on my toes I am. I mean, you've seen it.

(Editor's note: my interaction with Jonathan F. (being interviewed today) before this interview was a bit of a battle. He was adorned with a makeshift helmet of what looks now to be many layers of duct tape over 2 steel pots over his face, one drilled with eye holes, with sheets of scrap metal strapped weakly to his chest and back, dressed on his legs. He looked like a guerrilla soldier, and he acted like it, too. He was walking crouched as close to the ground as possible, (whether or not it was to do with the combined weight of everything or the stealth of it, being able to jump for cover at a moment's notice, is still left to interpretation) and by the time I got my white flag held up and into his sight he shot a flare out towards me. I ducked just not to get hit, and charged towards him (which in hindsight seemed to only frighten him more) and tried to tell him my motives. That I came from good faith. But it's always just a little bit harder than that. He started throwing rocks at me through the car window and no matter what I told him he wouldn't stop. Usually at times like this I would just forfeit and give up the interview and just move on, but I've run pretty short of interviews lately. Not a lot of people left. So I persist. I throw the book back and tell him to read a couple pages to show my earnestness. That was one of the most frightening experiences I've had writing the book so far. I'm not very quick to hand anybody the only copy of the one thing that drives my life. Could've just taken it and ran, and all of this would be kaput. But he realized I was alright, and offered to give up his testimony in the Broken Window Diner near Logan.)

I'm a weak guy. At most times I fear just how long I've survived. That I've survived for longer than I should.

What did you do before it happened?

Technical Security Analyst at AOL. Hard to imagine seeing any more of those around here. I was always afraid. Afraid of the world around me and other people and their judgements and the embarrassment of it and everything else. All the loud noises of the city and all of the cars and their beeps. Thinking about it now feels almost peaceful. What I would give now to only fear embarrassment, instead of fear for my life. I didn't go out much before. Only once or twice a month go out for groceries and pray to anything out there that nobody looks at me. The day everything hit I was supposed to go to my high school reunion. I prayed for something to stop it.

Jesus. That's a bit of an inconvenient coincidence. How did you arrive in Utah, or were you here before then?

I actually lived in California. Silicon Valley. It's where all the computer stuff is. Or was. California was especially fucked when everything hit. There was smoke filling the skies and the warehouses and stores and everything else in the way caught on fire. I'm sure if you look there now it's just a leveled plate of ash. I drove here in the early days of it because my mother lived there at the time and I needed to take care of her. And then the inevitable happened, and I just kind of lingered. There's not really any place I can go now. You know they say this is one of the safest places in America right now? Someone told me that when I was on my way here.

Says a lot that this is one of the more safe areas.

It makes me want to stay. There's always this fear but the more I'm here, the easier it is to get around. I'm pretty sure I know the whole city now.

Have you seen all the poems written across the state? Do you know anything about that?

Oh yeah of course, it's some guy out near Zion, I think, used to be a graffiti artist or one of those window cleaners who work on skyscrapers, or something like that.

I have a hunch that he's a part of The Brothers, you know, the big group of people that walk around in packs to stay safe.

That would make a lot of sense, yeah. Must be a pretty weird sicko with all the shit he scribbles, have you seen the one near Utah Lake and Loafer Mountain? Right on the I-15?

Actually yeah, it's one of my favorites of his. (Editor's note: I've never heard of this one. I need to check it out. Can't believe I haven't come across it before.)

—Jonathan F.

By the time I got home, back to Utah, I had already known everything that had happened. I just didn't know that it would happen there, what with all the Mormons and such. I spent more than enough time getting there from the time we landed in Fort Lauderdale.

Jesus Christ, if it's like this down here, I can only imagine what it's like in Florida.

If I got into even half of it we'd be here for, shit, years probably. Besides, I don't really like to talk about it. Don't like the man I was. And Utah, I thought, would be just a bit better. And for the record, it is. Although the big menace that overtook Utah is one of the more disturbing sights to see. Hundreds packed like sardines overflowing the streets. Wandering. Shoulder to shoulder.

I assume this is about the Brothers, right?

(Editor's note: I always get an embarrassing shiver down my spine whenever I say the name in public, or to people, because it's the name I came up with, and being frank, in the whole Utah Apocalypse community, it hasn't stuck very well.)

Yeah, I guess everybody calls it something different. I've always just heard it as The Big Menace.

(Editor's note: case in point.)

Yeah. I assumed you were with them, because when I asked for your name in previous interviews you declined. It's what all of them do. They turned themselves nameless and bodiless.

I was, for a good amount of time, when I first got here. For me, being there was almost easy. You would walk and someone would always be behind

you to push you if you were tired and you could just walk and see the skies. There's no more light pollution, so you can see every star for miles. I always try to follow any particular star, but whenever I look down I seem to lose it, but it's always okay, and I always pick another. My time in the Big Menace can assuredly be the most safe I've felt here.

So why'd you end up leaving then?

I left for him.

Who?

I guess that's the funny part. I never caught his name. He was with me in The Big Menace and they tell you to be nameless and bodiless. And I guess it's just one of those things that stuck. I don't even think we need to know each other's names. Sometimes I forget my own. It's like we're brought back down to our very essentials. Just the bodies we inhabit and nothing else. We know each other too well to be bothered by the meaningless details. Not when you're one foot in the grave at all times.

Going back to the Big Menace, who gave the orders and instructions? I've been asking people all around and they usually just don't get direct orders from people.

You hear it in small whispers in your ear. You're surrounded by bodies, I'm talking, like shoulder to shoulder packed, so when you hear orders like that being told to you, and you look to see who said it, you realize it could be *anybody* around you. Always gave me goosebumps. That keeps you trapped. The only times you can really leave are in the night, and that's never a sure shot.

That's something I've never thought about. How does sleeping work being

surrounded by so many people?

We either break up into little groups to hunt for food or deserters or really anything that comes across our way, and those usually go into the night where you set up camps and stuff like that. That's how me and him got away. Otherwise we all sleep huddled together when you're in the Big Menace. It's unusually warm for people that cold.

—*Anonymous (The Soldier)*

(Editor's note: once I got the tip-off from Jonathan, I headed over to the I-15 when I came across a bright red minivan that looked as if it was spray painted haphazardly and dressed with sheet metal wrapped around the edges. I was walking from the shoulder, and just as my eye reached up to the freeway, I could see the van barreling through the road. Although he was about a mile away he must have been going 100-120 down the freeway, and he was only getting closer. I took my white flag from my pouch and waved it for his attention. It was the same stark red that painted the poems all over Zion. I was certain this was the Poet. By the time he got to me, he pulled over quickly and threw open the van door. This was the only chance I was going to get, so I made the (ill-advised) decision to get in the stranger's van first and ask questions later.)

Glad you got in quick, we gotta keep on moving. Keep on moving. You see 'em yet? They're coming, gotta keep on moving.

Who's coming?

You know 'em. I seen 'em. I been with 'em 'till everything went mayhem n' chaos. big 'ol groups of 'em pushing each other runnin' all about 'n such. Big 'ol fires. Tossin' fire at each other.

Are you talking about the big horde that walks around shoulder to shoulder? Are they rioting?

Yer on it. Buncha' shit went down. Found the poachers that jumped ship. Been looking for 'em for a whole long time. Wasn't been a lot of time before they had a chance to hunt for sport. 'N found 'em n punished 'em like they do when these all happen. When people jump ship you know? Look out the window, you see 'em? You see 'em behind us?

(Editor's note: I stood up in the van and took a look out from the sunroof, which was stuck open the whole time and abstracted most of the audio quality of the tape recorder, so the transcription will not be entirely accurate due to the fact. I saw what he was talking about, the smoke billowing in a large gust of red and gray across the skyline. The smoke looked like it'd been there for a while.)

Says that they slashed the [?] boys, kids down by the throat, and [?] and one of 'em, like a big powder keg [?] could see fire eye to eye [?] before then the whole town crumbled.

(Editor's note: to the best of my recollection, I believe he said something about the two being homeless, and one self-detonating or something along those lines, but audio transcription was lost. Will investigate further, because this is a big development. And that's even before asking about all the poetry stuff.)

And how did they get the bombs?

Fuck if I know. Big ol' city turnin' to dust, got to get back out the wilderness. Them big mountains, that's where we're headed, if'n this duster [?] can get us there.

So how do you know about all this? Are you with them?

(Editor's note: by this point I was aware of how choppy the recording would turn out, so I adjusted the tape recorder closer to his face, which more or less, works.)

Shit, what? What you think I am? You think I'm one of those kooks? [He sighs.] Ain't got no real affiliation with 'em. But I seen 'em a whole lot. You must've too, they must have, shit, what, 200 people? From all the way up high you can see how everything all works. Climb right on the 'scrapers, I

do. I get right on ‘em. Ain’t no fear neither. Not when you got god.

Do you write the poems that are all over the state? Is that you?

Not just me. Me n’ him. [He points to a Jesus bobblehead with flakes of red paint splattered around it, with the words “JESUS SAVES” on the base of the statue.] I was sent. Whenever I’m up there, whenever I’m this close to death, I feel the wind. It pushes me back whenever I feel myself slipping. That’s God man. Up there. That’s God.

So is that what the poems are? Reflections of god?

[He shakes his head.] See, see I just let go. I let go of the chains in my mind. Higher consciousness, everything. Everything. You got the omnipresent soul. It’s energy, it’s everything. Nirvana for Buddhists. Moksha for the Hindus. It’s all the same shit, you know, when I’m up there I just let go.

[end of transcription]

III. THE EXCOMMUNICATION

I feel like I owe penance to something. For everything that's happened since I gave up on the book. And I feel that at least this is the place where I get to do it. where I get to make a long story short. The day I met the Poet is the day everything spiraled around me. No more interviews, no more anything. It was on that day, (right just near when the moment the transcription ended) that he decided to let go of the steering wheel of the van, right before there was to be a curve in the road, which threw us, along with the van, out of the freeway and into a grassy ditch, just out of Utah lake. The tape recorder flung out of my hands and was gone. I was thrown through the windshield and into the tall grass outside, which somewhat broke my fall, but not enough to keep me conscious from the blunt impact onto the (albeit still shattered) windshield. By the time I woke up, there was clotted, dried blood in my eyes. My tape recorder, the most important device to me and everything I was doing in Utah, was either gone or shattered. I didn't know what to think of it all. My judgment was clouded and I was also most likely concussed, confused, and angry. My heart was on fire and I needed to let it out. I knew by this point the true meaning of hatred. I remember seeing the steam of blood pouring out of my head and into the sky. I was boiling hot. And it must have been very cold outside for that to happen.

I walked to where the Poet laid, unconscious, curled up in a fetal (or in the case above, cannonball) position on the ground right in front of the van, whereas I was thrown maybe ten or so feet further away, and I felt the damage that distance had done to me. At first I went to his aid, hoping to get some more words. Any more of an explanation from him. But as I looked at him in my arms, at first just to assess damage, it was there that I saw what he truly was. He was scared. He was a scared, old, paranoid schizo. I had just thrown my whole life away for a fucking non-interview, for guff. For the fucked up ramblings of a man who had spent cans of fucking air duster in the back of his van. I felt cheated. So I guess I must have reverted back to what everybody does here. I smashed him to pieces. I threw his

head at the radiator grill so many times you could see loose chunks. You could see the mist of blood rising to the sky. I think the most traumatic part of it was that I still had him in my arms while I was doing it. I could feel the spasms of nerve endings screaming each time I sank his face into the grill. By the time I was worn out, his face was unrecognizable, and I couldn't help but feel mine was too. I got up, still heaving and panting, like a stupid dog, and I watched the lake for hours. What had to be just hours of staring into the lake. I was amazed at just how undisturbed everything was. The water, like a perfect mirror reflection of the mountain across from it. I stared at the water below me and saw a stranger in the water. I didn't recognize myself anymore. I dipped my head in the lake to get all the blood off, and you could see the ripples from it all the way through. I had never seen such a big body of water so violently still. I walked back into the van to grab my messenger bag with the book in it, when I saw the tape recorder I had thought I lost sitting on the dashboard, right next to the Jesus bobblehead.

The rest of what happened in the month or two since getting out of Utah have been somewhat of a blur. It's mostly been walking across farmland, which if you know anything about what times are like now, is the most exhausting, yet most infuriatingly boring thing to do. You have to keep your guard up as much as possible in the most desolate, unexciting places in America. I really didn't even know what happened that day with the Poet and the brothers, and I still don't, as the only valuable half of the interview was shrouded in choppy, indecipherable tape. It's another thing I've spent the month beating myself up over. All I knew is that the giant fire that overtook the city is one place I didn't want to go to find answers. And maybe it was just better if I got out of Utah. Didn't even care where I walked, although following the I-15 got me into Nevada, which just seemed more empty than anything else. Maybe a nice change of pace. Although I do remember one distinct memory of finding a loose shopping cart on the side of the road, and riding with it for a solid couple of miles. I don't remember where I got that idea from, but going up and down the interstate on a cart

is much more fun than you can imagine in a place like this. When you've done the things you've done.

—*The Journalist*

(E)ditor's note: how I came across the Lumberjack, or Cliff, for the last time was, as it always is, through complete coincidence. On my way through Nevada I had found a novelty map with the biggest schticky monuments across the state. Normal ones you already know, like the Hoover Dam or the Great Basin, but the rest of them became increasingly more niche and Nevada centered. Turns out there's a lot of history in Nevada. Old railways, makeshift castles built by mining prospectors, ancient charcoal ovens, the National Automobile Museum in Reno, and the one that led me to finding him, the site of Methuselah, noted on the map as the oldest living tree in the world. It was the most out of the way, almost near the California border, although with the stories I've heard about how the state has crumbled, I wouldn't be caught dead in California (which is probably how'd I'd end up, if I dared to go). I blocked out everything else, and tried as earnestly as I could to try to recover from Utah, and considering how the only other thing I had learned to do from all this was to hike, and to camp, and that these were things I could consider anything close to a hobby out here, I decided to say "fuck it", and drive my way out there in different cars to hike through the mountains.

It was only a couple of miles in when I first heard the echoes of falling trees, and I realized I wasn't alone. I thought I could ignore it, but the loud cracks just wouldn't stop coming, and my instincts as a journalist seemed to be too much to fight against. It was one of the first times in a while my instincts have served me for the good. So I followed it. And it sent me to a long stretch of hills, all the gnarled, pale trees flattened out and cut at the trunks. For a while I just watched him, swiping at trees and kicking them over. I was almost too scared to say anything, but I searched through my messenger bag and shot up my flare gun, which stopped him in his tracks and caught his attention towards me. We were nearly a mile away from each other, but once he looked back at me, we both knew who we were. I could see him drop his ax and run over towards me. Usually when you see anyone running towards you like that these days, you instinctually get

that fight-or-flight response. But something in me knew not to move, instead just going down to my bag and turning on the tape recorder. It just felt like a go-ahead. When you see someone at the airport and they drop everything to embrace you.)

Holy shit. [He comes over and gives me a bear hug, taking my feet off the ground and the air from my lungs.]

It's actually you. I never thought I'd see you again.

How did you find me? How'd you know I was here?

I wasn't, I—

So you just found me?

I guess I just found you. I was just in the area. I left Utah for good. Holy shit, it's just, really cool that you're here. I just thought you got lost in the fire with the rest of them. I still don't know what happened.

Fuck. [He lets out a big sigh.] I thought you would've been there. You really don't know what happened, huh?

I got ahold of someone and they said something about a couple of hobo's but—

[He sighs again.] Homos.

What?

Yeah.

You don't mean the two—

Yeah. Once we found out, they were already gone, and the crowd kind of dropped everything to find them.

Fuck.

(Editor's note: the way he croaked out the words, getting stuffier and closer to breaking down in front of me, I could feel his guilt over it. I already knew he was the one to do it.)

[He sits down on the edge of the hill.]

They started pushing all of us all the way out and I'm not even—
I'm not even like that.

Like what?

You know, like, a gay basher.

Homophobic?

I didn't even have any ill will against them. But I was the one. I'm always the fucking one that has to do it. I had to.

I get it.

I don't think you do. you've never—

I know exactly what it feels like. I had an old man's life in my hands. You know, the guy who climbs on buildings and paints poetry. I slaughtered him. With my bare hands until there was nothing left. He was innocent.

They were innocent. [He starts sobbing on the ground.]

They were innocent. Yeah.

(Editor's note: I sat down beside him and he put his head on my shoulder, and we watched the sun sink across the hills. I ended up walking down with him to his campout where he caught a sheep grazing on the hill that we cooked over the fire for the night. Apparently the sheep population in the area had been left undisturbed by the public and it had grown into the hundreds. He skinned the sheep and left the wool hung up to dry. I spent the night with him and continued the interview in the morning over roasted pine nuts and sheep stew, which if I may add, was the best meal I've had since everything hit, to which I give him my earnest thanks.)

I know you might not want to talk about it, but there's still a lot I don't know about what happened, and since you were there, I thought you could offer some insight for the book.

You know I've always been a fan of what you've been doing. With the book, with everything. I'm all ears to any questions you have.

Thanks. So how did the fires start up?

We had the big one, the one in the army fatigues, pinned down with his neck on the curb, but not the little one. After I killed him I felt poisoned. Poisoned with rage and ache. I knew I couldn't do this shit anymore after I heard the little one scream the way he did. I was surrounded by the lot of them, with only a little opening in the center so I could move around. Right after I dealt the final blow I broke down.

Like crying?

No, not at all. It's like I just snapped. I clawed and punched and axed myself through the crowd. Nobody really knew what to do. They were all

kind of confused and angry. I think they all thought I was the leader in all this. That I made all the decisions. But I didn't. Nearing the end of it, all I did was take orders.

Take orders from who?

In the beginning all I heard was whispers from randoms in the crowd, but when I became *the* guy, you know, the one in charge of killing everyone, what's the word for that?

You were the executioner.

Yeah, that sounds right. Once I became the main executioner, someone slipped one of those mini-radios with all my clothes and stuff, you know, not the walkie-talkies, cause you couldn't talk back, but the ones where you need to put it on a certain number to hear anything.

A ham radio. You tune the signal to frequencies. I know those.

Yeah. It was just a guy on the other side that put us in our directions. He'd call out directions short and sweet. He would say "north for an hour" or "northwest until Salt Lake" or "poacher bite." That's what he called the people who escaped.

What was his voice like? Was he old or young?

Definitely a younger voice. Truth be told, he sounded like a teenager. Bit older than a teenager, maybe in his early twenties.

So you think that he was the leader?

Fucker wasn't even there. No leader to me. To me it was the mob. That

was the pressure. That made me do what I did. He gave the orders but the rest was all them. fuckin' sheep all following each other's leads. All of them.

I mean, good riddance, you're out of it now. Hey, speaking of sheep, this is delicious.

[He lets out a hearty chuckle.] Yeah, man. It's all in the sheep too. There's plenty of sheep around here and the recipe with the stock is always the same, but they all taste different. A different gamey bit each time. We definitely lucked out with this one, man, it's stellar.

Stellar is right. Anyways, I still don't know where all the fire comes in. The only thing I saw from that far away was a crazy big fire, higher than anything I've seen.

Not even all that sure. All I know is that there was a big boom about around twenty and some change feet away, and then that giant bonfire started rolling n' feeding on the crowd. It smelled like the strongest gasoline you'd ever smell. Burning hair and plastic too.

Has to be napalm. Only napalm could blow up and spread that big.

How the hell do you even get napalm like that?

They test chemical weapons a couple of hours away from Salt Lake City.

[He lets out another belly laugh, eyes welling up.] Wow. What a couple of clever sons of bitches.

Pretty clever, I gotta say, yeah. How much did you see before you left?

I scrambled my way out of there pretty quickly. Once the fire was rolling

big, I was out of the big crowd. Went west and never looked back since.

Yeah, speaking of that, what brought you here specifically? I was just out to camp and hike and check out the oldest living tree.

Same here. Came to live with the oldest trees. Was working on clearing out some of the younger ones to have some good land to build up a house. After I'm done with that, I'm heading west and grabbing a big redwood in the Sierra Nevada to build it. I heard they're so big over here you only need one to get all the lumber you need. After that, you know, I don't know actually. I might just be a shepherd. Gonna need all the sheep I can get if I want any food around here.

I don't know about you, but that sounds to me like a great life.

Especially here. You're the first person I've seen in the past couple of months. And I'm glad to see you're still kickin'.

Hey, since we're out of all of this, you never told me your name.

It's Clifford, although the logging boys would always just call me Cliff.

It's been nice talking to you, Cliff.

(Editor's note: after the interview he brought me sheep jerky he had dried out a week or two prior, more roasted pine nuts, and the blanket he had made for me the night before for my journey out. Later on I had to look around a hundred miles to find an audio supply shop that had another tape, because I really do think it would be a mistake to ever get rid of the recording for this one.)

—*Clifford R.*

(E)ditor's note: coming out of Methuselah after my interaction with Cliff, I set north through all the different national parks along the border of California and Nevada. I set my next destination as Carson City and Reno, as I was not looking to go to the "City of Sin," Las Vegas, after a rapture anytime soon. You find cars everywhere in big parking lots for each of the respective national parks, enough to siphon gas out of (especially in the case of Yosemite, where one off-roading vehicle had an entirely separate tank of gas installed in the trunk) and drive just far enough to get to the next one. I did this all the way to Reno, which, as stated in the hokey side-show map, indeed felt like I was in the Biggest Little City in the World. It's almost where flashy, gaudy city lifestyle and suburbia finally crash into one another. The peak place to retire and throw your pension blissfully at the slot machines. At least it was. At first I was hesitant to go to any city in these times, especially knowing how chaotic and dangerous Salt Lake City could get, but once I started coming through, it became clear to me that this was a ghost town. There was nobody. Either the city had worn itself out, much like Utah did and imploded, and everyone split—or this was one of the places that got hit the hardest. Neither would be a surprise to me. It relieved my guard and unsettled me at the same time, because the more I noticed, the more Nevada felt like just a bunch of ghost towns tied to each other, and how maybe I should have just stayed here instead. It was the fear that kept me in Utah, and it was the fear that made me leave.

I decided to leave my car and walk through the town, where I got to North Virginia Street, the spot of all the casinos. There was something indescribable about seeing all of the casinos without a single light on. Where lights were once on nonstop, twenty-four hours a day, were gone—all the buildings left without context or color, with the exception of the fainting red glow of a gentleman's club situated in-between the last two casinos on the street, although half of it was shrouded by a white tarp thrown across. Outside stood the hung remains of a young man in a suit, the blazer dangling off his petrified skin and bone. It reminded me of something I

couldn't quite put my finger on (maybe something I'd watched in a movie) and I stepped in with caution. The black walls of the club gave way to red neon light drenching the entrance to the main lounge with all the poles and tables. It was shocking to the senses, since it had to have been years since I've seen neon lights. I looked at the bar across from me and saw a furnishing of spirits, all full, smattered fully across the bar. I had felt I was alone, so I decided to look further into the club (albeit with a scotch in hand).

What I saw next astounded me. It threw me for a loop and it finally made me remember what everything had reminded me of. This was Darwin's Fortress, and what appeared before me was a full buffet of meats, produce, and plenty of other foods you would never expect to survive a crisis. They had fucking crab legs.)

Shit. If you wanted me to come out for another interview you could've just rung me up.

(Editor's note: I looked again behind me and saw him sitting down at the DJ table, only all the DJ equipment was gone and replaced by a beefy display of HAM radios and antennas, which clicked a whole other series of lightbulbs in my head. I fumbled for the tape recorder, and tried my hardest to play along.)

See you've grabbed yourself a drink, and before you get all worried, no, you don't have to pay for it. Gotta be pretty thirsty to get here all the way from Utah.

I have to say, you were one of the more notable people I've started a dialogue with in my travels. So I decided to reach out again, and it seems I've got you.

[He stands up and puts his wrists together, imitating handcuffs.] Guess

you've got me. Still working on that book, huh? Get any hot gossip from anybody out here so far?

Well, not actually. I hadn't seen that many people coming from Nevada.

Really? Because I bet you've seen *a lot* of people from Nevada on your way here.

What do you mean?

You know, for a guy who spends his time in the fucking apocalypse writing a book about it, you sure aren't fucking observant.

I just genuinely don't know what you're talking about, or why there aren't a lot of people in Nevada. I just had to get outta Utah. Place imploded. Now I'm here.

(Editor's note: at this point I had already put together that he had to have been behind the Big Menace in Utah, but I knew that to get anything more valuable out of him, I would need to play dumb for as long as I could.)

You're telling me you really, really, have no idea what's going on?

Is there anything I should know about in particular?

That would ruin all the fun of it, you know? The whole enigma would be fucked if I just spilled my guts to you right now. [He laughs.] You know this is actually quite fun that you're in the dark here on this. Let's make a game out of it, okay? You get three guesses.

(Editor's note: this is the part that broke me.)

I don't want to play any of your fucking games anymore. I just fucking can't. I know what the fuck you're behind.

[He lets out a deep sigh.] Fuck. I guess you don't get the big villain monologue now. God, I was really excited for that too.

What's your fucking deal? What do you even get out of doing this to people?

I've thrown that question around the big ol' noggin for a bit now, and do you really want the truth?

Yes.

(Editor's note: by now, his tone has shifted dramatically. He seems more apathetic now, like a child who's gotten bored of his toy.)

It was just something to do. I was just bored. [He shrugs his shoulders]

Are you fucking kidding me?

You know, it is a lot more fun than writing a fucking book. You should try it sometime.

The difference is I'm trying to fucking do something in the world. This book is your only fucking legacy, now that your whole thing has gone to shit.

What do you mean my "whole thing" is "gone to shit?" [He uses air quotes.] You think I got a whole operation going on here? I literally don't give a shit about any of this. You're sitting here talking about a legacy. Look where you are bud. You're in an abandoned strip club in Reno out of all places. I cleared out Idaho, cleared out Nevada, cleared out Utah, all because it was something to fucking *do*. The fuck do you think I was trying to do from here, be the next president if I get enough heads?

You can't have done it for no reason. There has to be something there.

Honestly I'm more shocked it lasted for as long as it did. I was, literally, just fucking around. I was idling by, waiting for everything to fall apart. Gotta find some way to pass the time before you get strung up and gutted like a pig. You're the one to cast your bullshit stones, but it's not really all that different to what you do. It's a vice you have and it's a vice I have. Difference is, mine is just a lot cooler.

The difference is that I've saved lives with this book.

Ah. So no blood shed in the making of this book right here. [He pauses.] Something's telling me you're full of shit, bud.

You wouldn't know. You're never going to read it. You're delirious to everything going on around you. It's all some kind of fucking game to you.

That's the whole fucking thing! Who's to say it isn't? Who's to say it can't be? Went on for long enough without anybody stopping me. Look at all this bullshit around you and tell me there's some "natural" sense of morality out there. This is the one point in the history of the world where this kind of shit is allowed now. What kind of fucking square wouldn't take that up?

You're telling me there's never been a time like this? They were called the dark ages for a reason. And we moved past it, and created a better world for ourselves from it.

Yeah. Real class act world it's given us.

(Editor's note: Here he had grabbed a pistol from the DJ table where he was hunkered up and started shooting out all the lights and radio sets in the club. This, especially after the argument we had with each other, felt

like more of an attack towards me than what actually ended up happening. I ran out of the club and waited for the shots to stop and they eventually did, although they lasted longer than I had expected. After what I guessed was 10 or 15 minutes, I walked back in, at first nervous, but when I saw what was left of his head splattered on the walls of the DJ table, my nerves were extinguished and I felt the most calm I ever have since everything hit. The sigh of relief felt like the last breath of an exhausting era of my life. I walked up to where he was and drank the last of the brandy that he'd left unfinished. I looked out and saw the shots across the bar, with numerous bottles of broken spirits dripping down. I looked more into the table and saw a sealed letter with "Suicide Note" written on the front. I opened it and saw that it was a blank sheet of paper with a crude drawing of a dick on it. I guess that's all that is needed to have been known about his life. That even right near the end, the guy knew how to make a joke. I laughed at his joke for the last time. I picked up my tape recorder, turned everything off in the club, packed up my bag, and decided to leave Reno for good. I've decided to leave it all for good. I'm not sure where I'm going next, whether it be back west with Cliff, north all the way up to what I presume to be a similarly ghostly Idaho, one that can be of my very own, or east, back to Utah, once everything clears up and mellows out in maybe a couple of years. What I do know is that I'm done. I'm done with this magnifying glass onto the worst parts of the world. Especially when there's so much of it I've missed by staying in Utah for as long as I did. It's a lot more peaceful out here now. I'm done with being obsessed over a legacy of any sorts. It's not that anything else is left. It's barren, and I thought it was a wasteland, but the fields, and the stars, and the long stretches of road ahead of me in Nevada I spend my days riding grocery carts down, with the wind in my hair, make me feel something. It's good to feel something. It's good to feel something.)

—Anonymous (*The Joke*)

In Memory of
The Soldier and The Pastor
Forever in Love

“However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Luke 10:20

