Notes from Underground

Among the radicals of the Pacific Northwest

David Samuels

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Outside the air is thin and cold, and behind the porthole-shaped sheets of doublethick Plexiglas the landscape of northern California looks like a string of yellow Christmas lights floating on a featureless sea. Inside the cabin, at a height of 30,000 feet, my tray table has been stowed in its upright and locked position, and a drawn but efficient-looking stewardess in a navy-blue jacket has brought me a plastic cup of water with ice. I sip the water and look out the window and admire the millennial promise of soaring markets and ever more amazing technological advances written on the ground below. No one will ever be lonely. No one will ever be bored. Here are tens of millions of plugged-in Americans, driving cars, turning lights on and off, sitting at home in front of television sets and personal computers, accessing the new-age bounty of Microsoft and Cisco Systems, eBay, Hotmail, and Yahoo!

The red light flashes overhead, and the plane descends 25,000 feet in only a few minutes through the bad-weather clouds that muffle the runways of Portland, Oregon, six months out of the year. The optimistic tenor of my airborne thoughts is darkened by a sudden burst of paranoia, triggered by the noise of the engines and air filters, the flicker of the in-flight movie screens, and the blurry stares of my fellow passengers as oxygen levels in the cabin decline. It is the modern-day equivalent of a belief in magic, I am thinking, the expectation that in a minute or so the plane will touch down lightly on the rain-slicked runway in Portland instead of exploding in midair. If a blind trust in the operation of complex technological systems is a necessary part of modem life, it has only recently become the rule. Twenty years ago, most Americans could still fix their own cars. Not too long before that, you could listen to voices talking over the air at night from New York or London on a radio set that you made at home. The wing of the plane is silhouetted against a bank of heavy gray fog, and jutting out from the edge are antennae transmitting data relating to the speed of the plane and the angle of descent. Inscribed on the wing is a black-bordered warning, "Do not walk outside this area."

Outside the Greyhound station in Portland, a knot of six or seven dispossessed-looking men stand in the rain smoking cigarettes, waiting to board the bus to Eugene. The nylon gym bags at their feet advertise the brand names of Adidas and Nike. After thirteen hours in the air, I am happy to get on the bus and sit in the dark, the nighttime conversation washing over me like the sound of a television set coming through the walls of a neighboring apartment. Every few minutes the channel changes. There is the blonde woman behind me, who left home at fifteen and who is now twenty-five and who ordered grilled-cheese sandwiches at the station for her two young children. She is leaving town to stay with her mother and to escape her old man. Behind her is a pretty girl in a red flannel shirt, a long-haired traveler, a group of Mexican laborers, and a well-muscled guy with a shaved head and bulldog features. His black nylon sweat suit whispers in the dark whenever he moves. "He is a known drug user with a known propensity for violence," he reads out loud from a copy of a restraining order obtained by his girlfriend. He has lost everything he owns, including a split-level ranch house

worth $140,000, and he is headed for Las Vegas. His nylon sweat suit is emblazoned with the Nike swoosh.

Eugene is an old logging town in the Willamette River Valley, forty minutes by car to the Oregon coast and an equal distance from the Cascade Mountains. The Greyhound there from Portland takes approximately two and a half hours, and listening to the rise and fall of the voices on the bus, I can still taste some slight residue of anxiety left over from my hours on the plane. Most people I know have similar moments of dissonance, when some snippet of perception suddenly seems unfamiliar and strange. The frame slips by a fraction of an inch, just enough to admit some new possibility that wasn't there a moment before and that usually vanishes again a moment later. What is revealed in the gap between these two moments is that the world you perceive is actually the result of a more or less complicated bargain that you strike with yourself over time. If this slippage happens often enough, and with enough force behind it, your experience of reality can shift in some permanent way.

In the late Sixties and early Seventies, Eugene became the favorite destination for thousands of middle-class sons and daughters of California and elsewhere who arrived in hand-painted school buses and VW vans to search out unspoiled nature and live close to the land, practice communal living, manufacture handicrafts, smoke pot, meditate, chant, and raise a generation of children outside the corrupting norms of American consumer culture. It is a place where you go when your angle on reality shifts and the slippage becomes too great to sustain your previously settled approaches to life.

I am going to Eugene today so that I can see how the new age looks from an angle that first attracted wide public notice on November 30, 1999, when several hundred black-clad anarchist demonstrators materialized out of a protest march in Seattle, smashing windows, spray-painting anticapitalist slogans on walls, fighting running battles with police, and otherwise turning the birthplace of Bill Gates into the Waterloo of the WTO. Three weeks before the World Trade Organization met, Eugene's chief of police, James Hill, warned the Seattle police of the likelihood of violence by Eugene anarchists, who had attacked the local NikeTown the previous fall and tossed boxes of sneakers into a fountain. At home the anarchists' tactics had ranged from the familiar to more disruptive and original expressions of feeling. They smashed the windows of a local restaurant and health-food store, spray-painted graffiti on walls, and disrupted a city council meeting by vomiting on Eugene's mayor, Jim Torrey.

On June 18, 1999, nearly 400 demonstrators smashed computer screens and stereo equipment, and then snake-marched through downtown Eugene, attacking the local Taco Bell and several local banks, spray-painting slogans and throwing rocks at police. By November 30, Eugene's anarchists were no longer strictly a local concern. "The black bloc was a loosely organized cluster of affinity groups and individuals who roamed around downtown," a communique from the ACME Collective later explained, "pulled this way by a vulnerable and significant storefront and that way by the sight of a police formation." Using spray paint, slingshots, sledgehammers, crowbars, paint balls, eggs filled with glass-etching solution, and other devices, the black-masked demonstrators

attacked storefronts bearing the logos of brand-name corporations. Their message was a spirited blend of radical environmentalism, leftist anticapitalist sentiment, and slacker disdain for consumer culture. Their targets included "Levi's (whose overpriced products are made in sweatshops), McDonald's (slave-wage fast-food peddlers responsible for destruction of tropical rainforests .. .), Starbucks (peddlers of an addictive substance . . . harvested at below-poverty wages . . .), Warner Brothers (media monopolists), [and] Planet Hollywood (for being Planet Hollywood)."

What the pictures from Seattle captured was an anger whose true sources had less to do with Nike's treatment of its labor force or other objectionable practices than with a broader, more unreasoning sense of being trapped in a net. My favorite picture from Seattle showed a group of kids perched on top of the entrance to Nike-Town, using hammers and chisels to pry off the brushed-steel letters that spelled "Nike." At least one of the kids was wearing a pair of Nike sneakers. The picture was powerful because it so accurately captured an emotion shared by many people in their twenties and thirties, raised on advertisements whose carefully screened and focus-grouped vocabularies and images have insinuated themselves into the weave of the generational unconscious almost since birth.

You can't help wanting Nike sneakers. At the same time, the desire to smash the windows of NikeTown makes sense, too. Not because Nike sneakers are bad, or because they are manufactured in Third World countries by slave-wage labor, but on the more general principle that someone should be held responsible for the feelings of absence and compulsion that overwhelm us all at some point or another in our lives and that are not our fault, or even the fault of our parents, but are rather the products of the addictive vacuum that has manifested itself through the combined karmic energies of millions of cathode-ray tubes and digital cables. The advertisements on-screen—the Stead icam shots of strong healthy bodies, of children swimming and laughing in the Technicolor playgrounds of Aetna, and of twenty-somethings in khaki swing-dancing for the Gap—become powerful magnets for human desires, for health, human companionship, good times, and eternal consolation. Advertisements are secular prayers. And when our prayers aren't answered, the spiritual energies released by so many unmet desires focused on a single photograph or frame of film can result in a kind of corporate-sponsored low-pressure system, a Bermuda Triangle of the emotions whose human inhabitants feel angry, pathetic, and alone. Sitting at home alone in their underwear on Saturday night listening to the high-pitched whistling sound of 56K modems mating in the static-filled void, they hope to reconcile their irreconcilable need for human connectedness through acts of prayerful attention, like playing high-resolution Sega video games, watching cable television, and checking out the freshest new porn sites on the Web.

The Whiteaker neighborhood, where most young radicals in Eugene live, is a working-class district of 6,000 people, with a 20 percent minority population and perhaps an equal number of radically inclined bohemians in their twenties and early thirties. Because of the city's location west of the Cascades, the temperature in Eugene rarely

falls below thirty-five degrees, but the darkness and the damp combine to make it seem much colder. The rain begins in late October and lasts through the end of April. The streets are usually covered in fog, and the sky is gray for six months out of the year.

In the Whiteaker Police Sub-Station, Officer Tod Schneider sits at his desk and tries to explain what has happened to the neighborhood where he lives. A stoop-shouldered man whose liquid eyes and sensitive features make him an unlikely candidate for police work in most areas of the country, he still vividly remembers the moment when the slippage began. "When it first went sideways for me," he says, "was two years ago, when somebody, a self-titled anarchist, decided to attack me personally, as a representative of the Police Department and of their own projections of what police represent in the world. That involved smashing my windshield, spray-painting my car, slashing my tires, and so on."

As he recites a litany of facts relating to the destruction of his car, it is easy to forgive Tod Schneider his most apparent human weakness, which is his desire to be seen as a decent, well-meaning liberal person. He doesn't carry a gun, he says, and is puzzled that someone might target him as a representative of repressive authority. After arriving in Eugene wideeyed and broke as a nineteen-year-old hippie in 1971, he went to the University of Oregon, and then spent the next ten years working for the White Bird free clinic and other local social-service agencies, caring for burnouts, acid casualties, and other needy members of the community. In 1986, after joining the Police Department, he cut his hair short and bought a modest wood-frame house in Whiteaker, where he lives with his wife and children. The books above his desk, including an oral history of the civil rights movement and *Common Ground* by J. Anthony Lukas, suggest the personal library of a middle-aged sociologist at the nearby U of O.

Like everyone else in Eugene, Tod Schneider has his own account of where the anarchists came from, an account that includes the radicalization of local environmental activists after a successful two-year-long occupation of a tract of forest land at Warner Creek; the violent response of local police to a 1997 demonstration against Symantec, a high-tech company that had moved into Eugene and cut down forty trees; the influence of a local anarchist writer named John Zerzan; the radical fervor of a group of ten or fifteen teenage anarchists at South Eugene High, which converted some disenchanted older activists to the anarchist cause; the fact that Eugene is now the third least affordable housing market in the United States; and the closing of Icky's Tea House, a refuge for local anarchists, street kids, and punks.

The larger changes that Schneider has seen in Eugene over the last thirty 1 years, he says, are part of the broader social picture that you see everywhere else. There are more people with more money eating at better restaurants and driving more expensive cars. At the same time, according to the front page of this morning's paper, the income gap between the richest and poorest families in Oregon widened over the last decade by almost 50 percent. At night, the streets of downtown Eugene are home to a floating population of approximately 400 street kids, many of whom were ; abandoned by their

parents. The kids ' sleep in shelters, under highways, in cars, in $30-a-night motel rooms on Sixth Street, in newspaper-recycling boxes outdoors, and in the woods. Two years ago a local teenager named Kip Kinkel shot and killed his parents, and then opened fire on his classmates at school.

"The forces that used to be right there, the people sitting on their front stoops and watching the neighborhood," Schneider says, propping his worn brown Hush Puppy loafers up on a corner of his desk, "that kind of world is all but gone. You don't feel comfortable telling some kid you don't know, 'Hey, knock that off,' because you're afraid that you're going to get sued or accused of something. Kids are taught not to talk to strangers, which is one of the worst crime-prevention errors in the history of the country, since 90 percent of offenses against kids are committed by relatives, not strangers. Strangers are the guy running the corner grocery store or the neighbor across the street who maybe you could turn to and say, 'I need some help.'

"The more those things go away there's less of a sense of trust and safety in the community and more of a sense of isolation," he continues, gesturing out the window to the darkened storefront across the street. "Isolation is one of the things that makes people go crazy. That's why you punish prisoners by putting them in solitary confinement. And we do that in our culture by isolating people from each other."

Houses in Whiteaker are often drafty and poorly insulated, and the warmth of the old-fashioned steam radiators and electric heaters is rarely strong enough to make much of an impression on the weather. After only a few days of unending damp, bundled in Levi's jeans and a hooded sweatshirt, I become aware that the distinctive generational emotions of foot-dragging anger, thwarted desire, and suicidal disconnection familiar to fans of brand-name Pacific Northwestern rock bands like Nirvana and Pearl Jam in the early Nineties, as well as to partisans of Nirvana's more current and folkishly introverted cousins on the Olympia-based Kill Rock Stars label, have at least as much to do with the rain and fog and cold as they do with the decay of the American social fabric or the anomie-inducing properties of the Net. The weather is enough to make anyone miserable. The cold and the damp enter into your body, and after a while it is impossible to stay warm.

Randy and Kari's apartment, on the first floor of a wood-frame house in Whiteaker, is a warm and cozy oasis of silk-covered cushions on the floor and printed cloth tapestries hanging from the ceiling. With the silk cushions and the tapestries and the array of Christmas lights blinking from an assemblage of tree branches in the corner, it feels like a cross between an artist's loft and a Moroccan tent. Nearly everything in the apartment is handmade.

"The helicopters show you where the action is," Randy explains. A videographer who grew up in Eugene as the child of hippie parents and now goes by the name Randy Shadowalker, or Shade, he shot the footage we are watching on a handheld camera, as part of his ongoing attempt to capture the experience of the Whiteaker community in its own language, free of commercial sponsors and ads. He looks like a hip but scary children's book character with a mournful face and unwashed, shoulder-

length hair. The hour-long films he makes are shown on Sunday nights at the Grower's Market under the title "Simmeren Stew." He is lying on the floor as images of smashed windows and policemen in riot gear fill the screen above his head. Kari is steaming vegetables in the kitchen. Next to the sink is a plastic container for vegetable matter to be used as compost for the nearby community garden.

"It was the ultimate paint-ball game," Kari says, entering the living room with a plate of steamed broccoli, as the camera pans across the storefronts belonging to Starbucks Coffee and Fidelity Investments. "No real bullets. The gas does get to you after a while."

Like most of Whiteaker's radical bohemians, she eats vegan food, works a part-time job, and wears secondhand clothes. A mural she painted decorates the Jawbreaker art gallery a block away.

Below a spray-painted anarchy sign on a wall is the message WE ARE WINNING. The camera pans to a shot of the front page of the *Seattle Times,* with the headline "Shoppers Barred in Retail Core," and everyone laughs. The camera glides to a boarded-up Urban Outfitters, then to a long, artistic zoom-in shot of the McDonald's golden arches enveloped in a floating cloud of tear gas. The people in the room have seen this tape before. They are spellbound by the images on the screen, by scenes from a fairy-tale world in which good conquers evil and the edifice of American consumer culture comes crashing down. It is a scenario straight out of *Star Wars,* in which the evil empire of Starbucks and McDonald's, with its bad food and soul-sucking corporate architecture, is conquered by the forces of sustainable living and tofu pate. May the force be with you! Yet the mythopoetic sources of the dream to which the aspiring Lukes or Leias in Randy Shadowalker's living room adhere run deeper than the epic dreams of George Lucas circa 1977. A belief in the coming apocalypse is as American as apple pie once was, and the taste for Armageddon has been part of the basic operating code of the West since the birth of Christ.

So much for mytho-poetics. What interests me more, at this moment, are the reasons why a community of mostly secular middle-class TV-literate individuals would subscribe to a world vision more commonly held by crypto-survivalist freaks who live off the grid in log cabins, hew wood and draw water, and engage in prayerful shoot-outs with the FBI. The mood is not really all that hard to describe. Beneath the belief in unspoiled nature and the rhetoric of total industrial collapse is a no less urgent desire to be part of something larger than oneself—the same desire that motivates consumers to drink Starbucks coffee and wear Nikes. The attempt to escape one's corporate-branded identity by identifying with hand-painted clay plates and tom sneakers is part of the logic of consumer society. Which is not to say there is anything wrong with the idea of crafting your own life, spending time with close friends, walking lightly on the earth, buying only what you need, and celebrating the secondhand and handmade. Only that the fantasy of escape from the market is itself the product of market forces, and anyone who thinks different is likely to get screwed.

If the logic of late-stage capitalism is enough to make anyone dizzy, the bathroom of Randy and Kari's apartment offers at least some prospect of relief. On the wall is a scene of swimming dolphins whose peaceful, intelligent gaze draws attention to the toilet, whose unflushed basin testifies to the importance of saving water. The mirror is decorated with dried leaves and a handmade relief that asks, "Why is it called Black Market?" and answers, "Because it's Beautiful." The ginger toothpaste on the sink is manufactured by Tom's of Maine. The dolphins look down their bottle-shaped noses from the wall. It is only a matter of time, they are thinking. Global warming is real. In a thousand years the polar ice caps will melt, the cities will be flooded, and the virgin forests of the Cascades will be buried underwater. Starbucks coffee, Nike sneakers, McDonald's wrappers, computers and television sets, and all the other detritus of human civilization will petrify at the bottom of a vast and all-encompassing ocean ruled by dolphins with brains two or three times the size of the vanished race of human beings. Fear will be banished forever. The dolphins will build a great and lasting civilization, a mighty oceanic reich where no one is ever bored or alone.

In front of the television set, Randy sips apple-ginger juice from a Mason jar. He is talking about his parents' divorce and about the recession of the late Seventies, when the national housing market crashed and the mills in Eugene shut down.

"I remember once it was a cheese factory," Randy says of Eugene's attempt to attract new industries. "Everyone was bummed out about the cheese factory not coming to town. After that it was a chocolate factory. I remember seeing people lined up around the block, waiting to fill out applications at Taco Bell."

Thanks to tax breaks offered to Symantec, Hyundai, and other local high-tech employers, Eugene is now a magnet for highly paid workers from Silicon Valley who drive BMWs and Land Rovers through town and enjoy facials and massages at the Gervais day spa down the street. As Randy and Kari see it, Eugene has become part of a rapacious consumer culture that destroys the environment, exalts material values, and pacifies the benighted population by filling their minds with corporate-sponsored sludge. Beneath the handmade aura of their lives you can feel a powerful undertow of anger at a world that they didn't make and that they feel powerless to change. There is a notable absence of talk about peace and love. In the vision of the world they have adopted, they will always be the losers, because they are virtuous but weak, and their opponents—the consumer-hungry legions of Starbucks, McDonald's, and Nike, plus the Eugene police force and the local yuppies— are ruthless and strong. It is not a world that I would want to inhabit. What makes it bearable, for them, is that they know the truth, that they understand what it means to press up against the shatterproof glass of reality until you break on through to the other side.

"I love to use a lot of the TV stuff as a mirror reflecting back on itself," Randy says, as the riot policemen on-screen club a knot of peaceful demonstrators who have chained themselves to a post. "I want people to walk down the street and freak the fuck out. I want them to walk into McDonald's and look around and wonder, 'How do I get the fuck out of this system?"'

Life as a front-line activist requires a kind of personal migration, beyond the settled boundaries of work and school, beyond the reach of the thousand-fingered massage of brand names and logos, well-designed toasters, and television ads. You change your name. You stop eating meat. You stop drinking milk. Everything you own fits comfortably in the pack that you carry from town to town and from apartment to apartment. The apartments you live in have no furniture. You know people by their first names, or their forest names, or their underground names. When you first meet someone, you might exchange names but not phone numbers. Most people in town wonder if they're under police surveillance. You might meet someone five or six times before you invite him over to your house.

Seekers, drifters, and train-hopping street kids often make their way to one of Whiteaker's communal apartments, where they can meet like-minded people and find a bed for a night or a week before moving on. It is the kind of world you can build in when you are in your twenties before you have kids and no one is particularly inspired, a place where rents are cheap and people work part-time jobs as waiters or telemarketers, ride their bikes, and cook at home. The Ant Farm is home to Food Not Bombs. The Pleasure Palace is the local anarchist house. Environmental activists often wind up at the Ranch House, home to the leaders of Earth First! or at Bipi's House, a center for the tree-sitters at Fall Creek who have built a network of platforms 200 feet above the forest floor. Broadway House is home to a floating collection of radical activists, and Blair House is a magnet for punks. Underground houses shelter activists affiliated with ALF and ELF and other radical animal-liberation and environmentalist groups, responsible for raids on animal-research labs and incendiary attacks like the one that burned the Boise Cascade timberlands management center to the ground.

At Out of the Fog, a local vegan coffee shop, a bearded wanderer who calls himself Air takes careful sips from a glass of steamed soy milk as he describes his recent tree-sitting experience at Fall Creek. He spent eight or nine days in the forest and has spent the last month in town sleeping on a friend's porch. Before that he worked for a year on a farm in Maine, then traveled in a motor caravan across the country, promoting opposition to the WTO. He is thirty years old, polite and soft-spoken, and wears a black woolen watch cap pulled down low over his brow. "I'm someone who works for a positive transformation in society," he explains as three local environmental activists heatedly discuss the latest episode of *The X-Files* at the next table over. It takes a while for Air to feel comfortable enough to talk. He grew up in Chicago, he says, where he went to a private boarding school and then to the University of Illinois. His movements over the last ten years are a map to the confluence of urban radicalism and the environmental movement, taking him through Berkeley, Minneapolis, New York, Austin, San Francisco, and Philadelphia to the environmentalist blockades at Headwaters and Warner Creek. In 1998, at Grizzly Creek in northern California, he was sitting in the forest with another activist named Gypsy when an angry logger felled a tree in their direction. Gypsy died. "The highest path is to put down roots

somewhere, grow your own food, and lead a connected life," he says. "At the same time, I seem to fit in really well with a traveling lifestyle."

Working your way into the radical activist network in Eugene takes patience and time. The community is private and suspicious, and operates on many levels, reaching out to new arrivals through a variety of formal and informal institutions that also function as a sifting process separating the committed activists from the floating population of transients, addicts, unstable personalities, and possible spies. The literature on local activities and causes available at local coffeehouses and vegan restaurants welcomes newcomers into an alternate universe of affiliations that celebrate the pleasures of commercial-free consumption. "You hear the most amazing stuff on RFC," explains a leaflet for Radio Free Cascadia, the local pirate radio station. "Paranoid rants, out-of-print jazz albums, talk shows on anarchy, drunken tales of bondage, news from Cuba, erotica read over techno beats, and stolen movie dialogue."

The Black-Clod Messenger, the leading voice of anarchism in Eugene, serves up a peppery blend of anarchism, environmentalism, and animal rights mixed with the unwashed aroma of a roomful of fifteen-year-old kids who are enjoying their very first experience of punk rock. One author indicts "the Nuclear family—incubator for imbecility," while others call the WTO protests "a carnival of reformist lies" and provide instructions for making "a Paraffin-Sawdust incendiary" that is "almost as effective as napalm against combustible targets, but it is slower in starting." A parable entitled "Ship of Fools" targets the errors of reformist liberalism. The author is Ted Kaczynski. The radical end of the environmental movement is well represented, too. "Not only will the American people be robbed when the Anti-Forest Service steals their trees and sells them to Zip-O Lumber of Eugene," an anonymous tree-sitter warns from Fall Creek, "but all the creatures who live here will have their homes stolen ... to please a handful of fat-ass-evileyed money-mongruls." An essay entitled "Beyond Civil Disobedience" by "Snap Dragon" puts the radical environmentalist case in more sober terms.

"Most [Civil Disobedience] campaigns require enormous amounts of time and resources but achieve very little," the author writes. "Making these compromises would be justifiable if we were getting something significant out of it, but we don't." The sense that time is slipping away is plastered on the telephone poles and on the walls of the Blair Street Free Space. "On time? Are we? What if we weren't?" a poster asks. "Losing track of time is so common many humans carry a 'time keeping' device."

Once you are past the age where everything unmistakably matters, it is easy to lose track of time, most often with the more general goal of escaping from your life. There is the thrill of dropping in from the sky to unfamiliar places. There is the excitement of meeting new people and forming instantaneous bonds that allow you to penetrate their personal thoughts and record them on tape. There is the practice of emptying out your own center to create whatever space is necessary, a process that combines a zenlike appreciation for the void with the interpersonal dynamics of carnival sales. Or the no less false and manipulative but still emotionally connected position that allows

you to shut off your empathic radar, disengage, and turn the people you meet into characters whose dreams and aspirations are revealed in a sentence on the page.

The habit of depersonalization that these practices demand can't help but lead to elevated levels of anxiety and strain. When I start to feel bad, I retreat to my home at the Hilton, which has a mini-bar and a color television set, and where I can lie under the blankets with the heat turned up as far as it can go. I talk on the phone to friends in distant places. I listen to the rain on the window. I watch the actress Winona Ryder being interviewed by Charlie Rose. Winona Ryder has a willful fragility that suggests that she might enjoy hurting others. Charlie Rose is the fawning gallant who loses money at the races.

But what of celebrities? Who will feel sorry for them? They are media mummies, as if their normal complements of blood, tissue, and bone have been melted away by the camera. It is not just that no one looks the same on camera as in life. People who spend their lives in front of the camera use their features to express a very limited range of emotions, a kind of universal sign language that links our modem media rituals to the more ancient arts of Kabuki or No. Bare of the traditional ritual masks, their faces act like powerful magnets, attracting millions of stray emotional particles charged with envy, hatred, boredom, and fear. The incessant bombardment of such particles cannot help but have a negative karmic effect. Imagine dating a newscaster. Or imagine what it would be like to be David Cassidy, whose comments on the mutually emasculating aspects of celebrity, in the final issue of *Ben Is Dead,* are simply the flip side of the standard critique. Peeking out from under my blanket, *Ben Is Dead* is a kind of twenty-something samizadat publication, which has a lot in common with the anarchist literature I have been reading in Eugene. It was purchased this morning at Green Noise Records, where I was killing an hour with no particular object in mind.

"They owned my likeness and put it on everything," the former teen idol recalls, below a picture of his dreamy, wondering twenty-year-old self, "plastic guitars, pillow cases, trading cards, lunch boxes, dresses. My mom told me my aunt was riding the escalator at Macy's and as she got off there was a huge cut-out of me with these dresses hanging there. David Cassidy dresses.

> "... [Q] Was there ever a point [when] you felt unworthy? ...
>
> "[A] No."

After a week of lead-gray skies and the chill and the damp, it becomes difficult to separate the readings on my own internal barometer from the influence of the weather. The weather is everywhere, inside and out, throwing a depressive blanket over the streets and erasing the divisions between inner states and the fog outside. John Zerzan, Eugene's leading resident anarchist theorist, keeps his apartment immaculately clean, with a pile of correspondence stacked neatly on his desk and a television set turned to face the wall. He is a cleareyed man in his fifties, with a gray beard and an intellectual stoop to his shoulders, who graduated from Stanford University in 1966 and then

spent the rest of the Sixties in Haight-Ashbury, working as a social worker and later driving a cab. He is the favorite teacher of Eugene's anarchist youth. "Everybody was happy, aren't we happy, let's watch the Nelsons and listen to the canned laughter," he says, recalling his childhood in the suburbs of northern California. "And I remember thinking as a kid, 'I'm being strangled here. I don't get it. I don't like it. Goddamn, what a death trip this is.'"

What Zerzan wants is a total collapse of industrial society, which will bring about a return to a primitive state where men will be at one with nature. "It's becoming unbearable," he says, "the real emptiness of this society. I think it's been emptied out by technology ... the erosion of the moral self, the erosion of personal responsibility . . . you get to a place where all kinds of horrors are possible. ... You're just an object of the micro-marketing stuff, and there's no real attempt to give anybody the truth about anything, because, after all, what does it matter?" He is patient and well-spoken, referencing the works of Jacques Ellul, Herbert Marcuse, and Exene Cervenka, lead singer of the punk-rock band X. Still, there is something in the tilt of his head, in the Slavic cast of his features, and in the gentle despair in his voice that makes me think of a candlelit room from a novel by Turgenev or Dostoevsky. The words all seem to run together, to the sound of the rain falling on the wet ground outside. "Now everything is so mediated, real experience is being evacuated at a dizzying speed," he continues. "People wonder why there are forty million people on antidepressants. The kids are just getting dosed up on this stuff, because Ritalin isn't enough, and the teenage suicide rate has tripled in the last decade."

There is something unbalanced in his argument, in his desire for radical industrial collapse, that is causing my attention to wander, from the television set facing the wall to a nearby Exer-Cycle to a neat pile of correspondence on his desk. "I felt a real connection with him, in an almost mystical way," Zerzan says of his most famous correspondent, Ted Kaczynski. In addition to writing to Kaczynski, he also visited the Unabomber several times in jail. "There were just a whole bunch of biographical parallels," he explains. "We were both kind of whiz kids in school, we both renounced the academic route, we had brothers who were social workers, our fathers both died of cancer . . ." He sees Kaczynski as an ideological ally and as a modern-day John Brown. "They ain't innocent," he says of Kaczynski's victims. "Which isn't to say that I'm totally at ease with blowing them into pieces. Part of me is. And part of me isn't." On Sunday nights at 7:30, activists and new arrivals gather in the upstairs meeting room at the Grower's Market for "Simmeren Stew," Randy Shadowalker's weekly look into the community's collective unconscious.

Sitting in the dark on folding chairs, or sprawled out on the carpeted floor, a packed house of approximately seventy-five people whistle and cheer as shots of smashed windows and menacing policemen appear on the screen. Images of the communal triumph in Seattle morph with dreamlike random logic into a *Hard Copy* segment denouncing electroconvulsive treatment, footage of the Gulf War, an air freshener ad from the Seventies, buffoonish shots of Mayor Jim Torrey, and scenes from Nazi propaganda

rallies cross-cut with ads for new cars. Yet beneath the more general mood of sitting paranoid and stoned in the bluish glare of a television set at four in the morning there is also a very serious message.

"The power of advertising," a talking head with a British accent explains, "is based on its monopoly of the cultural space within which we think about ourselves." He speaks in the serious yet offhand tone that signals the presence of a truth received by all right-thinking people with a sympathetic nod of the head, whether they believe in what has been said or not. "The cultural space within which we think about ourselves" is a hard thing to define. Then again, the truth of these sentences is a powerful adhesive, bonding author and listener together in a common apprehension of superiority to the ignorant consumers of cable television and Big Macs.

"Wow, my teeth feel really clean!" explains a chirpy blonde in a toothpaste ad. Everyone laughs. A dog wanders through the narrow aisles, making its way up to the front of the room to lie down at the foot of the screen.

Against the evils of television ads and consumer culture are handheld shots of everyday life in Eugene, of familiar people and places that advertise the pleasure of removing yourself from the economy of fat-filled muffins and hormone-saturated cow's milk and entering a world where the muffins are all-natural and the soybeans are harvested by hand. A waitress at Out of the Fog explains the principles behind "Buy Nothing Day," when the cafe offers food and beverages for free. She is followed by scary infrared shots of shoppers at the local mall and by a deodorant ad warning, "If he smells, it's over." Freeing your mind from the grip of deodorant commercials is a step on the road to true liberation from new car ads and Styrofoam containers, and the even more subtle oppressions inherent in late-stage capitalism. From the passivity inherent in television viewing. From your parents. From the pain, fear, and boredom that are part of everyday life.

Only Mother Nature is pure. "Prairie dogs are cooperative," explains tonight's feature, an hour-and-a-half-long film about black-tailed prairie dogs. "They give off different calls for different predators. They groom each other." The audience's appreciation for the rodents' communal, crop-destroying behavior is matched by their disdain for the human residents of the Great Plains.

"No!" someone shouts, as a rancher in a cowboy hat lines up a prairie dog in the sights of his gun.

"Bite 'em!"

"You're a sick, sick man!"

Huddled out in front of the Grower's Market, a small knot of new arrivals are discussing their plans for the rest of the night. "We can stay at the Ant Farm or the Broadway House," a boy in a denim jacket offers. No one in the group is over twenty-five. They have come to Eugene, they explain, to join the tree-sit at Fall Creek. The boy in the denim jacket came from Colorado. His name is Brian, and he heard about Eugene from a guy at a punk show in Denver. He thinks that Eugene would be a cool place to live.

Standing off to the side, staring out into the fog, is a blond guy in a hooded patchwork corduroy sweatshirt. He is wearing the hood up to obscure his face. When I ask him his name, he looks at me for a long moment. When I ask him his name again, he answers, "A medley." He grew up in Massachusetts, he says, and went into military intelligence when he was sixteen. He was discharged from the army two years ago, he says, with a bone-marrow disease that costs $3.2 million to cure. Recently, he decided to stop taking medication. There is something spooky in his manner that I can't quite place. He is twenty-four years old, he says, and as I look into his eyes again I can't help doing the math. Eight times four is thirty-two. Eight times three is twenty-four. A moment later, he adds that his parents got divorced when he was younger. I ask him how old he was. He thrusts his hands deeper into his pockets. He was eight.

"They thought I was trying to kill myself," he says of the night when he was living in Brooklyn, New York, and decided to climb the Williamsburg Bridge. "I told them that 1 wanted to see trees. You have to climb a bridge if you want to see the trees. That's why I came here."

In the forest outside Eugene, activists live on sheets of four-by-eight plywood with caches of food, wood-powered rocket stoves, and emergency cell phones 200 feet above the floor of an endangered stretch of old-growth forest known as Fall Creek. They have been sitting in trees for the last two years under the banner of Red Cloud Thunder, the environmental organization directed by Deane Rimerman, which has moved beyond the letter-writing campaigns and civil-disobedience tactics of the mainstream environmental movement to the idea of a sacred community that will use any means necessary to defend endangered lands. "When I first showed up in town in '95," Rimerman explains, "there was a whole community of people organized around defending Warner Creek." At Warner Creek activists blockaded roads by clipping their hands to buried concrete blocks until a court finally issued an injunction against cutting the trees, pending an investigation of claims that the forest was a refuge for spotted owls, whose territories are protected by the Endangered Species Act. In response Senator Slade Gorton of Washington attached the so-called salvage rider to the 1995 Recisions Act, releasing timber sales that were held up by the courts, "notwithstanding any provision of law."

It was then, Rimerman says, that environmentalists and anarchists began to come together. In March 1998, under the authority of the salvage rider and the Northwest Forests Plan, the Clinton Administration approved the sale of the Fall Creek tract to Zip-O Lumber of Eugene. The first tree-sitters were discovered on April 20, 1998. Rimerman's goal now is to save the forest and to build a community of younger activists who feel comfortable operating outside of mainstream environmental campaigns and, when necessary, outside of the law.

"They are basically kids who are searching to find something in their lives," Rimerman explains. "They are coming out of typical American families, which are broken families." Some are mentally imbalanced. Others are young addicts who come to the forest to get straight, or street kids who vent and scream and start fights in order

to get attention. "Most of the kids that come out here visit once and leave," he says. "They don't have the social skills. They are much more pissed off at the world." Fall Creek offers these kids a sense of community, a place where they can work, cook, and live together as defenders of pure and ancient forest lands.

"Trees and forest symbolize unconditional love," Rimerman explains. "That's not something that many of these kids have felt before in their lives. You take them out of this hate-filled society, and you give them a place where they can be free." You have to believe that trees have a life of their own to see why the environmental movement is such a powerful magnet for the innermost dramas of a generation that grew up talking to their television sets. As objects of one's own internal process, the trees stay pure and absolute forever. Trees represent freedom, or the love of your parents in its most perfect and ideal form. Every tree is the same. They are iconic, nature's own version of a new pair of sneakers or a famous actress. You can become one with the trees in a way that would be much more difficult to accomplish with the poor and oppressed. What you are left with in the end is a pure and unbounded field for projection. You can erase the boundaries that exist between yourself and the world, and vanish completely inside your own head.

In an anonymous apartment in Whiteaker, with beige wall-to-wall carpeting in the living room, bare mattresses on the floor, and a copy of *The MIT Guide to Lock'Picking* in the bathroom next to a bar of Residence Inn soap, a group of activists are talking about the direction of their lives. "Right now there are people living in trees, because it's something they believe in," explains a crew-cut young activist in a red T-shirt and denim overalls who gives his name as "Free." He is limber, fidgety, and charismatic, in his late teens or early twenties. He speaks with a clarity of purpose that he carried with him from the suburbs of Los Angeles, where he grew up, to the forest at Fall Creek.

"I'm not fucking happy," he says when I ask him about his state of mind. "I'm not sitting in fucking trees in the cold because I'm happy. Going to jail doesn't make me happy. Going to jail is a bad experience. We're out there because we know we're right."

Two years ago Free was the first activist to enter the forest at Fall Creek and climb a tree. "I have a very close relationship with my parents," he says. "They're very supportive." His father was a federal officer who retired to spend more time with his children. While Free was sitting in a tree at Fall Creek, his parents led a write-in campaign that sent 15,000 e-mails to Bill Clinton and A1 Gore asking them not to cut the forest. His relationship with his parents is close, he says, because he and they agree on many issues, and perhaps also because his older brother killed himself at eighteen.

"I was the rebellious one," he says. "And I know that they treated me in certain ways to prevent me from ending up like my brother."

His embrace of anarchist philosophies, he says, began on the first day of his intro to sociology class at Long Beach Cal State, when the professor walked into the classroom, put his books down on his desk, and delivered a speech that has stuck in his mind ever since.

"The reason you are here," his professor explained, "is because we live in a society that can't find meaningful, constructive, engaging work for enough of its members. So we made up this thing called college to delay your entry into society for four or five years ; while training your minds to accept a system of discipline and control that benefits a very small percentage of the population.

When you graduate, most of you will wind up working as waiters or dishwashers, or in other mindless, dead-end jobs.

You will come home at night, get drunk, and watch television. Welcome to sociology."

The other activists in the room had similar moments of radical disconnection, when they realized that government was a form of oppression, or that politicians lie, or that their parents' lives were empty, or that the culture around them was too empty to support the true weight of a life. "We can live off dumpster garbage, and we do, and we still live better than 90 percent of the world's population," one activist says. They don't want to give their names because they were present in Seattle and are involved in other activities at which the authorities might look askance. Seattle was the culmination of months of careful planning and organization. "It went just like the instructions said it would go," one activist says.

"My mom shops," another activist offers. "She creates scenes at the stores. It's embarrassing. She likes to buy the latest technological gadgetry for the home."

"They all know the latest character in Pokemon, that stupid fucking game."

"They all know that the pink Teletubby is gay."

Kooky, an activist in a tall mohawk, red long-johns, and overalls, came to Eugene three years ago after following the Grateful Dead. His given name is Steven Hesline. "The society we're living in now is so fundamentally rotten," he says, "that it's become almost commonplace for kids to walk into school with guns and murder their classmates, or for people to walk into work and open fire on their co-workers." His interest in social change, he says, began with jobs at the Ralph Nader-inspired network of Public Interest Research Groups, or PIRGs, which took him to Massachusetts, New York, and nearly a dozen other states. As a member of OSPIRG, he spent a year of his life working to expand the Oregon state bottle bill, which promised consumers a nickel for every bottle they returned to stores.

"The Snapple bill," he says, reclining on the floor. "That's what broke me. The beverage industry slammed us with their stupid, misleading ads. It left me feeling ripped off. What 1 realized after that was that my life spent as a liberal activist was so full of contradictions and hypocrisy that I couldn't recognize myself anymore. Do I believe that affirmative action is good/ Do I believe in gun control? In my mind I was always against state regulation of firearms, but I would open my mouth and out came the usual liberal bullshit party line."

At the same time, Kooky admits, the life of an activist in Eugene is hardly free of contradictions either. "People here are unwilling to acknowledge their privilege," he says. "So we create this nice alternative universe of organic community gardens and

vegan restaurants and places to have coffee, because we have the luxury of doing that, and it's nice. But it doesn't really answer the question of how to live a life."

The fantasy of total secession is what brought the hippies to Eugene in the first place, and after a week in Eugene, I find an old grayhaired hippie named Skeeter, who lives in a single room with a futon on the floor. His gentle, scratchy voice, mellowed by years of meditation and smoke, reminds me of an old record. A mosaic of handwritten notes and elephant pictures covers nearly every square inch of space, as if the inside of his head has exploded onto the walls.

"We sent groups of people in VW buses up to Oregon, looking for land," he explains. "We were saving money, putting our money into a bank account, that was the scene." As a student at San Jose State, Skeeter belonged to an audiovisual collective that filmed protests, engaged in street theater, and demonstrated against the war in Vietnam. In 1971 the collective picked up en masse and moved to a three-story farmhouse in Eugene, where they worked the land and made their own tofu and mayonnaise. He later became a child-care worker and looked out for many local kids who are now his neighbors in Whiteaker. He sees their mood as similar to his own but filled with a lot more darkness and despair.

"I threw my rocks," he says. "I threw rocks at Nixon. And all these years later part of me is still bummed out that I did. I threw rocks through windows in San Francisco," he continues, "and there were secretaries behind those windows who had nothing to do with corporate power or the Vietnam War. Someone might have gone blind." No matter how many times I nod, as I gently try to change the subject, Skeeter stays focused on the rocks, a thirty-year-old memory that would appear to be symbolic of some deeper trauma or disturbance that he wants to set right. A young anarchist leader named Marshall Kirkpatrick, a bearded kid in his early twenties, listens attentively from a seat on the floor. Skeeter flutters his fingers and fixes Marshall with a drawn-out hippie stare. He takes another drag on his hand-rolled cigarette, then turns to me and launches into a story about watching a group of long-haired hippies stomp a man into the sidewalk one evening in Berkeley on the suspicion that he might be a cop.

"So there's a bunch of freaks beating on this guy, and I'm saying, 'Are we going to lynch the guy? Are we going to kill him?' It scared me," he says. "I worry now about the people I might have hurt. As I've gotten older, I worry about people taking things into their own hands."

The world outside of Whiteaker is an ocean of false desires, summoned up by sorcererlike technologies and by the destructive greed of big corporations. Under the circumstances, the best thing to do is to ride your bicycle to work, scale back your desires, and lead a modest life in which no one gets hurt. Thou shalt not eat meat. Thou shalt not buy new clothes. Thou shalt not dominate or oppress. The commandments prevailing here have less in common with anarchism than they do with the teachings of Jesus Christ, or with the absolutist psychology of children whose parents split up or sold out or otherwise succumbed to the instability inherent in modem marriage.

Eric and Whitney are in their early twenties and live together in a ground-floor Whiteaker apartment, where they spend a lot of their time. They work at the tofu factory in town. Whitney draws and plays the piano. Eric watches television and reads. One of the major questions they face is how to reconcile their emphasis on personal freedom with the possibility that someone else might get hurt.

"Eric's a lot more free with where he places things," Whitney says, in her precise way of speaking. "My space is my space, and I like it a certain way."

"Whitney lets stuff build up inside her," Eric says, rubbing the reddish stubble on his chin. "She'll get mad about a lot of things and say nothing."

Eric's parents divorced when he was four years old. He left home at fifteen. "I remember distinctly sitting there in freshman math class and thinking, 'My parents don't have any money, I'm not going to college anyway,"' he says over the low throb of the stereo. He moved into a rooming house, where his neighbors included a guy who wrote for the *Earth First! Journal,* a crazy guy who wanders the streets, and a recent graduate of the University of Oregon with a bachelor's degree in science who worked as the day manager of a Carl's Jr. franchise and was happy to have the job. The gentleness in Eric's voice is the type that conceals some deeper anger. "Today I spent an hour watching a Q and A with reporters who covered Governor George W. Bush in Texas," Eric says. "They were all talking about George W. Bush. The big question was whether George W. Bush has the gravitas to be president."

What seems most obvious about Eric and Whitney is that they are bound to each other by a shared love and by a shared anger. "My mom is one of the true Silicon Valley drunks," Whitney says of her childhood in Cupertino, California. Her father runs a high-tech firm. "He makes bank, but that wasn't what he wanted to do," she says. Their Puritan renunciation of unsavory appetites and impulses is matched by an emphasis on personal responsibility, which they contrast favorably with the attitudes of their parents. "They've been able to be okay with society," she explains. "They are happy with that and with the cost of what they bought, and I truly admire that in a way, that they have the necessary level of ignorance to make that work."

The life that Eric and Whitney make together, they believe, will be free of hypocrisy and compromise.

They will be honest and straightforward with each other. They will use their poverty, imagination, and strength of will to keep their unruly desires in check. They will stay pure in a compromised world of superflammable materials made with slave labor in Third World countries, where half the people on the planet live on incomes of less than two dollars a day.

"I make fifteen thousand dollars a year before taxes," Eric says. "1 try to spend my money in the neighborhood. I try not to buy new stuff. Which accomplishes nothing, sadly. I ride my bike to work." He leans back on the couch, taps the end of his hand-rolled cigarette, then talks some more. After a while, the simple, declarative sentences in which he sums up his life take on the solemn aspect of a hymn to the saving grace of limited desire. A palpable sense of release accompanies his words. By limiting his

own desires, he has found a way to rebuke and strike back without actually hurting anyone else.

"I work in my little job," he says. "Spend my time with little people. Try to be as light on the earth as I can. As light on other people as I can." If there is something Christlike in this approach, there is also something sad and scared. What I want to tell Eric is that everything will work out okay, and that boredom, fear, and crushing disappointment are simply part of everyone's life. That it is better to live in the world as it is, or can be, than to shut yourself down and live in a cave. What stops me from saying any of this stuff is the knowledge that in an hour or so, at three-thirty in the morning, I will return to the Hilton, turn the heat up too high, and fall asleep with the television on.

David Samuels
Notes from Underground
Among the radicals of the Pacific Northwest
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David Samueb is a contributing editor of *Harper's Magazine.* His article "Rock Is Dead" appeared in the November 1999 issue. He is at work on a novel.