THE SHALTZES, THE JUGGALO IX., 2010, ARCHIVAL INKJET PRINT, 24 × 36".
I’d been driving for seventeen hours, much of it on two-lane highways through Indiana and then southern Illinois. Red-green corn sidled closer to the road until it stooped over both shoulders. That early in the morning, a mist was tiding in the east.

I figured I had to be close. A couple of times I turned off the state road to drive past family plots where the houses were white, right-angled ideals. On many of these plots were incongruous strips of grass—home-spun cemeteries. I wondered what it would be like to grow up in a place like this. Your livelihood would surround you, waving hello every time the wind picked up. You wouldn’t be able to see your neighbors, but you’d for sure know who they were. You’d go to one of the Protestant churches seeded in the corn, take off your Sunday best to shoot hoops over the garage, and drink an after-dinner beer on your porch swing, certain of your regular Americanness. And one day you’d get buried feet from where you lived, worked, and died.

Doubt about the trip unfurled inside me as the odometer crawled on. I couldn’t have told you why I was doing this.

Back on IL-1 I looked to my right and saw an upside-down SUV in the corn. It must’ve flipped clear over the stalks nearest the road, which stood tall and undamaged. The SUV’s rear right wheel—the whole wheel—was gone, but the axle still spun. Stumbling alongside the wreck was a dazed kid in a Psychopathic Records fitted cap. The fingertips he touched to the side paneling seemed to keep him from pitching over.

When midwestern bugs hit your windshield, they chink like marbles. When I’m feeling indecisive in a car, I mash the accelerator.

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When the hip-hop label Psychopathic Records released its seventeen-minute trailer for the 11th Annual Gathering of the Juggalos, a four-day music festival, five people I knew sent me links to it. I suppose that for them it was a snarker’s Holy Grail: everyone involved in the video had such a boggling lack of self-awareness that the whole thing bordered on parody. “The Gathering has fresh and exciting shit to do all around the fucking fizzuck,” the trailer went. “One hundred rap and rock groups! Helicopter rides! Carnival rides! Seminars! . . . And if you like midgets, we got midgets for you.” Mind you, I had no idea who or what any of this was.

The trailer featured bedraggled and unkempt white folks. “Fresh-ass” was used as a compound modifier denoting quality. Willis from Diff’rent Strokes would be there, and Vanilla Ice was going to sign autographs. There would be wrestling all night, four nights in a row. I understood that some could find joy in making fun of these people and their “infamous one-of-a-kind” admixture of third-rate fun fair and perdition. But I was also impressed by the stated point of the thing: “The real flavor, what separates the Gathering from every other festival on the planet, is the magic in the air. The feeling of 10,000 best friends around you. The camaraderie. The family. And the love felt everywhere throughout the grounds. You’ll meet people, make future best friends, you’ll probably get laid. And you’ll realize that the family coming together is what all of this is really about.”

I did some hasty groundwork on that boon the internet and found that juggalos are: “Darwin’s biggest obstacle.” “A greasy, fat teenager with a Kool-Aid mustache and no friends who listens to songs about clowns in his stepmother’s double-wide mobile home when he isn’t hanging out at the mall food court.” “They paint their faces, are aggressive, travel in packs, abide (supposedly) by a simplistic code of rules, and tell all those non-juggalos that juggalos live a happier and freer life.” Saturday Night Live spoofed their last Gathering trailer. There’s a band called Juggalo Deathcamp. “Illegal Immigrants Can Stay, Deport the Juggalos” is a statement that 92,803 people on Facebook agree with.

Why didn’t I know about these people? Why does everyone hate them?
Juggalo etymology is this: Insane Clown Posse, founders of Psychopathic Records, were performing in front of 1,800 at the Ritz in Warren, Michigan, in the early ’90s. Violent J, one half of the Posse, was doing “The Juggla,” a song off Carnival of Carnage, and when he rapped the chorus, “You can’t fuck with the Juggla . . .” he asked, “What about you, Juggalo? Are there any Juggalos in here?” The crowd went nuts and the term stuck.

No definition exists. Nowhere in Psychopathic Records’ discography do any of their artists—neither ICP, nor Twiztid, nor Blaze Ya Dead Homie, nor Anybody Killa, nor Boondox—attempt to delineate what a juggalo is or believes. The artists themselves self-identify as juggalos, but when they rap about juggalos, they do so with awe, incredulity, and more than a little deliberation. From ICP’s “Welcome to Thy Show”: “We just glad we down with them, hate to be y’all / and have a juggalo shatter my skull for the Carnival.” From Violent J’s interview with Murder Dog magazine: “Juggalos started with ICP and now it’s grown into its own culture. It’s still very much a part of ICP, but there are other groups that Juggalos follow. A Juggalo is not just a fanbase of ICP. A Juggalo is a way of life. . . . The juggalos is very much like a tribe. It’s like this wandering tribe who gather every year at a sacred place to have a ritual. It’s an ancient thing for humans.”

ICP are Violent J and Shaggy 2 Dope, the juggalo patriarchs, two white minor felons from the working-class suburbs of Detroit who dropped out of high school, donned clown face, and around 1992 created both Psychopathic Records and a mythology called the Dark Carnival. Without getting too deep into it: the Dark Carnival comprises six studio albums, known as the Joker’s Cards. In each Joker’s Card—Carnival of Carnage, The Ringmaster, Riddle Box, The Great Milenko, The Amazing Jeckel Brothers, and The Wraith—ICP describes more of the Carnival and its murderous personalities and attractions. The Carnival is a traveling inquisition during which racists are blown up, wife beaters tortured, pedophiles bled dry, and the wealthy consigned to hell.

From Violent J’s memoir, Behind the Paint, which reads a lot like Bukowski’s Ham on Rye: “Every kid who came through the line was just like us. They looked like us, dressed like us, talked like us and all that. NO!!! I’m not saying that we influenced them and their style; I’m saying that they already had the same style as us. We were all just different forms of SCRUB!!! We were all the same kind of people! We were all the
world’s UNDERDOGS. We were all pissed, and ready to do something about it.”

In the early days, this “something” sounded a lot like class warfare. This, for instance, comes from the liner notes to *Carnival of Carnage*, ICP’s first studio album:

If those of the ghetto are nothing more than carnival exhibits to the upper class, then let’s give them the show they deserve to see. No more hearing of this show because you can witness it in your own front yard! A traveling mass of carnage, the same carnage we witness daily in the ghetto, can be yours to witness, feel and suffer. No longer killing one another, but killing the ones who have ignored our cries for help. FREE PASS FOR THE GOVERNOR’S FAMILY! Like a hurricane leaving a trail of destruction, the ghetto on wheels! My views may be ugly, but so are the bloodstains on the streets I roam. If there is no change soon tickets will be issued to . . . The Carnival of Carnage.

This is more or less of a piece with the greater gangsta rap ethos of the early ’90s, albeit espoused by two white clowns. But after *Carnival of Carnage*, ICP focused on inventing more characters and set pieces for their Dark Carnival, and gory righteous murders took precedence over politics. The clowns became like superheroes (at one point producing their own comic book series), and their slant-rhymed torture fantasies stood in for mobilization. If anything, their political beliefs could now be classified as apocalyptic. The Dark Carnival is, basically, a rapture that one can’t prepare for, aside from making sure not to be too wealthy to get through the needle’s eye. In the meanwhile, utopia comes once a year, at the Gathering.

Perhaps the most enduring element of that early ICP ethos is the violence. In 2006, a juggalo named Jacob Robida attacked three men in a Massachusetts gay bar with a hatchet and a gun, fled to West Virginia, kidnapped a woman, and drove to Arkansas, where he killed her, a police officer, and himself. In 2008, two Utah juggalos armed with a knife and a battle-ax attacked a 17-year-old and stabbed him twelve times. A juggalette from Colorado got her juggalo boyfriend to stab her mother to death. Two Pennsylvania juggalos took a boy into the woods and slit his throat in 2009. Police in Utah, Arizona, Pennsylvania, and California consider juggalos a criminal gang.
The man in the ticketing trailer told me someone would be by shortly with my press pass, which I had lied to get. Nobody assigned me to go to the Gathering of the Juggalos, and I couldn’t have said why I was standing there in the buzzing heat at the entrance of Hogrock Campground, a hundred-plus acres of cleared land in the Shawnee National Forest just outside tiny Cave-In-Rock, Illinois. Next to me was a shirtless kid named Squee. I’d helped him carry a gunnysack down the steep declivity that connects the overflow parking to the campground. I’d said, grinning conspiratorially, “Let me guess: This shit’s full of beers, right?” He’d said, “Fuck your beers, dude, we’re smoking that weed. This shit’s full of Powerades. Gonna sell these shits.”

Squee rapped on the trailer’s window ledge and told the ticketing man, “Uhh, I lost my car.” “You lost your what?” the ticketing man asked. “My hoopty.” “Can’t help you.” Squee turned to some other kids who were getting their bags checked at the gate and said, “Shit, I was in a tent with four juggalettes—sounds good, right?—Camry keys in my pocket, getting my drink on, my brain on. Now I can’t find that shit.” He glared at the kid next to him and said, “I told you it was a stupid idea to get that fucked up on the very first night, Randall.”

Sandy the PR agent, my age and attractive in a round-featured midwestern way, rode shotgun in a golf cart that skidded to a halt in the dirt in front of the ticketing trailer. She handed me a lanyarded, laminated card that had the dimensions of a child’s placemat at a chain restaurant. It was emblazoned with the Psychopathic Records mascot, the Hatchet-man, and the letters “VIP.” I’d never been credentialed before.

“Charmed, I’m sure,” Sandy said, and reached her right arm, which was sleeved with tattooed leopard spots, over her left shoulder for me to shake from the back of the golf cart. At the wheel was a freckled child. “This is Justin. He works here, kind of.” Justin turned to me slowly; his smile was wide and shingled with milk teeth. He floored it and the cart reared onto its back wheels, jumped forward once, and took off at speed.

We bounced down the dirt pathways that web Hogrock. “This is normally a biker camp,” Sandy said, “but sometimes also a Baptist kids’ camp. This is the third straight Gathering here. Every Gathering’s been in Michigan, Ohio, or Illinois. Seven thousand went to the first, twenty thousand went to the last. This thing’s a day longer than Woodstock.” Tents sprouted from every inch of open flat land on either side of the path. Pup tents, two-person tents, bivouacs, walk-in affairs with
air-conditioning. Back in the woods, red tarp domes showed between trees like pimples under hair. Next to most were dusty American cars filled with stuff: beers, empty motor oil bottles, liters and liters of Detroit’s bottom-shelf Faygo cola, pallets of Chef Boyardee, chips, chocolate, powdered Gatorade. Ruddy juggalo faces poked out from tent flaps at the approaching burre of the golf cart, adding to the surreal feeling of touring an encamped American diaspora.

We drifted past the seminar tent, the second stage, the autograph tent, the freak-show tent, the carny food booths. The sky was as dully off-white as the inside of a skull. I’d read that these four days would range in temperature from 96 to 100 degrees. Sweatwise I was already through the looking glass. “I did the whole Gathering last year,” Sandy said. “I’m not staying past sundown tomorrow. I hope you brought something green, or an orange.” Justin slalomed around shirtless juggalos. Seen from behind, most had broad, slumped shoulders and round, hanging arms. These people were not stout. Their torsos were grubbed with fat. They looked partially deflated. You think I’m being cruel, but these were the most physically unhealthy people I’ve ever seen. “Because if not, you’re shit out of luck. Unless you especially love carnival burgers, or fried curds from out the back of someone’s RV.”

We visited a swimming hole nicknamed Lake Hepatitis that was the kelly green of putt-putt hazard water; a waspy helicopter you could ride in for $40; a trailer full of showers; a wrestling ring; and the half-mile-long valley that held the main stage on one end and a small carnival at the other. It turned out that Justin was the son of Psychopathic Records’ VP. My credential flapped and whined in the false breeze like a musical saw.

Justin braked hard on a narrow bridge that spanned a parched creek. There was a backup of cars looking for open campground. Not more than twenty-four inches in front of us sat twin girls on the rear bumper of a white minivan. They couldn’t have been a day over 14 or a biscuit under 225. They wore bikini tops, and the way they slouched—breasts resting on paunches, navels razed to line segments—turned their trunks into parodies of their sullen faces.

The air here was dry and piquant. Cigarette and pot smoke convected, chasing out oxygen. One of the girls called out to Sandy, “You’re really pretty,” emphasizing the You’re as if being pretty were suspect. Juggalos swarmed the bridge, and when the traffic stopped they closed
in, hawking whatever they had. Hands shot into the cart holding cones of weed for $15, glass pipes for $10, bouquets of mushrooms for I don’t know how much, Keystone Lights for $1, single menthols for $1. A clutched breast was pushed through the fray and jiggled; from somewhere a disembodied voice demanded a dollar.

Then somebody screamed, “WHOOP, WHOOP!”

Understanding how this sounds is important, as it forms a refrain to the entire Gathering. A single “WHOOP, WHOOP!” is like a plaintive, low-pitched train whistle doppler from afar. The Os are long, and there’s a hinge between the first WHOOP and the second. You sort of swing from one syllable to the next.

The crowd fortified the call, returning it deeper and rounder. “WHOOP, WHOOOOOOOOOP!” Sandy overturned her handbag, found oversize sunglasses, and put them on. “Just say it. Just do it,” she said. Thinking myself a funny guy, I did a kind of Three Stooges “Whoop whoop whoop!”

Which I now know was wrong. “WHOOP, WHOOP!” is juggalo echolocation. It not pinging back means trouble.

The twins screamed, “Show us your titties, bitch!” at Sandy. A tall man with a massive water gun screamed, “Man, fuck your ride!” and sprayed us with a stream of orange drink the pressure and circumference of which would’ve made a gelding head-shy. A “FUCK YOUR RIDE!” chant went up and around the crowd, and garbage was thrown.

I would describe what kind of garbage, and how it felt to be the object of such ire—but I had so much garbage thrown at me at the Gathering of the Juggalos that showers of refuse became commonplace, a minor annoyance, and describing one would be like describing what it’s like to get a little wet on a winter’s day in Seattle. Justin, bless his soul, floored it, parting the crowd with the derring-do one is capable of when one’s father is running the show.

“Shit,” Sandy said. “Shitbagging shit.”

Justin grinned. “That was your first Faygo shower, dude.”

They dropped me off in an open field, and I never saw them again. Thenceforward I returned every “WHOOP, WHOOP!” with gusto.

B L E N D E R N A M E D I C P T H E W O R S T A R T I S T S in music history. I’m sure you won’t find many music fans or journalists who disagree. And yet, according to Billboard’s independent album charts—and ICP has
been independent since they left Island Records in 2001—their album *Forgotten Freshness Vol. 3* peaked at number 10, *The Wraith: Shangri-La* at number 1, *Hell's Pit* at number 1, *The Calm* at number 1, *Forgotten Freshness Vol. 4* at number 4, *The Wraith: Remix Albums* at number 9, *The Tempest* at number 2, and 2009's *Bang Pow Boom!* at number 1. Twiztid has had one number 1, two number 2, and one number 3 independent albums. Dark Lotus, the quasi-mystical supergroup made up of ICP, Twiztid, and Blaze Ya Dead Homie, has charted at number 3, number 4, and number 6.

ICP alone have two more number 1 independent albums than Arcade Fire and Elliott Smith; three more than Arctic Monkeys and the National; and four more than the Yeah Yeah Yeahs and the White Stripes. I understand that may be hard to believe. You likely can’t name a song by any Psychopathic Records artist (except maybe ICP’s “Miracles”). They don’t have singles that play on the radio, in hip boutiques, or on the stirring trailer for *Where the Wild Things Are*. Only Insane Clown Posse have been on the Billboard Hot 100—in 1997, when they spent five weeks on the charts, peaking at number 67, with “Santa’s a Fat Bitch.”

Psychopathic Records peddles horrorcore, a hip-hop genre that originated in the early 90s. Horrorcore narratively and figuratively incorporates all kinds of horror-film tropes: hyperviolence, gore, moralism, and inventive Rube Goldberg–style faces of death, all set to samples of, say, the *Creepshow* or *Zombi 2* soundtrack. Jamie Madrox of Twiztid: “Think of it as if there was a *Halloween* or *Friday the 13th* on wax and Jason and Michael Myers could actually rap, this is what their vibe would sound like.” The germ of horrorcore can be traced to the Geto Boys, influential beyond their appearance on the *Office Space* soundtrack, several of whose lesser-known songs integrated the aforementioned stuff. But Esham, a Geto Boys contemporary from Detroit, was the first MC to build his persona exclusively around the horrific, and thus is considered the true progenitor of horrorcore. He inspired Insane Clown Posse, who in turn inspired the Psychopathic family.

Horrorcore had its big national moment in the mid-90s, when the Flatlinerz and Gravediggaz were charting and ICP’s *The Great Milenko* went platinum. But the sound still defines Metro Detroit and much of the Rust Belt. There’s Esham and the Clowns, King Gordy, Prozak, Twiztid, Marz, Blaze Ya Dead Homie, J Reno, Rev. Fang Gory, Freddy Grimes, Troubled Mindz, Defekt—even Eminem can be considered
horrorcore-influenced, on account of Slim Shady’s chainsaw revs and
gore-focused gaze.* Since ICP, many if not most horrorcore acts have
been white, as has been their audience. All but one of the artists on Psy-
chopathic, which is based in Farmington Hills, come from Michigan. All
are white or Native American. Psychopathic pulls in $10 million a year
and has its own wrestling federation, energy drink, and film division.

Wending my way to the park entrance from where Sandy and
Justin dropped me off took three hours. The golf cart had created
a compact and navigable illusion. The site was shaped like a bone-in top
loin, its paths marbling it as randomly as fat. I realized I hadn’t packed
any water, or bedding.

I had imagined, what with the Gathering being a music festival, that
I’d be able to slink around anonymously. I was immediately disabused
of this. I was the only person not wearing black or red. I was the only
person who did not have Psychopathic Records iconography tattooed
somewhere on his body. My hair, ridiculous as it was, both fro’ed out
and sopping in the humidity, marked me as exceptional. The juggalos
who hadn’t shaved their heads completely had shaved everything below
their crowns and braided the rest into rigid tendrils that zagged upward
like the legs of a charred insect.

Everywhere I went, juggalos stopped what they were doing to track
me with spotlight eyes. Their heads moved in time with my stride, the
way man or beast will do when a threat is sensed. For four days I would
have to fight a strong urge to break into a jog.

I decided to follow one of the dry creeks that no longer reach the
Ohio River. I moved between trees on a rise above the bank and walked
until I realized I was amid a dozen people facing the creek in a staggered
formation of lawn chairs. Somehow I hadn’t noticed what they were
watching: one man breaking tube after fluorescent glass tube on the
back of another man who lay prone on the dead leaves in the creekbed.
When the tubes popped and tinkled they released jinnish poofs of talc.

* ICP and Eminem had a long-running beef that began in 1997, when Eminem was a little-known battle rap-
ner about to release The Slim Shady EP. He was passing around a flyer at a club regarding his release party. The
flyer read, “Featuring appearances by Esham, Kid Rock, and ICP (maybe).” Eminem handed one to Violent
J; this being the first time the two had ever met or spoken, Violent J objected to Eminem’s presumptuous-
ness. After that, bars went back and forth. Eminem called ICP talentless; ICP contended that Eminem was
a commercial product made by Dr. Dre and MTV, and recorded a parody of “The Real Slim Shady” entitled
“Slim Anus.”
I thought maybe the other guy was drunk. Then the assailant moseyed to the back of a rusted panel van that canted down the bank. He pulled out a T-ball bat vined with razor wire. I actually said, “Oh, no!” He knelt over the other guy, pulled his head up by the hair, and started gouging his forehead. Someone in the chairs finally said, “Pin his ass, Darryl.” I moved on.

I walked by a pavilion whose purpose I couldn’t immediately discern. Women danced naked in cages, and there was a stage fronted by picnic tables. Both stage and picnic tables were being stood on by a lot of people. A master of ceremonies emerged from the onstage crowd, screaming a station identification into a microphone—WFuckOffRadio, Psychopathic’s internet radio station—and that it was time for the contest. I didn’t see any hands go up. It was just: two beer bongs were handed to two dudes who put the hoses to their mouths before two other dudes poured a plastic 750 milliliter bottle of gin into each funnel. I found myself shaking my head no while applauding slowly. After the bottles were finished the dudes were allowed fifteen seconds to recoup. The naked ladies had stopped dancing and were gripping their bars tightly. Only cicadas zapped the silence. Then began the second leg of the contest, which involved a third dude—this time chosen from a show of eager hands—jumping onstage to kick one of the gin-drinkers in the crotch, and then the other, and so on, best-of-three-falls style. The last man standing was given a goodie bag smaller than the mediocre goodie bags I received at the end of grade-school birthday parties. The crowd lined up to high-five both contestants, “WHOOP, WHOOP!”s all around.

When I finally arrived at my rental car, panting and glazed with sweat, I threw it in reverse, feeling a most acute despair.

The Hardin County sheriff stopped me at the Hogrock egress. Caprices and Grand Marquises illustrated with Psychopathic Records decals sat passengerless on the shoulder. Two deputies were ducking juggalos into a paddy wagon. The sheriff ambled up to my window, leaned in to appraise me, and waved me on. I was still full of paranoia and phantom guilt when the wind whipped my VIP badge across my neck, drawing a faint line of blood. I drove to the next town over to buy beer.
A few words on horror, and why some people like it:

I’ve never seen Citizen Kane and don’t care to, but Kane Hodder is the best and only Jason Voorhees in my mind. I have no idea what Casablanca is about, but I can give you rundowns of Cannibal Holocaust, Cannibal Ferox, Sexo Canibal, and Anthropophagus, or if cannibals aren’t your thing, Demoni 1 and 2 or Demonicus. I need to scan down to number 14, Psycho, on the American Film Institute’s list of our hundred best movies to find one I’ve actually watched.

“Serious” film strikes me as absurd. It’s bowdlerized life. Filmic drama asks me to care about loves, losses, and supposed triumphs, which together amount to the chiseled dash connecting my birth to my death on my tombstone. To me, the modern horror film has more to do with first-world existence as it is lived today. In the modern horror film, we no longer come together to defeat a beast, gaining knowledge of and confidence in ourselves along the way. Altruism is no longer rewarded. Even the most self-sacrificing character will be killed off, often for laughs. One protagonist, if any, survives by becoming more brutal than the monster. He trades debasement for survival, which is short-lived—because the monster of course comes back, for the lucrative sequels.

In horror, characters are stripped of everything they think they know and believe they are. Education and privilege mean nothing. Security is a delusion; today is the last day of your life. You, what you think makes you you, your blemishes and singular characteristics, will disappear in an instant. Stalking everything you do is death, and all that matters is how furiously you go out.

Back at the gathering, with my quivered tent on one shoulder and a book bag full of water and Luna bars on the other, a suitcase of Natural Light in hand, I went looking for a spot to camp. I had picked up a map and program from the ticketing trailer, so I knew where I was going this time. On the way, I took note of the license plates I saw: Illinois, Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Iowa, Nebraska, Kentucky, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, New Mexico, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts. Over the course of the Gathering I did not see any plates from Florida, which is where I’m from, nor did I meet anyone from Miami, which is where I grew up. I encountered dozens of juggalos from Ohio, many of them from Akron, my dad’s ancestral home. My mom’s side of the family hails from New Castle, a cluster
of mining concerns and fireworks factories in western Pennsylvania, which was also well represented at the Gathering. I myself had never been this deep into the Midwest before. As I was driving here, thumping regularly over I-71’s asphalt panels, not quite equidistant from cultural capitals on both coasts, I imagined my rented red Kia a blood cell not driven but recalled to a heart.

One enterprising juggalo asked if I’d like to touch his testicles for $5. I hastened my search for a campsite. Finally I picked a spot next to the parking lot in the “Lost Ninja Clan” area. (*Ninja*, I learned, is the diminutive form of *juggalo*, e.g., “What up, ninja?”) Having never camped before, I spent twenty minutes flexing tent poles and accidentally launching them like javelins. I heard a soft voice behind me ask, “Need any help?” I turned and met Adam.

Adam was from Detroit. He was shorter but more solidly built than me, and as pallid as the disinterred, with fine black hair and black eyes. He pronounced short a’s with the nasal-pirate accent Michiganders swear they don’t have. His red and black Blaze Ya Dead Homie basketball jersey exposed an homage to horror-movie serial killers tattooed over powerful arms. A full-color Leatherface tattoo swelled on his right biceps while he put my tent together, a Kool puckered throughout.

Adam was camping with his brother twenty feet away in a canvas lean-to. They both worked irregular shifts at an auto plant, which was why they could come. This was Adam’s third Gathering. He was disappointed the rest of his friends couldn’t make it. “That’s OK, though,” he said, “because I’ve got ten thousand friends here.”

I knew then and there that I should have stuck to Adam like a journalistic remora, but it was hot and I’m awkward, so I shook his hand, told him I’d catch up with him later, and crawled into my tent, happy to have a space that was mine alone.

I turned on the lantern end of my emergency flashlight and started jotting impressions. The heat, light, and cicadas made the experience not unlike lying inside an incandescent bulb. It wasn’t long before I dozed off. A “FUCK YOUR FACE!” chant roused me from half-sleep; I checked the program and couldn’t be sure if it was coming from the Psychopathic Records Karaoke Tournament or the wet T-shirt contest hosted by Ron Jeremy. Then I was asleep.

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In 1992, my parents went into real estate and began making money. Almost instantly—my mother had been in the business three weeks, my father a little longer—I was pulled out of Boys and Girls Club baseball and enrolled in a tennis academy on a private island. I received a new wardrobe of tiny white shorts, white polos, white loafers. My parents bought a conversion van, with a TV and VCR in the back, to take on family vacations. There were art lessons. A family portrait was taken and mailed out with seasons greetings, four months ahead of Christmas.

We were at our first Dolphins game, a preseason game, marveling at the champagne and chicken fingers in the luxury suite, when one of the many TVs cut in with news that Hurricane Andrew had made an unanticipated 90-degree turn to the west. It was going to intensify into a category 5 storm between the Bahamas and Miami.

Police cruisers rolled through the neighborhood and ordered evacuation as Biscayne Bay crawled over the seawall. Except for what fit into duffels, we each wrapped our favorite belongings in a heavy-duty garbage bag that was left on top of our beds. They’re eerie even in memory, polypropylene sarcophagi. We piled into our van with our dogs and raced a black and fast sky inland to my grandfather’s.

We rode out the storm in my grandfather’s bathroom, the safest part of his cinder-block house. We took turns standing on the lip of the filled bathtub to look through the thin window. First came a five-hour block of destruction, after which my family, along with the rest of the city, went outside to tour the damage. Miami was leveled, cast yellow, and it quavered uncomfortably under the sun. There were thirty minutes’ worth of anxious peace. At 7 years old, desperate to run from building to building and sample the damage, I felt a kind of fluorescent joy, the liberation of disaster. Then came five more hours of bookending storm. When it ended, my parents drove me and my sisters straight to the airport.

My mother had called in a favor from her extended family in New Castle. My sisters and I were going to live there for a while. Before we boarded the plane to Pittsburgh, we had no idea we had cousins. They were the family my grandmother left when she and my grandfather, a local boy back from World War II, moved to Miami, where they’d heard there were jobs for fishermen.

My sisters and I stayed in the drafty empty nest of my great aunt, a fierce nonna recently widowed of her long-haul-driving husband. She
was the cook at the restaurant and bar my cousins collectively owned and operated. They pitied us as if we had fallen to them from a higher station. They went out of their way to treat us as they thought we were accustomed—they bought me a GameBoy, a New York Yankees hat, and Michael Jackson tapes. September in Pennsylvania was too cold for the clothes I had, so they took me to the consignment shop and bought me a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles sweatshirt on which Raphael challenged any and all to c’mon, try it! I asked my cousins how that first word read, and they said it was “cee-mon.”

It wasn’t until I got back to Florida that I understood our home had been destroyed. Thirteen feet of storm surge had washed over it. Only half of what remained was habitable. When school started, the district mandated that I be taken out of class once a week and put in a support group, where I colored in pictures of newer, better homes. For Christmas we covered the water damage with gift wrap; my dad was jobless within the year. We rebuilt our house with insurance money, sort of, and my folks lived in it for two more decades, leaks, mold, and zoning codes be damned. We never lived as high as we did before the hurricane or as low as immediately after it. When I got back from the Gathering, I learned that my parents had closed on a deal to sell the house to the neighbors. They then put their stuff in the van and lit off for California. The neighbors demolished the house posthaste.

I was awake and jackknifed in my tent after a juggalo screamed “WHOOP, WHOOP!” right outside it. Everyone in the vicinity returned the call, and it redoubled on the trails, an aural telegraph relaying the A-OK. Security stayed near the front entrance; juggalos were very much in charge here. Adam and his brother were gone. I’d slept for five hours, and now it was early evening. The bigger acts were beginning their sets, and everyone was making their way to the main stage.

The setting sun made candy floss out of the clouds. A kid leaned against a tree and faced the procession with this sign: “Need coke? Show me your open butt crack, girls.” The helicopter had not stopped nor would it stop buzzing ’Namishly overhead.

I stopped at a carny food booth to buy a cheesesteak. I took my sandwich to a large wooden pallet to sit and eat, but I was shooed by a child huckster who was using it as a stage. “What up, fam. Help a juggalo get home. Three dollars for one kick, five dollars for two.” He wore a red
jumpsuit and had braids like dead coral. On the back of his jumpsuit was the Hatchetman, Psychopathic Records’ logo and kokopelli. The Hatchetman is the cartoon profile of a guy with a big head, the aforementioned braids, and a goatee, and who is running with a hatchet in one hand. Over four days, I saw the Hatchetman stitched onto shirts, pants, cheer shorts, bikini tops, beanies, caps, and shoes; shaved into heads and chests; and tattooed on so many pounds of lacquered flesh—on arms, shoulders, forearms, over the avian bones on the backs of hands, across necks and asses, in the lee of breasts, on calves, clavicles, and feet.

A topless woman wrapped in the Canadian flag walked up next to me to watch, her boyfriend behind her. She noticed the VIP signboard around my neck.

“What makes you so special?” She was pale, but her eyes were so blue they looked colorized.

I stammered something about maybe trying to write about the Gathering. Then I asked if they’d met any other international juggalos.

“Fuck yeah we have,” the boyfriend said. He was bullish, with a shaved head. “Finns, Australians, English, Japanese.” He was from Windsor, Ontario, right across the border from Detroit. He’d been waiting ten years to go to a Gathering. He wanted to know: “You going to shit all over us like every other newspaper?”

“They want to shut us down,” the woman added. “If this was political, they’d shut us down.”

Her boyfriend leaned in: “Look, dude, there’ve always been juggalos. It’s just, before ICP, nobody gave us a name. We were just walking around in Bumfuck by ourselves, you know? But get us all together? Tens of thousands of us? And everybody wants to shut us down.” At this I nod, but I don’t know who “everybody” is; overall the Gathering seemed more ignored than persecuted. “Just tell everybody the truth, ninja. Tell them what we’re like. Maybe when they read it, they’ll be, like, ‘That’s me, that’s where I belong.’”

A non-carny working a barrel grill paid his $3 and had his kick. The kid didn’t even need to catch his breath before reprising his spiel. “Man, I was a punter in high school,” the griller said, shaking his head. “I heard them shits pop.”

The valley that held the main stage and carnival was filled with juggalos. After sunset, the only light came from the stage and the winking bulbs of the Octopus, the Swinger, and the Hustler. I lingered in the
light of the rides, scribbling notes and drinking the Nattys I’d brought. Several worse-than-mediocre acts came and went from the stage, and the juggalos chanted “FAM-I-LY” at the ones they liked.

I felt it necessary to get more than a little buzzed that night. The nigh-illegible notes I took in the rides’ glow became suffused with a false and beery insight. After one of the cars in the Hustler rained solid waste upon me, I wrote, “In another time, I still don’t believe these people would’ve belonged to unions or the Elks.” When a group of teens who hid their faces with bandannas passed by, I wrote, for reasons that remain inscrutable, “Ohio is SHAPED LIKE AN ANCHOR!!” and underlined it hard enough to tear the page.

I also wrote that juggalos seem far more comfortable around black people than your average middle American, and I still think that. There were a handful of blacks at the Gathering who weren’t performers, and their interactions with the juggalos (though I might have expected tension, going in) were some of the most natural white-black interactions I’ve ever observed. It was just dudes talking to one another.

By the time Naughty by Nature took the stage, I was good and drunk. They kept spouting malapropisms like “We’re glad to be at the juggalo!” and “Much love to the ICP posse!” Like the rest of the non-juggalo rappers performing at the Gathering—including Tone Loc, Warren G, Rob Base, Slick Rick, and Coolio—they were in it for the money. All I wanted was to hear “Hip Hop Hooray,” but first they kept demanding that I and everyone else chant “WHITE BOYS!” first.

This might have been the clearest indication that NbN misunderstood their audience. They saw the crowd as another mass of white boys, same as at every other concert they’d performed over the past two decades, and they betrayed a little passive-aggressive weariness. The juggalos around me seemed mostly confused. Their collective grumbled response could be summed up as: “These guys don’t understand that we’re just like they are, or like they used to be before they made money.”

I was a white, middle-class teenager, but where I’m from I was the exception. My Miami high school was five times the size of the average Florida school and 80 percent Hispanic, 10 percent black, 10 percent other. Most of the student body qualified for free or reduced-cost lunch. My friends were Cuban, Nicaraguan, Haitian, Brazilian, Panamanian, Colombian, Bahamian, Mexican. Few of their families could be
considered solidly middle class. They were working-class immigrants, born overseas or first-generation American.

Assimilation is a fascinating thing to watch happen. The metaphor of the melting pot is very often spot-on. Over time, immigrants’ original cultures are rendered and take on the essence of ours. That’s what stewing does—it takes disparate ingredients and imbues them with a single general flavor. In Miami, most people I knew assimilated. They put on polo shirts and said “dude” and drove circles around the mall on weekends. They affected middle-class white adolescence, with quite a few cultural tics. As an American you have to believe that’s something everyone strives for, becoming the “we.” You feel good seeing it. You’re a little affronted if someone doesn’t strive for inclusion. In my high school, the kids who assimilated had a derisive term for those who didn’t: *ref*, short for *refugee*. Fashion could be reffy, as could hair, mannerism, inflection, you name it.

The assimilated kids picked on refs, who were considerably poorer. They screamed “INS!” and waved lit matches around refs’ oiled hair. The refs never protested. They shoaled along walls and stared straight ahead, always maintaining the same imperturbable expression. Me, everyone mostly ignored. Sometimes I got pushed into the hydrangea bushes and called white boy. Sometimes Latinas feigned interest in me while their unseen novios busted guts behind lockers. But mostly I was an anomaly. And, at the risk of sounding ridiculous, I never felt white, except by default. White America was very far away. It was a nation my parents expatriated from; like my Cuban friends, I figured one day I’d visit my homeland. The glimpses I caught on TV or in movies were bewildering. Ski teams? Blond cheerleaders? Battles of the bands? We had a hip-hop showcase, with the final coming down to a Hot Boyz clone vs. a Dead Prez ripoff. Our school’s homepage looped Trick Daddy’s “Let’s Go.” Our senior class song was “Tipsy” by J-Kwon.

In the night I was roused by three juggalos attempting to enter my tent. I struggled to hold the zippers together, hissing “Go away!” until it became an incantation. “The fuck is up with this ninja?” said one of them. “We just want to pass out, ninja,” said another. Sometime later I woke up needing badly to go to the bathroom. The tent’s zippers, now broken, wouldn’t budge. I guzzled a bottle of water and used it as a receptacle; this I would do every hour for three hours. I missed
Coolio’s 4:30 AM set but could hear it anyway. The juggalos finally came to rest at dawn. The cacophony they made—burps, coughs, hacks, pukes—sounded like a bodily orchestra tuning up. A sleepy “WHOOP, WHOOP!” followed someone’s long brown note.

After tearing a hole in and birthing myself from the tent, I went on an early-morning circuit of the grounds. The nearest Port-o-Potty had been blown up in the night. RVs that also served as mobile tattoo parlors were opening their doors at seven thirty. The treetops in the distance made a rampart against the sky.

I stopped at the Spazmatic Energy Sauce pavilion to mix a tube of coffee crystals into a bottle of water. Juggalos in various stages of undress slumped everywhere over everything. A young mother led her son to the other end of my picnic table. He sat down to breakfast on an elephant ear and grape Faygo. His mother pulled the tab on a can of beef barley soup. She rubbed an eye with the heel of one hand and sipped from the can with the other. Hanging from her neck was a homemade advert scrawled on torn cardboard that read, **$2 for big ass titties, $1 if your a down ass ninja.** She lit a menthol and took a swig from her son’s Faygo.

The mother was in a bikini top and her son was shirtless, yangs of black paint smeared on his face. They were probably a combined 30 years old, yet stretch marks mottled their bodies. Fat dangled off them in dermal saddle bags as empty as the calories that made them. Again, I bring this up not because I’m body-snarking but because I’ve only ever seen these physiques in places—the Bronx; Liberty City, Florida; New Castle—where dinner comes either from Burger King or the convenience store.

The son razzed me with a tongue full of violet pulp. I smiled at him. Then he “WHOOP, WHOOP!”ed and pollocked his remaining Faygo all over me.

Whether my open notebook had triggered some kind of antischolastic mania in the child, I don’t know. But he managed to soak it so thoroughly that only days later, after several hours under a blow-dryer in a Washington, Pennsylvania, motel room, could the notebook be opened again. The rest of this essay’s grist was scribbled in a cryptic shorthand on folded paper towels in a goddamn hurry.

° ° °
I went to the Boondox, Insane Clown Posse, Anybody Killa, and Blaze Ya Dead Homie seminars. “Seminar” is the official name for these sessions, but it’s maybe the wrong term. They’re more like shareholder meetings. The artists stood on a dais and explained themselves to hundreds of juggalos under a tent sweltering in hay dust and pot smoke. Boondox set the tone, saying, “We wouldn’t be shit without you.” Audience participation stretched for hours; comments ranged from “When are you coming to my town?” to “Can I have a hug?” to “You don’t even know the names of your own songs, you cock,” to “I’m proud of the way your attitude has improved.” Juggalos challenged artists to onstage chugging competitions and beat them. Glass pipes of innumerable colors and fungal shapes were passed from the crowd to the stage. Someone fired roman candles into the tent’s folds, an exceptionally bad idea. In front of me among the crowd behind the tent, two men explained to a third how they had just hitchhiked their way back from the Hardin County jail. A range-finding water balloon popped in the dirt a few feet behind me. Violent J of ICP summed up my predicament: “You could have a camera crew, or documentary people running around, you could take pictures, interview ninjas, but you can’t possibly know what it’s really like to be part of this family unless you’re a part of this. That’s like, that’s like, hearing about love, and actually being in love. Those are two different ma’fucking things, right? Well this is love, right here. This is real love amongst each other in this bitch.” As he spoke this, some juggalos fifty yards away on a hillside with a trebuchet pegged me right in my face with a Faygo-filled balloon.

I had hoped to find Adam at the campsite around lunchtime, maybe have a few brats, laughs. No sign of Adam. I ate a few chocolate Luna bars, soft and fecal-looking in the heat; immediately regretted it.

There was one ATM on the premises. It might’ve been the only ATM in Cave-In-Rock. It was the plastic stand-alone kind you get flaccid bills out of at bodegas and strip clubs. I saw no one else use it. It was its own little island in a field that included the Psychopathic Records merch tent. The usage fee was $5.

For twelve hours every day, the merch tent thronged with juggalos. I watched them buy T-shirts and CDs, but also caps, cowboy hats, ski masks, hoodies, basketball, football, baseball, and hockey jerseys, tongue
rings, comics, posters, wallets, belt buckles, fingerless gloves, flip-flops, shorts, and dresses, all in every conceivable size and color. Except “Property of Psychopathic Records” onesies; those were available only in black.

I wondered, How is the merch tent doing such a brisk business without anyone having to use the ATM?

The answer is that the Gathering of the Juggalos is a free market in every sense. Aside from Drug Bridge—which even the security guards called Drug Bridge—juggalo wares were on sale anyplace you looked. RVs doubled as tattoo parlors and greasy spoons. Cardboard signs affixed to tents advertised kush, chronic, and ’dro. I still don’t know what ketamine is, but I said it out loud once and was pitched to immediately. Reese’s Cups, fan fiction, electronic cigarettes, oil paintings. I saw gasoline bartered for acid tabs. The juggalos I spoke with clearly believed that making money this way was preferable to having a real job, despite their living demonstrably worse lives than people with real jobs. Still, one juggalo told me, “Dog, I came here broke and hustled $1,000.”

The second evening, I locked myself out of my rental car. I asked the first person I saw if he had a slim jim. He did, and fifteen seconds and $35 later, I was back to getting waters out of my trunk. As I headed to see Warren G, a guy driving roughshod in a golf cart spotted me and pulled a U-ey. A handpainted sign read TAXI RIDES $2. “Hey my man!” the guy said, pointing to my VIP pass. “Where’d you get that?” I explained that I emailed ahead of time and made arrangements with Sandy, the disappeared PR agent, and that actually the VIP pass entitled you only to free golf-cart rides on the first day of the Gathering. “Yeah, I don’t care about all that. I’m riding in this golf cart, you know what I’m saying? Which I stole, you know what I’m saying? And they see that shit around my neck? Dog, I could get in anywhere!” Off in the distance, Warren G was launching into “I Want It All.” “Dog, I’ll make it worth your while. Money . . . or, you know, drugs.” I declined. When I reached the main stage and took a water out of my book bag, a horrifically sunburned albino limped up to me, squinting, and asked, “How much?” I didn’t know how to explain that I wasn’t selling my waters, and he was in a bad way, so I charged a dollar, because the bottle was still hot from the trunk.
I took my VIP pass off once to blend in, maybe get the juggalos to open up. Within three minutes security guards in a golf cart drove up and threatened to take me to “juggalo jail.” Standard admission was $150, and juggalos were sneaking in, they told me. Where was my wristband, or my commemorative sheriff’s badge celebrating the release of Psychopathic’s Western homage, “Big Money Rustlas”? I stammered and jangled my VIP lanyard. Then they all bought balloons filled with nitrous oxide from a guy.

The nights at the gathering were black as space. If you didn’t have a flashlight to sweep trails with, you were bound to twist an ankle. On the plus side, I could plop down with the burnouts and scrawl blind notes without anyone noticing.

That second night a carny stabbed another carny in the stomach, Tila Tequila got pelted with debris until she bled, and I saw Tom Green perform in the seminar tent. Before he came on, two juggalos in the audience fist-fought for half a minute before onlookers chanted “FAM-I-LY! FAM-I-LY!” The fighters stopped and slinked away, shamed.

Tom Green got hit with a hot dog and was offered two separate bong hits, one of which he accepted; the chant was “TOM SMOKES GREEN!” Any joke that required a setup was interrupted. Someone shouted something about Drew Barrymore that seemed to hurt him. A juggalette to my left started to laugh at a joke, paused to vomit, and resumed laughing. Tom tried to do a bit about technological dehumanization, with gags about text messages and porn, but he was chanted down. It was very uncomfortable in there. More things were thrown. Juggalos had power over a famous person and they knew it. Eventually he was performing like a jester, quick to start one joke only to abandon it for another before his audience assaulted him.

He ended with a monologue about how everyone on Twitter had begged him not to come, but that since his postcancer philosophy is carpe diem, he wanted not only to come but to prove everyone wrong about juggalos. This was answered with raucous “WHOOP WHOOP!”s.

I heard that later he would try to save Tila Tequila from bombardment with objects both vile and dangerous by jumping onstage to draw juggalo fire, to no avail.
After sleeping for maybe two hours, I got up on the third day and went to see the actual Cave-In-Rock. It’s a cave fifty-five feet wide and a hundred deep, scoured out of a cliffside by the Ohio River. For more than 200 years pirates, counterfeiters, horse thieves, and murderers used it as a natural refuge and ambush. The river floods the cave from time to time, which may be why it’s so cool and loamy inside, smelling of equal parts fecundity and decay.

I was reading the teen inscriptions (vince did allie x right here), not finding any that were juggalo-related, when a mother and her two daughters entered the cave. The mother, who spoke with a deep Midwest twang, said she lived forty-five minutes away but had never brought the girls here. We’re wont to do that, she said—spend our lives missing the beautiful things right in front of us. She had the blue eyes and curdled face of a 4-H beauty queen gone to seed. I lied and said I hadn’t heard of the Gathering but was passing through on my way home from a friend’s. She offered to pray with me right then and there, “Right here and right now to know you are saved,” was how she put it. “This wasn’t a coincidence. You and me here today. Don’t write it off as one.” My nods were bogus, like a drinking bird’s. Behind her on the Ohio the Shawnee Queen puttered by, and some old folks waved. She said she was sorry to say it but I could die just as easily as her sister did at 17. Wherever I was going to I could just die. “You will stand before Jesus Christ. You will.” She squeezed her girls’ hands, and they said, “You will be judged by our Lord and Savior.” The woman asked me to consider living a life like hers, said she’d leave a CD for me on my rental car’s windshield, and then she left.

My clothes were geologic with overlapping sweat rings. I smelled like trench foot. The shower trailer at the Gathering was out of the question. I took off my boots and jumped into the Ohio River. I promised the woman I’d listen to her CD, but I don’t know what I did with it.

On the third night of the gathering I finally found a perk associated with the VIP badge: access to the handicapped persons’ viewing platform. I stood behind paraplegic juggalos, juggalos on crutches, a little-ette (his term) with a prosthetic leg signed by the entire Psychopathic roster, a blind juggalo, juggalos suffering from various twists and sprains. One woman tore her meniscus during Brotha Lynch Hung but joined us on the platform rather than go to the infirmary; she refused to
miss Blaze Ya Dead Homie. Her face, and the faces of her husband and two children, were painted in the style of ICP’s Shaggy 2 Dope.

The handicapped used the height advantage to rain Faygo on those below. I used it to watch the crowd in the minutes before the sun set. Every third face was painted. Juggalos flew homemade banners announcing their area codes. They did drugs, they moshed, they diced the air with their hands while rapping along to Axe Murder Boyz, two Colorado brothers signed to Psychopathic’s sublabel Hatchet House. Amid the thousands someone was waving a used car lot–size American flag with the Hatchetman sewn over the fifty stars.

The good liberal definition of the underclass is something like: black and brown, struggling but persisting, dignified, systematically disadvantaged, living for the dream of becoming We. Americans don’t have a hard time explaining white poverty because Americans rarely try, even though most poor people in this country are white. If you’re white in this country, it’s taken for granted that you’re part of We.

Not all juggalos are poor. Many bristle at the accusation. But a lot, maybe most, are. In the last decade, the Midwest experienced the largest upswing in poverty in the US. A third of the country’s poor now live in suburban Middle America. Still, you’ll never hear a juggalo use the term “white trash.” “White trash” is an old term, older than the United States of America. Its roots lie in the 17th century, when “lubbers” and “cracker,” formerly indentured and escaped white servants, formed their own communities on the outskirts of the Chesapeake tidewater region. These whites flouted the colonists’ nascent cultural mold, disrespected their ideas of property, color, and labor. The majority thought of them as boondock curios, except during political and economic crises, when they considered them criminal savages. “White trash” nowadays is a contemptuous term, because it implies that one had all the privileges of whiteness and squandered them; one’s poverty is one’s own fault. It’s a shocking term, because it suggests that even without unions and factories, class in America is real and cuts across racial lines. But mostly it’s a useful term, because it has no set definition. It’s protean. It’s for when the majority of white people want to delineate what they are by saying, “What we are not is them.”

Juggalos say anyone’s free to become a juggalo, but I don’t know about that. I think it’s more like they weren’t born into the respectable middle class and didn’t see a path that led there, so they said fuck it.
They tattooed the Hatchetman on their necks and allied themselves with a fate they couldn’t escape. They would be stigmatized for this white poverty, this woeful inability to move and change, to be free radicals, so why not embrace it, make it known permanently and up front? You can be a juggalo, or you can be white trash—the first term is yours, the second is somebody else’s.

One juggalo in particular caught my attention right before it got dark. On stage the Axe Murder Boyz were closing out their set, rapping the coda to their modest hit “Body in a Hole”:

And it ain’t no friends, and it ain’t no girls ’cuz I’m by myself, and I got this hole in my backyard
I’ve been digging it for a year
I can’t cope with my own fear
Voice I hear has all control, so
I beat you in the head with a hammer and leave it stuck in your skull then I put your body in a hole.

The juggalo was threading his way laterally through the back of the crowd like an unraveling hem. He was decked out in Axe Murder Boyz merch, and he carried with him a milk crate brimming with plastic 1.5-liter bottles. The bottles were uncapped and filled with gray water. Periodically he set the crate down, grabbed a bottle, and chucked it skyward as hard as he could. A liter and a half of wastewater weighs 3.3 pounds. Some of that streamed off in flight, but not much. Fellow juggalos in the front were packed too tightly for any of the bottles to miss. If they weren’t knocked to the ground, the victims reacted the same way: First, they took a few moments to allow their eyeballs to recenter, and to consider what just happened. Then they looked around for the cause of the pain. Finding no evidence, they picked up the leaking bottle and hurled it in a cardinal direction. The kid in the AMB gear skipped close enough to the platform that I could hear him yelling “FUCK THE FRONT! FUCK THE FRONT!” as his bottles netted the air. The Axe Murder Boyz closed their set by shrieking, “Fuck the whole world except the motherfucking juggalo family!”

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I was disappointed with myself for having missed both nights of Flashlight Wrestling despite the program's adjuration to "FUCK YO SLEEP grab a six pack a bag of that fluffy green a flash light and join us ringside." But I was ready for BloodyMania 4, the biggest event of the Juggalo Championship Wrestling circuit.

I showed up early, a few minutes before 1 AM, but the three sets of bleachers were already full. When I sat down on the grass, I was quite surprised to find I was next to Adam and his massive twin brother.

"Adam!" I said. "Where've you been all week?"

"You are so uncomfortable, ninja," he said. The floodlamps were chaffed with bugs, so light flurried about his face like TV static.

"Dog, we know you're uncomfortable." He didn't look at me directly; his eyes were strabismic. He was probably quite high. He had a sweating phalanx of beers on the dead grass in front of him. "We seen you walking around all the time, never sitting down. The Orbiter's what we call you."

"It's because I'm writing about this. I'm going to write the good juggalo story, give you dudes a fair shake." I pulled out my wad of etched Brawnys. "I want you to help me. Like, will you ever stop being a juggalo, or is it like the mafia? How come when you guys start listening to Psychopathic, you stop listening to everything else?" A bit of a gulp and then, "Why does everyone hate you?"

"Nah man, I'm not going to speak for us. I'm not going to be no spokesperson. There are so many juggalos, and, like, you don't know me."

The Weedman and Officer Colt Cabana entered the ring. Officer Cabana was the heel, so he took it to the Weedman in the early going.

"Do me a solid, dude. No juggalos will talk to me because I'm not a juggalo." Officer Colt was using his baton on the Weedman whenever the referee's back was turned, and the crowd demanded redress.

"Bet it's not that they don't like you but 'cuz of this," and Adam flicked the enormous VIP pass around my neck.

Contrapuntal chants flared up, "YOU'RE A BITCH!" and "WE WANT BLOOD!" Adam's brother keeled over onto the grass.

"It's like, we'll never read whatever you write about us. You can write whatever you want about us, and everyone's going to believe it. What difference does it make what I say? You've got the power. Plus, I give no shits."
In the bleachers, juggalos stood and gestured at Officer Cabana. Each painted face sang its own curse. None was comprehensible, but all together the juggalos looked like a frontlit audience of nattering holy fools.

Officer Cabana climbed the top rope and told the crowd, “I am the law!” Juggalos hailed him with anything at hand. Full beers, chicken wings. A dead fish landed several feet short. I watched a mother take a shitty diaper off a baby and hand it to a man who spun it like a discus over the ring.

“What you should write, though,” Adam went on. “Why do, like, motherfuckers in New York or whatever, how do those motherfuckers think they’re better than me if, like, making fun of me is still OK with them? You know what I’m saying? It’s like they think they know me, and, like, know what’s best for me, is what pisses the fuck out of me. Motherfucker, not everyone wants to be you, you know what I’m saying?”

The Weedman began his comeback when someone hustled him a joint from the bleachers to the ring. I was exhausted.

“You know, I always wanted to be a professional wrestler,” Adam said. A juggalo on a bicycle shadowed me on the ten-minute walk back to my tent. Out here the night sky was unlidded. The moon seemed zambonied. Did you know our moon is the only one in this solar system to have been created out of its captor planet? It’s true. Billions of years ago, something the size of Mars slammed into proto-Earth and kicked up detritus that conglomerated into the moon. Much of the detritus came from that Mars-size projectile, but the moon and the earth are more alike molecularly than they are different. The moon’s an ashen doppelgänger. They say it smells like spent gunpowder. Before I turned off the path, the juggalo on the bicycle kicked me in my ass and said, “Fuck off!”

That third night a huge midwestern thunderstorm finally rolled in and inveighed. I had to sprawl out like a starfish to keep my tent on the ground. Purple lightning lit the inside of the tent like thoughts in a head. Three guys from Rochester sat around a sheltered fire talking about the juggalette they had slept with in succession. “I fucked the shit out of that bitch,” went one. “Listen to me, I sound like a proud dad, but that preteen pussy was doing some very fucking adult shit,” went another. I don’t think I can convey how terrified I was of them seeing the coal of my cupped flashlight as I transcribed their conversation. I consider
myself a connoisseur of low-pressure systems, and I was impressed with this storm. Serious midwestern thunder unfurls. It made me think of dead fists blooming.

At dawn I pulled up my stakes in the rain. The moon was still visible. I would miss the Insane Clown Posse concert that caps every Gathering. On my way out of the grounds, four juggalo hitchhikers ran into the path of my rental car. I did not slow down, and they jumped out of my way.

The teenage girl behind the counter at the lone two-pump station in Cave-In-Rock had angled a boombox so that it blasted Taylor Swift at the door. I lurched in, sopped and rank, my legs sheathed in mud. She was all freckles and crinkled church dress. After so many juggalos, I thought she was a seraph.

“The pump won’t stop, so be honest,” she said. “Are you part of that thing? Are you honest?”

I told her I was leaving it.

“We don’t like those people,” she said. “Those people aren’t like us here.” +