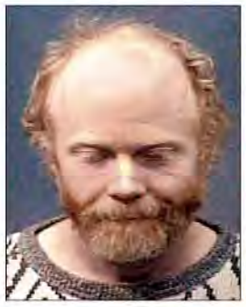


They saw themselves as revolutionaries protecting the environment. The government calls them "the number-one domestic terrorism threat"

THE RISE & FALL OF THE ECO-RADICAL UNDERGROUND

Top: Members of the Family charged with arson include (from left) Jacob Ferguson, William Rodgers, Josephine Overaker, Kevin Tubbs, Chelsea Gerlach and Stan Meyerhoff. Above: The Two Elk Lodge was one of eight fires set by Rodgers at Vail in 1998 – the costliest act of "eco-terrorism" in U.S. history, according to prosecutors.

IT WAS A MOONLESS night on the mountain at Vail, and in his black clothes Bill Rodgers imagined he was nearly invisible. Five feet six and barely 120 pounds, Rodgers was darting in and out of buildings at the Colorado ski resort, 11,000 feet up. He crept into the back bowl's ski-lift shacks, then made his way across the slopes to a massive shelter for skiers and a snack bar piled high with bulging trash bags. Everywhere he went, Rodgers set a crude timing device. Each timer was connected to a small filament attached to a matchbook. The flame from the matches would ignite a road flare or a gas-soaked sponge, which in turn would set off a five-gallon plastic bucket filled with a mix of diesel and gas – a concoction Rodgers liked to call "vegan jello." When the timers went off, the entire mountain would go up in smoke.

At thirty-three, Rodgers was the oldest member of the Earth Liberation Front at Vail on that October night in 1998. With his red hair, pale complexion and delicate features, he looked more like a computer nerd than a revolutionary intent on hastening the collapse of the "ecocidal empire," as he and his fellow members of the ELF like to call America. Few knew his real name – he went by Avalon, which came from *The Mists of Avalon*, a novel about matriarchal pagans fighting the oppressive forces of phallocentric Christianity. Avalon was hoping the name would help him connect with the soft and feminine side of his personality, at least enough to get him a girlfriend; he was the only one in his ELF cell who couldn't get a date. Known as "the Family," the cell was a loose and shifting group of twenty or so activists, all living in the Pacific Northwest and most in their early twenties: a diverse collection of hippie true believers, bearded ascetics, self-styled anarchists and one self-confessed criminal – Jacob Ferguson, a poor kid with a badass attitude and tattoos creeping across his sinewy chest, punctuated by an ominous pentagram on his skull to mark himself as the beast, a cast-out, a nonmember of polite society. To the middle-class brothers like Avalon who were posing as outlaws, he seemed like a blue-collar hero. To some

By **VANESSA GRIGORIADIS**

COCOMINO COUNTY JAIL/KTVK-TV/AP PHOTO (RODGERS); FBI/AP PHOTO (OVERAKER); LANE COUNTY ADULT CORRECTIONS/AP PHOTO (TUBBS AND GERLACH); MARK MOBLEY/AP PHOTO (TWO ELKS LODGE)

revolutionary sisters, Ferguson, handsome and tall, was the trophy fuck.

But tonight was Avalon's mission, his master stroke in the war to protect all that was powerless in the world. And there was no more appropriate symbol of power than the biggest building at Vail that he rigged with a timer: the Two Elk Lodge, a 33,000-square-foot, multimillion-dollar restaurant for the Kahlua-and-cream-sipping rich, built from old-growth fir logs, its walls decorated with a million dollars' worth of buffalo robes and elk-horn racks, snatched from their rightful American-Indian owners. Over the objections of local environmentalists, Vail was about to add almost 1,000 acres of new skiing terrain and twelve miles of roads in the last known habitat of the mountain lynx, a reclusive animal that hadn't been sighted in the Rockies for twenty years. Avalon was going to save the lynx, if it still existed, by making a statement that no one could ignore.

Shortly after 3 A.M., as a few snowflakes fell, Avalon and the three or four other members of his cell who were on the mountain watched as hundreds of gallons of vegan jello burst into flames. It was beautiful: The blaze spread across a mile and a half, lighting up the night sky and creating so much smoke that the first person to see it said it looked like a volcano had erupted. The mountain was on fire.

THE VAIL FIRE WAS THE MOST destructive act known to be committed by environmental activists in U.S. history, leaving the Two Elk Lodge and seven other buildings in cinders and causing at least $12 million in damages. From 1996 to 2001, Avalon's cell is accused of setting at least fifteen arsons across the West in the name of the ELF and the Animal Liberation Front. The "elves," as they call themselves, decimated meatpacking plants, forest ranger stations, animal research facilities, university bioengineering labs, three logging company headquarters and two wild-horse corrals – anything they could think of to defend the natural environment. The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee estimates that the ELF and ALF have caused a total of $110 million in property damage in the United States. Of this sum, the Family is responsible for $45 million.

It's long been assumed that those who counted themselves members of the ELF – less a group than an ideology, with no central office or leader, and its only mission the destruction of property with no harm to human life – were angry suburban boys in their late teens or early twenties who worked in small cells, performing one or two misdeeds and then disbanding. In fact, nearly every member of the Family was an adult committed to environmental activism, whether traveling below the radar, like Avalon, or as "top-landers," like Jonathan Paul, a longtime anti-whaling advocate and the brother of a *Baywatch* star, who famously posed as a fur farmer in the early Nineties to secretly videotape mink-ranching techniques. (Paul, accused in only one of the Family's arsons, has asserted his innocence.)

"Most of these people had two lives," says Mike Roselle, co-founder of Earth First! and the Ruckus Society, two of the country's leading environmental and civil-disobedience groups. "In their day lives, they were important activists. In their night lives, they were secret. I'm surprised at what I didn't know. I never knew I was hanging out with members of the ELF."

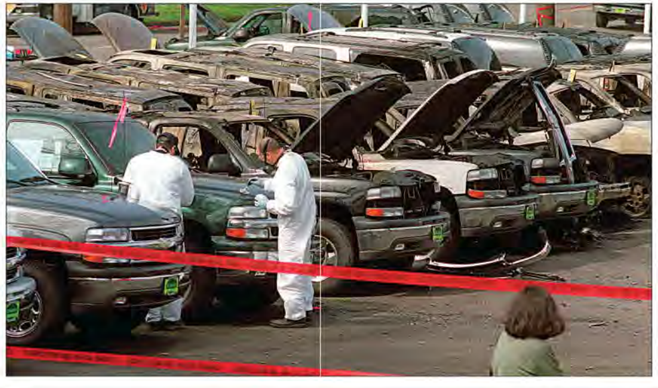
Although the elves always focused on destroying property and avoiding the loss of human life, the Bush administration now treats the ELF as the homegrown equivalent of Al Qaeda. Last year, FBI deputy assistant director John Lewis called the group – along with the ALF and an aggressive animal-liberation outfit called Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty – the nation's "number-one domestic terrorism threat." In the past three years, the administration has doubled the number of Joint Terrorism Task Forces, multi-agency units that add state and local police and Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents to each FBI field office, and many seem intent on busting arsonists like Avalon rather than catching killers like Osama bin Laden. In 2003, when activists including CalTech graduate students firebombed several SUV dealerships in Los Angeles, FBI director Robert Mueller responded by assigning the entire terrorism task force in L.A. to the case and personally briefed President Bush about it. In a post-9/11 world where every FBI agent wants to catch a terrorist, an "eco-terrorist" is better than nothing.

"Nabbing a bank robber or a big con guy is seen as so old-timey and passé by the top brass at the Justice Department," says Mark Reichel, a criminal-defense attorney who has defended several "eco-terrorists." "If you can bust an ELFer or an ALFer, you're big time – you move ahead in the organization."

In January, Attorney General Alberto Gonzales held a press conference to announce the success of Operation Backfire, a federal bust that resulted in the indictment of eleven members of the Family. It is the single biggest roundup of environmental activists in U.S. history. It is also part of a larger federal crackdown that radical environmentalists call a "green scare." In the past year alone, the government has indicted longtime animal-liberation hero Rodney Coronado for making a speech in San Diego in which he answered an audience question about how to set a jug of gasoline on fire; convicted six members of Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty for posting the home addresses of executives of an animal-testing company on the group's Web site; and arrested three young activists in California who had purchased ingredients at Kmart to make a plastic explosive – not realizing that their pal "Anna," a twenty-year-old anti-war protester with pink hair, long legs and an overtly stated hankering to blow shit up – was an FBI plant paid $75,000 for her troubles. One of the guys, with whom Anna sometimes shared a bed, now faces seventeen years behind bars.

More on Eco-Warriors
Meet ELF poster boy Tre Arrow and debate the future of environmental activism at *rollingstone.com/ecoradicals*

The Bush administration has launched the biggest roundup of environmental activists in U.S. history, prosecuting the Earth Liberation Front for causing millions in property damage. A U.S. attorney (left) announces an ELF attack on a facility at Brigham Young University in 2004. Other arsons by the group include (clockwise from below) a highway project in Indiana; the Oakridge ranger station burned by Ferguson and company; thirty-five SUVs in Eugene torched by Avalon and four accomplices to honor a jailed comrade; a Boise Cascade office in Oregon; and a University of Washington lab firebombed for genetically engineering trees.



"Most of these people had two lives," says a co-founder of Earth First! "I never knew I was hanging out with members of the ELF."

Branding activists as terrorists not only makes for good headlines, it also results in longer prison sentences. In 2001, forest advocate Jeffrey "Free" Luers, perhaps today's most passionately embraced eco-martyr, was sentenced to nearly twenty-three years for setting fire to three Chevy SUVs. The Family faces far more prison time. Under a 2003 order by then-Attorney General John Ashcroft, any arson set with a timer must be prosecuted under a post-Oklahoma City statute that defense lawyers call "the hammer." Under standard arson charges, the maximum sentence is five years for each building or car that is set ablaze. Under the hammer, the mandatory sentence for a single act of arson is a minimum of thirty years in prison. For two, the minimum is life – with no possibility of parole. The government wants to sentence some members of the Family to life plus 1,015 years.

Given the current environmental crisis facing the planet, even some of those responsible for putting the Family behind bars find themselves sympathizing with the group's motives. "My heart's with these people," says Kirk Engdall, the lead prosecutor in the case. "We've got to save the planet for our children and grandchildren. Where they went wrong is when they resorted to violence. They were desperate, because they felt that their cause wasn't being addressed appropriately."

Supporters in the environmental movement agree. "This is such a waste of good people," says Roselle. "I'll bet I trained some of these people in nonviolent civil disobedience, and we taught them that history shows that radical movements that are violent make people paranoid, isolated and easy for the feds to pick off." He starts to choke up. "When I think about them, it brings me to tears."

FOR AVALON, THE IMPETUS TO wreak havoc on man-made structures began with a pure-hearted love of the wild. To him, every creature was precious, from sparrows to mountain lions to his favorite: bats. Avalon, raised in upstate New York, was a quiet, sensitive child of middle-class parents. In the early 1980s, he enrolled in an ROTC program at a college in Rochester but dropped out after a few months, making his way to Prescott College, an environmental school in Arizona. In the high desert of Prescott, a town of Republican retirees with a tight-knit group of radicals on its fringes, he was introduced to Deep Ecology, a vision of the world in which humans have no more divine right over the planet than any other life form. "He was amazingly connected to the Earth," says ex-girlfriend Katie Rose Nelson. "Everything in nature was like a family member with whom he had formed an intimate relationship."

By the early 1990s, Avalon was devoting most of his time to Earth First!, the unruly, zealous environmental group established in the 1980s in reaction to polite, mainstream groups like the Sierra Club, which radicals viewed as making unjustified concessions to industry. Founded by a bunch of macho cowboys with a yippie sense of humor and an adulation of cult writer Edward Abbey, Earth First! urged activists to monkey-wrench the system by employing "all the tools in the toolbox" – pulling up survey stakes, pouring sand in the gas tanks of bulldozers. The goal was to protect America's remaining swaths of "big wilderness" from any human intervention, from logging and mining to overflights by aircraft. Their slogan: "No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth."

Avalon not only bought into the Earth First! worldview, he took it further. Convinced that even the most modest human habitation was too much of an imposition on the Earth, he took to living out of his silver-blue Toyota truck, a present from his parents. He even preached against domesticated pets and houseplants, explaining that humans could never fulfill the true desires of cats and ferns.

Traveling across the West in his truck, Avalon devoted months to the group's effort to save Arizona's red-squirrel habitat from a university astrophysics observatory and spent summers campaigning to stop logging in Idaho's Cove-Mallard forest, part of the largest roadless area in the lower forty-eight. Then, in 1996, he heard that a new kind of campaign was taking place in Oregon on fourteen acres of old-growth timber in the Willamette Valley. To prevent the forest from being logged, activists had transformed the area around Warner Creek into "Fort Warner," a square mile of encampments complete with a watchtower and ten-foot-deep trenches outfitted with a stream-fed shower. Avalon took his place behind the fortress walls, where activists chained their wrists to half-ton concrete barrels whenever Forest Service officers approached. The activists saw the area as part of Cascadia, a vast bioregion spanning the Pacific Northwest, and they defended the fort for eleven months.

"Warner Creek was one of the first permanent encampments, or 'free states,' as we called them," says Jim Flynn, a former editor of *Earth First! Journal*. "Whereas most Earth First! actions had been about 'you block the road until they kick your ass, and then you leave,' here people went up to the woods and declared that Cascadia is our land, and we're not going home, because this *is* our home."

Avalon was inspired by the radicals at Warner Creek, who seemed to herald a more militant stage of the movement. They even flew a new flag, of the Cascadia Forest Defenders, symbolically casting off Earth First! and its "patriarchal cowboy" baggage. At Warner, Avalon met the core group of intelligent PC activists who would form the Family. He already knew Chelsea Gerlach, a peppy twenty-two-year-old from the Oregon boonies first arrested for civil disobedience when she was only sixteen. Her boyfriend, Stan Meyerhoff, was a handsome, arrogant guy hell-bent on figuring out a way to live for the rest of his life without working. Kevin Tubbs, nicknamed "the Dog," was a dreamy kid from Nebraska with a degree in fine arts and philosophy and a deeply held, almost spiritual commitment to animal rights, feeling physical pain himself when faced with the suffering of animals. The Dog lived in the newest and niftiest civil-disobedience contraption around, a "bipod" – a platform raised between two poles – rigged to pitch him down a cliff if messed with by the wrong person. "I hope that the Forest Service shows more respect for human life than they do for plant and animal life," he said at the time, shrugging.

Avalon also met Jacob Ferguson, one of the leaders on the trench-digging team at Warner Creek. Ferguson went by a variety of code names, including Donut and Patch, but none of them stuck. He thought all the forest-elves stuff stupid. Like many of the protesters, Ferguson looked like a gutter punk, but he was no suburban kid pretending to be a panhandler – while growing up, his dad was in prison for armed robbery and writing bad checks. "I'd been all over the country hopping trains since I was nineteen," Ferguson says. "I was in New York squatting and sleeping on the sidewalk, stealing cars, breaking into shit, robbing people, burning the rich kids who came down from Connecticut to cop drugs, hopping a train to New Orleans, getting fucked up and hopping a train to Minneapolis, mailing heroin to San Francisco and getting money mailed back." When Ferguson got off a train in Eugene, Oregon, he bummed free food at the Food Not Bombs kitchen, where he befriended some of the forest

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DOUGLAS C. PIZAC/AP PHOTO; JEREMY HOGAN/POLARIS; PAUL CARTER/"THE REGISTER-GUARD" (2); RALPH RADFORD/AP PHOTO; RICK BOWMER/AP PHOTO

defenders and soon found himself at the Warner Creek encampment.

"I'm a homeless, stupid dirtbag, and suddenly I get to go hiking and do something to stop the loggers," Ferguson recalls. "Man, it was so empowering."

The Forest Service eventually canceled its logging plans for Warner Creek, but not before officers destroyed the blockade and arrested four women who had chained themselves to concrete barrels. Ferguson was furious. "You get fed up because you're so much into it with your heart, and then you get insomnia and can't sleep at night," he says. "You look for a way to say, 'You guys in power have been fucking things up for years and years, and we're sick of being passive and playing by your rules.' " At Warner Creek he'd heard stories about the ELF, a new group of England-based radicals who were resorting to "ecotage." Ferguson liked the sound of that. He always did like to play with fire as a kid.

In October 1996, two months after the victory at Warner Creek, Ferguson and his new girlfriend, Josephine Sunshine Overaker, an herbalist with a huge tattoo of a bird spanning her back, drove to a ranger station in Detroit, Oregon. Creeping among the moss-draped hemlocks, they scrambled onto the roof of the station and lit a wick attached to a jug of gasoline, but couldn't get it to ignite. They managed to set fire to a Forest Service pickup truck and spray-painted graffiti on a nearby shed: "Earth Liberation Front." It was the first time the phrase appeared at the site of an arson in the U.S. Two days later, Ferguson and Sunshine brought the Dog along to burn another ranger station, in Oakridge: This time they got it right, burning the place to cinders. They also threw piles of nails on the road as they left to slow down firetrucks on their way to the scene and chucked their gloves into a reservoir on the way home. The nucleus of the Family was now in place. The Dog had the commitment, Ferguson had the criminal skills and Sunshine would do anything for Ferguson.

FBI agents immediately began prowling the Eugene coffee shops, but activists resisted the idea that one of their own had set the fires. Sure, they believed in monkey-wrenching, but this was way more hardcore than anything Earth First! had ever preached. "We thought Oakridge couldn't have been us, because the building was burned so expertly," says Flynn. "We didn't think we had people who were that good."

FERGUSON BECAME THE MUSCLE of the operation, the recon specialist, visiting more than twenty fur farms across Oregon and Canada to scout their security systems. He soon found a wild-horse corral run by the Bureau of Land Management in Burns, Oregon, that he thought they could hit. The BLM was supposed to round up wild horses whose populations had grown too large and allow the public to adopt them for $125 each. But BLM employees were "adopting" the horses themselves and selling them to a slaughterhouse for $700 – after which the horse meat was flown to Europe for human consumption. Violence was being done to those horses, and the Family wanted respond in kind. That was enough of an argument for Avalon, who decided to join the action. "We were psyched," says Ferguson. "We needed someone to rely on."

Hitting the road in the Dog's van, they hid near the corral for hours, making notes about security guards, the time employees came and left, what parts of the structure were combustible and the location of the building's alarms. When it came time to set the fire, they shoplifted the supplies they needed to make the "burgers," which is what they called their firebombs, building them in a friend's garage while he was out of town – creating a mess of wires and plastic buckets, with kitchen timers attached to gas-soaked sponges. They bought the gas to make the vegan jello at a bunch of different gas stations, in hopes they wouldn't raise suspicions, and picked up secondhand black clothes from a Goodwill drop box as camouflage.

The night before the attack, Avalon and the others went on a "camping trip" – a dry run during which they found a location to put on their black clothes and decided where to place the burgers. The next night, they liberated the horses – 500 horses and burros rushing by them, into the great wild beyond. Then, while the Dog stayed in the van with a police scanner, Avalon and the others set the fires, working fast.

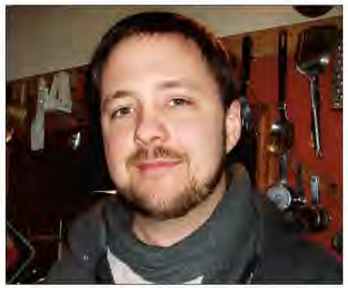
Afterward, they took their clothes and stuffed them all in a hole in the ground, pouring acid over everything. To cover their tracks, Ferguson sold the van to some hippies. Then, prosecutors say, the group typed up a communiqué, gloves on. "The BLM claims they are removing non-native species from public lands (aren't white Europeans also non-native)," they wrote. "This hypocrisy and genocide against the horse nation will not go unchallenged!"

When they were done, they mailed the communiqué to Craig Rosebraugh, a vegan activist living in Portland who had a reputation as an uncompromising radical. Although Rosebraugh wasn't a member of the cell, he recognized that he was being offered the role of spokesman for the ELF and sent the communiqué to every news outlet in the state.

It was a great fake-out: The feds kept pressure on Rosebraugh, with Congress even summoning him to Capitol Hill to answer questions, but he always took the Fifth. The only thing he would talk about was the ideological basis of the movement: The ELF's property destruction, he said, was no different from the Boston Tea Party's attempt to overthrow a repressive government. "It is time to start talking about a revolution in this country," Rosebraugh declared. "And, yes, if there is a revolution, it will be violent. Name one revolution in history that was not violent."

Over the next three years, the Family became the running dogs of the revolution, setting fires to show Babylon that they really meant it when they said there was no compromise in the defense of Mother Earth. The "brothers" and "sisters" took their cue from Abbey's novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, in which ex-Green Beret George Hayduke returns from Vietnam to find the Southwestern desert wrecked by development and vows to exact revenge. Hayduke loved monkey-wrenching: "The heavy pack on his back, overloaded with water and weapons and hardware, felt good, solid, real, meant business. He felt as potent as a pistol, dangerous as dynamite, tough and mean and hard and full of love for his fellow man."

The cell grew to encompass Jen Kolar, a millionaire yacht racer and fervent animal-rights advocate; Joe Dibee, an Internet Explorer security tester at Microsoft; Rebecca Rubin, a thin, black-haired scientist from Canada who studied cranes; and another one of Ferguson's flings, Kendall Sarah Tankersley, a medical receptionist at a Planned Parenthood clinic. But none was more dedicated than Avalon, Ferguson and the Dog. Avalon designed the burgers with his disciple Stan Meyerhoff. Ferguson did the legwork. And the Dog was the glue. He was in charge of the voice mailbox they had set up for people to leave messages, and Family members would tap on his window in Eugene at all hours to let him know they were available to do an action. Sometimes, Ferguson and the Dog would hook up with animal-rights militants they knew in the underground; once they liberated forty-six dogs from a pacemaker lab in Southern California. "None of those other skinny people, the vegans, could pop the locks," brags Ferguson. "Luckily, I was there."



Members of the Family targeted by the government include (clockwise from right) Daniel McGowan, a New York political activist now under house arrest; Jacob Ferguson, who joined the logging battle at Warner Creek, Oregon, before turning informer; Rebecca Rubin, a Canadian scientist currently on the run; Kevin Tubbs, nicknamed the Dog, in his "bipod" at Warner Creek; and Bill Rodgers, a.k.a. Avalon, the alleged leader of the cell, who designed firebombs to drive home his belief that humans have no more right over the planet than any other life form.

SUPPORTDANIELORG (MCGOWAN); "PICK AXE" (FERGUSON AND TUBBS); FBI/AP PHOTO (RUBIN)

FERGUSON WAS GETTING OFF ON being in the radical underground. By day he was a local hard-ass dude with crazy tattoos who played in a heavy-metal band called Eat Shit Fuckface, fixed up cars for a spare fifty bucks and worked summers, ironically, as a wild-lands firefighter. At night, he was an elf, so committed to the cause that after he got an ex-girlfriend pregnant, he got a vasectomy – not wanting to be responsible for bringing another soul into this world, which was headed for certain apocalypse unless he and his comrades could stop it first. But there was an even more secret part of Ferguson's life than being an elf – he was also using heroin and speed, a habit which he kept under wraps because no one around him seemed to approve. His personal life was quickly becoming a wreck: He even brought his son to a Christmas Eve arson at a logging-company headquarters as a decoy. He was sick of Sunshine, who had become a codependent zombie, and was dating lots of other girls. On the way to firebomb an animal-inspection facility in Olympia, Washington, Sunshine was arrested at a Tacoma supermarket for shoplifting a flashlight. Ferguson and Avalon set the fire anyway.

As Ferguson was spinning out of control, Avalon was retreating more and more into his cocoon. A true loner, he left the warehouse where he was living in Eugene and moved to Olympia, a quieter community 200 miles to the north where he thought he wouldn't attract as much attention. He set up an extensive pot-growing operation: He felt terrible for the plants, having to grow up in a hydroponic jail, but he certainly wasn't going to get a real job.

"At night, we are no longer prey but predators," Avalon wrote, "seeking to create a more just society – by any means necessary."

He rarely left his house, which was stuffed with his dumpster finds: old books, broken chairs, unworkable coffeepots, the detritus of other people's lives he knew he could breathe new life into someday. He stayed up until five every morning and slept until three in the afternoon, just like his favorite animal, the bat. He studied forensic DNA testing and learned how to build the firebombs in a "clean room," a new tent shoplifted from a camping store that the elves would set up in motel rooms. No one was allowed inside without a shower cap, surgeon's mask and three layers of latex gloves, so that no fingerprints, skin flakes or stray hairs were left on the bombs.

Through those long, lonely nights, Avalon would curl up with novels by Ursula Le Guin or scribble illustrations for ever-more complicated firebombs on pieces of recycled paper – imagining himself as the professor of the movement, he dreamed of a day when he would tell the masses all he knew. At an Earth First! meeting, he circulated an early zine of sabotage tricks, *The Black Cat Reader*. "At night," he later wrote, "we are no longer prey to our masters, but predators, seeking to change the established order and create a more just society – by whatever means necessary."

Although Ferguson and Avalon worked as a team, they weren't thrilled with each other and didn't hang out unless they had to. Ferguson saw Avalon as a freaky hardcore eco-nerd. "He had a whole house full of fucking books on how to fucking make shit," Ferguson recalls. "Goddamn, he used to fucking sketch me out." For his part, Avalon, who didn't use drugs or alcohol, worried about Ferguson's wild ways. He even wrote an article for *Earth First! Journal* calling for activists to stop partying. "Drugs and alcohol are used to subjugate the masses and pacify discontent," he declared in his puritanical way. "Look at the effects of alcohol on the American Indian Movement. Look at the effects of coke on the Black Panthers, and pot on Sixties radicals." If you were going to do night work, Avalon believed, you had to be sober. But they needed whoever they could get in this war.

TO MEMBERS OF THE FAMILY, IT felt like there really was a war. The massive, complicated fire Avalon engineered at Vail in 1998 was a success of epic proportions, and all across the country people were suddenly taking note of their movement. The sleepy little city of Eugene rocketed to fame the following year, during the WTO riots in Seattle. The riots were blamed on the influence of young activists from Eugene, whose mayor appealed to the world for help, calling his city "the anarchist capital of the United States." Subsets of anarchism – an ideology that views all government as inherently oppressive – were springing up all over the place, the most popular being "anarcho-primitivism," an extremist ideology pioneered by Eugene writer John Zerzan. Zerzan, who supported the goals of the Unabomber, advocates eliminating all technology – and, by extension, almost all civilization.

Ferguson vibed on the anger in the streets of Eugene, marching in monthly Reclaim the Streets rallies that sometimes ended with masked kids hurling bricks through Nike outlet windows. Vandals set fires in dumpsters nearly every weekend, trading war stories afterward at Cafe Anarquista. In the forests a kind of tree-sit mania was attracting gutter-punk kids from across the country who cared less about the trees and more about battling the government – younger versions of Ferguson who pissed on Forest Service officers from their "Ewok villages," plywood platforms 200 feet up in tree canopies. They didn't like "No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth" as a slogan. Their slogan was "Fuck Shit Up."

Still, the movement continued to draw in kids who were deeply committed to its ecological goals. Daniel McGowan, the sandy-haired son of a New York cop, hopped a train to the West Coast with a backpack of his things, hoping to find out what the green anarchists could teach him about changing the world. An earnest student of political theory, McGowan had been trained in nonviolent resistance by the Ruckus Society, and when he arrived in Eugene he volunteered to put together a page in *Earth First! Journal* to drum up support for political prisoners. Before long, prosecutors say, McGowan and two of his female friends were recruited into the Family. The newbies were told not to reveal their real names to one another, and went by handles like Green, Wounded Ego, Twisted Tongue and X.

There was more organization in the Family now. They started holding "book club" meetings in various squats and cities to strategize future arsons. At the beginning of each meeting, all members had to explain the evasive route they had taken there and their cover stories they had given family and friends. Avalon warned them never to speak to one another indoors in case there were bugs in their houses and to turn off their cell phones and remove the batteries when they were together to avoid detection by satellite. Each member received code books with instructions on how to use encrypted e-mails and a secret password at a shared Web site to communicate in between meetings. The technique – similar to one used by Al Qaeda – involved drafts of e-mails, which could not be traced electronically, and which self-destructed after seven days. Avalon also gave them pages of his instructions for firebombs, which they had to memorize and then destroy.

On New Year's Day in 2001, Tubbs, Meyerhoff and Ferguson – along with McGowan and his friend, Suzanne "India" Savoie – allegedly drove from Eugene to a rest area near Glendale, where they put on black clothes and earpieces. Their target was the offices of Superior Lumber, the largest BLM contractor in the state, and one of the most controversial: Forty percent of Superior's timber came from using helicopters in roadless areas where conventional logging was not allowed. The cell's van, called "Betty," broke down on the way, and Ferguson had to fix it. At the Superior offices, everything went smoothly. Ferguson and others started fires on opposite walls of the 2,000-square-foot building; flames raced up and ignited the attic without setting off the alarms below, while McGowan and Savoie acted as lookouts. They e-mailed their [*Cont. on 104*]

[*Cont. from 77*] communiqué to Rosebraugh. "This year, 2001, we hope to see an escalation in tactics against capitalism and industry," they proclaimed. "While Superior Lumber says, 'Make a few items and do it better than anyone else,' we say, 'Choose an Earth raper and destroy them.'"

MAYBE 2001 WOULD HAVE BEEN the year that America finally rose up against the Earth rapers, if the Family hadn't started coming apart over more petty concerns. That March, Avalon and four others set a colossal fire at a Chevrolet dealership on the outskirts of Eugene by setting gasoline-doused sheets ablaze under thirty-six SUVs. The action was in honor of Jeffrey "Free" Luers, an anarchist tree-sitter who had torched three SUVs at a nearby dealership in town the year before. His trial was slated to start the next morning, and most of the anarchist community was gathered on the steps of the courthouse in support of Luers when they heard the news of the latest arson.

The act proved to be the group's undoing. Rumors quickly circulated that Ferguson might have had something to do with the new arson. As usual, his personal life was a mess. He had gotten into a vicious fight with his roommate, Heather Coburn, and she had thrown him out of the house because he was bringing home too many women. He retaliated by leaving a bucket of piss in his room and scrawling the words "psycho bitch" in lipstick on her bathroom mirror. The next morning, she discovered that her truck had been moved from where she parked it. She called the cops and filed a report.

In the anarchist community, no one is supposed to go to the cops for anything, and soon Coburn was ambushed by fellow activists who thought she had fingered Ferguson as an arsonist. To settle the argument, one of Coburn's friends, a herbalist and nursery-school teacher known as Sparrow, took the most irrational step imaginable: She went to the police station herself to see the report Coburn had filed.

While she was at the station, Sparrow apparently said something that served as a red flag to the cops, causing them to wonder if Ferguson was linked to the SUV fire. "I don't think she realized the implications of what she was doing," says Thad Buchanan, then the chief of police in Eugene. "It was a probing question more than anything, but she missed the connection that we would make."

A few days later, federal agents came to Coburn's house and towed away her truck. They also handed down a grand jury subpoena to each of Ferguson's ex-roommates. "Most of the questions at the grand jury were about Jake . . . like 'Have you ever seen him with matches or sponges?'" says Tobias Policher, one of the roommates. "I was like, 'I've seen him smoke cigarettes once in a while, so I guess I've seen him with matches, but he doesn't do the dishes very much, so I've never seen him with any sponges.'"

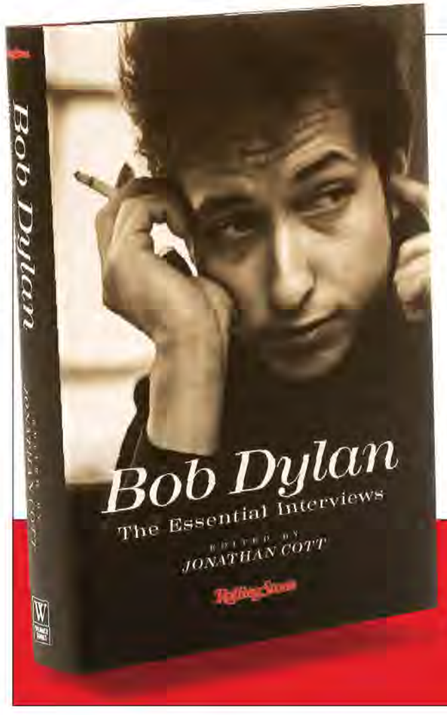
Ferguson was also subpoenaed, but he had an alibi for the night of the arson: He had crashed at the house of one of his girlfriends. "I told the feds I didn't have nothin' to do with nothin'," he says. "Still, they had all these undercover cops following me around Eugene all the time. I figured the feds had given me a free pass from the local cops, so I'd act like a dumbass, driving drunk and superfast."

The communiqué summed up the ELF's message: "Choose an Earth raper and destroy them."

The others in the cell weren't as cavalier as Ferguson: Their blood ran cold when they heard that the feds knew enough to even associate his name with the fires. In October 2001, figuring it would be safer to strike outside of the Pacific Northwest, they hit a wild-horse corral in Susanville, California. They worked in night-vision goggles, wearing socks to avoid leaving footprints. It would be their last fire.

AVALON WANTED TO KEEP GOING. He ratcheted up his rhetoric, lobbing the idea of targeting Monsanto CEOs in motorcycle drive-by assassinations; he had even gone to a gun range a couple of times for target practice with a pair of teenage dub DJs he recruited codenamed Exile and Sheba. But other elves were beginning to realize that their actions were not effective. Every single place they burned down had been rebuilt – even Vail, which was insured for the entire damage, was up and running in a matter of months and was expanded in exactly the ways environmentalists had been protesting. Even some of the most hard-core cell members, including the Dog, began to see their biggest action as a dismal failure.

Fed up with the increasing infighting among activists in the Northwest – and terrified of being caught – Avalon decided to pack up and move. Before he left, though, he took everything he knew about committing arson and posted it online in a zine he called *Setting Fires With Electrical Timers*. Some worried that the guide, a thirty-seven-page manual far more elaborate than the instructions in the *Anarchist Cookbook*, would give the feds information to tie together the devices they had used in the different arsons, but Avalon scoffed: These



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techniques, he said, would soon be dispersed among the revolutionary masses.

Avalon drove his truck down to his Arizona college town of Prescott, the safest place he knew, and moved in with a bunch of college kids – they had houseplants, which bummed him out, but they were OK. He hung up tapestries depicting caves and wolves, and a corkboard with photos of bats and illustrations of black cats. He dropped the name Avalon – now he was Bill, sometimes signing his last name as "Cascadia." He never let anyone take his photo, dodged cop cars and kept a pile of black clothes in his closet, in case he had to make a run for it.

In Prescott, Avalon became depressed. He was still a nocturnal creature, but now he had nothing to do at night. He frequented yoga classes looking for a girlfriend, sometimes even choking down a beer at a local bar in hopes of finding a woman there. He hung out with his friend, a teacher named Erica Ryberg, as she graded papers, and he worked on a manifesto about 9/11 as an inevitable outcome of America's role as a global policeman and resource glutton. He was itching to get back in the game but was paranoid about the feds.

"I'd just declared myself an überactivist, and one day he asked me to take a walk, because he was scared of bugs," says Ryberg, a no-nonsense blonde. "He'd checked me out to find out if I was legit, and he wanted to create an affinity group; he was talking about direct actions – and not of the legal variety. I was flaky about it: On one hand, I wanted to show up and be strong; on the other, I didn't have a good feeling. It was clear to me that he was in Prescott because he was hiding."

Avalon needn't have worried – no one was looking for him. "We didn't have much on the case, but before 9/11, we were working it hot and heavy with our task force of local and state cops, ATF and feds," says Buchanan, the Eugene police chief. "After 9/11, all the federal resources got pulled from under us, and we didn't have the time as a local agency to take on the work, so the investigation fizzled. It was a cold case."

But the feds soon had a wildly expanded budget to ferret out terrorists – and few terrorists to show for it. In late 2002, the FBI beefed up the joint task force in Eugene, assigning thirty agents to investigate the Family's string of arsons. "We knew that they were linked," says Engdall, the lead prosecutor in the case. "The first thing we did was reopen the Chevy arson in Eugene, because we had the most leads on that one." Their big lead was Ferguson, the only name they had after years of investigation that seemed promising.

By then, Ferguson was lost in the throes of heroin addiction. Deep in a drug haze, he lived in New Orleans for a while, washing dishes in a restaurant, before moving into a shack on a homestead miles outside of Eugene with his new girlfriend, another heroin addict. He thought about the arsons, and he didn't like the thoughts he had. "ELF is too hard-core for this country, which is all apple pie, fast cars and boob jobs, and no one is ready for the real issues," he says. "I've raided a fox farm, and those foxes did not want to jump out – they've been bred in a cage and shat in a cage, and they don't know a human. We let out 5,000 mink and then they got run over, or went into the natural ecosystem and the minks out there got their habitat fucked up. We fed our ego, but the local activists we were trying to help were left picking up the pieces with people on the other side who now thought they were connected to arsonists. We tried to change the world, on our level. It didn't work."

One day in the spring of 2003, Ferguson's own world changed. "I was going to cop drugs and I noticed an undercover car following me," he recalls. "I was like, 'Oh, shit,' because I hadn't seen that for a couple of years. The feds brought me in and said, 'We're not taking your bullshit anymore. You better take this deal right this minute or someone else will.' All I'm thinking about is my kid. I don't want to put him in a foster home. All I ever remembered of my dad is him in jail with his stupid gang tattoos and fucking bandanna on his head. My kid is a rad special person, and I wasn't going to be that kind of dad to him."

Ferguson agreed to cooperate, and his lawyer asked that he receive the $50,000 reward for information on the arsons. "When I made the deal, I was thinking I was the luckiest motherfucker in the world," Ferguson says. "But I wasn't realizing that I was the FBI's bitch from then until whenever. I had put the nails in my friends' coffins, and I had to pound them in."

DURING THE NEXT YEAR, FERGUSON wore a concealed recorder to an annual Earth First! camping event and to a national environmental-law conference. The government also flew him around the country to meet – and to secretly record – six of his former comrades. (In all, thirty-five CDs have been made from Ferguson's recordings.) He embraced his role as a snitch, lying with panache. He would turn up in unlikely places, like Meyerhoff's post office in Bend, Oregon. He told nearly everyone that he just happened to be in town for his mother's wedding.

In April 2005, when Ferguson "bumped into" Daniel McGowan at an animal-rights conference in New York, his mother was getting married to a "Jewish guy" in the city. McGowan had moved to the East Village, where he was an important and well-liked activist under his own name and "Jamie Moran," the alias he used to facilitate protests against the Republican National Convention in 2004. As Moran, he was quoted extensively in the press, including ROLLING STONE, as an anarchist and proponent of violence during the protests. "I'd like to see all Republican events – teas, backslapping lunches – disrupted," he said. "I'd like to see corporations involved in the Iraq reconstruction get targeted, anything from occupation to property destruction."

In tapes secretly recorded by Fergu-

son and obtained by ROLLING STONE, the two can be heard taking a walk around the grimy streets of Washington Heights. Within minutes, McGowan was confiding his worries to his old friend. "I still fuckin', every once in a while, every couple of months, I have a panic attack about it," McGowan said, apparently referring to the fires. "You know, about shit. You know, I think about shit, and I'm like, man, I see some fucking cop stuff on TV and they're talking about DNA or some shit, and I'm just like, 'Motherfucker, man, these motherfuckers are so technologically advanced.'"

McGowan talked a good game, but he wasn't doing anything in the way of hardcore actions, and while he definitely said too much to Ferguson, he fell short of giving him what the feds wanted: a confession. He was doing a lot of prisoner support work for Luers, who probably had received a longer sentence because Avalon and the other elves had set fire to the SUVs the night before his trial. He also bragged about his latest acts of petty defiance, like snipping the spokes on police bicycles after rides by the activist group Critical Mass. "They'll park their bike outside, and I always snip, like, about four of their spokes, or five, not enough so they notice right away, but when they're biking," he boasted.

A few months later, while visiting friends in Eugene, McGowan met Ferguson for some lemonade and a bike ride to the river. McGowan was much brasher this time, talking about putting out a call through the underground to commit eco-sabotage in solidarity with prisoners like Luers. He had made copies of Avalon's firebombing manual and sent them to a group of radicals in Canada to distribute, and was trying to get in touch with some of the women in the Family.

Ferguson steered the conversation to the topic of any evidence they may have left behind. "I'm pretty firmly convinced that if there were ever any hair or fingerprints or anything on any of them burgers, it already would have hit," he said.

McGowan agreed. It all happened so long ago; the feds must have forgotten about it by now. "You know, I'm in New York," he told Ferguson. "I'm not getting arrested. They care about, like, Arab terrorists there, you know. It's not even on their radar, man."

Under Ferguson's clothes, a digital tape recorder provided by the FBI recorded every word.

THE FEDS SAVED AVALON FOR LAST. Ferguson kept explaining that the Family was an anarchist group with no central leader, but the feds were convinced that someone had to be the brains behind the enterprise: Avalon, whom they liked to call the "intellectual architect" of the whole shebang. Just before Thanksgiving of last year, Ferguson showed up in Prescott. Avalon was living a radical's idyll. He had found himself a girlfriend, Katie Rose Nelson, a beautiful twenty-two-year-old with a punk-rock haircut and big blue eyes. She never asked him about the fires, and he never told. Together they started the Catalyst Infoshop, an anarchist bookstore in an old railroad cabin on the fringes of town, painting the walls in bright desert colors and carving out living quarters in the attic, which always seemed to get taken over by all of Avalon's crazy pack-rat belongings from the past – books, stacks of papers with drawings on both sides and a big box of alarm clocks.

Avalon's Infoshop was a quiet place, with classes on nonviolent communication and basic knitting, and Ferguson came in with his rage and his loudness, talking about how they should take down fliers from the Sierra Club because it wasn't radical enough. During a walk in the desert, Avalon confided to his old partner that he still believed in direct action. He wanted, he said, to do "something big."

A week later, as Avalon and Nelson sat in the backroom of the shop taking inventory of their stock, fifteen FBI agents burst through the door – including a female agent who had come by ten minutes earlier in street clothes to "sign up for their e-mail list." "At first, I thought it was a joke, because sometimes our friends would knock and say, 'Hey, it's the FBI,'" says Nelson. "But these were really, really big people all in blue, and I was like, 'Whoa, I don't know anybody who looks like that.'" As the agents led Avalon away, he remained calm. "Make sure you get the arrest warrant," he told Nelson.

"I had put the nails in my friends' coffins," says Jacob Ferguson. "And I had to pound them in."

That same day, the feds grabbed McGowan, Tubbs, Meyerhoff and two other elves. The rest of the Family would be snatched in the coming months, as some of the first batch began to inform on those whose real names Ferguson didn't know. For Stan Meyerhoff's arrest, the feds pulled out the stops: They flew Ferguson to Virginia, where Meyerhoff was a grad student in engineering, and had Ferguson stand in the hallway of the federal detention facility when Meyerhoff was brought in, just so Meyerhoff knew for sure that the jig was up. "Within twenty-four hours, with no deal of any sort on the table, Stan was supposedly squealing like a pig," says Lauren Regan, a lawyer with the Civil Liberties Defense Center in Eugene. "Given that Jake had a heroin-riddled mind, Stan was able to fill in a lot of blanks for the prosecution." The Justice Department started doing a victory dance.

To his lawyer, Avalon maintained that he was an innocent man falsely accused. But at his second hearing, when a federal prosecutor alleged that Avalon was "the mastermind of the Vail arsons," he realized he had been betrayed. It could only have been Ferguson, the one who had always called him "hella intelligent," who had always seen him as the smart guy with the books. When the judge denied him bail, Avalon knew it was the beginning of the end: He would now be kept caged up like all the animals he had tried to save.

Back in his jail cell, Avalon took out a piece of paper. "Never did I imagine things could have turned out like this," he wrote. "I have been betrayed before and each time I was astonished, and saddened. But this is the ultimate betrayal, delivered straight into the hands of my enemies." On another piece of paper, he composed a note for his friends and family: "Certain human cultures have been waging war against the Earth for millennia. I chose to fight on the side of bears, mountain lions, skunks, bats, saguaros, cliff roses and all things wild. I am just the most recent casualty in this war. But tonight I have made a jailbreak – I am returning home, to the Earth, to the place of my origins."

Setting the paper on his bunk, the man once known as Bill Rodgers took out a small plastic bag from the jail commissary and placed it over his head. By the time the guard appeared to check on him in the morning, he was gone.

A FEW MONTHS LATER, ON A COOL winter day in February, Avalon's friends carpooled from his anarchist bookstore to the desert for a memorial service. The sky was a brilliant blue. Nelson was wearing Avalon's silver pendant of a bat and purple bat wings made from tissue paper – Avalon's bat wings, the ones he wore on Halloween – and she carried a wand, touching each mourner with it lightly. Ever since the FBI had searched Avalon's house, Nelson had worried that he might do something to hurt himself. "I definitely considered that some of the allegations could be true, and if it was true, what would Bill do," she says. "At root, his goal in life was to protect the Earth, and talking to the FBI would have betrayed that. He was not afraid of dying. I knew he wouldn't stay in jail if he could get out."

Near the end of the service, as a hundred people sat in a big circle under the trees, Nelson talked about receiving Avalon's medical records, and how she read in them that he died with his right arm straight and clenched in a fist. She lifted her fist overhead. It was quiet all around. One by one, everyone else put their arms overhead for the lost warrior, and his lost cause.

IN THE PAST FEW MONTHS, THE GOVERNMENT has been very successful at using the threat of life sentences to destroy any remaining cohesion that the Family may have had. Their major tactical mistake was including so many people in the cell: Their activism became their social life, and their idealistic view of like-minded individuals as close-knit family members brought them down. Lovers have informed on lovers and friends on friends, and the list of defendants continues to grow as those who agree to a deal are forced to give up another of their brothers or sisters. The latest charges have been filed against Briana Waters, a pretty violin teacher and mother accused of taking part in a single arson.

The feds are currently looking for Sunshine, as well as for cell members Rubin, Dibee and Justin Solondz, a twenty-six-year-old who also allegedly joined up for the Susanville fire. All are believed to have fled the country. On July 20th and 21st, Tubbs, Meyerhoff, Gerlach, Tankersley, Savoie and Darren Thurston, a famous Canadian animal-rights activist who is accused only in the Susanville arson, pleaded guilty to their crimes. The prosecution is seeking sentences ranging from three to fifteen years.

Other radical environmentalists have turned their backs on those who have confessed and informed, calling them cowards and snitches. "As a movement, we're weak, young, mostly white and privileged," says Tony Silvaggio, an environmental activist and sociology professor at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California. "We come from a place where the threat to our life is minimal: If we were in the Black Panthers, we'd have long ago assumed we were going to get whacked for our beliefs. We have never been challenged like this before. With all these people flipping, you can see how weak we really are."

To those who have studied radical movements, the unprecedented prosecution of environmental activists represents the end of an era. Four states have already passed legislation – drafted by a right-wing lobbying group that represents 300 major corporations – that classifies any act of property destruction motivated by environmental beliefs as "ecological terrorism." In Pennsylvania, misdemeanors and nonviolent protests like tree-sitting are now punishable as terrorist acts. Even Coronado, considered the "leader" of the movement for years by the feds, has vowed to quiet down after too many years of harassment by the government – as the father of a young child, the risks are now too high for him. "I suspect that on a practical level, these arrests, especially followed by lengthy sentences, will fuel a transformation in local anarchist politics," says Michael Dreiling, a University of Oregon sociology professor who studies social movements in the Northwest. "If I were to make a guess, I'd say that it will lead to deeper fissures over tactics and strategy in years ahead. I don't think we will see many more ELF actions. We live in a society that can practically monitor your body from a satellite in outer space. An underground political-protest movement like the ELF is going to be very difficult in the future."

Of those indicted, only McGowan, Waters, Jonathan Paul and the couple known as Exile and Sheba have pleaded not guilty. They are scheduled to stand trial on October 31st. McGowan is under house arrest at his sister Lisa's apartment in New York, allowed to leave only two hours a week. "I lived in New York during 9/11, and I saw terrorism firsthand," says Lisa, a tough woman in a black leather jacket, over coffee around the corner from her house. "In the neighborhood Daniel and I grew up in, most of the dads were firefighters and policemen, and we lost 350 of them that day. My friends are still mourning the losses of their fathers and husbands. To call my brother and a group of activists terrorists is insulting and unfair."

Amanda Lee, McGowan's attorney, will likely argue that those who have accused her client have either lied or exaggerated his role in the arsons in order to secure lighter sentences for themselves. "Testimony from snitches or people facing life in prison is notoriously unreliable," she says. Although he is only charged with acting as a lookout on two of the arsons, McGowan faces life plus 330 years in prison.

THESE DAYS, FERGUSON LIVES IN THE suburbs of Eugene. A pariah in town, he has no steady girlfriend and calls his eight-year-old son his best friend. He studies diesel mechanics at a community college and works on cars. On a recent spring day, he sits on a bench outside his classroom, a messy braid poking out of his baseball cap. His face and body are bloated – one condition of his immunity deal was enrolling in a methadone program.

Ferguson's tattoos are faded, and a big copper ring is turning one of his fingers green. At the mention of Avalon, his face goes slack, and he stares at the ground, thinking about what he's done. "I guess I'm sitting around waiting for someone to probably come and kill me now," he says. "Sometimes, I think that's part of the feds' tactic, leaving me out of jail so I get killed. The feds are into punishment, dude. It's fucked up."

As the morning sun crosses a grassy quad, Ferguson grows more and more unhinged. He insists that he still loves his sisters and brothers, that he'll never stop loving them, that he knows they are sitting in their jail cells today with the firm knowledge that he only did what he had to do, harboring no grudge against him. Life for him was once thrilling in a way that few people ever experience – the rush of drugs and women and radical action, a revolution in the making. Now there is nothing but a long expanse of ordinary and lawful days, repetitive and boring, devoid of fire.

"Here I am, going to school, and I can't do an arson," Ferguson says, shaking his head. "Man, I can't steal a parakeet."

VANESSA GRIGORIADIS, *a contributing editor, wrote "Lost Idols" in RS 996.*