

Bucketheads
J.R. Leckman

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Wed, June 3 2013
Emergence Day

If you are one of those people who like to read about happy endings, move on. If you are one of those people who believe in the necessity of long scientific explanations that will help you sleep better at night next to your loved ones secure in the warm embrace of logic, you should keep moving too. I can only surmise as to the reason these lumbering giants of steel have risen from the earth, and I can only postulate as to why they have taken it into their cold, metal minds to blithely engage in the destruction of mankind. This journal, notebook, whatever you want to call it is merely a compilation of the last few days of my old life, beginning with the emergence of a creature I have named Alpha-1.

It was about two in the afternoon on a beautiful sunny Wednesday. I was actually visiting with my mother, making the two hour trek down to see her in Aurora, which was just east of Denver. I lived in a small town north of Fort Collins by the name of Severance. It's one of those towns so small that my mailing address is in the city closest to it, because even the United States Postal Service doesn't want to make the trip.

The nature of this visit was two-fold. One, it was my mother's birthday. Being her only child and the only other member of her family, I felt obligated to attend. Two, whenever I visit her, we go shopping.

Mom always wanted to take care of me, especially with my recent change in vocation. This meant she took every opportunity to bestow upon me such things as clothing, food, toiletries, the best a self employed individual could hope for.

I guess I should explain at this point that I had quit a perfectly good meaningless job to become a writer. I had been trying my hand at it for years, but with little success at it.

About two months before, I purchased a copy of "Hey Stupid! You can Write", one of those nationally acclaimed self help books that covered everything from addiction to nose picking. Ok, so I'm making that last one up. I read that damn book front to back numerous times, trying to incorporate the elements of good storytelling with every passing chapter.

Of course, quitting my job was Chapter Three: Limiting Distractions. Keeping a journal of my day to day life was Chapter Four, and writing what I know is part of Chapter Six. Of course, this effort in itself is actually a composite of the daily journal and writing what I know, as all of the following events are true as I have witnessed them.

Anyways, we had finished a long shopping trip. I presented Mom with a poem and one of those pocket kits, the kind you get at the bookstore that have little Bonsai trees, or voodoo dolls in them. Hers was actually some magnetic poetry. Mom smiled, hugged me, and proceeded to spend almost four hundred dollars getting me clothes and miscellaneous goodies.

Now the two of us are very close, so don't presume that I was one of those mooching children who didn't care. I was very poor and her poem was almost twenty pages long, extolling on the virtues of her mothering strategy and my own childhood. I sweated that one out for almost three months to get it just right, and she never got to read it.

We were having lunch in the mall. It used to be the Aurora mall before they bulldozed it down and rebuilt it three stories high. The food court was on the third floor,

one of those architectural cacophonies of glass and steel that made you feel like the third rate food you were overpaying for was being served in a first class environment.

Mom was sitting across from me, having sesame chicken and an egg roll. I was eating cashew pork. And some lo mien. And some happy family. Hey, I'm the equivalent of a poor college student, only ten years older. I had actually lost a bit of weight, due in part to being poor, and also due in part to the fact that I went running to clear my head. Lately, I had done a lot of running and not enough eating.

Mom had just finished giving me a lecture on my facial hair. She thought I would look better clean shaven, as opposed to the full beard look I had now. I have short, curly red hair and my beard matches. I remind myself of a neo-hippie, because I always wear wool earth tones and carry around a hemp and leather shoulder bag in which I keep my journal, sketchbook, some pencils, and a bottle of Dannon water. Good stuff for the aspiring writer, though truth be told, I was far better at drawing. Such is life.

The food court was almost completely full when the light shining in from the windows went completely dark. Everybody paused to look outside. It was like when you are at an intersection and a large semi truck pulls up so close alongside you, it goes dark and you can almost feel the chill in the air from a lack of sunlight. Now, instead of a truck, picture several feet of a dull gray metallic surface. That is what most people saw.

Having a strange sense of awareness, I was one of the few people who looked up. Instead of a clear blue sky, I saw what appeared to be the world's largest upturned bucket, complete with two glowing eyes set in two circular indentations like headlights. I have never looked into the headlights of a car and wondered what it was thinking, but when I saw those sinister orbs of light, I knew something was going through the mind of this gigantic being.

The thing peered in at the silent group of people for several moments; scrutinizing us as a four year old holding a magnifying glass scrutinizes ants. It leaned a little to the left, and then twisted to the right, sizing up the room. It had no facial expressions, just those two silent orbs. Its body made that groaning noise that huge amounts of metal make when they are forced to move, the kind of noise Hollywood uses in movies when a car balances on the edge of a cliff and everybody watching knows it's going to fall.

Several people were already starting to run when the thing slammed a giant clamp shaped hand in through the window, showering the room with broken glass and a few of the giant metal girders that had been holding them in place. I had already left my seat and grabbed Mom's hand when that same hand made a sweep of the food court, simultaneously crushing people and sending the rest into the air. We had eaten Chinese, meaning we were sitting at the very corner of the food court. Our culinary choice contributed greatly to our survival, as the room was swept clean. I was rounding the corner when a woman in a purple pant suit went careening past, her face smacking into the concrete pillar ahead of me so hard that her head caved in, leaving a jelly-like texture all over the wall. Mom and I stopped for just a moment, shock getting the better of us. I turned my head to look back, listening to the screams of my fellow mall rats.

The thing gazed back at me, no distinguishing features, just a being of metal and simplicity. The lights from his eyes shone on me like headlights, casting my shadow out behind me. I stared into those cold eyes for no more than a moment, but I felt like this being saw straight into my core, evaluating my fallacies and scrutinizing my sins, judging me unworthy.

Meet Alpha-1.

We went running through the mall, making sure to avoid the really big crowds of people. Unfortunately, not having seen what we saw, people were under the misconception that we had just suffered some sort of minor earthquake. I can't blame them, really. Colorado isn't known for earthquakes and these people were simply unable to distinguish the difference between a geological event, and a murderous metal giant fisting the mall. Fire alarms had been pulled, there was some minor looting going on as well, but in general, people were reacting rationally about the whole situation.

That would all change when they got outside.

When Mom and I got out into the cool, fresh air, we were both panting for breath. The first instinct both of us had was that we needed to get as far away as possible. My second instinct was to feel for my shoulder bag. It had been hanging from my chair when the whole thing started, and luckily I had grabbed it out of habit.

We had gotten about thirty feet into the lot when I heard that creaking metal noise again. I turned to see another metal giant step around from the side of the building. This one was smaller than Alpha-1 and had giant metal balls for hands instead of clamps. He began swinging his arms to and fro as he mangled his way through the crowd of people. Of course, the clear course of action was to get to your car and drive away as fast as possible, which meant that the parking lot was grid locked with fleeing people.

The newly christened Alpha-2, upon realizing this, quickly stomped his way over to the honking line of cars. He raised a giant metal foot, shaped like a big cube, and proceeded to crush a sports car. People began clambering out of their vehicles in a mad dash as Alpha-2 lifted his giant metal foot off of the mess he had made. He leaned down, inspecting the damage like a kid who had just squashed a beetle, then turned around to step down hard upon a small mini van. The shrapnel caught a man running across the grass, removing his legs from underneath him. As he began screaming, Alpha-2 moved towards him. Thirty feet tall, he raised his foot up high and slammed it down on the injured man. Blood sprayed outwards, coating everything nearby in a fine spray.

This time, when Alpha-2 leaned down to inspect his handy work, he let out a noise like a train. A blast of steam came out of a yet unseen tube in the top of his head as he swung a giant metal ball in the direction of an SUV, sending it flying forty feet before it collided with a man climbing out of his Volvo.

Mom and I had reached my Jeep. In conformity with the rest of mankind, we had decided that a car would be the best option. As I opened up the driver side door, I turned around in time to see Alpha-2 begin clomping his way across the parking lot, by-passing cars and other screaming people in pursuit of something in particular. I turned my head to see a woman holding her child in one arm and pushing a baby stroller in another, all while doing her best to sprint to safety.

"Oh my God..." Mom's voice was all I heard in my head as Alpha-2 raised a giant metal foot and brought it down on the young mother and her children. The concrete under her made a grinding noise at gore spit outwards in a circle while Alpha-2 twisted his foot back and forth.

I threw up. Twice.

With vomit and spittle still hanging from my mouth, I jumped in the Jeep, unlocking the passenger door. Before Mom had buckled her seat belt, I had thrown the car in four wheel drive and floored it, dodging random people on the lawn. Deciding discretion was

the better part of valor, I made it up and over the curb, jumping into another part of the parking lot. I swerved to avoid a screaming teenage girl in a Hot Topic employee uniform and jumped another curb out onto the main road. As soon as I saw that the way ahead was clear, I stared at the shrinking figure of Alpha-2 in my rearview mirror.

“Jack!” Mom screamed and I looked forward to see that the sky had gone dark ahead of me. Two giant metal feet, like overturned bowls, sat ahead of me. Tall cylindrical legs led upwards to yet another giant metal tube. On top, that overturned bucket head gazed down on the carnage it had wrought, contemplating its next move. I slammed on the brake and skidded to a halt, twisting the steering wheel around.

Alpha-1 took notice of me just as I took the car over the curb, hopping out onto the main road. Cars passing by had already cleared out, leaving the road empty and lifeless. Putting the pedal to the floor, I looked back in time with Mom to see Alpha-1 pick up a large truck in one giant clamp shaped hand.

“Faster, Jack!” The truck came hurtling towards us through the air and I swerved into the oncoming lane in time to watch it crash ahead of me. I managed to make it around the truck itself and took only a brief second to look back. Alpha-1 had resumed his duty of digging his giant clamp hands into the mall, pulling out entire support beams as the roof began to buckle and cave in.

My eyes back onto the front of the road, my mind raced. Where could we go? We drove on in silence for another few minutes, breaking the speed limit, when Mom voiced my thought out loud. We were now out on the freeway with several other cars when we saw one of those weather condition signs flashing, over and over, displaying a radio station and advising us to seek safety.

Mom fiddled with the knob on the radio as traffic began to back up and slow down to a halt.

“We repeat, this is a state of emergency. We advise all civilians to take shelter immediately and keep your radios tuned in for further instructions.” The voice was one of those pre-recorded deals, and it played over and over again, until Mom turned the stereo down.

“Mom, here.” I reached into my pocket and handed her my cell phone. It was one of those newest models, a gift from a mom who wants her son to call her more. My mother could barely boot up a computer, so I walked her through how to access the internet on the tiny device.

I could hear her clicking through menus, gasping silently. She read me the breaking news bulletins out loud, as traffic ahead of us began to bog down significantly. The internet itself was a mess, claims of mechanical giants wreaking havoc throughout the US. Apparently communication over seas had vanished only hours ago, leaving us in a quandary as to how the rest of the world stood. I reached over to click on a link and Mom and I watched a video clip entitled Emergence.

It was a clip of a man watching his son’s softball game. I had never played softball as a kid, largely due to the fact that I burned out in the sun faster than the other kids. The parents were cheering as little Billy, or Jimmy, or whoever hit the ball and began running the bases. In the outfield, an eight year old with an outstretched glove was running backwards when he tripped and fell. The camera itself started shaking as the dirt around the young boy exploded upwards. As the dirt fell in a fine cloud of silt, two giant headlight eyes burst into life and people began screaming when something large began

clawing its way up out of the earth. It only vaguely occurred to me that someone had taken the time to upload this video instead of hiding in a dark hole somewhere.

Fascinated, neither of us noticed that traffic had come to a complete stop. I only began to notice when I saw cars begin going the other direction on the highway. I looked up at the road ahead of us. At the top of the hill, I saw a brief glimmer of metal sway back and forth as a large white van with a hole torn through it slid neatly through the air, landing on a frontage road ahead of us while a new giant stomped up the hill.

A rusty red color, this one had giant steely tips for arms. It pierced the top of a Subaru and lifted it into the air, spinning it around wildly. The driver of the vehicle fell out of the window, landing somewhere at the creature's feet as it drove its pointed arm through another car. In moments, it wielded a car ka-bob around in a wild dance of frenzy. More graceful than its brethren, it hurled the vehicles off in various directions as it made its way down the line of cars.

You could never call me guilty of hesitating. I jerked the car around over the median and hit the accelerator. My cell phone fell down by my mother's feet with a hard clatter as I raced back the direction we came, ticking off the freeway exits we had passed.

In hindsight, what Mom did made sense to me. She was Mom, and always tried real hard to take care of me. At this moment, for some reason, making sure my cell phone got put away became priority number one and she unbuckled her seat belt, reaching down towards her feet to grab it.

When a huge metal foot stepped down into the road ahead of me, I swerved hard to avoid it. The first foot was easy, but a piece of wreckage caught on the second foot snagged my wheel well, causing my jeep to spin out of control. I rolled once or a hundred times, I'm not sure, before my wrecked car came to a halt. When I opened my eyes, I realized Mom wasn't there anymore.

Scrambling, I undid my seat belt, opened my door, and gracefully fell out. I'm no medical genius (and never plan to write about one), but I am fairly certain that I broke a few ribs. And got whiplash. Because that's what happens when you catch a wheel well on the foot of a giant tin man when driving at fifty-five.

Staggering, I made it to my feet. Unconsciously picking up my shoulder bag, I made my way around the jeep and through the broken windshield glass. The piece of metal I had caught on was deeply embedded in the shock spring thingy of my wheel. As you can tell, I never thought of writing about a mechanic either.

It was my friend, Alpha-1, who stood there to greet me. Those bright eyes set in that dark bucket gazed down on me and what was left of the jeep. At the time, I wished I could say I only had one more payment left for the amusement value, but I digress. I owned my jeep, even if it was now just a giant paperweight.

Alpha-1 was easily twice as tall as his little brother. In the distance, I could still see Steel Tip working his way through the procession of vehicles. Alpha-1 had made short work of the ones near me, and I felt dizzy just staring upwards into those cold white eyes.

I saw Mom lying on the pavement halfway between me and Alpha-1. I froze, hoping that Alpha-1 would simply go away and leave us alone.

I underestimated the giant's vision and tenacity. He raised a metal foot in the air and brought it down on Mom hard enough that the ground around her blew dust and gravel into the air. Small bits of gravel pelted me hard enough that they bit into my skin and I screamed.

Those eyes watched me as I held my face in my hands. When that cold metal hand began reaching down towards me, I debated letting it catch me. Luckily, my survival instinct overrode my shocked state of mind and I ran away as a giant clamp the size of my jeep attempted to close around me. I felt the air rush past me as the clamp closed behind me, just catching the back of my jacket. It was enough that it jerked me off balance, but my coat was lightweight, a style choice really, and it ripped off in Alpha-1's claw. I fell forward and began working my way towards the ditch to the side of the road, hoping memory served me correctly.

Having grown up in the area, I spent a lot of the time exploring it on my bike. Even when I was old enough to drive, I still rode my bike everywhere, searching for adventure wherever the wind would take me. One of my favorite things to do was explore all of the old sewer pipes that ran underneath the highway, mainly because a friend had told me that hobos hid their gold in there. A smarter child would have realized that hobos don't usually have gold.

Every couple of miles, a pipe ran underneath this piece of freeway because part of the road lay in a flood plain. Hoping against hope, I made the top of the road as Alpha-1 took a step towards me. My arms pin wheeled wildly as I made my way towards the bottom of the ditch. I reached the rocky bottom and looked off in the distance.

I was screwed. If not for the fact that I was gifted with an iron bladder, I would have peed my pants.

However, when I turned to see Alpha-1 towering over me, I noticed that the pipe was just hidden from view by a few bushes just ten feet to my right. I began stumbling towards the opening, making it just in time for the afternoon sky to become completely blacked out above me. I fell to my knees and began crawl-walking my way forward, dirt and spider webs clutching at my face. The smell of dust made me choke as I scrambled forward. I had made my way forward about ten when I heard that train noise and the tunnel behind me collapsed, pinched shut by an angry metal fist.

I laid there, quiet and shaking for almost an hour. Part of me expected the light at the end of the tunnel to grow larger and brighter until I made it into heaven, of sorts. The other part of me knew that that light wouldn't get any closer until I moved my ass forward. There was also a small part of me that figured if I wait long enough, I would wake up.

I would like to assure you, at this point, there will be no waking up. I hate it when a good story ends like that, not that I consider this story good by any means.

Instead, I simply waited until I found the courage to move. Of course, adrenaline aside, that first moment of movement was pure agony. My ribs felt like I had dragged them through broken glass and the muscles in my neck were so sore that my muscles had begun tightening. I did my best to stretch my arms and neck without moving my chest around, which resulted in a few questionably stupid painful moments.

Overhead, I could hear the steady clomp of those things as they seemed to fade into the distance and then come back again. It was hard to concentrate with all the noise and terror, but it finally crossed my mind to try and make my way to Mom's house. Maybe it wouldn't be the safest place, but it would be familiar.

I slowly made my way to the other end of the tunnel. I wasn't sure if these things had super hearing, so I was careful to make as little noise as possible. My heartbeat was

pounding in my head as I moved, making me feel like I had my own personal entourage of drummers, keeping in step with me and pounding away.

At the end of the tunnel, I set up camp, so to speak. I ventured a peek outside every now and again, usually waiting until it got quiet. Sometimes all I would see was wreckage and general human dismemberment. Other times I would see one of those giant metal beings stomping my way, so I would quickly return to my hiding place. I spent the remainder of Emergence day in this manner, sipping at my bottle of water, just biding my time for nightfall.

Wed June 3
The Night of Quiet

It was around ten in the evening when I awoke. I had nodded off several times during the late afternoon and the nap had done me well. The crystal on my five dollar watch had broken, but the hour hand still functioned just fine. It was difficult to see, due in part to the giant clouds of rubble swirling around in the air, and the fact that only a tenth of the streetlights seemed to be functioning.

I dared to venture out of my hole. As I walked forward and out of the ditch, it finally occurred to me that it would have been a disaster if one of those metal giants had crushed the other end of the pipe I had hidden in, especially when I saw the impact crater Alpha-1 had left in the opposite side of the road.

The night was quiet. In the distance, I couldn't even hear sirens or noise of any sort. To my delight, I didn't hear steaming locomotives or the metallic twang of iron on concrete. I looked down the road at the wreckage of my jeep, and debated with myself on going over to say goodbye to Mom. A large part of me was overwhelmed with sadness, and another part said I was better off not knowing. Besides that, there were similar stains all over, and I didn't feel like picking through them.

The freeway itself was built into the hills it traversed, meaning I walked for some time in an attempt to find a clear way up over the side. Most of the bridges had been collapsed by metal appendages, and it was too dark to be sure of my footing. Eventually, I came upon a gentle slope of cracked concrete with a functioning light source overhead. I didn't have to worry about any cars, due to the large piles of toppled automobiles laying everywhere. I can say now with utmost certainty that these things knew of our reliance on vehicles and had gone out of their way to make sure to cut off our best method of transportation. I, for one, lacked a thirty foot stride and would easily be overtaken by such metal men.

I did my best to avoid what looked like darkened patches of human remains. At some point, most people had abandoned their vehicles and tried to escape on foot. These were the people who had been crushed under foot, claw, and only God knows what else. Occasionally I would discover that the puddle I had stepped in only a minute ago wasn't water by checking out the dark, ruddy colored prints my tennis shoes left behind me.

That's not to say I didn't see some unspeakable horrors that night. I found a car that had been crushed between two giant hands, its occupants oozing out of the cracked windows. I imagined getting the same result from squeezing a pastry, or a soft fruit. Gore dripped and stank everywhere I went, and I found it disturbing to see birds picking at the face of a dead woman, her body crushed beneath a crumpled up bus. The bus had been thrown from the main road and then summarily stepped on. The flies were buzzing around the big yellow coffin in swarms like sumo wrestlers at a buffet, only sumo wrestlers don't lay their eggs in the potato salad.

Sometimes, I thought I saw other survivors, but the moving shadows melted away into the night. I would also hear people call out tenaciously into the breeze, calling for loved ones that could easily be the sticky mats of flesh and hair ground into the pavement.

It took me a few hours, but shortly before dawn, I made it into Mom's neighborhood. Surprisingly, nothing in the immediate area was damaged. Turning away from the rising sun, it was very surreal to see all the damage that had been wrought behind me, and then to turn back to a picture of normalcy. Intact homes, some with cars still in the driveway even. I felt like one of those tornado victims who wondered, what would have happened if I had just parked my trailer at this end of the park?

I broke in to the house. Took a big rock and threw it through the front window. I suffered only a few minor cuts, but I made it to the fridge, grabbed a beer and slinked my way down in to the basement. The spare bedroom down there was decorated just for me, and I didn't hesitate to drink my beer, get undressed, and fall fast asleep. As the sun rose, I believed that maybe everything had just been an isolated incident, an attack of killer robots from Mars, or perhaps some science experiment that went out of control.

And thus ended the night of quiet, the last peaceful night I would experience for months to come.

Thurs June 4
Bucket Rage

In a daze, I began walking among the rubble. The neighborhood had looked fine in the cloak of night's embrace, but its harsh reality was revealed in the discerning light of the morning sun. It was about eleven in the morning and I had begun wandering around, for reasons unknown to myself. Looking back, I think it was a combination of shock and the hope that I would meet up with someone who was looking for someone, maybe fall in love or become best friends, and then reminisce twenty years from now in a bar over a cold bottle of Fat Tire.

I didn't find someone to be my pal, but I did see people digging through the rubble of their homes and walking the street. At every crash and bang, we all flinched, expecting a giant steam blowing monstrosity to block out the sky above us. I wish I could tell you where Alpha-1 and his buddies were for twelve hours, but you will have to accept that I lack the omniscience to tell you. Perhaps they were all rigidly stomping around, calling out "Oilcan" with pursed bucket lips. Or maybe they were just on the other side of town.

Feeling a need to escape from the smoke and depression of crushed homes and burning wreckage (a few had burned down, but not many), I made my way towards the 7-11 near my mom's house. As a kid, I had spent time riding my bike over there to buy Slurpee's and comic books. I used to buy stuff like the National Enquirer, but it started to give me nightmares when I read about spontaneous combustion. Every hot, sweaty night as a preteen was spent in silent terror, awaiting the first spark of flame from my soon to be incinerated body. Silly looking back on it now, but stuff like that really can shape how you grow up and see the world.

A big reason I really wanted to go was that the 7-11 was on a tall hill overlooking the area. I wanted to judge for myself the severity of the damage. I cautiously stepped around a smeary mess in a pink bath robe (at least, all the blood made it look pink) and had a tough time getting around a row of crushed cars that looked like they had been stacked. One guy threatened to shoot me for walking through his lawn, but once he saw I wasn't interested in looting his home, he withdrew quietly into the shadows of his garage.

Things from 7-11 didn't look any better. Standing up on the hill, I got a fairly good view of the world at large. Pathways had been carved through neighborhoods, there were crimson smudges lining the concrete of the roads and sidewalks, and everything stank like bad meat and cabbage.

I stood at the top of the hill, 7-11 just to my right, devastation all around. I was gazing into nothingness when I saw a house go flying through the air.

It made me think of that scene from Wizard of Oz, when the black and white home spins through the air wildly before landing on that green bitch's sister. It arced nicely before plowing into a row of houses, sending slats and shingle everywhere in a cloud of dismay. In the distance, I could here people scream as a new monster clanked his way around the 'hood.

This one was a silvery blue, with giant metal scoops for hands. His legs were a lot shorter than the others, his body far thicker. I watched as he wrapped his scoops underneath a house, foundation and all, and threw it up in the air like an overzealous gardener weeding his azaleas. If I was close enough, I'm sure I could have seen people

flying through the air Hollywood style. Hollywood never shows you what those people look like after they hit the ground though. For the most part, imagine a large 180 lb roll of hamburger full of broken sticks slamming into the ground at from a ten story building. They sound like bags of soup when they hit and look like road kill afterwards. Disgusting.

Beta-1 (I don't know why, he just looks like a Beta-1) was content digging up homes and hurdling them skyward, meaning I was content to turn tail and run. I was tired of running though, and there were some bicycles hooked up to the bike rack outside 7-11. I desperately tried to think of how to free them when I realized some kid had left his bike just leaning on the wall. It was on the ground now with a bent handle bar, but it was now mine and I quickly shot down the other side of the hill, letting momentum carry me at a speed I could never hope to run at.

At this point, I was now heading east. I had debated heading up north and going home, but there was really no point in doing that now. Out east, there was still plenty of farmland, plenty of open area to see them coming, and plenty of nothing. Not sure what the best course of action was, I simply pedaled like the devil was after me.

For a couple of hours, I wound my way through toppled cars like a snake in the grass. At times, I made a hasty retreat, due to homicidal robot activity. By now, there were multiple Alpha-2's walking around, their upper torsos spinning like helicopters and their giant wrecking ball hands clearing out large areas of land. Disoriented, I was now trying my best to find a main road.

I had ended up on Alameda road. I was now going west, due largely in part to a robot in the east playing Godzilla with the local strip malls. If I followed Alameda long enough, I could go back to the mall where the shit hit the fan, or all the way into downtown Denver. I was curious what sort of state Denver was in, but not stupid enough to go look on purpose.

I was pedaling up a hill leading off the main road to a new housing development I had never been to before. The hill itself was a little steep, meaning that I walked my bike most of the way, hoping that if something reared its bucket head, it would be uphill from me.

As I crested a particularly large hill, I heard a strange sound in the sky. Baffled, I looked up to see a squadron of fighter jets screaming overhead. Feeling my heart surge in my chest, I let go of my bike and climbed a grassy hill on the left side of the road. When I got to the top, I watched as the jets unleashed hell on an Alpha-2 and a Rust-Tip. Rust-Tip lost its balance, its pointy arms and legs jerking at odd angles as it took a missile to the chest. Alpha-2 stumbled forward and took a clumsy swing at a jet as it flew by.

Explosion after explosion rocked the hillside as the concussion assaulted my ears. I swung my arms in joy as Rust-Tip quit moving and Alpha-2 began hobbling in clumsy circles. Alpha-2 let out a loud train blast as it fell forward, its giant ball hands splaying out as dust rose from the ground. I couldn't see them lying there, but I knew they had been bested.

A noise louder than the missile blasts deafened me, and Alpha-1 came stomping along the ground, letting out his own train blast in response. He quickly stood over his fallen comrades and began calling out loudly. He swung his metal clamps at the jets as they roared by and succeeded in taking one down with a well thrown car. Round after round sparked across his body as he made menacing gestures at the Air force.

Now, it would have been cool if lasers had come out of his eyes, or if his hands had fired off like missiles. Truth be told, he just stood there, angry and upset as he flailed at the air, letting off train blasts. I would have felt sorry for the bastard if he hadn't killed my mother. Alpha-1 was the only one that seemed unique amongst them, and I knew that he was the particular being responsible for my current orphaned state. I cheered and hollered, tears streaming down my face, and turned around in time to see that his train blasts weren't just attempts to curse out the armed forces.

Coming over the hill, and from all around, dozens of them were converging to see what the ruckus was about. I didn't bother sticking around to see what happened. I made a beeline straight down the hillside, running for a group of bushes towards the bottom. I was about to make a dive into them when I realized the bushes had begun to move. Frantic, I backpedaled as something slowly rose up from the ground.

Dirt covered me and I almost suffocated under it. Suffice to say, the weight of the dirt was enough that I lost consciousness, the last thing I saw being a giant white head rising towards the sky.

Sat June 8
Poor State of Mind

Now, I know you are probably wondering what happened to Friday. Well, I couldn't much tell you, because I spent most of it cowering in terror as numerous metal men stomped around the soft packed dirt of my hiding place. I never did see the robot with the white head again, but I do know from other peoples tales that his legs blew out super hot steam when he walked, flash boiling anyone caught in the midst of it.

I also spent a little of my time hunting for food and water, as I had become dehydrated and feverish. I paced around in a daze on Friday evening, my thoughts and memories a jumble as sickness and shock began claiming me. The only things I can remember now were that everything was really quiet, due in part to my eardrums being exposed to several loud blasts of noise, like after a rock concert. That and a woman wandering around with half a kid. His face had turned purplish black and it looked like his lower half had been stepped on by one of the giants. His bulging eyes gazed unseeing as his delirious mother tried to pour water down his open mouth as she wandered in circles telling him everything was going to be okay.

And that was my Friday.

I woke up on a playground early in the morning on Saturday. It had one of those drinking fountains off to the side and I had apparently been using it for a while now. My fever hadn't quite broken, but my minds acuity had returned. Once again, I had evaded the machines for another day. They weren't all powerful and all knowing. They were just very large versions of us cast in metal alloy. They could communicate with each other and took great pleasure in going out of the way to crush us underfoot. I really did expect one to start walking around with a giant magnifying glass, frying us underneath the super concentrated rays of the sun. When I was a kid, I used to hock loogies on anthills just to see what they would do. In a way, I half expected that as well, giant oil loogies descending from the heavens above. At this point, I kind of wished they would just pee on our anthill and leave.

Somehow, communication with different parts of the world had been reestablished. I was filled in on info by people who snuck into the park to use the drinking fountain. I'm sure half of it was bullshit rumors that had been built up, and I'm sure the other half was devastatingly true. All of the major cities were razed to the ground, skyscrapers leveled by Rust-Tips as they tunneled up them from the inside. A bunch of people had gathered in the football stadium in Denver, only to be steam washed by the mysterious white robot. One person told me it smelled like hot dogs cooking, a macabre tail gate party from hell.

Other stories I heard involved people attempting to take refuge in caves. A large group of tourists had crawled deep inside the bowels of national treasures like Carlsbad Caverns, only to have Alpha-2's seal the entrance behind them. Alpha-1 did make appearances in different locations, revealing itself (to me anyways) as a kind of demented Boy Scout leader, guiding the others in what seemed to be turning into a tightly controlled venture. The machines were striking out at civilization itself, leaving natural areas alone for the most part. Most people were fleeing up into the Rockies to live like nomads. One such group of these stopped through, inviting me to come with them. I

considered the offer briefly, not desiring the solitude of the last few days. However, part of me wondered how large a group of people could get before they were hunted down by Alpha-1 and his bucket-head brigade. That, and I was still very ill and didn't know how long I could march through the heart of destruction without falling, too sick to move any further.

By the afternoon, I was actually helped out by a few people from the neighborhood nearby as they were quietly gathering at the park. Most of them had lost loved ones and were very sympathetic towards each other. The number of children and elderly was very low, which disheartened most. A woman named Mya treated a few of my wounds and gave me some medicine to keep in my satchel. She was still wearing her nurses' scrubs and wore a pair of mismatched bloody sneakers. A lovely woman with an unknown future, she wandered off early the next morning with the pilgrims, leaving me and a few other people by ourselves. I didn't see much reason to affiliate myself with some of the others, especially when occasional arguments would turn violent. I kept to myself, filled up my water bottle from time to time, and eventually moved onward when I heard something rumble in the distance, followed by the smell of dust and plaster.

Mon June 10
Recovery

I found a decent drainage ditch to rest in the past couple of days. It gets real cold at night, but I managed to scavenge a blanket from a demolished house. As for food, I raided the remains of a nearby grocery store for canned goods. It had been picked over, but I found a treasure trove of canned veggies buried underneath some rubble. It looked like Alpha-2 had stomped the roof in and played whack a mole with the panicking shoppers in the parking lot.

By now, people are actually killing each other for their supplies. I found an older man who had been knifed several times, his backpack emptied of all his goods except for a picture of him and his family that he had wrapped in newspaper. Part of me had wanted to take the time to bury him. The realistic part of me had stopped caring.

I spent my time recuperating and drawing pictures of the machines with a charcoal briquette on a pad of legal paper I took from one of the nearby drug stores. At times, I would hear people moving nearby, at other times I would here the clomping noise of steel on concrete. Most of the time, I just heard nothing at all. My hearing was permanently damaged from my continuous exposure to the bombing from the other night. I took the time at one point to find some replacement clothes and wash my face in a park fountain, but was careful to maintain a small profile. At one point, a group of ratty looking survivors has spotted me and tried to wave me over, but I sprinted away, knowing I had a good fifty-fifty chance that they weren't interested in my well being.

That evening, when it fell quiet again, I made my move out of the ditch. I had found a small culvert to sleep in, but human activity had started picking up in the area and I wasn't interested in sharing my new bachelor pad. I headed out in a random direction, because it really didn't matter where I went.

Thurs June 13
A Place of My Own

I have found my new home. On a spur of the moment, I had decided to head out towards the Saddle Rock community. It was one of those neighborhoods built alongside a golf course for people who liked being rich and golfing. Of course, I didn't want to golf, but I did know now that the machines weren't ripping up trees and flattening bushes. In fact, they were making their way around the fields and plains and uprooting homes and roads. Most areas were impassable by now, as the amount of rubble was too much for most people to even walk through, meaning that the number of people I saw at a time began to dwindle.

I arrived on Tuesday morning and accidentally stumbled upon something I had thought had passed out of style years ago. I was making my way over a crushed wrought iron fence into someone's back yard when I noticed the huge tree out back. The community was almost forty years old, meaning that some of the trees around here had gotten huge. On impulse, I approached the tree and looked up into its branches.

Hidden from the surrounding area by onlookers and left intact by the machines, someone had built a tree house. Not an average tree house either, but one with the look of serious craftsmanship with wood stained to match the tree itself. From the ground, it hid in the shadows and was about twenty feet up.

I wasted no time in finding a ladder. I had to search for almost an hour before I found one in the neighbor's garage. Most of the homes had been ransacked by humans and crushed by machines, so I moved cautiously, always calling ahead of myself. I didn't want to invade someone's sanctuary and end up with a bullet in my head.

Upon scaling the ladder and entering the tree house, I felt an immediate sense of relief. It had a roof, a few screened windows, and enough floor space to sleep comfortably. It even had a desk with a built in book shelf. This wasn't just dad and son's summer project. This was a serious undertaking by somebody who knew what they were doing. I spent that first day inspecting the house, making sure everything was in sound condition. I found some books on building tree houses in the desk, along with some basic tools. I also found pictures of an older man with a couple of young girls taken inside. My best guess was that Grandpa was good with wood and wanted to make something special for his grandchildren. Inwardly, I hoped that the builder of the home was somewhere safe with his grandkids. That first night, I cried myself to sleep several times as I finally felt I was somewhere safe enough to do so.

On Wednesday, I walked the neighborhood searching for essentials. I found that the golf course had plenty of old style water pumps, meaning I would have a steady water supply. I found several feet of rope and a lightweight folding ladder. It took me a better part of the day, but I also found plenty of food to stockpile for the time being.

I also found guns. That was a chance encounter, as I pushed open a bedroom door to find a mess of blood and gore. A woman laid on the bed, her arms wrapped around two children. She was still holding the pistol in her hand that she had used to end her life and a quick search of the room turned up ammo for it. I said a brief prayer for the dead family and further fortified my new location. I hid the first ladder in a secluded area heavy with bushes and used the other lightweight one to get into my home and then pull it up. I

attached the rope to the door frame by looping it through a nearby window as a quick exit. I didn't want man or machine to know about my new safe haven. I had gathered enough food and water for days and finally felt like I could sleep at night.

Friday June 14
Beginning of the End

Beta-1 came through the area earlier in the day, plowing his shovel hands into the ground and prying homes from the ground. My theory came to the ultimate test when he fixed his headlight eye on the home nearest me, and then on my tree. I wasn't sure if he could see well enough to discern me watching him and I jumped when one giant shovel hand moved in my general direction. Tenderly, that hand hovered in between the tree and the three story home as Beta-1's other hand pried the home out of the ground and scooped it away. I sighed with relief.

Later in the day, some people came through and walked right by my hiding spot without a second glance. I was wary of them as I fingered the grip on my pistol. They looked tired and hungry, but I was paranoid enough not to care. An hour later, I would hear screeching metal and screams somewhere in the distance. My hearing isn't great anymore, so it could have been only a hundred feet away, but I wasn't going to watch. My heart had already seen enough.

I spend most of my free time writing. This thing you hold in your hands, for example, is a copy of the words I placed in my journal starting shortly after these grisly events began. It is a cleaner version of what I have written, as it had become full of chicken scratches, profanities, and generally strange scrawls written in the panic of the moment. The memories were painful and the images often disturbing, but it feels like squeezing pus out of an infection. It still hurts like hell, but the pressure of all that I have lost is no longer unbearable. I have rewritten the events of the first day alone dozens of times. When it gets cold, I plan to burn them all in a ditch somewhere and watch those painful memories float away on the smoke.

Late Spring (2018)
The End and Answers

Almost three years have passed since my last entry. At least, that is how it will seem to you, the reader.

I wrote in my journal almost every day for the last three years. I filled several journals, actually. I made brief trips out into civilization and raided crumpled bookstores. Humanity has abandoned this part of the world, anyways, and left me its sole keeper.

Actually, this is a partial truth. I have seen evidence of human passage. It took several months for the bucket heads to actually clean out every symbol of civilization. Realizing that my supplies were going to become severely limited, I began making raids on what was left of homes and businesses. Everything I could use, I took and squirreled away somewhere. Anything from a bookstore was treasured, and anything I could eat more so. While out on the town, I could often tell others were doing the same thing I was. One time, someone even happened across a cache of food I had gathered, ignoring the note I left on there asking them to please leave it behind. Either that, or coyotes have figured out how to use can openers.

I won't bore you with the details of learning how to survive these last few years. You have either survived them yourself, or are the descendant of those who have. I write these words down time and time again and leave them in safe locations for the sole purpose of conveying what has transpired to future generations, as a cautionary tale.

The bucket heads are largely gone. I still hear them from time to time, but these ones are a different breed. There is one that walks around on spider legs, watering giant fields of flowers. Another one shaped like a ball tills the soil in early spring by rolling around.

Nothing manmade is visible for miles around. Occasionally I will stumble over an old broken wall, or even find what is left of an overlooked basement, but these structures will most likely crumble in time. My house in the trees is still intact, largely due to my vigilant upkeep.

I was spotted by one of the things the other day. I was picking my way through a berry patch when it paused, obviously catching sight of me with dome eyes. I was ready to run when it just kept going. I watched it, breathless, as it continued its duties.

The night skies now are nothing short of amazing. There is no light pollution at all. I regret that I don't even have an old star chart, so I have simply renamed the constellations. It was easier that way.

The fields are full of flowers, and the plants are well tended. I see animals roaming freely, like they once did before the dawn of man. There is plenty of food for man and beast. I even planted my own garden, one that the remaining bucket heads leave alone.

The way I see it, the Earth had finally had enough of us. We poisoned it, we built on it, we had our way with it, and it finally struck back.

Now, don't mistake me for some angry hippy, I am simply telling it like it is. The bucket heads wiped us from the face of the earth and started over. They have replanted the Garden of Eden and given us a second chance to inherit the Earth. Woes betide he who eats the Apple of Knowledge and casts us out for a second time.

I'm being dramatic. You get that way after a couple of years by yourself.

So if you find this and can still remember Emergence Day, please feel free to seek me out. I am lonely and ready to play nice with others.

If, perhaps, you are some other kind of intelligent being and no trace of humanity exists on this planet, know that we were punished for our lack of humility and that the same fate could easily befall those who treat our planet badly as well. The bucket heads will rise again and comb this planet clean, leaving nothing of your legacy behind.

As for me, who knows what will happen. The only thing for certain is that I will write about it.

That's what writers do.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jack". The signature is stylized and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Jack

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About the Author:

J.R. Leckman currently resides somewhere in Colorado with his wife and a house full of pets. He is currently pursuing a degree in physics, but still finds that writing is his first love. He hoped you enjoyed or hated this story enough to leave a highly opinionated review (and perhaps a drawing of what a buckethead looks like) and looks forward to inviting you into another of his worlds very soon.

About the Artist

Laurie Ricard came highly recommended by a fellow author and she did not disappoint. Friend her on Facebook, and she may just make you a snazzy cover too!
<http://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=1225417402&sk=info>