

a note to troublemakers

the only way we can kill the beast of our own influence is honesty. is openness. living in a market is no excuse for perpetuating one's own power.

freed from the gods of art and naturalism, our ideas will live or die. but at least we will live.

death to crimethInc

when you're done, go outside. the embrace of new frontiers should never mean the abandonment of the old.



EXPECT RESISTANCE

a field manual

Praise for *Expect Resistance*

I had long awaited a book that resisted all parallels with other books save the use of ink and type: a book through which I might wander, losing myself in labyrinths and coming upon fantastic citadels to which I could not retrace my steps; a book into which I might plunge, skipping pages as a little girl skips rope, never to return to the world in which I'd began—emerging instead in another, or at least equipped to build one.

At first glance, it appears to be a collage of memoirs and polemics, but don't be fooled: what they're really doing here is telling the creation myth backwards as the symmetrical conclusion to the history of the world. Escaping exile in an alien dystopia, human beings storm paradise and, upon reentering, tear off their clothes without shame. God's judgment is overturned, nonsense is unlearned, a woman presents an apple to a snake, symbolizing the release of nature from the yoke of human will. Genders cease to be rigidly defined, each person becoming a complete unity of masculine and feminine characteristics. Finally, in only seven days' time, the entirety of the old world is unmade, and on the last evening the lights of all cities, no longer powered by vast unsustainable infrastructures, blink out one by one.

The revolution will not be shown on television. Nothing will be on television.

... or if anything is, no one will notice.

The revolution will not provide you with political clout, a luxury car, or designer antidepressants. It will render such things superfluous.

The revolution will not help you build muscle mass or tone your flabby thighs. It will make it possible for you to feel beautiful *in* your body, not because of it.

The revolution will not put the right people in control of the government or impose limits on the conduct of corporations. It will abolish control, government, limits, corporations.

The revolution will not give you superhuman powers of creativity, audacity, or conflict resolution. It will push aside the obstacles that inhibit you from exercising the powers you already have.

The revolution will not put an end to violence, struggle, or interpersonal strife. It will offer you the chance to fight for your own interests, for once, and let the chips fall where they may.

The revolution will not just put all genders, ethnicities, and nationalities on an equal footing—it will dissolve the borders that exist to crush them.

The revolution will not make you self-sufficient. It will require you to take care of others, and others to take care of you.

The revolution will not provide you with the man or woman of your dreams. It will bring out the unique beauty of the ones already around you.

The revolution might not always feed or house or heal you, but hunger and thirst and cold and even sickness will trouble you a lot less.

The revolution will not mean you finally get what you deserve. It will give you treasures no one could ever deserve, just as it will sometimes hurt with a pain nothing in your life has warranted.

The revolution will not be simple or clean or easy. It will help you to find meaning in difficult things, to be courageous in facing complexities and contradictions, to get your hands dirty and like it.

The revolution is not going
to happen tomorrow—
it's never going to happen.
It's taking place right now.
It is an alternate universe
that runs parallel to this one,
waiting for you to switch sides.



If you've never doubted the integrity of your
superiors or their right to demand your obedience,
nor felt the sting of wishing for something that
could not be found on department store shelves
or voting ballots;

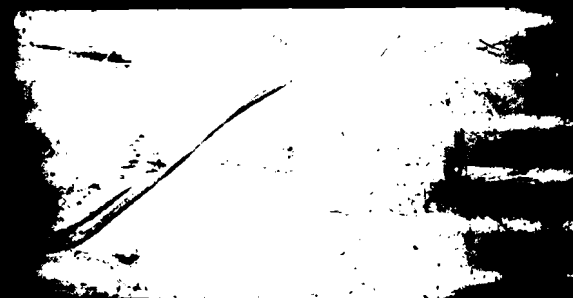
If you've never fallen so deeply in love that it
seemed you had been sleepwalking through life
until that moment, never daydreamed desperately
in a board meeting or math class, never been car-
ried away by extremities of emotion while every-
one around you remained unmoved and oblivious;

If you've never suspected that real life must
be elsewhere, somewhere beyond the shopping
districts and suburbs, off the highway, over the
fields and oceans;

If there is no part of you left unfulfilled by
stock options and prime time programming and
cutting edge digital technology—

then perhaps this is not for you.

But if you have a secret self, read on.





Crimethink is the stirrings of a new world, smuggled across every border in the heads and hearts of a dissident nation of millions, thrown through plate glass windows on notes tied to bricks. It is everything that evades control—the stolen sick-day at the seashore, the shared meal free when the manager is away, the city street liberated for an hour during a demonstration, the dream that rebels and comes true.

CrimethInc. is the underground railroad
from this world to the next. Hop on.

NC! 2008 CrimethInc. ex-Workers' Collective,
surviving in defiance of all odds and adversaries.
Come and get us, motherfuckers.

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This is neither a true story nor a work of fiction.
This is a chronicle of things that are *going to happen*.

Additional copies of this book are available for \$8 + postage.
A variety of similar materials can also be obtained from
CrimethInc. Skeleton Crew / PO Box 13998 / Salem OR 97309,
or by means of www.crimethinc.com

“When the great explorer was dying, his friends gathered by his bedside and implored him to rescind the parts of his book that had seemed incredible to them—to water down its miracles by means of judicious deletions; but he responded that he had not recounted even half of what he had in fact seen.”

They will say* that we refused everything to make a beautiful but utopian negation—as if it were just a work of *art* we were out to create. They will say that, like generations of nihilists before us, we uttered that grandiose denial and then were driven by it into the wilds of oblivion and annihilation, that “the air of crimethink is unbreathable for the masses of humanity.” They will praise the product—product being their specialty—and deny the evidence. They will imply that we *could not have lived*—but we do live, *we live!*—and so we give you these fragments, this poorly charted record, to spit in their faces . . . or whisper in their ears as they sleep.

A book like this is just the scattered dust from explosions in the lives of strangers, hastily scribbled notes from bygone days when freedoms were fought for and won. Like all such dust, these embers and ashes may retain a certain charge that could help precipitate explosions in other lives. Otherwise, they're useless. Don't stir them up unless you're in the business of starting fires.

* They will say this, at least, *if we fail*.

I. THE FANTASY REBELS . . .

It Begins	14
The Secret World	18
New Wings for Flighty Youth	22
The Invitation	26
The Rebellion of the Dead	29
On the Threshold	32
The Stillest Hour	34
The Fault Line	35
Wolves	37
Indulge and Undermine	40
At Sea	43
We Can Make Our Own	44
Mapping	48
A Map	50
Dreams	71
Alchemy	73
Beyond Democracy	74
Two Councils	90
Divided and Conquered	96
The Eviction	104
Crowd Dynamics and the Mass Psychology of Possibility	108
And the Crowd Goes Wild	116
One-Dimensional Man in the Three-Dimensional World	123
Other Encampments	132
You Can Run but You Can't Hide	136
All Roads Lead to Roam	137
Infighting the Good Fight	147
Hitting the Wall	163
On the Battlefield	168

II. . . BECOMES REALITY

183	The End of the World
184	Some Run for Cover—We Rush to Bear Witness
186	Disaster
196	Off the Cliff
199	Failure
203	Crash and Burn
222	Adultery
235	Betrayers and Betrayed
239	Abomination
243	Reform and Revolution
256	Despair
264	Believing in Miracles
269	Hope
273	Explosions
277	History as We Live It
291	Extinction
296	Nostalgia
297	Darkness
304	The Future
307	Countdown to Civil War
312	Leaving the 21 st Century
314	Dear Reader
315	Where We're Going

III. AFTERWARD

322	Inflamed Appendix
331	Disconnecting the Power
332	About the Authors
339	Hijack the Moon
345	The Explosion of Stars
346	The Future is Unwritten

PRELUDE

Marshall is scraping half-eaten spaghetti off dishes,
counting the minutes to the end of his shift.

Pablo is reading a book in an airport, waiting to fly to
see his editor.

Samia is behind a reception desk, instant messaging
with her friend Daniel.



I. Fantasy ...

"Yes— and others, as well."

It all started when Kate got back from Seattle and swore she wouldn't pay rent anymore. Of course, it all started long before that—when Elijah showed me how to hide a chicken patty under my salad so I could afford a complete lunch from the school cafeteria, when Kate's father called up the power company and told them to disconnect him from the grid, when Pablo stormed out of the airport instead of flying to see his boss—but those personal revolts didn't gain a common thread until we all met at the encampment.

Kate wasn't a student; after high school she had proceeded immediately to a series of retail jobs. Along the way she discovered a passion for organic gardening and ended up living in collective houses with students and environmental activists who had a lot more money than she did. It had been sucking her dry trying to pay bills the rest of them barely noticed. She knew people who had sworn off rent before, but most of them were from wealthier families and could rely on a whole network of couches maintained by others like them. For Kate to decide she could do the same thing was pure craziness.

One of the students Kate had lived with was involved in the campus anti-sweatshop campaign, and the administration was still dragging its feet on the previous year's agreements. The issue came up at someone's birthday party, and Kate suggested the students set up a protest encampment that could double as housing. I'd never have expected them to be up for it, but three days later Kate was setting up her tent in the quad with a big banner alongside it and student activists were stopping by between classes to hold signs and hand out fliers.

Two weeks later, it was clear that the administrators had no intention of following through on their promises; they were simply waiting for the protesters to return to their dorms. Little did they know what was brewing out there on the quad! Once it appeared the camp might last, others began filtering in, bringing with them a heady mix of wild ideas and grim determination. The newcomers had a different idea of politics than the student activists—they weren't just interested in changing school policy, but also in changing their own lives and everything else in reach. Like Kate, they were more invested in continuing the occupation than working out a compromise with the administration.

My friends and I had been waiting for something to do with the city's excess, the food and furniture and construction materials we gathered in our raids on its soft underbelly; we turned these into meals and camping gear and took them to campus as our contribution. We invited others there to join us on our outings, and soon we were bringing back more than anyone needed. We started sending bags home with cafeteria staff and maintenance workers, then moved on to making deliveries to their neighborhoods.

The next week, school officials approached the organizers of the anti-sweatshop campaign, offering to negotiate if they'd call off the occupation. When the latter broached the subject to us, we refused to budge; the students had to announce that the occupation would continue, lest it become known that non-student squatters had infiltrated it. Finally, the administration threatened to remove the encampment with or without the students' cooperation.

They'd waited too long to play that card. There were articles about the encampment in every newspaper; if the school sent police against us, they'd have to answer for it to a national audience. More importantly, we'd made connections with the invisibles who

powered the infrastructure through which the school drew life. A strike was brewing among campus workers; we had already assured the ones we knew that we could provide them with food and support through it.

The encampment became a nerve center for a community that hadn't existed until we all started sticking our necks out. My friends and I began each day in the undergraduate library, utilizing a loophole in the computer lab to print out hundreds of pamphlets and fliers. We brought these back to the encampment and set them out on a table of free literature; all afternoon we'd discuss politics, economics, and liberation with the students who came through. In the evening, we met with campus workers and other locals. These meetings sometimes ended in bitter conflicts over how far we could go, what our goals were, and which compromises were worth making; not every student, squatter, or worker was ready for a head-on confrontation with the authorities, but those of us who were found each other and plotted accordingly. Diego and I would finish off the night driving around to every grocery store in town; the employees at some of them had started setting big boxes of produce aside just for us.

Together we had traveled to the extreme limit of our notions of what was possible; our camp was pitched on the far side of them. Political science majors began concerning themselves more with the practical aspects of the struggle against hierarchical power than the theoretical objections their professors raised against it. Anthropology students started looking at their own lives as experiments in subversive socialization. Criminals and dropouts envisioned a thieves' guild that could coordinate citywide actions to power an underground gift economy. Chefs fantasized about being able to cook whatever they wanted for people and purposes they cared about; dishwashers like myself discovered how much more gratifying it was to wash our friends' dishes for free than strangers' dishes for pay. We looked past our tents to the surrounding buildings: they too could be ours.

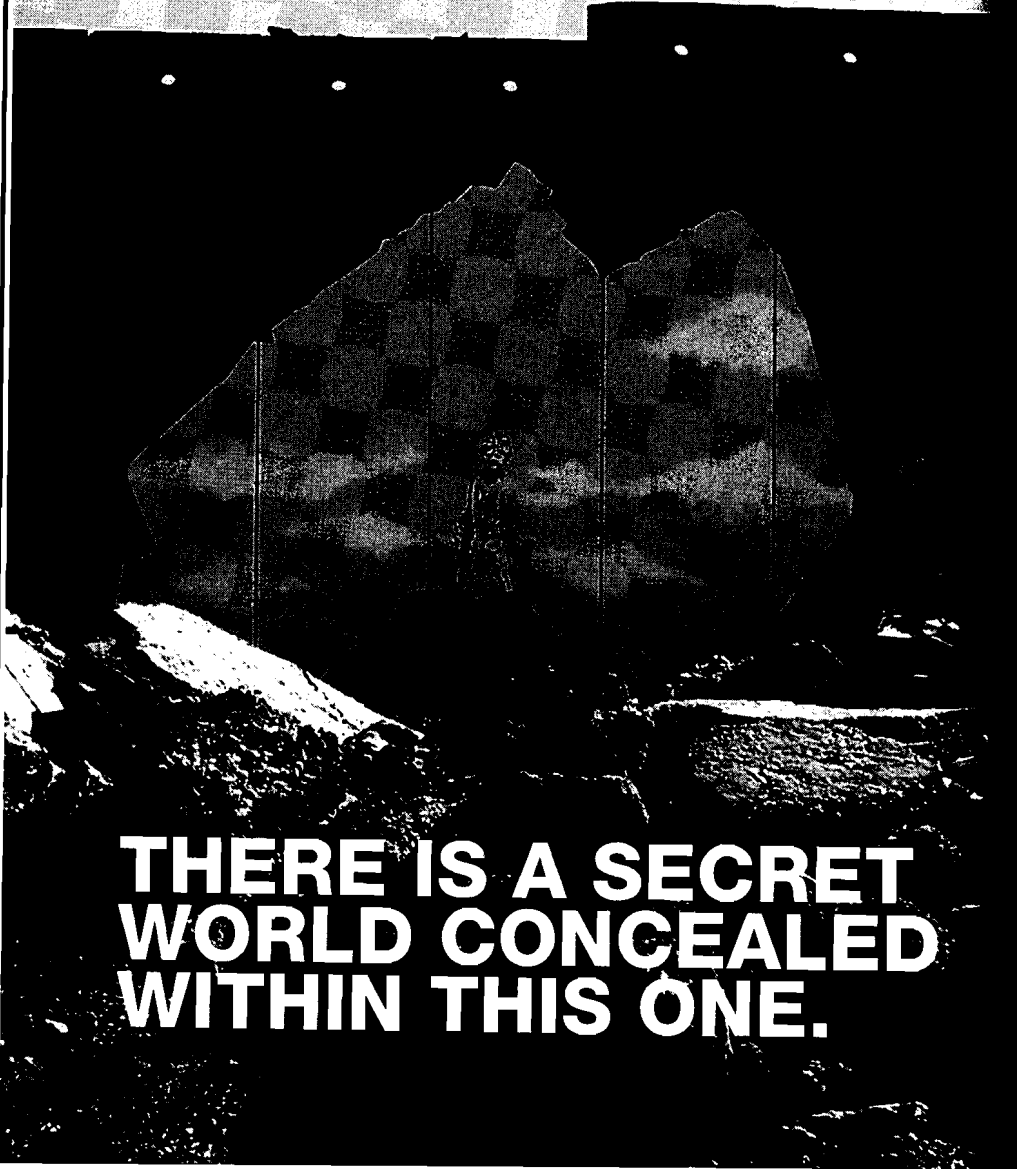
As a child, I'd had a daydream in which a messenger came to rescue me. He would appear unannounced and whisper, in a voice no one else heard, "*Grab your things—I've come to take you home.*" Later on, every time I walked past an empty, running car I would imagine leaping into it and driving far, far away. Still later I contemplated

suicide, which is what adults do when they can't bear their lives but can't imagine changing them. Diego and I were driving back from a construction site with a trunk full of barricading supplies when I realized how long it had been since I'd had any such thoughts. My companion behind the steering wheel was that messenger; the vehicle we were riding in was that stolen car; my old life was behind me, and I was still alive.

By the time they finally evicted us, we thought we were unstoppable. Kate and I were in love, students were dropping out, workers were on strike, and the whole campus was in an uproar. We laughed giddily in the back of the squad car, joking about what to do next. The enormity of what we were up against had yet to hit us.

Exiting the police station that night, we shuddered in the cool air, and all the things we'd never noticed before about the world suddenly snapped into focus. There were storm clouds close overhead, great white snow banks reflecting the light of the city as they sped past; they spoke to us of other lands, things to come, days ahead when everything would be very different from what we'd known—ourselves most of all.

This world, the so-called "real world," is just a front. Pull back the curtain and you'll see the libraries are filled with runaways writing novels, the highways are humming with escapees and sympathizers, receptionists and sensible mothers are straining at the leash for a chance to show how alive they still are . . . and all that talk of practicality and responsibility is just threats and bluffing to keep us from reaching out our hands to find that heaven lies in reach before us.



**THERE IS A SECRET
WORLD CONCEALED
WITHIN THIS ONE.**

You can taste it in the shock and roar of a first, unexpected kiss, or in the blood in your mouth that instant after an accident when you realize you're still alive. It blows in the wind you feel on the rooftops of a really reckless night of adventure. You hear it in the magic of your favorite songs, how they lift and transport you in ways no science or psychology could ever account for. Perhaps you've seen evidence of it scratched into bathroom walls in a code for which you had no key, or you've been able to make out a pale reflection of it in the movies that are supposed to keep us entertained. It's between the words when we speak of our desires and aspirations, still lurking somewhere beneath the limitations of what we feel to be possible and permissible.

When poets and radicals stay up until sunrise wracking their brains for the perfect sequence of words or deeds to fill hearts or cities with fire, they're trying to find a hidden entrance to it. When children escape out the window to go wandering late at night or freedom fighters search for a weakness in government fortifications, they're trying to steal into it—for they know better than the rest of us where the doors are hidden. When teenagers vandalize a billboard to provoke all-night chases with the police or anarchists interrupt an orderly demonstration to smash the windows of an army recruiting center, they're trying to storm its gates. When you're making love and you discover a new sensation or region of your lover's body, and the two of you feel like explorers discovering a desert oasis or the coast of an unknown continent—as if you are the first ones to reach the north pole or land on the moon—you are charting its frontiers.

Some find it in the sensation of danger: the feeling that, for one moment that seems to eclipse the past and future, something real is at stake. For others, it is a place of safety and sanctuary in a world of thoughtless brutality and destruction.

Maybe you stumbled into it by accident, once, amazed at what you found. The old world splintered behind and inside you, and no physician or metaphysician could ever put it back together again. Everything before became trivial, irrelevant, ridiculous as the horizons suddenly telescoped out around you and undreamt-of new paths offered themselves. And perhaps you swore that you would never return from whence you'd come, that you would live out the rest of your life electrified by that urgency, that thrill of discovery and transformation—but return you did.

Common sense dictates that this world can only be experienced temporarily, that it is just the shock of transition and nothing more; but the myths we share around our fires tell a different story: we hear of women and men who stayed there for weeks, years, who never returned, who lived and died there as heroes. We know, because we feel it in that atavistic chamber of our hearts that holds the memory of freedom from a time before time, that this secret world is near, waiting for us. You can see it in the flash in our eyes, in the abandon of our dances and love affairs, in the protest or party that gets out of hand.

You're not the only one trying to find it. We're out here, too—some of us are even waiting ahead there for you. Please know that anything you've ever done or considered doing to get there is not crazy, but beautiful, noble, necessary.

When we talk about revolution, the idea is that we could enter that secret world and never return—or that we could burn away this one, to reveal the one beneath entirely.

It also happens that, if you move along that city's compact walls, when you least expect it, you see a crack open and a different city appear. Then, an instant later, it has already vanished. Perhaps everything lies in knowing what words to speak, what actions to perform, and in what order and rhythm; or perhaps someone's gaze, answer, gesture is enough; it is enough for someone to do something for the sheer pleasure of doing it, and for her pleasure to become the pleasure of others: at that moment, all spaces change, all heights, distances; the city is transfigured, becomes crystalline, transparent as a dragonfly's wings. But everything must happen as if by chance, without attaching too much importance to it, without insisting that you are performing a decisive operation, remembering clearly that at any moment

the old city will return and weld its ceiling of concrete, neon, and smog over all heads.



Before the first arrow whistled from a bow, human beings dreamed of flying. Wingless, they lay on their backs in prickly fields, watching birds. Their descendants exchanged tales of flying carpets, winged horses and sandals, witches on broomsticks, women who put on magic coats and became swans. Sorcerers and shamans sought to elevate themselves through mystical experience; folk scientists plotted to steal flight from the angels as Prometheus had stolen fire from the gods.

Eleven centuries ago Abbas Ibn Firnas, one of the first aviation pioneers whose name is still known to us, launched himself off a mountain on a homemade glider. He was sixty-five years old. Inspired, an English monk modeled wings according to Ovid's description of the feathered cloaks Daedalus made; these bore him a full furlong through the sky, though he broke both legs upon landing. Marco Polo returned to Europe to report that the Chinese were sending people aloft in kites; Leonardo da Vinci drew up designs for a helicopter; three centuries before the famous flight at Kitty Hawk, a Turkish scientist shot himself a thousand feet in the air in a rocket and coasted safely into the Bosphorus. Hundreds, if not thousands, died in similar efforts to get a little closer to heaven. It was a worldwide obsession.

A few generations later, I sat in an airport waiting for a delayed flight, an anonymous commuter in an irritated crowd. I closed the book and returned it to my briefcase, reflecting that my species' love affair with flying had cooled. Perhaps it was the long lines at the security checkpoints: there were new restrictions on liquids in carry-on bags, and passengers had to make their way through several gauntlets of barking men in starched uniforms just to vie for seating. Perhaps it was the piercing tones over the intercom followed by announcements of further delays; perhaps it was the itch of the stale, sterile air, or the bizarre idea that somewhere out there there were people who wanted to fly planes into buildings with us inside them.

Once upon a time, orators declared that air travel would bring people together, erasing borders and prejudices to inaugurate a new era of universal amity and understanding; I reflected on this as my fellow passengers fussed with their cell phones, fastidiously avoiding eye contact with each other. Futurists had raved that the speed and brilliance of flight would inspire transcendent bliss; waiting on the runway, where the Wright brothers' hearts had pounded, my fellow passengers would flip idly through catalogs and pull down the shades to block out the sun. The challenge of flight had commanded the passions of the boldest and bravest of my ancestors; when our plane took off, after ignoring the droning safety presentation, their heirs would peer briefly out tiny double-plated windows at the carved-up landscape before settling back to watch—a movie! Ten thousand generations had dreamed of flying, and we needed *movies* to numb our boredom in the air!

Maybe flying was simply not that exciting, after all. Some long-sought miracles turn out to be letdowns; perhaps most do. Of course, this explanation didn't account for the fervor in Antoine de Saint Exupéry's writing, or the forces that impelled him and others to keep flying into increasingly perilous situations until their luck ran out. Nor did it account for the experiences of people I knew myself: hadn't Chloe described stealing her uncle's hang glider as the most exhilarating experience of her youth?

The alternative was less readily apparent, and its implications were more dramatic. What if flying, as we knew it, wasn't flying at all? Emotionally insulated from the adventure of getting into the air, physically isolated from the landscape below, deprived of any sensation of being airborne save a mild nausea, we might as well be crowding into the locker of an isolation tank. My fellow aeronauts would disembark at an airport identical to the one they had left, impatient to get on with their busy lives; there was no longer even a pretense that they were part of anything glorious, that they had anything in common with the daredevils and voyagers of times past. Perhaps the shamans of prehistory had known more about flight than businessmen with their frequent flier miles ever could.

And if flying was not really flying, what about travel itself, or dining, sex, work, friendship, romance, life? What if they, too, were not themselves? Everyone around me was staring blankly into television sets hanging from the ceiling. Some secrets are hidden in plain view.

Could it be that I had never lived? I had traveled, but everywhere I'd been people spoke my language, accepted my currency, affirmed my assumptions. I lived in rented apartments built and maintained by people I'd never met; I didn't know how to build a house, or even fix my own plumbing. I bought food products from the supermarket without any idea what was in them or where they came from; I didn't know what it was to hunt and kill an animal or rely on a garden for sustenance. I had donated to charities, but never seriously done anything to address injustice or even interact with the ones who suffered it. I had voted for politicians and signed petitions, but never organized anything in my community, never stopped a bulldozer or started a riot. I had dreams and aspirations, but it seemed I'd watched more action movies on television than I'd ever had adventures in real life. There were things I loved doing, goals I hoped to achieve, but I'd spent a lot more time working to pay for that rent, food, charity, television.

I'd been reflecting on these questions for months before I'd arrived at the ticket counter, but the situation at Gate Ten cast them in sharp relief. I wanted so earnestly to live, whatever that meant, but I was cocooned in a society that seemed to make that impossible, that sold itself to its citizens on precisely the grounds that it made that impossible.

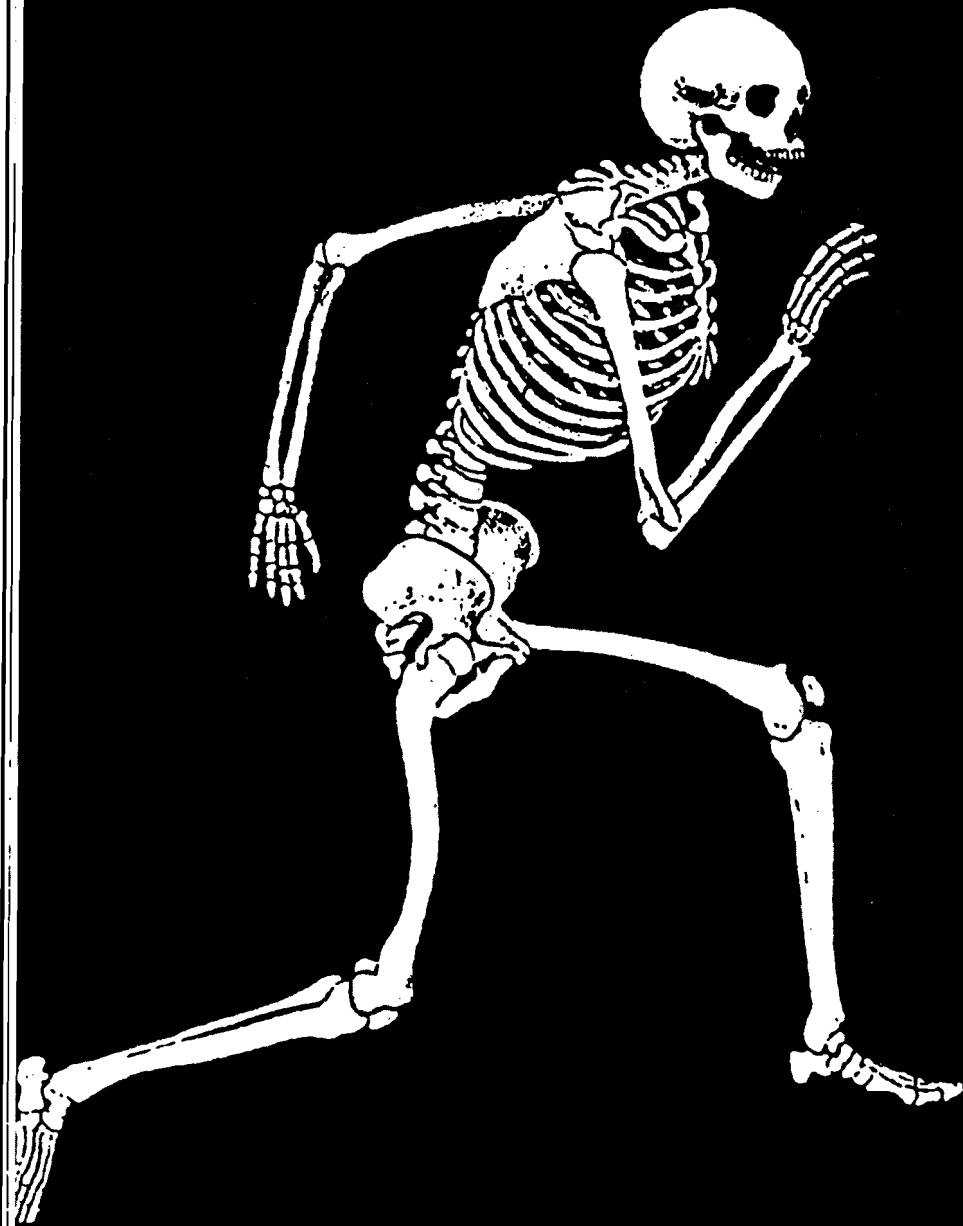
I was like everyone else there except I didn't have a mortgage, a family to feed, or a prescription drug habit to maintain. Perhaps I could find a way out. Of course, I had no idea what to do or where to go; all I had to go on was the vague notion that there must be something else out there. However I looked at it, certain facts of life seemed non-negotiable: without an income, for example, I imagined I would never ride in an airplane again unless I somehow got myself deported.

I considered that possibility. How many people can say they've been deported, anyway? Plenty, but not many from my social class. That was another kind of insulation, another layer of the cocoon.

Was I really desperate enough to dive off a cliff, knowing I would land somewhere or cease to exist? I couldn't deny that something stirred within me at the thought. What irony: the real flight my civilization offered held no attraction for me, but the proverbial leap into thin air made my pulse quicken. In making that leap, I could be an explorer like my ancestors, a pioneer like Abbas Ibn Firnas.

If I did, everyone I knew would accuse me of jettisoning myself from the world like a misguided Icarus. I would have to fight off the conviction, instilled in me since childhood, that those who do not play their parts in society are failures, parasites. On the other hand, if . . .

But at long last my flight had pulled into the gate. We all lined up dutifully to board in order of economic status. That plane was never going to alight in the Bosphorus or fly too close to the sun. If I wanted anything other than the future that was already written for me, I would have to strike out on my own.



Until our most fantastic demands are met, fantasy will always be at war with reality.

It hijacks history classes and funerals, waylays secretaries on the way to the coffee machine, turns rails into slides and shopping malls into playgrounds—it sends lives spinning *out of control*. Movie directors endeavor to harness it, travel agents to peddle it, political parties to enlist it; but fantasy, like those who pursue it in earnest, can serve no employer.

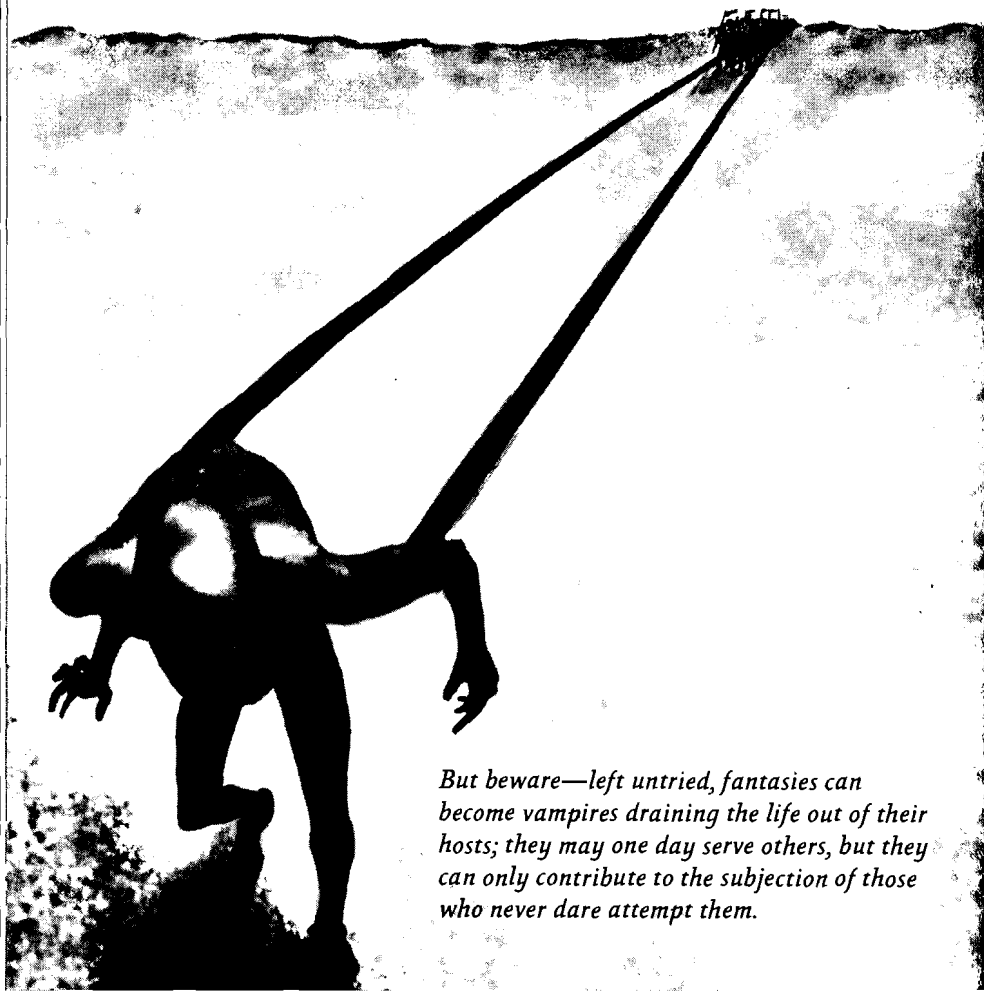
Now that every continent has been conquered and every countryside explored, nothing is more precious than passages to *new* worlds. Mass-manufactured faiths are haunted by a thousand dreams of escape—and fancy weaves better wings for flighty youth than pragmatism ever fashioned our forebears.

As revolutionaries, *of course* we are fighting for our daydreams! When we cannot stomach another hour of *this*, we side with those moments we surprise ourselves, flashes in which anything feels possible, peak experiences that may last only instants—and therefore with every inhibited impulse, forbidden pleasure, unexploded dream, all the stifled songs which, unleashed, could create an upheaval like no one has ever seen. *And when the dust settles afterwards, we will side with them again.*

Call this escapist—perhaps it is; but what class of people is most disturbed by the idea of escape? *Jailers*. Right or wrong, selfless or selfish, possible or impossible, we're *getting out of here*.

The invitation to a new world may take a lifetime or more to extend; self-imposed outcast status may be established in order to receive the transmissions, to give the seeds soil in which to grow. The one who does this is not jettisoning herself from life after all, but providing it a port of entry—quietly metabolizing the garbage of the old world into the new one, just as other “parasites” do.

Have we ever complained because we are misunderstood, misjudged, misheard or unheard? That fate is our distinction: we would not take ourselves seriously enough if we wished it were otherwise. All that is great happens far from the marketplace and from fame; inventors of new values and architects of new paradigms have always hidden in the margins, starved in the ghettos, acted in the shadows. There is not yet space in streets or newspapers for the parcels we have to deliver.



But beware—left untried, fantasies can become vampires draining the life out of their hosts; they may one day serve others, but they can only contribute to the subjection of those who never dare attempt them.

All along, he'd assumed he was only at the beginning of the grand narrative of his life, that he had time to kill before setting off on the adventures he described so compellingly to me in advance. Only in the end did he discover that he'd been a peripheral character in a very different story.

Death had been waiting from the outset for the decisive moment at which to call his body to mutiny. The crew abandoned their posts, doused the lanterns, set the vessel aflame, and scattered on the wind.

There were still things I wished I could ask him, conversations I'd hoped to revisit, but it was too late. He'd become a memory, a sort of archetype existing only in those he haunted; the mystery of those unfinished discussions was carved into the world forever. I still had his emails in my account, but there was no one on the other end.

What any of us would give for an audience with one of our archetypes! Some of them have passed into eternity without even having had to die.

Death finalizes the gulfs that separate us from each other—and from ourselves, from our own pasts. It interrupts the storylines we project onto our lives, dispelling the connections between the isolated moments of our experience—leaving them trapped, mute, in eternity.

That void not only circumscribes our existence but surrounds and isolates each instant, rendering them all irrevocable and precious beyond measure. We fear the very thought of it because it forces us to acknowledge that we can never return to a single moment of our lives.

I hadn't reflected much upon death before Daniel died. I was still in shock when we went to the memorial service. It was unnerving to feel so heartbroken and yet so numb, so incapable of engaging with my grief. Even surrounded by others in mourning I still felt isolated, alone in my thoughts and my sorrow, with no outlet for the desperate urgency that possessed me. If there was a time to

wail and rend our hair, to leap onto tables and shout out songs in his memory, to swear to avenge his senseless death with our own momentous lives, it was upon us. We were not up to the task. The faces around me looked listless, even bored.

I hadn't reflected much on death until then, even though I'd known I was going to die since I was a child. That is to say: *I'd been bored from before I could remember with the fact of my own mortality.* Was I in denial, or simply so bored with everything else that it didn't matter?

The next morning, I was back on the fourth floor with the view of the identical building across the street, shuffling through the faxes that had come in over the weekend. My breakfast remained in the desk, uneaten, and the phone kept ringing. I hadn't always been bored; even in that office, I'd surreptitiously read the books he lent me and we'd shared some good conversations over the phone and instant messenger.

An electronic memo arrived from down the hall: the coffee machine was jammed and it was up to me to fix it. What if he had known he was going to die, what then? Would he have counted backwards from that day, lived differently? Would he have frozen up in the face of that terrible knowledge?

Coffee had somehow spilled all over the counter; it was soaking into the box of doughnuts. I picked up the box, moved to throw it away, paused with it in one hand and a wad of napkins in the other—I would be in trouble if there were no doughnuts, could I save them somehow?—just long enough for the phone to ring.

I let it ring and tossed the doughnuts in the trash. What if I could know in advance when my own death would come? It was waiting ahead of me, as sure as Daniel's had been, as sure as all of ours are. If someone could look at time from above, taking in the sweep of history all at once, we would all appear as the walking dead, moving obliviously along our preordained tracks towards inexorable ends.

That wasn't much of a stretch—I knew my work schedule day by day through the end of December. Ten years ago, a summer had been an eternity; now entire years were flying by in a blur interrupted only by deaths, marriages, and other catastrophes. There is no more commonplace observation than this, but to my knowledge no one has yet set out to study why children and adults experience the passing of time differently.

I unplugged the coffee machine and carried it with me to the elevator. In innumerable other office buildings, innumerable other secretaries were struggling with innumerable other coffee machines; innumerable elevators bore innumerable employees to innumerable washrooms; innumerable phones rang and rang and rang. They were like a physical manifestation of the inevitability of our lives and deaths, a machine pushing us at maximum speed along our preordained tracks. I pressed the button for the top floor.

Death is the ultimate imposition upon and boundary to our freedom, but it only formalizes the renunciations we make ourselves, moment by moment, throughout our lives. I imagined all the occupants of those office buildings rising in mutiny like the cells in Daniel's body.

I got out at the top floor and walked to the spot where the janitors sometimes went to smoke. No one was there. I opened the window and dangled the coffee machine out by its cord, eleven stories above the pavement. I let it go. It shrank from view until there was a distant crash; a pedestrian lurched back absurdly in surprise.

Fuck it, I said to myself. *Behold, the first dawn the world has ever seen.* This is the rebellion of the dead.

Tremble a little upon the threshold.
Today you have been born, out of
abysmal sorrow and useless knowledge,
words, devices, instruments of
calculation and destruction; out of hates
and holocausts, ghosts and gruesome
fates, crimes, visions, and disaster—and
despair, now a friend and helpful.



That day I quit my job, threw my wallet in the trash, and set out to break every rule I knew. It took a very long time.

Oh, if only that were true! I did no such thing. Even walking out of the airport, I was mostly playacting; I wasn't about to build a glider and launch myself into the abyss. Making that one defiant gesture was difficult enough—it felt like a rupture in the very fabric of reality. I was not the sort of person who cancelled a business trip after driving to the airport! It was not until much later that I would develop the ability to wrench myself out of routines without flinching.

Internally, I still mirrored my society. The forces that comprised me, though increasingly at odds, were arranged in a strictly regimented hierarchy; I harbored private resentments, illicit longings, impulses to rebel, but all these were kept in check. In my heart, as in the city where I lived, there were vigilant police, restless ghettos, unaccountable tyrants, decimated wildernesses, hoarded treasures rusting in vaults. My associations with others were like the diplomatic relations between nations: non-aggression pacts, behind-the-scenes machinations, authoritarian powers negotiating over the heads of oppressed masses separated by well-guarded borders. There had been times when a renegade faction had precipitated an upheaval, such as the affair with Chloe that destroyed my marriage, and everything had to be reworked; but the essential order, and above all the commitments that safeguarded it, had always remained unshaken.

The fundamental change that took place that afternoon was invisible, though it ultimately had spectacular effects. From that moment forward, I identified with the insurgent currents inside myself against the society that proscribed them. I had always regarded them as something foreign and dangerous, flirting with them but keeping them under wraps; but at the airport, when I'd permitted them to take the reins in broad daylight, the world had not come to an end. I'd crossed the line between flirtation and indulgence, discovered that something lay beyond it, and wanted more. If my own habits and obligations obstructed my path, so much the worse for them.

I knew there was commercial skydiving for people like me, adventure tourism and recreational drugs and all sorts of other pressure valves, but I was determined to hold out for the real thing. All the career options and status symbols I'd worked my whole life to accumulate were starting to look like so many constraints and charades. I would let the wild streaks within me deepen and spread until I could set off, with my own wildness, a chain reaction that could make the world hospitable for them.

Every revolution is essentially the revolt of a people against itself. The hands that raise skyscrapers are the same ones that assemble barricades. Like a body in upheaval, painfully transforming itself into something else, people seized by insurgent desires wrest themselves from everything they know and attempt to reconstitute themselves as a new society.

Every struggle that takes place in a society plays out within each of the individuals within it. The same fault line that opens in a boulevard between riot police and rioters runs through the private lives of each officer and dissident. If enough of them can win their personal struggles against servility, addiction, fear, and inertia—that is, if that which is oppressed within each individual triumphs—then likewise the entire society can remake itself.

So I kept my job—barely, after canceling that trip—but where once I'd focused on advancing my career, now I regarded my leisure-time pursuits as my true vocation and aspired to increase their scope accordingly. Once I'd invested my earnings in the stock market, savings accounts, even golf clubs; now I smuggled every resource I could out of my workplace and sought a new calling in which to invest myself. My extracurricular activities became the center of my life. In this, I joined a nation of students doodling in anticipation of the bell, nursing home inmates counting the days to their next visit, spouses yearning for forbidden romance, and employees who, like me, had concluded that their professions were not paths to self-realization but barriers to it.

That is to say—I was like them, but I didn't know where to start to connect with them. My colleagues didn't dare give any indication of their true feelings; I barely ever saw my neighbors; I felt separated from old friends and family by an unbridgeable chasm. I was at an impasse, an insurgent without allies fighting a war without fronts. All that changed when I stumbled upon the occupation.



At first, we were like wolves, just out for ourselves. We'd discovered petty crime—shoplifting, scams, graffiti, vandalism—and we practiced it the way other people practiced religion, sports, or drugs. Like Pablo, we thought of ourselves as being at war, but it was a private war, six of us against six billion of them. Like most service workers, we hated our bosses, but hadn't worked out a critique of authority; we'd resented our teachers in school in the same instinctual way, just as our mothers had resented our fathers without using words like patriarchy. I didn't think of myself as opposing capitalism—for me it was much more specific: I wanted to escape the conveyor belt that brought piles of dirty plates into the dish room, and the stench of industrial cleaner mingled with rancid grease, and the nights I woke up scraping filth off phantom dishes in my sleep.

If delinquency didn't enable me to escape all that entirely, at least it carved out a little territory apart from it. The first time I stole a pair of shoes, I was so conditioned to my place at the bottom of the social ladder I stole the cheapest ones in the store. A year later, I was accustomed to dining on the finest organic cuisine, products intended for only the wealthiest shoppers: why not grab the most expensive items, if I was risking the same charges?

This shift in diet was accompanied by radical changes in my self-esteem, which led to new trains of thought. In a very concrete way, the foods I was permitted by law to eat reflected my value in society. As a dishwasher, I literally couldn't afford the products I stole; did that mean I didn't deserve them? My manager, who never got his hands dirty, could take for granted luxuries I had to risk jail time just to taste. The counselors at school had told us people ended up with jobs like ours because they didn't get enough education, but I could see through that right away—wherever there were restaurants and cafeterias, somebody was going to have to wash the dishes, and it sure wasn't going to be the owners. Some of my coworkers had been to college and had nothing to show for it but debt.

When I reflected on the poverty I'd seen growing up and the centuries of destitution there must have been before that, it outraged me that anyone would condemn stealing as immoral. Could anyone really argue with a clean conscience that all that privation was not enough, that poor people throughout history should have had to go without all they had stolen, as well?

So we developed a broader analysis of what we were fighting against, but our motives remained schizophrenic: we despised rich people, their privileges and their sense of entitlement and above all the injustices they heaped on others, but envied their lifestyle—even though it made them soft, even though it necessitated the exploitation of others. Living in constant conflict with the law kept our senses sharp and spiced up a day-to-day existence that would otherwise have been utterly demoralizing, but it didn't make things any easier for others of our social class—at the most, I could take some groceries over to my mom's place, but I had no idea what to do for everyone else on her street.

After the first few arrests hit home, we had to look for a more sustainable approach. A couple broke off to pursue careers as hardcore criminals; the rest of us scaled back the more hazardous activities and stepped up everything else. We focused more and more on the surplus of our society—it was less carefully guarded. And what bounty! Why fill our pockets inside the store with one eye on the security guard when we could fill up a whole pickup truck out back?

That was how I finally came to question my own materialism. I'd been raised to want things I could never have—sports cars, gold

watches, designer sunglasses and furniture. Everyone in the country was chasing that same mirage, and somewhere there were waste dumps overflowing with all those things—one of them wasn't far from my old neighborhood. At distribution centers I would look into dumpsters packed to the top with perfectly good juice and shake my head in disgust. Wage slaves like me were throwing away our entire lives working to make things we could never own, and our society was shoveling them right past us into the trash. I didn't want anything to do with it, even as a thief.

Driving around at night, gathering copper to sell or merchandise we'd damaged during the day, Diego and I would mock the ubiquitous billboards. "Look at that one," he'd point out, "Nice cowboy hat, gringo! And to top it off it's called 'Colt 45'—ever notice how every fucking malt liquor company has a name like that? We're supposed to identify with the brand names, to feel tough and powerful as we wreck our livers—but the barrel's pointed at us."

"And the crazy part is I still want the stuff. What else am I gonna do with the rest of the night?" This was a couple months before we met the students who invited us to the encampment. "I know how to get everything for free, but I've got no idea how to get free myself."

"For that, we'll need a bigger gang," Diego deadpanned.



...AND UNDERMINE

Have you noticed that exhortations to indulge yourself are always followed by *suggestions*? Proselytizers seek footholds to claim territory within you, salesmen grasp for handles to jerk you around . . . from new-age prophets to advertisers, from pornographers to radicals, everyone exhorts you to “pursue your desires,” but the question remains: *which ones*? The “real” ones? Who decides which those are?

It’s a war for your soul on every front. And those much-contested desires are all *constructed*, anyway—they change, they’re dependent on external factors, culture, the whole context and history of our

society. We “like” fast food because we have to hurry back to work, because processed supermarket food doesn’t taste much better, because the nuclear family—for those who still have even that—is too small and stressed to sustain much festivity in cooking and eating. We “have to” check our email because the dissolution of community has taken our friends and kindred far away, because our bosses would rather not have to talk to us, because “time-saving” technology has claimed the hours once used to write letters—and killed all the passenger pigeons, besides. We “want” to go to work because in this society no one looks out for those who don’t, because it’s hard to imagine more pleasurable ways to spend time when everything around us is designed for commerce and consumption. Every craving we feel, every conception we form, is framed in the language of the civilization that creates us.

Does this mean we would want differently in a different world? Yes, but not because we would be free to feel our “natural” desires—no such things exist. Beyond the life you live, you have no “true” self—you *are* precisely what you do and think and feel. That’s the real tragedy for the man who spends his life talking on his cell phone and attending business meetings and fidgeting with the remote control: it’s not that he denies himself his dreams, necessarily, but that he makes them answer to reality rather than attempting the opposite. The accountant regarded with such pity by runaway teenage lovers may in fact be happy when he arrives home from work in time for his favorite sitcom—but it is a very different happiness than the one they experience on the lam.

If our desires are constructs, if we are the products of our environment, then our freedom is a question of how much control we have over that environment. It’s nonsense to say a woman is free to feel however she wants about her body when she grows up surrounded by diet advertisements and posters of anorexic models. It’s nonsense to say a man is free to live as he pleases when everything he needs to do to acquire food, shelter, companionship, and a sense of accomplishment is already established and all that remains is for him to choose between prefabricated options. We must *make* our freedom by forging the realities which, in turn, fashion us.

This sounds like a lot to ask. But change, revolutionary change, is going on everywhere all the time—and *everyone* plays a part in it, consciously or not. Our lives are vastly different today than they

were even a mere decade ago. The question is simply whether we take responsibility for our part in the ongoing transformation of the cosmos, acting deliberately and with a sense of our own power, or frame our actions as reactions, participating in unfolding events accidentally as if we were purely victims of circumstance.

Forget about whether “the” revolution will ever happen—the best reason to be a revolutionary is that it is a better way to *live*. It offers you a chance to lead a life that *matters*, gives you a relationship to injustice so you don’t have to deny your own grief and outrage, keeps you conscious of the give and take always going on between individual and institution, self and community, one and all. No institution can offer you freedom—but you can experience it in challenging and reinventing institutions. When school children make up their own words to the songs they are taught, when people show up by the tens of thousands to interfere with a closed-door meeting of expert economists discussing *everyone’s* lives, they are rediscovering that self-determination, like power, belongs only to the ones who exercise it.

If, as idealists like us insist, we can indeed create whatever world we want, then perhaps it’s true that we could adapt to any world, too. But spending your life in reaction and adaptation, hurrying to catch up to whatever is already happening, means being perpetually a step behind, at the mercy of history as it unfolds. That’s no way to go about pursuing your desires, whichever ones you choose to pursue.

Don’t be too hard on yourself about the fragments of the old order that remain within you. You can’t sever yourself from the chain of cause and effect that produced you—not with any amount of will-power. The trick is to find ways to indulge your programming that simultaneously subvert it—that create, in the process of satisfying the old desires, conditions that foster new ones. If you need to follow leaders, find leaders who will help you depose them from the pedestal you put them on; if you wish to lead others, find equals who will help you dethrone yourself; if you have to fight against others, find wars you can wage for *everyone’s* benefit. When it comes to dodging the imperatives of your conditioning, you’ll find that *indulge and undermine* is a far more effective program than the old heritage of “renounce and struggle” passed down from a humorless Christianity.

One of my most disappointing discoveries was that I desired so little. After long disuse, my passions were stunted like bonsai trees: trite, typical, boring. I’d hoped to throw myself at their mercy, to follow their tyrannical dictates and thus, even in leaving the beaten path, retain some sort of guide through the wilderness. Without that, I was totally at sea.

The limits of my desire were a sort of cage, no less than the limitations imposed by civil society. Even after I followed the coffee machine out of the office, I had no idea where to start. Should I take my meager savings and go to Ecuador? Visit family in Southeast Asia? Move to New Mexico? Would life really be more immediate or authentic there? Should I take up mountain climbing, or apply to graduate school, or dedicate myself to volunteer work? I was surrounded by banality, trying to choose between clichés. I wanted to be lit up, electrified by the world in every moment—but for that to be possible, the world and I would both have to change.

Likewise, if I was to share adventures with others, it was up to me to infect them with new desires. As it was, I knew no one with whom I could undertake anything more audacious than a night out dancing. I tried to imagine myself as a seductress, inspiring friends and former coworkers with hedonistic fervor the way others drove suitors to distraction, suicide, and feats of bravado. I couldn’t imagine a role for which I was less suited.

And yet I was determined that my life would be something out of the ordinary, if I could not undo Daniel’s death, at least I would avenge my own. I counted the days, my savings trickling away as I waited for the right opportunities and compatriots to come along. Based on my experience leaving the office, I surmised I’d be able to recognize them by the terror they would inspire in me.

History is not something that happens to people—it is the activity of people. Culture does not dictate human behavior—it is the sum of human behavior. Technological progress is not a force of nature, either. There is no civilization without us civilizing, no capitalism without us capitalizing and capitulating.

These are hard things to remember in the boss's office, let alone working the checkout line at Wal-Mart. The mass media encourages us to feel sentimental about "our" achievements: the space shuttle soars, the disease is cured, the star gets the girl at the end of the movie.

But we can make our own music, mythology, science, technology, tradition, psychology, literature, history, ethics, political power. Until we do, we're stuck buying mass-produced movies and compact discs made by corporate mercenaries, sitting faceless and immobilized at arena rock performances and sports events, struggling with other people's inventions and programs and theories that make less sense to us than sorcery did to our ancestors, shamefacedly accepting the judgments of priests and agony columnists and radio talk show hosts, berating ourselves for not living up to the standards set by college entrance exams and glamour magazines, listening to parents and counselors and psychiatrists and managers tell us we are the ones with the problems, buying our whole lives from the same specialists and entrepreneurs we sell them to—and gnashing our teeth in smothered fury as they cut down the last trees and heroes with the cash and authority we give them. These things aren't inevitable, inescapable tragedies—they're consequences of the passivity to which we have relegated ourselves. In the checkout lines of supermarkets, on the dialing and receiving ends of 900 numbers, in the locker rooms before gym classes and cafeteria shifts, we long to be protagonists in our *own* epics, masters of our own fate.

If we are to transform ourselves, we must transform the world—but to begin reconstructing the world, we must reconstruct ourselves. Today we are all occupied territory. Our appetites and attitudes and roles have all been molded by this world that turns us against ourselves and each other. How can we take and share control of our lives, and neither fear nor falter, when we've spent those lives being conditioned to do the opposite?



Individuals cannot be autonomous— we are formed by relationships:

without them, we do not exist. One cannot create meaning in a vacuum—but neither can one be anything but at the mercy of and alienated by a meaning that arrives from on high. One must make meaning with others, cooperatively, for it to be meaningful. Freedom is not standing alone, man versus humanity—those who set out to “pursue their desires” as individualists forget that even those desires are socially constructed. Neither is freedom to be found in unquestioning obedience to law: a free human being is not a law-follower or a law-breaker, but an inventor and reinventor of laws, a part of a tribe.* When we want to rebel against the limits a culture imposes, we call it “ideology,” or “conformity”; but we cannot escape culture itself—we carry it with us as we flee, leaving a trail of it in our wake.

Culture is made up of languages—languages of words and numbers, of concepts and assumptions, of conventions and expectations, of problems and solutions, of answers and questions. Languages write our lives: they set the options whenever we make a choice, however free we may be in selecting. At the same time, it is our use of them that makes them what they are and reproduces them. Terms in languages work only because we hold them in common; language-writing is the ultimate collective activity, the common denominator of all social activity. To be free of language is impossible in human relations—as we know it, that universe not only is described by language but exists *as* language.

Languages enforce their constraints upon us—that is to say, those constraints *are* us—but every time we adjust a concept or subvert an expectation, we remake ourselves. It is in this constant redefining of terms, the ongoing creation and negation of forms and assumptions, that freedom becomes possible.

A cancer of mass-produced, impersonal, prefabricated culture threatens our species. A creature does not die “of” cancer—a creature dies by *becoming* cancer, when its cells begin reproducing sameness at the expense of diversity. A culture that sets up a million franchises with workers in matching uniforms executing identical tasks is a

* In former times, culture was developed in tribal groups, on a small enough scale that everyone could participate.

cancer out of control, a monster riding the humanity that gave birth to it into an untimely grave. We need a culture that is a dialogue, an interplay between us and the languages we think and speak and live in—not a monologue arriving out of a loudspeaker.

Fighting for this, we attack the average, deny the universal, and nurture the anomalous.



Like I said, the real turning point came when we got involved in the encampment. I grew more in the course of that month than I had in several years. Finally, our rage and marginalization, not to mention our hard-won skills, were assets rather than barriers; finally, we could wage our secret war out in the open, in a way that connected us to others rather than isolating us.

My friends and I were very different from most people there, but it was such an intense experience that it drew us all together; those who shared it as a common reference point were bonded for years afterwards regardless of how their paths diverged. I hadn't had much interest in college students before, and the ones with whom I'd crossed paths had made it clear they had no interest in me; it was only when all the barriers of class and habit were removed and we were joined in a common project that we could interact as human beings rather than social roles. I'd been on the opposite end of that same dynamic with older workers—I faulted them, unjustly, for failing to escape the fate I feared awaited me, and I imagined they resented me for my youth and mobility—but at the encampment there was no young or old except in terms of how long people had been involved.

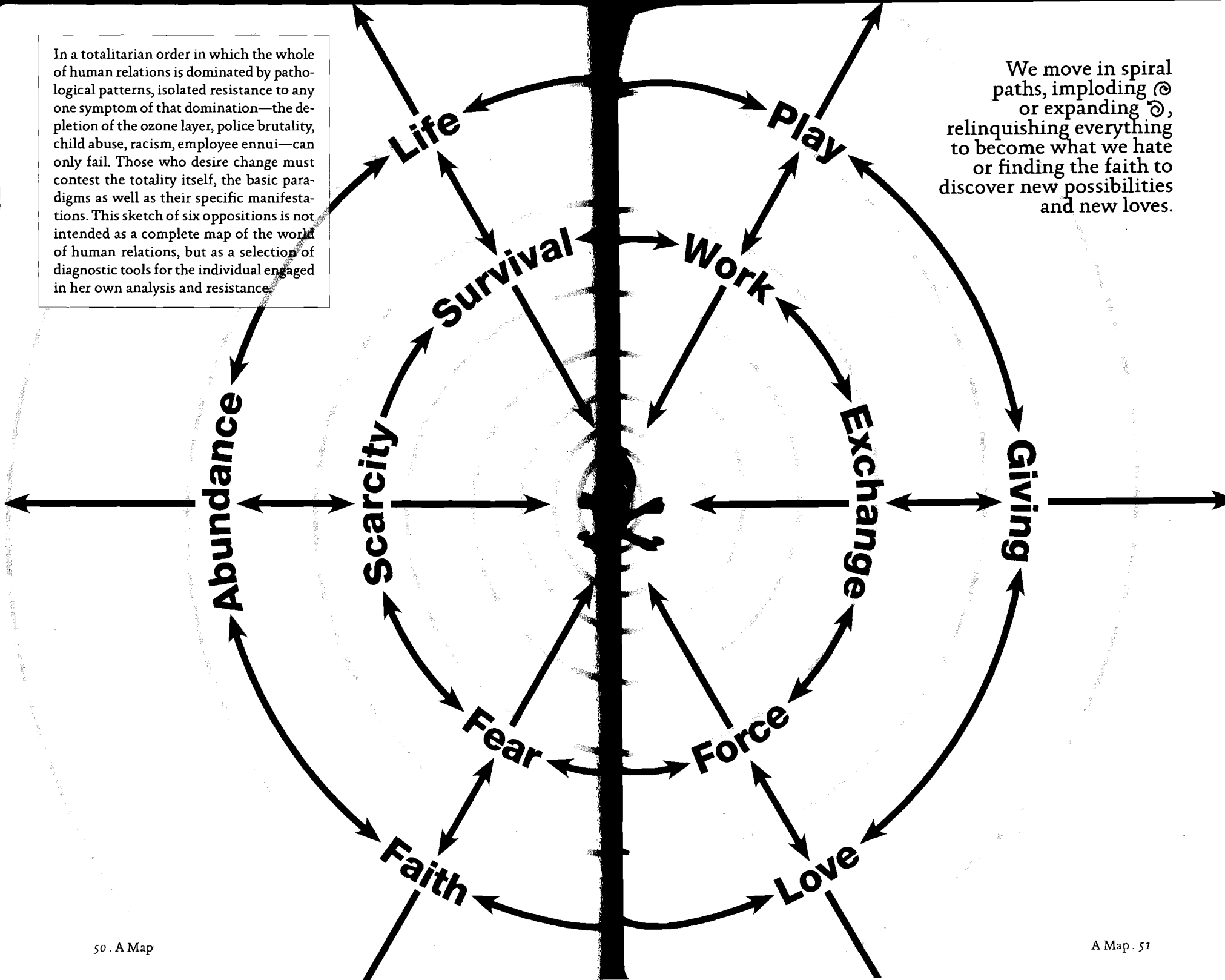
Time itself passed differently. Because I never knew what would happen next, it often felt like I'd lived through a week by the time I lay down at the end of the day. In the heat of that urgency, our different pasts and uncertain futures fell away and all that remained was the concentrated rush of the present. Coordinating to provide for everyone in the camp, staying up late preparing for rumored police attacks, sharing the daily triumph of maintaining the occupation against all odds, we grew together into one organism.

Once, we'd evaluated activities according to how much they paid; now we looked at them in terms of how rewarding they were to experience and how beneficial they were for others. Before, we'd sought our own material interests, taking it for granted that there wasn't enough of what we wanted to go around; now we sought social interests, and found that even crowded four to a tent we felt wealthier than ever before. At first, I'd just wanted to get out of the dish room—now we were talking about making a clean break with Western civilization and building a new society in its midst. The fears that had kept me in place, the bad habits that had tied me down, the unhealthy assumptions I'd developed about human nature and my own potential—all these came into sharp focus as I discovered what it meant to do without them.

Day by day, step by step, we were mapping an entirely new way of living. The encampment was the laboratory in which we began this experiment, but it was also a beachhead from which to extend it.

In a totalitarian order in which the whole of human relations is dominated by pathological patterns, isolated resistance to any one symptom of that domination—the depletion of the ozone layer, police brutality, child abuse, racism, employee ennui—can only fail. Those who desire change must contest the totality itself, the basic paradigms as well as their specific manifestations. This sketch of six oppositions is not intended as a complete map of the world of human relations, but as a selection of diagnostic tools for the individual engaged in her own analysis and resistance.

We move in spiral paths, imploding @ or expanding @, relinquishing everything to become what we hate or finding the faith to discover new possibilities and new loves.



Abundance

The more you can recognize the opportunities life offers, the more you can take advantage of them

The more full and free life is, the easier it is to recognize all the opportunities and treasures it has to offer

Life

The more your life is in your own hands, the more it is an experience of liberty and pleasure

The more you approach life as a game, the more full and free it becomes

Play

The more pleasure you take in your activities, the more freely you share the fruits

The more freely you give and receive, the more your life can be a game rather than a struggle

Gift Giving

The more you share with others, the more they share with you, and the more thankful you are for one another's existence

The more you love, the more freely you give

Love

The more you love, the more you trust

The more you trust, the more you can love

Faith

The more you trust the world, the more wonderful things you recognize in it

The more you recognize the treasures life has to offer, the more faith you have in it

Abundance

The more you can recognize the opportunities life offers, the more you can take advantage of them

The more full and free life is, the easier it is to recognize all the opportunities and treasures it has to offer

Scarcity

The less you trust the world, the less you see what it has to offer

The less you live, the less you see what the world has to offer

Survival

The more you think you need to survive, the harder you have to work

The more you work, the less you live

Work

The more you work, the more you feel the need to be compensated for your sacrifice

The less freely you give and receive, the harder you have to work to provide for yourself

Exchange

Force is always present where exchange must be negotiated, where giving is not practiced for its own sake

The more you depend on force, the less you can give and receive freely

Force

The more you depend on force, the more you have to fear

The less you trust, the more you depend on force

Fear

The more you fear the world, the less you recognize what it offers

The less you recognize what the world has to offer, the less you trust

Scarcity

The less you trust the world, the less you see what it has to offer

The less you live, the less you see what the world has to offer

Abundance

All of us can be rich . . .

Abundance and scarcity are not just measures of the resources that exist to meet needs—they are different ways of regarding both resources and needs, which become reflected *in the world*.

Abundant resources exceed the need for them; they may even multiply when utilized. Most of the things which set life apart from survival—love, friendship, confidence, imagination, courage, adventure, experience—are available in abundance: the more you partake of them, the more there is of them for you and everyone else as well.

Abundance and scarcity are above all the manifestations of opposing approaches to life: ingenuity or inertia, faith or fear. If we restructure our values and assumptions about what the cosmos has to offer us, we can enter a new world of plenty.

Scarcity

. . . not all of us can be wealthy.

Scarce resources exist in limited supply, and there may simply not be enough to go around. A scarcity economy is driven by the considerations necessitated by those conditions: the “laws” of supply and demand are imposed first of all by a shortage, real or perceived, of needed goods.

It might seem that scarcity is simply an inescapable fact of life, but it's not that simple. Not all scarcities are imposed by circumstances—often, we impose them upon ourselves by the ways we assess and apply our assets. In our technologically advanced, post-industrial civilization, tools and amenities that were unheard of before are plentiful, yet most of us distinctly feel there to be a shortage of the things we need. This should not be surprising, for our social and economic systems *depend* on there not being enough for everybody. Everyone can have a full life—but not everyone can have a full wallet. Our society institutes scarcity and deprivation, by framing life as a desperate rush for limited material wealth and status.

It used to be said that the only free men are the hobo and the king. They are indeed the only ones who can claim to be lords of all they survey—though for utterly different reasons: the former pos-



There's enough for everyone,
but they'd rather throw it away than share it with you

sesses the entire world by releasing it, while the latter still owns only what he can conquer. Here we can see the paradigms of abundance and scarcity in action as philosophies of life. Likewise, the scavenger who thrives off the excess of his society sees opportunity and adventure where the executive sees only hunger and destitution; the non-monogamous lover sees love as something that only increases in richness and depth by being shared freely, while the possessive husband regards it as a precarious prize obtained by sacrifice and hard labor, which must be hoarded and caged; the would-be rock idol or movie star needs a million anonymous fans watching his actions to validate them—selfhood itself is subject to scarcity in a spectator society—while the woman in a supportive, egalitarian community generally attains self-confidence and happiness to the extent that she helps others around her do the same.

Here's a story: once upon a time, human beings lived in a relationship of trust with the earth, seeing it as a wellspring of abundance.*

* "Paleolithic man [sic, throughout], a hunter/gatherer who understood the value of sharing and mutual assistance, 'had' nothing—why hoard things when the whole world is yours? Later, Neolithic man, who toiled in the fields, sometimes produced a surplus, which he bartered with others—and thus for him a shift occurred from being *in the world* to having *things*, mere parts of the world. The hunters and gatherers never curbed their materialistic impulses—but they never made institutions out of them, either. Homo Economicus is a construction, the result of ten thousand years of 'subjugation': that is to say, etymologically speaking, life under the yoke."—Finnegan Bell in *Hunters and Gatherers through the Ages*

We ate fruit, which grew freely around us, naturally wrapped in a biodegradable peel and containing seeds from which more fruit trees would grow after the fruit was eaten. Today we eat candy bars, for which we must exchange our labor, of which supplies are strictly limited—and when we throw away the wrappers, which are manufactured from plastics and chemicals foreign to nature, we can be sure that we are adding to the slow accumulation of garbage that makes fruit trees less and less abundant. Our ancestors lived in conditions of feast or famine, celebrating when their cups overflowed and whistling through leaner times, never diminishing their faith in the bountiful earth by measuring what it gave them; for us, everything is a transaction, an occasion for computation and calculation.

Life,

Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness

Life is existence when it feels worth waking up for in the morning. Life is written about in epic poetry, love songs, Shakespeare's plays and sonnets; survival is treated in medical textbooks, urban planning reports, and ergonomics presentations. Life is glorious, heartbreaking, extravagant; survival, without life, is ridiculous, burdensome, absurd.

Survival,

Safety, and the Pursuit of Property

Survival is life reduced to imperatives, whether biological (*get air to breathe! get food to eat! get laid!*) or cultural (*get air conditioning to keep cool! get a television to keep up with what's going on! get a sports car to attract a mate!*). It's often ambiguous which class specific mandates fall into, as in the case of the computer programmer who cannot feed himself without a can opener; but the essential character of these needs is that they appear non-negotiable.

Survival resources tend to be seen as scarce—there's only so much food, water, housing, and medicine in the world; but as the famous tramp responded to a bourgeois man's query ("you've got to eat, haven't you?"), "yeah, but not as much as *you* eat."

Our era is characterized by ever-increasing standards of survival. The minimum standard of living to participate in society is always



rising, and it's a full-time job keeping up: getting the new format for video-viewing, learning to use the new computer program, treating yourself with the new prescription drug . . . This constant technological and cultural acceleration is the consequence of an economic system based on competition, in which continuous innovation is necessary both to sell new products and to keep up with everyone who uses them.

Many anthropologists believe that people spend more time working to meet their "basic" needs today than ever before. Prehistoric human beings spent the greater part of their days in creative leisure, while with all our labor-saving devices we waste most of our lives earning money to pay for them, using them to mow the lawn, waiting in traffic to buy more batteries for them . . . and of course, the more time we spend providing for mere survival, the less time we have to *live*.

Play

Head for horizons . . .

Play is what takes place when all the problems of survival have been solved and time and energy remain. Play is not constrained by external demands—the player establishes her own goals and meanings in the course of acting. Play takes place in a condition of freedom—that is to say, it is the condition of freedom. In play, the individual interacts with the forces around her rather than reacting to them, creates the context for her actions as she acts rather than passively being shaped by the situation: it is thus that self-determination is possible. You can see play today in the collages on teenagers' walls, in the eccentric furnishing of squatted buildings, in the break between skirmishes when the insurgents dance, in the movements of lovers' bodies together.

The resources for play are available in abundance. The more one plays, the more others are enabled and encouraged to do the same; true playfulness is infectious. One can't play long at others' expense—being "free" at such a price ends up taking a lot of work, as in the case of the successful executive, and doesn't lend itself to much real, spontaneous play, as the ennui typical of the trust-fund playboy demonstrates.

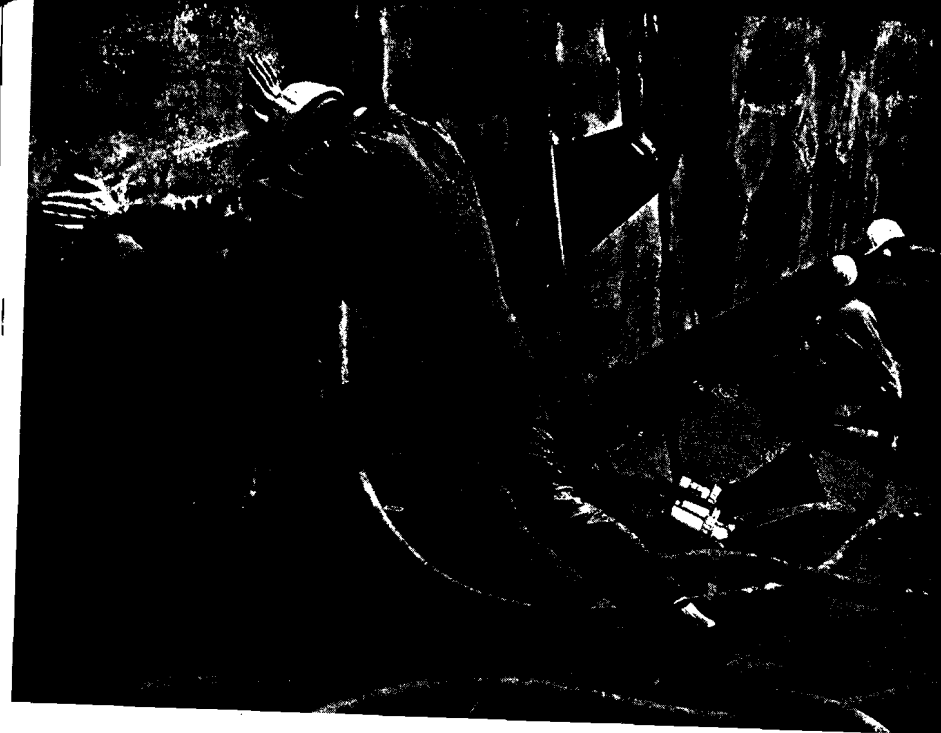
It's ambiguous whether many of the things currently called "play" actually warrant the title. Is it play when an office worker goes golf-



ing with his boss? How about when a group of men play football together according to a strict set of rules, with a struggle for dominance as an ever-present subtext? How about when a young man comes home from work so exhausted that he doesn't have enough energy to do anything but "play" video games?

Children come into this world knowing all about play—at least until they've spent a few years cooped up in small rooms with the television on. We can win back that lost innocence, for them and for ourselves, by approaching everything we do as a game rather than a struggle or responsibility—by creating environments in which we can *run wild*.

The best-kept secret of capitalism is that play activities can also provide for our survival needs: think of all the retirees who start gardens and build bookcases! Except in extremities, work is *unnecessary*.



Work

... not destinations.

Work provides for survival, nothing more. It always appears as a response to necessity, whether that be the need for food and shelter and life insurance, the establishment of social status, or the obligations of the Protestant work ethic. Work answers to imperatives; play creates its own rules.

Gift Economics

We know everything is priceless...

In stark contrast to exchange trading, gift-giving is its own reward. In a gift economy, which exists whenever anything is freely shared and no score is kept, the participants receive more the more they bestow. Everyone who has shared a real friendship or a morning of incredible lovemaking knows intuitively that when the opportunity presents itself, human beings return to this natural relationship.

Life itself is the greatest gift. It is absurd to think one could deserve life in all its complexity and magnanimity in the first place—let alone good or bad fortune, the moment of stillness at sunrise,

the flavor of avocados, the sensation of riding a galloping horse! Anyone who has lived and *paid attention* knows the best and worst things life has to offer are things no one could ever earn.

My liberation, my delight, my world itself begins where yours begins. Nobody can command my services because I have, of my own, pledged to give all—and gratuitously, for that is the only way to give.

Exchange Economies

... they say everything has a price.

Liberty ends where economics begins. Get your money's worth—earn your keep—there's no such thing as a free lunch: exchange economics posits life as a zero-sum sport between bargainers who maneuver to outbid and outwit each other in order to gain control of pieces of a fragmented world. Free trade, the free market—these are oxymorons: where systematized competition is free to bend all humanity to its prerogatives, ultimately no one is free to focus on anything else.

Exchange economics presupposes a one-dimensional scale of value, according to which everything can be appraised: if an avocado costs a dollar, and a new sports car costs \$20,000, then a sports car must be worth exactly twenty thousand avocados. But such equations are absurd. Can you calculate the financial value of a friendship, the exchange rate of a clever joke for a meal tenderly prepared, the comparative worth of the sound of birds singing in the trees against the current market value of lumber? Those who would measure such things miss everything that is beautiful and unrepeatable about them; once one recognizes this, it becomes clear how pathological such calculations are in any context. To assess the commercial value of experiences and sensations, let alone trade in the very lives of the human beings around you with an eye to your own advantage, is to flatten the world for yourself and everyone you touch.

The machinery of exchange eats quality and shits out quantity, enslaves process to despicable product, teaches that practical necessities and moments of joy and spiritual redemption alike must all be earned. There is something of the old Christian theology of guilt and salvation in the ways those who hold stock in the values of exchange speak of hard work and entitlement. In their eyes, anything free is suspect at best—nothing obtained without sacrifice,



... and it's mine, all mine!

without an exchange, can be worth anything—and the act of paying for things, with the compensation they receive for abdicating their lives, is itself more important than anything they could buy. It is the way one buys oneself out of the hell of worthlessness to which the tramp and the failure are assigned, not without a little jealous spite. For such people, human beings do not “deserve” happiness, comfort, even existence itself, unless they pay for it with suffering.* It should come as no surprise that some employees see things this way: if they didn't, they would have to face the possibility that they have been *wasting their lives*.

Likewise, those who would refuse this system of exchange are confronted with the same accusations of valuelessness *by their own bodies*, when they find that they cannot get food to eat or a soft place to sleep unless they give up some part of themselves for it. Once some people in a society begin hoarding and trading for their own benefit, all who interact with them must adopt the same miserliness and self-interest to survive—and the most ruthless ones inevitably end with the most power, just as magnanimity and largesse find themselves disenfranchised. The world now waits for a generosity that can *defend itself*.

Relationships of Love

Cooperate and celebrate . . .

Love is self-assured, fearless, generous. Love does not make demands or judge according to standards—love celebrates, consecrates the unique, *makes* beauty and beautiful. To feel love is to be grateful for the past, present, and future, to feel for a moment that there is meaning in existence. To be in love is not to be deluded or destitute, but to gain a sixth sense with which to perceive the real splendor of the universe. To experience love is to be connected directly to the tragedy of existence—which is not that there is not enough beauty in life, but that none of us has the breadth or depth of self, or the time on this planet, to savor fully the magnificence the world lavishes upon us.

Love makes war upon any peace which in fact is war systematized and concealed, for love is a ruthless enemy of senseless con-

* We, on the other hand, have ceased to use words like *earn* and *deserve*; we ask, instead, what would be best for everyone, and leave it at that. Revenge doesn't interest us—it's just another form of exchange.



Beauty must be defined as *what we are*, or else the concept itself is our enemy. Why languish in the shadow of a standard we cannot personify, an ideal we cannot live?

To see beauty is simply to learn the private language of meaning that is another's life: to recognize and relish what *is*.

flict and waste. It is love, of liberty when not of one's fellow beings, that makes it possible for us to coexist in pursuit of our own desires rather than languishing in thrall to that fat old god Discord. Those in love come to identify each other's needs with their own, ultimately making no distinction and overcoming the self/other dichotomy that is at the root of Western alienation. Thus in love we find a way to surpass ourselves, to exalt each other and ourselves in the course of living.

Relationships of Force

... or live and die by the sword?

When you live in fear, the only way to approach the world that makes sense is with a gun in your hand. Just as the ones who see scarcity everywhere they look create a world of shortages, those who depend on force to relate to others create a necessity for it, and their children inherit this cycle.

Coercion comes in more subtle forms than rape, "peace-keeping" bombings, and economic sanctions. It comes camouflaged as body image standards, psychological pressures that compel people to repress their desires, laws enforced by public opinion as well as thugs in uniform. It may be disguised as a seemingly trivial argu-

ment between friends (for anyone who seeks to establish rank, even in knowledge of trifling things, seeks a lever with which to exert force on his fellows), or that quiet self-mutilation which lovers and relatives sometimes use to manipulate each other—the inverse and *identical twin* of macho aggression.

Some call this a democracy—did you get a say in what the billboards you pass every morning say, what they go on repeating inside your head all day, the trees they cut down by your house to make room for the new gas station? How about the preservatives they put in the food you eat, or the conditions in the factories that produce them? What about your wages at work, or how much money the IRS takes from you? These aren't just inevitable "facts of life"—they are the manifestations of conflict as the *system* of human relations, every man for himself and *force* against us all.* The leagues of

* Walk down the street. Look around. The skin cream advertisements proposing an unreachable ideal for women's beauty, urging them to ransom their self-confidence by pouring their income into corporate coffers: *violence*. The fruits and vegetables for sale in the grocery store, which will be thrown in locked dumpsters to rot before they are shared with the hungry a block away: *violence*. The taxes on the sales of those vegetables, which pay for prisons to hold men who will slave there as their ancestors did in chain gangs and slave plantations, not to mention bombs to be sent as foreign aid to governments who oppress and kill their own: *violence*. The employees who work at the stores, so they can afford a disproportionately small portion of the goods and services made by others like them: *violence*. The hospitals, insurance companies, psychiatrists, manufacturers of prescription drugs, waiting like so many circling vultures for the bodies and minds of these people to weaken and betray them, poised to plunder their bank accounts and drive them and their children back to work: *violence*. The hush in the air, the absence of friends rejoicing together, of the shouts of children at play, for the children are all at home with video games and television and no one wants to be here, everyone wishes they were somewhere far, far away, farther even than the palm-tree-spotted scenes on the billboards advertising vacation resorts and malt liquor . . . *violence, violence*. You may not see one altercation, one bruise; but the feeling in the air is the feeling of war.



intimidating red tape and the battering of women, the biased news coverage and the inhumanity of factory farms, the jockeying for ascendance between colleagues and countries, all these are simultaneously expressions of the strife at the heart of our civilization and weapons which, used by factions fighting for survival on its terms, perpetuate it.

Living under the reign of coercion strips you of your faith, leaves you ready to use force on others, to treat them as the world has treated you. It is well known that the playground bully acts out of feelings of worthlessness, that the teenage hoodlum is moved to vandalism by insecurity and frustrated yearning; how much self-loathing and desperation must then be in the hearts of the moguls and power-brokers whose machinations keep the global market running? Whether dishwashers or directors, all who cannot feel safe enough to create and pursue their own dreams seek compensation in wealth, status, or more overt forms of power over others.

Under such conditions, people come to see all human relations as a conflict between mutually exclusive interests; it's no wonder many have a hard time imagining how human beings could live without the coercion of supposedly beneficial forces. But competition and combat are themselves barriers to freedom, no less so than the repression authorities insist is for our own good: conflicts distract, control, and simplify all who are subject to them, just as police do. The terror-mongers insist that hierarchy is necessary to protect us from the violence inherent in our species—but hierarchy is simply the large-scale manifestation of the violence intrinsic to this particular system. The fact that hierarchy can be absent—between friends, in moments of widespread teamwork, in other societies—is proof that we can live without its attendant violence, too.

Ultimately, all conflicts come down to relations of force—even those known, up to this point, as revolutions. Our dream is not to win another war, but to stage a *total revolution*, a war against the condition of war, on behalf of those beautiful moments when we can be thankful for each other's existence.



Faith

Invest in the future . . .

One either invests oneself in the present or the future: either reacts to existing circumstances and their demands, or acts to change them. You can spend all your energy surviving according to the terms set by the market economy, the expectations of your parents and peers, and the weight of your own inertia—or you can risk everything to make those considerations obsolete. To succeed in the latter, you'll need faith.

Faith is the opposite of superstition. Faith means believing in the boundless possibilities of the universe and setting out to explore them. It means knowing that if you leap off a cliff, you're bound to land somewhere. Faith means trusting that the world is wider and richer than you could possibly see from where you are, and therefore not feeling pressure to plan out the rest of your life from here. You might be better off just sketching a route to the horizon: from there, you'll be able to make out new vistas and make new plans accordingly. Heaven help those who make long-term plans today and *stick to them*, whose lives will never be greater than what they can imagine right now!

Faith means embracing your desire: knowing what you want, that it is good, that it will come true. Faith enables you to relax—relaxing allows you to act freely and learn from the consequences. Faith is the engine of the self-fulfilling prophecy. It equips you to rely on your intuition and grants you power over your fear. Whether you are confronting a police line or giving birth to a child or a song, faith is indispensable for capital-L *living*.

Fear

. . . or protect yourself to death.

Force cannot rule alone, for one can only rule over the living. Force can establish domination only in combination with fear; fear, on the other hand, can rule even in the absence of force.

Fear dictates that, in the mind of the ruled, beyond the frontiers of obedience, there is only darkness, nothingness, the unthinkable. Chaos, failure, damnation, and death are projected onto this unknown; this is ironic, in that what one projects can only be based on what one knows. We can deduce that those who fear the unknown reveal the world they know to be a place of terror, and that those who most fear setting out for the horizon stand to gain the most from doing so.

But the one who lives in fear moves only to consolidate the present. He is not capable of free action—he is too busy reacting in advance to things that haven't even happened yet. He can only conceive of the future—any future—as a threat. He trusts nothing to chance, and thus chance cannot entrust him with more than he already has.

Fear lies at the root of all violence and coercion. When one trusts her companions and the surrounding world to provide, if not what she thinks she needs, at least something equally weird and wonderful, she too can be gentle and generous. If she feels threatened by them, she grows defensive and aggressive, strikes out blindly, becomes possessed by resentment and cruelty. *Vengeance* becomes her motivating force, more powerful than any other desire: anything to take revenge upon the world that has made her feel so unwelcome and worthless. Acting on these impulses, she spreads them to others like a plague. Fear, like faith, is self-perpetuating—until something breaks the cycle.

Whatever your path in life, you must develop a healthy relationship to your fear, or else it will truly be a terrible master. We read about "primitive" peoples' rites of passage—but we are the primitive ones, coddling our fears rather than confronting them. We never come of age.

Are you living deliberately? Do you approach risk willfully, or do you deny yourself things out of fear? What are you afraid of? What are you saving yourself for? Do you own your body? Preservation of the flesh is futile—we all die someday. The question is what happens first.

There are two possible responses to fear. One is to cower. The other is to follow your fear, to use it as a guide, to track it out past the limits of the world you know. Don't save yourself. Don't spare yourself. Some things can't be written or told. Go search.

I arrived at the university on assignment. My editor had long known that I'd lost faith in the racket; he was waiting for a suitable pretext to fire me, and in the meantime sent me to cover the least desirable stories. I had attended pie-eating competitions, senior citizen golf tournaments, exhibitions of Victorian furniture. I didn't expect this to be much different.

When I showed up the occupation was already in full swing. It looked like the outpost of a medieval army: banners painted with inscrutable proclamations, cauldrons of stew steaming over an open fire, sooty-faced barbarians conferring in the crisp morning air. It seemed inconceivable that something like this existed in my own century, let alone zip code.

The young barbarian who showed me around the site seemed to regard me as the anachronism, however. She was personable enough, but didn't bother even pretending to take me seriously. Every question I asked was turned back around at me:

"And which organizations provide your funding?"

"Which 'organizations' provide *your* funding?"

"Come on, you must be drawing resources from *somewhere*." I gestured at the tents around us just as two bleary-eyed ruffians stumbled past with cardboard boxes full of produce. "You don't expect me to believe you're doing all this without sponsors, do you?"

"Is that what you think? No wonder you're a reporter."

This was terrible form for anyone hoping for sympathetic coverage; we journalists are notoriously thin-skinned and have the instruments of revenge continuously at our fingertips. Could it be that these savages truly didn't give a damn about good press?

That would be something new. Everywhere I went, people fawned on me, jostling each other out of the way for the chance to tell their trifling stories. I was the doorkeeper at the gates of power and public opinion, a character straight out of Kafka; in a society that viewed the whole world through the media lens, I was, like the fairy in *Pinnocchio*, the only one who could make them real. This was doubly true of radicals and protesters, however dubiously they claimed to regard my employers.

My interlocutor didn't have any interest in becoming real—she was content to remain imaginary, along with the medieval encampment around us and the objectives of this protest, if any even existed. I had to admit, it was almost refreshing to encounter someone for once who had no interest in me at all. Instead of breaking off the interview to hammer out a dismissive dispatch, I continued pressing her with questions, though with less and less conviction. Finally, I gave up and sat down, narrowly resisting the impulse to put my head in my hands.

"I don't get it." The open tent flap to the left revealed three sleeping young people, naked and androgynous, entwined in an embrace that repudiated two thousand years of Christian doctrine. On my right, a man I took to be a janitor rifled through a crate of tools, finally selecting a hacksaw and a bowling pin. "All this is like a dream, and I never dream."

That had come out more maudlin than I'd intended. She seated herself at my side, looking at me for the first time with compassion. "Like the king who never had any dreams until the wizard made him sleep in a pigsty."

Scarcity, propriety, cruelty, routine—these things seem like laws of nature, at least until you experience otherwise. You can't blame those who cannot imagine more—only show them it exists.

Just as the alchemists of bygone days strove to change lead into gold, to create new possibilities by rearranging existing elements, we must make fortune from misfortune and magic of the mundane. The alchemist understands it is the forces that count, not the materials—the relationships, not the things. Any situation, every situation, can be revolutionized—you simply have to enter knowing your life is at stake.

Our contest is with gravity, with the weight of inertia. It is up to us to shake it off—or turn it to our advantage. For the slothful man, gravity is a force to be feared, a hated master; he finds in it an argument against motion, action, life itself. But for the dancer, gravity is indispensable. Without it, she would have nothing to play against, no counterpoint for her strength and skill. She flies all the more gracefully for being born without wings.

We must dance with our apprehensions, our agonies, our histories, or be paralyzed by them. With lightness of foot, we can transform our centuries-long history of destruction and disappointment into a mere prologue, the tragic overture before a beautiful symphony—justifying and absolving ourselves, and the world we know, in the process.

If there is anyone foolish enough to want this world the way it is, let him have it—*let him have it!*—and perish with it. For the rest of us, alchemy is our only hope.

"Unfortunately, some people have careers and responsibilities," I mused aloud, inviting her to help me excuse myself. "Not everyone can drop everything and set up camp here like you. I have bills to pay, appointments to keep . . ."

She took my hand and led me breathless from the ruins. "Life is not retrospective," she confided. "Let's not be, either."



"Just be thankful you live in a democracy!"

Beyond Democracy?!

Nowadays, democracy rules the world. Communism is long dead, elections are taking place in all those third world countries you see on television, and world leaders are meeting to plan the "global community" we hear so much about. So why isn't everybody happy, finally? For that matter—why do so few of the eligible voters in the United States, the world's flagship democracy, even bother to vote?

Could it be that democracy, long the catchword of every revolution and resistance, is simply not democratic enough? What could be more democratic?

Every little child can grow up to be President.



No they can't. Being President means occupying a position of hierarchical power, just like being a billionaire: for every person who is President, there have to be millions who are not. It's no coincidence that billionaires and Presidents tend to rub shoulders; both exist in a privileged world off limits to the rest of us. Speaking of billionaires, our economy isn't exactly democratic—capitalism distributes resources in absurdly unequal proportions, and you have to start with resources if you're ever going to get elected.*

*Let's suspend our misgivings about democracy long enough to consider whether, if it were an effective means for people to share power over their lives, it could be compatible with capitalism. In a democracy, an informed citizenry is supposed to vote according to their enlightened self-interest—but who controls the flow of information under capitalism if not wealthy executives? They can't help but skew their coverage according to their class interests, and you can hardly blame them—the newspapers and networks that didn't flinch at alienating corporate advertisers were run out of business long ago by competitors with fewer scruples.

Likewise, voting means choosing between options, according to which possibilities seem most desirable—but who sets the options, who establishes what is considered possible, who constructs desire itself but the wealthy patriarchs of the political establishment and their nephews in advertising and public relations firms? In the United States, the two-party system has reduced politics to choosing the lesser of two identical evils, both of which answer to their funders before anyone else. Sure, the parties differ over exactly how much to repress personal freedoms or spend on bombs—but do we ever get to vote on who controls "public" spaces such as shopping malls, or whether workers are entitled to the full product of their labor, or any other question that could seriously change the way we live? In such a state of affairs, the essential function of the democratic process is to limit the appearance of what is possible to the narrow spectrum debated by candidates for office. This demoralizes dissidents and contributes to the general impression that they are impotent utopians—when nothing is more utopian than trusting representatives from the owning class to redress the grievances caused by their own dominance, and nothing more impotent than accepting their political system as the only possible political system.

Ultimately, the most transparent democratic political process will always be trumped by economic matters such as property ownership. Even if we could convene everyone, capitalists and convicts alike, in one vast general assembly, what would prevent the same dynamics that rule the marketplace from spilling over into that sacred space? So long as resources are unevenly distributed, the rich can always buy others' votes: either literally, or by promising a piece of the pie, or else by means of propaganda and intimidation. Intimidation may be oblique—"Those radicals want to take away your hard-earned property"—or as overt as the bloody gang wars that accompanied electoral campaigns in nineteenth century America. Thus, even at best, democracy can only serve its purported purpose if it occurs among those who explicitly oppose capitalism and forswear its prizes—and in those circles, consensus makes a lot more sense than majority rule.



capitalism
+
democracy
=
one dollar, one vote.



Even if it was true that anyone *could* grow up to be President, that wouldn't help the millions who inevitably don't, who must still live in the shadow of that power. This imbalance is intrinsic to the structure of representative democracy, at the local level as much as at the top. The professional politicians of a town council discuss municipal affairs and pass ordinances all day without consulting the citizens of the town, who have to be at work; when one of those ordinances displeases citizens, they have to use what little leisure time they have to contest it, and then they're back at work again the next time the town council meets. In theory, the citizens could elect a different town council from the available pool of politicians and would-be politicians, but the interests of politicians as a class always remain essentially at odds with their own—besides, voting fraud, gerrymandering, and inane party loyalty usually prevent them from going that far. Even in the unlikely scenario that a whole new government was elected consisting of firebrands intent on undoing the imbalance of power between politicians and citizens, they would inevitably perpetuate it simply by accepting roles in the system—for the political apparatus itself is the foundation of that imbalance. To succeed in their objective, they would have to dissolve the government and join the rest of the populace in restructuring society from the roots up.

But even if there were no Presidents or town councils, democracy as we know it would still be an impediment to freedom. Corruption, privilege, and hierarchy aside, majority rule is not only inherently oppressive but also paradoxically divisive and homogenizing at the same time.

The Tyranny of the Majority

If you ever found yourself in a vastly outnumbered minority, and the majority voted that you had to give up something as necessary to your life as water and air, would you comply? When it comes down to it, does anyone really believe it makes sense to accept the authority of a group simply on the grounds that they outnumber everyone else? We accept majority rule because we do not believe it will threaten *us*—and those it does threaten are already silenced before anyone can hear their misgivings.

The average self-professed law-abiding citizen does not consider himself threatened by majority rule because, consciously or not, he conceives of himself as having the power and moral authority of the majority: if not in fact, by virtue of his being politically and socially “moderate,” then in theory, because he believes everyone would be convinced by his arguments if only he had the opportunity to present them. Majority-rule democracy has always rested on the conviction that if all the facts were known, everyone could be made to see that there is only one right course of action—without this belief, it amounts to nothing more than the dictatorship of the herd. But even if “the” facts could be made equally clear to everyone, assuming such a thing were possible, people still would have their individual perspectives and motivations and needs. We need social and political structures that take this into account, in which we are free from the mob rule of the majority as well as the ascendancy of the privileged class.

Living under democratic rule teaches people to think in terms of quantity, to focus more on public opinion than on what their consciences tell them, to see themselves as powerless unless they are immersed in a mass. The root of majority-rule democracy is *competition*: competition to persuade everyone else to your position whether or not it is in their best interest, competition to constitute a majority to wield power before others outmaneuver you to do the

same—and the losers (that is to say, the minorities) be damned.* At the same time, majority rule forces those who wish for power to appeal to the lowest common denominator, precipitating a race to the bottom that rewards the most bland, superficial, and demagogic; under democracy, power itself comes to be associated with conformity rather than individuality. And the more power is concentrated in the hands of the majority, the less any individual can do on her own, whether she is inside or outside that majority.

In purporting to give everyone an opportunity to participate, majority-rule democracy offers a perfect justification for repressing those who don't abide by its dictates: if they don't like the government, why don't they go into politics themselves? And if they don't win at the game of building up a majority to wield power, didn't they

* The disempowerment of losers and out-groups is central to democracy, in contrast to forms of decision-making in which everyone's needs matter. It is well known that in ancient Athens, the "cradle of democracy," scarcely an eighth of the population was permitted to vote, as women, foreigners, slaves, and others were excluded from citizenship. This is generally regarded as an early kink that time has ironed out, but one could also conclude that exclusion itself is the most essential and abiding characteristic of democracy: millions who live in the United States today are not permitted to vote either, and the distinctions between citizen and non-citizen have not eroded significantly in 2500 years. Every bourgeois property owner can come up with a thousand reasons why it isn't practical to allow everyone whose interests are involved to share in decision making, just as no boss or bureaucrat would dream of giving his employees an equal say in their workplace, but that doesn't make it any less exclusive. What if—we must at least broach the hypothesis—democracy arose in Greece not as a step in Man's Progress Towards Freedom, but as a way of keeping power out of certain hands?

Democracy is the most sustainable way to maintain the distinction between powerful and powerless because it gives the greatest possible number of people incentive to defend that distinction.

That's why the high-water mark of democracy—its current ascendancy around the globe—corresponds with unprecedented inequities in the distribution of resources and power. Dictatorships are inherently unstable: you can slaughter, imprison, and brainwash entire generations and their children will invent the struggle for freedom anew. But promise every man the opportunity to be a dictator, to be able to force the "will of the majority" upon his fellows rather than work through disagreements like a mature adult, and you can build a common front of destructive self-interest against the cooperation and collectivity that make individual freedom possible. All the better if there are even more repressive dictatorships near at hand to point to as "the" alternative, so you can glorify all this in the rhetoric of liberty.

get their chance? This is the same blame-the-victim reasoning used to justify capitalism: if the dishwasher isn't happy with his salary, he should work harder so he too can own a restaurant chain. Sure, everyone gets a chance to compete, however unequal—but what about those of us who don't want to compete, who never wanted power to be centralized in the hands of a government in the first place? What if we don't care to rule or be ruled?

That's what police are for—and courts and judges and prisons.

The Rule of Law

Even if you don't believe their purpose is to grind out nonconformity wherever it appears, you have to acknowledge that legal institutions are no substitute for fairness, mutual respect, and good will. The rule of "just and equal law," as fetishized by the stockholders and landlords whose interests it protects, offers no guarantees against injustice; it simply creates another arena of specialization, in which power and responsibility are ceded to expensive lawyers and pompous judges. Rather than serving to protect our communities and work out conflicts, this arrangement ensures that our communities' skills for conflict resolution and self-defense atrophy—and that those whose profession it supposedly is to discourage crime have a stake in it proliferating, since their careers depend upon it.

Ironically, we are told that we need these institutions to protect the rights of minorities—even though the implicit function of the courts is, at best, to impose the legislation of the majority on the minority. In actuality, a person is only able to use the courts to defend his rights when he can bring sufficient force to bear upon them in a currency they recognize; thanks to capitalism, only a minority can do this, so in a roundabout way it turns out that, indeed, the courts exist to protect the rights of at least *a certain* minority.

Justice cannot be established through the mere drawing up and enforcement of laws; such laws can only institutionalize what is already the rule in a society. Common sense and compassion are always preferable to the enforcement of strict, impersonal regulations. Where the law is the private province of an elite invested in its own perpetuation, the sensible and compassionate are bound to end up as defendants; we need a social system that fosters and rewards those qualities rather than blind obedience and impassivity.

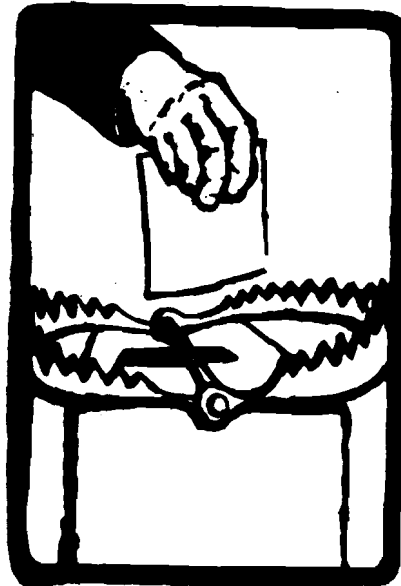
It's no coincidence "freedom" is not on the ballot.

Freedom is a quality of activity, not a condition that exists in a vacuum: it is a prize to be won daily, not a possession that can be kept in the basement and taken out and polished up for parades. Freedom cannot be given—the most you can hope is to free others from the forces that prevent them from finding it themselves. Real freedom has nothing to do with voting; being free doesn't mean simply being able to choose between options, but actively participating in establishing the options in the first place.

"Look, a ballot box—democracy!!"

If the freedom for which so many generations have fought and died is best exemplified by a man in a voting booth checking a box on a ballot before returning to work in an environment no more under his control than it was before, then the heritage our emancipating forefathers and suffragette grandmothers have left us is nothing but a sham substitute for the liberty they sought.

For a better illustration of real freedom in action, look at the musician in the act of improvising with her companions:



ous, seemingly effortless cooperation, they create a sonic and emotional environment, transforming the world that in turn transforms them. Take this model and extend it to every one of our interactions with each other and you would have something qualitatively different from our present system—a harmony in human relationships and activity. To get there from here, we have to dispense with voting as the archetypal expression of freedom and participation.

Representative democracy is a contradiction in terms.

No one can represent your power and interests for you—you can only have power by wielding it, you can only learn what your interests are by getting involved. Politicians make careers out of claiming to represent others, as if freedom and political power could be held by proxy; in fact, they are a priest class that answers only to itself, and their very existence is proof of our disenfranchisement.

Voting in elections is an expression of our powerlessness: it is an admission that we can only approach the resources and capabilities of our own society through the mediation of that priest class. When we let them prefabricate our options for us, we relinquish control of our communities to these politicians in the same way that we have ceded technology to engineers, health care to doctors, and control of our living environments to city planners and private real estate developers. We end up living in a world that is alien to us, even though our labor has built it, for we have acted like sleepwalkers hypnotized by the monopoly our leaders and specialists hold on setting the possibilities.

But we don't have to simply choose between presidential candidates, soft drink brands, television shows, and political ideologies. We can make our own decisions as individuals and communities, we can make our own delicious beverages and social structures and *power*, we can establish a new society on the basis of freedom and cooperation. Here's how.

What are the democratic alternatives to democracy?

Consensus

Consensus-based decision-making is already practiced around the globe, from indigenous communities in Latin America and direct action groups in Europe to organic farming cooperatives in Australia. In contrast to representative democracy, the participants take part in the decision-making process on an ongoing basis and exercise real

control over their daily lives. Unlike majority-rule democracy, consensus values the needs and concerns of each individual equally; if one person is unhappy with a resolution, it is everyone's responsibility to find a new solution that is acceptable to all. Consensus-based decision-making does not demand that any person accept others' power over her, though it does require that everybody consider everyone else's needs; what it loses in efficiency it makes up tenfold in freedom and accountability. Instead of asking that people accept leaders or find common cause by homogenizing themselves, consensus process integrates all into a working whole while allowing each to retain his or her own autonomy.

Autonomy

To be free, you must have control over your immediate surroundings and the basic matters of your life. No one is more qualified than you are to decide how you live; no one should be able to vote on what you do with your time and your potential unless you invite them to. To claim these privileges for yourself and respect them in others is to cultivate autonomy.

Autonomy is not to be confused with so-called independence: in actuality, *no* one is independent, since our lives all depend on each other.* The glamorization of self-sufficiency in competitive society is an underhanded way to accuse those who will not exploit others of being responsible for their own poverty; as such, it is one of the most significant obstacles to building community! In contrast to this Western mirage, autonomy offers a free *interdependence* between people who share consensus.

Autonomy is the antithesis of bureaucracy. There is nothing more efficient than people acting on their own initiative as they see fit, and nothing more inefficient than attempting to dictate everyone's actions from above—that is, unless your fundamental goal is to control other people. Top-down coordination is only necessary when people must be made to do something they would never do

* "Western man fills his closet with groceries and calls himself self-sufficient."
—Mohandas Gandhi

† The politicians' myth of "welfare mothers" snatching hardworking citizens' rightful earnings, for example, divides individuals who might otherwise form cooperative groups with no use for politicians.



Who needs democracy when we can agree?

of their own accord; likewise, obligatory uniformity, however horizontally it is imposed, can only empower a group by disempowering the individuals who comprise it. Consensus can be as repressive as democracy unless the participants retain their autonomy.

Autonomous individuals can cooperate without agreeing on a shared agenda, so long as everyone benefits from everyone else's participation. Groups that cooperate thus can contain conflicts and contradictions, just as each of us does individually, and still empower the participants. Let's leave marching under a single flag to the military.

Finally, autonomy entails self-defense. Autonomous groups have a stake in defending themselves against the encroachments of those who do not recognize their right to self-determination, and in expanding the territory of autonomy and consensus by doing everything in their power to destroy coercive structures.

Topless Federations

Independent autonomous groups can work together in federations without any of them wielding authority. Such a structure sounds utopian, but it can actually be quite practical and efficient. International mail delivery and railway travel both work on this system, to name two examples: while individual postal and transportation

systems are internally hierarchical, they all cooperate together to get mail or rail passengers from one nation to another without an ultimate authority being necessary at any point in the process. Similarly, individuals who cannot agree enough to work together within one collective can still coexist in separate groups. For this to work in the long run, of course, we need to instill values of cooperation, consideration, and tolerance in the coming generations—but that's exactly what we are proposing, and we can hardly do worse at this task than the partisans of capitalism and hierarchy have.

Direct Action

Autonomy necessitates that you act for yourself: that rather than waiting for requests to pass through the established channels only to bog down in paperwork and endless negotiations, you establish your own channels instead. If you want hungry people to have food to eat, don't just give money to a bureaucratic charity organization—find out where food is going to waste, collect it, and share. If you want affordable housing, don't try to get the town council to pass a bill—that will take years, while people sleep outside every night; take over abandoned buildings, open them up to the public, and organize groups to defend them when the thugs of the absentee landlords show up. If you want corporations to have less power, don't petition the politicians they bought to put limits on their own masters—take that power from them yourself. Don't buy their products, don't work for them, sabotage their billboards and offices, prevent their meetings from taking place and their merchandise from being delivered. They use similar tactics to exert their power over you, too—it only looks valid because they bought up the laws and values of your society long before you were born.

Don't wait for permission or leadership from some outside authority, don't beg some higher power to organize your life for you. Take the initiative!

How to Solve Disagreements Without Calling the Authorities

In a social arrangement that is truly in the best interest of each participating individual, the threat of exclusion should be enough to

discourage most destructive or disrespectful behavior. Even when it is impossible to avoid, exclusion is certainly a more humanitarian approach than prisons and executions, which corrupt police and judges as much as they embitter criminals. Those who refuse to respect others' needs, who will not integrate themselves into any community, may find themselves banished from social life—but that is still better than exile in the mental ward or on death row, two of the possibilities awaiting such people today. Violence should only be used by communities in self-defense, not with the smug sense of entitlement with which it is applied by our present injustice system. Unfortunately, in a world governed by force, autonomous consensus-based groups are likely to find themselves at odds with those who do not abide by cooperative or tolerant values; they must be careful not to lose those values themselves in the process of defending them.

Serious disagreements within communities can be solved in many cases by reorganizing or subdividing groups. Often individuals who can't get along in one social configuration have more success cooperating in another setting or as members of parallel communities. If consensus cannot be reached within a group, that group can split into smaller groups that can achieve it internally—such a thing may be inconvenient and frustrating, but it is better than group decisions ultimately being made by force by those who have the most power. As with individuals and society, so with different collectives: if the benefits of working together outweigh the frustrations, that should be incentive enough for people to sort out their differences. Even drastically dissimilar communities still have it in their best interest to coexist peacefully, and must somehow negotiate ways to achieve this . . .

Living Without Permission

. . . that's the most difficult part, of course. But we're not talking about just another social system here, we're talking about a total transformation of human relations—for it will take nothing less to solve the problems our species faces today. Let's not kid ourselves—until we can achieve this, the violence and strife inherent in conflict-based relations will continue to intensify, and no law or system will be able to protect us. In consensus-based structures, there are

no fake solutions, no ways to suppress conflict without resolving it; those who participate in them *must* learn to coexist without coercion and submission.

The first precious grains of this new world can be found in your friendships and love affairs whenever they are free from power dynamics, whenever cooperation occurs naturally. Imagine those moments expanded to the scale of our entire society—that's the life that waits beyond democracy.

It may feel like we are separated from that world by an uncrossable chasm, but the wonderful thing about consensus and autonomy is that you don't have to wait for the government to vote for them—you can practice them right now with the people around you. Put into practice, the virtues of this way of living are clear. Form your own autonomous group, answering to no power but your own, and chase down freedom for yourselves, if your representatives will not do it for you—since they *cannot* do it for you.

**Whoever they vote for,
we are ungovernable!**



Nature abhors a vacuum, and civilization is no different; so it was that one by one I found ersatz versions of everything I'd set out to experience. I'd wanted wild romance; I was dating a nice boy who went trespassing with me on the weekends. I'd longed for adventure; I was applying to schools in hopes of getting funding to study abroad. I'd wanted to do something that mattered with my life; after months of flailing around, I'd settled for a little environmental activism. Had you asked me then whether these satisfied me, I might have said they did; I had nothing to compare them to. I might also have told you that I only made it from one moment to the next by imagining everything around me on fire.

That was my state of mind in the audience of the city council meeting as I waited to speak about the water table. Rita and I had fidgeted quietly through a seemingly interminable succession of formalities, gripes, and pitches; now, if I remembered correctly, there was only one name left on the ledger before hers.

Watching the speakers before us—homeowners outraged about speed bumps, businessmen putting in appearances to smooth over back-room deals—it was clear we were out of our league. These people didn't give a damn about water or anything else; they had their hands full keeping up with their own bureaucracy and thought too highly of themselves to aspire to anything more. The citizens there couldn't see beyond their own property rights; the only ones that struck me as remotely interesting were the two shabbily dressed young men seated at my right. One of them was the only other brown face in the audience, besides a few people I took to be city employees. Heaven only knew what kept the two of them there—it didn't look like they had any property to speak of.

When you've decided that spontaneity and passion are, if not your basis for life, your only hope of escape, the pressure can be tremendous. Nothing is more terrifying than the moments when it seems impossible that anything exciting will happen, and those moments succeed each other like Chinese water torture. I had been living under that pressure since Daniel's funeral, and had started to take

refuge from it in a contrived cynicism—the inverse of the enforced optimism I'd had to adopt for job applications and presentations like this one. The longer I sat there, the more it turned my stomach to think about trying to make a case to those bureaucrats; it was hard enough convincing myself it mattered what they thought or did. But the councilmen had finished their remarks, and the woman who had been complaining in coded language about Latino youth appearing in her neighborhood was returning to her seat.

The young man to my right leaned confidentially across the empty seat between us. "Watch this," he whispered.

His companion stood up and walked slowly to the podium, brushed back disheveled black hair, and began shuffling through a sheaf of dog-eared papers. The rustle of those papers over the PA speakers was the only sound in the room for almost a full minute. At last, he began in a mumbling drone: "Several men meet their deaths at the hands of a monster. Two monsters from the Department of the Interior come to look the situation over . . ."

As he continued, the faces around me shifted slowly from disinterest to disbelief. Finally, a councilman attempted to cut him off. At that point, the boy next to me called out in a booming voice: "Your honor, what my colleague is getting at is that it would be a grave mistake to evict the occupation from the university. But first, let me add something on the subject of monsters, which—"

The councilman turned his attention to the second speaker; he was better prepared to deal with this kind of disruption. "Let me remind everyone that those who speak out of turn will be removed. There is a standard policy for signing up to address the Town, which anyone can make use of, and it is not fair to other citizens to misuse this venue."

The hoodlum at the podium straightened up and threw back his shoulders, and his dark eyes narrowed like a hawk's. "But we have something of great importance to convey to you about this matter," he continued, in pompous parody of the officials. "You see, those who do battle with monsters—"

The mayor had turned bright red and was pounding his fist on the table: "Get to the point, get to the point!"

It hadn't occurred to me until then that they intended to make the bureaucrats lose their composure. My neighbor kicked his chair back and leaped onto it, waving his arms and roaring like a madman:

“*The point is*, we all tried to be good citizens, behaving ourselves and trying to beat each other out for promotions and spending our money on soft drinks—and we ended up dishwashers and doormen, waiting in line at the free clinic to have our rotten teeth pulled by student volunteers! It’s a fucking **PYRAMID SCAM** and *you know it!* The point is, there are fifty of us on that campus who aren’t afraid of you because we have an *entirely different future* ahead of us than anything you can offer—and if there are fifty today, there’ll be *fifty thousand* tomorrow, because people are dying for something else and some of us are ready to *LIVE for it, TOO!!* *The point is*, I’m warning you—you’re dealing with fucking **ANARCHISTS!** We didn’t sign your social contract! If you’re willing to coexist with us, we’ll share everything we have with you, we’ll go to any length to work out conflicts—but if you want to be the boss, if you want to give orders and always be in the right, then whether you have a security guard or a whole civilization behind you we’re going to have to **FIGHT** until one of us is **DEAD**, because one thing we will *NOT* do is **BE RULED!!!** *Are you listening to me?”*”

A man in a uniform was struggling to make his way down our aisle; in the second subversive act of my life, I stretched out my leg, making him stumble just as he reached for the orator’s arm. The latter, having completed his address, leaped to an empty chair behind us and bounded that way from row to row all the way to the back of the room, dodging audience members who clutched their purses and briefcases as he passed. His partner met him at the door, loose papers filling the air behind him; I could see now that these were handbills. It seemed certain that the two would be apprehended there, but at that instant there was shouting and movement from the other side of the room as a cloud of smoke appeared from between the seats. When I looked back to the door, they were gone.

Even after the smoke had cleared and a functionary had gathered up most of the papers, the meeting did not resume for some minutes. Not only had the incident thoroughly rattled everyone, but it appeared the young man who had been at the podium had taken the microphone with him.

Rita and I filed out along with much of the audience as more men in uniforms bustled about and town officials conferred in irritated knots. Some of the people around me were silent; others spoke in hushed tones. A few were actually laughing. I was relieved not to have to make our presentation, but the rest of what had happened hadn’t yet sunk in. I glanced at the handbill I’d picked up:

If it were not for the prisons they threaten to lock us in, we might see that we are all in prison. If it were not for monsters like the sweatshop profiteers, we might see that capitalism has made us all monstrous. We visit zoos to see what becomes of the wild ones, we sit in audiences to learn that we are not musicians or protagonists

—or city councilmen, I thought to myself.

I pushed open the door and stepped out into the cool autumn air. Hanging across the building opposite Town Hall was a homemade banner as long as a city bus. In enormous scarlet letters it read, simply,

EXPECT RESISTANCE

A few days later the ones who had instigated the fracas at the town council meeting were my new best friends, but it was another month before I learned of the protracted discussions that had preceded it. After the university announced that they were definitely going to evict the encampment, word had reached the occupiers that city police would be brought in for the eviction. There followed a series of meetings that began late in the afternoon and continued into the early hours of morning.

Although I wasn't there, I can imagine based on later meetings how it must have played out. At first there was quite a bit of dissension: some argued that the occupation had served its purpose and it would be most empowering for the participants to quit while they were ahead, while others contended that if the goal was to exert leverage on the administration by offering a deterrent to working with noxious corporations, that could best be achieved by forcing them to carry out the most expensive and embarrassing eviction possible. Eventually implacable camps crystallized on opposite sides of this issue, and the group split up into two separate meetings so each could establish what its goals were and what it asked of the other. Some hours later, it had been negotiated that the fifty-odd occupiers who desired a confrontation with the university would remain, but that they would release a statement to the effect that they no longer had anything to do with the student group. It had been important until then to blur the line between the student organization and the rest of the occupiers to maintain the "legitimacy" of the occupation, but now that a messy eviction was inevitable that association was a needless liability.

Those who remained faced the challenging task of organizing the defense of the encampment. This was particularly complicated because there were almost certainly police agents among them who would not only report proposed illegal activity but also attempt to steer the planning in the least advantageous direction possible. First, as a group, they agreed on their basic goals and guidelines: making

the eviction costly was a higher priority than positive media coverage; no one was to be injured, but destruction of property was not ruled out; resources for legal defense would be shared according to need with all those arrested, regardless of charges. Next, everyone split into smaller groups to strategize with people they knew and trusted. This ensured that those who shared longstanding friendships could make the most of their comfort and experience while police agents ended up with other isolated newcomers, planning the aspects of the defense that required the least security. Once some of those groups had hashed out their own plans, they sent delegates to other groups to propose collaborations, sharing only the information that was necessary for joint coordination. By this time, it was late at night; small circles of conspirators dotted the grass around the encampment, while elsewhere on campus spokespersons of the more cautious groups held hushed consultations in twos and threes.

None of this happened easily, I was told. At every step, there were arguments, ruptures, hurt feelings and angry accusations. At the time, these must have seemed the inevitable price of organizing in stressful circumstances with people from such a wide range of perspectives; much later, it became clear that we hadn't taken conflicts seriously enough from the beginning. We lost the following round of struggle because no one addressed the rifts when they first appeared.

Once upon a time, it was said that capitalism reduced the industrial worker to an appendage of flesh on a machine of iron. Today, that description can be applied across the board: each of us is a mere appendage of flesh on the vast machine that is our society, for our communities and lives are divided into isolated sectors to such an extent that the totality they comprise appears entirely beyond our control. If we want to change the whole of life, we must somehow become whole again ourselves.

Divided & Conquered

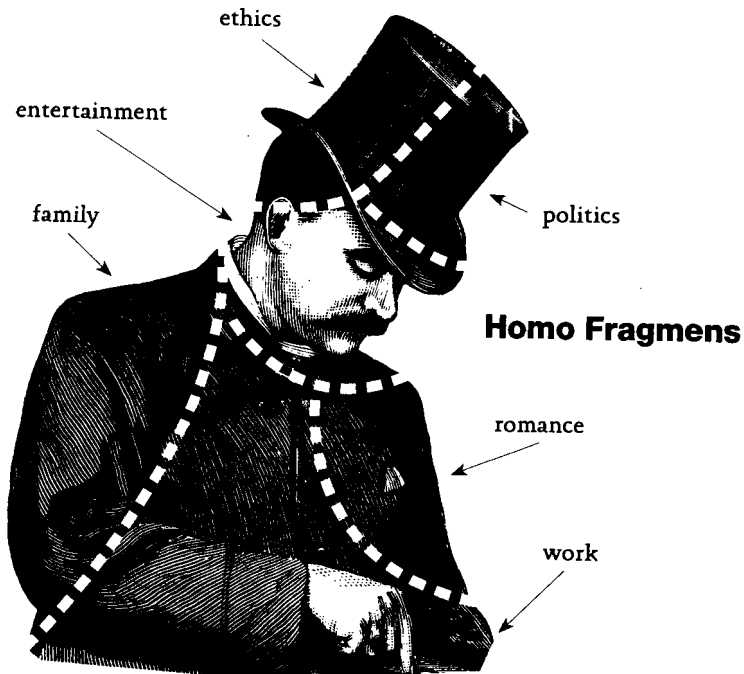


Separation: The Disintegration of Self

Modern man's daily activity is as atomized as the cities that circumscribe it. He experiences existence as an ongoing conflict between achievement, romance, responsibility, fitness, relaxation, and pleasure because all these pursuits seem to be mutually exclusive. He would like to spend more time with his wife, but if he doesn't stay at the office another hour he won't be able to advance his career, and then he has to go to the gym to offset the effects of lunch . . . and there's that damn vacation to plan for, not to mention world news to catch up on, before he can even think about romance. He downloads music over the internet, but never has time to listen to it; he would like to get involved in some kind of volunteer work, but doesn't know where it would fit in his schedule. It's hard enough just keeping up with his favorite radio program, and even that doesn't provide him with much relief from the strain of his busy life. *Meaning*, of course, is absent everywhere when life is this disjointed; as none of his activities engage him completely, he cannot find lasting satisfaction in any of them.

Compare this with the integrated, holistic life of the hunter-gatherer. For her, there is no distinction between working and playing, between taking care of her practical needs, enjoying herself, and spending time with her children, friends, and lovers. She moves through the world, deriving sustenance, physical fitness, and companionship from the same activities, weaving a daily life that is both challenging and familiar: at once adventure, livelihood, and religious ceremony.

Perhaps you've experienced this kind of life before in an enterprise that incorporated every aspect of your being into a perfect equilibrium. If we cannot reintegrate our lives, we will squander them trying to make impossible choices between equally indispensable pieces of ourselves. Likewise, if we want to make revolutionary social change, we have to find ways of living that are revolutionary in their very nature; for activism, environmental conservatism, or social responsibility as separate domains of life—as hobbies, or even as day jobs—can never outweigh the effects of the rest of our lives.



Homo Fragmens



**Crime or Miracle:
A Complete Human Being**

JOHN BROWN AT THE AGE OF 58.

Specialization: The Division of Labor

Just as our individual lives are fragmented by compartmentalization, our society is fragmented by ever-increasing specialization as every sphere of life is relegated to the care of experts. Every profession is divided and subdivided: from scientist to chemist, from chemist to biochemist, from biochemist to pharmaceutical neurobiologist until no one outside a handful of authorities can understand the questions, let alone the answers. At that point, the division of knowledge itself becomes authoritarian, for it grants small groups of people vast power over others who are incapable of informed participation in decisions that affect their lives.

Becoming a specialist is a self-selecting process: only those willing to concentrate on one subject to the exclusion of all others can excel at it. Thus engineers and computer programmers are willing to build weapons of mass destruction and crack the codes of "subversive" groups for the government, for they have never taken the time to reflect seriously on the effects of their efforts—they simply do what they have learned to do for whoever provides them the opportunity and salary to do it. An expert who does his job well without ever reflecting upon how his work impacts the social whole is potentially extremely dangerous; without such men, there would be no nuclear weapons. At the same time, without an analysis of the part they play in society, each of these experts experiences society as an external force acting on him without his participation, even though it is comprised of people like himself.

Specialization discourages all of us from being well-rounded human beings. Entertainment is left to movie directors, car maintenance to automechanics, social change to professional politicians or amateur activists. The more complicated technologies become, the more obscure the language used by those in the know, the fewer of us are able to exercise any control over our environments: "Call the repair man," we chant, intimidated into ignorance and impotence. Many question authority in the political sense, but few are prepared to question the authorities on technical matters.

For an example of the impoverishing effects of specialization, consider how rarely adults who are not recognized as "artists" partake of the joys of aesthetic creation. What is meaningful about a painting cannot be captured by purchasing it in a gallery and hanging it on

... is conceived,
... with his comrades late one
... about narrative and form, and has a sudden exhilarat-
ing insight. This is something we could all take part in, each with our
unique talents; but by the end of elementary school, all but a few of
us have learned that we cannot paint, cannot sing, cannot dance. The
myth of the divine inspiration of artists and the expert credentials of
the art critics who deify them—just like the genius of scientists and
the arcane knowledge of locksmiths—have fooled us into denying
ourselves some of the sweetest gifts life has to offer.

Segregation: The Sub-Division of Communities

Any schoolchild knows racial segregation didn't end with the Jim
Crow laws, or when they started bussing students from the ghetto
to detention rooms at predominantly white schools. Classes and
races still live apart, separated by the walls of gated communities,
the windows of restaurants and automobiles, and invisible barriers
a thousand times more difficult to traverse. This is not a holdover
from an earlier era, but an essential part of the capitalist world
order, just like the walls that separate Mexico from the United
States and Palestine from Israel; borders are open for commodities
and closed to human bodies, except when those bodies are them-
selves valuable commodities—tourists, for example. With these
barriers in place, communities cannot learn from each other, can-
not exchange resources or intermingle. At the most, they intersect
through the market and mass media—white kids buy hip hop al-
bums and think they know about life in the 'hood.

But this subtle apartheid goes further: wherever there are walls
between communities, there are inevitably walls between individ-
uals within each community and walls within individuals as well.
"Every man for himself" means "... against himself," insofar as he
must renounce all the parts of himself that reside in other people.
If we were really out "for ourselves" we would demolish every bar-
rier that separates us, for healthy relations with others are the most
precious form of wealth. The proverbial white picket fence of the
suburbs, now hypertrophied into cinderblock and barbed wire, in-
dicates a pathological drive to deprive oneself of all the nutrients



Separated spatially, socially, and psychologically, unable to recognize themselves in each other, people rarely seek common cause. Instead, each group tends to blame others for its woes: the library would get the necessary funding if only it wasn't going to the linguistics department, the African-American community would be able to pull itself up by its bootstraps if it wasn't for the Korean merchants leeching off it. Even political activists, in taking on single issues rather than addressing the root causes of modern misery, find themselves in competition with other activists: Will Congress prioritize forest protection legislation this session, or focus on abortion rights? Is the revolutionary subject of history the proletariat, or the oppressed peoples of the Third World? Such isolated, mutually exclusive campaigns and frameworks can only maintain the underpinnings of our powerlessness; we need to transform our sick society, not treat its symptoms one by one.

End Segregation! Reintegrate Our Lives!

As you read this, somewhere in the world there is an underground circus or punk rock band on tour. Unbeknownst to themselves and others, they carry with them the seeds of an ancient social structure. Responsibilities are shared and valued equally within the group, and whenever someone wants a break from something or is curious to learn about something else she switches roles with another person. No one member's participation is any more or less important than any other's, whatever their individual strengths may be, for the cooperation and contentment of each is crucial to the functioning of the group. Each member's daily activities satisfy her various desires: she feels at home with her friends while she travels through new environments, she makes art that simultaneously entertains and educates, she gets exercise loading and unloading equipment, she learns new things repairing the van and interacting with locals, she has adventures collecting food and other supplies through urban hunting and gathering that does not conflict with her anti-consumerist ethics. Best of all, she no longer has to distinguish between her own needs and those of the people around her, and this eliminates most of the stress of interacting with others. Together all the participants function as an extended family, to such an extent that over time they are able to lose some members and gain others without losing their customs or closeness.

This spills over into their interactions with those outside their clan. If there are no hierarchies or rigid divisions within a group, there need not be artificial boundaries between that group and others. They can move through a variety of social and cultural circles, giving and receiving freely, limited only by their own sociability.

Yes, we'd have to downsize and rework our whole civilization to follow the lead this merry little band offers, but for the past few centuries we've been struggling to deal with the difficulties of *not* living in such communities—and we haven't had much success. If we're going to struggle anyway, it might as well be towards a utopia in which our lives can encompass everything the cosmos has to offer.

Divorces

- Production : Consumption
- Art : Life
- Work : Play
- Lovers : Friends
- Intimacy : Sexuality
- Farms : Supermarkets
- Management : Labor
- Theory : Action
- Rich : Poor
- Youth : Age
- White : Color
- Men : Women
- Entertainment : Education
- Exercise : Relaxation
- Words : Deeds
- Technology : Nature
- Self-interest : Generosity
- Poetry : Resistance
- Workplaces : Apartments
- Business : Pleasure

We knew we couldn't hold out against the city police, so we decided to upstage them: if the administration was going to evict our encampment, we'd evict the university first. There were a couple dozen of us in teams of twos and threes; we divided the campus into nine zones, agreed on a time, and split up.

I got the main cafeteria on account of my rapport with the employees. I wanted to check in once more anyway, since this was probably the last time they'd see me on campus.

After two watchful circuits around the building, I hung around the back door until a couple students came out. Another group of students was coming down the stairs close on their heels; after they passed I waited on the landing until the door clicked shut before slipping the can out of my pack and spraying NO SWEATSHOPS NO EVICTION NO QUARTER across the wall. I sprang up the remaining stairs three at a time before anyone else appeared.

In the weeks I'd spent at the university, I'd never gotten over the shock I felt every time I entered the cafeteria. The sheer tonnage of unguarded food was exhilarating for someone used to having to shoplift it one candy bar at a time, but it was also infuriating to see it here, unappreciated and often unused. In the course of an hour, more food left on the conveyor belt into the dish room than my mother brought home in a month—and on the other side of the wall, invisible to the students with their symbolic logic and art history homework, guys like me were dodging jets of scalding water to process all that waste.

I strolled up to the fruit display, exchanging a wink with Walter as he refilled one of the cereal machines. I'd underestimated: my backpack was big, but there was no way all those apples, oranges, and bananas would fit in it, let alone the bagels I had my eye on.

There were designer book bags unattended on the tables behind me, but however privileged and ignorant their owners were they were just innocent civilians in the war I was fighting now. I had to come up with something else. The watch I'd borrowed read 11:59.

I went into the restroom and pulled out the garbage bag under the paper towel dispenser; sure enough, there were several unused bags folded neatly in the bottom of the can. When I'd taken out the trash at the diner two jobs ago, I'd always done the same so I didn't have to get a new bag from the utility closet every time. I snapped a bag open in the air and slipped it into the front pocket of my sweatshirt. On the way out, I grabbed a paper towel and held it doubled between my fingers and thumb.

I pulled my hood up and took a left out of the bathroom. No one was looking at me; three hundred students were gossiping, shoveling food into their mouths, and shouting for their friends to save them seats without the slightest idea what was coming. I didn't glance up again. In ten paces I reached the fire alarm. I gripped the lever through the paper towel and pulled down.

Until that instant, my whole being had been taut, trembling in fear of the deed I was to perform. I'd woken up twice in the three hours I'd tried to sleep; right up to the moment the buzzer tore the air and everyone leaped up in shock, there was a part of me that could not believe it was really going to happen. Unexpectedly, as soon as it was done, I was completely at peace. Now there was no time to worry about consequences and complications; I inhabited my body like an animal, with tasks to accomplish and predators to escape.

I walked straight to the fruit display. Without glancing at the pandemonium around me, I upended the shelves of fruit one after another into the garbage bag, then shook all the bagels out of their display case into my backpack and pushed in the one-gallon peanut butter can for good measure. Walter had left a full cereal bag by the cereal dispensers; I dropped it in with the fruit as I took off at an oblique angle to the flow of students making for the exit. The garbage bag bumped against my legs as I ran. I struggled to hold it out to the side, but it was heavy.

We hit a bottleneck at the stairs. As soon as I was through the exit door, I pulled my hood back; there were no cameras here, the kids around me weren't paying attention, and if anyone behind us was

interested in me they'd have to fight through a lot of traffic. As we reached the stairs and began our slow descent, NO SWEATSHOPS NO EVICTION came into view over the heads of the crowd below.

The mood shifted here. What had been a routine drill for some and a frightening situation for others suddenly took on a new character. Conversations grew more animated; someone let out a whistle.

As we stepped outside, I could hear other alarms in the distance alternating faintly with the one immediately behind us in a complex call and response pattern. There was already a thick crowd around the building mingling with the crowds pouring out of other buildings: students holding half-eaten hamburgers or notebooks they'd just been writing in, some yammering into cell phones, others silently taking in the spectacle—and interspersed among them professors, janitors, librarians, dining hall managers, secretaries, administrators. Normally, most of these people would be inside, segregated according to class and position, but here it was as if all the buildings on campus had been upended and shaken out to show the true composition of the university. It was ironic that only a total interruption could bring together all the different people who constituted it and give them something in common.

All the cafeteria employees were sitting or leaning along one low brick wall, including the Latino dishwashers whose existence was such a carefully guarded secret. I set down the heavy garbage bag behind a trash can and made my way over. Someone had brought out a little radio, which was cheerfully singing gospel music in a tinny, indomitable voice. Ethel and Velma were there, laughing at something with Joe; it really was intolerable that anyone would have to be inside on such a lovely sunny day.

"Hey y'all, how's it going?"

"Enjoying the sunlight, that's all! How you doing?"

"Pretty good! Listen, I want you to know I probably won't be seeing you here for a while"—I nodded in the direction of the cafeteria, from which the awful buzzing could still be heard—"but we'll be by with a bunch of stuff again Thursday." With surprise and a little dismay, I recognized a woman in the crowd from the action the night before—she'd been sitting right next to me in the audience. What the fuck was she doing here? "Tell Luis we'll go over to the apartments, too. I've gotta get going, I'll see you soon."

"All right then! Be safe!" Ethel raised an eyebrow meaningfully.

A couple campus policemen were making their way through the crowd with sour looks on their faces. I'd never seen anyone look so disagreeable in my life. It was time to get my bag and go.

I'd made it twenty paces from the crowd when I sensed someone behind me. Resisting the urge to look around, I sped up and scanned my surroundings for escape routes.

"I'm sorry—can you direct me to the encampment?"

I broke and glanced over my shoulder. It was my neighbor from the previous evening.

I did some quick thinking—she and I had crossed paths at the town council meeting, and only a few of us had known there was going to be an action there, so it was unlikely she was working for the police. "It's across the quad. I'm not headed there right now."

"I'm sorry to bother you—" She was panting a bit to keep up; I was too, lugging my great big bag and hurrying as fast as I could without breaking into a run. "—I just want to get involved, and maybe you can help me to—"

"All right—listen, I need twenty minutes to take care of something, then I'll meet you right here. OK?"

She was with Kate and me that evening when all of us were arrested.



“It was not a column but a mob, an awful river that filled the street—the people of the abyss, mad with drink and wrongs, up at last and roaring for the blood of their masters. I had seen the people of the abyss before, gone through their ghettos, and thought I knew them; but I found that I was now looking on them for the first time.

“This fascinating spectacle of dread surged past my vision in concrete waves of wrath, snarling and growling, carnivorous, drunk with whisky from pillaged warehouses, drunk with hatred, drunk with lust for blood—men, women and children in rags and tatters, dim ferocious intelligences with all the godlike blotted from their features and all the fiendlike stamped in, apes and tigers, anemic consumptives and great hairy beasts of burden, wan faces from which vampire society had sucked the juice of life, bloated forms swollen with physical grossness and corruption, withered hags and death’s-heads bearded like patriarchs, festering youth and festering age, crooked, twisted, misshapen monsters blasted with the ravages of disease and all the horrors of chronic malnutrition—the refuse and the scum of life, a raging, screaming, screeching, demoniacal horde.”

—Jack London [socialist, reformist, etc., etc.], *The Iron Heel*

Crowd Dynamics and the Mass Psychology of Possibility

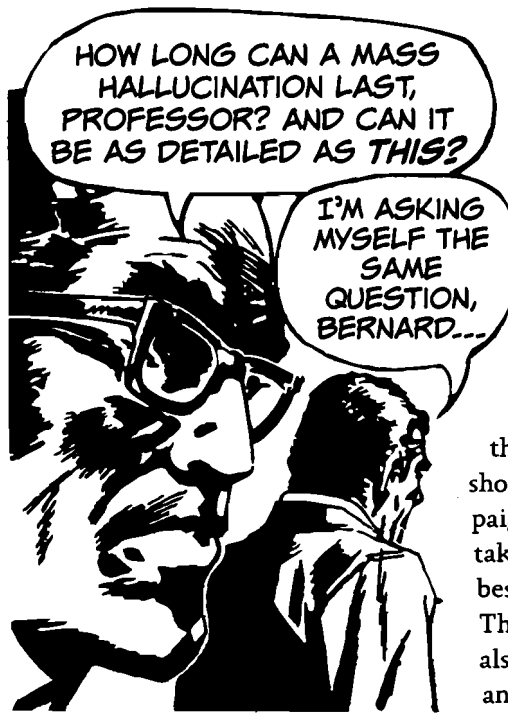
An account of spatial movement,
an allegory of social movement.

*“A sociologist is an authority on crowds
like a policeman is an authority on people.”*

—Bill Buford, *AMONG THE THUGS*

If you go to the experts to learn about crowds, you will read that they are mindless monsters: people gone mad or returned to their primitive state, animals out of control, flocks of sheep that must be properly dominated lest they become packs of wolves. The rabble long to be roused, to be hypnotized by their own brute force, and that is all there is to it. Such crowd theory gives the impression that the theorists are simply apologists for their patrons’ crowd control; the analysis is so one dimensional, the tone so superior, that you’d think the closest they ever came to the subject was in peering down from the high, narrow windows of their ivory towers.

And you’d almost be right. But in fact, they too are submerged in a crowd: it is simply a bigger one, so much bigger that it is unrecognizable as one so long as the observer remains within it. The crowds they purport to explain are dissident microcosms of the same form; these can be identified as crowds only because they are distinct in some way from the colossal crowd that is the theorists’ society. Inevitably, these smaller masses look crazed and irrational to



the specialists of the status quo, because—for however brief a time—they are acting according to a dissenting sense of reality and value. So there are always at least two crowds in any equation: in the case of the mob that riots and loots a shopping district, for example, the other crowd is the one that built the shopping district, that owns the shops and organizes advertising campaigns to promote their wares, that takes it for granted that that space is best utilized for buying and selling. The fact that this dominant crowd is also a mob, only a more entrenched and institutionalized one, may only be apparent from outside it—for in-

stance, from the perspective of one of the looters.

Reality itself is determined by consensus—that is to say, by crowds. What is possible, what is impossible: these are decided collectively, according to what people believe to be so. The world we inhabit is not made up merely of physical or sensory facts; these raw materials gain meaning as signs, tools, customs, and so on from their social context, and the resulting forest of signs is the greater part of what we mean when we say reality. It is these social conditions that create individuals, including the values that influence their choices; but, as these conditions are themselves the result of individual decisions, they only persist because people choose to reproduce them.

Why does this happen, then, in the case of notoriously unpopular social conditions such as war, pollution, and miserable employment? Generally, people make choices based on what they consider to be “realistic” rather than on what they desire, and what they consider realistic depends on what they believe others consider realistic—this is how the stock market works, for example. Thus, any given social order rests on a kind of mob mentality, a collective psychosis—and is by no means guaranteed to be in the best interests of those who comprise it.

When people do not recognize themselves as part of a crowd,

but think of themselves only as sovereign individuals who just so happen to speak, vote, shop, think, and feel the same way thousands or millions of others do, they tend to see reality as fixed and undisputable. This is the first kind of crowd, the most primitive kind—a crowd that lacks awareness of its own existence. This sort of crowd is no less powerful than other kinds, but the power it has rarely does anyone any good, as it is never wielded consciously. Crowds of this type are characterized by an inability to question their own assumptions and a total denial of responsibility for their actions; when eighty million televisions sets go on in unison at the end of the workday, that’s an example of such a crowd in action.

The second kind of crowd is a crowd that is aware of its existence, but not its power. A good example of this is the mass of fans at a sports or entertainment event. People will go to great lengths to come together in such settings, to feel the excitement in the air when a great number share a common space and focus.* Let’s not be coy about this: there is something thrilling about being part of a crowd, something fundamentally pleasurable about feeling your experiences and reactions mirrored in the ones around you. The disappointment many voice at low-turnout events indicates a common awareness that it is the atmosphere generated by the mass, not the supposed main attraction, that makes such affairs interesting. Yet the members of such crowds do not think of themselves as the authors of the situations they create. It is their money, their attendance, their interest alone that make these possible, but they attribute this power to others outside themselves—the organizers, the promoters, the Rolling Stones or Atlanta Braves.

But sports fans don’t always limit themselves to buying tickets, shouting chants, and filing in and out of stadiums. Sometimes they get carried away. Every promoter who brings together a great crowd in order to sell them back their own togetherness runs the risk that some of his customers will take things too far and engage in some street sports of their own—football hooliganism, for example. The usual pundits decry this as barbaric, uncivilized behavior, but it is

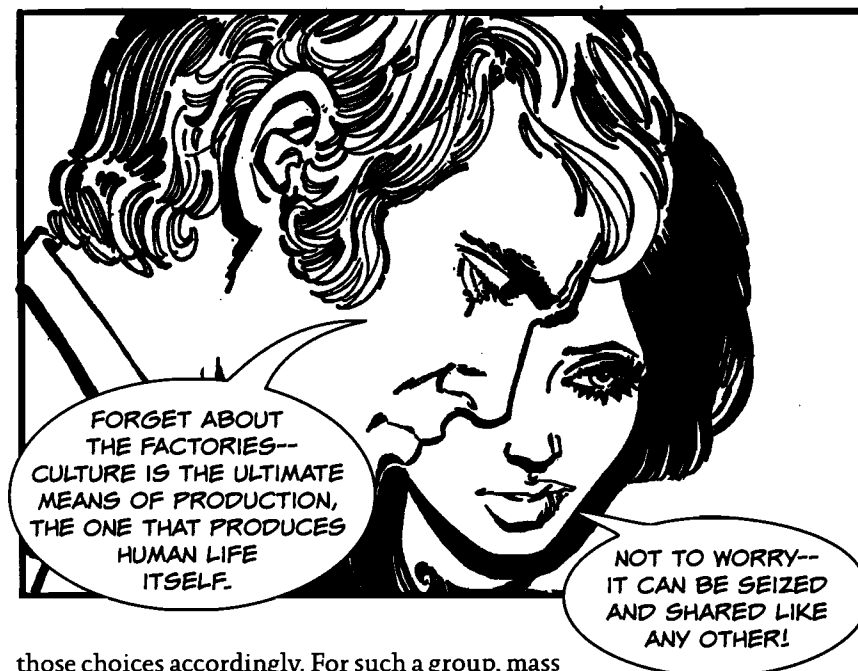
* People in crowds types two and up tend to lose their borders—think of the audience packed tight at a concert. By contrast, people in type one crowds, who won’t acknowledge that they form a crowd at all, tend to emphasize and reinforce the borders that separate them: imagine the same people packed tight in a city bus the following morning.

actually *more* cultured, *more* civilized, than mere spectatorship: these are people initiating their own activities, not just following instructions like automatons. Joining in large-scale street fights, provoking riots and confrontations with police—these otherwise senseless activities give the participants the opportunity to form the third kind of crowd: the crowd that is aware of its own power to determine reality. This is the crowd as protagonist, as subject rather than object; the fact that people willingly join in such violent, unpleasant activities is not just evidence of how screwed up they are, but also of how desperate they are to experience themselves as something other than passive vessels of commerce. Small wonder such misbehavior is so contagious; once a crowd gains a sense of its ability to reinvent situations, peanuts and popcorn—even front row seats to someone else's game—lose their luster. This is not to say that every renegade crowd is a good crowd—lynch mobs are, after all, mobs—but only to point out how, in a society based on segregation and passivity, any self-generated, self-determined group activity is seductively subversive.

All the same, a crowd that has a sense of its own power is not necessarily liberating for those who form it. As a crowd, they may be free from the domination of other crowds, but this is no guarantee that any of them are free within the crowd. Individuals who know they are powerful together aren't always aware of the part each plays in creating that power, nor do they necessarily know how to join in deciding how it is applied.

Crowds are vulnerable to authority, to being controlled by minorities or outsiders, to the extent that each participant is unaware of how to employ his agency in the group. Conversely, a crowd is capable, flexible, and likely to act in the best interests of its members to the exact degree that all within it are conscious of their own power and familiar with applying it.* The fourth kind of crowd, then, is the crowd made up of individuals who recognize that the crowd is nothing more than the sum of their individual choices, and make

* This stands in stark contrast to the military model of group participation, in which each individual is systematically broken of his sense of autonomy and independence so he can function more efficiently in a strict chain of command. The implication there is that it is conformist, hierarchical unity that gives power to a group—but could it be that one of the primary purposes of armies is to strip power from their members, to create defenseless crowds under the pretense of defending them?



those choices accordingly. For such a group, mass activity is a chance to share selfhood with others, for people to multiply themselves by one another—not a cover under which to abdicate responsibility.

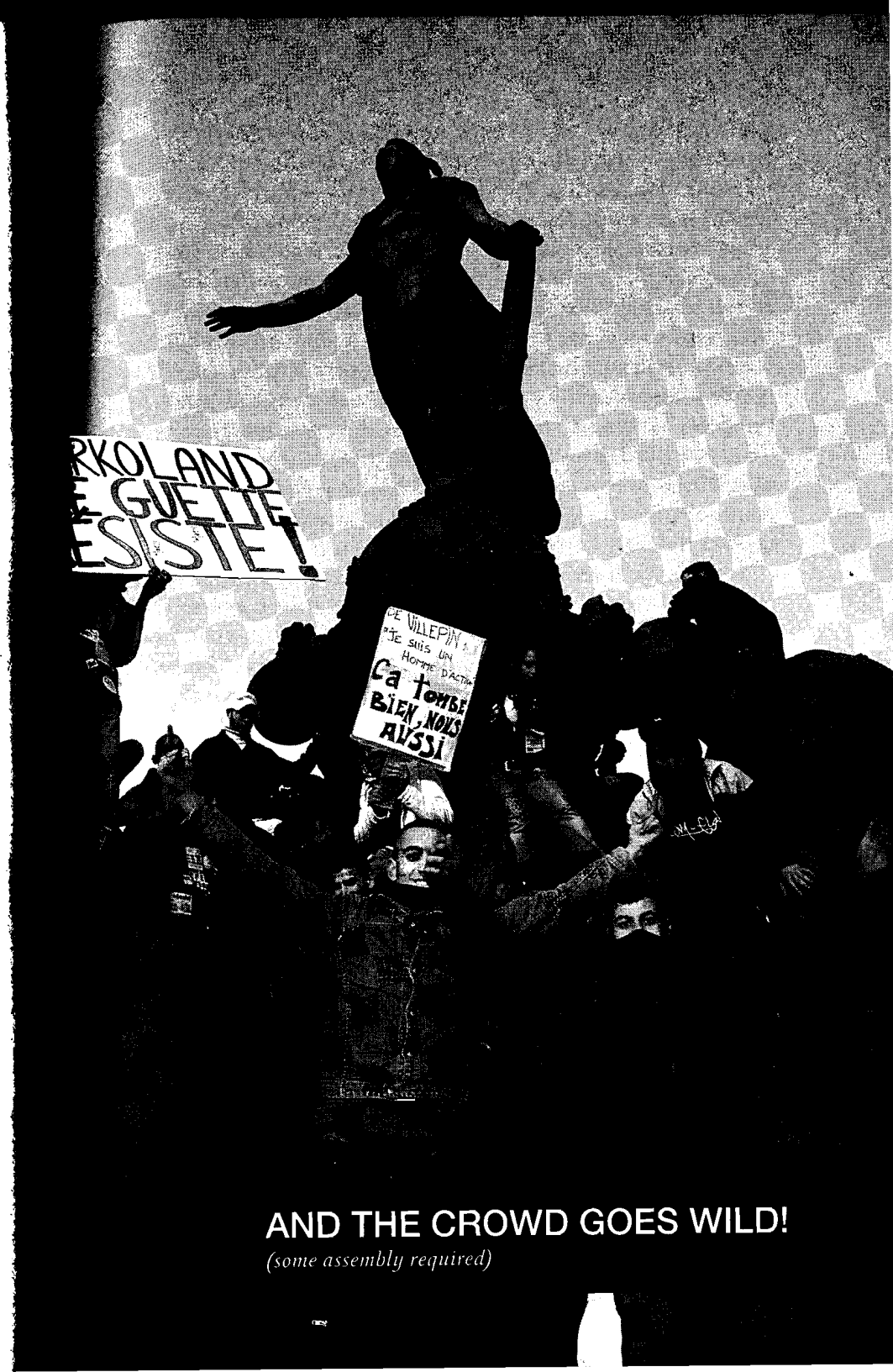
The affinity group of political activists, in which decisions are made by consensus among a group of friends who not only have developed their conception of what is meaningful together but also are in the habit of acting on it decisively, is a microcosm of such a crowd. The do-it-yourself music counterculture, in which pleasure itself is refined and redefined through collaborative experiments in aesthetics that influence and inform one another, is a somewhat larger-scale version of the same thing. In such contexts, where reality is determined consciously and collectively, one's freedom is the sum of all others' freedom, not the narrow space left over in the margins.

Those who desire this freedom face the challenge of transforming crowd dynamics. Actual throngs are excellent laboratories for studying ways to do this. In close proximity, the processes by which people read and respond to one another speed up; thanks to this feedback loop, new realities can quickly be generated in the collective psyche. This is why guardians of the status quo always malign

the mob:* small, tight-knit crowds can be pressure cookers of social transformation. In our society, every effort is made to prevent people from coming together in masses, to prevent masses who have come together from recognizing themselves as masses, to prevent masses that recognize themselves as such from gaining a sense of their power, and to prevent those who participate in masses that have a sense of their power from recognizing their own individual part in this power. But all it takes to unleash the crowd is to name it for what it is and engage with it; we are, after all, living in the most crowded era in history.

A small group that behaves confidently as if they are living in a different world can call into question things everyone else takes for granted; if they take their departure far enough at the right time, they can render the impossible possible by persuading others that it is so on the strength of their own conviction. This can be done without coercion or instruction: one need only demonstrate options with one's behavior that were invisible before, and others will join in if what they see is attractive to them. Thus the yearning of a very few can be taken up by a mass and become a self-fulfilling prophecy; all it takes is for a few dreamers to practice believing and desiring outside the lines while resisting the quarantine of pigeonholing, then publicly demonstrate those dreams and their faith in them.

* Just as they frame "minority groups" as groups in a way that downplays the agency of the individuals that comprise them, authorities usually describe type four crowds as crowds (or cult groups, extremist sects, etc.) in order to obscure the enhanced liberties they can offer participants.



AND THE CROWD GOES WILD!

(some assembly required)

I returned to the university two days after my first visit, and again two days after that. At first I told myself I was staying abreast of things for a follow-up story; as the situation intensified, I decided I was taking notes for a potential book. Most of the occupiers, especially the non-students, regarded me with polite suspicion, but thanks to Kate taking me under her wing I wasn't run off the way other reporters were.

I would never have acknowledged it to my coworkers, but the more time I spent around the barbarians, the more sympathetic I was to their quixotic crusade. Didn't I myself hate the media and the corporate world more than these youngsters possibly could, having squandered the best years of my life in a rat maze? Wasn't the duplicity of the university administration loathsome enough to justify just about anything? All the same, I was glad they were the ones fighting this impossible battle while I took notes from the sidelines. It takes more emotional energy than most people have to invest yourself in a contest you can only lose.

I missed the fire drill and the eviction, though by that time I was sitting in on meetings and even taking the odd shift on dishes. That night I chipped in a few hundred dollars for bail and waited outside the station with a dozen others to serve hot soup and apple cider to the arrestees as they were released. The barbarian I took to be Kate's boyfriend, a wiry young savage with an aquiline nose and perpetually furrowed brow, still refused to acknowledge me even as I passed him a steaming styrofoam cup. That stung, and the sting drove home to me that I was more emotionally involved in my subject than a journalist should ever permit himself to be.

After that night, the momentum that had begun on campus fragmented into the university employee strike, a new wave of student activism, a renewed off-campus anti-sweatshop campaign, and sporadic attacks throughout the city that implied a politicized hooligan-

ism. It was clear that something was still afoot, but that something was more diffuse and more difficult to follow. Some of the aspects of the previous weeks that had interested me most, such as the relationship between the black-clad barbarians of the encampment and the black and Latino employees of the school, seemed to have disappeared entirely into a subterranean realm.

I went to the benefit concert in hopes of recovering the thread. A band was performing to raise funds for the upcoming court case, and workers from campus were speaking there too. I was shocked how fast the club filled up; if all these people were part of an emerging movement, there was a future for my book after all.

Canetti suggests that all demands for justice and all theories about equality ultimately derive from the experience of actual equality familiar to anyone who has been part of a crowd. Indeed, I felt no sting of exclusion there, pressed tight in the darkness with hundreds of strangers. Student protesters I hadn't seen since the last days of the occupation greeted me as if I was one of them; it was the first time I'd exchanged sincere embraces with acquaintances in longer than I could remember. Pressed together listening to Walter speak about the strike and the power of people who cannot be appeased, I was sure even those who hadn't heard of the occupation until that night felt like they were part of something greater than themselves.

All this evaporated as we passed through the exit doors; instantly everyone was on their cell phones, splitting up into little cliques en route to their cars. The clock struck midnight and, as in the fairy tale, the others became young music consumers again and I was once more the reporter. The show had been an anomaly, a sort of nature preserve in which togetherness was still permitted to run wild—under close supervision and at a price.

But here, suddenly, people were passing out sticks and plastic buckets fashioned into drums and unfurling an enormous roll of painted canvas. Afterwards, I couldn't say exactly who it had been, though I had the impression I knew some of them; I was sure they'd been part of the crowd inside the club—otherwise, who would have followed their example? At any rate, they were not alone for long: the dissipating crowd regrouped around this new focal point, and others began picking up drums and joining in.

The district's main thoroughfare lay right across the parking lot. Perhaps some of the radicals in the audience had fantasized about

blocking or seizing it, but that had never happened before, ergo it must not be possible. Everyone knew that the street was for car traffic, just as the sidewalk was for pedestrian shoppers; the question of whether these limitations were oppressive or constraining never crossed most citizens' minds, for their roles were not negotiable.

And yet a few of the drummers stepped into the street, right into the middle of it, halting traffic; they were joined by three masked barbarians carrying a great banner. Now the street was also for drumming, for shouting and dancing and marching. The rest of us watched from the sidewalk, as if to see what would happen to those who crossed this threshold.

Later, I looked back at this as a crucial moment. At first it seemed things would go no further—the crowd was stretched out, a few rushing ahead and everyone else lingering behind, and it looked like we were about to rupture and disperse—but then the momentum of the first ones off the sidewalk spread to the rest of us, and what had been a flow of consumers returning to their cars became a parade.

A subtle transformation took place after we moved onto the asphalt. Clearly, taking the street was possible after all, and was possible because a critical mass had deemed it so. Once again, as we had been in the club, we were conscious of ourselves as a collective force; only here, outside its confines, we had the magical power to renegotiate reality.

From this new vantage point, it was as if we were passing through a different city. Traffic was backed up behind us as far as I could see, a cacophonous symphony of honking horns, but the sound only mingled with the drumming and added to the ambience. Were those actually *torches* up in the front? Returning to the same spot a few days later, I had the uncanny impression that I could not find the streets we'd traversed that night: the distances seemed shorter, the lighting less dramatic, the buildings less imposing.

A police car arrived, followed by two more with their lights flashing, but they remained at a distance, presumably waiting for further orders or backup. Had ten people attempted to block traffic here at this time of night, they would certainly have been arrested; but when two hundred did, the laws dissolved. Another officer appeared ahead of us, turning his car sideways across the street. Flushed with the confidence that had blossomed out of thin air in the past few minutes, we simply walked around it, leaving the driver huffing

and impotent behind the wheel. When I saw the car pull up again at the next intersection, one of its lights had been kicked out and a streak of spray paint ran along its side.

As we approached the car again, a bottle rocket shot up into the air and exploded overhead. This must have been the work of one individual, or perhaps a couple; but feeling it to proceed from the context we had authored together, the whole crowd cheered in ownership. Several more rockets whistled over our heads, one ricocheting off the brick facade of a bank. We turned left unexpectedly, following the banner to one side of the police car this time, and picked up our pace. A new sense of urgency and expectation was spreading through the crowd; looking around, I saw that many of those around me had pulled up their hoods or wrapped scarves around their faces.

We were entering one of the city's most expensive commercial districts; one after another, we passed corporate cafés, jewelry shops, restaurants and boutiques. I'd driven down this street countless times, even shopped on it—but from within the crowd I experienced it as something alien, a manifestation of the system that exploited, that evicted, that policed. We turned again, and again our pace increased; I almost had to break into a run to keep up. Now the police cars were nowhere to be seen. Suddenly, as we swung around another corner, a storefront half the length of the block came into view. Six-foot-high letters proclaimed the name of the corporation involved in the sweatshop scandal on campus.

Time froze here for a second. Then the windows were crashing in, great sections of plate glass falling free and shattering across the concrete. I remember it reminded me of footage I'd seen of the glaciers at the polar caps melting, massive vertical sheets of ice coming loose in slow motion and tumbling into the sea.

There's something singular about watching a person commit a flagrantly illegal act in full public view. No one ever looks more decisive than a masked figure swinging a crowbar against a display window. Normally, a person's actions gain their meaning from the validation of a whole society; in that single transgressive movement, the vandal appears entirely self-governing, sufficient unto himself or herself, infinitely free and powerful.

A second later we were sprinting down a side street, dropping glass still ringing out behind us. Fear hadn't set in yet, though I'm



sure most of us had gone further over the line than we had ever imagined ourselves venturing. The only sensations I experienced at that moment were euphoria and the impression that I was flying over the concrete beneath me without touching it. I felt connected to the strangers around me as if we had grown up hunting together in a rainforest—I was boundlessly grateful to them for being there with me, for rendering that moment possible. I had done nothing more myself than witness and approve, but that had been enough. My determination to identify with the insurgent parts of myself was finally bearing fruit.

Now we heard sirens in the distance—they were closing in from several directions at once. Before we could reach the end of the block, two police cars whizzed by ahead; when we arrived at the intersection, police officers were jumping out of cars on either side. Masked groups were breaking off from the crowd and disappearing down alleys, calling out to each other in code. The rest of us paused in indecision and distress.

When a crowd of people take over a street or carry off some similarly impossible action, all their strength comes from the sense that they can count on each other, all their confidence as individuals is founded upon their collective morale. What the group believes to be possible becomes possible; what some believe impossible becomes impossible, and thus none can believe in it to make it so. As soon as some visibly doubted that we could maintain our cohesion

and the power that derived from it, everyone else suddenly doubted it as well and fled as if following orders.

In flight, the bulk of us remained together, but now we were a very different crowd. We were no longer bound by a sense of shared strength, but by fear of the police—and, more importantly, of responsibility for ourselves. In a dangerous situation, no risk could be more terrifying than the fact that every individual is ultimately responsible for the decisions that bear him to safety or misfortune. This is why people almost always flee en masse if they can, whether or not it is the wisest decision: by doing so, each hopes to evade the obligation of making wise decisions, placing it on the shoulders of those around—who are doing the same, unfortunately. A fearful crowd can be exponentially more fearful than a fearful individual, just as a courageous crowd can be more courageous than a courageous individual: this is why it is important for anyone who dabbles in crowd participation to know how to extricate himself from the crowd's groupthink at a moment's notice.

I didn't understand that at the time, but fortunately I couldn't keep up with the others either. I followed a dozen of them down an alley and when they ran one way out of it I headed the other direction at a brisk walk, trying to project professional calm and disinterest: *Me, I'm a journalist. What do you mean, what am I doing here? I'm a journalist!* My chest was heaving. Three police cars sped past me in the direction the others had run. *I'm a fucking journalist, I tell you, journalist JOURNALIST!* In retrospect, it was the safest thing I could have done, short of concealing myself in a dumpster as I later learned Kate had.

One tense block on I reached a public park. It was closed for the night, but I surprised myself by lurching over the fence. The roar of helicopters rose over the city behind me. I huddled in the shadows behind a line of bushes and exhaled.

As my eyes adjusted, I realized I was not alone behind my bush: a few dozen feet away, there were homeless men sleeping on the grass. I felt the same anonymous kinship with them I had with the others in the club and then in the march; they too were hiding out, they too were fugitives. They would never turn me over to the police or despise me for getting myself into this situation.

The ones who set the march in motion hadn't given any orders—they simply opened a window of possibility by carrying out actions

that left room for others to join in. There was no master with a megaphone, no media spokesperson, just the disparate desires and goals each individual brought to the street. At the same time, not all of us were ready to be equal participants in an action like this. Was it irresponsible that the ones who had kicked out the headlight of the police car and smashed the windows of the superstore had put me in harm's way? Or was I irresponsible for not being prepared to conduct myself wisely in this situation, for not taking ownership of my desire to be part of it?

One thing was certain—everything looked a lot different from that bush than it had from my desk at the office. I'm not writing a fucking book, I said to myself. This is really happening, and I'm not going to miss another minute of it. My pulse was racing like a freight train. I actually pinched myself: *This is really happening.*

One-Dimensional Man in the Three-Dimensional World

Why abstractions and absolutes are an assault on humanity and existence itself

...BUT THAT'S
A FALSE DICHOTOMY,
LIKE EVERY DICHOTOMY!
CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE,
LIKE ANY EVIDENCE!

A GROSS
GENERALIZATION--
LIKE EVERY
GENERALIZATION!



"A woman can never be too rich or too thin."

The anorexic and the body builder are both pursuing ideals that recede before them. Once you start to measure yourself by a one-dimensional standard such as strength or slimness, too much is never enough: the goal is always ahead of you, no matter how far you pursue it. These ideals cannot be reached in this world; if you follow them far enough, they lead you *out* of it, into the abyss that is their true domain—as the heart problems of bodybuilders and the suicides of our rock stars and sex symbols attest.

True, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Hollywood actresses, and others like them were practically factory farmed by our hyper-competitive society, but the rest of us are also infected with the values that produced them—we're just free-range versions of the same livestock. All our ways of judging and conceptualizing are comparative: Sara is pretty, but not as pretty as Diana, who is not as pretty as the girl on the magazine cover; Jane is smart, but not as smart as the boy who was just accepted to Harvard, who is not as intelligent as Albert Einstein was; serving free food is revolutionary, but not as revolutionary as setting police stations on fire. We are one-dimensional thinkers, unable to see each individual quality or action for what it is in itself, only able to apprehend them in terms of how they rate against others—the implication being that there is some fundamental scale by which *everything* can be rated. This is one way of conceiving of the world, yes, but not the only way—and not usually the best way, either.

This way of thinking makes life into a contest in which all must struggle to distinguish themselves by finding inferiors; it makes us disregard the unique qualities of every event and entity in favor of finding a place for them in some universal calibration of value. Another way of looking reveals that every human being has qualities

unlike any other, every moment is unique and unrepeatable, every radical action and approach is important to "the" revolution in irreplaceable ways. But we have no language that can articulate this, no means of expression that celebrates through description rather than comparison. Even when we aspire to value things in and of themselves, we are trapped by the assumptions implicit in our speech:

"I love you," whispers the young girl.

"Do you love me more than anyone else, more than anything?" demands the boy.

"I love you . . . differently, because of what you are. Not more, not less—there's no comparison with love, for love cherishes what is. Love is not judgment, it is measureless, matchless . . ." she replies—but he has already turned away.

Where did this obsession with one-dimensional standards come from? Perhaps it originated with language itself: where one word serves to represent many different individual experiences, abstraction is already present.* When you say "sunlight," the implication is that you are referring to something changeless and uniform—but all that can be said for sure is that the term designates a multitude of diverse sensory data and potential sensory data.

One might argue that what is most precious in life is not the lowest common denominators but the once-in-a-lifetime particulars, which words are least equipped to convey. What use is a word that refers to only one instant of one individual's experience? Words serve as currency precisely because they are vague and simplistic; no word or concept could ever capture the infinite depth and complexity of a single instant of life.

Western civilization is founded upon one-dimensional thinking: monotheism, monoculture, monogamy, monopoly, monotony.

* It could be argued that speaking a language doesn't give you a means to describe and discuss "the" world so much as it affords you entry to the additional world of description and discussion, which is often only connected to the world of sensory experience by the most tenuous abstractions. The urban environment, in which everything is mass-produced according to the same ideological framework through which it is experienced, could be considered a physical manifestation of this world of abstractions: conceptualization imposing itself upon reality.

Our cyclopean vision of the cosmos can be traced back to ancient Greece, where Plato took the abstraction inherent in language one step further. He declared that our abstractions refer to some "higher plane" in which abstractions like "justice" exist in their pure form. In doing so, he turned everything backwards, placing our broad generalizations *before* the experiences they summarize and claiming that they are truer than the raw materials they purport to represent. Thus he took the reference point of our concepts out of the world altogether, suggesting that our real experiences in it are less important than our ideas about it. Paul, the founder of Christianity, expanded this philosophy into a religious doctrine: the ideal exists in heaven and the earth is only a flawed, evil imitation.

Doctrines alone were not enough to make people see everything in terms of absolutes, of course. Against the wisdom of bodily experience, in which the unique qualities of every entity and event are encountered up close, they were powerless. But slowly, it became possible to force even the world of sensory perception onto the Procrustean bed of abstraction and judgment.

This began with the twin developments of currency and subdivided time. Suddenly, everything had an exchange value that could be determined according to an external standard, and likewise each day was divided into quantified segments. Time and worth cannot really be measured—the woman who has truly lived knows that no stopwatch can register the way time speeds up when she is in bed with her lover and slows down when she is "on the clock" at work, she knows that the best and worst things in life cannot be "deserved" or earned, let alone appraised—but wage labor and the change economics forced people to measure them anyway, and the habit sank in.

Soon, everything was measured and calibrated: women's clothing sizes, for example. Until the end of the nineteenth century, women's

* "That's funny," she said, "I have a similar equation in my journal, only with terms the other way 'round." She sketched it out on the napkin:

$$\frac{\infty}{x} = \text{every moment}$$

I was dumbfounded. Our equations were strikingly gendered—mine was an exhortation to an infinite and therefore impossible task, while hers suggested an infinity that could neither be sought nor evaded: eternity within the space of an instant, outer space within the smallest atom.

clothing was made by hand for individual women, and a woman was seen as possessing distinct personal qualities, not as a "size 6" or "plus size." It's telling that over the last few decades, the ideal woman has been described numerically—"36-24-36"—and anyone who varies from that Platonic form is considered less beautiful. Every morning women weigh themselves and experience just how inadequate any scale is for measuring the diverse beauty of human beings.

It only remained for corporate branding to standardize the real world according to our abstractions. Once upon a time most human beings ate from gardens, or else from the wild; in those days every fruit and vegetable was unique and looked it. Now our food is scientifically engineered to total uniformity, and each item comes with a brand name identifying which absolute it represents: the supermarket's generic brand is the Platonic form of the inferior banana, the name-brand banana is the perfect incarnation of the banana as abstraction, and the archetypal banana of wealthy, eco-elitist consumers comes marked "organic."

Those who would resist these attempts to press the real world to the flatness of the conceptual world often fall into the same practices. The world of political theory is rife with abstraction and one-dimensional thinking—the words you are reading right now, for example.* Many make it through childhood without losing the ability to appreciate the irreplaceable details of life, only to succumb

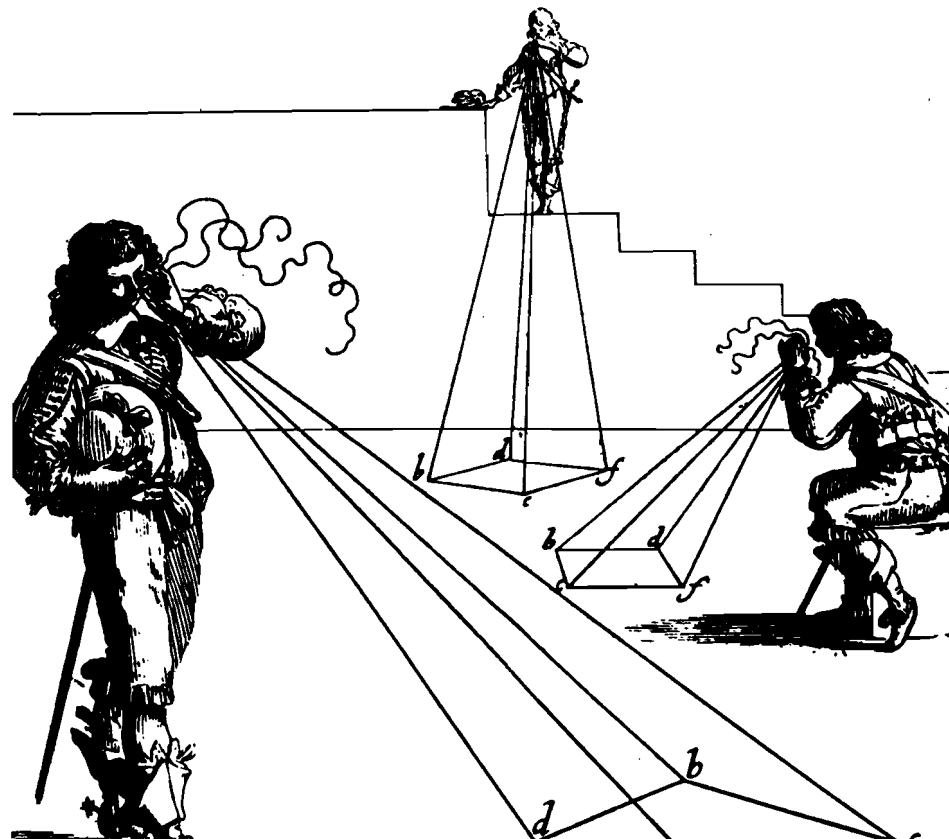
* Intellectuals have quite an aptitude for displacement—when they suffer from the ennui of their dry, disembodied existence, they respond to this suffering not with action but with more desiccating and disembodiment. All too often their real discontent is diverted into theory and abstract analysis, and thereby into career and status . . . and thus, more status quo.

Ideology creeps quickly into any language, languages that seek to oppose it no less. If you want to experience passion and liberty, the last thing you should do is make up slogans about them. This footnote itself is a pernicious little thing, just more abstractions about abstractions—put the book down, stop conceptualizing, get out there and *live*, whatever that means! Enough expounding, rationalizing, glorifying . . . distrust any words or symbols intended to capture the things that make life matter, political pomposities above all! Words can only express reality accidentally, and then only briefly. Cornered by the inertia of our own rhetoric, we must finally take a stand against speech itself—and *for* expression, but in *action* alone, the only place where it can avoid being burdened by the dead weight of ideology. That is to say—it is only sufficient to speak when, in speaking, you *are* acting. So unless you have hit upon a way to turn all this theory into actual life—throw this treatise aside!

[The treatise, of course, goes on undaunted, forgetful of its own demands, as ideology always does and is.]

to the maladies of generalizing and idealizing when they begin to read theory and attempt to form an analysis of the cosmos: their impressions and emotions are converted into an ideology, and where their struggles and goals once referred to real people they now see people only as playing pieces in a contest of symbols.

There are no more obvious or prevalent examples of vampiric archetypes than whiteness and masculinity. White supremacist patriarchal society still rewards certain superficial traits and ways of comporting oneself above all others, despite the fact that the race and gender divisions that supposedly form the justification for this are increasingly seen as arbitrary constructions—their being constructions simply makes them more useful for dividing and conquering. Whiteness is not just a quality some possess and others lack, but a *way of comparing people*; proof of this can be found in nations in which no one is “white” by European standards, but some groups still benefit from white privilege in relation to others. Likewise, the fact that they are all men doesn’t stop football players from competing against one another to be the most manly—on the contrary!—



**It is only now that I can
recognize your beauty and
deny no part of my own.**

while even in women-only groups people can be seen playing the role of “the man.” Insofar as one-dimensional cultural norms are constraining and dehumanizing, everyone—even the whitest of the white and manliest of men—has a stake in overthrowing white supremacy and patriarchy, though people experience this differently according to their places in the hierarchy.

Ultimately, the pursuit of ideals that cannot be realized in this world constitutes a rejection of the world and thus of life itself—as demonstrated by the sad fate of the body builders and anorexics who take that pursuit to its logical extreme, the grave. We are so used to denigrating this world, saying it is an imperfect, even intolerable place. So it appears, compared against ideals that seem perfect precisely because they cannot exist; so it becomes, when we attempt

to navigate it according to those ideals rather than the real things around and within us. A truly radical resolution would be to embrace existence just as it is, as the only thing that matters, to proclaim that this world itself is heaven, made for our total enjoyment and fulfillment . . . and then to ask: *If that's the case, how do we act accordingly? What have we been doing wrong all this time?**

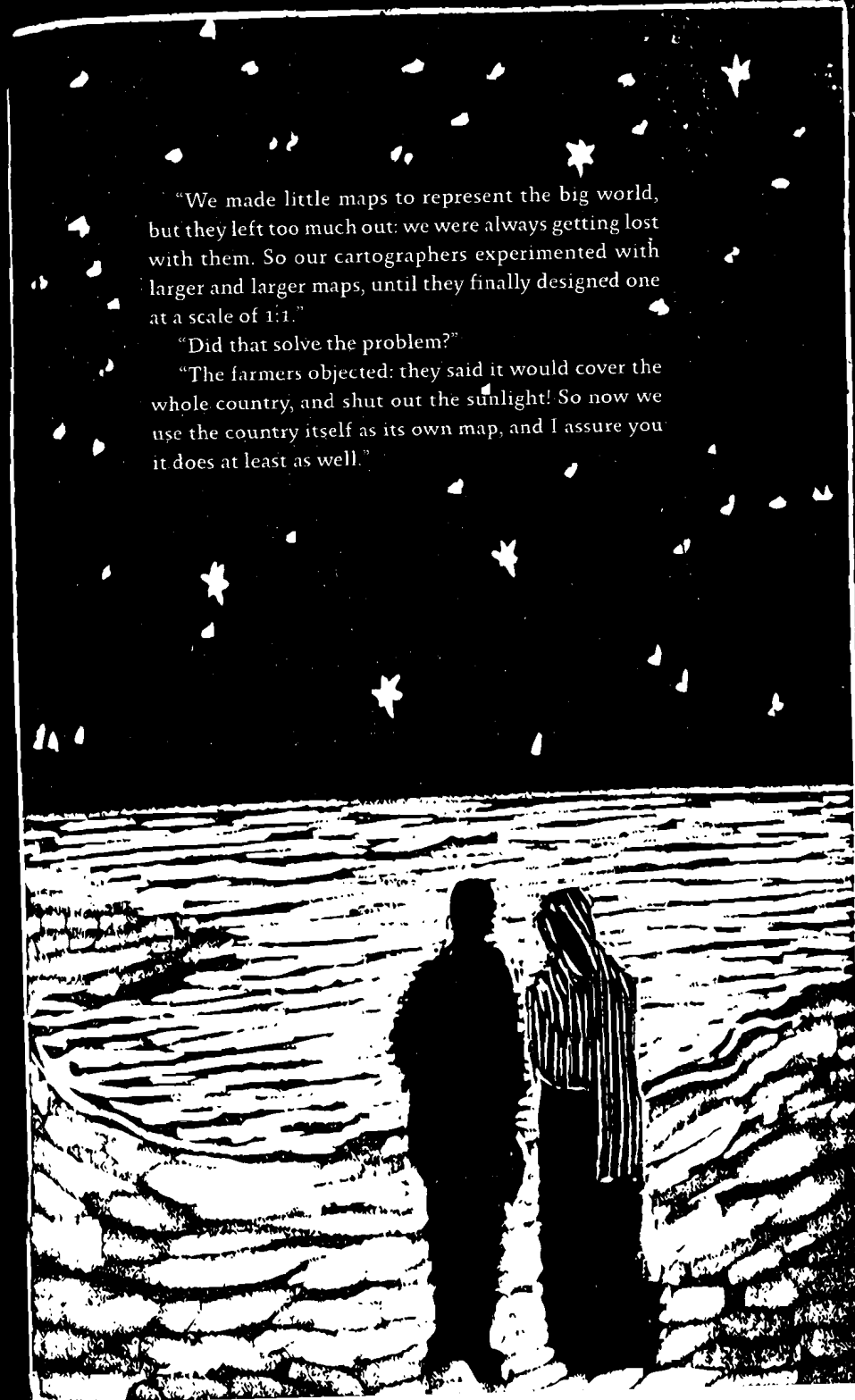
In doing so, we would finally have to accept and embrace ourselves as we are, in all our diversity and variety, and emerge from the shadow of the false heaven of Plato and the advertising agents where real beauty supposedly resides. Liberated from one-dimensional standards and standardization, from the lingering ghost of Christian judgment and condemnation, we could see that *what we are* must itself constitute the measure and meaning of beauty, of significance and magnificence, if such concepts are to exist at all.

* He flipped to another page. "Listen to this: *'Man looks for the miracle, and to accomplish it he will wade through blood, he will debauch himself with ideas, he will reduce himself to a shadow if for only one second of his life he can close his eyes to the hideousness of reality. Everything is endured—disgrace, humiliation, poverty, war, crime—in the belief that overnight something will occur, a miracle, which will render life tolerable.'* Sound familiar?"

"Yeah—I don't know whether I'm fighting that mentality, or I'm infected with it myself—maybe fighting it has infected me. Surely it's utopian to think capitalism can go on forever without destroying the entire planet, but it's also optimistic to think we can stop it first."

"That's what I don't like about all this anarchist rhetoric—it just offers a competing utopia. The majority of people in this society already subsist on visions of other worlds—it's practically banal. He's arguing here that the existing world—precisely because it exists, a quality without which any world is worthless—is a heaven more wondrous than any of those others, if we live in it attentively."

"Yes, of course, Pablo—but it's equally utopian to think we could live that attentively, except perhaps by accident for instants at a time. Maybe it makes just as much sense to vacillate wildly between rejecting the entirety of what is for something which is not, yet—you know, being a Revolutionary with a capital R—and rejecting all futures, all abstractions, all ideals, for the impossible project of trying to find perfection in that which exists."



"We made little maps to represent the big world, but they left too much out: we were always getting lost with them. So our cartographers experimented with larger and larger maps, until they finally designed one at a scale of 1:1."

"Did that solve the problem?"

"The farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So now we use the country itself as its own map, and I assure you it does at least as well."

Diego was still stewing about the legal number. "... and after three hours of going straight to the answering machine, I was like 'OK, fuck these people, they might as well be the cops!' I had no idea whether you guys were in jail, or dead, or what! It's not that hard, you know? You say you're going to do something, you do it. If you're not going to do it"—he pounded out each syllable on the steering wheel—"don't fucking say you'll do it!"

"Diego, those are practically the last students still involved." Kate was always trying to smooth over conflicts. "The others I started out with are all back in their dorms, studying for finals. OK, they don't have their shit together, but they're all we've got. If we can't make things work with them, who are we going to work with? At least we know what to watch out for with them. We can talk about this next—"

He cut her off dismissively. "Whatever, I'll never do anything with them again. Bunch of privileged white kids playing at revolution! I'd rather do things with people I know will come through, like—"

"Hey," I opened Samia's cell phone and held it in the air so Diego could see its glowing screen in the rear view, "can we talk about this later?" Samia was gazing out the window at the woods along the road; we were well into the countryside and the world was a blurred black silhouette against the sky. It had to be approaching five in the morning. At the time I thought Diego was right, but I didn't want Samia to hear us arguing like this—or anyone else to, either.

Everyone's spirits lifted when we turned onto the dirt road. When I go into the country it's like a muscle relaxes that otherwise is perpetually clenched. The last time I'd left town had been

before the encampment, when I still had my apartment; since the eviction I'd been carrying my toothbrush in my jacket, moving from couch to couch to keep up with the action. Tonight, it had seemed like a bad idea to go back to any of the busy, well-known houses we had to choose from, and Kate had offered to guide us out to her father's place.

The car bucked and dragged across stretches of the long driveway; at times it seemed we were in danger of getting entirely stuck. Stepping into the darkness, our voices and slamming doors echoing in the winter night, we suddenly felt a lot smaller. It really was dark out there; only a couple stars peered down through gaps in the hastening clouds, and the house looming ahead was a black silhouette. We had all started carrying flashlights as well as knives, sewing kits, and water bottles, and we made our way to the steps in a hushed line, each following a tiny spot of light across the crunching leaves.

The door was unlocked. "My father doesn't have electricity," Kate explained in a whisper as she struck a match and lifted the smoke-stained glass silo off an oil lamp. Lit, it illuminated rough wooden walls, mud-caked gardening tools, and a pitch-black wood stove. "Lay your bags out on the floor here. The toilet's through there—there's sawdust next to it, just put some in after you use it." She returned the lamp to the table, casting dancing shadows on my sleepy, squinting friends, and laid her hand on my arm. "Do you want to sleep outside with me?"

Outside, I wrestled with the familiar tent as the wind picked up and tiny drops of rain began to fall. I was afraid it would be cold, but by the time we had managed to get into our sleeping bags, awkwardly jostling elbows and knees and pushing against the tight canvas walls, we were warm enough.

Kate turned over to face me and put her lips to my ear. "I'm going to check out my cervix to see if it looks like I'm pregnant. Will you give me a hand with the flashlight?"

No one had ever asked me to do that before. "Um, sure, if you tell me what to do. Can you tell if you're pregnant from...?"

"As I understand it, it should be bluish if I am—it's not guaranteed, though." She extracted a mirror and speculum from her pack and shimmied out of her jeans. "It's never happened before, anyway. But I was fertile that time on the rooftop, and I always try to keep up with what's going on in my body." She tore open a tiny sampler

of lube in her teeth and maneuvered the speculum into place. "OK, now hold the flashlight here and aim it at the mirror." She held the mirror with one hand, angling it delicately between her legs; it took her a couple minutes to find the view she wanted. I gazed at her shyly in the dim glow—I'd never seen anyone so at home in herself. I was being granted access to a private ceremony, like a hunter stumbling upon fairies in the woods. "Never mind—it doesn't look blue at all! Want to have a look?"

"OK, yeah." She unzipped the sleeping bag further and I blundered down to the other end of the tiny tent, straining against the canvas and bumping into her knee, my own sleeping bag still up around my waist. "I've never done this before. It's really . . . I think it's the most intimate I've ever been with anyone."

"Yeah?" She looked at me with gentle amusement.

Now that I reflected on it, it was crazy how many women I'd been involved with without ever seeing their bodies this way. I could hear the wind outside the tent sweeping leaves past us in whispering gusts. "Thank you," I murmured. "You're really beautiful."

She was silent a minute. "I struggled with that for a long time," she began as I settled back into place beside her. "Feeling beautiful, I mean."

"Sorry—I didn't . . . I mean, I don't want to bring up anything difficult. Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Sure." She shifted, folding her arms behind her head. "Just the usual stuff, really. I tried all sorts of diets, I wore makeup and shaved every hair and tried to match my outfits to my eyes; then I quit doing all that stuff, but I just felt worse. I finally came to the conclusion that it would take as much energy to like myself the way I was as it did to count calories and style my hair every morning—but if I could, it would be under my control. I could go to the gym every day and keep losing weight, but how I felt about myself would never be under my control no matter how much weight I lost. It's still serious shit to look at my thighs and really believe they're perfect just the way they are, but it's a struggle I want to fight and the other one isn't anymore. Anyway—thank you. You're beautiful, too."

Long after her breathing had slowed and thickened, I lay awake on my back, listening to the wind and feeling how far I was from everything familiar. *I have never been in this place before*, I thought to myself, and *I'll never be here again*. In that regard it was the op-

posite of the dish room where I'd lost so many months. That was terrifying as well as liberating—more terrifying the more I wished to cling to it. I stayed awake until I heard birds venturing the first notes of morning.

When I finally closed my eyes I was in a moving car again, packed tight with people I didn't recognize but took to be my beloved companions. The driver pressed the accelerator to the floor and the landscape opened out around us into a painted desert, alien and sublime.

You Can Run But You Can't Hide

Tourism? Escape Routine!

Dear Crimethinc,
I'm stuck out here in Norway with my
parents on this stupid vacation. God,
it seems like I could go to the fucking
moon with them, and it would still be
like being home in New Bedford. These
people make everything feel petty and dumb,
even fjords and Viking longboats. I know
I'm lucky to be here - most of my friends back
home will never get the chance to see this place,
and that's just another level of how fucked up
everything is - but this isn't even like being
here, it's just more being with my family in
the fake fucking world they live in.

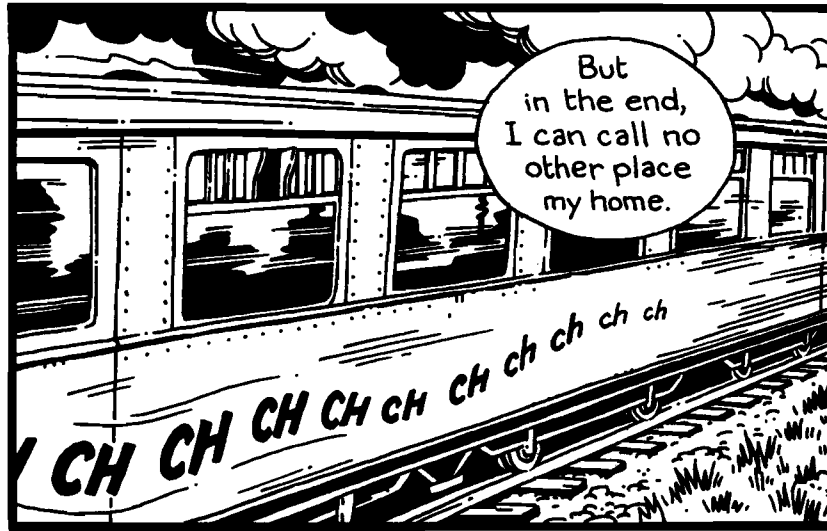
Thanks,
[Redacted]

On the flight back from São Paulo a year and a half later, I shut myself in the airplane bathroom, took off my paint-splattered jacket and shirt, and gazed at myself in the mirror. I saw something reflected there that I'd only glimpsed before in the eyes of my most adoring lovers: the shades and textures of my skin and the scars and lines carved into it told of a life of wild gambles and undreamable extremes, a story as poignant and thrilling as any novel. I was beautiful—beauty was incarnated in me, the vessel of a world of struggles and longings and triumphs more incredible than anything that could fit between the covers of a book. This was a blinding revelation, but I rested comfortably in it as if I had known through all my doldrums and desperation that I was simply being primed for this.

When the weekend arrives, the college students pack their cars and drive to the beach. They arrive shortly before sundown and spend a full hour and a half unpacking, setting up tents and tarps, and heating up the grill. Then they crank up the sound system, charbroil hamburgers, and drink and shout and argue until midnight. When they wake up the next morning, they spend another hour and a half taking down the tents and, if they're environmentalists, cleaning up after themselves before driving back to the city. Everything they've done at the beach they could have done more easily at home, but the beach is fetishized as a zone of recreation and leisure: if you're there, you know you're off the clock and having fun—whether or not you swim in the surf, walk in silence under the stars, or find the carcass of a shark washed up by a tide pool, tiny crabs dancing across its flesh.

Years later they will return with their families, setting up play tents for the kids and folding tables for the adults and sipping wine as they watch DVDs. If they do well for themselves, they'll visit beaches on other continents, never leaving the bubble of beach towel, hotel room, cruise ship, resort.

But it would be unfair to accuse all vacationers of ignoring their surroundings—on the contrary, you can always identify high-class tourists by their video cameras and learned guides. Let's examine these more sophisticated specimens to get to the bottom of tourism as a phenomenon.



Coming from a subculture in which owning and appearing are emphasized over feeling and acting, bourgeois vacationers seek diversion in the symbolic possession of parts of the world other than those they normally occupy. They establish this by the act of looking—"sightseeing," to use their redundant expression—just as the conquerors of old surveyed newly subjugated peoples. This is the real significance of all the photographing and videotaping: the pictures may not be important later on (except for those insufferable slideshows to which one imagines Roman emperors would have subjected their courts, had they possessed the technology), they may not be taken with any artistic aspirations, but they serve to establish the tourists as *collectors*—they collect images the way others collect butterflies or war booty. This is the only way the bourgeois know to relate to foreign things: the beautiful and the wild are quite scenic, but lack meaning until they are hunted, captured, pinned.

The hastily snapped images are preserved as if in formaldehyde, and the vacationers congratulate themselves on knowing all about

* Witness ecotourism, which is predicated on the idea that a small fragment of an ecosystem deserves to be left alone as long as it is entertaining to the tourist class. They go on vacation to ooh and aah at exotic wildlife when they won't even recycle bottles in their own kitchens. They speak about "special" places that should be made parks and reserves, neglecting the fact that the very ground they live on was once just as wild and beautiful before it was destroyed by the lifestyles they refuse to question.

Norway, Italian architecture, the wildlife of the Pacific Ocean, the struggles of the first Polar explorers, the troubled childhood of Van Gogh ("and that," intones the tourist as he guides his audience through a slideshow of photos taken from behind a rope under the direction of another tour guide, how's that for postmodern, "is the very room he spent his first six years in!"). The lenses never leave the eyes of the tourists in the course of their vacation, literally or figuratively. Mediation is integral to the tourist experience—anything to keep the world at arm's length, to avoid getting involved.

The tourist arrives from a world of control mania, already an expert at protecting himself to death. The bourgeois insist on being safe wherever they go—not just from actual danger, but from everything not already anticipated, comprehended, controlled. The travel guides and guidebooks, the painstakingly planned itineraries, the tourist buses and museums and hotels, the armies of salesmen who cater to every fabricated need—all these combine to ensure that being in Oslo or Zimbabwe is as similar as possible to being in Oklahoma. And yet beneath everything, tourism is still a desperate bid to experience something *different*, something "exotic," which is to say—something not quite as lifeless, meaningless, tedious, banal, and insipid as daily life under the tyranny of the hair dryer and the cellular phone.*

And so the worst tragedy is that tourism destroys the observed as it maintains the alienation of the observers. Just as explorers have cut wider and wider swaths through the natural environment in the course of their exploits until all that remain of it in some places are fish tanks and potted plants, the tourist crushes beneath him exactly that which he seeks. The human being in the bourgeois man needs variety, danger, adventure, but the bourgeois in him channels these needs into surrogate enterprises and hedged bets: traveling Honduras, he still wants to speak English; rafting the rapids, he still needs a release to sign and a "historic path" to follow (as all meaningful experience is held hostage in the past, or in the lives of other peoples); landing on Mars, he

* Indeed, when one listens closely to the ghost stories about kidnappings and stolen kidneys shared by bourgeois youth on the summer vacation backpacker/hostel circuit, it becomes clear that they are practically *fantasies*, legends of something real and endangering—that is to say, engaging!—happening to someone *just like you*, told in desperate faith that something crazy and new is still possible even in this world and couched in the only terms the bourgeois have to describe the unfamiliar: terror!

would look around for a sign announcing the next guided tour. Wielding the power of the angry god Dollar, he is able to compel everyone he encounters to confine him in this safety net. Wherever the tourist tramples, soon little remains but the detritus of his own creative and cultural bankruptcy—visit Tijuana, Mexico for proof. Whole cultures have been annihilated in his wake; tourism is not the heir of ancient quests and pilgrimages but of colonial imperialism.

In the absence of the real thing, the tourist is left with simulation. Even the most wild and crazy travel handbooks ("Europe on two dollars a day!" "Antarctica for hitchhikers!") are museums of fossilized adventure by the time they go into circulation—as if there could be such thing as an adventure guide, when adventure is precisely that which happens *off the map*. The most the daring tourist can hope to find is the cooling trail left by those who embarked without maps—in their wake, he has to make do with monuments, museums, and theme parks, forever asking rhetorical questions ("I wonder what it would be like to . . .?") without connecting the possible answers to his own life. Distraught, he buys more guidebooks, characteristically seeking a solution from the market rather than shaking off his alienation to try a different approach.

The common quality that unifies all tourists is *disconnection*: they are totally uninvolved in what they see, pursuing the sight alone without all the entanglements, liabilities, and challenges that come with real life engagement. They can passively vote on their favorite place or painting, or, at most, develop some paternalistic, picturesque Hallmark sentiment that exceptional environments or cultures should be protected, but it never occurs to them that *they are interacting* with the worlds they view with such detachment. This is why they are unable to acknowledge the part they play in eradicating them, let alone confront their own spiritual malaise and restlessness. They could be at home—or anywhere—giving themselves to a project, involving themselves in something outside the demands of work and social status, holding themselves accountable for the effects of their actions and considering their decisions with appropriate seriousness; instead, they vacation in never-never land, extending their own alienation to the furthest corners of the globe. This alienation replicates itself there, driving them to ever more expensive ocean cruises and souvenir hunts in a listless addicts' pursuit of stimulation—when all it would take to break the

spell would be for them to commit themselves to some value or dream, one that would drag them into danger and heartbreak and ragged glory and all those other things one must experience to live an engaged, fulfilling life. They could do that without ever booking flights or packing suitcases. The fact that they are able to maintain their distance from life as easily ten thousand miles from home as in the midst of their daily routines is a testament to the global triumph of universal self-estrangement.

Ultimately, tourism is not a leisure activity but a *way of life*, an expression of the vacuum at the heart of consumer society. The executive does the same thing in the Louvre and the Himalayas and Jamaica that he does in his own neighborhood when he drives past a stand of trees being cut down to make way for a new gas station. What would it take to snap him out of this trance, to make him relate himself to those around him and take responsibility for his actions? The fate of the planet rests on us answering this question, or else disarming and disabling him.

To do either, we have to locate the parts of ourselves that are not yet totally detached, to seek out the passions that might still stir within us. For good or for ill, most of us long to travel—our hearts leap at the thought of dropping everything and setting out free and empty-handed across an unfamiliar landscape, and this must run deeper than bourgeois conditioning. Travel is associated with human liberty and romance; it was the original state of our species, and we still pine for it. In traveling we can shake off our old selves and hunt down others that wait in alternate worlds—travel enables a special kind of freedom, for without new horizons we tend to repeat the well-practiced choices we have already made, in thrall to inertia if no other master.

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TOURRORIST ATTACKS INCREASE THROUGHOUT THIRD WORLD
U.S., Japan responsible, claims anarchist group

President Vows to Exact Punishment for 'Evil'

A CREEPING HORROR
Buildings Burn and Fall as Onlookers Search for Elusive Safety



By JEROME KATZBERG
Anarchist groups claimed responsibility for a series of attacks on tourists in the Third World, including the September 11 bombing of the Pan Am building in New York City. The group said it was responsible for the September 11 bombing of the Pan Am building in New York City. The group said it was responsible for the September 11 bombing of the Pan Am building in New York City. The group said it was responsible for the September 11 bombing of the Pan Am building in New York City.

But with the whole planet standardized under corporate imperialism and industrial capitalism, when we bear the seeds of these poisons within our own breasts as colonized colonizers, where is there left to go? How are we now to travel?

In place. The adventures of the future will be created, not by Westerners who destroy civilizations in their desperate bid to escape their own, but by people who seize familiar parts of this planet and make them unfamiliar. Washington, D.C. could become the Paris of 1968, just as Paris, boring as usual until that May, became the Barcelona of 1936; small towns in the Midwest could host social centers and upheavals like those in Oaxaca and Berlin; a sense of one's own significance and capabilities can transform even a suburban bedroom into the setting of a real life epic. Really, this was always the case: one either regards the world passively, or approaches it as a participant—all things hinge on this, whether you are at home or on the peak of Mount Ararat.

In traveling in place, we can rediscover the art of participation that is essential for any adventuring—and finally set out on a journey, rather than yet another flight.

Escape Escapism!

The administration couldn't take the heat; they broke their contract with the corporation and signed a new agreement with campus workers only a few months after the night march. I was off like a bottle rocket as soon as they caved in. Flushed with the thrill of victory and equipped with nationwide connections courtesy of my new friends, I set out to seek my fortune.

So many of us begin our novels in our heads and fear to finish them on paper—or begin our lives on paper and finish them too soon on earth. Our songs go unsung, our throats remain mute, the expectant trembling before the strings are struck goes on and on into infinity; the whole world echoes with that pregnant silence, if you have ears for it. I was going to take revenge for all the squandered potential of my species: I was going to live the life I wanted, and nothing could stop me.

I felt irrationally guilty towards Daniel, though. Enjoying myself seemed like a betrayal, especially doing things he would have wanted to do.

I can still hear the clack-clack of the tracks amplified inside the train car that carried us out of town, speeding up in a deafening polyrhythm until it sounded like a thunder drum circle. A day later we were dodging the flashlights of security guards in the train yard outside a bigger city, life as tense and dramatic as it had been at the high points of our struggle with the university. It was a revelation to discover that there were people like us everywhere, fighting similar fights and chasing dreams that resonated with mine. In one city they'd occupied a big building, filling it with discarded objects in a post-industrial bricolage: barbershop chairs, a jungle gym nailed to the ceiling, refrigerator doors that opened into bedrooms. In others they ran programs that put Marshall's produce

distribution to shame: occupied community gardens, clandestine abortion clinics, tenants' rights groups ready to march on landlords with torches and pitchforks.

On a rural commune, I walked through blossoming fields at dusk to dance around a tremendous fire with a hundred exquisite strangers. Have you ever heard the deep bass growl of a fire that size, sparks and cinders rising overhead to mingle with the stars? In Europe, we arrived in one metropolis the evening after riots left the city center in ruins, armored police vans patrolling streets of burnt cars and boarded-up shops. We had to get through a police line to reach the squat where we were to stay, and all night officers and lookouts shouted insults back and forth in a foreign tongue; I'd never felt so at home. We saw social centers there that could fit a thousand people in their event halls, stewarded by multigenerational councils with decades of experience.

I hitchhiked to the top of the Alps where the earth disappears into the stratosphere and rode with a Dutch pilot all the way down to Ljubljana, where anarchists and artists had occupied a whole neighborhood. That night I sat up talking to old Slovenes about life under communism and walked back in the early morning through a fog so thick I couldn't see ten feet. In Latin America I toured shantytowns bigger than the suburb I'd grown up in, and stayed on twenty miles of occupied farmland; I learned Spanish quickly because everyone spoke to me as if I already knew it. Rita even made it to Kenya to visit the workers in the sweatshops we'd protested—I heard all about it over coffee in Santiago. A week later I was at the front of a charging crowd, paint bombs sailing overhead from behind me and riot police thirty feet ahead firing warning shots in the air.

Until I'd set out, there had been no train yards, no squatted social centers or Alps or favelas—I'd never heard of them, never considered whether they might exist. Had I stumbled across the same places in the distracted rush of a business trip, I might have stood at their gates or even passed through them without ever recognizing them for what they were. Now I was ready to believe that everything I'd ever dreamt of might exist somewhere in the world—just as before the globe was circumnavigated it was possible to imagine that the world of dreams was a physical place to which spirits traveled by night, which you might reach by day if only you traveled far enough.

It takes a real shock to cut through the veneer of routine and apprehend the world we actually live in. I imagine astronauts set foot on earth for the very first time when they leave the spacecraft that took them to the stars. I felt present in those unfamiliar places in a way I never had in familiar ones—and when I finally stepped from the airplane at the end of my trip, I felt as if I were laying my feet upon the surface of the moon.

It didn't last. My mother and sister were waiting anxiously for me at the top of the escalator. It was nice to see them, but disturbing to find that while I had been off discovering new expanses of possibility everything at home had remained unchanged. I felt with terror that I was returning through time to the moment I'd departed, to pick up again from there as if all that had transpired in the meantime had been a hallucination.

In the short year of my vagabondage, some of my new friends had already returned to default setting, concluding that indeed it had been "only a dream" and reintegrating themselves into the world we'd escaped. I should have recognized this as an ominous warning, but at the time I was too busy meeting new people and setting off for new destinations. When I finally caught up with them later, they spoke about their periods of travel as closed parentheses in their lives and expected me to do the same.

But I was still sworn to my impractical quest for adventure; I seemed constitutionally incapable of resigning myself to the life everyone else accepted as normal. Everybody assumed I'd returned because I was exhausted and broke, but that had never stopped me before. The truth was I'd come back on a mission. I'd left home to get away from it all, but as I'd traveled, I'd found "it all" waiting wherever I went: border controls and advertisements in English, familiar fast food joints and squat evictions, improbably blonde bombshells in the soap operas and subtle references to Hollywood movies peppering my foreign friends' speech. These were the harbingers of an imperialism that would homogenize the entire world unless people dug in their heels somewhere to halt its advance.

The city I'd left in uproar was quiet when I returned, like Hamelin after all the children were lured away. If no one stayed to bring it back to life, travelers like myself would be doomed to wander endlessly like earthbound ghosts, combing the world in search of wonder and community and struggle without ever stopping anywhere long enough to cultivate them. Now that I'd seen riots and social centers and other miracles, I was determined to bring them home with me.

But first, there was a demonstration a thousand miles away that I couldn't resist attending.

Infighting the Good Fight:

Why We're Right and You're Wrong



Towards a Non-D(en)ominational Revolution

"Just like every coddled middle class liberal, he'll just run back home when things get tough." "Those lifestylists don't care about anything but themselves. Don't they understand if everyone lived like them, there would be no system to leech off?" "If they're not going to abide by the decisions of the spokescouncil, they shouldn't be here at all. I'd rather they were at home doing nothing than messing up *our* protest like this!" "How can you expect to ___ without ___? If you really cared about ___, you'd ___! [like me]" "I don't want to be an activist or an anarchist or a part of this at all if it means I have to . . ."

Why We Can't All Just Get Along

Can we get along? Even for those of us who would prefer to be hermits, there is no question today more important than this one—the fate of our species and planet will be decided by the answer.

There is no shortcut around this dilemma. Any kind of capital-R Revolution, any redistribution of wealth and power, will be short-lived and irrelevant without a fundamental change in our relationships—for social structure is a *manifestation* of these relationships, not a factor external to them. Revolution is not a single transformation, but a way of living: anarchy and hierarchy *always* coexist in varying proportions, and the important question is which you foster yourself.

We are ill-qualified to reconstruct human relations if we can't even get along with each other in the attempt—and nothing seems to create dissension and division like our attempts. Often it seems that the people who know *least* how to relate to others are the self-professed activists who set out to save them. Yet these conflicts are not an inescapable consequence of human nature, but rather a pattern of cause and effect that can and must be altered.

The Scarcity Economy of Self

In a world where free, creative action is hard to get away with, we all feel impoverished, cheated of the experiences and sensations we know should be ours. We compensate as best we can, and often this compensation serves only to preserve our destitution. We seek status in wealth, power, strength, beauty, reputation, anything to soften the blows of wasted days. We compensate by seeking another kind of status, too: feelings of superiority, status in our own heads.

We live in a society that teaches there is not enough of any valuable resource to go around, including selfhood. People on television or in books are held up as more important, more attractive, more heroic than the rest of us. We grow up in households where our parents don't have enough time for us; we are sent to schools that employ a grading system that permits only a handful to excel, and are discharged into a market that enriches a few of us while exploiting or discarding the rest. We internalize the values of this system. We become used to judging our value by what we are "better than."

With a little hard work, you can make yourself feel alienated by just about anything.

We rush to despise others, their plans and ideas and habits and beliefs, in order to reassure ourselves that we have worth of our own. When we should be looking for what is positive in everything, we denounce and criticize instead—just to reassure ourselves! The most insecure among us are not even able to enjoy movies and music, because it is so important to them that they have "refined" tastes; they don't realize that when they succeed in failing to enjoy something, no one loses more than them. If you're going to get anything out of any movie or song or interaction—so as not to have simply wasted your time!—you must take responsibility for finding ways to enjoy and benefit from it.

In its advanced stages, this hypercritical status-seeking engenders a spectator mentality: from a distance, the critic passively votes for or against the efforts of others, unable to discern that such things as art, activism, and community are entirely what he makes of them—and that he *must* make something of them himself in order to get anything out of them. This spectatorship reinforces the sense that everything everyone else is doing is uninteresting and unintelligent, and thus the feeling of superiority the spectator so desperately needs. You seldom encounter a genuinely active, engaged person who feels the need to proclaim her actions superior to others'; but in the spectator's scarcity economy of self, *any* expression of selfhood, even the most generous and positive, can be interpreted as an encroachment, an attack.* Every achievement is something to rebel against, to assail, to deride—as if we don't all feel worthless, abused, and hunted enough already!

* The other expression of this same affliction is hero worship, in which one projects all the qualities one admires onto others. This is similarly crippling, of course, and inevitably leads back to the same hostility and scorn—for the only thing you can do with those you have put on a pedestal is *knock them off*.

Those who would oppose this scarcity system face the additional challenge of unlearning its conditioning. Many of us have come to this resistance from a life of conflict and struggle, the effects of which still exert a great influence over us. Having been abused, neglected, harassed, and intimidated, having had to fight peers, parents, teachers, bosses, and police to establish ourselves, we see selfhood as something that is obtained by fighting. We come to think of being radical as a *war*—hence the more wars we fight, the more radical we must be. We profess intentions to create peace, but the only tools we possess are weapons.* Small wonder we end up fighting among ourselves.

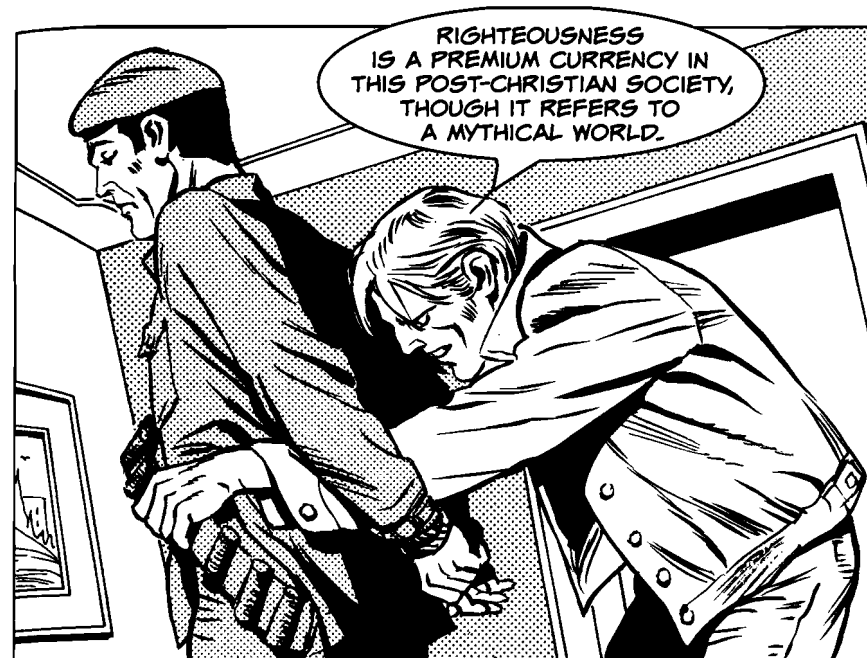
Justice and Judgment

Scarcity thinking and the destructive insecurity it fosters have played a large part in shaping our notions of justice.† Passing judgment can be the ultimate compensation for one's own shortcomings. It's easy to get self-righteous about someone else's mistakes, flaws, and inconsistencies, for the more we focus on others' the less we have to think about our own. Witch-hunters who believe that they have found a real live criminal (or racist, lifestyleist, class traitor, etc.) just like the ones in the movies can reassure themselves that they have isolated the contagion and need look no further—and the more vitriolic their denunciations of the enemy, the more afraid everyone else is to admit what they have in common with the accused.

Again—we live in a violent, oppressive world. It's as sensible to blame any one of us for being colonized by this violence and domination as it is to blame the oceans for being polluted. The question should not be whether an individual is guilty—we all are, at least of complicity—but rather how to enable individuals to confront and

* Ironically this combativeness is especially prevalent in some pacifist circles, in which people eschew physical violence but impose this disavowal upon others with incredible self-righteousness and belligerence.

† The self-righteous activist's sense of justice is derived from the same origins as the "justice system" which feeds today's prison-industrial complex: a Christianity that emphasizes individual responsibility over the cause and effect of social conditions in order to invent, advertise, and sell the ultimate scarce commodity—salvation. In a state of truly mutually beneficial social relations, threats like incarceration and hellfire would not be necessary to make people behave themselves.



transform the violence and ignorance within themselves. Often nothing can help a person to do this more than to give him the benefit of the doubt, trusting that he is interested in coexisting with others; this makes it easier for him to drop his defenses, communicate, and question himself. This is not to say we shouldn't defend ourselves by any means necessary whenever we have to—but let's do this for practical reasons, not out of lust for revenge and superiority.

Objectivity versus Subjectivity

Our scarcity-oriented, authoritarian civilization is predicated on the idea that there is only one truth; privileged access to that truth is called objectivity, and many compete for this prize. According to this school of thought, those who want to explain human behavior or overthrow capitalism should make different propositions regarding the best way to do this and debate them until the correct one is recognized. So it is that in ivory towers and squalid basements, intellectuals and armchair revolutionaries debate incessantly, coming no closer to consensus, developing more and more exclusive jargon while others in the field labor to forge the compromises necessary to accomplish anything.

To prioritize subjectivity is to accept that there is no “the” reality, by inference, any “objective” reality must simply be one subjective reality institutionalized as Truth by those in power. Thinking this way means recognizing that people have arrived at their particular beliefs and behaviors as a result of their individual life experiences. This has an important bearing on how we interact with each other, especially in our efforts to change the world.

Different people are bound to have different beliefs, tactics, and goals. They don’t necessarily think differently than you because they are less intelligent, experienced, perceptive, or compassionate—they may be your equals in all these regards, but come to different conclusions based on different evidence from their own lives. Upon hearing a person’s position on an issue, you needn’t immediately commence debating which of you is right. It might be more worthwhile to establish whether there are projects that can further both your interests,* or at least ways you can coexist. Whatever ideological issues need to be worked out can be worked out in practice, if they can be worked out at all—they certainly will not be resolved by another contest of egos disguised as a debate about theory.†

Obviously, it’s impossible for anyone to legislate for everyone else, since every life experience is unique; nevertheless, you can offer your own experiences and conclusions for others to do with what they will—and if you speak honestly for yourself, you will probably find you have spoken for others as well. This may be seen as legislative by those who believe there is only one right way, but those who attack you for offering your own perspective or analysis on the grounds that it doesn’t apply to them (or isn’t relevant to *all* people, starving mothers in Somalia, transgendered Republicans, etc.) are still working within the scarcity model.

Remember—every value you espouse, every decision you make, you make for yourself alone. When people attack you as if you are

* Of course, when interests genuinely conflict, sometimes there is nothing to do but fight it out. The communists who attempted to coexist with Hitler’s fascists in the late 1930s sealed their own fates and those of countless others.

† In taking sides against others, you can forget that everyone’s positions are fluid—and forcing someone to act as a partisan of an opposing side can trap them into identifying themselves with that side exclusively. Often it happens that a person adopts a position impulsively, but upon being attacked entrenches himself and defends it for the rest of his life.

deciding for everyone, don’t fall into the trap of arguing for your own methods and ideas as universals. Simply point out that you act according to your own conscience, and hope to integrate your approach into those of others—just as it is up to others to do with you.

The Capitalism of Ideas

Those who still hold that there is such a thing as objective truth generally feel a compulsion to persuade others of their truths. This is the self-perpetuating consequence of the power struggles that go on in the market of ideas; as in any economy based on scarcity, that market is characterized by competition between capitalists who strive to preserve and increase their power over others.

In our society, ideas function as capital in much the same way money does.* Individuals who can get others to buy into their ideas obtain disproportionate control over their surroundings; large conglomerates such as the Catholic Church and the Communist Party have come to rule large parts of the world this way, and indeed one cannot long hold political or financial power without ideological capital to back it up. Little start-up companies contest these monopolies with new visions, and sometimes one unseats the reigning creed to become the new dominant paradigm; but as in any capitalist system, power tends to flow upward to the top of the hierarchy. In this state of affairs, anyone with a value or viewpoint has to rush to sell it to others before being run out of business.

From this vantage point, it’s hard to imagine what a world free from this war of ideologies would be like. Obviously, it would have to be free from analogous wars for money, power, and selfhood as well, for it’s foolish to insist that one can think however one wants when some ways of conceptualizing the cosmos are punished by exclusion or embargo. Those who fight for freedom from gods and masters must contest the dictatorships of ideology that always accompany and enable them.†

* Ideas, like other forms of capital, are considered private property and protected by law from plagiarism, copyright infringement, and other methods of redistributing wealth.

† Paradoxically, this statement rests on ideological assumptions of its own—but perhaps this kind of self-contradiction is the first necessary step in the disarmament of ideology.

Why People Don't Want to "Join the Movement"

Considering the numbers of public relations agents, televangelists, self-help gurus, and other assorted fanatics and salesmen competing to convert them, the hesitance of the masses to get involved in any kind of social movement is actually a healthy self-defense mechanism. Consequently, the greatest challenge for those who seek common cause with others to make revolutionary change is to avoid making them defensive.

The tendency of radical politics to make people feel defensive may currently be a greater obstacle to social transformation than any corporate control or government repression. It is caused in part by the attitudes of activists themselves: many activists have invested in their activist identities as an act of *compensation* at least as much as out of a genuine desire to make things happen—for them, activism serves the same function that machismo, fashion, and popularity serve for others. Activists who are still serving the imperatives of insecurity tend to alienate others; they may even unconsciously desire to alienate others so they can stand alone as the virtuous vanguard. Seeing such activists in action, people who placate their insecurities in other ways frequently conclude that revolutionary struggle has nothing to do with their lives.

Whenever we are considering a revolutionary project, we must ask ourselves: Are we certain of our motivations? Will our words and deeds mobilize and enable, or immobilize and discourage? Are we trying to create a spectacle of our freedom or compassion or erudition, to establish our status as revolutionaries or leaders or intellectuals, to claim the moral high ground, to win at the childish competition of who is most radical or most oppressed (as if suffering was quantifiable)—are we still seeking power and revenge in the guise of liberation? People can tell when you are lording yourself over them or playing a role, just as they can sense when you are acting honestly from a place of desire and good faith. They're much more likely to respond to that, since their lives already include too much role-playing and rivalry.

We would do better to abandon the crusade to convert the masses, with its patronizing implications that others are lazy, weak, victimized, or in need of guidance. Instead, we can begin by

reaching out to those with whom we have the most in common, to whom our perspectives can be most useful and with whom cooperation comes most naturally.* Likewise, we can work with those who are already active in other communities, insofar as we share values and goals—this is vastly preferable to entering others' communities and attempting to organize them according to the doctrines of outsiders.† We can help others defend themselves from the encroachments of power and ideology, offering them the tools we have developed in our own struggles to apply as they see fit.‡ Finally, we can find common cause with people on the basis of all the social and "antisocial" things they are already doing and feeling: theft, vandalism, graffiti, "laziness," rebelliousness, apparent nihilism, not to mention compassion and cooperation wherever they appear.

This is the real purpose of the glorification of shoplifting, vagrancy, and so on that some radical propaganda indulges in: not to argue that shoplifting itself is revolutionary (or that one must shoplift to be radical, as if revolution was a commodity in a scarcity economy!), but to establish connections to the daily lives and resistances of individuals who have not necessarily articulated a desire for revolution but are already acting, however impetuously, outside the logic of the ruling order.

The private longings and frustrations people feel—their hatred for busywork, the pleasure in transgression they find they share with teenagers and anarchists, the instinctive suspicion with which they view all totalitarian systems—provide a starting point for a resistance that proceeds from the individual motivations and standpoints of

* I grew up as a middle class rebel, but I thought I had to put that behind me to work towards social change. When I gave up trying to push reforms through the bureaucracy and began to practice direct action with others of my background, I realized what a vast, untapped force my demographic has to offer.

† It turned out that just one neighborhood over there was a group in the Chicano community working according to the same principles, using different words for similar ideas. When I sat in on one of their meetings, it became clear how much more we could be doing.

‡ When the locals started joining in the fighting, we showed them how to make their shirts into masks so the police couldn't identify them and how to use lime juice to treat the effects of tear gas—that's anarchist "leadership," or what we have in place of it: sharing our skills with others, spreading power rather than concentrating it.

all who comprise it rather than the demands of political parties and dogmas.* This is the only kind of resistance that can rescue us from authoritarian power and authoritarian ideology alike.

Not Unity, but Harmony

Any resistance movement is going to develop conflicts over strategy (violence vs. pacifism, coordination vs. autonomy) as different individuals construct their own analyses and test them out in practice. To contest this diversity rather than seeking to benefit from it—to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory by turning chances to address important issues into squabbles, as liberals do whenever radicals use direct action to give their petitioning teeth—is needlessly counterproductive; more than this, it is tantamount to wishing everyone had the same life history and perspective. By and large, teenage hoodlums are not going to find the same things liberating middle-aged librarians do—but both have a stake in liberation, and must be a part of any struggle for it. Those who would set rules for the unruly and regulations for the irregular deny the complexity not only of human beings but also of the struggle it will take to win our freedom.

Again, others' approaches and goals are bound to differ from yours; the challenge is not to convert them to your own strategy (for who knows—they might actually know better than you what is good for them!), but rather to find ways to integrate divergent methods into a mutually beneficial whole. Similarly, if you share another's goals but feel that their tactics are ineffective or counterproductive, it is up to you to find and add the missing ingredients that can make them effective—if you don't, you have yourself to blame for all the energy you feel they're wasting.

* When it comes to underrepresented perspectives—if they are not your own, don't try to represent them, the way politicians "represent" us. Better represent yourself, and encourage others to do the same... for example, by making an effort to listen to those who already are. Some people may dismiss your perspective (as "middle class," "reformist," "extremist," etc.), but there is no such thing as an illegitimate perspective—it is only illegitimate to act as if someone else's perspective is not legitimate. A lot of that goes on, sometimes perpetrated in the name of the underrepresented by those who aren't necessarily underrepresented themselves.

Don't be intimidated—you can be sure that if you are feeling something someone else is feeling it too, and needs to know she is not alone.



ANYONE WHO ISN'T ON
BOTH SIDES OF THE
ISSUE IS OBVIOUSLY
AGAINST ME FROM
SOME DIRECTION.

Approaches that speak clearly to some people may alienate others, including self-proclaimed activists. In these cases, it's important not to feel too threatened, since you may not actually be—and to keep in mind that with the vast diversity of lives on this planet, we'll need an equally diverse arsenal of outreaches. In some cases, approaches that seem to contradict each other may actually form a perfect symbiosis, as in the relationship between masked rioters and well-behaved, well-spoken proponents of social change. No one in power would take heed of the latter without the former behind them—imagine Martin Luther King's nonviolence without the implicit threat of Malcolm X's confrontational stance—and without "respectable" support, insurgents can easily be marginalized and destroyed. In these situations, all parties should remember that others may even have to publicly disavow their tactics in order to continue playing their parts effectively;* there should be no hard feelings when this happens.

Certainly it can be difficult to work alongside people who profess beliefs entirely different from yours—and you should never work with those you fear will betray you or hijack your efforts to serve their own ends. But, again, ask yourself: are your positions important to you *as positions*—that is to say, as status symbols, badges of identity, distinctions that separate yourself from others—or as means of achieving a more fulfilling life? It's common sense to integrate

* As the masked window-smasher yelled at the law-abiding liberal protester who tried to restrain her, "It's not your job to stop me from 'making your cause look bad,' but to distance yourself from my actions as much as you have to to keep the respect of the demographic you're trying to reach! It's my job to make something happen here so they'll have to listen to you in the fucking first place!"

the differing tactics of those who share a common goal; it's more challenging, though no less constructive, to put aside the compulsion to persuade everyone else of your opinions and work to create harmony between individuals who live in totally different worlds. Such harmony will never be complete, but it's a nobler objective than any unity that demands conversion by the sword.

Working in Collectives

Just as a band needs musicians who play different instruments, healthy associations don't restrict the participants with compromises that limit them to the things they have in common, but instead integrate their dissimilarities into a whole greater than the sum of its parts. Working and living in such associations, in which every person is conscious of being responsible for making the projects and relationships work, helps one learn to see oneself as a part of the web of human relations rather than as an isolated individual. In order to coexist, we must take others' desires as seriously as our own—recognizing this enables an individual to be a more complete person, as her companions can represent parts of herself that she would not otherwise express. Everyone is ultimately a product of the same world—we are all interconnected, each manifesting different aspects of the same interplay of forces. Without this insight, cooperation and community can only be incidental and haphazard.

For the individual experienced in living communally, it becomes possible to regard the entire cosmos as one vast, albeit dysfunctional, collective; the problem is simply how to make its workings more to one's liking. This is not to say fascists, sexists, and other oppressors can go about their merry business and still be "part of our collective"—they'd be the first ones to deny *that*, and follow up with proof! But the chief argument of fascism and reactionary thinking has always been that cooperation and autonomy are mutually exclusive, that people must be ordered and controlled or else they will be lazy and/or kill each other. The more we demonstrate this to be untrue, the less appeal their claims will have.

War or Revolution?

Would-be revolutionaries so frequently frame our project in martial terms: we set out to Fight Racism, Smash Fascism, Destroy Capitalism, Eat the Rich. This enables us to see ourselves as noble crusaders—and more importantly, to have adversaries, which reassures us of our own righteousness. This reassurance is more seductive than the success it replaces and prevents—at least, it is so long as one hasn't yet tasted that success. We have to remember in every extremity that our enemies are not human beings, but rather the conditions that make human beings enemies.

A world entirely without enemies is not possible—it might not even be desirable—but remember, war is *business as usual* for capitalist society: Exxon vs. Shell, USA vs. Iraq, Communists vs. Anarchists, lover against lover and parent against child. Even if we could kill every last rapist, C.E.O., head of state, police officer, and housemate who won't do the dishes, that violence would remain in the world as the venom and fury of those who survived them, not to mention the effects on the killers themselves—that's karma for you. Revolution happens when you create situations that make the old conflicts irrelevant, that dispel all that inertia of resentment and insecurity and antagonism.

Warfare is necessary sometimes—we have to defend ourselves, and sometimes this requires violence. But, as any child can point out, "*if it's you against the world, bet on the world.*" So many of us alienate ourselves needlessly from others, eventually relying on abstractions ("the working class," "the imminent insurrection") for allies once every flesh and blood companion is gone or, worse, concluding that cooperation is simply impossible—when history shows that it *is* possible, at least for those who are patient, considerate, humble, forgiving.

Doing things you enjoy will help you resist taking your frustrations out on others—as will working with people you like whenever it's possible.* There's nothing noble or revolutionary about sacrificing yourself for a cause, especially when it makes you impossible to

* Organizing autonomously and trying another free association whenever one isn't working can give you the freedom you need so you will not resent others. Revolution may involve learning to live and act cooperatively, but it doesn't mean *everyone* has to be friends.

be around. At the same time, it won't—and shouldn't—always be possible to surround yourself with people who see things the way you do: be ready to leave your comfort zone, and bring a generous heart when you do.

When you forgive others for their incoherence, selfishness, and errors, you can discern what they have to offer you. When you practice a form of justice that takes responsibility for setting things right, you can heal rather than impotently dispensing guilty verdicts. When you are patient with impatience, when you refrain from being self-righteous even and especially with the self-righteous, when you approach every conflict as an opportunity to learn from your own mistakes, you can do your part to liberate all of us prisoners of war.

This is dedicated to all those who have done this over the years, who have taken it for granted that for all their clumsiness, people from other backgrounds and advocates of other tactics really did want to coexist and cooperate with them: to the working class men and women who took the time to explain to bourgeois activists how they were alienating them, even when the latter did not at first know how to listen; to the women who not only demanded men recognize the existence and effects of their sexism, but also acknowledged the fears and anxieties men feel; to the survivors of abuse who went on to counsel both abused and abusers. Without them, we would assuredly have torn each other to pieces already. It's frightening to let your guard down, it's hard to swallow your pride even when clinging to it would mean betraying yourself—but this is the only way to help others do the same.

Don't be intimidated by the colossal challenge of "saving the world"; there are as many worlds as there are people—save *yours*, the one made up of the life you share with those around you. Where one flower blooms, a million more will follow.

Perhaps the most important thing you can do is *be there* for others, help them believe in themselves, offer real compassion—not the condescension of charity—when it is needed. But there is no formula for this; mercy comes in the least predictable forms and from the most unexpected sources. Often it takes a person who has suffered something similar to be able to offer real succor to someone in distress. That's another reason why it is good that we have all chosen different paths and suffered different things, even things that seemed to isolate us—why there is a place even for spoiled rich kids and homeless drug addicts and lovers who have lied and betrayed in this struggle: for who else could relate to others in those difficult situations, offer them guidance and hope? When you recognize how your tribulations have prepared you to help others, it can make sense of experiences that seemed senseless; at the same time, this may help you to see the importance of others who previously appeared without worth.

Often we have our hands full dealing with our own pain, too consumed by bitterness and confusion to be able to offer others anything, least of all mercy. This means it is all the more critical that we not miss the opportunities we have to be good to others—whether or not they have "earned" it, whether or not we understand them, whether or not we think it will make a difference.

I would like to be someone with whom no one would be ashamed of any part of herself. I would like to be able to regard the actions of others without feeling threatened or becoming defensive, even when they are defensive with me—to see others in the context of their lives, not my own. I would like to know how to set the right limits on how far I trust others, so I never risk losing my respect for them or my ability to trust. I would like to be able to look those adversaries who should be allies in the eyes and say Like it or not, this is who I am. This is what the world has made of me, and we all must live with the consequences. I can't change the decades of life behind me that have wrought this, only take responsibility for what I am and what I do. I don't want to compete with you for moral high ground or anything else. Unless you're prepared to kill everyone who doesn't live up to your standards or else to endure this impasse indefinitely, you're going to have to accept me on my own terms, as I hope to accept you. You are as responsible as I am for making what goes on between us positive for us both—or for the world of strife we will suffer in otherwise.

The announcement that the administration was severing all ties with the sweatshop industry marked the final splintering of our precarious confederation. This was apparent in the way the strike ended and in the increasing distance between groups employing different tactics—more and more people were getting involved, but they crossed paths less and less. Part of the initial magic of the encampment had been the confluence of disparate demographics; the unlikely alliances made it seem the whole world was reconfiguring itself. Yet once we'd succeeded in forcing the administration to stop using sweatshop labor and improve working conditions, we lost track of each other—there wasn't even a celebration to bring us together one last time.

We'd won a victory I'd assumed was impossible—but now there was no more “we” and the fundamental structures we'd taken on remained unshaken. Perhaps the ones who initiated the campaign should have set their sights higher from the beginning.

In place of working with other locals, each group began to organize with its counterparts in other cities. Thus the expansion of the struggle corresponded with its local disintegration, though no one put this together at the time. This expansion enabled us to act on a more dramatic scale, but also drew disproportionately more repression—that scale was the province of our enemies, the terrain on which they could mobilize the most force.

By the end of the following year, local activity had died down significantly; everyone was busy preparing for a demonstration that was happening halfway across the country. This was the first major event in recent memory we all agreed was important; it would be a testing ground at which we would see if we could work together in our new configurations.

I hadn't seen Samia since the debriefing that followed the night march; her friends had been in and out of town, but as far as I could tell she'd been gone the entire time. Kate and Marshall and their crowd were still around, though we rarely saw each other. I'd remained something of a loner, partly on account of my age, though I'd begun working with an independent media collective to put my skills to use. As was becoming typical, most of the collective resided elsewhere in the country.

I arrived in the city less than a week before the summit was to begin. Night had fallen, the kind of frenetic night that falls in big metropolises, and the atmosphere was tense and portentous. The red and blue lights of police cruisers flashed at every intersection; lines of police in black riot armor were drilling in the square next to teams of workmen assembling walls of chain link and concrete. Downtown had the air of an occupied nation during wartime. Sirens resounded constantly in the distance; in my new persona as an enemy of the state, I hoped each one indicated a new challenge to their control.

Kate had invited me to a private meeting the evening before the first big day of action. She'd known me long enough that she trusted me to participate in such things, though Marshall and Diego still treated me with thinly veiled disdain on account of my social class and suspect profession. I hadn't turned our adventures into a book after all, but the stigma of being able to still lay upon me.

The meeting took place in a classroom at the local university—here was the fantasy Marshall had talked about in the occupation days coming true in humble reality. A stocky young man in a black flight jacket stood guard at the door. He didn't step aside until I told him who had invited me.

The fluorescent lighting and spotless white walls of the classroom contrasted starkly with my companions' somber attire and visages. Most people were already there—barbarians of the sort I'd first encountered at the occupation, conversing in twos and threes. I knew perhaps six out of the three dozen present, and two of those only by sight.

A tall woman with an authoritative air exchanged whispers with the young man outside, then locked the door and addressed the room. "Before we begin, I want everybody to touch someone they vouch for."

Everyone laid their hands on the people around them, forming a lattice of limbs extending from row to row—with one exception: Kate and the others I knew were on the other side of the room. All eyes fell on me. It didn't help that I was the oldest by a full decade. "I'm with those people," I offered sheepishly, gesturing at Kate and Marshall and Diego, whose arms rested on each others' shoulders.

Then we went around giving our names and fields of activity; Kate was Hecate, Marshall Mars, and so on. I explained that I was there on behalf of the independent media, to make sure there were photographers and reporters where activists desired them. Others specified the number of people in the contingent they represented, or the equipment they'd brought: "One hundred hockey pucks; thirty gas masks; thirty improvised shields; enough fireworks for ourselves and another group our size; one reinforced banner, twenty-five feet wide, with two joints."

It soon came out that there were still disagreements as to what we were here to accomplish. Some people wanted to mount a direct assault on the security perimeter around the summit; others thought that foolhardy. The spokesperson of the locals was utterly despondent: "We can't go to the wall, it's impossible. They'll shoot us, they'll kill us all."

In my sexism, I had taken it that Samia was a sort of protégée of Marshall, but here she appeared at the head of a contingent of her own—which, if her companions in the meeting were any indication, seemed to be composed of starry-eyed vagabonds from the four corners of the earth. She proposed an alternative: "If we can't go to the wall, let's head the opposite direction with the liberal march, and break off to visit the shopping district. They won't be prepared for that."

Marshall countered this. "I can trash the McDonald's in my neighborhood any time I want. *We're going to the wall.*" His tone didn't permit discussion or dispute.

"But what's to stop them from shooting us, really?" Samia was talking out of turn. "You know the police have a free hand when it's only us in the streets. The real problem here is it's only us in this room! Why aren't we meeting with all the other groups that will be out there tomorrow? Look around the faces here—do you think this is representative? What happened to the coalitions we had a year ago?"

This sent Diego into a rage. "What happened? Where the fuck have you been? While you were out cavorting around the world, we were struggling to keep things going, we were showing up every week to shovel beans! Don't ask me where everyone else is after you fucking abandoned us!"

Everyone froze. This was the critical moment, when someone had to speak up to calm tempers and get the discussion back on track, but no one dared. Instead, Samia lashed back: "If you're going to speak to me like that—no wonder I left! No wonder there's no one else here!"

Several other people broke in at once. "Come on, we don't have time for this! There are serious things we have to decide by tomorrow—" "Y'all should have talked this out already before you brought it in here!" "Christ, here we go again . . ."

I left in the hopeless rage of those who watch powerlessly as their loved ones destroy something precious. We'd gotten nowhere. My comrades' critiques of each other were all true enough, but that was beside the point; they were fighting each other rather than our common enemies.

This, too, had become increasingly common over the preceding year. Of course, no external forces prevented them from acknowledging and curbing this behavior, and the advantages of doing so were obvious—but they could not. One might say of an animal that persists in some counterproductive activity that it is incapable of behaving differently, and an animal observing my companions would have said the same of them. Up close, this inability manifested itself as their endless excuses, defensive responses to criticism, dwelling on each others' faults, and efforts to discredit former friends rather than hear out their critiques—anything to avoid having to set aside their insecurities and work through differences like adults.

They had been sculpted by our times as sure as the crenellations and parapets of medieval castles were sculpted by theirs. Historians teach that those parapets were invented by men, but just as a stream of water will erode a cliff into an accommodating shape it was the inventions and decisions of generations of men and women that forced those inventors to design parapets or perish. Likewise, my friends had been shaped by their atomized society into individual walled fortresses, and it was futile to expect them to let down their guard and stop fighting each other.

And this was why no revolution had taken place: no one had succeeded in introducing a new element to this equation, so it perpetually produced the same results. Every collective ended in acrimonious division, every alliance broke off before it bore fruit. Each of us went through friendship after friendship, using them up and burning them out, then moving on to do the same with others. Crowded into cities, our planet teeming with billions of people, this seemed a sustainable approach to social life. In fact, it was like releasing pollution into the ocean: if only one person does it, it dissolves harmlessly, but when everyone does so perpetually, the results are catastrophic. The wreckage of our planet was simply the physical manifestation of the disposable nature of our relationships and commitments.

On the battlefield, the grim anarchists pull down masks over knit brows and clenched teeth. As the sun rises through the tear gas, we thank our lucky stars we still have a common enemy so we can put off our rifts and rivalries for another day. We carry with us our disappointments in ourselves, in each other, and in our dreams—and also our shame, our arrogance and fear, our martyr complexes, our despair. We know better than to hope for victory: after this fight, even after any revolution, there will always be another conflict, another line to draw. Even if every government and board of directors abdicated and no one stepped forward to replace them, we would simply commence fighting each other. This is what we do, it is all we have learned, it is all we can do with our bitterness.



That day we marched to the wall and tore it to the ground. The march was striking in that it was utterly silent—no chants, no songs, just a dense mass of people going somewhere to do something. When the media appeared, we smashed their cameras and stomped in the windshields of their vans. The police withdrew before us—they hadn't bargained on us being so numerous and so fierce. That was the day they finally recognized the threat we posed; in all the subsequent demonstrations, they mobilized every mercenary within a thousand miles to intercept us before we could even come together. It was our one chance to penetrate their defenses, and we did—we cut the bars with bolt cutters and smashed the metal poles free of their concrete bases and rocked the whole structure until it crashed to the asphalt.

Ahead of me, through the first puff of the tear gas that was to saturate the air for the next two days, I could see the high-rise in which the summit was taking place. There, men had gathered to ensure that dishwashers stayed in dish rooms, Africans and Asians and Latin Americans stayed in mines and sweatshops, and the necessities of life remained hostage behind shop windows; they signed their names in our blood on documents milled from our forests, they forked flesh from our bones into their insatiable mouths and called it *freedom*. It was not their power that kept us on our knees, of course, so much as our willingness to abide it; but here we were at last, ready to contest it, almost ready to test our own.

And there we stopped. It was incredible; we hadn't imagined we could possibly get to this point, we had spent all our time bickering about whose fault it was that we couldn't, so now that we'd arrived we were unprepared to do anything. That hush was bone-chilling. That was our moment, our once in a lifetime chance, and we squandered it in frozen disbelief.

Then, finally, the slow apparatus of the state roused itself and lurched into motion. No one ever stepped forward through the holes we had knocked in the wall; instead, an hour later, we found ourselves three blocks back, fleeing a police charge calculated to sweep us into the arms of an arriving army unlike anything we'd seen before. We paused again, our escape routes blocked by a new wall of beige and green.

Standing there facing the assembled might of the police state, armored tanks and water cannons and concussion grenades, we thought we had lost, we thought we had grievously miscalculated the strength of our foe and were about to be crushed without even leaving a smudge on history. We didn't realize that we had already fought nine tenths

of the battle, that the last lines of defense were being brought out to restrain us because we had triumphed against all the repressive forces within, all the inertia and insecurity and self-imposed impotence—all but our own internal conflicts, which were our real undoing. If only we had understood that the battle lines were not in front of us but within, in our planning meetings and conversations, our neighborhoods and our bedrooms! If we had arrived at the wall with our relationships and confidence in one another intact, the only way we could have lost would have been to turn back at that moment, forswearing our struggle and begging to be forgiven our heresies.

It took a lot of doing, but with great effort, we managed to lose. This took years to accomplish; it was too massive an undertaking to complete in the moment we found ourselves surrounded. We had to call off the crusade to which we had given our lives, disconnect vast international networks, persuade our friends that all the commitments to which we had pledged ourselves were pipe dreams; hardest of all, we had to return to siding with the police and bosses and billboards against ourselves and the desires we had nurtured beyond their control.

We were fools. We didn't believe in ourselves enough, nor in each other; had we apprehended the gravity of the war we were fighting, how much depended on us, we would have put aside our pride and sorted out our petty feuds. Even throwing molotov cocktails at armored personnel carriers, we still weren't convinced of the reality of what we were doing—we were still playacting, dubiously testing what was possible in the world rather than shouldering the task of changing it.

After that, we didn't deserve another chance. But history always doubles back on itself, trying the same experiments endlessly over until they produce different results.

Next time we won't hesitate when we've pulled down the wall, nor when we have to apologize to one another and talk out our disputes. When only riot police stand between us and our freedom—only guns and shields, and nothing more—we can win, for the contest between desire and military might is not played out according to military rules.

Ironically, everything we'd idly charged against capitalism and hierarchy was borne out beyond our wildest nightmares by what followed. We'd given up so easily in part because we weren't prepared for the grisly implications of our own conclusions, because we weren't ready to handle the responsibility of being the first line of defense against the wholesale destruction of life on earth. We thought we still had time for quarreling and second thoughts.

Little did we know

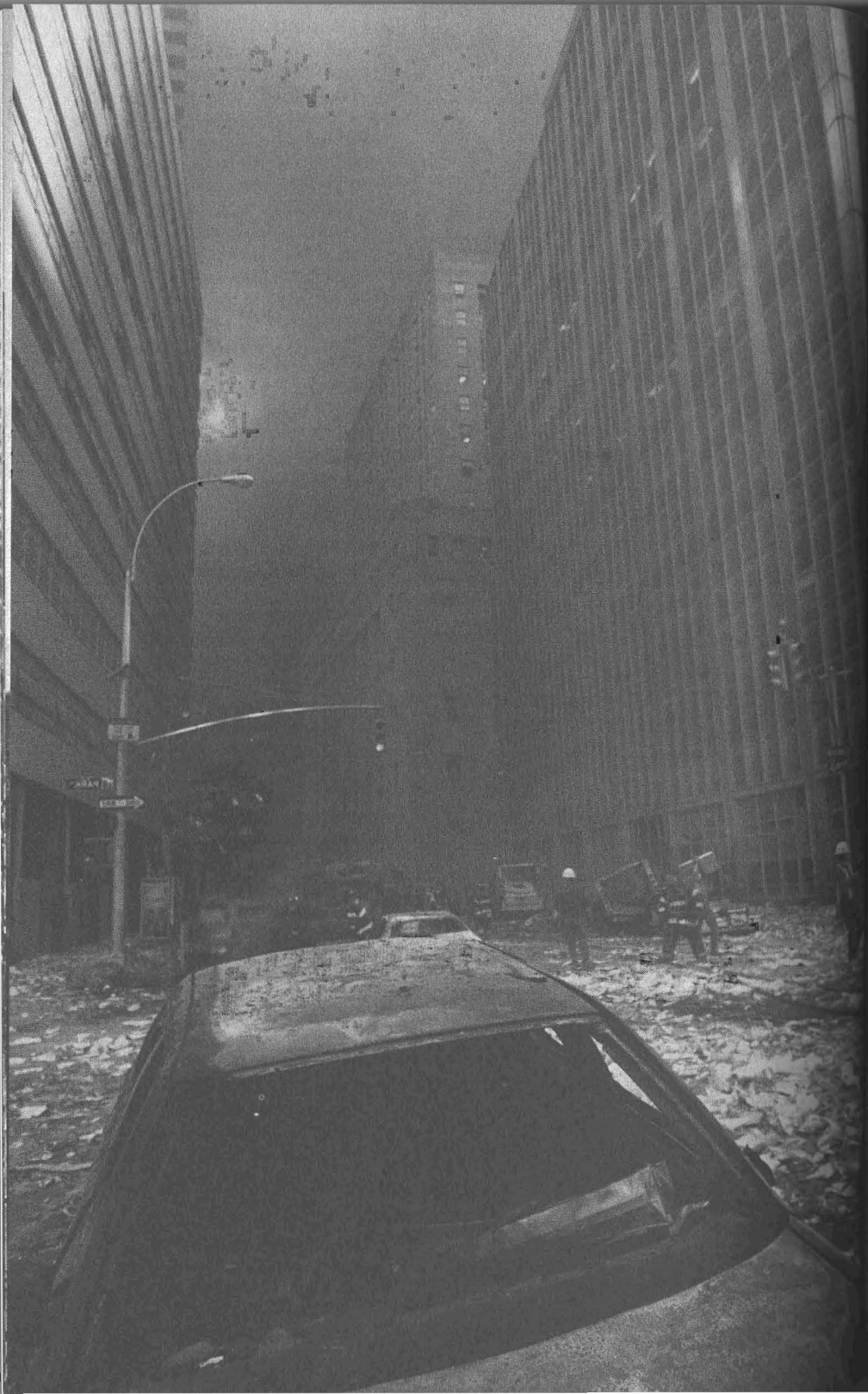


how much trouble









II. . . . Becomes Reality

THE END OF THE WORLD

When the world ends, white dust will fill the air like the curtain at the end of a play. A rain of desperate bodies will fall from the windows of burning buildings, drumming the concrete below. Men with splinters in their eyes will stumble through streets choked with debris; women clutching babies will pick through the rubble and tear out their hair. Our generation will go to its grave shouting its last words into a cell phone.

Or perhaps it will arrive as a thief in the night, step by invisible step. Factories will disappear overseas and corporations vanish into thin air, taking jobs and retirement funds with them. Cities dying from the inside out will spread like ringworm, the shrapnel spray of suburbs slicing through forest and field. Wars will reach from continent to continent and neighborhood to neighborhood—the terrorists who won't make peace against the horrorists who would enforce it at any price, who keep trying to impose harmony between oppressed and oppressor with fear and firepower. Gas prices will rise with global temperatures and tides, acid rains fall with the last of the redwoods, computer systems crash with stocks and stock markets . . . until one day *everyone* has cancer.

Or else nothing will happen at all, business will continue as usual: prison guards pace concrete tombs, psychiatrists contemplate madness, demons glare from the eyes of ministers, consumers are bought and sold in the marketplace. *It's after the end of the world*, whispers the homeless man on the corner—*don't you know that yet?*

Others, mysterious and knowing, who have held themselves aloof from the discussion until now, finally interject: "*Which world?*"

Then the catastrophes began: terrorist attacks, wars, hurricanes, pandemics. Or perhaps they'd been going on all along, but we'd been oblivious to them until our own lives were sufficiently disrupted. It hadn't occurred to me that the cancer that killed Daniel might be the harbinger of our species' extinction, nor that the alarmist presentations I'd made about the water table in my former life as an environmental activist would return as chilling front-page headlines.

Faced with actual upheaval, those of us who had been playing at revolution froze, wracked by guilt as if our own subversive desires had somehow invited that chaos into the world. It was absurd to think that the burning buildings on our patches and posters had caused the real buildings of our cities to catch fire, but we behaved like penitent criminals, disguising ourselves in the rhetoric of the dupes who were marching lockstep into the waiting maw of the apocalypse. Our entire approach had been predicated on the exaggerated placidity of the order we opposed; now that the curtain had been pulled back from the abyss, we were utterly at a loss.

Young children, being hypersensitized to the unspoken, often unconsciously devote themselves to the fulfillment of their parents' unacted desires; likewise, it might be that our own revolts had just been early indicators of the ruptures that were to come. As we had all found our paths to resistance one by one, painfully breaking out of the roles assigned us, we thought of ourselves as uniquely independent from history—but perhaps the forces that sent us spiraling out of orbit were the same ones that were soon to tear through our entire society, and our painful trials were simply that society wresting itself from its prepared track in microcosm.

Some of my friends concluded that the world was indeed coming to an end and attempted to act accordingly, but this only seemed to further immobilize them. They floundered about in millenarian desperation, preparing for a doomsday that never arrived or awaiting some watershed until their sense of agency had atrophied entirely; the specter of the world ending was too vast to address with any particular course of action. If the world really was ending, it wasn't ending *fast* enough—the end seemed to drag on forever, indistinguishable from the calamities that had always made up our daily lives.

Only in the smoke and tumult occasionally unleashed by real catastrophes was it possible to escape that malaise—and so some of us who once had circled the globe in search of adventure now flocked to those, both to lend a hand and to learn about life after the end of the world.

“Disasters bring people together, imparting a common context and project. In this suddenly opened and democratized atmosphere, individuals whose lives were formerly separated identify with each other. This sense of community offers intimations of a different kind of society, turning calamity into a harbinger of better things. Disasters are often the crucibles of millenarian and revolutionary movements: in such extremes, people experience the broad possibilities of life and subsequently set out to realize them.”

-National Research Council Committee on Disaster Studies,
Convergence Behavior in Disasters: A Problem in Social Control

“ONE ORDINARY WEEKEND IS BLOODIER

When the world ends, people come out of their apartments and meet their neighbors for the first time; they share food, stories, companionship. No one has to go to work or the laundromat; nobody remembers to check the mirror or scale or email account before leaving the house. Graffiti artists surge into the streets; strangers embrace, sobbing and laughing. Every moment possesses an immediacy formerly spread out across months. Burdens fall away, people confess secrets and grant forgiveness, the stars come out over New York City; and nine months later, a new generation is born.

Disaster

Yes, birth rates increase immediately following disasters, just as the rate of natural death declines during them. People don't often die of old age—that is to say, boredom—in the midst of catastrophes.* Life, however precarious, is worth staying awake for; in fact, it's never tasted so sweet. The urgency of emergency provides just the spice that the constant low-intensity stress of daily life never could.

* It's not just birth and death rates, either—domestic violence decreased dramatically in South Central Los Angeles during the riots in 1992, for example, while it hits a national peak on the day of the Super Bowl. As a French student commented back in May of 1968, having had the good fortune to experience both,

“THAN A MONTH OF INSURRECTION.”

But what about the people who *do* die in disasters? It's true that people lose their lives in heat waves, flash floods, and airplane hijackings; they also die in automobile collisions, workplace accidents, of drug overdoses and heart attacks and lung cancer—and in unprecedented numbers, alone and forgotten in rest homes. The really strange thing is that, as a society, we fixate so fearfully on disasters, when everyday life is statistically more dangerous to us; and that, at the same time as we fear them, we find them so fascinating. To get to the bottom of this, we must reexamine both disasters and their supposed opposite, normal life, and figure out which is really which. Let's begin by looking at disasters from the dissident perspective, through the forbidden eyes of the secret part of each of us that rejoices in them.

Disaster as Interruption

It's a public secret: disasters are exciting. Trying as they may be, we come alive in them. In our "normal" lives, we accommodate ourselves to the smallness of what seems to be the world, and that accommodation becomes itself a prison. Disasters throw everything into disarray and into question: the wide world reasserts that anything is indeed possible, and we find ourselves tossed out of our prisons, ready or not, shivering on the sidewalk before the ruins. In these new conditions we can become heroes, work and witness miracles, suffer tragedies rather than mere indignities; we find ourselves fully engaged, thankful for each other and everything we have, even for what we have lost. Danger and distress do not always arrive uninvited; to trade one's tiresome old fears and frustrations for new and compelling ones can be a real relief. In the wake of a disaster, everything has weight and meaning—tears and laughter both come easily, and no one knows for sure what will follow next. Afterwards, many find it difficult to readjust, to resign themselves again to all that knowing.

Disasters deliver the equality law promises but fails to fulfill. When disaster strikes, a boy in a wheelchair is no less than a haughty executive: the two watch the burning high-rise side by side. Outsiders and outcasts can find themselves elevated to positions of prestige and approval—indeed, they may be the only ones prepared for the situation: when the *Is* evaporates, people who have invested everything in it must rely on those who have spent their lives pondering

Nadia —, quoted in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's atlas of human suffering and inhuman repression *The Gulag Archipelago*, recalls the time when she was being taken to interrogation by an impassive, silent guard with unseeing eyes—when suddenly the bombs began to explode right next to the Big House and it sounded as if at the next moment they would fall directly upon them. The terrified guard threw her arms around the prisoner and embraced her, desperate for human companionship and sympathy in the face of the end. Then the bombing stopped. And her eyes became unseeing again. "Hands behind your back! Move along."

That was a disaster that didn't go far enough.

the Could Be. Skills that seemed specialized and irrelevant—fighting riot police, surviving in the woods—suddenly become essential for everyone, and dissident futures the pragmatic once dismissed as impossible take over where the former chains of cause and effect leave off.

Disasters render the social facts that comprise reality negotiable; abrupt freedom takes the place of hackneyed choice. Lost hikers teach themselves to start fires with wristwatches, errand-running mothers lift automobiles off children, docile airplane passengers commit cannibalism and are celebrated for it. When school is closed and the roads are impassable, when everything is up in the air, one is no longer at the mercy of routine, atrophying commitments, cowardice and inertia: complete self-determination, in the new and alien landscape of upheaval, is inescapable. Catastrophes are sometimes described as experiences of total liberation, heretical as such a notion is in our safety-first society. It's no coincidence the Millennium referred to in so many religious traditions is to be ushered in by a phase of terrible destruction: the kingdom of heaven arrives through the smoke.

That the notion of such an apocalypse—whether as nuclear war, final judgment, or total revolution—is so pervasive in our civilization suggests a popular fascination with extremes in which conventions no longer apply. Our preoccupation with danger and tragedy implies a barely disguised longing for risk and uncertainty. "What would you do if you learned you had only twenty four hours to live?" From inside our cubicles and confessionals, we can only envision total freedom

and authentic living in the context of imminent destruction—we do, constantly.

Here in the world of structure, safety, and routine, we know disaster only from afar, as spectacle: news reports, motion pictures, rumors. These representations serve a host of purposes, the foremost being intimidation: they keep us cowed, grateful for the protection of our noble leaders. The disaster we see through these screens, like the wilderness allegedly beyond the walls of civilization, is a nightmare in which life is short, brutish, and ugly. These portrayals also more tellingly, serve an economic role: they cash in on the immense popularity of the apocalypse—vicarious living, through action movies and video games and the like, is bound to be in great demand in a society that stifles first-hand adventure. In the process, they teach the important lesson that the moments of truth we secretly pine for are distant, inaccessible, perhaps only fictional; certainly nothing we could participate in or, for that matter, precipitate. That is to say: those noble leaders are simply protecting us from ourselves. Or is it themselves they are protecting?

After all, where do our leaders fit in the anatomy of calamity? Airlifted in by private jet to address the mourners (and cameramen), they speak as if they suffer our own tragedies more than we do, but they're not the ones who bear the brunt when something goes awry. Students of disaster tell us that while disasters can increase the opportunities for exploitation, they also reduce the motivations for it, at least among the population that experiences them; thus the only exploitation in disaster conditions is usually perpetrated by outsiders, profiteers who take advantage of the situation to fleece survivors. And our leaders are the ultimate profiteers of disaster: they rely on it—more precisely, on the terror the thought of it provokes—to maintain their power. Disaster works for them—especially if we never experience it ourselves but only see it on television, in the papers, in our nightmares. In fact, these leaders are the ones endangering us—it is their policies that give us cancer and turn suicide bombers against us. Our protectors run the ultimate protection racket.

But are they protecting us? Once upon a time oil spills and shootings were considered disasters; today these are practically standard features of our society, built into the social fabric and accounted for in advance. They are not anomalies, but routines. Real interruptions in which the system breaks down, on the other hand, such as black-

outs and bomb threats, are still described as disasters, whether or not anyone dies. Already harrowed by the vicissitudes of the system itself, we dutifully fear them, but those who have lived through such disruptions know how sweet it can be when Something Happens.

The essential quality of disasters as we know them is the break with the status quo; this is the one feature they all share. It is not destructiveness that sets disasters apart: the slaughterhouses, suicides, and collateral damage of Business As Usual take more lives than all the worst catastrophes combined, while many disasters don't result in any deaths at all. If the casualties of all disasters were tallied and compared to those of "normal life," disaster would look very safe indeed, just as the number of deaths and injustices that have resulted from people obeying authorities far outnumber those perpetrated by those who have broken laws. Yet there are some who live in horror of disasters while unflinchingly extolling the virtues of war: these, then, must be people who fear the boundlessness and unruliness of life but are quite at home with the orderliness of its opposite. War, in particular, is a safe ritual—it is the protector of the status quo, the reassertion of normality. It is no coincidence that the runaway disaster of September 11, 2001 was followed immediately by a series of wars—and which calamity has ultimately been bloodier, especially if you count foreigners as human beings?

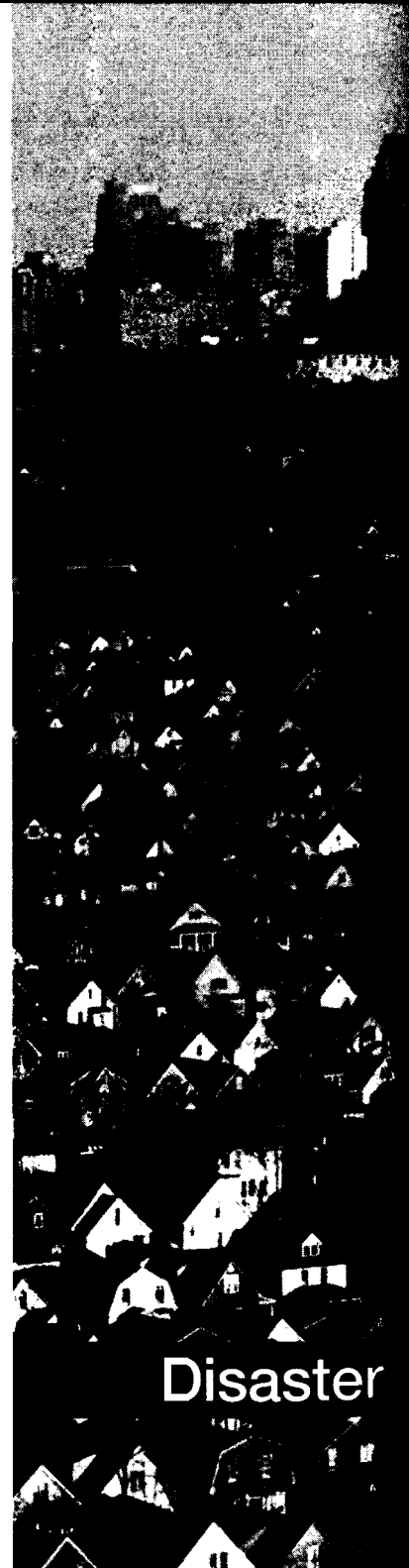
So only the coward fears disasters—that is to say, there is a cowardly part of each of us that would keep everything familiar, whatever the cost in lives and life. This is fear of the unknown in its purest form: it projects chaos, destruction, and death onto everything beyond the pale of the ordinary, projections all the more ironic in that they can only be modeled on that which is known. From this irony, we can conclude that those who most fear the unknown reveal in doing so that the world they know is a place of terror. It is precisely the terrorized, those caught in thrall to fear, who most dread to leave its territory. The free and fearless, ready to live and all too aware of what is insufferable in the everyday, welcome new horizons—disasters included.

The Disaster as Permanent Condition

Wait—how could that be, that disasters are the apex of adventure, community, life itself? Does that mean that if we really want to live, we have to spend our lives as disastourists, quixotically chasing the



disaster



Disaster

few brief moments of upheaval destiny affords each of us, longing for the fleeting, borrowed wings of destruction and rebirth as we wade through years of deadening routine in the meantime? Is that practical, practicable, worthwhile? Does the woman fed up with her car payments and marriage really crave tornadoes and typhoons, or is she just desperate for an honorable way out?

Perhaps we have everything backwards here—maybe disasters aren't so great after all, but the *real* Disaster, the worst one, is the Disaster we live every day: the emptiness of our full schedules, the trivia that trivializes us, the machinery that runs on rivers of blood. That would explain why we feel so free whenever something, anything, however dangerous or difficult, interrupts all this. Perhaps the excitement and immediacy that break out in emergencies are simply indications of a return to our natural state, in the break they herald from the full-scale slow-motion train wreck that is our society. If that is the case, then it is not disasters per se that are liberating—it is, rather, a question of perspective: a “disaster” that disrupts a life of constraint is experienced as a moment of liberation, when that “normal life” is actually Disaster in disguise.

Most of the disasters we really suffer from can be traced to this invisible Disaster, anyway. The destruction of rainforests and the ozone layer, holocausts perpetuated with biological weapons and smart bombs, even global pandemics like mad cow disease, anorexia, bulimia, depression—these would not be possible without centralized state and corporate power, and the meaningless busywork of billions that engenders it. To live with the unknown ahead of and around us, to struggle only with the “natural disasters” our ancestors faced, would almost be idyllic after all this.

Could we fight Disaster with disaster? If we stopped feeding its flames with our hard work and attention, if we ceased paying tribute, the Disaster would surely crash and burn once and for all. If this status quo is the ultimate Disaster, if it really is disorder and tragedy normalized as a system, no lower-case disaster could be worse.

Interrupt the Disaster!

Some of us are already practicing this. We don't live in the Disaster but in encampments at its edge—yes, in a state of ongoing disaster and difficulties, but nothing compared to the misery of life in the Disaster area proper. We don't fall for popular propaganda about disasters; we're conducting our own experiments with them. We don't have to wait for catastrophe to strike to enjoy its benefits—we can throw a disaster any time we like. And we are.



The Disaster takes care of everything. That is: the Disaster ruins everything, by leaving everything intact.

We contemplate disasters from within the Disaster, their supposed opposite. From in here, they look frightening—everything does. Thinking of disasters, we always see them ahead of us: a gang of monsters around the bend, holding the future hostage.

But in fact it is the present that holds our future hostage. The Disaster surrounds us, a desolation we live day after day—and it is this horror, not the unknown ahead but that which is the most banal and familiar, that we cannot concede, cannot confront. The guarantee that, unless catastrophe hits, everything will go on as is, every last injustice and humiliation included—what could be more terrible than this?

The Disaster is that there is no disaster. Only a real disaster could save us from the Disaster, which is the *real* disaster.

We can learn a lot about the Disaster from what it says about disasters. The Disaster needs the specter of disasters to play bad cop to its good cop; but whenever it has to let a bona fide disaster out of the cage, the Disaster endangers itself—for as soon as we establish an unmediated relationship to disasters, that specter is exorcised. It is only popular fear of disasters that keeps the Disaster in place, after all. When people recognize that it is not disasters but the Disaster they have to fear, the next disaster will put an end to it once and for all.

Enough about the disintegration of our little movement—let's return to the subject of flight, where we started. During the Second World War, Colditz Castle, a thousand-year-old fortress near Dresden, was chosen by the Nazis to serve as a high security POW camp. Colditz was the prison to which the Nazis sent the most dogged Allied escape artists, and consequently it became an elite school of escape.

After several failed attempts involving standard tactics such as hiding places, disguises, and ropes, the top secret Escape Committee approved a plan to depart by air. In 1943, prisoners began building a glider that was to be launched from the rooftop of the castle and piloted to a field across the nearby river. The glider was assembled entirely out of parts of the prison: floorboards, bed sheets, improvised fasteners, adhesives and tools. The craft was nearly ready to fly just as Colditz was liberated by Allied troops; later tests showed that it could have succeeded. Under the most difficult conditions the prisoners had invented the airplane!

As a means of escape from the physical confines of prison, the glider was a ridiculous scheme: it took years to build, demanded a tremendous quantity of resources, and would only have been able to convey two people a scant thousand meters from the walls. The plan looks different, however, if we adjust our notion of what constitutes prison. If prison is not simply the condition of spatial confinement but a spectrum of confinements ranging from iron bars to debilitating despair to suburban ennui, what qualifies as a successful escape looks different as well.

The soldiers who were imprisoned in Colditz would probably never have become inventors if they had not been captured. I reflected on this as I traveled the country reporting on floods, fires, tornados, and industrial accidents. By and large, the survivors impressed me as more courageous, inventive, and emotionally present

than anyone in the towns that had been spared. Even those who had lost all their possessions had gained the one thing you couldn't buy on the market at any price—urgency. This gave them something in common with those of us who had made disasters of our own lives in trying to chart a path out of our disastrous society.

The popular fascination with accounts of disaster survival seemed to me a tacit admission that something was lacking in most people's daily lives. Businessmen in hotel bars never tired of the Colditz story; the subtext was that they, too, might be able to invent airplanes if only they weren't trapped in their well-paying careers. Provided the protagonists were suitably middle class, even the most extreme cases—such as the famous rugby team who survived by cannibalism after their airplane crashed in the Andes—provoked more curiosity than horror. The charm of that particular story was that it permitted college graduates to violate the most fundamental taboo that separates civilized humans from savages and wild beasts. It was a case study proving that even the basic prohibitions of God and Nature are negotiable—a sort of coded map to a loophole in the social contract.

A scenario like that calls all manner of lesser rules and morals into question. The airplane is a metaphor for civilization, government, social institutions: systems that purport to offer services or protection in exchange for obedience. A contract exists between the passengers and the plane: the plane safely transports the passengers, the passengers behave within certain limits. But as soon as the plane crashes, all deals are off.

As a reporter dispatched to disaster areas, it was my job to portray life outside the plane as ugly, brutish, and short, to balance the titillation of that escape against the terror and misery that must inevitably result. They sent me to ghettos destroyed by natural disasters, where whole districts were sealed off and the inhabitants left to die. First I was supposed to paint the savagery of the locals in vivid colors, to sensationalize the looting and arson that followed the breakdown of order and praise the bravery of the sheriffs and National Guardsmen who quarantined it. Then the story changed and I was permitted to decry the sluggish response of federal disaster relief agencies and bewail the senseless deaths of the poor. But long before the storms hit, those ghettos had been disaster areas wracked by malnutrition and drug addiction, devastated by slumlords and waste dumps, and

patrolled by militarized police—and not one newspaper had run a story about them. Our disaster coverage was just a smokescreen to obscure the real holocausts that were taking place.

I was fed up with bullying people into the arms of the status quo. Every time I sat down at my desk to hammer out another exercise in prevarication, disgust washed over me in a tidal wave. I wanted every ski resort to burn down, every stadium to cave in, every gated community to flood—I wanted to see snide executives standing out in the hot sun on the freeway median, desperately entreating sealed windows and averted eyes. If bombs had to drop somewhere, shouldn't they drop on the ones who ordered bombings? If anyone had to live in prison or in fear, shouldn't it be the bigots and homophobes who believed it was right for people to languish in cells and closets? Maybe it wasn't sensible or defensible, but I wasn't afraid of disasters anymore—I was practically praying for them.

I started where I could, in my own life: I gave notice at the office. I'd been waiting all along for them to fire me, but it had turned out my employers needed me more than I needed them. From now on, I might indeed starve to death or get deported, but I would never write another word I didn't wholeheartedly believe. It was absurd to think that for so many years I had been less frightened of hurricanes, suicide bombers, and terminal illnesses than of simply losing my job. I was finally throwing myself off the cliff; I would invent the airplane, or perish in the crash.

It is the final night of junior musicians' camp, and the campers' parents have gathered at a gala dinner event to see their young prodigies perform. Awkward at the threshold of adolescence, embarrassed in the presence of their families, the fidgeting students count the minutes, each waiting in terror for his turn to come. Most awkward of all is the star pianist, a shy boy with tousled hair and wrinkled clothes whose performance is to be the highlight of the evening.

His instructor has picked a particularly difficult piece, eager to show off his pupil's rapidly developing abilities—not to mention his own coaching. Nobody has asked the youth what he would like to play—no one has asked him anything of the sort since his mother signed him up for his first lessons: they take it for granted that he knows his responsibilities as frontrunner of a new generation of musicians. For his part, he wants so desperately to please them that he has not thought to consider the question either.

The girl before him is playing her violin solo, and he can't stop his hands from shaking. What if he misses a note, what if his fingers knot and stumble? There is a minefield in the middle of the composition, a series of difficult chords practically right on top of each other. He would give anything to be on the other side of the next twenty minutes, to have this behind him.

The girl ruefully bows to polite applause, and he takes his place on the piano bench. The hush now in the air is not etiquette alone; all eyes are on him, all ears alert. He opens the sheet music to the proper page, positions his hands above the keys, and begins.

The music that pours forth is elegant and precise. Mothers fold their hands and smile; fathers nod approvingly, silently reproaching their own offspring for failing to apply themselves. Even the instructor looks pleased with himself.

The minefield looms closer and closer; now the boy is in the thick of it, sailing through like a true maestro; and now it is behind him! There remains only the final stretch of the song, a victory march of sorts, a real walk in the park.

But suddenly, inexplicably, he hits a wrong note. Just one—but that's not all: far, far worse, contrary to everything he has been painstakingly taught about concert performance, he stops cold, freezes.

There is nothing for it: he goes back, takes up the piece again from the beginning of the phrase, playing forward with all the grace and finesse he had been as if nothing has happened—and hits the same wrong note. This has never happened in this piece before, or any piece he has played in years. In shock and disbelief, he breaks off again, then inwardly kicks himself for doing so.

His face burning, he backs up and begins once more—and, once more, hits the note, freezing as if jolted by electricity. In the total stillness of the ensuing instant, he becomes aware of the others in the room—not just the monolithic pressure of their expectations, but their presence as individuals. They too are uncomfortable—they need him to get through this to rescue both the evening and their pride, to protect their faith in the investments they have made. It is up to him to save everybody from the impending catastrophe, to fight his way to the end of the composition and then go home to hide his face forever.

He hits the wrong note again. At this moment he would be grateful if a bolt of lightning struck him down, or he suddenly died of a heart attack. Everything he has built his young life upon—his prospects as a musician, his attempts to do what is expected of him—is in shambles. Faced with the unendurable, the boy must either perish or change. No bolt of lightning strikes; his heart goes on beating in his chest.

Once again he backtracks and plays up to the note again—but this time when he reaches it, he plays it wrong deliberately, blasting through all his deepest fears and values to redefine the meaning of the previous sour notes. The audience is none the wiser—they are too overwhelmed, mortified at having to witness this fiasco. Every father in the room is on the edge of his seat, every mother holds her breath; they would give anything to be elsewhere, to be spared this. Every note the boy plays wrong, every successive time he tries and fails, it is as if that failure re-

flected upon all of them, upon all humanity. Mediocrity they can stomach, even the professional musicians in the audience; outright failure is a contagion they fear worse than death, a harbinger of utter breakdown.

He botches the part again—and again. The dynamic is reversed, now: all the pressure that bore down upon the boy, the weight of the expectations of parents and teachers and students and by extension the whole civilization they represent, is turned upon them. The boy is in total control, free for the first time in his life, and they are helpless, paralyzed in a situation for which nothing has prepared them. The tension is absolutely unendurable. There is a nervous laugh, coughing, helpless fidgeting. The recalcitrant note sounds again and again, like a skipping record, like a fire alarm.

A few feet from the stage, the violinist's eyes light up: she understands. She turns and looks back at the anguished faces behind her: it is truly a vision of damned souls in hell. Peering around the room, she catches the eyes of another young girl a few tables away—they are shining like hers. The two nod to each other, grinning from ear to ear.



Failure

Sorry, you are not a winner.



Failure is disaster on an individual scale. Suffered consciously, it makes everything painfully intense, bringing meaningful and meaningless into sharp focus; faced with courage, it becomes a fortifying draft, a powerful teacher; embraced, it can even become a channel from one destiny to another—and in a civilization which is itself a colossal failure, we desperately need such channels. Feared, denied, or stigmatized, however, it becomes a monstrous enemy and master. In our success-obsessed society, where our horror of failure enables it to rule over us in disguise, we have a lot to learn from failure itself, and the ones we call failures.

Defeat, the Greatest of Feats

True failure, tragic and heartbreaking as it is, is proof that you've reached beyond yourself, that you are pushing at your own limits and the limits of the world. The one who fails in the course of really trying needn't fear she is failing to live life to the fullest. Heroic failure is greatness that does not depend on success or approval—not just greatness, but inalienable greatness, the greatest greatness of all.

Here we are speaking of good old-fashioned failure, such as can be experienced by those trying hard to achieve something worthwhile: in failing to achieve their goals, they achieve something even more valuable, the experience of giving all. But there are other ways to define failure. Failure is relative, according to the standards by which one judges success: and woe to him who does not judge for himself what is success and what is failure, but unquestioningly receives his standards from others.

We'd thought we'd had it tough before, but the years after the assault on the wall taught us new meanings of the word struggle. At times, as everything collapsed, I had the distinct sensation of vertigo. Every nadir we reached, a new depth opened beneath us.

Once we no longer thought of ourselves as fighting a winning battle against capitalism, there was nothing to stop us from turning all our frustration on each other. All our collectives and networks broke down in bitter recriminations. The workers were to blame for only being interested in their own needs; the activists were to blame for not organizing with the workers; the students were to blame for being too privileged to commit to real struggle; fuckups like me were to blame for scaring people off with our criminal activity and violent tactics; men and white folks and straight people were to blame for alienating our more oppressed allies. Sure, it was all true, but bickering about it got us nowhere.

Some insisted that we weren't self-sacrificing enough, that our revolution never got off the ground because we were just fighting for ourselves rather than the truly oppressed. I didn't agree; in my version of the story, our resistance had begun when Kate linked her personal struggle for liberation to the more abstract activism of the students, and foundered from the moment we started choosing abstract battles ourselves. As far as I was concerned, hitching our

desire for a radically different life to the cart of service-oriented activism was like killing the goose that laid the golden eggs. I did my grocery distribution for the same reasons I stole food for myself—I wanted everyone to have enough to eat, regardless of the laws or the economy. There was no way I was going to take marching orders from some professional activist or union rep who claimed to speak for the people I'd grown up with, worked with, and fought beside.

Others, mostly delinquents like myself, pushed for the remnants of our network to escalate to guerrilla warfare, but I knew where that would lead—I still remembered what had happened to our friends who had split off to pursue criminal careers back before we were politicized. Our momentum had been contagious because we were acting openly and others could join in; isolating ourselves in clandestine cells would guarantee we wouldn't be followed by another generation.

As it became clear the world wasn't changing for the better, everyone vanished, even the ones I'd met at the encampment. Most of them returned to what they knew: dropouts went back to school, travelers drifted to more exciting towns, the employees who had been most active had lost their jobs and gotten hired elsewhere. For all I knew, Samia was getting a PhD somewhere and Pablo was seeking publishers for his inevitable book. I imagined her getting tenure for her edgy essays about the actions that sent my friends to prison, and him eating from a deli tray at a book signing while I waited to salvage the scraps. Maybe their texts would offer astute insights on our failure to mobilize the working class or establish enduring counter-institutions.

All that was left for my crowd after things died down was petty crime—we still had to survive somehow—and drinking. The drinking was a real problem; it expanded to fill every vacuum that opened. "Which do you think will fail first—capitalism, or my liver?" I already had serious problems maintaining my mental health, so I didn't start again; but not drinking distanced me from my remaining companions, who took it as a comment on their choices that I didn't join in.

If nothing else remained of the old days, there were still bills coming due. I'd been lucky enough the times I'd been arrested not to be recognized for the more serious things I'd been involved in, but Diego was not so lucky. The legal aid collective was on its last legs by then,

and they declined to help because the action he was being charged for had been controversial and that mobilization was long over. I remember going to see his grandmother to tell her that her son was being held for fifty thousand dollars bail and we couldn't raise half of it; it was painful to realize how bad my Spanish still was, how little work I'd put into it over the years. Nothing feels worse than calling around to friends and then acquaintances after something like that, waking them up one by one, trying to find somewhere to sleep on the couch. The worst of it was I had to borrow her phone.

All the while, the world was falling in around our ears—but regular folks were taking the brunt of it, not the ones who set that destruction in motion. Terrorists were blowing up public transportation, prisons were overflowing, deserts were spreading across continents, storms generated by industrial pollution were decimating entire cities. One night the news showed white vigilantes forcing refugees back at gunpoint into a ruined neighborhood awash in toxic chemicals. We should have been there in our affinity groups, backing the racists down with guns of our own, helping coordinate evacuation on the survivors' terms. It was all our side could do to get together some relief efforts alongside the Red Cross.

On top of everything else, my relationship with Kate was on the rocks. It was an old, sad, typical story—the passionate lovers who try and fail to sustain their romance in a world fatal to romance. We didn't live together anymore; I'd visit her at the shed she stayed in behind a collective house on the other side of town, and we'd argue without saying a word. As everything crashed and burned, I swore myself again and again to that old impossible dream: that we'd make a world of magic in which the magic of love, too, could survive.

Failure as Exercise, Success as Obstacle

Let's look at failure in a vacuum, if such a thing is possible, to see what secrets it holds for us.

If you want to subject yourself to a real test of mettle, try failing. Struggling to succeed can be demanding, but failure is trying like nothing else. Attempt an impossible task everyone around you considers senseless and stupid—you'll be surprised at what a challenge it is to exist in exile from the world in which people can make sense of your actions. Commit yourself to a project you know to

be beyond your powers; note how hard it is to bear your own hurt pride when things go awry, even if you knew from the start they were bound to.

Failing that, start out small: make a habit of telling jokes that fall so flat people flee your company, announce in a public square that you are a juggler of great expertise and then try to juggle for the very first time before the crowd that gathers. Even frivolous exercises like these, which sound like mere child's play on paper, can be excruciating in practice. This seems senseless—failing should not be difficult, unless one is invested in success. That it is so hard for most of us to fail even in meaningless ways reveals how much we covet success for its own sake. Being able to fail fearlessly before others is one of the hardest skills to master; being able to fail before yourself without shame is harder still.

But readiness to fail is a prerequisite for being able to do anything great. Pride, self-consciousness, insecurity, cowardice, the qualities which demand triumph after triumph and nothing else—these are the same qualities that impede the total freedom of action needed to achieve any genuine triumph. Artists, for example, must be prepared to abandon everything they have learned and begin failing again, and to repeat this process over and over, if they are to evade stagnation. Fearing to fail, one cannot accomplish anything—not even failure.

Too much success makes you weak, anyway. As a success, how can you know how you stand up under the ultimate duress of disaster, or for that matter what your motivations are in the first place? Failure, for the one who needs to think of himself as successful, is truly an enemy to be feared. But a person experienced in misfortune and disappointment is less likely to be unnaturally afraid of failing; if she has not yet given up, she is stronger and knows both life and herself better than the protagonist of any success story. Fail once, and it feels like the end of the world; live through the end of the world a few times, and you'll learn how much more durable you are than it is.

Some of us have spent years, lifetimes, whole generations in failure and disappointment. We know exactly how much poverty, humiliation, suffering we can take—we're well versed in these things, we've been getting plenty of practice. We're not easily intimidated—we have nothing to lose. We persist with a patience that is inconceivable to celebrities, star athletes, spelling bee winners. Just as the

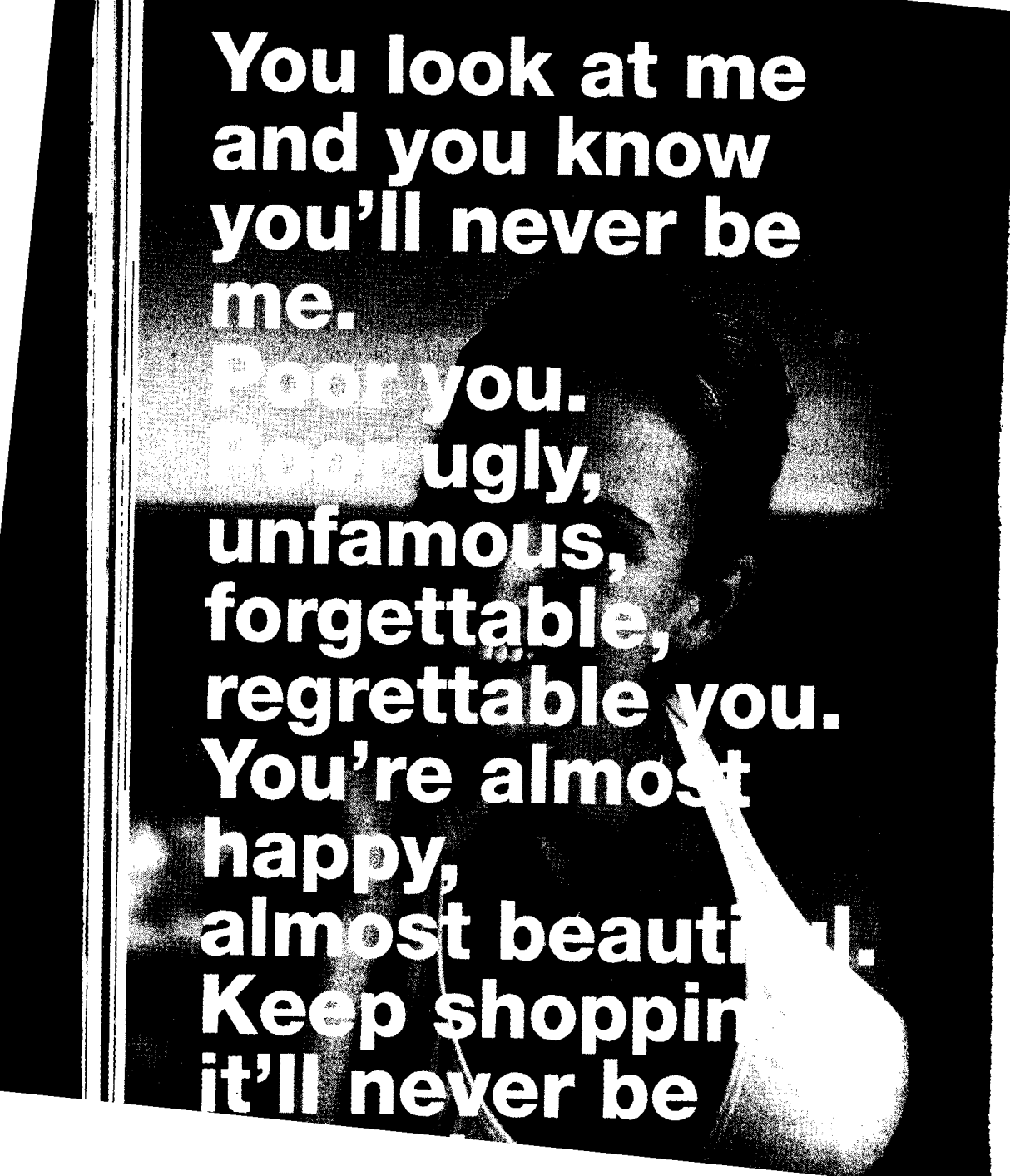
homeless man who greets the dawn with his will to live intact after walking around all night to keep from freezing to death is tougher than the most high-powered corporate financial officer, we failures are better equipped than any other class to take the risks one must take to work miracles.

There is an ominous side to opening yourself up to miracles rarely acknowledged by those who celebrate them. Once you leave the beaten track and anything is possible, the world can indeed bestow wondrous gifts upon you; but if things can occur that are miraculously good, things can also befall you that are supernaturally awful.

I reflected on this as I arranged my shoes under my sleeping bag so the cold metal roof wouldn't be too uncomfortable against my knees. I lay down and looked up past the radio antennas, the spewing smokestacks, and the ringing police sirens that designated that neighborhood occupied territory. The moon hung overhead, an inextinguishable golden lamp. I'd forgotten there was anything beyond the frontiers of the nightmare around me. The yellow disc blurred; I blinked and tears poured down my temples.

When you're totally disenfranchised, your fantasies veer to the extreme opposite your daily experience: so it was that I developed a rich inner life that winter. In utter deprivation and disappointment, I could easily imagine all the empty buildings around me as social centers with free childcare and drug treatment programs, all the empty lots as community gardens in full bloom, all the strangers who hurried past me with downcast eyes as neighbors with whom I shared camaraderie and good cheer. Diego would walk free in the sunlight again, my mother would be treated for her back problems, and the three of us would meet for dinner at a dining hall in the foyer of a converted mansion. The folks from the encampment would be there, even the ones who had gone to prison or become economists or committed suicide, and afterwards we'd all line up to wash our own dishes. It was just psychological compensation, a last-ditch defense against despair; but if so much suffering and misery was possible, god damn it, how much joy must be possible too!

Whether or not any of that ever came to pass, I was satisfied that I'd made the right choice staking everything on our fight. I was happier freezing to death alone than I would have been as employee of the month, even if they'd given me a restaurant of my very own.



**You look at me
and you know
you'll never be
me.**

**Poor you.
Poor ugly,
unfamous,
forgettable,
regrettable you.
You're almost
happy,
almost beautiful.
Keep shopping
it'll never be**

Success as Failure, Failure as

In this world turned upside down, in which misery masquerades as happiness and truth is simply falsehood with powerful friends, the right kind of failure can protect you from the most insidious danger of all—capital-S Success. It is important to know which battles not to win, what callings not to excel in; some victories are more humiliating than any defeats, some fiascos are triumphs in disguise. The miserable waitress who is promoted to manager and stays at the restaurant long after she had planned to quit might have been better off getting fired, after all, just as the Russian working class could have given themselves a better shot at liberation by losing the revolution of 1917; likewise, it was for the best that Allen Ginsberg didn't make a well adjusted stockbroker.

This kind of failure is a blessing in disguise. Even when suffered by one who desires so-called success, it can be an antechamber of transformation, a sort of cocoon. In failing at an enterprise of questionable value, the individual's condition and activity already diverge from the norms set out for him; it only remains for his values and standards to cross that fissure and join him on the other side. When this happens, he can redefine success and failure for himself, so he will not be so busy succeeding that his hands are tied when he has the chance to try them at something that really matters.

Fighting a losing battle against the capitalist system gave me a deeper respect for my fellow losers. All our lives we'd heard that the working class was composed of failures who hadn't tried hard enough or hadn't gotten enough education or, at best, hadn't been given a fair shot. The implication was that everyone would choose to be successful and middle class, if only they had the chance.

On the contrary, many of us had willfully chosen not to play the game, whatever the consequences. The wrecked black neighborhood I visited on my grocery distribution route was still suffering the aftermath of the Black Panthers' heroic defeat; in retaliation, the forces of white supremacy had arranged for landlords, drug dealers, and arsonists to ravage it, then hacked it in half with a freeway. In the trailer parks I'd played in as a kid, middle-aged women wore skimpy clothes fashioned for emaciated models, brazenly flaunting bodies the corporate media deemed more obscene than pornography; in retrospect, I saw them a

heroes in the struggle against patriarchal beauty norms. The homeless were supposed to be the ultimate examples of failure, but once I'd spent enough time among them I learned that some of them were on the streets by choice—as I was myself. They were heroes too: no homeless person ever produced enough chlorofluorocarbons to damage the ozone layer or evicted anyone's grandmother from her home.

Once I'd despised these people, swearing I would escape their fates at all costs; now I saw them as comrades who refused to disgrace themselves for worthless prizes. The shiftless hoboes and migrant workers who'd seen half the world without ever looking at a travel brochure, the minimum-wage employees who never wanted to be anyone's boss, the workers at the cash registers with cameras pointed at them from all sides—they were no less worthy than the big-name anarchists who had beaten back imperial armies and escaped maximum security prisons only to die of tuberculosis and alcoholism. We were all glorious failures; it only remained to us to triumph at long last.

Success as Impossibility, Failure as Resistance

It is ironic enough that so many dedicate their lives to succeeding at projects that fail to fulfill their dreams; it is more ironic still that it is practically impossible to succeed at these projects in the first place. Still worse is that, living in fearful denial of this failure, most people are not even able to learn from it.

Ours is a civilization of losers. Faced with the impossible ideals of beauty and perfection set for us, we fail without fail. This is an open secret, *the* open secret of our era: no one, but no one, is a winner. The harder we work to measure up to these standards, the faster they recede before us. That's why models are more insecure about their bodies than we are about ours, why millionaires read books about how to be more efficient. If you're so successful, what's with the antidepressants?

Even a superstar like Madonna, who presumably represents the pinnacle of status in our society, has in common with all of us that she is *not* actually Madonna, not the two-dimensional caricature of success and sex appeal that saturates the airwaves. At the end of the day, lines on her face and doubt in her gut, she too turns on the television and feels her heart drop at seeing that flawless goddess cavorting through a digital paradise. In fact, she is worse off than the rest of us: for not only is she not Madonna, but she is also nothing else besides.

Face it—you're never going to look like the models in the magazines, no matter how much skin cream and lip gloss you apply. Hell, without airbrushing, even they don't look like that! Once you embrace this failure, you'll be free to excel at becoming something else.

A new revolutionary class, the proletariat of failures, could count even members of the ruling class in its ranks, were they able to own up to the hard truth that they are no more like the satisfied, svelte executives in Wall Street Journal commercials than we are like the brainless, well-adjusted working families next door on Channel 11. Having sought and failed to find happiness according to their prescriptions, having sincerely given it our best shot, we all have something at stake in making it possible to live differently. All that is needed is for us to come out of the closet, to come to terms with what we are and begin to fail at these roles *deliberately*, to explore the forbidden territory we already occupy.

Of course, there are safeguards in place to discourage us from doing this. In this civilization, failure is the ultimate abomination. Obscenity, drug use, sexual and religious heresy, these may become acceptable—but in our hierarchical society, failure itself will always be anathema. Under capitalism, failure to compete is punished by the severest measures: for if people are to keep on capitulating, non-participation must look utterly undesirable, must be associated with the worst dregs of society and the most unendurable tribulations. The homeless and chronically unemployed play as fundamental a role in our economy as bosses and bureaucrats do: they teach us to equate life off the treadmill with alcoholism and mental illness, they are visual cues reminding us that annihilation is the only alternative to wage slavery. But this intimidation tactic can only succeed so long as the unemployed cooperate by accepting their misery and the miserable cooperate by accepting employment. As soon as a new class of self-proclaimed failures appears, visibly finding happiness by rejecting both options and making a joyous catastrophe of their lives, the jig will be up.

Pride would hold us forever in no-win situations, insisting we are happy and everything is going according to plan, struggling to prove we are "good enough" to make them work somehow. This is not even tragedy—it's just foolishness. We're good enough to deserve to be happy, for once, whether that be called winning or losing.

Enough of being successful failures—let us finally succeed in our failure!

The perfect ones. The beautiful ones. The right ones, the just ones, the noble ones. The ones who never breakdown crying in restaurants who never do anything in secret they would be ashamed of. The normal ones. The healthy ones. The ones who always plan ahead. The content ones. The happy ones. The ones who work hard and reap the benefits, who brush and floss after every single meal. The well-adjusted ones. The popular ones. The ones who never disappoint, the little boys who do grow up to be president. The lucky ones. The ones with perfect skin and perfect teeth and perfect figures. The ones who want what they have and have what they want.

**They
don't
exist.
The ones
posing
as them
are even
more
fucked
up than
you.**

When Samia reappeared that spring, I sought her out and asked her to set some time aside to talk. My period of exile had given me new powers of humility: I was going to apologize for the way our last meeting had gone. Whether or not she felt she had anything to apologize for, whether or not she was still invested in revolutionary struggle, I had nothing to lose by taking responsibility for my own unconstructive bullheadedness.

It turned out she'd just returned from working in the very neighborhood I'd seen on television the previous fall; she hadn't gone back to graduate school after all. Her skin was rough and already a rich brown in early March, and her eyes flashed with a light I hadn't seen in a long time. I felt a pang of envy that grew bitter as I recalled our first meetings. At the same time, it was interesting that she was still involved in things; maybe I'd been wrong assuming everyone like her had disappeared into retirement.

Grimly, my eyes fixed on the leaves in front of our park bench, I went over every time I felt I'd been insensitive, overbearing, or arrogant in the years we'd known each other. She heard me out patiently, with a lightness in her bearing that contrasted sharply with my condemned man's slouch.

"Thank you for telling me all this. I really don't know what to say."

I shrugged. "Don't say anything, I guess. Just know I've been thinking about this stuff. I wanted it all to end differently, and I understand how I contributed to it not working out."

She was silent for a minute. "You know, I respect a lot that you're still here keeping the same projects going. What Diego said was true, really—we basically went off and abandoned you."

Now I was silent. She shifted her legs and went on.

"The ironic thing is I'd come back determined to get involved again just before that meeting, but after that it was hard to want to stay and I got swept up in the next thing I heard about out of town. Who knows if I would have stuck around, really—maybe that fight just gave me the excuse I wanted. It's so intimidating to commit to rooting yourself in one place instead of following the battle lines to wherever it seems we have a chance of winning."

"Maybe staying wouldn't have been the right thing for you—I feel like we've totally failed here. At least you seem to have kept some sparks alive." I met her eyes for the first time since I'd started

talking, then looked away. "I have too much here to leave. This is my home. I can't be running around Europe while people here go hungry and my friends rot in prison."

"You shouldn't say you've failed." She was looking at me intently now; my eyes were back on the leaves. "You're still here. It's a victory any of us are even alive, let alone free to sit here talking, after some of the things we've been through."

"The only victory I give a damn about is making sure everyone has what they need—that and burning those prisons to the ground. You know that."

"OK, look at it this way: to fail, you have to be totally committed to something, to desire it with all your heart—to believe that life will be unlivable if it doesn't come true. Everyone has things they want that badly, what they call impossible desires—they just don't pursue them because it would hurt too much if they never caught up to them. I think most people don't even acknowledge what they really want to themselves, they're so scared of not getting it. You've failed: that's a real achievement."

Certain Failure Imposed by Fear of Failure

If a person's dearest dreams can come true, then real failure, too, is possible. As failure is the most feared of misfortunes, being responsible for pursuing and perhaps failing to achieve precious dreams is everyone's ultimate terror. On the other hand, if the realization of such dreams is impossible, then we are free of this terrible responsibility: many people find it easier to endure the idea that everything they want is impossible than to face down the terror of being responsible for attaining it. And once they decide that what they really want is impossible, from that moment on they are invested in that being the truth—otherwise they are fools who have thrown away their lives for nothing. They may even work, subconsciously, to prevent their dreams from coming true, to prevent the things they long for from becoming possible. Imagine that, a planet of six billion people working around the clock to push what they want out of reach! It must require that much work—what most of us want is not really all that difficult or complex. It takes a Disaster of billions to hold us back!

Dusk was falling and it was getting chilly, but our conversation continued meandering from topic to topic. Finally, we returned to the meeting. There was something still I needed to say about it.

"You know we did try to work with everyone else, don't you? There was a big spokescouncil meeting before you got there, over a hundred representatives from different groups—mostly NGO people like that, since our folks hadn't made it to town yet or weren't busy with other things. I was washing the dishes in the convergence center—Diego was there for us, and anyway I trusted that they'd make decisions that would work for everyone. I couldn't fucking believe it when I heard they'd resolved over all objections to denounce direct action and organize a march to lead people away from the wall."

"Honestly, I had no idea at the time—I'd just gotten there. I was spouting off, I was used to other people already having put things together before I showed up. I only found out about the spokescouncil afterwards. I felt dumb, but by then the die was cast, and I was angrier about how you'd handled yourselves—it was closer to home, because I'd trusted you more than I'd ever trusted those liberals."

"Those fucking authoritarians!" Thinking about the spokescouncil made me furious all over again. "The ironic thing is those are the same motherfuckers that want to know who would collect the garbage when you talk about an anarchist society. We take out their fucking garbage right now! They're just afraid of having to get their hands dirty. They think this system works great because they never have to get close to their own trash—while some of us have to live next to it, or off it!"

Samia cut back in. "We had to deal with those people this past winter—we didn't have our own media team, so they were able to take credit for everything we did. We were all there as volunteers while they were there on salary, and they kept trying to give us orders! Half their work went into getting donations from people who really wanted to help—but those donations paid for advertisements on the backs of fucking pizza boxes all around the country, while the people they were supposed to be helping were crammed into trailers or staying with their families in other cities!"

"Yeah, I've seen those pizza boxes. What a scam—our tragedies pay their salaries."

"It's ironic that those people criticize direct action on the grounds that only privileged white people can participate, and then when people of color take direct action they write it off as apolitical criminal activity—calling it looting, for example. Not all of us have the option of limiting ourselves to legal means! I'm so fed up with white activists saying militant tactics are only for young white males when people like me are clearly involved as well. Talk about paternalism—my existence is so inconvenient for them they won't even acknowledge me! If they did, would they have to say out loud that they think I'm mistaken about what's best for me?"

"They might as well be honest and admit direct action is alienating to *them*, as middle class organizers who don't want to lose their legitimacy."

"But look—why didn't we just bypass the spokescouncil and reach out to people directly? Before, when we were doing things around here, we always went straight to people in a bunch of different communities, not just the kids in black. I know there were security issues, but we could have organized openly with others and privately among ourselves."

"We got outmaneuvered, I guess. Once those leeches figured out how much momentum we had, they all latched onto us. Every party was there recruiting at every meeting, all the old has-beens came out of retirement to try to hijack everything. They set up front groups and coalitions camouflaged to look just like us so they could absorb everyone who wanted to get involved, they—"

"I remember all that. But if we'd done the work—"

"Of course, sure, but you said yourself—I slowed down and tried to speak more softly, the way Kate would have—"you didn't show up ready to do that, either. We were exhausted, we'd already been through so much just to get to that point." We both paused, withdrawing into private recollections. "The real question is why so many people who say they want what we want back out when it counts. It's like you were saying before about failure—I think we only failed because no one could imagine us winning. All the people who joined the spokescouncil and went along with it even when it turned against them—they were used to defeat, to accepting that everything they wanted was impossible; they didn't know how to do anything else, just like we didn't know how to stop fighting even when we were the only ones on the battlefield."

“Like the black uniform all the new kids wear, as if they’re at a funeral—it’s practically a glorification of failure, an admission that the most we can do is refuse to participate and be destroyed. That’s the opposite of really trying and failing—it’s a farce, not a tragedy.”

“And all the groups that say they want radical changes but always try to stop anyone who tries to make them, I think they do that because they don’t want to win, because they’re invested in failing. They don’t dare risk what they have, so for them it’s never the right time to act, there’s always more preparation to be done. So long as they keep their roles as conscientious objectors, so long as their hands are clean, they don’t care what happens to the rest of us, they don’t care if people have to sleep on rooftops and rainforests are turned into pulp and cities are bombed into dust.”

Beyond Success and Failure

Here’s an exercise, then, for the impetuous freedom fighter: fail at the duties you are most afraid to, and struggle with all your heart to succeed at the challenges you never dared undertake. What doesn’t kill you can only make you stronger, whether it be the mortification of not being able to explain to your parents what you’re doing with your life or the utter heartbreak of giving everything to follow a dream only to see it burn to ashes.

Such a practice sharpens and strengthens, but it also can reveal just how arbitrary most of our deep-seated values are. Ultimately, liberation is not a question of succeeding or failing, but of moving beyond such binary ways of thinking. Our pathological fear of failure exists only by virtue of our superstitions about success; to emancipate ourselves from the former, we must forgive ourselves enough to stop pining for the latter. The mystique of victory gives rise to the fiction of defeat.

To be free of internal as well as external pressures to achieve, to cease to judge oneself by one-dimensional yardsticks of value or success, to be able to do and live anything and appreciate it for what it is, itself, without imposing systems of evaluation—wouldn’t that be a triumph sweeter than any victory?

Perhaps our fear of failure is a symptom of our inability to release ourselves to the present. To be capable of anything—even failure,

and thus even success—one must be able to give oneself entirely to the doing, neither fearing the future nor judging by its standards. To fail and overcome that failure is to grow; this is one of the ways we come to know each other and ourselves. Setting out to fail—not by attempting too little, so one succeeds in not succeeding, but by attempting so much that one can only fail gloriously—could be a way to re-center one’s life around action, not consequences.

That is to say:
around courage,
not fear.
Around the present,
not the future
or past.
Around destruction
and creation,
not stasis.



From failure to mutiny!

Two hours later, we were still on the bench, huddled together for warmth in the cold night air. Samia was recounting a story from her childhood. I could picture everything she described vividly, though my own childhood had never included recitals or summer camps or anything like them.

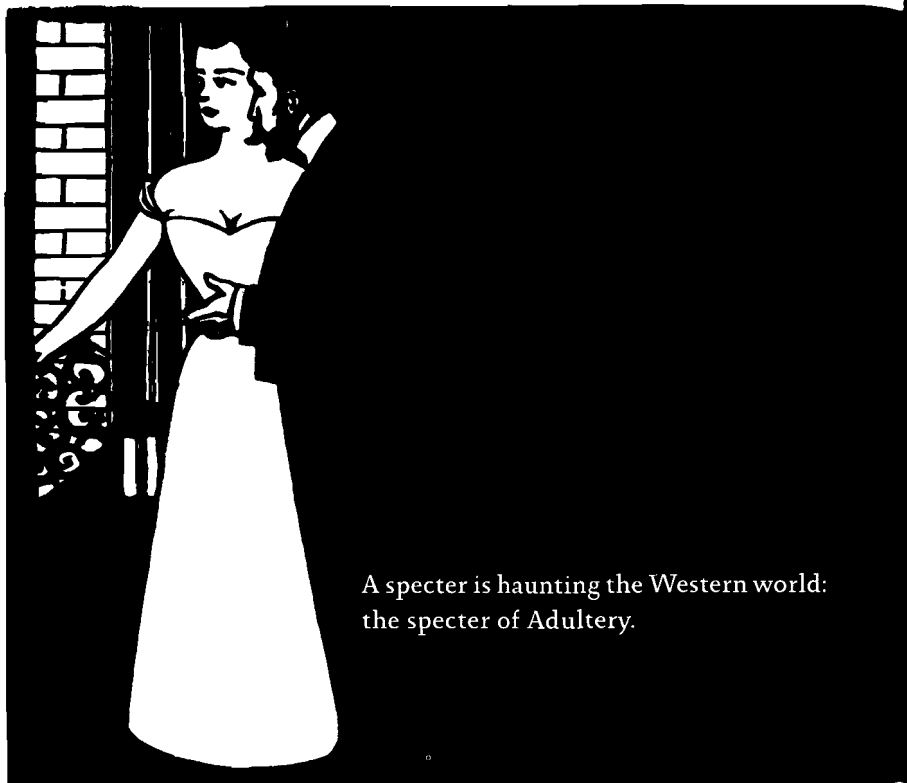
I felt giddy. To be able to speak with someone about these things again without all the tension and resentment that had become so common—it was a relief, a kind of absolution. At the same time, I had the sinking feeling that my giddiness was a warning sign: I wanted desperately to make things work with Kate, and the last thing I needed was complications with someone else. But inching a little closer as we spoke, just because it was so chilly and we'd finally talked out a conflict that had stood between us for years—by itself, that couldn't be a problem. It felt good; could it really be a crime to want to feel good again for once, just for a minute, in such a harmless way?

“... so we can't be afraid to desire or believe in outrageous things, we have to give ourselves to them without fear of loss, or regret, or disappointment.” She seized my hand between hers and looked right into my eyes. “Would you like to kiss me?”

I swallowed hard and hesitated, then nodded. So much for sorting out the consequences of my old mistakes; now I had new troubles to deal with.

Adultery

(and other half revolutions)



A specter is haunting the Western world:
the specter of Adultery.

If the two-party relationship system is the pinnacle achievement of a hundred thousand years of human loving, why is adultery so common that it forms the most reliable material for bourgeois drawing room humor—not to mention employment for a whole army of marriage counselors? If all any of us truly desire is our one true love, why can't we keep our hands off everyone else?

If you really want to know, you should cut straight to the source and ask the adulterers themselves. Or maybe you don't have to go that far—maybe *you've* had adulterous affairs or inclinations of your own, as the statistics suggest.

Good Marriages Take Work

Growing up in an environment dominated by capitalist economics teaches certain psychological lessons that are hard to unlearn: *Anything of value is only available in limited supplies. Stake your claim now, before you're left alone with nothing.* Unable to imagine that love and pleasure could multiply when shared, we come to measure commitment and affection by how much others sacrifice for us. An outsider might counter that in a healthy relationship, friends or lovers enable each other to be able to do and live and feel *more*. If you feel, in your gut if not your head, that having a romantic partner means giving something up—your “freedom,” as they say—then the patterns of exploitation and control have penetrated even into your love life.

We all know that Good Marriages Take Work. There it is again, *work*: the cornerstone of our society. Wage labor, relationship labor—are you ever not on the clock? Do you accept stifling limitations in return for affection and reassurance the same way you trade time for money at your job? When you have to *work* at monogamy, you are back in the exchange system: just like the capitalist economy, your intimacy is governed by scarcity, threats, and programmed prohibitions, and protected ideologically by assurances that there are no viable alternatives. When relationships become work, when desire is organized contractually with accounts kept and fidelity extracted like labor from employees, when marriage is a domestic factory policed by rigid shop-floor discipline designed to keep wives and husbands chained to the machinery of responsible reproduction—then it should come as no surprise that some individuals cannot help but revolt.

Adultery, in stark contrast to the Good Marriage, comes naturally, arriving without even being invited. Suddenly you feel transformed, awakened from the graveyard of once-vital passion that your partnership has become to feel that excitement again. You shouldn't be **feeling** any of this, damn it, and yet it's the first time you've been carried away by pure, unforced happiness in who knows how long—and oh, the sweet optimism of something new, something that isn't yet fucking predictable . . . it's as if surprise, risk, gratification, and fulfillment were again genuinely imaginable possibilities. Who, if they could feel what you're feeling right now, could possibly demand you resist?

Stolen Moments

The adulterer gets a crash course in the extent to which his space and time is controlled. It immediately becomes clear how little time he possesses when he is not *under observation*—it turns out that the workday does not end when he leaves the workplace, but extends before and after it, consuming practically his entire life. The domination of the space around him is revealed, as well: how many places are there for him to spend time with his new lover, places he need not rent with money, respectable explanations, and the image of social propriety? In what few moments of his life is he not held to guidelines imposed by outside forces, guidelines which plainly no longer have anything to do with his emotional and physical needs?

The adulterer becomes a virtuoso of petty theft, stealing the moments of his life one by one from their rightful owners: his spouse, his employer, his family and social obligations. Just like the vandal, he resists the domination of his world in the only way he knows how—by tiny, symbolic acts of daily sedition, out of which he carefully constructs an infinitely fragile alternate universe. There he hides, in spirit when he cannot in body, hoping not to be found out and called to account for what he has become: a traitor to the entire civilization that raised him.

“Honesty is the Best Policy”

Society, personified by her unfortunate spouse, demands that the adulterer be honest and frank about all things when it will only punish her for this. It attempts to secure her compliance through routine interrogations (“who was that on the phone, dear?”), surveillance (“do you think I didn’t notice how much time you spent talking to him?”), search and seizure (“and just what the hell am I supposed to think this is?”), and more serious intimidation tactics: the threat of total expulsion from the only home and community she likely knows. The adulterer who would like to tell the truth is forced to compute whether she really can permit herself this luxury: *divide your current unhappiness by the harmful consequences of admitting it, multiply by your fear of the unknown, then think twice about whether you really need to say anything after all.* This is the same formula used by exploited migrant workers and children locked in private school hells, by battered wives and sexually harassed secretaries.

What our society is missing here is the wisdom to know that telling the truth is not just the responsibility of the teller. If you really want to know the truth, you must make it easy for people to tell it to you: you must be genuinely supportive and ready for whatever it may be, not just make self-righteous demands or play good cop/bad cop (“just tell me, I promise I’ll understand . . . you did WHAT?!”). That can only lead to evasive action, or else to the subject of your cross-examination finding ways to lie to herself as well as to you. Neither our society nor, consequently, its cuckolds are ready for the revelation of truth that the adulterer has to offer; it is only safe in the sheltering ears of her illicit lover.

“People Will Get Hurt”

Inevitably, despite the best intentions and most secretive schemes of the adulterer, people get hurt. More to the point, people already were hurting, only invisibly, in the enforced happily-ever-after of domestic silence—or else such drastic measures would not have been necessary in the first place to bring dead hearts to life. Would it have been better for the routines and illusions of the marriage to remain undisturbed forever, to stay the course in mutual ennui to the embittered end? Could it be preferable for your unsuspecting partner to go on measuring her value as a lover and spouse according to a standard of fidelity that boils down to self-denial, a standard which has already been violated in spirit if not in letter? Of course, instead of cheating you could always have gone to counseling, stayed faithful to your spouse rather than yourself and turned away from the new landscapes you saw about to be born in the eyes of your potential lover, trying instead to achieve a passable substitute with your officially sanctioned partner—or resorted to dulling your senses with television or Prozac, if that failed.

To cut to the heart of the matter: can it possibly be wrong to desire not to be emotionally dead? What vast measures of self-conscience and entitlement would it take the modern married man or woman to risk feeling alive, unarmed with the twin weapons of self-justification and self-abasement, the excuses and apologies and self-recriminations? The adulterer discovers that he is trapped in the life he had adopted under the encouragement and threats of the established romantic norm—and, despite his best efforts to restrain



beautiful, but precarious

himself, has begun plotting an escape. Were he to reflect lucidly on his situation, his secret self might rebel and begin to ask the important questions: What kind of life does he really aspire to live? How much freedom and fulfillment does he *deserve* to feel? How has it come to be that he hurts others just by expressing his own needs?

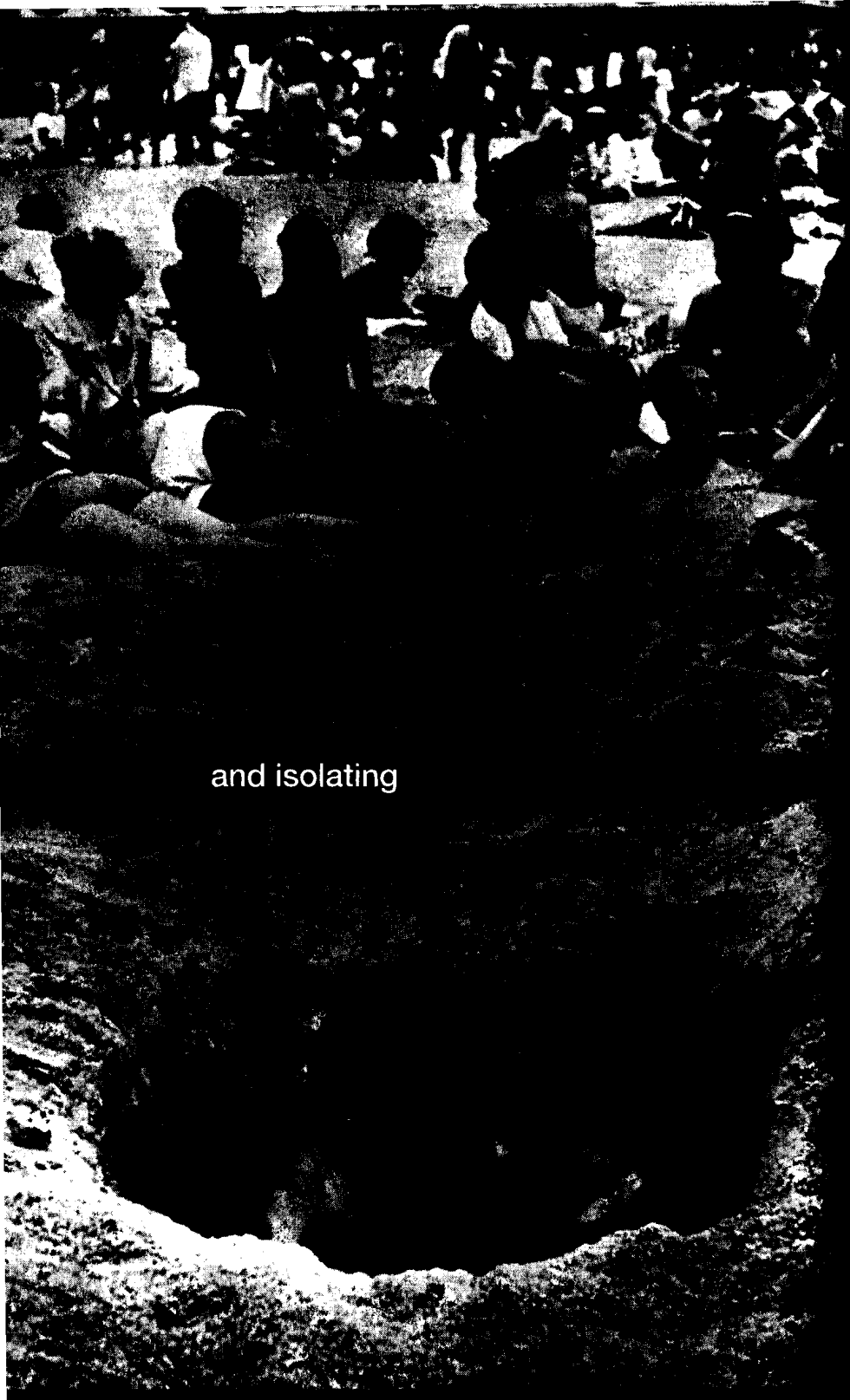
The fact is, people always get hurt whenever someone contests the long-entrenched order, and often the victims are "innocent." That's why anything less than complete prostration to the status quo is considered bad ethics—standing up for yourself is just too damn dangerous for everyone else. But once the itch to mutiny takes hold, the alternative becomes unthinkable: so the adulterer takes it upon himself, often unwillingly but without being able to resist, to do things that can hurt others.

The problem is that he generally does this without admitting it to himself; his situation is untenable, but he does everything to avoid grappling with the reality of it. If he were prepared to embrace and proclaim his outlawed desires (rather than ultimately rejecting them in a fit of rueful revisionism: "I didn't know what I was doing!") and accept full responsibility for the further pain that would cause, he would finally be positioned to step out of the circle of hurt that is the scarcity economy of love. But he lacks the courage and analysis for this final act: that is why he is an adulterer.

"What about the Children?"

"What about the children?" demand the shocked sentries of the bourgeoisie when they hear about yet another marriage endangered by an affair, terrified that their own strayings might come out next. Well, what about them? Do you think you can protect the next generation from the tragic tension between the complexity of desire and the simplicity of social prohibitions just by knuckling under yourself? If you smother your own aspirations for happiness, displacing them instead onto future generations, you will end by smothering your children as well as yourself. Your children would be better off growing up in a world where people dare to be honest about what they want, regardless of the consequences. Would you prefer that they learn to beat their own longings into flattened reminders of shame and remorse, as you do?

And it's worth pointing out that nuclear-family monogamy, which these self-appointed judges would protect from the assault implied



and isolating

by adultery, is the very thing that replaced the broader, more fluid, extended family structures of the past. By all accounts, children were better cared for in those environments, and their parents had more freedom as well. Could it be that adultery is a blind, desperate lunge from the cage of the contractual relationship towards the extended community we once had? More importantly, can it serve as a stepping-stone towards a new resurgence of that community?

Faithful to Many

What would it look like to have relationships in which there was no such thing as adultery, or at least no cause for it? First, it would necessitate that communication be prized above obedience to social norms. The conditions that foster honesty—trust, self-awareness, unconditional love—would have to be safeguarded by extensive support structures. Communities would be interlinked by networks of close relationships in which everyone could count on assistance from and intimacy with others even if one relationship changed. There would be no social or legal rewards for any particular relationship format, and no looking askance at any format either. We would have to grapple with our own insecurities rather than attempting to limit others' autonomy. In short, it would demand maturity in the same way monogamy monoculture rewards childishness—including the childishness of adulterers.

Of course, we don't live in a society that equips us in any of these ways, or else you wouldn't have gotten yourself into this predicament. The question now is how you get yourself out of it: do you continue on the path that compelled you to cheat in the first place, or try something else?

And here the ultimate irony awaits: even if you leave your spouse for your partner in crime, you will probably find that he expects the same kind of relationship you just escaped. When he got involved with you, he knew you were capable of loving more than one person at a time, that monogamy imposed impossible choices upon you—and now he wants to return you to the situation you were in when he took up with you, with the same pressures and perils. But it's different with him because he's "the" one, right? Small wonder if one day you cheat again.

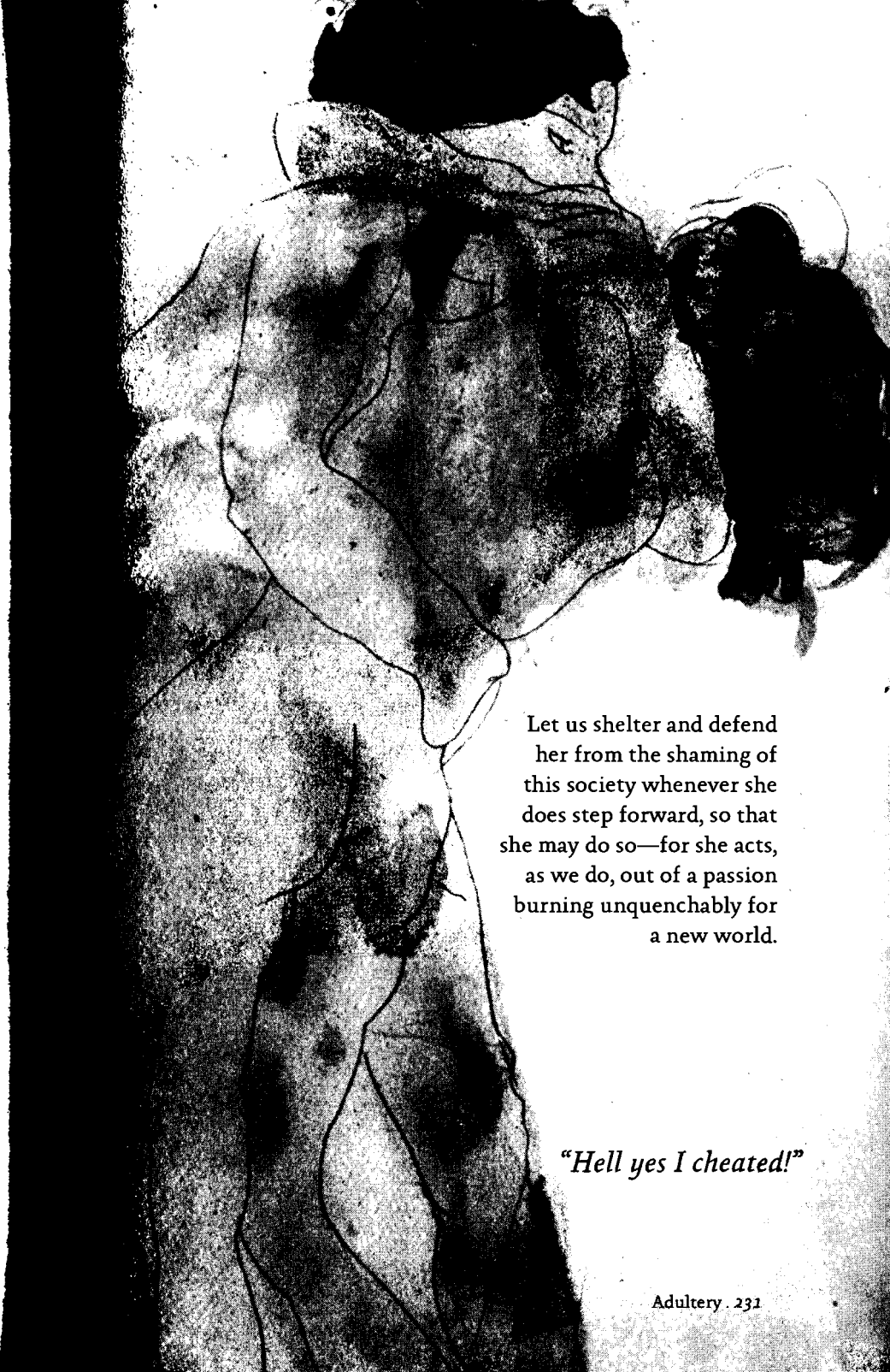
Marriage and Other Affairs of State

It serves the interests of the powers that be to have everyone separated into couples and nuclear families, with all unions suitably licensed and policed. A divided people is a conquerable people; the fewer the ties connecting individuals and the narrower the range of permissible associations, the better. When you're attached to and responsible for only a handful of people, your enemies always have potential hostages: "But I can't run any risks—who would take care of Sheila?" On the other hand, when you feel passionately connected with and accountable to an entire community, you're more likely to conceive of your interests in collective terms—and better situated to fight for them, too.

Marriage exalts the bond between two people with the unspoken implication that it is them against the world—and the stress of this setup often turns them against each other. But like it or not, we all have to live on this planet together and bear the consequences of each others' actions: effectively, we're all married, and it's high time we start thinking and acting accordingly. Once the false promises of two-in-a-coffin matrimonial bliss have utterly failed you, is it any more utopian to fantasize about conceiving of your relationships as One Big Union? Imagine being close and comfortable with everyone around you, letting each relationship evolve independently of other relationships, and—yes—making love with anyone who also wanted to make love with you without it bringing about the end of the world as you know it. You can't, can you?

Adultery is Marriage's Loyal Opposition

Ultimately, adultery is only possible because it leaves the questions it asks unanswered. Just like the shoplifter, the hooligan, and the suicide, the adulterer makes only half a revolution: she violates the decrees of authoritarian convention and law, but in such a way that they remain in place, still dictating her actions—be those actions obedient or reactive. She would do better to expose what she is and wants to the whole world without guilt or regret and demand that it find a place for her and her desires, whatever they might be. Then her struggle could be the starting point for a revolution in human relationships from which everyone might benefit, not just a flash of isolated passion and insurgency to be stomped out before it illuminates anything.



Let us shelter and defend her from the shaming of this society whenever she does step forward, so that she may do so—for she acts, as we do, out of a passion burning unquenchably for a new world.

"Hell yes I cheated!"



I lie to you

because I cannot accept the truth—at least not this truth. I delay, desperately, wishing each night as I fall asleep that I will somehow awaken in another world. Each morning I do not, I steel myself against reality so I might come through another day without acknowledging it—and try my luck once more, more desperately, that night.

because I fear you, as well as the truth. I am not prepared to confront it, and neither are you, and you've made that absolutely clear.

because I don't know how to communicate this truth to you. Should I tell it in the words by which I would apprehend it myself, even if you will interpret them to designate something entirely different? Or should I tell with words I hope will make you feel the way I believe you would feel if I could somehow convey it to you wordlessly and without distortion? Which is honesty? Which is lie?



because there are sides to this truth that are inexpressible, invisible to outside eyes, and these have become precious to me. Such treasures are crushed beneath the weight of words, become mere scandal, wreckage, dust. I love you, but I will not raze my secret cities to rubbish heaps and shame for you.

to preserve something, anything, of my own, in this impersonal, impoverishing world.

because I am a coward, of course. Or is it because a hidden demon in me delights in trouble?

because this truth would destroy us all. I shoulder this crime, dishonesty, as a defender of humanity and all things beautiful . . .

because words lie in my mouth—in any mouth. Words cannot express anything that matters—

—so the alternative is silence. I lie to you *because I won't accept despair, because I am an optimist: I hope to catch the truth by some miracle or voodoo in my web of lies.*



It is absurd to demand unconditional honesty from others and place the entire responsibility for this upon their shoulders. We tell you exactly those truths you make it possible for us to tell. What we withhold, we withhold in sorrow as well as fear—for there is no sweeter bliss than offering yourself honestly to companions who can comprehend and celebrate what you are. Secrets are sweet—but sharing them, sweeter. If you would know the truth, strive to be a person with whom no one need be ashamed of anything, with whom nothing is forbidden. Reality, even in the cases of the ones we hold most dear, is always wider and wilder than anything that could fit our prescriptions. Let's be wide and wild enough ourselves to receive it with open arms.

Long before I fell in with the barbarians, I'd already learned everything I know about clandestine activity. Smuggling secret passions under my parents' radar and then my own lovers' noses prepared me for researching targets without leaving a trail and sneaking video footage through police checkpoints. If I learned anything as a teenager, it was that the sweetest moments of bliss always came at the expense of being able to be honest with those in power.

This served me well in high school when I was sneaking out the window to meet Linda and much later when I had to think on my feet in front of a grand jury, but it didn't equip me to be honest about my needs when the people "in power" were my own partners. My marriage ended in a sordid mess after I fell in love with Chloe; when that well ran dry, Chloe and I betrayed each other and moved on to repeat the same cycle with others.

Millions in every generation have to come to terms with their propensity for unfaithfulness on their own because no one dares speak openly about the issue. There are no honest memoirs unobscured by bravado or shame, no useful family advice is passed down on the subject, the phone book lists no harm reduction programs for serial cheaters. Yet there are probably more adulterers in North America than vegetarians! People will sooner admit to being criminals at war with God and Country than engage with the consequences and implications of their own secret trysts.

It took decades to acknowledge to myself that I was the one in power doing harm to those I loved and not the other way around. I experienced my lovers' expectations of me as a constraint, but over and over I participated in setting up the same expectations. To be fair, I couldn't imagine any other way. I wasn't exposed to polyamory until after the university occupation; by that time I was old enough that it felt like I'd never be in a relationship again, and certainly not with one of those crazy young people. When it comes to romance, once you reach a certain age you become invisible.

I accepted the isolation of middle age with a mixture of melancholy and relief. I'd broken off my last affair around the time I canceled that business trip, joining the legions of single men marinating in bitterness as the world goes on without them. If this was what it felt like to be a middle-aged man, I could only imagine what it must be like for women of my generation—but I was separated from them, too, all of us invisible to one another. Lonely as I felt, at least I didn't have to worry about breaking any more hearts; I felt like damaged goods, a disease carrier who could only hurt people by getting close to them.

What I missed most, it turned out, was not romance or sex but rather the intimacy of sharing a private world with someone. That might explain why I responded so uncharacteristically to Kate's warmth, why I went to such lengths to involve myself in a movement that ostensibly had no place for people of my class and career. I loved the fellowship of eating together, scheming together, charging down a street together—in my eyes, that togetherness was the really revolutionary aspect of the thing, far and above any window-smashing. Even people like my former coworkers must long for that kind of companionship. Their college years in fraternities and sororities are the closest they ever get and they reminisce about that ridiculous simulation of community for the rest of their lives.

With local activity at a standstill, though, I spent a lot of time alone. Now that I'd quit my post at the paper, I barely saw anyone at all except at the occasional meeting. I was working on a book, at long last, but it was a guide for radical journalists, not the eyewitness chronicle of insurrection and depravity I'd originally imagined catapulting me to corporate fame; besides that, I busied myself doing independent media work and rereading Tolstoy and Melville. I had some money in savings, enough to put off exploring the job market

I spent it sparingly. Finally, it occurred to me to get involved in some of the community projects I'd always been too busy to investigate. That was how I started seeing Marshall again.

All along, even at the lowest ebb, Marshall had kept his grocery distribution program running with whatever volunteers were on hand. Union organizers had lost track of the workers who had been involved in the campus strike, as most of them had changed jobs over the ensuing years; but Marshall still went through their neighborhoods every week with a trunk full of bread and vegetables. Expecting yet another chilly rebuff, I approached him and offered my services.

I was surprised by his response. He seemed at pains to make me feel welcome and appreciated; within a few weeks, I was a regular participant, driving to all the stores and washing the produce we collected and sometimes accompanying Marshall on his rounds. He struck me as sadder now, his brow more furrowed than ever, but also more tolerant and mature. Of course, I'd never really gotten to know him before.

By the time I joined in, he'd gone through several generations of employees inside the stores. Each time one quit or was caught, we had to switch back to raiding the dumpsters until we found a new inside connection; every once in a while a store would exchange its dumpster for a trash compactor and we had to rework our whole route. Even our sparsest hauls, however, were enough to feed dozens of households. I could scarcely believe they'd been doing this for years without the authorities catching on; it was even harder to believe that, for years before that, all that food had rotted while families spent their last dollars on ramen noodles.

Between back doors, dumpsters, kitchens, and apartment complexes, we began making conversation. At first our exchanges were superficial, if painstakingly civil; it took us a long time to open up to each other. Once we did, there was a lot to talk about: what our mutual friends from the occupation were doing, why the movement had died down, how much current technology and production should remain in a post-revolutionary world. In the end, Marshall even apologized for his previous haughtiness.

One thing that surprised me was how little I saw Kate. It appeared she and Marshall were still involved, at least off and on, but she seemed to be avoiding her the way I had started avoiding my wife

when I didn't want to be defined by our relationship but wasn't ready to break it off. I still had the highest regard for Kate; I'd initially hoped that seeing more of Marshall would mean interacting with her more as well. One night I got a hint of what was going on when Marshall had me drop him off at a collective house where Samia was staying; she greeted him with an embrace that was hardly platonic and he twisted away, clearly uncomfortable about being affectionate in front of me. Samia, of all people! I was surprised the two were even speaking after the last time I'd seen them interact.

I couldn't have been worse situated to bring this up, but I felt I had a responsibility to. "This isn't my business, and I have no right to pry," I began the next time we were alone in the car together, "but does Kate know about you and Samia? You have been seeing her, haven't you?"

He didn't answer. I glanced over at him; his eyes were fixed on the glove compartment. My own history of infidelity was playing back inside my head on a permanent loop. Had the world betrayed us all so much that we could only betray each other?

"Marshall, you've got to talk to her."

Abomination



It is not difficult for rulers to justify their power: they need only dominate and abuse their victims long enough that no one can imagine the latter being responsible for themselves. For the first few generations of colonization, it is necessary to subdue the savages with rifles; once the brutes have learned to fear and obey, the guns

can be kept out of sight, until finally the conquered are integrated into the social order as willing beggars and employees. In the end, the conquerors can parade themselves before the world as humanitarians: they provide jobs for the poor (hiring them to till the very lands they once held in common), medicines for the sick (derived from the natural environment that has been seized from them), and mediation between tribes that would otherwise be slaughtering each other (with weapons sold by the colonizers, over conflicts generated by their colonization).

Every government that holds power today is descended in a direct line from this brutality, however much they distance themselves from it. Once the savages are resigned to the new order, they can be allowed to eat at the same lunch counters as the victors—presuming they can afford it—and even run for congress; dead ones can be put on postage stamps the way hunters hang trophies on their walls, with the same hypocrisy a developer names a new subdivision “Shady Acres.” Democracy is the silence in the village after the massacre, the signing of the peace treaty renouncing independence. If it seems we are not fit to govern ourselves, it is because government has systematically disabled us.

Insofar as it is possible, the powers that be maintain this veneer of peace; but every time an individual or a people steps out of line, the embargoes are reinstated and the guns come back out. Starved, isolated, humiliated, beaten, a rebel cannot help but turn on himself. Force people to live in concentration camps: they will become suicide bombers, and everyone will understand why the camps are necessary. Punish children for their blind impulses towards freedom: when they become drug addicts, you can call for even stricter limitations on the next generation. That which is pronounced evil becomes evil; atrocity begets atrocity.

Crippled and disgraced, fulfilling every stereotype and judgment of her enemies, the dreamer loses faith in herself, questions whether she even deserves to achieve her dreams. The downtrodden can scarcely feel themselves worthy of a liberation struggle: they are so messed up, so erratic and easily confused, while the powerful are eminently evenhanded and informed. Everywhere a flower blooms in defiance of the prevailing order, nothing remains afterward but its antithesis. The generous are left paupers; the imaginative and optimistic are driven to despair; the most faithful and courageous

end by betraying each other. Shackled and delirious, surrounded by scornful clergymen twice her age, Joan of Arc can hardly compose her thoughts, let alone articulate the heavenly visions that guided her to take up arms against them.

The abomination is the ultimate product of a society that represses difference: the stuttering cretin behind the defendant’s bench, the misfit fit only to wear a straitjacket, the indefensible and irredeemable. The monsters produced by our society indicate the monstrous imbalances of power that characterize it, not the necessity of those imbalances—but they provide exhibit A for its apologists. The revolutionary must be a bloodthirsty ideologue, a filthy malcontent jealous of others’ success, or else, at best, a solitary figure scattering flowers on the road of pain he walks. Otherwise, who knows who else might join in?



Cain accepts the judgment that has been pronounced upon him, but reverses the values upon which it is predicated. Against all counsel, he chooses to assume responsibility for what he is, for what others have made him—to become, in defiance of all, what all say he is: a thief, a cheat, a beast, a devil. Shame is the only distinction between above and below: he does away with this distinction, and thus knows his triumph by his defeat, his worth by his worthlessness, his riches by his poverty. By this inversion, he survives.

His accusers cannot imagine being branded thieves, cheats, beasts, devils. It is unthinkable. These allegations are brandished as weapons on the premise that no one could survive them. Embracing them, Cain steps irrevocably beyond their world, inaugurating a new table of values: *The first shall be the last, and the last shall be the first.*

M-

I've thought long & hard after our conversation, and I want you to know my conclusions. I hate to write this to you in a letter, but I don't want to risk being too cowardly to tell you as soon as I see you again. Ironic, eh? You and I have always found ways to get around the hard things, even when we need to talk about them. We can't do that anymore.

We can't go on having a relationship. I love you, I'm still in love with you even after everything, but it's not healthy for me to be with a person who can't be honest with me at all times. I'll try to stay a good friend to you but I have to take care of myself.

You know you could have told me about this when it started. However much trouble we were having, we could have worked something out. Thank you, at least, for telling me now. At least I don't have to find out from someone else.

I'm afraid this means we can't share certain projects anymore, either. If you couldn't tell me about this, how can I count on you when my freedom is on the line? Believe me, this is as frustrating to me as it must be for you. We've done so many amazing things together.

Nothing breaks my heart more than to have to write these words to you. I would give a lot for all this to have happened differently. But, my dearest, be what you must be.

With tears, K

Staying alive is reformist: you keep trying the same basic approach, hoping for a different outcome. Suicide, on the other hand—guaranteed results. If you want to solve a problem, *solve it*.

It wasn't that I didn't love life—on the contrary, I had such a high opinion of it, at least of what it could be, that it was unbearable to be living such a ridiculous farce instead. I'd experienced moments of incredible joy, fallen passionately in love, reclaimed neighborhoods from police in pitched warfare—after all that, I wasn't about to return to the dish room. I would go through anything to experience those things again, but I wasn't interested in adding fifty more bad years to twenty-five good ones.

And there was no reason to believe I'd ever get a second chance. The world was crashing in around our ears and I wasn't getting any younger. I blamed myself for everything: I'd driven my friends away, fractured coalitions when it counted most, ruined my relationship with Kate. I was so angry with myself, so disappointed.

I couldn't stop thinking about suicide. I spent a disproportionate part of every day thinking through the details, working out how to be sure I would succeed and where to leave my body. Even apart from the question of whether or not I should kill myself, it was hardly an efficient use of time; I could barely focus on anything else. During the worst of it, every half hour I had to sit down, focus on making it from one breath to the next, and talk myself through:

OK, you're at the bottom of the pit now. Remember you're at war. People like you aren't supposed to survive—you're supposed to kill yourself and save them the trouble. You have to get through this for all the ones who never lived to tell their stories. Just surviving is fighting in that war. Just surviving.

Marsh—

This won't be easy to read. When you spend all but an hour of each day in solitary confinement, fluorescent lights humming overhead, it isn't easy to write.

Yesterday that reporter I told you about came here, one of Pablo's kind. The pigs never tell me who's out there when they come to get me for visiting hours. I assumed it was my grandmother, and instead I get some gringo in a starched shirt, earnestly auditioning to be news anchor for the revolution.

They didn't let him take in paper or pen, but that didn't stop him: he was a real investigative reporter, a credit to his profession. He wanted me to explain "the movement," when all I want is for someone to explain something, anything! I'm supposed to give a fucking statement of purpose when my head seethes with all the fluctuating statements of the past, which I'm constantly presenting, with increasing derision, in evidence against myself.

I couldn't tell him anything anyway, of course. I was polite, but I wish I'd said something like this:

I would like to rebel much more than I actually do. I would like my hatred to be pure and clean again, not diluted and staged as it is. How I'd love to love and not feel that I do it out of habit or duty, how I want to suffer truly at these tragedies, not in the empty, practiced way I do! For all my talk of being my own master, how I long for some new passion or sensation to seize me and make itself my master!

It would be convenient for you if I would lock myself in ideas the way my enemies have locked me in a cell. But there are things in me that escape description and prescription, and you must acknowledge them, too, or else all your talk about better worlds and people will be worthless.

When you say "community," I permit myself a furtive sneer, because I don't want to hide from myself in the safety of your numbers; I want to be alone in danger and the agony of solitude, which I know and love. When you speak of action, I cherish my passivity, moving indifferently through a distant world, wrapped up in the turmoils of my own gloomy spirit. I would rather sit here in a concrete tomb than playact in some travesty of togetherness.

When you celebrate romance with ribbons and ceremony, I feel all too painfully how little of myself can fit that mold. And then when I try to submerge myself in crowds or isolation, suddenly I long for a single companion with whom to flee, against whom I could smash my heart like a boat on a reef in pursuit of that impossible immersion for which lovers hunger as moths do for flames. Not that I will ever have the chance again, thank God.

When you exalt the courageous and the good, there is a proud, evil part of me that is possessive of my faults, my cowardice, my stupidity, and I want to be faithful to that part, too, rather than split myself in pieces. When you hold out the future as a happy answer to all our prayers, a fiend within me wishes this

misery to stretch on forever, glorying in inflicting it upon myself...as I cannot get my hands on anyone else.

As soon as I've finished my plea for acceptance, the devil in me will strike away your outstretched arms. Build a paradise for me; I'll still revolt, I'll bring heaven down around my ears: for every house is a set of walls, and I only feel utterly myself in the act of transgression, sailing on its borrowed wings.

I am the ugly secret, the forbidden part that must remain silent, invisible, nocturnal, that can never reveal itself, that can only betray itself by trying. Keep me in kitchens and barrios and cornfields, behind penitentiary walls and border patrols; the more you try to bury me, the more you pledge yourself to all that is noble, permissible, and intelligible, the more you need me, the more I am part of you. Offer me the blondest hair, the cleanest accent, citizenship for all my relatives; I'll still end up in prison with the illegals who can't even speak your precious English.

I would like to tell the story of the most antisocial, indefensible man, to give voice to his untold treasures and torments, to expose his wretched humanity in so compelling a portrait that you would be made to see the absoluteness of his needs as you see the absoluteness of your own. Then all his unforgivable sins would be on your conscience, and you'd have to find a way to wash the world of shame once and for all or else perish

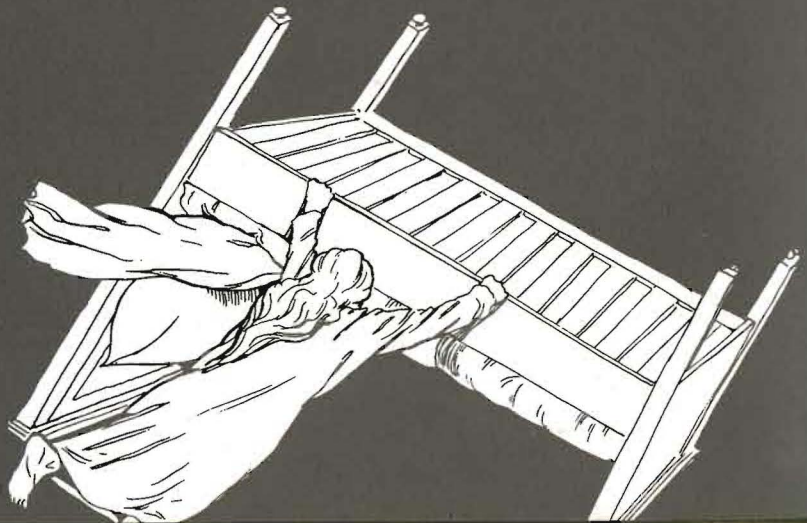
with the untouchables you're so proud to outrank... for once you tasted all that spite and self-loathing and malice, you would be guilty, too. So it's not so humanitarian of you to present yourself as an angel: it would be better to show off your faults in solidarity with the rest of us. Besides, if it's mercy you want to offer, everyone knows only the sufferers, the lowest of the low, can minister to each other. Give me the sympathy of whores any day over the good deeds of busybody priests.

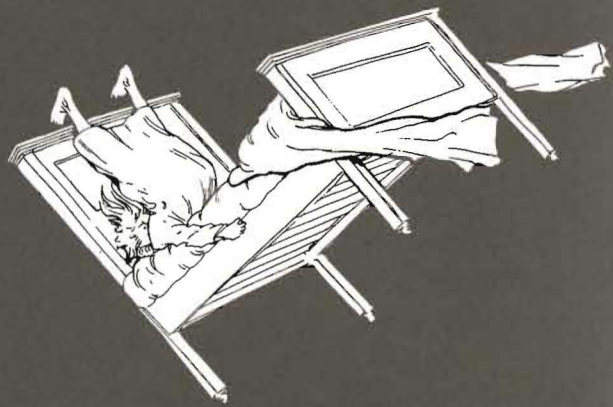
This is absolution for the cast-out and unrepentant, for the addicted and the infected and the weak, for the ones who had to prostitute themselves to survive. The world must make a place in the sun for us, too, or else we will continue to poison it as we rot in its ghettos and dungeons. For a world that knows no monsters, for a day we feel no shame, let us show our faces to stake our claim.

totally out of control

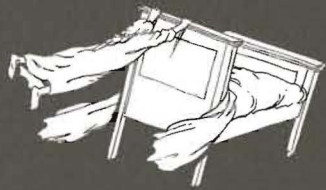
DIEGO

Facts and events seemed to conspire against us: we had staked our lives on miracles, and miracles were not forthcoming. We'd given everything to believe in them, because of the beauty of that believing and the things it enabled us to do; but as the world remained unchanged and our friends who had been different became indifferent, we couldn't help but doubt ourselves. In great tests, one always does—that is the test.





Our dreams treated us as we, consequently, treated each another: the soaring moments beckoning, the beauty longed for, shining from afar—and then when we turned away from everything else and sought to embrace them, to bend everything to their pursuit, they scorned us, shunned us, left us mute and broken, incomprehensible to the crowds around us who also were pursuing dreams, though not dreams of their own.



We rejected our crazy dreams then, furious, broken-hearted; but in their wake, all other schemes seemed lackluster, all hopes half-hearted, and one by one we returned to soar and burn again.

How do you want to die?

Hanging from a rafter with the stool kicked to the floor beneath you? From an overdose of sleeping pills, like an actress or a fed up housewife? Opening your arteries with a razor, in a hot bath so you won't shake so much when the warmth leaves your body?

All at once, in a spatter of brains and bone on the concrete at the foot of the high-rise where you work? Or in increments, installment by installment with cigarettes and saturated fat and air pollution, high blood pressure, radiation, toxins in the water, carcinogenic sugar substitutes and cell phones?

Do you want certainty, a gun to your temple? Or do you play the lottery—driving on the freeway, having unprotected sex, paying taxes to a government that might send you to war or the police to your door with guns in their hands?

Perhaps you're getting paid for it—how much are you worth per hour? Do you wash dishes for minimum wage, give and receive orders for a manager's salary, fight your way to the top to get a fair price for your life?

Or are you buying it? Do you purchase it in single servings, buying yourself a taste whenever you can with alcohol, cocaine, heroine, prostitutes, action movies, video games, television, whatever it takes to go blank for an instant? Do you sometimes long to cut right to the inevitable, flinging yourself into the abyss of some addiction, religion, absolute negation of everything you've ever wanted, everything that has disappointed you?

Do you savor every drop, stretching it out as far as you can? A moderate dose every day for the rest of your life, with health insurance to make sure you don't miss out on a single hour? Or are you ready to get it all over with, consummate the affair with one defiant gesture, flaunting your disdain for the absurd tragedies of this world as you go down in a hail of bullets?

Or maybe it's not death you're after, after all.
But what else is there?



Despair

“I wish all the people who’ve killed themselves were still alive—and all the people who are alive would *kill themselves!*”

If there is a social stratum below the exploited underclass, a demographic that suffers most from the absurdities of our society, it is the suicides. The suicidal class—every minute, more hit the pavement. Who is more dispossessed than them? They are only recognized when they absent themselves; only their blood speaks on their behalf. They know better than anyone else what must change about this world, and yet in despair of ever changing it they avenge themselves upon the only victims in easy reach—giving a new meaning to the saying that those who make half a revolution dig their own graves.

Imagine a person feeling that his life is out of his control to such an extent that he can only regain possession of it by murdering himself! Can a society really be free and healthy if people will go to such lengths to escape?

So like theft and adultery, suicide is forbidden, an unspeakable abomination. Self-satisfied den mothers who have never grappled with debilitating depression feel entitled to sneer at the cowardice of those who make the difficult decision to end their lives. Even the terminally ill are not to choose for themselves when and how they pass away—there are laws against it, as if the living could legislate for those crossing over into death! What does it say of a civilization that it not only forbids its denizens to kill themselves but does not even permit the *question* of whether life is worth living?

Yet we commit a little suicide every moment we deny ourselves the lives we wish to live. Wholesale suicide is off-limits, but most settle willingly enough for death on the installment plan, whittling their lives away hour by hour. No matter how unfulfilling life is, they dare not back out, for God is waiting on the other side to punish them for shirking their earthly duties—God, that is, or else Public Opinion, which He has deputized in His absence.

Meanwhile, if a young man joins the military and mindlessly obeys orders that lead to his senseless death, his conduct is courageous and praiseworthy. Suicide, like Disaster, is perfectly acceptable so long as it occurs on the terms of the powers that be; you can die in their hands, but not of your own. The ones who shoot or hang

themselves are daring heretics, like the upstart mystics who claim to receive divine guidance that bypasses the Pope: if self-destruction is the order of the day, they’re determined to have a firsthand relationship with it, whatever anyone else says. In rejecting both living death and the sovereignty of the authorities over their lives, they are only one step away from rejecting death and domination altogether: *Neither death nor taxes!*

But again, like theft, adultery, and other pressure valves, suicide is isolating—indeed, it is the most isolating act bar none. While it returns an instant of autonomy to an individual, it can only prevent people from establishing collective ownership of their lives. Those who dig their own graves make only half a revolution. If no one could steal, if no one could cheat, if no one could end his life, yet all the tensions that run through our society today remained—picture the massive upheavals that would ensue!

If all who have killed themselves could compare notes at some grand convention center in the hereafter, what would they be able to tell us? Perhaps they would be capable of succoring one another where no one else could; perhaps they would regret that, rather than destroying themselves, they didn’t launch a revolutionary organization comprised of those who have nothing to lose; perhaps it would seem strange to them that it had felt so much easier to do violence to themselves than to respond to the violence done to them.

It’s too late, of course—their lives are fixed in eternity, set apart like flies trapped in amber. But there is still time to find those who are currently contemplating suicide, to encourage them to speak freely about their feelings and do our best to make a world no one will wish to leave.



“Put me out of my misery or *take me out of it!*”

Life is not simply a trap, a sentence. This occurs to everyone at least once. We have an option that makes us freer than the gods, just as every employee is freer than every boss: we can quit. One can savor this idea in every extremity; it provides consolation when nothing else can. Nothing obligates us to live—therefore, if we have the courage for it, at every moment life can become a *tabula rasa*, a space in which anything is possible and everything can be risked.

With such freedom, we can only be slaves if we choose to be. Slavery is for those who still believe that their masters control the domain of death as well as life—not for us. For us, there is only the unknown. It may be awful, it may be salvation, it may be nothingness, but it is unknowable, in life as well as death. Frontiers to be crossed, new worlds to explore, abysses to be risked—yes, the possibility of joy, of the realization of your most cherished desires, and risk, risk too. The risk of finally confronting fear, daring the unknown, looking the ugliness of life in the face—of, one way or another, *quitting the job of existing*.

For most of our contemporaries, life itself is a job, a desperate struggle to juggle a thousand obligations—including the saddest imperative of all, enjoying oneself. These unfortunates forget the lightness of life, the weightlessness of every moment, every situation, in the face of nonexistence.

We can choose not to live. So there is no reason not to open oneself to, to risk everything for, a life of joy. There is always the option of putting an end to things—one may as well play for high stakes if one chooses to exist. After all, the worst that could happen is already assured.

There is no reason to get up in the morning, then, but to *live*. No boss, no law, no god can take from you the possibility of saying No.

All this is useless, and not news, to the suicide, who has already disconnected from life and wills death simply to finalize the arrangement, to put an end to the inconvenience of feeling one thing and living another. Once you're that exhausted and demoralized, no mere mental exercise can change your mind; suicide bombers, contrary to idle speculation, must act from a tremendous investment in this world to be capable of going to such lengths to die at others'

expense. Your average suicidal person can barely vacuum his apartment, let alone carry out an elaborate mission.

But imagine if people lived as though they might die at any moment, so every day it was as if they were born again! Imagine if no one let life become a job for himself or anyone else in the first place! Then how many people would kill themselves? People commit suicide when it is harder for them to picture breaking off their commitments than ceasing to exist—here again are our customs and investments, become cancerous and inorganic, riding us to early graves.

Life—Consider the Alternative

If we were brave or reckless enough for it, our despair could afford us supernatural powers. Imagine being able to act without fear of the repercussions, to choose the unknown over the intolerably familiar, to withdraw from unhealthy obligations and relationships the moment you recognize them for what they are. It takes a ruthless mercy to discard sentimentality and remember all the things that never happened and *still might never happen*, all the dreams that never came true—to acknowledge that we can't wait forever, there's not enough time for that.

Let the past go. All the old battles you're still fighting, all your denial and defense mechanisms, all the addictions and inertia you've accumulated and all the fears that bind you to them. This is going to be the hardest thing you ever live through—but let them go, let them die, have courage through the silent moments in the void as you wait, trembling, for your new life to be born. It will be.

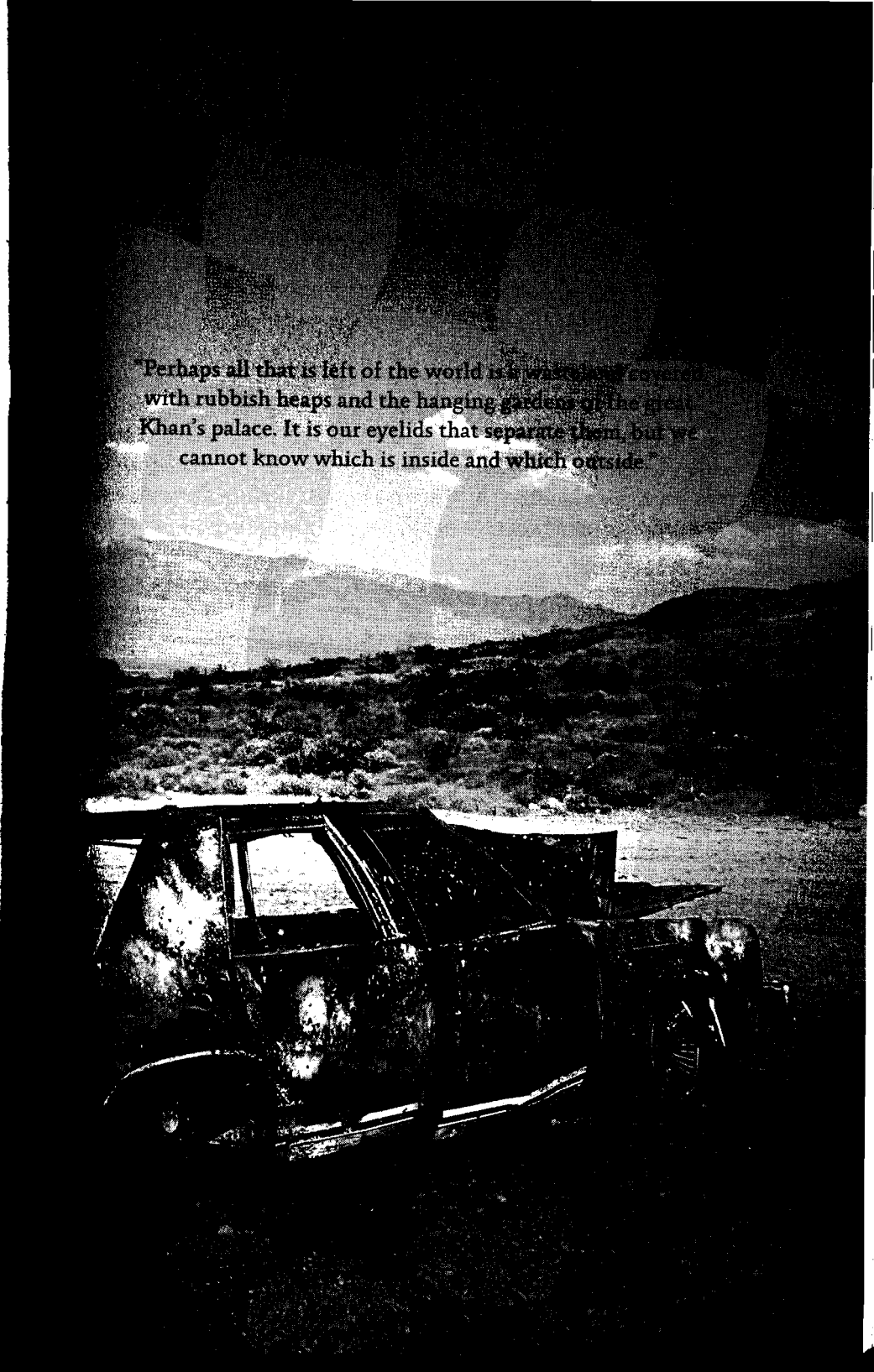
Despair. It's our only hope.

When your friends misunderstand your works and your enemies understand them all too well, when waking up every morning feels like a defeat rather than a triumph, when the razor blade or the cliff's edge beckons, remember—death is not pretty, only well-advertised. Remember what they did to Michelangelo, waiting until he was buried to paint over all his masterpieces—just as the racist sister Nietzsche hated presented him to the world as a champion of her own cause after he lost his sanity—just as Paul used Jesus, and Plato used Socrates, and the Communists used Durruti. The dead cannot defend themselves.

Give your enemies nothing. Let your tears freeze to stones we can hurl from catapults. Write your own epitaph and shout it aloud. This life is a war we are not yet winning for our daughters' children; don't do your enemies' work for them—finish your own.

If you're fighting, you've already won.

"Perhaps all that is left of the world is a wasteland covered with rubbish heaps and the hanging gardens of the great Khan's palace. It is our eyelids that separate them, but we cannot know which is inside and which outside."

A black and white photograph showing a severely damaged, rusted-out car in the foreground. The car is positioned in a desolate, hilly landscape under a dark, overcast sky. The background features rolling hills and a distant horizon line. The overall mood is one of despair and desolation.

Despite all our proclamations to the contrary, revolution had remained a mere concept for us, a fantasy future—the social revolution, when we would put into practice at last all those abstractions about transforming everything; the personal revolution, when we would finally live life like it really was ending one minute at a time. Calling for mass actions in the name of total liberation, we'd still feared to confess our private trials and tribulations to each other; defacing diet billboards, decrying patriarchal propaganda, we'd still put off coming to terms with our own bodies and desires. All those declarations of war and fables about insurrection—perhaps they were just stuff and nonsense: such ideas spring from the psychological needs of those who trade in them at least as much as from any insight into what is desirable or possible. Looking back, it seems we needed to be in unreciprocated love with some apocalyptic event—just as many of us were, not coincidentally, with each other—at least as much as we actually wished for or expected one. This longing suffused everything with meaning, but it also made everything bearable—when we'd once felt, and still continued to insist, that it was all *unbearable*.

We'd found ways of surviving, after all: we, who prided ourselves on our intransigence, who had lived through moments when it seemed the old order was crumbling and had pledged ourselves to defend and extend them or die trying, we too had found ways to bide time and lose ourselves in routine, albeit a routine of resistance. We'd developed our own rituals to commemorate the ghosts of insurrections past—and slowly, famished for something tangible to live on, come to mistake those formalities for liberation itself.

Meanwhile, those who had lived their whole lives under the burdens of work and rent and gender, who thought of these injustices as inescapable forces of nature, still experienced resistance as a shaking off of reality, a system shock, the way I had when I'd first gone to campus in search of the encampment. The closest they got to liberation was admiring the stars during a blackout, sharing resources after a tornado, disrupting some staid wedding or school assembly. If they stopped there, it was a failure of imagination, not of character: however sweet those moments were, it was impossible to picture anything beyond them. Perhaps one had to awaken, as I'd been lucky enough to, under different constellations, surrounded by beautiful foreigners, to be ready to invest in revelry, risk, and revolt as a way of life. But there were not enough foreign lands to accommodate everyone: we had to conjure them here, somehow, on domestic soil.

I'd been telling myself this for years without following through. Every time I came to this conclusion, it turned out it was too hard to conjure and too easy to flee. Perhaps once upon a time I'd been waiting it out in good faith for the revolution, but I was no longer convinced it was coming. I'd been wrong to leave it up to others; I couldn't help anyone else make their big break with reality if I didn't believe it was possible myself. If no pivotal moment of transformation was forthcoming, it was up to me to bring about the things I desired in the present.

I no longer think of revolution as a goal in the future; now I see it as something ongoing, a point of rupture. It is the threshold over which people pass into believing in miracles, for lack of a better word—and, in that state of grace, find themselves capable of changing things that had seemed immutable. Sooner or later they return from across that frontier, even if they return as dedicated revolutionaries—and all the worse for us to be burdened with revolutionaries who no longer believe in miracles! You have to be a real romantic, a maniac who trusts in fairy tales more than reality, to remain long beyond that horizon, let alone expect everyone else to join you there. But that—believing in the unbelievable—is what it takes for our dreams to come true, is what makes such dreams possible at all.

That some of us yet persist from one day to the next, believing in miracles in a world that denies all magic and mystery, is itself a miracle: and proof that we can, in fact, do anything.

The first step was to set things right with my old friends and find out who still had fight left in them. Then I imagined we'd reconvene the troops, open a social center like the ones I'd seen overseas, and initiate another campaign like the one that had begun with the occupation. I'd wanted those things all along, but I was finally ready to take responsibility for making them happen. There was no time to lose, either—everybody said there was another war on the horizon.

I went to Kate the way Marshall had come to me, willing to answer for my actions and do what I could to earn back her trust. I feared the worst—people often forgive their partners' misdeeds while blaming their partners' partners—but she made an effort to be approachable. We spoke for a long time. I didn't expect things to be the same between us for months, maybe years, but at least we were talking.

Next I looked up Rita, who had just moved back to town. I hadn't seen much of her since the march to the wall. I found out she was living with Sherry, another friend from that era.

After we'd stopped seeing each other regularly, Rita had been among those who had started preparing for industrial collapse; she'd made a dramatic shift from mainstream environmental activism to a kind of doomsday survivalism. The last time we'd spent time together she was living out in the country, learning to identify edible wild plants and prepare animal hides.

You can imagine my disbelief when I found a giant condominium at the address she'd given me. I double-checked the crumpled slip of paper in my pocket and looked around back just in case before locking my bicycle to the metal fencing. Sure enough, their names were on the list by the intercom: *Rita McKean, Sherry Lechleidner, B2.*

She buzzed me in and met me at her door. Sherry was in the kitchen behind her, making coffee next to a brand-new chrome refrigerator.

I couldn't help myself. "How do you afford this place? It's so fancy."

"One word—credit! But I've also got a job on campus. It's bullshit, but it beats poverty! Turns out all that NGO stuff was good for my résumé."

This was unexpected, but I didn't let it put me off. Hadn't Pablo done good things while working for a corporate newspaper?

Rita led me into the sitting room and pointed me to a love seat; Sherry joined her on the couch. Once we'd caught up a bit, I started to make my pitch.

She didn't let me get far. "Sami, I'm not interested in anything like that right now."

I was incredulous. "Wait, hear me out! Don't tell me you like being back in an office!"

"Being in an office is dreadful, sure, but honestly it's a lot easier to get on with my life without taking on more than I can handle. I really had myself in a dead end."

Sherry nodded vigorously. "All that activism stuff—don't you think it's just a way of making yourself unhappy, an alibi for putting off coming to grips with things?"

"But what about all the people who can't work in offices?" That wasn't what I meant at all. I was flustered, falling into platitudes.

"Do you really think any of the things we did helped them?"

"Well, first of all, the strike—"

"Sure, but I know you'll agree only a fundamental change in the economic system could make a real difference. A big change like that is totally out of our hands. I'm just admitting that."

"You don't think it matters what we do?"

Breathlessly, with a mixture of sheepishness and pride, Rita spelled it out for me: she had lost her idealism, and with it her commitment to struggle. Throughout the conversation that followed, with increasing enthusiasm, the two of them referred to this loss as

though it represented an important transition to a new stage of life, perhaps even to a higher plane of consciousness. They spoke about it, in short, like teenagers confessing they had lost their virginity.

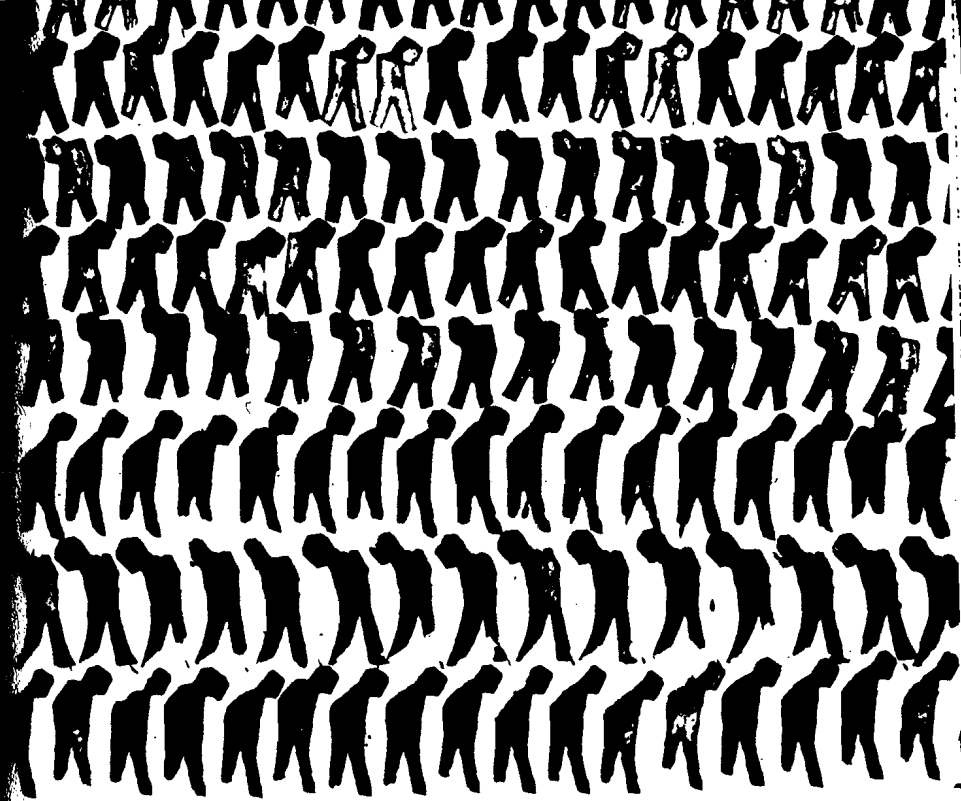
When they moved on to complaining about having to fill out income tax forms again, I had to bite my tongue. I wanted to say, "So you're finally all grown up, huh? Don't worry—I hear the first time's not so great, anyway! But sooner or later, you'll get used to it—and in time, you'll even start to like it!"

"To like—what?" they answered, in my imagination.

"GETTING FUCKED!"

Storming down the street, banging my ankle against the pedal of my bicycle every few steps, I tried to get to the bottom of my anger. Rita had been a good friend, one of the few I'd kept up with since my secretary days. She and I had gone through the same evolution after that infamous City Council meeting. So I felt abandoned, that was one aspect of it.

Rita had given up on waiting for the big changes she wanted to see, just as I had: but for her, this meant there was no reason to do anything except the things she had to do to be like everyone else of her class. The polar ice caps might melt, the world might end, but she would meet her fate with central heating and air conditioning, pumping pollutants into the sky with the rest of them. She was right back where she'd started—right back where both of us had started, where I would be myself if I weren't so impractical. No wonder I took it so personally.



You who no longer dance in the street
Who have given up on winning
But not yet on giving in;
Have you made your peace with war?
Did they bribe you to betray
Your scorn for bribery and betrayal?
Would you seek accommodation
With the ones who broke your heart
And trade the bitterness of struggle
For the sour grapes of defeat?

don't give up
hope



Hope as a Martial Art

Hope is a magic power that grants further powers. It is not a consequence of good fortune, but a precondition for it: not a conjecture about the future, but a strength exercised in the present. As anyone who has broken through a police line knows, when it really counts morale is more important than organization, preparation, or even intelligence.

This is not to say we should study self-delusion, but simply that the revolutionary project takes place outside the domain of calculation and common sense. In setting out to transform the world, we are attempting the impossible; supernatural faith may indeed be better suited to the task than mundane pragmatism. A revolutionary aspires to have a tight grasp on reality without the converse being true.

Those who insist that there is no hope are thinking like scientists: they look at hope as a measurable quantity outside themselves, reducing it to a question of whether there are grounds to believe something is true of the future. They are poor scientists, at that, speculating from a static position rather than proposing a hypothesis and conducting an experiment! It is never possible to answer such questions accurately; one never has access to all the necessary information, and one's own choices influence the outcome in unforeseeable ways.

In acknowledging the influence of our choices, we can begin to formulate another conception of hope. Even if it were possible to see into the future from an armchair, it wouldn't be as fulfilling as consciously playing a role in determining it; conceptualized differently, hope can enable us to do this, even if it does not guarantee the results.

Besides, why measure the value of any undertaking by its consequences alone? If a revolutionary effort does not succeed in immediately transfiguring the cosmos, that doesn't mean it was a waste of time. Evaluating our activities that way is naïve if anything is; there's no sense privileging the future over the present and rejecting everything that exists in favor of things that do not. The point is always what is happening: the process, not the product, the means, not some overriding end—that, for a few minutes or years, something beautiful is happening. The paradise we deserve doesn't wait

in a future that may or may not arrive; it is comprised of these moments, whenever they occur. Which side are you on—the future, or the present?

Utopia is notoriously unreachable as a destination, but equally notorious for inspiring incredible voyages. By the time we arrive at our goals they are often unrecognizable, or else we are. A preoccupation with life “after the revolution” can be as debilitating as the news constantly broadcast from Capitol Hill to distract us from what we can do where we are. But unyoked from our addiction to assurances and our expectation to be *paid* for everything, practiced instead as the art of making self-fulfilling prophecies—as a *martial art*—hope offers us tremendous power.

If this is so, then the real question is why people willfully disable themselves by embracing resignation and defeatism. The cynic is not coming to terms with the hard facts of reality, but imposing them upon himself. If he really wants to learn whether the things he desires are impossible, he has to start from the premise—no, from the *deep-seated conviction*—that they are possible, and act accordingly.

The fireball explosion of our affair cast all the relationships before it as mere shadows. The first night we spent together, we were still awake at nine in the morning gazing into each other’s eyes. In that moment all my solipsism fell away and I was able to feel another person’s consciousness as a palpable presence: another human being was there with me, looking back at me, a life story as intricate as my own behind her. A wild idea gripped me then: in another world, might it be possible to look out across the rooftops and be that grateful for *everyone’s* existence? That reverie lasted as long as it took me to walk to the metro that morning. I certainly wasn’t equipped to establish bonds with all those miserable people; as it turned out, I wasn’t even prepared to protect the fragile connection I’d made with her. I didn’t feel anything like that optimism again until a decade later I found myself racing away from a smashed storefront with a crowd of masked hoodlums.

The café was practically empty that afternoon. I settled myself at a small table by the window and waited for her to join me with her cappuccino. We hadn’t seen each other in years, but Chloe skipped the formalities with her patented nonchalance: “So what have you been doing with yourself, stranger?”

I explained that I had become a revolutionary. She looked at me quizzically. “And what does it mean to be a revolutionary?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “It’s an act of faith.”

“Like being a writer,” she ventured.

We compared notes on our respective writing endeavors, the market for commercial writing, and the impact of the latest technology on literature. Chloe’s specialty was to be critical without offering solutions. “Everyone reads and writes in little thoughtless bursts now. Can you imagine somebody writing *Les Misérables* with new messages in the inbox every five minutes and publishers demanding something that sells in airports? The novel, I mean, not the musical!”

"Orwell said that reading skyrocketed among the British during the Second World War—all those soldiers in the trenches and families waiting in bomb shelters with nothing to do but read. Nowadays we're in a different kind of war"—Chloe scowled; she hated anything that struck her as hyperbole—"and no one reads actual books except copyeditors and people serving long prison terms. But the prison population in this country is up to several million; maybe you just need to change your audience."

"But tell me—what do revolutionaries do these days?" She was trying to keep things light. "Do you still storm prisons and overthrow governments?"

That was a tricky question. As a means of actually overthrowing the government and liberating prisoners, our efforts had been as ineffectual as the Colditz glider; on the other hand, as a means of *escape*—of finding our way to another life in a totally occupied zone—we weren't doing badly. I tried to formulate an epigram to convey this, but the distant wail of police sirens broke my concentration. "Maybe right now we're more like the monks of the Middle Ages, preserving a space without prisoners or governments, however limited. But that's not to say we can't expand it, link up with others . . ."

"Well, you know what they say about human nature." Through the window behind her, I could see a line of police cars racing across the intersection a block away, lights flashing.

"Yeah?" I couldn't bring myself to let that pass. "What do you think about what they say about it?"

"Come on! Do you really think people can get along without those things? Today, I mean, in this world." She'd restrained herself as long as she could. "There's not going to be a revolution, not in this country. You can't be serious."

"OK, look at things at a different level. With billions of people on the planet, you can hardly talk about changing the world without being autocratic. But that's the scale you see on the world news—it's like looking at life through the wrong end of the telescope. Of course everything you can do seems pathetically small on the stage of history, but if you reverse perspective, starting from yourself—"

Another line of police cars passed. Chloe's cell phone was vibrating in her purse. Distractedly, she tried to change the subject. "OK, what are you doing yourself, then?"

"For one thing, I'm moving out of my apartment. I'm going in on a building with a bunch of people in their twenties. It's a crazy idea, really, but . . ."

Chloe finally fished out her cell phone in exasperation. "Sorry—hold on. Hello? Yeah, I'm fine, why? *Oh my god*. Are you serious? OK, I'll call you back."

"What's going on?"

"There's something happening downtown. I don't know, let's go out and look."

From the pavement, we could see a black cloud of smoke filling the sky behind the buildings ahead. A fire truck passed us, deafeningly close, followed by an ambulance.

"Wow." We stood beside each other in silence.

"Pablo, I'm sorry, I should go. Heaven knows what's going on."

"Chloe—" I caught her arm without thinking, then released it. She didn't flinch. "I wanted to see you to talk about what happened between us, to say all the things I should have said before. I . . ."

"Don't you think it's a little late for that?" A helicopter roared into view overhead.

"Not for the sake of the relationship we had. Just because you deserved better—because everyone deserves better."

"Oh, I've already forgiven you for all that. I mean, I don't think about it anymore, anyway."

"We can talk about it another time, if you prefer." We both paused. "Here, I'll walk you to your car."

She turned to me inside the parking garage. "Just be careful with yourself. This isn't a safe time to be . . ." She saw my expression and stopped. "Don't think it's going to be easy, anyway. You can expect—"

"—resistance, I know," I finished. "Oh, I know!"

She paused again. "If you need anything, get in touch with me, OK?"

"OK, I will. The same goes for you."

She looked at me then with a tenderness I hadn't seen in a decade. "Tell the truth, I'm glad one of us is doing something crazy. I wish you could persuade me about human nature, though. I feel like the whole world's going to hell."

"We can talk about that another time, too." She was getting into her car. "I bet I could persuade you—or at least talk your ear off about it."

"I'm sure you could." She backed the car out, then rolled down the window. "Anything else?"

"I don't think so. Just be good to yourself—"

"Sure."

"—and reassure Rachel than I haven't traded her book for three magic beans." I'd borrowed her friend's copy of *The Annotated Hunting of the Snark* at a dinner party back when I was still married.

She laughed. "Are you in the habit of trading things you borrow for magic beans?"

"Yeah, I've got a whole silo of them saved up. It's gonna be serious shit when all those beanstalks start to sprout."

History as We Live It

Whenever the question of human nature comes up, the programmed always point us to their history books to show that all human beings ever do is fight, command, obey. Before we look at those books, let's look a little closer at history itself: when they say history, which history do they mean? Time and space are both so vast that one could not hope to begin to record either in full: any record is inevitably selective. Could one write a history of children's games, of kisses, of picnics? And yet aren't these, proportionately speaking, a much greater part of human history than anything in the history books?

Today we are in the belly of a hierarchical leviathan, which naturally tells the stories of other hierarchical empires as the history of the human race: contests for economic and political power, books of laws and philosophical rationalizing, the trivia of the lives of "great men." But most of human history has not been spent at the Battle of Hastings or the crossing of the Rubicon; most of the time, human beings were—and are, today, any time the boss has his back turned—just preparing food, flirting, daydreaming, playing or working on projects cooperatively. The times when slavemasters seized power and coerced masses of people have been *exceptions*—though Western civilization has seen a disproportionate number of these, to its discredit. Remember, our species has been around for hundreds of thousands of years, but the kind of centralized power and social control we see today is only a few thousand years old—and only became globalized in the last few hundred.



If some of the earliest historical records are of wars and conquests, it is because the first peoples to catch the disease of so-called civilization were the first to conquer and keep tally. Unbelievably, these records are the only ones taken seriously by historians, who discount the oral traditions and folklore common to all human communities; but we can tell by the very rarity of such records that they are not representative of what all human beings were doing in those days, let alone before then—or today.

Let's speak of proportions again. The human race has been around for over a million years, but centralized power and warfare as we know them have existed for less than ten thousand. Over those ten millennia, only a small minority of human communities have been as bellicose and coercive as this one—and even today, only a small part of human interactions actually express that violence and subservience. Thus we can see that, on every level, fighting, commanding, and obeying comprise perhaps one percent of human history. What about games, kissing, and picnics, then? Aren't they the heritage of our species, representative of our "nature" if anything is?

We Are Continuously Giving Birth to Our Ancestors

The war to define the past is indeed a war to claim the soul of humanity. Old demagogues brandished the Will of God at us; new ones brandish Nature and History. When we want to prove another world is possible, we instinctively fight them for these—but we have to be careful not to win a Pyrrhic victory by reconstructing a past that outshines any possible present or future. It couldn't hurt to remember that, as the bare remains must be interpreted to be read at all, the chief activity of any people looking at the past is always *projection*—historians tend to see what they are looking for, not what they are looking at. People always cast behind themselves whatever past they need to believe that what they want is possible. Fine then! We'll do the same!

So let's not argue that things were better once, but that they were different—and that they are still different.* The past behind us

* The politicians say, "Today things are more the way they are than ever before," and the newscasters agree with them. Don't fall for it!

is so vast it must hold more difference than we can imagine, great multitudes of Atlantises with currencies and cosmologies unimaginable from this vantage point.* Compose your own stories about what your ancestors did—they're probably true—and use them to kindle the courage you need to live the stories *you* want. Tell those fables around the fire before the next great adventure your clan undertakes, be it a great journey or a dangerous engagement; whisper them into your lover's ear when he needs reassurance that he is not crazy for breaking ranks with this global village of cannibals. If anything is certain, it is that your predecessors did the same.

No Future in Nostalgia

"In addition to shorter and more flexible hours and the more reliable safety net afforded by food sharing, foragers' labor was more satisfying than most modern work is. We awaken to the alarm clock—they slept a lot, night and day. We are sedentary in buildings in our polluted cities; they moved about freely, breathing the fresh air of the country. We have bosses—they had companions. Our work typically involves one, or, at most, a few hyperspecialized skills, if any; theirs combined handwork and brainwork in a wide range of activities, exactly as the great utopians called for. Our commute is dead time, and unpaid, to boot—they could scarcely leave their campsites without experiencing an adventure of some kind. Life, for us, is chiefly a cause of anxiety, and a source of retinue for insurance companies; for them, it was a feast—or perhaps, at times, a famine, but a famine nobler and more sensible than our greatest sufferings and achievements here in the condominium and the cubicle."

*My first summer back I stayed up later and later, exploring the unseen dimensions of our city as I had explored so many other cities and countries. At four in the morning, everything seemed deserted; at a quarter past five, birds strutted on streets cars would monopolize two hours later. I walked there, too—it was a fairyland, an alternate universe in which this crowded, heavily policed district was my own domain, a quiet paradise such as Adam and Eve might have wandered. My joy in it was so profound I almost wanted to run out and conceive a new race of offspring to populate it.

After months of enjoying this solitude, I was joined first by one, then a few friends. Surprisingly, this did not spoil my pleasure, but increased it: now I had a people with whom to share my secret world!

So late at night, we roamed the asphalt on which automobiles drove by day. We didn't speak it aloud, but we knew that one day, when there were no more cars, all the inhabitants of this land would follow in our footsteps. This was our universe, extending before and behind us through eternity, and its past and future were as real to us as the industrial revolution was to the motorists.

"Tool-using primitive peoples were actually more accustomed to exercising their intelligence than we are. They were used to inventing their tools and solutions, while we, for the most part, simply receive them. Similarly, they were more practiced in the arts of enjoying life, as they weren't constantly struggling to catch up to the progress of their civilization. Joy, wonder, and friendship were the centers of life, not survival. Only today, in our world of enforced artificial scarcities and unbridled social change, are the nuts and bolts issues of mere survival the main focus."

"In that Golden Age, they lived as if they were gods, their hearts free from all sorrow. When they died, it was as if they simply fell asleep. The fruitful grainland yielded its harvest to them of its own accord—while they, at their pleasure, quietly looked after their works, in the midst of good things."

Here we find an amateur anthropologist, a professional sociologist, and a Greek poet (Hesiod, in 700 BC, to be exact) celebrating the lifestyles of human beings immeasurably removed from them by time and space—but you could as easily replace the foragers, primitive peoples, and golden gods with more recent protagonists to make the passages refer to the present day. After all, why let dead people have all the fun? Why celebrate only the foragers of prehistory when people are foraging in the suburbs at this very moment? There's no sense glorifying the past at the expense of the possibilities of the present unless you're trying to get yourself off the hook by making your situation out to be hopeless.

Those who declare that freedom existed before civilization and vanished with its arrival have more in common than they might care to admit with those who insist that freedom, impossible today, waits ahead for us around the bend of some millenarian revolution. Both situate everything precious over some ultimate horizon, whether before or behind us, without troubling to explain how we are even able to conceive of that perfection without examples of it on hand. The old-line Marxist who insists the world will be a paradise once the proletariat takes power and can only be a hell until then is speechless in the face of the paradise discovered by a lovemaking couple; the hard-line primitivist who writes of how magical everything was before our fall from grace is similarly disoriented when it comes to the question of what matters *right now*.

We would do better to orient our values around what we have experienced in our own lives and what might be possible in them. If we can't begin our project of liberation from what we know and aim for something we can reach, we can't start or steer such a project at all.

One Million Years of Do-It-Yourself Culture!

The Dreamtime, according to some Aborigines, is a time that runs concurrent with mortal time as well as having taken place at the inception of the cosmos. It is the world in which people dream new worlds into being, and in which worlds dream themselves into being through people. The Dreamtime offers a model for an alternate mythology: a heritage as old as our species that can become new in an instant, an ongoing history we participate in by conjuring it, a time and space in which it is always the first day of Creation. Invoking this story, any time, any place, we reenter the Garden of Eden to invent our universe from scratch. In that spirit, to orient ourselves for looking ahead, let's look back:

One million years of exploration and discovery! The first human being to climb Mount Everest reached its peak 20,000 years ago. What, you don't believe it? Do you think Columbus, or Leif Ericsson, or the Phoenicians, for that matter, were the first to discover America, too? Do you think people really spent the first nine hundred and ninety millennia huddled in caves, motionless and terrified—is that how human beings reached Greenland and Hawaii from the forests of Africa? Imagine all the journeys we undertook in the past million years—expeditions and escapades that would be unbelievable to our historians even if they weren't invisible to their instruments. Remnants of these linger in our fairy tales still.

In prehistoric times, energy not expended on survival must have been employed as children still employ it during camping trips today: to devise and narrate stories, explore untrodden spaces, plot impossible voyages and sometimes carry them out. Surely, unconstrained by apartment leases, border guards, and ticket prices, people experienced more joy in traveling than frequent-flier businessmen do now; adventure was the order of the day, not something imitated annually on tourist vacations. And just imagine what they encountered when they traveled! A week's trek brought them into another

Since the time of his youth, Crazy Horse had known that the world men [sic] lived in was only a shadow of the real world. To get into the real world, he had to dream, and when he was in the real world everything seemed to float or dance. In this real world his horse danced as if it were wild or crazy, and this was why he called himself Crazy Horse. He had learned that if he dreamed himself into the real world before going into a fight, he could endure anything.

—Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*

ecosystem, into contact with unfamiliar cultures and creatures—a far cry from the identical airports and hotels our unfortunate businessmen deem their natural environment. We still set out on such journeys today wherever one of us goes off the map; hitchhiking for the first time from Amsterdam to Stockholm, exploring the disused train tunnel that runs through the darkness under Providence, Rhode Island, we cross paths with the woman who first ascended Mount Everest.

One million years of women's liberation and gender mutiny! It's common knowledge that matriarchal societies preceded patriarchal ones—but “matriarchy” is simply an abstraction coined by unimaginative men to describe what they can only picture as the reverse of today's gender relations. Those were days when gender as we know it had yet to be invented, when women were revered as bearers of the spirit world *and anybody could be one*.

The Amazons were only one among hundreds of tribes of powerful women who fought to keep these mysteries alive after the emergence of patriarchy. Patriarchal empires built the Great Wall of China as a desperate defense against the Samartians, a nation of horsewomen who lived without masters and were buried in their armor; according to Herodotus, a woman of their tribe would not take a lover for herself until she had slain a man in battle. The witches who followed them eighteen centuries later were keepers of the same secrets, as we are today when we organize underground abortion services and share herbal alternatives to medical dogma. We gather in trans- and woman-only spaces as our ancestors did at the dawn of humanity and rediscover our powers as they discovered theirs,

guided by goddesses who have lost their names only to receive new ones. We still refuse all attempts to define or silence us, still devise and revise our own genders, still take each other fiercely and fearlessly in strong arms and gentle hands. As Sappho declared, in the words of Rita Mae Brown, *an army of lovers shall not fail*.

One million years of squatting, graffiti, and punk rock! For over 50,000 generations, our ancestors didn't shave their legs or armpits or wear deodorant. They scavenged food like modern trashpickers do, traveled like hitchhikers riding rivers and hopping ocean currents around the world, celebrated life with folk music made by their friends, passed down folk culture *they* devised. You can bet some of them had dreadlocks, some homemade tattoos and scarification, some patches proclaiming their allegiances.

There used to be as many human beings in the world as there are avowed anarchists today. Where once there were saber-toothed tigers, there now are security guards; where later we had to fight Sumerian mercenaries and Roman legions to protect our liberty, today we face corporate conglomerates and so-called democratic governments. We were squatting caves before they erected buildings—we painted graffiti on those walls before sandblasting was invented—we were composing our own songs before the radio waves were invaded—we met to reach consensus long before the first ballot was tampered with! When a few of us come together in any liberated, communal space to share those songs and stories and strategies, we are participating in the same tradition our ancestors practiced with their neighbors one thousand generations ago. We can claim one million years of do-it-yourself culture and resistance for our heritage; the tyrants only a few senseless wars, asinine inventions, self-important treatises, and short-lived empires—which we've always eventually razed to the ground! The ruins of their failed nations, wrecked temples on hills where metropolises stood mere centuries ago, foreshadow the end they know awaits—our way stretches ahead of us infinitely, through the entire future of our species: for as long as inhuman institutions are made up of human lives, there will be resistance, and afterwards there will be celebrations just as there are today. Our war can never be entirely lost; theirs can never be won.

One million years of folk science, folk medicine, folk everything! Did you know—people two thousand years ago took birth control pills? They made them by boiling down the urine of female pigs.



The early Egyptians, and those earlier than them in China and the Middle East, having not invented a process for making iron, fashioned iron tools from fragments of iron that arrived in meteors fallen from the sky—there was an Egyptian hieroglyph representing “heavenly iron.” The peoples of northwestern Greenland were still doing this a century ago—polar explorer R.E. Peary was shown three enormous meteorites which they had been visiting in yearly pilgrimages for centuries to obtain tips for their harpoons.* As Thor Heyerdahl demonstrated, several thousand years before the Roman Empire, human beings were capable of circumnavigating the globe in wash-through rafts hundreds of feet long; since solid-hulled boats became common, the expertise to fashion such crafts has been lost to all but a few isolated groups, but evidence suggests that the wash-through model may have been better adapted for ocean travel than its successor.

Proof remains at Stonehenge and on Easter Island that technology is not a singular force that develops in a straight line, that different technologies are always evolving and disappearing—the ones who insist that such marvels must be the work of extraterrestrials just reveal how colonized their imaginations are by modernist indoc-

* Here’s the bad news: In return for the trust of those who shared this wonder with him, Peary stole the meteorites and sold them to the American Museum of Natural History in New York—decimating traditional lifeways for personal profit as European explorers always have. Once the meteorites had been removed, Knud Rasmussen set up a trading post nearby to sell the locals what they had once gathered freely—that’s progress for you!

Peary also took six indigenous people back to New York, including a father and his tiny child, exhibiting them to tens of thousands at an entry fee of twenty-five cents. Afterwards, they were shut away in a damp basement at the Museum; within months, all but two of them had died of tuberculosis. Prominent anthropologists “studied” them even as they were dying, but no one offered them adequate medical attention.

The child, one of the two survivors, begged to be allowed to bury his father properly according to his people’s customs, but the Museum considered his father’s body to be its property, so the Museum staff staged a fake burial to appease the boy. The four corpses were sent to Bellevue hospital for dissection. Years later, the boy was heartbroken to discover his father’s bleached bones on display.

And this was less than a century ago—not our civilization’s barbaric past, but the savagery that *always* occurs whenever capitalists interact with so-called uncivilized peoples. The American Museum of Natural History did not return the remains of the four victims to their clan until 1993. Next time you visit a museum, remember the brutality, fraud, and theft upon which institutionalized science is built.

trination. The folk-scientific method, familiar to every adolescent astronomer with a cheap telescope and a notebook of personal discoveries, has more in common with science as most human beings have practiced it than anything the books tell us about Archimedes or Einstein. Omnipresent cultural propaganda insists that the present is utterly unlike the past, glorifying the “unprecedented progress” of the present day as it simultaneously portrays that past as a golden age to which there is no return—but the technologies, medicines, and arts of today have analogs dating back perhaps to the very beginnings of our species. No need to cling in fear to “modern technology” and the scant comforts it provides—*this is the Dark Age, if ever there was one!*

So how do we make our own Enlightenment? How do we follow in the footsteps of those from the last fifty generations who defected to make their own way through the world, leaving only cryptic messages scratched into trees behind them: *Gone to Croatan . . .*



Correspondences: Thor Heyerdahl and Other Folk Scientists, Folk Singers, Folk Warriors

When his colleagues insisted, on account of the vast distances involved, that similarities between the technologies and folklore of the ancient peoples of the Mediterranean, the Americas, and the Polynesian islands must be coincidental, Norwegian Thor Heyerdahl left the ivory tower to test their theory. He contracted reed boat builders from Lake Titicaca in Peru, some of the only people in the world who still understand the complexities of such design, to fashion the kind of vessel those ancient peoples used, and set out

with an international crew (“a Russian, an African, a Mexican, an Egyptian, an American, an Italian, and a monkey”) to find out just how far they could sail in one. In this boat, the Ra II, they sailed from Morocco to Barbados in only fifty-seven days.

One can interpret Heyerdahl’s project in the framework of Western civilization’s supposedly linear development of knowledge and technology—he was simply adding to “the” store of human knowledge, albeit by returning to the lost lore of the past. But Heyerdahl himself tells it differently: in rediscovering a prehistoric form of ocean travel, he felt a close kinship with the human beings who had made this same journey in a similar craft. Outside the linear timeline, the men on Heyerdahl’s ship stood beside sailors on ships perhaps four thousand years earlier, gazing upon the same stars. Speaking proportionately, once more: even on excursions like this one that end up in the history books, less than one percent of what takes place is recorded. The other ninety-nine percent is concealed from historians but familiar to the rest of us.

Such correspondences between past and present human activities can be found everywhere: A woman adjusts a recipe her mother passed down to her as her ancestors did six millennia before. Spanish squatters decorate and defend their walls with fragments of broken glass the way their forerunners prepared for Roman attacks. Nomadic volunteers till organic farms as Celtic peoples did before them. An adolescent runaway beholds Paris with the same wide eyes Rimbaud did over a century earlier, as the first human beings to reach that site must have at the dawn of time. A singer-songwriter discovers she can make her language her own, just as Percy Shelley did; both share the same sense of wonder experienced by the human beings who invented the first words. Knowing he would be denied legal entry, an anarchist with full facial tattoos rides a freight train across a national border to fight in the streets against his enemies as they meet to discuss some new “free trade” agreement: this is tribal war.

“At night, when the tropical stars twinkled from the black sky and a myriad of phosphorescent plankton twinkled back from the sea, we too felt like gods on a flying carpet in the universe. There was nothing but us on the raft, surrounded by darkness and stars. We could well understand the pre-Incan artists who depicted Kon Tiki and other bearded and hook-nosed deities as traveling on serpents undulating among the stars, symbolically pulled along by bird-headed men while they themselves enjoyed pulling in fishlines that had hooked rays, sharks, or sea monsters. We too pulled in giant fishes. Aboard our balsa raft, real life became like a fairy tale. After all, this real life was a fairy tale. How else could one describe the fact that the twinkling plankton in the sea around us were the ancestors of the six of us who sat above water and looked down upon them?”

—Thor Heyerdahl in *Green Was the Earth on the Seventh Day*

So there we were in the park, seated in a circle, just like the old days—our own old days, and the olden days of our ancestors—trying to negotiate the terms of a new alliance. We were the slaves who revolted with Spartacus, the so-called Iroquois nation, the heroes of the Spanish Civil War. And like the slaves, the so-called Iroquois, the Catalan anarchists, we couldn't work out our differences, so we were doomed.

After the bombing, the local liberal coalition had split in two; the younger, more militant faction accused the government of putting everyone in harm's way by provoking terrorist attacks, and called a demonstration to publicize that charge. This marked a dramatic shift: the same liberals had responded to attacks elsewhere with hand-wringing and paralysis, decrying one war after another without connecting war and occupation to the cycles that produced terrorism. It turned out that this demonstration was to coincide with a protest about climate change, so the two were combined into one event under the banner “Preempt the End of the World.”

Thanks to Pablo's efforts, our new group had been invited to give teeth to the event. It only remained for us to hash out the details among ourselves, but that was proving impossible.

As the conversation dragged on, each of us began to fidget with whatever was closest at hand. Marshall was making little forts out of twigs that had fallen from the branches overhead; Diego absent-mindedly took the twigs and snapped them into smaller and smaller pieces, flicking these carelessly over his shoulder; I found myself meticulously splitting blades of grass into finer and finer strands. An anthropologist from some future society, looking on without understanding our speech, might have concluded that this fidgeting was our chief activity. Perhaps that's what modern anthropologists mean when they say our ancestors spent so much time at play: they're just acknowledging that they can't figure out what our predecessors were doing any more than the old-fashioned anthropologists who interpreted the same activities as work.

“OK, friends, we're getting nowhere.” Kate had patiently waited her turn to state the obvious. “Our only hope is to break up into smaller groups. Otherwise we'll still be here tomorrow morning.”

We looked at each other dubiously. For almost two hours now, we'd been talking around this: all of us desperately wanted to be back in action, but our relationships were fractured, our trust broken. Kate continued with the quiet courage that distinguished her from the rest of us. "Each person should have a partner. Pablo, do you want to try working with me?"

This was a pointed gesture; Kate and Marshall had worked together in everything since the end of the occupation, at least until Marshall told her about his relationship with me. Pablo hesitated. "I guess I could. I mean, I'm not really qualified . . ." He trailed off.

Diego broke the silence. "All right, I'll roll with Marshall—but only with him."

I looked at Marshall desperately. He tried to take Diego aside: "Diego, if—"

Diego addressed himself to the circle. "Listen, I just came out of two years and by the end of it no one was writing me except Marshall here. I have a fucking suspended sentence, I shouldn't even be doing this shit—I can't trust anyone I don't go back with like that. I know all y'all need partners, but that's what I need, otherwise I'm out."

The other side of the circle was all new kids, watching this trainwreck in hushed discomfort. They were still young enough that their friendships hadn't been tried; they would have no trouble pairing up. I didn't know any of them well enough to work with them, though. "Where does that leave me, then?"

Diego pounced. "Well, where are your friends? Where's Rita? Shouldn't she be here? How about Flake, or Snowflake or whatever her name was, and all those other traveler kids you ran with? Did they just melt away?"

I was speechless. Hadn't we already been through this years ago? Marshall was angrily hissing something in Diego's ear. My lips were trembling and my face felt hot.

Kate unhelpfully attempted to move the conversation along. "Remember, we have to set up the Center tonight, too. If we can't—"

"Fine, I'll go do that. You guys can work this out on your own."

"Samia—"

I was out of earshot before he finished the sentence.

It was painful to arrive back at our space precisely because I was so excited about it. If only I could be disappointed with everything, I'd be able to give up and stop hurting—and here we had finally secured a two-story building with an industrial kitchen and space to pack in over a hundred people.

I passed the shuttered front and let myself in the side door. The main room was still in disarray: tables and chairs from the university stacked against the wall, boxes of books for the library, cans of mismatched paint, bags of bagels. At least the freezers were working so the grocery program could expand without overwhelming the cramped house that had hosted it. When this space was finished—when the walls were painted, the shelves stocked with books, the computer lab running, the stage built—it would be amazing.

But how much worse to be wedded to an amazing project with such fucked up people! Everything I was involved in depended on people like Diego—it was vulnerable to their caprices, their resentments and vendettas, their selfish refusal to take others' needs seriously. How could I set myself up for heartbreak by committing to things with them when they weren't committed to looking out for me?

At the same time, how could I leave everything I'd worked so hard to build? If I was trapped here just as I had been in that office building years ago, it was all the more insidious in that it was my own desires and aspirations holding me rather than mere fear and inertia. It was like an abusive relationship in which my projects were being held hostage rather than my children. I set down an armload of boxes in the back room and went back for more.

Speaking of power dynamics, wasn't it typical that as the only woman of color in the group I was here cleaning up while everyone else played action hero? It was certainly convenient that they could

look at this as a private conflict between me and Diego—white people are always afraid to get involved when people of color are at odds. As for Kate, wouldn't she have stood up for me if Marshall and I hadn't gotten together? Why is it so hard for people to deal with their relationships changing?

I moved a stack of posters promoting the demonstration off another box and heaved it up to my chest. What were we doing protesting terrorism and climate change, anyway? They were killing us, for sure, but no protest was going to stop them. A group had come through town a couple weeks earlier on a speaking tour about global warming. To hear them tell it, within a few generations our species was going to join all the species we'd already killed off in extinction.

Our own mortality is terrifying enough: if every passing moment is irrecoverable, how could we possibly live accordingly? What would it take to rise to that challenge and really suck the marrow out of life? I certainly wasn't doing it lugging boxes around in the dust.

But the extinction of the human race—now that's unthinkable. It makes you shudder just to try to picture it, even though everyone knows that, global warming or nuclear winter or not, all species die out sooner or later. If it's painful to confront our individual failures to seize each day in the face of our impending deaths, multiply that by six billion.

I dropped another stack of boxes and gave up on clearing the floor. Every day, each of us accepts countless indignities and deferrals of happiness in the faith that one day it will not be so. Whether or not you believe in heaven, the future is always on hand to redeem the squandered potential of the present—and the future of our species is the ultimate insurance policy, the ultimate afterlife. When we neglect to live out our dreams, we foist that responsibility on the next generation; if we don't win liberation in our lifetime, there's always the future, shining in the distance, when all our prophecies are bound to come true.

But if that future is just an illusion, a projection, what then? What if there will never be any happily-ever-after, any redemption, any revolution? Tomorrow will arrive as insufferable as today, and people will postpone everything again until every last one of us has become a corpse—and it becomes clear we've all been corpses all along.

I'd arrived at the top of the stairs; now I started up the ladder to the roof. Even if we could shut down every factory, even if we could undo the hundreds of years of pollution that caused global warming, even if we disabled every warhead and overthrew every government and burned down every prison, we were still all doomed: as individuals, as a society, as a species. The world to come was a vast graveyard.

The view from the roof lifted me out of these gloomy thoughts. Night was falling and the first stars were sparkling overhead. Somewhere under those same stars there were roads I'd never traveled, coastlines I'd never set foot upon, beautiful people I'd never met. If the present and the future were both inescapable and irredeemable, didn't that render me weightless, debtless, free? Shouldn't I be out traveling those roads, walking those coastlines, meeting those people? What was I doing in this dismal place, anyway?

I came back to myself with a start. This was exactly the way I started thinking every time I ended up skipping town. It probably wasn't all that far off from Rita's train of thought around the time she moved back and renounced her old beliefs. If I wanted to stop going around in circles, I had to try to work things out with Marshall and Kate and even Diego. Maybe it would be impossible, but I had to find out the hard way.

I would be dust soon enough, perhaps along with my entire civilization. All the rebels and heroes of the past—all the escaped slaves and indigenous warriors, every Crazy Horse and Durruti—were already dust alongside the mercenaries who killed them, the anonymous masses who stood by, and the cowards who had wanted to join them but always found excuses not to. That didn't take away from their deeds. To act when everything will one day be nothing, to stake your brief life on the rebellion of the dead—that's a way of stepping off the conveyor belt of history, of ceasing to be a corpse in waiting.

If Daniel had lived long enough to stand with me on that rooftop, I imagined he would have stayed to fight. I climbed back down the ladder to find material for a banner.

Remember the future? That golden vessel into which we poured all our creativity, all our longings and fantasies and faith? It was to be our crowning achievement, our vindication, our retirement program. Now we cannot retire. Well, so much the better. In retrospect, one might say it invested us with a patience that was unbecoming.

This is not to say we're glad to see it go. On the contrary, we remember the future with fondness and love, as a beautiful but lost idyll that brings a grateful smile to our lips and a wistful gleam to our eyes. But we must not tarry in the future, we must not be sentimental, however tempting that is—for we are needed here, now.

In Kolkata, people were just starting to wake up outside the train station. Their bodies lined the sidewalks for blocks, crowded onto the filthy brick. Some were travelers waiting to depart, others penniless families who had lived there for months. Two centuries earlier, carts had traversed these streets bearing the opium the British East India Company used to addict the whole of China; in those days, Kolkata was divided into White Town and Black Town.

A few blocks away uniformed guards stood at the closed gate of an expensive hotel. Inside its walls, empty acres of carefully watered grass extended in stark contrast to the brown city streets, assuring foreign businessmen that it was safe to invest in eastern India. Kolkata was becoming a hub for information technology services; newspapers spoke of economic resurgences and emerging markets.

Outside the hotel's white walls, the first light of dawn fell on the ubiquitous billboards, illuminating handsome models so pale-skinned

and Caucasian-featured an outsider would never have recognized them as Bengali. Their white faces gazed down in silent judgment upon the shiftless, the beaten, the anachronistic.

On the other side of the world, near billboards advertising the same cosmetics, soft drinks, and cell phones with the same seemingly white faces, a labor organizer in Bogotá had stayed late at his office to talk to a visiting journalism student. He was endeavoring to convey how the cold war of competition and class struggle that went on invisibly in the student's country was a hot war there: rainforests were being decimated, union militants abducted and murdered, entire villages gunned down by paramilitaries. He spoke of an accomplice class overseeing the wholesale pillaging of his homeland and the reduction of his countrymen to mercenaries, wage slaves, and prisoners. The student nodded, making notes for his homework assignment.

In the first class seating of a modern airliner a few thousand miles north and west, an executive switched back and forth between a spreadsheet and a text file on his laptop. On the other side of his window shade the setting sun illuminated silver clouds and cast mile-long shadows across the darkening landscape; but the real world was composed of tasks and data and ratios and deals, not clouds or rainforests. There were business opportunities in Calcutta, or whatever they were calling that place now, and in Colombia too despite all that damn unrest.

Miles below, Samia and I beheld the horizon from our post atop the high-rise. Standing there in tremulous expectation, already dizzy from vertigo and suspense, I experienced the sunset as a physical movement through space, a ten-thousand-mile-per-hour backwards somersault into the night. I'd had to wrench myself out of everything I knew and break off all my old commitments to arrive there—but finally, like the pioneers before me, I was flying.

We had the banner spread out along the edge of the roof, ready to toss over and unfurl if only the march would arrive; they were already over half an hour late. If anyone came up here, we were going to look awfully suspicious with fifteen yards of cloth and chain stretched out. I paced back and forth, fingering the padlock I'd brought to close the trap door behind us in my gloved hand. At last, reverberating off the building behind us so it sounded like they were coming from the opposite direction, we heard them. First it was

just a distant bass rhythm, subtle enough that it could have been a figment of my imagination; then that pulse swelled to a roar, until it was unbelievable that we could be hearing such an incredible din and still looking at an empty street.

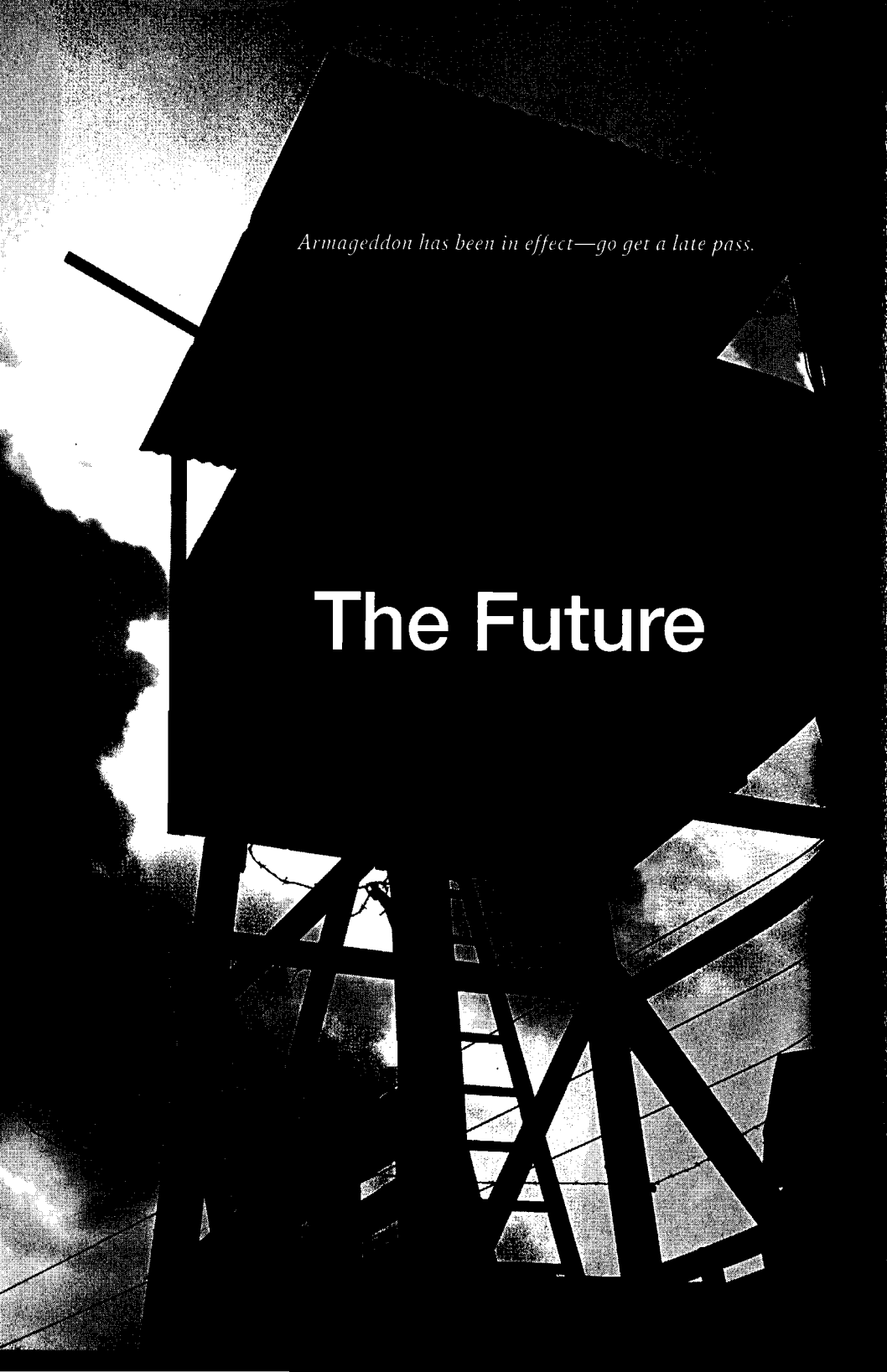
He was still in the middle of his work, but the flight was drawing to an end. The stewardess mechanically recited instructions over the intercom: "Please turn off all electrical devices and return all seat backs and tray tables to the upright and locked position." He'd heard those words so many times he could practically chant along like a devout Catholic at Mass.

Irritated, he closed his computer and impulsively slid up his window shade as he might have decades ago in childhood. In the gathering gloom, one could no longer see the remaining trees or rivers below—only the lighted streets, the cars on the freeway, the electrical grid. The city spread out before him like computer circuitry, pure architecture of power and transmission. It was reassuring, all that magnificent order, like the endless cornfields in Iowa, the airwaves sold and portioned out, the rigid timetables of the TV Guide. Those poor saps, invisible and interchangeable below him—they had no idea of the larger context they existed in. Only men like him, with specialized skills that took decades to amass and what the Rand Corporation called "topview," could take it all in and act decisively. It was a stressful job—the long hours, the gulf between him and others who didn't understand—but someone had to take it on.

Suddenly he was staring into impenetrable blackness—all he could see was his own spectral reflection in the airplane window. The lights of the city had blinked out.

From our rooftop, breathless with anticipation, we watched the march come into view around the corner. People poured into the intersection, filled it, and continued down the street while more and more appeared around the corner behind them. I hadn't seen such a crowd since our heyday. It gave the situation an air of unreality.

The moment was upon us. We double-checked the carabiners that anchored the banner to a pipe along the roof, then Samia took up position at one side and I went to the other. Each of us gathered up an armful of the material and together we hurled it out into space. The fabric that remained on the rooftop between us was pulled after, then the chain snapped taut and our banner unrolled forty feet down the building for all to see, reading



Armageddon has been in effect—go get a late pass.

The Future

The world is coming to an end. Make no mistake about it, the days are numbered. Where you are, you can't even imagine what it will be like when the bottom hits.

Or, to put it differently, the world is *always* ending. What comes next is up to us. Every morning we wake up and sweat and bleed to put an exact duplicate of the previous day's world in its place. We need not do this, but we do, out of fear, or despair, or psychotically deluded petty ambition, or sheer stubborn lack of imagination. At any moment we could all stop paying rent and going to work—nothing could stop us if we all deserted together—and rebuild society from scratch without landlords or loan payments. Heaven knows we've all had that daydream at least once. It's not police or politicians that keep the wheels turning and the bodies burning, it's our own compliance and complacency, not to mention lack of faith in each another.

Yet even if we insist on keeping at it, the Disaster is not sustainable. Capitalism as we know it is not going to be here in five generations—any environmental scientist can tell you that. Likewise no one has to argue for the destruction of the middle class—it's already destroyed: it is the class of people laid waste by their own materialism and duplicity, suffering emotional and psychological consequences to which any psychiatrist can attest. It's no longer a question of whether the system we grew up in has created the best of all possible worlds—everybody knows the answer to that question by now—but of how we're going to handle the mess next time the terrorists get through the checkpoints, the fuel supply runs out, the computers and power plants break down. Considering other options, trying them out, that's not radical—it's just common sense when the writing is on the wall.

But are we really going to live to see anything else? Do we dare hold our breath for another world?

Despite the seriousness of our situation, the future isn't one monolithic, inescapable doom. There are several futures ahead of us, just as today there are people who live side by side but inhabit different worlds; which one you live to witness will depend largely on what you do in the meantime. This nightmare exists precisely to the extent that we invest ourselves in it—every day we work for it, buy from it, and stake our lives on it, we are buying into the protection racket that keeps it the only game in town. Correspondingly,

the world of our dreams exists to the exact degree that we behave as if we're already living in it—there's no other way it can come to be. The turning point for each individual is the turning point of society, in miniature. Don't ask when or whether that point will come, but how you can reach yours; if you can get there yourself, everyone else can too.

When you really start to go for it, when your actions open a bona fide portal to another way of life, others will come out of hiding and join in. What, did you think you were the only one going crazy here? It takes an entire subjugated nation to keep things running, and there are plenty of others among that number who know how little they're getting out of it. They are the millions who don't get consulted for newspaper polls, who might pick you up hitchhiking but never appear on television. Ten thousand sleeper cells wait for the point of critical mass to arrive, ready to spring into action with their own yearnings to breathe free and private scores to settle, desperate for a war to fight in that really matters, a love to fall in that can command their attention—killing time and themselves in the meantime with anorexia and alcoholism, dead marriages and deadening careers. Every day each of us puts off taking the risks we know we need to take, waiting for the right moment to come or for someone else to make the first move or just feeling too beaten to try, we have the blood on our hands of every suicide who couldn't hold out any longer, every ruined love affair that couldn't endure in the vacuum, every sensitive desperado artist buried inside the corpse of a miserable service industry employee.

Next time the end of the world comes, we won't be paralyzed watching it on television. We'll be out there deciding for ourselves what comes next, cutting down the transmitter poles with chainsaws if need be to get others to join us.

It's not too late to live like there's no tomorrow—all hope for the future depends on it. Say your last words now, and start from there with whoever joins in. Dreams do rebel and come true.

"There are pigs out front!" We were in the Center, in inky darkness, and the police were outside. I didn't know how many there were or how close; they'd come after I'd arrived, and I hadn't made my way through the press of bodies around the side door yet to check things out.

"Someone who's on the lease go talk to them! Tell them this place had nothing to do with the march! Try to figure out what they're going to do!"

I'd been trying without success to find Pablo or anyone else associated with the space since I arrived. I was lucky enough to be equipped with the flashlight I still carried from the days I'd camped with Kate at her father's place; everyone else was picking slowly through the crowded darkness with their cell phones open, looking for familiar faces in that ghostly light.

The police accompanying the demonstration had panicked the moment the power went out. Most of them backed off and started radioing for instructions, but the officer near us got shoved in the confusion and started pepper spraying everyone around him. The crowd fell back in panic and rage, and a second later windows were crashing in up the street. Despite my years of experience, I lost track of Diego; it was impossible to differentiate between masked running figures in the sudden darkness. I took the arm of a woman who had been pepper sprayed and walked her through the fray.

"Can you see?"

"Yes—I mean, no." She was small, somewhat older than me, wearing a floral dress. A police car rammed into the crowd behind us and she spun around blindly: "*Fuck you, you FUCKING BASTARDS!*" For someone I assumed had never been in this situation before, she seemed pretty composed.

"My name's Marshall. We're going to an alley, I'm going to help you with your eyes. Step up"—I put my arm around her shoulders to steady her and lifted her a bit against my hip—"now. Hey, can I get some water here?"

I got somebody to give me a water bottle and found the steps of a fire escape, where I held her eyes open and poured the water across them. If I'd had any idea things could turn out like this, I'd have argued for us to have medics, scouts, lawyers, and hard banners like in the old days. I was getting slack.

We emerged from the alley to find groups of ten and twenty wandering the streets, trying to avoid the police. Ahead I could see the roving spotlights of their cruisers, stark and ominous upon the lightless walls of the city. This new generation didn't know anything about dispersal. I yelled for people not to follow us, but a small army tagged along at what they must have thought was a respectful distance. After we arrived at the Center more and more people filed in behind us until the darkness was electric with excited voices and nervous energy.

My flashlight fell on someone I recognized from the planning meetings. He had no cell phone to light his way, and this instantly endeared him to me; I'd pegged him as the type who had no phone or car because he had defaulted on the payments, not for ideological reasons. "Have you seen Diego? Or Kate? Who have you seen? Are you OK?"

"Wait, who's there? I heard they arrested a bunch of people. Me, I'm fine."

A voice from somewhere behind me: "Marsh! Over here!" It was Diego.

That was a fucking relief. "You should probably get out of here—this is a bad idea, everyone coming back here like this."

"Ah, it's hard for me to take it seriously. It's like, oh yeah, I remember, this is the part where we're trapped in the convergence center—this is pretty realistic!"

"Yeah, we'd have a hard time staging a drill like this on purpose! But hopefully this'll give some of these new folks the experience—"

"OK everybody!" It was Samia's voice. She was standing on something, holding a flashlight so her face was a little star in the darkness. "The police scanner says they've arrested four people. We don't have names yet. If anyone saw people getting arrested, come over here."

People were shouting out questions around the room: "What about the cops? Are they going to raid us?"

"Forget it," Diego yelled. "There's no way they're gonna risk that when they don't know what this place looks like inside, they don't know how many of us there are, they can't see anything, and the power's out in the whole neighborhood—they got their hands full."

His tone reminded me. "Diego—as soon as things cool down, we have to talk about shit with you and Samia and everyone else. I'm serious."

"Yeah, all right." He sounded noncommittal.

Pablo was standing on the chair now with the flashlight. "If anyone here was hit or pepper sprayed, I'll be in the back room in five minutes shooting video. We can use these for lawsuits. It's extremely important that if you were injured or sprayed you make a statement right now while your memory is still fresh."

I made my way back to the kitchen, where I'd last seen the woman I arrived with. There were two candles on the countertop, and in their flickering light she and a couple other people had stripped naked and were using the spray faucet from the sink to wash off. They were getting water all over the floor, but under the circumstances that seemed pretty insignificant. "Did you all hear that about the video footage? If you want to make a statement, they'll be recording here in five minutes." Someone in the front room was making an announcement about proper care for those who had been pepper sprayed.

Where was Kate? I knew she could take care of herself, but it was impossible not to worry. Another person was standing on the chair: "So if you absolutely need to leave, go in a small group, one group at a time, and call as soon as you've gotten to safety!"

"Wait, my phone's not working! Is anyone here getting service?" A clamor of voices.

Somebody got up on a chair on the other side of the room, using his cell phone for illumination. "OK, the power's out all around here, who wants to go out and *fuck shit up*?"

That probably would have been me a few years earlier, but now I just found it annoying and a security risk to boot. "Don't just smash windows," I shouted. "Go to the supermarkets. Do you realize how much food they'll be throwing away tonight? If all that comes back here, the whole city will eat free for a week. We might need it, if this keeps up!"

I heard Pablo's voice beside me. "You OK? Did you see Kate?"

"Yeah, I'm fine—no, I haven't. Is she here, is she all right? By the way, thanks for going with Samia. That was fucking awesome."

"Kate's out front, dealing with the police. So what do you think, was it one of ours or one of theirs?"

"The power, you mean? Fuck, you think this is terrorist shit *again*? I just assumed it was an accident."

"It's possible it was an accident, or even one of us, but it's also possible we got upstaged. We have to think about how to handle this. If their actions outpace ours, they get to set the terms and then all anyone sees is government versus terrorists, no space for liberation at all."

Everything was coming to a head, whether we were ready or not. Someone squeezed my arm. It was Kate.

"You're OK?"

"Yeah. You?"

"Yes. Come with me, there's someone who wants to see you." She led me through the crowd to the side door; compared to the pitch darkness within, there was actually a tiny bit of light there.

It was Walter. He was the last person I'd expected, especially in the midst of all this. "Man, y'all got some chaos going on up here! I thought it was crazy where we are!"

"Walt! What's going on! What brings you here?"

"I'll make it simple, 'cause I can see y'all are busy. You know they've been threatening to evict Ethel, and it came out they're set to do it tomorrow. We were wondering if you could get some of your folks together to help us discourage them, if you know what I mean."

"Uh, yeah, um—" I looked at Kate in the glow of distant police headlights; she raised her eyebrows and nodded. "Do you want to make a statement about it? You're the public speaker."

"Naw, these are your people. You should do it."

"Well—" I hesitated. "OK, come with me." We made our way back through the crowd into the darkness. Ethel, of all people! Those motherfuckers!

"Do you know what time? Should we be there all day?"

"I'd reckon so. Never know, they might not come at all if the power's still out." Walter put his hand on my shoulder. "You know, if this works, folks in our neighborhood are gonna be a lot less eager to pay rent."

I stepped onto the chair and pointed the flashlight up at my face. "Hey everybody!" A lot of people were still talking; I started over with the booming voice I'd used at a town council meeting once long ago. "HEY EVERYBODY! My friend Ethel has lived in the same house for something like twenty years! I've been seeing her there every Thursday for the past five, and she is the most welcoming, generous person I know! Some of you might remember Ethel from the strike at the university a few years back—maybe you thought we won that, but she lost her job a couple years later and now the real estate motherfuckers want to kick her out of her house!"

There was respectful silence in the room now. "I know some of you think you have to be at work or school in the morning, but I want to know how many of you are gonna be with me tomorrow at Ethel's house to make sure no one can get her out!"

There was raucous cheering from all around; it surprised me. "Seriously, how many of you are down?"

"I'm serious!" a voice cried out. "Hell yeah!" another echoed.

Someone had found an oil lamp and was carrying it into the center of the room; titanic shadows raced across the high walls as it passed through the crowd. I stepped down off the chair. For the first time since I'd arrived, I could see the faces of the people around me; everyone pressed in, eagerly asking questions and suggesting strategies. I could see Walter, Kate, Samia, Diego, and a dozen newer folks; Pablo was in the back room, filming.

Only then did it strike me that the thought of suicide hadn't crossed my mind once in weeks. I met Kate's eyes and my own filled with tears. We'd survived.

Leaving the 21st Century...

When our ancestors first hacked down the forests that had sheltered them since time immemorial to build fences, they laid the foundations for the world we live in today. In place of gifts and sharing, we have competition and imposed scarcity—corporations develop and manufacture more and more new commodities in order that something may still be scarce enough to fight over while our landfills overflow with surplus. In place of our faith that nature would provide for us, we have the defenses science affords us as it spins the last of our natural resources into war machines and toxic waste. In place of the joys of wandering new and changing landscapes, we have cities that double as corporate theme parks linked by dual tourist and commuter tracks—while the final fugitive aspects of existence are reduced to binary code for virtual reality.

Perhaps this world will never be free of misfortunes—people will always die before they are ready, just as magical love affairs will end in ruins, adventures be cut short by catastrophes, and moments of bliss be forgotten. But what is most heartbreaking is the way we flee from those inevitable truths into more horrible things. It may be true that every one of us is fundamentally on her own, that life is capricious and cruel—but it doesn't have to be true that some people starve while others destroy food or buy mansions. It doesn't have to be that men and women are forced to squander their lives working to serve the hollow greed of a few rich men just to survive; it doesn't have to be that we let meaningless traditions and doctrines autopilot our lives into bewildering voids. It doesn't have to be that we never dare to tell each other what we really want, to share ourselves honestly, to use our talents and capabilities to make life more bearable—let alone more beautiful. Those are *unnecessary* tragedies, stupid tragedies, pathetic and pointless. It's not even utopian to demand that we put an end to farces like these.

Our fear of failure restrains us from letting ourselves believe that these absurdities can be transcended. But fear, once recognized for what it is, can serve a different purpose: if we make a practice of doing what we fear most, our fears can guide us more reliably than any compass beyond the unnecessary boundaries we have built around ourselves and into new worlds.

Let's be brave enough to follow their lead out of this darkness, to recognize and face the inescapable tragedies of our lives and contest the rest without hesitation or doubt. Could it be that the bountiful jungles of old still wait for us somewhere beyond the edges of this factory farm civilization, and all we have to do to be free is to drop our anxieties and tools of control and set out?



...Breaking and Entering a New World

I think of you all the time, dear reader. Who are you? Why have you read this far? What is your story? There are so many things we could discuss—but time is drawing short. We'd better start tying up loose ends.

You'll want to know how much of this is true. All these things happened, but not precisely as described. Yes, we smashed the windows, but not those particular windows. We sneaked into the cafeteria and pulled the fire alarm, but perhaps not at the same time. We dropped out of school, divorced our spouses, and quit our jobs, but over and over we went back to school and applied for other jobs and returned to our partners on our knees. We struggled with despair and dissension, but we also had to deal with addiction, sexual assault, our own deeply ingrained racism. We changed our genders, fought with our parents, had children and quarreled over how to raise them; there's so much that doesn't appear here.

It would have been better to tell these stories they way they happened, but we couldn't run that risk when the trails had yet to cool. Besides, reality evades any net: to be true to life, we would have had to tell the story of the whole world, extending infinitely in every direction. We had to content ourselves with this, incomplete as it is. Think of the tales we'll be able to tell around the fire after all this is over and each of us can finally take credit for her feats of courage and cunning!

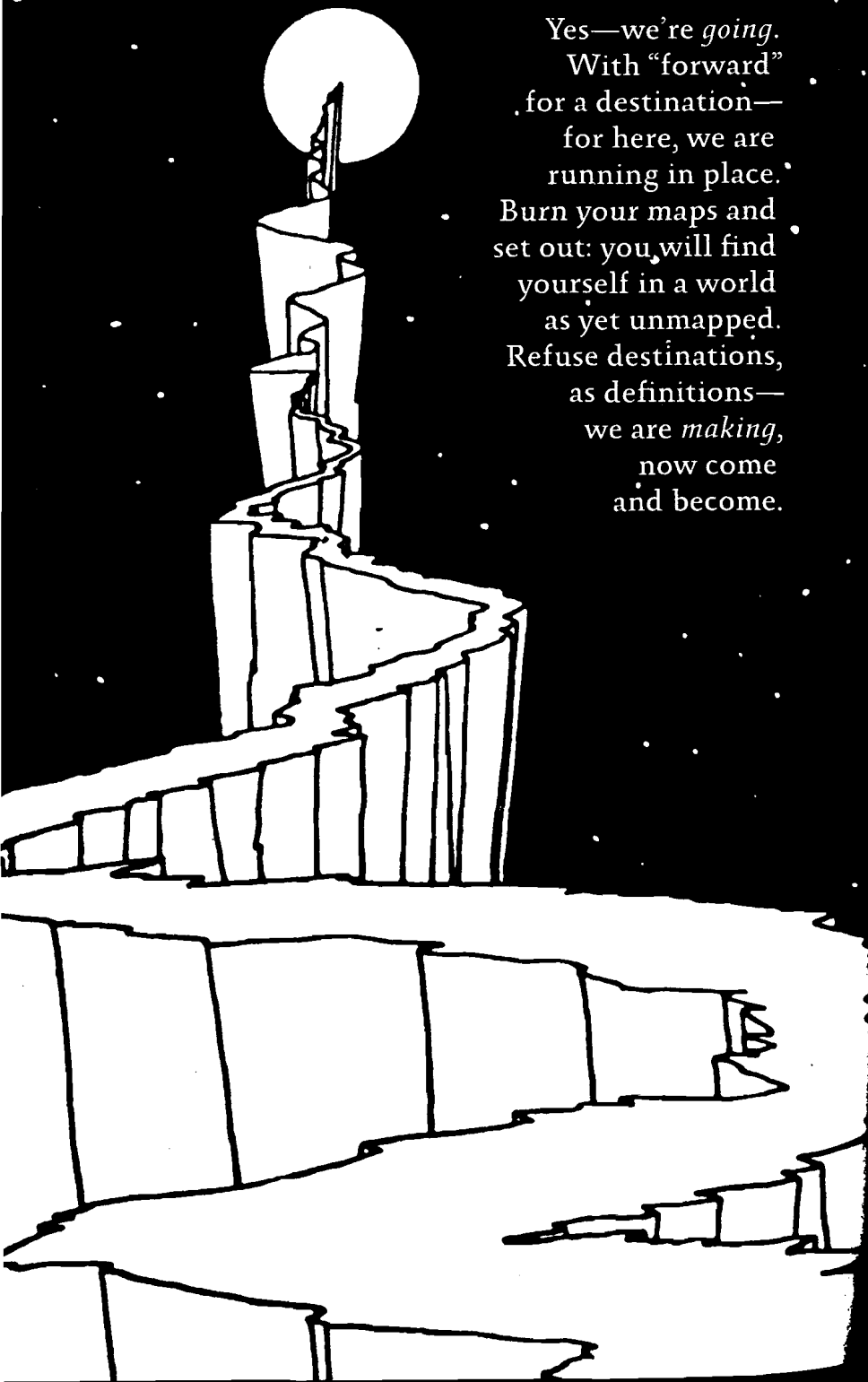
Perhaps you'll want to meet us; unfortunately, that's not possible. You can never meet the characters in a book, even if they are real people. Better you get to know us here and real people in real life than conflate the two.

Anyway, the important thing is not who we are, but who you are—and what you're going to do.



Where Are We Going?

*ward the rudderless ships, jump the untrackable trains, those are
sons of this earth get unchained, whatever their atlases say...*



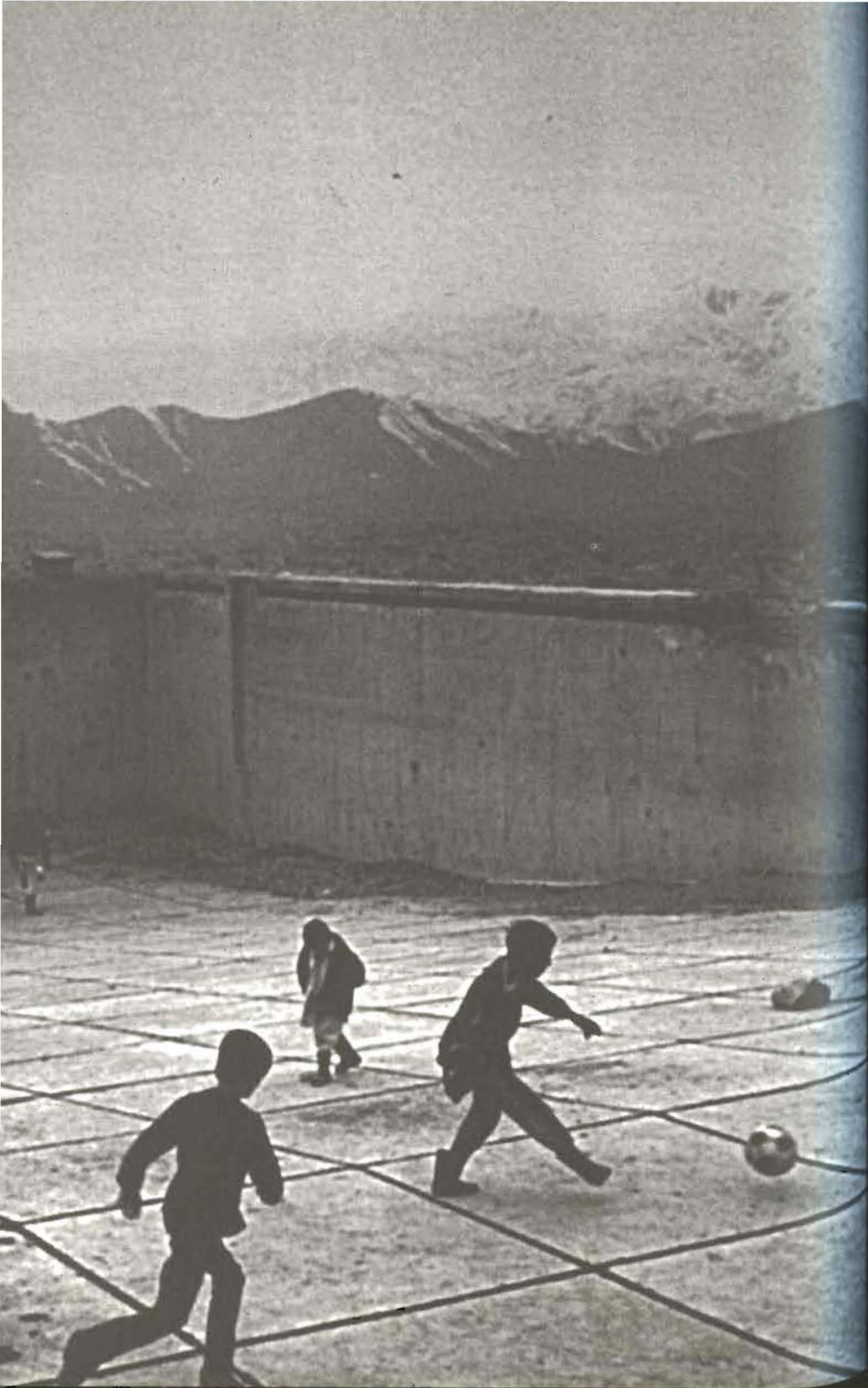
Yes—we're *going*.
With "forward"
for a destination—
for here, we are
running in place.
Burn your maps and
set out: you will find
yourself in a world
as yet unmapped.
Refuse destinations,
as definitions—
we are *making*,
now come
and become.

a building without a blueprint,
a party without a platform,
an experiment without a hypothesis,
a mission without end,
a quest without objective,
a desire without object

When they insist that you outline your alternative world for them, with every possibility accounted for and every detail mapped out, *refuse*. This isn't a new attempt to program everything and everyone, or a new formula that will finally force all the organic complexity of living into the mold of some theoretical ideal. This is a *way* of doing things, not a new standard to march under, not another system—it's an approach to life, to solving the problems we have right now and then solving the next ones. It works right now in some places, tomorrow it will work in others, and we can hope that one day it will work everywhere.

Would they hold up the ravaged present they've made as proof that nothing else is possible? Better find out what else is possible in this present, and go from there. Would they brandish the vast uncertainty of the future as an objection to our fantasies of a better world? Better then throw out all planned futures, theirs first of all, and then only this remains: what do we do now, continue around in circles or blast the fuck out?

In the middle of summer, when the dying sun bled the blue sky orange, the movement began. At first it was no more than a tremor, but slowly it increased to a rumble, an upheaval, an earthquake, and everyone ran to see what was going on.



III. Afterward

"The reasonable adapt themselves to the world; the unreasonable struggle to alter it; therefore all progress depends on the creatively maladjusted. The one who listens to reason is lost—reason enslaves all minds not strong enough to resist."

MAXIMUM

ALL NON-ULTRAISTS TO BE LASSOED!



ULTRAISM

MAXIMUM ULTRAISM is the antidote to everything stifling in democracy and polite society. Ultraists wage a life-and-death war against consensus reality for the liberation of all and of all other realities.

MAXIMUM ULTRAISM is a provocation, that's for sure. Both the devil and the devil's advocate are Ultraists, and they've done more for freedom and range of thought than God ever has.

MAXIMUM ULTRAISM is the art of following every idea through to its logical conclusion. It means never doing anything by half. Ultraists mortify underhanded politicians by putting everything on the table for all to see. Even and especially when they are wrong, Ultraists do everyone the great service of revealing the virtues and weaknesses of theories and strategies in their purest forms. Every community needs a few Ultraists around to test out new possibilities.

MAXIMUM ULTRAISM opens up horizons: every Ultraist is a pioneer. The Ultraist escapes disciples, and yet enables others who would never have dared before to try positions similar to hers. The Ultraist sets a precedent, making it possible for the less openly radical to give themselves permission to explore the middle ground that opens up between the "mainstream" and the radical.



MAXIMUM ULTRAISM is not dogmatic or doctrinaire. To be an Ultraist is not to surrender one's self or senses; orthodoxy, fanaticism, these are simply competing brands of Standard. The true Ultraist invents her own ultimates and issues her own ultimatums.

MAXIMUM ULTRAISM does not call for converts; it is a challenge to all to establish themselves at extremes of their own.



MAXIMUM ULTRAISM is not a competition or a standard of measure for some new elite. More-ultra-than-thou is a contest without meaning—there are extremes enough for everybody. Moreover, the practice of transgressing boundaries and pushing limits reveals that there is no “center,” and so no extremes either.

Thus MAXIMUM ULTRAISM is non-hierarchical; no self-respecting Ultraist looks down upon others as “less Ultra” than herself—to do so would be to accept the conformist myth that there *is* a standard of normalcy at all. The true Ultraist recognizes that *all* are extremists,* that the mainstream is a myth of the sheepish and sheeplike.

MAXIMUM ULTRAISM is not about getting dolled up in a suit and tie for the administration, practicing diction for the cameras, or adopting local customs to seduce recruits. Insincerity is the foundation of this sick society; people have learned to smell it a mile away just to survive. You're not doing anyone any favors by reinforcing its

* If this is true, then all are Ultraists whether or not they embrace Maximum Ultraism. In that case, an exhortation to Ultraism, such as this one, should not be read as an attempt to persuade people to choose one manner of committing themselves over another, but rather as

a refutation of the alibis of moderation and deference to popular opinion.



ubiquity in your own activities, nor by insulting their intelligence and passion assuming they aren't ready to be as radical as you secretly are. Likewise, Ultraists don't disguise themselves as moderates to work with others towards moderate goals—your average group of moderates is just a bunch of closeted Ultraists waiting for partners with whom to go for it.

MAXIMUM ULTRAISM is a *deliberate attempt to alienate the masses*—for who is the greatest enemy of liberty and individuality, if not masses? Besides, let's not kid ourselves: those "masses" are the ones forming militias, gunning each other down in post offices and high schools, joining cult groups that promise immortality through self-castration—these people *crave* extremism, they're *desperate* for it! If all they needed to "join the movement" was a radicalism that looked exactly like the politics they're familiar with, the Green Party

would have won the last election. No, people are holding out for a *different way of life*. If your radical stance has isolated you, maybe it's because you haven't gone far *enough*.

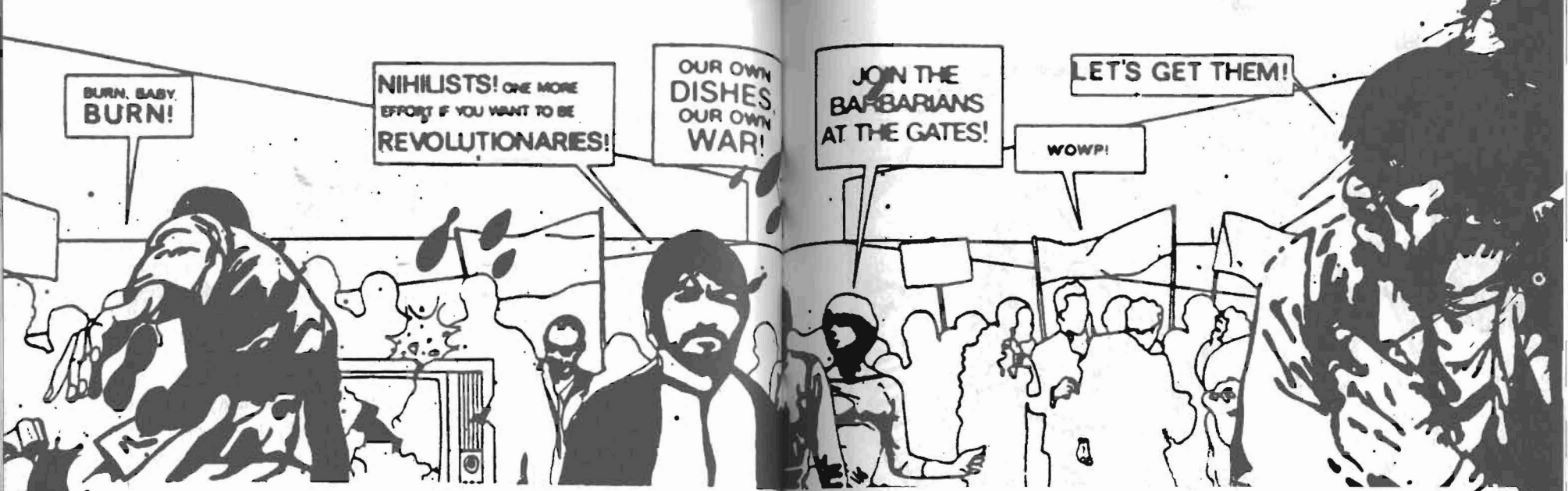
Enthusiasts of MAXIMUM ULTRAISM aren't afraid of looking like the radicals they are. Bashfulness, embarrassment, watering-down—nothing makes us look more like we have something to hide in our politics than these. Ultraists' positions are more attractive for being held with confidence and without apology; in the long run, endless disclaimers, alienate more people than they placate.

MAXIMUM ULTRAISM is failsafe, anyway. The Ultraist can set people against himself and his ideas if he does something harmful to others. This makes him less dangerous to society than the moderate, who can do a great deal of damage through common, accepted practices without attracting any attention at all.

MAXIMUM ULTRAISM can complement positions and tactics perceived to be less radical. Some, who take stances they see as moderate, accuse Ultraists in the same camp of alienating their constituency—but in fact, such Ultraists can make those positions attractive to people and force their enemies to make concessions by providing a less palatable alternative: "Parley with us, or you'll have to deal with . . . the Ultraists."

Needless to say, no one associated with MAXIMUM ULTRAISM conducts surveys or gives a good goddamn about statistics. You're responsible for your opinions and choices; a glance at recent history shows that the majority knows best only by chance. Life is not something to be voted on—you have one of your own, it's all you have to work from, no one else can know better what's right for you. The paralysis of "waiting until you've learned enough about the issues" does no one any good—draw some conclusions from your experience and act on them! Those who see an expression of their secret selves in your actions, or who stand to benefit from what you're doing, will take notice and join in.

MAXIMUM ULTRAISM will not alienate your peers—it will win you the recognition of the most daring and passionate among them.



But let it not be said that MAXIMUM ULTRAISM is not for the weak of heart—Ultraism is a way to develop *strength* of heart. To move daily through a world that contradicts and denies your values, your very existence, is to forge a firmness of character that cannot be undercut by any peer pressure or passing fad. Ultraists can be counted upon to say what they feel and practice what they preach; they have nothing to lose and nothing to hide. An Ultraist, if she is of the same mind as you, is the most reliable ally you can find.

MAXIMUM ULTRAISM buries treasures for the future. Think of all the geniuses and visionaries who died marginalized and unsung! If they had worked instead to water down their revelations and adjust their visions to their times, they would have cheated us all of these riches. We should be thankful they were far-sighted enough to isolate themselves so they could channel into being the world that was to come. Seclusion, obscurity, the mask of insanity—these can enable one to discover truths and possibilities invisible to those blindered by expectation and the demands of being realistic. We can *all* be such geniuses, if we trust and follow our own visions. A commitment to Ultraism signifies faith in the boundless fertility of the imagination and the endless possibilities of the universe.

MAXIMUM ULTRAISM is a holistic way of life wedding theory to practice. The Ultraist's beliefs play an active role in her day-to-day existence—hers are not mere conversation pieces to be trotted out at dinner parties! By working out her own principles and acting in accordance with them, by taking herself and her destiny seriously enough to refuse any walk-on role in the scripted spectacle of some Silent Majority, she is guaranteed a leading role in a life story of adventure: high stakes to play for, triumphs to achieve, tragedies to suffer. Boredom, feelings of insignificance and impotence, these will be the least of her many problems. When she laughs, she laughs all of her laughter; if she cries, she cries all of her tears. An Ultraist may live a life of desperation, but you can bet your bullets it won't be a quiet one.

MAXIMUM ULTRAISM is the opposite of the happy medium promoted by the happy media. It is a challenge to those who oppose concentration camps in the name of moderation—a moderate degree of control, a moderate degree of freedom, a moderate degree of life and a correspondingly moderate degree of death. Ultraists counter this with a passionate dedication to life—for the ones dedicated to death are no longer with us!



MAXIMUM ULTRAISM is unique in its every manifestation. MAXIMUM ULTRAISM cannot be co-opted. MAXIMUM ULTRAISM is radically democratic. Individual Ultraism is an act of solidarity with all others believing, dreaming, and acting outside the lines.

For a revolution without limits,
against restraints and restraint!
Long live the superlative!

A few years before all this started, the environmental action group I briefly worked for sent canvassers around to raise awareness about the harmful effects of the nuclear power plant that supplies electricity to our whole county. One of them ended up at a doorstep out past the edge of town—at Kate’s father’s house, as it turned out. The young activist rang the bell and delivered his spiel to the grizzled veteran who answered the door; the latter listened patiently for its duration, interrupting only to swear in outrage at the accounts of injustice and contamination. Concluding his presentation, the youngster politely explained that the action group was collecting contributions, which were tax deductible, and invited the older man to sign a petition. The latter was nonplussed: “You’re telling me these scumfucks are destroying the land we live on, and you want me to sign a petition? What good is that going to do?”

“Well, sir, we—”

“If what you say is true, we should be going after these mother-fuckers with guns! Seriously, that’s just a piece of paper—are people gonna do something about this, or what?”

“Yes, er, but—we have to start somewhere, and . . .”

“Son, if you’re not gonna be any help, run along—you’re on the clock right now anyway, right? I’ll take care of this myself.”

Kate’s father called up the power company and asked them if what he’d heard about their plant was true. He found their evasive answers unconvincing, and demanded that they send a truck to disengage his house from their system. I can only imagine the bewilderment of the representative who took his call:

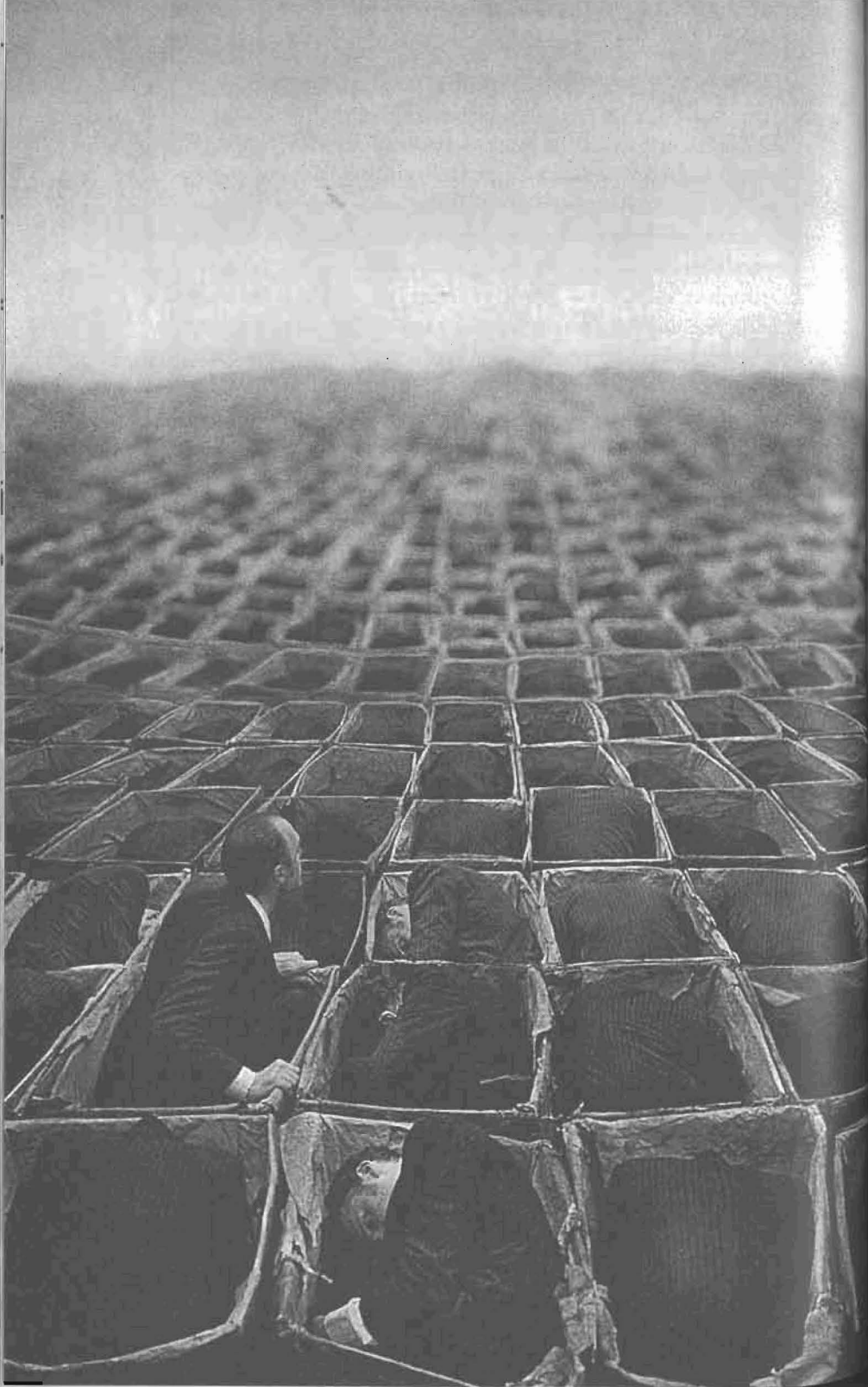
“Excuse me, sir?”

“That’s right, I need you to send somebody right now to disconnect me from the grid. We’re through with your services for good.”

“I’m sorry, sir . . . I’m not sure there’s any—I mean, I’ve never heard of anyone asking to have their power disconnected like this—”

“Listen, I’m not just asking to have the power disconnected, I’m telling you you better take down the whole rig, wires and all, and get it the hell off my property, or else I’m gonna do it myself! And don’t think you can get away with this bullshit anymore. We’re onto your tricks now, you scum-sucking leeches.”

That’s why his house didn’t have electrical power when we went there after that march. Give us one hundred women and men like him and we’ll finish this thing right now.



What Is Crimethink?

Crimethink can be reached from the subway station only by means of a daring double somersault. It is only a mad dash away from the checkout counter of the grocery store and a mere lobbed brick distant from the witness box of the courtroom, but it is much harder to access from the closed playpens of your homes, schools, workplaces, and nightclubs—you practically have to be Joan of Arc with hair aflame.

Crimethink is the ether with which the bourgeois are put to sleep, perchance to dream. Sour people, sweet dreams. Crimethink cannot be captured by the cameras of the photojournalists. Crimethink is the watchword of those who die on their feet rather than live on their knees, but are more likely to be found on the run in between—like you, perhaps.

Crimethink is the burning bush in the desert of industrial society, which can still be found between the thighs of the most mercilessly free and beautiful. Crimethink is revenge for that fucking flag they put on the moon.*

Crimethink is the homeland of the homeless, of Übermensch and underdog. Crimethink isn't a manner of speaking, but of acting; it only takes the form of speech when speaking *is* acting. Crimethink explains everything in the whole world, instance by instance, stopping short of the abyss of abstraction—a process that isn't quite finished, of course. Crimethink says to you: *I put a spell on you, because you're mine.*

Militants and dilettantes, you do well to put your stock in crimethink!† For the market manages the managers, hierarchy bosses the bosses, capitalism owns the owners, but those who crimethink for themselves are truly free and wild.

* Very clever, bureaucrats—finally a flag we can't burn.

† *Invest in Crimethink!* Crimethink is the only savings bank that will still pay interest after the fall of global capitalism. Crimethink stocks soar with interest rates and flying bricks—even and especially when the stock market crashes. Crimethink will make you the kind of fortune that favors the brave—we challenge you to find a better deal. The wealth afforded by Crimethink increases according to the laws of cellular division. Crimethink works on the abundance model—the more you cash in your investment, the more it increases in value! When the twilight of the old gods arrives, you'll be glad you traded in your currency before it was too late.

What Is CrimethInc.?

One must be enough of a crimethinker to adopt a crimethoughtful stance towards one's own crimethink. Crimethink is *not* CrimethInc.; it is, rather, the spirit of playful destruction that—we can only hope—saves CrimethInc. from itself.

CrimethInc. throws up contradictions the way others erect fences: to protect itself from ideology, from stiffening. CrimethInc. is a secret—yet sends out a call to revolt that *will* be heard in every corner of the Occupied Territories by the time you finish this very sentence.*

Listen hard to silence, and you'll hear thunder deep inside.

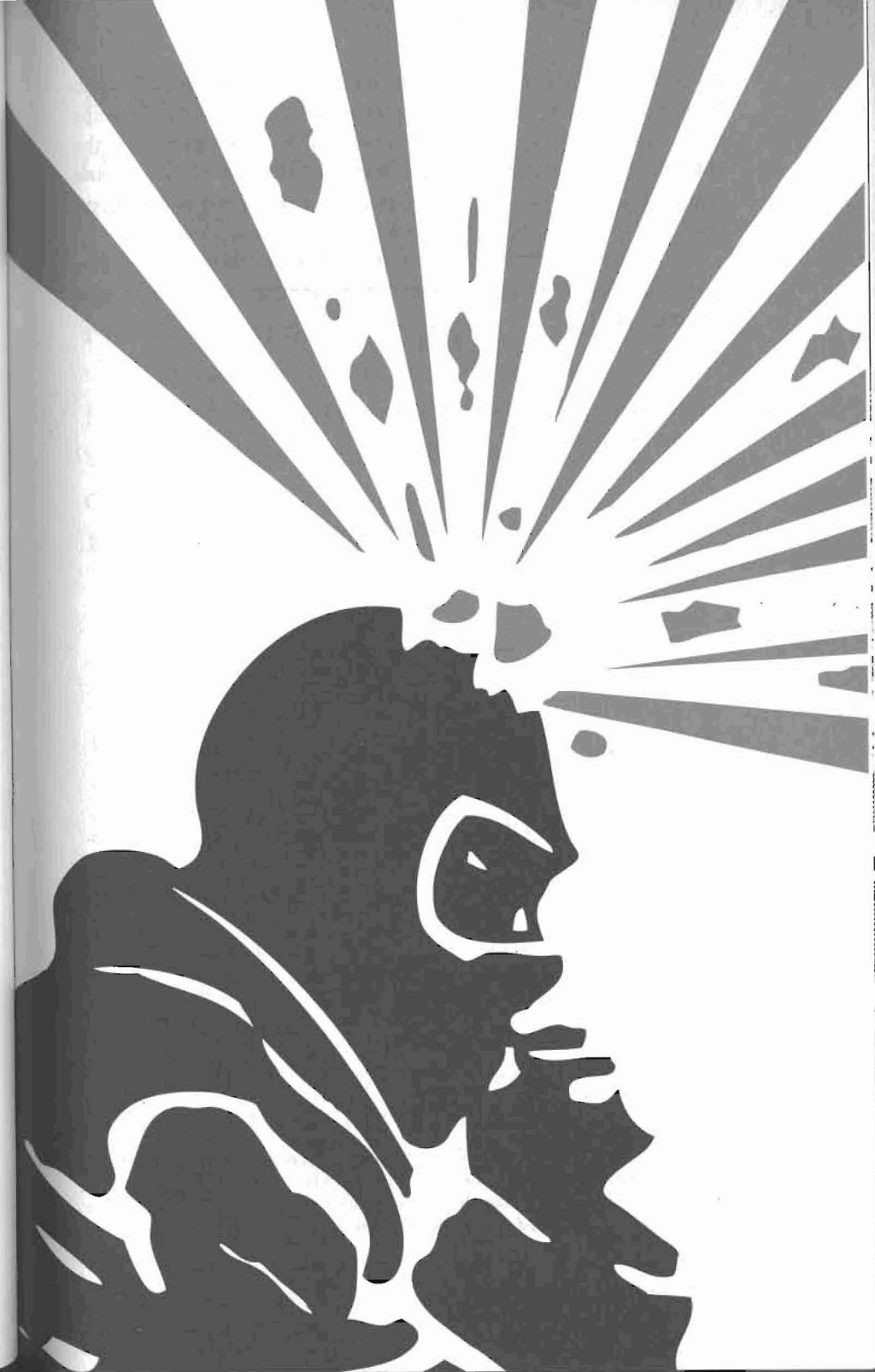
CrimethInc. is the hip gnosis of a new youth rebellion that goes beyond both youth *and* rebellion. CrimethInc. is a Non-Prophet Organization. CrimethInc. is beautiful: it's ugly; where beauty is apportioned in pageants and every pretty thing has been copyrighted by greeting card companies, it is a foray into the unknown to seek new veins of joy before we all suffocate like yeast in our own excrement.

CrimethInc. is the cure for the cancers with which they propose to cure cancer. CrimethInc. sweeps through the streets with fire and banners and steals through the classroom in xeroxes and whispers. CrimethInc. pilots the rudderless ships of the movement movement, coded into the paths of those who trade bondage for vagabondage; CrimethInc. smashes tourism and all other despicable formulas for running in place.

CrimethInc. is the Last Loosening: it is here by order of those out of order, so that nothing may ever be in order, or made to order, again. O ye rabble without a cause, CrimethInc. is the ticket out of here you've been waiting for—if you're willing to cash it in yourself, that is. *CrimethInc. is what you do yourself, nothing more.*

CrimethInc. is constantly in effect whenever workers daydream, everywhere a bank is being robbed, on airplanes passing over the Brazilian coastline at sunrise. It maintains office hours in squats under riot squad siege occupied by boys and girls who have escaped

* Don't believe us? *You've* heard it, haven't you?



the suburbs to fall in love. Take the last night train from La Plata to Buenos Aires, and if the doors are open so you can sit on the steps of the train listening to the young passengers beating out a samba rhythm on the seats and singing along behind you as the Argentine night speeds past, you might realize there is a letter or a novel you need to write—and at that moment, you'll enter an outpost.

CrimethInc. is present wherever anything or anyone is on fire. CrimethInc.'s field of operations extends as far as there is crimethought, and beyond:

*it speeds through Arctic waters in the wake of comets fallen
and swallowed up by the cold,*

*into Russian cities ringed by vast rivers at the end of winter—
the crack of thawing ice bellowing into the night,*

arriving at the magnetic poles where compasses spin, and
moving on*

*to the bottom of the ocean where the waterlogged corpses of
whales lie.*

* It's important to point out here that the magnetic poles are not fixed—they wander across the surface of the earth. That is, in fact, exactly the kind of voyage sanctioned and undertaken by CrimethInc. operatives: invisible, detectable only by effects registered thousands of miles away, yet of global import . . .

In Conclusion:

Obviously, gentlemen, if you fear for the morality of your wives, the education of your children, the peace of mind of your investors, the submissiveness of your mistresses and house pets, the solidity of your armchairs and privatized prisons and factory farms, the manner in which your whorehouses are licensed and the security of the State . . . then you are right. But what can you do?

*You are rotten,
and the fire has been lit.*

But as for you would-be revolutionaries, radicals wedded to a license without limits, girls and boys who love without leave, we urge you:

**More rigor in your recklessness!
More ambition in your hedonism!***

*When you're young, and it feels like you're
invincible, it's because you are.
From this moment forth, no one shall ever die.*

* . . . and vice versa, *vice* being the key word.

The text of this book is set 10/13 in the unique and pleasurable Absara, and its lovely *italic*, designed by Xavier Dupré in 2005. The display face is the plucky and indomitable Helvetica, created by Swiss graphic designer Max Miedinger in 1957.

When they send in the National Guard, we'll take chainsaws to the telephone polls to halt their progress—and they'll throw down their guns when they see their nieces and nephews on the other side of the barricades. That night, we'll drag all the furniture out of the offices and department stores to build great bonfires in the intersections; we'll sit around them, passing food and drink and telling the unbelievable stories of how we arrived there.

The next morning we'll venture out one by one, then in pairs, to survey the remains—and perhaps after the initial shock it will appear to us as a great playground. We'll gaze at the carcasses of the dead machines in wonder that we lived in a society powered by things beyond our understanding; from that moment forward our understanding will be honed sharp by the challenges of building anew.

Some of us will still be angry, some will still be hurting; others will climb to the tops of the great wreckage heaps to look out into the sunrise, trying to see beyond it into the future, and sit there in silence for a long, long time. We'll trace each other's scars with our fingers, squeeze our hands together and shake our heads; perhaps someone will sing softly.

We'll stand outside looted supermarkets, pitching soda cans and hitting them with axe handles to see them explode in the air, spinning like pinwheels. We'll dress the lampposts in satin curtains, paint our own names on the street signs, throw Christmas ornaments at each other like snowballs. We'll string extension cords around the old monuments to pull them down like the Communards did in Paris; we'll empty the TV dinners from our freezers and throw them off rooftops as we eat fresh apples from new trees. This is what it will take to rediscover that we are the masters of things and not they of us. Wearing bridal gowns and firemen's jackets, leaving a swath of shattered dinner crystal in our wake, we'll cut a path to the gates of heaven so wide no one can ever shut them again.

We'll tattoo our faces to celebrate that there are no more borders to cross, that we can meet our oppressors in open war instead of having to smuggle ourselves through their checkpoints. Police stations will be evicted wherever they appear, officers will walk the streets in fear of being picked up and taken to squats,

and the next time terrorists fly airplanes into
office buildings, no one will be working in them.



The earth will give birth to stars that humble the heavens, and we'll have hospitals without sick people where today we have sick people without hospitals. Blacksmiths will once again swing their heavy hammers through the air, forging crowns great enough to fit on all heads at once. Driving through the wilderness across overgrown freeways on our species' last tank of gas, we'll see fireworks shooting up into the night sky on the horizon—a flare saying "don't rescue me!"

A decade to track down technicians to disable warheads and deactivate nuclear power plants; a generation to replace grocery stores with gardens and cough syrup with licorice root; a century for dairy cows and toy poodles to go feral; five hundred years to melt down cannons into wine goblets, water pipes, and sleigh bells; a millennium for the dandelions growing out of the sidewalk to become redwoods.

Or else none of this will happen, but we will have the adventure of our lives; and if we meet again, we will build another castle in the sky.

Dear friend
Where
I end
You begin.

All this is nothing compared to what I'll be able
to tell you tomorrow night if I am still alive



the explosion of stars is not reserved for ticketholders