

CLASS WARFARE

... Et surtout mon corps aussi bien que mon âme, gardez-vous de vous croiser les bras en l'attitude sterile du spectateur, car la vie n'est pas un spectacle, car une mer de douleurs n'est pas un proscenium, car un homme qui crie, n'est pas un ours qui danse.

—Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour an pays natal*

TIME SEEMS TO BE running out, for all of us. Many of the stories lately have an apocalyptic ring; the air is full of rumours, intimations of collapse. It is being said, more and more often with more and more conviction, that things are getting “out of control,” that Order is “breaking down,” that Civilization-as-we-know-it is at an end, or close to it. That is entirely possible. It was what we were hoping for, at the outset; it was what we planned for, what we conspired to accomplish. True, we were as surprised as anybody else when it began to happen: but now we are no longer greatly surprised by anything. Events occur, and we participate in them, we do what demands to be done, we allow for contingency, even for the possibility of success. It is not as remote an eventuality, today, as it once was. Even if we fail, we succeed.

The abduction itself was almost laughably simple. The essential factors were speed and timing, coordination, a precise calculation of the knowable variables. No bodily violence, no theatrics, no gunfire in the night. The prisoner made no attempt to resist us, or to escape; he did not once cry out. It was strangely as if he had been expecting us, waiting for us—as if he had known for a long time that, sooner or later, we would be coming for him. Whatever the reason, he was calm and co-operative. What the press subsequently referred to as our “daring midnight raid” was as straightforward as going to call on an old acquaintance, and taking him away. Some of us, perhaps, were even slightly disappointed by the ease with which we were able to achieve our objective. We had geared up for heroics, and none were necessary.

At present, there are five of us active in the collective; until recently, there were six, but it became expedient to eliminate the sixth. That was Alex, whom we executed. Our history has been a succession of such adjustments, revisions of the scenario, improvisations; for this, we are sometimes called “adventurists,” and disowned by other, more rigidly programmatic groups. It is a subtle accusation, and there is doubtless a degree of merit in it, but less now than formerly—although, like all human creatures, we are to some extent at the mercy of circumstances, and it would be delusional to suppose otherwise. We are not delusional: rather we strive for, and often attain, a synthesis of doctrine and praxis. The exigencies of praxis should not be underestimated. When it seemed appropriate to arm ourselves, we went out and bought guns, or stole them, and in time we taught ourselves how—and when—to use them. (It was difficult at first, to be sure; it was somewhat like being in the audience at one of those performances, much in vogue a few years ago, in which the

actors come down from the stage to embrace the spectators, drawing them into the play, reciting in some counterfeit of intimacy *I love you, do you love me?* ... To which the answer must always be *no*. Guilt is involved here, and a certain residual paranoia. We are children of peacetime, after all, and the arts of warfare do not always come naturally to us. I, for example, had never fired a gun before, had never even had occasion to hold one in my hand, and I was unprepared for the weight of it, for the recoil.) We find ourselves, again and again, doing things for the first time.

It is probably unwise to be writing this, producing evidence which, if discovered, can only incriminate us. That was the mistake Alex made, one of his mistakes: he allowed himself to become conspicuous, a “personality.” His name was widely known, and his face, his mannerisms, his style. In our work, visibility is counterproductive, individual recognition a hindrance. One cannot proceed directly from a raid to a television studio. But, at this point, I am still invisible: you have passed me a thousand times, in public places, without seeing me. And it will be easy enough to destroy these papers, if I must; I have no great attachment to them. It was harder to destroy Alex.

This should not be construed as an official communiqué. I am writing merely on my own initiative, for my own purposes, not the least of which is to pass the time. Required as we are to guard the prisoner constantly, we become, in effect, prisoners ourselves; it is an irony my comrades may not appreciate. There is the element of hazard, of course, to spice the days—admittedly, we feel a spasm of apprehension whenever we hear a siren, or whenever some passerby seems to gaze too long at our house—but that order of hazard is so much a commonplace of our lives that, for most of us, it is no longer

really a stimulant. We either will, or will not, be captured. As propositions go, that one is hardly sufficient to occupy the mind through these hours of tedium.

In the group photograph, before we destroyed it, Alex was the third from the left; smiling wickedly, in his outsize sombrero, he could have been the villain in a spaghetti western. (It was our early, *bandito* period, before the purge, before we went underground.) It may be significant that, on the day of our first serious raid, he managed to have urgent business elsewhere. It may be significant, too, that the raid was not a strategic success, that we very quickly found it advisable to abort it. We may have had insufficient discipline, in those days. The issue has never been wholly resolved to anyone's satisfaction, but it was taken into account—perhaps too much so—in our eventual judgement of Alex. It had not entered our minds, then, that we might be making a mistake, overreacting.

There was no coherent intention, at first, to form a cell: it was more as if the cell had always been there, an empty space in history, waiting for us to come along, discover it, take possession of it, fill it. It seemed to exist before we knew what it was, or what it could become ... But it may be premature, absurd, to linger on this, to ask: what happened to us all, how did it happen, by what route have we come here, to this dim and barricaded room, these policies? It is not a subject we discuss often among ourselves, having little taste for nostalgia, preferring to speak of more impersonal things, specifics of action, points of theory, our quotidian preoccupations. Introspection is not encouraged, nor should it be. What do I know of my comrades, or they of me?—only everything that matters: who is competent to do what, who can be trusted, whose thinking has evolved to what stage, in which direction. Of the rest, the private histories, there is

occasionally a glimpse, no more: a story told for some instructive purpose, a confession, a self-criticism, sometimes—very rarely—an incursion of something like wistfulness, the merest glimmer of sadness, regret. Such moments go by swiftly, driven out by the urgencies we deal in. But the temptation to remember the irrelevant is difficult to resist at times, and the days are long, and in our present isolation it is easier than before to drift carelessly into reminiscence, the old miasma of a life long since renounced, abandoned, almost forgotten, never completely forgotten ...

Somewhere it begins. Somewhere (after you're already moving, on your way, too late to get off, go back, even if you wanted to) it dawns on you that the journey is not an excursion tour, a holiday, that it's not a round-trip ticket you have. That can be exhilarating—and dangerous. And it is true that in the early phases of that journey our liberty, the sense of *release*, was always teetering on the edge of hysteria. It was the hysteria encountered, from time to time, on ship-board: a sanctuary into which the Real World may not venture. The wars and punishments go on elsewhere, in other coordinates of time and attention. A treaty is confirmed with one's ticket, an amnesty for all us shabby travellers—the old women wrapped in furs and Central European dialects, the mothers of yowling infants, the beaten fathers, movie-mag addicts, guileless hippies in happy dopehaze, itinerant workers, eager juicers, seducers and seduced—the whole kit-n-caboodle of us abruptly reprieved, pardoned, delivered of all such burdens as the ordinary world afflicts us with, set briefly free to celebrate the transient madneses, the ritual lies of passage. We were aboard ship, indeed, in our innocence, in the merciful night, toot-toot and then gone, and who remembers what manic jazz-loud parties there were, whooping and hollering in every bottle-strewn stateroom, every streamered corridor, love in the lifeboats, every-

thing allowed, the band swinging into the *Muskrat Ramble* now, and why not, *dance, you buggers, get it on, yeah*, and every bleary eye blind to the icebergs, the treacherous heaving water, fog sneaking up closer and closer with none of that pretended majesty of final, absolute things ... It didn't last long. We were children in those times.

Enough, enough. How can I explain, justify to the collective, the compulsion under which I fill these pages? It is surely no more than foolishness, no more than presumption, to expect that an arbitrary arrangement of words—words no other eyes than mine may ever see—will in some fashion advance our cause. I know better. Even Alex, toward the end, knew better. What was it he said? We were walking home from an incident, a rally we'd done our best to disrupt; it was raining; I had been holding forth on Revolutionary Art, the need for it, the function it could perform in the pre-revolutionary state. All at once Alex stopped walking, and turned on me: *Ah, you dumb bastard, you think you're so fucking tough, such a hard-liner, and you're soft as a baby's arse. Admit it. Look at yourself, sitting up scribbling your pretty words in the middle of the night, digging every moment of it, that's the way to fight for the masses, sure it is. Do you imagine they love you for it? Or care at all? Who're you trying to kid? Do you seriously believe you're defending anything, liberating anything, redeeming anything, inciting anyone to action, feeding one empty belly except your own? Some shit-hot revolutionary you are, yapping all the time about your precious Art, just like any other faggot lackey, as if a goddamned word of it is ever going to change a thing on earth. Ah yes, wonderful, isn't it. People are out there working and dying like animals while you sit on your ass and dither about Style, about aesthetics, world without end amen. That's great, you're just what we've all been waiting for, a raving comsymp who writes Nice Prose. With all the punctuation in the right place, too. Next you'll*

be telling us the story of your life: How I Forsook the Bourgeoisie and Became a Fearless Urban Guerrilla. Big deal, buddy. When are you going to wake up to what's going down in this world? When are you going to wake the fuck up? I heard the argument before: in the revolutionary society there would be no artists, no need for them. Come the day, I'll have to accept it. But it seemed a curious sentiment, somehow incongruous, coming from Alex.

We are listening now, fitfully, to the radio. The news is unenlightening: we are believed to be hiding in another city, in the south. A house there—the home of a known sympathizer—was raided, fire-bombed, in expectation of flushing us out, but we were not there to be flushed. Several persons are dead, several others wounded; it seems they were having a birthday party, for one of their children, at the time. At a nearby commune a quantity of weaponry was seized, arrests were made, witnesses were interrogated. The operation was organized and carried out along the lines of a game-plan first tested, and perfected, during the recent Asian war. Now, the search is reportedly being intensified; anyone with information is urged to relay it, immediately, to the nearest authorities. We have been seen in the east, in the midwest, in Algeria, Cuba, and Mexico, in a Canadian border town, entering a famous bordello in Reno, eating lasagna in an underworld café in New Orleans, boarding flights for London, Damascus, Lisbon, and Hanoi. We have allies everywhere.

At the beginning, to be truthful, I had reservations about our project. It was a matter of readiness, chiefly: I was not convinced that we had the means, or the stamina, to sustain an act of war. We had had, up to then, only rather haphazard experience of praxis. A few isolated experiments in shoplifting, armed robbery, random bombing—routine guerrilla offensives—did not seem to me, then, adequate prepa-

ration for the kind of activity we were contemplating. And it was far from clear, too, whether abduction had ever been wholly efficacious, as a tactic. I think a number of us entertained these doubts, and others like them, but at that stage of our development we tended to identify our qualms with cowardice, or at least quietism, and consequently were reluctant to voice them. That may have been a mistake. In certain instances the correct policy does not automatically present itself: killing Alex, for instance, may also in retrospect appear to have been a mistake, and it is too late now to undo it. We will learn, as we learn everything, through hindsight.

The prisoner is a young man, good-looking in an unformed way, the son of a prominent and inordinately admired political figure; to ensure our security, and his, we have assigned him the code-name Dionysius. Recorded messages have been supplied to the media, defining our position, our objectives. We are demanding a variety of small arms and munitions, \$1 million in unmarked bills of low denomination, and unconditional amnesty in the event of our capture. We are demanding, further, the release from jail of our brothers Eduardo Donaro, Eugene Lilienthal, Gerard Macklewain, and Constantin Stavros, and our sister Marie Tyrell. We are confident that our terms will be met, in full, before the deadline.

It is necessary to correct the popular misapprehensions about our motives and actions. We are not conscienceless. In the newspapers we are most often portrayed, falsely, as a band of savages, heartless adventurers, nihilists, wanton lovers of destruction and death. Pulp novelists write inflammatory thrillers in which we invariably appear as soul-less robots, the puppets of foreign malefactors. That is merely propaganda, devised to titillate the gullible and deceive the masses. *Terrorists*, we are called, time and again; but the real Terror is not

of our making. It is true that on occasion we have acted rashly, in desperation or haste; it is equally true that we have committed ourselves, irrevocably, to the eradication of our enemies—as they, with their superior numbers and sophisticated gadgetry, have pledged themselves to eradicate *us*. The enterprise is permanent, and continually self-renewing. We may, in the end, be more evenly matched than they suspect: they are powerful, but we are clever. We have routes, redoubts, they know nothing of. And our mission is just, as theirs is not.

Alex was shot cleanly, knowing our reasons, the logic by which it became essential, as we thought, to remove him. It may have been less than essential; we might have found another solution, less drastic, if we had known where to look for it. There were, in his case, aspects we were actually unaware of; our original intelligence (that he was an infiltrator, an informer and provocateur) seems to have been inaccurate, or wildly exaggerated. In the last analysis, above all else it was his attitude that condemned him: he was, we felt, an anomaly within the collective, a cyst to be cut away before, malignant, it infected the healthy organs. The metaphor was unfortunate. Interestingly, Alex made no protest. His defence was listless, perfunctory (*Do as you see fit, you will anyway*); had he argued, had he only resisted us, we would have found it easier to spare him. But he left us no choice. He appeared genuinely to believe, as we all did then, that when the will of the collective manifests itself it must prevail, even in error. Or perhaps he saw his execution as the one fitting resolution of the melodrama in which, long ago, he had assigned himself the starring role. There could be many explanations, most of them unacceptable. But we are more careful now.

The trial, which we had all dreaded, which more than once we

had voted to postpone (“pending further investigation”), was brief and purely mechanical, a formality we felt constrained to observe. Alex already knew what we had in mind, what we had decided in the conferences from which—at first to his bewilderment—we had excluded him. “Let’s just get it over with,” he said. “It will only be worse if it drags on.” I was delegated to read the list of charges, because I had known Alex longer than the others had, because I had brought him into the cell, and because—having grown up friends in the same town, and having fled it together—we were that much more deeply implicated in each other’s actions. And I myself was not above suspicion: my own weaknesses, my divided allegiances, were not unknown to the collective. It was painful, reading the charges, seeing as I did so the glint of mockery, of knowledge, behind his set and stoic face. “In the name of the collective,” I read, “in the name of our brothers and sisters in struggle everywhere”—*who had written THAT bullshit?*—“it is my duty to condemn you, expel you from this cell, and by the authority of my comrades sentence you ...” The words were ridiculous; I had the impulse, which I’d frequently felt as a child, at funerals and other solemn gatherings, to break into laughter. “Do you accept the verdict of your peers?” I managed to finish. “It doesn’t look as though I have much choice,” Alex said. The room was very quiet.

I was also appointed to guard him, afterwards. I was given a knife and a small automatic, to use at my discretion in the event of trouble; there was no trouble. It was early in the afternoon, and nothing was scheduled to happen before dark. We sat in the loft of a warehouse to which, through an employee of the company that owned it, we had unlimited access in those days. Even in the bright sunlight, the room seemed nocturnal. I was remembering unimportant things, scenes

from an age I was trying to outgrow, leave behind forever: the girls we'd shared, not always equably, the small acts of delinquency we'd committed, not always boldly, the night we'd driven my father's car, in high drunkenness and glee, into the ocean. (*"Why did you do it?" Isobel Monadnock wailed. "Oh, oh, oh, why did you have to do it?" Alex and I were hooting, holding each other's shoulders and raging with laughter. "I had a merciless vision of banality," he said, when he was able to speak.*) The loft stank of fish by-products, containers of which, chemically treated, were stored downstairs. "You must have loved me," Alex said after a while. "There must have been an instant, sometime, a split second you probably weren't even capable of noticing while it happened, when you loved me. Why else would you have done what you did? You had to teach me everything you knew, everything I know now, your language, the things the words mean, all the fictions you insist on living by, all the stories everyone has told again and again ever since the world began. The same old shit, the same delusions, every turd you were ever fed and swallowed like a baby, all of it, you put into me. And expected me to take it for my own. You almost convinced me, you almost got away with it, because in some hopeless way I loved *you*, I wanted the rubbish you were selling. It was a way out, the easiest way, the one I didn't have to work for. The poor grow up fatalistic; they know that at best there's exactly one chance, if that, to get the hell out, and if they botch that they're stuck with the botch forever after. It's a matter of hanging on where you are, wherever you're able to haul yourself up or down to, or else just staying in the same black hole for the rest of your life. *You* lured me out of that—to this. I was poor, you never were. Thanks to you, I broke loose, or thought I did; I thought I was being utterly happy, that I was living through the happiest time of my life, that I was free. You persuaded me that everything everywhere was weighted with

the most extraordinary significance ever signified, and that some bright day I'd remember it, and know exactly what it meant, and tell all the sentient world about it, and just like magic the Revolution would rise up like the grand finale of some overproduced musical comedy. You still think it's going to be like that. You're dreaming and you love it, you dance in it like crazy every time they play the music, you can hardly wait to weep over me when they shoot me. When *you* shoot me. Weep all you like; I won't. I hate and despise you, and everything you claim to be. You taught me the words, and I'll use them, every last bloody one of them, before I die. You loved me because I was *weird*, because I was the deserving poor, because you never had guts enough to get out on your own, you had to take someone inferior with you. Away from the prospect of ordinary life, that perpetual dead end you thought you were born to escape from, and I to live in. Does it astonish you that I speak your language now? That I can even do it better than you can? It shouldn't astonish you. After all, you only loved me, tempted me, in order to close all the doors opening back, back *there ...*"

For strategic purposes, it was considered advisable to shoot him at night. Our best marksman was nervous: it was the first time we had had to act against one of our own. There was a farm, some distance from the city, where we were welcome and felt secure; for the execution we chose the field farthest from the highway. The moon was brilliant, the dew glossy as sweat on a lover's flanks. The women had brought along sandwiches and beer, potato salad, barbecued chicken in a hamper. No one was hungry; we'd eat later, when accomplishment had made us hilarious. Someone played a harmonica, without conviction. We walked slowly, almost a cortege, across the field. Alex refused the blindfold, accepted a cigarette, a mouthful of beer. Then

he spoke briefly, before anyone could silence him: "And most of all beware, even in thought, of assuming the sterile attitude of the spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of griefs is not a proscenium, a man who wails is not a dancing bear." I recognized the passage as one from an African poem; long before, in a comradely gesture, Alex had given me the book with those words underlined. Was he addressing them, now, to me? He had always had a taste for irony, the bastard ... We were going to have to proceed. I led Alex to a slight rise in the field, where he could be seen clearly. He stood there uncertainly, looking confused. "I don't think I believe this," he whispered. "What if I make a break for it?" "Where would you go?" He grinned, scraped his feet against the dirt. "Where am I going now?" "Would you like anything?" "Nothing I can think of." A hundred yards distant, the others stood restlessly, resenting this privacy, this intrusion of subjectivism. I went back to join them; as I left him, Alex began to speak again: "To die for the people ..." Two shots were required; the first one went astray.

On the way home we drove slowly, alert for police. The car radio played country music. Toward midnight, thirsty after our exertions, we stopped at a suburban tavern where we were unknown. But the atmosphere was grim, and we soon left.

The prisoner is describing his childhood, from which he is not far removed. "It was boring, most of the time, because I was always expected to be on my best behaviour. That meant being quiet, it meant never just bugging off and having fun. There wasn't anyone to have fun *with*. No one I liked was ever considered suitable, and I didn't meet anyone suitable that I could like. I was in public, I was watched, I was told I had to set an example. You can imagine what I must have been an example of. There were stories about me in the women's

magazines, and photographs too. In one of them, I was falling off a horse; the whole country thought that was so cute, so ... so *typical*. Shit, if I'd ever grown up enough to get into trouble, it would have ruined my father. Or so he and his advisors kept telling me. Other people's kids got into trouble, the disadvantaged were always getting into trouble; our kind didn't know what trouble was. I wonder when I saw through it, all that crap. Something must have happened. Maybe I did something bad and enjoyed doing it, really got off on it. I don't remember. Maybe it was gradual, like coming off a long bad trip. But I guess being here is part of it, I know that much, I suppose I was waiting for something like this. Any excuse to get away. Even to a place like this, which isn't a lot like what I've been used to. It could be worse. I remember the lies I had to tell, to keep *them* off my back, so I could sneak out for a joyride now and then. We were warned, you see, we were told there'd probably be some hassle ... oh, they didn't exactly go into the details, but we knew we were on somebody's list. We were prime targets. Maybe you were keeping a list, and they knew about it; they had ways to get that sort of information. But I'd always been guarded, it was nothing new when they got paranoid about you guys. It was only more exciting, because I was old enough to understand it. Like living in a movie, with an honest-to-god plot, for a change. *Nothing had ever happened before*. It was just that dismal house and the dismal people who came to it with their bodyguards and their chauffeurs, and a whole series of dismal schools where you couldn't piss after lights out, trips in the summer to dismal hotels I was never allowed to leave by myself, and the talk about money and politics—not *your* kind of politics—and rules. More rules than the government ever dreamed of, if it could dream. Everyone was frightened of everything; it seemed strange, because they were all so powerful. They had everything going for them, and

they were scared. My father even hired rent-a-cops these last few weeks, at his own expense. I don't know where he got them—some agency, most likely. The one he gave me was called Geoffrey, he was okay, he liked to talk, tell stories. I used to bribe him to take lots of time off, go meet his woman or his buddies, go anywhere but where I was ... That's what I did the night you came."

We listen amiably enough to this chatter. The prisoner's past, his psychological disabilities, are no concern of ours. He fancies himself to be a victim of circumstance. He may be. But the prospects for re-education are, I should say, excellent.

Locally, a manhunt is underway, but it has so far achieved no more than the ordinary harassment of civilians. We are occupying an unexceptional stucco house in a pleasant middle-income district of stucco houses where our presence is well-established, our rather reclusive lifestyle taken for granted. We have gone to some trouble to establish amicable relations with our neighbours, who think of us as colourful but harmless, well-bred, no threat to property values. We are suspected of nothing untoward. Even the elderly and anxious lady from whom we rent this house has displayed no curiosity about us, because we have done nothing unusual to arouse it. It is unthinkable that we could have taken part in anything as forceful, as unacceptable, as an abduction.

The police have been unable to make anything like a positive identification; our names and origins are recorded nowhere. Alex did not, as things turned out, inform on us. No one has betrayed us, yet. There are a great many groups like ours, and we could be any one of them.

In the tapes we released, the prisoner reported only the truth, without

coercion: he said, correctly, that he has not been tortured or otherwise harmed, that he is being treated hospitably, and that we are absolutely serious in our demands. He said that we are not receptive to offers of compromise, and that we have the means at our disposal to back up our statements. Voice-prints have established that it was, unquestionably, the prisoner speaking. The published speculations that we extorted these tapes from him under duress are, like most gossip about our movements and methods, unfounded. We have our own means of persuasion. Alex was in many respects a charlatan and a poseur, but he said one thing we all remember, and strive to apply: "Each of us must carry at all times a concealed weapon—his mind."

The father has already communicated a willingness to negotiate. We have informed him that our position is, and will continue to be, non-negotiable.

On this third day of Operation Dionysius, it is apparent that the prisoner is in fact preparing himself, by degrees, to co-operate with us. He apologizes often for his ignorance, his "childishness," as he calls it. He has indicated, covertly but unmistakably, that he is not himself wholly unsympathetic toward our intentions, and that we should not confuse his own ideological stance with that of his parents, and his parents' class in general. He has begun to refer to them, more naturally, as *they*. That is a promising beginning. Moreover, remarkably, he demonstrates a keen—if as yet immature—theoretical mind, an unexpected grasp of dialectics, a sensitivity to tactical subtleties. Several of his passing suggestions have been found useful. He talks, now, of joining up with us (if we'll have him), repudiating his family and former friends, sharing our cause, whatever the outcome of this present business. Vulnerable as we are, we have no sure way to determine whether he is speaking out of self-interest, in

an understandable effort to ingratiate himself with us, or genuinely out of an evolving solidarity with our aims. We will have to test him. One of the women has proposed that we include him (in, of course, a relatively insignificant role) in our next action, but just now we have no specific actions planned. One will presumably present itself to us, at the right time.

For our part, we do not treat him badly. The food, if less than elegant, is wholesome and plentiful; there is no lack of beer and wine, within moderation. He has an adequate mattress, blankets, unrestricted use of the bathroom, no scarcity of reading matter to peruse if he wishes. Discipline is not harsh. There is, inevitably, some slight discomfort, a measure of deprivation, a nagging anxiety about the future course of the operation (which we ourselves cannot predict), but on the whole we are scrupulously observing the articles of the Geneva Convention which pertain to prisoners of war. We have performed no atrocities, this time.

The radio keeps us in touch, hourly, with the progress of the man-hunt; it is making no progress. People are being detained, searched, questioned, released on their own recognizance, revealing nothing usable. The police are annoyed; there is dissension between civil and military authorities; the public is fascinated. Our friends have remained loyal. There have been countless diversionary actions: gratuitous robberies, shootings, bombings, anonymous letters, fake phone calls. The press is ecstatic. It pleases us to hear that so many of our brothers and sisters have been out sowing confusion and panic in our name. They are welcome to the name; if they use it well, it is theirs. Whoever does the work we do must be our ally; there are no more splendid words than these: *We are with you*. Alex said it better once, before an audience of the innocent. "Every disruption of

the entrenched order, every crime,” he said, leaning into the microphone as though it had leaped erect from his beloved’s navel, “every discomfort inflicted upon the comfortable, every assault, every ambush, every raid, every strike, every act of war against the powerful and propertied, everything that cannot be comprehended, works to our ends. Every man who dies of hunger feeds us. Every woman who fights for her life gives birth to us. Everyone who stumbles and stands up again, who refuses to lie down, carries us forward. *We are all one force, and you will never be rid of us, you will never prevail.*”

I was in the crowd, listening, hearing his voice—with the regional twang it had never completely lost—ricochet off the concrete and steel walls around us. His hair flapped; his eyes were aimed straight out at a horizon only he saw. It was one of his better speeches.

It is reasonable to assume, for the present, that we will not be discovered; if we are, we will not hesitate to defend ourselves. Our arsenal is adequate. We have no wish to kill the prisoner, whom we would prefer to rehabilitate, but we are not yet unwilling to do it if we must. Only one of us is squeamish, but he is very likely thinking of Alex, about whom we have all had second thoughts. We can trust him to come around, if the situation compels it.

Between bulletins, the radio plays songs of disgruntled love, pain, the familiar grievances. Between commercials (for pizza joints, rental agencies, popular causes), the announcer has forgotten to switch off his mike. “Listen to me,” he shouts across acres of tiled studio space. “Listen to me. It’s my job to send my voice out into the dark, from here, to be retrieved by someone else’s receiver. It’s my job to be listened to. I’m paid money by the purveyors of shit to convince the would-be purchasers of shit that they should purchase the particular shit I’m being paid to purvey. No one loves me for it, for what I

do. The softer I speak, the gentler I make my voice sound, the more they buy. Sheets and towels, lawn furniture, soap, appliances. *Home delivery*. And some of them phone me up in the middle of the night; they say things like, *Hey, big boy, how're you hung? What's happenin' when yer shift ends?* Usually I just laugh, when that happens ...”

Alex loved the battle itself, for its poetry, its pyrotechnics. He loved the music he heard, the drums and whistles in his head, when we went out adventuring. He was often in the vanguard of our undertakings, in the early days, with his transcendental smile and demon's laughter, his characteristic mane of fiery hair. His beauty was dangerous to us, but we followed it like a lodestar, in the early days. Those days are gone now, and when we understood that they were gone, that the gay music had finally turned sombre and purposeful, we executed him. I will concede it was a mistake, at least a failure of imagination, but it taught us what we needed to know. The next time, it will not be a mistake. Alex understood that, I think. We are different now, *other*: we have come—through years of indecision, years of indifference, acquiescence, oppression, years of futility—we have come to know our terms and to set them, to accept nothing less, permit no compromise. To say, meaning it: *Give us what is ours, or we will take it away from you.*

Alex said, in one of the speeches he made before he went underground: “Give us what we ask for, that infinitesimal fraction of what you owe us by your greed, your rapacity, or it will be extracted from you in another currency: your children, your estates, your miserable lives. The hostages we take are your own, not ours.” It seemed hyperbolic. The audience was nervous, unsettled by the fury in his voice. Did he comprehend what he was saying? Had he meant to say it? Was he ... sincere?

Your hostages, not ours. We have taken one captive, one only. The exchange is still unequal.

It appears, from the latest reports, that our project may have run into difficulties. This is not positively clear. (It may be a tactic to divide and unnerve us.) The money has been promised, but not the arms, and there has been no word at all on amnesty or the release of our comrades. There is always the risk, which we have tried not to think about, that we were actually observed at some point during the abduction, and followed afterward. That danger was the original weak point in our plan; now, there seem to have been others. Nothing is definite. Morale, for the first time, is low. We have noticed movements, shadows, in the house across the street, supposedly vacant. Our deadline expires tomorrow at midnight, and we disagree among ourselves on the possibility of an extension. The prisoner is eager to join forces with us, but we are less than eager to have him. He could break, easily. We are tired, dirty, irritable. There are decisions to be made, but no one wishes to initiate the business of making them. No one knows what is going to happen ...

Undeniably, we would prefer to be doing other things, enjoying the mundane pleasures, dining and dancing in velvet palaces, making love on expensive mattresses, watching contact sports on television—everything that had to be given up, expelled from mind, from the territory of hope. We would have slept forever, if it had been possible: but it was not possible. The noise of gunfire woke us. The siren in the street, the crack of truncheon on skull, the groaning of muscle and crashing of blood, in all the unrewarded labours of the world, woke us. The shouts of the dying penetrated into that sleep, dragged us half-blind and staggering out of the lovely dreams, the

sheltered nests we thought were ours by right, into this wakefulness, this cold and unforgiving daylight. There was no choice. It was Alex saying, *When are you going to wake the fuck up?* and knowing, *This is the time. Now. You can't pretend he's not talking to you. To you.* There was no choice. Necessity came to the door, knocked once politely, and getting no answer smashed through ... There wasn't time to gather together keepsakes. There wasn't time to say, *Sorry, you've come to the wrong place, it isn't me you want.* It would have done no good to say it. There was no choice.

There is no romance in this venture now, no glamour, none. It is a job like any other, a matter of seeing the task at hand (straining the eyes to see it) and doing it. The object of the exercise is to do it well. Efficiently. There are many things still to be overcome, left behind. Among them, there is this habit of mind, my own, which persists in language, a crippling attachment to the merely rhetorical. We realize it, I especially realize it, even as we remain in bondage to it. Of all the lessons I have had forced upon me, this has been the hardest to assimilate: that our words themselves, the very cadences of our speech, are the property of others. A poet wrote: "My tongue shall serve those miseries which have no tongue." But I am not doing it yet. I am not doing it. My tongue is too much, still, the servant of those masters I would otherwise resist, the ones whose sole hunger is to be amused, diverted, lulled ... Even these few paragraphs, scrawled in the dead space of our three days' entombment here, even these lines that must be burned and scattered before we leave, are an indulgence, a frivolity allowable only because there is nothing else, immediately, to do. *Beware, even in thought ...*

It is no hardship, or very little, to give up the material toys and trappings of the ordinary world, the impedimenta of accumulated objects, wasteful loves, money, safety: those things fall away like dead

skin, a welcome riddance. But it *is* painful, a continual rending, to detach oneself from the sound of one's own voice, the rhythms and modalities of a lifetime's speaking, writing, thinking ... this addiction, the last, always, to be shed. And I have not yet managed to shed it, and may never. Precisely as Alex was unable to quit the theatre in which his life was staged, I cannot bring myself to flee the story in which mine is written. One day I must, or betray everything—our people, our intentions, everything we collectively strive for. One day I will have to acknowledge that the only story is the world, and action the only language in which to tell it.

The task is to purge, permanently, the elements of Style: to obliterate personality itself, in effect *to disappear*. All this affectation, this posing, this strutting selfhood, must go. It serves no function. It must be forsaken as remorselessly, as irretrievably, as we were called to leave all the overstuffed baggage of that other life, that sleep ...

Midnight now, twenty-four hours to the deadline. In the streets, loud voices, a howling of tires, car doors slamming, metallic sounds. The radio reports that we have been traced to “a house in the East End”; that is a lie. We have not been traced, and we are not in the East End. Someone outside is playing a mandolin. In a special broadcast from his home, the prisoner's father pleads for clemency, in a voice close to breaking. It is not specified to whom the clemency ought to be extended. There have been other abductions: a minor government clerk, a vice-consul from one of the colonial powers, the wife of an oil-company executive; the pattern is more or less haphazard. Here a hijacking, there a plastic bomb. It will continue. A famous evangelist has recommended summary execution for all “enemies of mankind.” At least it remains possible to smile.

That is one of many things I had not foreseen, when I embarked on this course.

For there are, oddly enough, compensations we had not looked for, satisfactions that have, as we receive them, nothing directly to do with our historical situation, our stated goals. It may be improper to dwell on these things; it may be no more than self-delusion; it may illuminate nothing. But it is present, felt, in each of us: the concealed weapon, the one that can never be confiscated.

There are compensations. Here in this room, as I write, here, where we are together, it is permissible for a moment to forget, for this duration, the burden of what we set out to do, what we will yet have to do. Just now we are in suspended animation. Late-night traffic growls inoffensively in the street, outside, where it ought to be. Kids in muscle cars, prom princesses superlatively coiffed, going home. And a lone woeful baritone cracking into song:

*I've given up expecting trains
to take me anywhere,
I've had enough of looking for
a friendly place to be,
I've had a lifetime going places
finding nothing for me there,
It means nothing any more.
I've had enough of travelling in this company.*

The radio plays on, drowning out the singer. The news is predictable, the commentary typically inept, typically jejune. A shoot-on-sight order has been issued for us; there have been complaints, from liberal quarters, that such measures are unusual, that they set a distressing precedent. "Democracy" is said to be hanging by its fingernails. The world continues, entranced. Somewhere—in another zone, another theatre of operations—an evacuation is proceeding, approximately on schedule; public servants address audiences, to

applause; negotiations collapse; steps are taken to deal with crises. Someone seizes power, crying Emergency, and is not opposed. The Loyal Opposition is grateful. A spokesman for the regime summons men of good will to create a United Front Against Terror. It is not being created. A Vivaldi concerto comes on, the slow movement: it seems to us, listening, that the solo violinist is unsure of his part—or he may, for all we know, be under some unspecified duress. Many people are, these days.

The prisoner is behaving normally, sleeping or feigning sleep. He looks sublimely guiltless. Spaghetti bubbles on the stove, untended.

Before he died, Alex tried to say, quoting Mao: “To die for the people is heavier than Mount Tai, but to work for the fascists and die for the exploiters and oppressors is lighter than a feather.” He faced us calmly, stolidly, unassertive for once. It was unmistakable then, how much he loved us. But he would have his ironies, to the end—as we, awaiting the deadline, have ours. He smiled and waved, like a child going off on a vacation, in the moment it took the bullets to reach him. If it was a performance, it was a good one. We perceived, as he fell, that we might have made a mistake.

Time is running out. The deadline is approaching. We have reached a decision: there will be no extensions. The radio signs off with the National Anthem; behind it, somewhere surprisingly close, a walkie-talkie crackles, footsteps sound.

We will not be taken alive.