

# **distress signals**

**"extremism in defense of the powerless is not a vice!"**



## **VOLUME TWO**

### **LIVING IN AMERICA, IN STRUGGLE...**

**JUNE 2004**

the first victims of the oppressive society are the children.

as children, we are all attacked by the vicious and murderous values of the system.

no one escapes.

adults ignore the pain of children, because their own pain is so severe it clouds their intelligence to the point of being asleep...

**wake up.**

**this is the child's cry...**

sometimes it comes in one million tears.

sometimes it comes in a deafening scream. sometimes it comes as a rage unrelenting,

unstoppable. sometimes it is merely the shiver that shakes down to your bones.

sometimes it is only a whisper in the night, spoken to no one at all...

**listen.**



these are *distress signals*...

calling out through the darkness in these desperate times.

in the past we may have tried to forgive those who would beat, neglect, abandon and rape

us. once, we might have prayed for mercy, and the strength

to endure our terrible burden.

we used to suffer silently, numbing our pain with drugs and other addictions...

**no more.**

***now we demand to live.***

## ***Brujo Shit.***

“what first inspired you to resist the status quo?”

“inspiration is the wrong word. it was desperation. it was a survival instinct, a rebellion, an intuitive rebellion...the images i saw on TV were all of families that all liked each other and treated each other good and everything, but that wasn't my family. in my family, we were all concerned with the needs of my alcoholic father. we didn't like each other in my family, we didn't treat each other good. and then i went to high school, and i just couldn't do all the stupid stuff that they tried to get me to do, so i did whatever i wanted instead and got in more and more trouble...i figured - and i had a lot of encouragement in this viewpoint - that i was just a criminal. i could maybe deny it or try and hide it, but basically i couldn't. the reality that i experienced sharply contrasted the reality that everyone else claimed to experience...”

-andy keniston

inspiration is really the wrong word. i advocate conflagration to reconcile my heart with the world outside of me. the only given seems to be that i will experience a rift inside myself, a misery that i cannot translate to those i love, no matter how hard i try.

the misery we share is barely acknowledged as misery, if it is spoken of at all.

i notice i'm not fundamentally different from the religionists - fervently adhering to a desperate sense that justice and decency will prevail. i wonder how one could do without some sort of belief to make it through the grinding repetition of american life. the predictable, cold, driving, viciousness of the way we live is like a cloud of contagious gas which plagues me at all hours. i cannot run far or fast enough to escape the cruelty of our civilization.

and i am still naïve enough to read stories from the past as if i don't know the ending. my sense of surprise when i learn that the voices for liberation were slaughtered is genuine. how else could i keep reading?

when my uncle was my age, he fled chicago to find a quiet place to fade into his alcoholism, and his weary, appalled sadness in reaction to the calm, calculated, and clearly *counter*-intelligence murder of fred hampton. ten years of drunkenness like an unriddable virus, the type of rage that lands people in jail, and a whole series of decisions that he will never cease to regret. ten years sinking into his own desperation, letting it overtake him and swallow his passion to live another way. ten years of surrendering to the supremacy of the beast.

i don't know how to moralize against this anymore. what is the cogent argument for why my uncle should have continued to wade through the blood of the empire and call out through the haze for a world that lives?

two summers ago, when my uncle attempted suicide, i rode down to baltimore with my mother, and spent the whole ride arguing against her desire to give him a firm talking to. though shaken and terrified, a part of her still thought it necessary to tell my uncle what people “should” do - what’s “right” and so on.

i was belligerent: “unless you can offer him a dignified alternative to the current labor choices in america, his decision to die is perfectly reasonable.”

the dignified alternatives are few and substantially invisible. thoroughly *ir*reasonably, we live on.



so inspiration is the wrong word. arson begins inside us, and threatens to overtake us completely, unless we offer the flames some release. to survive, to preserve our dim hopes for an enjoyable existence, we choose *something else* to destroy, and begin setting fires. unless there is some profound transformation, the rest of our lives will be spent feeding and spreading those flames, and yet keeping them from torching our hearts, minds, flesh.

perhaps we need a good deal more myth. "brujos shit." time to start telling stories about healing fires - the rebirth of the prairie,

the crops that feed on ashes, the forest which burns so that it might live.

maybe it doesn't even take that much. just the slightest little glimmer of a chance and, thoroughly *ir*reasonably, we live on. i stay bouyed up high enough to breathe knowing that my uncle lives on knowing that i live on. i have chosen not to resign myself fully to the slumber of my self-hatred, addiction, and hopelessness because i am not living only for myself.

but the winters grow colder, longer, lonelier. and the fascists grow stronger, more subtle, more overt, more cohesive, more numerous, more unanimous. time grinds against us - each setting sun takes with it another bit of evidence for the notion that, somehow, all of this will give way to something meant to sustain human beings.

i said in philadelphia, 2001, "if they kill my uncle, i'll ravage the motherfuckers, i'll totally lose control..." no matter how my uncle dies, i will blame america; i blame her in advance.

i told him when i was 14, "i can't make peace with the so-called normal people. i tried. i just can't do it." and he told me that i could walk the warrior's path - hard, unforgiving and relentless.

once you begin walking this way, you can't walk any other way. the world burns around you, and you walk on.

somehow, thoroughly irreasonably, we live on.



## ***deaf***

the deafness of the listener is my muteness.

had no language for this.  
conversating with god,  
shouting in the forest.  
asked him to kill me,  
in a lonely pew.

but the deafness of the listener  
is my muteness.

desperation i knew first.  
unnamed and entire,  
shrieking and silent,  
pounding and impotent,  
burning and cold.

voice in bottles crashing into wall,  
vase to the floor.

voice in fire,  
fist to mother's face.  
voice in poetry on blackboards,  
screaming through the halls.

voice in walking away.

we speak when we are heard.  
desperation i knew first.

a crippling corrosion,  
an enraged explosion.  
imprisoned cries, overflowing emptiness  
and suicidal dreams.

*struggle is my native tongue.*

to have voice, i have fought.  
i have fought to have voice.

no master, no politician,  
no class, no race, no gender  
speaks for me.

*i either speak or am mute.*

where you can not hear, words swell within me.

i choke.

**i will not suffocate for your deafness.**

## ***underground.***

### **a true story a friend told me:**

about eight hundred people gathered last weekend in chicago to protest the meeting of a group of economic elites and the latest incarnation of the war machine.

the police outnumbered the protestors by a tremendous amount, and they lined up in three lines, as follows: the first line, marched *with* the protestors, in black-clad, full riot gear, in straight lines along the edges of the march. the second line of police marched just beyond the first line, carrying metal barricade-fencing, the bike-rack looking stuff used to block off roads and redirect traffic, sometimes. the third line was beyond them, walking in alternating pairs, one cop with baton drawn, the next with both hands behind her back, and so on, straight down the line.

the “everyday people” - pedestrians not attempting to challenge capital, war, or americanism - were left to walk on the sidewalks, up against that last line of alternating baton-drawn thugs.

the protestors were “left” the streets. any attempt to fight back would have been against forces vastly greater in number, weaponry, and military-style organization.

there was no clash.

the eight hundred saw fit to call it a “protest” afterwards.

### **a dream:**

i go to DC with two friends, to protest the war. they go ahead. i say i’ll meet them at the protest. when i get there, there arne’t many of “us.” only a few hundred protestors. the cops line all sides. some are hiding behind surreal, hand-painted, giant cardboard masks - like the kind of thing *art and revolution* puppet makers make. caricature, colorful “masks” hiding black-clad, helmet, shield, baton wielding DC pigs. i search through the crowd. no friends. i’m anxious the whole time, even before i arrive. i’m carrying a foot-and-a-half long metal club, like a “billy club” style weapon. i realize, clumsily, that i should conceal it. i slide the weapon down my right pant leg, holding on to the top of it. i am acutely aware that i am armed, but fairly confident that i wasn’t seen with it out in plain sight. despite being armed, i size up the two crowds - cops and people - and decide that the odds are terrible. after only a couple of minutes “protesting” i turn back, leaving the scene in a flurry. as i’m leaving, i descend at least one flight of stairs, perhaps many more. a female police officer comes chasing after me, alone, in regular uniform, and without drawing any weapons. as she nears me, she yells out “hey! don’t you want to come and protest the fascist state?” i hesitate in my walking but don’t respond. she quickens her pace so she’s much closer and says “hey! you’re just doing the easy, convenient thing! you’re complicit in this whole mess.” i stop, scared and angry, and, turning around to stare her down i yell “FUCK YOU! That’s what YOU’RE DOING, YOU FUCKER! GET AWAY FROM ME!” and i end the last epithet by spitting at her, landing on the ground just before her feet. she runs off and i continue fleeing the protest, descending more stairs. i come across an older black man and someone else my age, on a landing. looking out of an upward facing window, the black man is explaining the scene above, giving intricate descriptions of the placement and tactics of the police and their available weapons. the other simply listens. i am skeptical of both, but stay nearby, somewhat listening. i hear enough to realize that, indeed, the police have an elaborate plan and intentions to proceed as if in warfare. just a moment or two after arriving, we hear machine gun fire break out - for what seems like an extremely long time, tremendously loudly, as if nearby. it does, it sounds like the sounds come from below ground, up. and yet, i never question that it’s the cops shooting protestors. i’m absolutely sure. thankful to have left the protest, i lean my head into the black man’s chest and he’s comforting to me, even in the aftermath of the shooting.

**a type of translation. a dream-based poem:**

there's no solace  
to be offered.  
your misery and mine  
strain towards each other  
yearning to console  
and leaving a portion  
secret, unsaid.

and the layers flow past my eyes  
a history i had no part in making.  
the edges of cliffed-apart rock and concrete,  
metal and glass piled atop soil that once  
breathed

\*\*\*\*\*

i enter the cavern of steel and bone  
and somehow it warms me  
descending, almost fleeing  
the terror is, somehow  
both of my memory and my future.

maybe we should be learning how to  
best endure slavery.  
wait it out, he says.

i suppose now i see how so many jews made  
their way to the ovens.

i told you, i can't just wait to die.  
i can't simply endure for 50 more years.

but i don't want to fight, either.  
not now.  
not these foes.  
not with these tools.  
not if we're the only ones.

dear friend,  
i would stay and help provide shelter,  
but there is none to be found.  
the buildings cold and sterile,  
the inhabitants turned out to pasture



to see in the eyes of my friends  
the coming dying  
and no offer, no recourse, no antidote.

and then the buildings, too.  
we wander with restless eyes,  
dreamless nights.

\*\*\*\*\*

he tells me, in all seriousness:

i feel the ground sway beneath me,  
like motion of  
the rain  
conveyed by the moonlight.  
tell me a story of rebirth,  
of healing fires  
of cleansing water.

when the ground gives way,  
i don't know that i'll have the sense  
or desire  
to hold on.

rocking, shaking in  
my knees  
quiver of lonely,  
tired, small  
too many faces like  
evil masks,  
caricatures of care-  
givers  
ghosts of demons  
i've never known,  
the smile plasters  
over  
pock-faced scowl,  
volume down.

these are not my  
brethren.  
this nest does not  
protect me.  
i will not surrender to the  
sting of vipors who  
no longer talk  
to the soil.

\*\*\*\*\*

if i must sleep beneath a pernicious sky  
i'll make blankets of the soil.  
i cannot die unless  
i must live waiting for death.  
a grave becomes a womb  
while the living become vampires.  
i'm going down again now  
so sing a song of becoming alive.  
rejoice in this simple slumber.

perched just one layer beneath,

the soldiers marching  
becomes a theatre.  
and we remember  
laughter  
becoming.

the darkness re-trains the  
eyes.

\*\*\*\*\*

i never knew you brother.  
brought up in lonely  
halls  
devoid of your  
tired eyes.  
almost as if you grew old  
before i could even  
muster  
a hello.

how delightful to see you,  
so glad you could make it.  
of all the places we might have been,  
i'd still find you here  
no matter where we might wander.  
perhaps there will be no solace  
but still, i'll rest, for a moment.



## ***When i Grow Up, i...***

i think about how fred hampton was my age and about how he went to bed one night and about how police filled his bed with bullets and i think about the criminal black man that gave the motherfuckers the floor plan. cuz he was a criminal and he wanted out, but there's no way out.

the system makes you criminal and then outlaws it.

fred hampton was a criminal too, just trying to make his way out a little bigger. big enough that dozens of small children could stand up at his funeral and say "i am fred hampton! i am fred hampton! *I* am fred hampton!" when i grow up i want to be a small chicago Black kid in 1969 and i want to stand up at fred hampton's funeral and say "i am fred hampton!" i want to eat free breakfast with all my friends and inbetween bites of pancake i want to shout "long live mao!" or "all power to the people!"

what would happen if a million school children all raised their hands and said "when i grow up, i want to be just like John Brown!"?



mama, when i grow up i want my mama to bring me into the world for *good* reasons. mama, i want a good reason to grow up. just one. any one of the many reasons out there to choose from. because it's fun, because i'll learn something, because i want to, because i can, because i haven't before, any new reason will do.

mama, everything i want to do when i grow up i can't do if i have to

grow up.

i hope you're not ashamed anymore. maybe you just don't notice that i'm still a criminal. you can't wipe it away you know. the system makes you a criminal and then you can't ever let it go.

i'm afraid. i look for the reservoirs inside me where i still hope. i still hope that something about simple criminality will teach me why living is worth pursuing, why pursuing is a most beautiful task of the living. i wonder why i have to be afraid to keep living when dying is so common. i wonder why mama thought *now* was a good time to bring a child onto the planet.

mama, they're never gonna forget what we did. how could they? it's truly fucking sick. i'm sacred mama. the more i know, the sicker it is. mama, they're never gonna forget all of this.

it's too much to keep stored inside. you could see the images in your dreams if your daylight weren't so full of illusion.

mama, they're being forced to march in chains mama they're being packed into the belly of boats  
mama they're hanging like strange fruit from the trees, everyone's all gathered around and smiling –  
they made it into postcards, and they burned the flesh alive mama they stuck nat turner's head on a  
post mama they'll never forget mama, how could they forget? how could they?

there were black men in john brown's army who couldn't be tried because they 'weren't human'  
then... so they were hung too. mama, i'm scared, how could they ever forget? why would they ever  
want us to live again?



how can i grow *up*  
into this world?  
mama there's  
millions, millions  
more and those  
millions have  
children and the  
children can never  
forget mama, never  
forget.

will it come in  
waves mama, or all  
at once?

ok i'm here, i'm  
ready, let's begin.

but what do we do?  
what could we say?

they can never forget. and even if they could, it doesn't stop.

it'll come to you, like in a dream, if you let it. then you'll see it in your waking hours. maybe you'll  
be terrified... or maybe you already have a plan. maybe you knew all this already cuz you're the one  
who brought *me* here. yeah, but why did your parents bring *you* here? and why didn't you go  
somewhere new before bringing me with you?

what is one good reason that i should be born?

what shall i do with this birth, this living? what shall i call my time between death? what should stop  
me from mugging your husband or murdering your father?

i'm afraid i'm a criminal mama. i'm a criminal. and i'm afraid.

# *My Brother,*

We've gone far enough, brother...

Time to leave this world  
to those who built it,  
those who bled for it.

Time to find shelter  
in the crevices of  
our air-tight palaces.

Time to remember how to breathe  
in the open sky.

Time to forget about  
Time and Money and  
Progress and Jesus and  
Which equals Which and  
Who is better than Who

Time to forget about  
Making IT Big  
or small  
or even just "long enough..."

Time to forget to  
take every nasty little pill  
we've been taught to swallow,

To cough up  
All the bullets we've been  
Candy-coating;  
All the plastic gods  
We've worshipped.

All of it -  
Say goodbye to all of it..

Brother, if you're trying to "make it"  
In the White Man's world,  
You'll only make it that much harder  
(to tear it down).

You can't come to join us,  
Cuz we all have lost our minds  
(and our hearts most of all)

We are the homeless  
Who own everything -  
Even one another.

We are choking on the ashes  
Of the earth we've set ablaze  
We are all so close to drowning  
Only arrogance sustains us.

Please sister,  
I beg you.  
Swear off the White Man's disease,  
Learn to see and hear  
Your history.  
Your ancestors must be the guide  
To build a future  
Worthy of grandmama's dreams.

The time has come to be darker  
And the best amongst the whites  
will follow.

We'd give you all we've got  
If it'd make it any better,  
And we do.

You could take all you need,  
And you ought to.

## ***Stop!***

## ***Before we bury ourselves alive...***

## *Imagination and Dignity*

**"It's always easier not to think for oneself. Find a nice safe hierarchy, and settle in. Don't make changes - don't risk disapproval. It's always easier to let yourself be governed..."**

**It is the nature of the idea to be communicated: written, spoken, done. The idea is like grass. It craves light, likes crowds, thrives on crossbreeding, grows better for being stepped on..."**

**- Ursula Le Guin  
*The Dispossessed***

Israeli tanks are said to be indestructable. But numerous times while in the Gaza strip, friends recounted a story to us. It went a little something like this:

Back in february 2002, Palestinian militants opened fired on an armored settler bus that was driving along one of the settler-only roads in southern Gaza. The bus being bulletproof, no one was harmed. But, as planned, the IDF sent out tanks to respond to the attack on the settler bus.

As the tanks rolled across the desert they passed over the bombs the militants had buried beforehand, and three were totally destroyed.

The story is always told with a gleeful pride in the action. I think if you had spent a couple of nights in ramallah, trying to sleep through the terrifying sound, sight and feeling of a fucking tank pounding through the streets at four a.m., you would have some sense of why. Certainly if you had spent your whole life under military occupation you'd have a pretty clear picture in your head of the beauty of a tank being blown to bits.

The destruction of a tank is symbolically significant because, perhaps like no other machine can, tanks crush the human imagination. Tanks exist to flatten. Tanks destroy with a thoroughness - an utterly mechanical lack of apology - that is mindblowing. But more powerful still is the way in which - unlike bombs and missiles - tanks destroy with a force that is immediately, intimately, and *undeniably, the work of human beings*.

In many ways, the tank is the perfect Zionist weapon. The Zionist project is designed to be simultaneously impenetrable - permanently dominant - *and* explicitly and obviously done by and for actual people. While the "facts on the ground" are about destroying homes, crops, villages, etc. and rebuilding them for Jewish use, much of the work of Zionism is the systematic assault on human values. Zionism is as much about destroying memory, initiative, imagination, hope and dignity as it is about seizing land.

In the face of this reality, much of the most brilliant and creative work possible is *the assertion of brilliance and creativity* in and of themselves. Every tangible action taken against Zionism gives birth to - and keeps alive, and nourishes, and defends - the exact liberating human qualities which are being rolled over by Zionist doctrine and tanks.

Defiant action is a reminder that humans might still choose to be *actors in their own lives*, all the other despicable nonsense aside.

## ***along the ocean floor***

spent years wandering parched earth  
begging for water to carry me  
away.  
home?

slept in the belly of the great machine  
as it walked across water  
and spat me out  
covered in the blood  
and grime  
of our time together.

birthed in blood,  
nursed in stagnant waters  
bathed in torrential rains.

i want to slip back inside  
inviting myself to be cradled  
in the deep recesses  
of the vehicle which broke me,  
spoke me.  
abandoned me  
thirsty, and crawling.

\*\*\*\*\*

this ship brings the old world  
more than it goes.  
**and a new world still beckons.**



JKL

what may be new  
would still be a discovery.

there's nothing to be gained in this staying.  
gold piled higher  
drowns me deeper.  
falling down all around me.  
i'll like to swim in healing waters  
but all my gifts threaten  
to murder me.

\*\*\*\*\*

i'd rather not be run aground.  
endlessly you push us forward  
but the tides swell higher  
the islands choke, cough  
and fade away.  
forward.  
ever forward.

\*\*\*\*\*

i wrote you a letter  
old friend.  
in it, we laughed again  
taking in the breadth of the fields  
remember how they filled our eyes?  
remember the taste of sunshine  
on your back?  
remember the touch of the mountain air?  
when we lived it  
i swore we'd live better  
here.  
now my nights are full of then,  
with you.  
images so beautiful  
i awake with  
a skriek.



JKL

skeletons laid out as tracks,  
headed west, again  
silencing torrents  
above and below.  
the wind whips at our backs,  
screaching, so that we might halt.  
but forward. ever forward.

i'm digging my heels  
deep enough to sprout roots.  
i've been homeless too long.  
there's nowhere left to wander.

at this distance,  
you can't help but  
think me dumb.  
as if forgetting is the only respite  
as if i could harvet this parched ground  
and reap joy  
from a memory of fire.

if i could walk the ocean floor,  
i'd trace the machine's steps,  
and embrace you  
in the morning.

**T**he time fades so fucking fast, and it has been so long since days that seemed so huge, and that i can not have back. But many days seem huge, and are remembered for just hours trapped inside. I will never have any day back. And i truly only miss folks when i remember to. A photo, or an old letter, or a morning alone, and i remember all of the people i miss. one at a time. Faces come back from the past, with an unbroken tenderness towards someone i once was, or a friend we once shared. It makes me want to like them, again.

I suppose i don't always want to fight, really.

I can't be the only one that, in the presence of authority, finds himself making sure that i at least do the minimal amount necessary to be in compliance.

I can't be the only one that feels minimalized by this process.

I've studied enough to know that most people want to live a different way, and that mostly everybody works themselves harder than any boss ever could coerce them to, for a different way of living. I think we want to be tender to one another. I think we mostly all long for those moments where time is our own, and asks nothing of us. I think we mostly all can settle into and appreciate the sweet warmth of fading deep into your dreams, well past the coming of the morning. Perhaps many other folks live well on the memories of napping genuinely and wholly in another person's arms.

But i've also studied enough to know that the marxist governments aren't fundamentally different from nazism and that the peace that one generation longs for, out of exhaustion from the brutality of war, will not likely lead to the next generation being free from inciting such brutality. I've studied enough to know that what gains mass appeal isn't likely to appeal to the part of a human being that makes her distinct from the next or autonomously intelligent. I've studied enough to know that if there are two choices, one can clearly be worse, and yet neither will be better. And i've studied enough to know that we have accumulated enough viciousness, as a species, to fuel further viciousness well into the coming centuries.

I know there is plenty of fight that remains. So, like so many others, i pick myself up, time and time again, brush off the dust and the dreams of a simple rest, and i keep on trying. Pushing here, and pulling there, bending and standing firm, listening and raging, reaching out and pushing away, giving and taking. Trying, and trying, whatever might give way towards something like what i might dream of as a new way.

I believe a lot more on sunny days than on grey and rainy ones. I believe a lot more in the company of friends than i do in the presence of police. I believe a lot more in the woods than in the mall. And not a day goes by without me reminding myself that maybe, just maybe we've got a shot of working our way out of this mess.

Actually, many days it is enough to simply convince myself that i have done what i could reasonably have been expected to accomplish in one day's time and that i may reasonably sleep soundly.

We sure are a long way from living...



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