

Between the Sun and the Sea: Icarus at 12th and L

A Voice from the J20 Black Bloc and Kettle on the Practice of Anarchy

CrimethInc.

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Several blocks before the L & 12th Street intersection, I was already feeling that the march had run its course. At each cross street, we met a line of police, sirens blaring. A few brave souls still managed to fell some final windows on the periphery. Yet while the Bank of America windows had crashed in triumphant cacophony, these windows struck the pavement with an urgency that reflected our increasingly dire situation. We had no destination, no end goal. It felt as though we were running solely to evade police. I knew that it was time to break from the group, yet I still held a kind of separation anxiety.

Leaving has always been hard for me. Dispersing consistently feels like a haphazardly unthought-out ending tacked onto an otherwise compelling novel. A novel that begins with, “Collectively, anything is possible—you can do whatever you’d like” and ends with, “Everyone goes their own way and pretends to be normal.” Leaving the bloc means leaving the safety of a powerful mass of people, often to wander the streets immediately adjacent to crime scenes, alone, with police looking to single out suspects. There was a rumor circulating that, given their history with lawsuits, the DC police would be unlikely to mass arrest. This false prediction spelled doom for us unlucky rioters, as the police did just that. It was with these thoughts circling my head, alongside memories of past dispersals gone awry, that I decided to stay with the march.

I was with a few friends. We stayed together. We kept track of each other. As the march shrunk in size, we paired off and prepared to jettison ourselves from the bloc. We turned to face an alleyway on L Street between 13th and 12th. I knew very well that this could be my chance to safely exit the march. My friends bolted down the alleyway, not knowing what lay the next street over. For a moment, I thought to follow suit, but decided that too many of us in one place might attract police attention. A few minutes later, I was trapped between a wall and a riot shield. Facing the corridor that had offered safe passage just moments earlier to anyone brave enough to step down its halls, I contemplated the hesitation that had led me to this fate. If there’s anything I can say from my experience being pinned against that wall, it is that a split second of intuition in the street is worth more than weeks of prior planning.

The kettle was where I made my biggest mistake. It was there, and the moments just before, that I put almost no effort into escaping. The police had us sardined together so tightly that I gravely underestimated our collective potential within the kettle. I thought that I was about to be arrested with at most seventy people, less than a third of our actual numbers. I was primarily among strangers. In my heart, I felt that I would participate in a second attempt to charge the police line. It was my fear of being cast as a leader, in a film produced by live-streamers and on-duty officers, that kept me from voicing my intent. If there was any time to risk collective trust and courage, it was there, where we were most vulnerable.

There was a larger reason I was compliant in my own captivity. I felt myself above persecution. There are two reasons why one would go willingly to their arrest. The first, they think that they haven't committed any crime. The second, that they committed a crime so flawlessly that they could not possibly be convicted of it. Both of these presumptions involve a false sense of security; neither save you from prosecution. Though I did not delude myself with the pretense that I had performed a perfect execution of black bloc tactics, I considered myself "high-hanging fruit." I was counting on the prosecution to be lazy, to lack the funding or time to convict me. When I was in the kettle, I was convinced that I wouldn't actually be arrested. At worst, I would be charged with a misdemeanor, slapped on the wrist, and eventually end up with a check from a class action lawsuit. Instead, I had to navigate the next year and a half with looming felonies.

I had not come to DC innocently. I knew the risk, the potential repercussions. I chose to look them in the face. The pepper spray and stun grenades were terrifying, but not unexpected. In some ways, they heightened my senses and fortified my convictions. My heart races when I look back on the march—but not from trauma, nor from anxiety. It drums in vigorous reverie, recounts the last time it beat with purpose.

Over the following year, I was forced to tame my heart. In court, I stilled my breathing, attempted to hide my guilt. I kept a caged life. The legal procedure left me fraught with anxiety. I clung to the safety and certainty of routine. I denied every passion, every risk, in hopes that I would be able to convince a jury that I was simply not the adventurous type. My heart sat and sulked. I came to learn that, as a friend so eloquently put it, "The process is the punishment."

Felonies change things. I catch glimpses of understanding in the eyes of my friends who have faced prosecution to this degree. One of the beauties of black bloc is that I might be anyone under this mask; a restaurant server, a designer, a nurse. Once donned, the mask allowed me to act in ways a nurse can only dream.

To be unmasked is to be held in purgatory between selves. I was no longer the person I was in the streets, yet I could not return to being who I had been just days earlier. At its core, the bloc hinges on the moment when we shed our black clothes and return to normalcy. While there have been times where I've de-bloc'ed with a profoundly different understanding of the world, I was still banking on returning to work with only one less sick day. As time passed after J20 and my charges remained, I realized there was a possibility that I might never return to being the person I had been before my arrest.

During the interim awaiting trial, I chose a course of action that seems common among anarchist pending-felons. I applied to college.

For me, college was an attempt to regain some agency in two different ways. In one way, I was trying to influence my potential sentencing. If I could convince a judge that I was an upstanding citizen, then he or she might be a little more lenient in punishing me. Going to college was also an attempt to salvage my future, a future I felt was starting to escape my grasp.

At the time I was arrested, I did not consider myself to have a clear vision of the future. Yet in the wake of my arrest, all successful futures seemed out of reach. Success felt like a mirage, shimmering, hazy, always on the horizon. My case continued and evidence mounted against me. I scrambled to claim any sort of successful future I could before a conviction made one unobtainable. I raced towards the horizon without drawing any closer to it, meeting the same scene in every direction. My charges sent me spiraling and forced me to examine my feelings of helplessness.

When I did so, I realized that all along, I had held within me a concrete image of success after all. It was not the unimaginable utopia I had believed myself to be pursuing. On the contrary, it was all too familiar; I had simply kept it intentionally obscured from myself. When I honestly consulted myself about what constituted my image of a successful future, what I found was indistinguishable from the world I already knew—only in the future I had been imagining, I had a little more money, a better presence on social media. I had been so disgusted by this vision that I had banished it to the horizon of my mind.

The anarchist canon has changed dramatically over the past decade. Today, we are not as steeped in subculture. Our politics rely a lot less on consumer choices. We've come a long way from the cornerstone pieces of the early 2000s. Early CrimethInc. texts took the Situationist exhortation "Never Work—Ever" literally, proposing a sort of exodus that often looked more like voluntary exile; today, as work becomes more and more a part of our social as well as professional lives, the proposal seems unthinkably absurd. We have largely escaped the cultural pitfalls of the punk scene, expanded our access to funding for our projects, even created our own platforms so that anarchist ideas can proliferate. Along with these conscious efforts to grow and develop nuance with age, for me, something has shifted silently in the background.

I gave up my resistance to work—even took up office at some of the same companies I believed were bringing about an apocalyptic nightmare. I closed my eyes, clicked my heels, and repeated "There is no ethical consumption under capitalism." I justified my increasingly indiscriminate use of money, sought to tally up my influence on the world. I became obsessed with power, quantifiable power. I searched for any sign that the anarchist movement was gaining traction, that one day we could finally make "The Switch." My measurements for success had paralleled social norms; now they began to overlap with them. Soon Anarchy was just something I believed in. Aside from sharing meals and resources among friends, it was not something I practiced.

To some, the black bloc is a tactic, a means to an end. For me, having lived through a myriad of outcomes, black bloc is a practice. Black blocs are a practice in timing: when to return tear gas to the police, when to leave an intersection, when to smash windows, when to disperse. As in all practice, some days are better than others. To be in bloc is to experience what can be possible when the laws that typically govern us are momentarily superseded and how to act when our adversaries try to reassert them. When we participate in black blocs, we are attempting to learn

the balance between exercising an otherwise impossible freedom at the cost of our safety and maintaining a minimum degree of safety so that we can continue to act freely.

Every night as I mulled over my legal predicament, I would ask myself the same questions. “Are black blocs a pertinent part of the way we do Anarchy today? Are they just hollow tradition from a bygone era? Are they worth risking the world you inhabit daily for a fleeting experience, however ecstatic?” I think of my friends who are a little older than I, who have better jobs, who were noticeably absent from the march on January 20. For many people, their lot of worldly success is not worth the risk.

When I look back to the texts that inspired me as I was coming of age in radical politics, I trace a common thread binding them. Travel logs, accounts of underground healthcare, epics of animal liberation—at their core, all of them conveyed the same story. They told that There is a Secret World Concealed Within This One; a world that I had long since forgotten. The once-common anarchist saying “Another world is possible” is no longer spoken between friends. It is not overlaid on images of riots, nor commonly held as an anarchist truth. I mourn it’s absence. There are those who would say there is no life outside of capitalism, that we are bound to this world by birth. Only recently has the premise emerged that being born into a position invalidates your ability to transcend it.

The truth is that we alone are the visionaries of our success. We define our values, sculpt our objects of beauty. If we build from the blueprints of power and safety laid out in this world, then we will make more of the same. But I believe that we are capable of breaching the precedents of modern life. We can imagine less abhorrent futures, create lives worth living—but to do so, **we must abandon the worldly successes we seek for validation.** If we want to continue to experience the transcendental, unbridled ecstasy of black blocs, the practice of anarchy and experimentation, then we must create and maintain worlds in which the consequences of a felony rioting conviction are not so dire—worlds worth leaving this one to get to. Another world is not only possible, it is waiting for us. We must believe in our ability to reach it so we can find the strength to depart. We have to let go of our attachments and truly believe that we are capable of taking flight.

In the face of repression, I sometimes feel like a young Icarus, hurtling towards the sun only to plummet into the sea. All exercises in freedom have these risks. To those who dare to soar, may we also learn to swim, and never fear the consequences of singed wings.

Despite its abrupt end and unfortunate outcome, the march on January 20, 2017 was one of the most inspiring, vitalizing moments of my life. Despite its obvious challenges, I am thankful that facing charges has given me time to reflect. Let me take a moment here to explicitly state, with a clear mind and certain heart, that—having eluded conviction—I would 100% do it again no questions asked. I hope someday to share an experience of elation similar to that of J20 with the readers of this piece. If and when that day comes, may we both avoid arrest and get off scot-free.

With love,

a CrimethInc. ex-defendant

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