A decorative border of thin, winding vines with small leaves and flowers surrounds the title. The flowers are simple line drawings of various shapes, some resembling roses or daisies.

# Survival and Full Lives

Queerness and antisemitism.

in prison and beyond.

A horizontal decorative vine with leaves and small flowers.

by Max Reynard



# Zine Distros who send free\* to prisoners

PRISONER CORRESPONDENCE PROJECT (also has penpals for LGBTQ+)  
QPIRG c/o Concordia Univ., 1455 de Maisonneuve Ouest  
Montreal, QC H36 1M8 CANADA (\$1.70 postage from U.S.)

PRISON BOOKS COLLECTIVE (also has books for NC, AL)  
P.O. Box 625, Carrboro, NC 27510

EAST BAY PRISONER SUPPORT  
P.O. Box 22449, Oakland, CA 94609

\* write & ask for  
their catalogs

MONGOOSE DISTRO  
P.O. Box 220069, Brooklyn, NY 11222

BLACKBIRD ZINE DISTRO  
P.O. Box 11142, Durham, NC 27703

SOUTH CHICAGO ABC ZINE DISTRO  
P.O. Box 721, Homewood, IL 60430

GREAT FALLS BOOKS THROUGH BARS (also has books)  
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We're sitting on the bed, watching TV, when my grandmother explains to me that because my mother isn't Jewish, I'm not either, even though my father is.

But, she says, partial heritage is sufficient. "Good enough for Hitler," she says.

I am twelve.



Next to me, now, a casual white supremacist is watching TV here in prison. He's friendly, and in return I feel I have to be friendly toward him. The animated plot on screen is about going back in time to shoot the Fuhrer.

"I'm one of the few," he says over his shoulder, "who think he was right."

I'm not sure there are that few.

But I say nothing. I'm Jewish (enough) and queer, and trying to survive in prison. Sometimes doing nothing is survival, or at least it feels like it is. So I wear an attitude of acceptance, and don't reveal my true self.



**SENTENCES FOR SEX OFFENSES IN THE UNITED STATES**

MINIMUM and/or IMPRISONMENT: For FIRST OFFENSE unless otherwise noted, as of 1964. NUMBERS ARE GIVEN. THEY REPRESENT MINIMUM AND MAXIMUM PENALTIES.

	FORNICATION	ADULTERY	COHABITATION
SODOMY*			
2-10 yrs.	\$100 to 1 or 6 mos.**	\$100 to 1 or 6 mos.**	
	\$400 or 2 years	\$200 or 3 mos.	3 yrs.

It's not surprising that queer and trans prisoners tend to wear metaphorical masks. Some of us, for physical or emotional safety, have to use a mask of "normality," or at least plausible deniability, in order to survive. As for ancestry, anything not immediately visible as whiteness seems better left unsaid, at least to white people.

We're rarely able to show our full selves in here, even when we feel safe enough -- or simply incapable of hiding -- some parts.

The challenge is how to know when a mask is a shield, cumbersome but necessary, and when it is a prison in itself, limiting our growth and freedom. We shouldn't ever feel fully comfortable wearing the mask, or we risk a temporary strategy for just making do turning into the only way we know to live.

As Audre Lorde wrote:

"For we have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition, and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us."

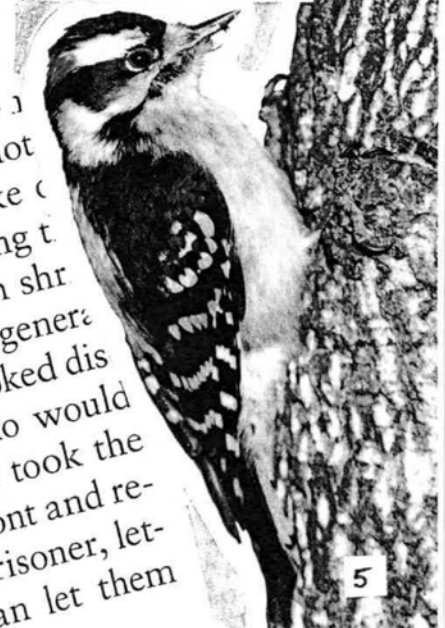
MASSACHUSETTS	1-10 yrs.			
	1-10 yrs.	\$100 and 2 mos.	\$1000 or 5 yrs.	\$1000 or 1 yr. or both
	20 yrs.	\$30 or 3 mos.	\$10	\$300 or 5 yrs.

We must constantly check the fit of those masks. Are we unwittingly internalizing our oppression? Do we need to have them on as often as we do? Must they be quite so opaque? Do we have actual concerns about our safety, or is it a generalized fear that keeps them in place?

I don't discount the danger we do sometimes face, but forcing our lives to always be "safe" will, over a lifetime, murder the parts inside us most worth protecting. And that's as much a call to myself as to you, to take off my mask more often, in more places.

One other question to ask ourselves: Are there others who can help us to see the parts of the mask that have become too tangled in our truer persons, or places that the mask might be pushing its tendrils where they don't belong?

\*\*\*  
 "Suddenly, two cops came to a boy who had done absolutely not to a waiting van brought to take cops joined them and began pounding the groin with night sticks. A high shrieked "our sister!" and there was a general "butch" looking "numbers" looked disconcerted, fifty or more homosexuals who would as "nelly," rushed the cops and took the They then formed a solid front and refused to regain their prisoner, let them than let them



Later that night in my grandmother's apartment, she shakes me by the shoulders. We are watching one last show before I go to bed, and I'm feeling newly embarrassed in just a t-shirt and white little-kid briefs. I'm not even sure why I'm embarrassed; I'm ashamed for being ashamed.

"I want you to know," she shakes me. "I love you no matter what. No matter what," she says.

Nothing has prompted this. She just sees something in me, some truth I haven't yet figured out myself about my sexuality. She wants to get in before that truth hunts me down, to help me build the fortress that will withstand its march.

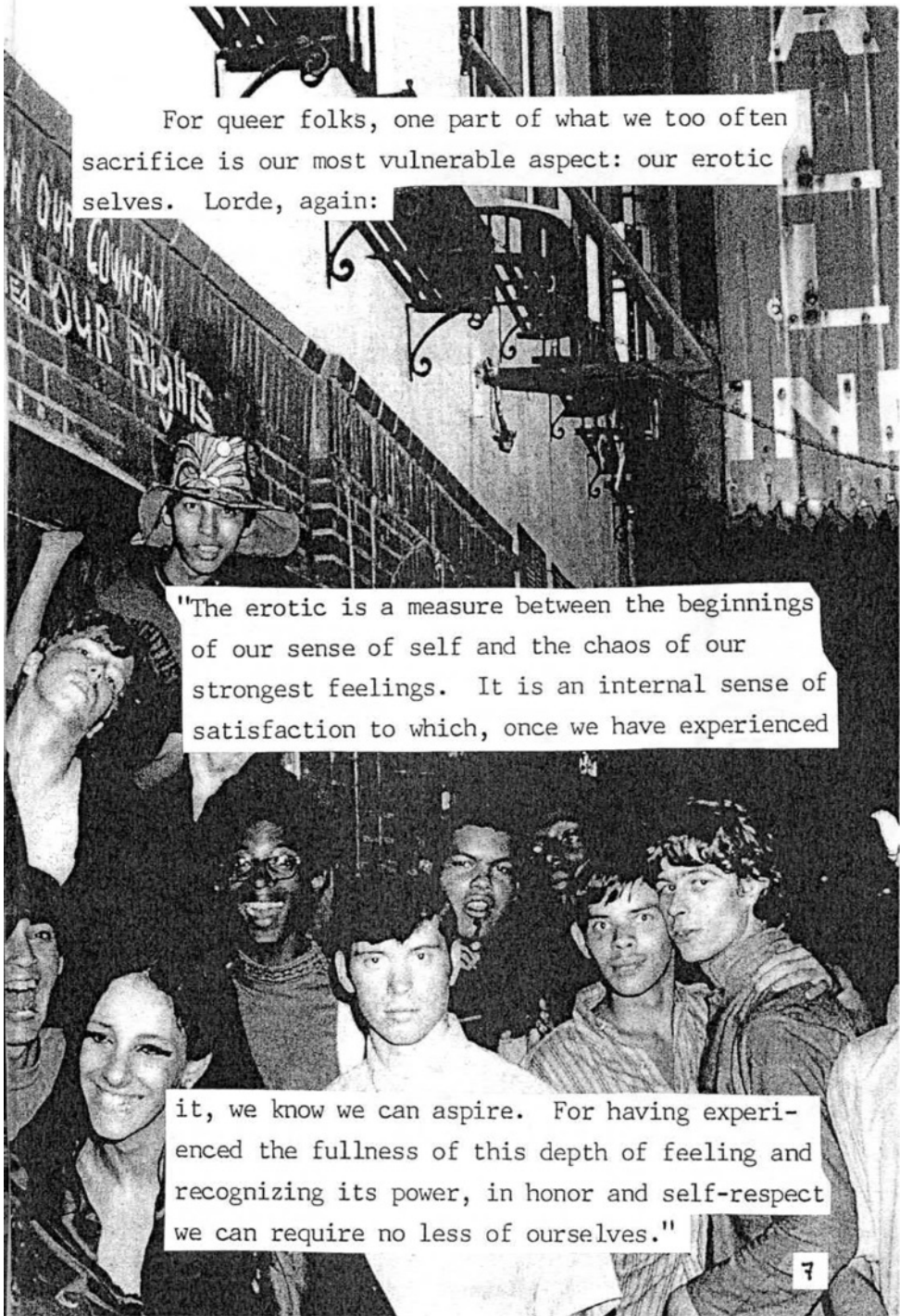
In a car a few months into the future, I'll hear her describe someone as faygeleh, with an apparently good-natured laugh. It goes over my head.

\*\*\*

I worry what will happen when those of us who are queer or trans move outside of prison, for those who get to leave.

Will we still be able to center ourselves in completeness? Or will we have integrated oppression so deeply in our bodies that we go on hiding a powerful, beautiful part of ourselves out in the wider world?

6



For queer folks, one part of what we too often sacrifice is our most vulnerable aspect: our erotic selves. Lorde, again:

"The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced

it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves."

7

Prisoners are forced to conceal the erotic parts of themselves -- queer prisoners doubly so.

I think it must be that threat of self-knowing, of intimate power, that so frightens the staff who institute these rules.

They already work to frustrate platonic connections between prisoners. They forbid material support -- even giving things to one another, for free, is a violation.

They deny ongoing contact, should one friend be transferred or go home. That's to say nothing of prisoner study groups, which staff seem to assume are precursors to riots and escapes.

Connections between friends and lovers

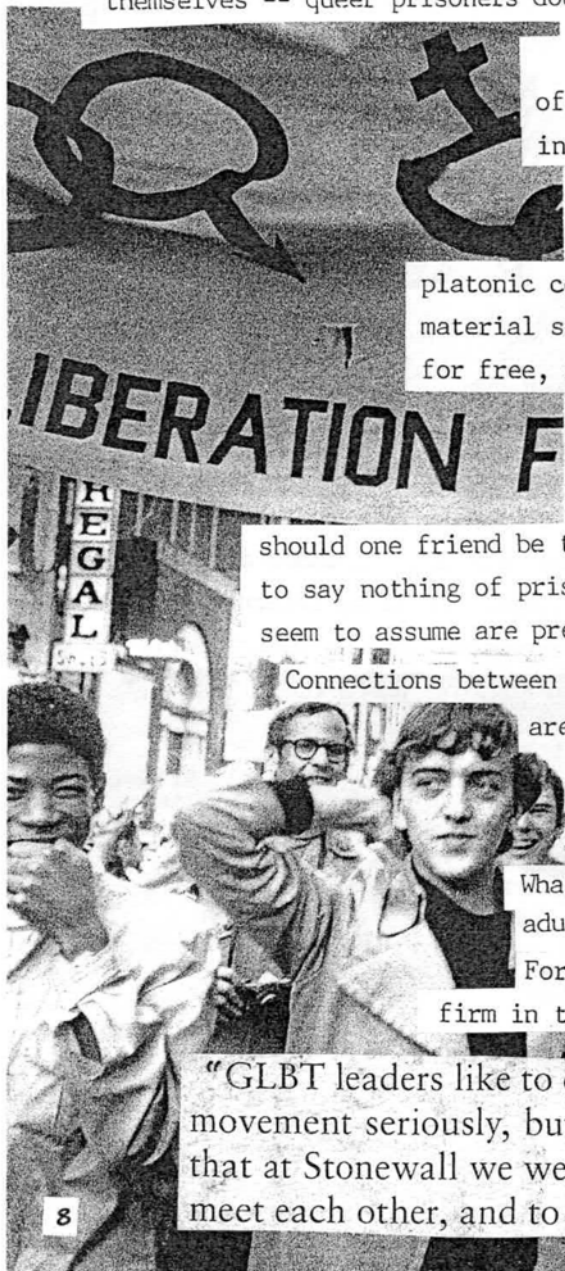
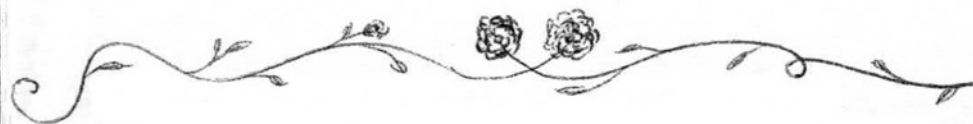
are part of a well-adjusted human life, yet the carceral state always manages to leave this out of their "corrections" plans.

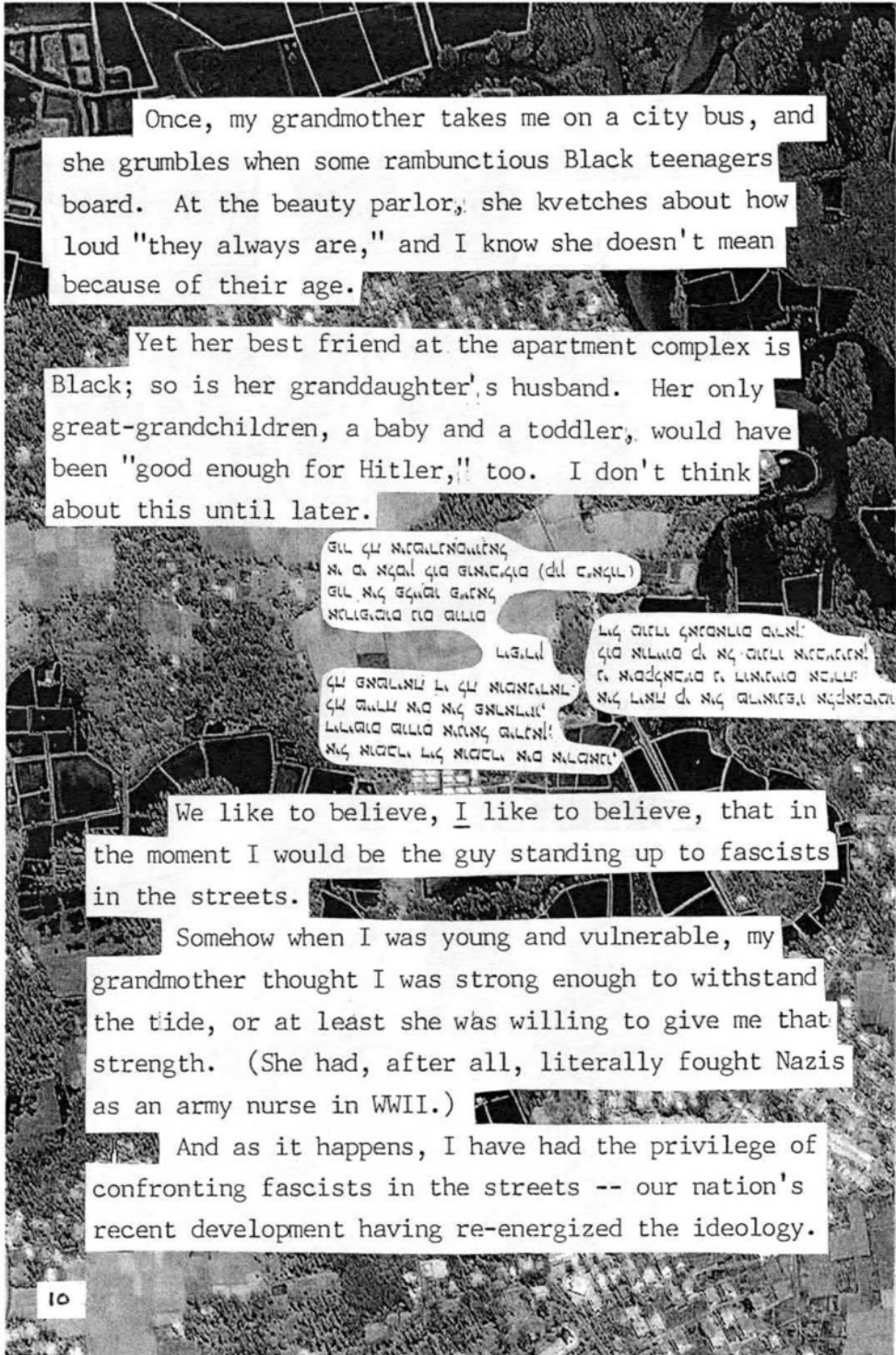
What they want are not interdependent adults, but obedient simpletons.

For queer prisoners, we must remember to hold firm in the full measure of our lives -- desire included.

\* \* \*

"GLBT leaders like to criticize young gays for not taking the movement seriously, but don't listen to them. Just remember that at Stonewall we were defending our right to have fun, to meet each other, and to have sex."





Once, my grandmother takes me on a city bus, and she grumbles when some rambunctious Black teenagers board. At the beauty parlor, she kvetches about how loud "they always are," and I know she doesn't mean because of their age.

Yet her best friend at the apartment complex is Black; so is her granddaughter's husband. Her only great-grandchildren, a baby and a toddler, would have been "good enough for Hitler," too. I don't think about this until later.

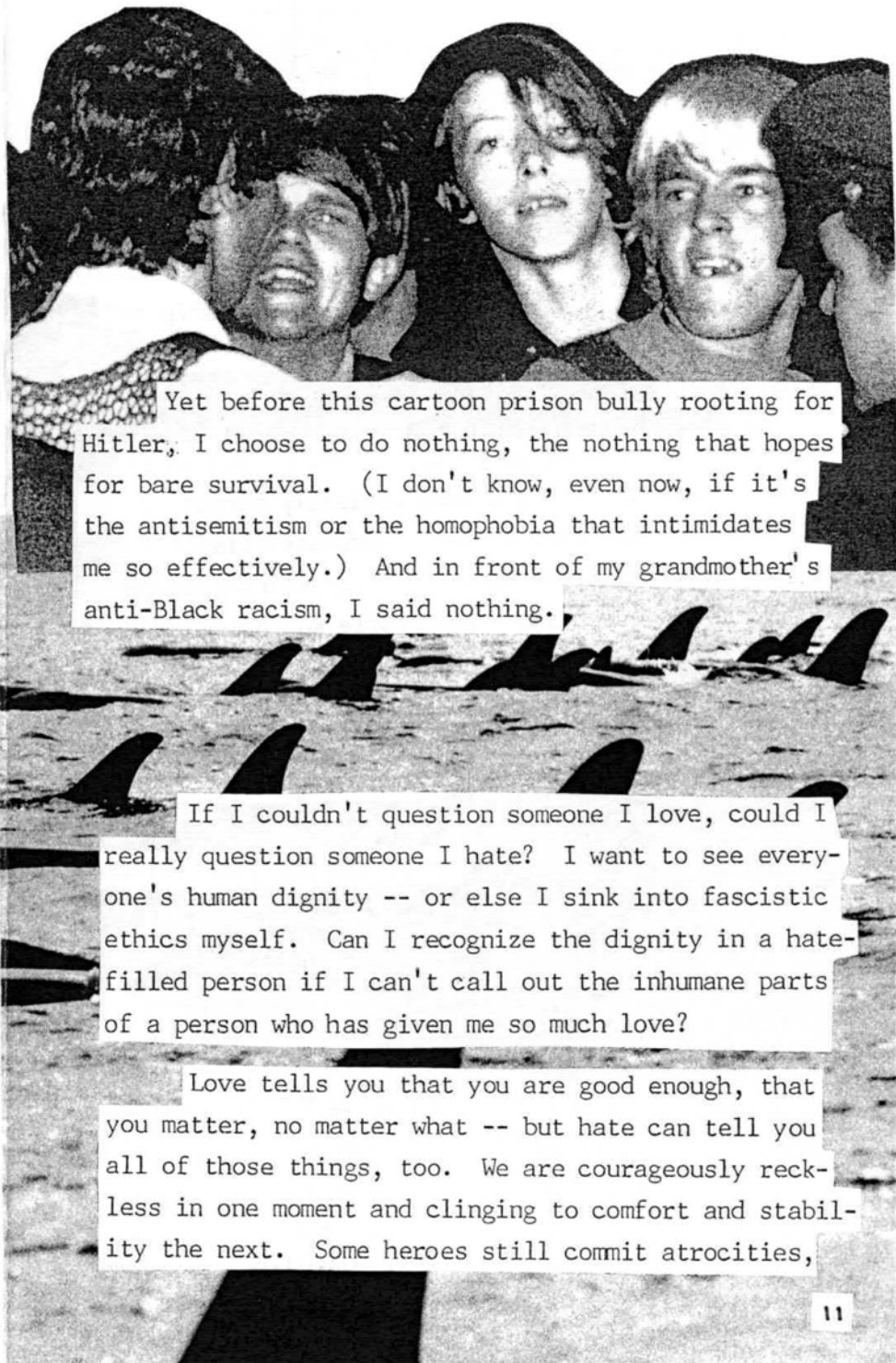
ELI QU NIGALNANING  
NI A NIGAL QIA GINICQIA (DI TANGU)  
ELI NIQ GINIGAL GINIG  
NIGALQIA NIA QILIA

LIQ QILIA GINIGALIA QILNI!  
QIA NIGALIA DI NI-QILIA NIGALAN!  
NI NIGALQIA NI LUNIGIA NIGAL!  
NIQ LILIA DI NIQ QILINIA NIGALQIA

We like to believe, I like to believe, that in the moment I would be the guy standing up to fascists in the streets.

Somehow when I was young and vulnerable, my grandmother thought I was strong enough to withstand the tide, or at least she was willing to give me that strength. (She had, after all, literally fought Nazis as an army nurse in WWII.)

And as it happens, I have had the privilege of confronting fascists in the streets -- our nation's recent development having re-energized the ideology.



Yet before this cartoon prison bully rooting for Hitler, I choose to do nothing, the nothing that hopes for bare survival. (I don't know, even now, if it's the antisemitism or the homophobia that intimidates me so effectively.) And in front of my grandmother's anti-Black racism, I said nothing.

If I couldn't question someone I love, could I really question someone I hate? I want to see everyone's human dignity -- or else I sink into fascist ethics myself. Can I recognize the dignity in a hate-filled person if I can't call out the inhumane parts of a person who has given me so much love?

Love tells you that you are good enough, that you matter, no matter what -- but hate can tell you all of those things, too. We are courageously reckless in one moment and clinging to comfort and stability the next. Some heroes still commit atrocities,

some traitors end up rescuers, and there are rarely uniforms to identify the sides.

\* \* \*

Under Hitler's Paragraph 175, thousands of LGBTQ+ people were stripped of their German citizenship and sent to death camps. (So, I would have qualified twice over.)

Berlin, a queer haven in the 1920s, was sanitized into conformity and then violently purged by the Third Reich. But when Allied Powers established a postwar government, Paragraph 175 was maintained.

The few queer and trans people who had survived

extermination were freed,

then remained criminals

under the law for decades.

"I had met Marsha in 1973 as an Advocate reporter. The GAA people had freed her. It was, they locked up her gay sister, Marsha Johnson, but they went into the mental hospital and they snuck her out in an elevator and they ran out the door. Now the reason they . . . she was in the mental hospital is she took LSD and was sitting in the middle of either

There's a photograph from 1936, of a crowd of men saluting as a Nazi parade goes by -- except one man, alone among the group, who does not raise his arm.

As related by Isabel Wilkerson, the man in the picture is August Landmesser. He is "Aryan" but in love with a Jewish woman, illegal under the Third Reich's "racial infamy" laws. Those around him don't know this, of course -- to remove that mask of national purity would indeed put him in danger. But he is nonetheless willing to risk withholding public assent.

It's not too much of a stretch to say that August is "queering" the expectation of what makes for acceptable love. The unacceptable forms of love were forced, with violence, into hiding. Yet he chooses to show -- for reasons undisclosed -- that there are other ways to live.

August must acknowledge the murderous power holding him silent, while he can still refuse to consign his whole self to the shadows. His declining to salute keeps alive the parts inside of himself he cannot show.

I think about how many rallies August might have attended before, how many times he may have even raised his hand to the glint of an officer's pin.

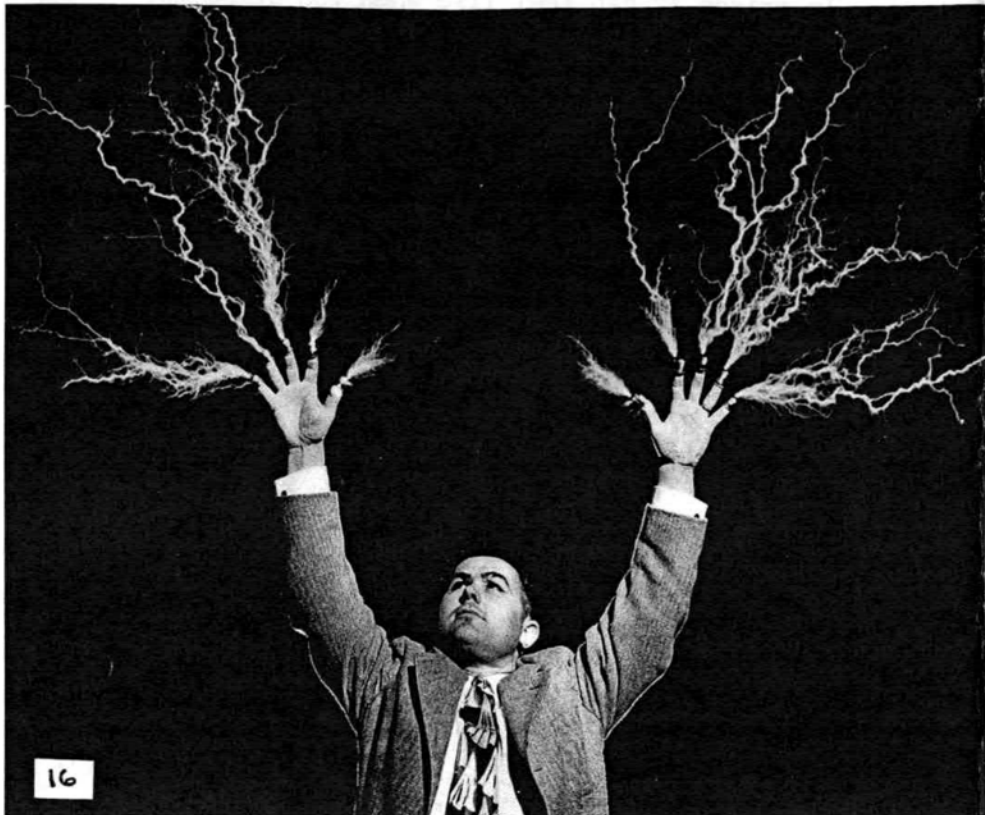
Those other days he did nothing to stand against the tide -- and doing nothing matters, of course it does -- but one day love and courage welled up inside of him and anchored him firmly.





James Baldwin, who wrote a lot about surviving in the face of dehumanization as a Black gay man in the 1950s, said, "Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within."

If you're queer or trans and in prison, you may not be able to take off your mask right now, but you can nurture that spark inside containing your whole self. You are not the person this grim apparatus of immiseration tries to turn you into; you exist at a deeper, truer level than their policies or programs can ever touch.



Wearing a mask doesn't mean you're giving up, it means you're surviving pending revolution. When you can, ask yourself whether your masks of silence or conformity are still necessary -- and yes, sometimes they are. But consider when and where your deepest vulnerabilities can, in love, power your greatest strength.

This system makes demands of you, demands to which you sometimes must acquiesce. Your love, however, contradicts the fictions of incarceration's hate and control.

Your very existence is good enough.

\* \* \*

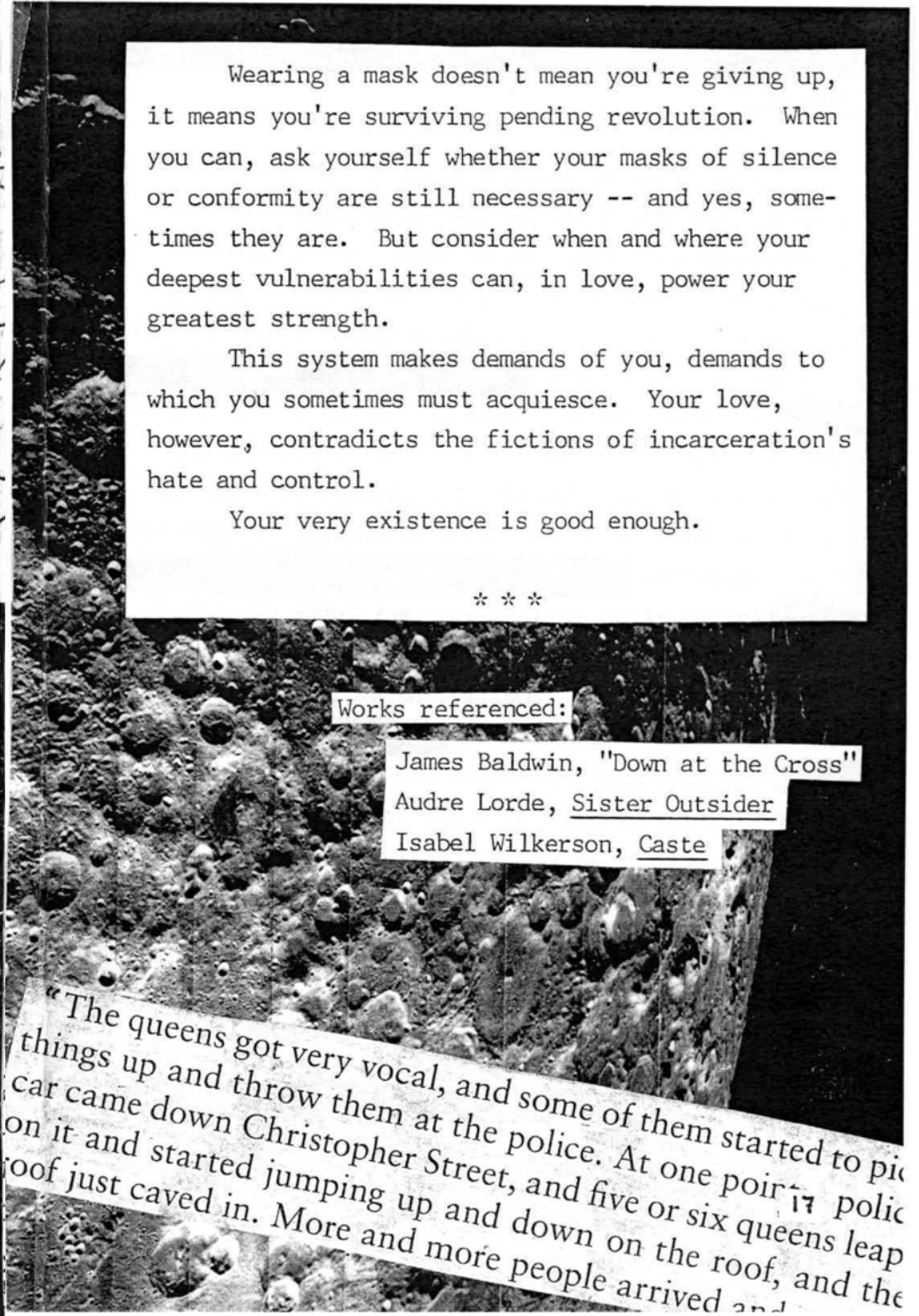
Works referenced:

James Baldwin, "Down at the Cross"

Audre Lorde, Sister Outsider

Isabel Wilkerson, Caste

"The queens got very vocal, and some of them started to pick things up and throw them at the police. At one point a police car came down Christopher Street, and five or six queens leap on it and started jumping up and down on the roof, and the roof just caved in. More and more people arrived and



Addendum:

I've tried to write this essay engaging with both my Jewishness and my queerness. But I have to acknowledge that only one of these can be publicly proclaimed, from the U.S. president on down through prison staff and other residents here, as shameful, or demonic, or imaginary.

I'm a cis man and have not had to suffer transphobia directly -- that's something my friends and family face -- but physical and rhetorical violence toward trans people, and trans prisoners, is exponentially greater.

Antisemitism remains a potent force of malevolence in the world and in my prison dorm. But faith is a protected class, legally and socially, in a way that sexuality simply isn't.

At the moment, fascists are cynically deploying "fighting antisemitism" as a way to justify genocide and repression -- almost impressive in its level of intellectual bankruptcy, and insulting to Jews and Jewish ideals.

But for queers, and trans people, the people in power openly seek to dismantle our humanity as they debate our humanness, more akin to Jewishness in 1936 than 2026.

Neither hatred is excusable; nor are they equivalent. Acknowledging these two parts of myself fully also means acknowledging how they are attacked differently in the United States of the twenty-first century.

Quotes

5: Dick Leitsch, "The Hairpin Drop Heard Around the World."

12: Randy Wicker and Marsha P. Johnson, interviewed by Eric Marcus.

15: Martin Boyce, interviewed by Eric Marcus.

17: Jayne County, "Man Enough to Be a Woman."

back cover: Miss Major, interviewed by Abram J. Lewis.

Images

3: From the masthead for "La Vara," a Sephardic Jewish socialist newspaper in the 1900s.

7: At the Stonewall Inn, NYC.

8-9: Gay Liberation Front march, Times Square, NYC, fall 1969.  
*Edmund White, "City Boy."*

10 & back cover: Hebrew lyrics to "The Internationale"

11: At the Stonewall Inn, NYC, 1:20 AM, June 28, 1969.

15: Flyer from the Mattachine Society, summer, 1969.

Playlist 

that helped me write this

- |                                     |                                    |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Love Lies Limp<br>ALTERNATIVE TV    | Stepping Out of Line<br>AU PAIRS   |
| So Afraid<br>JANELLE MONAÉ          | The Guillotine<br>THE COUP         |
| Cosmic Dancer<br>T. REX             | The City<br>PATRICK WOLF           |
| Radicalized<br>DESAPARECIDOS        | Come Back Home<br>D76 SHAKE        |
| Wild is the Wind<br>NINA SIMONE     | Prince Johnny<br>ST. VINCENT       |
| Apocalypse<br>CIGARETTES AFTER SEX  | Blush<br>WOLF ALICE                |
| Things Behind the Sun<br>NICK DRAKE | Dancing in a Mindfield<br>PLUSHGUN |

...ked into the bar for protection. And then the next thing you knew, the riot squad was there and then it was on. And you had learned from some friends in Chicago, if you're ever in a situation with a cop, do something to piss him off enough to rock you out. 'Cause if they don't knock you out, they will continue to beat your ass till they break bones in your body."


QOTI QO NIGALLENQINGI  
NI ELIACIO QILLO NIGLLO:  
LI GU QO MODENAO QI EN!  
NIGLLO QO ELICAO LIQ QILLO!

QO NIGALLENQINGI

Max Reynard is currently incarcerated in a U.S. federal prison. Prior to incarceration, Max worked as a community organizer, website developer, nonprofit staffer, produce monger, and semi-professional musician.

Max would love to hear from you! Contact QOTI, below, for his mailing address.

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free to prisoners  
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