Rebecca Solnit. *Hope in the Dark.* New York: Nation Books, 2006.

1
Looking into Darkness

On January 18, 1915, six months into the First World War, as all Europe was convulsed by killing and dying, Virginia Woolf wrote in her journal, "The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think." Dark, she seems to be saying, as in inscrutable, not as in terrible. We often mistake the one for the other. Or we transform the future's unknowability into something certain, the fulfillment of all our dread, the place beyond which there is no way forward. But again and again, far stranger things happen than the end of the world.

Who, two decades ago, could have imagined a world in which the Soviet Union had vanished and the Internet had arrived? Who then dreamed that the political prisoner Nelson Mandela would become president of a transformed South Africa? Who foresaw the resurgence of the indigenous world of which the Zapatista uprising in southern Mexico is only the most visible face? Who, four decades ago, could have conceived of the changed status

of all who are nonwhite, nonmale, or nonstraight, the wide-open conversations about power, nature, economies, and ecologies?

There are times when it seems as though not only the future but the present is dark: few recognize what a radically transformed world we live in, one that has been transformed not only by such nightmares as global warming and global capital, but by dreams of freedom and of justice—and transformed by things we could not have dreamed of. We adjust to changes without measuring them, we forget how much the culture has changed. The US Supreme Court ruled in favor of gay rights on a grand scale last summer, a ruling inconceivable a few decades ago. What accretion of incremental, imperceptible changes made that possible, and how did they come about? And so we need to hope for the realization of our own dreams, but also to recognize a world that will remain wilder than our imaginations.

Twenty-one years ago this June, a million people gathered in New York City's Central Park to demand a nuclear freeze. They didn't get it. The freeze movement was full of people who believed they'd realize their goal in a few years and then go home. They were motivated by a story line in which the world would be made safe—safe for, among other things, going home from activism. Many went home disappointed or burned out, though some are still doing great work. But in less than a decade, major

nuclear arms reductions were negotiated, helped along by European antinuclear movements and the impetus they gave the Soviet Union's last prime minister, Mikhail Gorbachev. Since then, the issue has fallen off the map and we have lost much of what was gained. The United States never ratified the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which could have put an end to nuclear weapons development and proliferation. Instead, the arms race continues as new nations go nuclear, and the current Bush administration is planning to resume the full-fledged nuclear testing halted in 1991, to resume development of a new generation of nuclear weapons, to expand the arsenal, and perhaps even to use it in once-proscribed ways. The activism of the freeze era cut itself short, with a fixed vision and an unrealistic timeline, not anticipating that the Cold War would come to an end at the close of the decade. They didn't push hard enough or stay long enough to collect the famous peace dividend, and so there was none.

It's always too soon to go home. And it's always too soon to calculate effect. I once read an anecdote by someone involved in Women's Strike for Peace (WSP), the first great antinuclear movement in the United States, the one that did contribute to a major victory: the end, in 1963, of aboveground of nuclear testing and so, of the radioactive fallout that was showing up in mother's milk and baby teeth (and to the fall of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee, the Homeland Security Department of its

day. Positioning themselves as housewives and using humor as their weapon, they made HUAC's anticommunist interrogations look ridiculous.) The woman from WSP told of how foolish and futile she had felt standing in the rain one morning protesting at the Kennedy White House. Years later she heard Dr. Benjamin Spock—who had become one of the most high-profile activists on the issue—say that the turning point for him was spotting a small group of women standing in the rain, protesting at the White House. If they were so passionately committed, he thought, he should give the issue more consideration himself.

Causes and effects assume history marches forward, but history is not an army. It is a crab scuttling sideways, a drip of soft water wearing away stone, an earthquake breaking centuries of tension. Sometimes one person inspires a movement, or her words do decades later; sometimes a few passionate people change the world; sometimes they start a mass movement and millions do; sometimes those millions are stirred by the same outrage or the same ideal and change comes upon us like a change of weather. All that these transformations have in common is that they begin in the imagination, in hope. To hope is to gamble. It's to bet on the future, on your desires, on the possibility that an open heart and uncertainty are better than gloom and safety. To hope is dangerous, and yet it is the opposite of fear, for to live is to risk.

I say all this to you because hope is not like a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. I say this because hope is an ax you break down doors with in an emergency; because hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal. Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action; action is impossible without hope. At the beginning of his massive 1930s treatise on hope, the German philosopher Ernst Bloch wrote, "The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong." To hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable.

Anything could happen, and whether we act or not has everything to do with it. Though there is no lottery ticket for the lazy and the detached, for the engaged there is a tremendous gamble for the highest stakes right now. I say this to you not because I haven't noticed that this country has strayed close to destroying itself and everything it once stood for in pursuit of empire in the world and the eradication of democracy at home, that our civilization is close to destroying the very nature on which we depend—the oceans, the atmosphere, the uncounted species of plant and insect and bird. I say it because I *have* noticed: wars

will break out, the planet will heat up, species will die out, but how many, how hot, and what survives depends on whether we act. The future is dark, with a darkness as much of the womb as of the grave.

In this book, I want to propose a new vision of how change happens; I want to count a few of the victories that get overlooked; I want to assess the wildly changed world we inhabit; I want to throw out the crippling assumptions with which many activists proceed. I want to start over, with an imagination adequate to the possibilities and the strangeness and the dangers on this earth in this moment.

2
Other Ways of Telling

In a photograph, four men lift a two-year-old girl from the rubble of the May 2003 Algerian earthquake as if they were midwives delivering her into the world. The camera of the photographer, Jerome Delay, peers down so that we see mostly the top of the men's heads and their outstretched arms. The girl, Emilie Kaidi, looks up with a grave and open face, ready to be born again into this world that nearly buried her. A lock of black hair cuts across one wide eye to touch her mouth. The photograph isn't really news; the earthquake that killed more than 1,400 Algerians was only a small item here; what happened to her was neither caused by nor overtly affects our own actions. The photograph was probably on the front page of the *San Francisco Chronicle* because it's such a beautiful composition and because the expression on her face is so miraculous, this trust and seriousness from a girl who survived because she called for her mother for two days. It was her cries that let these volunteers from Spain whose hands look so huge locate her.

And when I look at the photograph now, yellowed from months on my refrigerator, I realize that it struck me because of another image that was everywhere that April of 2003: the photograph of Ali Ismaail Abbas, the twelve-year-old Iraqi boy who lost his father, his pregnant mother, fourteen other family members, and both of his arms to American bombing in Baghdad. He, too, had a beautiful face and seemed strangely composed in the most widely seen photograph, looking back at us—from whom came the bombs to mutilate him and make him an orphan. And in the photographs he was alone, though someone must have pulled him, too, from the rubble.

The photograph of Ali Abbas was news. The photograph of Emilie Kaidi was not. What happened to him happened because of politics, because news is about what went wrong, because he tells us about our own effect in the world as she does not. He became an emblem of what we know, of barbarism and brutality, but what is she an emblem of? Surprise? Trust? Hope? The philosopher Alphonso Lingis says, "Hope is hope against the evidence. Hope arises in a break with the past. There is a kind of cut and the past is let go of. There is a difference between simple expectation and hope. One could say 'because I see this is the way things are going, this is the way things have developed, I expect this to happen'; expectation is based on the pattern you see in the past. . . . I think that hope is a kind of birth—it doesn't come out of what went before, it comes out *in*

spite of what went before. Abruptly there's a break and there's an upsurge of hope, something turned toward the future." Cynicism and despair are predicated on a prophesy of more of the same, or of decline and fall. Every generation believes it has arrived at some final state of awareness about justice, about politics, about possibility, and then that state implodes or is swept aside, critiqued from a recently unimaginable standpoint. Ours will be, too. There are problems of expectation and of focus.

Survival demands that you notice the tiger in the tree before you pay attention to the beauty of its branches. The one person who's furious at you compels more attention than the eighty-nine who love you. Problems are our work; we deal with them in order to survive or to improve the world, and so to face them is better than turning away from them, than burying them and denying them. To face problems can be an act of hope, but only if you remember that they're not all there is. Some bomb, some dig.

Some of it is a matter of how we tell our stories, the problem of expectation. On April 7, 2003, a few days after American bombs landed on Ali Abbas and his family, several hundred peace activists came out at dawn to picket the gates of a company shipping armaments to Iraq from the docks in Oakland, California. The longshoreman's union had vowed not to cross our picket line. The police arrived in riot gear and, unprovoked and unthreatened, began firing wooden bullets and beanbags of shot at the

activists. They had been instructed to regard us as tantamount to terrorists: "You can make an easy kind of a link that, if you have a protest group protesting a war where the cause that's being fought against is international terrorism, you might have terrorism at that [protest]," said Mike Van Winkle of the California Justice Department. "You can almost argue that a protest against that is a terrorist act." Three members of the media, nine longshoremen, and fifty activists were injured. I saw bloody welts the size of half grapefruits on the backs of some of the young men—they had been shot as they fled—and a swelling the size of an egg on the jaw of a delicate yoga instructor. Told that way, violence won.

But the violence also inspired the union dock workers to form a closer alliance with antiwar activists and underscored the connections between local and global issues. On May 12, we picketed again, with no violence. This time, the longshoremen acted in solidarity with the picketers and, for the first time in memory, the shipping companies cancelled a work shift rather than face protest. Told that way, the story continued to unfold, and we grew stronger.

And there's a third way to tell it. The April 7 picket stalled a lot of semi trucks. Some of the drivers were annoyed. Some—we talked to them—sincerely believed that the war was a humanitarian effort. Some of them—notably a group of South Asian drivers standing around in the morning sun looking radiant—thought we were great.

After the picket was broken up, one immigrant driver honked in support and pulled over to ask for a peace sign for his rig. I stepped forward to pierce holes in it with my pocket knife so he could bungee-cord it to the truck's chrome grille. We talked briefly, shook hands, and he stepped up into the cab. He was turned back at the gates. They weren't accepting deliveries from antiwar truckers. When I next saw the driver, he was sitting on a curb all alone behind police lines, looking cheerful and fearless. Who knows what has or will come of the spontaneous courage of this man with a job on the line?

Ali Abbas was, thanks to the intervention of an Australian journalist, flown to Kuwait and then to Britain for better medical care and prosthetic arms, and chances are good that he will live abroad. The face of a war lives on after the war, as did that girl-child who ran screaming, her flesh burned from American napalm, in what became one of the definitive images of the Vietnam war. The world is full of atrocities now, and it would be criminal to turn our backs on them. Emilie Kaidi's story is not a way to ignore Ali Abbas's story but to move toward it, as the Spaniards moved toward her voice in the ruins; he is news, she is not; together they might be history.

This book tells stories of victories and possibilities because the defeats and disasters are more than adequately documented; it exists not in opposition to or denial of them, but in symbiosis with them, or perhaps as

a small counterweight to their tonnage. In the past half century the state of the world has declined dramatically, measured by material terms and by the brutality of wars and economies. But we have also added a huge number of intangibles—rights, ideas, concepts, words to describe and to realize what was once invisible or unimaginable—and these constitute both a breathing space and a toolbox, a toolbox with which those atrocities can be and have been addressed, a box of hope.

I want to illuminate a past that is too seldom recognized, one in which the power of individuals and unarmed people is colossal, in which the scale of change in the world and the collective imagination over the past few decades is staggering, in which the astonishing things that have taken place can brace us to enter that dark future with boldness. To recognize the momentousness of what has happened is to apprehend what might happen. Inside the word *emergency* is emerge; from an emergency new things come forth. The old certainties are crumbling fast, but danger and possibility are sisters.