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As Eve Said to the Serpent: On Landscape, Gender, and Art

HOPE IN THE DARK

HOPE IN THE DARK: UNTOLD HISTORIES, WILD POSSIBILITIES

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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 anticomunist 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 is 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.

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.

Sometimes Las Vegas-style casinos give Native Americans visibility and political clout. Sometimes corporations and the military demand affirmative action because it benefits them, too. Sometimes Laura Bush pushes a poet to trigger an insurrection that lets thousands of poets speak out against her husband's war.

The Internet was invented by the US military and may be one of our most valuable weapons against it, for the decentralized dissemination of information and for the organization of citizen action. The Internet can be an elitist instrument, requiring access to computers—and, usually, to electricity and phone lines—and the knowledge to use them (though a nomadic friend tells me that all through the poorest parts of the world—Thailand, Bolivia—the young flock to proliferating Internet cafés). But the Zapatista revolution was the first to make serious use of the Internet; the shutdown of the WTO meeting in Seattle was organized to a significant extent by Internet communications; and so were the 2003 antiwar actions around the world. What can be said of a medium that sometimes seems to be made half out of cheesy porn sites and yet opens these doors? Just this: Coyote pisses on moral purity and rigid definitions.

GETTING THE HELL OUT OF PARADISE

Perfection is a stick with which to beat the possible. Perfectionists can find fault with anything, and no one has higher standards in this regard than radicals. In January 2003, when Governor Ryan of Illinois overturned 167 death sentences, reprieving everyone on death row, there were radical commentators who found fault with the details, carped when we should have been pouring champagne over our heads like football champs. But there's an increasing gap between this new movement, with its capacity for joy and carnival, and the old figureheads. Their grumpiness is often the grumpiness of perfectionists who hold that anything less than total victory is failure, a premise that makes it easy to give up at the start or to disparage the victories that are possible. This is earth. It will never be heaven. There will always be cruelty, always be violence, always be destruction. There is tremendous devastation now. In the time it takes you to read this book, acres of rain forest will vanish, a species will go extinct, people will be raped, killed, dispossessed,

die of easily preventable causes. We cannot eliminate all devastation for all time, but we can reduce it, outlaw it, undermine its sources and foundations: these are victories. A better world, yes; a perfect world, never.

A million years ago I wrote a few features for the punk magazine *Maximum Rock and Roll*. One of them was about women's rights, and a cranky guy wrote in that women used to make sixty-six cents to the male dollar and that now we made seventy-seven cents, so what were we complaining about? It doesn't seem that it should be so complicated to acknowledge that seventy-seven cents is better than sixty-six cents and that seventy-seven cents isn't good enough, but the politics we have are so pathetically bipolar that we tell this story only two ways: either seventy-seven cents is a victory and victories are points where you shut up and stop fighting, or seventy-seven cents is a defeat and activism accomplishes nothing and what's the point of fighting? Both versions are defeatist because they are static. What's missing from these two ways of telling is an ability to recognize a situation in which you are traveling and have not arrived, in which you have cause both to celebrate and to fight, in which the world is always being made and is never finished. What's missing, you could say, is a sense of Coyote's world instead of Yahweh's.

In South Africa, the apartheid system was overthrown after decades of heroic struggle of every kind, but economic justice has yet to arrive; it was a seventy-seven-cent

victory. Václav Havel was a gorgeous gadfly to the communists, but as president of Czechoslovakia, then the Czech Republic, he's been just a seventy-seven-cent politician. "We are winning," said the graffiti in Seattle, not "We have won." It's a way of telling in which you can feel successful without feeling smug, in which you can feel challenged without feeling defeated. Most victories will be temporary, or incomplete, or compromised in some way, and we might as well celebrate them as well as the stunning victories that come from time to time. Without stopping. Even if someday we get to dollar-for-dollar parity, that will just free us up to attend to something else (just as US women's wages have advanced compared to men's, but most working people's wages have diminished overall since the 1970s). "Utopia is on the horizon," declares the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano. "When I walk two steps, it takes two steps back. I walk ten steps and it is ten steps further away. What is utopia for? It is for this, for walking."

Judeo-Christian culture's central story is of Paradise and the Fall. It is a story of perfection and of loss, and perhaps a deep sense of loss is contingent upon the belief in perfection. Conservatives rear-project narratives about how everyone used to be straight, God-fearing, decently clad, and content with the nuclear family, narratives that any good reading of history undoes. Activists, even those who decry Judeo-Christian heritage as our own fall from grace,

are as prone to tell the story of paradise, though their paradise might be matriarchial or vegan or the flip side of the technological utopia of classical socialism. And they compare the possible to perfection, again and again, finding fault with the former because of the latter. Paradise is imagined as a static place, as a place before or after history, after strife and eventfulness and change: the premise is that once perfection has arrived, change is no longer necessary. This idea of perfection is also why people believe in saving, in going home, and in activism as crisis response rather than everyday practice.

Moths and other nocturnal insects navigate by the moon and stars. Those heavenly bodies are useful for them to find their way, even though they never get far from the surface of the earth. But lightbulbs and candles send them astray; they fly into the heat or the flame and die. For these creatures, to arrive is a calamity. When activists mistake heaven for some goal at which they must arrive, rather than an idea to navigate by, they burn themselves out, or they set up a totalitarian utopia in which others are burned in the flames. Don't mistake a lightbulb for the moon, and don't believe that the moon is useless unless we land on it. After all those millennia of poetry about the moon, nothing was more prosaic than the guys in space suits stomping around on the moon with their flags and golf clubs thirty-something years ago. The moon is profound *except* when we land on it.

The Czech novelist Milan Kundera said several years before his country liberated itself from Soviet-style communism, "Totalitarianism is not only hell, but also the dream of paradise—the age-old dream of a world where everybody would live in harmony, united by a single common will and faith, without secrets from each other If totalitarianism did not exploit these archetypes, which are deep inside us all and rooted deep in all religions, it could never attract so many people, especially during the early phases of its existence. Once the dream of paradise starts to turn into reality, however, here and there people begin to crop up who stand in its way, and so the rulers of paradise must build a little gulag on the side of Eden. In the course of time this gulag grows ever bigger and more perfect, while the adjoining paradise gets ever smaller and poorer It is extremely easy to condemn gulags but to reject the totalitarian poesy which leads to the gulag by way of paradise is as difficult as ever."

Paradise is not the place in which you arrive but the journey toward it. Sometimes I think victories must be temporary or incomplete; what kind of humanity would survive paradise? The United States has tried to approximate paradise in its suburbs, with *luxe, calme, volupté*, cul-de-sacs, cable television, and two-car garages, and it has produced a soft ennui that shades over into despair and a decay of the soul suggesting that paradise is already

a gulag. Countless desperate teenagers will tell you so. For paradise does not require of us courage, selflessness, creativity, passion: paradise in all accounts is passive, is sedative, and if you read carefully, soulless.

That's why the poet John Keats called the world with all its suffering "this vale of soul-making," why crisis often brings out the best in us. Some imaginative Christian heretics worshipped Eve for having liberated us from paradise—the myth of the fortunate fall. The heretics recognized that before the fall we were not yet fully human—Adam and Eve need not wrestle with morality, with creation, with society, with mortality in paradise; they only realize their own potential and their own humanity in the struggle an imperfect world invites. When the Iraq war broke out, 20,000 of us in San Francisco shut down downtown, shut down streets, bridges, highways, corporations that first day and kept coming back for weeks. Out of all that conviction, all that passion, one phrase stood out for me: Gopal Dayaneni, one of the key organizers for the antiwar actions, was asked by the daily newspaper why he was getting arrested. "I have a soul," he replied.

Recent strains of activism proceed on the realization that victory is not some absolute state far away but the achieving of it, not the moon landing but the flight. A number of ideas and practices have emerged that realize this. The term "politics of prefiguration" has long been used to describe the idea that if you embody what you

aspire to, you have already succeeded. That is to say, if your activism is already democratic, peaceful, creative, then in one small corner of the world these things have triumphed. Activism, in this model, is not only a toolbox to change things but a home in which to take up residence and live according to your beliefs—even if it's a temporary and local place, this paradise of participating, this vale where souls get made.

This has been an important belief for activists who recognize that change happens as much by inspiration and catalyst as by imposition. You could describe activism as having two primary strains: the attempt to change something problematic outside itself, and the attempt to build something better—though the two strains are irrevocably and necessarily intertwined, which is exactly the point of the politics of prefiguration. This idea was itself prefigured by Walter Benjamin, who wrote, "The class struggle . . . is a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the forms of the spoils which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude." They are present all along the journey; arrival is at best irrelevant, at worst undermining, at least to the goods of the spirit.

Reclaim the Streets, the rowdy British movement of the later 1990s, lived this out beautifully. The premise behind

RTS's street parties seemed to be that if what they were protesting was isolation, privatization, and alienation, then a free-for-all party out in public was not just a protest but a solution, if a solution in the mode that Hakim Bey called "Temporary Autonomous Zones." (Hakim Bey contrasted these moments of liberation with revolutions proper, which "lead to the expected curve, the consensus-approved trajectory: revolution, reaction, betrayal, the founding of a stronger and even more oppressive State . . . By failing to follow this curve, the *up-rising* suggests the possibility of a movement outside and beyond the Hegelian spiral of that 'progress' which is secretly nothing more than a vicious circle.") RTS and the Anti-Roads Movement took on what could be called the post-industrialization of Britain: the privatization of everyday life and the imposition of monster roads and freeways on still-vital landscapes and communities.

There were some beautiful moments: people taking up residence in trees to which they established legal residence by receiving mail there, a tactic to keep the tree from being cut; an RTS party in which people surged onto a freeway overpass and, muffled by rave music, smuggled jackhammers onto the concrete under the giant bell-skirt of a stiltwalking grande dame, then jackhammered openings in which trees were planted. Huge street parties in downtown London linked up with activists around the world to become global anticapitalist demonstrations.

Humor, creativity, outrageousness, and exuberance were among the group's hallmarks. That RTS didn't outlive its moment was also a kind of victory, a recognition that time had moved on and the focus was elsewhere. Instead, RTS's incendiary carnival spirit, global Internet communications, and tactics of temporary victory became part of the vocabulary of what came next, the global justice movement. RTS decomposed itself into the soil from which new flowers sprang.

One day I heard a Zen Buddhist abbot from Ireland quote the Argentinian Jew Jorge Luis Borges, "There is no day without its moments of paradise." And then the day continues.