

From the Faraway Nearby

Rebecca Solnit

JUSTICE BY MOONLIGHT

Canister guns are probably not in the arsenal of democracy, but poetry should be

THERE MIGHT HAVE BEEN as many as 400 of us activists, marching toward the Chevron-Texaco refinery in Richmond, California, on September 9, 2003. When we got there, the Richmond police had arrived ahead of us and done what we were planning to do: blockade the refinery gate through which Iraqi crude brought in by ship exits in gasoline trucks.

Those of us who were willing to be arrested linked arms and sat down anyway, in a single line across the wide street, twenty-two people in front of that gate choosing civil disobedience as a way to state our outrage: outrage about the arrival of Iraqi oil in the U.S.; about the role of Chevron-Texaco in profiting from this war; about the environmental impact of a fossil-fuel economy; about the war itself; about the transnational corporations whose profits seem to have much to do with the motives for this war; about a world run by and for those corporations. We were acting both globally, as one of hundreds of actions undertaken around the world in solidarity with the activists in Cancún who opposed the World Trade Organization's Fifth Ministerial meeting, and locally, in solidarity with the people of Richmond.

Richmond isn't how most people picture the San Francisco Bay Area:

Chevron-Texaco's pipelines, smokestacks, and storage tanks dominate the city, whose poor, mostly nonwhite citizens are periodically confined to their houses or sent to the hospital by leaked fumes from the huge refinery. The march included community members and community activists, three Catholic priests,



white-haired peace activists, environmentalists, and a lot of youngish activists connected to the organization that called

the protest, Direct Action to Stop War, which also orchestrated the 20,000-person shutdown of San Francisco's financial district when the bombing began in Iraq last March.

Because Chevron-Texaco refines stolen Iraqi oil, we were able to address the linkages between local environmental justice issues, global corporate pillage, and the ongoing war in Iraq. The profits from Iraqi oil go to the "rebuilding of Iraq"; in other words, to Halliburton and Bechtel. It's all connected in the ugliest possible way, long chains of profit and violence and pollutants stretching around the globe, from the toxic fumes in Richmond to the ruins of Baghdad and beyond. So we sat down in solidarity with the rest of the world, the small world, the local world, the rural world, the indigenous world, the diverse world—the democratic world facing off against the WTO. Ahead of us in the east as day turned into night the full moon rose from a bank of glowing clouds into a clear sky. Mars shone.

I had spent the summer traveling around the West, a journey made out of beautiful summer evenings sitting with friends watching day turn to night. Sitting still at Chevron-Texaco for two hours was the culmination of that summer. Sometimes you go to an action to demand peace, to speak up for the

connectedness of all things. Sometimes peace is not a demand but a realization, and it felt like a strange triumph to sit there with the priests, the punk kids, the locals, as sunlight behind us became moonlight ahead. It was as beautiful as any evening in the Rockies or the Eastern Sierra, and in that stark industrial space the sky was just as wide.

Whenever I turned around I saw that the ranks of cops were growing—eventually there were a hundred of them at our backs, the first solid row only a few steps behind us, shifting weight from armored leg to armored leg, explosives strapped to their bodies, holding clubs and canister rifles that could shoot tear gas, rubber bullets, beanbags, and various other “sub-lethal” projectiles that can cause blindness, broken bones, severe wounds—and death. When the war was in full force, the Oakland police had used these weapons to injure more than sixty activists, longshoremen, and journalists at a peaceful picket to protest weapons shipments from the docks. But the Richmond police at the refinery gate never budged. And we held our line too. Kids with faces masked in bandannas—members of the Black Block, which has gotten an outrageous reputation for property destruction—walked down the line, tenderly kneeling and offering to feed us blockaders from plates of rice and beans. We had turned our back on authority and made our own peace.

Maybe what’s so important to me about those summer evenings under the open sky is being out in the wide world, not just moving busily through it from one place to another, not doing what most of us industrialized-world people do most of the time—look through a window or remain in our boxes—but sitting with nothing between me, heaven, and everything else on Earth. Open to the world and the world open to me, under the same sky in which the moon had already risen over Iraq, over Cancún, everything is

connected. That’s the nightmare of how Chevron is choking kids here and benefiting from wars there and thinning the skies above. Everything is connected and that’s the dream we dreamed as day turned to night and we sat down under the Richmond sky to link up with sister demonstrations around the world. The unlikely breadth of our coalition was already a small victory, as were the few

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hours we kept Iraqi oil from going to market. Afterward a compatriot and I walked up to the cops, looked them in the eye, and told them, cluster by cluster, that they were not the enemy we’d come to oppose, we were glad it had stayed peaceful, and wished them a good night. They smiled small wobbly smiles like the cracks in hardboiled eggs.

That week in Cancún, a huge gathering of activists came together, led by Mexican campesinos, who are among those hit hardest by free trade since NAFTA went into effect in 1994 and flooded their country with cheap industrial-agriculture corn. The activists, the nongovernmental organizations, and the Third World countries formed unprecedented alliances. Together, the developing nations, led by Brazil, China, and India—which alone represent nearly half the world’s people—were able to stand up to the developed world and its devastating economic proposals. The talks collapsed amid ecstatic celebration. It was an extraordinary victory for activism, for democracy, for farmers, for the poor, for the power of nonviolence over the violent institutions seeking to rule the world.

Sometimes we’re called antiglobaliza-

tion activists or anticorporate globalization activists, but the right term might be global justice advocates. After all, to defend the local against the corporate domination of the globe, we’ve formed alliances that are themselves global, slender skeins of ideas, of words, of plans, of hopes spread by internet and encounter, beautiful networks of indigenous elders and Korean farmers and Swaziland

officials and punky Black Block kids, and this delicate net first pulled down the literal steel fences erected to protect the free-trade advocates from the free people and then pulled down the whole meeting. Many of us expected the WTO ministerial in Cancún to fail, but it failed more gloriously than anyone could have foreseen.

There’s a lot of Japanese poetry about moon viewing, and after the Richmond protest I wrote to my friends that moon viewing with a platoon of heavily armed potential adversaries behind one’s back could be a whole new subgenre. One of them wrote back that it wasn’t so new and recalled a few Japanese poems: “I remember one in which the poet looks at a full summer moon (over a river, I seem to recall), and thinks of people far away who, he’s heard, have just suffered from a flood and are starving, and he knows they are looking at it also. The last line is on the order of ‘Ah, the people of Nara are watching too: this summer moon.’” My friend concluded, “Moon-gazing is the nicest kind of globalization.” 🌙

After corporate capitalism is dismantled, Rebecca Solnit will revert to writing moon-viewing poetry full time.