

*Do You Like the
Word Crisis?*

MATTHEW WHITLEY

COMMUNE EDITIONS

PURVEYOR OF POETRY & OTHER ANTAGONISMS

Oakland

2018

communeditions.com

The early seismograph, of Chinese design, made use of an 8 pointed system corresponding to the rays of a compass. When an earthquake was detected, a ball would roll down the appropriate ramp, finishing its course at the open maw of a bronze dragon gesturing towards some far off disturbance.

Modern seismograph machines withhold all flourish. They are, appropriately, a measure of the force required to keep a mass still. Through a negative feedback loop a pendulum is held steady, and electronically, the results are presented to the user revealing exactly how much effort was expended to ensure that nothing changed in the confines of the device, that all remained still. We watch the price of calm bob and dip without logic, and tick away the expenditures

Do You Like the Word Crisis?

repeat after me
when giving testimony

hide your cough!
walk at a perfect 90 degrees!
pick your myths / pick your colors
prosecute the shameless
if you can't remember your anthem

to hear you tell it
the [currency] was always lower
and you're right

do you like the word crisis? – judgment, result of a trial, selection

I respond –
what do you see
in a puncture wound, a banana peel on the sidewalk,
in a footprint, or impact shattered glass?

[*they*] sneak into Greece in the back of a chocolate tanker
now what do you see in your chocolate kiss?

count the number of Hershey bars dipped without papers!

these ones pollute
our water – wash up in our
streets – they smile all degraded Styrofoam

these ones still parade and
produce with muscles
that still move –
exotic and obscene

sharpening their weakness
translating our free time

that's where we are
and why we buy our groceries
a day at a time

do you like the word crisis?
a German derivative – literally “shut-door-panic,”
fear of being on the wrong side of a closing gate

[message received]

Anastasiya,

You can't imagine the sounds at the moment. High pitched whistles bounce off the walls, sounds like a pack of Mongols only these people don't have any mounts, let alone furs or treasure. Pick your hemisphere and they're all coming down with the Golden Horde. Hell, Antonis, who the press styles as their leader has no front teeth on account of one too many night sticks. He only speaks in shrill modem tones now, or when mad, in a deep infrasound made into a perfect sine wave when it hits his gums. If you happen to channel surf past an interview you're liable to blow your eardrums. The other day he's giving a speech and a heckler shouts, "Our mother is not your mother." One imperceptible snarl in the back of Antonis' throat sent the whole crowd into spasms. The Sanitation crew that follows the demonstration, the poor bastards, they couldn't keep up. You should see the look of disgust as the syntax pours through their gloved fingers, hits the ground with a viscous pop.

But civil unrest is always a messy business. Leader, I think, is a bit too rich of a title. What we have here is a simple exchange. They demand and he supplies.

The rest of the news is End of Days, as usual. Energy weapons, acoustic devices, Large Hadron black holes, and a mini-Ice Age riding piggyback on Global Warming. Take your pick. With the new Caliphate blowing holes in Palmyra and dragging cozy Formaldehyde Pharaohs from their tombs, you're not even safe in the afterlife. They, too, should have heeded the advice... "a little less love and a little more infrastructure." Or at least had the presence of mind for a booby trap or two. As for myself, when I go out to some tired dinner party in a fit of desperation I'm always greeted with the same thing, "Oh you're back in town!" I'm doing a lot traveling, it seems, for a person in stasis. They've caught me in surveillance in Camden, shopping for tchotchkes in a dried up rock star's shop. In Aruba I'm said to be in the casino black book, the last haven of the Pinkertons, but the mug shot doesn't quite line up. Confirmation was achieved by birth mark. The North African connection is by far the best. They've got me down for selling my own face as Qaddafi's death mask. What's next on the feed?

Such is the mood of the day.

Your Faithful Correspondent and Informant on Permanent Vacation,

Lola Ridge

To Anna Zvyagintseva & Anastasiya Osipova

Her fingernails are dirty with the sediment of an age
lead filings that had been reduced from gold
under a line of bad credit

When she was last seen in public
her long black braid showed white wires at its core
bleached in the reflection of a balloon dog,
that plastic hound of currency
that gives off borrowed heat

“Why are you confined here?”
“Because I’m the opposition between brown and red”
“A recording on the bones”

“My country is a ceramic echo
chipped at the edge and buried
as if it fell under the hooves of some Attila
that was then and this is now
all that remains is the magnetic conflict
of a spinning compass”

You can see her ribs like a topographical map
the trenches at the flanks
holding off any invasion
and defining a small but defensible territory

But what use is terrain at \$600 a month?
“So much for real estate.
Here,
this is where the slogans arrive...
from the bottom of a pot.”

As a girl from the council houses
once said in a live interview
while sipping looted champagne
“a ROSE is a ROSÉ is a RIOT is a very sick woman!”

There you are
a barricade broadcast from a kitchen table
at home –
composing the march of a tubercle

The Phantom of Heilbronn

Police in Germany have admitted that a woman they had been hunting for more than 15 years never in fact existed.

Dubbed the “phantom of Heilbronn,” often alternatively referred to as the “Woman Without a Face,” she was described by police as the country’s most dangerous female criminal. Investigators had connected her to six murders and an unsolved death based on DNA traces found at the crime scenes. Police now acknowledge that swabs used to collect DNA samples were contaminated by an innocent worker in a factory in Bavaria.

—BBC News

the difference between searching for a woman and an apparatus
lies in a simple question most can answer:

how were you born?

it’s a natural operation, fucking,
but how many can say instead:

from a phthisic cough that scattered manhunts
across 60 feet of the conveyor belt
and colored a decade with Motherly crime,

across an unmarked border and two Cardinal Points
a cough that saluted the factory floor
concentrating entire mobs at the tip of a cotton swab

by one Taylorist pirouette
Germany imported a fame that cannot be located
a dangerous kind of star power
capable of making the nightly news without an excited call from Auntie
Gren

ten women for a particular shape of cotton
ten carefully differentiated motions / ten time-cards / ten uniforms
ten workers cast in two available roles – cipher or abomination
the former jealous of the latter
the former still without a face

like aerobic, like paycheck, like movement

only the police were surprised
only the ministers

for the ones who still make without authorship
they'll remember the prayer:
“by a q-tip I am multitudes” —
you'd laugh if I said it was an old prayer
but prayers can age months in days, years in weeks
and grow old in congress with the tired breath of their penitents

A Low Fidelity Execution

seated on a bench
 a young poet, in his 20s,
 pulls a ring of black hair taut
 across his face
 to worry his vision
 to superimpose a guillotine
 of grease and split ends
 between the head and shoulders
 of the unsuspecting police
 across the road

it is a low fidelity execution –
 (his eyes fail to pull focus – he tries again with a squint
 fails in a mess of curls and astigmatisms and...)

digital camouflage,
 their blue and grey pixels injecting noise
 into court yellows
 and worm food pastels
 breaking both resolution and resolve

they want to destroy our values
 sure – but not production values
 let it not be said the barbarians at the gates are without class

a sweet cream froth,
tired on his lips,
makes a muzzle for
a silver tooth
that reflects this poor conspiracy
back down his throat

January 20th — Day of Patriotic Devotion

There's not so much space from here to there

[x] men dressed as 'Indians' tossing tea into the harbor

[x] refugees drowned and floating, face down, alongside the cargo

A limousine's in flames...the men on the screen say "there goes
somebody's livelihood"

Maybe that's where it all washes up

Maybe that's what's stuck in my throat:

Two centuries and we're still talking about
the price of tea

Today a man was shot – by mummies, by a tired myth, by men

Nobody calls him anything, so we call him Marcos – why not?

And now Marcos has a leak, a .45 inch hole

We look ourselves over

and we congratulate ourselves

unharmmed

and we're ashamed, ourselves,

unharmmed

And so we read his skin instead

happy to have a biography in faded blacks and blues

and try it on ourselves –

Is it wrong to steal a hole?

After all we can see ourselves now, mirrored in the headlines
in a piece of newsprint – greasy on the sidewalk of L street
Besides it's not so far from *he* to *we*
just that number .45

.45 inches to accommodate the searching fingers
of immigrants, paperless fingers from Syria, Libya, Iraq, and
Mexico

The fingers of women who've learned to hover,
to never touch the ground

The arthritic fingers of our grandparents who still remember,
who've seen it all before
and know it's not so much like the cinema
although they did watch *What Did You Do in the War – Thanasis?* and
liked it

The fingers that smell of cooking oil, of shit, of industrial cleaners

The fingers stained by the clichés of daily life
of those with no banners – who I cannot name, but who
have kitchens and children and homes and
who also drink tea
who also feel the shape and space of their own lives in that hole

.45 inches to accommodate my own colonizing tongue
 which licks the wound clean

In fact, I'm asking you now, through that .45 inch mouth:

Why count the bodies marching in the streets?
 There's not so much space between them
 We only need to follow one

The day ends for her as you'd expect – the jailer asks for his thirty pieces
 of silver

and she pays him, laughs and looks down at her watch:

After Death – Before Christ – Common Era

Fructidor – Thermidor – Brumaire

Space Age – Information Age – Iron and Bronze

Years of the Tiger and the Rabbit

“I'm so happy to see you” – she says to the second, the minute and the hour
 which conspire to turn silver into lead.

An Alien Proposition

You wouldn't like me to go searching for numbers.
Skeletal statistics that have no flesh.
Although I'm fond of them for their mass and spine.

I know you – you prefer anecdotes.
And so let's look at the nightly news.
“Today in 60 Seconds.”

It's seconds 4-8 we're after.
Just one bit of the tapestry on screen – there in the top left.
Banners & placards – delivered speeches
half lost to:
COURT ORDER quiet
SEEKS let her speak CRASH ALERT
FOR TELECOMS must be exhumed
lady justice has glasses THAT FAIL
IMMIGRANT ACTION raided the dollar market
BALTIMORE vendors of lingerie SLOWS TO .03%

again – we say QUIET
maybe I'd like you to find the rebellion
there in the caesura.

Ignore the noise and you will see
 the woman addressing the assembly on 14th street
 using a paper cone for a megaphone
 made from a rolled up handbill.
 She has a preacher's teeth stained from many dirty sermons
 that, over the drone of the news anchor,
 from within that paper circle, make a case for a still too foreign planet.

No Border, No Wall – an alien proposition
 but it intrudes, 4 seconds of 60, 1/15th of the day's events.

That's what you're armed with –
 a fraction of a frozen image.

*

But images too are made by hand.
 With precision and “just in time.”
 And are carried.
 Or so I'm reminded by a friend.

Her brother was an extra in a film.
 The Gangs of New York.

They asked him – can you speak English?
So what if he said sí?
They gave him “Angry Irish Laborer #12”
He needed one cotton shirt
metallic spray paint for its plastic buttons
and makeup to cover his tattoos.
About \$10 was the cost to teleport him between continents.

So much distance, such meager heritage,
and still an immigrant sent against the Natives.

\$80 a day – he didn’t complain.
When the draft riots came he was told
take this – a plastic cudgel –
made to look like gnarled wood.
Take this and break the windows.
For ten takes they rioted.
For ten takes anonymous hands
cleaned and replaced the scenery.
And the previous revolt was forgotten.
And on the last he swung too wildly,
the shards flew into his mouth.
He said they tasted sweet. Like sugar.

He scooped up some of that candied glass.
Was sent home for the day.
And walked – with a rage,
manufactured without country or place,
wedged between his cheek and gums.
Tasting sweet.

To Watch the Demonstration

Gathered underneath the window
is a mass of unsculpted wood,
a grey penitentiary – a fossil that can't
articulate a finger
to grasp a copper coin

For now it is still – the assembly is tightly packed
feeling the whip of nervous plants
reaching from the asphalt in the
nightly breeze

It is rooted there – a garden of abbozi on 34th avenue –
beautiful there,
the refusal to reach for form
undifferentiated,
entrenched

But no vision stands still
and the silent blockade is animated by the
whistle of a police sergeant
 or was it the whistle of a kettle
 or a domestic cry without and within
 (the frontlines, in such a swarming city,
 sometimes leap into bedrooms,
 apartment windows, before landing again
 on asphalt with a truncheon's crunch)

But the direction doesn't matter
the signal is the same
and the uncarved block
surges past the intersection –
a beetle escaping its shell
expressing arms and legs
 there –

a set of teeth is separated from its tonnage
speaks for all and none
before resettling its mass
in its paralytic form
impassive to the orchestra of the city

its machines, leaned on horns, motors, and electrical hums

the uncarved block
arriving here at the chokepoint
the site of some bank, bridge or massacre
where the streets had been densely perfumed
by sweat, whiskeyed breath, another night's long mourning
rhythmic chants
and the uncarved block autogestates
grooms itself, shears away its
fear, sheds its Protestant wood

revealing in its immature skin the deep
red of overripe plums

radiant and moving now
a spearhead
with purpose
it strikes with that fleeting
tenacity found at the pinprick of
the dawn

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

“January 20th – Day of Patriotic Devotion” was originally published in N+1. “Phantom of Heilbronn” is forthcoming in the collection *Ritual and Capital*, by Wendy’s Subway.