

Feeeh!

by Helen Chau Bradley

We were at least ninety-seven weeks into the crisis, depending on your geographical location, and the accumulation of loss was staggering. Against the backdrop of devastation and absurdity, my days were preoccupied by a far more mundane concern: I had misplaced my name. Like various ex-lovers, it had departed slowly, over a stretch of time that I now looked back on with confusion. It was hard for me to remember whether this shedding was a choice I had made, or whether my old name had simply detached from me at a certain point, after flapping loosely from my outline like one of the errant plastic bags that could be seen holding fast to the ragged branch outside my window.

The previous tenant had left the blinds when she moved out, and I had, for the past five years, worried daily about exchanging them for curtains. I used to take short walks down my street, doubling back to surprise the blinds from the outside. I was trying to figure out how my apartment looked to strangers, and thus how I myself might appear to the world. Friends had become impatient with my lack of initiative, my groaning. Now visiting had become forbidden, so I spent my mornings tracing the wooden slats, furring my fingers with dust. I watched the light move, its regular slants marking the far wall like a language. This satisfied me almost enough to photograph and transmit to the general following.

I did not transmit. For days or weeks now, I had been meaning to leave my house, but I was stuck in a language that didn't seem to travel.

Earlier in the crisis, when we were being told it might last a year at most, a friend had shown me a place to walk without meeting anyone at all, a trajectory that crisscrossed the train tracks, where plants had begun to grow back unchallenged. The tracks were north of the highway, and the highway was north of my apartment. North in the city was never actually north, but everyone was used to this by now. When people said "north," they meant "west-northwest," if you were to go by the rules of a 16-wind compass rose. Everyone knew that everyone else meant "west-northwest," unless they were new, in which case they still didn't get lost, because everyone always had a constantly updating map in their pocket.

In this skewed city, over the years, I had found people who dwelled in the skewedness more easily than in the regulated, compass-respecting grids of other places. I had found it possible to remain here because of the presence of these other people, but they were getting harder to find. It wasn't so much that they had left, as that they were all constantly on the verge of leaving, which, in the end, was worse than being already gone. This was one earlier crisis with which the current one now overlapped. Meanwhile, I had forgotten how to take a walk in any direction.

In my living room, I caught my screen blinking, but it was only the sun reaching in through the dust. I peered through the blinds

towards the multi-storeyed buildings that marked the edges of the neighbourhood, beyond which there was another neighbourhood, not quite gated but clearly communicating an if-you're-out-stay-out warning via rows of impenetrable shrubbery and a system of streets that closed in on itself. The nightly patrols blinked red and blue through our neighbourhood on the one side, hazardous to many; on the other side of the boulevard, the streets were wide, empty, and lined with large plane trees that muffled responsibility. The people on that side lived cloistered behind richly weighted curtain systems that probably whispered across state-of-the-art silent runners, if they were ever opened at all. I couldn't live over there. I had chosen to live over here. Others did not have the choice. I had been sending out messages from the third floor, which gave me a certain perspective, but everyone had changed their coordinates, or had simply stopped watching for the words to land.

There was no one to gripe to about my loneliness. Was this the risk of remaining nameless for too long? Or had I become nameless due to a lack of camaraderie? There was my teacher, but she was not intent on knowing me beyond my struggles with tonal pronunciation. I had begun learning a new language—new to me, although old as breathing to my mother, so old that she had, in her lifetime, both learned and forgotten it. I had lately taken it upon myself to learn what she had lost. But I was having trouble with the gaps between intention and reception. Or did I mean intonation? In the new language, I had been taught to say sitting, and then to write it. I had learned that sitting involved the earth. *Touch grass* happened to be everyone's favourite insult at the time. It being winter, there was no grass to touch. In fact, we had been warned

against setting foot beyond our own doorways. After sundown, it was squarely forbidden.

Prior to the crisis, I had ignored many attempts at befriending or seduction, smug with independence. Folly, I thought now, but the best thing back then, as everyone knew, was to be reached for, and to decide to stay in after all and draw a bath. To stay in alone, while not being reached for, was a completely different matter. Now we all stayed inside at night because it was the law.

The new language in one tentative fist, I sat in the bath and tried to begin a name for myself. I kept stalling. I could see my naked body too clearly. The water wasn't hot enough. The Epsom salts hadn't dissolved. There was black mould mottling the tiles under the faucet. I cast about for a first letter. My open mouth rounded onto an absence. The new language did not involve the concept of letters. In the soupy present, I could find no consonants to ground me, and I couldn't accept being a formless wail, though I felt like one. I let myself sink under the greying water, and yelled through mouthfuls of liquid.

Wrapped in a towel, I returned to my studies. To tell a person your name involved a mouth and then something angular, like a tuning fork. I pictured an open mouth, sound pushing forth between teeth, which appeared as oblongs with two roots protruding, like legs. There was a tongue, too, which looked like a small boat. I imagined the reverberation of the tuning fork, the way the ring of it shifted from side to side, like a hallucination, sounding loudly, then more and more softly until it disappeared. A name should, I

thought, arrive this way. I wanted a name as deep and rich as a bell in a tower, ringing out without wavering, unfurling in the ears of its listeners, not strident but majestic. But what name was that?

Plenty of people I knew had chosen new names, sometimes one after another—there were certain people I admired who did not believe in stasis. They could don a new name, and live beautifully in it, and then shed it, and don another. They did this in such a natural way, so that when you ran into them you cocked your ear or opened your eyes wide, eager to receive the new syllables they had cloaked themselves in. But now that I was trying to do it for myself, I felt clumsy and arrogant.

Since no one was calling me anything anymore, I thought that I should figure out seeing. Perhaps this was the first step towards being perceived anew. There were various ways to say seeing. There were other, different ways to write it. All of the ways were related to the eye, whose written form looked like a window covered in blinds. One eye was hanging off of a structure that reminded me of having, or hands. The other eye appeared to have legs.

The way you said a thing often would not map onto the way you wrote it. When you wrote a word, it had its own shape, which betrayed little about how you were meant to say it. When you said it, you would speak it differently, and then, of course, you couldn't write it that way. This had to be explained to me constantly. I kept asking questions, I kept being pointed back to the strokes. The strokes had a specific order, and travelled in a specific direction.

These things could not be inferred. When you said “I see you,” you might also have been saying that you experienced seeing me in an active way, but you might only have been saying that your eyes scanned the space where I stood. In the other language, you might have said that you saw me and that you *saw* me, and you could have written the first character, followed by the second one, to emphasize both the looking and the experiencing of our meeting in space.

Earlier in the crisis, when we still thought it would pass through like a storm—devastating but finite—I had been teaching someone, through a screen, to make various figures from a large loop of string. I had issued instructions and moved my hands in prescribed patterns. They had watched and listened and eventually also taken up the choreography so that each time, the result was two birds, two ladders, two boats, two caves, two traps—facing each other across distance. We communicated like that for months: thumbs dip under and across, bring back the far little finger string and lay it on the back of the hand, pointer fingers skate under and then over, hooking into the thumb loops, drop the bottom thumb loops, and return. We were soothed by this shared motion. We were also excited by it. My decision to communicate via the possibilities of a string tied to itself kept me busy learning new ways for loops to be loosened without being lost entirely. We never called each other by name, which was intuitive. It opened up a new space. Until somewhere along the way they dropped a loop, or my thumb picked up the slack from the back of the wrong finger, and the entire figure, when pulled, extended and extended into a stunned

nothing. We flapped our hands around. Our motions were those of surrender. I closed the device.

Now, I sat in my living room, remembering the possibility of movement. The air in my apartment had become stale. It was clear that soon I would need to go outside.

Yet another season had begun, and people began to exude restlessness against the official recommendations. Across the boulevard, the hedges had grown denser, and each household had bought yet another vehicle, wider and with tinted windows. Downtown, there were protests that flew in the face of public health. Uptown, there were protests about the severe lack of affordable housing units. Everyone knew ahead of time which ones would be policed, and yet everyone kept showing up, including the police, who were often so well-informed as to show up long before any of the protestors did.

The neighbourhood had shifted again. I watched it change on the apps. The last time I'd walked up and down its streets, I'd been delivering hot meals in rectangular styrofoam containers. I had been saying "thank you, thank you" when I meant "you're welcome"—in the new language, the same word could be used for both, and this had rerouted me. Nobody seemed to mind, so I kept handing over stacks of food to my neighbours, whose landlords couldn't be bothered to keep the buzzers working, or the heat on, or the rats from getting in. Now, where a series of grocers, hair salons, and driving schools had been, there was a block-long empty chain restaurant for the people who would presumably soon show

up to inhabit the new structures. Where parkland had been they were constructing an entire university campus. My new neighbours had bought their building and were renovating it in order to turn it into an entirely new building, which they could have bought elsewhere. Everywhere there was the sound of grinding.

Since I'd failed in my string communications I wondered if I could recreate the sensation of looping by some other method. With the string, there had been something maladaptive about using the shapes invented by someone else's forebears in order to formulate new ways of speaking, and naming. I was unhitched. Unhinged. I thought of my own forebears. My father's family name meant Wide Field. My mother's original name meant Clean Doorframe. Was I the door?

The eye has legs, I recalled.

Maybe if I traded the loops for a wolf-hair brush, an ink stick, and a lexicon of thousands and thousands of characters, I might actually get somewhere.

This required a trip to Chinatown. I would have to leave the house.

Hours later, clad in clothing I hadn't touched in months, I stepped outside.

Only to find that there was no ground there.

While I'd been indoors, they had dug up my street. Of course! Where there had been a set of concrete steps leading to the sidewalk, there was now a deep trough, which I was flailing into.

As I landed, a loud sound dislodged from behind my teeth—Feeeh!

I grabbed it. A clue! I thought. Could it be? The beginning of a new name?

I dusted myself off and climbed out of the hole, waving to a passing family. Limping slightly, muttering my new syllable.