

SHAILJA PATEL

# To Uncover

*On April 20, 2020, the U.S. benchmark price for crude oil dropped below zero for the first time in history due to the drop in fuel consumption caused by COVID lockdowns*

## I

It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking apocalypse on Wall Street.

On the tenth anniversary of the *Deepwater Horizon* Oil spill, the price of Oil tanked, disappeared, went negative.

Before screens all over the world, Oil traders, stockbrokers, speculators in planetary extraction, stared, numb and disbelieving, as red lines plummeted.

Oil barons wailed and howled and beat their breasts. Buried their faces in their hands and cursed and begged and prayed.

Was there ever a time before Oil? Wasn't it always pumping up from the earth, thick, rich, and viscous? Filling hungry pipelines, from Iraq to Nigeria to Ecuador?

For Market so loved the world, it sent its beloved Oil across oceans in container ships larger than cities. Gasoline, streaming into eager vehicles, was the body and blood of Oil, and whosoever ate of it would have eternal motion.

## II.

Of course there were heretics. There are always heretics. Unwashed, crazy, violent. They gathered in mobs, rioted in the streets, screaming

Keep the oil  
in the soil

No blood for oil!  
No wars for profit!

Bush, Major, we won't go  
We won't fight for Texaco

Bush and Blair, go to hell  
We won't go to war for Shell

But the heretics only strengthened the faith of Oil's people. The heretics had turned their backs on Oil and their doom was self-evident. Oil's people paid their tithes to Oil and knew they would inherit the earth.

### III.

Apocalypse comes from the Greek *apokalupsis*, meaning revelation, and *apokaluptein*, to uncover.

What does revelation ask of us? What must we do once we know?

### IV.

It was a golden warm day in January 2009, and the clocks were striking apocalypse in Kenya's Rift Valley. A tanker carrying petroleum overturned on the Naivasha highway. Crowds came running, with jerrycans, with empty margarine tins, with plastic laundry tubs. With their bare hands they scooped petrol into their vessels. And then, the petrol exploded. A giant fireball swallowed over one hundred people. The blessed ones, Oil consumed entirely. From the less blessed, it took skin offerings, flesh offerings, whole limb offerings, left them marked forever, with the Sign of Oil.

### V.

It was a dull chilly day in September 2011, and the clocks were striking apocalypse in Mukuru-Sinai, an informal settlement in Nairobi's industrial area.

A pipeline running through Mukuru-Sinai, carrying petrol to the leafy suburbs of Nairobi, sprung a leak. The desperate flocked to gather precious fuel.

Someone flicked a cigarette into the rainbows of runoff in a drainage ditch. A wall of fire roared up.

When the flames were doused, the ground was strewn with what looked like naked shop mannequins, imperfectly coated in tar. On their backs, knees and elbows bent.

They weren't mannequins. The black was not tar. The white streaks visible under the black were not moulded plastic. They were bone. Oil swallowed dozens of homes and one hundred and twenty human beings.

## VI.

On the tenth anniversary of the *Deepwater* oil explosion, the tenth birthday of Oilocalypse, when British Petroleum pierced the earth's crust in the Gulf of Mexico and forced it to hemorrhage Oil, Oil became worthless. Less than zero. A liability. The market giveth and the market taketh away. Blessed be the hand of the market.

## VII.

Apocalypse seized at the root means revelation, means to uncover.

Revelation calls for reckoning.

For decades we the heretics have marched, shouted, pitted our bodies against the violence of the state to end fossil fuel addiction.

It's impossible, they said. Our way of life will end, they said. Economies will collapse. The market is our highest good. The market will deliver our desires. There is no god but Oil, and the market is its prophet.

The revelation of apocalypse is that the market is not a market. It is certainly not free.

The U.S. is now the world's largest producer of Oil. Its Oil production binge is carried by debt, precariously anchored in fantasies of future profit. The U.S. spends more on fossil fuel subsidies than it does on defense. Ten times more on fossil fuel subsidies than it does on education. The market is an optical illusion, sustained by lights and special effects, the biggest show in town.

### VIII.

A month ago, the show stopped. Cars were parked. Factories shut down. Airports emptied. Oil producers can't slow their production fast enough, and storage tanks are full. The house lights came up, the backdrop rose, the levers and pulleys are on full display.

Gas costs less than milk. Gas costs less than bread. Gas costs less than vegetables. Oil fills the tankers and silos and pumps. Oil companies will pay to get it off their hands.

Big Oil knew and lied about climate change for thirty years. If Henry Ford could buy up railroads and put them out of business, we can buy up oil companies, for pennies on the dollar, and do the same.

### IX.

Stop calling this moment a crisis. Call it a churning, a revelation, an uncovering, an opening. Millions of victims of Big Oil, the souls of Iraq, of Rift Valley, of Mukuru-Sinai, of Ecuador, Ogoniland, Afghanistan, Syria, are watching us. The Gulf of Mexico, the Persian Gulf, the Amazon River, species destroyed, ecosystems poisoned, are here for this. Waiting for us to act.

If we say Crisis, let crisis stand for  
Care  
Revolution  
Showing  
Its  
Strength.

Let Crisis stand for  
Capitalism  
RIP  
I'm  
Standing  
In  
Socialism

If apocalypse means uncover, let this be the re-cover. The reparation, the re-storying. The restoration, the restitution. The moment of reckoning.

The opening line is adapted from the opening line of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell (Secker and Warburg, 1949).