



The Last and
the Lasting

Taylor Weech

“The only thing that makes life possible is permanent, intolerable uncertainty; not knowing what comes next.” —Ursula K. LeGuin

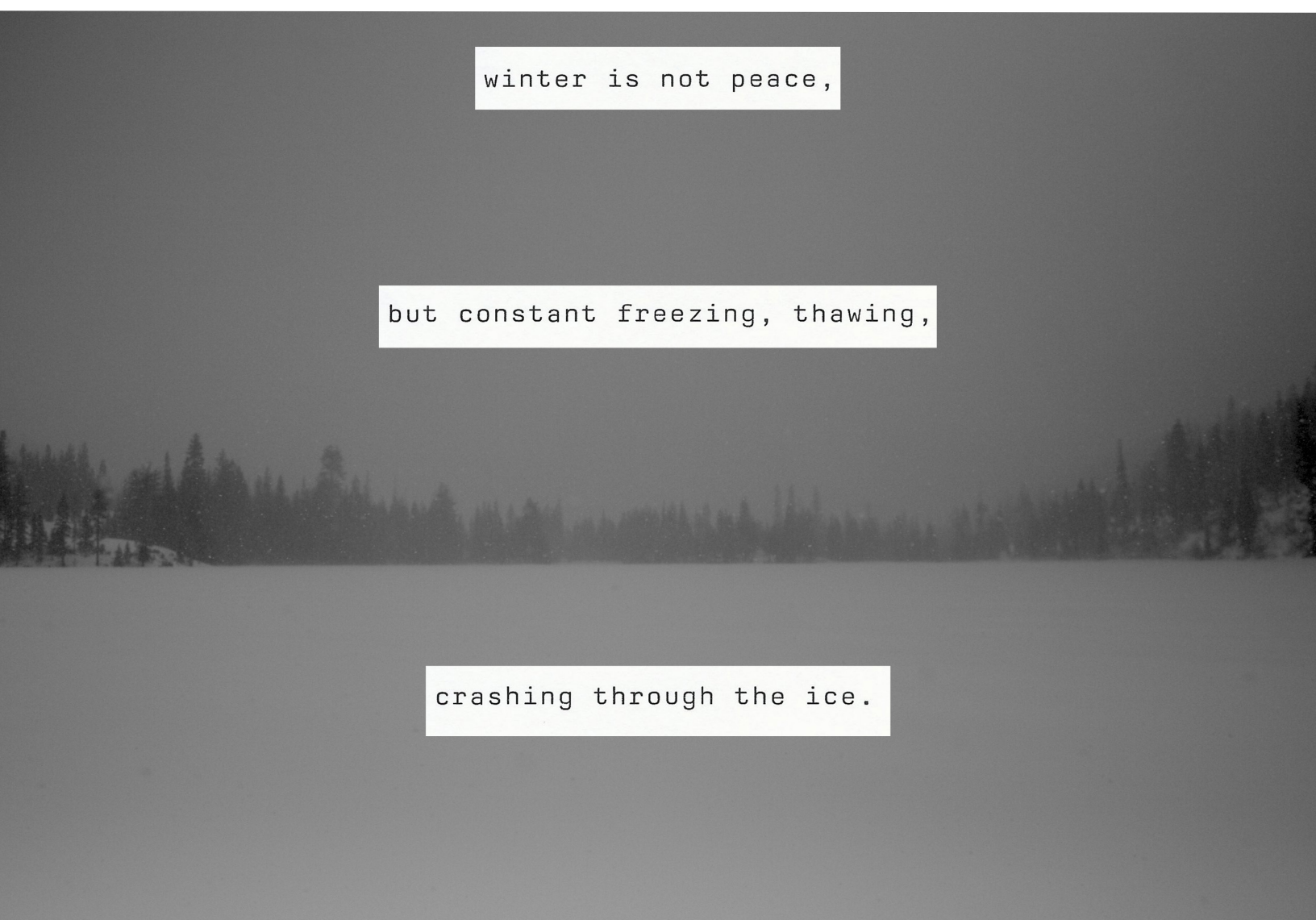
This is a collection of poems about not knowing what comes next. It represents years of my personal process moving through stages of grief and anxiety and hopefulness regarding the state of our planet, our species, and all of the other species we've taken down with us. It would not have been possible without support in many forms, so thank you to: Mark, for putting me on the feature schedule and in effect forcing me to do this; Ceilan and Fitz, for your infectious enthusiasm and discipline in being creative examples to me; Laura and Maya for excellent guidance and Spark Central for providing a space; Adrian, for every time I gripe about life, responding consistently with “write it down”; Ryan, for being the first poet I ever met; Madeline, for showing me how to breathe more powerfully; Sagen, for your thoughtful patience through all of my moods and poems, even those that didn't make any sense; and all of the scientists, artists, warriors, and teachers who try to make meaning of our world.

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The Last & The Lasting

I. Winter	4
Castle Lake, March 2012	5
Holocene Horses	6
Debris	8
Caribou Challenges the Skeptic	9
II. Spring	10
Rosa Nutkana	11
Spring Burst Early	12
Sea Legs	13
The Birth of Venus	14
III. Summer	16
Our Lady of the Melting Ice	17
Among Strangers	18
Las Vegas, The Riot	20
River Whispers, River Roars	21
IV. Autumn	23
Slingshot / Riot / Giant / Harvest	24
Posing for an Oil Portrait...	26
Feathers & Talons	27
Nation in Labor	30



winter is not peace,

but constant freezing, thawing,

crashing through the ice.

Castle Lake, March 2012

Where all things are already, and not yet,
 forever—what is lost in remaining?
Falling snow obscures tracks, fill the past
 easy to become lost on a frozen lake.
Flakes whisper as they meet solid sheet, unique
 hushed voices ripple against jagged rock.
(turn back) you did this
(come closer) no one could do this alone
She blinks. It's all in motion now.
Whether the forest wants to forgive is irrelevant.

I'm sorry.
I love you.
Please forgive me.
Thank you.

I spoke aloud the four phrases I had learned.
I don't know what whispered from under snow.
I don't know how to speak about it in the city,
 so I don't.
The language of ice as wind breathes across it.
I have communed with aliens, and bears, and God
 and they all sounded the same.
I have heard stones buzz and mutter and a mountain
 has told me turn back, come closer.
I have stood surrounded by panthers unafraid.
I have heard the forest speak.
I have longed for the wilderness,
I have been long in the wilderness.

What is lost in remaining?

Holocene Horses

Those first storms
people still spoke of them as anomalies,
freak occurrences, one-offs.
It felt like the end of the world, they said.
Smoke choked summer
Warm blown apart winter
and then...and then...
Thank God things are back to normal
the lights come on again
we imagine it's the darkness that's temporary
and not our wires.

Last spring, I had a vision.
I shared it in a letter to a man
who wanted civilization to crash around us
The trees will do the work here,
I told him. *It would take one big storm*
Did I wish the storm here?
He pretended to listen—infatuated—
She walks like Thoreau. Favorite tree, black locust
He wanted to interrupt something:
a promise I'd made that didn't make sense
a fragile wire strung alongside a brittle tree.

Those big plans of his
big as the electrical grid
bold, short-sighted, dangerous
I don't care if there are consequences
he told me, never indirect about intention
like straight rows of power lines
so male in their determination.
We have to tear down to build something new
Something out of Nothing
but first we have to rebuild Nothing
to flatten by fire and flood.

Last fall, I met a woman
and we shared our visions
and listened—infatuated—
I simply have no interest in the male mind
she told me, too many straight lines
when we need circles building
Something within What Is
we feel with complexity and that is reason
but to feel so much—inundated—
we sway under the weight
until our roots lift from the soil.

These cold days
I spend hours in the bath
a woman adrift sculpting bubbles
thinking on the Holocene extinction.
is it really the end of the world?
I wonder. Stretching chamomile-scented
suds into wave, sphere, tower—
Something within Something—
a mushroom cloud, the apocalypse,
the birth of the Universe
held by air, water, chemicals.

Last spring, I wrote a letter
to the wrong man and I forgot
to make a copy. I can't remember
the ending for sure—a vision:
*when the end comes, no horses will
remain to signal the arrival of Nothing,
only my grandchildren,
and I don't think about my grandchildren.*
Could it really have ended so abruptly?
No way to know. The paper dried up
already and blew away in the storm.

Debris

I want to see my feet
I should be able to from here
peering down through the overgrowth
of ID cards, spare change, lipstick,
the smell of scarves after storage.

I want to know it's down there,
along with my absent feet:
A book of dust-toned photos,
waiting. Reaching
like a forgotten mossy handle.

Wading through discarded things,
through moving water, laughter,
being small.
Christmas cactus tendrils at my ankles
I know will oblivate before they can bloom.

Oblivate with a swish and flick
of the wand when I awake.

But magic isn't real.
This landscape of damp
debris is—as real as dust,
as the suitcase of regret
in your mom's closet.

My ankles brush the strange collection
and it clatters against itself, loud.
The roar of a boat-sized chunk
of bright blue glacier
caving into the black ocean.

Caribou Challenges the Skeptic

Whose voice did you hear on the road
If space is just dead and so cold?
It whispered to turn on the brights
driving in rain that darkest night
as your senses began to erode.

Just in time hit the brakes and slowed,
the wisps of mist parted and showed
the side of a caribou—massive and white.
Whose voice did you hear on the road?

To Someone, a sacrifice owed,
That's what the stories have told.
Argue, then, which one is right
(ear for an ear: the void's delight)
But consider the question that's posed:
Whose voice did you hear on the road?



if we are to fall,

then let's not madly--slowly,

as spring to summer.

(Rosa nutkana)

my voice is soft
like my nursery-purple petals
yet, if you need to hear me,
you'll be called stream side,
near my roots, to drink.

those clean waters can wash
your uncertainties into
gentle exhalations
they will wet your throat,
colder than you had believed.

the taste will be that of
a nymph's perfume
and named for me,
Rosa nutkana
and my tea will clear your vision.

wash your eyes out in it
chew on my hips
eat of my young shoots
pluck the petals and as
you let them fall, they'll
always read he loves me.

listen—
listen to that wisdom, mine
but murmured from your
own soft mouth
it is yours now, too.

and when you are quiet,
soft like me and blooming
you'll remember the taste
of these waters
how clean I made your mouth,
your hands.

Spring Burst Early

To savor Spring's early bursting—
a portentous taste of a frightening
new normality—prelude to burning,
to drought and desert, but for a day,
sublime. A sun-warmed rock above
a flattened span of grasses not yet
green, regal dying trees, some
standing and some at rest
fostering life in their decay, nearly-neon
maples in bloom and a sea of pines
layered in a crescendo to the sky.
The sky, too blue, salted with lumbering
clouds that coast like ships grey-bottomed
and heavy pulled forward by their
white and towering sails.

To lean back and hear the wind
build in its woosh, braced by
friendship, by touch. Four kinds of
birds, ants who carry scraps of our
tobacco home among leaves and
other treasures.

The poles begin to shift.
The Gulf Stream reverses and
takes a page of the calendar with it.
We are so uncertain.

Today, though, the little river winds
quietly past as it has, feeding the
everything around it, requesting
nothing in return, feeding its small
sip to a brash older sibling whose
open throat roars incessant in spring
through a concrete jaw. A jaw decorated
by the bones of what came before
and bedecked with death.

The past roars a warning, overture to
the burning future.
But now, now,
a ways away, the present rustles
the tops of the pines, two herons pass,
and life blooms without knowing any better.

Sea Legs

Wobbly, wondering how
to balance caution with madness.
Not running through the streets,
but walking in the water,
hours.

To spill, not to spill,
to bottle the flow for years
offering dwindling sips to
one parched mouth when
all this water waits.

Not to boil over, but to fall steadily
under the gray and evaporate back—
an ocean. Hold this shell to your ear,
dear. Hear the sound that I hear.

The Birth of Venus

The wind is blowing—cold—
you can see it coming out of
the twin wind's mouths.
It ruffles into chaos the blanket
she'll be wrapped in soon.
You can tell it's cold even though
the sun is out because
her nipples are hard pink stones.
It can't be comfortable to
stand on that shell.

I remember the first time
I went naked at the beach,
playing mermaid with girl friends,
wrapping up in long hair like hers.
The cold puckering of skin
shrinking into premature wrinkles
as feet met sand again.

There are roses falling out of the sky
they announce her arrival
they are thrown to the stage
but she is not to keep them
and they mostly land in the sea.

There are small waves at the shore
they, too, announce her arrival,
but in a small voice
a statement of fact
that barely disturbs the surface.

She arrives in this windy, floral
seascape to be wrapped in
delicate silk and presented.
Presented to whom?
Where will she go?
Wherever it is, she won't need
shoes, nor underwear, it seems.

Did people wear underwear back then,
Mr. Botticelli? He shrugs in the grave.

She seems at peace, confident,
but the winds look worried.
Where can a naked girl go
in just a blanket—
in a towel—
with just her hair to wrap her?

How long does a pair of underwear last?
I can't remember the patterns on
most of mine, where they ended up—
blood-stained, rejected or ripped,
but I think if I try I can remember
that cold wind in her hair,
the sun on her body,
and the way the flowers felt
as they brushed against her
on the way down.



we could have burned too,

flames in forests, summer-long--

unquenchable thirst.

Our Lady of the Melting Ice

Our mother is exhausted
Her ice melts in the glass.
It's hot but she shuts the window.
She should be out there in it,
Relishing a world that is hers,
Truly, but we're here instead
Cocooned in blankets watching
A show about mammals.
Most of them won't make it through
These coming hard decades
But we don't talk about that
As the last shards of ice softly
Shift against each other, clinking.

Next week we'll shake loose the dust
Next week drink only water
Next week quit inhaling black smoke
Next week plan a future since
 our first has been ruined
Next week, she tells me.

She tells another story.
You can tell she is dying.
Trapped and twenty years
too late to help, you listen instead.

Stay under the too-hot blankets;
Dig a burrow under the burning earth;
Drown in melted ice cubes,
Another bath, tears.
This week stands still and sighs,
 knowing next week is a lie.

Among Strangers

I wanted to be among strangers
without expectation of me
or mine, hows or whys,
too much advice tipping the
scales against questions
and questions, when asked,
trampled over in haste to already
know my thoughts.

I wanted to be alone
so I tested the hammock,
pushing off with a foot and swinging.
From here, voices blend into birdsong
as vague and unintelligible and
easy to ignore,
looking up to gnarled maple limbs
and straight fir branches, sap.

I wanted to disappear
so I grasped each edge of fabric and lifting,
pulled the sides up and over my head
so that all I could hear was the rocking
of the universe and the full moon rising.
The light diffused through the red-orange fabric
glowed pink inside, warm. A womb.
A cocoon. Shadows of moths fluttering,
scarcely visible on my legs.

I wanted to walk and see
Venus touch Jupiter
a giant bright star of planets
but when I made my way back
they were hidden and the city dark.
The moon presided still,
following me home like a
drunken mumbling vampire.

I wanted to leave this place
of crumbling bricks and bleached walkways
or even see it burn
the way the red begonias at the new hotel
had burned in the weekend's heat,
wilting in their desire to shrink back
into seeds, into gentle invisibility.

I wanted to destroy
everything ostentatious and stupid
staring with the hotel.
To splash red paint across the windows
witness the elevator of blood that dyed the carpets—
Then to drive away unobserved, uncelebrated
to be among strangers, and nothing.

Las Vegas, The Riot

Las Vegas is the one rioting—
sure, Baltimore may flare up in
fire and rage for a while
but this permanent onslaught
of light, noise, flash, bang,
flesh, sell, buy—what is it
if not a riot?

Not as fun if you ask me,
and without righteousness,
feeling, other than empty stomach
grabbing hands, go
faster more now
hollow fearful frailty wrapped in
bravado, cloaked in neon
and pornography.

When I drove away tonight and
saw those hollering lights
fade into a glittering bed of orange
coals the color of shame and
excess I thought

*I hope to see the day they
burn themselves out for good*

We'll see that day, alright.
I'll throw a party then.
You're invited.

As I pushed north into the desert
into a blackness so comforting and
empty I was, by some miracle,
alone on the road for at least
ten miles. Alone with the
uncertain, unknowable darkness,
the white glow of headlights, and
three stars.

River Whispers, River Roars
to Colonel George Wright, may he never rest

"I have not lost a man or animal. I did not come into this country to ask you to make peace, I came to fight. Now when you are tired of the war and you ask for peace, I will tell you what you must do: You must come to me with your arms, your women, your children, and everything that you have and lay them at my feet. You must put your faith in me and trust in my mercy... If you do not do this, war will be made upon you this year and next and until your nation shall be exterminated."

-Colonel George Wright after the Battle of Four Lakes, 1858

I wake up from a dream about a strange familiar place that roars with a fullness of life itself. So many fish that their slapping on the water fights its way to the surface of the noise. Bear, and deer, and beaver, and standing in the water where it calms below the falls. It's my twenty-third birthday and a helicopter has awakened me before my first alarm. It's looping for no reason through my neighborhood and it isn't marked at all, flying so low you can see the faces of the men inside. Get up. Grit teeth. Walk east to downtown. Clench fist. Face the day, helicopters and all. Stop at Sherman Alexie, native son's, most under appreciated piece of public art. Walk the spiral labyrinth, read the poem that says,

"I understand that rage, Coyote. We can all understand but look at the falls now and tell me what you see. Look at the falls now, if you can see beyond all of the concrete the white man has built here. Look at all of this and tell me that concrete ever equals love, Coyote."

Walk downstairs to the lower platform where the rainbows and mist persist in existence despite the concrete above, below, within. Does the river miss the salmon? Is she grateful for the mill, for the newspaper? Does she notice the gondola swinging overhead? Is she bothered by the heavy metals, the trash in her eddies? Of course I'm crying, looking up at the bridge's arches, a reversal of the last sight so many see. Is there another city on Earth that incorporates it's suicide jumper's landmark into its municipal logo? Touché, San Francisco, you got me there.

It's easy to forget about the Earth when you live in a city. Paths lay predictable and smooth with consistent obstacles and markings—curbs, crosswalks, revolving doors. Right angles rule the day. When laws are observed, the speed and trajectory of objects in motion around and including our own falls into a steady hypnotic rhythm. Cities lucky or brash enough to straddle a river do so like they would a young trophy wife: her power, harnessed and contained for some practical purpose; her striking beauty, trotted out to show off to visiting cousins, her wild, unpredictable fury, pre-empted by networks of bridges—safe, rolled smooth, the connective veins of the city. Hush now, dear, hear the hum of the traffic?

In Alexie's poem, Coyote smashed the river and created the falls because of unrequited love. I want to ask the trickster city founders: Did you do this for love? Did you want to share the beauty of this majestic river with us all? Bridge her in your benevolence, for posterity? Did you love her so much but just wish she'd change that one thing, fill that gapped tooth with a dam? Now there's that pretty smile. Did you know your love would kill the salmon? Did you do it all anyway? Did you hang all those boys by accident down at the creek, George? Were they simply a misunderstood sacrifice to your Great Love? What about the horses, George? What about the winter? I ran Bloomsday on your street, George. Do you know why I like to run, like the river?

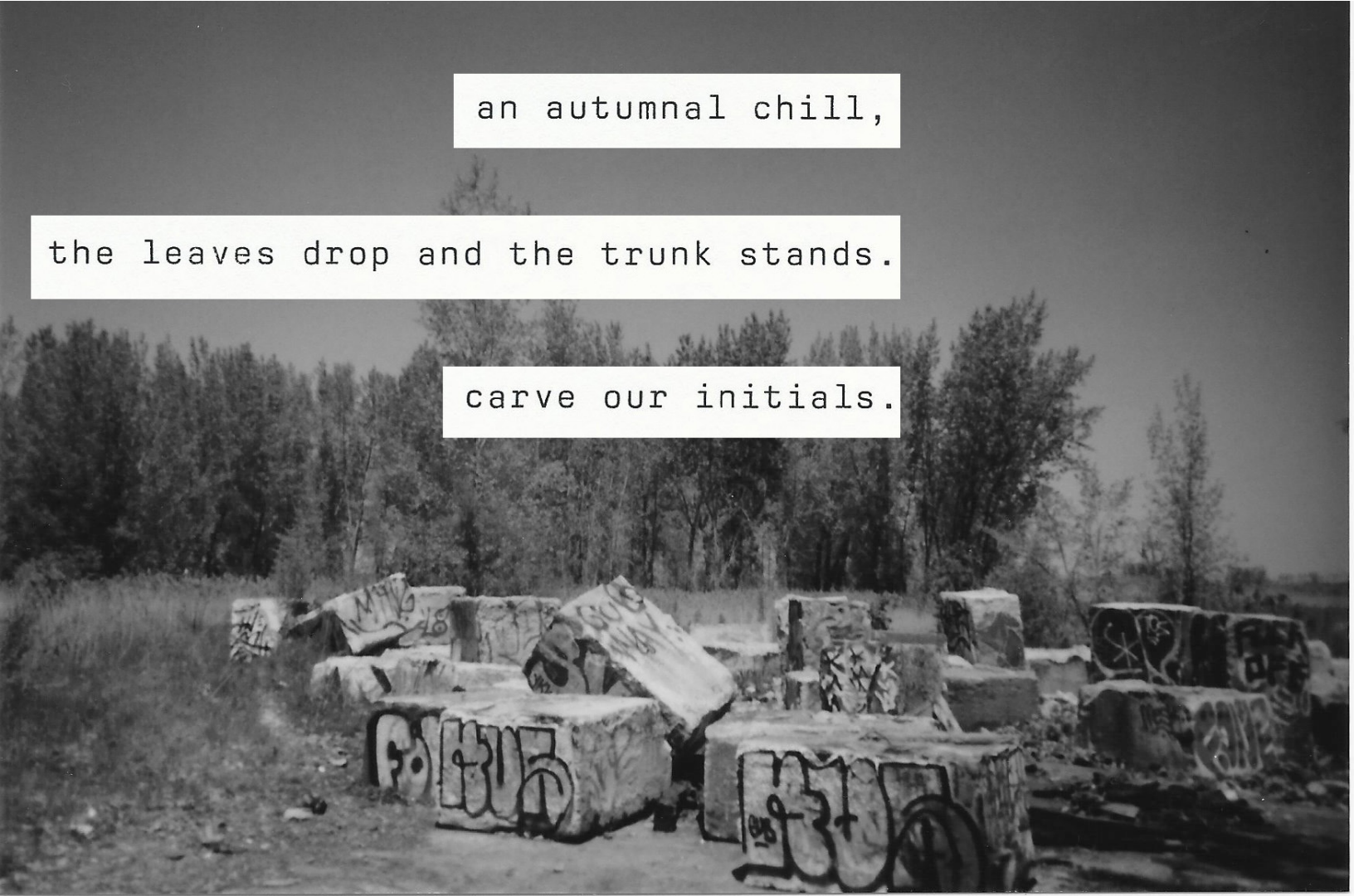
I'm glad you asked, George. The honest answer is I don't always know if I'm running towards or away from, but I like to run fast. Sometimes I think about men like you when I run, and how good it feels to be faster and better and stronger than you were. I can outrun you, but even so your evidence is everywhere. It cursed the river and now it whispers to people like me even as it roars and those whispers pull us to the edges of your bridges. I run on the bridges anyway, but I always look straight ahead. You see, George, when you hurt it's a gift sometimes to have a pain you can control. The leg ache changes over the course of miles, couples with the rhythms of feet and breath.

I like the trails on the north bank best—hidden underneath that new development. You have to cross the bridges to get there, and to get back. I never run on your street unless it's Bloomsday because of the cars and the faces of the men inside. People live down there by the trails—did you know that—but I seldom see them. On a trail, George, you have to watch where you place every step, but you also have to look up for branches. You're forced to pay attention to this place where you'll always just be a visitor. I saw an eagle fighting a hawk just fifteen feet over my head there once where the river meets Latah—or is it Hangman—Creek. What do you think that meant, George? Do you think either of them won?

an autumnal chill,

the leaves drop and the trunk stands.

carve our initials.



Slingshot / Riot / Giant / Harvest

“There are only sacred places / and desecrated places.”
-Wendell Berry

The train yard is poisoned, abandoned.
A place desecrated by chemical
trash, better left untouched.
Desire to break something permeates,
but everything here is already broken:
Pieces of concrete that never got to be
part of anything greater than themselves;
dented, rusting metal barrels that don't
have anything left to hold; and a
decades worth of broken bottle glass
competing for ground with gravel.

And yet, there are trees.
Who knows what ruin they drink up through
their roots, what unholy water flows below?
And yet, there are birds nesting.

Every fence with a sign that
reads NO TRESPASSING
has a hole in it somewhere.
Part the chain link teeth—
Hold them open for the others.

Pick your way across that toxic floor
in sandals; carry your own water.
Watch your friend choose stone-sized
chunks of former something to load.
Learn the way to pull your arm
all the way back; concentrate.
Take aim at the waste and let fly.

Across the ocean, it is
nearly dawn in Nazareth.

A small boy picks his way across
a room of sleeping siblings and
slips out the door.
He watches the road, crosses it,
pocketing stones on the way.
He learns to pull back without
shaking, the hatred too big for his
body; he concentrates.
He takes aim at the wall and the
noise as pebble meets concrete is
too quiet to wake anyone.

Every wall that high is topped with
sharp teeth, with soldiers.
No one will ever have to
explain Goliath to him.

Back at the train yard,
pebbles fail to satisfy rage.
Throw larger rocks at the barrels.
Taste the gong noise as it
ricochets between ear and jawbone.
Lift, then, the barrels and
bash them against the others,
louder now, and yell and
stomp as rust cuts into palm.
Sweat in the heat before the harvest.
Hum the song you learned at
the demonstration:

I am a sleeping giant/There is a riot in my bones
I am a sleeping giant/There is a riot in my bones

Remember: there are trees.
(across the ocean, olives
and almonds, ancient)
Take up your sore limbs and
Walk home as the world awakes.
Wash your hands clean and wait.

Posing for an Oil Portrait While
Watching a Documentary About Cave Paintings

Jared sketches, I recline,
the narrator gently intones:

“We are locked in history and they are not.”

Paintings in caves, layered across five thousand
years, divided from us by millennia more—
the caves were a special place for painting.
Humans never lived there due, of course, to
the presence of cave bears.

Antelope, horses, mammoth, rhinos
still leaping among shadows of the first
people, calcified and glittering with crystals.
A black mark where a torch was scraped
against the wall 28,000 years ago.

*“We can’t walk too deep because we would
crush the ground,
crush the tracks of the cave bear.”*

Jared frowns and chews the end of a pencil,
studying my face as the narrator explains:

*“An enchanted world of the imaginary where
time and space lose their meaning.”*

To inspect the obscured top half of a
woman depicted in one cave is impossible.
She is the only human representation there,
and only her hips, her legs are visible.

(People have never not wanted to draw women)

They find a flute, 30,000 years ago made,
and play “The Star Spangled Banner”
tuning unchanged through all that time.

A master perfumer smells his way
through the cave. The breath of
tourists grows mold on the walls.

Trains hurtle past the studio window,
shake the room and dim the narrator’s tone.
I shift slightly, trying to remain still.

Feathers & Talons

Hope may be “the thing with feathers—
that perches in the soul”—
but Emily Dickinson forgot to mention
the sharp beak, the tiny talons
that can’t help but cut that
soft soul flesh with a thousand
tiny what-if pecks that wear down

the tired glaciers behind your eyes
until they start to calve—
and yes, that’s calve, as in,
to have a cow—and the
chunks of ice send ripples of salt
across your life and hope’s
bird friend despair is there, in the bath.

It’s 80 degrees in April and by the time
the Lilac Parade rolls around,
the purples, dark and light,
and the rarer white blooms
will be long since past.
Do we change the date of the
festival? Will we adjust our calendar
a little more each year?

They’re too early, the lilacs,
the spring. All of this warmth
come too fast before we even
believe it can be real.
And we’re too late to slow
the ticking. We came here,
somehow, part of this perfection
of life and planet and universe,

and we never got to rehearse.
We’re out here, hot lights,
broad stage, fellow players,
Hoping to hope we can pull
it off, but it’s one night only.
What if there is no after party?
No time for an encore? Just the
one time and we’re too late?

I hate it when people talk
about saving the planet, as
if we are the ones smarter than
the whole planet, that needs us.
But I also hate when people talk
about humans as a cancer and the world
will be so much better without us.
Have you ever held hands with a
human? I want to ask.

Have you seen a baby laugh?
Have you put your feet in a river?
Those things have nothing to do with
cancer. We have made so many
mistakes, but we didn't rehearse.
How could we have rehearsed?
We have failed, yes, and badly.

And many times. We tried to
make straight lines out of a circle.
I tried to make this into a straight line
story kind of poem but it isn't.
Remember I was going to tell you about
hope? And the feathers and talons?
Well it's easier to survive without hope.
Nothing to lose if there's nothing.

Clean, logical, zero times zero.
Don't care much if you die
or if we all die, and watch it happen.
Keep it in a pocket like a bird
but it doesn't feel real so it isn't.
The Truth a little stuffed bird you
can squeeze when you get nervous
but it won't bite you.
It won't sing how it should either though.

But the real bird will chirp and sing
in the darkness and when it pecks
at you and says "do it for your
grandchildren" you will listen because
the talons hurt and you want to meet
them someday in the maybe-not
future and the hurt comes from the
maybe but the maybe holds a yes.

A yes of flowers that are blooming
too early but all they know to do is
bloom and all we can do when they
wilt in the too fast too early heat
is remember what they looked like
and know that we are them too
and that even though it's all gone
wrong and we can't remember our lines

That here we are, on stage,
being so strange and performing
for no one, or everyone,
and we just have to seize the
only time we have to do what
we can. Nothing much else is
going on, and how do you want to
spend the final days of being
human beings on Earth, anyway?

Nation in Labor

I.

Be born—mewling and squalling
into this great swirling life,
eyes open and peering and curious.
Learn—contort your wonders
and awe into answer, perspective,
known fact.
Simmer in the strange pot a while
until you feel you've become
a person, found yourself here.

Spill your youth on the altar of nothing.
A sacrifice to shining nowhere—all around.
Awake—spinning and swelling and
lost after the ritual, examining
your first wrinkle, your growing belly
alive inside.

II.

Can you feel the pressure—down?
(the weight of the fullest a world ever was)

This is a nation in labor:

Breathe with me now

<<

>>

The contractions coming, some aren't
ready for the pain because life was
soft for them, but it's time to
be brave now, throw down.

<<

>>

This is a nation in labor.

Breathe with me now

and if you can't breathe,

If you can't breathe,

<<

<<

Then push.

Push hard past the

pain and danger

and silent hallways.

This is a nation in labor.
The emotional presence
of fear prolongs labor by
an average of thirty-seven minutes.

<<

>>

The future floats in liquid fear and
distrust as the world around it swells.
This is a nation in labor.
But think how many children
of abuse and addiction have
laid upon this table vowing
newness? And some succeeded.

History suggests, she doesn't dictate.
Breathe with me. It's time.

III.

Time stops.
Far above, the
stars align. The
comet approaches.
Some of the asteroid burns
away in the atmosphere—some
remains. Water rises to nostril in the
former coastal cities as the ocean, vast
and churning gives birth to something entirely new.

