End Times

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Image by Theodore Van Alst

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By Josh Slotnick

In trucks, on tractors, pulling handcarts, carrying boxes, walking at work pace, we've carved grooves in our land, worn paths according to the seasonal rhythms of labor. From barn to field, to greenhouse to walk-in coolers, to trucks, to home, we made these ruts and trails according to temperature, the arc of the sun and the concordant rhythms of labor. The seasons run steadily here in western Montana, always in motion. Farming means reading the signs and abiding. The axis of time and place point the way and we follow — watching, waiting — accepting the seasonal terms of our bargain, and these dictates are reliable as clockwork. Seasonality, the flow of spring, summer, fall and winter, is our roadmap for how we live. There is no negotiating; it's implacable, steadfast, and authoritative. Success, on nearly every level, demands we act accordingly. The presence of such certainty offers an anchor of security in an uncertain world.

"The harvest season's almost here," says the smiling guy at the post office, "You must be excited." Yes, fall is around the corner, but we've been harvesting food since mid-May, at a relentless pace. The singularity of fall as harvest season is for grain farmers, we vegetable growers work off a different calendar. By fall, our annual crop-by-crop challenges have been won or lost, and the franticness of doing all types of work at once—planting, weeding, irrigating, harvesting—becomes much more one-dimensional. "Excited" doesn't really fit. Fall means that though the year is not yet over, the stress mostly is, and the weather makes for glorious days. Fall weather redeems the hazy yellow horizon, roasting heat of July and August, when you walk at speed down the path along the field's dry edge to the irrigation pump, and your heavy feet graze crunchy earth. Summer's long days stack quick like cordwood, making for short weeks, but fall is an entirely

different story. From mid-September to mid-October the sky, no longer faded, turns cobalt and expands out and up, deep as any ocean. The air, sweatshirt-cold in the morning, becomes t-shirt pleasant by afternoon, and time slows to a much more civilized pace, slow enough for you to notice the sky's sharp clearness. In summer, if you raise your head at all, you see a chalky heat haze fading to an ill-defined horizon. Swollen volatile clouds mark the spring sky, churning like a bad stomach, all movement and upheaval. But in fall, when you raise your head, you get, clarity. The mountains lay on the horizon in clean, knife-edge silhouette.

Since mid May we've been harvesting shelf-life crops, the sensitive, soft types, like head lettuce, mixed greens, bunched kale, green beans, chard and collards. Leafy and ephemeral, summer vegetables begin melting the moment we cut them from the earth or snap them from a stalk. But not fall food. Fall holds its weight. We bring in a year's worth of hot sun, irrigation, black soil and labor, repackaged into the pound weight of the real — medicine ball pumpkins, mountains of bright winter squash, onions, onions and more onions, carrots, beets, shallots, celeriac, and potatoes. Again and again, squatting, lifting, and carrying overstuffed wax boxes and burlap sacks to trucks, tractors and handcarts, all that weighty food rides our rutted paths to coolers and sheds, and then off to the rest of the valley. In these ways fall is both heavy and light.

All of that used to be true.

My wife and I started farming in 1992, on a small patch of rented ground nearby the land I speak of now, the year before our first child was born. We bought this place seven years later. It came cloaked in rich soil with a 100-year-old farm house done up in sky blue 70's shag carpet and crumbling 1950's wall paper. A slew of outbuildings shot through with sunlight dotted the property and with all that — land, buildings, house — came the rest of our of lives. All three kids were so little when we began here they have known no other family home. They grew up right here, and so did we, in a way, on this place, our place. Bit by bit we remade the house, the land, and the outbuildings into a reflection of this farming/family life. Nearly every day, spring, summer, fall, at all hours, for decades, we have been in motion making and re-making all this. From the outside looking in, that level of labor looks devotional, and in a sense that's exactly right. The depth of commitment required to fuel decades of relentless work came from a kind of faith-left-understood, an absolute rock-solid belief beyond the reach of doubt, logic or even words. If we did right by our children, by the land, and if we followed the clockwork of this place — seasonality — doing what was called for when it needed to be done, we would thrive together. This faith held us up like bedrock, it gave birth to action pre–speech, did not rest in our skills, our understanding of each other as people or some traditional religion, rather we believed to the core of our being in the constancy of this land, this place as a home for our family and the immutable compass of seasonality. That faith allowed for all the work that followed and the work formed us, much like we have etched lines in the land. For many years now we've grown produce off of 10 acres, sold that food in western Montana, and lived in accordance with the dictates of raising children and the seasonal parameters of this place.

In the summer of 2000 our seven, four, and one-year-old children needed continual maintenance. We were just in it: moving pipe, changing diapers, reading stories, loading trucks, napping kids in greenhouses, making snacks, keeping bed times, doing rivers of laundry, hauling the kids and their devices — strollers, car seats, frontpacks — to market, everything in motion and all at once. It was a chaotic weave of love and energy and mess. I remember feeling this way of living was as big and endless as the horizon. I came to understand the certainty of family like I understood seasonality — it infused everything we did, lived outside of doubt, and had no expiration date. In the summer of 2000 we were swimming in the endlessness of family farm life, and glorious fall was once again within reach. But 2000 was not like other years. An exceptionally dry spring gave way to real heat right away and June unfurled strings of 90+ degree days, and those became 100 degree days by July. At the end of the month the Bitterroot Mountains, a lovely line of peaks to the south, caught fire. The far southern end of the Bitterroot Valley has a pinch point, where the Bitterroot Mountains from the west side and the Saphire Mountains from the east side come together. Highway 93 and the Bitterroot River tumble down from Lost Trail pass and shoot the gap where the mountains meet. On August 8th a towering wall of flames burning at 800 degrees jumped the river, and then the highway, from west to east. The fire screamed up the slopes of the East Fork of the Bitterroot

vaporizing everything in its path. That fire, called the Valley Complex fire, eventually devoured more than 360,000 acres across a 1.6 million acre national forest in Montana and Idaho. At night, entire trees flared up all at once like giant torches shining for miles. Thick billowing smoke rolled downstream, following the path of the Bitterroot River and settled into the big bowl that is the Missoula valley. Visibility dropped to near zero.

For all of August the smoke stayed close in, like a lid over our valley. September eventually arrived, but not fall as the horizon melted into a dead grey sky and the mountains remained hidden. The crisp air of fall lived only in memory. Instead we breathed air like campfire smoke, sticky and ashy and foul. We had smoke every day until a snowfall blanketed the Valley Complex fire.

The year 2000 seemed to hit on bad weather luck, a perfect storm of circumstances with way below average spring rainfall, searing temperatures beginning in June and never relenting, then a spate of dry lightning thunder storms. All that set us up for an inevitable fire season and similar to a 100-year flood the fires felt apocalypt-ish, in that huge things, defining elements of reality got bent into dramatically new and previously unimaginable shapes, like how a flood turns streets into waterways. The mountains define our landscape here and in late summer of 2000 the mountains disappeared, for months. The crisp high altitude air we live by became heavy, clammy and faintly toxic. Ahead of the new year back in early winter of that year (1999) the nation's frightful and faithful predicted that the year 2000, called Y2K in popular culture, would bring the End Times. They said clunky twentieth century computer code wouldn't be able to account for the new millennium and the world as we knew it, dependent on the clockwork of computers, would shatter at 12:01 am., then, of course, would come The Rapture — judgment day. Jan 1, 2000 arrived and nothing happened. Time kept moving, paying no mind to the changes. Similarly, when the fires swept through the Bitterroots in the summer of 2000 and the sky became gunmetal grey, the mountains disappeared, and the air went bad, people accommodated, moving about the way they always do. Time kept moving on. The world we have created seems to be so big a ship its course cannot waver. None of that — how the fires temporarily bent foundational reality, the boomerang back to normal eight weeks later, and our non-response to any of it, caused me to begin to doubt the certainty of the clockwork of nature, the breadth and depth of my family or how we fit into the world. But it should have. Y2K did not bring The End Times, but it was the end of a time.

Fire and smoke came again in 2003, and then again in 2007. But these were otherwise distracted years for us, we had hit peak family — everyone in grade school together and no one old enough yet to show signs of anything else. Certain farm tasks became "kid jobs", picking cucumbers on Sundays, collecting eggs, mowing the lawn. They moved irrigation when they got tall enough to carry pipe without the rainbird hitting the ground, and they helped work market when they could do math on the fly. I talked through school issues with my son while moving pipe, planned meals with my oldest daughter while harvesting greens bunches, caught up with the youngest in the hoop house cucumbers on Sunday mornings. In most all instances the work, the season, the particularities of our place, set the stage for our lives together. Farming does not follow the temporal pattern of a typical job, allowing for chunks of compartmentalized time allotted for "parenting", self-care, quality time with your spouse etc. Farming means the distinctions between work and family and land melt away, and in those years that is exactly what happened.

Beyond our farm, into the valley and beyond, the events of 2003-2007 kept popular notice away from the weather. The nation still reeled from 9/11, war raged on in Iraq and Afghanistan, growing almost daily, and a mad housing boom infected western Montana, and most everywhere else. Weather hardly made the news. But for us, weather is news. In 2003 spring lasted about ten minutes, and barely shed a tear's worth of rain. 90-degree days became weeks of triple digits and again we marched through the rhythms of work in dry heat haze. Our fields sucked up irrigation before our eyes. Water flew constantly from our irrigation pipes, roostertailing through hot wind from early morning till well into the night. We had to move pipes every few hours, from dawn to dusk, just to keep the whole place alive. I didn't waste energy hoping for rain in the hills as the present demanded so much effort and attention. I knew what was to come and didn't dwell on the horrors of the inevitable, with intense heat, week in and week out, on top of low soil moisture, it was only a matter of time till a dry lightning storm ignited the mountains. And that's of course just what

happened. By the beginning of September, 16 major fires burned in western Montana, blackening more than 300,000 acres. Not since 1910 had the west seen so much fire and this was all in one corner of one state.

In 2007, 21 days in a row broke 90 degrees, including 11 days over 100. On July 6th we hit 107, 24 degrees above normal for the day. In one night of dry lightning, small fires ignited all around us. The woods burned near Seely Lake, Frenchtown, Rock Creek, Stevensville — every cardinal direction led to a fire rolling smoke into a valley that feeds into ours. Sooty black clouds tumbled along the topography, and smoke once again filled the bowl that is Missoula, like air in a balloon. Smoke ate September, devoured most of October, and fall, in all its glory, didn't really happen. By the time snow fell in 2007, more than 800,000 acres across western Montana had burned, making 2003 look moderate. That September I first wondered if the clockwork of the universe was breaking, or if it was just moving in a new way. Would fall still come now, but just on a predictable semi-annual beat, alternating with smoke? I thought of asking my father, a statistician fascinated with numerical patterns, if he could decipher it, but the next year was fine, and I didn't think about smoke. We were distracted. Farming life spun now with new iterations of family-dom, ferrying the youngest to gymnastics, watching hundreds of soccer games, our son learned to drive, and we set kids up to run a stand at a second market. Everything worked, children grew, crops grew, we coasted through the winter, and that faith, in the endlessness of everything working, if only we did everything we know to do, in accordance with the season and each other, remained unabated.

In 2012 1.1 million acres burned statewide, nearly 3X the fires of 2000, and smoke from the Mustang fire in north Idaho filled our skies as well. The smoke hung on for seven weeks, thick as coastal fog, obliterating the season, spreading sore throats and snot like pollen in the wind. The smoke ground down our horizon, made fuzzy borders of the otherwise crisp mountain edges to this valley. The super-fit mountain recro-hedonists, who make up so much of our citizenry, lost their playgrounds and became confused, lounging lost at coffee shops in the middle of otherwise sunny summer days. Even the rivers looked sad, trickling when they should have been running, with big rocks exposed, faded and whitening like sun-bleached bones.

Now, its late August, and we're in it again. This time the clockwork's really shot, as it's not just this valley, or even this corner of the state. From western Montana to Utah, to Colorado, all the way out to eastern Washington — the west is burning. Fall will not break through this smoke. The rhythmic heart of seasonality is stuttering, calling out for cosmic defibrillation.

I'm in the field around the corner from our house harvesting potatoes, and smoke grabs at my throat. This day is the worst of it so far this year. No sky to be had at all. No fall on the way. Nothing but smoke. Ash wafts down on me like snowflakes, while I dig potatoes. I'm on my knees in the tilled dirt, and I assume this posture to drop earth-encrusted maroon, pale yellow, and metallic purple spuds in a bucket, but I have been leveled. My older daughter, she was four in 2000, is inside, packing to leave.

All that smoke, a few years of arrhythmic seasons, and even the occasional disappearance of fall in all its glory, and my faith remained solid, not just unquestioned, but so deep and protected to defy understanding as such. But today I am flooded with doubt. The universe has shifted just enough to expose my faith, left it open for consideration, like these lustrous potatoes. Only now as my second child leaves, am I questioning what has been before me for a while. At the opening of this new century was I so blinded by the certainty of a type of permanence — drunk on faith — that I missed how special that time was, all of us together, the beauty of a workable world, and the unshakable guidance of it all? 2000 did not bring the rapture, but it did mark the time when the pattern we live by first cracked hard. I will shortly load these buckets of potatoes in a truck, ride the rutted paths we made across this field to sheds, coolers etc., like I always do. Even in the face of such colossal contradictions, in faulty faith exposed like the emperor's new clothes, the big ship just keeps moving forward. Because really, we just cannot conceive of other options. I know of no other way to live. We have no other pattern to follow. We used to move in concert with the predictable progression of the seasons, the needs of children and the demands of this land. We understood what to do when. But volatility makes the clock tick now. The natural order of things no longer comes naturally, and our seasonal road map for living does not sync up with reality. Right now, here on my knees

in the potatoes, while our second child leaves and fall becomes a ghost, I know I need to address this — how do we live in accordance with a discordant universe? But, at least at this moment, I just don't care to know. Instead I want a more thoughtful shot at the past. I don't want to change it, I just want to drink it in slowly, really feel it this time, knowing that it will not last. If I could I surely would, and call out the true rarity it was, when our kids were all around us, shiny and golden, and fall would come like clockwork to redeem the year, and all of us, for always.

Josh Slotnick is a vegetable farmer. He has been farming in Missoula, MT for 24 years, and has been teaching in the Environmental Studies program at the University of Montana for 20. Josh's energy is not divided between, but blurred among, farming, teaching, and being part of a family. He has published academic essays and one book of poems, *HomeFarm*, in 2014