Opinion
EarthBeat
Snow-covered building pictured in snow-filled area.

Ice covers communication towers as massive amounts of snow trap residents of mountain towns in San Bernardino County, California., March 2. In recent weeks, California residents have experienced unprecedented snow, 75 mph winds and ice storms. (OSV News/Reuters/David Swanson)

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As I write these words, this rumination on Ada Limón's poem "Instructions on Not Giving Up," California is bracing for an uncommon winter storm. Snow in the Santa Cruz mountains, wind speeds up to 75 miles per hour and thunder is promised for tonight. Elsewhere, hundreds of thousands of residents in Michigan are without power, while Atlanta recorded its hottest day on record for the winter season. 81 degrees. Something is not right.

The weather's ill temper — evidenced by the oscillations between an early spring bloom and the freeze expected to encrust the many pink blossoms of my town's magnolia and plum trees — is the earth's response to a high-grade fever. Climate change has punctured and bludgeoned and scraped at the intelligence of nature. Now it snows 30 miles southwest of the Bay Area. Now it's summer in February in Atlanta. Now it's different, the way we thought the world worked.

And in the hours leading up to this writing, as I've watched clouds bloated with rain tumble into this corner, this sliver of the world I belong to, I have begun to see endings everywhere. Endings in the too-early bloom of blossoms, endings in the

sirens heard from across the city. Endings in news reports of uncanny, harmful and deadly things happening somewhere else, and surely, happening here. I cannot peel myself away from this easy feeling, that the ending is more inevitable than the continuing, which, when done well, is a good kind of living. I require assistance.

I lean on Limón's "Instructions on Not Giving Up," a poem that offers an image of nature turning itself into the form recognizable as spring. The muffled monochrome of winter fades, or melts, and gives way to birth. Or, as the poem says, "it's the greening of the trees that really gets to me."

> 'The end and the beginning are, with delight, the same place.'
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My favorite line is the ninth, where a "green skin," or that of leaves, papers the past of winter so decently, so illustriously, that this papering is akin to a perfect circle. Green growing back into place and into herself is, as the poem says, a return. It's not any kind of return, where the journey happens far from ourselves or far from our home, only to come back to the start in order to realize the circle embedded in our own wandering: The end and the beginning are, with delight, the same place. This time, the journey of giving up and coming to life takes place along the same branch-spine.

As I read this poem, an image comes to my mind, of the peace lily who lives in a pot in my house, and blooms all year long. New, young leaves burst outward from the middle of the plant. At first, they arrive curled into themselves, fetal in their position, never before having to lift their heads up and look around. A day and a week pass and the leaves yawn open, so as to say "here I am."

I am not naturally gifted with plants; I do not seem to speak their language. Yet even as this lily has creeped close to death's edge, I've witnessed her revival. There is an instinct to live. There is a desire to come back to the point from which we set out. Rather, as the poem says, after the shock of the winter season the earth's plants offer a "return to the strange idea of continuous living despite the mess of us, the hurt, the empty."

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In these favorite lines is the resonant idea, the one that holds me during the prelude to a late winter storm. That we, humans, with our brains, intellect, and inventions, can believe in endings more than we do beginnings. That we, humans, can narrowly see endings everywhere, even as life pulsates all around.

The storm, which brings water to a parched and needing soil, I've only viewed with reticence. It is strange to me that things can feel off-center even as much as they round the corner and run back to their beginnings, continuously. This poem speaks to multiple listeners — the reader, the natural world, even back to the speaker herself. And in speaking to all of us, the poem demonstrates the circle it so patiently and ploddingly draws around a fuchsia, a crabapple tree, cherry branches and that final fist relenting to palm. These instructions are a short paragraph, enough words for a receipt, yet the circle it draws is as old and deep as time, the always existing and never-ending clock of nature.

While these are my favorite lines, the best lines are the final three, which begin with a defiant "Fine then, I'll take it," as the speaker of the poem intuits a voice for the tree. The tree's leaves don't just open to the world, which could happen timidly, rather they "unfurl" like "a fist to an open palm." The poem seems to say that the leaf gives way to its own inevitable life, and that possibly, there's pride in that kind of living, accepting all that happens within and around us, for these are kinds of living, too.