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Orbiting Forward (Thoughts On The Nature Of Conflict - Sighs On The Struggles Of Change)

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Orbiting Forward • *Sighs On The Struggles Of Change*

Submitted to the faculty of the School of the Arts
at Virginia Commonwealth University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Design, Visual Communications.

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Orbiting Forward
Sighs On The Struggles Of Change

My world is pulled from under my feet.
I'm flip turning underwater ..
it starts in a blink of an eye,
then it slows down,
until almost frozen .

Upside down ..
water is filling every hole in my head ..

am I doing it right?
am I upside down?
or am I leaning to a side?

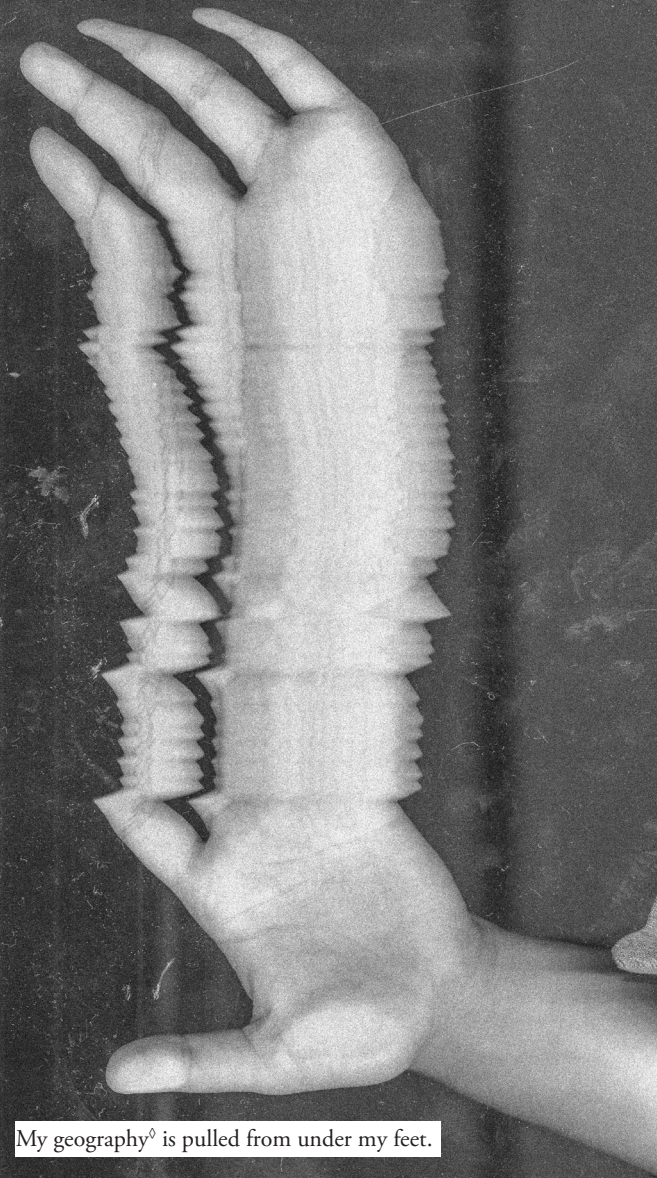
A very long

uncertain

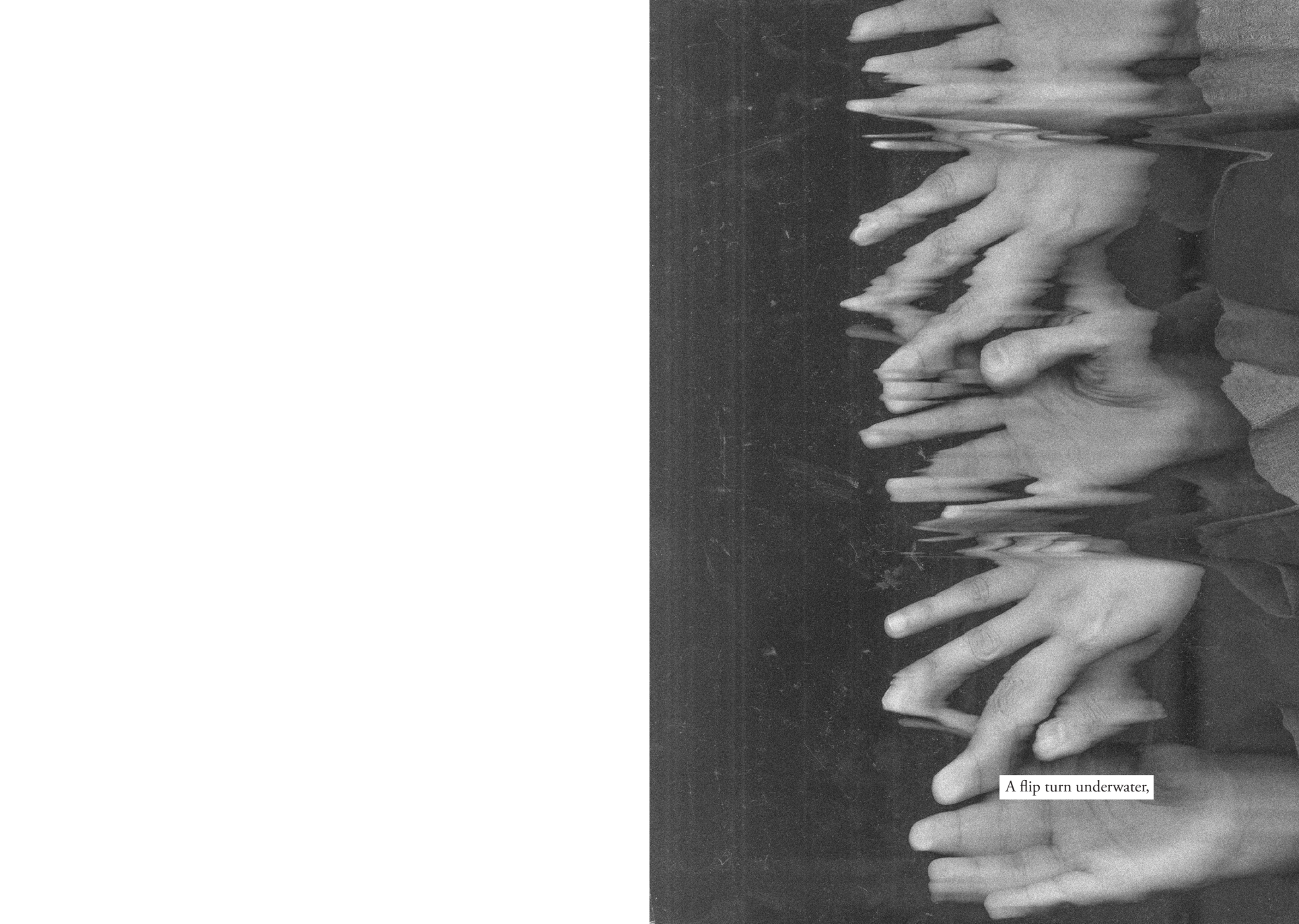
exciting

terrifying

transitioning moment*



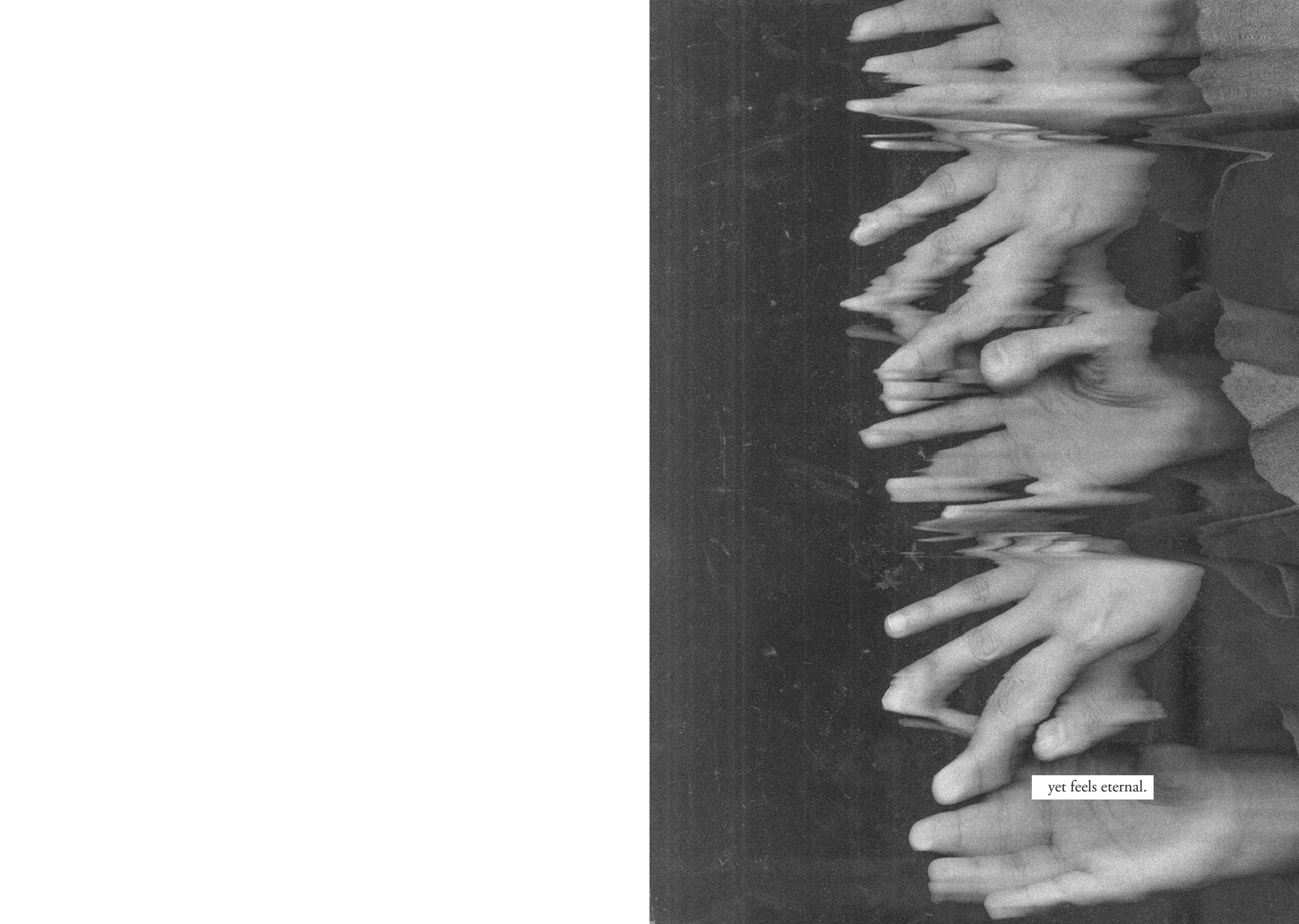
My geography^o is pulled from under my feet.



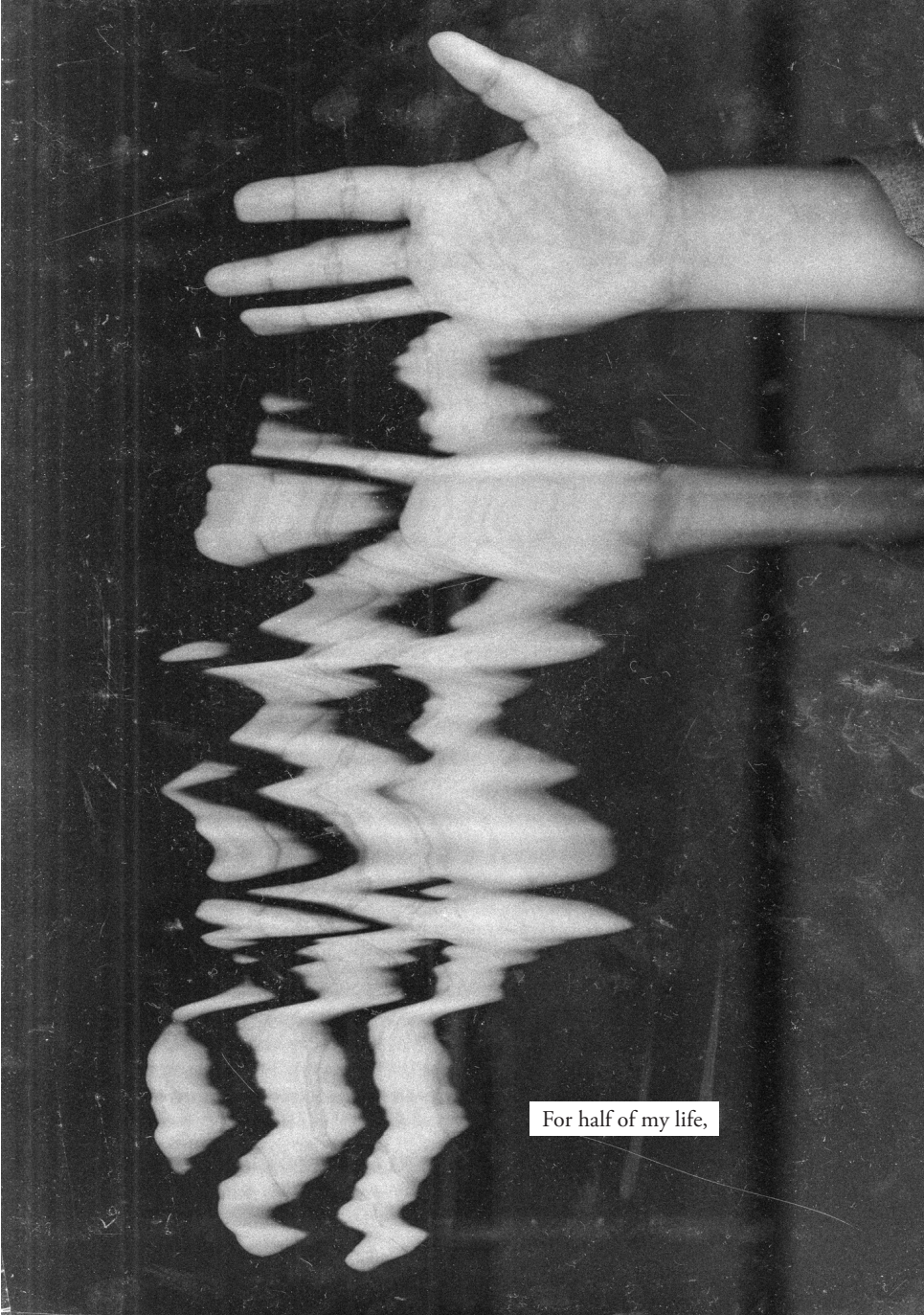
A flip turn underwater,



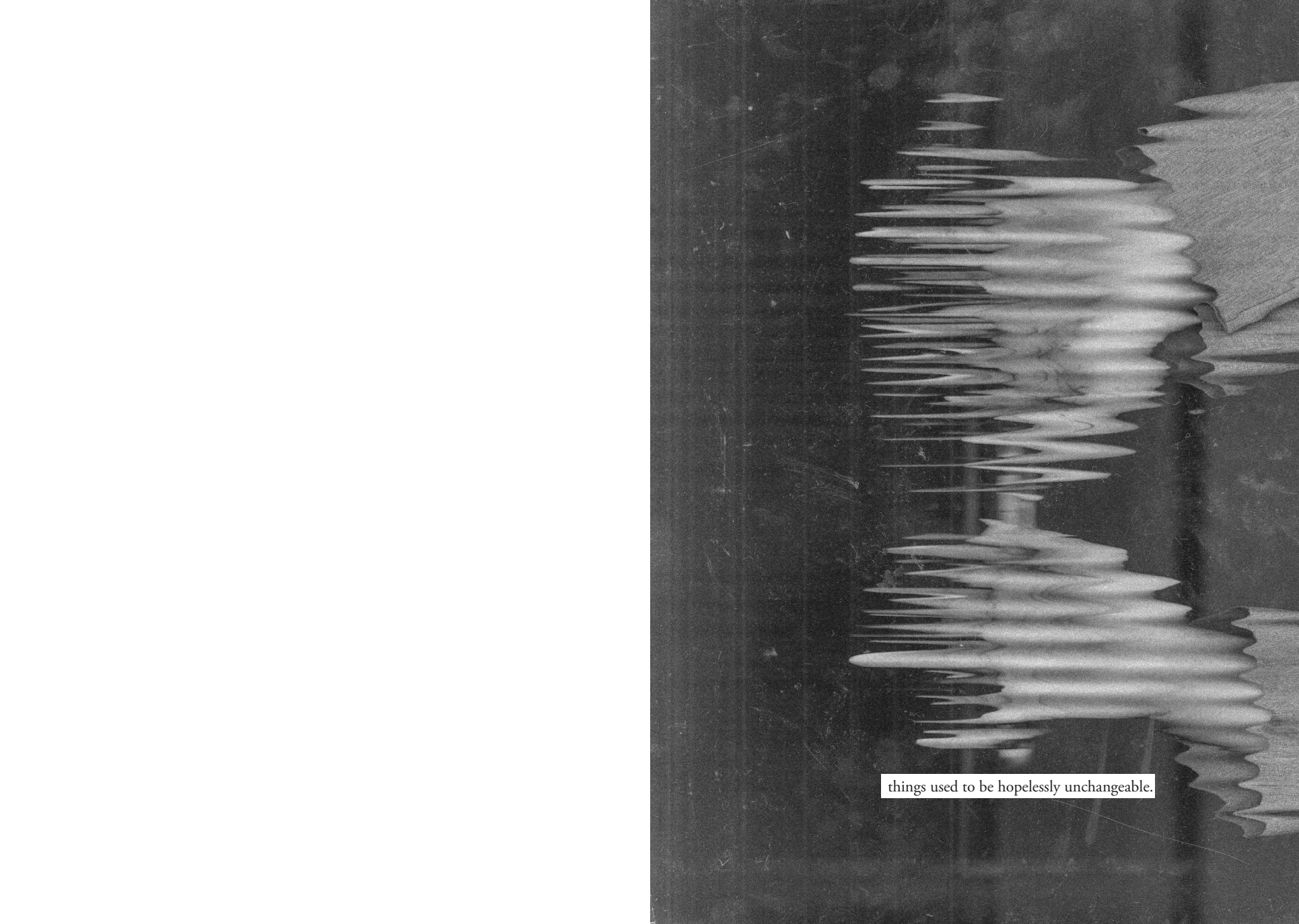
exists less than two seconds,



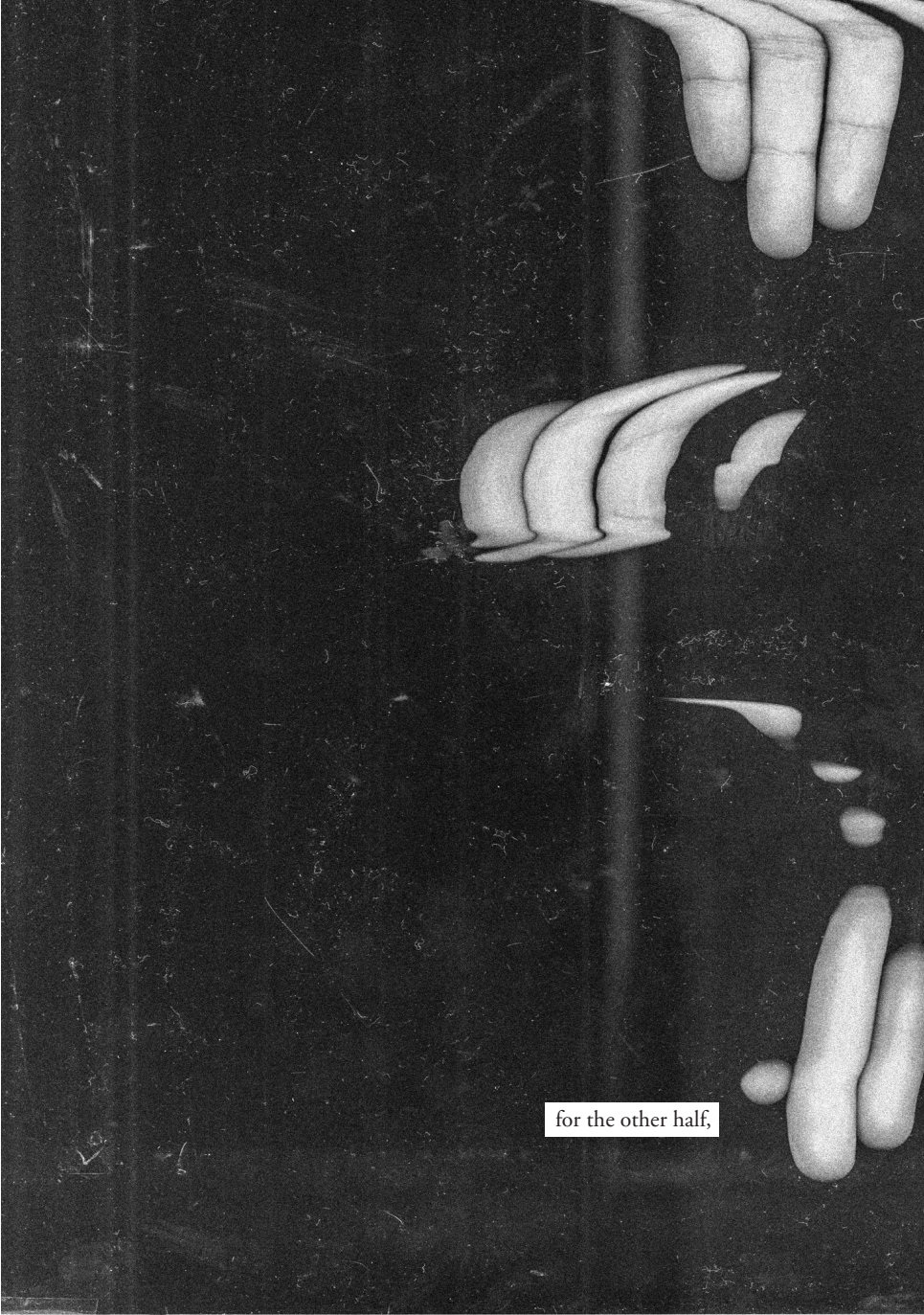
yet feels eternal.



For half of my life,

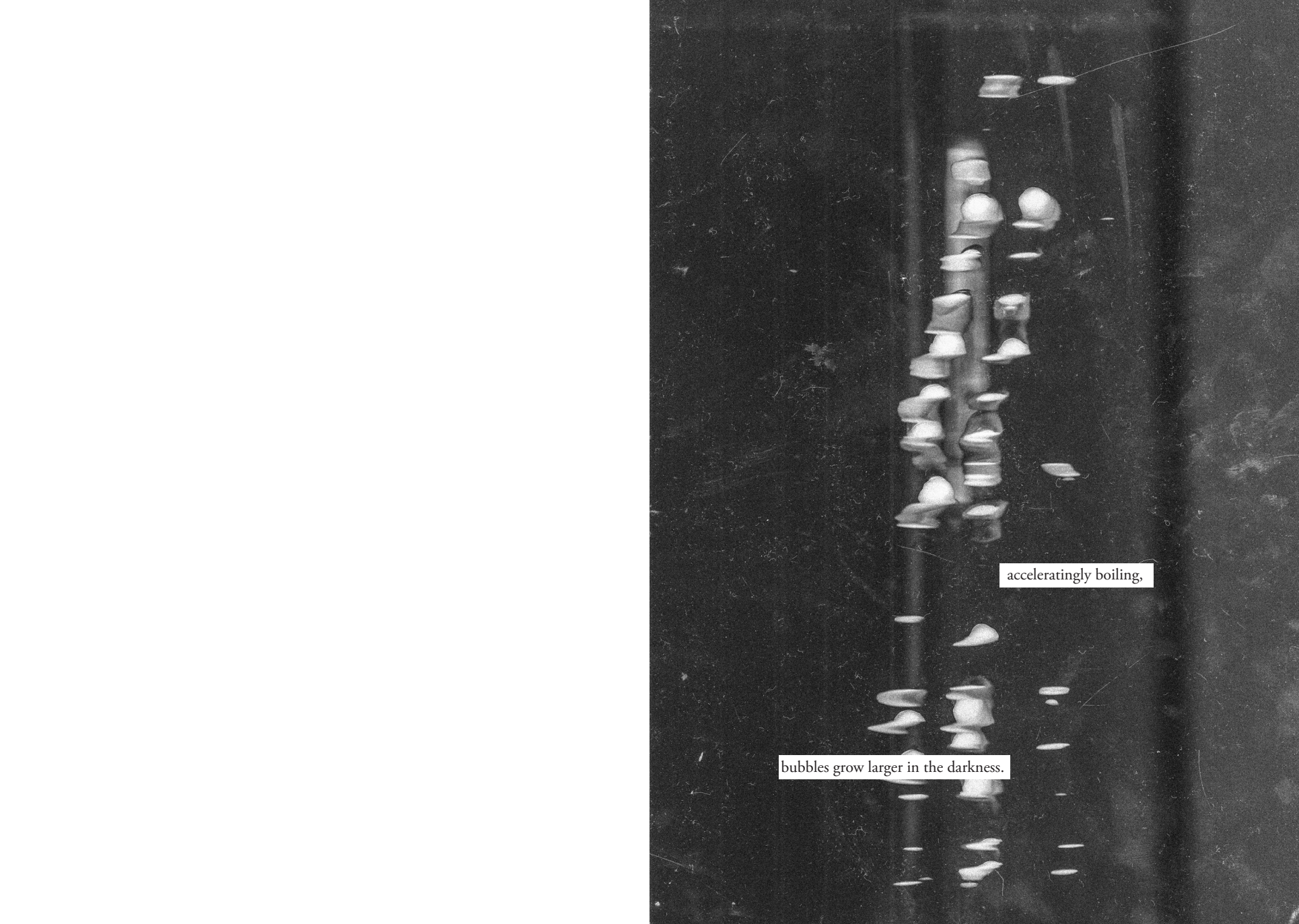


things used to be hopelessly unchangeable.



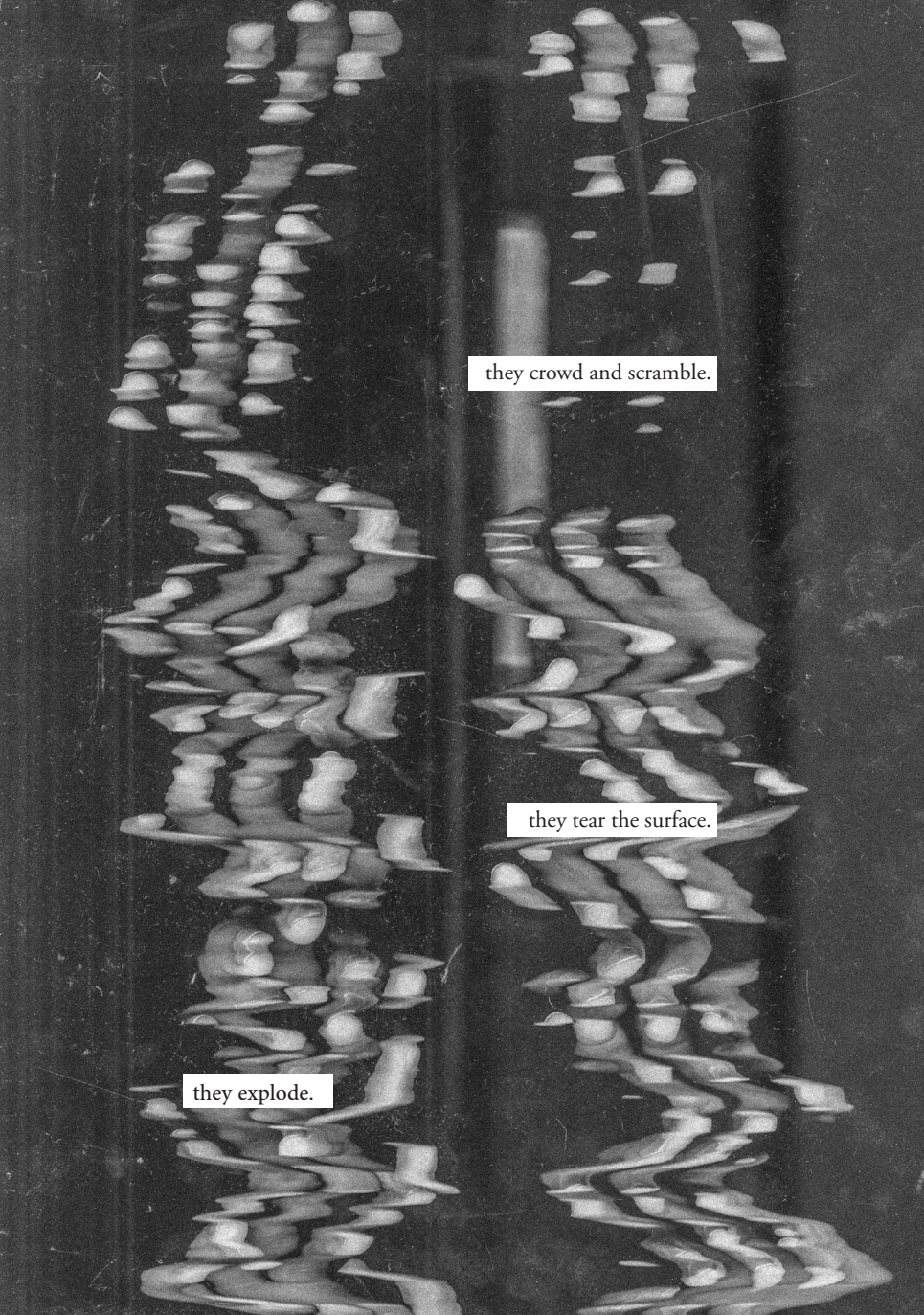
for the other half,

everything have been insanely changing.



acceleratingly boiling.

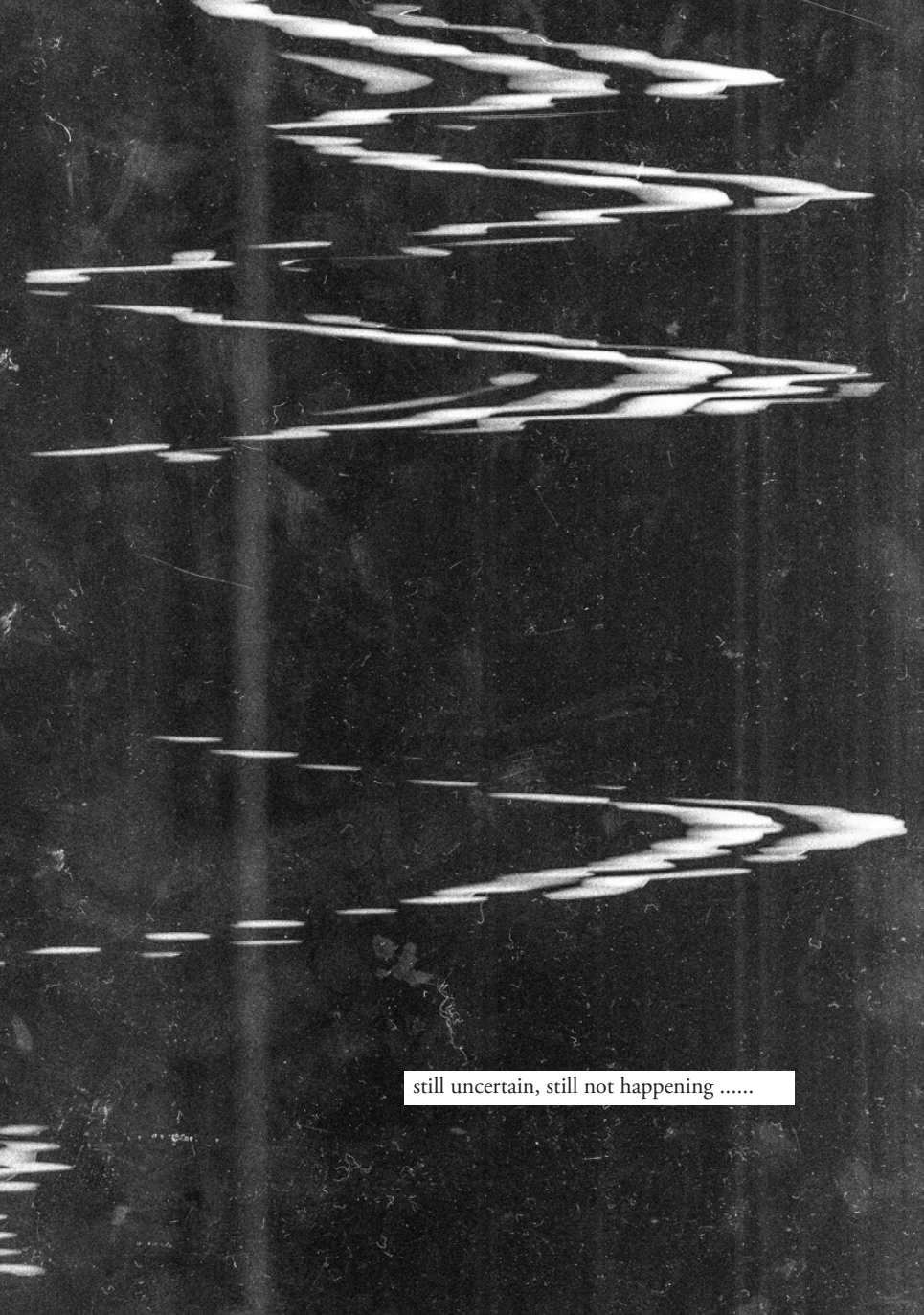
bubbles grow larger in the darkness.



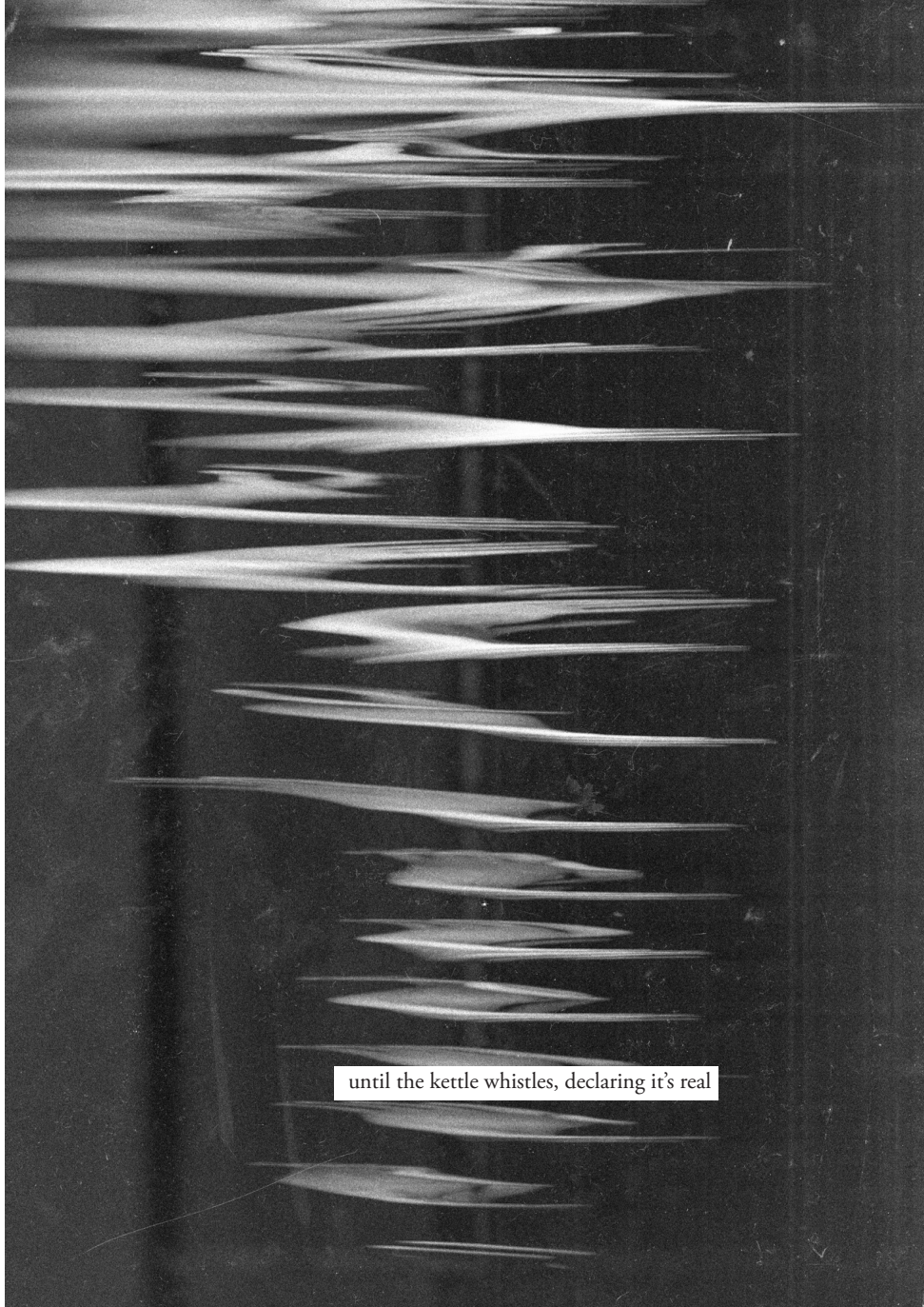
they crowd and scramble.

they tear the surface.

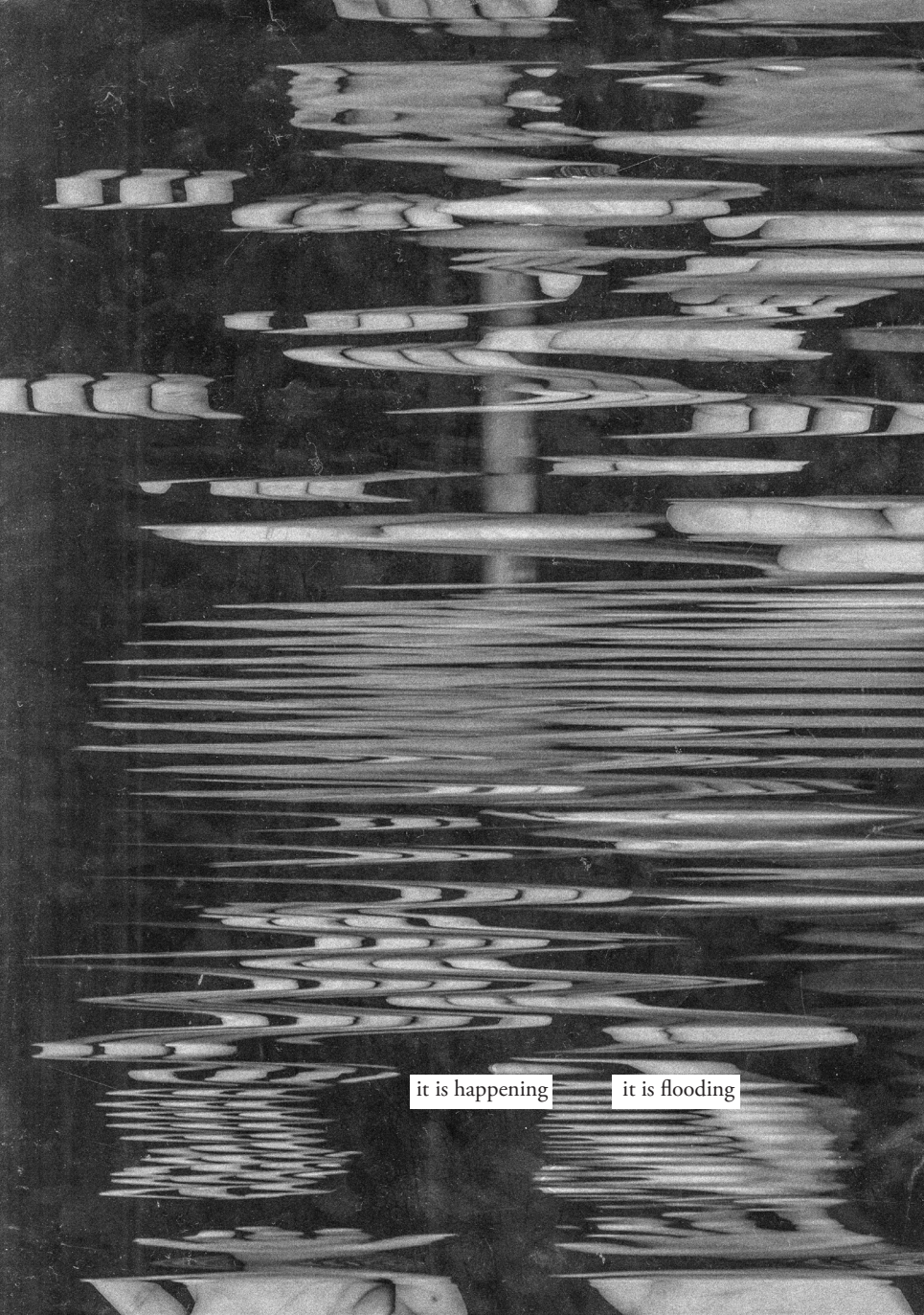
they explode.



still uncertain, still not happening

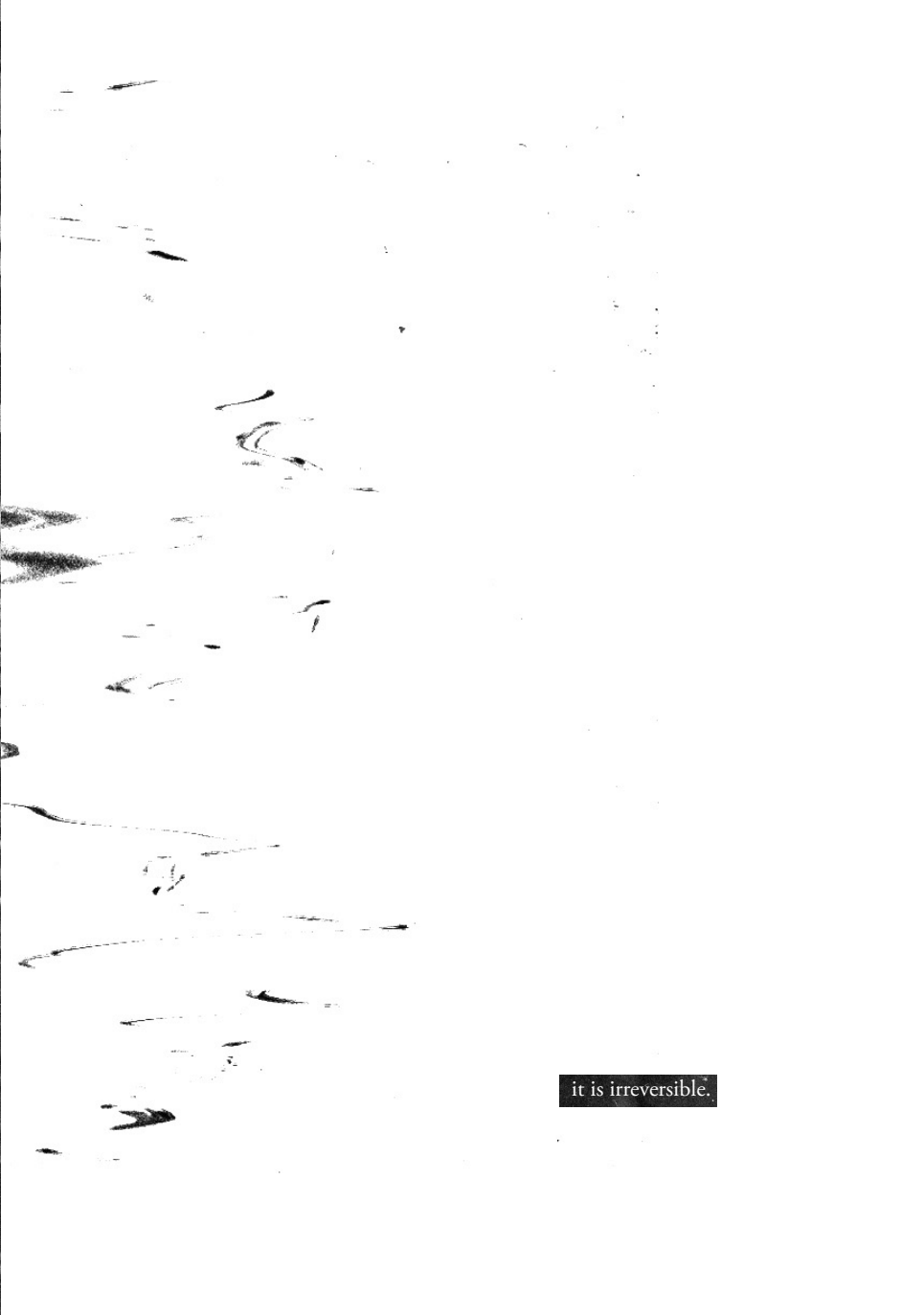


until the kettle whistles, declaring it's real



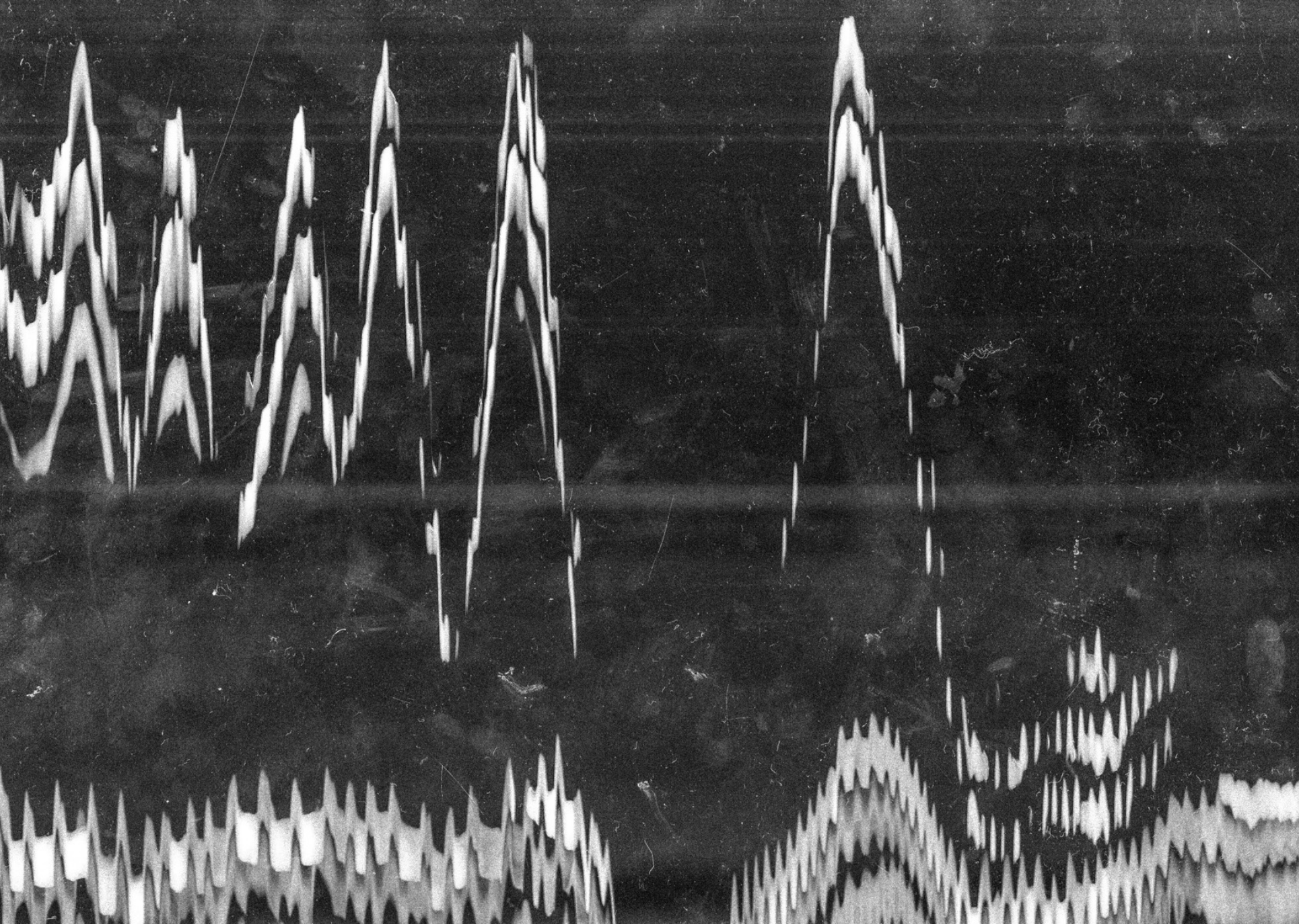
it is happening

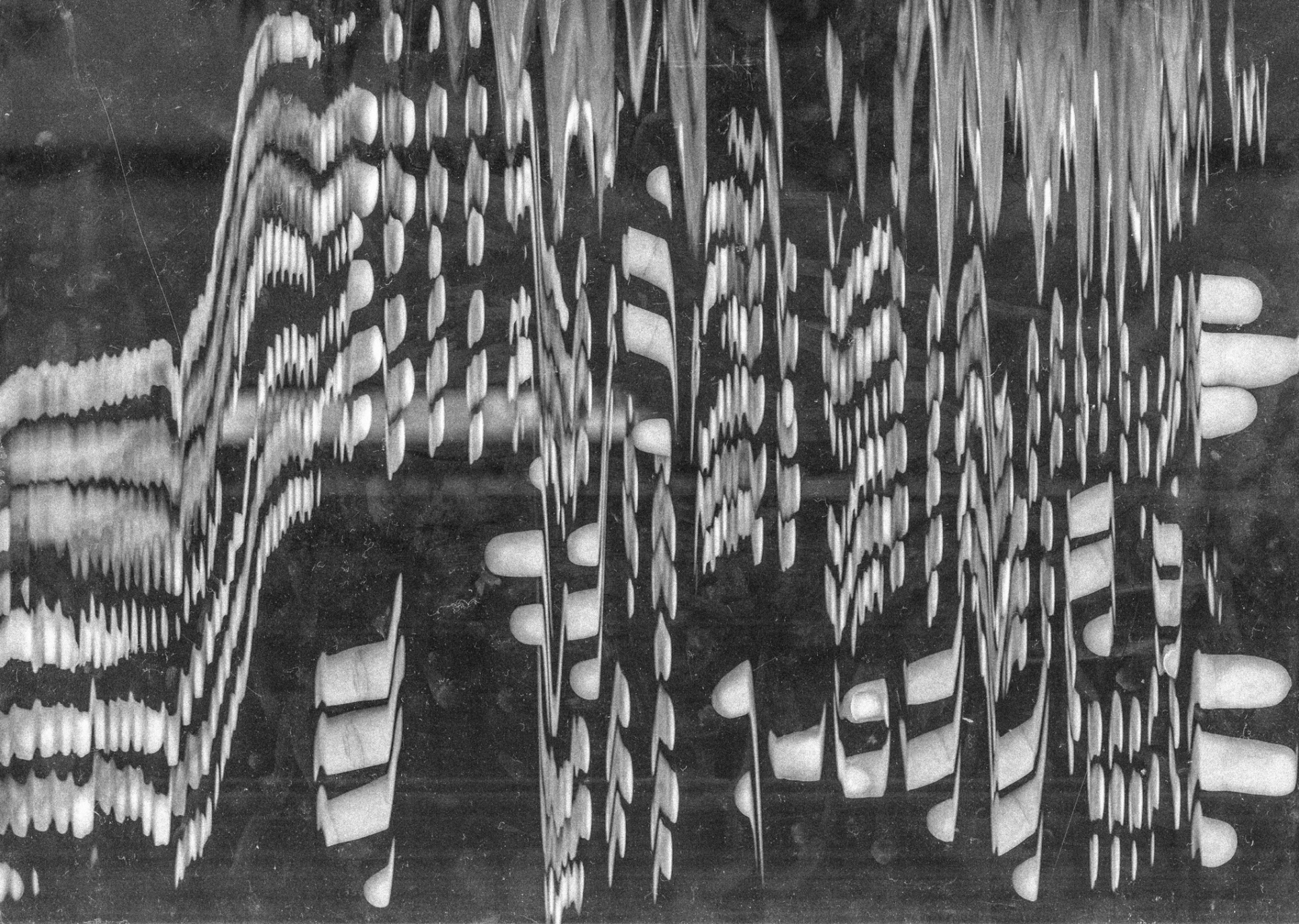
it is flooding

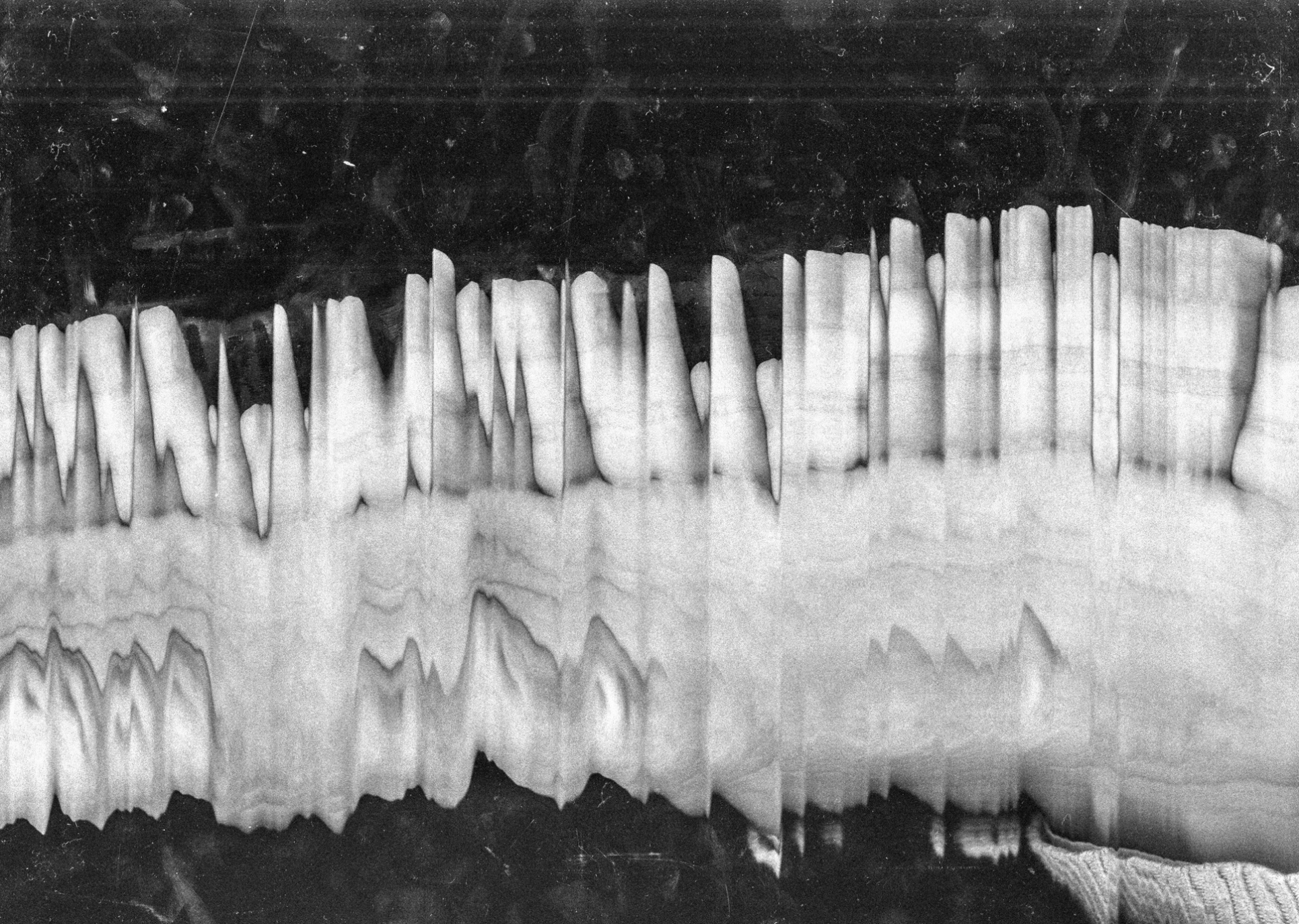


it is irreversible.



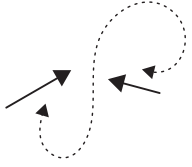








I remember when I was a child, I used to sit between my dad and my younger brother around the dinner table. They would disagree on something, they always find something to disagree about, then they start arguing about it. I used to always interfere with the arguments, commenting sometimes in support to my dad, and the other time in support to my brother. Until my dad loses his patience and turns to me saying "don't you have an ally?" wondering why wouldn't I pick a side? I used to answer that both arguments made sense to me and I thought I could help them understand each other.



Later on in my life, I kept finding myself in that position in almost every conflict.

I'm always a mediator.

Will

Is there a way out?

It's an ongoing

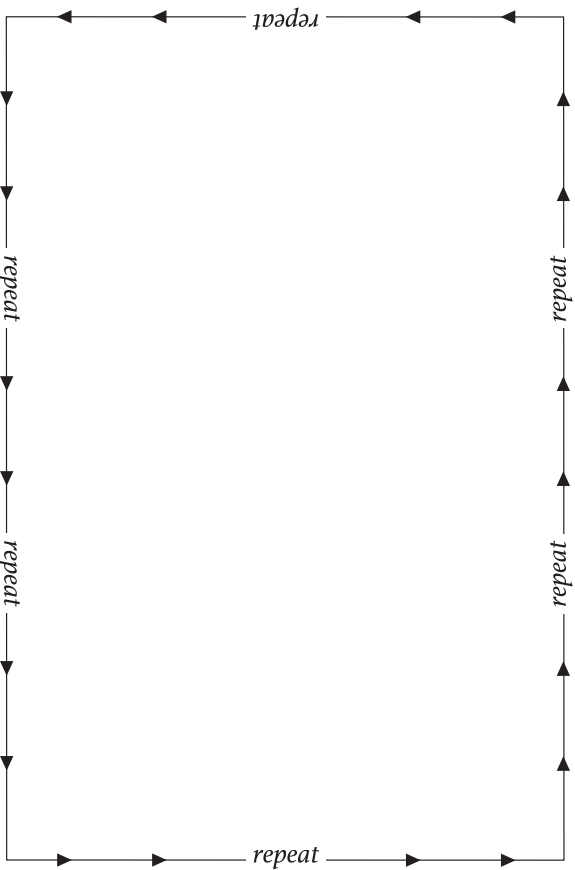
global-scale experiment that has been generating massive results on the political, social and individual landscapes.

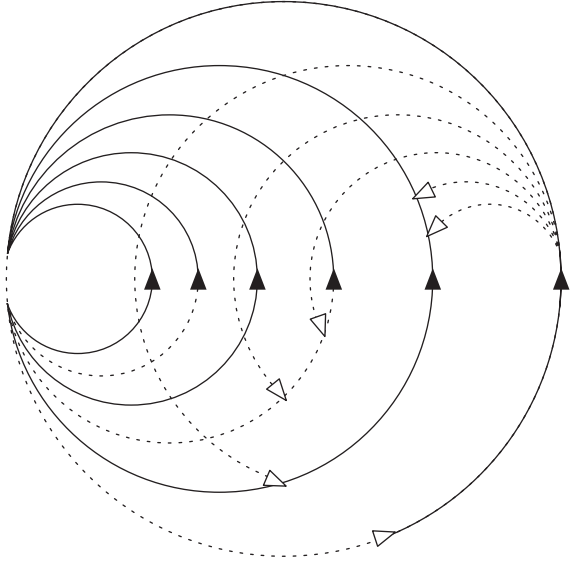
This state however offers an exceptional space of intellectual freedom.

what you believe is important.

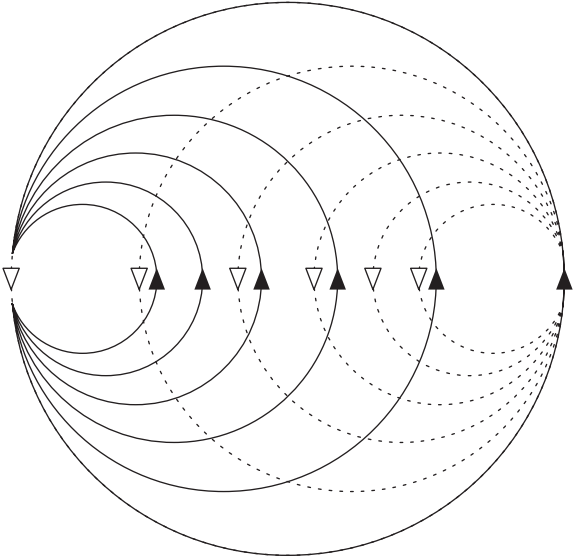
"be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for God, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives."

Repeat After the transitioning moment takes its time, the situation goes back to dominant-marginalized with flipped roles. But still, huge changes have happened in the process in both narratives and in the public scene. The continuous change and the process of recharge and transition force both sides to go into critical revision and narrative recreation. This way narratives never stay the same, thoughts evolve by interaction.

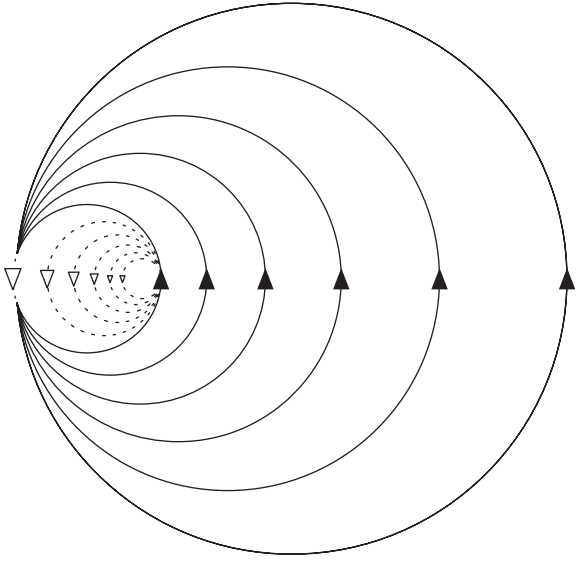




Resist The power equation changes and the positions start to shift. The marginalized narrative is now powerful enough to challenge the dominant narrative and attack. The dominant side doesn't have enough power nor arguments to face this shift, so parts of its masses melt into the new dominant narrative while the rest becomes the new margin. At this stage, the whole situation is less firm and possibilities of change are open. It is the most fragile state for both sides where everything is transitioning, everything is possible, and nothing is certain.



Change Every narrative constantly fuels itself and charges its language with arguments, symbolism, and poetics as long as it exists. But in case of an identity threat, this fuel becomes a survival necessity. The marginalized side invests in charging its narrative until it creates strong zealotry and becomes a powerful impulse to resist. Meanwhile, as the dominant side gets used to stability and luxury, its power declines and its narrative weakens.



Dominate A powerful narrative on a side of the extreme dominates over an opposing narrative on the other side.

Pushing that side to the margin, silencing it and at the same time keeping it contained within the dominant narrative. In this stage, the dominant side owns the means of power and shapes public reality according to its values and narrative. While the marginalized side faces an identity threat that causes it to become an enclosed community to preserve its identity and sustain the narrative.

context, overpower their opponents, and start building a civilization are Zealotry and Austerity. An extreme and enthusiast belonging to an identity or an ideology means a solid motivating narrative, in line with a tough lifestyle, which means having more ability to sacrifice for the sake of change.

Zealotry As much as this word may carry negative

connotations, but it's indeed the attraction force that

joins the masses and makes the collective action possible.

Extreme and enthusiast belonging fuels the generality of

the narrative and reduces individual disagreement on the

details. Collective identity is enforced through claims of

superiority in the name of the ultimate value in this crowd's

particular value system

Austerity Ibn Khaldoun argued that leisure and austerity

are not mere results of the rise and fall of civilization, rather,

they are main factors in the rise and fall process. People who

live tough lifestyles with minimal materialistic belongings

have a stronger will to pursue change, more endurance of

hardship for its sake, and less to lose in their quest for it.

Luxury on the other side is a strong reason to be satisfied

with reality, less adherent to the narrative, and unwilling to

take any risks.

In light of these concepts, repelling nature and civilization cycle, a third scene of three stages may emerge and help us understand how does conflict operate and how does opposing forces interaction look like:

Engine

It seems inevitable that conflict of some kind must arise

whenever and wherever a group of people exist. We might

even live in conflicts with our own selves. As the Arabic

proverb says "even guts fight inside your belly". It is an

exhausting reality, especially for an agreeable extrovert like

myself. Although over time, this reality seems to be like a

moving force for a larger picture. A hint of the answer arises

for me in a verse of the Qur'an

"And had it not been for the repelling by God of mankind, some by means of others, the earth would indeed have corrupted".

This verse paints a dynamic scene of opposing forces

intersecting in a tense situation that results in limiting both

sides and preventing unexpected damage. It firstly suggests

that conflict is a continuous movement, then it describes

the movement as a two-way force. A looped image that is

open enough for interpretation, which brings to mind Ibn

Khaldun's cycle on the rise and fall of civilization.

In this theory, Ibn Khaldoun suggests a model to study the nature of civilization/dynasties and the circulation of power by relating these to the nature of the people who establish it and the changes in their lifestyle. The impulses that give a group of people the power to spread out of their

Goals

Our thoughts, emotions, opinions, and choices are unavoidably influenced by those of other people who exist in our bubble. We tend to formulate our perspectives by either mirroring or reacting to those of our communities. And when we figure out our own perspective, we tend to look for others who share it with us. We look for a community of a narrative that aligns with ours, or we create one. Communities create narratives, and narratives create communities.

When someone feels enough alignment with the narrative and the group, they tend to lower their critical defenses for the sake of more alignment. In the case of an active narrative that is competing on the public scene and requires action and support of its members in order to advance, more intellectual adjustment is required of the individual for the sake of involvement and collective action. Gradually, the individuals melt into the group and they become one. Just like a huge flock of birds covering the sun, the crowd has an incredible power to change the scene. Mass movements have always been playing a huge role in shaping all of the most critical transformations in human history. A mass movement in action is the live manifestation of a narrative in its purest and most powerful form.

When a powerfully charged crowd meets (or produces) an inspiring leadership, that is when its whole power gets released and activated. Then, the complex nature of the narrative changes in order to be sharable and stay powerful while navigating the dynamics of the scene. It reduces to a form that is easier to digest and to be reproduced by the crowd. Its rich literature boils down to quotes, its sophisticated arguments change to slogans, its boundaries shrink, and its faded borders sharpen.

The consciousness of the mass movement is not the sum of the individual perceptions who belong to it. Rather, it's an entity of its own. A giant heavy body of tiny bodies tied together by an invisible force, moving slowly but firmly. This giant communicates and reacts to a very simplified, yet extremely charged language of symbols and vocabulary. That is the reason why mass movements are perfect raw material subject to polarization and propaganda.

This is the...
Some...
Don't...
If you...

A huge part of human intellectual products start, operate and end in the imagination. We may have forgotten this through our long journey of practicing and trusting the virtues of rationality and critical thinking. Stories are our best companions in the face of the infinite ambiguity in this world. We create them—or may I say, they exist—to make sense of things, to fill in the blanks, to explain, to order, and above all to find a direction. They are the manifestations of our intuitive needs, desires, struggles, fears, and aspirations. Many sentiments are lived through art and folklore before they are experienced in real life. The beloved is created in the imagination of the lover before they even meet. A nation is created in the imagination of the people before it exists on the map. Loads of symbols, images, vocabulary, and values align together to constitute a vision of existence and purpose⁶. In another word, a narrative.

The clearest manifestations of narratives can be noticed in the use of language. Think of all the words that are almost exclusive to a specific ideology and which are almost impossible to be used in the context of another. Think of everytime you had a conversation with a stranger and you were able to predict a lot about their background, beliefs, and values without discussing any of them directly, just by

noticing the way they are using certain words and phrases. Think about the words you chose to speak or write about things you believe in, versus those you chose for things that you disagree with. Rather, think of how hard it is to find “neutral” words when you are speaking or writing about something that you disagree with. It’s impressive to notice how language is curated by ideologies, subcultures, and schools of thought to the extent that creates a sublanguage for each narrative.

Narratives are also a collective product. They are a social archive, a collection of shared concepts and ways of reasoning developed by historical conditions and curated over time by relative collective consent. Because of that, they have always been confined by geography and framed by the shared language. The common person used to live under the umbrella of a single narrative for a lifetime, or in some—not very few—cases, under successive narratives⁷, some narrative at a time. Although that is not the case anymore, narratives still emerge, update, and adapt. But not anymore! With the vast spread of globalization and the boundless reach of ideologies through multinational media, the singularity of the local narratives became a multitude. Layers of local and foreign, personal and collective, new and traditional narratives operate and compete at the same time on the common person, especially the people of non-dominant cultures. The communal need of a shared ground and the personal need of a coherent value system became challenged with the modern state of rapid shift and constant reorientation⁸.

Today's world is a wide open hyper-connected sphere where human societies worldwide exist in a complex crossroads of historical conditions, ideologies, and power structures. A pool of constant confrontations, minor or major, between the traditional and the progressive, the local and the international, the materialistic and the transcendent, the pragmatic and the idealistic, and countless layers of meaning. For an individual who exists in such an intense moment of history, it seems almost incapable to be exposed to, affected by, or even involved in a major conflict. A situation that makes individuals always in a critical position where every role they may choose becomes an effective player in the conflict, whether they choose to participate or to retreat.

Despite all of the utopian expectations of the last century, this hyper-connected information-flooded reality became a powerful cause of division and polarization. The very systems that have been created to inform and encourage expression evolved to become platforms of mobbing and mobilization. Layering even more and more confusion upon one's ability to morally judge and participate in the scene.

However, there might be a hope of clarity when stepping back and acting as an observer of the scene. Over time, patterns begin to emerge before the eyes of the observer. They emerge from the fog, they thicken, they align and reflect each other, and they eventually form a useful structure for interpretation. The following pages are thoughts on the nature of conflicts from an observer's lens. An ordinary observer who lives in a time and space that can never be ordinary, as the only constant thing in this world is change.

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Orbiting Forward • Thoughts On The Nature of Conflict

A series of 15 horizontal double-headed arrows, arranged vertically, intended for writing thoughts or notes.