

A black and white photograph of a traditional Japanese boat, possibly a fishing boat, on a calm body of water. The boat is positioned in the lower half of the frame, with its mast and rigging extending upwards. The water is still, reflecting the boat and the surrounding environment. In the background, there are trees and a small building on the shore. The overall scene is peaceful and serene.

KOKORO

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KOKORO

Wandering Through a Photographic Life

*An Image Journal
with Commentary, Meditation, Philosophy,
and Unanswered Questions*

Brooks Jensen

Brooks Jensen



"The Moon and Sun are eternal travelers. Even the years wander on. A lifetime adrift in a boat, or in old age leading a tired horse into the years, every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home."

Opening lines from
Narrow Road to the Deep North
by Bashō (1644-1694)



For my introduction to this on-going project for which I use the same title, I bow to Lafcadio Hearn. Perhaps he will not protest too much if I paraphrase (almost word for word) from *Kokoro*, his 1895 book of Japanese life. He explains this important Japanese term far better than I ever could:



“The entries comprising this volume treat of the inner rather than the outer life, — for which reason they have been grouped under the title *Kokoro* (heart). Written with the above character, this word signifies also *mind*, in the emotional sense; *spirit*; *courage*; *resolve*; *sentiment*; *affection*; and *inner meaning*, — just as we say in English, ‘the heart of things.’”





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I AM BORN



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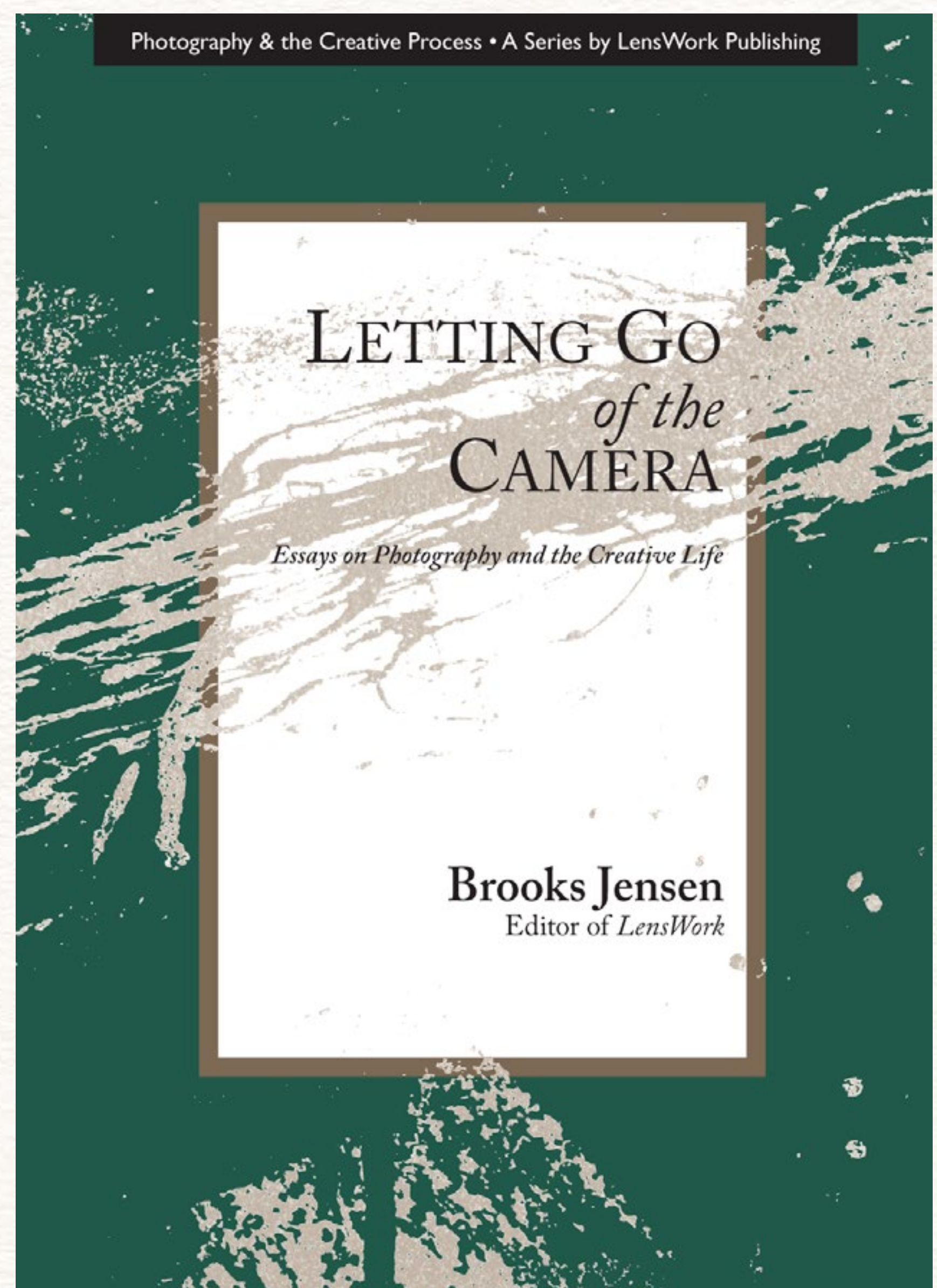
My body is 60 years old. Photography found me (I should say, *captured* me) in 1970 when I was 16. However, I didn't find *photography* until this photograph on New Year's Day in 1983. The first 12 years were filled with cameras and light meters, f/stops and shutter speeds. With this photograph, I discovered that one doesn't *take* photographs — one *makes* them. I celebrate January 1, 1983 as the birthday of my photographic life. Photographically, I'm a spry 32.

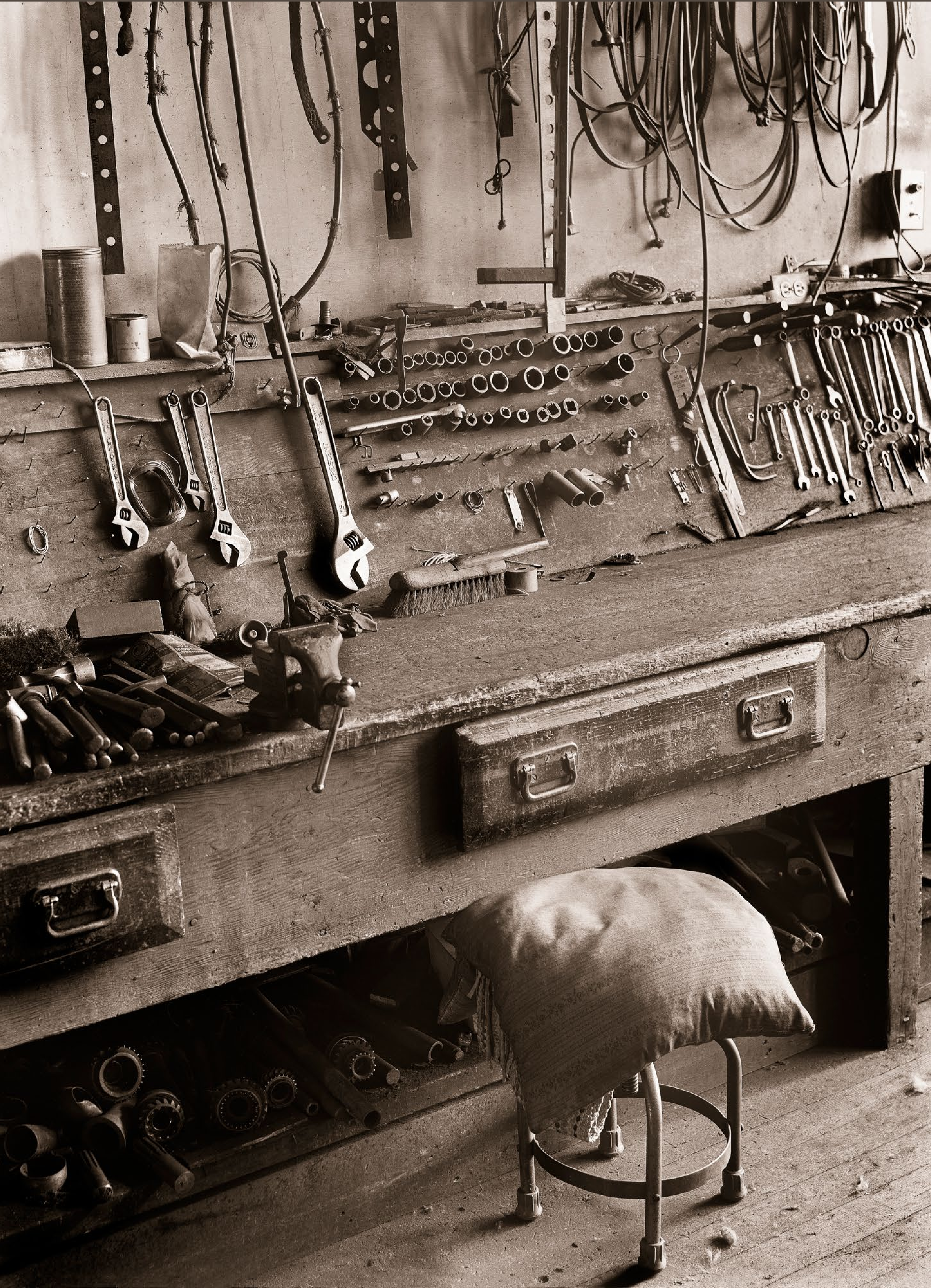


We had decided that a get-away for the long holiday weekend might help. My relationship with Barbara was ending. This trip was an attempt to revive it, but we both knew we were grasping at straws. I brought my camera gear with me so I could escape and spend some time out photographing while she was — not with me. It was a miserable day for landscape photography — drippy, cold, foggy, miserable. I saw this boat, and in it I felt a reflection of my mood, but strangely *not* as it appeared to my eye. The scene was gray, drowning, and bleak. *Emotionally*, it was light, airy, a release — with a horizon obscured in mist. In my mind's eye, the scene was much brighter, the water much calmer than what my physical eyes revealed. I realized I could make a photograph that either reflected my emotions, or simply capture the drab scene. A switch in my brain flipped, and my art life was born. It was cathartic; it was a revelation; not a fork in the road, but a complete dissolution of the road I thought I was on.

I titled my first book of essays on photography *Letting Go of the Camera* and that is still how I think of that transition. Today, some 32 years after *Sunken Boat*, the entire evolution seems so obvious. At the same time, I now recognize it as the most crucial first step in a budding photographer's career. Without it, photography remains about gear and technique for one's entire life. Dive into the pool, and life is never the same. At least that's my experience.

After making this exposure, soaking wet yet feeling excited to photograph some more, I headed for the nearest town to dry off and warm up. Nursing a hot beverage at the window seat of the coffee shop, I absentmindedly gazed across the street. There was Dollar's Garage. The next negative I exposed was the first in the project that became my first monograph and my best-known work — *Made of Steel*. That these two photographs are so juxtaposed in my personal history still amazes me. One never knows in the midst of life when The Moment will happen, but if we are lucky, happen it does, and a new life begins.





WYOMING DUST



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The Earth is all dirt, *star dust* as they say. Wyoming dirt is special. On the 26th of February in 1954, the dirt of Wyoming (along with my parents and older brother) welcomed me to the planet. Dust unto dust, I suppose, implies that I am Wyoming star dust. At least to me, Wyoming dirt is special.

Visiting family in 1995, I drove past a hole in the ground near Casper, Wyoming known as Hell's Half Acre. Nice tourist bait. Except it didn't work because there simply aren't enough tourists to drive by and be seduced by the view or the ice cream cones. The concession was long ago boarded up and out of business. The hole was still there, so I descended into Hell, made a couple of photographs — and a note to myself to return one day and take a more leisurely look.





Finally, in 2006 I returned for a week of photography with my friend Joe Lipka. A week of photographing dirt. In a hole. In the middle of nowhere, in the middle of Wyoming. There are many clues that one is a dedicated fine art photographer and I suppose this could be interpreted as one.

We spent 8 days — 10-12 hours a day — “working” this little spot of landscape, waiting for the light, racing to catch the clouds, returning to the same spots time and time again to see how the light changed with the time of day and angle of the sun. I made over 200 different compositions, all of Wyoming dirt in an out-of-the-way roadside attraction. Sometimes artmaking is senseless unless you are the artmaker.



Why does one photograph dirt? I'm not sure I can answer that. If asked, I'd say, "To make art." But that doesn't really explain much. In fact, it sounds more like self-puffery and an excuse for wasting time. Or ...

Perhaps it is a way to *connect*, to spend time *without* a reason. To breathe, walk, sit, look, ponder, and yes, even to nap in some comfortable nook. Perhaps just *being there* — for an uninterrupted week — is the real reason to go, and *artmaking* is merely a socially acceptable excuse that appears saner than the truth. I don't know. However, I do know that to *not* go is not an option. Wynn Bullock used to talk about photography as "A Way of Life." Count me in.















Working usually results in, well, *results* — photographs that very likely may not mean anything to anyone. *Ever*. But to me, they are, at the very least, *evidence*.

More than mere memory, the photographs attest to something concrete — to time spent, to a life lived, to a connection between photographer and place, between photographer and idea, between a photographer and their quiet thoughts. Viewing photographs may not connect the *viewer* to the scene, but it does show the viewer that the *photographer* connected with the scene. In that sense, photographs can tell us something about their maker, the person behind the camera who chose that place, that moment, that composition, that connection as being important enough to expose, produce, and preserve the evidence.

Of all the moments of their life, of all the clicks of their shutter, these are the ones the photographer has chosen to submit as evidence of their life. I try to remember that every time I look at a photographer's work. Perhaps that is the best reason I can offer for these photographs. I hope they communicate something about life and the land, but if they only offer something about *me*, that will have to do.



THANK YOU, JOHANNES



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Where would we be without *writing*? I remember being so excited about entering the third grade because I was to learn writing — not block-letter printing, but *writing*, in cursive hand — which I thought would teach me to write books. I could hardly quell my enthusiasm for the first day of school.



From the moment we are born, we yearn to express ourselves. To speak is marvelous, but to write approaches the divine. I have always thought it magical that scratches on paper could be me — my thoughts, my feelings, my yawp. Me, there on the paper, for all to see, even long after I no longer strut my hour upon the stage. Truly miraculous, not to be taken for granted.

As a photographer, I am supposed to love the print — and I do — but books are the true medium to preserve and share our work. There is no better way to connect with the future. Odd, I suppose, to state in a digital publication like this.





My yawp. Text, image, idea. If I have an artmaking credo, that would be it. I've not had much interest in making movies; they happen at the speed of life. (Should photographs be called *stillies* because they do not move?) Text and image are outside of time, frozen, allowing the viewer to set the pace. Text and image are patient, waiting on the shelf for when the reader has time to linger and absorb. More than once I've felt as though the characters in a Dickens novel were frozen in mid-gesture as I put the book down, waiting for me to pick up my reading so they can animate once again.

God may have evoked the world with, "Let there be light!" but, Gutenberg! There was a man opening the door to *immortality*. Gutenberg is more of a hero to me than Ulysses. Ulysses gave us *his* story; Gutenberg gave all of us access to know stories outside of time — and to tell our own. Type, printing, a photograph, and the page. Books and ideas, outside the constraints of time. Thank you, Johannes.

TIME



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Four score we are told — but there is no guarantee. Time is the great enemy of the art life. Photography has always seemed a way to cheat time and death, but that is only one of the great myths of the medium. Perhaps the only sane approach is to accept that *all things change*; every blossom has its time, but not forever.







We photographers seem always to be striving to produce our work to “archival standards” so it will live forever. If this is, indeed, the illusion, then perhaps living *fully*, even if only for a moment, is all we can or should hope for. Living *in* time, rather than in defiance of it; *rhythm* rather than *time* might be the key. In the words of Shakespeare’s Richard II ...

Ha, ha! keep time: how sour sweet music is,
When time is broke and no proportion kept!
So is it in the music of men’s lives.
And here have I the daintiness of ear
To cheque time broke in a disorder’d string;
But for the concord of my state and time
Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.
I wasted time, and now doth time waste me.

WITH LOVE, GRANDPA APPLE



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Dear Ryan, Noah, and Lauren — my beloved grandchildren,

Today, you are 8, 6, and 2 years old. Your full lives are ahead of you!

I, on the other hand, am dead — or expect to be pretty soon. Oh, not that I have any plans or foreknowledge, but I see no evidence for presuming immortality. In fact, there may even be some pointing in the other direction. I feel fine, today, but my time is coming — as it did for my grandfather, and his grandfather before him.

I knew my Grandfather — that is, my *maternal* Grandfather. I loved him dearly. He is your great-great Grandfather. That's him, posed for a formal portrait, so *adult*, not as I knew him at all. I remember him well — but only as a child knows and remembers a grandfather — larger than life, that special patriarch. That is how you know me today — a family patriarch destined to become a precious childhood memory. I am that, but that is not all of me.

I wish I knew more of my grandfather. I wish I could meet him today, now that I am a grandfather, and

compare lives and experiences. I would like to know the man behind the grandfatherly role, who he was as a man, as a person. But, alas.

Unfortunately, I never knew my paternal Grandfather at all. Nor did I ever know *any* of my great-Grandfathers, nor do I know anything at all about *their* fathers, or *their* fathers, in that unbroken chain extending to the horizon of history. Time has erased them all from everywhere except my imagination. There, I find a silent, impenetrable void, as though they never existed. But of course, they did. Of course, they did ...



I wonder about those silent lives. Not dry dates and statistics, but what did they *think*? What did they *feel*? What did they *understand*? What did they *question*? What would they choose to say to me, if they could have imagined me in their distant futures? Who were they and what of them survives in me?

What I wouldn't give to have an evening with each of them, just to listen and ask them about their lives!

Such two-sided conversations are not possible through the span of time, but we *can* speak to our descendants — be it near or in the distant, distant future. In fact, ours is the first generation to be able to do so with such ease and in so many media. I feel an obligation to do so lest I, in my time, extend the silent void. Sure, it may be a one-sided conversation, but why should that mute us?



I am a grandfather now — *your* grandfather — “Grandpa Apple,” because I always bring you apples. Today you are three wonderfully young bundles of energy. You know me and I know you. It's a privilege to be in your young lives. But, I know that my time is limited and I may not know you — or you, me — as adults, as I would have liked to know my grandfather. It is to those future adults I wish to speak in this project. It is as adults that I see you in my mind's eye as I share my thoughts, feelings, understanding, and questions as I wish I could with my grandfathers.

So, here I am — or at least some bits of me — that might provide a sketch of your Grandpa Apple. I speak also to your descendants for whom I am great-Grandpa Apple, or great-great, or great-great-great, or great-great-great-great Grandpa Apple — whom even your parents don't remember. Photography has been a way of life for me. Perhaps through my photographs, I can share a bit of my life, a bit of myself. Perhaps that's a worthy pursuit for all of us photographers. Perhaps it's a *reason* to be a photographer, an artist. Art is connection, and that is why I write and share these thoughts with all of you.

With Love,
Grandpa Apple

LIFE WITH BROOM



Brooks Jensen

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The world can be a messy place. In my youth — I suppose like all *boys* — I hated cleaning. But then, I realized that I would be cleaning things *every day of my life*, for the rest of my life. Why not make it fun? Life with broom began. A great photographer once said, “Photograph your life.” I hope he meant that literally.









One day Master Zhaozhou was sweeping. A monk asked, "The Master is a great worthy. Why are you engaged in the lowly task of sweeping?"

Master Zhaozhou said, "Dust comes in from outside."

The monk replied, "This is a pure temple. Why, then, is there dust?"

Looking around, the Master said, "Ah, there's some *more* dust," and kept sweeping.















ENSŌ



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Funny thing about art — how we connect so deeply with things that others pass by without noticing. I've watched people in museums stare at a painting for the longest time, and I have no idea what fascinates them so much. Try as I might, I just can't form a connection. Art, like beauty I suppose, is in the eye of the beholder.

As an artmaker, the inverse of this is also true. Sometimes I'm completely captivated by some photograph I've made that others find totally uninteresting. In my youth, I was bothered that the connection I sought with them had failed so completely. But, when I started making folios — sets of a dozen or so prints exploring a theme — I would hear back from people about which image of the set they liked best. There was never a consensus — and *never* an image *unselected*.

It's almost as if *people are different* — not surprising, but a liberating revelation.

This image (on the next page) from my abstract work is one of my personal favorites. Most people don't connect to it like I do. Such is life. In thinking about this more, however, I've come to realize that my love of Zen art is influencing me in ways that it simply won't influence others without that experience. In Zen art, there is a character that is drawn by many called an *enso*. It's a simple circle that demonstrates, in ink, the Master's enlightenment. It is the manifestation of power, confidence, understanding, unhesitating engagement with life. In a simple circle, we can see the movement of the Master's arm, hand, and brush. *Enso* are treasured almost above all other Zen paintings. I have no doubt that my love of *enso* influences how I responded to that bit of graffiti when producing my photograph.



Enso, Zen Master Bankei (1622-1693)



In photography, we cannot see the arm, hand, or brush as we can in a Zen painting. Nonetheless, the mark of the photographer is there. Photographers make choices; they manipulate machines and materials to create an image that may deviate considerably from the original. To photographers, this is obvious and simply the “tools of the trade;” to non-photographers, such dancing with materials may be perfectly invisible — in fact, it’s *supposed* to be.

Nonetheless, just for fun (and to illustrate the point), here is the original of the above image, captured by my digital camera, in color, in its correct orientation. Below is a wider view of the WWI cement bunker at Fort Worden where I found this marvelous bit of potential. In fact, in this room can be found the original of 22 of my abstracts photographs from this project.



BASHO'S NARROW PATH



J Brooks Jensen

A Brooks Jensen Arts Publication



Basho didn't just write haiku; he showed us the way of being an artist in the world, of connecting with life, of being immersed in the moment. He stressed *amari-no-kokoro*, which he explains as "the heart/soul of the poem must reach far beyond the words themselves, leaving an indelible aftertaste."

As a photographer, I'm inspired by his directness, but the road is difficult. He had assets and tools — namely, his *wisdom* and *haiku*. All I have is me and a camera. I have so many questions I wish I could ask of him . . .

Master Basho, how do we begin the narrow path of the art life?

*The moon and sun are travelers through eternity. Even the years wander on. Whether drifting through life on a boat, or climbing toward old age leading a horse, each day is a journey, and the journey itself is home.**

Master Basho, you write in 17 syllables with eloquence; I have a hard time keeping it under 17 *paragraphs*. How do I know when it's right?

*In the end, without skill or talent, I've given myself over entirely to poetry. Po Chu-i labored at it until he nearly burst. Tu Fu starved rather than abandon it. Neither my intelligence nor my writing is comparable to such men. Nevertheless, in the end, we **all** live in phantom huts.*



* Text from his famous *Oku no Hosomichi* (Narrow Road to the Deep North), written in 1689.



But, life is so much more complicated now. How can we possibly measure up to those who have gone before us? How do we travel the narrow path?

No matter where your interest lies, you will not be able to accomplish anything unless you bring your deepest devotion to it.

How do I begin?

*Do not seek the men of old; **seek what they sought.***

Old pond

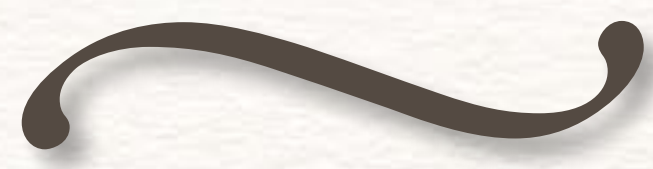
A frog jumps in . . .

Plop!

I'll try.



CLOUDS



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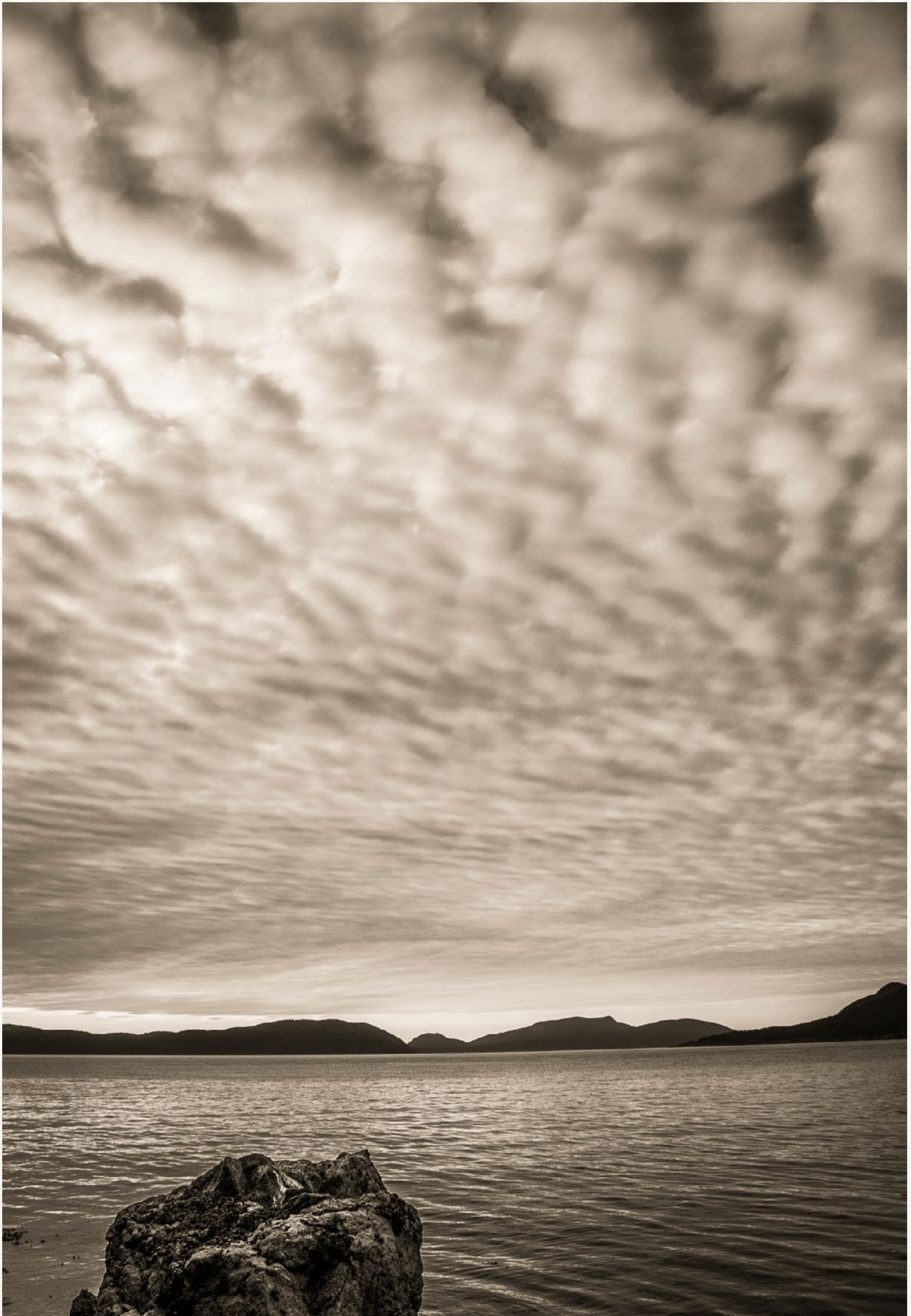
As photographers, we are trained to love the light; as a terrestrial-bound being, clouds speak more directly to my heart.







Just because a photograph includes a cloud does not make it a better photograph, but in that genre known as “landscape” photography, a sterling image without a cloud is a rarity. I live for clouds; I search for clouds; I revel in clouds of all types.













My friend Chris Anderson taught me a most valuable lesson before he passed away from cancer. As a busy portrait and wedding photographer, his opportunities to dedicate a day to landscape photography were rare. “But,” he said, “even while I’m just waiting for a bridal portrait in the garden, I can look up and see a cloud floating by overhead. I can use that moment to make a photograph that lifts my spirit.”

In any location, during any busy or hectic day, in the midst of the city or the expanse of nature’s wonder, we can look up and discover a cloud that would otherwise pass by unnoticed. We can allow it to touch our soul. That we take the moment to notice makes all the difference.







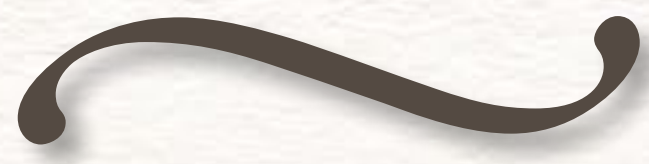




Thanks for the lesson, Chris. I haven't forgotten.



MEMENTO MORI



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The Latin maxim *memento mori* (“Remember that you will die,” or more succinctly “Remember death”) has a long association with art. It’s a call to urgency, humility, and a reverence for living *fully* while we are yet alive. Mortality is our gruesome, yet common lot — but it’s so easy to pretend otherwise.

On Hainan, the island prefecture of southern China, I found *memento mori* in the remote village of Bing Lang Gu, revered by the native Li and Miao peoples. Throughout the village, reminders of mortality were everywhere in the form of painted cow skulls. How does one not think of Georgia O’Keeffe’s paintings, Edward Weston’s still life photographs, and all the other examples in art that point us in the direction of *memento mori*? Perhaps artists are keenly aware that their work will end, yet simultaneously remain.

Perhaps *all* of us are aware of our mortality, at least for a moment here, a moment there, in the midst of daily life. And then our routine resumes and the rhythm of days ticks on. But for those moments when *memento mori* is with us, uncomfortable as it is, do we not feel just a bit more connected to a larger truth?













PETALS OF POWER

Tug Boat Propellers of Dakota Creek Shipyards



J Brooks Jensen

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where force normal to the surface is dL : $dL = \frac{1}{2} \rho C_L [V_a^2 (1+a)^2 + 4\pi^2 r^2 (1-a')^2] b dr$

$$\frac{1}{2} \rho C_L [V_a^2 (1+a)^2 + 4\pi^2 r^2 (1-a')^2] b dr$$



So with the propellers the expression for both will be the same.

$$\frac{D_1^2}{D_2^2}$$

For ten years, my office was directly across the street from Dakota Creek Shipyards. From the window next to my desk, I could watch each project while it morphed from piles of sheet metal to a massive, fully-functioning ship. One of the most exciting days of my photographic life was when the owner of the shipyard gave me my own hardhat and permanent visitor's pass so I could wander the shipyard with my camera whenever the action and the light moved me.



$$\left(\frac{D}{V} \frac{ND}{V_a}\right)$$

$$\frac{D_1^2}{D_2^2} = \frac{D_1^2}{D_2^2}$$

where force normal to the surface is dL :

$$\frac{1}{2} \rho C_L [V_a^2 (1+a)^2 + 4\pi^2 r^2 (1-a')^2] b dr$$

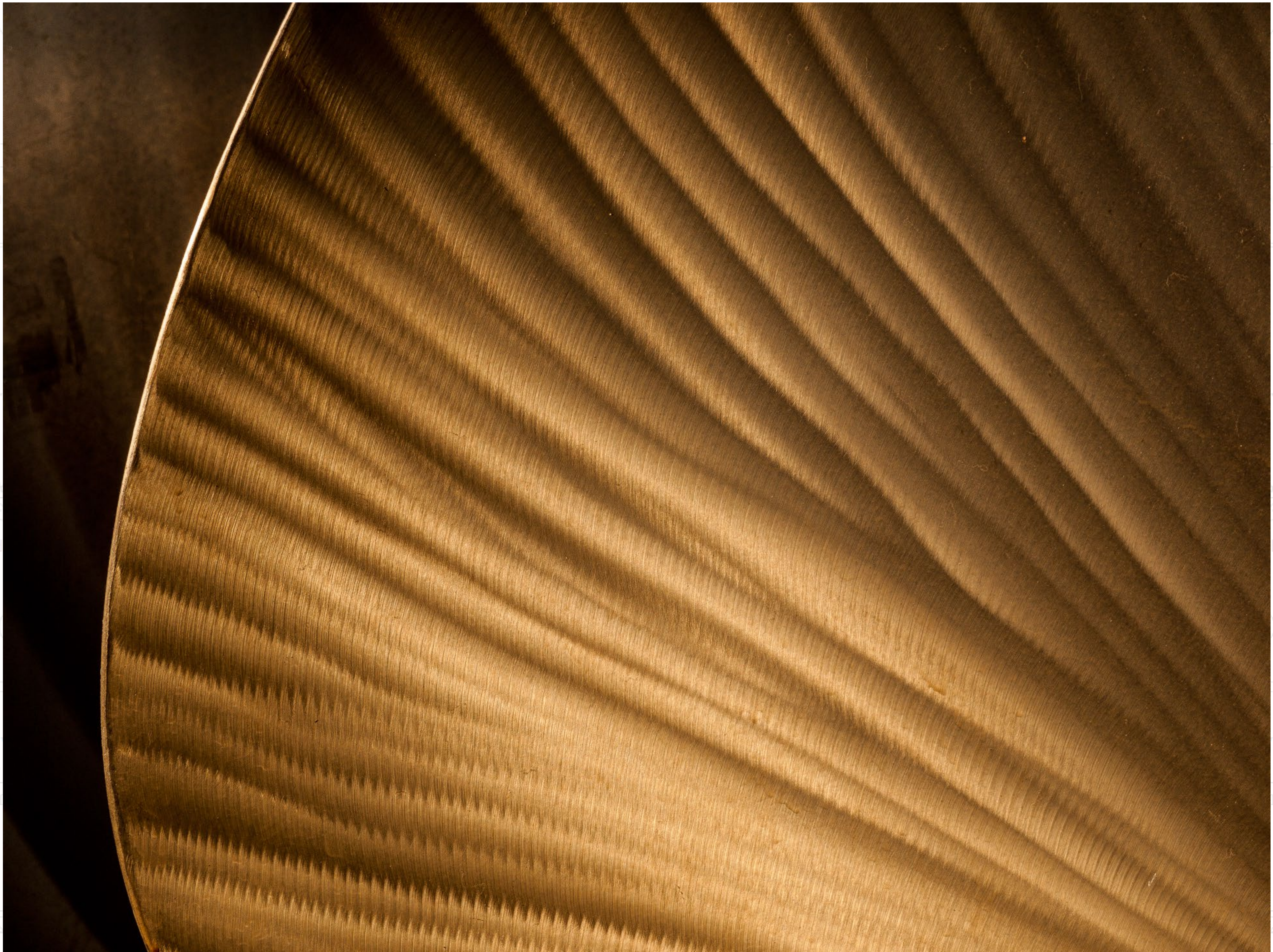
Mechanics, materials, and math are the foundations of a ship. The angles and twist of the propeller blades can push even the most massive and laden ship through the roughest seas. The forward thrust of a ship's spinning propeller is a matter of engineering, calculable by some fairly high-level math which I have no hope of understanding. For me, the magic is in the simple beauty of exquisite and graceful *form*, particularly in those giant petals of power, designed for a powerful purpose, sculpted out of solid brass, taller than I am, golden in the evening sun.

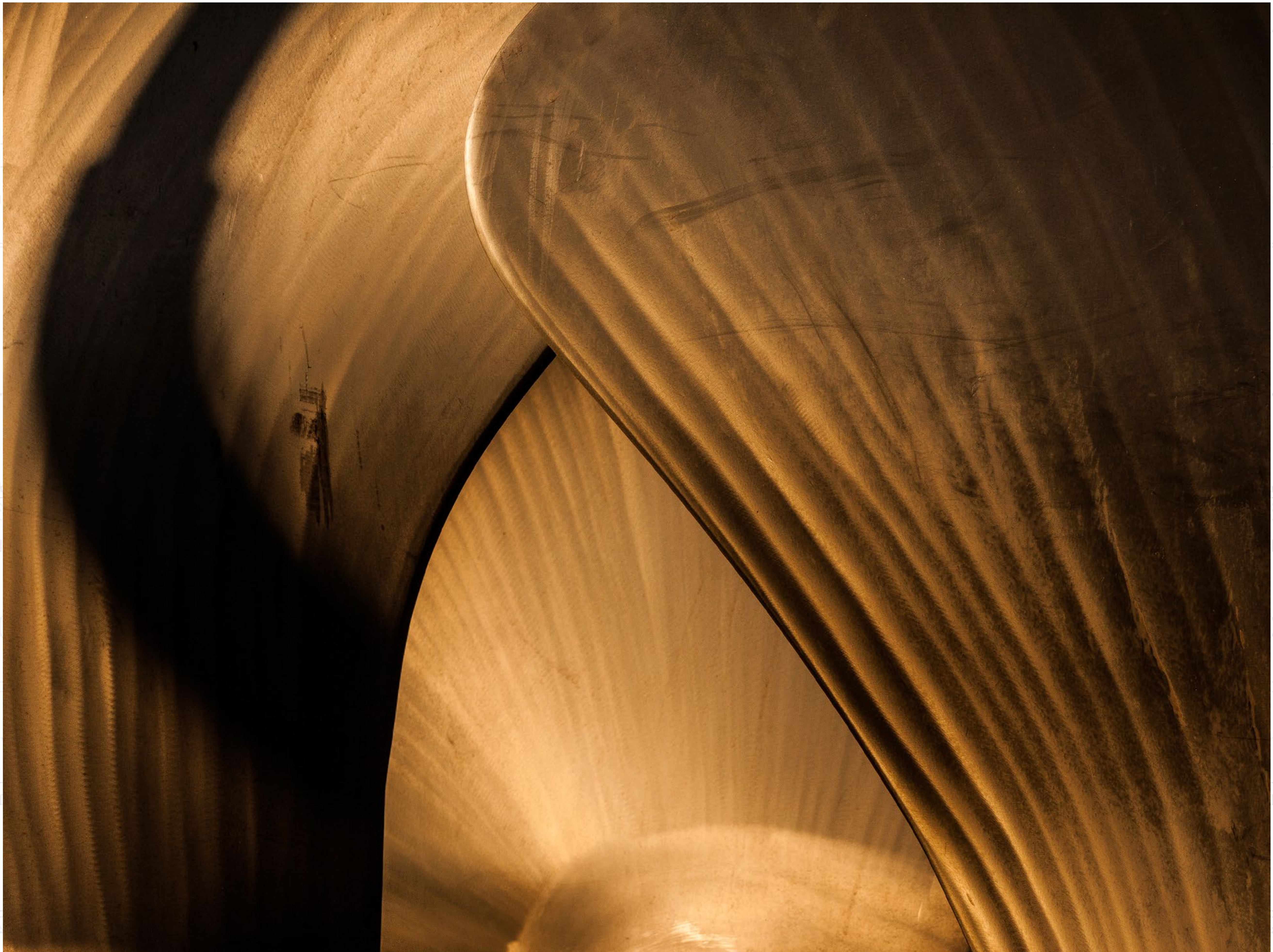


$$\frac{D_1^2}{D_2^2}$$







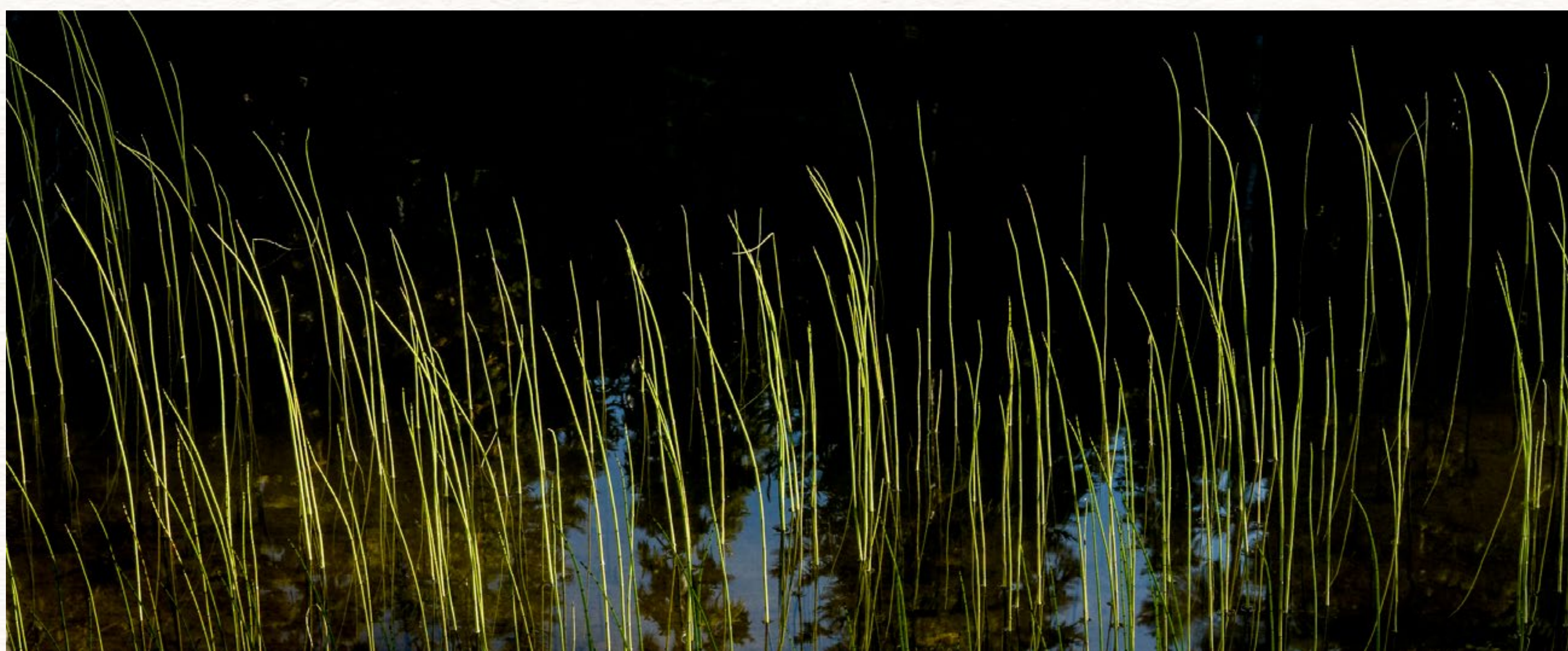








ORDER IN THE CHAOS



J Brooks Jensen

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Photographing nature is a delicate business. On one hand, we artists want to impose some sense of order onto the chaos of nature's unordered mess. We compose our images based on this premise; e.g., as photographers, we eliminate and crop until the order becomes visible.

Conversely, we also want to open ourselves to nature's organization, to sense the beauty there without our simplistic human preconceptions. We prefer the organic line to the grid of regularity, the flow of water to straight edge of a ruler, the sound of the wind to the cadence of a military march. The chaos of nature renews us, but only if the chaos is not *too* chaotic.

For me, photographing in the landscape is a search for balance. The most successful photographs occur when I find that spot right in the middle — finding order in chaos, but allowing the chaos to define the order.

Ultimately, this always seems to me a matter of *listening* rather than speaking, *looking* rather than composing, opening ourselves to what *is* rather than defining what should be. In Zen, they call this the "controlled accident." I love that sense of the aesthetic dance between opposites.

















Brooks Jensen is a fine-art photographer, publisher, workshop teacher, and writer. In his personal work he specializes in small prints, hand-made artist's books, and digital media publications.

He and his wife (Maureen Gallagher) are the owners, co-founders, editors, and publishers of the award winning *LensWork*, one of today's most respected and important periodicals in fine art photography. With subscribers in 73 countries, Brooks' impact on fine art photography is truly world-wide. His long-running podcasts on art and photography are heard over the Internet by thousands every day. All 900+ podcasts are available at [LensWork Online](#), the LensWork membership website. LensWork Publishing is also at the leading edge in multimedia and digital media publishing with *LensWork Extended* — a PDF based, media-rich expanded version of the magazine.

Brooks is the author of seven best-selling books about photography and creativity: *Letting Go of the Camera* (2004); *The Creative Life in Photography* (2013); *Single Exposures* (4 books in a series, random observations on art, photography and creativity); and *Looking at Images* (2014); as well as a photography monograph, *Made of Steel* (2012). His next book will be *Those Who Inspire Me (And Why)*. A free monthly compilation of of this image journal, [Kokoro](#), is available for download.

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