



KOKORO

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KOKORO

Wandering Through a Photographic Life

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

Brooks Jensen

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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.’”



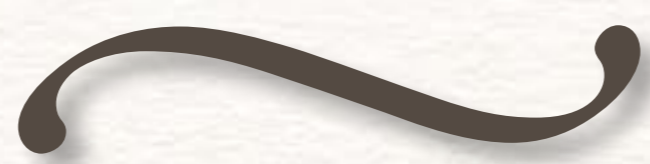


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LIFE LIVED IN MOMENTS



Brooks Jensen

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Our group of photographers was spending three weeks in the sub-freezing edge of the Gobi desert in inner-Mongolia. I have fond memories of the people and events, but *this moment* — about 30 minutes, alone in the desert, photographing the skiff of new snow on the dunes — is the most intense memory of the trip.

I walked away from the chatter, the hubbub, away from the structures and machines. I walked across the snow toward the freshly-covered dunes. I can still hear the scrunching-squeak of the dry snow as it compressed under my boots. The sun dropped below the horizon of the dune above me. The silence became all-enveloping. The Moment swallowed me. The universe distilled to Now. Crunch, crunch, pause — patterns in the dry snow and cold sand. The beep/snap of my camera. Then crunch, crunch, crunch, pause, more patterns in the dry snow and cold sand.



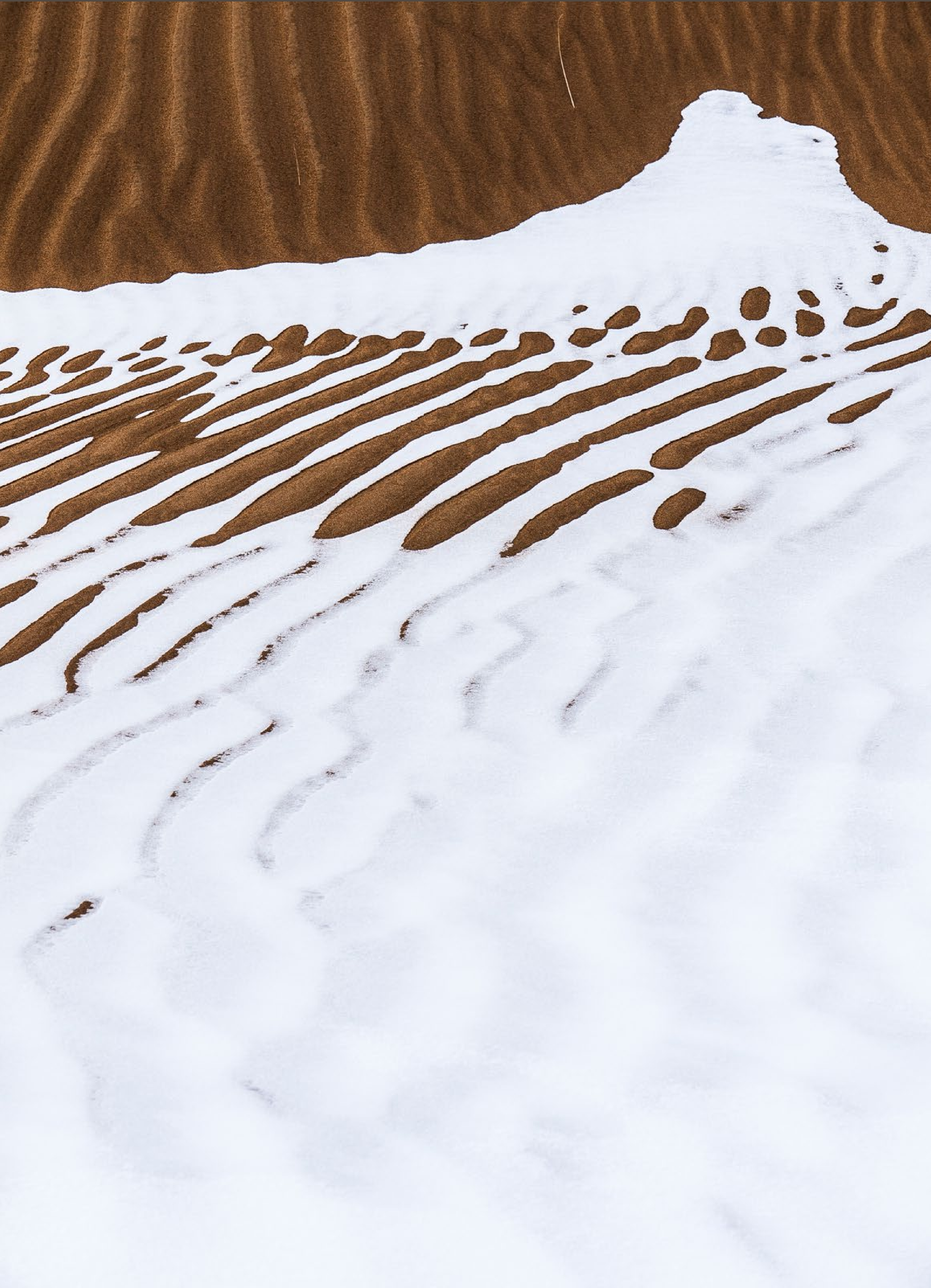




It may not be true, but I've heard that passionate golfers can remember every shot on every hole they've ever made. Sounds a bit far-fetched, but as a photographer I can see the kernel of possibility in the tale.

Photographs function as a kind of visual diary of my life. I can remember the making each one upon seeing it. More than that—I can *feel* it, *hear* it, as though it were now. Crunch, crunch, patterns in the dry snow and cold sand.





The image narrative in my photographs recounts my life — not for anyone else, but clearly and with precision for me. The narrative intensifies certain moments — or do I have that backwards? The more I think about this, the more it feels as though the moments spent with my camera are somehow more real, more intense, more engaging than so much of the rest of daily life. Is it that looking intently impregnates the memory more deeply? Is it that the act of artmaking clarifies the moment so that we are more present and available for The Immediate to affect us? I'm not sure. I just know that somehow these moments of my life seem more real to me than others. Crunch, crunch, patterns in the dry snow and cold sand.



Life is experienced as a conscious stream, but *memory* is a series of moments, connected only by the most gossamer of threads, separated by wide, wide gaps of — nothing.

*To be an artist
is a life lived in moments.*



DARK WATERS



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Certain universal themes recur in art. In photographic art, *the water's edge* is one such theme. Perhaps it is because our planet is mostly water. Perhaps it is because we are mostly water.

It is strange that we should be so compelled to the water's edge where just under the water's surface live terrors that seduce and simultaneously scare the daylights out of us — the deep and the mysterious, where danger and unimaginable creatures lurk and wait to lunge at us when we least expect it.

Then again, perhaps I'm just speaking for me — and Ulysses. And Melville and Captain Ahab. And Jules Verne. And Lovecraft and his creepy Cthulhu. And there's Kraken, Ogopogo, and the Nabooian sea monsters, and giant squid and octopi. The Loch Ness monster, and watery ghosts and graves. Slimy creatures with spiny pincers and beady eyes, down there in the dark and the muck, waiting, waiting.







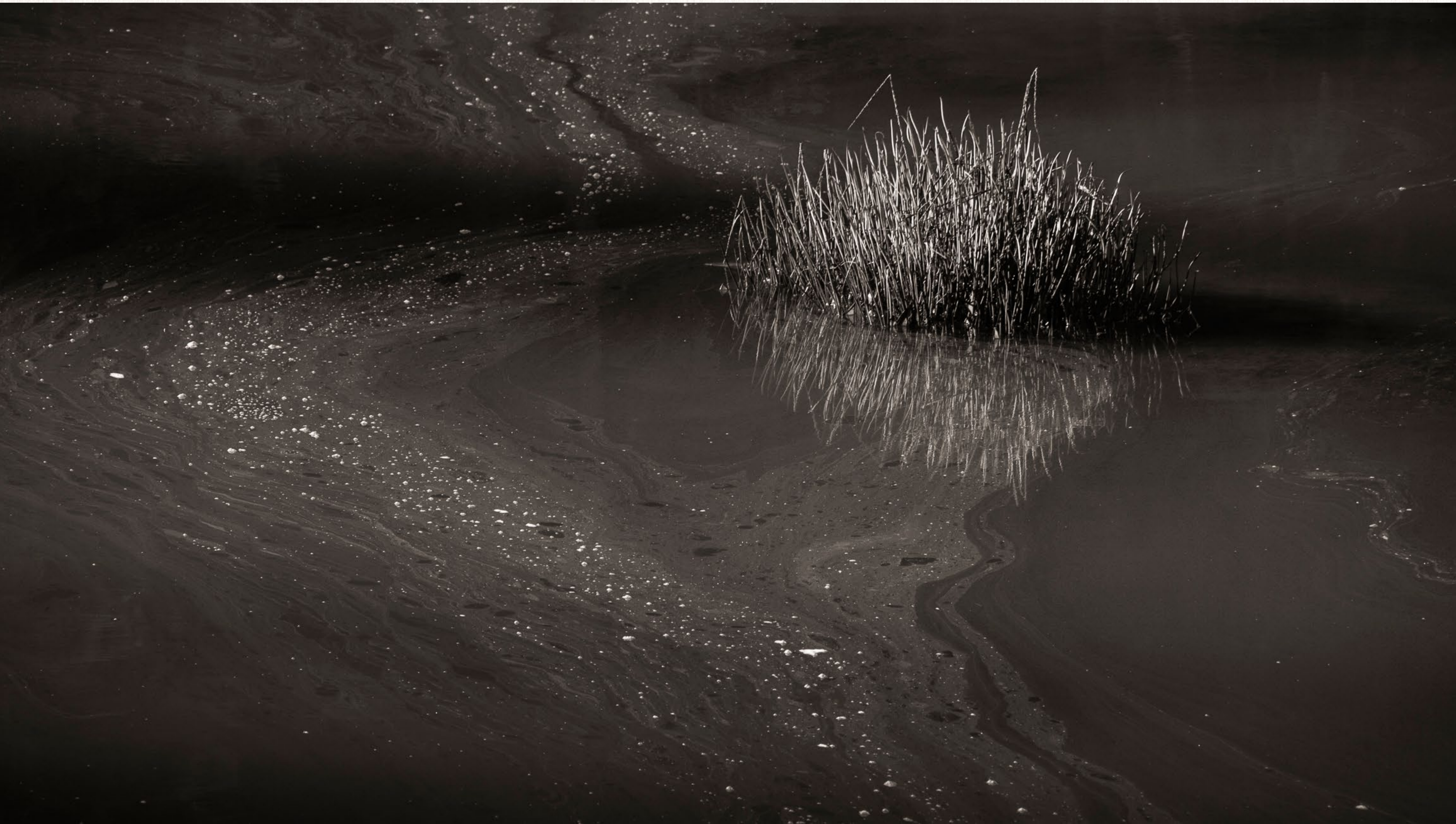


I inherited from my grandfather an old turn-of-the-century, giant Webster's Dictionary. There, I found pages and pages of line drawings of deep sea fish and strange creatures that looked like fantasies, but were *real*. I can still see them in my mind's eye, swimming in the deep, mouths open, teeth at the ready, a far-off look in their hungry eyes. I can still see them . . .

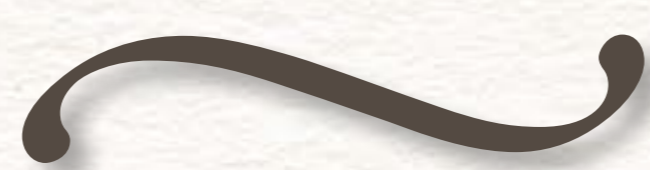




All I know for certain is that sometimes,
photographing at the water's edge gives me the creeps. Sometimes.



FREEDOM



*Some thoughts after reading
The Gulag Archipelago
by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn*

Brooks Jensen

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Mixing art and politics is dangerous business, but I would be foolish to ignore the connection between *freedom* and my creative life.

Western democracy is under attack — from outside, and from within. It has become fashionable in recent years for artists in certain circles to bash Western culture and even democracy itself. I cannot agree. As an artmaker, I value freedom too much to take it for granted. Freedom is the cornerstone of my art life. Any survey of the history of the planet, shows that the vast majority of those who have ever lived have done so under tyranny, oppression, domination, or even slavery. Without freedom, everything is lost.

Because I am free, I can create any artwork I chose.

Because I am free, I can distribute my artwork any way and anywhere I choose.

Because I am free, I can publish my artwork via a book, a website, or any medium I chose.

Because I am free, I can connect with people all over the world and both share my artwork, and enjoy theirs.

Because I am free, I can pursue my art life without the necessity of requiring permission from anyone or any authority.

Because I am free, I can travel and make photographs without restrictions. Well, *almost* without restrictions.

Because I am free, I can acquire any tools, relationships, or services I need to create my artwork without asking anyone for approval or a license to do so.

Because I am free, I can read anything, study anything, learn anything, and grow in any direction I choose.

Because I am free, I can create without fear that my artwork might offend some governmental restrictions that could land me in trouble or even imprisonment.

I celebrate Freedom,
and am thankful to be an American,
free to pursue my art without limits.







Let me be precise: I am not proud to be an American because of any blind *birth-place* fidelity; I am not proud to be an American because of some jingoistic, nationalist loyalty. I am proud to be an America because it is the greatest country in the history of the planet — the *freeist* country in the history of the planet — the only one founded on the idea of individual freedom and limited government. It is the only country in the history of the planet founded on liberty, freedom for each individual, and the rights of its citizens rather than its rulers. I celebrate the democracy of America and her principles. I simply cannot understand any artist who would not treasure the freedoms that make their art life possible.

The freedom of Western democracy is not perfect, but nothing — not even art — ever is. In the words of Winston Churchill, one of freedom's greatest defenders, "No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the *worst* form of government — *except all those other forms* that have been tried from time to time." All of us who are blessed with Freedom would do well to remember that it makes our art life possible, wherever freedom reigns.





UNCLE KENNY



J Brooks Jensen

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Everyone has an “Uncle Kenny” — or should have, a man who works hard — with his hands — his entire life. Kenny was actually my wife’s uncle, or I should say, one of her many uncles. On my side of the family, there was Uncle Lee — hardworking, slow talking, with hands so strong he had to consciously shake hands with a gentle touch. By the time I met Kenny, decades on the farm had taken its toll. His hands reminded me of his old tools — bent and scarred, a testament to years of use.

Kenny and I immediately hit it off when he learned that I like to play cribbage. He loved to play cards — wait, let me re-phrase that. Kenny loved to *win* at cards. Oh, he was a good loser, too — as long as you allowed him an opportunity to triumph before the night was over. We’d stop by their home and he’d invariably have the board out and the cards all ready. We played best of seven and I always lost. I’d enter the fray with enthusiasm and determination — and end with Kenny still the reigning champ. He enjoyed my visits — but if truth be told, not as much as I enjoyed losing to him and sharing his company.



Once, I was wandering around in the local grocery store over in Westby, waiting for a tire to be repaired across the street. Always on the lookout for photographic opportunities, I was proceeding up and down each aisle of the small store, looking for angles and potential compositions. Wearing my photo vest, I must have looked suspicious. The owner of the store came up to me with a stern, worried look and asked — in a not-too-friendly tone — what I was doing. I explained I was just waiting on my tire repair. Clearly not satisfied, he probed, “Where you from?” To set his mind at ease, I mentioned that my wife was Kenny’s niece and that we were staying over on the farm. After an awkward pause, I could tell he was not reassured, so in desperation I added, “That Kenny is one helluva cribbage player. He skunked me so bad last night that Palma took pity on me. She offered me a second piece of pie.” The grocer smiled and said, “Tell Kenny hi for me,” and then walked away. I passed the test.



I'd spent several days photographing the farm, Kenny's shop, the old homestead, his tools and coats and barns. He tracked me down out back by the grain bin.

"I thought you might want a portrait of me," he said, standing a little straighter than normal. I noticed he'd dressed up for the occasion. "Why, sure I do. Where would you like me to photograph you?" Without hesitation he pointed, "In my shop." He knew exactly the pose he wanted; I could tell he'd been thinking about it a while. I was glad — no, *honored* — to oblige him.









Kenny and Palma are gone now. I miss our nights of cribbage. I miss her pies. Not that I ever lost on purpose, mind you, but I could have been tempted. Losing to Kenny was not really losing at all — not the way I remember it, anyway.

DEM BONES
DEM BONES
DEM DRY BONES



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The lava came.

The trees resisted.

The lava won.

The bones remain.















WALL OF TEARS



Brooks Jensen

A Brooks Jensen Arts Publication

My century has given us more than enough reasons for a wall of tears. I know it is psychological projection, but standing in front of these walls with my camera always reminds me of the First Noble Truth of Buddhism: **Suffering exists.**

Asian flu pandemic of 1957-58 — 2 million dead



The Holocaust — 6 million dead



World War I — 16 million dead



Stalin's "Great Terror" — 20 million dead



HIV in the Congo Basin — 30 million dead



Mao's "Cultural Revolution" — 40 million dead



U.S. abortions since 1973 — 55 million dead



World War II — 60 million dead



Flu epidemic of 1918-20 — 75 million dead



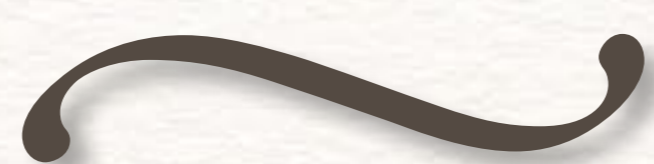
Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, right reverends and wrong reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day.

Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

**We remember,
and offer our prayers for the suffering.**

And never allow ourselves to take a single day of our life for granted.

CLARA'S GARDEN



J Brooks Jensen

A Brooks Jensen Arts Publication



The most valuable assets for the pioneer are naiveté and youthful enthusiasm. But, if most of us knew what awaited us in our future, we'd fear to make the trip. Clara had plenty of youthful innocence, surely enough to endure her husband's dreams, at least for a while.

He told her he knew farming in Ohio would be easy, but chose the wrong crops and failed. He just *knew* dairy in Minnesota would be successful, but cows didn't like him and only stubbornly gave up their milk. To go west and seek their fortune in the rich farm lands of far-off California was not her dream, but it *was* her husband's, so she moved again, as she had before, without complaint but with plenty of doubt. This was not the life she had hoped for, but in her wisdom she knew that no one lives the life they dream.

It was a hard and long trip. There was little adventure and ample drudgery. Chester's reassurance was wrong — to sleeping on the dirt night after night was *not* made easier with repetition. She once complained, but knew it was a mistake even as the words passed her lips. The makeshift tent he built collapsed on her the first time she used it. She learned that suffering in silence was often easier on their relationship than offering him opportunities to be kind. He always meant well, but his optimism so often led to disappointment. Chester could patch, but he could not build.







He decided to stop short of the valley they had set out for and make their future in the bright sun of California's high desert. It would be warm here and there was gold in the hills around Bodie, enough for any man willing to work. Everyone said so.

Chester staked a claim in a small swale between two low hills that no one else wanted. They moved into the abandoned shack. Here they would have some protection, he told her, from any wind that might blow. The wind did blow, every day, every season. She was understanding, as she had always

been, when dust and grit blew into every crevice of their lives. He borrowed a hammer and patched their home every time the wind changed direction.

Chester also borrowed a shovel and learned how to dig. He found that digging was easy; *finding* was much more difficult.



The first Spring, Clara silently planned, and excitedly planted her garden while Chester looked on in surprise. He told her to buy more canning jars than she knew she would need. She wished he hadn't cared. She grew just enough to feed them through the fall; she had prayed for enough to last through the winter. The second Spring she planted with care while Chester was away. The third she planted with concern. The fourth she planted in desperation.

In Ohio, the soil had been dark and rich and her crops found it a comfortable home. In the desert, the soil was dry and sandy. Crops would grow, but only sagebrush would thrive. A plot of land that completely fails to grow crops is kind. At least one quickly knows the need to move on. Here, there was enough growth to encourage, but barely enough to harvest.

Her children were born and died in sequence. When the last one died of measles, she felt only relief that her obligations to try were now ended. At least now she could concentrate her attentions on the garden.





Her tenth garden suffered from the drought and produced no seed at all. In their next California spring, she was tired and grew weak and sick. She spent April and May gazing out the window at the tree by the well. Chester cared for her as best he could. She died in June, quietly and without hesitation.

Chester buried her under the locust tree next to the garden, next to her children. The next day he dug for gold again and suddenly remembered she was gone.



He walked to the well and took a long pull on the cool water and thought of her smile and gazed at the patches on the walls of their home. Even as she died, he never saw *her* as old and dry. He leaned against the tree and dreamt of a bountiful garden harvest and the laughter of children and wished he had enough youth left to move on, to try again. He wanted to remember the sound of her voice, but could only hear the wind.

Then he'd spat, wiped the back of his neck with his handkerchief, patted the tree, and walked back up the hill toward the mine. That night, he patched the shack again, listened to the wind and thought of Clara, under the tree in the garden.





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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