

KOKORO

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KOKORO

Wandering Through a Photographic Life

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

J Brooks Jensen

Brooks Jensen



Thanks to [Joe Lipka](#) for the use of this photo of me in Capitol Reef.

Perhaps Lafcadio Hearn 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.’”



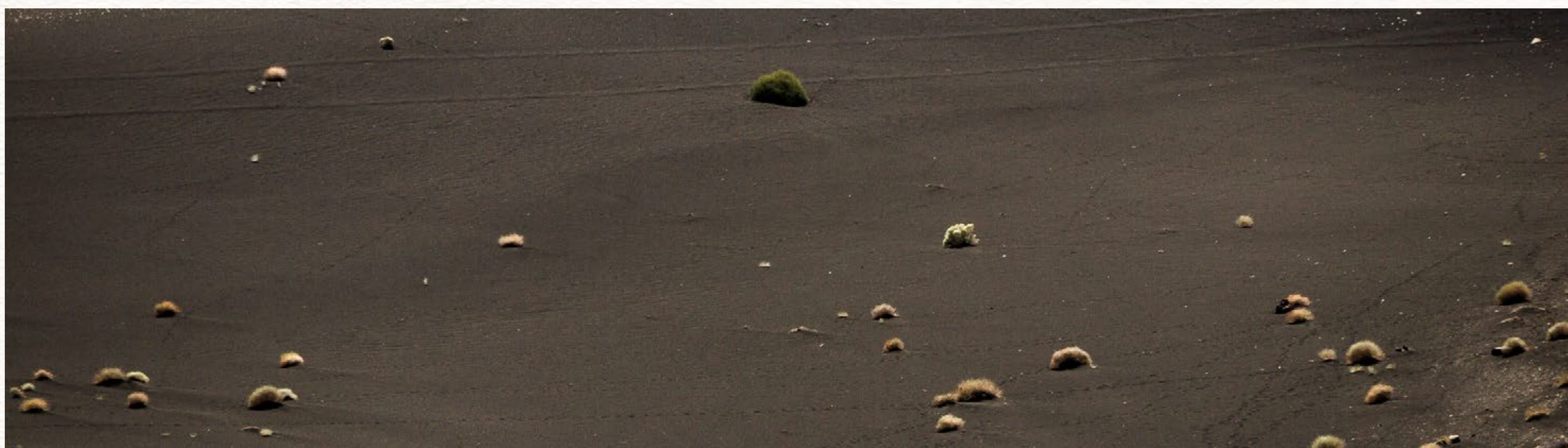
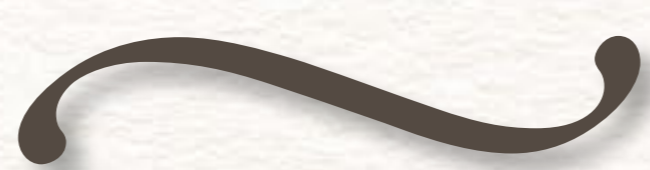
In This Issue

Life Itself	4
Intermission	27
The Priest of Tozen-in	52
A Few of the Billion	61
The Eat Cafe	78
A Lesson Learned, Again	86
Circular Logic	96



LIFE ITSELF

PART I



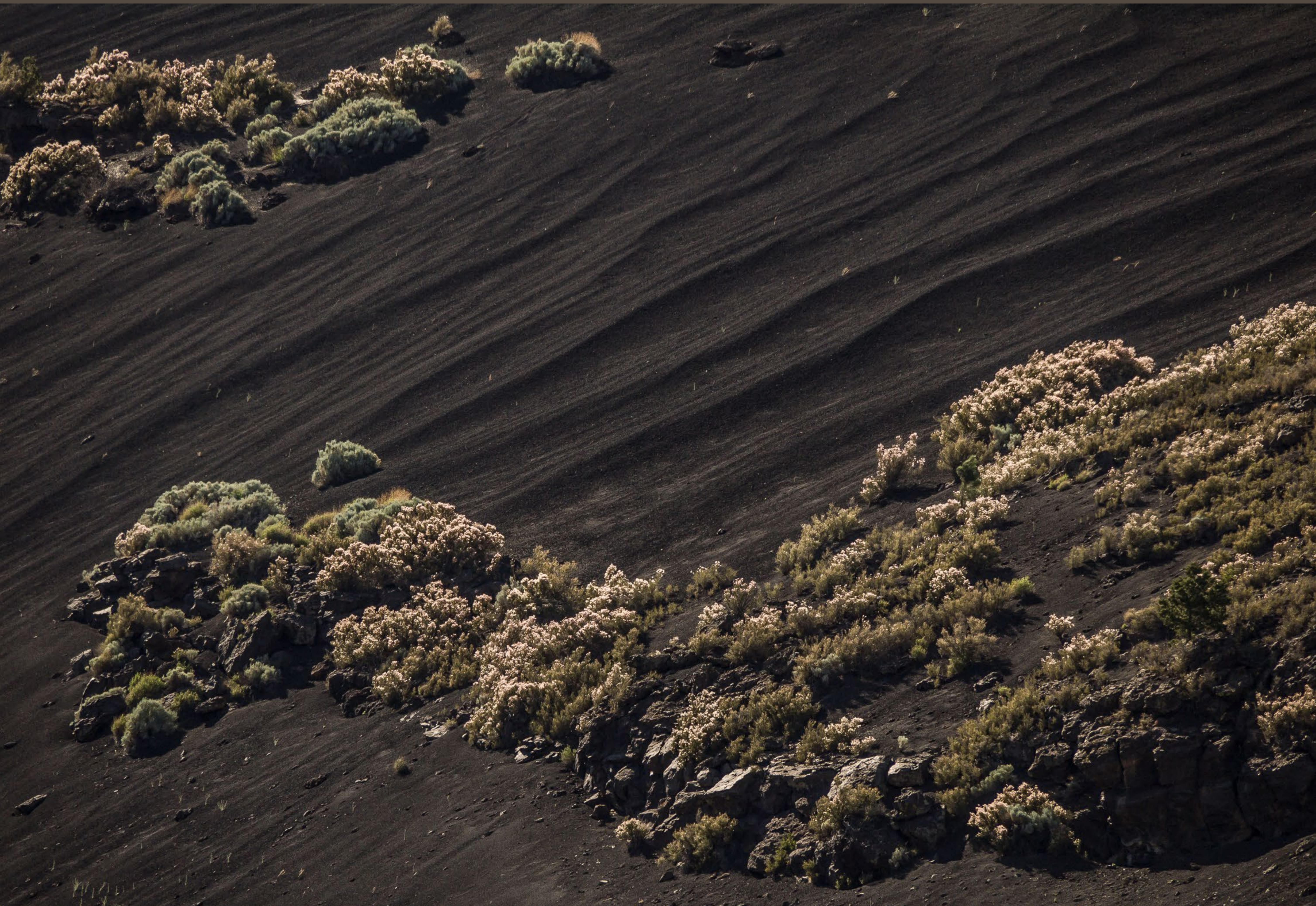
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Life always finds a way. Individuals are born and individuals die; species appear and fade away; but Life itself will not be denied.

For example, examine the miles of cinder surrounding Sunset Crater just north of Flagstaff, Arizona. A more inhospitable place can barely be imagined. But life is here, in the desert, growing out of the glass-black pumice, clinging to the sides of the steep, black hills.













Even a tree can occasionally find a root-hold ...



... continued in Part II

LIFE ITSELF

PART II



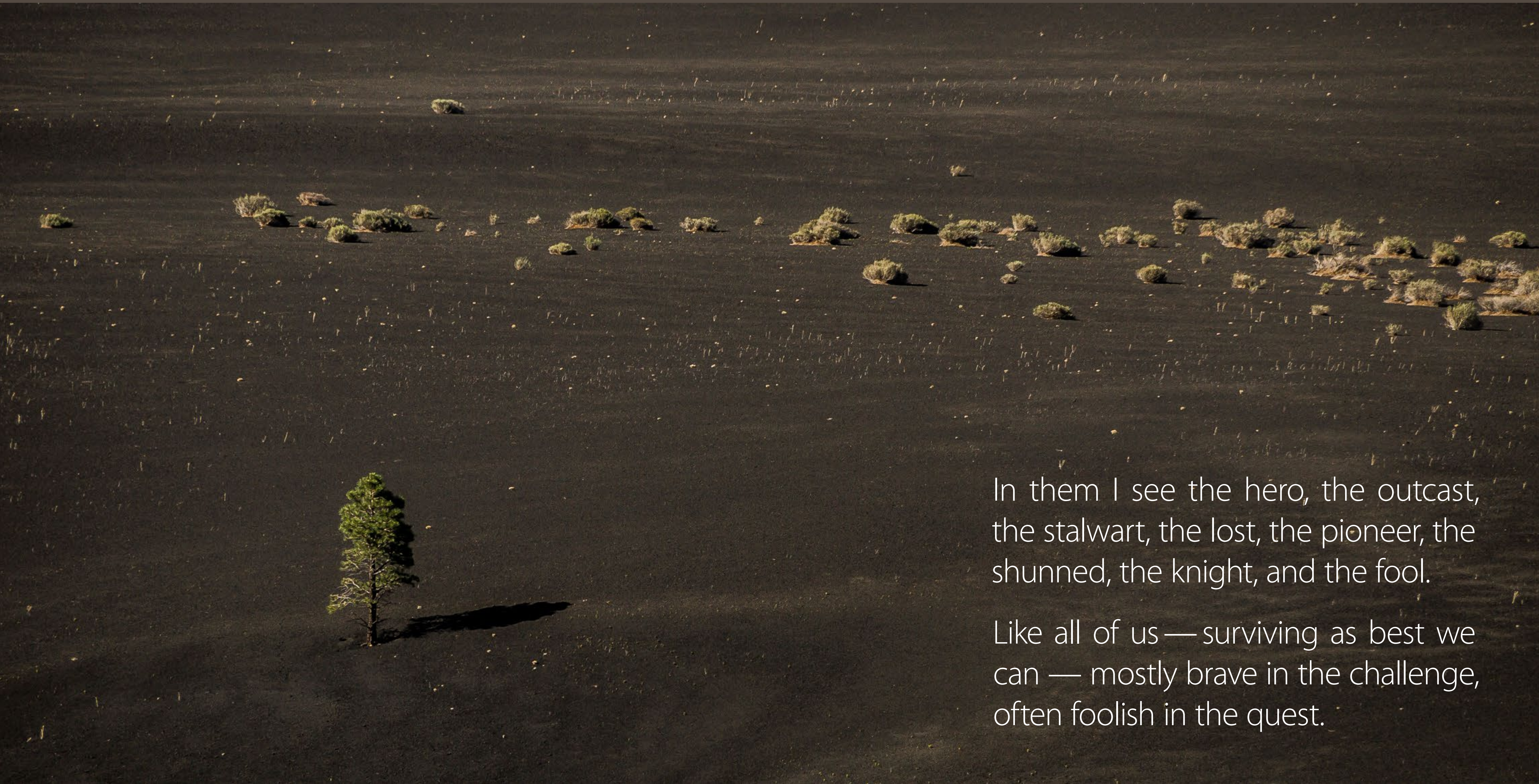
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Life is a social existence. Plants, animals, people all live in clusters. Isolation is unnatural, even if it is occasionally welcome. But here, in the dry, glass-black pumice, isolation means *life* — means enough water to survive, enough nutrients to grow — enough, but *just* enough.

Why do I find these trees on the slopes of the Sunset Crater simultaneously an inspiration, a metaphor, a warning, an example, and a mirror? They are just trees, but I cannot help but think of them as more.



In them I see the hero, the outcast,
the stalwart, the lost, the pioneer, the
shunned, the knight, and the fool.

Like all of us — surviving as best we
can — mostly brave in the challenge,
often foolish in the quest.















Life ...



itself ...



the knight ...



... and the fool.



INTERMISSION

IN GREEN AND BROWN



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No one likes abstracts.

So, during this brief intermission
while I entertain myself,
please feel free to visit the restroom and
get some more popcorn. We remind you,
there is no smoking in the lobby.



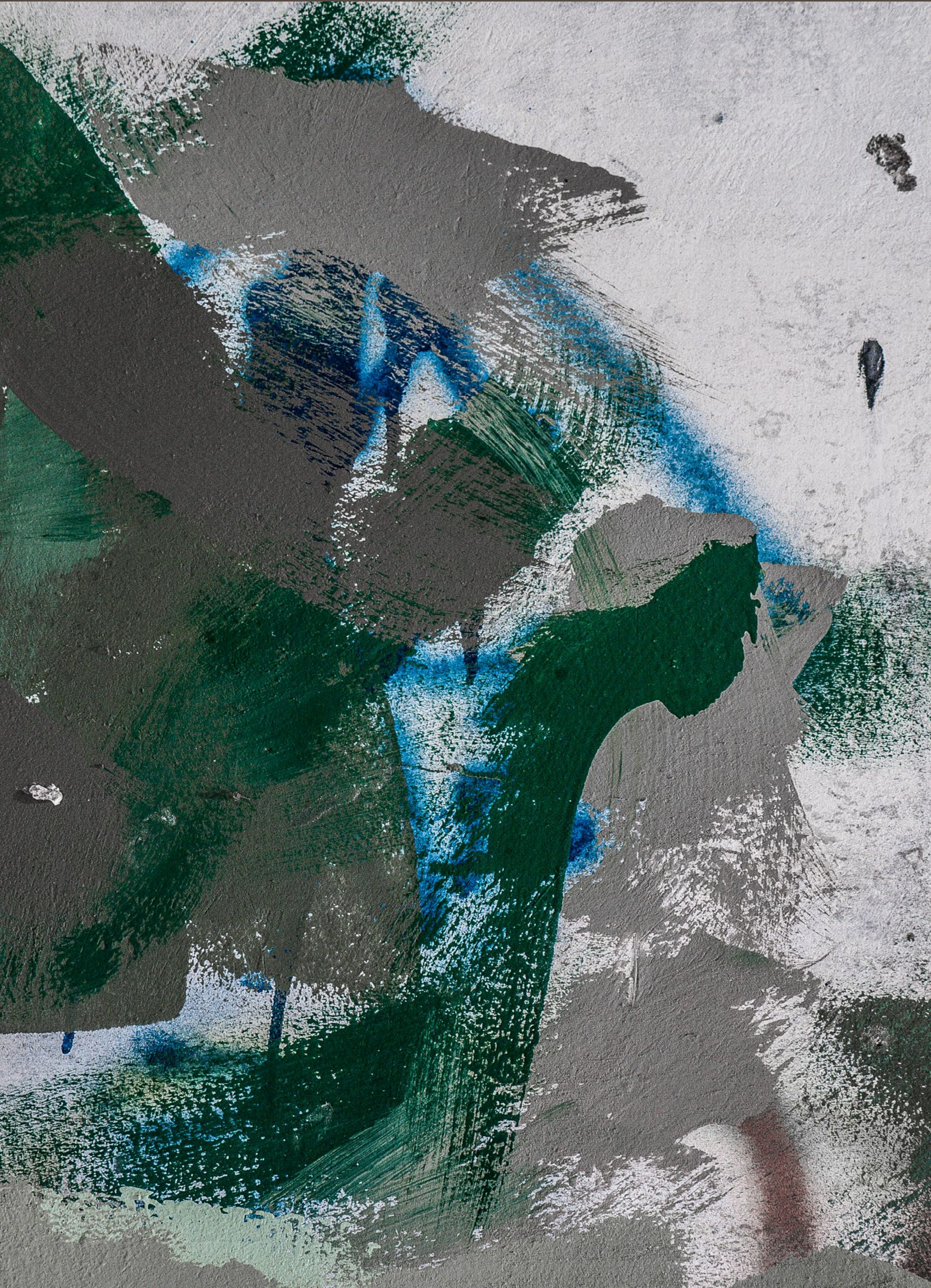


















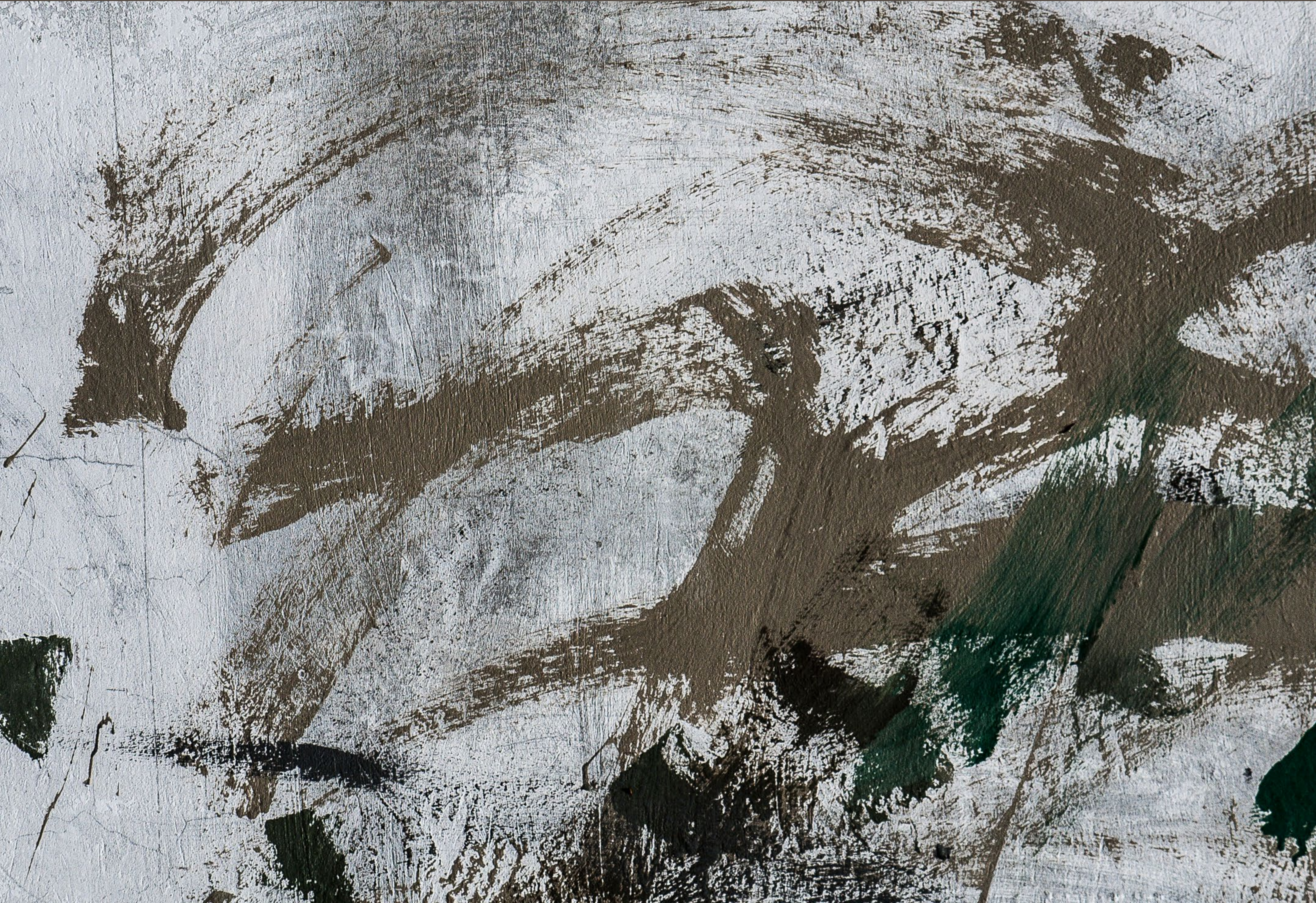


























We hope you enjoyed this intermission
in green and brown
— or at least the popcorn.

Our regular feature will continue soon.
Please return to your seats.

THE PRIEST OF TOZEN-IN



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As the train approached the next town in our tour of rural Japan, it snaked its way along the valley floor at the edge of a steep hillside. On our left we started to see the signs of the approaching town. The dusk of the evening was growing dark. Just before we arrived at the station, I spied the back side of a quaint temple barely visible in the deepening shadows. That would be my first photographic adventure the next morning.

At first light the next day, I worked my way back down the train track and entered the temple from behind, slowly photographing as I went. I'd been working an hour or so when I suddenly became aware of a gardener, high in a tree, trimming and pruning. We smiled and waved. He returned my "Hello" with *ohayo gozaimasu* and we both kept working.









Another hour of photography brought a woman from inside the temple with a note, written with four words in English, but clearly without the benefit of a native speaker's knowledge. It read, "Work hard. Want tea." I took the latter to be a question and nodded that I would. She guided me to the veranda of the main temple building where I found the temple priest — my gardener friend! — now dressed in his robes, waiting to share some tea and Japanese sweets.



With the fumbling help of our translation dictionaries, we managed a sort of conversation mostly in disjointed words and phrases. I told him I was studying the Japanese philosopher Dogen. "*Muzukashii, desu ne,*" he said. "Yes," I replied, "very difficult."

I had with me an introduction book to my photographic project, complete with a Japanese translation. He read it intently, then excused himself for a moment.

He returned with a small box of old photographs and an ancient Japanese camera of a kind I'd never seen. He explained that he had been very interested in photography in his teenage years before dedicating his life to the priesthood at age 18. He showed me the pictures he had developed and printed in his darkroom, presumably some 60+ years earlier. He pronounced it clearly — "darkroom" — the only word of English he spoke in our entire encounter.

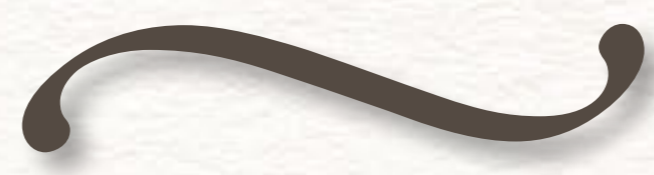
An hour or so later, I left with his portrait and a memory of the morning when our two lives crossed paths, mine and the temple priest of Tozen-in.





A FEW OF THE BILLION

*Portraits and Stories
from China*



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I was informed that he was the richest man in the village. I asked my translator how he knew such information. "It's easy to tell by the number of chickens he owns." Of course it is.



The entire length of this street was filled with small shops, almost all of them with one person, sitting in the door, making or repairing something. This fellow looked up at me and said in English, "Nice camera." Then he went back to work as though he was quite used to being photographed.





In this “volcano village” — so called because volcanic pumice stone is the construction material for all the homes and walls — every one of the elders suffers from crippling arthritis. There is something in the ground water that afflicts them all, but the government can’t convince them to stop drinking it.





First, he cooked us a delicious stir-fry in his giant wok. Later, I saw him down at the floating dock, washing the dishes in the river.





He was born and raised in this house. Now he is the patriarch. His only son lives in the city, but had come home for a vacation. Everyone was excited because for the first time there would be electricity in the house — as soon as his son finished installing the wiring in all three rooms. It was a big day and we were invited to stay and watch them turn it on, but alas our bus was waiting.



They were some sort of potato, or perhaps a yam. I was never sure, and try as I might to understand the Mandarin word he kept using, I could never quite hear it clearly enough to look it up. The most amazing part was the *bounty* he found in what I thought was just a patch of wasted land. It certainly didn't look cultivated.



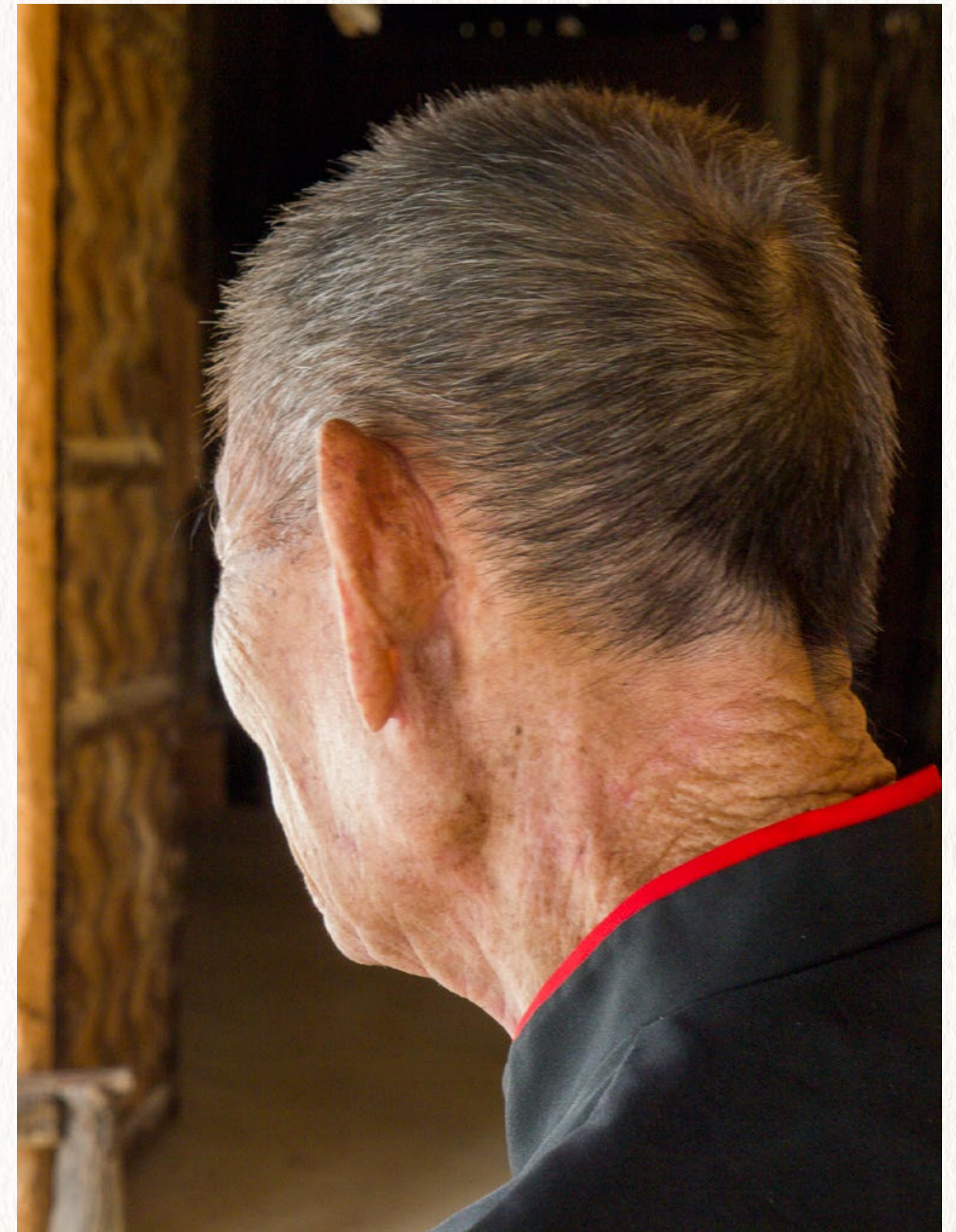


The incongruity of the scene was amazing — the leather jacket and hat, that tiny chair, and the oversized slippers. In spite of the oddity of the moment, I did notice that his basket work was intricate and simply beautiful.





He was fascinated with the bald spot on the top of my head. He asked if he could touch it. "Sure," I replied through my translator, "but only if I can photograph yours. I'm jealous." He laughed and then stroked my head. I had earned my photograph.





It was 10am and he was drunk as a skunk. He was desperate to sell me a chicken. I have no idea what he thought I was supposed to do with a live chicken, but that didn't deter him. Finally, I paid him for a piece of string which I wound into a circle and placed in my pocket. He was satisfied and all talk of the chicken sale ceased.



Drying, I learned, is a big deal in rural China. Fruit is dried; vegetables are dried; mushrooms, herbs, even salted meats and fish are dried. We saw these drying trays everywhere we went. I thought they were marvelous, but I couldn't figure a way to fit one into my luggage. Too bad.





It seemed that every time I turned a corner, I saw this busy monk hurrying to and fro, often in different robes. I must have photographed him several times in the few hours I was there. At one point, a different monk approached me to practice his English. He boldly struck up a conversation and asked if I'd like to see his dorm room and meet his room mate. Of course I would! Upon entering his room, there was my busy monk of the morning, donning yet a different set of robes! He graciously agreed to pose for a portrait in front of the altar in their room.



This factory makes swords for the tourist trade. I tried to imagine working here, all day, applying a thin paint to these sword handles, breathing those fumes all day long. I simply couldn't stretch my imagination that far. At the gift shop out front, there was a brisk trade as bus-load after bus-load of tourists filed through. I kept thinking of the workers I'd photographed, wondering about their lives.





Mr. Zhao was the patriarch of the family — and I was told the family was considered very well off for this region of rural China. They even owned a small plot of land. His son was away because he worked in the city. Mr. Zhao was alone for the day and invited us into the living room for tea. He was anxious to know if we liked American basketball. He was a big fan, especially of the famous Chinese player Yao Ming who played for the Houston Rockets. He pronounced it, “Oooston Ockets.”



An entirely one-person operation, he ran a neighborhood school for children. Teacher, administrator, cook, and janitor — if it needed to be done, he did it. He explained it was good Buddhist practice. I was surprised that a religious school was permitted in Communist China. “We are too far out in the country for the officials to care what we do,” he explained.





Rounding a corner in a rural village, and suddenly there are the old ways, the old tools, in a harvest story that is as old as humanity.





Based on the number of harvest baskets lining the alleyway, I could easily understand the need for a nap on a nice, sunny afternoon.



THE EAT CAFE



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He responded, “As a matter of fact, there’s a good place t’eat jus’ down the road. You can’t miss it on your right there, jus’ past the old Harmon place and up a piece from Dry Creek. It’s called the Eat Cafe. Order **HOT CAKES**. If you call ‘em *pancakes*, they’ll know you’re from the city.”

I’m now an experienced Eat Cafe customer, down dozens of roads. I heartily recommend the experience. It doesn’t matter what road you’re on, there’s *always* an Eat Cafe just ahead. If it’s still open, pull over and enjoy the hot cakes. I’ve never been disappointed.

Most mornings you’ll be waited on either by Debbie (who just works there) or Sue (the owner) who’s again trying to figure out what went wrong between high school and last night. She’ll tell you all about her search for the right man, a nice home, a car from the current decade, or a vacation beyond the state line.

Find an open booth and “Set a spell, honey. Can I git ya some coffee?”





While you're waiting for your coffee, take a moment to enjoy the wall decor. It will be a collection of, well, *something*. Frequently it's the "World's Largest Collection of ..." It may be bottle caps or beer bottles, belt buckles or bullet casings, ashtrays, animal horns, dinner plates, old farms tools, license plates, livestock brands (a consistent favorite), coffee mugs, horseshoes, hubcaps, silver dollars, canning jars, or arrowheads. No matter how large the collection, it'll never completely cover the clear varnished knotty pine or the tattered *We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to Anyone We Don't Like* sign.

On her way to deliver a perfectly balanced armful of steaming hot eggs, hash browns, and bacon to the group sitting across the way, Debbie will swing by your booth with your thick ceramic white coffee mug, the coffee pot, and the menu, this last being tucked securely under her arm. "I'll be right with you, sugar." The aroma of down-home cooking and coffee always mixes into a wonderful saliva-producing incense.



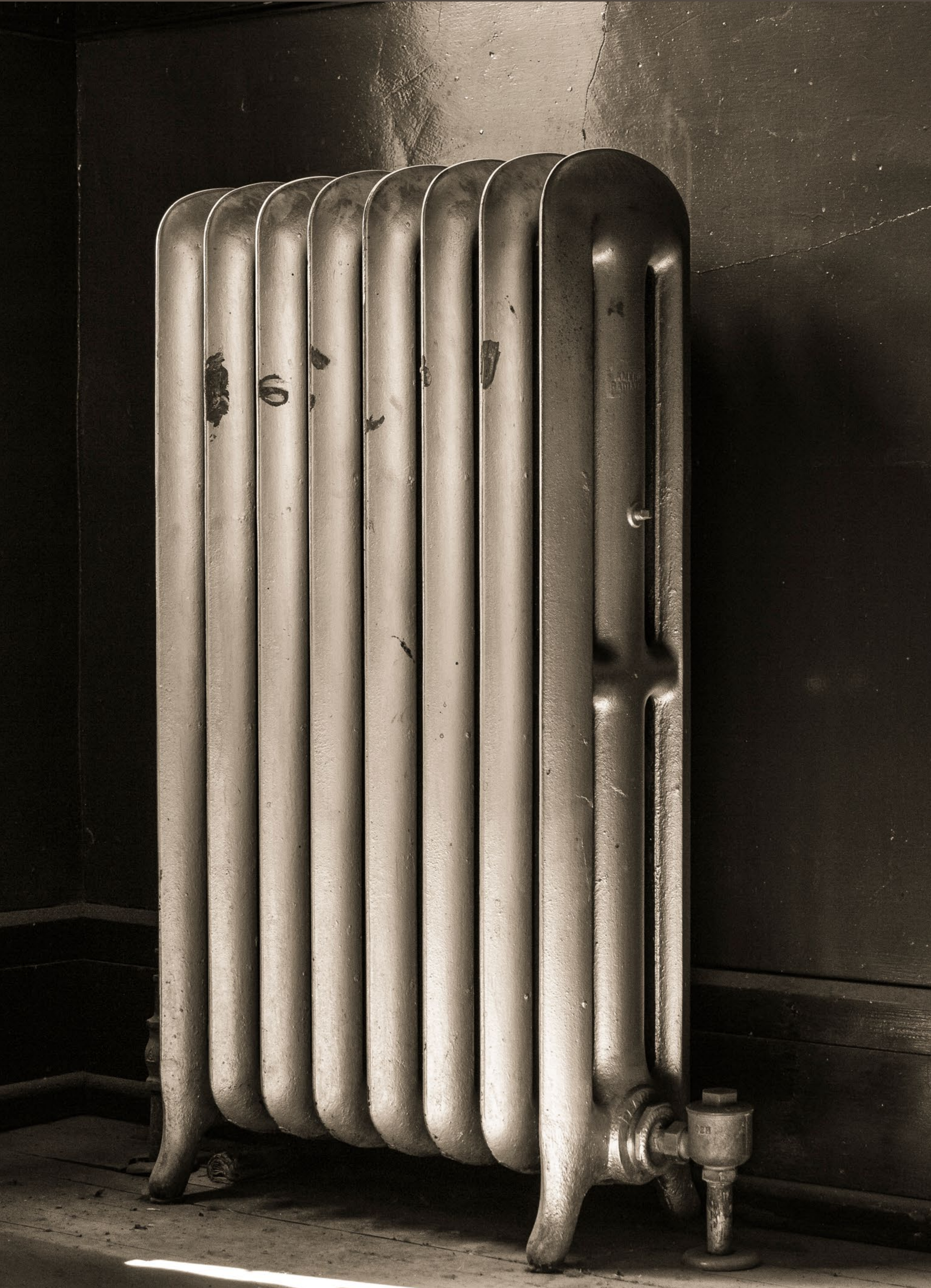
The typewritten page stuffed inside the plastic sleeve that serves as the menu will invariably include:

- Hot cakes (2) \$1.45
- Hot cakes (3) \$1.90
- Hot cakes (2) and bacon \$2.90

There's no quiche or crepes to be found here. Go ahead and try the hot cakes. They're filling and affordable, even on a traveler's tight budget.

Sometimes, when Sue goes to bed in a stupor and forgets to set her alarm, the boys just let themselves in. They know where the extra key is hidden. That's not unusual, though. The whole town knows where it's hidden. Gus'll make the coffee (stronger than Sue does) and Tom will turn on both the radio (louder than Sue does) and the heat (higher than Sue does). They'll even serve you coffee, as long as you don't ask for cream. They're glad for something to do because it makes them feel useful, and it'll earn them a free pat on Sue's behind (without protest) when she arrives from her beauty sleep.





Just about the time you're digging into your hot cakes and starting your fourth half-cup of coffee (Debi's tenacity in making sure your cup never gets farther down than half full makes you wonder whether or not this is a spiritual matter with her), in will walk Opal with her daughter Jenny. Opal is a seventyish-looking fifty-year old with smoky, yellow-gray hair and a jacket that looks as though it came from Gus' closet. Jenny's hair is long and curled and her choice of blouse calculated to make the most of her figure — tight, sparse, and not quite covering her navel. Billy, her first-born in the booth next to her, is too young yet to be embarrassed by his haircut or the way it emphasizes his cowlick.

Jenny has just come from the clinic and is wondering why the good Lord made it her lot in life to be pregnant — again — now that she just got her figure back. It's plain to see that Opal is glad her time has passed. Opal orders tomato juice and sneaks herself a Bloody Mary with a flask she removes from her inside pocket next to the stick matches.



Jenny orders coffee which she cools down with an ice cube from her water glass while distractedly drumming her artificial fingernails on the tabletop in time with the music. Billy gets milk, which instantly makes a white mustache above his lip which more than likely will remain there for the rest of the morning.

Opal's conversation generally runs along the lines of canasta and bingo, grocery prices and game shows, what Mabel said June said about Henrietta's cousin, and "My Lord, is it never gonna end?" Jenny's conversation centers around what Billy broke yesterday, how Matt is getting such a raw deal at the plant, and how he's going to be pissed when he finds out what the doctor said. Although each is looking at the other during the entire interchange, you'll have to apply yourself to remember that these two are talking to each other.

Yup, the folks'll all be there at the Eat Cafe, or the Toastmaster Cafe, or the Hilltop, the Valley, the Riverside, the Cowboy, the Sunnyside, the Calico Cupboard, the Blue Rooster, the Red Hen, or the Wagon Wheel. I've been to them all and remember them well. You can always count on the entertainment to be brisk, the coffee to be strong, and the hot cakes to fill you up. Say "Hi" to Sue and Debbie for me. Best to hurry, though, before you miss the opportunity.



A LESSON LEARNED, AGAIN



J Brooks Jensen

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There is no doubt that we live in an age of ever more sophisticated technology that aids — and sometime *rules* — our lives. Like so many, I'm fascinated by all the magic the new devices can perform; I embrace them, enjoy them, are entertained by them, and will even admit to a small degree of lust for the newest gadgets.

And then I'll wander into a place like Smiley's and am overwhelmed by a sense of nostalgia for what we are at risk to leave behind.

I needed some repairs done to the trailer hitch on my car. I was advised that Smiley's was the place, so off I went. Luckily, I had the camera in the car. I asked and was given permission to photograph from the fellow working on the repairs. I eagerly and naively started working.















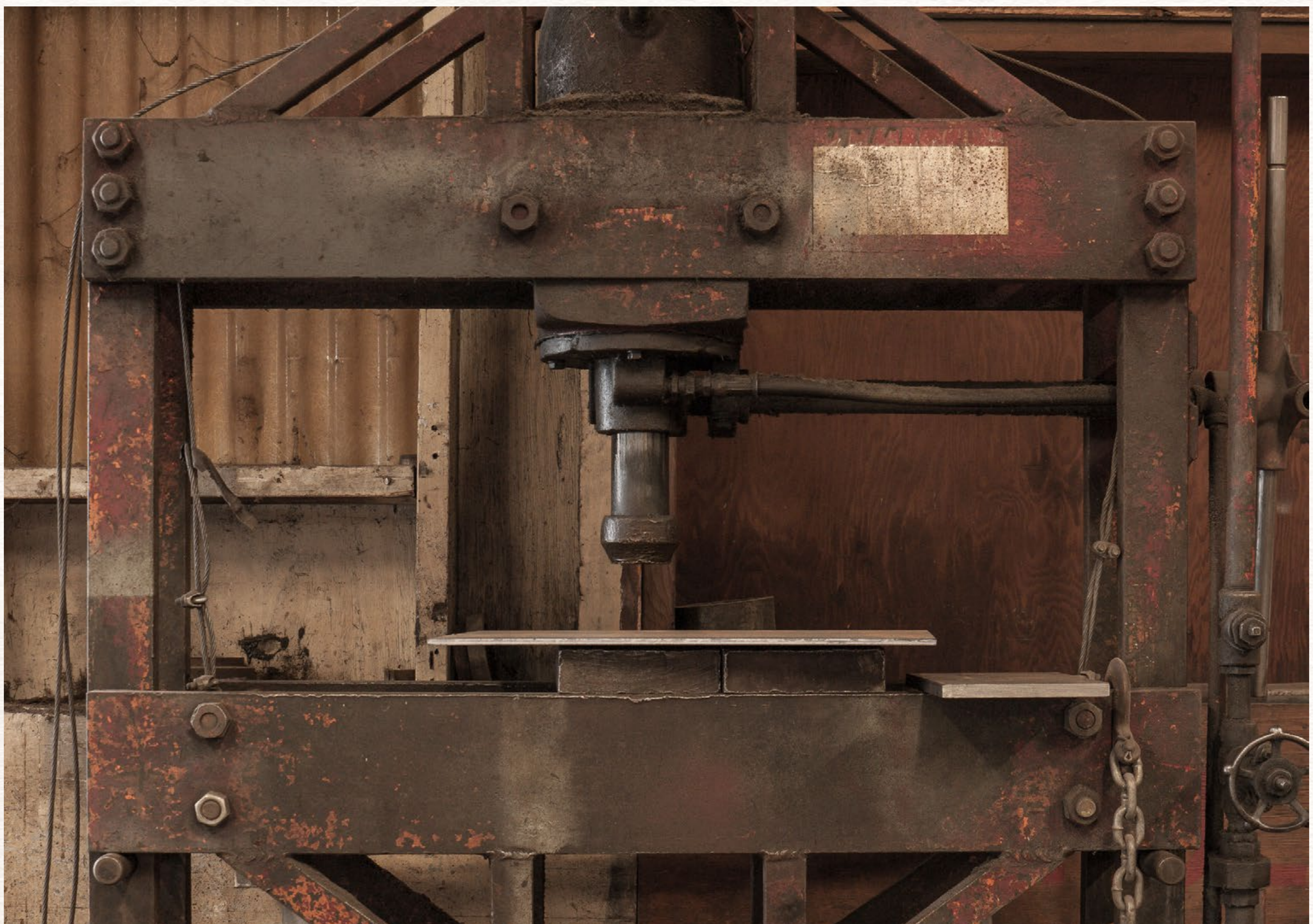
A short 20 minutes later, I was approached by the owner. I introduced myself and assumed a little small talk was in order. "Why are you photographing?" he asked. I fumbled an answer which clearly didn't satisfy him. He kindly, but firmly, asked me to stop.

Hoping it would smooth things over, I explained that I had asked permission from his employee. "Well," he replied curtly, "you should have asked *me*." And, of course, he was right. I knew better, but in my eagerness I had neglected to seek out the *the owner* before I started photographing — a foolish and embarrassing mistake.



During the next few moments as I tried to talk my way into an understanding, I could feel the tension building. Not wanting things to escalate, I changed course, apologized and complied. Tail between my legs, I spent the next hour in the waiting room, watching the clock tick. Ten photographs made, and countless ones lost because of my inept lack of courtesy. I couldn't blame him. I can just imagine how I'd feel if someone came into my business and started poking around without first asking for my permission. I'd be suspicious, perhaps angry, too.

Art may be some higher calling, but it doesn't trump common courtesy and human relations. This was the second time in my photographic life I'd been kicked out from somewhere I regretted being denied — and as the *second* time, I must have needed to relearn the lesson. This time, the lesson has been stamped as if in steel. Thanks, Smiley — I owe you one.



CIRCULAR LOGIC



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The wheel. Where would we be without the wheel?

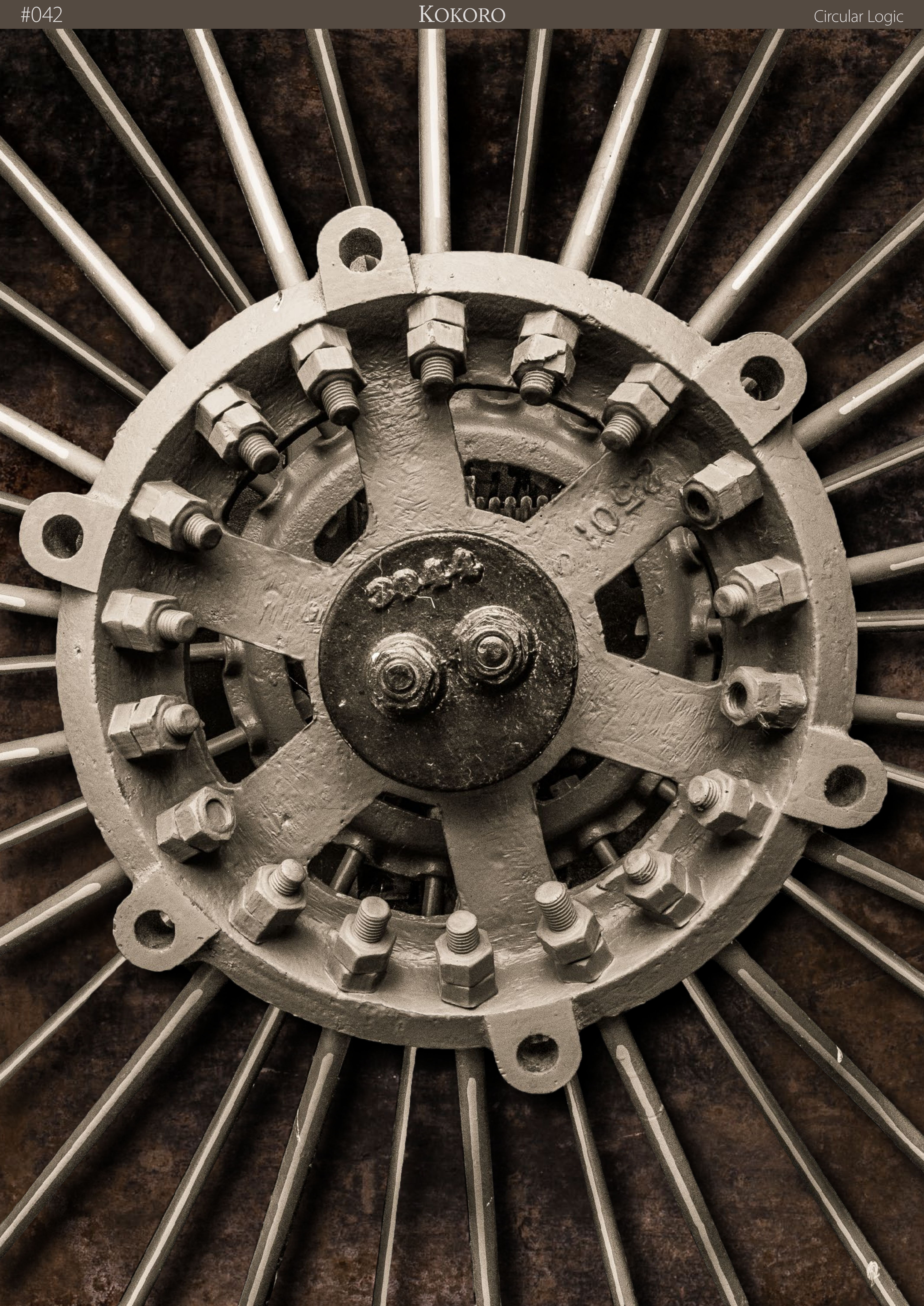
My wife's family in North Dakota are all farmers. Their tractors are built entirely of circular logic — fly-wheels, gears, wheels of spokes, and every kind of circular part that can be imagined. Their life is built on the circle, the wheel, and the gear.

What goes around, comes around.

The cycle of the seasons.

The life of a farmer and his world of circular logic.







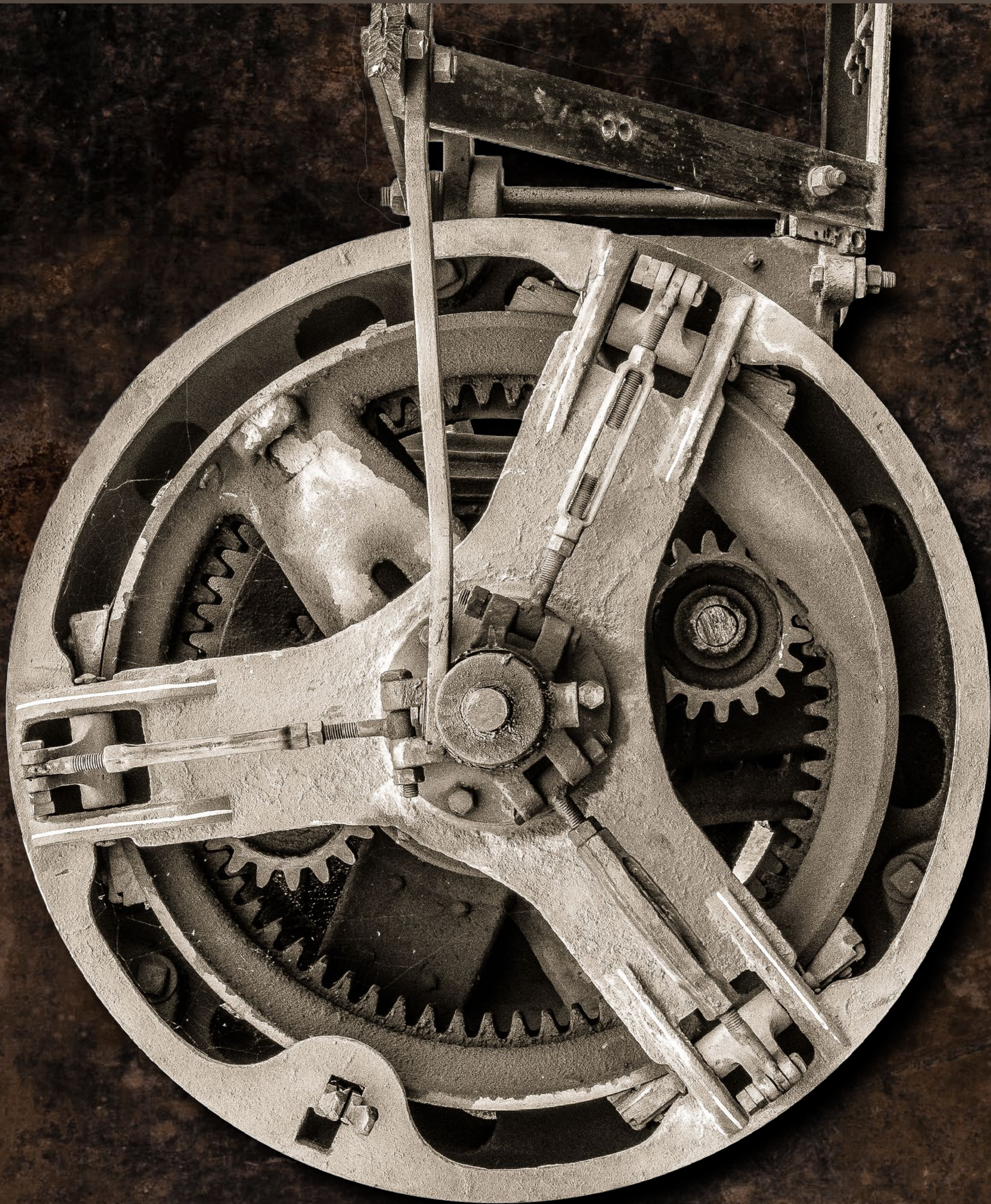




















Brooks Jensen is a fine-art photographer, publisher, workshop teacher, and writer. In his personal work he specializes in small prints, hand-made artist's books, and digital media publications.

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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