

A high-angle, vertical photograph of a deep canyon. The rock walls are layered and textured, with a color palette ranging from light tan to dark brown. Sparse, dark green trees and shrubs are scattered across the slopes. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights that emphasize the ruggedness of the terrain.

# KOKORO

VOL 1, NO 3 • MAR 2015



# KOKORO

## *Wandering Through a Photographic Life*

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

*J Brooks Jensen*

*Brooks Jensen*



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*

At Home in the Rocks . . . . .	4
Work . . . . .	12
The Chinese Way . . . . .	24
Gestures of a Primitive Mind. . . . .	50
Pooh's Gorse . . . . .	61
The Source . . . . .	69
Lesser Fleas . . . . .	77
Joe Sasak . . . . .	84





# AT HOME IN THE ROCKS



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**It's natural,** on occasion, to despair of life's turmoil. But at least we don't live our life on the edge of a precipice! I get queasy near the void at the edge of a height. But then again, I don't have roots that burrow deep into the rock and hold tight for dear life.









Sitting here, gazing out across the canyon at the opposite wall, I wonder: *How many trees are there? What determines how close they grow to one another? How many living creatures are within this view?* I try to still the chatter of such questions and **just breathe**. Not always, but from time to time, the quiet descends and I am enveloped in the living space.











A slight breeze ambles past me; the sun warms my back. An unseen crow floats right to left through the space between the walls as if chasing his own echo, as a *caw-caw* fills the canyon from one end to the other. The buzz of a bee fades in and out of the soundscape, then a chipmunk squeaks, then the breeze again. The sounds of my own breathing mix with waves of sound approaching from the quiet void behind me, fading into the quiet void between me and the trees on the far side of the canyon.





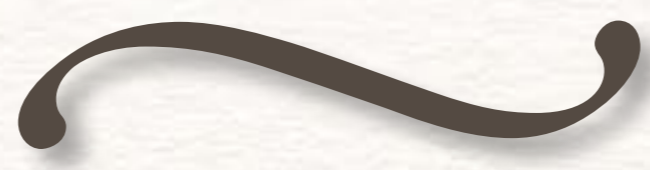




Visually, nothing moves; aurally it never stops. Here, there is space for living — space for living *things*. Nothing is crowded, but no crevice is left empty that could be home.



# WORK AND REAL WORK



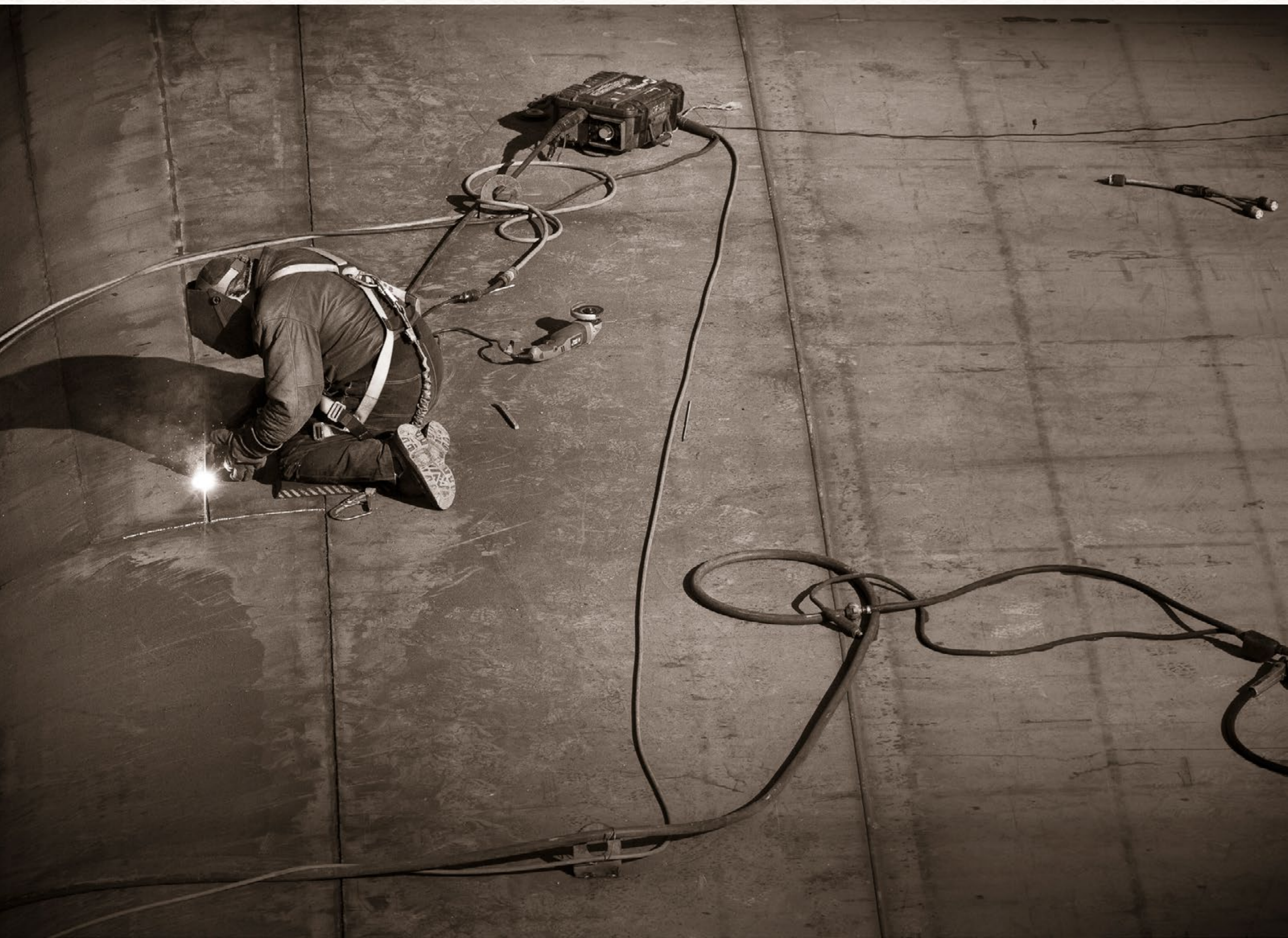
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**We all** like to think we work hard — at whatever it is we do. I sit at my desk and type, read, think, edit, and click my mouse buttons. Then I look across the street from my office and see the shipbuilders turning piles of sheet metal into massive ships. When I compare what I do to what they do, I find it difficult to describe what I do as “work.” I don’t break a sweat and I don’t get dirty. Somehow, it seems like cheating to call it *work*.

In their protective clothing, hot, doing physically demanding tasks, contorted into uncomfortable positions, on their knees for weeks at a time, hanging in the air on the side of a ship — *that* is work. Even when I was young and fit, I doubt I would have had the stamina to be a shipbuilder. It is a privilege to watch them ply their craft and build, one piece at a time.







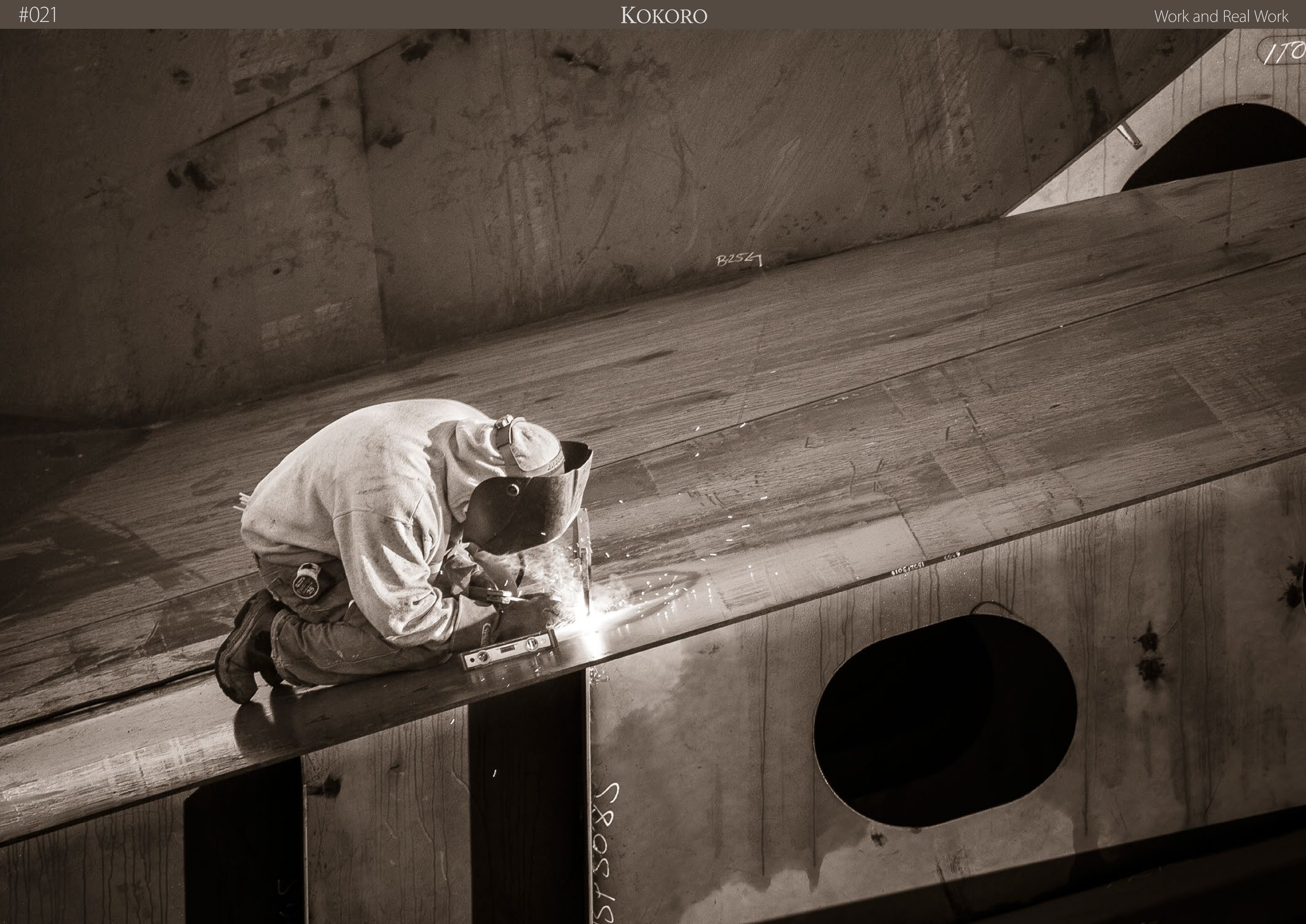




































I'd salute them with a tip of my hat,  
but my job doesn't require that I wear one.



# THE CHINESE WAY



*Brooks Jensen*

*A Brooks Jensen Arts Publication*





**Travel photography** may not be “high art,” but it is certainly fun!

The invitation to exhibit my work in China was unexpected. Of course, I’d be delighted! But when I learned that the invitation included an all-expenses-paid, two-week visit to attend the opening, I was reduced to drooling and wondering what stars had aligned in my astrological skies. “Can I bring my camera?” They insisted that I do so, and promised plenty of opportunities and time to photograph.





I arrived a couple days early to acclimate to the time shift and ease my way into the adventure. The next day I ventured out for a walk around the neighborhood, camera in hand, ready and alert for any photographic opportunities. The remote city rarely receives foreign visitors and I had been forewarned to expect to be greeted with curious caution. With each person I passed, I was met with an intense stare that felt like hostility — not an *“Aren’t you an unexpected curiosity!”* stare, but rather a *“What planet are you from and why have you come here? We have weapons, too!”* sort of stare. I was nonplussed. I was intimidated. I was instinctively guarded and careful — not quite afraid, but definitely wary.











That night at dinner, I relayed my experience to my host. She laughed and graciously explained, "It's just the Chinese way. To the Chinese, staring is not considered impolite as it is in Western culture. Just smile and be friendly and they'll smile right back. But, they wouldn't dream of smiling at you first!" I decided to test her theory the next morning.



Wandering out from my hotel, I quickly found my first test subject. I walked directly up, opened a big smile, held out my hand, and did my best to pronounce the universal Mandarin greeting for hello, "*Ni hao!*" The old man responded with a smile even larger than mine, held out his hand and we shook over numerous *ni hao* for what seemed like several minutes. Overnight, the Chinese people became some of the most hospitable and gracious hosts I've ever experienced. I may not speak the language, but a smile is universally understood.













This couple graciously invited me into their kitchen to photograph. While I was photographing, they offered me some steamed sweet potatoes they were cooking — and a tasty treat it was!



We found this woman sunning herself by the side of the road. When I walked up with a smile and a "Ni hao," she insisted on standing for our greeting. In old Mandarin she said, "If he's come all the way from America, at least I can stand to meet him." My translator helped her out of her chair so we could shake hands. The exchange of compassion between these two strangers, visible in their faces, warmed my heart.





Nearby, a neighborhood Chinese opera group was scheduled to perform in an outdoor community theater. We were invited to attend — and photograph! Equipped with my new-found knowledge, I brought my big smile and a bag full of *ni-hao* greetings to ease the encounters. I was invited — no, *encouraged* — to photograph at will, including backstage, during the performance, wherever I wanted to go.





























The neighbors had come to view the performances, and I was reticent to intrude myself into their entertainment. I tried to be as inconspicuous as I could be — a serious challenge for a large Swede with a camera in a crowd of smaller Chinese. The performance took place on a small, raised platform about 5-feet above the floor. To make photographs of the musicians and dancers, I'd set the 10-second timer on my camera, raise it to performance level at the end of my monopod, and aim as carefully as I could without the benefit of knowing exactly what was in the field of view. Everyone was patient with my intrusion, and I hoped (with luck) that I might get some good photographs without disturbing their enjoyment with my presence. I smiled a lot and quickly ducked out of the way until the next opportunity arose.



















行樂圖

樓

















Unknowingly, I had become a fascination for the performers who kept seeing my disembodied camera pop up center stage at the end of my monopod. Moments after the last applause had died down at the end of the performance, a number of the dancers rushed down the steps and surrounded me for a group photograph. Lots of *ni-hao* and big smiles. It's just the Chinese way.



# GESTURES OF A PRIMITIVE MIND



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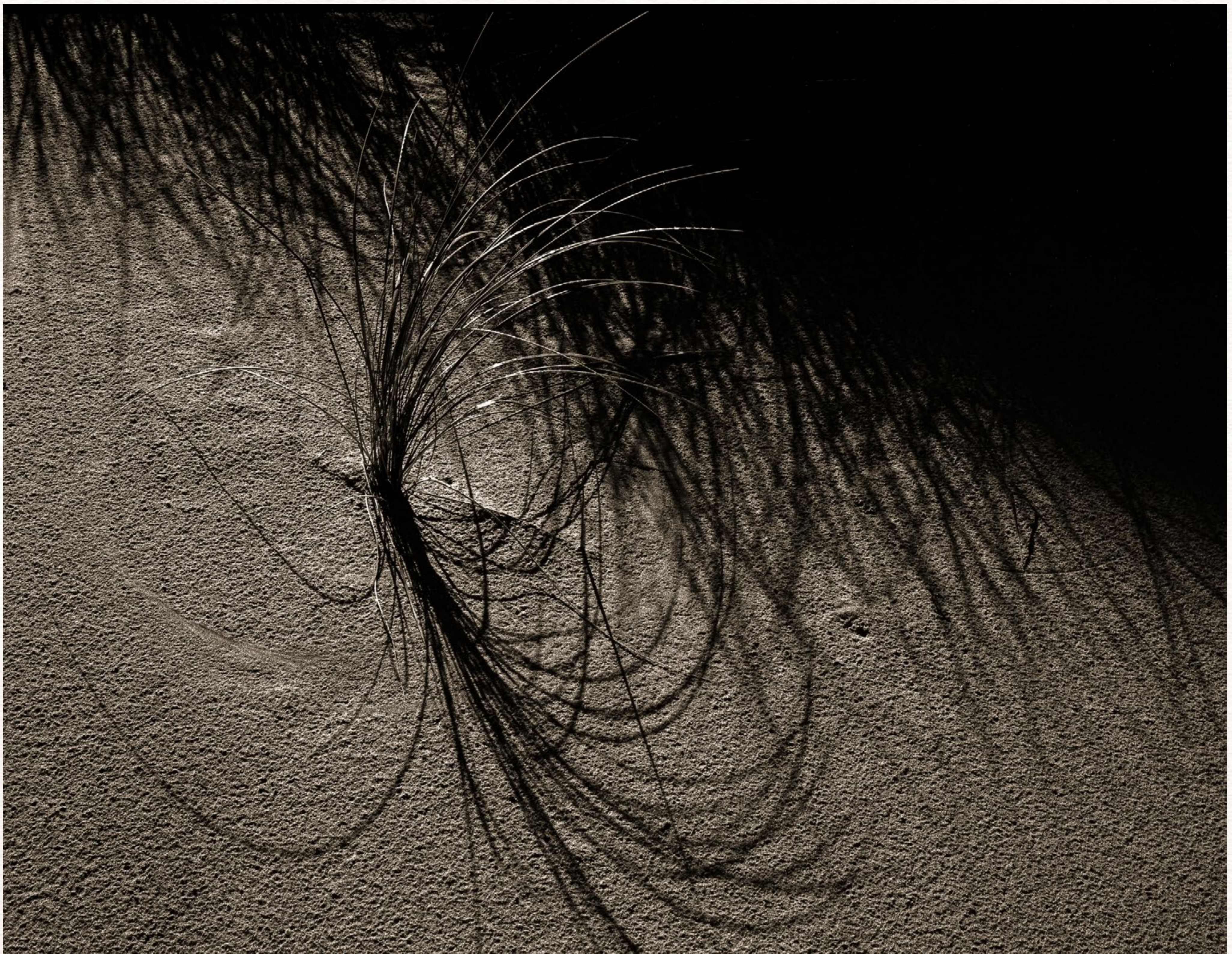
**I would** like to think that plants have consciousness. I would be comforted by it. The trees would wave hello; the flowers would return my smile. But it is not so. Science assures me of this.





Then again . . . imagine four billion years ago some astronaut from another world happened to be out surveying the galaxy and passed our sphere of blue and brown. He would no doubt have looked down upon the Earth and noted in his journal “No life — just a bunch of rocks.” Is it possible, on his return trip, he might look down upon us *today* and correct his entry: “Excuse me! Not just a bunch of rocks. They are *peopling* rocks after all!” For don’t we all grow *out* of this world the same way apples grow from the apple tree? It seems we are symptomatic of rocks.

Locked in the acorn is the mystery of how to grow an oak. I can’t turn an acorn into an oak, so is an acorn more intelligent than me? If I kick my neighbor, he manifests his intelligence and says, “Ouch.” If I kick a rock, it manifests its intelligence and goes, “Clunk.” Different intelligence indeed, but who is to say if one is not simply far more sensitive than the other, far more expressive than the other, far more developed. I’d like to think it’s so.







You laugh. It's considered sentimental to exhibit such anthropomorphism — the attribution of human characteristics or behavior to nonhuman objects. Nonetheless, I cannot help but feel the grass is trying to ... *something*. Waving? Writing? Something that I can't comprehend.

Like when my cat sees my finger wiggle under the blanket and tries, with her limited cat-intelligence, to figure it out — again. She engages her mind, but there isn't much mind there to engage. I know that plants would like to discuss philosophy and metaphysics and share recipes and humorous anecdotes with me. They seem to try so hard to do so — reaching without muscles and thinking as best they can with brainless roots. And I try hard to listen.



















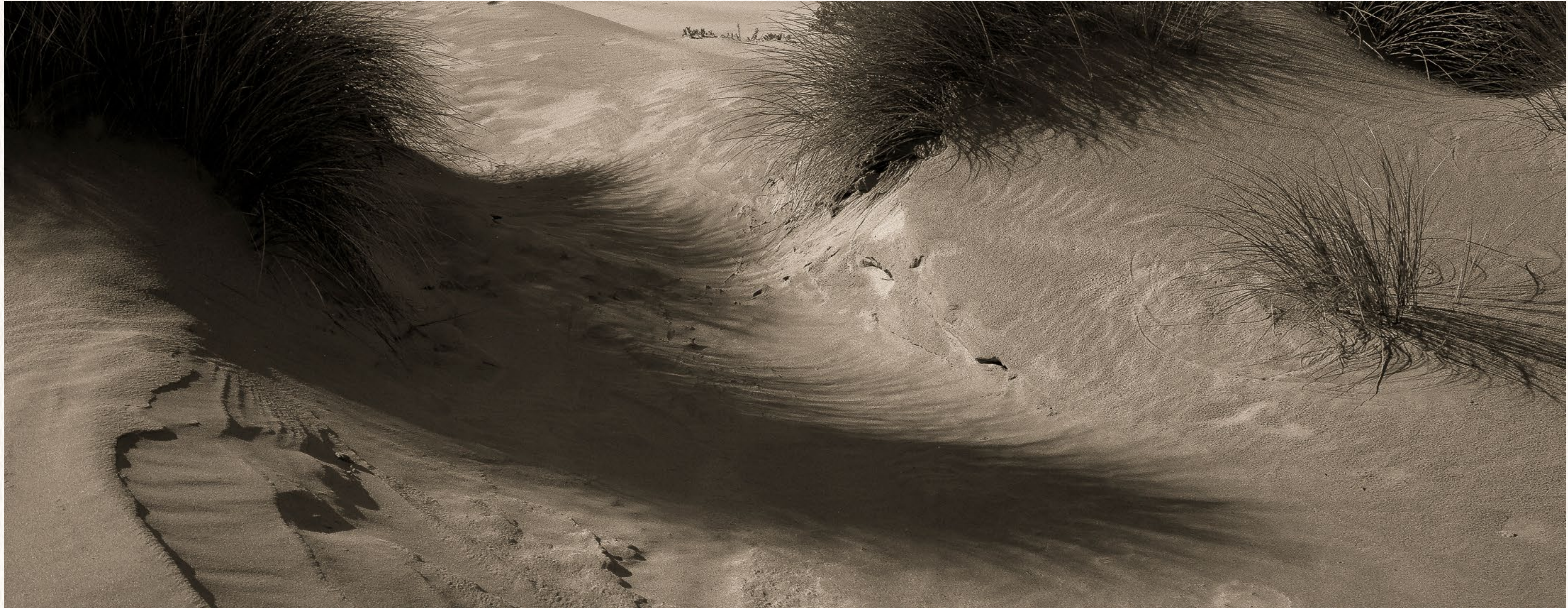








Which begs a deeper question: Which is the more primitive intelligence — the one who rustles carelessly in the breeze, or the one who tries so passionately to make it meaningful?



*This project is dedicated to the work and memory of the late Alan Watts — from whom I first heard the “peopling rocks” idea.*



# POOH'S GORSE



*Brooks Jensen*

*A Brooks Jensen Arts Publication*



**The gorse bush** is not a native to where I live, so the first time I'd ever heard of it was reading *Winnie the Pooh* in the third grade, my first big book ever.

They had come to a stream which twisted and tumbled between high rocky banks, and Christopher Robin saw at once how dangerous it was. "It's just the place," he explained, "for an Ambush."

"What sort of bush?" whispered Pooh to Piglet. "A gorse-bush?"

"My dear Pooh," said Owl in his superior way, "don't you know what an Ambush is?"

"Owl," said Piglet, looking round at him severely, "Pooh's whisper was a perfectly private whisper, and there was no need----"

"An Ambush," said Owl, "is a sort of Surprise."

"So is a gorse-bush sometimes," said Pooh.

And seeing a gorse bush for the first time, at age 60, I understood Pooh.







Gorse bushes played a major role in Pooh's life. Wherever there was a gorse bush, Pooh's rear end was bound to find it. As an eight-year-old, I lived in fear of gorse, even though I'd never seen one.



Gorse was introduced to the southern Oregon coast where it has become an invasive, pernicious troublemaker. An Ambush, indeed.

Just ask the trees.



















I've learned my fear was justified.

Pooh was wiser than I thought.



# THE SOURCE



*J Brooks Jensen*

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# Walking up the bone-dry gully.

Cracked mud.  
Desert silence.





A hint of breeze barely moves a feather.





Another.





And another.





Too many to be lost.  
There must be a *source*.









# Walking up the bone-dry gully.

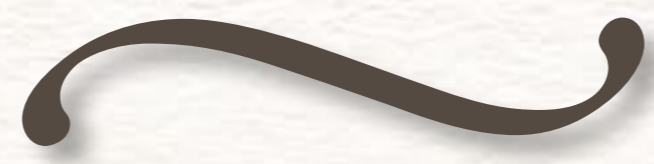
Cracked mud.

Desert silence.





# LESSER FLEAS



*J Brooks Jensen*

*A Brooks Jensen Arts Publication*



**Standing on rocks** is a favorite pastime of mine. Their solidity is reassuring. We are connected, the rocks of the Earth and all of us. We are pulled — quite literally by gravity — until we touch rock beneath us. Safe and secure.





Nothing brings home the enormity of time and our microscopic place in it, than watching the rocks for while and trying to feel important while making a photograph. We are specks. No, we are specks on the specks. Okay, we are *dust motes* on the specks on the specks — on this sphere of rocks orbiting the sun.





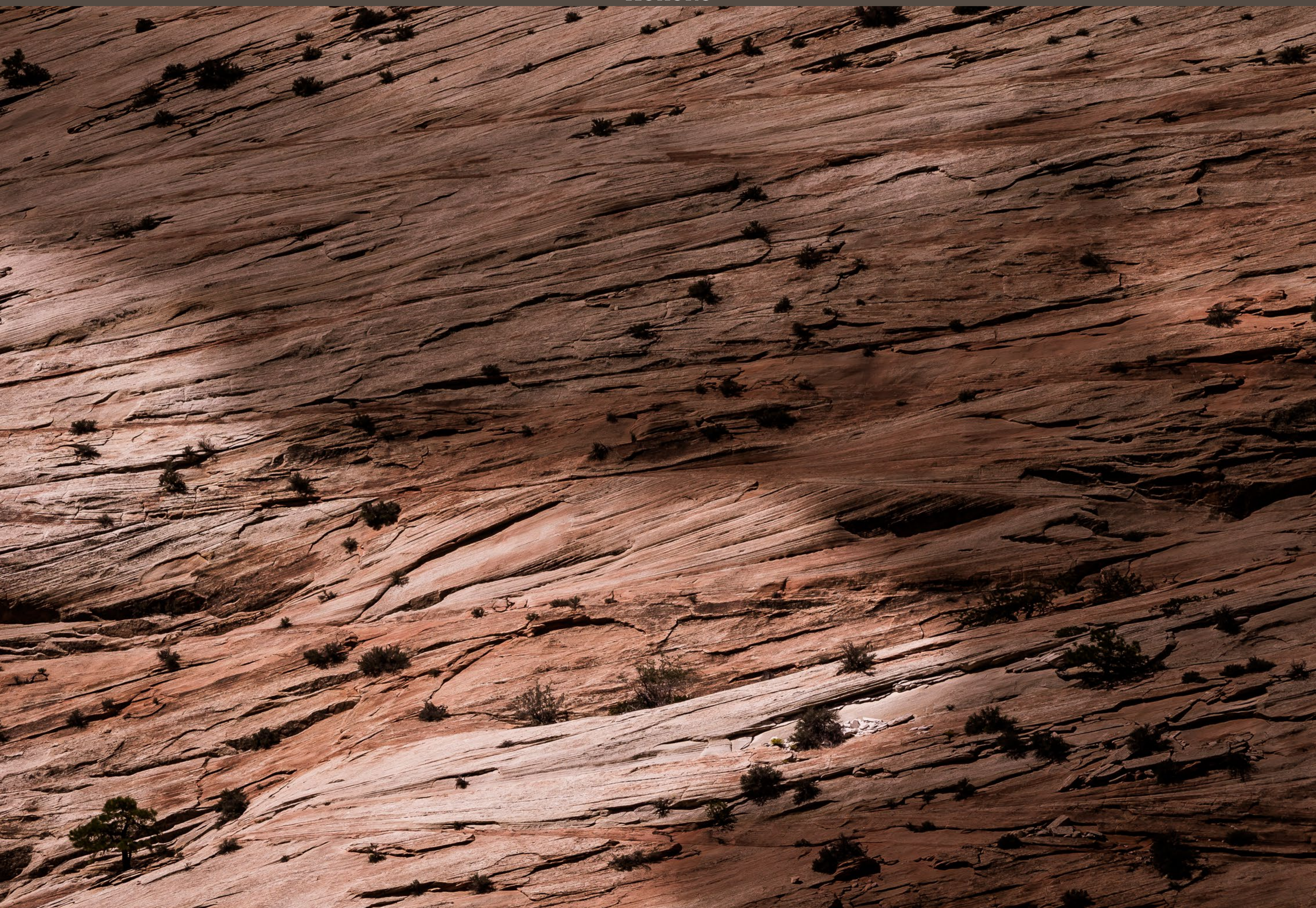
Reminds me of that age-old nursery rhyme known as *The Siphonaptera* ...

*Big fleas have little fleas  
Upon their back to bite 'em.  
And little fleas have lesser fleas,  
And so, ad infinitum.*

We are way down the list of *ad infinitum*. Not at the bottom, but pretty close to it. Somewhere between the protozoa and the elephant. All safe and secure on the rocks.

Strangely, I find all this comforting. It's nice to be put in place on a cosmic scale. It's relaxing to be immersed in a humility encouraged by the rocks. A lesser flea indeed, but how nice to be carried along on the Bigger Flea's back.







In the parlance of the day, “we are all one” — except that I am 61 and the Earth is 4.5 *billion* years old. I cannot comprehend that number.


Like every living thing, I experience life by the yardstick of *my time* on the planet. It simply does not compute that I am 0.000000013 as old as the rocks I photograph.\*

No, we are not *one*, but we *are* bound together — fleas upon fleas upon fleas on the rocks.

\* *If the rocks were my age,  
I'd be 25-seconds old.*







I was taught to respect my elders — which includes, I suppose, these mineral entities that are so much older than I am. Makes me feel somewhat *whippersnapperish* — which is a good thing as one enters the sixth decade of life. Makes time in the red rocks a sort of worship, too, I suppose — a time to be thankful, and I am.



# JOE SASAKI



*J Brooks Jensen*

*A Brooks Jensen Arts Publication*





**With a free weekend,** I pointed my rental car north from Chicago toward somewhere unknown. I needed to be in Milwaukee on Tuesday, but I had three days of photography before then.

Somewhere north of Milwaukee about sixty miles, I passed a farm off to my right that caught my eye. The machinery outside the building looked interesting, but I was cruising at 50 miles per hour and just drove on by. A few miles down the road, I admitted to myself that the place looked *really* interesting ... but I was too far passed it to go back. Another half dozen miles and the vision of *potential* started gnawing at me in earnest. Finally, at the intersection of county road Y and county road YY (I will resist the temptation to propose any philosophical symbolism about this) I came to the town of Leroy, Wisconsin and turned around. I drove back, turned down the driveway, walked up to Joe and introduced myself. We started talking and two days later, along with a couple dozen rolls of exposed film, we said goodbye and I drove away.







“Oh, dat. I don’t t’row dat away. We use dat yet. We can still make sumpin’ outta dis guy. You can make a collar outta dis one yet — bore the t’read out — cut dis flat — maybe cut deese here corners off yet.” He thought some more during a pause, “I could make a smaller nut outta dat yet, too. Never t’row anything away,” he advised, “you never know when you might need it.” There was another thoughtful pause after which he added, “Or if you’ll be able to find it.”

As evidence of this wisdom, he pointed toward the door. “I made dis here door handle outta ol’ beer tap.” Then he turned and slowly walked around the shop, more searching his mind than the nooks and crannies of his shelves. Finally, from off in the corner I heard, “Here’s dat leetle fart. I knew I had it somewheres.”









Eat it up. Wear it out. Make it do. Do without.

As a young boy, I first heard these words of advice from my grandfather. How foolish they seemed then, in my youth. I doubt if Joe had ever thrown away a tool in all his life. Screwdriver handles were now serving as lever controls. An old beer tap opened his front door. An ice pick was now a cotter key. I mentioned he was about due for some new gloves. "Aw dem sheets are okay, yet. Dere okay. I use dem for a rag when dey get too bad."





Dan, one of Joe's neighbors, came by to pick up an axle Joe had repaired. It had taken him three days of work to complete. "Oh, Joe can fix everything," he said admiring the new axle. Dan turned to me and began explaining Joe's work. "This thing here was built on a cast and when it came loose that cast iron all broke. Joe turned that piece out and made a steel one for me." Joe was over in the far side of the shop, but I could see he was listening. When Dan had finished his description Joe came over and added the final touches. "Den I couldn't hold the goddamn t'ing but I had enough on dere to machine it off and stick it on dere and cut dis out and den put dat in a chuck. Den I cut dis all back and stuck dis t'ing on and smoothed it out. Now it turns like new, only better. Oh, dem guys give me grey hair once in a while."

Fixing things was a point of pride with Joe. While I was in Chicago, I'd picked up a new recessed lens board for my view camera for use with a new wide angle lens I had with me. I mentioned to Joe that I wished I could use it now to make a photo of his shop. "Gimme dat dere t'ing and I can make it fit." Here he is drilling a hole for my lens. I used it for the photograph on the next page.





As we talked, a formation of Canada geese flew overhead and I mentioned how loud and how pretty they were. “Oh sheet dere here by da millions. Christ, when dey come da sky is all black with ‘em. Once an’ a while you’ll find a whole field black with geese. When, those leettle sheets come dis time of year you here ‘em first in this window and then they fade over to this window and that means dere headin’ north. It’s always nice when they come dat way.” He stared at me seriously as though he was teaching a great lesson. “But let me tell ya, when ya here ‘em outa this window an’ then over t’ this window they’re headin’ south. Den dere not so nice, cuz ya know.” Here was a man who reckoned the spinning of the earth, the very global change of seasons by the sounds of the geese outside his workshop window. His workshop, his yard, his house, and the other few people in Leroy was a world big enough to satisfy Joe for 73 years. Some might scoff at this and say his was a restricted life. I admire him for knowing the definition of “enough.”



## *The Stove*

“Oh sheet yes it gits cold — down twenty t’irty b’low zero outside. But, it’s never cold in here.” Our conversation had arrived at a bragging point. “Sheet, yeah. This t’ing gits started in October an’ never goes out ‘til summer. I come out here in the mornin’ its sixty seventy degrees. I stand all my wood all up. Den I put a great big one on the bottom and den I giver a start an’ shut evert’ing off. Sometimes I doan hafta put not’ing in til two t’ree o’clock in the afternoon.”

Joe built the stove. The main belly was an old water main dug up in Milwaukee. The top came off a boiler from an old freighter. The grid was from an old Victrola. He welded it there one day after having burned his arm by absentmindedly leaning up against the stove to rest and warm himself. “Now ya can lean up dere an’ stay toasty all day and never burn yurself no matter how hot th’ fire is.” I suspect it never occurred to Joe that, other than himself, this theory would never be tested.

“I used to have to put on my gloves to open the door cuz th’ handle was so hot. I fine’ly got smart one day and put on this new handle I made outa th’ top of a brass bed post.” I suddenly had this image of the bed in his room missing one post top. To a man like Joe, the practicality of a cool stove handle is much more important than the cosmetic of his bed. After all, he would handle the stove door every day, but who would ever see his bed?







ROUND OAK  
*Moistair*  
BOILER PLATE



TURN  
GRATE  
FROM LEFT  
TO RIGHT





Joe had tools everywhere and all of them looked quite used. It was easy to see that tools were the man's life.

"All your tools are old, Joe."

"Yeah, but dey all work. The t'ing is, you know, you gotta know how to use it. You could have a brand new one and not do nuttin' with it. You can break it by doin' nuttin' with it. Tools was meant to be used. Sometimes I buy old tools just to save 'em."





Joe's expression left me doubting whether I was welcome or not. I soon learned to read Joe from his words and his actions rather than from his scowl. We spent two days together and were both sad when the time came for me to leave. He shook my hand and told me, "You come by anytime. I'll be right here." Two years later, I visited him again. True to his word, he was there.

"Where you been? I t'ought you mighta forgot about me."

No, Joe. I'll never forget you.



# Support the artist!

For over 30 years, Brooks has shared his photographic lessons, failures, inspiration, creative path — and more than a few laughs. If you've enjoyed his free *Kokoro* PDFs publications, or been a long-time listener to his free audio commentaries (his weekly podcast *On Photography and the Creative Life*, or his daily *Here's a Thought* commentaries), here is your chance to tell him how much you appreciate his efforts. Support the artist!



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[You can donate to support Brooks' creative life using this link.](#) Thanks!





**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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