

Poetic Visuals

Essays

The Resonant Moment

Nick Becker

Inquiry in the Wetlands

Saikat Chakraborty

The Spirit of Place

Brad Carr

On Zen and Fleeting Light

Murray Livingston

Collaborative Gallery

Resonances

Volume 2 — Resonances

Autumn 2025



Poetic Visuals

/pəʊ'tet.ɪk + 'vɪʒ.u.əlz/

Photographs that employ a visual language to actively engage with one's surroundings, explore the ineffable qualities of being, and create meaning

Image: Murray Livingston

Editor's Note

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Welcome to Volume 2 of Poetic Visuals!

As Volume 1 began making the rounds about six months ago, co-editor Murray Livingston and I were already brainstorming ideas we wished to explore in future iterations. We both quickly latched onto the idea of resonance in photography, a concept that is foundational to how each of us makes images.

This issue was created with the same collaborative, experimental mindset as Volume 1. Murray and I share an interest in exploring the subject matter at hand, but we approach it very differently. Similarly, we invited two collaborators to bring their unique perspectives to explore this common ground together.

My essay *The Resonant Moment* opens the discussion. A returning theme in my life these days, I discuss the balance of creativity and family life, and how moving through a new landscape with openness can reveal tiny moments of connection with your external surroundings and within.

Saikat Chakraborty moves the discussion in a fascinating new direction in *Inquiry in the Wetlands* by leaning into his expertise as a chemist, poetically illustrating the beauty of Adirondack wetlands.

In *The Spirit of Place*, **Brad Carr** tells us the heartfelt story about how finding a spiritual resonance among trees has shaped his personal transformation as an artist and a person.

The fourth feature in this volume, *Resonances*, is a true experiment: a collaborative gallery featuring images from both Murray and I, as well as Saikat and Brad. We approached our contributors with a simple prompt: to show us some of their images that build on the theme of resonance. We then curated and arranged the images to create a cohesive visual and narrative experience.

Finally, Murray's *On Zen and Fleeting Light* takes readers across the world to a remote canyon in Namibia, where he thoughtfully meditates on the importance of shadows, the fragility of light, and the power in the act of noticing.

I hope you find some peace to enjoy the words and images in *Volume 2 — Resonances*. We couldn't be more excited to share it with you.

Sincerely,

Nick Becker



Autumn 2025

Poetic Visuals is a journal by Murray Livingston and Nick Becker. Volume 2 features guest contributions from Brad Carr & Saikat Chakraborty. It explores the poetics of photography through the intersection of writing and images.

Co-Editors: Murray Livingston & Nick Becker

Images: Brad Carr (left), Saikat Chakraborty (right)

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A photograph of a white-barked tree, possibly a birch, in the foreground. The tree has several bare, thin branches reaching out. Behind the tree is a large, dark, and jagged wall of lava rock, which appears to be a remnant of a volcanic eruption. The ground in the foreground is covered with dry, brown grass and some small, dark rocks.

The Resonant Moment

Nick Becker

Those who are at least somewhat familiar with the brief history of photography have likely heard of Henri Cartier-Bresson, who is sometimes considered to be the father of modern-day street photography. Although he himself did not coin the term, Cartier-Bresson described the notion of the decisive moment: the moment in time at which story, emotion, and composition align to create the perfect image. For him, it was critical to time the release of his shutter at the precise instant to capture a fleeting alignment of dynamic elements within a scene.

The idea of “capturing a moment” is not unique to documentary or street photography. Nature abounds with dynamic subjects: wildlife, weather systems, flowing bodies of water, or the transcendent crawl of the sun as Earth rotates on its axis, to name a few.

However, I posit that there is another essential moment in the birth of an image, one that can happen even before your camera is in your hands: the *resonant* moment.

Seeking Opportunity

In April of this year I embarked on an ambitious family trip to Arizona. Although making such a long trip with a toddler, flying with her and all her miniature belongings for the first time, would have been ambitious enough, we were also coordinating with my parents, who were meeting us there. Additionally, we brought my wife’s grandmother, who fell in love with the region when she first visited over forty years ago. The more the merrier, right?

While the Grand Canyon was the focal point of the trip, we were staying a couple hours away in Flagstaff, giving us ample opportunity to explore the surrounding area. If the word *Arizona* in the previous paragraph invoked imagery of saguaro cacti in a hot, sunny desert, here's my opportunity to note that Flagstaff lies at an elevation of 7000 feet. We experienced multiple passing snow storms during our time there, each of which briefly turned the world around us into a frenzied snow globe.

On one of the days where we had a light schedule, the six of us decided to pack up the minivan and investigate Sunset Crater, which wasn't far from where we were staying. As we neared our destination, I found myself suddenly surrounded by an alien landscape of sprawling lava fields filled with jagged volcanic boulders. Ponderosa pines lined the hillsides of dark sand and snow-capped peaks towered in the distance. I pulled the van over to take it all in and before I even stepped out, I knew I would have to return before our trip was over.

A few days later, as my family began to wind down for the day, I sensed the opportunity for a selfish adventure. After sharing a knowing look with my wife, I threw a few essentials into a small backpack and set off for the dark, mysterious landscape that had been lingering on my mind ever since I'd set foot in it.

Embarking with Openness

There was something about the landscape that resonated with me beyond its unique aesthetic, but as I parked the van and donned my layers, I couldn't put my finger on it.

For the first time in days, I had a moment to myself. And for the first time in months, I found myself excited as I prepared my bag and set off with my small point and shoot camera in my hands. Surprisingly, I also felt nervous. Extended periods of time with little creative energy sometimes leave me to second-guess my intuitions. Even though I've largely come to terms with this necessary phase of the creative cycle, I still find it challenging to cope with the nagging feeling of doubt that can slowly build as a result.

So it wasn't a pressure to create that I felt as I set off, nor expectations about any particular results; it was an anxiety that the flame wouldn't ignite now that there was finally a spark. I was scared that I was trying to force a feeling that wasn't there.





Fortunately, there was little time to reconsider. The sun was quickly descending, my fingers were getting numb, and the landscape, now draped in low light and long shadows, beckoned enticingly. I had no idea what images I would create in this unique place, but I chose to accept any possible outcome because spending the evening exploring this unique, harsh, beautiful landscape would in and of itself make for an unforgettable evening.

Paying Attention

I set off down a narrow trail through the lava field. Normally when I hike, my mind wanders, much like a dog trying to follow a hundred different scents: follow one for a few steps, encounter another exciting scent, follow that one for a while, repeat. On this hike, however, my mind was fixated on my surroundings. I observed the coarse, intricate surface of the volcanic rocks (and tread very carefully; a stumble here would not have ended well). I pondered the hardy but sparse flora, resolutely finding its way through cracks and crevices. I tried to envision the geological events that created this volcanic wonderland.

Despite my state of curious wonder, images didn't immediately spring forth in my mind. I made a few early shots, but these were the snapshots that needed to be made to get them out of the way. Some warm-up exercises. As I wandered, looked, craned my neck, backtracked, and wandered some more, my mind began to relax. Anxiety slowly yielded to the joy of discovery.

It likely goes without saying that observation is an essential part of making photographs. One must look before one sees. But even beyond that, there is more than one way to see. You can make a photograph of your subject because it is beautiful, but to invoke Minor White, *what else is it?*¹

Less obvious, but equally important to observation, is learning how to pay attention to the ways in which your mind responds to your surroundings. You might spot a pine cone out of the corner of your eye, but it is easy to ignore it for the mountainous sunset ahead. It has taken a great deal of practice, but I strive to honour those quiet curiosities. This practice sometimes leaves me chasing





my tail, but it's proven to be a fruitful pathway for nurturing emotional connections with my surroundings and remaining present in the moment.

While I was overwhelmed with the beauty and novelty of the volcanic landscape around me, I soon began to notice flickering moments of internal friction. Philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman discusses the notion of *glimpses* as things or events that “appear, but on their way to disappearing” (*Glimpses. Between Appearance and Disappearance*); for me, these almost imperceptible moments of recognition from my periphery are a sign of something worth investigating; a beckoning for a deeper look.²

First: a charred tree, fallen and shattered against the grey Earth. Pinecones nestled in swirling beds of pine needles, lit by warm light against black sand. Gnarled aspen trees, stunted and twisted. Tiny patterns of lichen growing at the base of towering black boulders. Distant trees silhouetted against a mountainous backdrop of fading light.

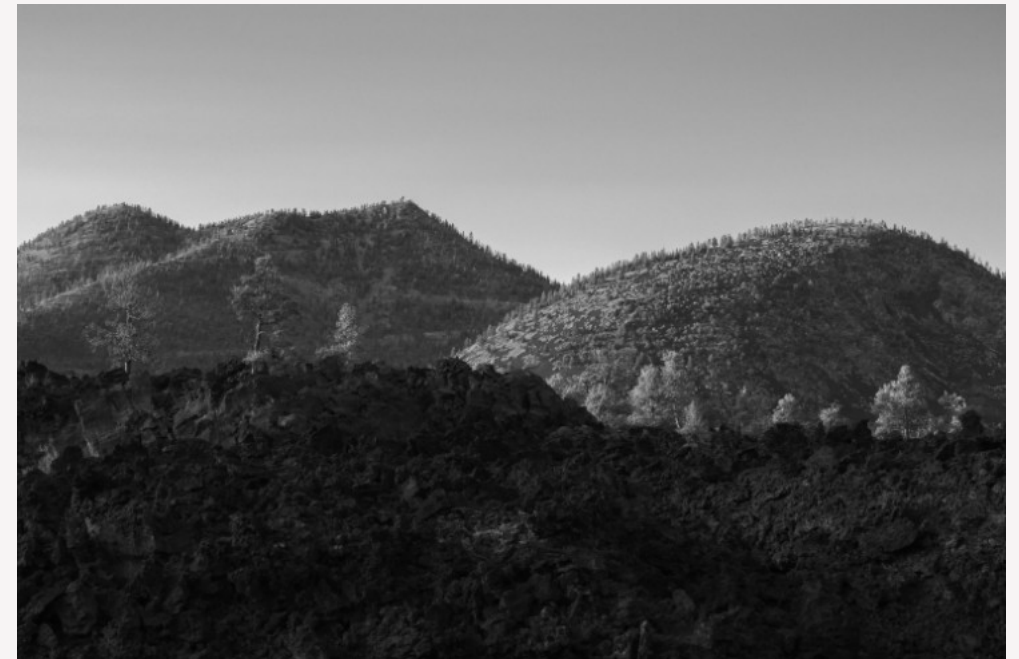
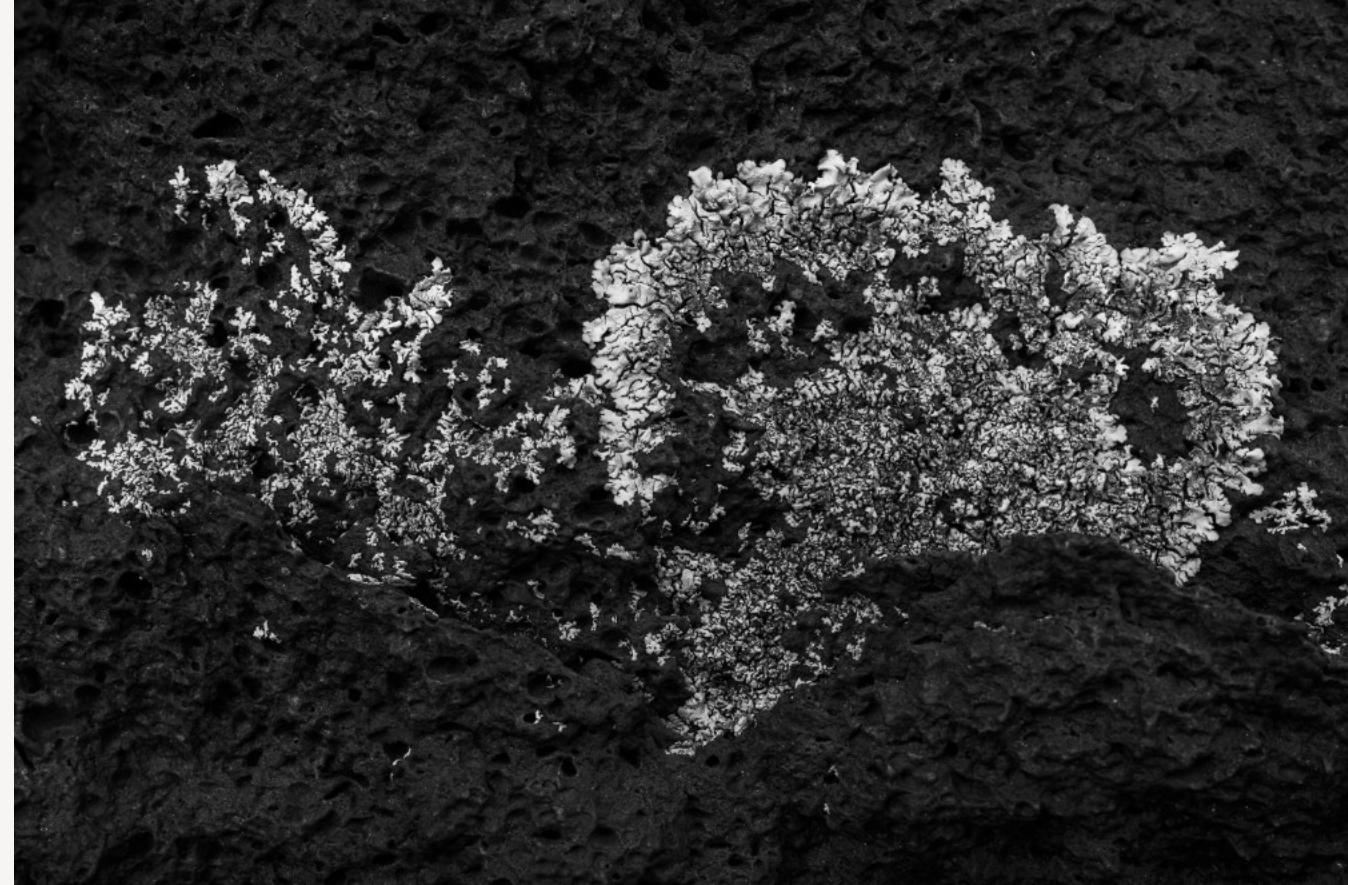
My curiosities led me exactly where I needed to go that evening: on a wild goose chase to nowhere. No quiet call of curiosity was left unanswered. I moved slowly, traveling fewer than two miles in over two hours. I drained both of my camera batteries and stayed until my hands were numb from the cold.

A Connection that Resonates

For me, responding to these curiosities, no matter how seemingly insignificant, is a surefire path to nurturing resonant moments in nature. Much like Bresson's decisive moment, I've found that these moments often have a fleeting nature. The difference is that we can learn to hold on to resonant moments; to let them ring, to build on them as a foundation. When our internal state of mind aligns with the external world around us, an opportunity for a deeper connection is born.

¹ *The Eye That Shapes*, Minor White, p. 34.

² *Glimpses. Between Appearance and Disappearance*, Georges Didi-Huberman, p. 109.

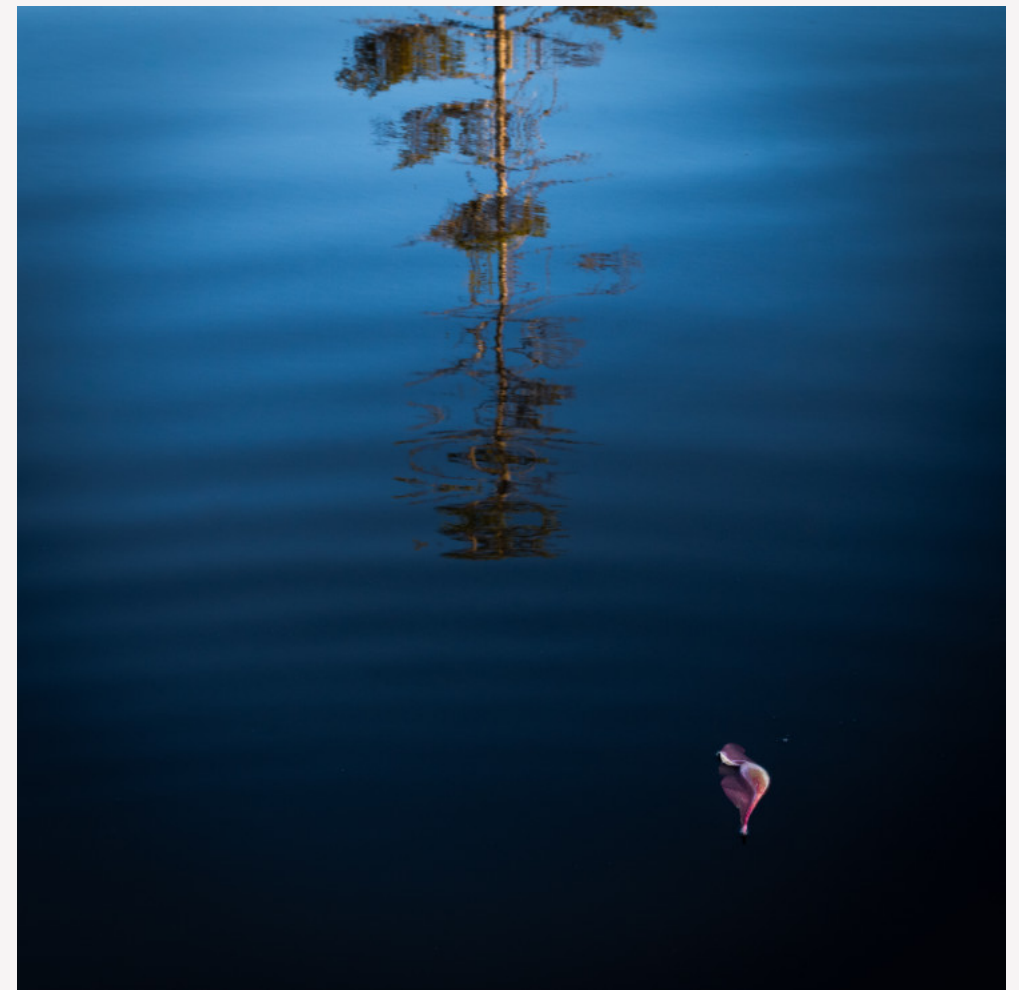




Rumi said, “*There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground*”.¹ And so it goes in this country, where I am bartering my knowledge of chemical principles to kneel and kiss this swamp.

I was drawn to the mountains first, where the breath of fresh oxygen from the white pines and the balsam firs filled my lungs. The beauty of these mountains were a given, almost as if they were born with the right to be pugnaciously magnificent.

But now I try to get close to a *grass pink*, as the downdrafts fill my nose with ozone, and the rainbow rises as if to fill that vacuum in the upper echelons of the atmosphere.



Inquiry in the Wetlands

Saikat Chakraborty

Resonance can be a hefty word, the meaning of which greatly varies in specifics depending on who you ask. It could firstly be defined as a quality of being resonant, meaning a reinforcement of sound (as a musical tone) in a vibrating body. Gen Z might equate the word with vibes.

I am a trained chemist and currently I teach chemistry to undergraduates. It is no surprise that when I hear the word resonance, my mind veers to the following definition: the conceptual alternation of a chemical species (such as a molecule or ion) between two or more equivalent allowed structural representations, differing only in the placement of electrons that aids in understanding the actual state of the species as an amalgamation of its possible structures and the usually higher-than-expected stability of the species.

Please allow me to elaborate and hopefully simplify the above definition.



Chemists study molecules, and while we cannot see an individual molecule (some instruments can), we can pictorially represent them based on our understanding of atoms, subatomic particles, elements in the periodic table, and their tendency to combine with each other to make different compounds.

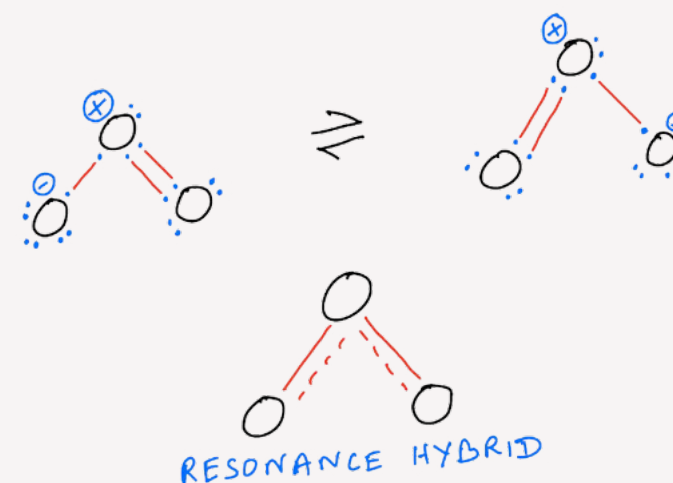
For example, even a non-chemist probably knows that the formula for oxygen gas, a by-product of photosynthesis that makes most of life viable, is O_2 (the symbol for elemental oxygen being O). Molecular oxygen can be represented pictorially using a diagram called a Lewis structure (formulated by the scientist Gilbert Lewis), which depicts a representation of oxygen atoms and their subatomic particles (protons, neutrons, and electrons):²



This diagram illustrates the bonding between atoms (denoted by red lines) and the maximum stable arrangement of electrons (denoted by blue dots) that is possible under the given circumstances. This arrangement is what one would ideally expect if two or more atoms joined hands to create a molecule.

However, for some molecules, it is possible to draw multiple such Lewis structures. What if you did not stop at a handshake, but gave your dear friend a hug as well? So it is with electrons between the atoms in a molecule: they can interact with each other in multiple ways, thus conferring even greater stability to the molecule.

An example of such a molecule is ozone (formula O_3):



Because its atoms have multiple possible stable arrangements of electrons, a resonance exists in ozone, unlike the oxygen molecule which could only be drawn in one fashion. The overall molecular structure of ozone is a hybrid of its two forms. This is evident in many other compounds, especially many complex biomolecules (from seminal work by Linus Pauling).³

Any scientific concept, and certainly resonance, is not just a tool for investigating the world, but invites deeper ramifications. We are made of molecules, which are made of myriad electronic interactions and then we open our eyes and look to the land. What interactions shall we have? What connections shall we make? Should we be content with a handshake? What about that hug? A kiss, maybe?

I find myself in a small body of water, choked with reeds and lily pads, and yet holding so much sky. There is a towering mountain at the far shore.

The camera comes out of the bag. There is an image to be made. It can be about the mountain light or it can be about my connection to this overwhelmed pond.

Under the same glorious sky, the same information can be re-presented in any different light. None better or worse than another, but some bear a greater fidelity to our Self.

What else is here:

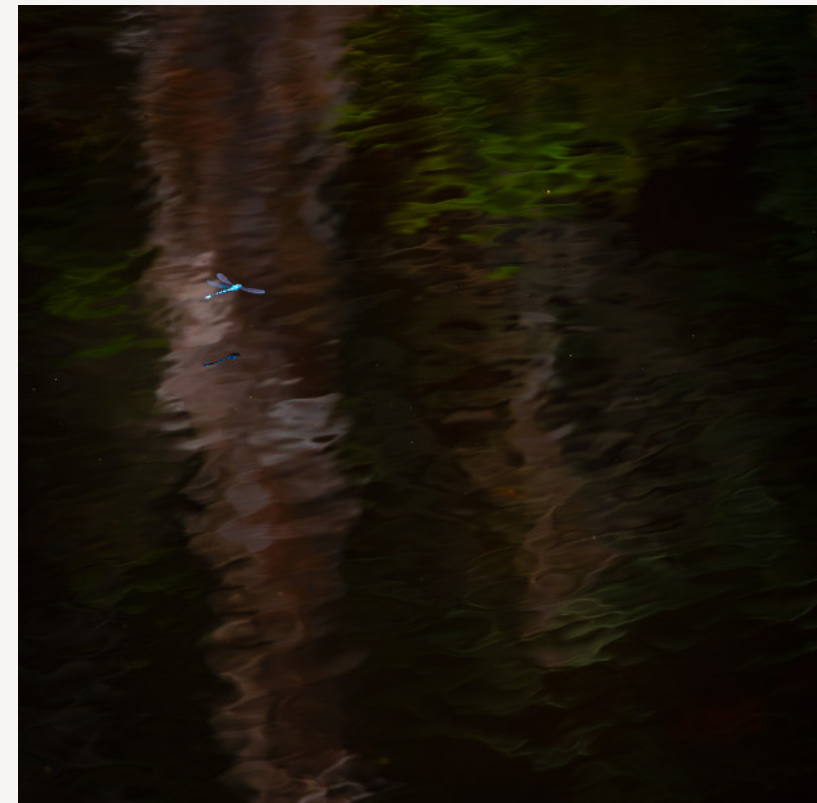
sundews that have colonised the log mat, save a few sedges, the grass pink, and a pitcher plant;

water lilies that shall open once the sun, now touching the dead trees in the distance, fills the entire bog;

deerflies that attack my purlicue every time I take the camera out to make an image;

a dragonfly that tries to save me but is clearly bested by the prolific deerflies this humid season;

damselflies in their pretty blues that glide effortlessly from sedge to sedge across open water.





Despite his many failings, Pauling infused poetry in molecules, making connections electron by electron, atom by atom, until mathematics rhymed.

And so I continue to learn about this insect, that flower, and the plant that eats this insect to make that flower, the stronger my connection becomes to the land. Without any choice, I willingly submit to it across all seasons — witness the sphagnum go from green to red to brown, until all is a blanket of white, long after all the insects and flowers are gone, save a few pitchers.

What is this wetland but a drop of experience.

Resonance (or any scientific concept) can illuminate only the garden, while questions remain, and new ones arise on the vast field beyond the enclosure.

And I believe I would like to tend the garden in my community in all possible manners, rather than trying to visit all of them in distant lands. The place I can know best is where I live, where I breathe the same air in my evening grocery run as in my morning wetland contemplations.

The only land where I can express myself is the land I have submitted to.

Where I have moved beyond a succession of one-night stands — those thrilling encounters consummated in dazzling displays of light and colour — and held hands in times of the unremarkable. All that I could ever realize is indeed a resonating hybrid of remarkable connections between unremarkable entities.

As Rumi wrote in the same poem, *“Today, like every other day, we wake up empty*

and frightened. Don’t open the door to the study

and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument.

*Let the beauty we love be what we do.”*⁴





what is this wetland but a musical instrument
what is this wetland but music
where I immerse myself wholly
knowing the learning will never be complete



¹ *The Essential Rumi*, Coleman Barks.

² *Gilbert Newton Lewis*, Science History Institute.

³ *Linus Pauling and The Nature of the Chemical Bond: A Documentary History*, Special Collections & Archives Research Center.

⁴ *Essential Rumi*, Barks.

“When you regain a sense of your life as a journey of discovery, you return to rhythm with yourself. When you take the time to travel with reverence, a richer life unfolds before you. Moments of beauty begin to braid your days.”

John O'Donohue, Beauty: The Invisible Embrace

Seeing compositions in the landscape can be a challenge — a beautiful, rewarding, and sometimes frustrating challenge — made easier once the photographic eye is ‘in’ and we are attuned to the spirit of the place that we find ourselves exploring. Time is our greatest ally as we attempt to find resonance with a place. In the modern world, we are so often distracted from our true, spiritual nature by constant stimulation from devices and their notifications, as well as electronic signals, and countless other stimuli. Our attention is our most valuable resource in the 21st Century. How often do you find yourself giving yours away cheaply? We collectively long for deeper connections with our loved ones, ourselves, and the natural world, but how often are our minds elsewhere and not ‘here’ in the moment that has called to us?

Recent technological advancements in the ever-growing digital landscape have, no doubt, contributed to higher levels of stress and anxiety. In my experience, high stress is not conducive to creativity and can inhibit a person’s ability to focus. Therefore, I can’t help but wonder how our societal ‘progression’ impacts our ability to think creatively and, in the case of the photographer, to see meaningful photographs emerge from the landscape. It is difficult to enter the creative state when one’s energy is disturbed. Rushing around without focus has become the norm. How can photographs possibly find us when we are focused on future tasks, or, of course, dwelling on past experiences? It takes deep presence to create meaningful photographs.

Finding Resonance

There is a particular resonance that one feels from certain landscapes. These wild, untamed places invoke and awaken the soul, bringing forth that which is inexplicable from within the human vessel. When we take tentative steps into these sacred landscapes, we are entering a cathedral. We silently encounter the divine in the mirror of the outer world.

I have long believed that every place has its own spirit. If we are open, this spirit becomes a part of us. If we silence our minds for long enough, we feel the spirit’s whispers gently caressing our bones. It is this alluring feeling in the woodland sanctuary within that one must learn to interpret, and subsequently react to, if one

The Spirit of Place

Brad Carr

is to make personally meaningful, expressive photographs that resonate deeply with another soul, awakening the kind of emotional response that every artist dreams of. This belief forms part of my personal philosophy as an artist — that we are the very landscape through which we walk. I am, therefore, not photographing trees or lakes, but parts of myself mirrored in the external world.

Whilst tutoring on group workshops and one-to-ones, I like to encourage attendees to hold this idea at the forefront of their minds. When we cross the threshold of the landscape with reverence and enter the creative state of mind, the spirit of Mother Nature calls for us to become attuned to her. She tempts us to return home. Refusing to surrender to our egos and rather coming home to the soul, we attune our energetic body to the frequency of Nature and the spirit of a place. This trust ensures that our photographs are in service of something greater, beyond Her lustful beauty.

When Deep Presence Reveals Pictures

As I embark upon a conversation with another photographer during tuition sessions, I am often aware that the landscape surrounding their vessel starts to mould itself into photographs. Conversation can be a portal to a place of deep presence, allowing the observer to enter their state of observation. It is in this place of presence — a mystical and often foreign place to the modern human — that I become the witness to the unfolding of beauty and begin to sense opportunities for it to be recorded with the camera.

It takes patience to find this place of deep presence, and it takes patience to create meaningful photographs. In photography, as with my previous life as an aspiring bodybuilder, I have learned firsthand that hard work and consistency yield extraordinary results. The most difficult work in the world of landscape photography is not mastering the technical features of the camera, much to the frustration of many who begin their journey to create. Rather, it begins when one sets out into the landscape with inspiration from Mother Nature and curiosity in pursuit of a creative vision that restores one's sense of self-sovereignty.

A Defining Personal Creative Chapter

When I think about one of my most prolific chapters as a photographer, I am transported back to 2021. It was a year in which I was immersed in the natural world, having left full-time employment and begun placing bricks in the wall of self-employment. My only real focus throughout this year was on producing a meaningful portfolio of photographs. In hindsight, I might have focused some more of my energy on creating revenue streams for the long-term, but my newfound sense of freedom and





insatiable hunger to express repressed parts of myself led me to roam the landscape with single-minded vigour. Having saved a small amount of money to see me through as I built a new life for myself, I created and expressed without too much care or worry for the future.

During this year, I unearthed a deep love of and reverence for wise, ancient oaks and silver birch trees along the way. It was during this period of my life that I believe I was most attuned to Nature and that my resonance with the landscape was at its strongest. This resonance is what resulted in some of my most meaningful photographs to date. Perhaps it was also that I had found my soul's true calling by entering the Welsh woodland and communing with trees that have, ever since, held me safely in their warm embrace.

Finding Resonance through Ancient Language

Trees have been a source of inspiration and hope for human beings for as long as history has been recorded. All ancient scriptures, as well as inspirational modern stories, talk of our great reverence for these wise and sentient beings. In the Bible's Genesis, Adam and Eve ate the apple from the Tree of Knowledge. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* tells the story of Ents fighting back against the forces that are harvesting the Earth's energy for dark purposes. The Druids held trees, particularly the oaks, in high regard, considering them to be gateways between worlds and telling their stories as symbols of life, death, and rebirth.

It seems as though people have been finding resonance with the ancient language of trees for eternity. This is no surprise, given that the average lifespan of an oak tree, for example, is between 200-300 years. One yew tree in North Wales has been gathering wisdom through its roots and leaves for an estimated 4,000-5,000 years, making it a possible convening point for the Ancient Druids themselves. A single ancient yew tree could hold the stories of 160 generations of human beings. Can you imagine how much wisdom is stored by trees collectively?

Trees are the great wisdom keepers of our world, whispering messages for those who are quiet enough to hear them. When I enter a woodland, it is as though I have crossed an invisible boundary into a sacred world. A sense of safety washes over me. It feels like I have been relieved of all the baggage that has been weighing down on my shoulders. Whenever I am around trees, I return home to my senses and become fluent in the unspoken language of feelings and intuition. Within the womb of the misty woodland, I have found the place that resonates with my soul — a spiritual place that has allowed me to heal old wounds and unearth a deep sense of purpose. After many years of searching, I have found where it is that I belong. The woodland is a sanctuary for anyone seeking respite and healing.

“What you encounter, recognise or discover depends to a large degree on the quality of your approach. Many of the ancient cultures practiced careful rituals of approach. An encounter of depth and spirit was preceded by careful preparation.

When we approach with reverence, great things decide to approach us. Our real life comes to the surface and its light awakens the concealed beauty in things. When we walk on the earth with reverence, beauty will decide to trust us. The rushed heart and arrogant mind lack the gentleness and patience to enter that embrace.”

John O'Donohue, Beauty: The Invisible Embrace

Respect Yields Immeasurable Rewards

Our approach to a landscape is of the utmost importance if we wish to strike a resonance with spirit and create meaningful work. When we walk with reverence and respect shown towards Mother Nature, she often rewards our innocence with moments of the purest beauty. Our job is simply to remain curious and open to new experiences; to ‘know’ too much is to limit oneself and to ensure that the window of creative opportunity remains bolted closed.





Photographs aside, the real reward of our connection with the spirit of Nature is in what we become through the process. Every experience alters us, and every place becomes a part of us. Like a giant jigsaw puzzle, we get to add and remove parts of ourselves as we please — just like the trees, we are constantly undergoing our own cycle of life, death, and rebirth. As we find resonance with the spirit of place and our energy attunes to the frequency of the natural world, profound shifts begin to occur within our Being.

I have noticed an incredible transformation within my own body and mind since I took my first enthusiastic steps into the world of Nature in 2018. My world then was shaped by episodes of domestic abuse and violence. I was surrounded by chaos and destruction for the first eleven years of my life. Throughout my teenage years and early adulthood, I was lost in the world, drifting aimlessly with no direction or hope for the future. I drank alcohol, partied as I searched for my place to belong, and buried much of my inherited stresses and anxieties beneath layers of a false self. That, sadly, is a cycle that many young men fall into when they are guided by the kind of father figures I had.


Thankfully, I took a spoonful of bittersweet medicine at the age of twenty-six and tasted my first romantic heartbreak. Following a short period of depression, I awoke from my slumber and wandered outdoors, finding the sanctuary that I had long been searching for: a home. Through a long healing process, whilst cradled in the arms of the trees, I became one of them. My now-life partner refers to me as her tree, informing me that I am the embodiment of their energy: strong, grounded, stable, and rooted. I became everything my three father figures were not.

With that in mind, I am reminded of the words a friend shared with me recently whilst we were hiking to the summit of Cnicht. After telling him about some of my struggles with creative motivation following the end of my first creative chapter, he uttered, ‘Maybe you’re the art now.’ Those few simple words, delivered in a moment of need, were a timely reminder of the power of spending time in the landscape, immersed in the creative process, on our quest to find presence and experience this existence fully.

I have learned firsthand through my journey that the spirit of place is the greatest catalyst for inner and outer transformation. When we cross the threshold into the world of Nature, we reconnect with our true spiritual nature in an act of sacred remembrance. Every step along these ancient pathways, therefore, is an invitation to awaken to the beauty of this wondrous existence, find presence, and strike a resonance with Nature.







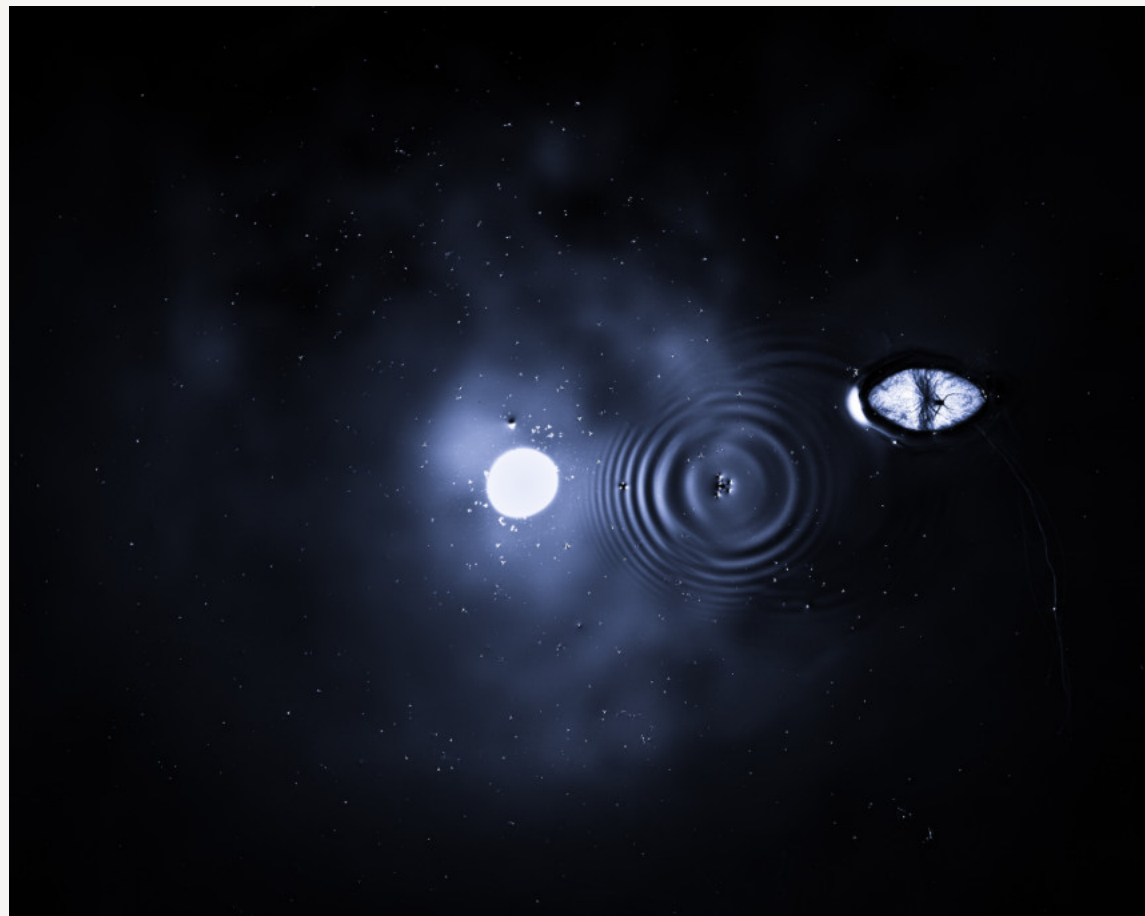
Finding resonances through collaboration was always an idea that excited Nick and Murray. There's an inexplicable alchemy that occurs when you mix the work of multiple artists together in a single collection — the result is a beautiful melange that can't be replicated.

The following gallery is just that: a curated selection of photographs that seek to engage in conversation with one another. Image pairs invite questions and sequencing suggests a narrative; ultimately, it is up to the viewer to draw conclusions.

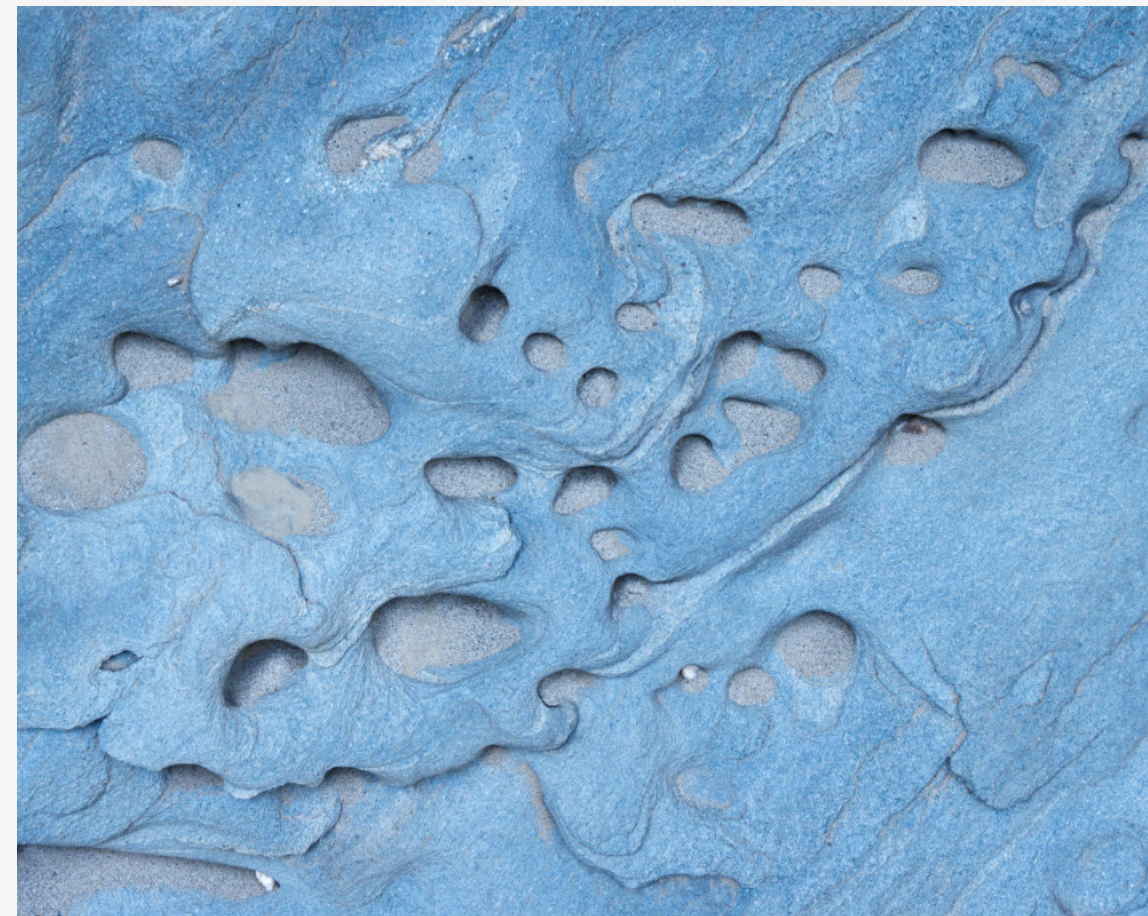
Resonances

Collaborative Gallery

Brad Carr



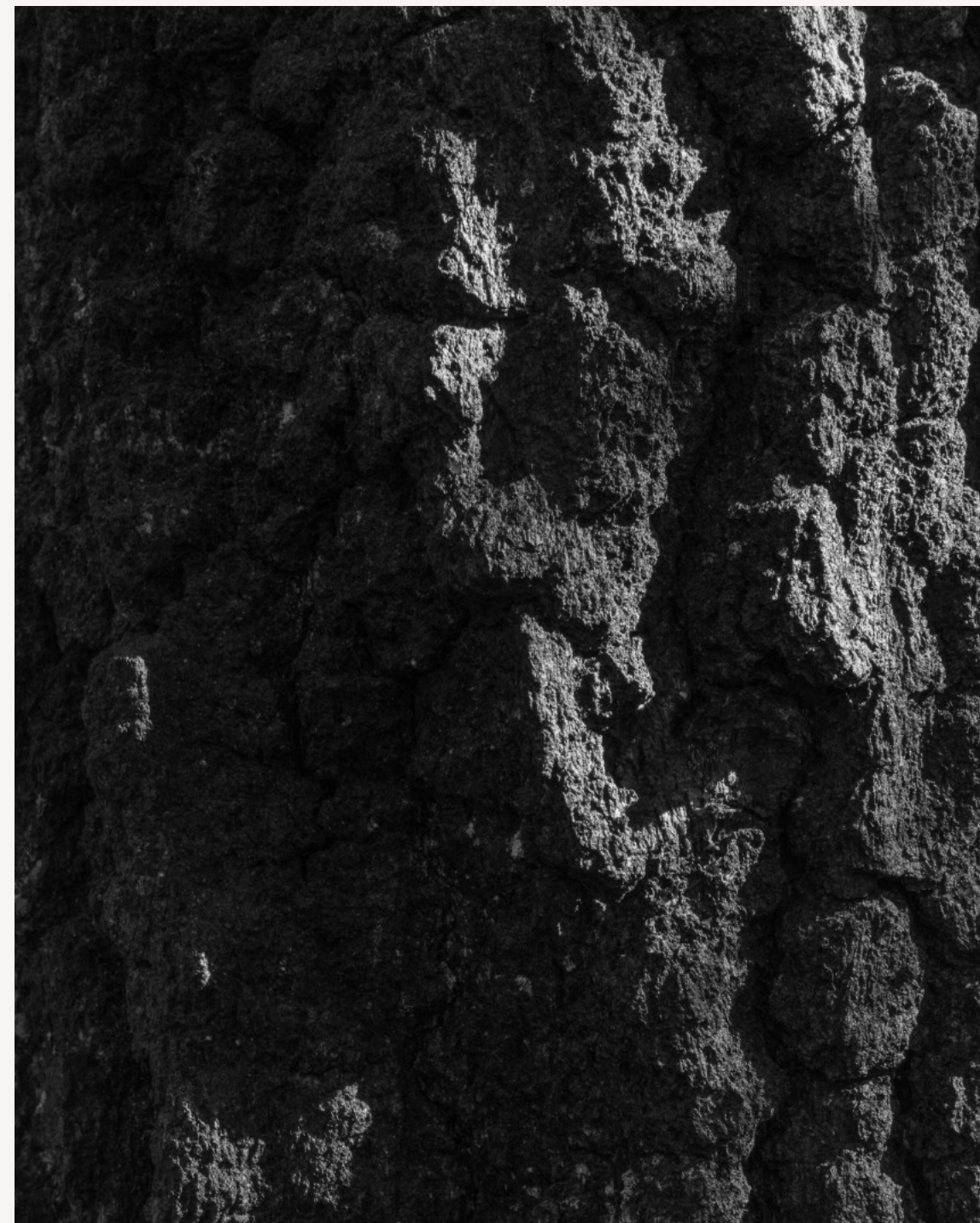
Saikat Chakraborty



Murray Livingston



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Murray Livingston



Saikat Chakraborty



Brad Carr



Nick Becker



Brad Carr



On Zen and Fleeting Light

Murray Livingston

かぎり有命のひまや秋のくれ

kagiri aru inochi no himaya aki no kure

An Autumn Eve —

An hour of leisure

In a fleeting life

Yosa Buson (1783)

This is Buson's "death haiku", the final lines written by the master poet before his passing. They are, however, anything but final. Rather they speak to a life spent appreciating brief moments of beauty and pondering the tranquility found in the fleeting nature of life. He found immortal peace in a walk on a fall evening. Autumn here specifically reminds us that life is finite — just as nature's vibrancy fades into winter — but this moment, is forever. It is forever in its total uniqueness: bound to the present moment as a singular event, yet everlasting as it will never happen in exactly the same way again.

Daisetz T. Suzuki writes of haikus in his book *Zen and Japanese Culture*: "Every art has its mystery, its spiritual rhythm, its *myō* (miao), as the Japanese would call it... The true artist, like a Zen master, is one who knows how to appreciate the *myō* of things".¹ *Myō* is also sometimes referred to as *yūgen* (yu-hsüan), or an unfathomable and mysterious quality. Art that penetrates into the truth of things, concerns the mystery and meaning of life and provides us with a "glimpse of things eternal in the world of constant changes", gives us a flash of reality through the sense that the artist has embodied some kind of universal creative energy.² This intuitiveness, known as *satori*, is essential to Zen and, more broadly, the Japanese way of life. Buson's haiku expresses these concepts at its essence: *myō*, *yūgen*, and *satori*; spiritual rhythm, mystery, and intuitiveness.

Photography as an Inquiry of Life

Poets capture the *myō* of life in words; musicians make sound to capture silence and time; architects design to envelop empty space; what do photographers seek? What happens when we consider photography as a philosophical discipline in the same way as other art forms? Photography becomes an inquiry of life itself. It seeks to answer questions around the mystery of life: what does it mean to be human, to live or die, to remember, to dream, or to be totally present in your current surroundings. It is active relationship-building with the world around us, a deep reflection on the inner soul, and a way to live a life of intuition, creativity, and playfulness. These might even be considered as the key Zen practices of photography. The act of composition is exploring the world, yourself, and learning through success and failure. It is reflective, reflexive, and absorptive, just as the very light we photograph. And as much as photography explores light, it too delves into the allure of the shadow: a shadowy former self, the hidden or unseen, or the glimpse of something out the corner of our eye.

It is said that photography is a form of meditation (an idea I wholeheartedly agree with). It can take us to places within ourselves we dare not venture — often it leads us to venture to places where thought or conceptualisation can't take us — and, at times, to question our very being. There is beauty in these shadows and the unknown.



Fragile Light & The Importance of Shadows

Shadows can hold tranquility, silence, or reprieve, as from the beating summer sun. Junichiro Tanizaki explains in his essay *In Praise of Shadows* that Japanese culture “tend[s] to seek out satisfactions in whatever surroundings we happen to find ourselves, to content ourselves with things as they are; and so darkness causes us no discontent, we resign ourselves to it as inevitable. If light is scarce, then light is scarce; we will immerse ourselves in the darkness and there discover its own particular beauty”.³ Where Western culture seeks light, the Japanese find resonance in their given surroundings, even in the beautiful mystery of the shadows. Allowing yourself to be open to this mystery can illuminate a world of creative photography.

After all, shadows are what give our photographs contrast. Photos of pure brilliance and light become explicit in their rendering, allowing nothing of the imagination to creep in. What would life be but mundane and homogenous without deep shadows? A recent hike through a deep remote canyon in Namibia reminded me of this in a visceral way.

To the south lies the Namib Sand Sea, a formidable endless orange ocean of nothingness; the north is no less striking, with its impenetrable black ravines of the Naukluft mountains. The reflective quality of the dunes bounces light endlessly, where the canyons seem to absorb all daylight, muting tonalities and colours. It is a land of contrasts and seeming dichotomies, of simultaneous movement and stillness. The brightness of day is just as pure as the darkness of night. And when one inhabits it, the body and mind must respond: move in the coolness of morning, rest in the heat of the day. The harshness of the surrounding environment is softened by the organic forms of the weaving riverbeds in the canyon. Water rarely floods the canyons, but when it does, it is a reminder of both the elegance and might of nature, evidenced by the massive erosion of bedrock and continually shifting sands. The relentless heat makes all the more clear the importance of shade. To pause at midday in the blue shadow of a broad Ana tree is to know the meaning of relief. It is impossible to allow the mind to drift here; one feels that life itself is at stake.





Light in the desert can be just as fragile as life. When we look beyond the harshness of the midday sun to see light filtering through the leaves of a tree, it is transformed in an instant. The leaves dance in the breeze, constantly shifting the light's focal point as it mixes with the tree's shadow. Blues spill into the shadows from the cloudless sky above, contrasting the warmth of sunshine. The sun moves fast here and one must keep moving through the canyon too, leaving the tree's dappled shadow behind. The moment is unique, once, never the same, and gone forever — mimicking further Japanese philosophy of *Ichigo Ichi E*, or 'one time, one meeting'. The fleeting quality of light as one snakes through the bends of the deep canyons enhances the uniqueness of every moment.

There is a certain beauty and peace to living in this immediacy. As Tanizaki writes, "In this small corner of the atmosphere there reigns complete and utter silence; that here in the darkness immutable tranquility holds sway".⁴ Mundane moments are elevated to brilliance — a cool dip in water left behind from the previous month's rain, a gentle breeze rustling the leaves of a Wild Fig, or simply noticing the tracks of a mother leopard with her cub (hopefully walking in the other direction). All of these become photographic opportunities to celebrate moments that feel so far removed from modern life, yet resonate deeply with the human experience. Surrendering to the experience of this place and learning how to exist in the here and now allowed me to "discover its own particular beauty", as Tanizaki puts it.⁵





Conclusion

Tanizaki expounds further on the Japanese sentiment towards aesthetics by saying that “the quality that we call beauty... must always grow from the realities of life”.⁶ So, how do we make images that are in harmony with their inception? We find resonance with our subject matter and attune to their natural frequencies. Standing in the cooling water of the canyon, every movement one makes sends out energy as ripples across the surface of the water. While we can stay still for a time, eventually we must move, creating vibrations. The way in which we move will determine the amplitude of those ripples, be it large splashes or gentle laminar flows. We must be aware of our impact on our surroundings.

As the seasons change and the quality of light shifts with the changing angles of sunrise and sunset, aligning with the light — making photographs that are the best version of themselves given the current conditions — is what one might call attuning to nature’s spiritual rhythm, or *myō*. This is how photographers can create art that speaks of life itself. Our environments are constantly changing around us. Winds pick up and slow down, leaves turn from translucent spring green to vibrant autumnal oranges, and so we must therefore continually shift our response to the present moment. This deep form of noticing is resonance. Finding resonance reminds us that there is true beauty in the reality of our surroundings when we pay close enough attention. Still the mind in order to listen to the wild, find peace within fleeting moments of light, and reveal the subtleties of shadows.

¹ *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Daisetz T. Suzuki, p. 219-221.

² *Ibid.*

³ *In Praise of Shadows*, Junichiro Tanizaki, p. 48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶ *Ibid.*

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