

# INVOCATIONS

v



## CHURCH



*Late in September, I decided to take a break from writing. Instead of walking out into the high desert as I do each morning, I would treat myself to a drive in the pickup truck, stop, and then walk into new territory. It was a beautiful day and for weeks, I'd been looking through binoculars at a distant ridge of rim-rock and wondering if I could find it.*

What would be living among its cracks and crevices? Earlier, in the rocks of a nearby rim, I had watched a Black Great Basin Fence Lizard and found a small, elegantly curved eagle feather. And, in any of these rims, there is always the chance of finding opal.

In the last several months, only one person had come across my camp, but before leaving I found myself locking up. Then, joking with myself, I thought, *Perhaps you should also leave a note on the door, "Gone to church." After all, it is Sunday morning, and surely thieves don't rob people while they're in church.*

I didn't do it, but the thought led me to wonder if people ever used to make the trek to church from out here. *Doubtful*, I thought. While today's paved and graded roads have cut travel time to less than three hours, in the past, when horseback was the way to town, it took days. People probably had church out here.

In turn, this led me to wonder what a high-desert church would have been. *A little building in the middle of nowhere? If so, I'd never seen one. Maybe a place of some sort? A feeling? Who knows?*

I forgot church as I gingerly started east at two or three miles an hour in four-wheel low, hoping not to damage the new six-ply tires or bottom-out the truck's oil pan on the two-track's sharp rocky sections.

An hour or so later, having finally left the dirt track and driven through open sage and dry cheat grass toward my destination, I came to an unexpected gentle swale, a small waterhole of sorts that was completely dry and devoid of vegetation. Parking and walking up onto



higher ground revealed no nearby landmarks and no distant rim-rock. All that could be seen were the small volcanic rocks and occasional grasses underfoot, knee-high bluish-gray sagebrush in every direction, and lots of sky with summer clouds floating off to distant horizons. Even after walking for a few miles, there was no sign of the destination rim.

I had suspected this might happen due to the difficulty of estimating distances—especially with binoculars. When trying to judge a distance solely with reference to the volcanic rim rocks, which display similar fracture patterns at all their different scales, miles and miles are likely to be lost or gained in the process. In this case, I concluded that the rim in question must be a lot bigger than I thought and another ten or twenty miles away—too far to walk today.

My purposeful walk turned into meandering, guided now by curiosity about what might be seen from nearby ridges, the slight undulating corrugations in this old inland seabed, now five thousand feet above the ocean. Walking half a mile to a new ridge might include a rise of just a few feet, but that could be enough to reveal a new vista of twenty or maybe even fifty miles, or just another half-mile distant ridge.

In going from ridge to ridge, distant views did appear. One revealed the tops of raw mountains well over a hundred miles south in Nevada—quite different from the closer Oregon escarpments to the east and west. Another view revealed Iron Mountain, a perfect flat blue triangle, far to the north. While walking, I also thought more about church, though the question shifted a bit. *Does it matter where people go? Is the place important? Isn't church wherever you get closer to God?*

When I was ready to return to camp, I realized that even though I'd made mental notes of distant landmarks from above the truck's parking spot, I'd been walking according to whim for so long, and the waterhole-swale was so small—maybe thirty acres—that it could be difficult to find, sunk as it was beneath the visible landscape. There was a sudden moment of alarm, then a forced surrender to the bigness of the space. I reassured myself, *No worry, I have what I need: water, snakebite kit, elastic bandage, a jacket, and lots more daylight for walking.* Uneasiness shifted to something more like the awe that comes with a moonless, star-filled desert night,

though now, in the bright afternoon, the expanded space was not only overhead like at night, but also extending out in all directions across the almost featureless land. I had to find my small way in all this distance.

While looking for the truck, I continued thinking about why people go to church—something I don't do. Then I wondered why I keep coming to the high desert. *Why does it attract me so? With its uninterrupted landscape and distance extending in every direction, isn't this a place where the grip of the world is somehow weaker, or its boundaries thinner? Maybe the world is more permeable here? Or maybe it's just that I can see deeper? One thing is sure: beauty takes over here. And, with so much beauty and such an intimate vastness on all sides, how far away can God be? Why isn't this church?*

In time, and without difficulty, I found the truck and then, when circling back through another basin about two miles from camp, I made a mistake. Looking for the road that led home, I got on an old track that looked like it was headed in the right direction. I followed it and by the time I realized it wasn't what I'd thought, I was in exploring mode again.

After about half a mile, having driven up onto another sage-covered plateau, a flat oval clearing of about sixty feet appeared in the sage close to the plateau rim. I might have driven right by, but for some reason I stopped. I got out of the truck, walked to the edge, looked out over the clearing, and was stunned—immobilized by sudden chills and a burning sensation in my chest.

*What is this place? What's happening here? How could this be, how could anything be this beautiful?* I wanted to kneel down! Tears blurred my eyes and I was breathing in gasps—or maybe it was sobs.

Here in the clearing there were no plants of any kind. It was as if the force of creation had risen up from deep within the earth and, rather than giving rise to a vegetative nature, had moved and arranged the materials of the earth itself—clay, silt, pebbles and stones—and had left behind primordial forms and patterns, marks of the organizing intelligence that dwells deep within life.

A few sizable lichen-covered rocks were placed with such deliberately random precision that it seemed the innocent archetype for the great temple gardens



of Kyoto.

When I finally moved, it was with extreme care, no heels touching ground, watching the placement of each boot and grateful the tread was worn off. *The ground here shouldn't even be touched*, I thought.

I only stayed a few minutes, circling the clearing once in a kind of daze, with weak legs, a butterfly stomach and agitated hands. I stayed at the edge of the sage, never going into the center. It was too much.

Bewildered, I didn't question how it could be too much. I didn't ask, as I asked later, *Can there be too much beauty? Too much for whom?* It wasn't too much for the one who wanted to kneel down, to remove his boots, whose heart was overflowing and whose eyes were filled with tears.

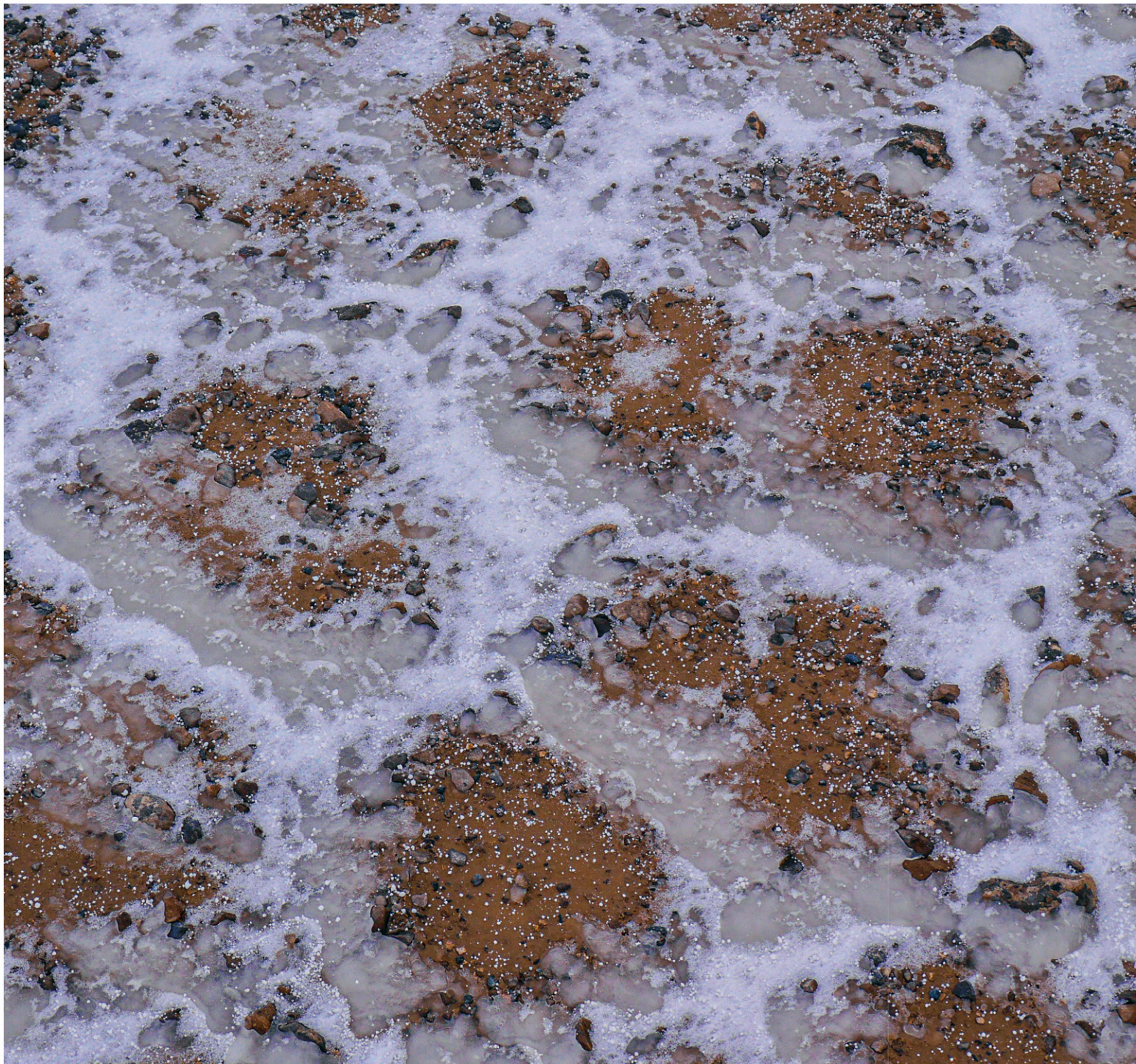
But it was too much for the clever one, the weasel, fighting for control: *On your knees?* it asked. *Embarrassing! Stupid. Don't be a fool. And don't take off your boots either!*

Then it switched tack: *You're not safe here. Go! Give in to this, and it will destroy you. You'll be lost. You'll never go home, never go back to your world. You should be afraid! You don't belong here.*

And yet another feint: *Don't be silly; this is nothing, nothing at all. It's four o'clock and you haven't eaten lunch. You're hungry. Find your road. Go back and eat. This isn't why you're out here. Leave!*

Confused, even a bit frightened by the intense barrage, I did go.

However, by the time I got back to camp, I knew the beauty of this spot is not too much. Beauty is never too much. That voice was wrong—and deliberately so.



After that first visit, I returned to the clearing several times, joyful, as if on assignment. And after each visit, I came home in love, with a quiet, even absent mind, my heart overflowing with a deep longing, a longing way bigger and way sweeter than the huge high-desert space or the nighttime sky, way more wonderful than anything I could ever imagine; a longing so beautiful and so big that my mind can't, or won't, remember it properly as it fades. Only my heart can remember. And it keeps recalling—*or is it being called? Do I dare to hope it's being called?*

Now, back in the Midwest, no longer alone, I'm still trying to destroy the whining voice, not listen and not obey. *Even though you sound exactly like me, I'm on to you! Though I may be slow, I see you for what you are; I know you, and you are ugly and you are ignorant. When will I leave you behind? How long will this take? When will I finally learn to live correctly?*

*Maybe, if I could see beauty everywhere, always—be absorbed by beauty, indifferent to the ugly—I'd be done. Maybe I can. Maybe . . . with help . . . surely I can.*

*So, I ask You. Please help me. Please. Help me. Keep sending me, again and again send me to beauty. Push me, break me, or do something else . . . do whatever it takes . . . anything. But please, please, please don't let go. Please don't abandon this little one.*





## BETWEEN



*Everything was fine—better than fine; life was glorious. Then came a shock seemingly from nowhere. At first, a kind of empty grayness, and then intense heartache. The pain quickly spread from the center of my chest through my entire being. Agonizingly, this strange pain engulfed the world around me. It even seemed to extend into the past and future. I wanted to cry but didn't—couldn't. I wondered if it was depression, and decided not; I could still hope. Could it be because I had to return to the city?*



As it became stronger, it felt as if I were being torn apart. “To tear” seems the right verb, with its sudden and harsh connotation. Tearing delivers a sort of hot, ragged pain and this was that kind, like the pain of unexpected deep sadness or an immense grief. “Apart” implies that something has once been whole, or two have been in close association. *What is being pulled apart from what? What is tearing?* I asked. Quickly an answer came, but I’m not sure from where. Could I trust it? *I am being torn from You. You have retreated, you’re leaving me. Why have You gone?*

*I have gratefully left much of my life behind to come out here into the remote solitude of the high desert to be alone with You. As in the past, I am hoping to find You here, and You have given me encouragement. Beauty, Your Beauty, embedded in this thin high desert world has been the hook. By now, You have given me enough of Yourself that my habits and desires are changing. My vision is focused on You. Like a vibrating compass needle settling on true North, You have pulled me to You and I know I want You—more and always. Even in my weakness, I know I want You. Especially in this tearing apart, I know. Surely, You must know too, that I can’t live properly without You. What have I done?*

*I’m willing—I’m trying—to leave my world behind, but I’m not sure how much I am able. I don’t want to leave Your world—just my world, the constricted one fabricated by my grasping and ignorance. It might be easy to go back, and with sufficient distraction I might, but not whole-heartedly and not without loss. I know I mustn’t. Only the ugly old habits want me back, living as I’ve done in the past. Who I really am, or at least who I want to be, can’t and mustn’t be happy there—at least not without You. Though with You, I know I could be happy anywhere—nothing would matter.*

*I believe that You and Your beauty are everywhere, but I don’t fully live that, so I come out here to learn. So far, You have shown me Yourself in the huge empty silence, in the wild horses, in the rosy everlasting among the rocks, in the undulating flight of the sage thrasher and in the first morning light, emerging as if from the multitude of stars. Actually, when I consider thoughtfully, the list is a long and beautiful one—and, I admit, You have been showing Yourself, all along, always and everywhere.*

*The fault must be with me. I don’t see properly. My eyes are not fresh. I don’t feel. My heart is not clean. No doubt, You haven’t retreated at all, it’s just me. My weakness. I’ve*



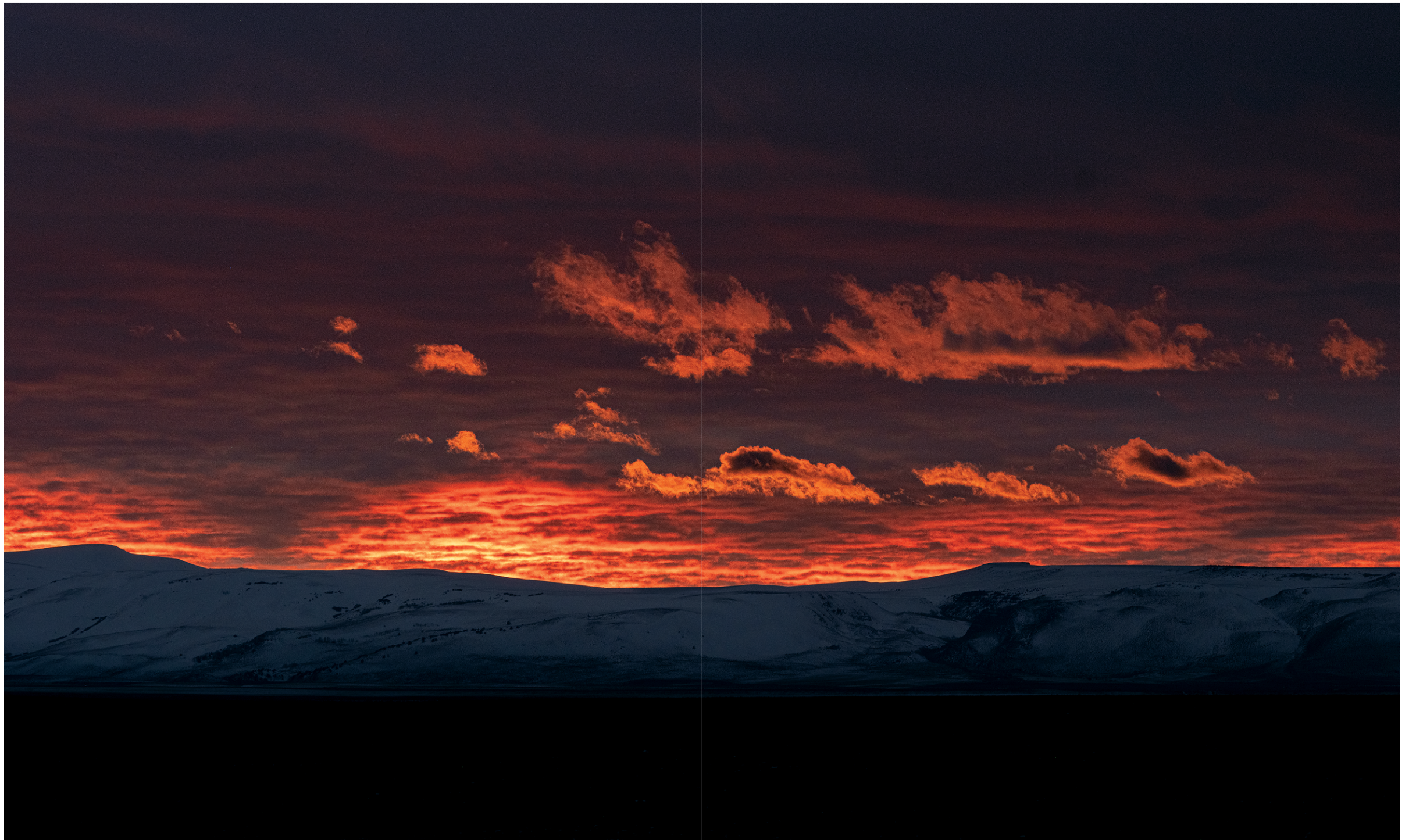


*lost You. But even if that's so, how can I become strong enough to hold You unless You pull me closer—so close that I am lost in You and can't escape? You can do this. I know you can. Please do it. Please. Especially now that I have to leave this place, don't let me go where I won't find You. Unless You pull me to You, I can't leave my worthless life behind. But if You do pull me to You, won't this tiny life become an immeasurable wave of joy in Your creation?*

Not long ago, in the ashram of Ammachi, an Indian mahatma known for Her extraordinary compassion, there was a goat who became the friend of all the ashramites and who was particularly devoted to Her. When, after many years, the ashramites realized its life was failing, they called Her. She came and sat down on the ground not far from the dying goat. The goat, seeing Her, stirred, but unable to rise, began moving toward Her on its knees. After some time of heart-rending and agonizing struggle, the goat finally reached Her, laid its head in Her lap, and expired.

What the goat found is all that I ask.







## FISHING IN THE DESERT

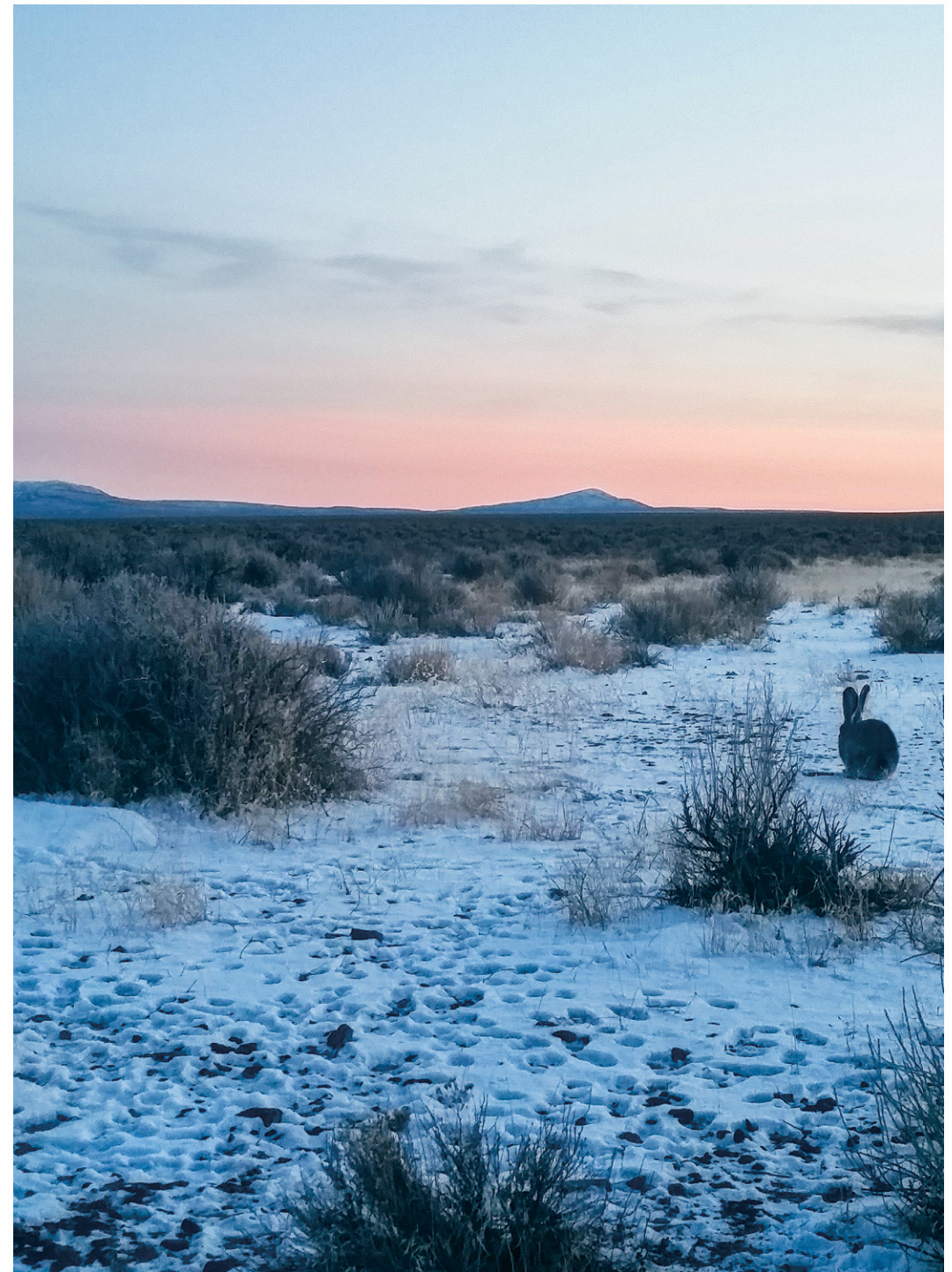


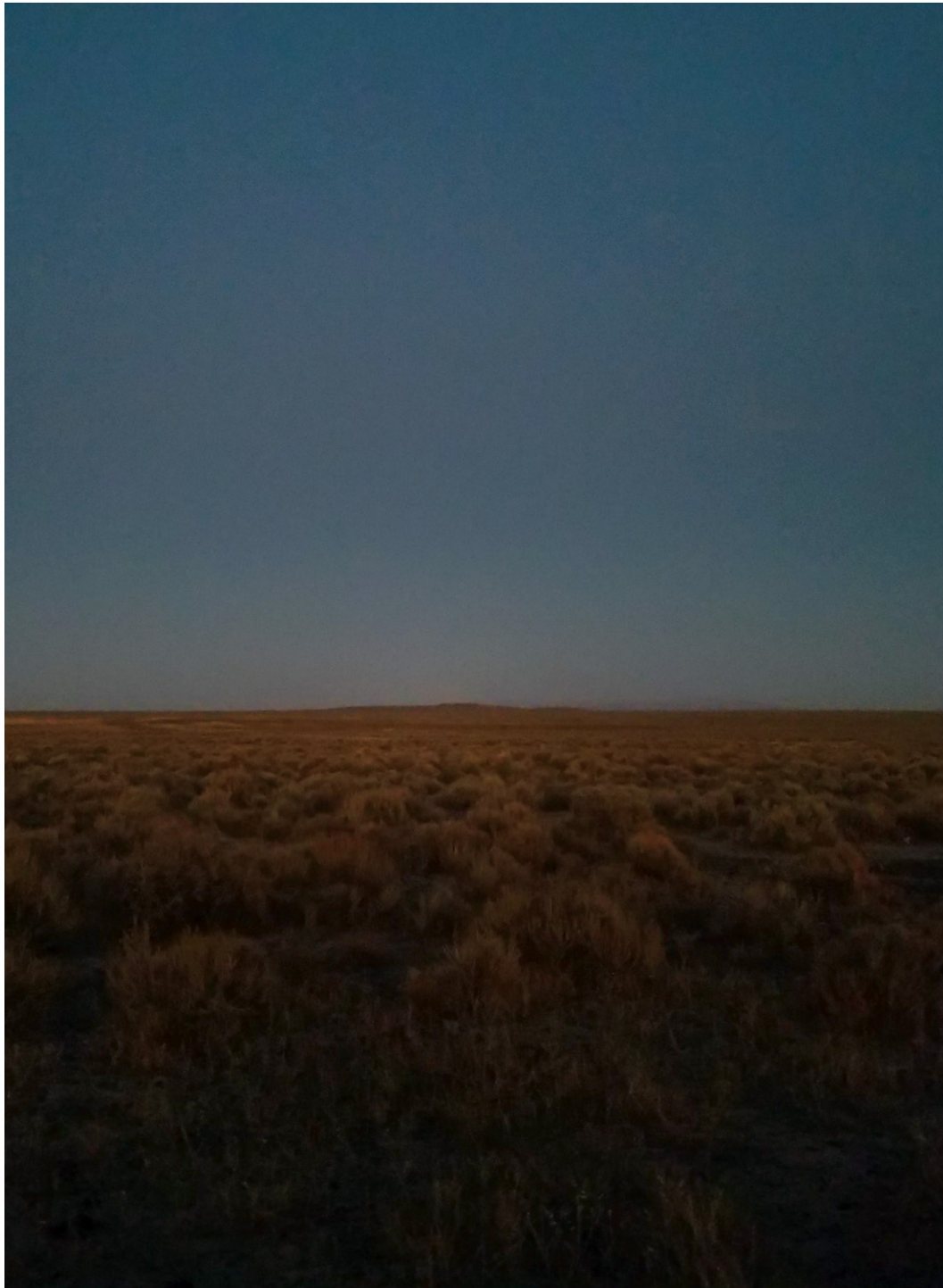
*In recent days, he's taken to fishing, sitting at the edge for a few hours, fishing in the river of beauty that flows through the sagebrush flats surrounding his home. At first, his luck was good. He caught rabbit, cloud and mountain. For bait, rabbit, of course, came to carrots. Cloud was attracted by desire—not surprising, as both like to hide vastness. Constant looking caught mountain, or perhaps it was love. There were also nibbles from the unseen.*

When he reeled in rabbit, close enough to touch softness, he couldn't get beyond rabbit's fearful eyes. Not knowing it could be good to be caught, rabbit bolted. As cloud was drawn in, she stayed overhead, day and night, through three otherwise cloudless days, but ultimately, became impossibly thin and disappeared. He didn't get to feel her touch either. Mountain, so ancient, could not be moved and had to be let go.

These were disappointing results, as nothing was landed. Perhaps he didn't belong at the river, or maybe he shouldn't be fishing. But still he sat, hopeful. And the nibbling continued. Then came a strike—a big one. He leaned back, ready for the battle, but something was wrong: the pull was too strong and was coming from an unexpected direction. He thought to cut the line but couldn't. Now, it was he who was being reeled in, bent, bent down, down, until finally his head touched the dusty ground—bent, held . . . and then released.

Released! Rather, he wished Her hook were barbed, that She kept her catch, devoured everything, even the bones. But it seems that is not Her way, at least not with small fish, so he was returned to the river. But now, for a while at least, he's in the river, not sitting at its edge. Maybe this is the bath he's needed, and soon, perhaps after being cleaned up a bit more by the river's gentle waves of luminous silence, he'll get caught again—and with luck, even end up in Her creel.





## ONE



*“Our whole business in life then,  
is to heal this eye of the heart  
whereby God may be seen.”*

*— Augustine of Hippo*

*Toward the end of summer, I heard about immigrant families being separated at the Mexican border. I was dismayed by our behavior and wanted to do something, so I carefully printed a sign on a piece of cardboard and drove up to Bend. The sign read “WE ARE ONE.”*

In Bend, I joined others who were equally disgusted. We stood at a central intersection with our signs as passersby honked and waved or offered a view of an erect middle finger. A few of the big dualie-diesel pickups also knew how to pass a cloud of smelly black smoke.

I didn't have friends in Bend, and wasn't in a mood for talking, so I mostly thought about the sign. I did see one other like it—"SOMOS UNO"—held by a young woman. When I got back to my trailer, I put the sign by the door as a reminder.

A few weeks later, I left the desert. Inevitably, there are occasions when I have to leave—sometimes for a very long time. Often, I go willingly, drawn by the intrigue of people, and the myriad possibilities of the city. On such occasions, I say my fond farewell, knowing I'll be back. Other times, I don't want to go—attached, or afraid that I will lose the subtle lessons I've learned, and only gingerly hold. This time when I left, I didn't think much about it: I expected to be back in eight days. However, because of the unforeseen, it was eight months before I could return.

Held in Iowa, I decided to take advantage of an extreme winter—lots of wind, snow, freezing rain and sub-zero temperatures—perfect for getting out and making photographs. I was pleased with the results of several days looking and shooting the frozen world, and, after a friend helped with the photoshop clean-up, I wanted to print and frame a couple dozen for a small exhibition. Someone suggested I check out Walmart for printing. They were said to have a new Fuji printing system that gives surprisingly good results.

I'm not fond of Walmart or its big-box-store business model, but to get my printing job done, I went, as directed, to the print department. There were no customers at the time. A young man was busy behind the counter. Dressed in a hybrid-hoodie and ripped jeans, his head was partially shaved, and on the remainder his hair was long, and dyed purple, rose and blue. He had two weeks of thin beard, and lots of daylight-seeking tattoos. I politely asked for help with the Big Fuji printing machine, even though it informed me that it has interactive instructions. With my first words, I noticed something unexpected: his response to my request for help was a sweet, disarming smile.

I had brought a flash drive with twenty-four TIFF files. No problem, he knew what to do. Would I like to learn how to use the machine? OK. Though it was simple, I got confused, and decided to rely on him. He was happy to do it.

When they were printed, the twenty-four photos looked fine when viewed individually, but when seen together it became evident that some had a slight excess of magenta throughout. Why? Was it a problem in the machine or in the files? Undaunted, he asked that I go back to photoshop and make certain that the white balance was the same for all files. He would look into the problem from his end to see if it was something the Fuji rep could explain.

An hour later, I was back. I'd found complete consistency among the TIFF files and brought a set of JPEGs as well. My friend was no longer alone behind the counter. The dayshift departmental manager was also present, a young woman who, in her personal appearance and a somewhat sullen air, also fit my stereotype of the Walmart employee. Again, I politely called to the young man, asking if he'd had any luck. "Yes," he'd found that Fuji knew of the problem, and attributed it to the fact that the software was designed to print directly from cellphones. Out of luck? "No," he had a work-around we could try. Meanwhile, the dayshift manager had become interested. Looking at the failed prints, she saw the problem, but also noted to her subordinate, that these were not the usual customer photos. "Where were they made? When?" The sullen demeanor disappeared—replaced by curiosity.

We try the work-around (rather, he does) but it doesn't help—out come another set of twenty-four, thirteen of which are slightly more magenta than the others. The three of us discuss it, and I can see that both are really out to solve this one. I can feel them thinking. No one is uptight or rushed. From their eyes, I know this desire to help is sincere, not just adherence to customer service guidelines.

Then we (they) try yet another work-around—transferring the files to a CD and exporting to Big Fuji from their Walmart workstation computer. By now, we are several hours into what has become a challenging project. They have put aside all other considerations, except service. They are determined to provide this personal service, simply because they want to. They are also having fun—both are relaxed,



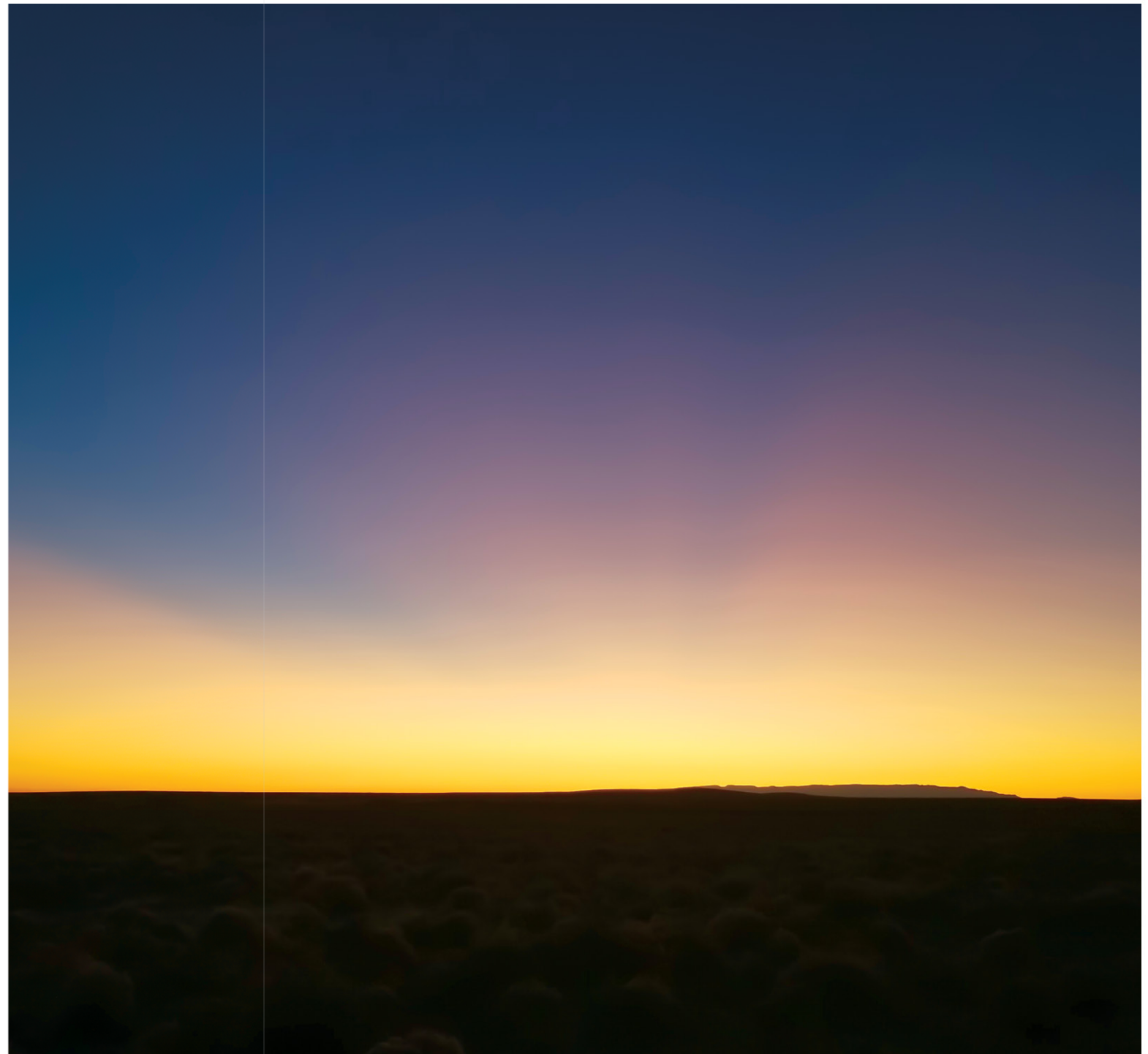
smiling and chattering with one another like desert sparrows.

Watching these two, I realize I'm operating differently also, very differently. Inside, it feels like I'm watching the steadily warming hue of a pre-dawn desert sky, or like I'm lost in a deep meditation. But I'm here, in Walmart, and, unexpectedly, have dropped my usual mantle of judgment and am seeing something quite different—different, yet familiar. As I continue to watch and listen, I notice a delicate, fluttering sensation in my chest. Come to think of it, it's been here since I came in the first time, but now it's getting stronger. The sensation is stirring the same feelings of contentment and happiness that come when I finally drive up onto the high desert steppe after a day in town—when my attention is liberated by the space, and flows out into the enormous expanse. It's the same golden feeling that dissolves the residue of isolation, of separation. Unfailingly, this delicate vibration of heart generates a wave of deep gratitude, of humility and love—there on the steppe—and now, here at Walmart.

Then come more thoughts: *These are people, this is not the desert, not easy nature. This is human nature.*

*Yes, but nature is nature. It's all the same,* I answer. *Maybe I've lost something or learned something, or brought something back? Or maybe I have nothing to do with it. Maybe it's grace?* Whatever the case, while watching these two new friends, judgment is gone, and separation is rapidly diminishing; vision is ripening, becoming fragrant and golden. They have become deeply familiar—they've become beautiful. Actually, they *are* beautiful. In fact, they are *Beauty*.

This work-around doesn't work either. Now, it's





time for a shift change. We've been at this for several hours and they have to stop. Tomorrow: will I come back tomorrow? Maybe if we do each of the thirteen singly rather than in a batch Big Fuji will be happy. We say goodbye and they leave for home, somewhat late. But I'm not leaving. I'm caught by this newly discovered beauty and want more. My mind is also questioning the cause of this transformation: *What's responsible for this? What will happen with other people?* I wander around Walmart for a bit—intrigued by the brilliance and depth of this new way of seeing. It's as if I'm now seeing through a glory.

“Glory” is a technical term for an optical phenomenon that occurs in vast expanses—from airplanes, mountain tops, tall buildings and other elevated vantage points. When the sun is behind us, and we look out through our shadow which is projected into space, there is a concentration of light that appears around the point where our shadow ends. Often it takes the form of subtle rainbow-hued concentric circles. In a classical example, you see the shadow of your head in the distant atmosphere surrounded by a halo. The phenomenon is named after the radiance said to surround the heads of the saintly, as is shown in the pictorial traditions of a number of religions.

The physics of this phenomenon is well understood. It arises from light being refracted and reflected by minute particles of water vapor—clouds or mist or even haze. However, in the high desert, I've noticed this, or a similar phenomenon, even under extreme low-humidity or perhaps dusty, conditions. Then, I don't see rainbow colors but rather, the distant point of my shadow is lit up by exceptionally intense sunlight—as if a beam of light coming from my eyes were projecting a small circular field of illumination, brighter there than anywhere else.

I suspect that a “desert glory” may be augmented, or even caused, by another perspective-related factor. In the evening, looking away from the setting sun, one's shadow disappears into the distant sage. Just at the point where the observer's shadow disappears, there are no shadows—or more correctly, all shadows are perfectly hidden from view—hidden behind brightly lit, golden sagebrush. Outside of that small circular area of brightness, shadows become increasingly prominent in proportion

to their distance from the center of the observer's focal point. Therefore, on all sides, the dark shadows make up an increasing percentage of what is visible. In addition, one looks away from the brilliant circular field, because of the increasing obliqueness of the angle, the sagebrush surfaces reflect less and less sunlight back to the observer. Consequently, from the observer's perspective, there is a peripheral gradient of decreasing reflected light and increasing shadowed surface. This gradient diminishes the visible light as one looks away from the full brilliance of the focused circular field—the glory. In this way the glory, the central brilliance is subjectively enhanced by being surrounded by increasing shadow and darkness.

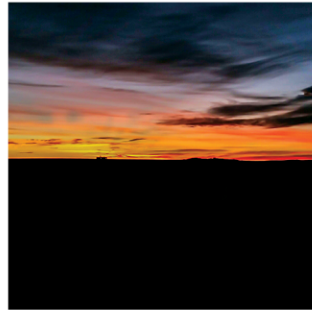
Now back in Walmart, I realize that the deep beauty I've been seeing as I look at my friends is a brilliance much like that of a desert glory. But this glory is not an optical effect. Its origin is not in my eyes, physics does not explain it, and there is no sun shining in Walmart. The resplendence of this glory is coming from my heart. My heart is seeing—dispersing the shadows of my ignorance in the intense glare of love.

I wander over to another department where there are picture frames. There, an older man is putting products on the shelves across the aisle from the frames. Smiling, because I can't do otherwise, I ask for help. But this is an excuse. I don't really need help. I just want to look—to see. We carry on a pleasant conversation—he, too, is willing to do whatever might be needed. He shows me thin black frames and explains how to snap the photos in under the glass. Surprisingly, talking and doing are easy, done without distraction—even though I am overwhelmed by my heart's vision of the profound beauty deep within yet another human being. Then this is enough. Mind is quiet, undone. There is no need to test things further. I go home, happy the whole way. And I remain happy.

The next day I went back to the photo department and found the same two people working in the aisles. There were also two other employees who had gotten pulled into the Big Fuji challenge. The third work-around solved the problem. It took quite a while, but I didn't care. Looking at everyone milling about, I was completely absorbed by the joy of a heart again overflowing with love—and a vision of the beauty of Being. I knew for certain, seeing with my own heart: we really are One. One. One, even here in Walmart.



## AFTERWORD



Before sending “One” for editing, I spent most of a day trying to clarify the three paragraphs that describe a glory. Normally, by day’s end, I step outside for the sunset and earth shadow. However, I was still at it when the sun dropped below the distant western escarpment. Because the day was exceptionally clear, I noticed the rapid decline in light coming through the windows, but didn’t stop my work. Twenty-five minutes later, I had finished the glory description. Strangely, at that same moment, the light inside the trailer intensified and became much warmer in hue. I got up and went outside to see what was going on. From horizon to zenith, the cloud-free western sky was now a dazzling twenty-four carat gold. While the earth shadow in the east had already disappeared and night was trying to fall, the vivid gold effulgence of the west was keeping the world inexplicably alive.

Suddenly, looking into the east, I saw the glory—ran inside, grabbed my cellphone and got the photo that now precedes “One.” Even in that moment, I knew something was different. Having spent the day trying to describe the optics of a desert glory, I knew this one was impossible: there was no sun, no point source of

light—there hadn’t been for almost thirty minutes. How could it happen? Had it not been for the photograph, I’d certainly have immediately been discounting my observation as . . . I don’t know what.

The next evening, I was wondering if there might be a repeat of the impossible. The sky was again clear. I waited until the sun got very low. From up on the roof, looking east, I made several photographs of the usual glory. Everything looked right, just as expected—but very different from last night’s photo. I watched as the sun sank. Then its arc of luminosity disappeared from the horizon and the earth shadow formed and dissolved in the east. All this, while wondering—hoping, but not expecting—that the golden radiance would reappear in the western half of the sky.

Twenty-five minutes after the sun’s disappearance, there was a quiet wash of golden light at the western horizon and a darkening zenith. It was nothing like the previous evening’s half-dome of golden sky—and, not surprisingly, with the sun long gone, there was no “impossible” glory. Still questioning, I looked again at yesterday’s photo and it was then I noticed that unlike the photos taken earlier tonight (and for the last six years), yesterday’s glory photo does not show the distant Steens Mountain escarpment. It should be there. On a clear day, it’s always there in the distance. But, somehow, in this impossible glory, all traces of distance have vanished.

