



Beauty Will Save the World

Volume I: Thirty Photographs of Southern Utah

Stephen S. Ashley

2017

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FRONTISPIECE: *Last Rays of Sunlight, Capitol Reef, 2015*

THINKERS have long wrestled with the contradiction of beauty in a world filled with discord. Why should artists persist in their efforts to create works of beauty while drowning in ugliness? Dostoevsky placed an answer to this question in the mouth of the character Prince Myshkin in the novel *The Idiot*: “Beauty will save the world.” In *Demons*, Dostoevsky wrote, “[M]ankind ... could subsist without science and even without bread. But it is impossible to do without beauty because then there would be nothing left for us to do in the world!” Responding to Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn asked, “When in bloodthirsty history did beauty ever save anyone from anything? Ennobled, uplifted, yes—but whom has it saved?” His answer: “[T]hose works of art which have scooped up the truth and presented it to us as a living force—they take hold of us, compel us, and nobody ever, not even in ages to come, will appear to refute them.”

The Catholics have seized upon Dostoevsky’s bold answer the most eagerly. In his “Letter to Artists,” Pope John Paul II proposed that the purpose of beauty is to enthuse us for work that uplifts us. Artists, he maintained, should create beauty that stirs us to that wonder that arouses in us a yearning to meet the future: “Thanks to this enthusiasm, humanity, every time it loses its way, will be able to lift itself up and set out again on the right path. In this sense it has been said with profound insight that ‘beauty will save the world’.” Pope Benedict XVI, quoting a different passage from Dostoevsky, saw beauty as “a path towards the transcendent, towards the ultimate Mystery, towards God.”

The pontiffs’ reasoning does not resonate with me as a non-believer, though I welcome the Church’s warm embrace of artists and beauty. I find greater comfort with the role of beauty in the world view of the Navajos, at least as described in the mystery novels of Tony Hillerman. In his first novel, *The Blessing Way*, Hillerman described the Navajos’ ceremonial chants as “the old songs to the Holy People—not prayers of humility or supplication, and not pleas for forgiveness, but songs *which sought nothing but to restore man’s harmony with all that was elemental.*” It struck me that Hillerman’s description of Navajo chants expresses

what for me a beautiful photograph does: it heightens the viewer's feeling of harmony with the world.

I remember the first times I saw the photographs of Ansel Adams, Philip Hyde, Eliot Porter, and Cedric Wright when, as a young teenager, I turned the pages of the Sierra Club's Exhibit Format books. Each turn of the page brought a new image—*Clearing Winter Storm; Winter Sunrise, Sierra Nevada; Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico; Frozen Lake and Cliffs; Mount Williamson*. (You can easily find these image and other images mentioned in this book on the internet.) The first viewing of photographs like these gives me a feeling like a gust of wind beneath my wings. Each subsequent viewing boosts my feeling of harmony with nature. I hope that the pictures included in this volume likewise give you a brief lift out of the ordinariness of life and heighten your feeling of harmony with the world. I hope that by striving to squeeze every drop of beauty from the scenes I have photographed I have scooped up a small piece of truth and presented it as a living force. This is my goal in making photographs. This is my small contribution to saving the world.

* * *

A hundred million years ago in the area in the American Southwest where Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico intersect, a pathway to the ocean opened, and a warm, shallow sea flooded the region. The advancing and retreating seaway left behind thick layers of sandstone. In subsequent millennia geologic forces combined with wind and water to carve the sandstone and other rock into the fantastic and beautiful formations that we see today.

For the past three years I have visited southern Utah and photographed the natural features that have caught my eye—the arches and buttresses in Arches National Park, the cliffs and canyons in Canyonlands National Park and Capitol Reef National Park, and across the region the Colorado River and its canyon and the constantly changing weather. This book contains 30 photographs that I took on my visits to the Colorado Plateau.

I created this book to accompany a portfolio containing these 30 images. The images are not organized chronologically or geographically but rather appear in this book in the order in which they appear in the portfolio, grouped in a way that makes sense to me thematically.

In these pages I share the experience of taking these photographs. I have learned from experience that viewers are sometimes curious about the stories that lie behind my photographs. To satisfy that curiosity I have provided a brief account of the making of each of them. When I thought I had something to share that would be of interest to other photographers, I have included descriptions of the techniques I used to take and process these photographs.

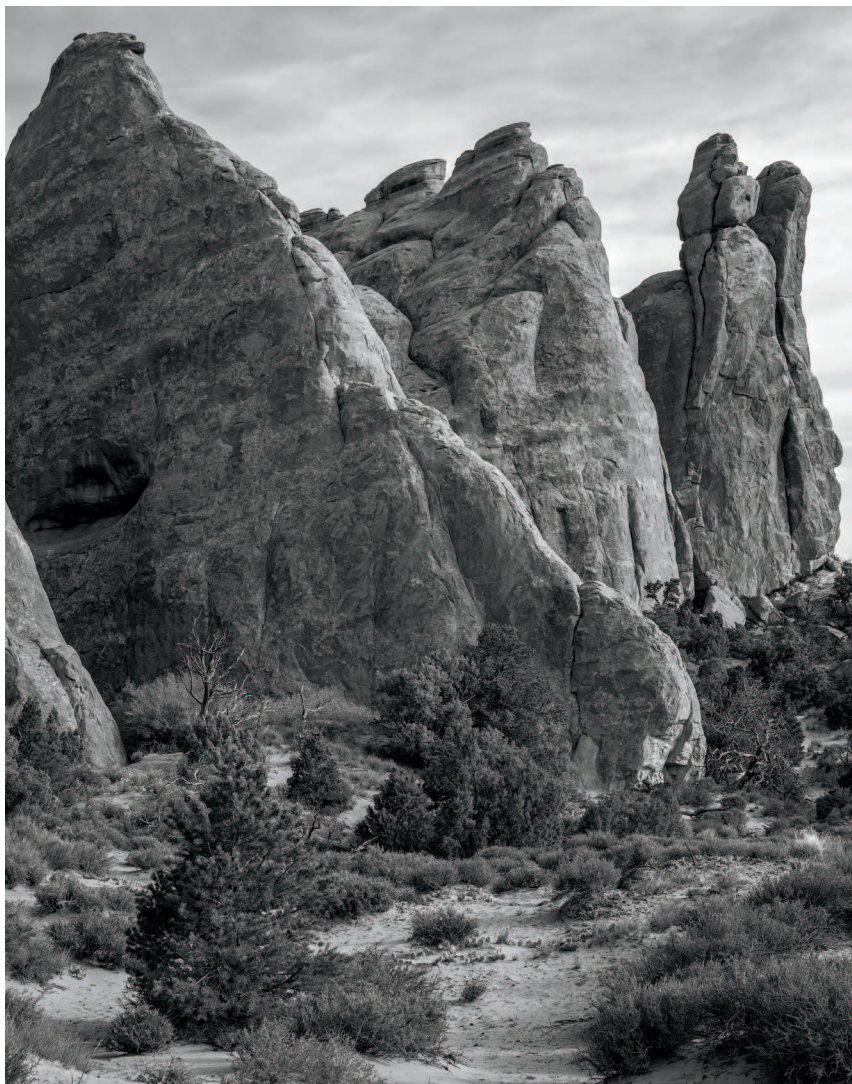
If you drive almost to the end of the main road in Arches, you will come to the turnout for Sandy Arch. That arch is hidden up a slot in the sandstone and is not worth the trudge up a sandy trail to reach it. Instead, before the entrance to the Sandy Arch trail, turn left and follow the path north in the direction of the more picturesque Broken Arch, which is a bit farther from the road but is still an easy walk. On the left as you head towards Broken Arch you will see a number of sandstone formations.

Early on the morning of April 23, 2016, I walked out to Broken Arch and took several exposures of the views to the north, including *Near Broken Arch No. 1, Arches, 2016*. The Nikon D800E camera with which I recorded this image contains a feature that allows one to adjust the tripod head so that the camera is aligned perfectly straight up and down and level. I am accustomed to setting up my camera and tripod in this starting position because in my view camera days I followed the standard practice of setting up my camera in this manner. A glance through the viewfinder showed, however, that the viewfinder cut off the top of the rock formation. One can, of course, include the hidden portion of a scene by tilting the camera backwards (or forwards, if the circumstances so require), but tilting the camera distorts the image. If you have ever taken a picture looking up at a tall building, you probably noticed that the parallel edges of the building converged. One can avoid tilting the camera by using a perspective control lens, which allows one to mimic the movements of a view camera on a DSLR. Using a perspective control lens, I shifted the lens up without moving my camera, which brought the entire sandstone formation within the viewfinder. A perspective control lens is of greater use to architectural photographers than to landscape photographers because convergence is more evident when photographing objects like buildings. Nevertheless, one can see distortion even when tilting a camera backwards to photograph a tree or mountain. (I have tried both the Nikon and the Schneider perspective control lenses, and I found the Schneider lens superior to the Nikon. It is truly a marvel of mechanical engineering.)



Near Broken Arch No. 1, Arches, 2016

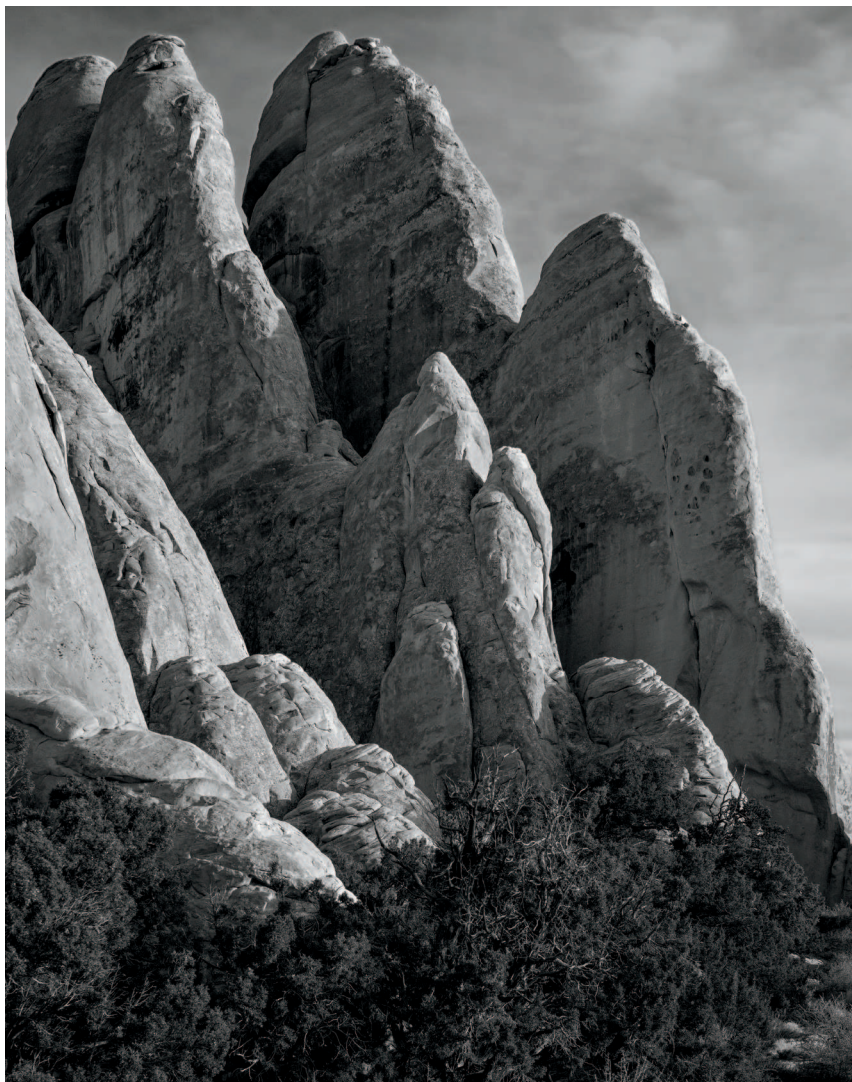
Looking in the opposite direction, to the south, you see the back of the sandstone formation of which Sandy Arch is a part. On the backside you find a number of sandstone fins, which look like the flying buttresses built in the Middle Ages to support Gothic cathedrals. On the same morning I made several exposures of these sandstone structures, again using the shift feature of the perspective control lens to minimize the camera tilting needed to include an entire structure in the viewfinder. I took *Near Sand Dune Arch No. 1, Arches, 2016* before the sun rose. The eastern sky acted like a giant light box projecting a diffuse light on the stone. The indirect lighting gave the formation a statuesque appearance. Because of the modest difference in the luminance values between the darkest and the lightest areas on the sandstone, I boosted the image's contrast when processing it in Photoshop using a curves adjustment layer.



Near Sand Dune Arch No. 1, Arches, 2016

Compare *Near Sand Dune Arch No. 1, 2016* with the next image, *Near Sand Dune Arch No. 5, 2016*, which I took an hour later, after the sun had risen. The rock in *No. 5* displays areas of both direct sunlight and shadow, with a correspondingly greater dynamic range than *No. 1*.

Making exposures just before dawn and just after sunset is a technique favored by John Sexton, Ansel Adams's last and most important assistant. A good example of an image Sexton made just after sunset is his *Aspens, Reflections, Snowmass Village, Colorado*, which he took in 1987, before the digital era. When I took *Near Sand Dune Arch No. 1*, I made a series of exposures until my camera's histogram showed me that I had made an exposure that captured both the highlights and deep shadows without losing detail in either region. When Sexton took *Aspens, Reflections, Snowmass Village, Colorado*, he faced the daunting task of gauging the correct exposure. Sexton was shooting on sheet film. Trial and error was not a practical method for determining the correct exposure. I expect that he measured the brightness range with a spot meter, judged how long he would have to develop the film in order to get decent contrast, and then adjusted his working film speed based on his intended development time, all while the sky's illumination of the aspens diminished with the setting sun.



Near Sand Dune Arch No. 5, Arches, 2016

Just to the west of Arches is Castle Valley. At the mouth of Castle Valley stands Parriott Mesa, one of my favorite sandstone formations. It is a pity that Congress did not include Castle Valley in Arches when Congress promoted Arches National Monument to National Park status in 1971.

From dawn to twilight, the shadows on Parriott Mesa constantly shift. I am particularly fond of the late afternoon when the foreground is entirely in shade and the shadows on the face of the mesa highlight the textures in the rock.



Parriott Mesa #3, 2014

On my 2016 visit to Utah, I travelled by car. On my way home to California, I passed a tall sandstone column to the west of Interstate 70. I exited the interstate and took several exposures of the column, the best of which resulted in *Sandstone Column, Last Chance Road, 2016*. So far as I have been able to determine, this column has no name. Among the wonders of southern Utah, this feature ranks pretty low. If it were located in Nebraska, it would be a national monument.

Among the several views I had of the column, this view caught my eye because of the fence tracking down the hill diagonally and then angling towards the bottom right corner of the frame.



Sandstone Column, Last Chance Road, 2016

The Six-Shooter Peaks, North and South, stand just outside the boundary of the Needles District. Visitors travelling Utah Highway 211 to the Needles District drive right past these splendid formations, but few cars stop.

The entrance to the more accessible, and therefore more popular, Arches National Park is 79 miles away. During the summer, the traffic into Arches becomes so heavy that the Park Service has to close the entrance and force visitors to wait or to leave and come back later. At dawn, the popular sites in Arches like the Windows Section are crawling with tourists, to the point that there is often no reason for trying to take a serious photograph of the North or South Window or of the Turret Arch. Despite the crowding, the Park Service keeps the entrance fee at Arches at \$10, good for seven consecutive days. During the year, there are a number of free days. Seniors like me (62 and older) can buy a \$10 pass, good for life.

The solution to the crowding problem should be obvious here in free enterprise America (and no, I am not suggesting that we should sell Arches to a private developer). I think we should raise the ridiculously low entrance fees at the most popular national parks until we find the prices that generate the most revenue and reduce demand for entrance. Then we should use the extra funds to buy private lands containing wild and beautiful features like the Six-Shooter Peaks in order to expand the existing parks and to create new ones.

Except at sunrise and sunset, the bright sunlight in the high desert tends to wash out details in the shadows. To bring back the shadow details, like those to the right of the South Six-Shooter Peak pinnacle, I added a curves adjustment layer and pulled the curve upward, thereby increasing the image's brightness and contrast, especially in the midtones. I filled the layer's mask with black in order to protect all the pixels in the image from the effect of the adjustment layer and then used the brush tool to paint the color white onto the portions of the layer mask that corresponded to the shadow areas. This had the effect of brightening the shadows and increasing the contrast at the low end of the spectrum. I then adjusted the layer's opacity in order to fine-tune the shadows.



South Six-Shooter Peak, Needles District, 2016

Just up the road from the Six-Shooter formations is the Bridger Jack Mesa.



Bridger Jack Mesa No. 2, Needles District, 2016

While exploring the dirt road connecting the Needles District Visitor Center in Canyonlands National Park with the Colorado River Outlook, I happened upon this view of a mesa on the horizon and behind it a towering cumulous cloud and dark sky. Rain cells migrated across the landscape all day. Although the weather was sunny when I took *Needles District No. 2, Canyonlands, 2016*, a rain cell had just passed through, as evidenced by the puddles filing the depressions in the rock.



Needles District No. 2, Canyonlands, 2016

One morning at sunrise I drove from the Fruita Campground in Capitol Reef west on Utah Highway 24 to Panorama Point. I made this photograph at Panorama Point shortly after the sun had risen, before the clouds had had a chance to build and fill the sky. Beyond Panorama Point runs a dirt road, which extends to Goosenecks Overlook, a spectacular place from which to photograph Capitol Reef at sunset. In *Panorama Point #1, Capitol Reef, 2015* you can see the road descending to the right.

On the horizon you can see the Henry Mountains, which lie to the east of Capitol Reef. These remote and rugged mountains were the last mountains in the lower 48 states to be surveyed.

Panorama Point #1, Capitol Reef, 2015 did not require extensive Photoshop magic, as is often the case with the most successful photographs. I used three curves adjustment layers. The first I used to darken the darkest portion of the clouds. The second I used to open up the shadows and reveal the details in the sagebrush. The third I used to lighten the fallen slabs of stone to match the luminosity of the ledge on the left. I try to exercise restraint when working my magic because I want the scene to feel as natural as possible. If the viewer says to himself, "Stephen Ashley sure did a good job enhancing the clouds, opening the shadows, and lightening the fallen slabs," then I have failed.



Panorama Point #1, Capitol Reef, 2015

A day that started with a sunny morning turned into a stormy afternoon, bad for the campers but good for the photographers. In the afternoon I drove out Capitol Reef's Scenic Drive. Not long after leaving the Fruita campground area, I pulled over to make an exposure of the view looking back down the road towards the campground. The sky was full of clouds and passing rain showers, but an opening in the clouds to the west allowed a shaft of light to illuminate the cliffs north of Highway 24.

In *Last Rays of Sunlight, Capitol Reef, 2015* a correct exposure of the sky left the cliffs and the foreground too dark. I used curves adjustment layers and carefully drawn masks to increase the contrast in the clouds and to open up the shadows on the shaded hillsides to the left of the road. I also used a curves adjustment layer to increase the separation of tones in the shadowed portions of the cliff faces.



Last Rays of Sunlight, Capitol Reef, 2015

I awoke in Monticello to a cloudy day and drove to the Needles District. As I entered the park, a break in the clouds allowed a beam of sunlight to illuminate a distant cliff. I pulled over to the side of the road and hauled my camera bag and tripod to the top of a spacious rock.

The raw exposure required only minor adjustments in Photoshop. The sagebrush in the foreground verged into solid black; I added a layer using the Soft Light mode and accepted Photoshop's invitation to fill the layer with a 50 percent gray. A Soft Light layer filled with 50 percent gray has no effect on the underlying layer. I then used a soft white brush to paint onto the Soft Light layer on the sagebrush that were too dark. The combination of a Soft Light layer and a white brush produces the effect we used to achieve in the darkroom using a dodging tool to block the enlarger light from reaching the paper, lightening the image. After I had lightened all the desired spots, I adjusted the opacity of the Soft Light layer to achieve the desired balance. In the sky I used a curves adjustment layer to add drama to the clouds. I also used a curves adjustment layer to lighten and add contrast to the near cliffs not in the sunshine.

Needles District No. 1, Canyonlands, 2016 follows one rule of composition and breaks another. It includes a diagonal line, the road, which leads the viewer's eye from the lower left corner of the image towards the subject of greatest interest, the sunlit cliffs. The conventions of fine art photography say that this is a good thing. Those conventions also say, however, that one should avoid including a horizontal line that cuts an image in half. The line of cliffs breaks this rule. I tried cropping the photograph either to raise the line of cliffs or to lower it, but none of my experiments produced a more pleasing result than the one I chose. Raising the horizon favored the less interesting sagebrush over the more interesting sky; lowering the horizon included more of the dramatic sky and placed the start of the road closer to the lower left corner but seemed to draw attention away from the sunlit cliffs, which I regard as the true subject of this photograph.



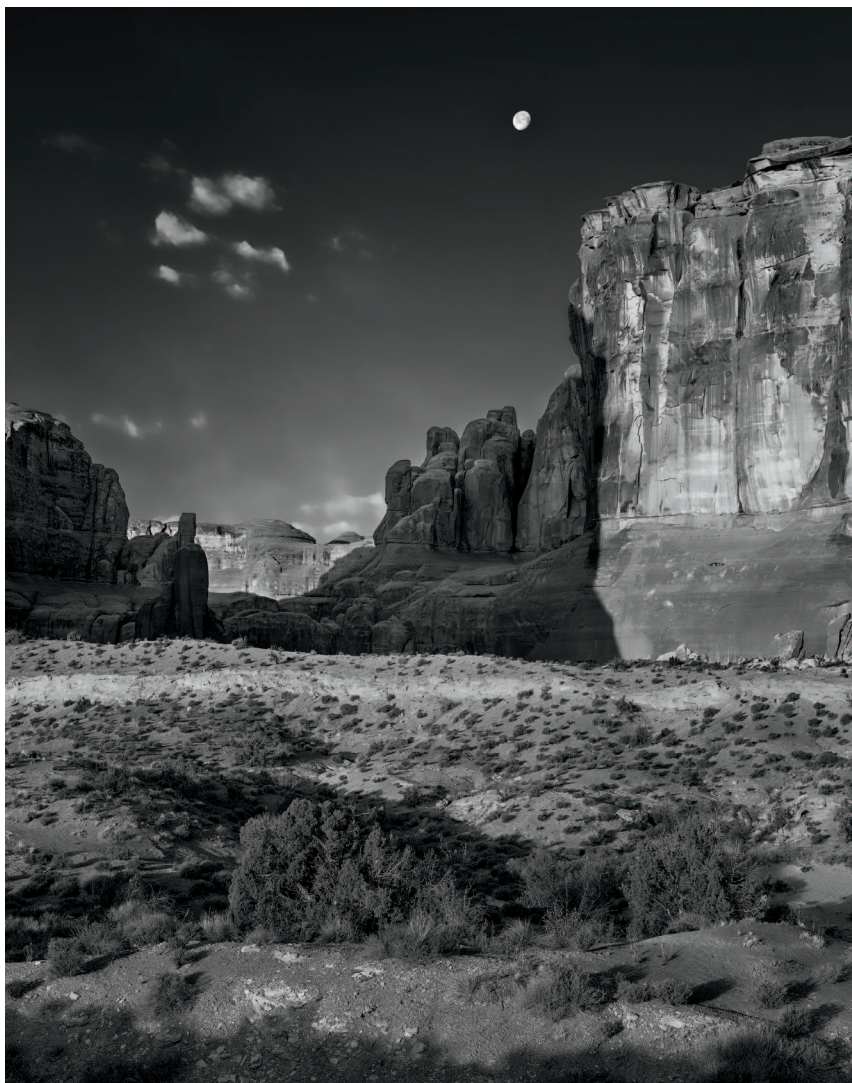
Needles District No. 1, Canyonlands, 2016

Driving west on Interstate 70, I stopped at the Ghost Rocks Rest Stop. Clouds cast a shadow over the cliffs in the foreground, but sunlight reached the snow-covered mountains in the distance.



Ghost Rocks Rest Stop No. 1, I-70, 2016

A favorite spot to photograph at dawn in Arches is the turnout for the La Sal Mountains Viewpoint. Instead of looking west towards the La Sal Mountains, face northeast. At sunrise the light hits the tops of the Three Gossips, The Organ, and the Tower of Babel and eventually illuminates the cliff across the road. My 2016 visit coincided with a waning gibbous moon, which set behind the cliff as the sun was rising.



Rising Sun, Setting Moon, Arches, 2016

The Fremont River traverses Capitol Reef from west to east, dividing the park in half. Highway 24 follows the river from Fruita to the park's eastern boundary and beyond. Between the Hickman Natural Bridge trailhead and the park boundary the river flows through the canyon it has carved in the sandstone. The river has sculpted the south wall of the canyon into strange and beautiful shapes. *Fremont River Canyon #6, Capitol Reef, 2015* depicts one small section of the canyon wall, which continues for miles towards the park entrance.



Fremont River Canyon #6, Capitol Reef, 2015

Wind and water eroded this sandstone outcropping in a manner that reveals the layers of sediment deposited by the advancing and retreating seaway a hundred million years ago.



Swirling Sandstone No. 1, Needles District, 2016

I took this photograph at the turnout for the La Sal Mountains Viewpoint. I originally entitled the photograph *Courthouse Towers, Arches, 2015* but now think that I mislabelled it. Having studied the relevant USGS map (*The Windows Section UT*), I now believe that the photograph depicts The Organ, with a sliver of the Tower of Babel behind it. The USGS map shows the Courthouse Towers to the left and across the road from the formations shown in the photograph. So the photograph has a new name: *The Organ, Arches, 2015*.

Identifying sandstone structures can be a challenge. Since taking and misnaming this photograph in 2015 I learned about a valuable resource, which would have saved me from this mistake: the National Geographic repository of free 7.5 minute USGS topological maps (<http://www.natgeomaps.com/trail-maps/pdf-quads>).

In my discussion of *Near Broken Arch No. 1, Arches, 2016* I described how I used the shift feature of a perspective control lens to include the top of a sandstone formation in the viewfinder without distorting the image by tilting the camera body backwards. In addition to shifting the lens up and down, a perspective control lens allows one to tilt the lens forwards and backwards without moving the camera. Tilting the lens forwards has the effect of tilting the plane of focus forwards so that near objects and distant objects are both in sharp focus, without having to use a tiny aperture in order to expand the depth of field. I used this technique in *The Organ, Arches, 2015* to align the plane of focus with both the primroses in the foreground and the sandstone formations in the distance.

You can obtain sharp focus of both near and far objects by using an extreme wide-angle lens and moving the camera close to the near object. You see this technique used all the time nowadays. To my eye, however, this technique produces an unpleasant effect. Near objects appear abnormally big, and distant objects appear abnormally small. You end up with wildflowers the size of mountains, and mountains the size of wildflowers. I prefer using a perspective control lens in order to achieve the distortion-free look obtained by previous generations of landscape photographers using view cameras.



The Organ, Arches, 2015

I took this photograph within an hour of taking *Last Rays of Sunlight, Capitol Reef, 2015* and at the same location. In order to bring out the layering in the face of the hillside I used a curves adjustment layer in Photoshop to brighten the light-colored bands and to darken the adjacent layers.



Rain Clouds, Capitol Reef, 2015

Spring of 2014 was an exceptional year for wildflowers. The desert was covered with primroses. One day during my attendance at the 2014 Moab Photography Symposium I went by myself to the boulder field below the Three Gossips and came upon a huge sandstone boulder that had fallen off the Three Gossips eons ago and rolled to the bottom of the wash. I found a primrose blooming in a crack in the boulder. You see it in *Primrose #1, 2014*.

The next day a Symposium instructor took my field-trip group to the same spot. In one day the primrose had faded. The petals were falling off, and the whole plant was drooping down the face of the sandstone. "Oh," she said, "if only we had come here yesterday!"



Primrose #1, 2014

At the end of my 2016 visit to southern Utah I rented a jeep and spent a week driving the dirt roads in Canyonlands. I highly recommend this experience because a four-wheel drive vehicle opens doors to scenery not visible to vehicles designed only for pavement.

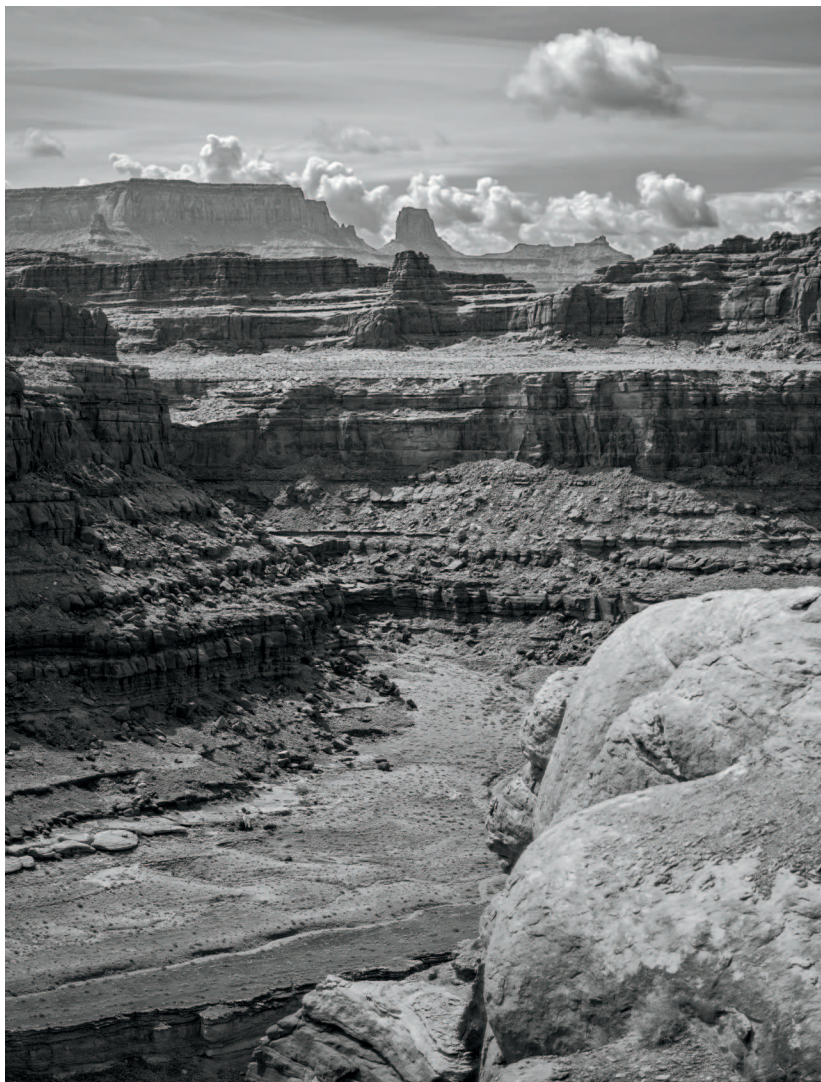
Driving northeast from Moab on U.S. Highway 191, you come to a left turn onto Utah Highway 279. About 17 miles down Highway 279 you come to a potash plant and the beginning of Potash Road, which follows a bench above the Colorado River for several miles. After entering Canyonlands, the road climbs the Shafer Switchbacks and comes out on the main road in the Island-in-the-Sky District about a mile from the visitor center.

I took *Colorado River No. 1, Canyonlands, 2016* on Potash Road above the Colorado River, near where Thelma and Louise took their final drive.



Colorado River No. 1, Canyonlands, 2016

Another view from Potash Road, looking across the Colorado River Canyon.



Potash Road No. 4, Canyonlands, 2016

Another dirt road with spectacular views leaves from behind the Needles District Visitor Center. This road is rougher than roads like Potash Road and the Shafer Switchbacks. At the six-mile mark you come to a high ledge, which less capable four-wheel drive vehicles have a hard time negotiating. Even with my rented Jeep Rubicon I chose to park before descending the ledge and to walk the last mile to a spot that overlooks the Colorado River. *Colorado River Canyon No. 4, Canyonlands, 2016* shows the view downstream. The constantly shifting storm clouds and rays of sunshine were spectacular.

On my return to my jeep, I met a park ranger, who had parked his four-wheel drive pickup truck at the same spot. Although he was confident that a Rubicon could handle the ledge, he would not attempt it in his pickup.



Colorado River Canyon No. 4, Canyonlands, 2016

On my way out of the Needles District I stopped for lunch at the Needles Outpost, a private campground and store on the park boundary. I struck up a conversation with the nice lady who made my sandwich. She gave me directions to a site of petroglyphs outside the park. As I drove back towards Moab, I watched carefully for the turnoff, parked, and followed her directions down an embankment, across a stream, along a river bed with ancient animal tracks, and up the side of a cliff to a rock face covered with ancient petroglyphs.



Puebloan Petroglyphs, 2015

The photographic possibilities in southern Utah are endless because the weather is constantly changing. I encountered this passing rain cell as I made my way on Highway 191 from Moab to Monticello, my base for excursions into the Needles District.



Rainstorm, U.S. Highway 191, 2016

I took this photograph of a snowstorm over the La Sal Mountains from Utah Highway 46,
near where it joins Highway 191.



Spring Snowstorm, Utah Highway 46, 2016

On my way from Moab to Capitol Reef I began to feel sleepy. I had the good fortune to be driving a rented RV. Fearing that I might fall asleep at the wheel, I turned off Highway 24 where it intersects Temple Mountain Road, parked off to the side of the road, and took a nap. By the time I woke up, a rainstorm had moved in. Although no rain was falling where I was, I could see rain and dark clouds in every direction. I photographed these Highway 24 signs against a stormy backdrop.

As someone who photographs in black and white, I am sometimes told that my photographs remind viewers of Ansel Adams's work. Although such comments embarrass me, I can understand why people make them. We who photograph in black and white labor in Adams's giant shadow. From my perspective I see one major difference between Adams and me (ignoring the issue of skill). Adams put nature and humans in distinctly separate categories.

Adams photographed plenty of humans, but when he photographed nature, he went to great lengths to exclude any evidence of Europeans and their descendants. In his famous photograph of the east side of the Sierra Nevada, *Winter Sunrise, Sierra Nevada From Lone Pine* (one of his few landscapes that includes a living animal, a horse), he printed the foreground hills very dark in order to blot out the letters "LP," with which an earlier generation of Lone Pine high school students had decorated the hillside. He used spotting dyes to hide any lingering trace of the offending letters.

In my view, the movement of humans across the planet is as much a part of nature as the migration of birds. Ugly though our traces may be, humans do not live in a world apart from nature. So, when I find beautiful storm clouds in the distance and highway signs in the foreground, I explore the possibility that the signs can somehow live in harmony with the clouds. If I had taken *Winter Sunrise, Sierra Nevada From Lone Pine*, I would have left the "LP" in.



Utah Highway 24 #1, 2015

Driving back to Moab from Capitol Reef on Highway 24, I encountered a powerful storm between Hanksville and Interstate 70. I pulled over, rolled down my window, and leaned back to take this photograph, hoping that I could avoid the blowing rain without including the window frame in the photograph. On the horizon you can see Temple Mountain.



Storm Near Hanksville, 2014

On my way back to California on U.S. Highway 50, “The Loneliest Road in America” according to *Life* magazine, I approached the Nevada border and photographed a buildup of clouds over the House Range with rain and snow falling on the peaks. *Storm Cell Over the House Range, Utah, 2016* provides a dramatic example of orographic lift. The wind blew moist air over rising terrain. As the moist air rose, it cooled, and the moisture condensed, creating clouds and precipitation.

When I started back to California, I had foolishly packed my tripod at the bottom of my luggage, so I knew that this exposure had to be a handheld. I also knew that the composition would require shifting the perspective control lens upward in order to capture the whole cloud without tilting the camera backwards. Through trial and error I found the amount of shifting that allowed me to take the picture while holding the camera level. I used a large aperture in order to take the photograph at 1/2000th of a second, fast enough to avoid blurring.

When I am taking photographs on a trip, I seldom know at the time which exposures I will be able to turn into outstanding prints. When I saw the weather over the House Range, I encountered one of those rare moments when I know when I release the shutter that I am making what may be one of my important photographs.



Storm Cell Over the House Range, Utah, 2016

I was at the Grand View Point Overlook in the Island in the Sky District on a stormy day.
Rain cells drifted across the desert.



Rainstorm No. 2, Canyonlands, 2016

Just north of the Tower of Babel along the Arches Scenic Drive the Courthouse Wash is just a trickle. The creek meanders through the park and exits at a spot along Highway 191 a short distance from where 191 crosses the Colorado River after leaving Moab. The Courthouse Wash, which by now has grown into a respectable stream, joins the Colorado River a quarter of a mile further on. I took *Courthouse Wash, Arches, 2016* where the stream leaves the park.



Courthouse Wash, Arches, 2016

Cottonwoods flourish near watercourses. Although they are not as spectacular as aspens at their peak, cottonwoods are nevertheless impressive trees. They combine sculptural forms, deeply textured limbs and trunks, and a world-weary dignity that comes from years of Utah summers and winters.



Cottonwoods #3, Capitol Reef, 2015

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About This Portfolio

I took the photographs in this portfolio on trips to southern Utah in 2014, 2015, and 2016. I used a Nikon D800E camera, chosen because of the high resolution of the sensor. I used 50mm and 85mm prime lenses and 45mm and 50mm perspective control lenses. I processed the photographs in Adobe Photoshop using the Nik Collection of plug-ins, in particular Silver Efex Pro 2. I composed the text in this book in Optima using Adobe InDesign.

You can find many of these photographs, along with dozens of photographs of other beautiful places, on the website at nigrumetalbum.com. If you would like to track my photographic activities, you may follow me on Twitter (twitter.com/sashleyphotos) or on Instagram ([instagram.com/sashleyphotos](https://www.instagram.com/sashleyphotos)). You can reach me by email at stephen.ashley@strattonpress.com.

This portfolio and many other photographs are available for purchase on the website, nigrumetalbum.com, and on Etsy at [nigrumetalbum.etsy.com](https://www.etsy.com/shop/nigrumetalbum). Printed versions of my photography books are available at www.blurb.com/user/store/sashley; pdf versions of the same books are available for free at nigrumetalbum.com/books.

About the Photographer

When I was a young teenager, my parents rented a house with a bomb shelter in the basement. I discovered that when I turned off the lights, the bomb shelter was perfectly black, and I realized that it would make an ideal darkroom. I assembled one, using a Kodak slide projector as an enlarger. The light from the projector burned so brightly that it solarized the enlarging paper. Thus began my photographic avocation.

During my career I engaged in many occupations—fire fighter, typesetter, lawyer, writer, publisher, law professor, software developer, flight instructor—but all the while I honed my photographic skills. After a serious illness forced me to give up my law-related work, my retirement gave me the opportunity to devote my time to expanding my portfolio and to finding an audience for my photographs.

I had no formal education in photography but learned from many teachers. My primary mentor was my uncle, Roy Stratton, who freely shared with me his deep knowledge of photography. In the 1970s and 1980s the University of California Extension programs at Berkeley and Santa Cruz offered a wide selection of short courses on various aspects of photography, and I enrolled in several. These courses gave me the opportunity to meet and learn from Stuart Scofield, Mark Citret, and others. I also had the good fortune to attend a Friends of Photography program, where I met Ruth Bernhard, Morley Baer, John Sexton, Marilyn Bridges, and William Christenberry. More recently, in 2014, 2015, and 2016, I travelled to Moab, Utah, to attend the Moab Photography Symposium, where I had an opportunity to photograph with Judith Zimmerman, Colleen Miniuk-Sperry, Bruce Hucko, and Guy Tal.

During three annual visits to southern Utah, Stephen S. Ashley photographed the natural features that caught his eye—the arches and buttresses in Arches National Park, the cliffs and canyons in Canyonlands National Park and Capitol Reef National Park, and across the region the Colorado River and its canyon and the constantly changing weather. This book contains 30 photographs that he took on his visits to the Colorado Plateau.

This book was created to accompany a portfolio containing these 30 images. The images are not organized chronologically or geographically but rather appear in this book in the order in which they appear in the portfolio, grouped in a way that makes sense thematically.

In these pages Ashley shares the experience of taking these photographs and provides a brief account of the making of each of these photographs, including descriptions of the techniques used to take and process them.

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