

# CONTEMPLATIONS

A VISUAL ODYSSEY IN BLACK AND WHITE

**BY GEORGE H. VAGO**

WITH A FOREWORD BY ERIC BIGGERSTAFF

*For*  
*the memory of my late father,*  
*Joseph Vago,*  
*an art enthusiast and respected street photographer,*  
*who strongly influenced my photographic vision*  
*and technical development.*  
*He taught me sensitivity to my surroundings and was*  
*a guiding light in my early years.*

# Stopping the Truck

A Foreword by Eric Biggerstaff

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It is just after dawn on the last day of a photo trip to the Colorado high country when the voice of George Vago breaks the silence in my car. We have been traveling in separate trucks on this trip and communicating via “walkie-talkie” due to the large amount of photographic equipment we each take on journeys such as this. Being large format photographers, it is just part of the normal process. The bumpy dirt road leading to Crested Butte is not offering much inspiration and my desire for smooth pavement is outweighing my need to make more images, but George’s voice brings me around, “Pull off just ahead. I saw something I want to photograph”.

Following his instructions, I find a wide spot on the road and pull off. Looking out my window, I am not excited by what falls within sight. However, glancing in the rear view mirror I see George already out of his truck and checking things out so I too exit for a look. There, sitting on the edge of a beautiful stand of large Colorado blue spruce trees is the white skeleton of a tree long ago dead. It is the perfect counterpoint to the dark green trees surrounding it and for the next hour we make several images along this stretch of lonely road.

The famous photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson coined a term known as the “decisive moment”, meaning that a photographer has to have an instinctive understanding of when the precise time is to press the shutter release

on the camera in order to capture the subject at a time of maximum impact. Great photographs come from great moments.

While this may be true, it does a poor job of explaining the first part of the process which is what to point the camera at to begin with. Ansel Adams’s historic image, “Moonrise Hernandez, New Mexico”, would not be so impactful if the image were simply “Hernandez, New Mexico”. That moon is what the image is all about. Adams knew about Hernandez and had a feeling that if the light was right, and the moon was where it should be, then a great image was to be had. His intuition told him where he should be and in which direction he should point the lens. Then his great skill as a photographer, having learned his craft over many years, allowed him to capture the scene and create the famous image we know today.

A talented photographer intuitively understands what to point the camera at, and when to trip the shutter. It is the inner voice that we listen to. George Vago has excellent intuition.

This is plainly evident when looking at his images, a body of work which spans a number of decades. From his earliest prints to those made only recently, George has had a remarkably consistent vision that has translated into a style which sets his work apart from those of us who may have the skill but lack the insight of knowing what will make

an exceptional photograph. Whether it is Russian peasants in Siberia, the great mountains of Alaska, the snow-covered peaks of the Rockies or ghost towns in California, George has explored them all with his camera and his innate understanding of what will work as a photograph allows the viewer to explore these areas and come away with a fresh perspective on each.

To watch George work in the field is to see a person completely at ease, a person so comfortable with a process as to have it become as natural as breathing. Anyone who is a photographer, or has spent time with one, knows that photography is not exactly an action sport. My family gave up going on field trips with me years ago due to the sheer boredom of the process. But being with George and observing him work is anything but boring to another photographer. He goes about creating his art in a quiet, confident way. He sees in his mind the image he wants to make, works out the angles, determines the position and lens, then completes the act by exposing his sheet of film. The process may appear very simple, but to become so fluid in using large format photographic equipment takes many years of practice, working to get to a point where the process is no longer a hindrance to the act of creating.

Despite advances in digital image making, George continues to prefer film over pixels when working with a camera. In fact, George designs and builds his own lightweight 4X5 inch format cameras. While not against the advances digital photography has made, he knows that film still enables an experienced photographer the ability to make a negative with an exceptionally long tonal scale, which in turn allows a master darkroom technician to realize a meaningful final print.

A photographic negative is simply an untold story, and until it becomes a print, the story remains silent. It is the responsibility of the photographer and printmaker to bring the story to life, to give it a voice.

George is a gifted storyteller who has no interest in using photography as a means of simply recording a moment in time. His desire is to take the image he captured on film and transform it into a work of art, to move beyond what it represents to something more.

Creating the final print is what brings his initial intuition to life. By combining contrast (the range of light tones to dark), dodging (lightening tonal values in a portion of the image) and burning (darkening tonal values in a portion of the print), George is able to direct the viewers attention to the primary subject of his image. A skilled printmaker is able to do all of this without the viewer even knowing what is happening. The print manipulations are so subtle that to the average person they are all but undetectable.

George is a bold printer whose imagery grabs the viewer’s attention. His work is rarely subtle and is never dull. The light he prefers to work in and the compositions he tends to favor lend themselves to strong prints with more tones on the upper and lower ends of the scale and with the mid-tones acting more as a transition to the others. His style falls clearly in the “West Coast” tradition of printing, which favors stronger contrast and bolder imagery as practiced by Ansel Adams. George knew many of those artists and his style was influenced by them, Morley Baer perhaps most prominent among them.

Mastering the technical skills of photography is within most people’s reach. However, it requires some instruction and a great deal of practice. What separates a good image from great art are the components of emotion and intuition. George Vago has spent a lifetime not only developing the strong technical skills needed to be considered a master at his chosen craft, but also honing the talent he is blessed with, the intuitive ability to understand when to stop and get out of the truck to photograph.

He knows what makes a great image. It is part of who he is.

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## A Personal Journey

My decades long photographic career has been a journey that began as a child growing up in Budapest, Hungary where my father, and role model, was an avid and well-respected photographer. Despite his career as a chemist in the leather industry, Dad had a very strong background in the arts and possessed a keen interest in photography and darkroom printing. He loved taking his camera onto the streets of Budapest to photograph, today a practice known as “street photography”. As a child, I remember following along with him, then hurrying back to his darkroom to develop the film. My father was a talented and exquisite printer which earned him a great deal of respect within the photographic circles of Budapest.

I was allowed to help him in the darkroom where I was entrusted with the important task of washing beakers and heavy porcelain developing trays. Gradually, I moved on to polishing ferrotype plates as well. Once I had proven myself a good assistant, he allowed me to watch him print which was my first lesson in photography. Strange as it may seem, I learned to print before I learned to photograph. His lessons were well learned and now, all these decades later, I still use many of the techniques he taught me.

I am grateful to my dad for his photographic guidance. His critiques of my images helped to shape my photographic vision and technical expertise, both of which have served as a firm foundation for my photographic development.

Unfortunately, under Hungary’s Communist government, as the son of a member of one of its politically undesirable groups, I would have been prevented from moving onto a university level education. Consequently, I entered a vocational school at age 14 from which I graduated as a tool, die, and instrument maker.

During the 1956 Hungarian uprising, I embarked on a very perilous journey in which I departed from my native land. Leaving behind its dark authoritarian, oppressive and threatening regime, I escaped to the United States to begin

a new life. There I began studies in Aerospace Engineering. Subsequently, I was working in various engineering, chief engineering and CEO positions prior to establishing my own engineering firm. Nevertheless, my love of photography remained strong and I practiced it at every opportunity.

While running my own company, I had another goal which was to become a photographic art teacher. I enrolled in San Jose State University as a graduate student under Reed Estabrook, Dean of the Faculty at the time, to pursue an MFA degree. Unfortunately, due to deep artistic differences between me and the university I decided to leave, my goal unrealized. Nevertheless, over the years I have had many opportunities to teach others techniques that have served me well. I am grateful to my students and I hope many of them are continuing to follow their own journey in the photographic arts.

Being an avid outdoors person and hiker, my own inclination was to photograph landscapes. A turning point arrived in my photographic development, one that certainly amplified my love of landscape photography. I enrolled in a series of Ansel Adams photography workshops. These classes significantly added to my technical knowledge. Adams’s vision and approach to landscapes was unique. His pursuit of technical expertise and mastery of his materials was paramount to him being able to realize his grand vision of America. Being a technically oriented person myself, I enthusiastically embraced his methods and applied them to my own work process.

Years later, almost parallel with running my engineering firm, I started a commercial photo studio, “Visions Unlimited”. My new company was devoted to working with advertising firms that were seeking product and interior photography. Although successful and in demand, the pressure of the advertising field took a toll on my health and seriously encroached on my fine art. In my rare spare time during this period, I pursued my interest in landscape photography until

one day my father persuaded me to abandon my commercial studio and concentrate on the activities I loved the most.

Soon after closing my studio, I was introduced to the respected architectural and landscape photographer, Morley Baer, by my close friend and mentor Marvin Wax. Marvin was a well-known graphic art designer and landscape photographer in the San Francisco bay area. After spending time with Morley, I quickly embraced and adopted his simplified, streamlined approach to photography. Morley’s reluctance to use filters, unless absolutely necessary and his desire to work with very basic equipment became hallmarks of my practice as well.

Reflecting on those early dreary years in my native homeland, I realized that those times had left an indelible mark on my printing style. My printing had evolved into a bold and dramatic approach characterized by strong contrast. Morley, a photographer with strength of character if ever there was one, supported my printing methods and encouraged me to continue with them and refine them. He urged me to follow my instincts so that I would identify with the approaches that gave me the most personal satisfaction.

In subsequent years, I had the pleasure of meeting and spending time with Oliver Gagliani, a photographer who unlocked an additional path that led me to see things differently. Oliver’s style was a departure from grandiose vistas. He found art, satisfaction and intrigue in subjects that represented just a fraction of the larger scene. His mastery of isolated compositions inspired yet another fruitful avenue for me to explore.

In 1991, an unusual opportunity arose. A short time after the end of Communism in Russia and the beginning of “Glasnost” (transparency), I was privileged to become one of five photographers invited by the Russian government to travel in Central Siberia for six weeks and photograph in locations where no westerners had laid foot for over seventy years. Eastman Kodak and Minolta, among others, sponsored this expedition.

Our sponsors selected me based on my merits as a landscape photographer. In view of what I was facing on my

arrival in a part of Siberia that did not have very inspiring landscapes, I drew upon my early exposure to street photography and decided to work on an environmental portraiture series. This Siberian collection became an independent portfolio that was immensely successful as a traveling exhibit. It was shown in many parts of the United States.

After relocating from the West Coast to Denver, Colorado, I became aware that the years were piling up and the weight of my large format cameras was proving to be entirely too much for me as I hiked and continued to concentrate on my art in Colorado’s many inviting landscapes.

Naturally, I put my engineering hat back on and designed two different cameras, one an all-aluminum monorail and the other, a carbon fiber-phenolic modified flat bed, each weighing less than 3 pounds and each within an ounce of the other. My primary choice is a 4X5 film format. Very occasionally, I also use medium format.

Since childhood, I have been enamored with machining and fabrication. Still owning some machinery, I called up on my machining skills and I set out to fabricate these two cameras. Importantly at my age, they are very light, have extensive movements and are designed around my personal needs. I have been using these two cameras for a number of years now with great success. Above all, these cameras have largely enabled me to prolong my photographic activity primarily in Colorado, one of America’s most beautiful and image rich states.

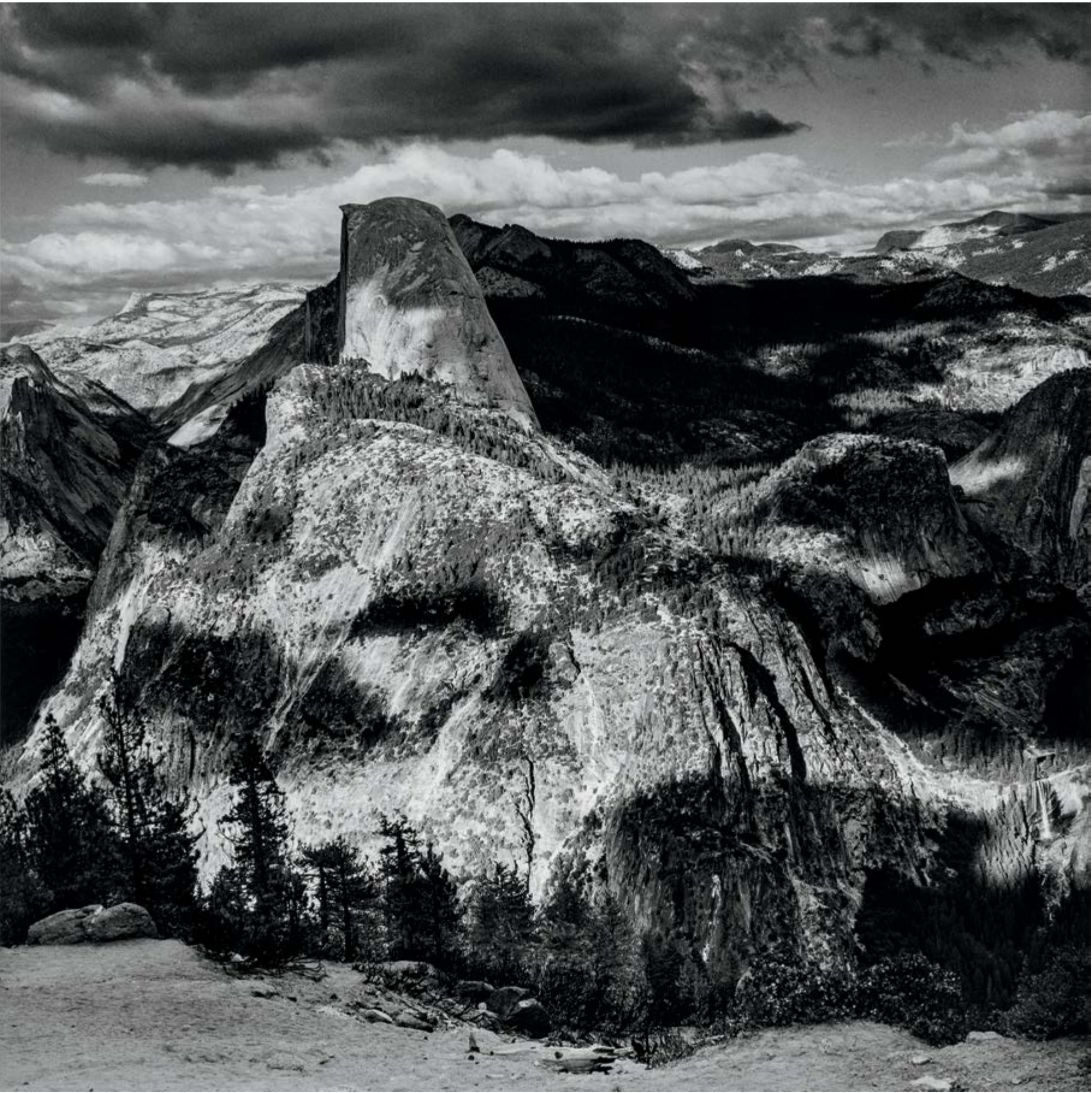
Over the years my printing and composition style gained substantial recognition. I have successfully exhibited in numerous shows and galleries and my work hangs in many private collections in the United States and abroad.

This book offers a small sample of my photographic interests and contains many representations of my lifelong devotion to the fine art of photography. My personal journey has been a long one and I hope the images within these pages will allow you to experience a few of my treasured moments in time as well as gain a little understanding regarding the development of my personal photographic style.

*George H. Vago*



6 Half Dome, Yosemite, California





8 Mt. Princeton, Colorado



10 Jasper National Park, Alberta, Canada









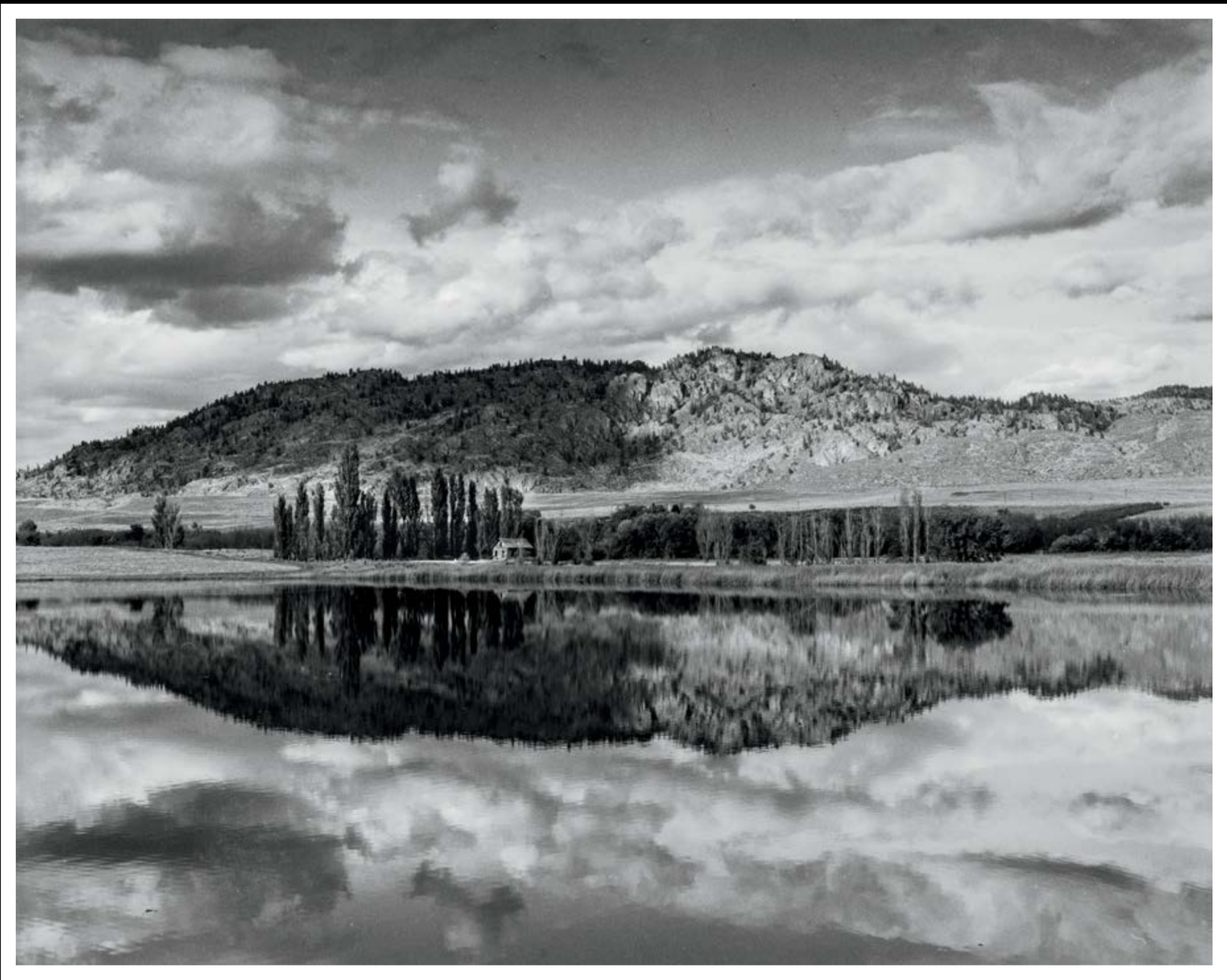
14 Jasper National Park, Alberta, Canada













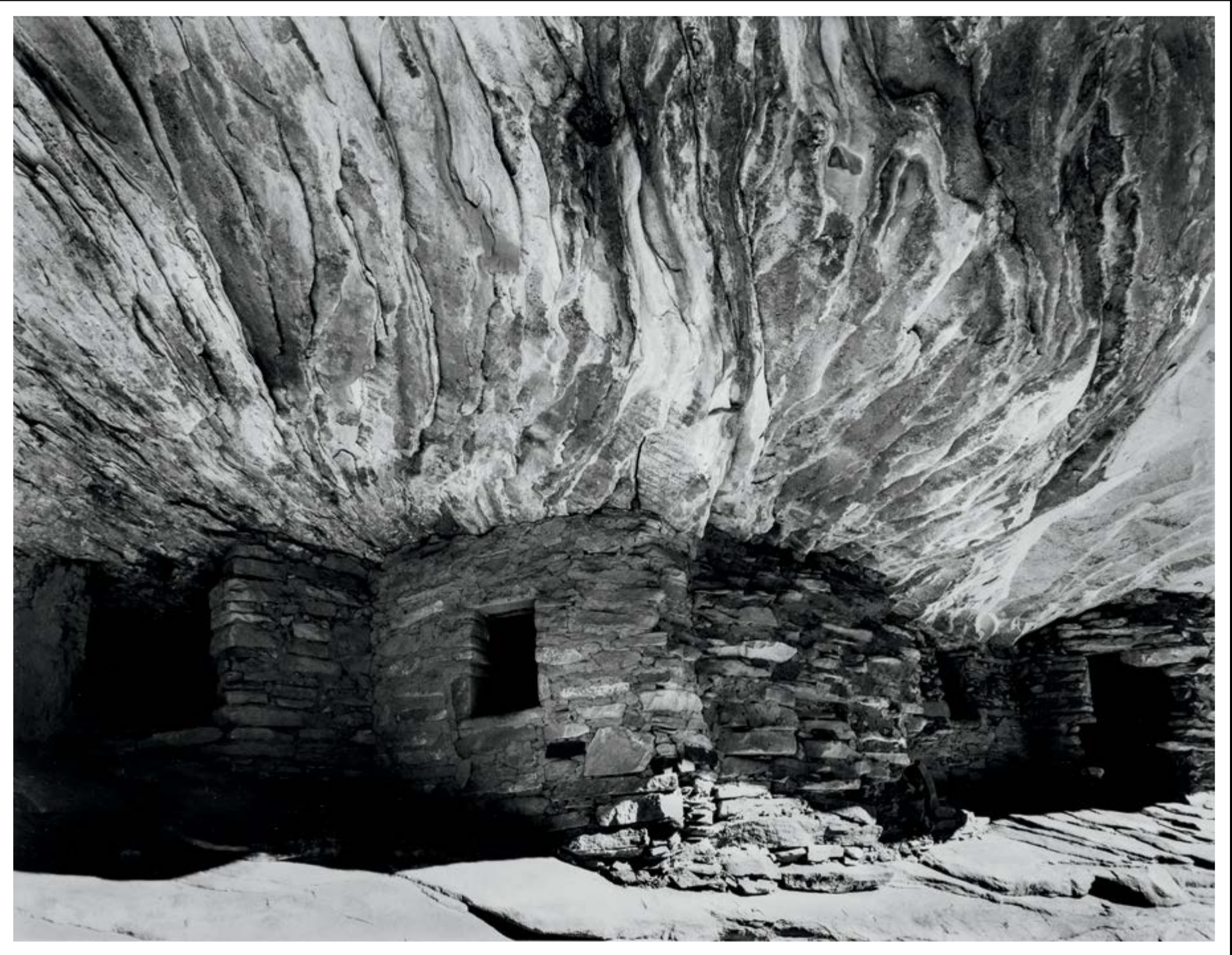


































38 Mueller State Park, Colorado



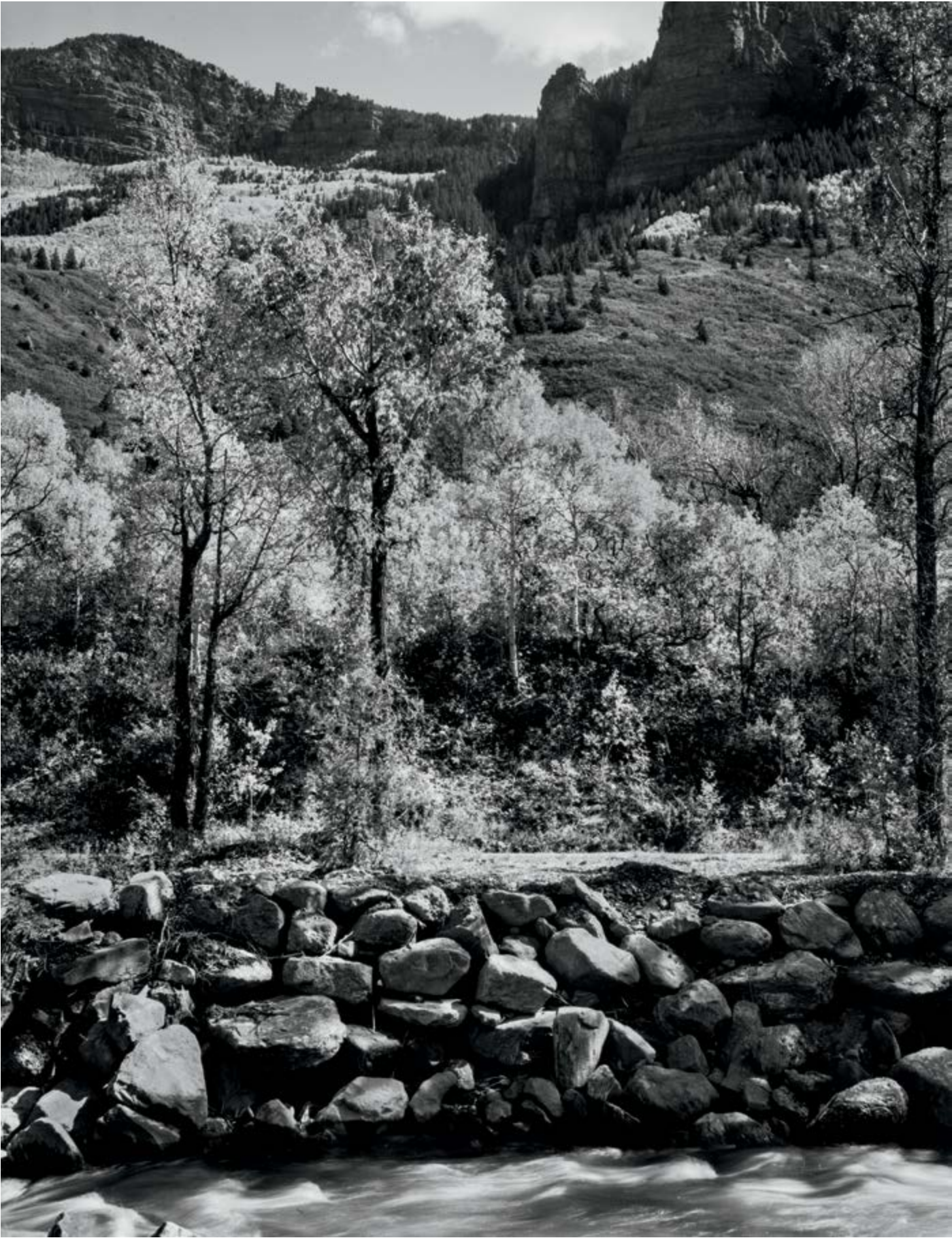




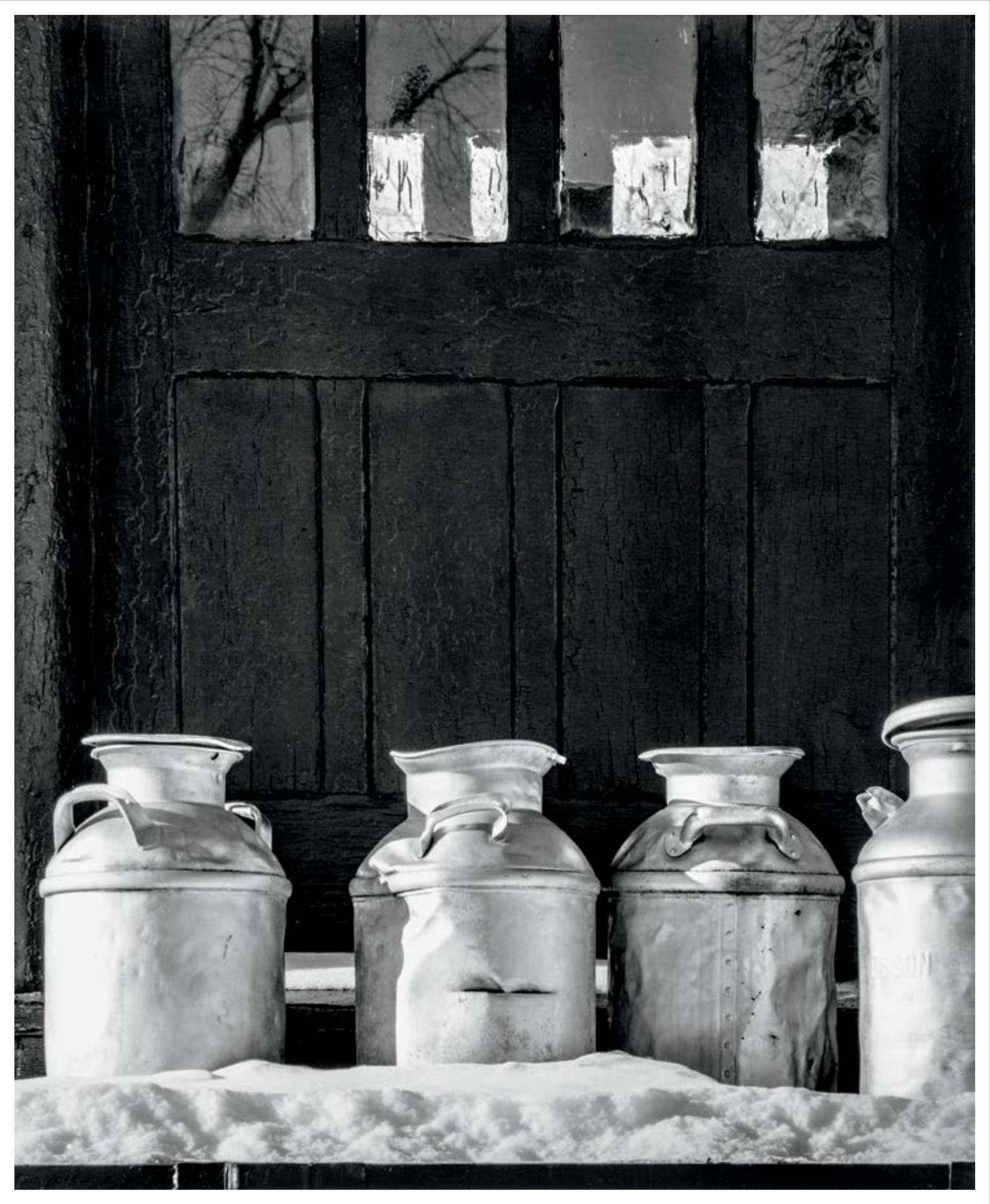






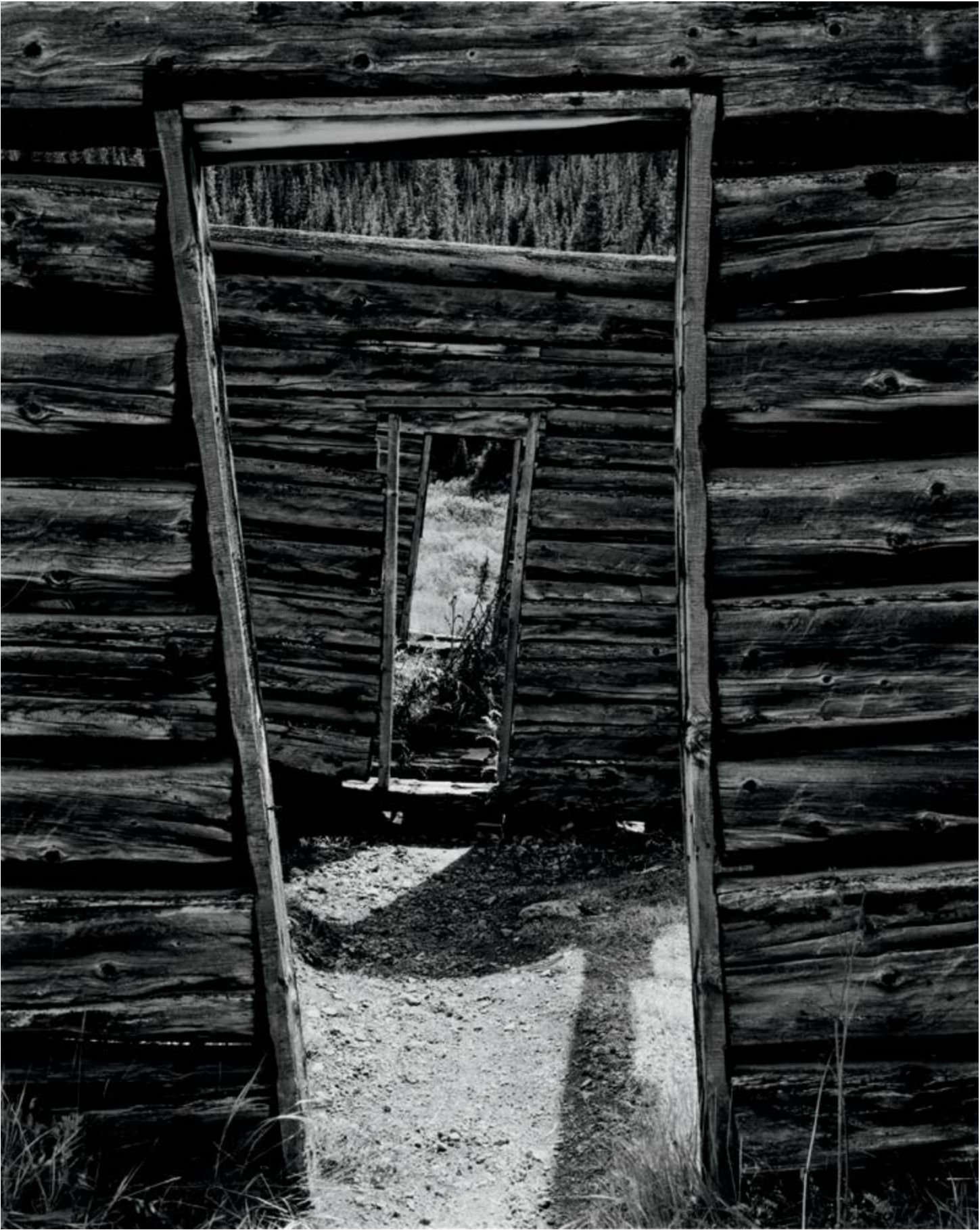




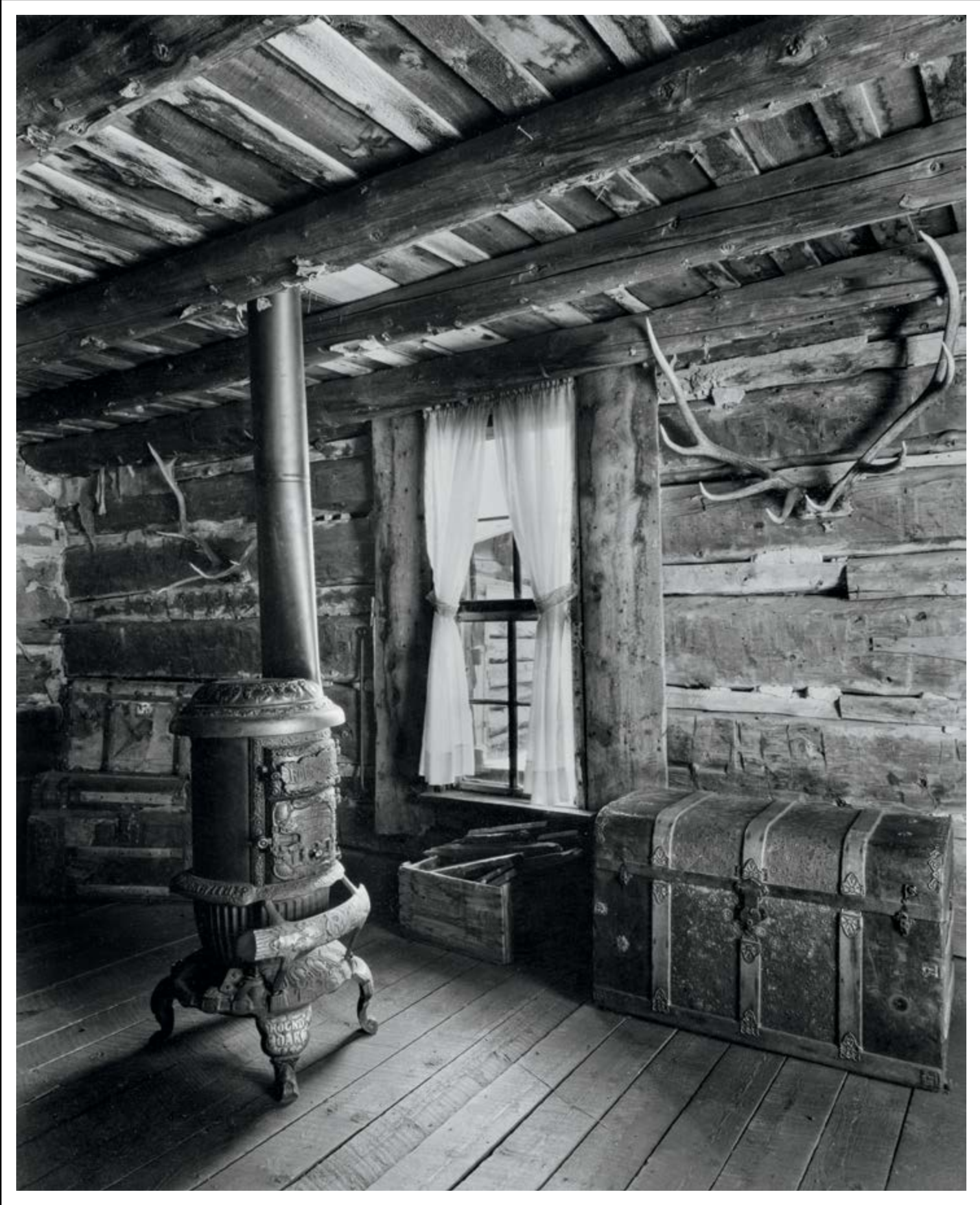
























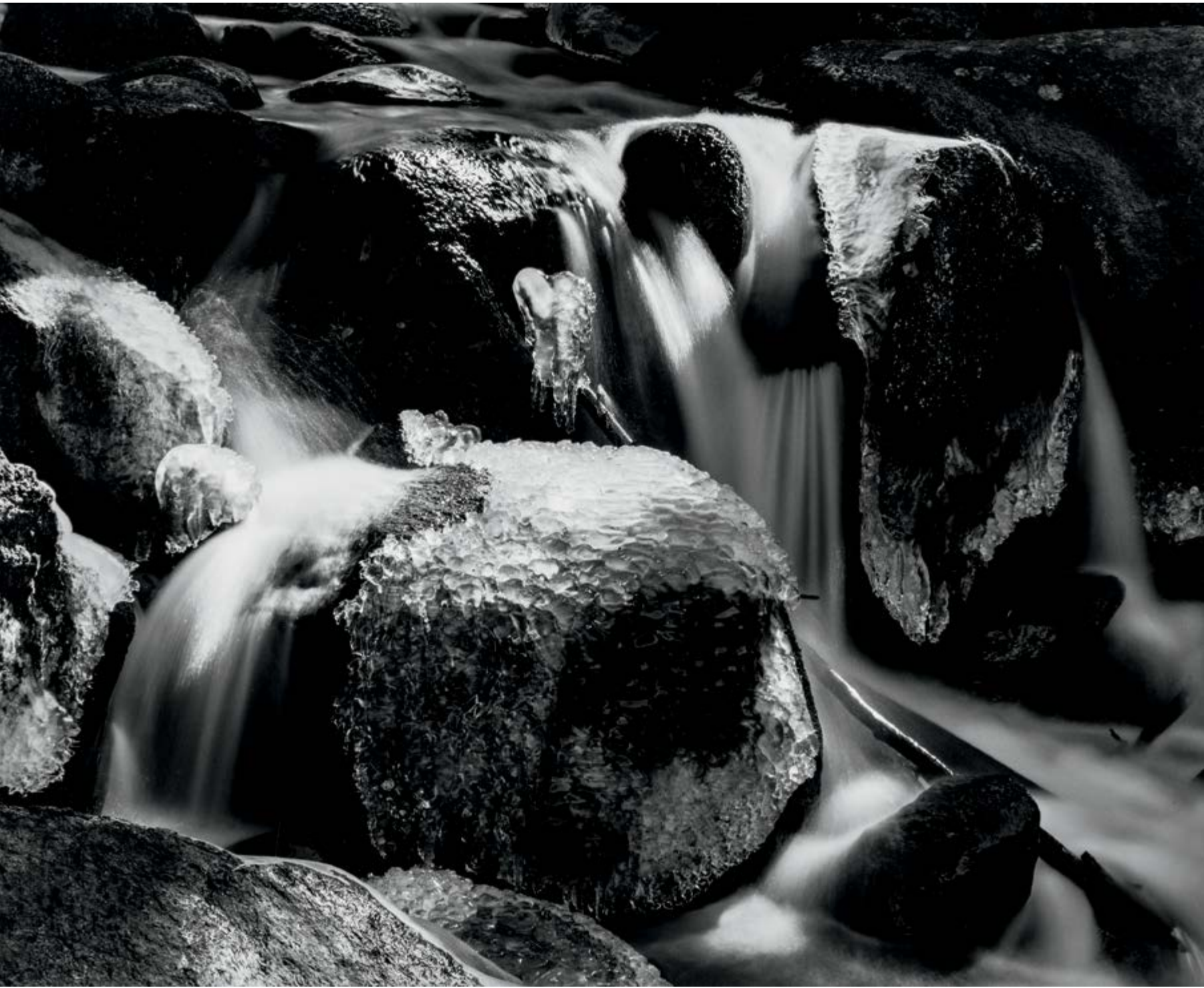








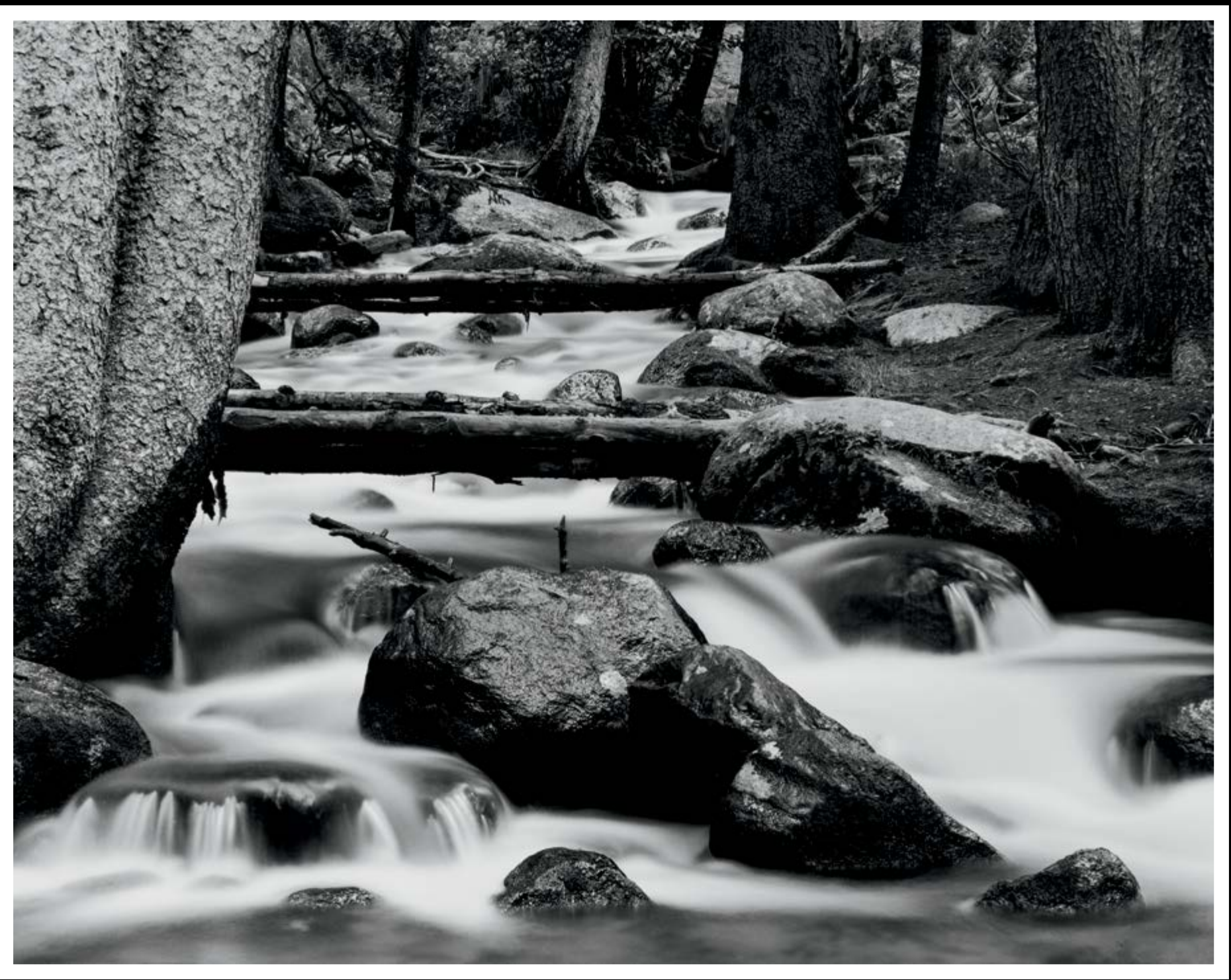




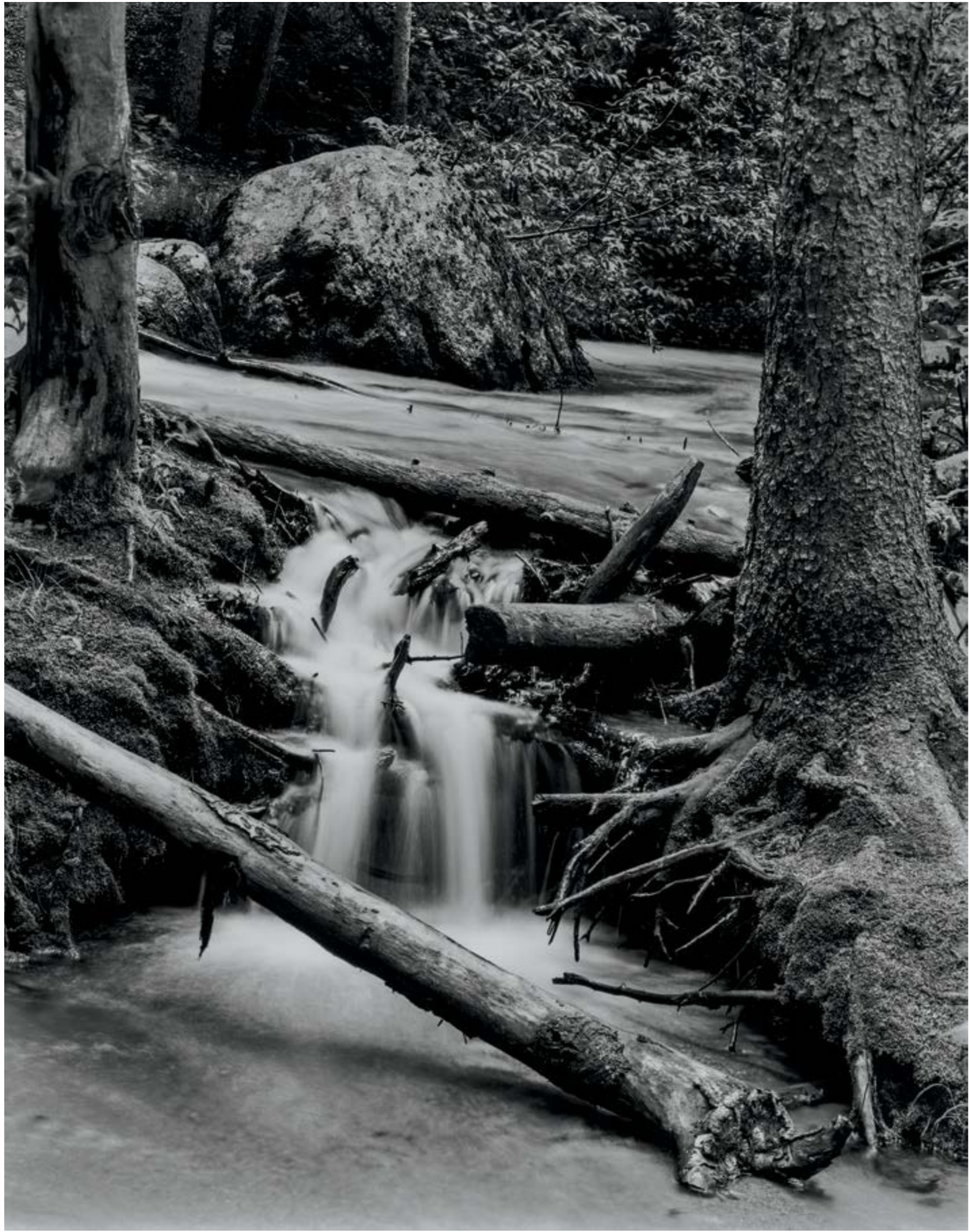
















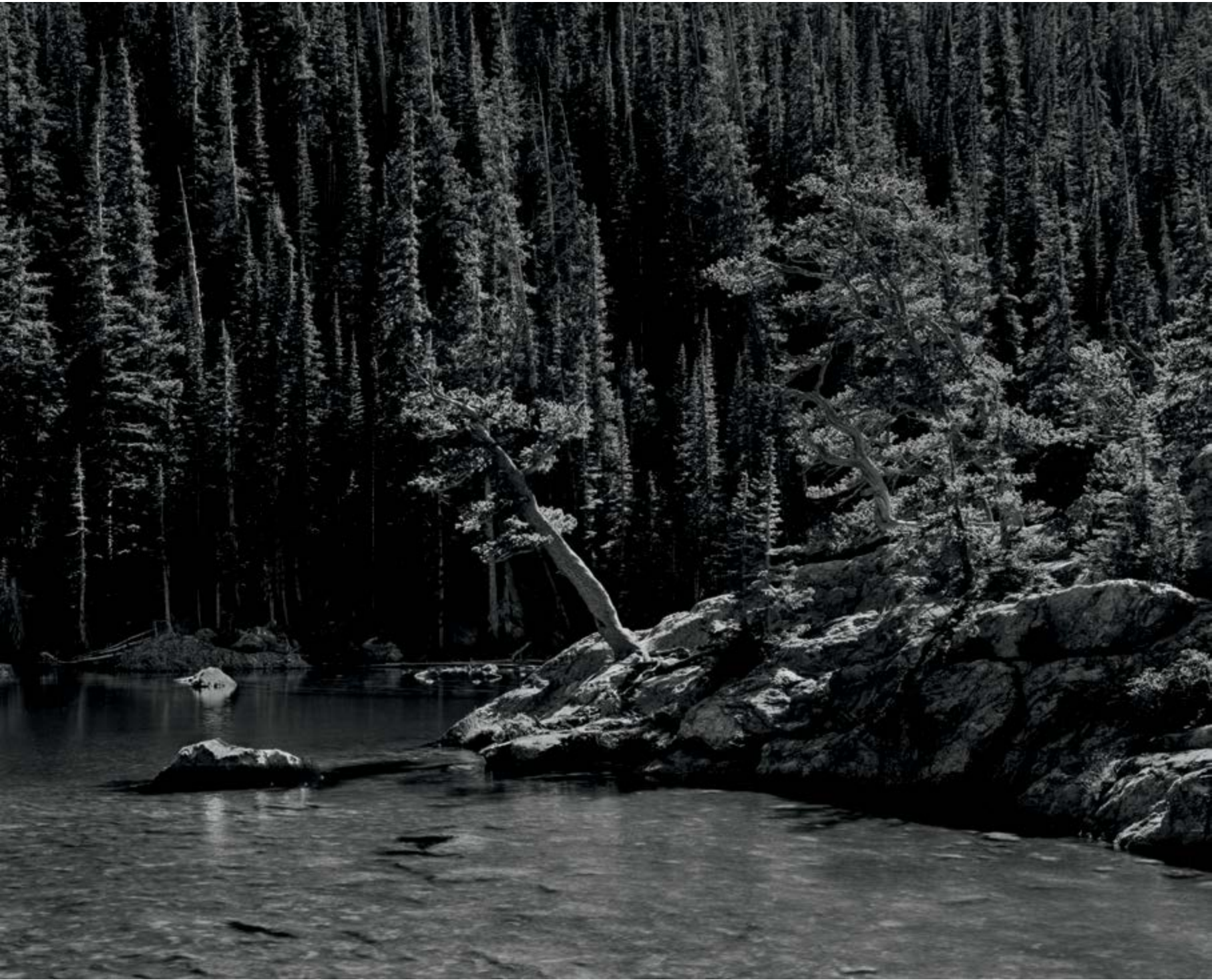




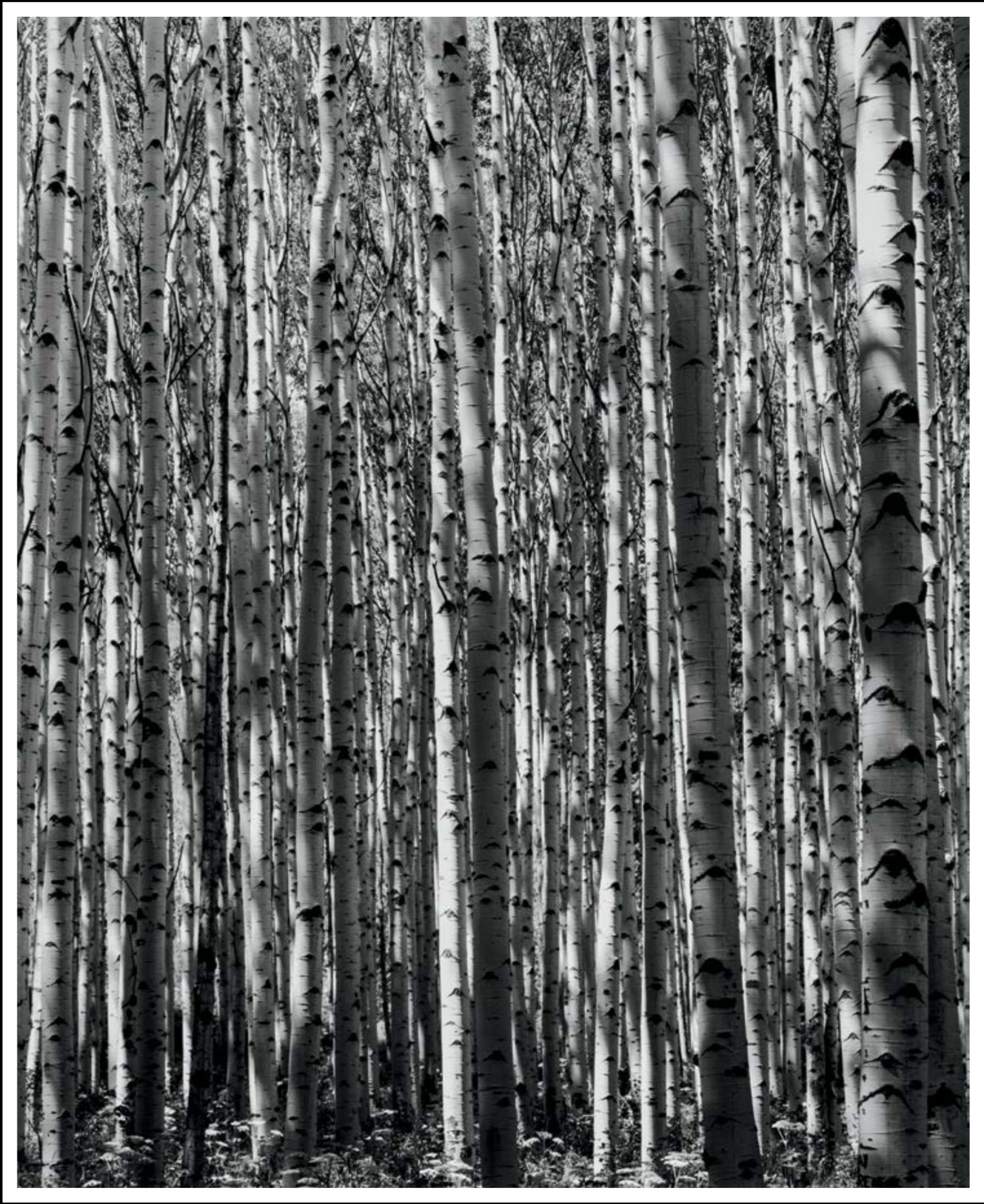












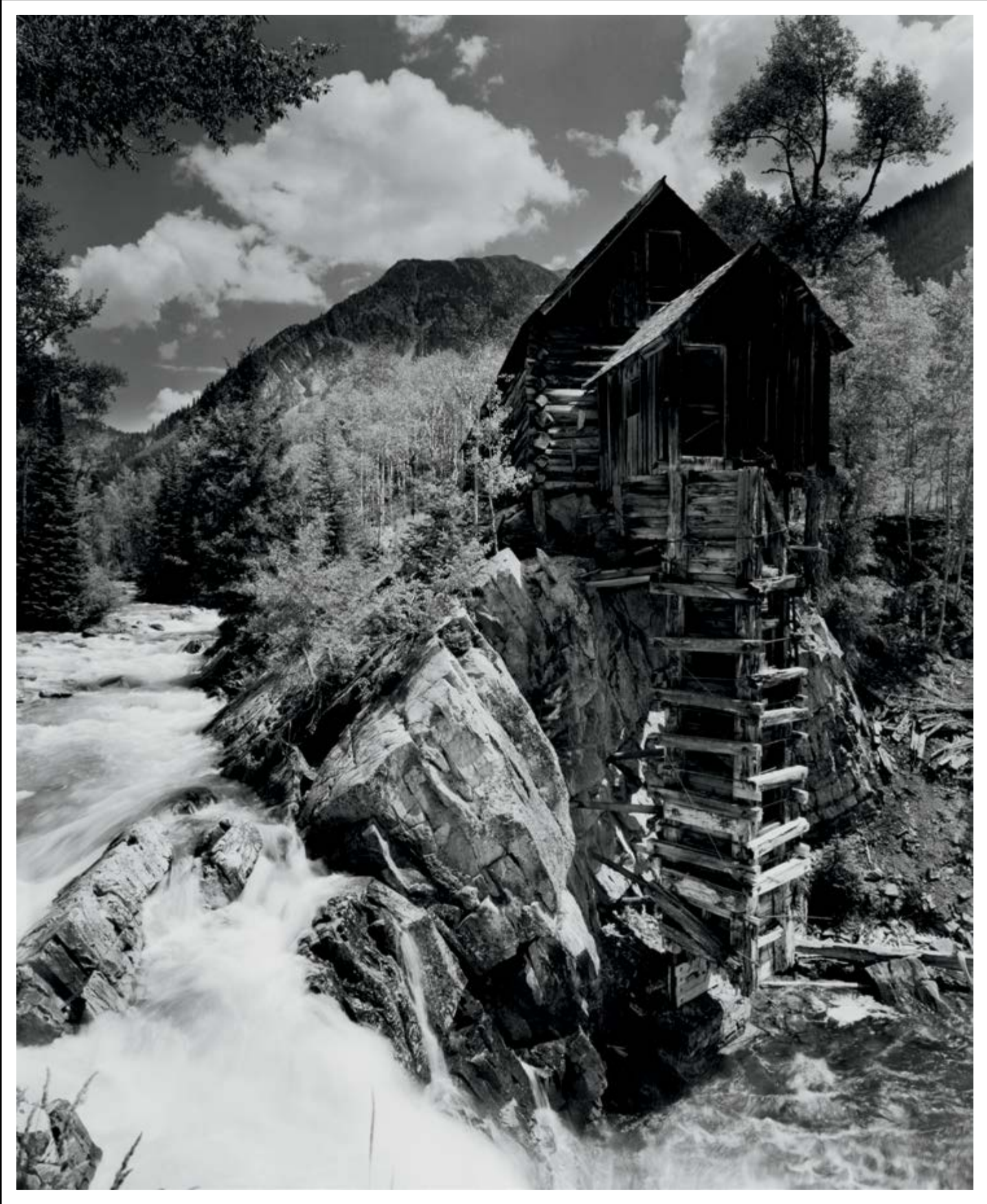




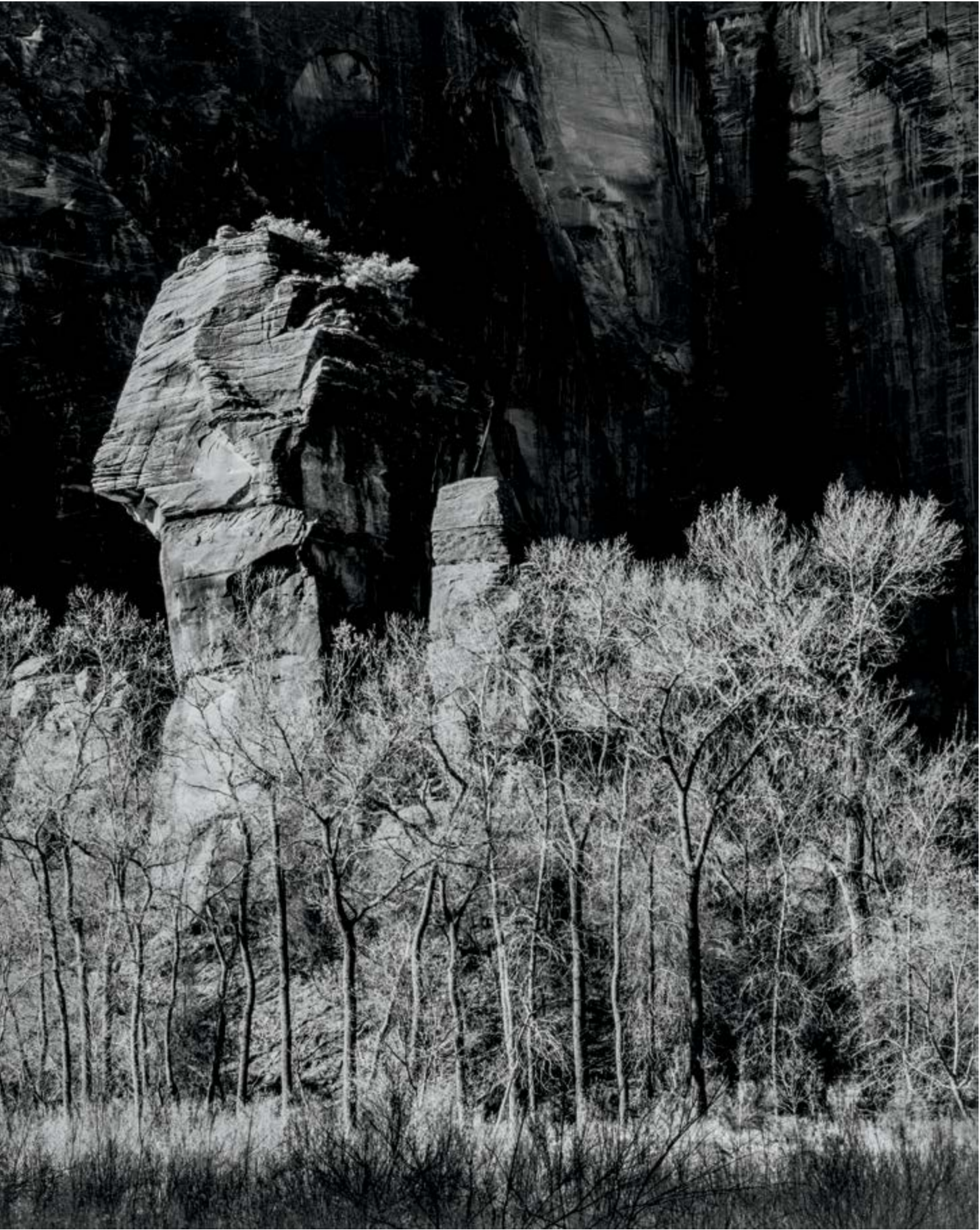




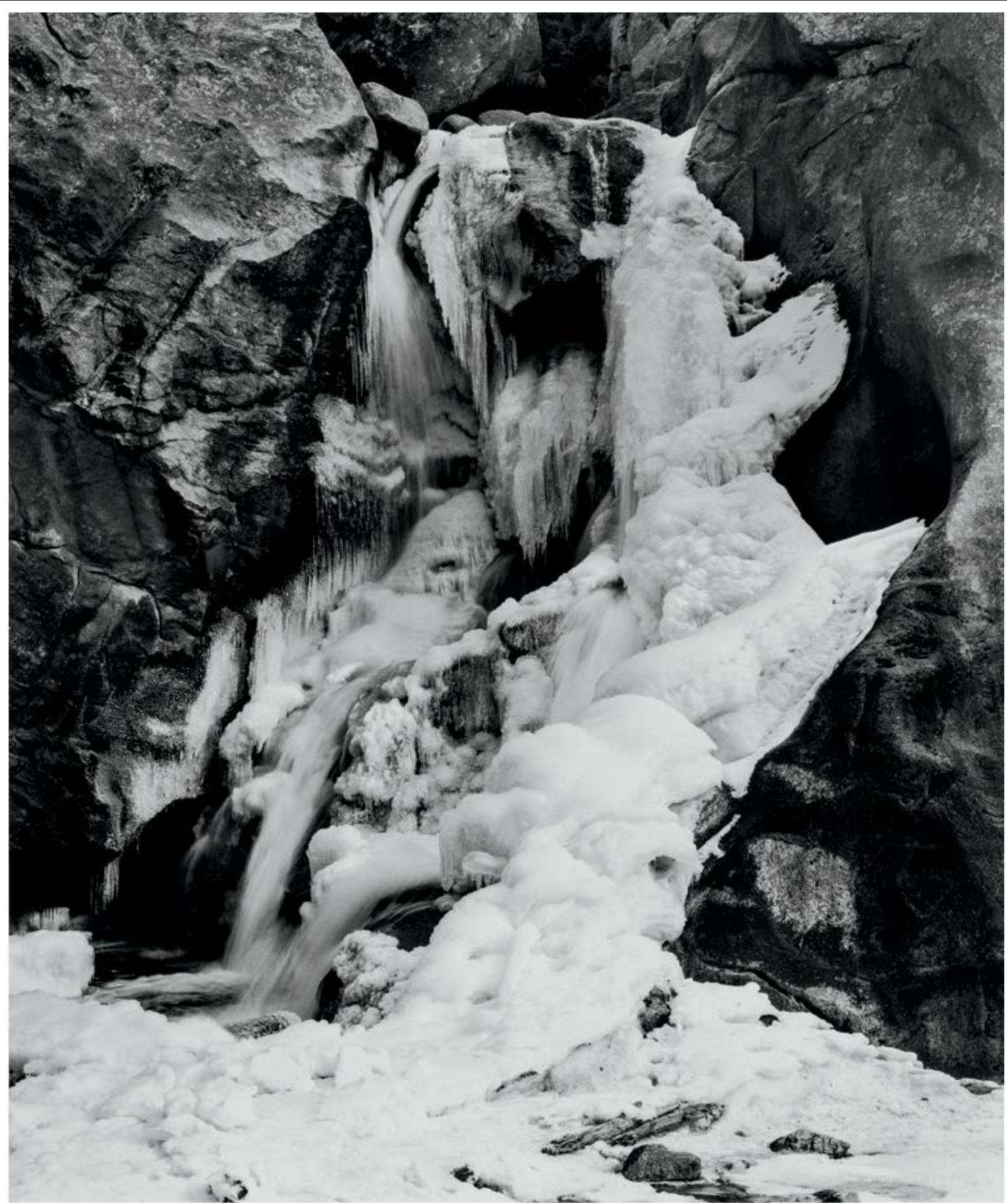




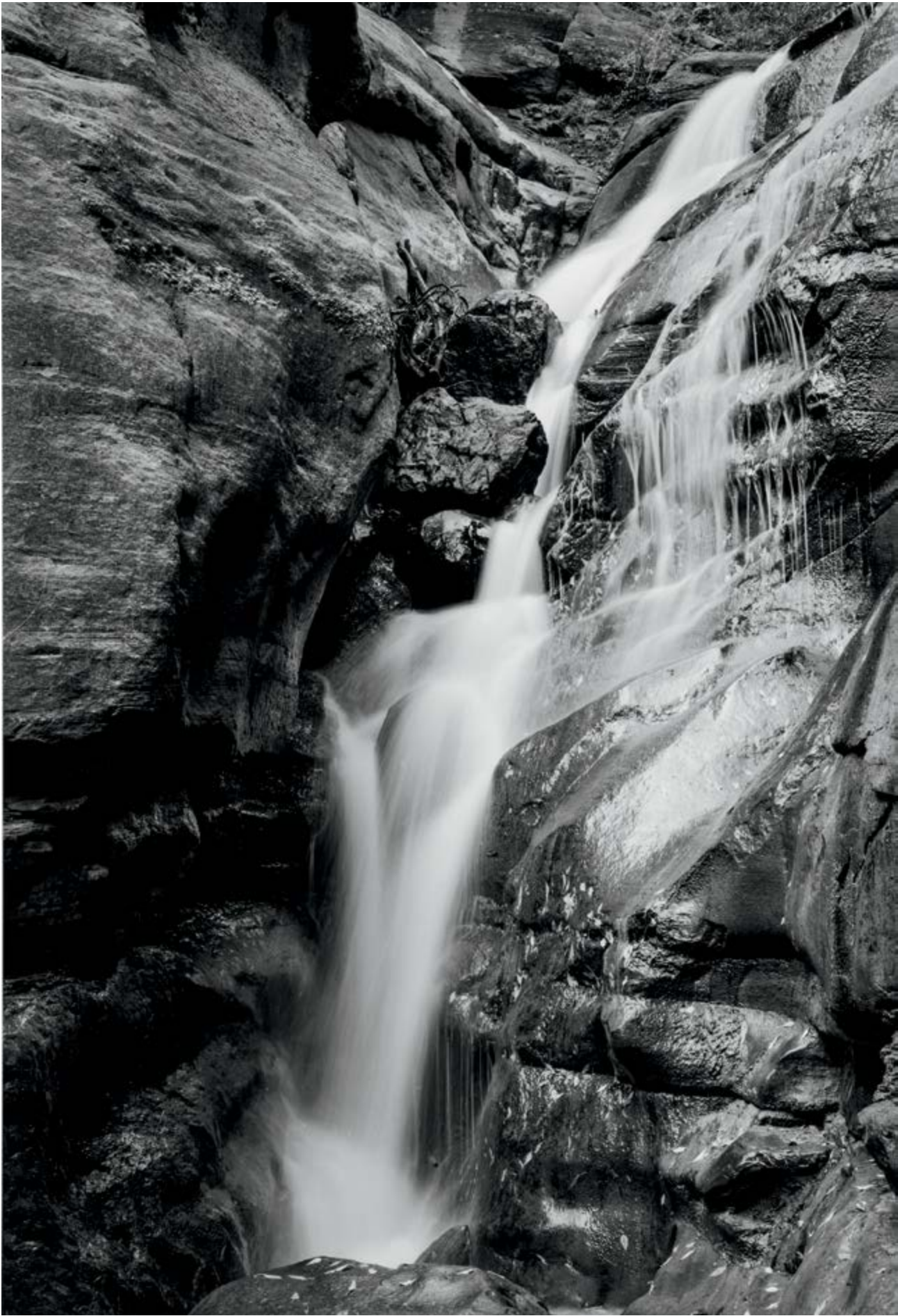




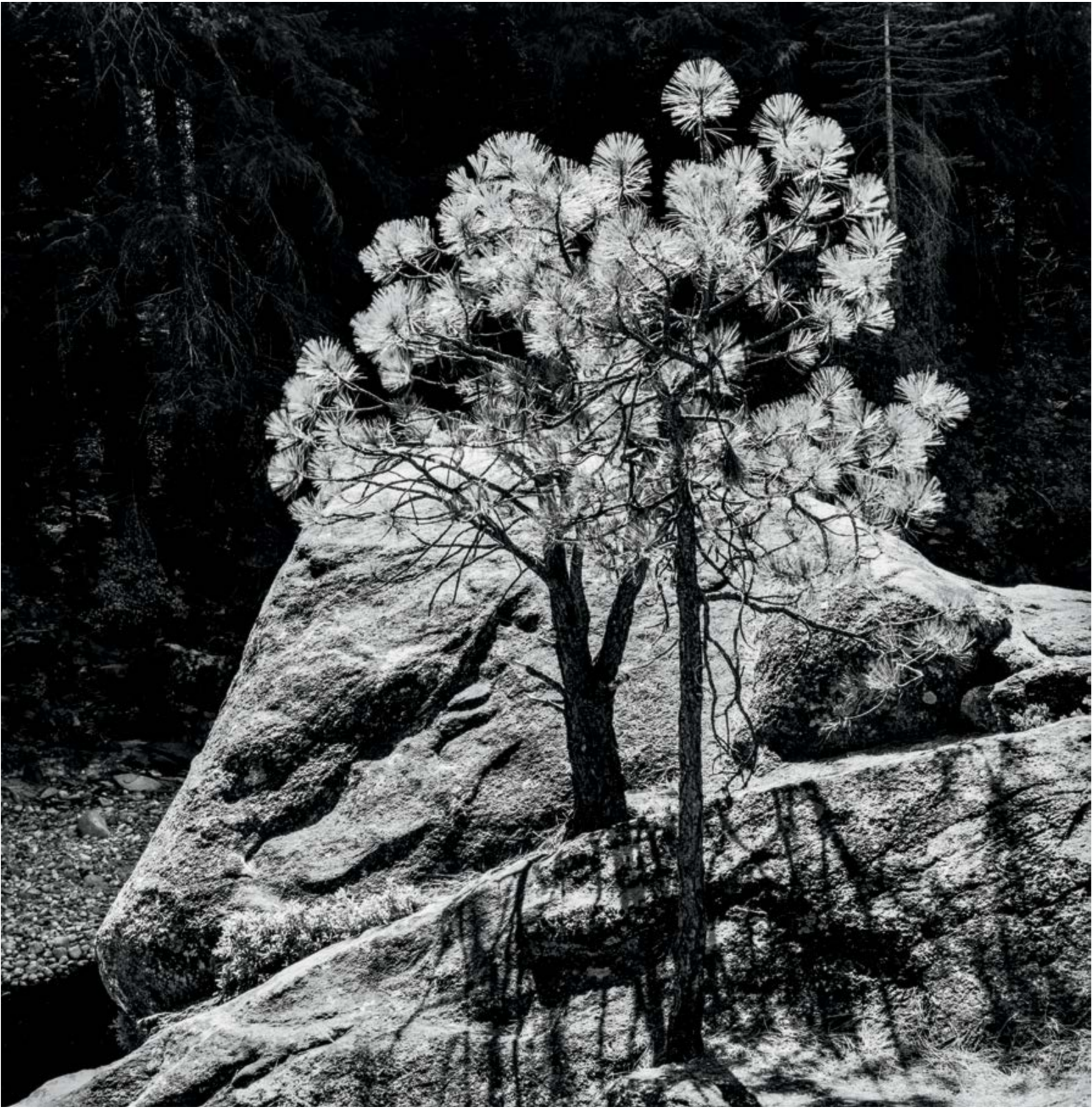












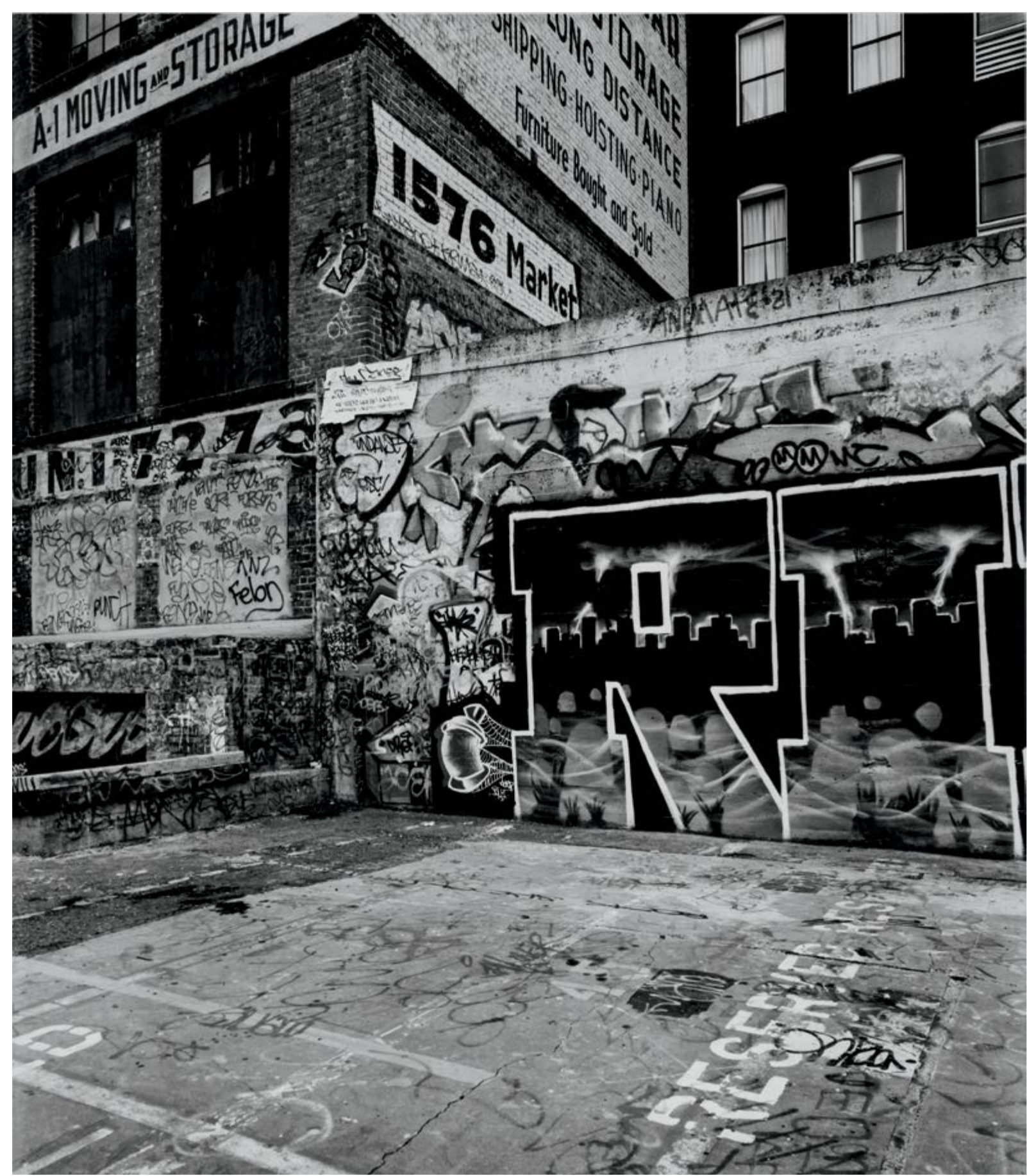




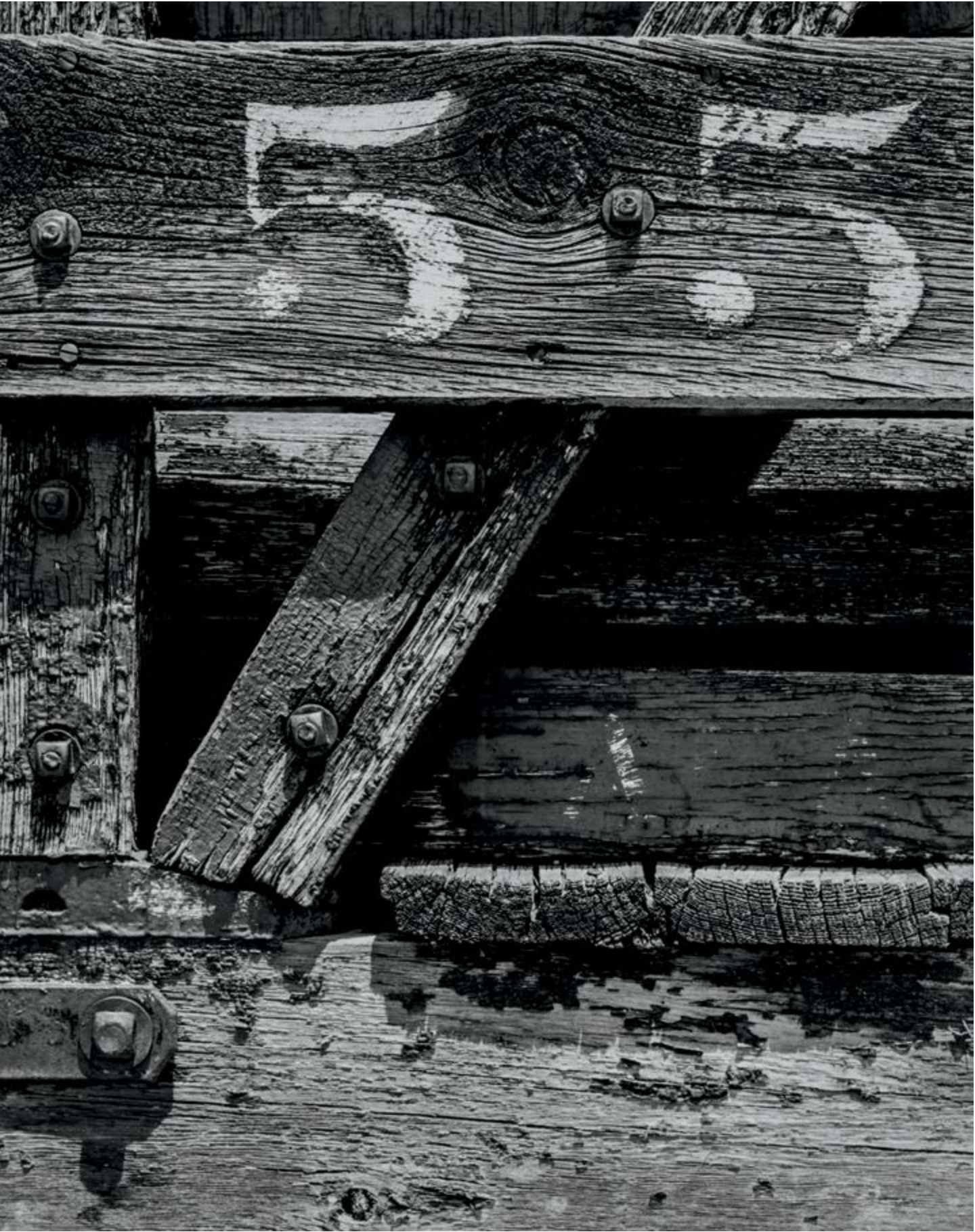


























110 Stove Pipe Wells, Death Valley, California



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114 Death Valley, California

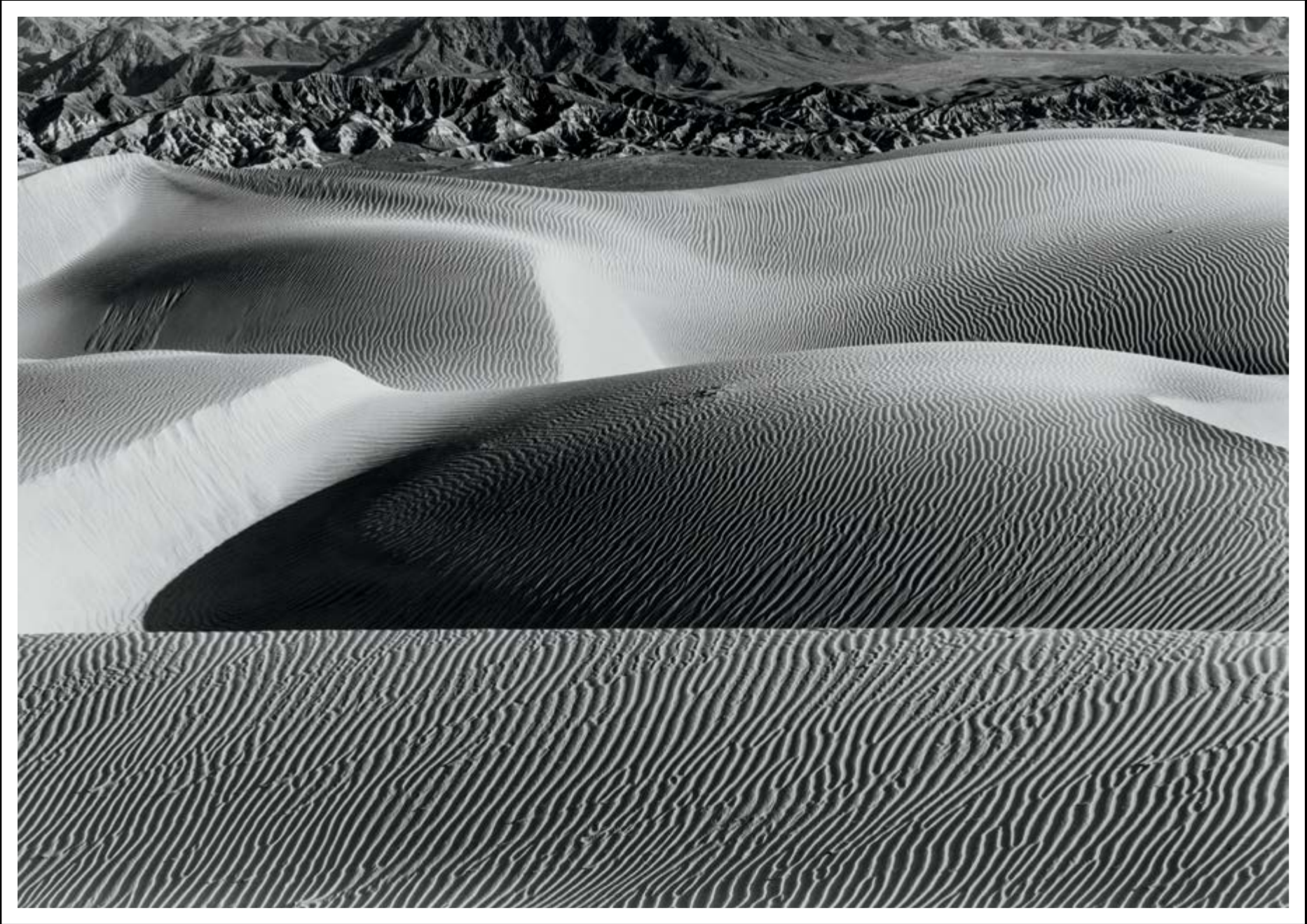


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Hanging Lake (summer), Colorado





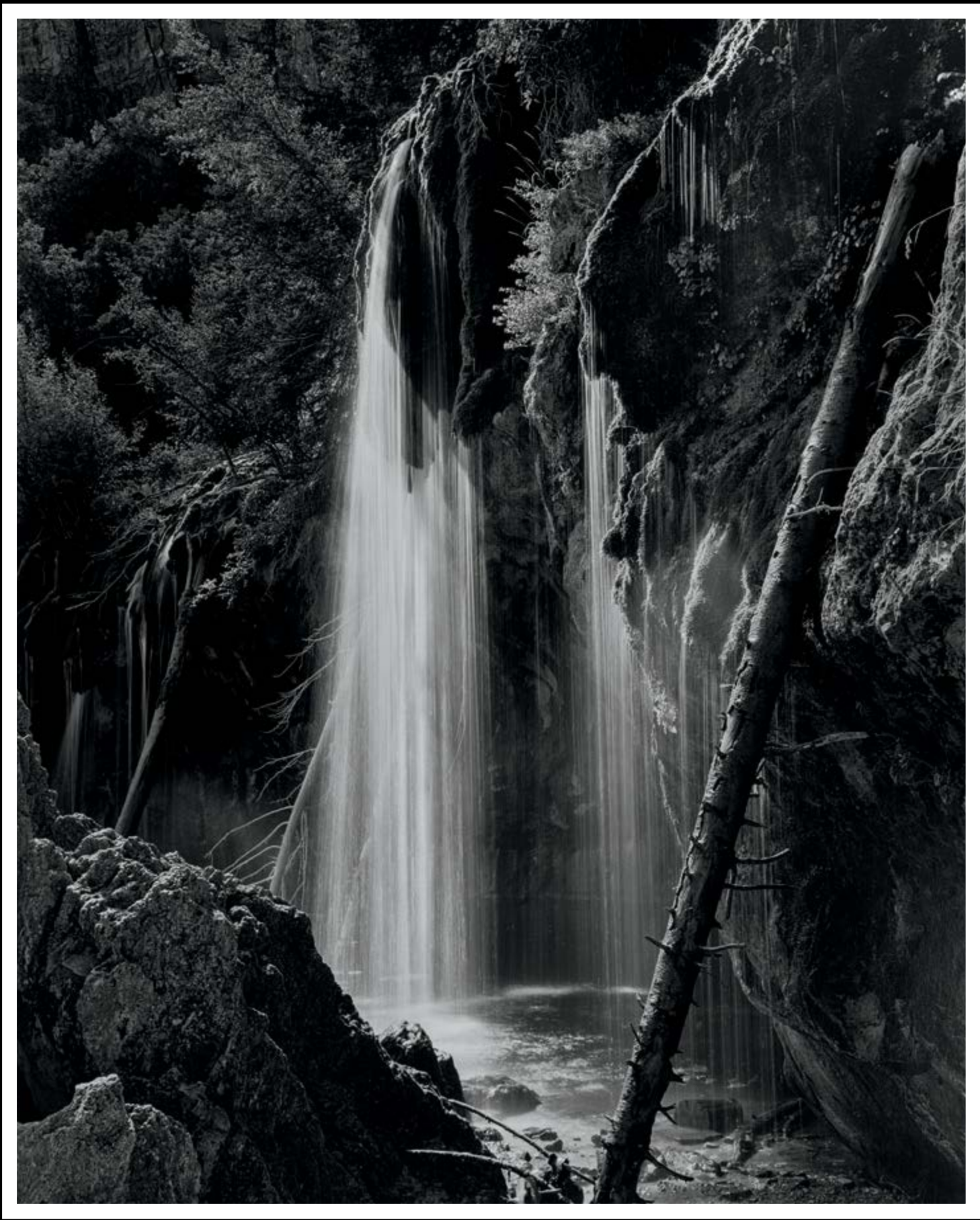








138 Hanging Lake (summer), Colorado



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### Ekaterina Rossovsкая

Ekaterina has been a very dear and valued friend for the past 25 years.

During my travels across Siberia, we first met at a big coal mining company in Krasnoyarsk, when I was negotiating for potential business collaboration. Ekaterina was their corporate interpreter.

Having traveled extensively in Russia and worldwide, on business and for leisure, Ekaterina developed a passion for photography. Although she is already an exceptionally talented and tireless photographer, Ekaterina is always on a mission to improve her photographic proficiency. She has long been one of my most creative students and I have always admired her gift for innovation, unusually keen perception and boundless desire for learning.

It is my profound pleasure to thank Ekaterina for her unselfish endless support, as the creation of Contemplations is largely the result of her vision, initiative and independent ideas.

I could not have found a better and more creative project manager, and would like to express my gratitude for her enthusiastic, generous involvement as well as her remarkable organizational and managerial talent.

The creation of this book would never have become a reality without her personal involvement.

### Sergei O. Tolstikhin

Sergei is an excellent and accomplished Graphic Artist and a talented Book Designer. I met Sergei through Ekaterina. She had associated with him for many years and, preferring his talent, she convinced him to take on the intricacies of this book's design.

Applying his broad experience and artistic creativity, Sergei threw himself into this project with a vengeance. I offer my heartfelt thanks to Sergei for his long hours and sleepless nights while working on this book, designing, arranging and adding the finishing touches, so that Contemplations could become a long awaited reality.

### Barbara Vago

Many thanks to Barbara, my wife and literary counselor, in view of the fact that English is not my native language. Her patience with me and her endurance gave me the comfort and assurance I needed to produce the legible drafts necessary for the completion of this book.



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EXHIBITS AND PUBLICATIONS

	Photographic Art Center, Carmel, California	The Medical Foundation, Palo Alto, California
	Merced County Museum, Merced, California	Center For The Arts, Benicia, California
	Getzoff and Krown Gallery, Los Angeles, California	Vigado Center Gallery, Budapest, Hungary 1996
	The Visual Art Center, Singapore	Contributing Photographer, “Inside Tennis” Magazine
	Borrone Gallery, Menlo Park, California	Gallery Concord Art Center, Concord, California 1996
	Ansel Adams Gallery, Yosemite Renaissance III	Foster City Museum Exhibit, Foster City, California 1997
	Yosemite Natl. Park, California 1988	Ogonek Weekly Magazine, Russia
	Official Photographer of Astara Expedition, Egypt 1989	Brooks Gallery, Santa Barbara, California
	Ansel Adams Gallery, Yosemite Renaissance V	Leshner Center for The Arts, Walnut Creek, California
	Yosemite Natl. Park, California 1990	Red Mountain Gallery, Reno, Nevada
	Palace of Culture, Krasnoyarsk, Russia 1991	Sacramento Valley Photo Art Center, Sacramento, California
	Photographer’s Forum Magazine,	One Artist Calendar, Unocal Oil Corporation, California
	Best of Photography Award of excellence 1991	Reed Gallery, Denver, Colorado
	Olive Hyde Gallery, Fremont, California	Flash Gallery, Denver, Colorado
	Member of the U.S. Traveling Exhibition, “Siberian Project” 1991	Photographer’s Gallery, Denver, Colorado
	The Art Museum of Norilsk, Central Siberia, Russia 1991	National Center for Atmospheric Research, Boulder, Colorado
	Photographer’s Forum Magazine	Englewood Art Center, Colorado
	Best of Photography Award of Excellence 1993	American Mountaineering Center, Golden, Colorado
	Gallery Concord Art Center, Concord, California 1994	Rocky Mountain Regional Art Center, Colorado
	Foster City Museum Exhibit, Foster City, California 1995	Curtis Arts Center, Greenwood Village, Colorado



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