



Small Joys

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I left home on Saturday. I remember looking forward to long road trips when living in other places. These days, there is a certain bitter-sweetness in leaving my little house and the beloved views of my home. A light winter storm drifted over the Great Basin, providing a dramatic backdrop of clouds. On occasion, shafts of sunlight filtered through the velvety gray, like slow-moving searchlights sweeping the landscape. The spectacle lasted for many hours and miles as I made my way down the long empty roads into the wild heart of Nevada.

By early afternoon, I set up camp among the Joshua trees on the slopes of a small mountain range overlooking a vast dry valley. A steep but short hike got me to the craggy top of a prominent summit and I sat down for a snack and a few minutes of meditation. There's a distinct flavor of happiness that accompanies such experiences that is hard to describe to those not already familiar with it: a subtle, sweet, and somewhat melancholy version of euphoria that can only be experienced in quiet solitude, in magnificent settings. It is a strange mix of elation, humility, and overwhelming gratitude, making it hard to draw a deep breath without experiencing a slight burning sensation behind the eyelids, telling you that tears may not be far behind if you allow your mind to wander and become too overwhelmed with the grandeur.



I began my descent in the warm afternoon light, not wanting to hike back in the dark. From the summit, I could see a deep wash on the opposite side of my camp. I decided to hike down it, then back up the slope where I parked. At the bottom of the wash, crumbly layers of shale told the story of an ancient sea bed. One small slab showed the crushed remains of an ancient crustacean and I collected a few promising rock samples to examine later. Back at camp, I carefully tapped them with a hammer, separating the layers like the pages of an ancient book, exposing several tiny trilobite fossils to the last light of the day – and the first light they had seen in more than half a billion years.

A few sips of tequila and gentle notes from Ennio Morricone's soundtrack to Cinema Paradiso made for an evening of deep contemplation and dreams I know I had but cannot remember.

I woke up to cold darkness, about an hour before dawn. The warmth and rich aroma of fresh coffee eased the chill, and I was on my way again. I waited by a grove of large Joshua trees for the first light, listening to a distant owl hooting as darkness faded.

The previous day's light show continued. I stopped here and there along the lonesome roads until arriving at my next

destination. I wanted to soak in a natural hot spring I knew of that evening, and spent the afternoon looking for a nearby camp site. To my delight, I followed an old mining road to discover a beautiful section of high desert, dotted with cedar and pine trees, mine shafts, and small mining camps, many still containing various mementos of the lives of hardy folks who were here so many years ago.

I spent the rest of the afternoon reading, taking occasional breaks to climb some of the nearby hills for views of the area. After the sun set, I drove the few miles to the hot spring for a naked soak in its steamy sulphury warmth. So wonderful was the feeling that I almost considered falling asleep right there in the water. By the time I drove back to my camp, I could barely keep my eyes open.



So ended the solitary part of my trip. I left camp before dawn to meet Michael and Steve in Death Valley, and a new kind of adventure ensued. Our first hike found us huddled below a rock arch as flurries of snow began to blow. A perfect setting for catching up with old friends.

The next couple of days saw us hiking through desert canyons, shivering on lofty viewpoints above the desert, savoring every moment of beauty in the daytime, and laughing around the campfire and poker table at night.

On Wednesday, Michael and I checked into our hotel room to clean up and prepare before meeting our workshop clients. To our delight, we had an amazing group of participants, each with a passion for making images and interesting life stories to share. The week flew by.

In so many ways, this was a typical outing, but I still find it hard to relate to such things in terms like “normal” or “usual.” There is nothing mundane about these small chapters in the unfolding story of a life I marvel at every day and that I could never take for granted. These are my other kind of retirement savings – the moments and memories I will some day look back upon with the same bitter-sweet joy and immense gratitude as I did when experiencing them.

In the end, it's not about photography; it's about living the life. I tried to convey these thoughts in conversations with some of our workshop participants. My greatest hope is that they, too, may strive to find balance, beauty, and fulfillment in their own lives, by whatever means best fit them. Photography is the thin thread that bound us together during these few days, but I was glad to have gained small glimpses into their worlds as well, as we practiced making images.

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