



Journey to Moab

by Stephen S. Ashley

Journey to Moab



Journey to Moab

by Stephen S. Ashley

First Edition

Copyright © 2014 by Stephen S. Ashley. All rights reserved.

Published by:
Stephen S. Ashley
386 Tucker Avenue
Alameda, California 94501

First Edition

FRONTISPIECE: *From Hanksville to Escalante #5*

When I was 49, I decided that I needed to decalcify my brain: I needed to learn something completely new. I decided to take flying lessons. Six months later I passed my checkride and received my private pilot certificate. It was one of the best decisions I ever made.

I fly out of the Oakland International Airport. If you know the Bay Area, you know that in the summer the marine layer blows in from the Pacific late in the afternoon, hangs around all night, and evaporates by late morning. This layer of clouds typically bottoms out below 1,000 feet. The rules say that an airplane must fly at least 1,000 feet over any congested area, and, unless you are flying on an instrument flight plan, you must remain at least 500 feet below the clouds. Therefore, if the marine layer is less than 1,500 feet above the ground, you cannot fly in or out of Oakland without filing and opening an instrument flight plan. You cannot file an instrument flight plan unless you have an instrument rating, which you earn by demonstrating your ability to fly in the clouds while referring exclusively to the cockpit instruments. On several occasions I had to delay my departure because of low clouds, and I always had to time my return to Oakland to make sure that low clouds would not force me to divert to another airport. To avoid these inconveniences I earned an instrument rating.

During the early years of my flying career I belonged to a flying club, and eventually I purchased a Cessna 172 airplane and leased it to the club for the use of its members, who rented it primarily for flight training. There came a time, however, when the club's corps of flight instructors dwindled, which meant that my

plane was not being used and was not generating enough revenue to cover the high cost of flight instruction insurance. I decided to remedy the problem by becoming a flight instructor myself. This required earning a commercial pilot certificate and a flight instructor certificate, which I proceeded to do.

My career as a flight instructor went well. I had plenty of students, a number of whom finished their training and passed their private pilot checkrides. I was adding 200 hours of flying to my logbook each year. Then I ran into trouble. I began accumulating health issues that had no effect on my flying ability but nevertheless got me into trouble with the Federal Aviation Administration Aerospace Medical Certification Division.

In order to fly an airplane a pilot needs to undergo periodic examinations by an FAA medical examiner and receive a medical certificate. My health issues threatened to end my flying career: if the FAA refused to renew my medical certificate because of any of my health issues, I could no longer fly as a commercial pilot.

Fortunately, in 2004 the FAA created a new type of pilot certificate, the sport pilot certificate. To exercise the privileges of a sport pilot certificate, a pilot does not need a medical certificate as long as the FAA has not denied the pilot's most recent application to renew his medical certificate. This means that an old pilot like me must not file an application to renew if the FAA might deny the application. To avoid that risk, I let my medical certificate lapse. I can no longer fly as a commercial pilot, but I can fly as a sport pilot until I make the decision to stop flying altogether. After I let my medical certificate

lapse, I sold my Cessna 172, which I could no longer fly legally, and bought a Cessna Skycatcher, which qualifies as a light sport plane.

Demoting one's self from commercial pilot to sport pilot comes at a high cost. I can only fly a light sport plane, which is a plane with no more than two seats, a takeoff weight of no more than 1,320 pounds, a single, fixed-pitch propeller, a fixed landing gear, a low stall speed, and a maximum cruise speed of 120 knots. I can't fly at night. I can't fly in the clouds.

* * *

In early 2014, I decided I needed an adventure. I had purchased my Skycatcher the previous August and had flown it about 50 hours, enough, I thought, to master the handling of this little airplane. So I decided to enroll in the Moab Photography Symposium, scheduled for the end of April and the first week of May, and to fly myself to Moab, Utah, in my Skycatcher.

I chose a route that took me over the Sierra Nevada mountains through the 10,000-foot Tioga Pass in Yosemite and across the Great Basin and the Colorado Plateau at an altitude of 1,000 feet above the ground and a speed of 100 knots. I had my camera at the ready the whole time. The photographs in this book are the best from the dozens of exposures I took on my way to Utah and back.

Having to pilot a small plane while taking photographs limits what I can do with the camera. The cockpit windows in a Cessna Skycatcher do not open, so I have to shoot through plexiglass, which tends to pick up glare from sunlight in the cockpit. I carefully clean the windows before each flight. Because I photograph things I see on the ground, the camera is always focused at infinity, so before I take off, I focus the lens on a distant object, like the control tower, and then switch the lens focusing mode to the manual setting so that the camera does not try to

refocus with every exposure. Because all my subjects are a great distance from the lens, I do not need an extended depth of field, so I use large apertures, consistent with optimum sharpness, usually $f/4$. The plane's engine sends vibrations throughout the plane, and the surrounding air adds its own turbulence, so motion blurring is a problem. Tripods and clamps are useless in airplanes. In order to achieve fast shutter speeds and minimize blurring I adjust the camera for high sensitivity, ISO 400 and higher. High sensor sensitivity combined with large apertures produces short exposures, 1/1,000th of a second and shorter.

I hold the camera in one hand and the airplane's stick in the other, bank the plane to get the desired view, step on the opposite rudder pedal to keep the plane from turning, and release the shutter. I take many exposures because I know I'll have to discard most of them: an image may be blurred, or the camera may have picked up glare from sunlight in the cockpit, or the image may not have been framed correctly.

I have over 2,200 hours of flight experience, both as a pilot and as a flight instructor, so I have had plenty of opportunities to look outside airplanes at the vistas below. I have seen the shorelines, valleys, deserts, mountains, and cities of California from the sky. I thought I had seen it all. Then I flew to Moab and back, by way of Tioga Pass and the Sierras on the way out and by way of Las Vegas and the Mojave Desert on the way back. My previous flying experience had not prepared me for the amazing and beautiful formations I saw in the Nevada and Utah deserts. All pilots, at some point in their flying careers, should fly low over the route from the Canyonlands Airport near Moab to Hanksville to Escalante to Kanab. It is like flying across the surface of a different planet. (Just try not to think about what would happen if the engine failed; there aren't a lot of places to land.)



I took off at dawn. The tricky Bay Area airspace and air traffic control demanded my attention, but I had enough time to take pictures of the East Bay hills and of the windmills just east of the Altamont Pass. The side-lighting from the early morning sun cast undulating shadows across this familiar landscape.

The demands of air traffic control lightened as I crossed the Central Valley of California on the way to my first stop at the Pine Mountain Airport. I photographed a reservoir, surprisingly full in a drought year, and an unusual land formation, which reminded me of an Indian burial mound.



East Bay Hills at Daybreak



Altamont Pass Windmills at Daybreak



Central Valley Reservoir



The Central Valley

After refueling at the Pine Mountain Airport, I took off and headed for Tonopah, Nevada. This was the most difficult leg of the journey because if the engine failed, there would be no place to land between the Hetch Hetchy reservoir and Tuolumne Meadows. I climbed aggressively in order to attain as much altitude as possible by the time I reached Hetch Hetchy. I planned to follow the Tuolumne River past Hetch Hetchy and continue to climb so that if the engine failed before reaching Tuolumne Meadows, I could glide the plane back to Hetch Hetchy and ditch it in the reservoir. I knew that that would destroy the plane but that I could survive a water landing. I felt a wave of relief when I was within gliding distance of Tuolumne Meadows. I spotted many peaks familiar to me from my backpacking days—Mt. Conness, Cathedral Peak, and Ritter and Banner. I was well-acquainted with Ritter and Banner, having twice hiked the segment of the John Muir Trail from Tuolumne Meadows to Devil's Postpile. On the first hike my companions and I tried to climb Mount Ritter but were blocked by snow before we reached the top.



Hetch Hetchy



The High Sierras



Mt. Conness



Cathedral Peak



Ritter and Banner

The high point in the crossing of the Sierra Nevada mountains through Yosemite is 10,000-foot Tioga Pass. On the right one sees Mt. Dana. On the left one sees the less prominent Mt. Gaylor and the peaks to the north. Passing the top of the pass induces a feeling of relief because from that point on if the engine fails, one can glide to the Lee Vining Airport.

Do I seem obsessed with engine failures? In my 2,200 hours of flying I have never had an engine fail. I've never had an engine seriously sputter. Good pilots think about everything that could possibly go wrong. When you are flying over an area with no safe places for an emergency landing, it pays to make contingency plans in case of engine failure. You are more likely to survive if you make your plan before the engine fails rather than after.



Tioga Pass Looking South



Tioga Pass Looking North



Over the Pass



The East Side of the Sierras

Once you are clear of Tioga Pass, the prominent geological features are Mono Lake on the left and the White Mountains on the right. Mono Lake is a strange and beautiful salt-water lake decorated with natural sculptures, the limestone tufa towers. The White Mountains are home to the oldest living trees in the world, the bristlecone pines. The oldest known bristlecone pine is over 5,000 years old.



Mono Lake



Paoha Island



The White Mountains

Leaving Mono Lake behind me, I proceeded on my way across the Great Basin. What struck me was the fact that the dominant force that had shaped this bone-dry expanse was water. I saw no water, but I saw its effects in the eroded cliffs, gullies, dry streambeds, and dry lakes. Except for roads and the tracks of four-wheel drive vehicles, I saw almost no evidence of humans until I reached Tonopah, Nevada, where I landed, refueled, and ate my lunch. Then on to Milford, Utah.

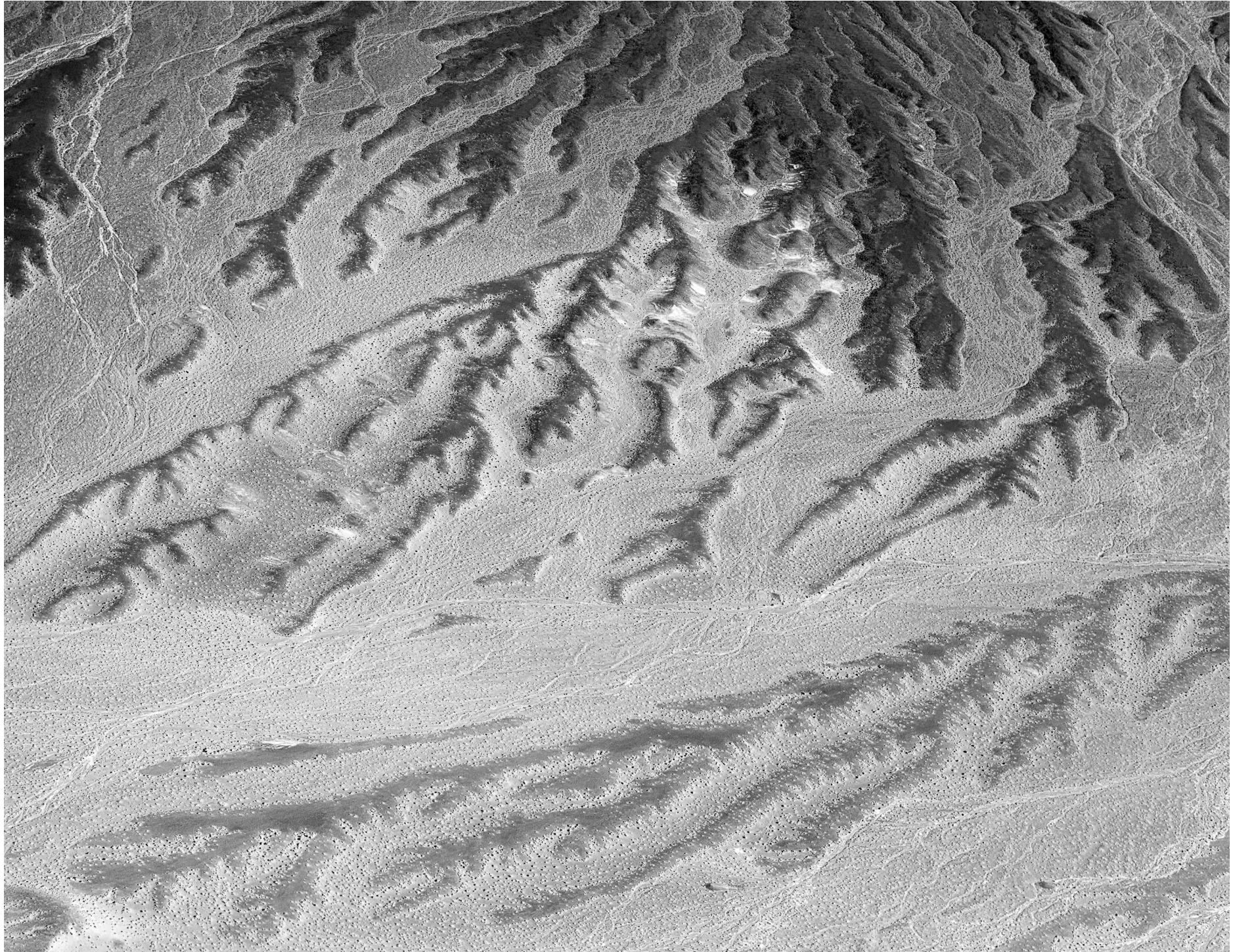
The flight from Tonopah to Milford was the same as the flight from Mono Lake to Tonopah: mile upon mile of empty desert. As the afternoon progressed, however, the wind picked up, and turbulence tossed my little Skycatcher every which way. I had my hands full keeping the plane level. I had intended to fly all the way to Moab in one day, but when I landed in Milford, I decided to spend the night there. Flying through unfamiliar mountains late in the afternoon with the wind gusting to 30 knots did not seem like a smart plan.



The Nevada Desert #1



Dry Lakebed



The Nevada Desert #2



The Nevada Desert #3



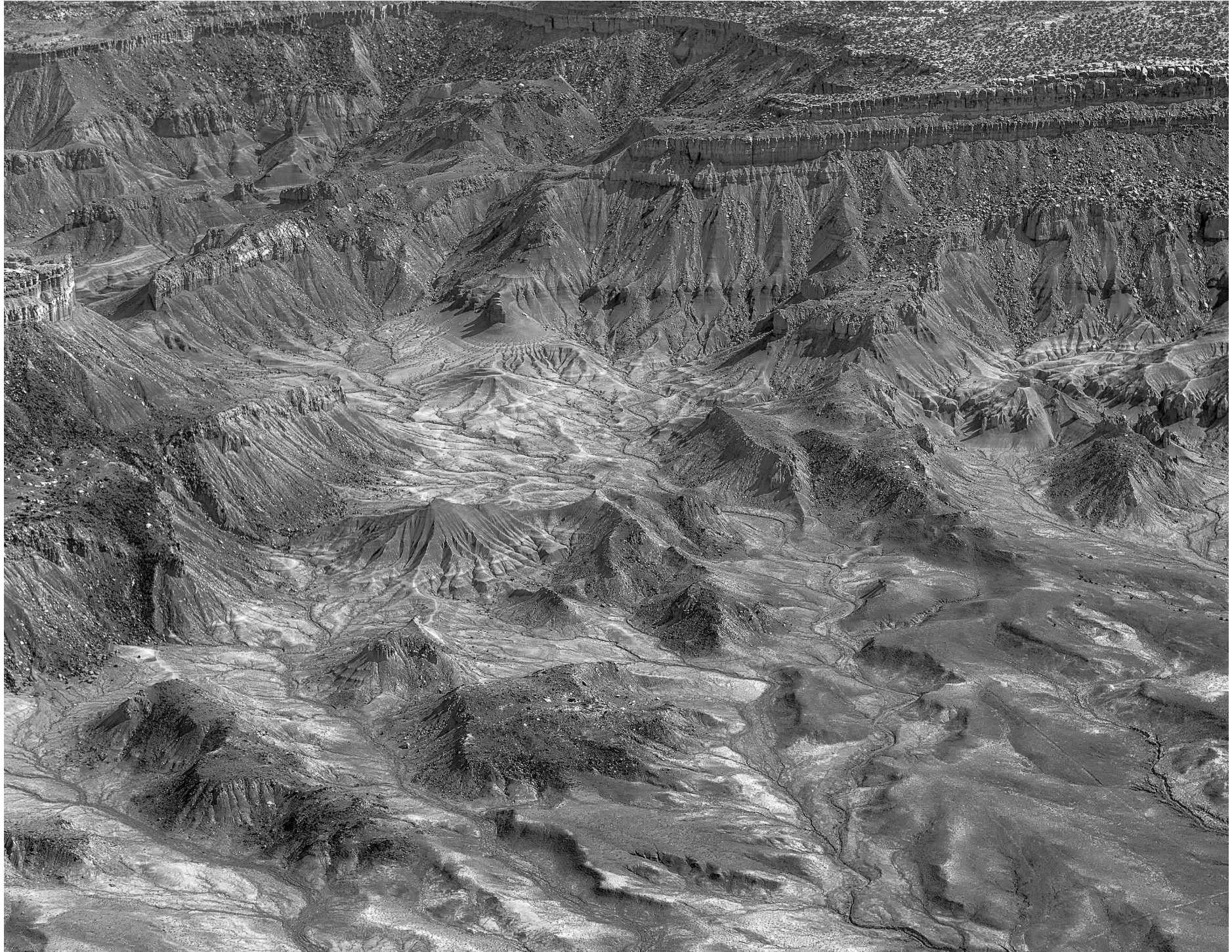
The Nevada Desert #4

When I arrived at the airport the next morning, the temperature was near freezing. I had not put cold-weather oil in the Skycatcher's engine before leaving Oakland, and the effect of the temperature on the oil was obvious. Every time I tried to start the engine, the engine would fire and then die, as the thick oil prevented the engine from turning over. I had to try starting the plane several times before the oil loosened up to the point that the engine would stay running. The steady running of the engine was a great relief because I knew I wouldn't have to deal with the problem of recharging the plane's battery at the rural Milford Airport. Next time I'll use a multi-grade oil.

I took off from Milford and headed east. In a short time I reached the Tushar Mountains and turned north to follow Interstate 70 through the mountains. Interstate 70 brought me to Richfield, where I landed to refuel. I then took off and followed Interstate 70 through the mountains. Once I cleared the mountains towards the east, I parted company with the highway and headed across what may be the wildest corner of America. The area between Richfield and Moab is filled with mesas, cliffs, canyons, gullies, and sandstone formations.



The Tushar Mountains



Utah Desert #1



Utah Desert #2



Utah Desert #3



Utah Desert #4



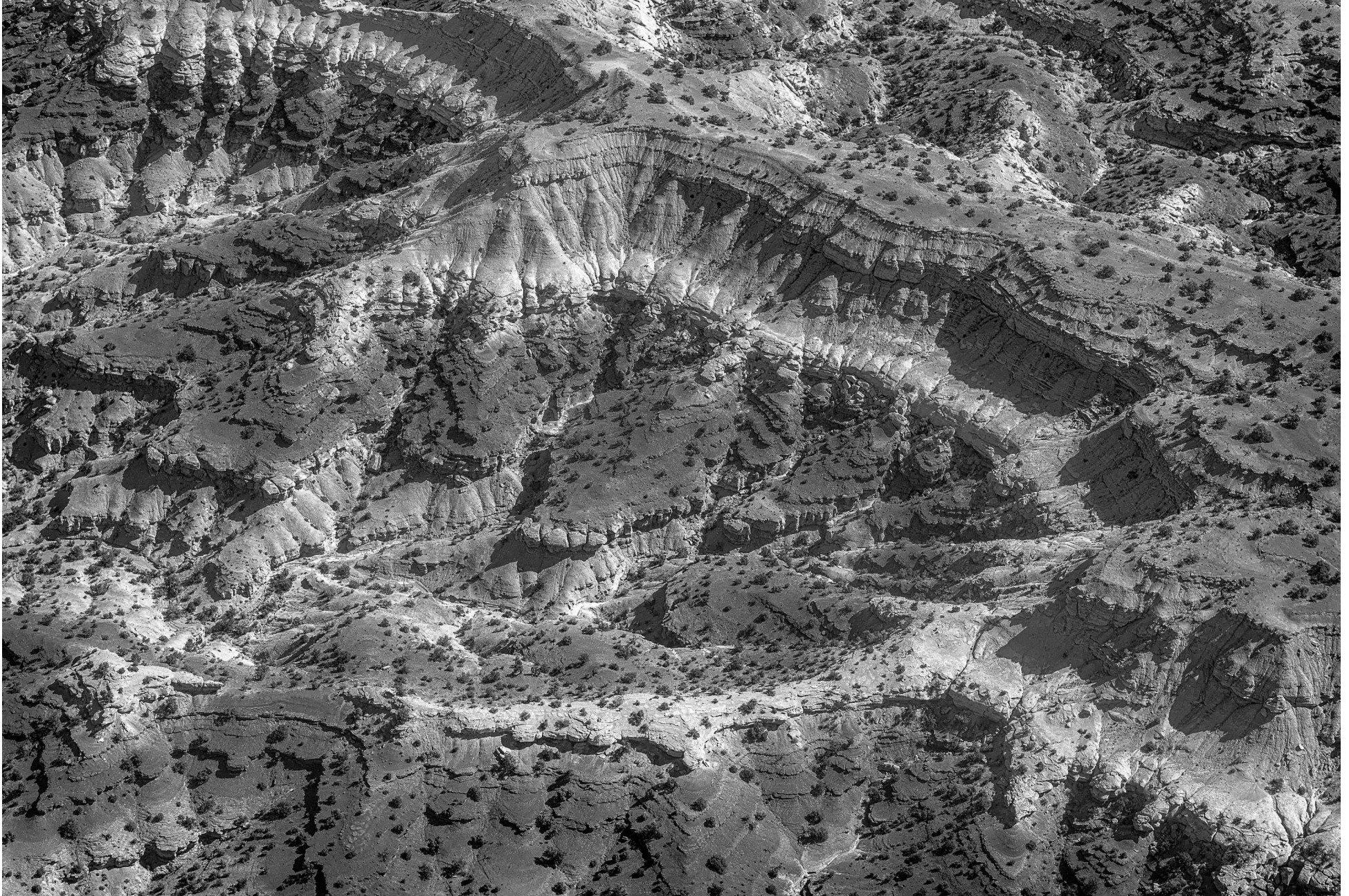
Sandstone Formation #1



Sandstone Formation #2



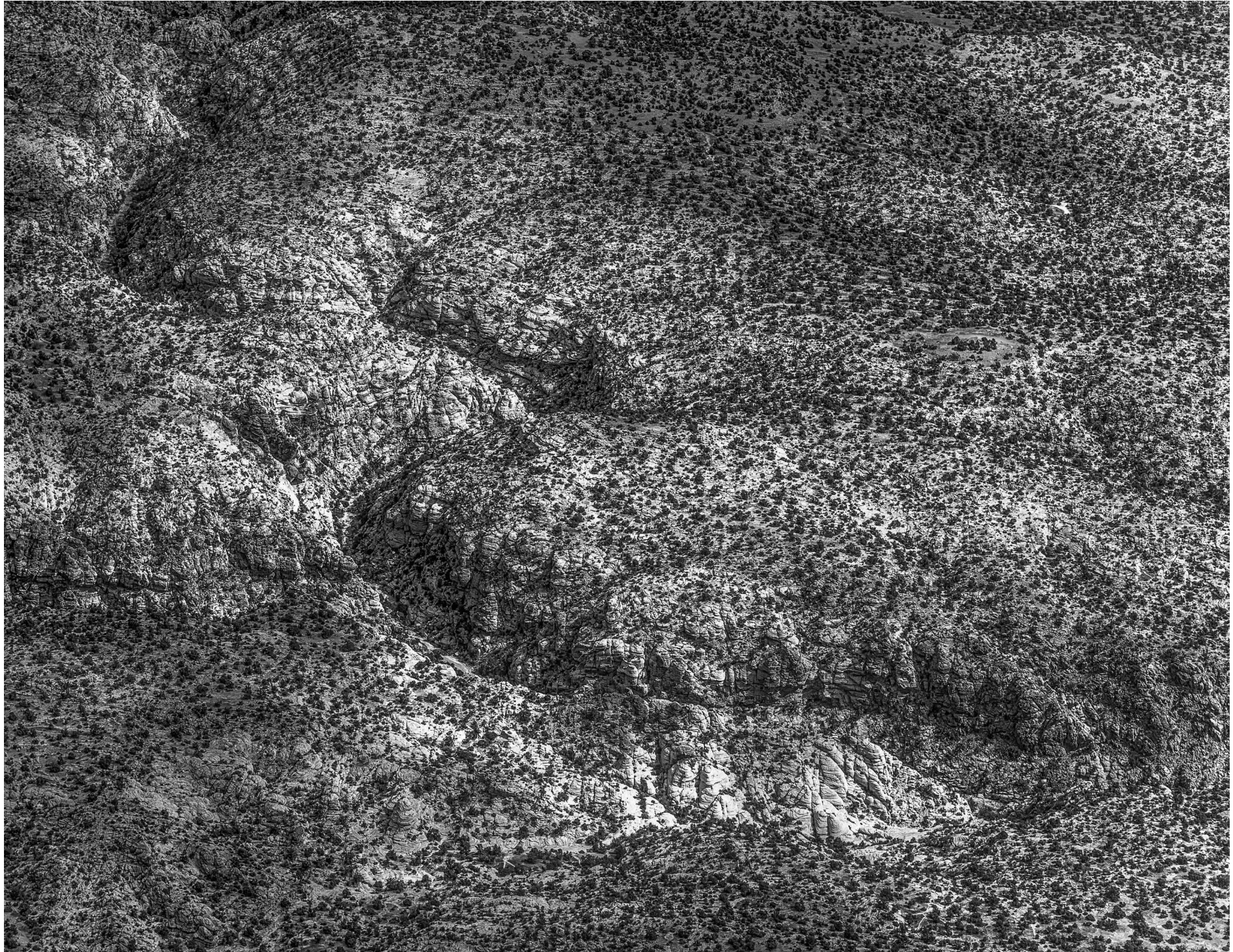
Utah Desert #5



Utah Desert #6



Sandstone Formation #3



A Path Through the Rock



The Waterpocket Fold

I had the next day to myself: the symposium would not start until the day after that. I decided to use my free time to take a sightseeing flight over the Arches and Canyonlands National Parks. I took off from the Canyonlands Airport and climbed over the entrance to Arches. I then headed for Castle Valley, passing the Park Avenue formation in Arches on my way. I followed the Colorado River until I reached Castle Valley and circled Parriott Mesa and Castleton Tower before heading back over Arches. I circled the Park Avenue formation again and then intercepted the Colorado River, following it south past Jackson Hole and Dead Horse Point and then returning to the airport.



Park Avenue



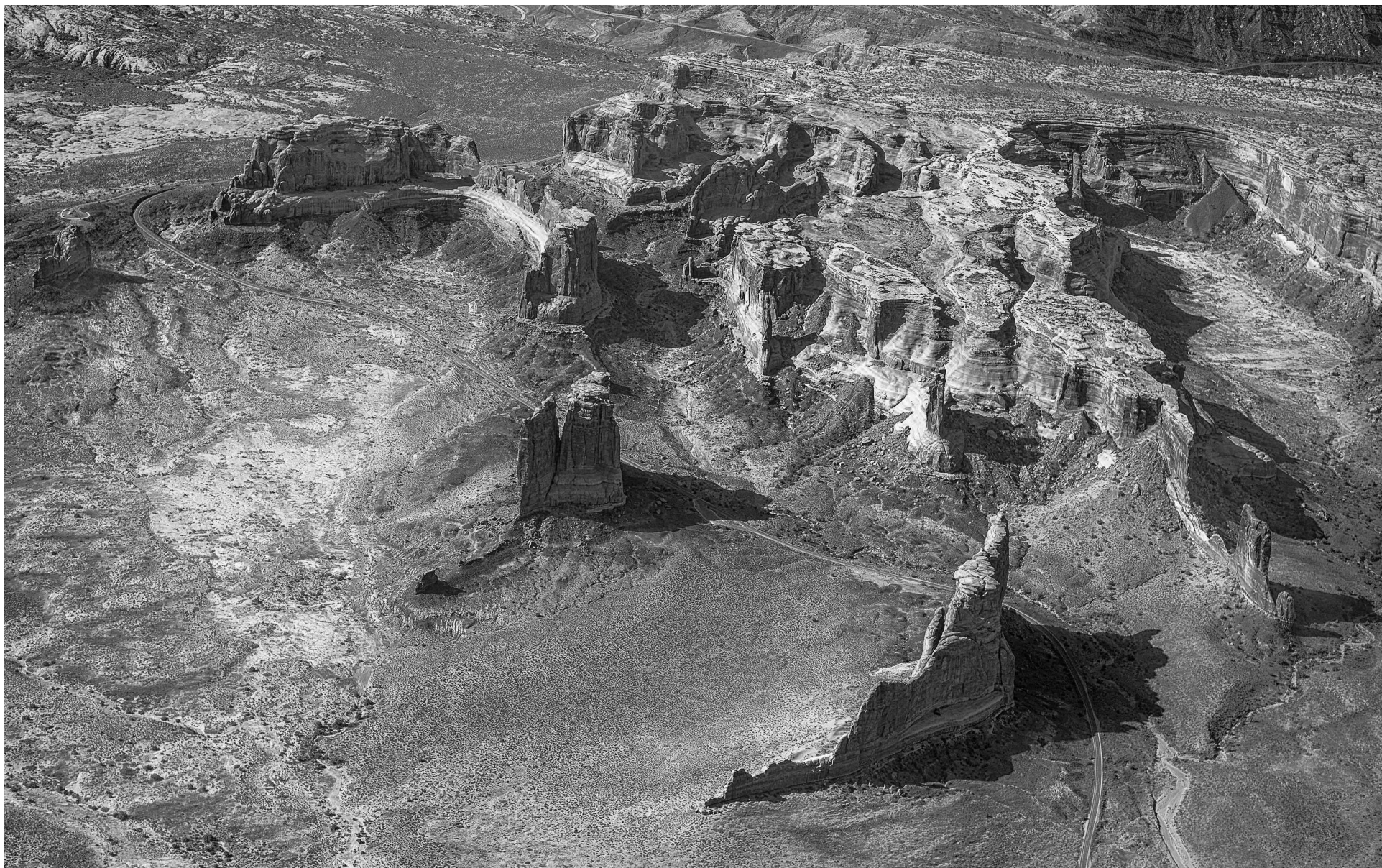
Parriott Mesa



Castleton Tower #1



Castleton Tower #2



Park Avenue #2



The Three Gossips and Their Neighbors



Jackson Hole



Above Dead Horse Point

The symposium was a success for me and resulted in many satisfying images. They, however, are the subject for a different book. It's time now to return to the Skycatcher for the second half of the journey, the return to Oakland.

I planned to return the way I came and cross the Sierra Nevada mountains at Tioga Pass. As so often happens when flying 1,000 feet above the ground, the weather did not cooperate. High winds and stormy weather were forecast for the Tioga Pass area. As it was, I had to wait a few days for a brief opening for a flight along a more southerly route from Moab to Las Vegas to Bakersfield and home.

I got off to a good start with calm winds and high clouds. My route took me a bit south of the path I had followed coming into Canyonlands Airport, so I saw terrain I hadn't seen before. I crossed the Green River, which winds its way through this wasteland until it joins the Colorado River in Canyonlands National Park. I headed for the Hanksville airport and then, without stopping, headed towards Kanab. In this segment of the flight I saw the strangest territory I encountered during the whole flight, and the most beautiful. I crossed Capitol Reef National Park and decided to divert to Escalante to stretch my legs before pushing on to Kanab, which I reached in good time.



Green River #1



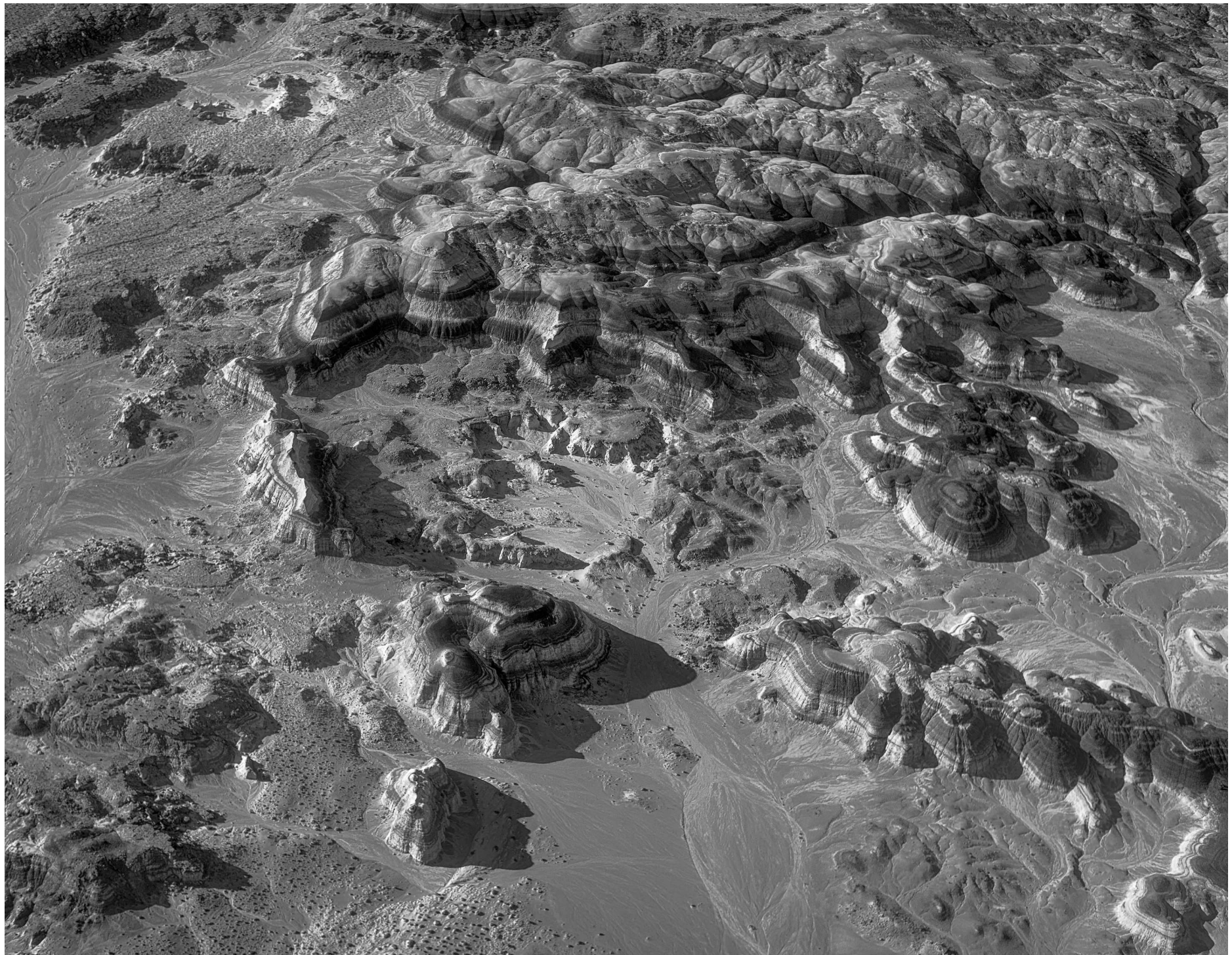
Green River #2



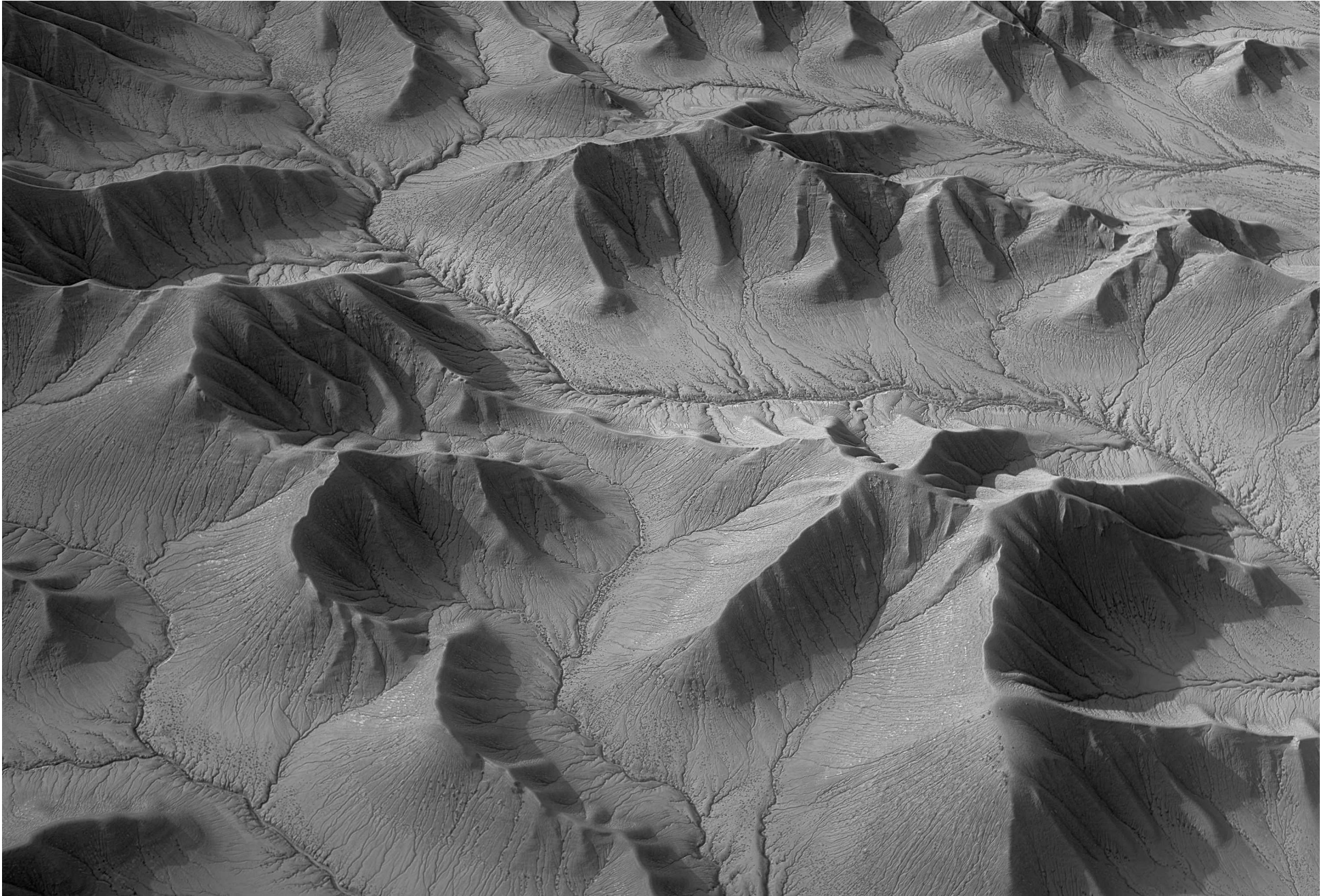
Approaching Hanksville



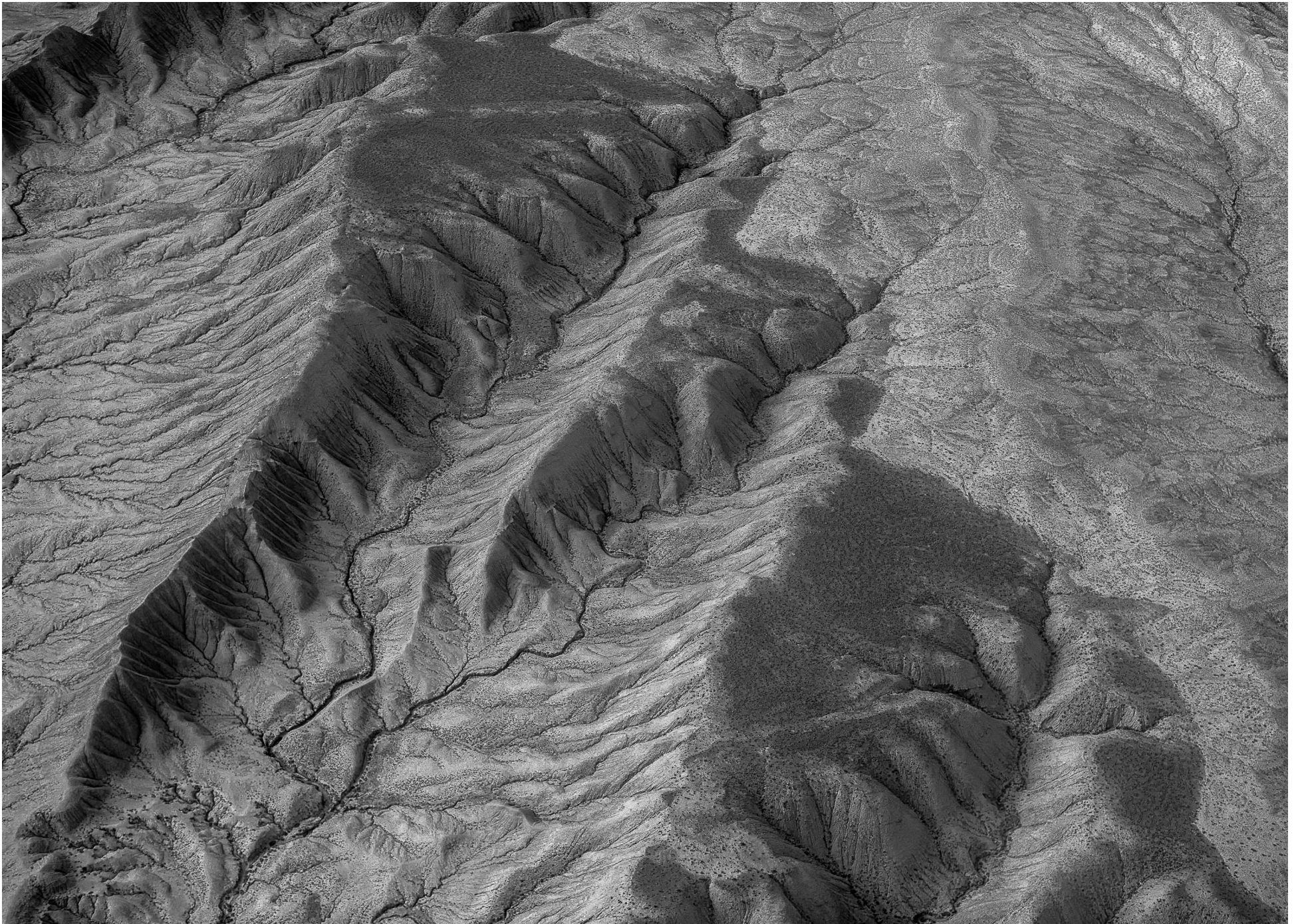
From Hanksville to Escalante #1



From Hanksville to Escalante #2



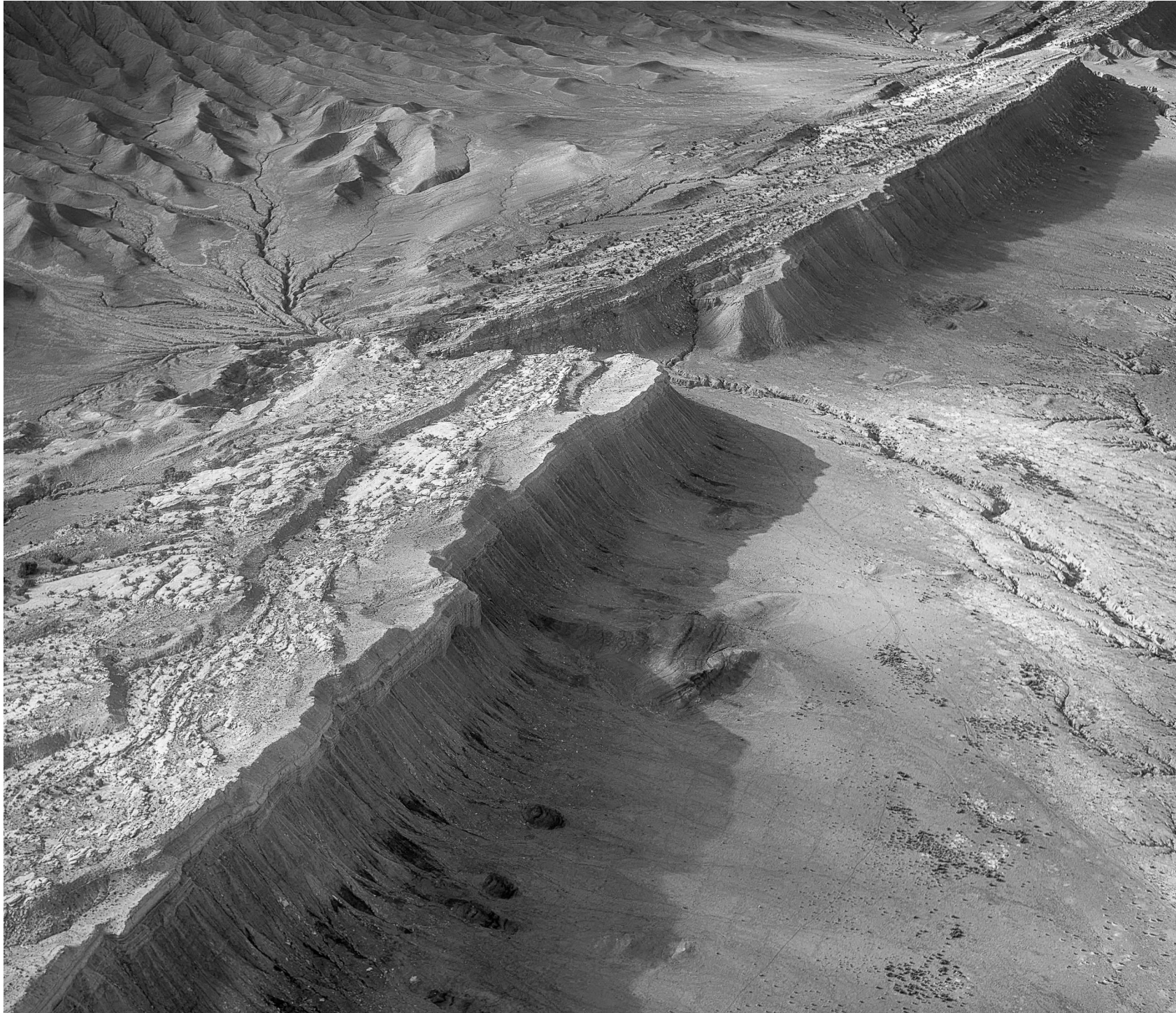
From Hanksville to Escalante #3



From Hanksville to Escalante #4



From Hanksville to Escalante #6



From Hanksville to Escalante #7



From Hanksville to Escalante #8



Capitol Reef #1



From Hanksville to Escalante #9

I took my last photograph of the trip before reaching Kanab. Flying from Kanab towards Boulder City, just south of Las Vegas, I ran into turbulence, and the terrain turned nondescript. The turbulence grew worse as I approached Barstow, California, and I was forced to land there and spend the night. The wind picked up during the night, and I decided to take a commercial flight home from Ontario and come back for the plane once the wind subsided.

This was the third time that weather forced me to make an unplanned stop in the Mojave Desert, the high desert east of Los Angeles. The area is famous for high winds, especially over the Tehachapi Mountains, which separate the Mojave Desert from the Central Valley. When you fly a plane that goes through the weather rather than over it, you are at the mercy of the wind.

About this Book

The photographs in this book were taken on a round trip from Oakland, California, to Moab, Utah, in April and May of 2014. They were taken with a Nikon D800E using 50mm and 85mm lenses. The photographs were processed in Adobe Photoshop using the NIK Collection of plug-ins, in particular Silver Efex Pro 2. The text of this book was set in Optima using the Adobe Lightroom Book module.

You can find most of these photographs, along with dozens of photographs of other beautiful places, on the website at nigrumetalbum.com. If you would like to track Stephen Ashley's photographic activities, you may follow him on Twitter (twitter.com/sashleyphotos) or on Pinterest (pinterest.com/NigrumEtAlbum/). You can reach him by email at stephen.ashley@strattonpress.com.

Many of Mr. Ashley's photographs are available for purchase on the website, nigrumetalbum.com, and on Etsy at www.etsy.com/shop/nigrumetalbum.

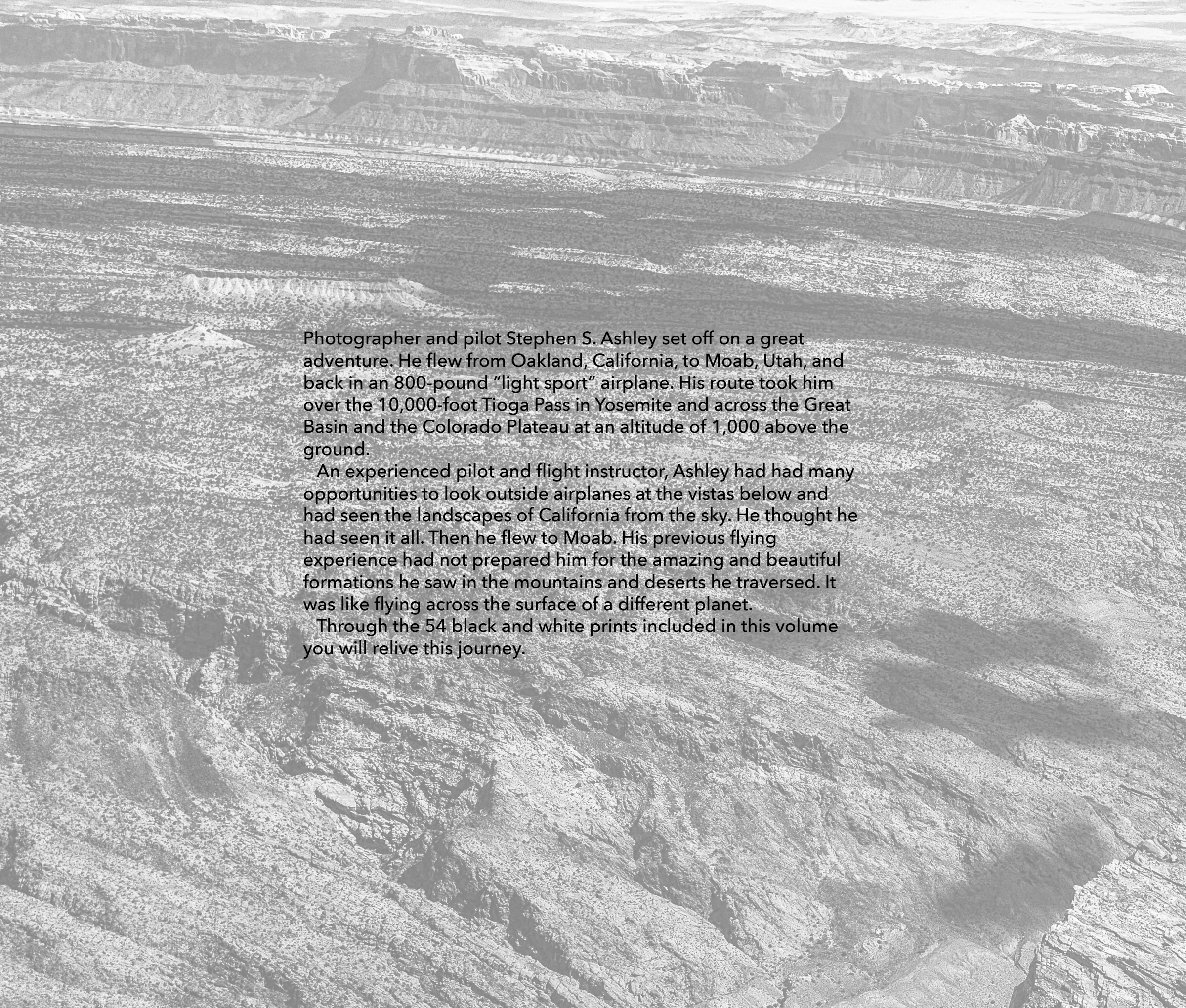
About the Photographer

When Stephen Ashley was a young teenager, his family moved to a new town and rented a house with a bomb shelter in the basement. He discovered that when he turned off the lights, the bomb shelter was perfectly black. He realized that the bomb shelter would make an ideal darkroom, and he assembled one, using a Kodak slide projector as an enlarger. The light from the projector was so bright that it solarized the enlarging paper. Thus began his photographic avocation.

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

Mr. Ashley had no formal education in photography but learned from many teachers. 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 he enrolled in many of them. These courses gave him the opportunity to meet and learn from Stuart Scofield, Mark Citret, and others. He also had the good fortune to attend a Friends of Photography program, where he met Ruth Bernhard, Morley Baer, John Sexton, Marilyn Bridges, and William Christenberry. More recently, in May of 2014 he flew himself to Moab, Utah, to attend the Moab Photography Symposium, where he had an opportunity to photograph with Judith Zimmerman and Colleen Miniuk-Sperry.

Mr. Ashley counts Cedric Wright, Eliot Porter, Philip Hyde, and, of course, Ansel Adams as influences. Growing up he learned about fine art photography by studying the exquisite prints by these photographers contained in the Sierra Club Exhibit Format books.



Photographer and pilot Stephen S. Ashley set off on a great adventure. He flew from Oakland, California, to Moab, Utah, and back in an 800-pound "light sport" airplane. His route took him over the 10,000-foot Tioga Pass in Yosemite and across the Great Basin and the Colorado Plateau at an altitude of 1,000 above the ground.

An experienced pilot and flight instructor, Ashley had had many opportunities to look outside airplanes at the vistas below and had seen the landscapes of California from the sky. He thought he had seen it all. Then he flew to Moab. His previous flying experience had not prepared him for the amazing and beautiful formations he saw in the mountains and deserts he traversed. It was like flying across the surface of a different planet.

Through the 54 black and white prints included in this volume you will relive this journey.