Three Parks

Canyonlands, Arches, and Capitol Reef

by Stephen S. Ashley

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2014

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First Edition

FRONTISPIECE: *The La Sal Mountains, 2014*

In the spring of 2014 I flew from Oakland, California, to Moab, Utah, in my little Cessna Skycatcher to attend the Moab Photography Symposium. I arrived a couple of days before the symposium began, and bad flying weather forced me to stay in Moab a few days after the symposium ended, so I had plenty of opportunities, before, during and after the symposium, to photograph the national parks near Moab—Arches, Canyonlands, and Capitol Reef—and the wild country located nearby. In *Journey to Moab* I shared photographs I took on my way to and from Moab; in this volume I have the pleasure of sharing photographs I took on the ground in Utah.

Needles District #1, 2014

Canyonlands

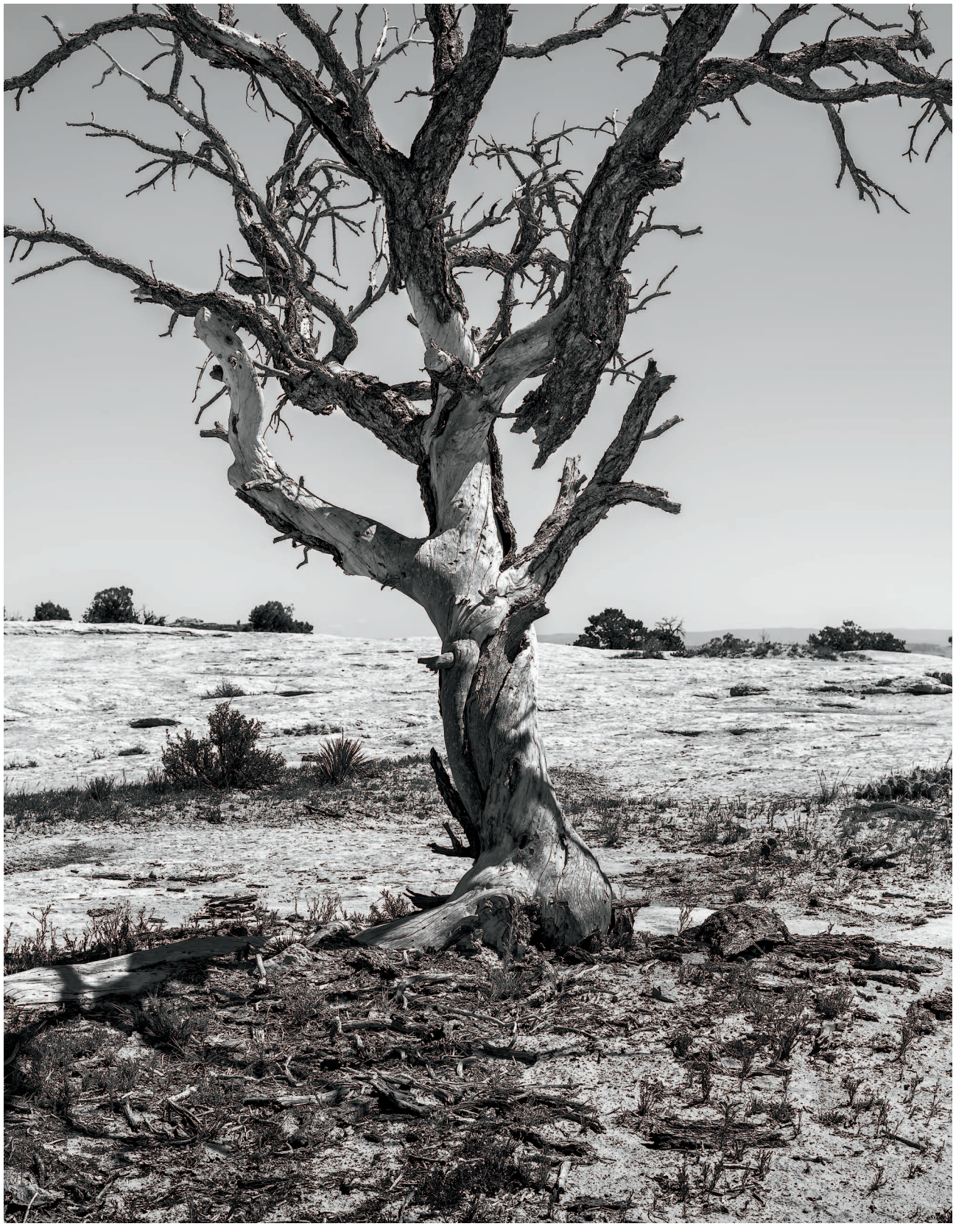
After I landed at the Canyonlands Airport near Moab, picked up my rental car, and checked into my motel, I went looking for photographs starting in Arches National Park.

In the middle of the day I often come up empty-handed. When the sun is high in the sky, the shadows on the landscape are less pronounced, and the flat sunlight diminishes the texture in plants and rocks. I found no promising images in Arches and decided to treat the visit as a scouting trip.

I had better luck after I left Arches and headed towards Canyonlands National Park. As I drove along Highway 313 on my way toward the Island in the Sky district of Canyonlands, I came upon an overhanging outcropping. The salt deposits on the wall of the overhang caught my eye.

Salt Deposits, 2014

In the bone-dry Utah climate when a tree dies, it does not immediately decay. Instead, it stands in place and turns into a ghost. Its leaves or needles blow away, its bark peels off, and it waits until the wind finally blows it over. Until then its sun-bleached branches reach to the sky like the petrified antlers of some extinct giant elk.



Dead Tree #1, 2014

Dead Tree #2, 2014

Highway 313 leads to Dead Horse Point, where 19th century cowboys allegedly used the mesa to corral wild mustangs. Legend teaches that the cowboys once left a herd of horses confined on the point, where the horses died of thirst, thus giving the point its name.

Two thousand feet below, the Colorado River curves around the Goose Neck.

Backtracking on 313, one comes to the road to Canyonlands National Park. Following this road to its end brings one to the Grand View Point Overlook, from which one can see the Needles district of Canyonlands and, in the distance, the La Sal Mountains.

Dead Horse Point, 2014

Needles, Canyonlands, 2014

Islands in the Sky, Canyonlands, 2014

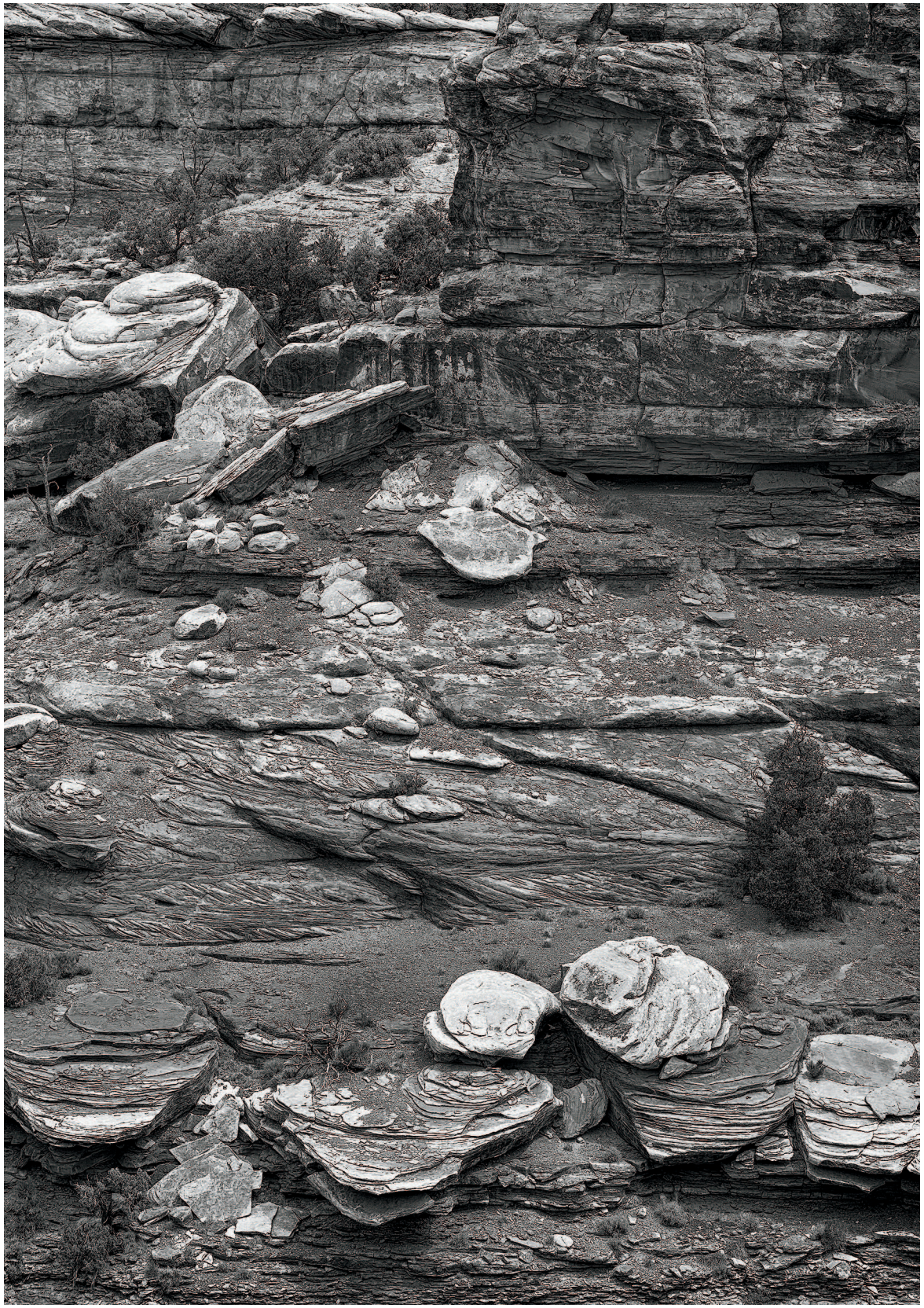
After photographing the Grand View Overlook, I returned to Moab and treated myself to a cold beer at the Moab Brewery. I did not return to Canyonlands until the conclusion of the symposium. On that occasion I took Highways 191 and 211 south to the Needles district of Canyonlands.

Highway 211 crosses one of the remotest corners of the United States. I expected at any moment to come across Walter White and Jesse Pinkman cooking meth in their rolling lab.

The Needles district gets its name from its distinctive red and white layered formations, which reminded me more of Q-tips than needles.

Highway 211, 2014

Shoe Arch, 2014



Needles District #2, 2014

On my way out of Canyonlands, 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 enbankment, 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 pictures.

Petroglyph #3, 2014

Petroglyph #5, 2014

The La Sal Mountains, 2014

Arches

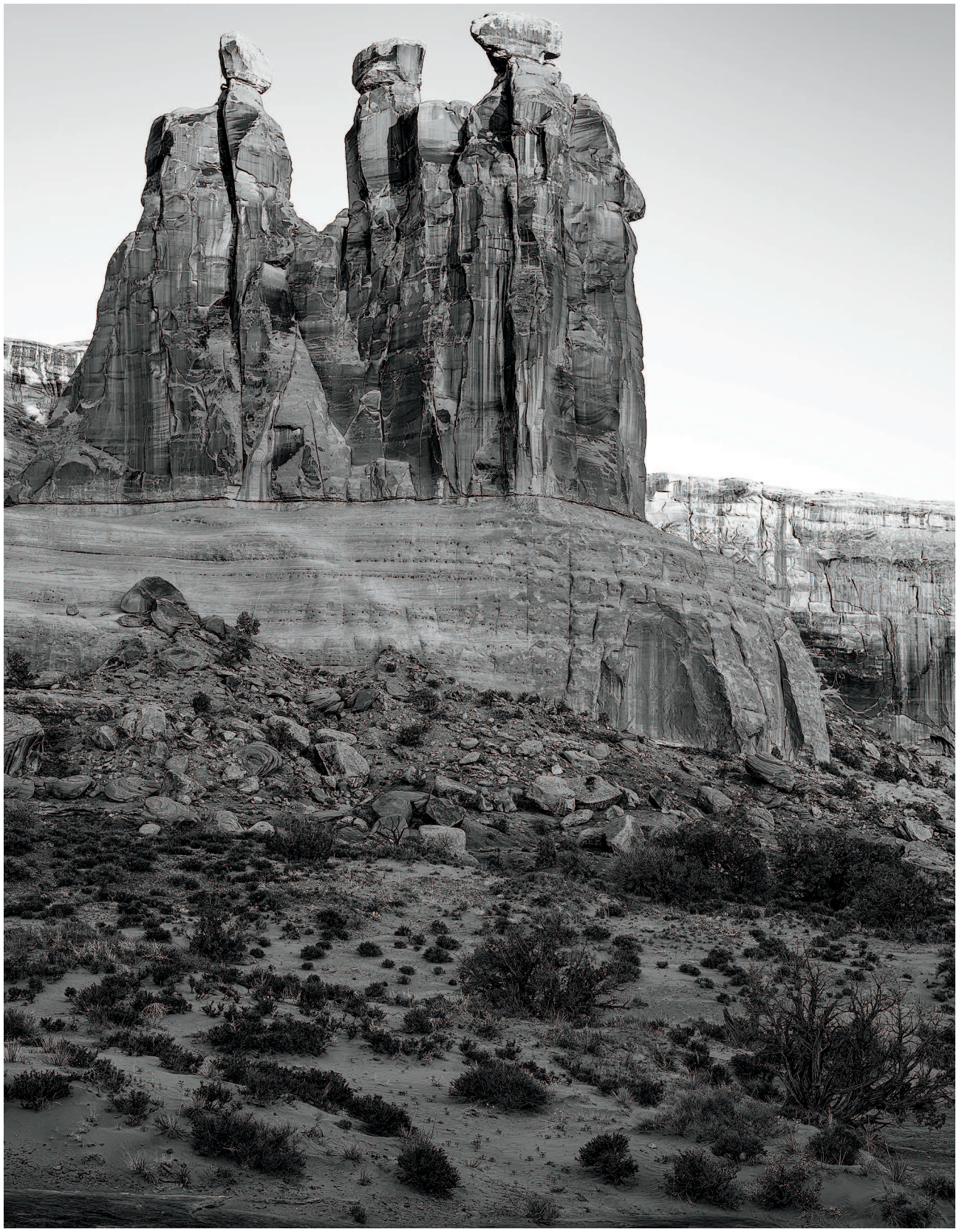
The symposium filled most of the daytime hours, but I found time to take many photographs by visiting Arches National Park early each morning and late each afternoon. Every day I rose an hour before dawn and drove to the park, the entrance to which is only a few miles from Moab. As the eastern sky brightened before sunrise I positioned myself to make my exposures.

I love to photograph during the period just before sunrise because the brightening eastern sky acts like a huge lightbox illuminating the landscape. The absence of direct sunlight on the rock formations means that there is no sharp division between light and shadow. The diffuse eastern light imparts a suggestion of directionality: the eastern sky lights the east side of a formation more brightly than a side facing in any other direction. Rock formations lit by the predawn light seem to lose their sharp edges and glow from a light that comes from within them. When the sun finally rises, for a few minutes it casts a predominantly red light on the landscape, which makes for dramatic color photographs, but dramatic color does little for black and white photographs. For me, the magic moments come before sunrise.

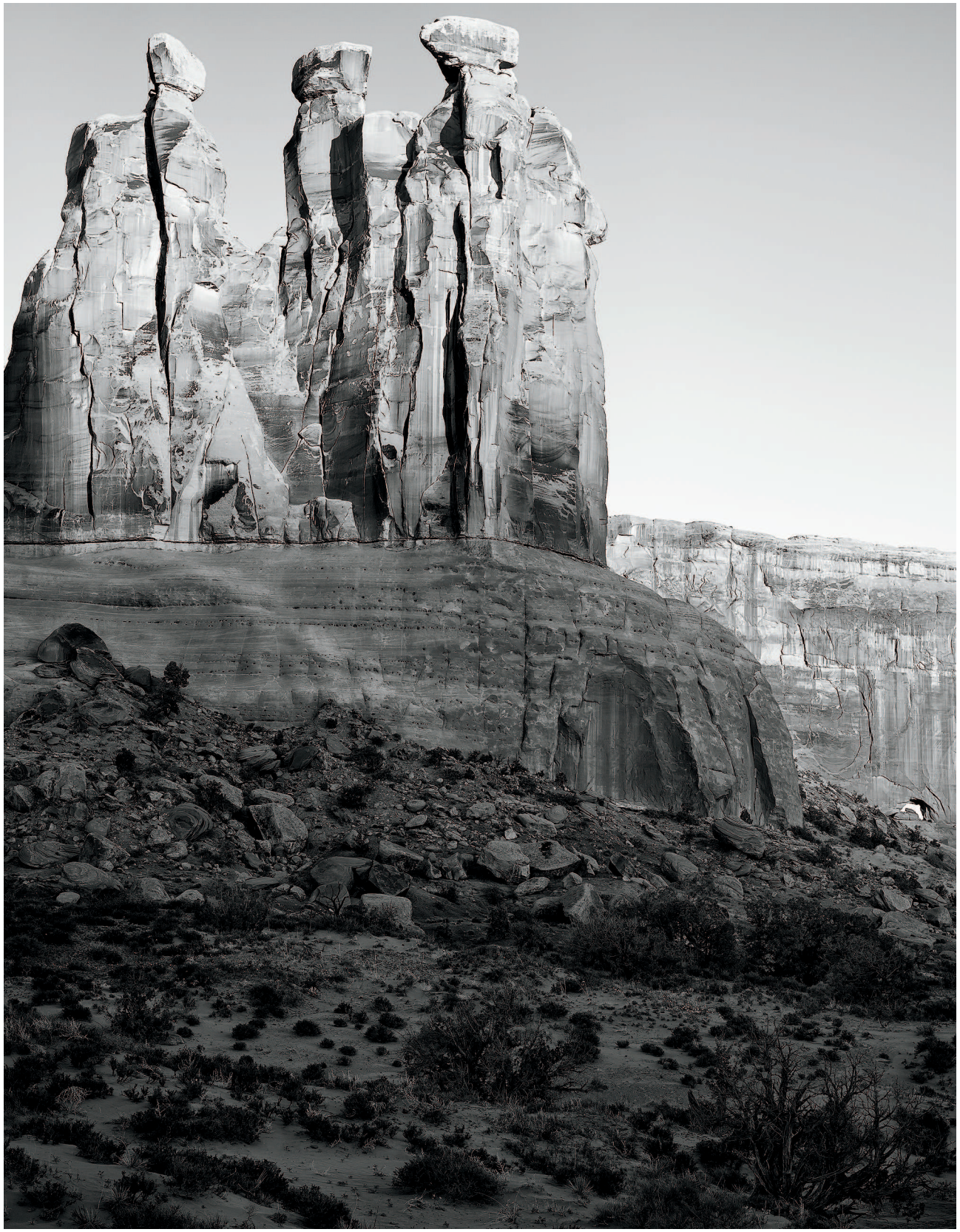
The movement of the sun throughout the day presents a constantly changing array of images of any given subject. On the following pages you will see photographs of the Tower of Babel formation, the Three Gossips, Park Avenue, and the Balanced Rock taken at different times of day and from different angles based on the sunlight's direction at the moment I made each exposure. Compare, for example, *Tower of Babel #1, 2014,* which I took just before dawn, with *Tower of Babel at Sunrise, 2014*, which I took a few minutes later, after the sun had risen.

Tower of Babel #1, 2014

Tower of Babel at Sunrise, 2014

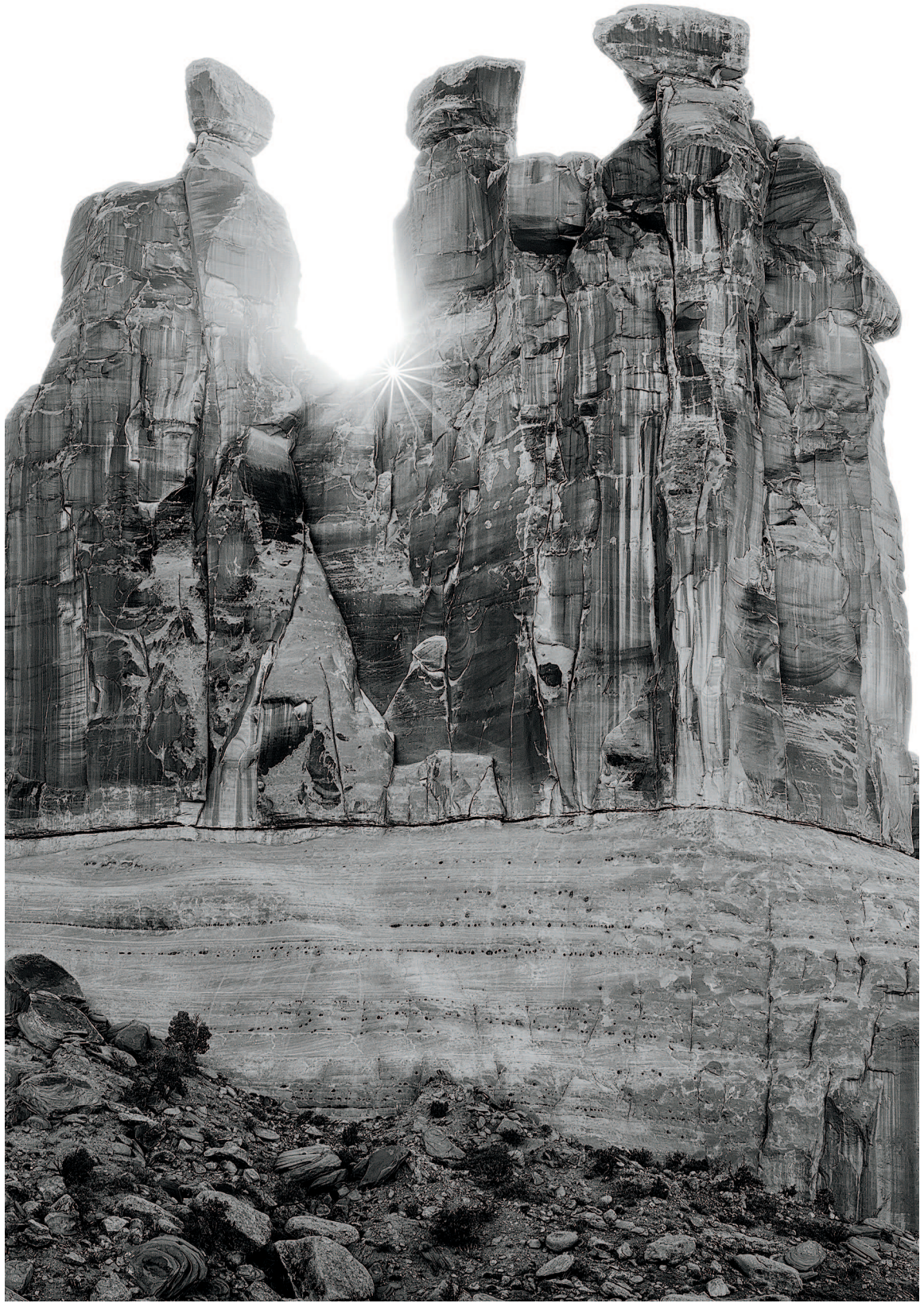


The Three Gossips #1, 2014



The Three Gossips at Sunrise, 2014

I took the photograph of the Three Gossips on the next page late in the afternoon. I wanted to create a starburst pattern as the sun set behind this rock formation, but a layer of haze diffused the sun, making a normal starburst pattern unobtainable. (To create a starburst pattern wait for the appearance of a pin-point of sunlight as the sun rises or sets behind some object and then point your camera at that pin-point of sunlight using the smallest aperture that your lens affords.) I noticed, however, a tiny hole in the rock, so I positioned myself so that I could see the sun shining through that hole. I released the shutter and then checked the camera's screen to confirm that the hole in the rock had provided the pin-point of light necessary to produce a starburst.



The Three Gossips with Starburst, 2014

On the next two pages you will see views of Park Avenue, the first taken after sunrise looking up the valley and the second taken before sunset looking down.

Park Avenue at Sunrise, 2014

Park Avenue Before Sunset, 2014

Deserts have a well-deserved reputation for being arid, and the Colorado Plateau is no exception, but I managed to find a trickle of water in the Courthouse Wash.

Courthouse Wash, 2014

Here are three different views of the same formation, the Balanced Rock.

Balanced Rock #1, 2014

Balanced Rock #2, 2014

Balanced Rock #3, 2014

A symposium field trip took me to Castle Valley, which lies just across the Colorado River from Arches National Park. Parriott Mesa dominates the valley. During the course of the afternoon I took a series of exposures of Parriott Mesa as the sun set behind me and a shadow crept across the foreground and started up the side of the mesa. After the sun set, I took a picture of Parriott Mesa flanked by Castleton Tower. Once again the sky acted like a giant lightbox casting a diffuse light on the sandstone formations. I then rotated the tripod head to the opposite direction, tilted the lens up, and took a photograph of the evening sky with the silhouette of the cliff, a crescent moon, and a contrail.

Parriott Mesa #2, 2014

Parriott Mesa #3, 2014

Parriott Mesa #4, 2014

Parriott Mesa After Sunset, 2014

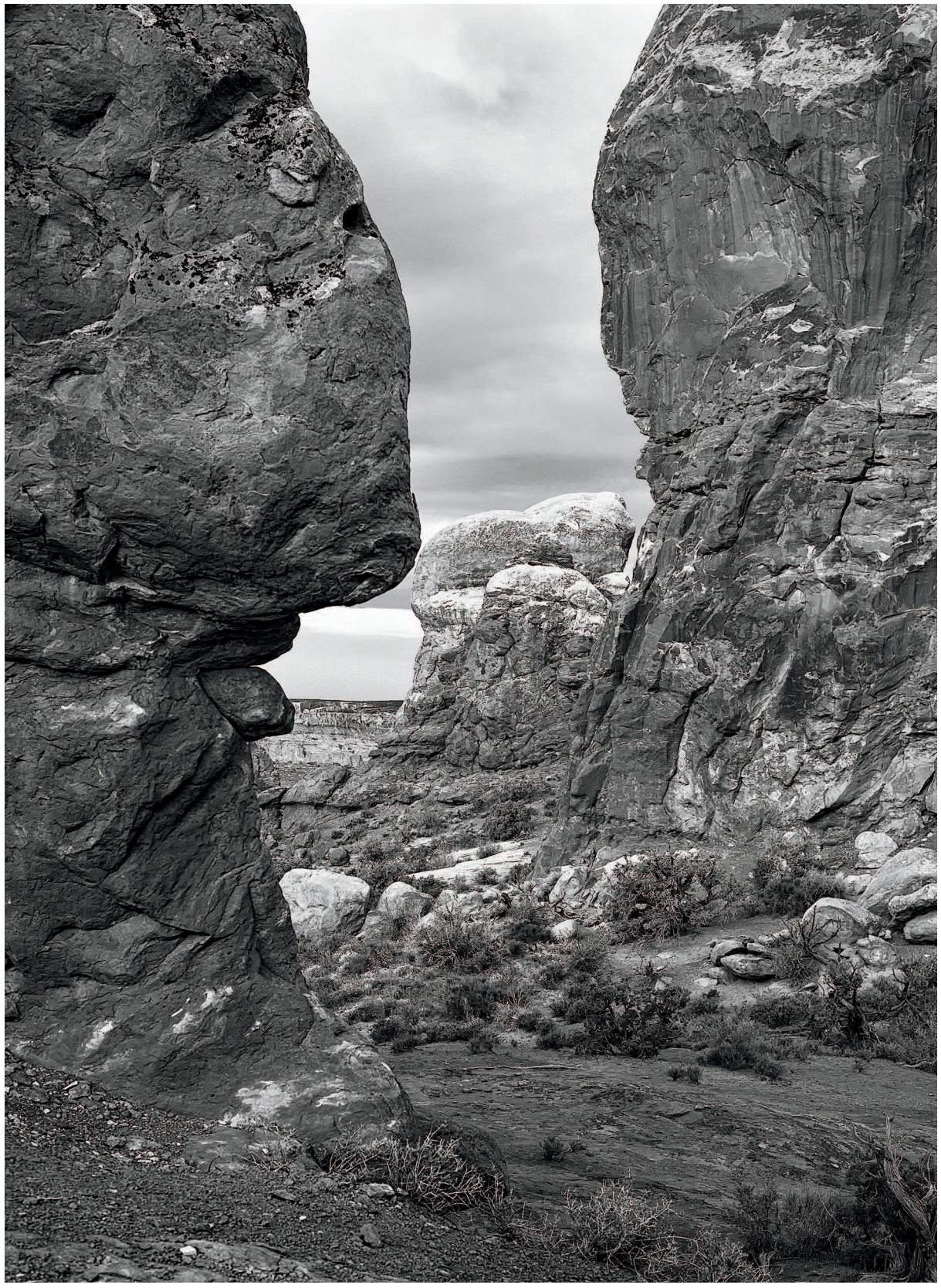
Crescent Moon Over Utah, 2014

Castle Valley Ridge, 2014

The Colorado River at Sunset, 2014

The Windows Section, Arches, 2014

On multiple occasions I went to the Windows section, site of numerous formations, including, the Turret Arch and the South Window, where I took several photographs early in the morning and late in the afternoon.

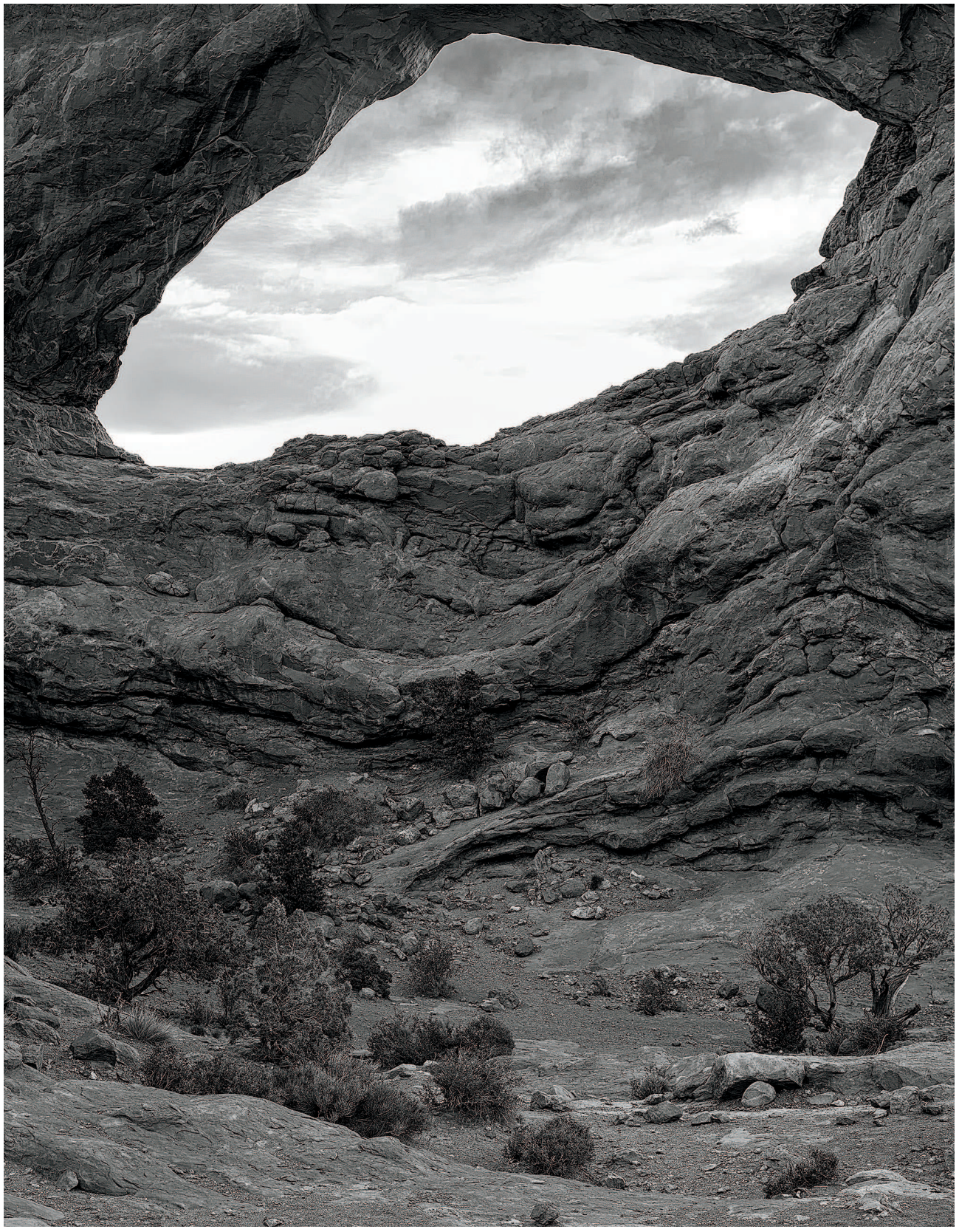


Formations Near Turret Arch, 2014

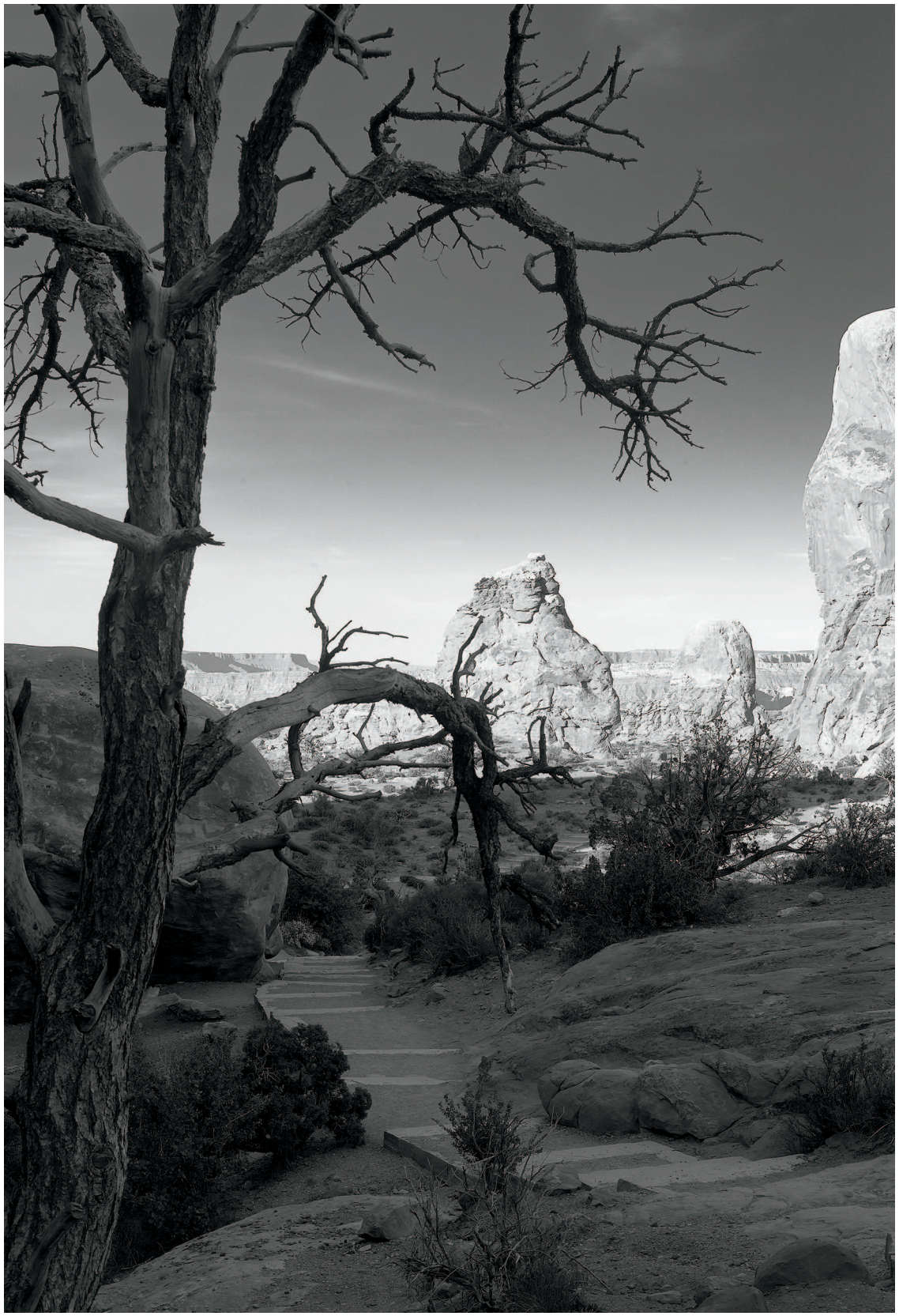
Turret Arch #1, 2014

Turret Arch #2, 2014

South Window Arch #1, 2014



South Window Arch #2, 2014



Looking East From the South Window Arch, 2014

Dead Tree #3, 2014

Sunrise Near the South Window Arch, 2014

Near South Window Arch, 2014

Southern Utah experienced the perfect combination of precipitation and temperature during the spring of 2014 to turn the desert into a garden of wildflowers. In places primroses carpeted the desert floor. The next photograph shows a primrose growing out of a crack in a sandstone boulder. I found it at just the right moment; by the next day it had wilted.

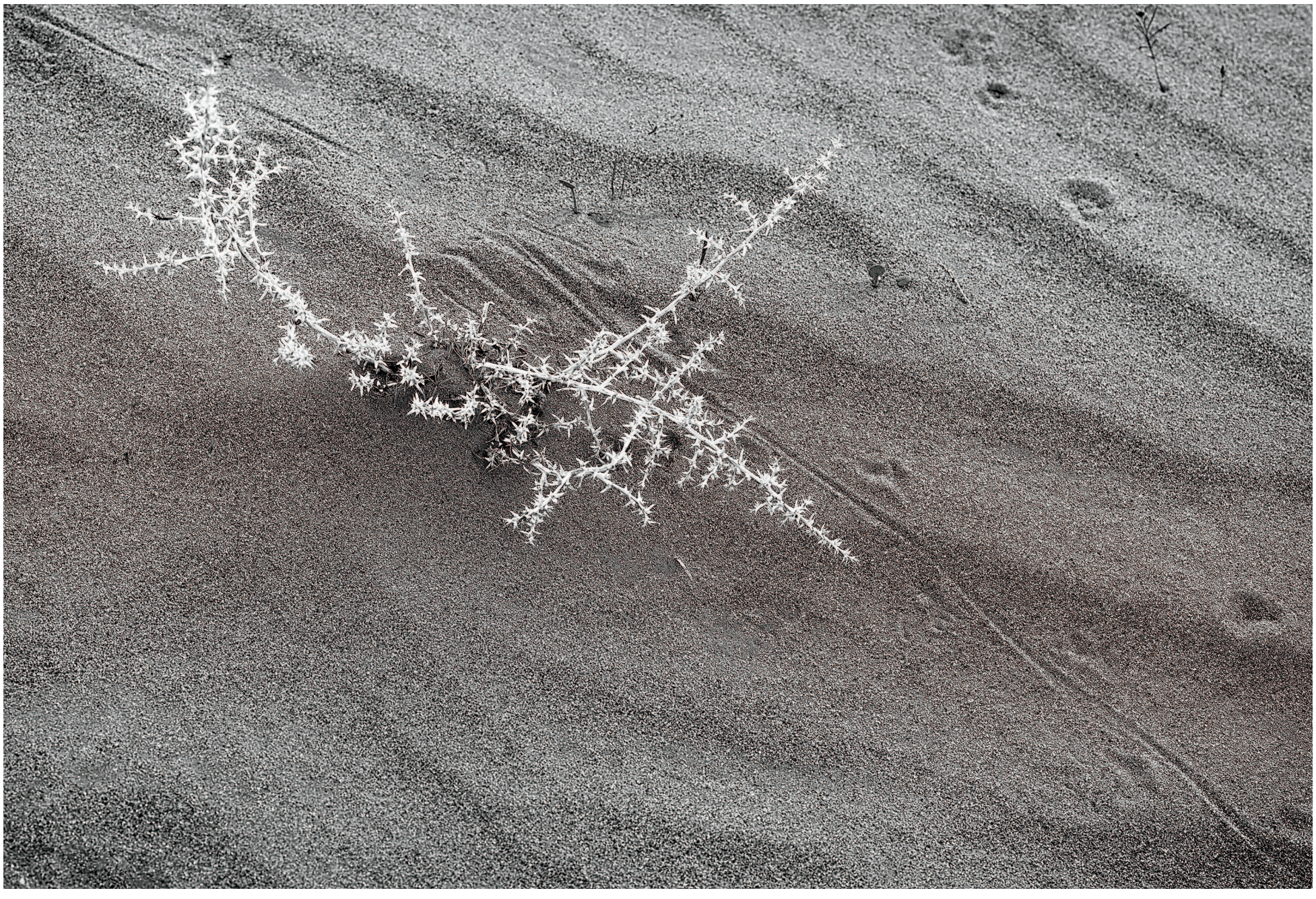
Primrose #1, 2014

Desert Flowers, 2014

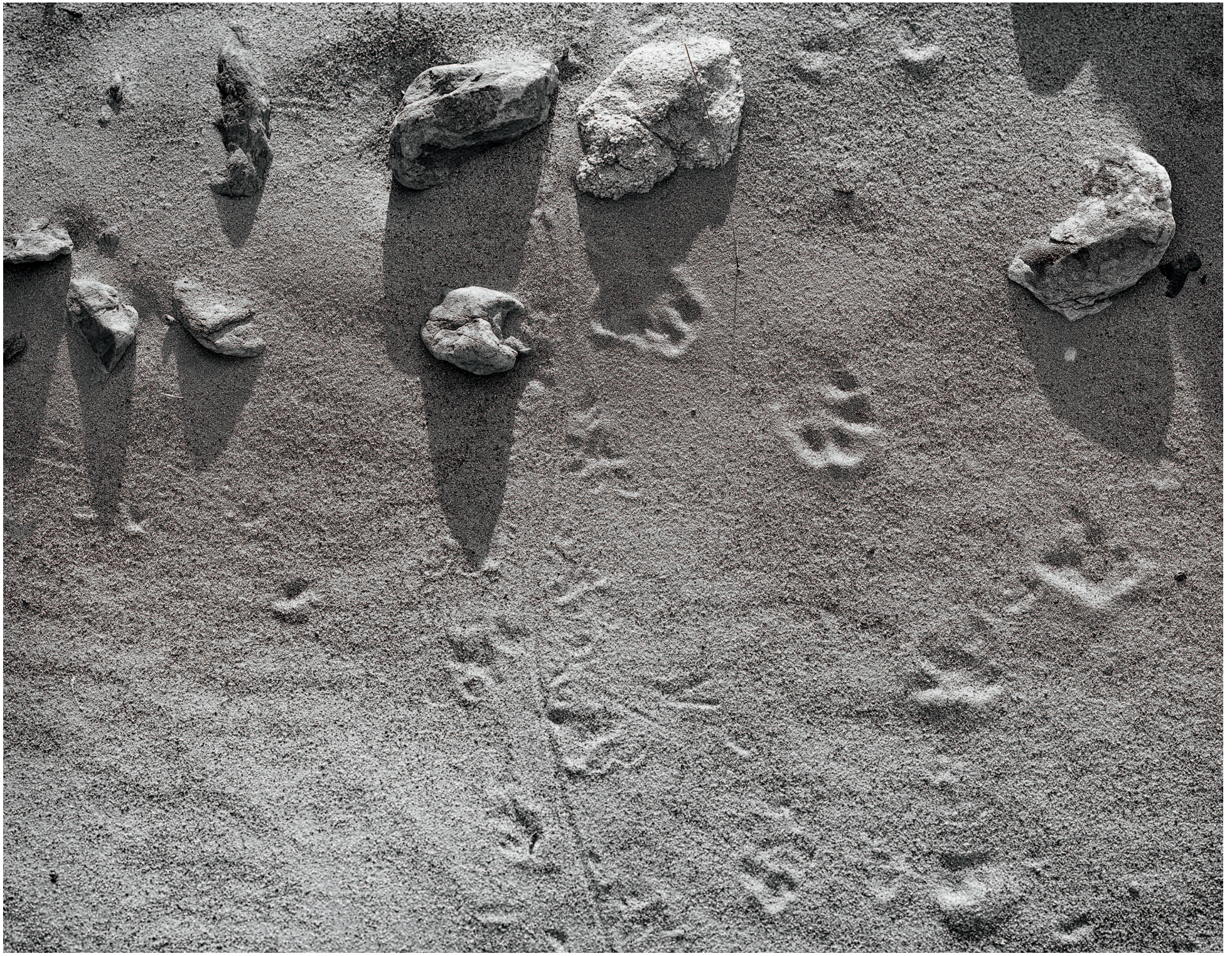
Blooming Cactus, 2014

Primrose #2, 2014

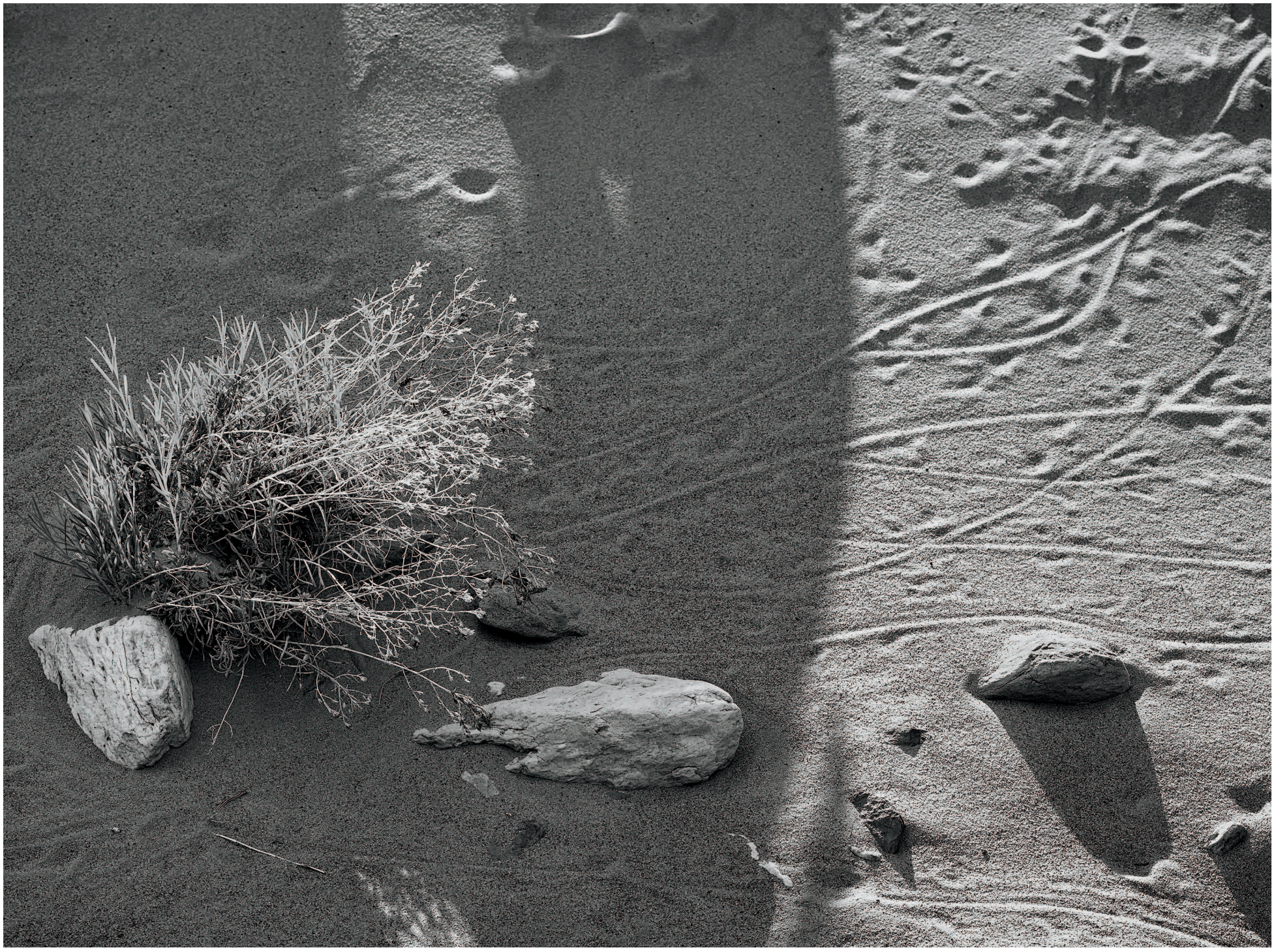
Weathered Stump, 2014



Desert Plant and Tracks, 2014



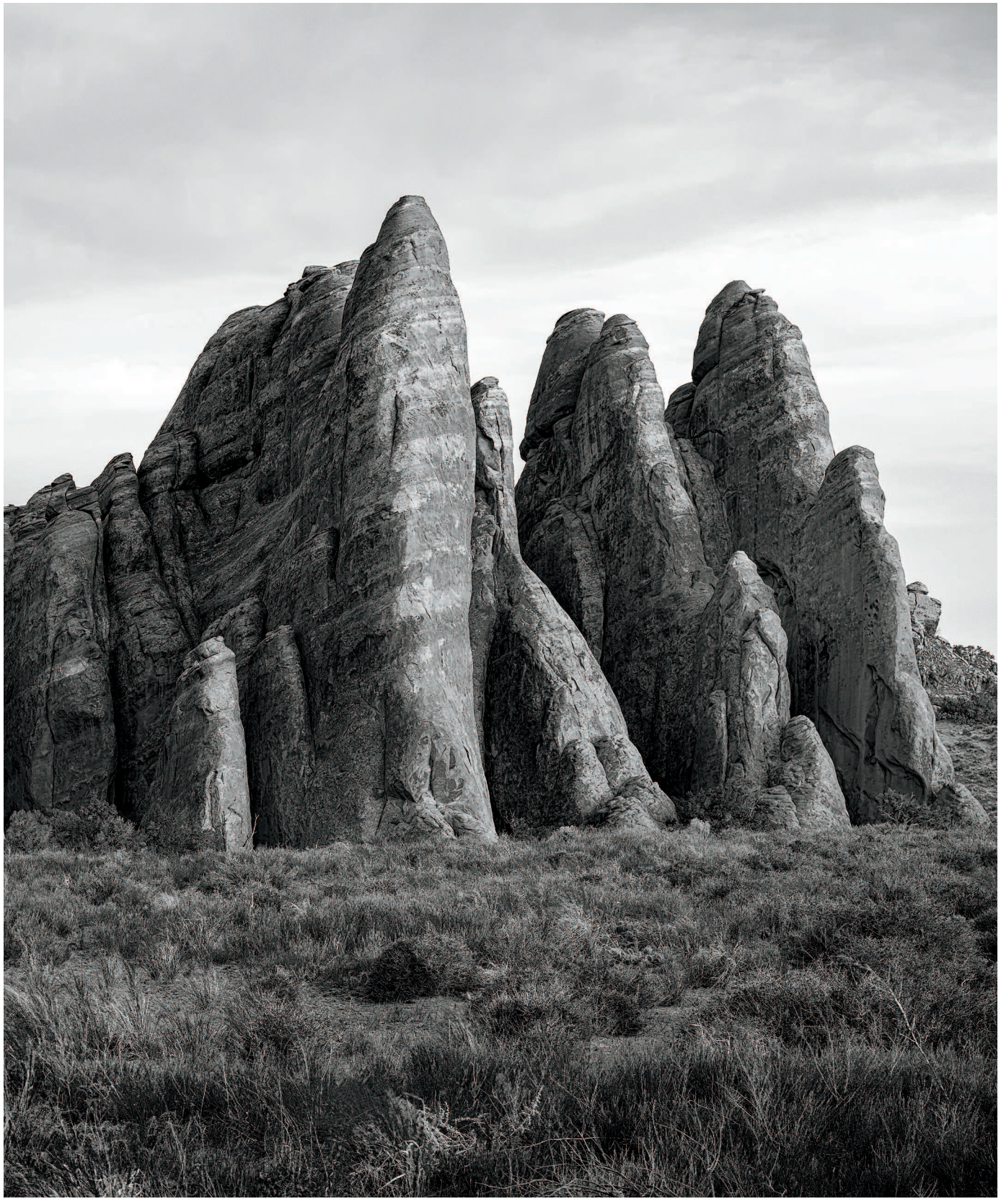
Tracks in the Sand, 2014



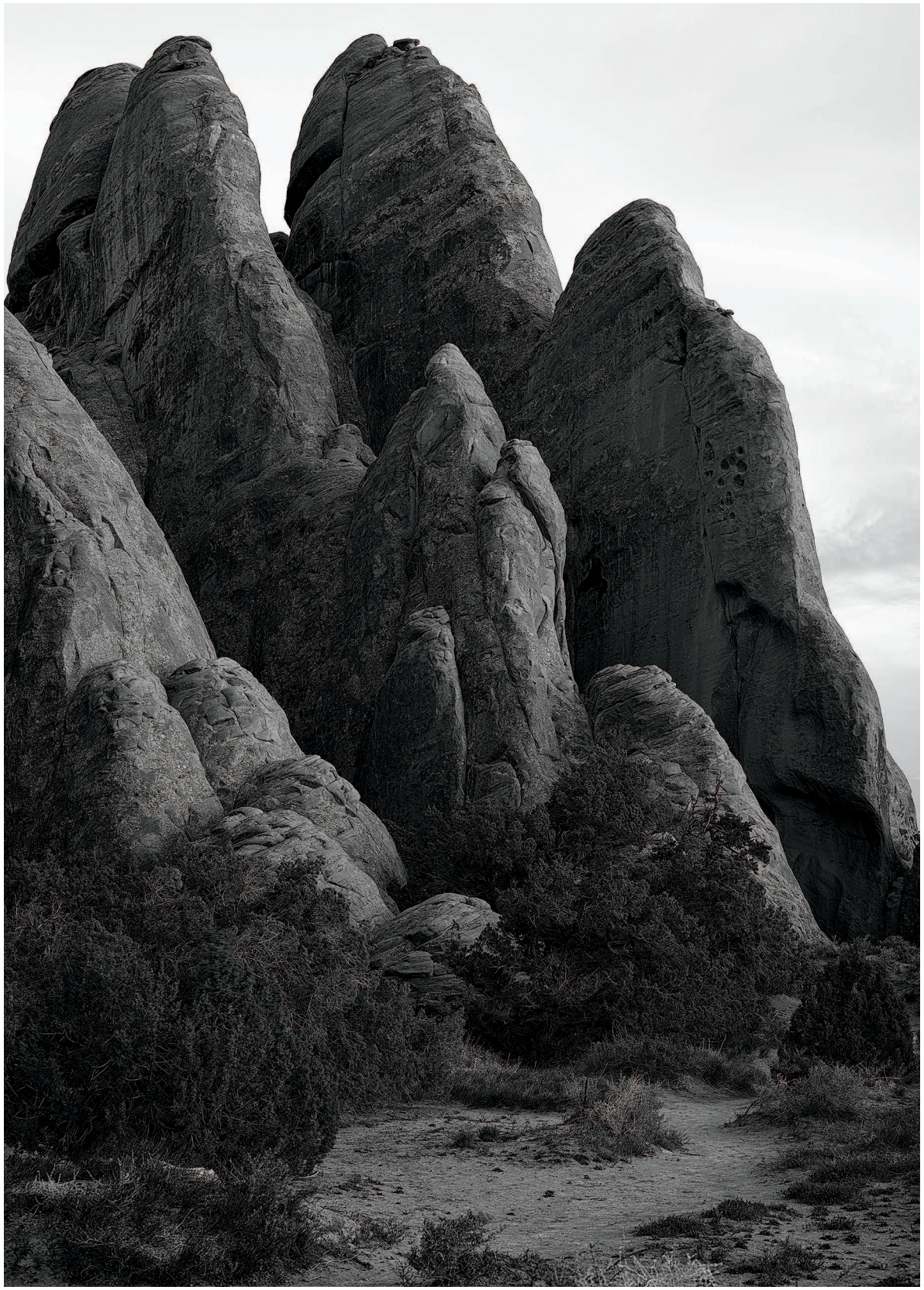
Tracks and Grass, 2014

I took my last photographs in Arches at a spot near Sandy Arch. The sun had just set, and I used the waning light to capture these sculptural formations. The latter two are photographs of the same rocks, the second closer and later than the first. This formation reminded me of the flying buttresses on Gothic cathedrals.

Near Sandy Arch, 2014



Flying Buttresses #1, 2014



Flying Buttresses #2, 2014

Desert of Primroses, 2014

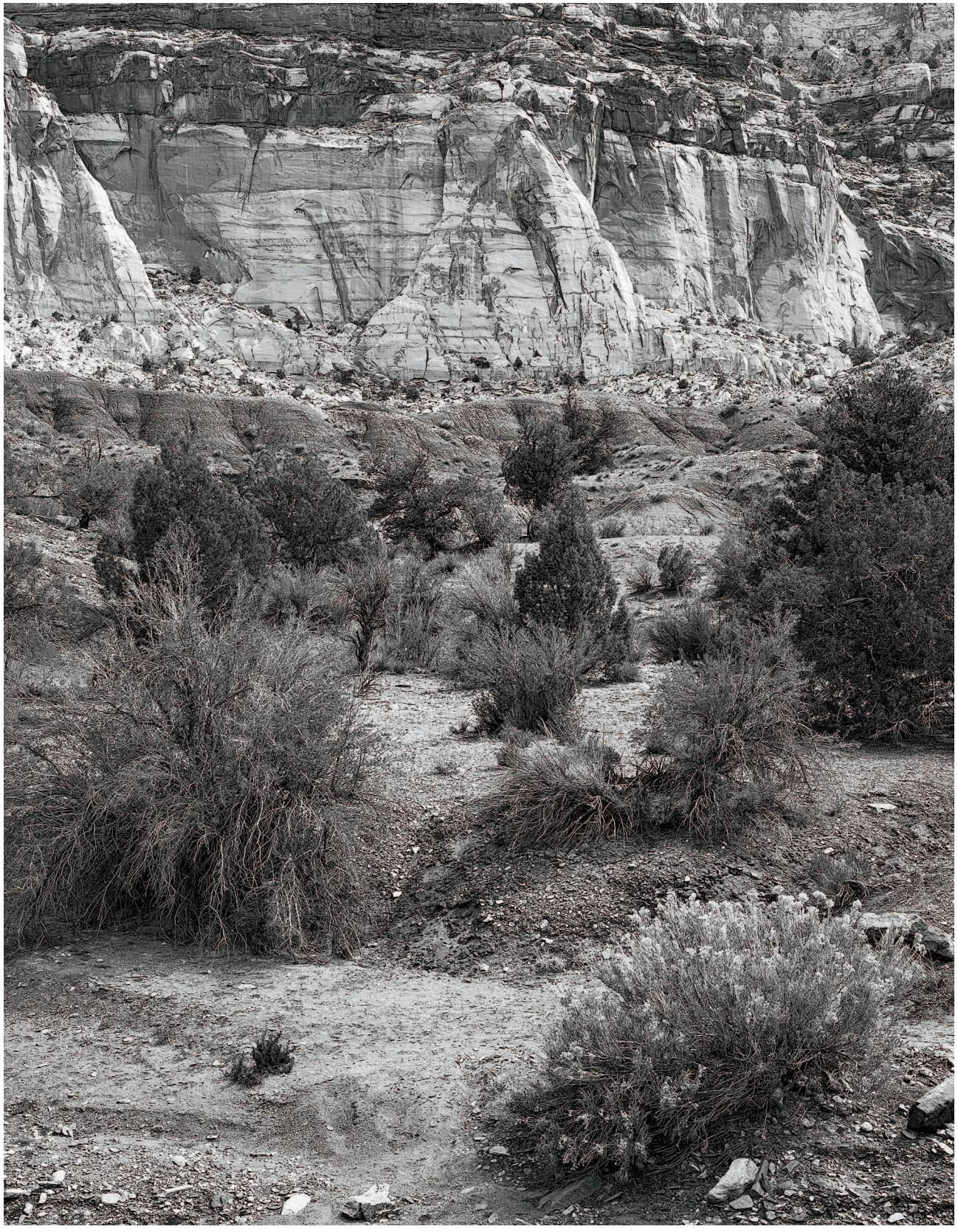
Capitol Reef

Capitol Reef is an odd national park. This long, narrow park follows the Waterpocket Fold and is characterized by steep, colorful cliffs. On the last day of my visit to southeastern Utah I drove from Moab over to Capitol Reef via Hanksville and spent the day photographing Capitol Reef and its environs.

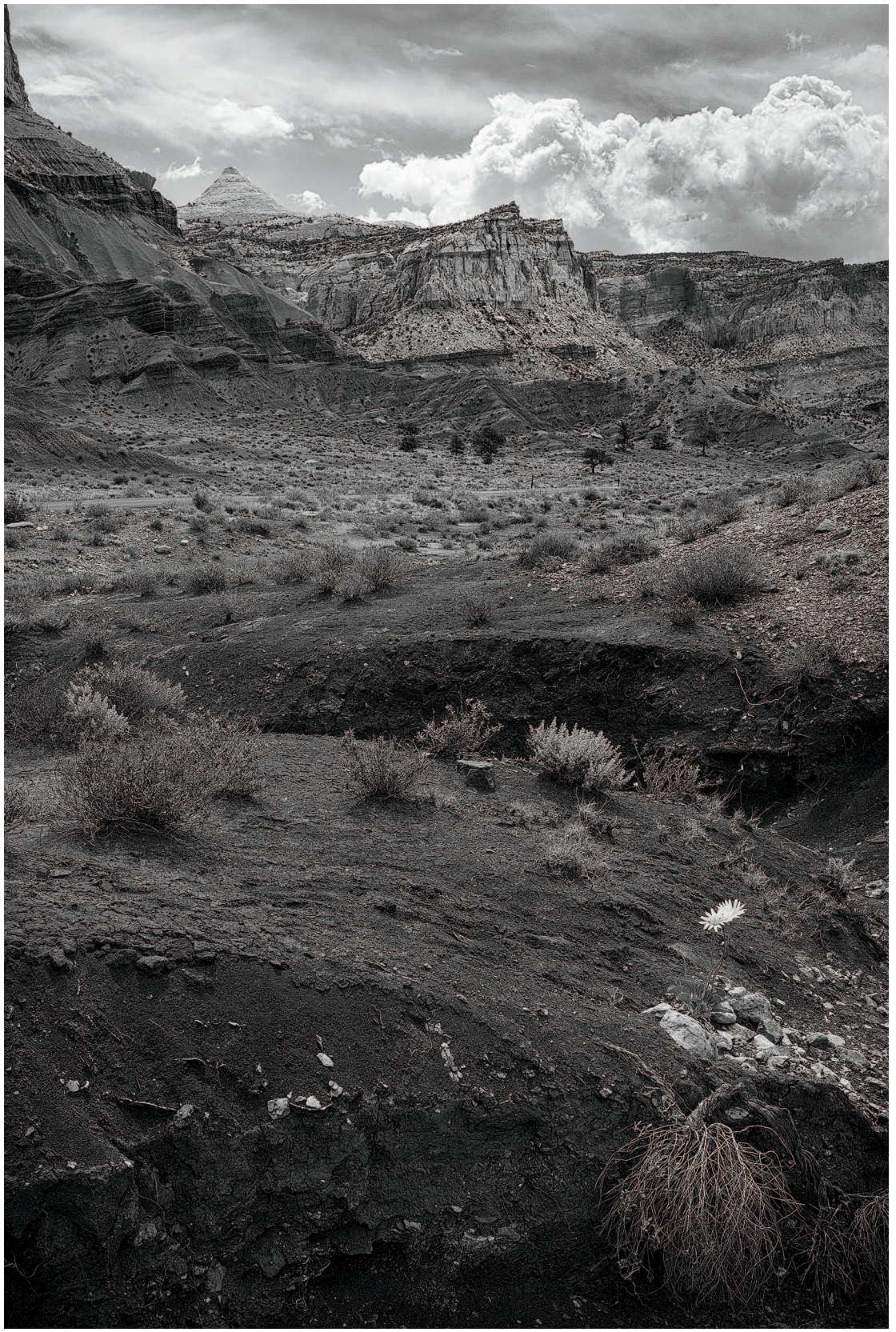
The day started with beautiful, sunny weather perfectly suited to the primroses that carpeted the desert floor. During the day a storm moved through, and the day ended with dramatic clouds.

Capitol Reef #1, 2014

Capitol Reef #2, 2014

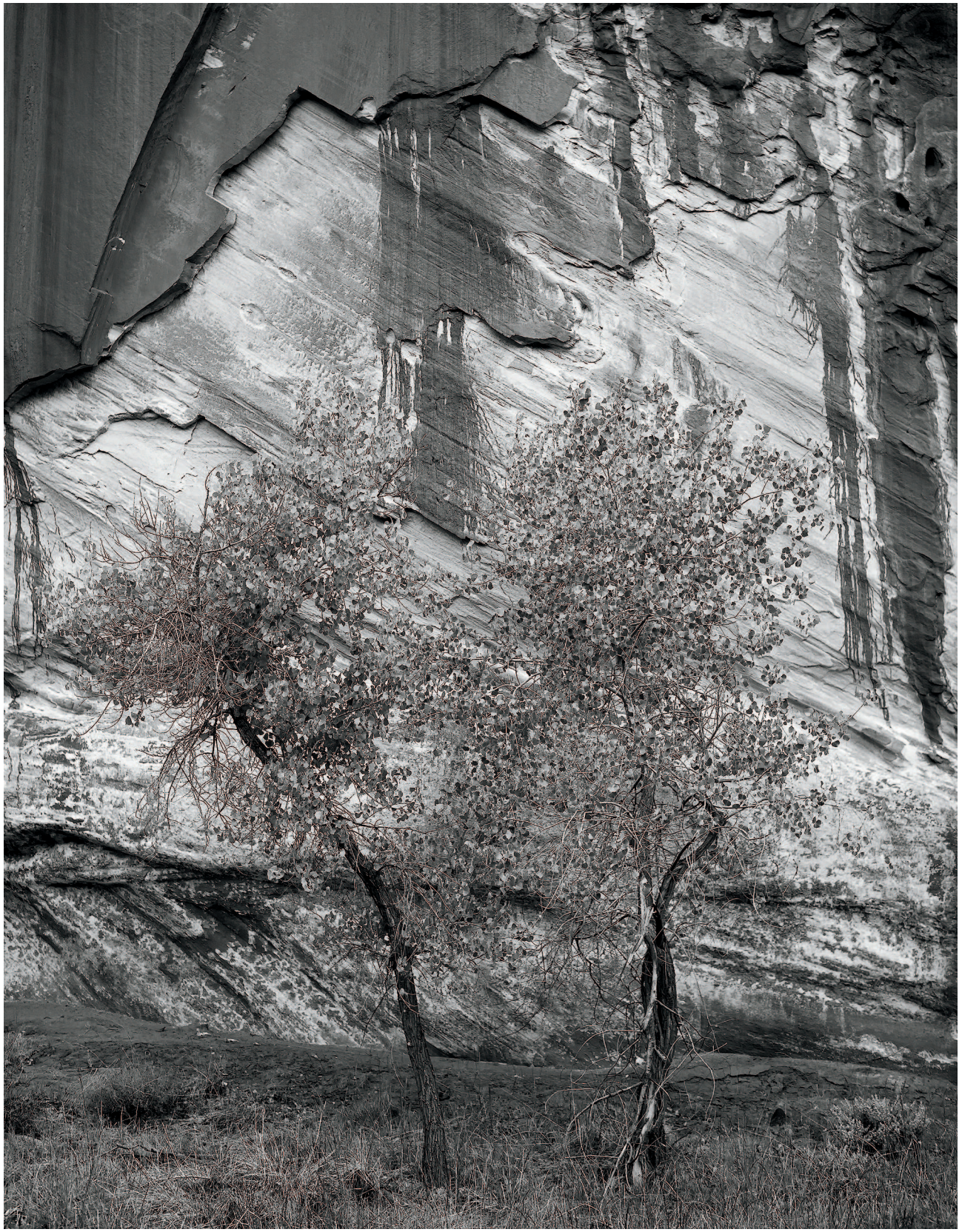


Capitol Reef #3, 2014



Capitol Reef #4, 2014

Approaching Storm, Capitol Reef, 2014



Trees and Sandstone Cliff, 2014

Rain Near Hanksville, 2014

Storm Near Hanksville, 2014

Storm Near Hanksville was the last photograph I took on the ground in Utah. Early the next morning I took off from the Canyonlands Airport near Moab and headed for Oakland. I had hoped to go back the way I came, but bad weather over the High Sierras persuaded me to head toward Las Vegas and the Mojave Desert and come home via Bakersfield. On my way to Las Vegas I crossed much of the territory I had visited by car the day before.

You may view the photographs I took on the flights to and from Moab on my website, nigrumetalbum.com, and in the photo book I created, *Journey to Moab,* which is also available on the website.

About this Book

The photographs in this book were taken on a trip to southeastern Utah in 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 Adobe InDesign.

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. Printed version of his 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.html.

About the Photographer

When Stephen Ashley was a young teenager, his parents 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, and he realized that it would make an ideal darkroom. 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 photographs.

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 several. 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.

In May of 2014, Stephen S. Ashley spent seven days in Moab, Utah, photographing three national parks—Canyonlands, Arches, and Capitol Reef—and the wild country located nearby. He had the good fortune to come home with a camera full of sandstone formations, arches, cliffs, wildflowers, and dramatic weather. Through the 61 black and white prints included in this volume you will relive his visit to this unique landscape.