

Poetic Visuals

Essays

Developing a Visual Language

Murray Livingston

The Photographer's Poem

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Design Thinking

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Poem

Earthsong

Madeleine Bazil

Featured Project

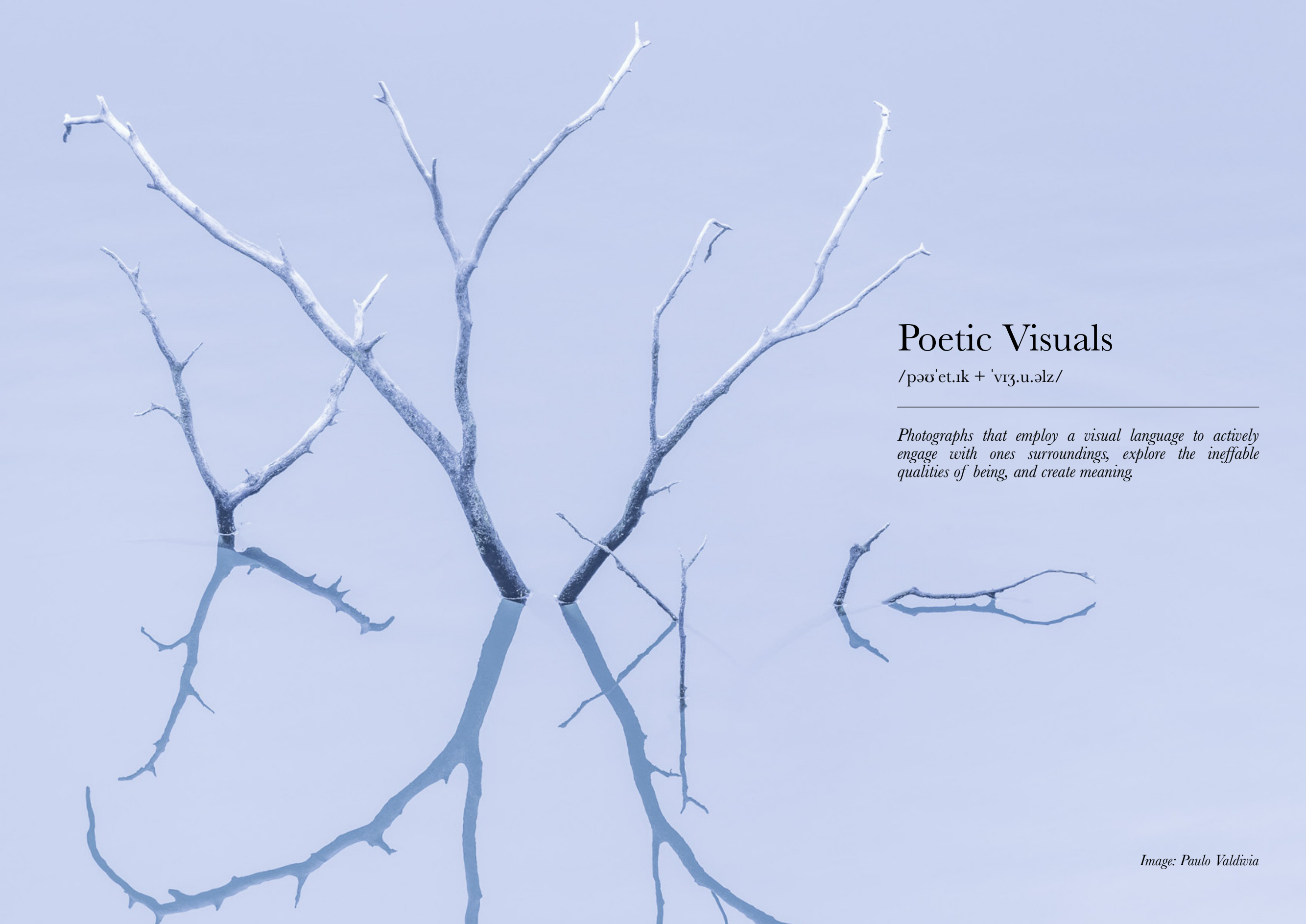
This Land Remembers

Murray Livingston



Volume 1 — Intersections

Winter 2025



Poetic Visuals

/pəʊ'et.ɪk + 'vɪʒ.u.əlz/

Photographs that employ a visual language to actively engage with ones surroundings, explore the ineffable qualities of being, and create meaning

Image: Paulo Valdivia

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Editor's Note

A warm welcome to all readers! This new journal, *Poetic Visuals*, is an idea borne out of a mutual interest in language — both written and visual.

It is an experimental collaboration between creatives, namely myself and **co-editor Nick Becker**. The concept was simple: to give a (beautiful) home to some of our more philosophical musings about the intersection of images and words.

As the winter of 2025 slowly blends into spring, new life blossoms. A fitting metaphor, and perhaps a little bit of personal creative permission, to share this new idea with the world. As I sit here writing this introduction, I have spent a significant number of hours over the last few weeks reflecting on the year that has passed, and planning for the months to come. Writing and producing this journal has been a fantastic outlet during this relative state of photographic “inactivity”, and for that I am grateful.

In Volume 1, Nick Becker writes lyrically about the photographic poem, developing a rich thesis on how poetry can inform composition and how one finds meaning in image making.

I explore the concept of visual languages, discussing the process of compositional design and how the act of photography itself can lead to new ideas.

This first issue also features the insightful writing and photography of guest contributor **Paulo Valdivia**. Paulo delves deep into visual design thinking as he uncovers how perception informs our photos and life itself. Finally, **Madeleine Bazil** shares with us a reflective poem on life in the aftermath of fire.

I hope you find some inspiration in these pages, enjoy the writing, the ideas, and, of course, the photography.

Sincerely,

Murray Livingston



Winter 2025

Poetic Visuals is a journal by Murray Livingston and Nick Becker. Volume 1 features guest contributions from Paulo Valdivia & Madeleine Bazil. It explores the poetics of photography through the intersection of writing and images.

Co-Editors: Murray Livingston & Nick Becker



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Cover: *The Watchman*, Murray Livingston

A blue-tinted photograph of a snowy landscape. In the foreground, a small, bare tree stands on a gentle slope covered in snow. The background shows a dense forest of trees, also covered in snow, under a pale, overcast sky. The overall mood is quiet and serene.

Design Thinking:

A *Kanji* for Crafting Visual Poetics in
Photography

Paulo Valdivia

In his book titled Visual Thinking, Rudolf Arnheim wrote: “A Japanese reads without difficulty ideographs printed so small that a Westerner needs a magnifying glass to discern them, not because the Japanese have more acute eyesight but because they hold the kanji characters in visual storage”. He uses the analogy of *kanji* (i.e. the Japanese written system) to explain how information, stored in memory as referential images, plays a key role in cognition, broadly, and in visual perception, specifically. And just as command of language is essential for speaking and writing, so is understanding the language of visual perception crucial for photographers to express their ideas more effectively.

Perception

Scholars have developed several theories to explain how memory and other concepts operate in visual perception processes. However, there are four theories that have remained dominant in academic disciplines and studies of perception: a) bottom-up processing, b) top-down processing, c) direct perception, and d) Gestalt theory. Briefly, bottom-up theory explains that perception starts with the sensory input: the eyes capture raw visual information, then the brain processes this data and ultimately builds up a representation of what has been processed. Top-down processing theory suggests the opposite view, in which perception is shaped by our prior knowledge and experiences. On the other hand, direct perception theory suggests that perception occurs without the assistance of complex brain processing and information. In this case, the environment itself provides all the necessary information for visual perception. And lastly, Gestalt theory proposes that our brains are prone to group elements into coherent and unified wholes based on principles such as similarity and figure-ground separations, among others.

Gestalt theory, based on research conducted by psychologists Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka, and Wolfgang Kohler in the early 1900s, influenced multiple disciplines, including linguistics, musicology, human-computer interaction, art, and visual communication. For graphic designers and visual artists, this theory was particularly appealing because it offered a scientific framework for understanding human perception and the brain's tendency to seek patterns. The Gestalt “laws” (closure, continuity, similarity, proximity, figure/ground) validated compositional ideas used by design educators and artists in the mid-twentieth century. Thus, Gestalt theory remains relevant in art, design, and academia, and its wide acceptance makes it essential knowledge for photographers who want to understand the language of visual perception.

But an important question remains: how can we, as creatives, apply Gestalt theory to our work? We can appreciate its theoretical propositions as intellectual pursuits that further our growth as photographers. But this framework should also help us improve our craft pragmatically. In my own journey, visual design has enhanced my understanding of how visual perception operates in practice. Its connection to Gestalt laws and its widespread use by visual media professionals and artists provide a consistent and applicable framework — a *kanji* as a visual language for my photographic work.

Visual Design

Visual Design is defined as the purposeful organisation of elements (i.e. lines, shapes, volumes, colour, etc.) according to a set of principles (i.e. balance, unity, contrast, etc.). Thus, visual design in art-making entails cognitive and emotional decisions to arrange visual elements in order to effectively communicate ideas. As an example, these elements and principles have been widely applied by graphic designers to communicate typographic and pictographic information for diverse industries in efficient ways. Being essentially a graphic medium, photography can be understood by the same rules of visual design, and can help us to achieve effective self-expression. In sum, elements refer to what is used, and principles refer to how they are used.

The intention of this essay is not to provide a comprehensive discussion of all the elements and principles that govern visual design thinking. However, the reader may find insight in exploring three of the most fundamental conceptualisations of visual design in art: lines and colour (as elements), and balance (as a principle). Lines are not only the foundation of any work of art, but they are also a child's first visual means of expression, as seen in their first rudimentary drawings. Although lines are characterised by having only length and a single dimension, their expressive power is often





underestimated. For instance, vertical lines can convey a sense of dignity and height, while horizontal lines can create calm and stability. Curved lines can create dynamism or movement, while diagonal lines can create tension in the visual field. It is not surprising then that photographs of vast landscapes stretching out horizontally provide a sense of soothing relaxation.

On the other hand, colour is defined as the visual experience that is dependent on light. In simple terms, if there is no light, there is no perception of colour. This visual element has the potential to generate important emotional impacts on the human psyche. For instance, yellow and red convey feelings of energy and passion, respectively. Whereas blue evoke sensations of serene calm. Evolutionary science suggests that human colour preferences may have evolved because individuals who favoured certain colours were more likely to survive. People tend to prefer colours associated with positive experiences (e.g., blue and cyan for clear skies and water) and dislike colours associated with negative ones (e.g., brown for rotting food).

Balance, a principle of visual design rooted in Gestalt theory, is the visual equilibrium achieved through the distribution of weight within a composition. For instance, if, in a photograph, one element is visually heavier than other elements within the frame, then the image could make us feel uneasy. Similarly, if a tree appears to be leaning to one side of the frame without a visual counterweight, then we tend to perceive that there is some kind of imbalance. However, it is interesting to note that this type of imbalance can also be visually appealing and beautiful. Thus, the principle of balance requires the artist to be mindful of its use, as it can impact a visual design in both positive and negative ways.

It is also important to understand that an element with more visual weight than the others in a photograph does not necessarily imply that the photograph is inherently imbalanced. Theorists have pointed out that there is symmetrical and asymmetrical balance. The reflection of a branch emerging from a lake creates a nearly symmetrical balance. Conversely, a massive and dark cloud on a rainy day, on the right side of the frame, and a small couple of dark trees, located on the left side of the photograph, could be considered asymmetrically balanced. Simply put, the difference in size of one element in relation to others within a photograph does not necessarily equate to a visual imbalance.

These examples reveal how the human brain naturally seeks order and structure in visual processing. Scholars largely agree that organisation is the underlying force behind how our perceptual system makes sense of raw information, such as light, colours, and shapes. This means that the brain finds patterns by establishing relationships, grouping or comparing different elements in the visual field. Such processes allow for objects and events to become coherent and perceivable stimuli. This rationale is what Gestalt theorists actually understood more than a hundred years ago: an object in the visual space is determined by the total context in which it exists.



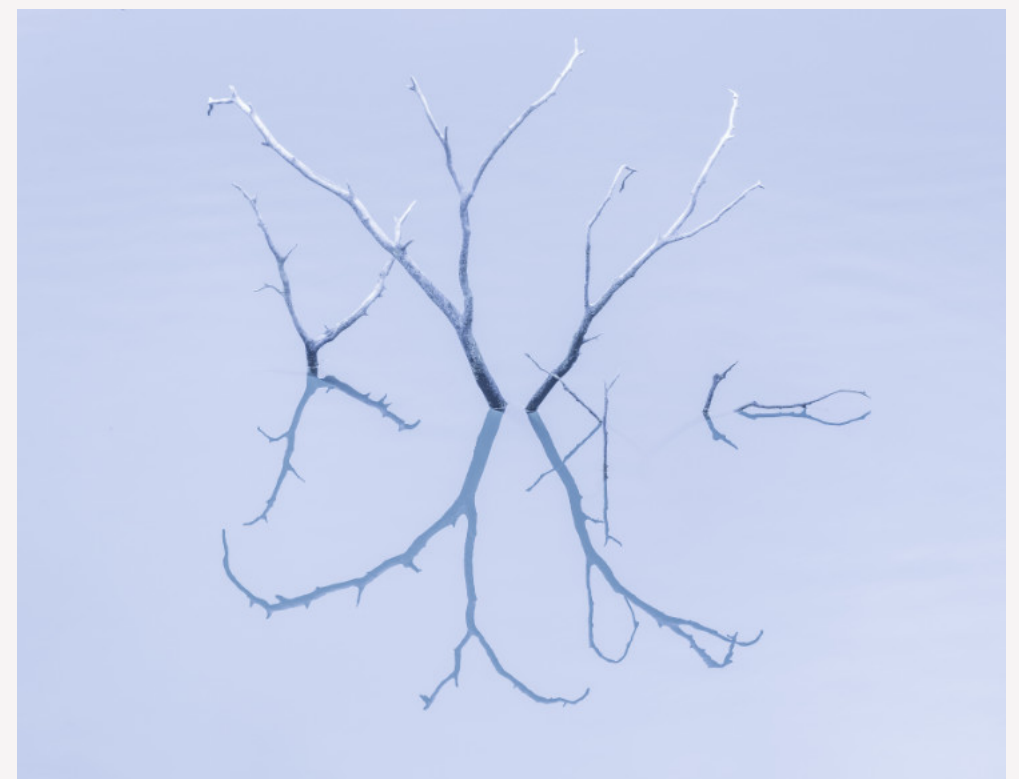




Conclusion

The elements and principles of visual design represent the *kanji* — the visual vocabulary — of spatial reasoning, through which we can translate our emotional responses to the environment into visual narratives. However, It is important for photographers to understand that the use of a particular visual design is not self-expression per se. In the creative photographic process, visual design sits between the subject matter and the artist's expressive intent. An appropriate visual design, then, is a prerequisite for effective expression.

The ability to express oneself also depends on other factors, such as careful observation, curiosity, imagination, emotional connection, and intuition. Therefore, visual design should not be interpreted as an end goal in photography, as it will yield formulaic work that is not in tune with our emotional response to nature. However, when used as a practical tool, visual design can be conducive to the expression of one's inner life, allowing us, as photographers, to craft the poetics of space.





This Land Remembers

Scotland's Ancient Caledonian Forest

Murray Livingston

This Land Remembers

Over the last year I have begun work on a photographic project about Scotland's remaining Caledonian Forests. These are the native woodlands that grew after the ice age retreated 14,000 years ago; it is estimated that roughly 1% remains with just 84 isolated fragments on the official inventory. Some unrecorded sites are still being discovered, by eNGO's like Trees for Life through their Wild Pines project and other adventurous souls, in an effort to document the woodlands that were missed by the original catalog. The trees that remain are often isolated, remote, and facing increasing threat.

The dramatic reduction in woodlands has been due to a number of factors. Today these are predominantly grazing pressures, while historically highland clearances and war efforts during WWI and WWII played a role. Human pressures through climate change are now also affecting their ability to naturally regenerate, especially on the wet west coast.

I have not found any photographic projects, books, or exhibitions dedicated to the subject. The Pinewood Conference in October 2024 was the first of its kind in 30 years. It made clear that immediate action is needed, mostly on landscape-scale deer management. Funding this action means the organisations and people involved need a clear story to tell in order to not only preserve what is left of these forests, but restore some of what has been lost.

Growing up, I was always gifted the opportunity of time in wilderness. Particularly in South Africa where wide open spaces relatively untouched by human influence are abundant. These experiences instilled in me from a very young age their importance on my understanding of the world and my very being. I see glimpses of this in the Scottish landscape and certainly in the Scottish people.

That is the story I'm trying to tell. To make Scotland proud once again of what is a globally unique ecosystem and help to protect and expand these native woodlands. Scotland's landscape has experienced "shifting baseline syndrome": the norm of what is thought of as beautiful, wild Scotland is in reality a barren landscape stripped clean. The desolate rolling hills and mountains are unnatural. Through this project, I hope to show a vision for Scotland. While people may not remember what Scotland once was, this land remembers.

This initial limited selection of work was made in the Winter of 2023/24 exploring pinewood remnants and their enduring nature. Small pockets of trees face out over the landscape standing their ground, resilient and resolute.



Resolve



Solitude





Prev: Pinewood Fantasy, Above: Veiled Birches



Under Cover of Snow





Prev: Brothers Across the Loch, Above: The Heavy Weight of Burden



Sgurr Dubh & Pines





Prev: An Ancient Order, Above: Pioneers



Frozen Birch





Prev: Wistful Birch, Above: Tilted, Twisted



Above: The Watchman, Next: A Ray of Hope





*“In April 2021, a devastating wildfire tore through the Table Mountain area. Following a human-induced ignition on the morning of 18 April, worsening weather conditions led to increased fire spread that lasted until the afternoon of 20 April when the fire was eventually extinguished.”**

*“How does one go about cataloguing the material of colonial conquest in a way that takes cognisance of how materials were obtained, and the potential harm latent in their representations, without over-curating? The runaway fire that gutted the Jagger Reading room and several collections at the University of Cape Town in 2021 threw these debates into sharp relief.”***

** Mail & Guardian Online, 2 March 2023.*

*** Rijdsdijk, I. M., & Evans, M. (2024). ‘All who care to look’: loss and renewal in the wake of the Jagger Library fire. Social Dynamics, 50(1), 92–96.*

An earlier version of this poem appeared in New Contrast Literary Journal.

Kinship lies beyond indifference and care.
I used to misunderstand the texture of my beloveds.

Now I grip them intimately—tenor of birds, silver trees
coruscating in lush breeze. Gravity’s hard embrace.

Yet we never live in tandem. The heat of sandstone
becomes belligerent. When the burn ends,

I press my body against scorched soil—
shallow pine roots ripe with unbelonging,

invasive, too eager to self-immolate—
blackened signet of the fragmented colony.

For a moment, illuminated by coiling flame,
I had felt the relief of release, germination—

but the grey thrum of morning is heavy with smoke.
Students lift boxes from rubble like ants in a chain.

Water, airlifted down from tabletop dams
as body recognises body, as form soothes form.

Histories are triaged in cold storage,
the practice of archive inert and charred,

loss engendering, here, a certain tenderness—
this, the unwelcome labour of unbecoming.

So late in the season for such vehemence,
I was unprepared for the fire.

See how I’m capable of falling my way forward.
We are quanta laughing in the dark. I need love that survives.

Have you ever been moved by a photograph? Overcome with emotion or stricken with wonder? Inspired or saddened?

A mysterious and magical exchange happens between a great image and its receptive viewer. As Ansel said, "You bring to the act of photography all the pictures you have seen, the books you have read, the music you have heard, the people you have loved." Like a carefully crafted poem, an image comes together as one particular configuration out of infinitely many possibilities; one pursuant to the artist's intent, informed by a lifetime of experience brought to bear during the image's creation.

The viewer does not show up empty handed; they too bring all of their own experiences. One of the most important mediators of this beautiful exchange is composition. Composition tames, morphs, or embraces the chaos we often find in the natural world, creating a visual alignment that induces a response for both creator and viewer. By intentionally organising what lies within an image's frame, the photographer can create harmony that can be felt within this exchange.

To compose an image is much like composing a poem, song, or painting: we take the materials before us and reconfigure them into something more. It is an exercise in abstraction: seeing beyond the literal, without necessarily ignoring it. Words, notes, graphical elements seen in nature: all are arranged to create new relationships between the component pieces. This realignment induces a response. But how, and perhaps more importantly, why?

There are many factors at play, including cognitive processes beyond the scope of these musings. Countless claims and tutorials about "rules of composition" offer confident solutions and promise secrets to unlock this process. In my experience, the best teacher is time, and the best gauge of a composition is intuition, developed over years and honed by an openness to feeling something from an image.

We may get closer to our answer if we consider abstractions such as lines, textures, patterns. However, if we lean into the abstraction even further, we are left with fundamental visual units and the relationships between them: an intentional arrangement of our materials.

These considerations extend beyond photography. And indeed, composition, which means "putting together," is central to other visual arts like painting and sculpture, as well as literature and music. We take courses on composition to become better writers. We listen to classical composers to enrich our existence. In all cases, the goals are similar: to create an arrangement for greater effect.

The Photographer's Poem

Nick Becker

The Poetic Connection

Poetry, in particular, provides an especially insightful perspective for exploring the parameters of composition.

Much like a photograph, a poem is dense with aesthetic information and emotional cues. Poems are typically more compressed than prose, which places key compositional decisions in the spotlight. And similar to the limitations that photographers face in the composition of an image within the boundaries of a frame, composers of poetry are motivated to create great effect within a relatively small amount of space (ignoring, for the sake of argument, epic poetry that can fill hundreds of pages). Like a photograph, a poem arranges, includes, omits, and manipulates.

In *The Sounds of Poetry*, author Robert Pinsky summarises a few core parameters of poetry. At a high level, these are: accent and duration; syntax and lines; and rhyme and alliteration. If you look closely, each of these axes has a corollary in photography.

Accent and Duration

Accent is roughly equivalent to stress, while duration (or “quantity”) describes the relative length of a syllable. They are distinct quantities that can either reinforce or contrast with one another, depending on the desired effect. Pinsky describes accent as relative and continuous, and through its interaction with duration, capable of creating a “dance-like rhythm” across the lines of a poem.*

Variations of accent and duration contribute heavily to the overall cadence of a poem — its flow, rhythm, how it rests on the lips and in the mind. Within a photograph, visual weight provides a corollary. Visual weight signifies the degree to which an element in the frame stands out to the viewer, creating a distribution of “stickiness” for our attention. It is modulated in large part by contrast — the visual equivalent of accent. Much like accent, contrast is the perceptual difference that makes an element stand out from its surroundings, whether it is differences in colour or tone. Poetic duration might therefore be equivalent to the relative size of visual elements within a frame, working with or against with contrast to create a rhythm of visual weight.

Thus, an image with a singular and relatively large subject with high contrast could be said to have a heavily accented element reinforced by duration. Such compositions are often felt as bold, direct, or focused. An array of smaller subjects or visual elements with less contrast would convey a different distribution of both accent and duration, perhaps creating a staccato energy across the frame. Each image creates a different kind of rhythm, but balance can be found in both, for different visual (and emotional) effects.





Syntax and Lines

Syntax and lines offer another fascinating avenue of study for the photographer keenly interested in composition. Syntax refers to the internal (grammatical) structure of spoken sentences, which are distributed over the lines of the poem. Just as accent and duration reinforce or contrast with one another during the delivery of a poem, the manner in which sentences are (or are not) broken up over lines is pivotal to how the poem is read aloud. Sometimes, breaking a sentence into a new line can slow down the sentence, while syntax itself tries to speed it up, creating tension. Other times, the finality of ending a line at a natural syntactic division calls attention to the finality of its delivery.

Broadly speaking, the elements of visual design that we use to construct our compositions — the intentional use of colour, tonality, contrast, and balance, to name a few — comprise the syntax of our photographic poems. Where are the lines over which that syntax is distributed? Literal lines are a core component of graphical arrangements, central to any composition, but the foundation of our journey through an image are four lines that enclose every image: the borders of the frame itself. Within these borders, leading lines guide our eyes through the image, providing the framework with which to explore its subtleties. Visual juxtapositions among all of these compositional elements allow the photographer to manipulate tension and release it in a way that echoes a poet's use of syntax and lines.

Rhyme and Alliteration

Rhyme and alliteration are both ways to play with the sounds of language. We all have some intuition of what rhyme is from everyday life. Rhyme is often thought of in terms of similarity, but perhaps just as important is that there must be some difference: rhyme and rhyme do not rhyme, but rhyme and time do. It is also important to consider that rhyme is a matter of degree: rhyme and time; time and tired; tired and word; word and wild; wild and winter — all expressions of varying degrees of rhyme.

Alliteration, on the other hand, is the repetition of consonant sounds. Using words from the previous example: time, tired; word, wild, winter.





Just like pitch and duration, rhyme and alliteration provide additional expressive tools that can be used to reinforce or contrast an effect. To me, the photographic corollary of can be found in the repetition of graphical elements, textures, and colours that we see and use for effect in our images: the shape of a shoreline echoing or rhyming with the contours of a distant mountain range; the smoothness of still water with the buttery smooth gradient of a clear sky at dusk; red hues in lichen-covered rocks with the warm autumnal hues of the trees overhead.

All this is to say nothing of the endless possibilities that we discover when we consider metaphor. Perhaps visual rhymes create metaphors, or perhaps metaphors offer rhymes.

A more sustained riffing of similarity in shape, texture, colour, or metaphor creates a visual alliteration, which can be used to emphasise certain characteristics of a composition for further effect.

Conclusion

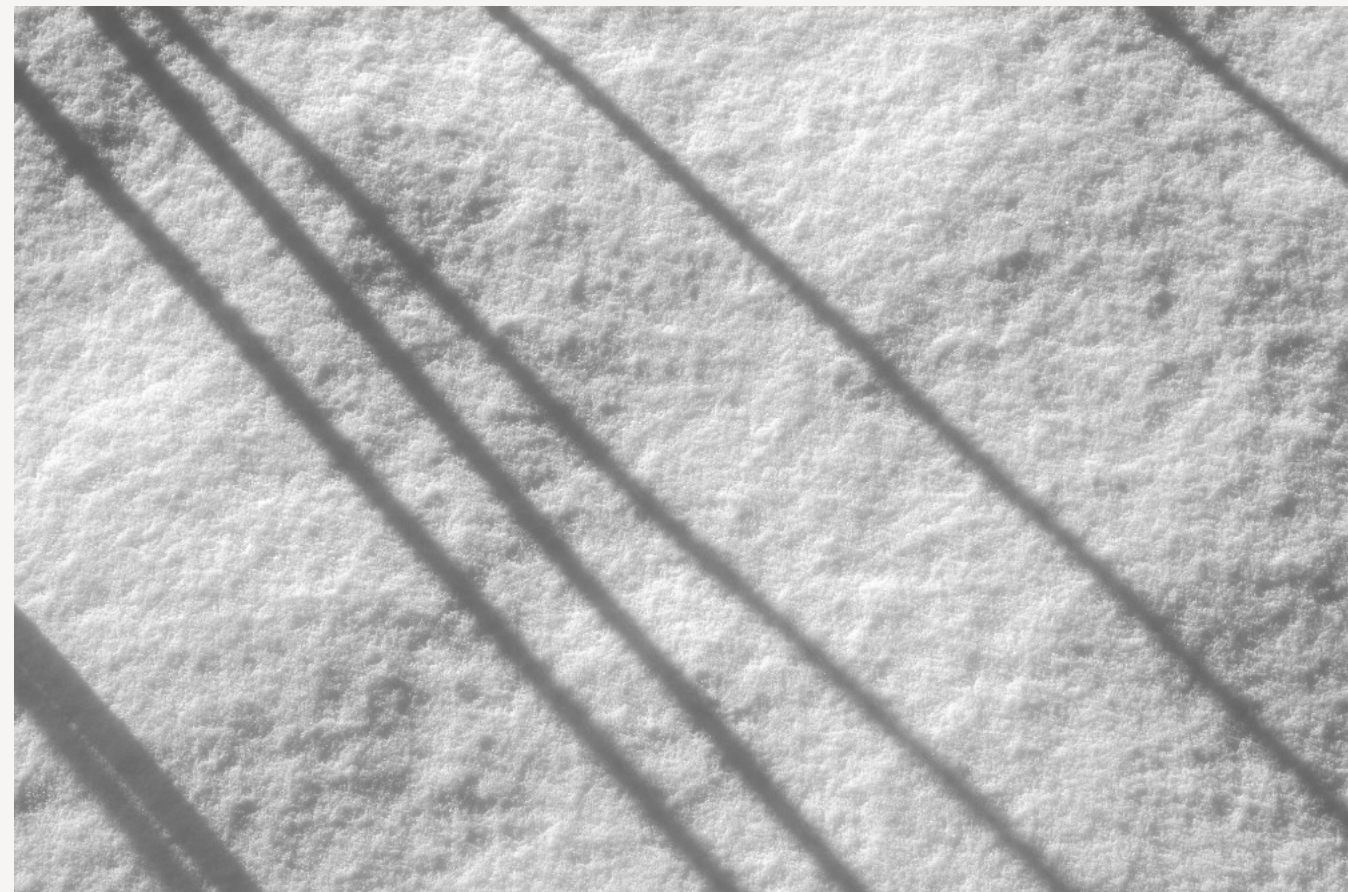
While the focus here is the conceptual overlap between the composition of singular poems and images, it is important to remember that no work lives in a vacuum. Images can relate to other images within a broader collection of work. Perhaps more importantly, composition (within a single image, or across many) can be used to achieve effects beyond aesthetics — reaching into metaphorical grounds or extending beyond the boundaries of a page or frame and into the broader context of the real world. To find a place within such a context is often our ultimate goal.

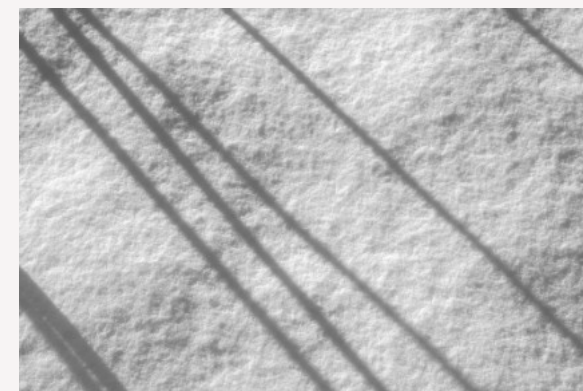
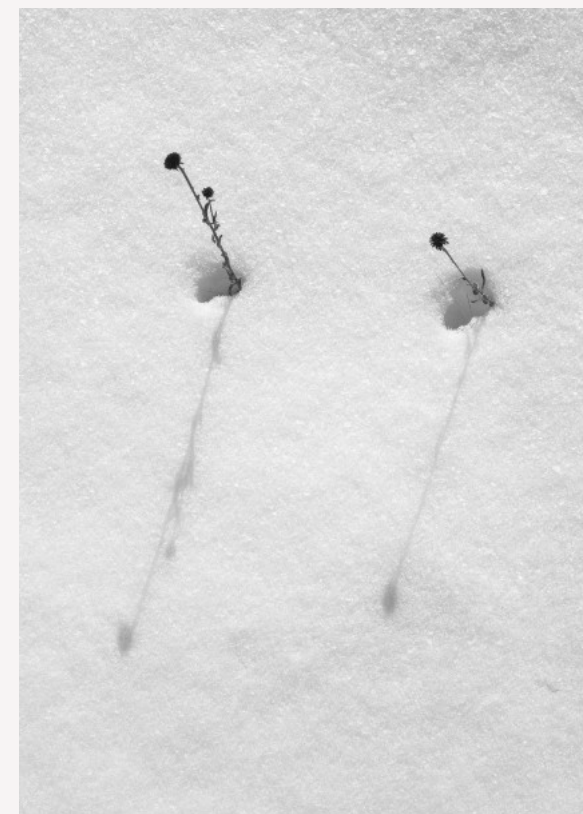
But not always. Whether we're writing a poem, crafting an image, or maybe a little of both, we can use these compositional parameters to explore, discover, and indulge — or perhaps even more simply, to create just a tiny bit of harmony in celebration of the beauty before us.

* *The Sounds of Poetry, Robert Pinksy; page 18.*

** *The Sounds of Poetry, Robert Pinksy; page 29-30.*

*** *The Sounds of Poetry, Robert Pinksy; page 81.*





Images from *Keepers of Time*

Developing a Visual Language

Murray Livingston

When we photograph, we make designs with the landscape — detailed drawings of light and shadow. Compositions are rich with information, pattern, colour, form, and function. Landscape photography is the process of communicating this visual language of design, the design of the natural world.

I think of design as a process that is often non-linear and iterative. The active participation in this process produces ideas. Our engagement with the natural world and the curiosity to notice is what gives a nature photographer infinite creative potential. Each one of these moments of focus can spark the next idea in the iterative process.

For instance, the dappled light through trees might first make us look at the translucency of the spring leaves on a beech tree, only then to notice the tree casting dancing shadows of its branches on the surface of a pond. The camera becomes an extension of our interacting body. The act of pointing the lens from one moment to the next is creative thinking, or “thinking through image making”. Nature photography is therefore a deeply generous act. One offers up a part of themselves, as in any good conversation, and nature replies. To develop a visual language, to speak through imagery, one must dedicate their life to service for nature, always engaged, listening, and reciprocating with care.

Visual Languages

In the same way a photographer communicates with their subjects (an unspoken reciprocity), photographs themselves communicate with their viewers. Images can often trigger emotions, memories, or intangible connections. Additionally, every viewer will interpret their own meaning from a given image. Visual languages therefore have the capacity to communicate what can't be put into words: ephemeral ideas that extend beyond the literal and deep into the human experience.

So, how do we develop a unique visual language that can align our creative process with an intended outcome? In practice, there are infinite modes of photographic communication - and there is beauty in this fact. We each have our own way of doing things. The way in which we arrive at the communication of an idea, emotion, feeling, or aesthetic, is ultimately a path everyone must find on their own.



For some, the very act of engaging with the world around them through photography may be enough in and of itself. Others may find a voice in reactive or responsive photography, using their intuition to create imagery of surprise. Carefully planned photography can lead to images that feel permanent or unyielding. These aren't strict rules or judgments, but rather observations from my own experience and exploration. The examples given here are not understood as good or bad, but the outcome must be recognised for what it is in order to be harnessed towards a creative purpose. Through this understanding, intuition and instinct become just as intentional as previsualisation and forethought.

My own creative process always stems from a deep reverence for the natural world: photographs made in the woodlands of Scotland are typically unplanned as I never know what I will stumble upon on any given day. In this complex environment, my process takes on a non-linear, reactive form, and the resulting images therefore often mirror some of the chaos that I encounter. Developing a visual language in this manner unlocks photography that is about something, rather than of something.



Poetics of the Photographic Series

“There is no more surprising, yet, in its naturalness and organic sequence, simpler form than the photographic series. This is the logical culmination of photography. The series is no longer a “picture,” and none of the canons of pictorial aesthetics can be applied to it. Here the separate picture loses its identity as such and becomes a detail of assembly, an essential structural element of the whole which is the thing itself. In this concatenation of its separate but inseparable parts a photographic series inspired by a definite purpose can become at once the most potent weapon and the tenderest lyric.”

- From *Pigment to Light*, 1936, László Moholy-Nagy

It is necessary as an artist to surrender your images in order for others to derive their own meaning. Ambiguity is a vital aesthetic component for visual poetics to function. The unknown (a gap between images in a series, clouds or fog obscuring a view, abstraction through composition) leaves the viewer to engage, ask questions, and draw their own conclusions. They must also be an active participant in the photographic process in order for images to become metaphors, poetic visages of the indescribable.

Creating a rhythm, cadence, or measure to a collection of photographs means the spaces between are of as much importance as the images themselves. A photographic process that is rigid in its approach to interacting with subject matter — photographing and displaying those photographs in the same way repeatedly — won't leave room for the spontaneity needed for these unintended gaps to appear. This is not to say that one should avoid iteration and repetition in our creative process, but more so that play and experimentation are what lead to invention and novel ideas. These ideas can then be iterated and continually evolved. For example, if every image is “big” and perfectly sculpted, there is no breathing room. No space for nuanced concepts to exist next to each other. While this may work for a single large print on the wall, collections of images in this manner start to fight for their own space on the page rather than working together to tell the bigger story. Everything begins to blur together into a continuous drone of noise. Punctuating a collection with moments of quiet provides reprieve for the viewer and allows them the time needed to formulate their own ideas. Brooks Jensen put it wonderfully by describing multiple images functioning like a sentence, or I might add, like a poem.*



Arranging photography in this way, one makes images as fragments. Each photo is a landscape within a landscape with an equal weighting of importance no matter the location or scale of the scene. Bringing those fragments together into a series is an exercise of exploring infinite possibilities, much like constructing a stacked drystone wall. The pieces can fit together in any number of ways: in some arrangements they fall over, while in others they nestle together, perfectly matched. A combination of these conditions is necessary, both for visual variety and to allow the storyteller room to play. One can create moments of surprise by interrupting visual flow, or use the repetition of motifs to signify an idea. Tension is a necessary component to both visual interest and interesting storytelling. The feeling that the wall might crumble builds anticipation and doesn't let the viewer know what might happen next. Occasionally, we should let everything fall apart if the story we are telling calls for it. Or perhaps the story is how we might put the pieces back together again. Assembling the fragments of a collection into a cohesive whole is a process of discovery.

Much as how visual relationships are used to build compositions (exposure as the relationship of light and shadow; depth as the relationship of foreground and background; visual weight as the relationship of importance; etc.), metaphor, allegory, punctuation, grammar, rhythm, cadence, measure, and syntax are the poetics of the photographic series. When this is understood, we can develop a holistic photographic language, from capture to presentation. A visual design language is therefore the key to unlocking a creative toolkit beyond the camera itself.

Finding Resonance

In practice, my photographic language is always informed by nature itself. One might call this finding resonance in the landscape around me. Experiences of stillness result in images that emphasise negative space, both in composition and in print. When conditions erupt into a cacophony of drama, the image is processed to enhance this feeling of energy. Or, I may look to photograph chaotic polyrhythms in woodland, seeking out repetition and pattern. Spaces between images in a series get smaller. The tempo of a collection speeds up to a gallop. Light bursts out of the fog as the series reaches a crescendo.

Through the discovery of resonance, I align myself with nature's design and am able to intuit the unintelligible moments that speak



to the emotion and soul of a place. Acting in a relational manner, one based on the understanding that I too am a part of nature, allows for a conversation between nature and my very being. If I listen carefully, this can develop to an awareness of a collective consciousness, a sense of oneness. It is from photographing this deep connection that ineffable poetic truths arise: the truth found in spoken word being transcended by experience, or a sense of knowing that doesn't need to be expressed verbally.

When the noise of the modern world falls away, the impermeable silence of nature wraps around you, holding you in its embrace**. Expressing this profound feeling of peace — one that is not isolationary but rather inherently connected with the world — is a recurring theme in my photography. I leave room in the frame for atmosphere, for silence. I mirror this space in print by providing extra matting or a large border around the image to give the viewer their own margin for wonder. Hopefully, through these moments of intentional design, they too can experience their own poetic silence.

Images from *Scotland's Ancient Caledonian Forest*

Woodland Alchemy
Filigree
Golden Drapery
Unveiled
Pine Polyrhythms
A Warm Embrace
Birch & Pine



Conclusion

The biggest shift in my own photography over the last year has been developing the confidence to be aesthetically open-minded. I allow nature to guide the final result, whether that is colour or black and white; high key or dark and moody; intimate and focused or a wide angle vista. Ultimately, I'm applying a set of first principles, a sense of design language, but as the landscape I photograph changes, and so to does the end result. It is the very act of photography — thinking through image making — that drives my creativity.

The word poet is, after all, etymologically derived from the word maker. Being a maker of things, of new ideas, of unexplored ways to look at the world, is therefore inherently poetic. Every conversation with nature through the lens is an opportunity for the creation of art. A conversation dictates a certain reciprocity and resonance and so the act of making photographs becomes a form of expression (of self, of emotion, of story) in response to nature itself. This has led me to an aesthetic approach which is in fluid response to my environment, looking to absorb the multiplicity and complexity of nature. It is my belief that developing a visual language by harnessing all of our senses engages our photographs and viewers with the poetics of the landscape.

**Brooks Jensen, The Power of Projects*

***Eugen Herrigel, Zen in the Art of Archery*

Editors

Murray Livingston

Murray is a full-time professional landscape and nature photographer, educator, and workshop leader with more than 10 years of image making experience. Murray photographs all aspects of the landscape through long-term photographic projects in Scotland, where he is based most of the year in a self-built campervan, and his home country of South Africa. Murray is a deep thinker with interests in adventure & conservation, both of which he strives to communicate and teach through a deeply contemplative and introspective approach to photography.

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Nick Becker is a nature photographer and outdoor enthusiast who is particularly drawn to the small, quiet scenes in his local area. His background in computer science, linguistics, and cognitive science informs the perspectives he shares through his writing and images.

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Madeleine Bazil is a multidisciplinary artist and writer whose work is shaped by open questions of memory and of place — and how these questions shape identities and relationships. Her poetry appears in West Branch Magazine, The Seventh Wave, New Contrast, Sonora Review, and elsewhere. She was long listed for Palette Poetry's 2023 Rising Poet Prize. As a photographer, she has exhibited in the UK, US, and South Africa, and her film work has screened in film festivals globally. She lives in Cape Town, South Africa.

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Poetic Visuals

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