

# The Essence of Belonging

IMAGES FROM THE ISLES OF SHOALS, SCOTLAND AND IRELAND

by Alexandra de Steiguer



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write this in my 24th year as the Star Island winter caretaker, from seven miles into the north Atlantic, among the wild and rugged Isles of Shoals. The low sun slowly warms the granite upon which I sit at the ocean's edge, casting the shadow of my pen across the page. From my rocky perch above the sea, I feel the weight of the ledges stretching away north and south, ancient and stoic, yet almost alive to me with all it has seen. Where bare expanses of storm-washed ledge ends, impassably dense brush begins; rugosa and bay bushes, hearty island grasses, vines and wind-twisted juniper. All that's able to cling to this wind-scoured place clings with a breathtaking capacity for life.

Overhead a lone gull hovers and I stretch my arms wide, following its movements as it glides and dances with the wind. Often I lean against a familiar tree just to smell the wild scent of pine or to share with it the blowing gale; my hair and its branches both thrashing in the wind, our trunks slowly swaying. I sit in quiet companionship with stones and shrubs, with feathered, furred and seal-slick residents nearby—all the wild denizens-of-place, animate and otherwise. In these moments, I'm once again almost as they are: part of a deeper kind of belonging, one linked vitally and essentially to the life and the living of their island. I crave an earned place in that web of kinship, to vibrate with the thrum of belonging that I sense connecting them to each other and to the very roots of the planet and its ancient purposes.

Each day I walk upon the ledges of this island and sense its immensity stretching downward from where I stand, beneath watery fathoms, through trenches and fault-lines and mantle and magma and on to the very center of the earth upon which we all stand. Just inland of the bare ledges wild juniper grows, its roots tangled in soil and rock, twisted trunks and branches fronting frequent storms, giving shelter and sustenance to wild things that live on, among and beyond it. Beneath my hand the ledge is rough. Leaning forward I grab an edge and pull, and of course it makes no movement toward me, but as the muscles of my arm and shoulder tighten I feel a flood of affection for what

seems in that moment a caring, protective someone ... strong and reliable, holding me safely above the watery depths and wild surf in an immense and rocky embrace.

But even with more than two decades of living through winters offshore, even within the many moments of feeling in deeper communion with the world around me, I know with visceral certainty that I still fail to belong to this place in the way that every single natural thing—from surrounding sea and ledge down to the very smallest bird—already does without trying at all. For the truer denizens of earth are those that participate in the dynamic of a living planet, steadily responding to its rhythms over a lifetime, over centuries and millennia; shaped and cracked and worn by the elements.

And though these islands might seem unbearably removed, small and finite to anyone contemplating living alone here for months, I feel the opposite. Here, I fully sense the connection of this wild place to every other across an entire planet, its denizens in their essence like those of other wild places, each carrying an ineffable "presence" imbued by belonging. The ancient Celts of the British Isles felt these presences as well. Living close to the land and within the cycles and rhythms of nature, they believed that spirits inhabited the world all around them; in the rivers and lakes, in trees and rocks and streams. And so, not only across an ocean but also across time, timeless others share with me a kind of communion, one made of longing—heartfelt and spiritual—for connection to the presences that surround us.

At the end of each winter, I leave the Isles of Shoals and move back to the bustle and throng of the mainland, to a way of life far different than the ancients could have ever imagined. Yet wherever we may go, and however far removed, the rhythms of earth remain as ever-present as the changing tides. They beckon to us from the wilderness, from ancestors long forgotten and from presences elemental, reminding us that we too are not just on the earth, but of it.

— Alexandra de Steiguer



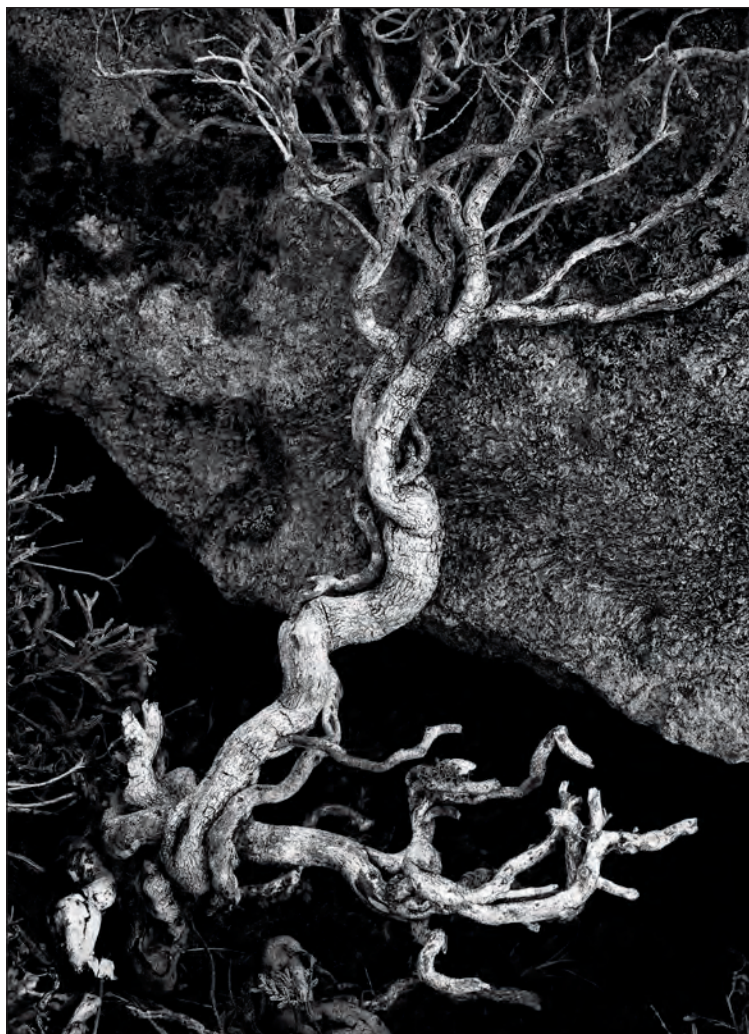
*Sky Light*, 2021  
Isles of Shoals  
15 x 18.5"  
AS108

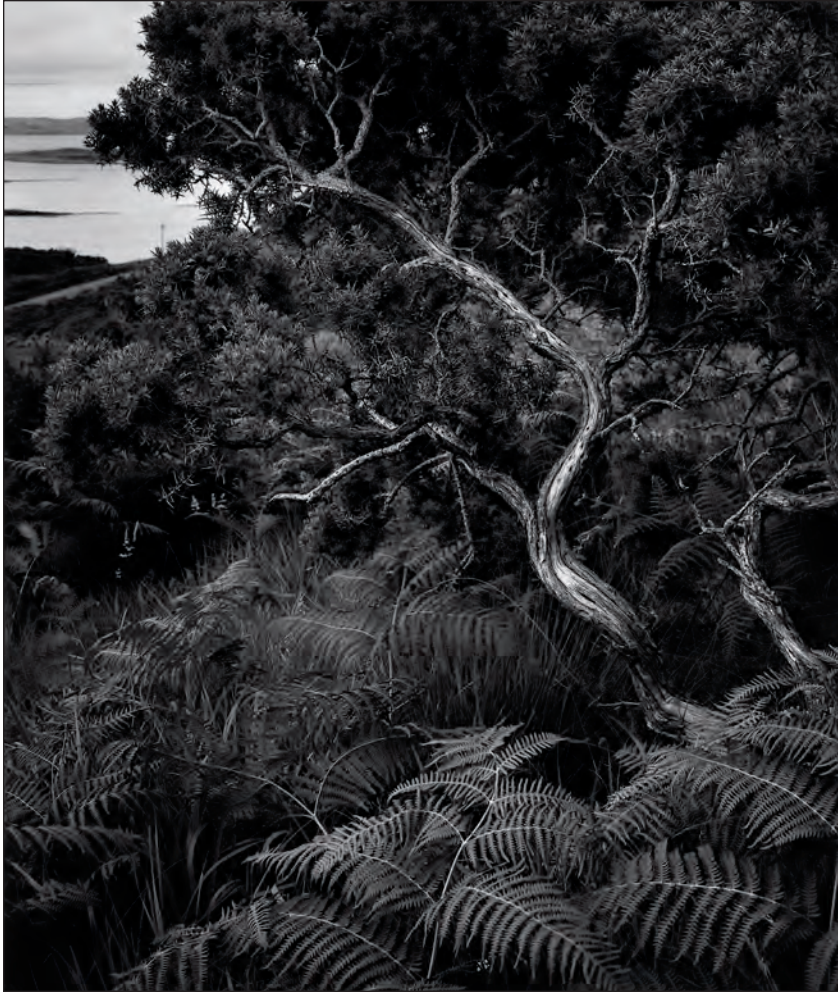
*All works are silver gelatin prints.*

*Denizens 8, 2021*  
Ireland  
10 x 12.25"  
AS87



*Denizens 10, 2021*  
Ireland  
12.75 x 9.5"  
AS89



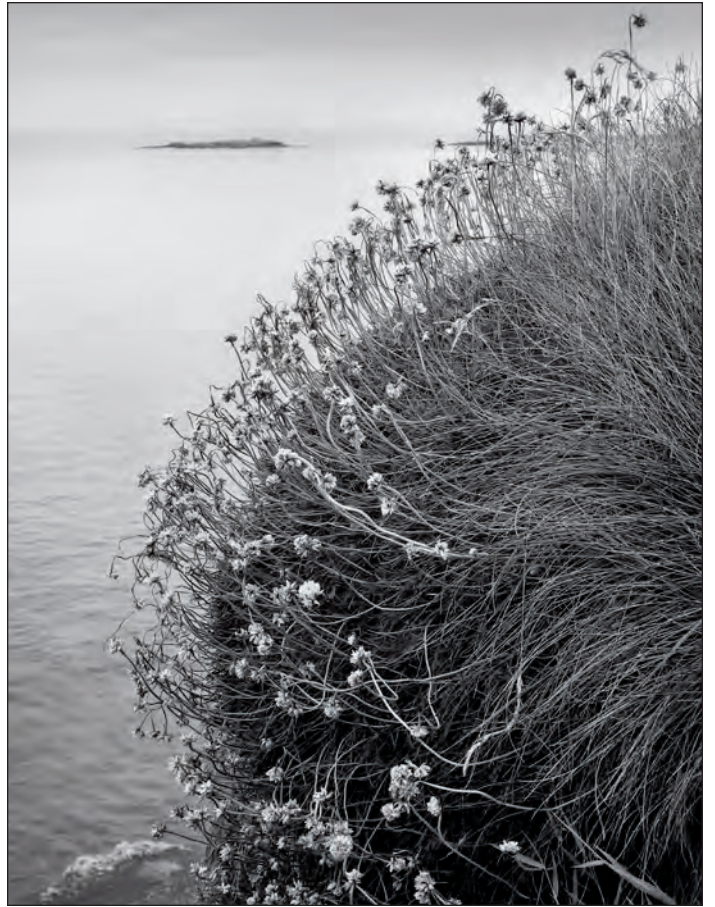


*Denizens 7, 2021*  
Ireland  
12.25 x 10"  
AS86



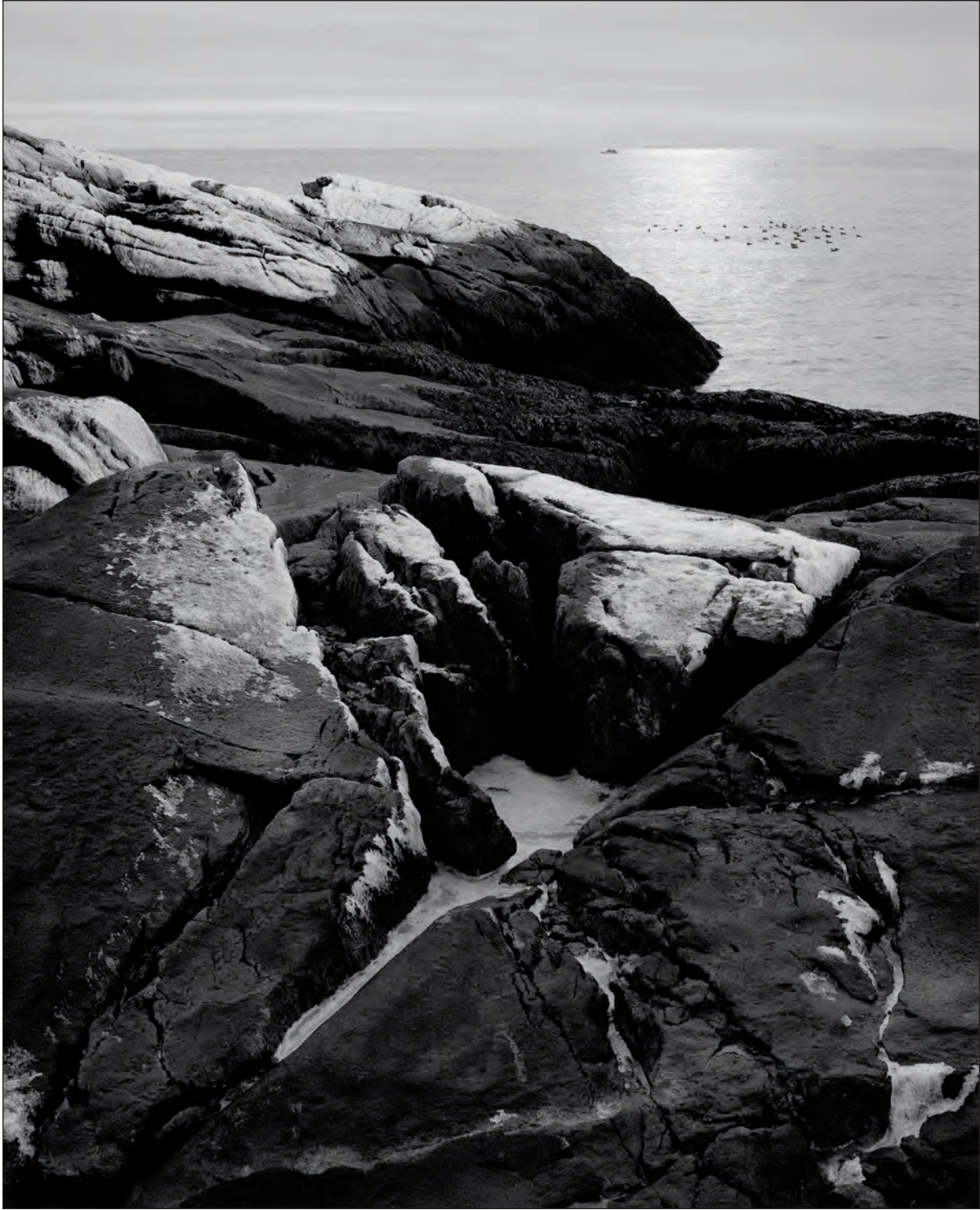
*Denizens 6, 2021*  
Ireland  
10 x 12.5"  
AS85

*Denizens 5, 2021*  
Ireland  
13 x 9.5"  
AS84



*Denizens 12, 2021*  
Scotland  
13 x 9.75"  
AS90





*Shoals—Rocks and  
Water 37, 2021  
Isles of Shoals  
18.25 x 14.75"  
AS106*



*Denizens 11, 2021*  
Scotland  
14.25 x 18.75"  
AS105





*Wind Shaped*, 2021  
Isles of Shoals  
10 x 13"  
AS104



*Windblown 6*, 2021  
Isles of Shoals  
13 x 10"  
AS103

*To the Parsonage, 2007*  
Isles of Shoals  
12 x 10"  
AS101

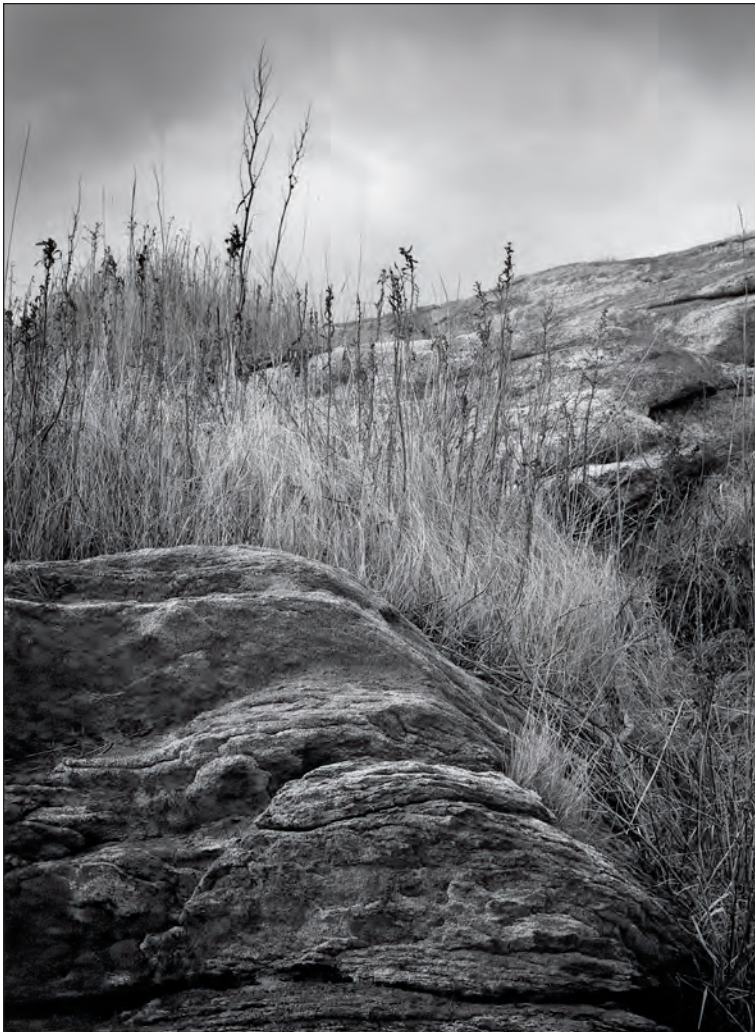


*Shoals—Rocks and Water 38, 2021*  
Isles of Shoals  
10 x 13"  
AS97





*Shoals—Rocks and Water 36, 2021*  
Isles of Shoals  
9.75 x 12.25"  
AS96



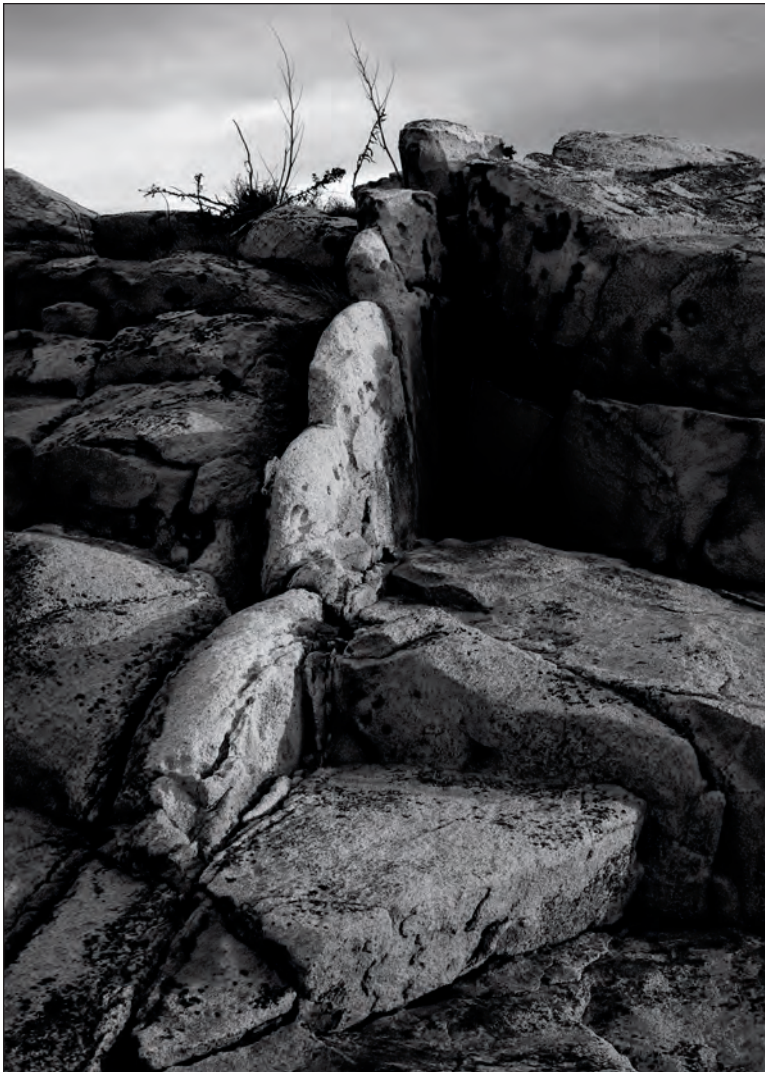
*Still Life Standing 2, 2021*  
Isles of Shoals  
13 x 9.5"  
AS100



*Denizens 15, 2021*  
Isles of Shoals  
14.5 x 15"  
AS109



*Fading In the Grass*, 2009  
Isles of Shoals  
7.5 x 9.5"  
AS81



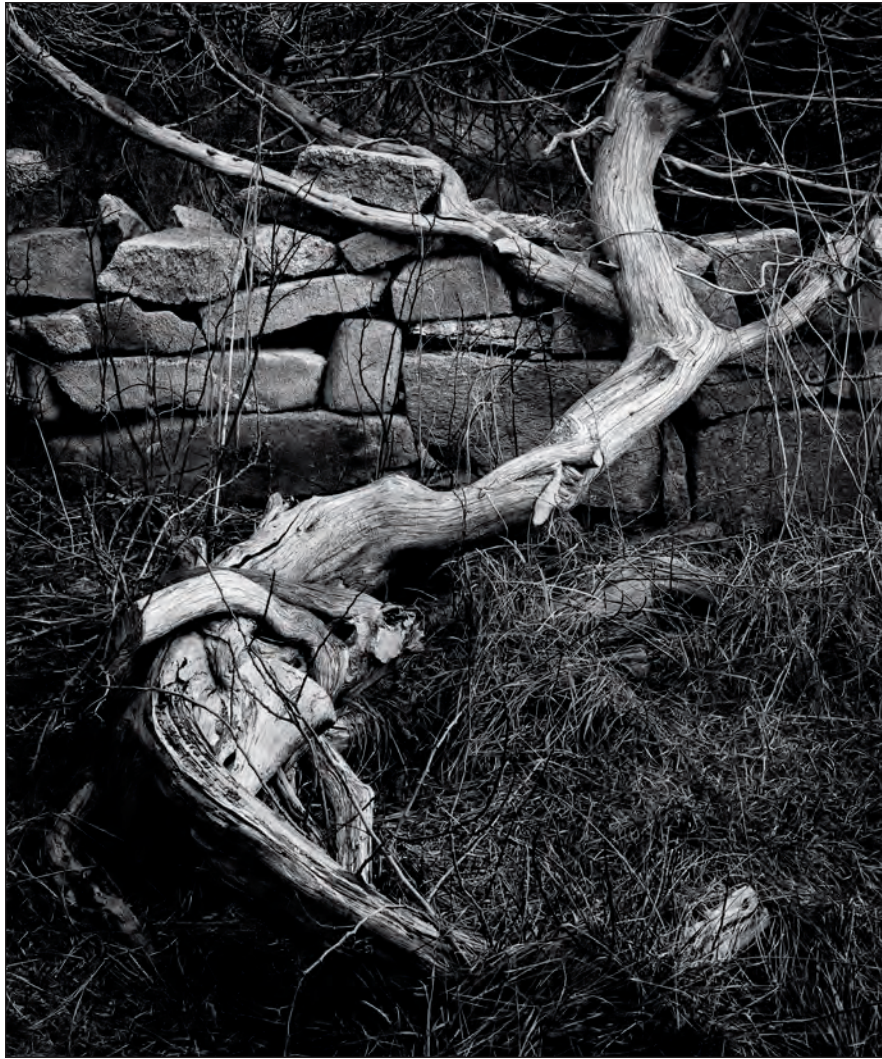
*Skyward 4*, 2021  
Isles of Shoals  
13 x 9.5"  
AS99

*Delicate Balance and Power, 2021*  
Isles of Shoals  
10 x 12.25"  
AS83



*Three Pools of Sky, 2019*  
Isles of Shoals  
9.25 x 6.75"  
AS82





*Juniper and Wall 2, 2021*  
Isles of Shoals  
12.25 x 10"  
AS94

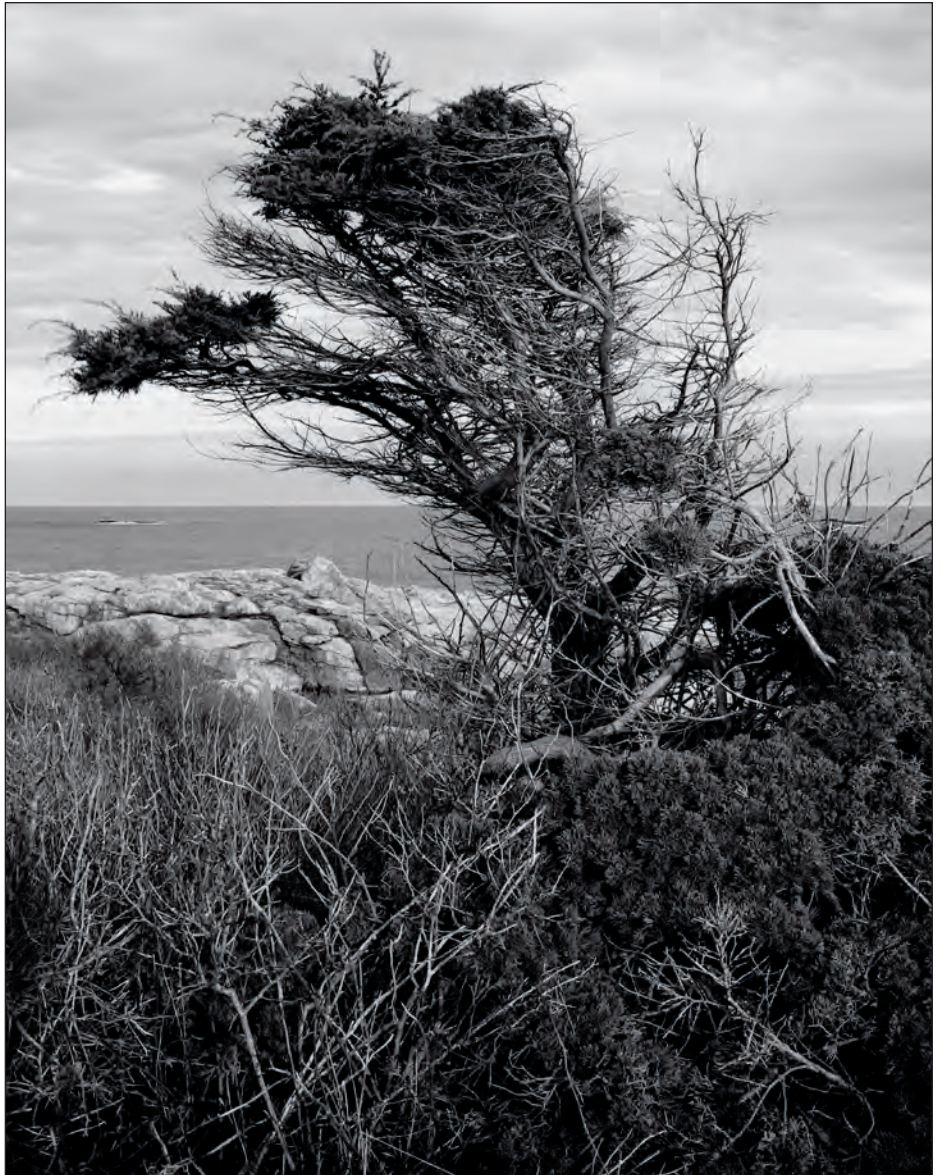


*Flight 2, 2021*  
Isles of Shoals  
9 x 13"  
AS93

*Flight*, 2008  
Isles of Shoals  
7 x 13"  
AS92



*Denizens 13*, 2021  
Isles of Shoals  
12.75 x 10"  
AS91





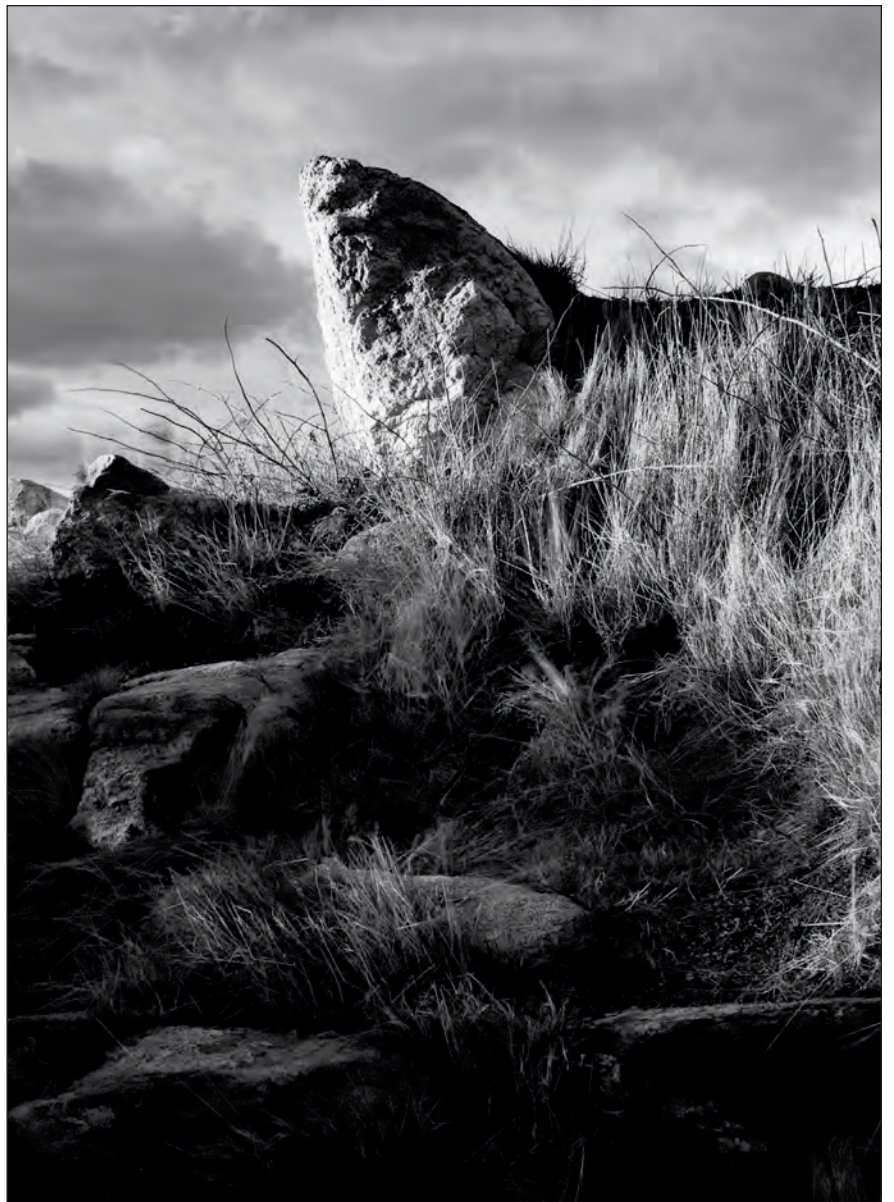


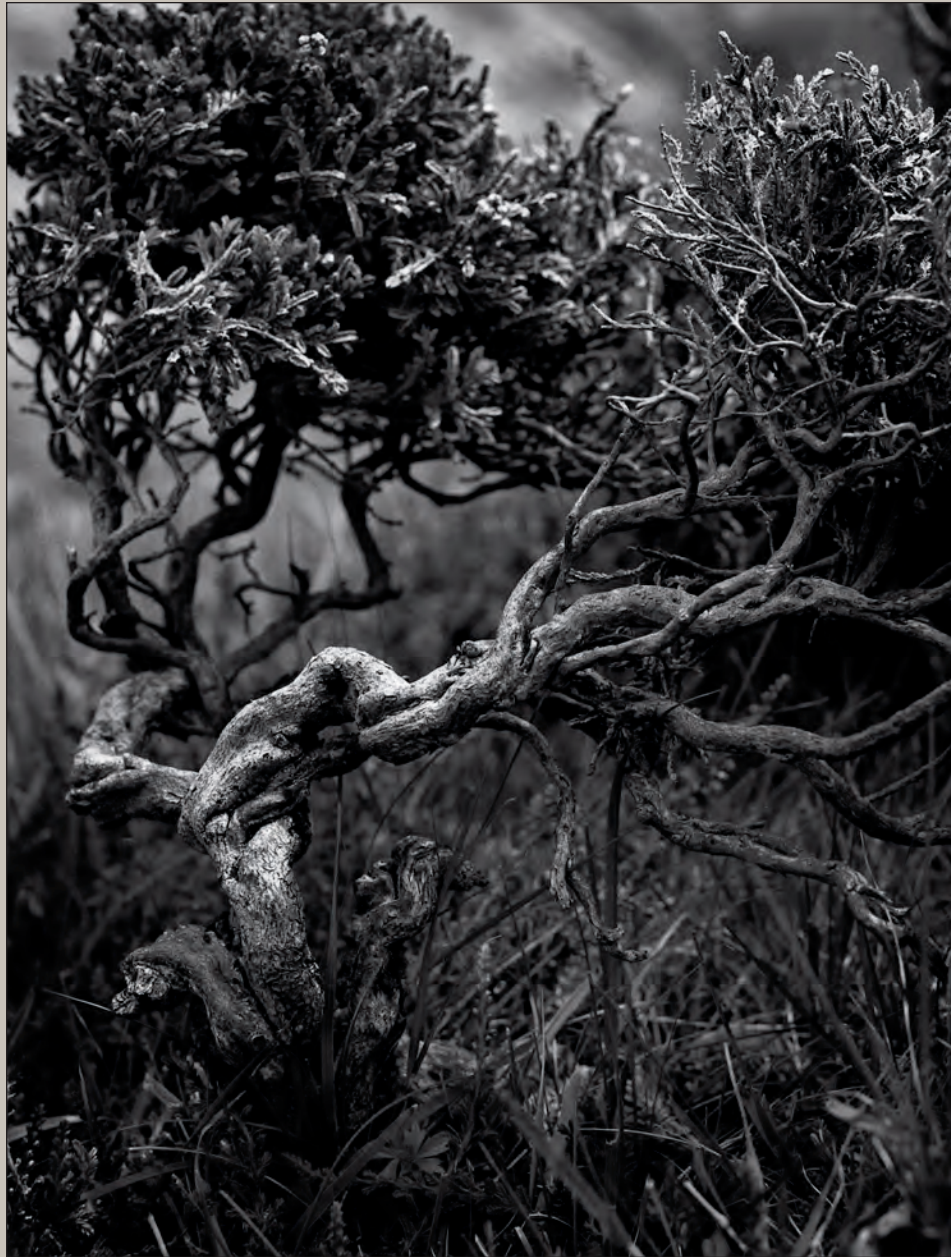
*Tree and Reflection*, 2000  
Isles of Shoals  
18 x 14"  
AS107

*Denizens 14*, 2016  
Isles of Shoals  
6.75 x 9.25"  
AS80



*Skyward 3*, 2021  
Isles of Shoals  
12.75 x 9.5"  
AS98





*Denizens 9*, 2021  
Ireland  
12.5 x 9.75"  
AS88

Alexandra de Steiguer has been photographing the Isles of Shoals for the past twenty-four years while winter caretaker. Her affinity for being entirely alone on this small group of rocky offshore islands during stormy North Atlantic winters has drawn her to the inspiration of other remote places as well. Her images of the pared-down and timeless essence found there quietly exalt the wild elements that shape and define these places, underscoring the fundamental connections within the natural world and the transitory and humbling nature of our residence in it.

Alex creates her images using medium-format film and personally prints each one in her traditional darkroom. Her work

has been exhibited in galleries throughout New England and is in the permanent collections of the deCordova museum, the North Carolina Museum of Art and the Ogunquit Museum of American Art. Her photographs and writings were commissioned for the book *American Impressionist: Childe Hassam and the Isles of Shoals*, and traveled with the exhibition of the same name to the Peabody Essex Museum and the North Carolina Museum of Art. Her insightful musings on solitude, connection and the creative process are published in her book “Small Island, Big Picture” and in original music composed and arranged on the Isles of Shoals. Alexandra’s story has been the subject of two internationally distributed short-form documentary films. She is a two-time artist fellow of the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts.



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### PUCKER GALLERY

240 Newbury Street, 3rd floor  
Boston, MA 02116  
617.267.9473  
[contactus@puckergallery.com](mailto:contactus@puckergallery.com)

### GALLERY HOURS:

Monday through Saturday  
10:00 AM to 5:30 PM  
Sunday 10:30 AM to 5:00 PM

Pucker Gallery is open to all and taking necessary precautions for visitor and staff safety as recommended by current public health guidelines. Though not required, appointments are available.

Pucker Gallery is a member of the Boston Art Dealers Association and the New England Appraisers Association.

### CREDITS:

*Design:* Leslie Anne Feagley

*Editors:* Jeanne Koles,  
Jacqueline Belfield Gertner,  
and Ellen Buchanan

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Printed in Canada by Friesens, Inc.



*Tree in Wind, 2021*  
Isles of Shoals  
12.75 x 9.75"  
AS102

**COVER:**  
*Shoals—Rock Pool 9, 2021*  
Isles of Shoals  
9.75 x 12.5"  
AS95

### DATES:

30 October through  
28 November 2021

### PUBLIC OPENING RECEPTION:

Saturday 30 October 2021  
3–6 pm

The artist will be present.

### ONLINE EVENTS:

Please visit  
[www.puckergallery.com](http://www.puckergallery.com)  
for a list of virtual gatherings  
and events accompanying  
*The Essence of Belonging*.

Please visit [www.puckergallery.com](http://www.puckergallery.com) to view current and past exhibition catalogues and subscribe to the *Artwork of the Week* email list.