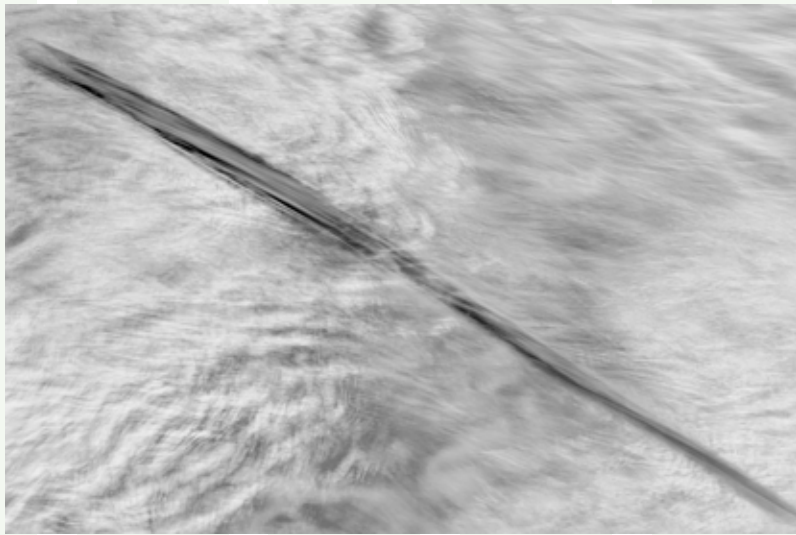


FOLLOWING FIRE

A RESILIENT FOREST / AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE



STILL: Standing, Moving, Reaching

by David Paul Bayles and Frederick J Swanson.

FOLLOWING FIRE

A Resilient Forest / An Uncertain Future

The 2020 Holiday Farm Fire roared down the McKenzie River in the western Cascades of Oregon, burning 173,000 acres of forest lands and over 450 homes. In the midst of these tragic losses, the blackened, skeletal forest exhibits a stark beauty.

In an impulsive response, while the fire still smoldered, we undertook a project of using four photographic approaches to document change over time in the burned forest on lands previously managed for industrial forestry, but now under conservation stewardship of the McKenzie River Trust.

Within the first three to four months of our project, we noticed the process of image-making fell into four distinct photographic approaches; Chronosequence, Typologies, Landscape and Fine Art.

From an ecological view, Following Fire is driven by curiosity about what is removed by fire, what remains after fire, how those remnants of the pre-fire forest change over time, and what will be the future of the forest in a changing environment. These photographs depict the abundance of organic matter, nutrients, and life remaining in the blackened forest. But, in a few short years after the fire, the forces of climate change, invasive species, and intensive forestry have revealed the uncertainties of the future of the land.

We find the fire to have a powerful emotional dimension as well. Friends and colleagues lost homes and had their lives profoundly disrupted. The lush, nurturing sense of the rainforest abruptly turned black, but at the same time we are aware that today's old growth had its origin in events such as this. We, too, struggle with stages of grief and work to dial our emotions to a fruitful place between grief and hope.

This inquiry combines David's visual storytelling practice, with Fred's interests in the physical and biological processes that have shaped forest history and will influence its future. We find common ground in life-long engagements with forests. We anticipate passing the Following Fire project on to future generations of photographers and scientists, in keeping with the long-term approach to ecological, arts, and humanities inquiry characteristic of the nearby H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest, where we both work.

David Paul Bayles, Photographer

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October 2024

STILL

My connection to these trees began as they were burning. I lived ninety miles downwind. The smoke filled the air with an eerie orange haze. Ash settled silently on everything as I breathed in the carbon released from limbs, needles, and heartwood.

The western red cedars and Douglas firs lining the banks of the McKenzie River had survived more than two centuries of fierce upriver and downriver winds, as well as flooding and erosion. Fire raged and smoldered up and down the canyon for thirty-five days. Weeks after the smoke cleared, scorched needles and leaves dropped to the ground, covering the blackened forest floor with a golden brown blanket.

The fierce windstorm accompanying the fire met little resistance. Treetops broke off, plunging into the river. Limbs dangled, connected by tissues charred and crisp, and still the trees stood, a visual legacy of quiet persistence and rooted strength.



STANDING, STILL

Standing before these trees that had withstood so much, I wanted to make portraits that conveyed their dignity and grace. Using tonality to distinguish them from their surroundings, I sought to portray each as an individual survivor who is standing, still.















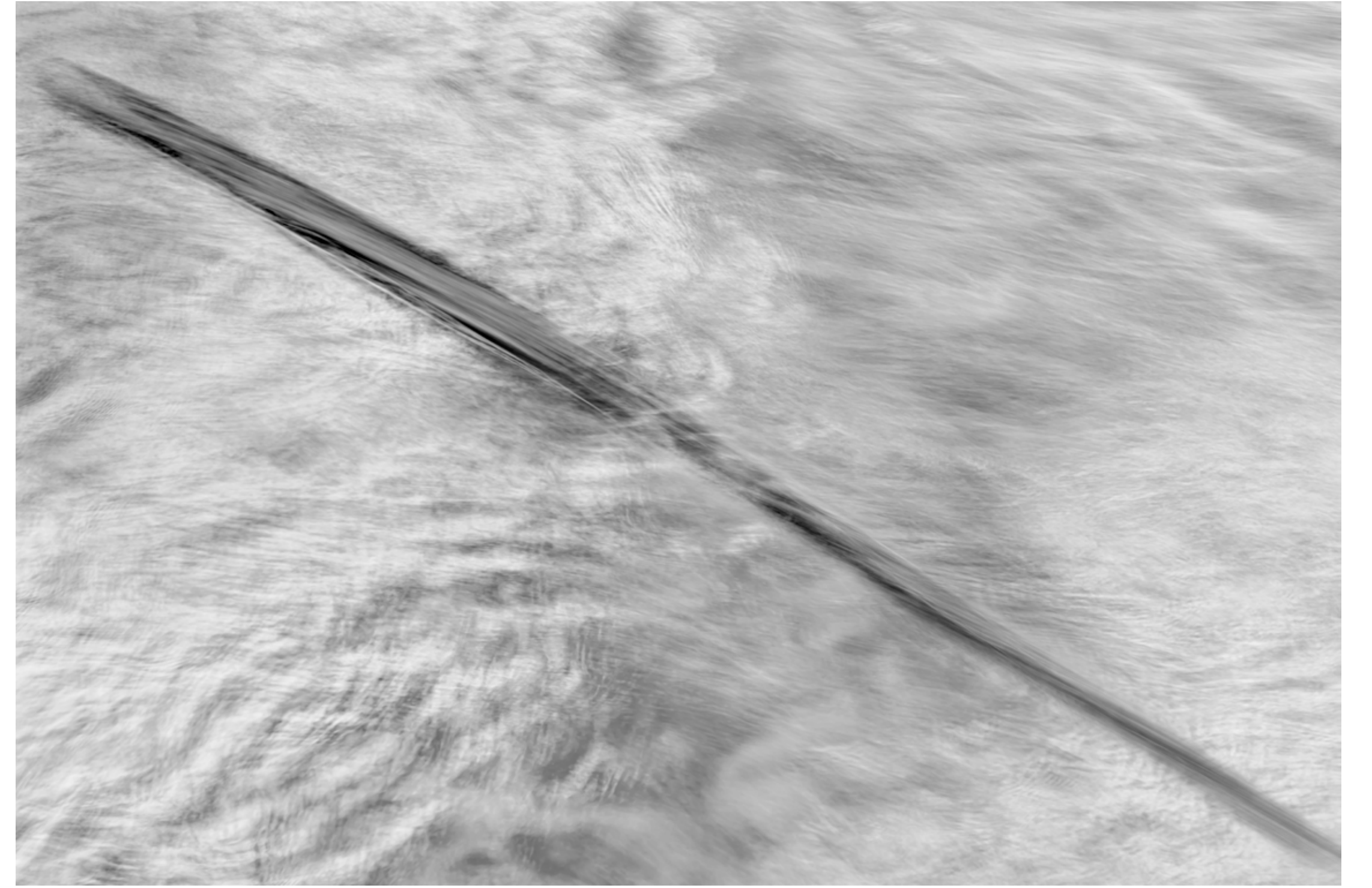
MOVING, STILL

Forests are sanctuaries of stillness. My heart rate slows when I enter them. My breath deepens. And yet, in reality, forests are always in motion. Trees move water from root to crown. Needles, lichens, and insects—litterfall—drift unnoticed to the forest floor.

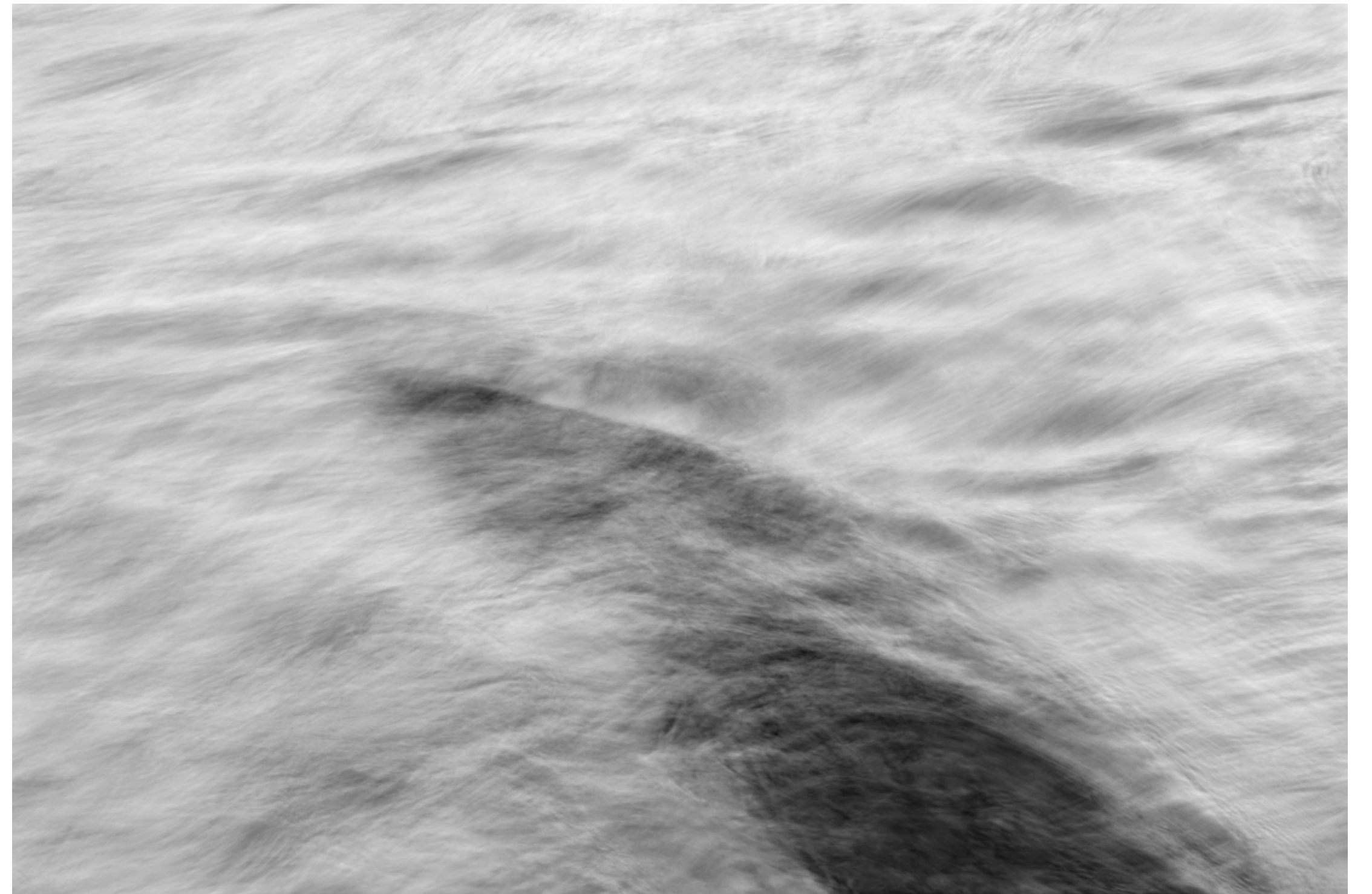
Two years post-fire, gravity and decomposition work in harmony to dismantle the blackened sentinels. A limb falls. A treetop snaps. In bits and pieces the structures of these charred trees collapse into the river and are moving, still.

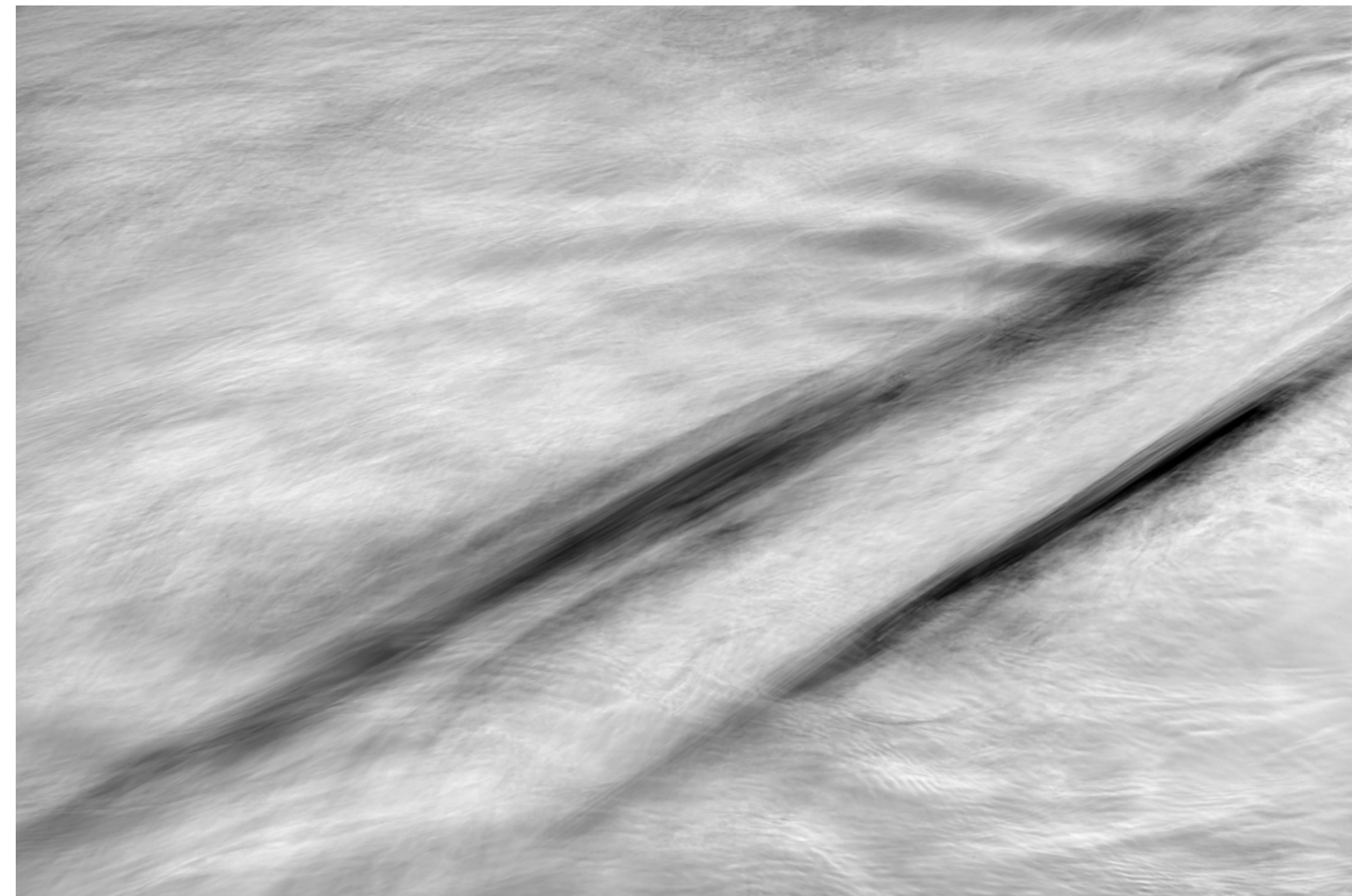












REACHING, STILL

Trees root in the mysteries of the dark soil while growing toward the light above. They have much to teach us about physical and spiritual qualities of light. Looking up to the broken tops and floating clouds I sense that, even in their demise, the trees are reaching, still.















We gratefully acknowledge the generous support of these organizations:

McKenzie River Trust
H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest
Oregon Arts Commission
Spring Creek Project for Ideas, Nature, and the Written Word
Long-Term Ecological Reflections Program

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www.liberalarts.oregonstate.edu/centers-and-initiatives/spring-creek-project
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