

SACRED WATER



LESLIE MARMON SILKO



51E Δ

SACRED WATER

NARRATIVES AND PICTURES

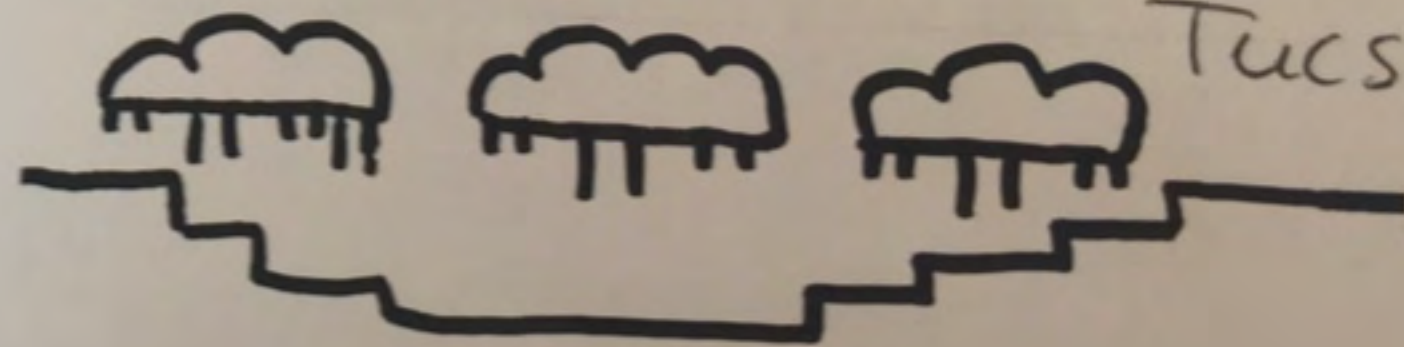
BY

LESLIE MARMON SILKO

Leslie Marmon Silko

August 4, 1993

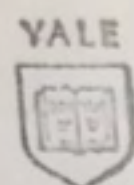
TUCSON



FLOOD PLAIN PRESS
8000 WEST EL CAMINO DEL CERRO
TUCSON, ARIZONA 85745

14/250

FIRST EDITION



THIS IS DEDICATED TO
GUS
WITH ALL MY LOVE

FLOOD PLAIN PRESS
8000 WEST EL CAMINO DEL CERRO
TUCSON, ARIZONA 85745

© 1993 by Leslie Marmon Silko

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 93-70715

ISBN 0-9636554-3-4

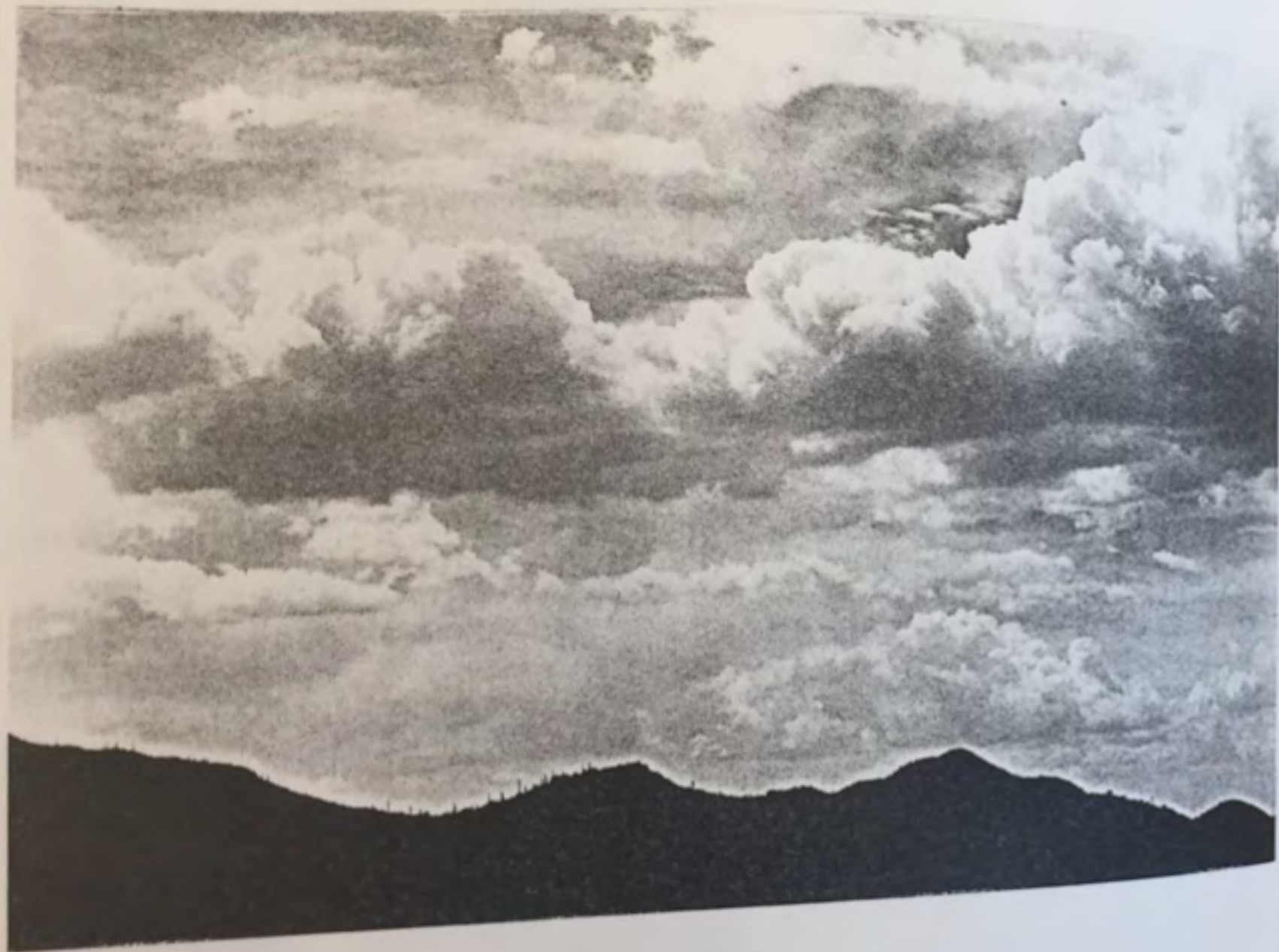
Special thanks to the Lila Wallace-Readers' Digest
Foundation for the writer's grant in 1992.

SACRED WATER



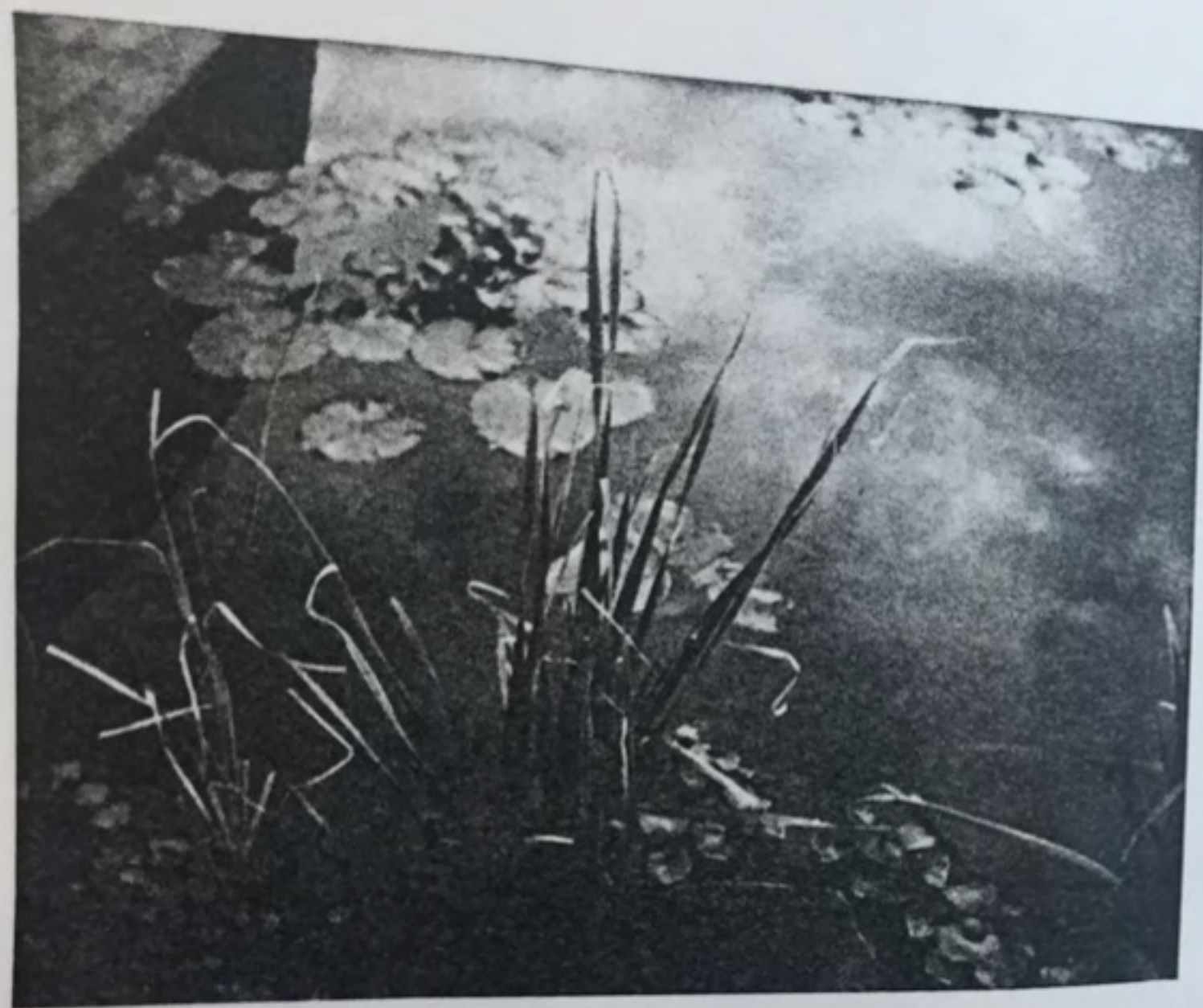
In memory of the nine Thailand Buddhists
assassinated in their temple near Phoenix, Arizona
on August 10, 1991.





Spring rain clouds follow early morning gusts of wind, and sudden drops in temperature.

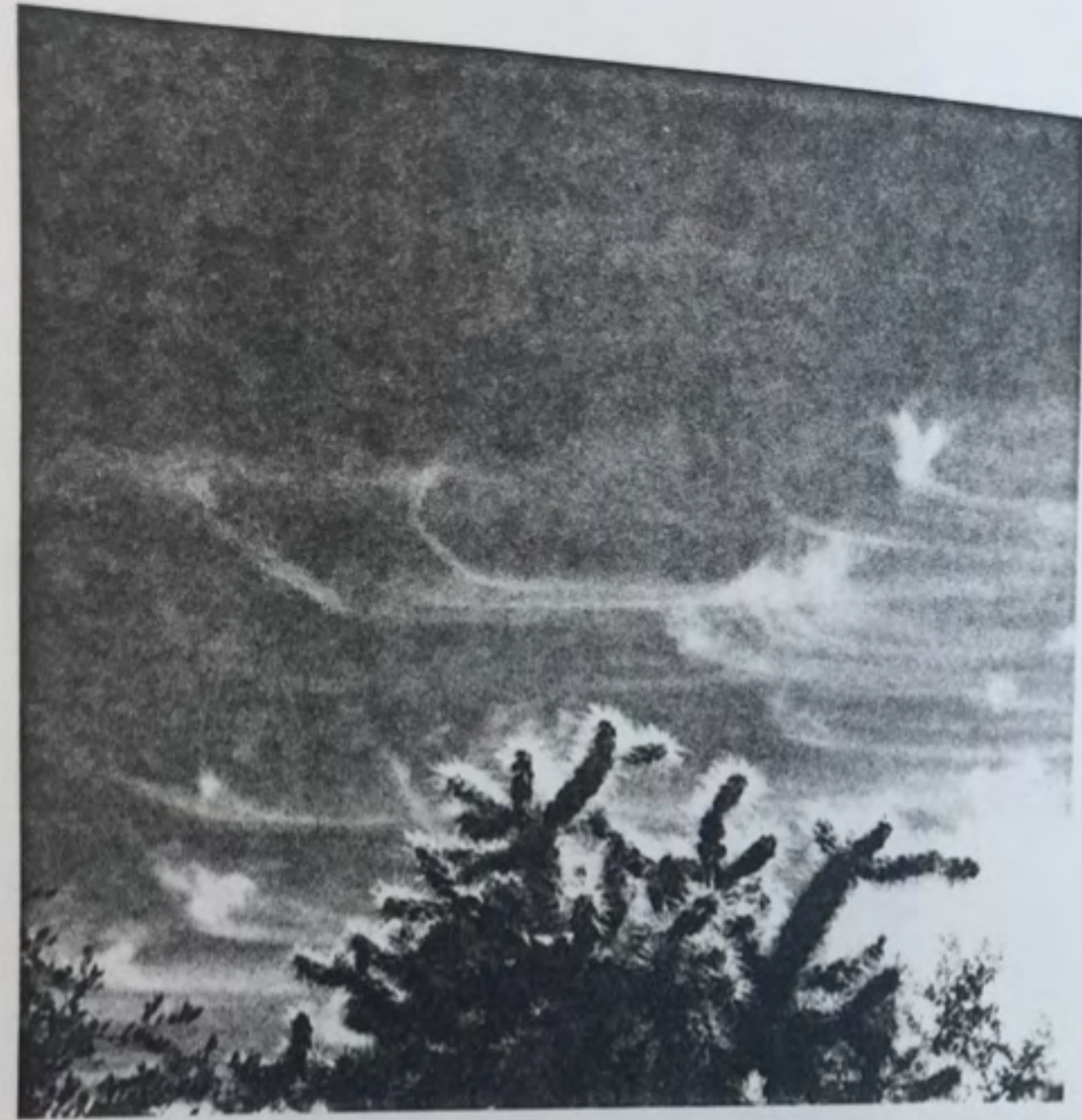
By dawn, the smell of rain is heavy in the air. The sun is masked in cumulus layers of pearl blue.



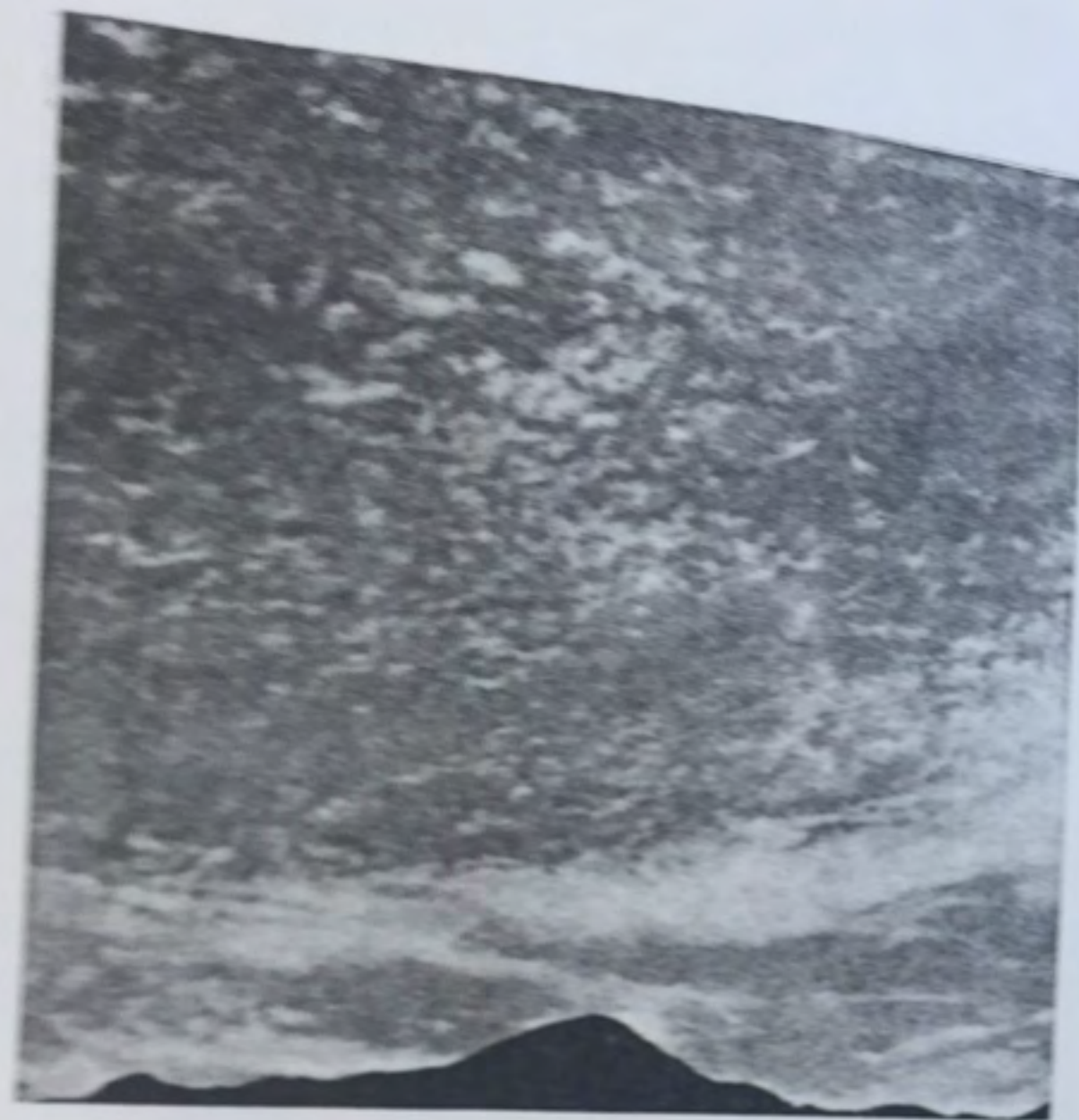
When I was a child, the people used to watch the sky for changes in the weather. I learned to watch for the fat dark rain clouds, and I remember the excitement and the anticipation as the cool wind arrived smelling of rain.

We children were seldom scolded or punished for our behavior. But we were never permitted to frolic with or waste fresh water. We were given stern warnings about killing toads or frogs. Harm to frogs and toads could bring disasterous cloudbursts and floods because the frogs and toads are the beloved children of the rain clouds.



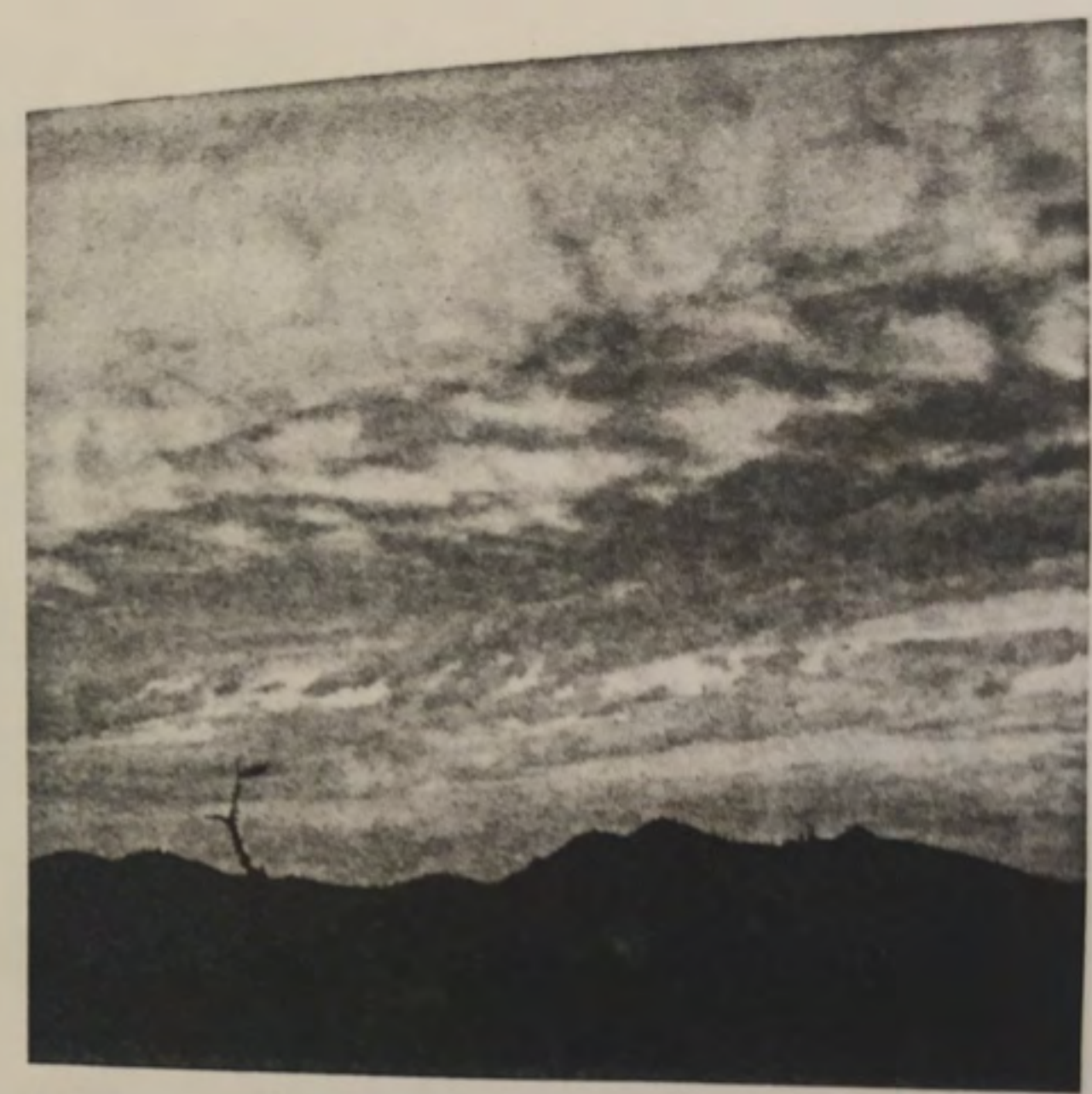


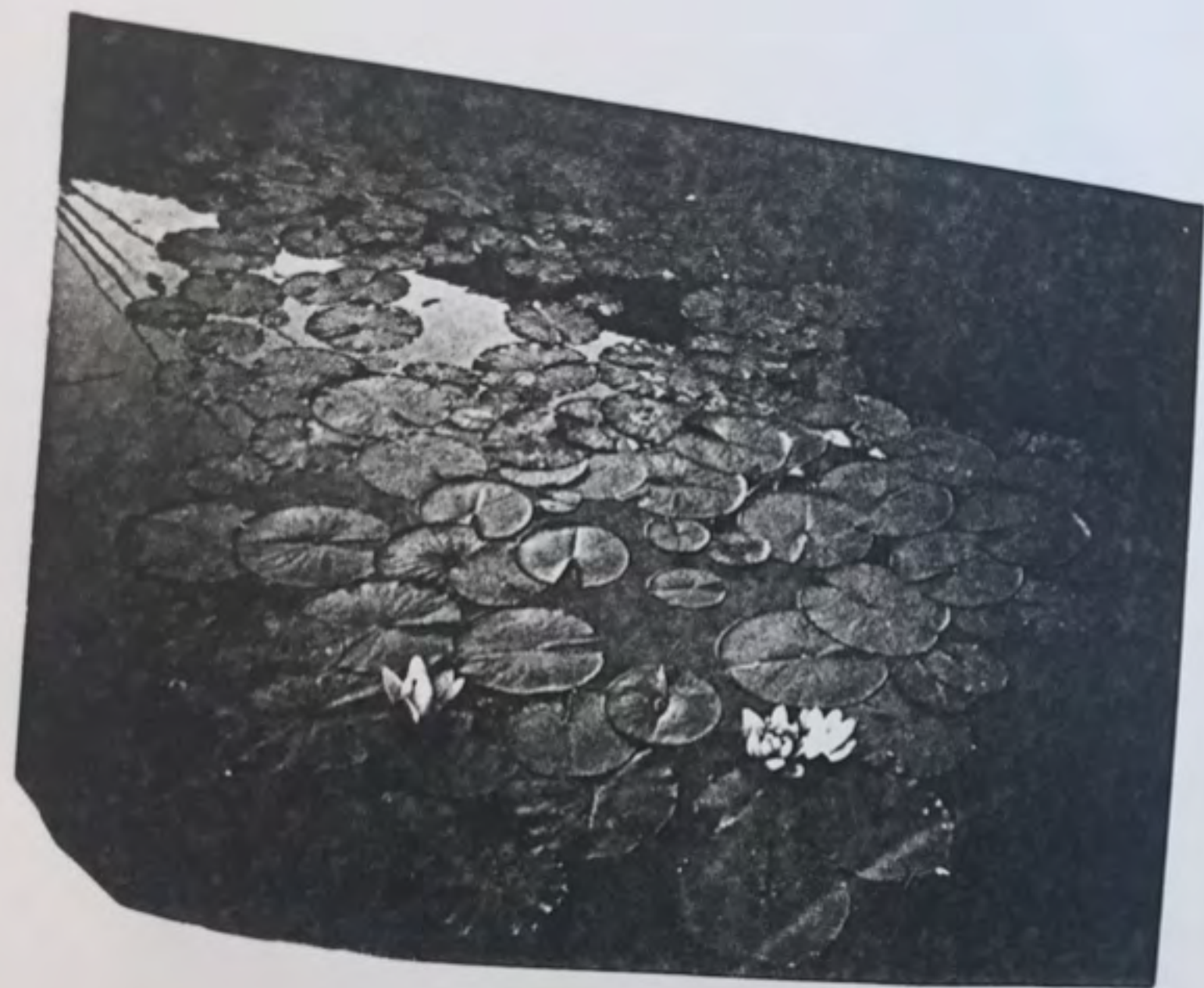
A huge toad lived in the bottom of a wooden box buried in the ground to protect the water shut-off valve. As a child I was fascinated with the big toad. I'd lift off the lid of the box and look down into the dim hole that smelled of damp gunny sacks wrapped around the water pipe. Sometimes, all I could see were the toad's big eyes, reflecting the light of the sun.



When I got older, I used to ride my horse into the sandhills after a summer rain storm. What an amazing sight! Hundreds of little toads were popping out of the sand everywhere.

Years later in Tucson, I moved a flower pot in the garden, and uncovered four Sonoran red-spotted toads in the damp earth. Their backs were the colors of ivory and copper speckled with red. They slept head to head, each with its rear-end pointed in one of the four directions.





My great grandmother, Marie Anaya, belonged to the Water Clan. She had been born at Paguate village, north of Laguna. After she passed on, the Water Clan people made sure she had a big pottery jar full of water at the head of her grave.

Every year around Easter, my father's clanswomen used to bring him sweet pudding; otherwise he might have turned into a frog.

No one ever called my Uncle Polly by his legal name, Richard, because when he was born, someone thought he looked like a polly-wog, dark, fat, and wiggling.

When I was a child, the people use to say that a person had passed on; they seldom used the word "died". At the table before a meal, a small dish was passed around. Pinches of food from each person's plate were placed in the dish to feed the spirits of beloved family members.



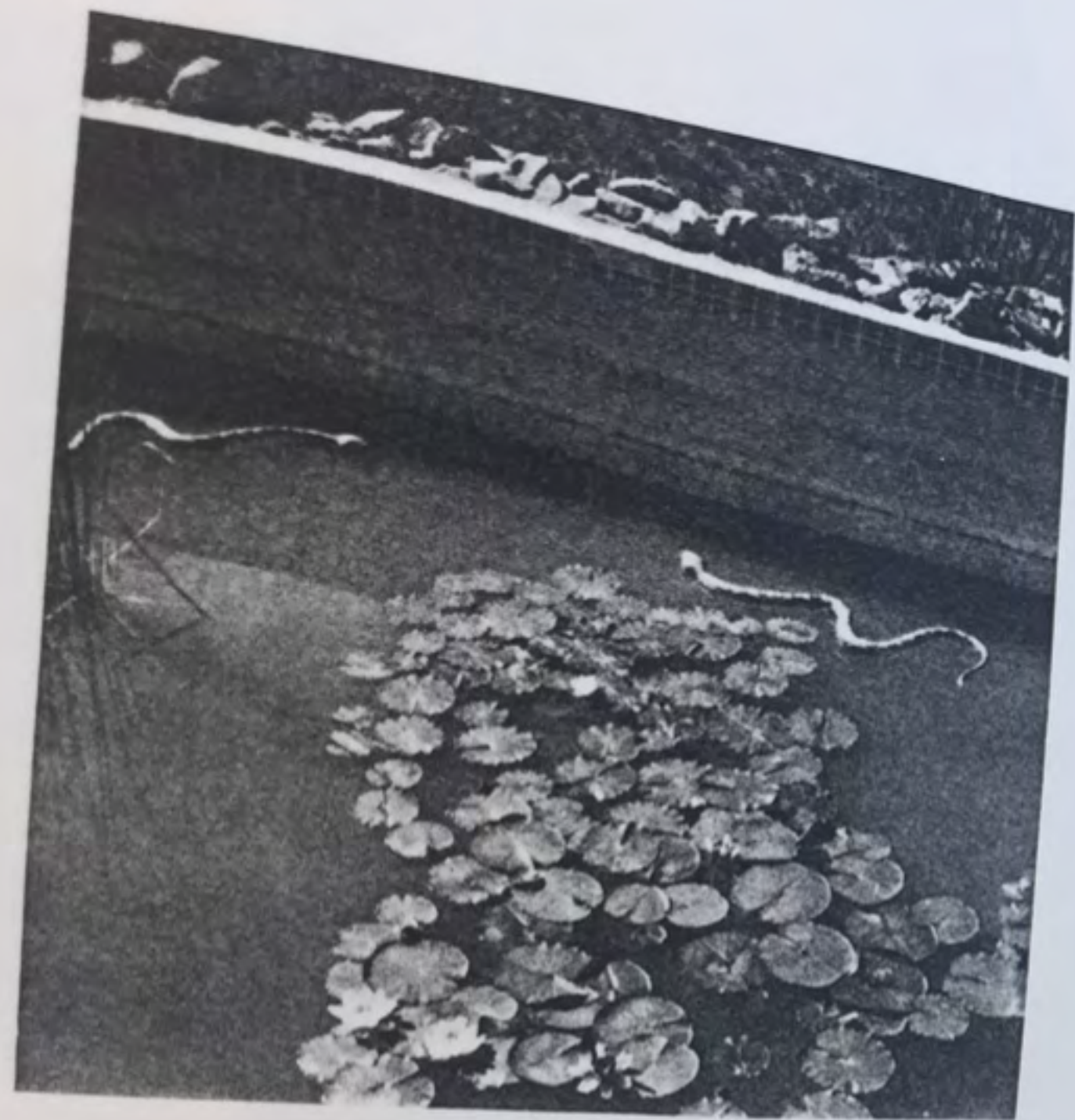
On All Souls Day, November 2, the people take oven bread and red chile stew to the graves to feed the spirits of the dead. All these feedings of the spirits were conducted with such tenderness and love, that as a child, I learned there is nothing to fear from the dead. They love us and they bless us when they return as rain clouds.

All around Laguna and Acoma, there are sandstone formations which make natural basins and pools that hold rain water. These rain water pools are cherished even now, because long ago in times of drought, the survival of the people depended on the rain water stored in the sandstone pools.





The old-time Pueblo people believe that natural springs and fresh-water lakes possess great power. Beneath their surfaces lie entrances to the four worlds below this world.

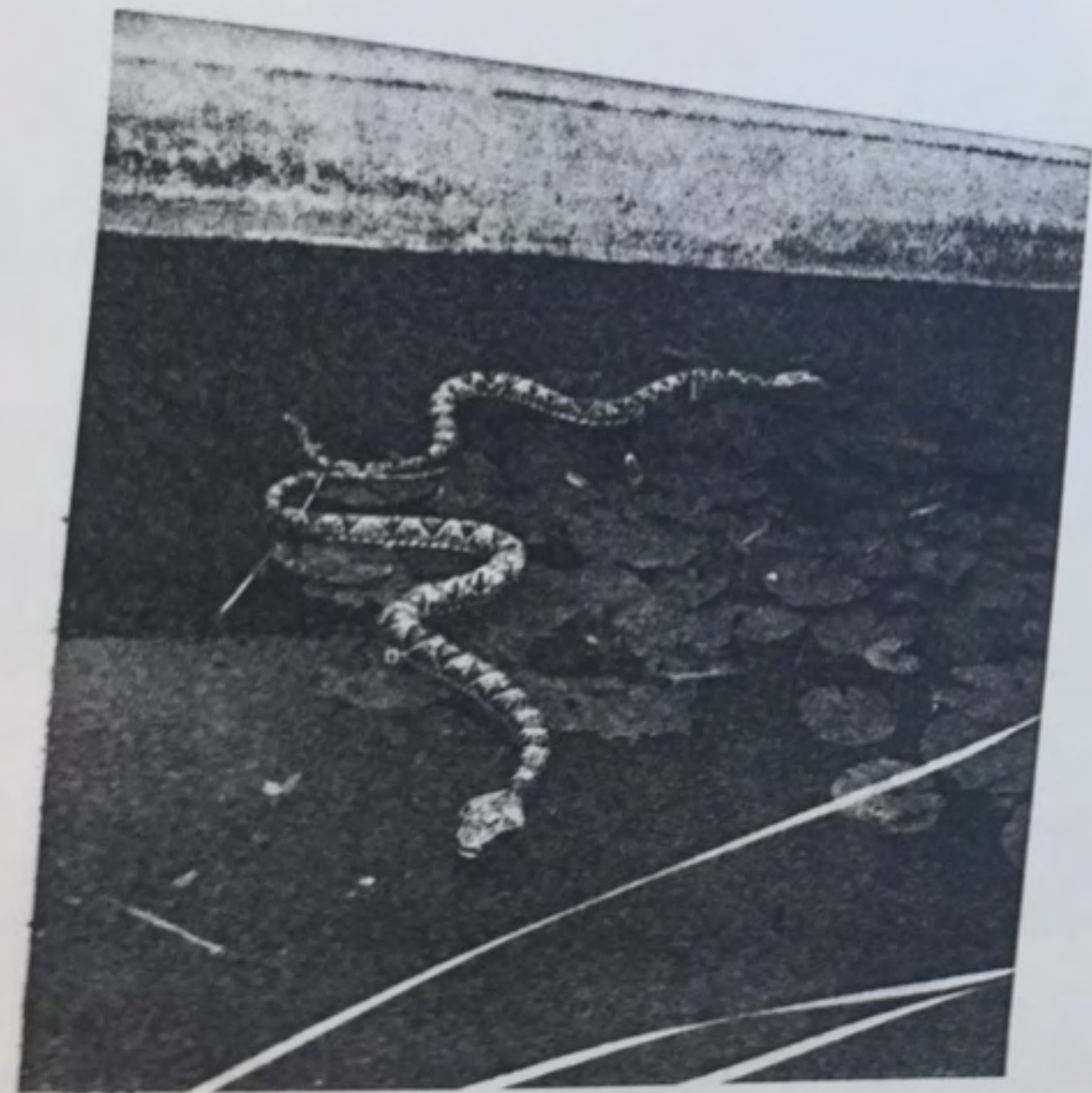


At one time there was a beautiful lake west of Ka'waik, Laguna village. The word "Ka'waik" means "beautiful lake"; the Spanish word for "lake" is "laguna".

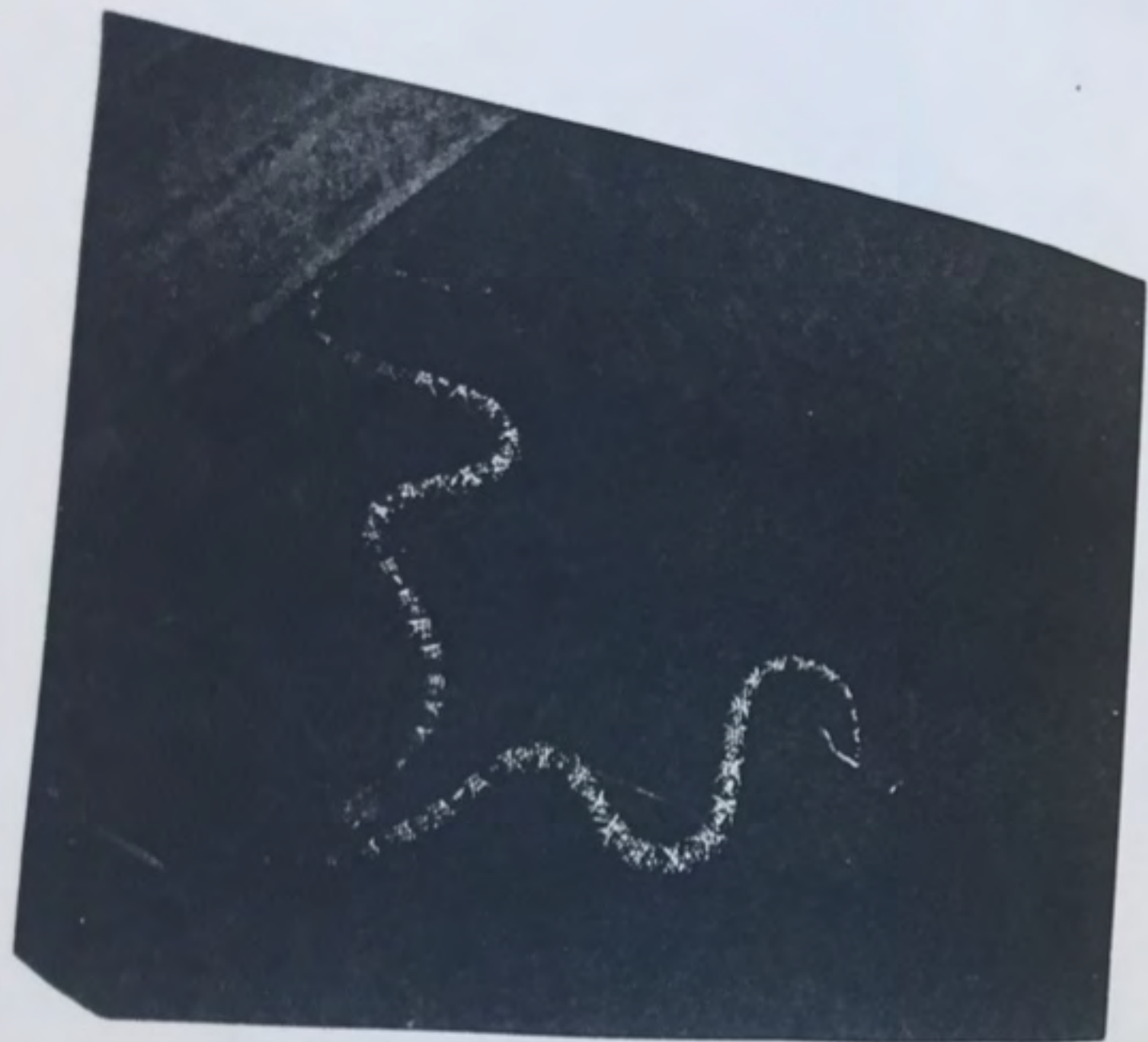
A giant water snake named "Ma'sh'ra'tru'ee" lived in the beautiful lake which was connected to the four worlds below and which allowed the gentle snake to travel down below. Down there, clear streams run all year round, and flowers are everywhere because the Mother Creator is there.

The snake was a messenger who carried the prayers of the people to the Mother Creator below. Ma'sh'ra'tru'ee always made sure the people had plenty of rain for the plants and the animals, and of course, to keep the beautiful lake full of fresh water.





But then neighboring cousins became jealous,
and one night they came and broke down the
natural barriers which formed the lake, and all
the water drained away. The beautiful lake that
had been there, dried up; and the giant water snake
was never seen after that.



Petroglyphs of coiled snakes are signs that a natural spring or pool of rain water is nearby.

The head of the snake glyph points in the direction of the water. The Spaniards thought the snake glyphs pointed to buried treasures the Indians had hidden. The Spaniards did not understand: fresh water is the treasure.

Rattlesnakes sense the approach of summer rainstorms, and they emerge to join the horned lizards, tortoises, tarantulas and the red-spotted toads--all of them waiting for the rain.

The coyotes have a particular ecstatic howl they give for the rain; the curved-beak thrashers and cactus wrens also have special rain songs. The red-spotted toads carry on with their singing all night after a summer rain storm.





When the hot days of June arrive and the last moisture of the spring rain has gone, the desert animals become increasingly vulnerable to drowning. Once the water holes dry up, thirst drives the creatures to try to reach water no matter where the water may be.

I found an elf owl floating face down in a water barrel. It was early morning and the water was still cool. When I turned him over, his big yellow eyes were open wide. Although the wings were stiff, still the eyes seemed alive, kept moist by the water. If the water barrel had been full to the brim, the owl might have been able to escape.

When the summer thunderstorms arrive, the arroyos and dry riverbeds may be suddenly transformed by muddy torrents of flood water that appear out of nowhere even as the sun shines. Flash floods race out of cloudbursts from many miles away; lightning travels in horizontal branches up to twenty miles to strike---a bolt out of the blue sky.

Motorists, most frequently those driving four-wheel-drive vehicles, are swept away by the muddy water as they attempt to prove their vehicles' invincibility at a flooded crossing.



In downtown Tucson, the old underpasses often flood with nine feet of water after heavy storms. A number of automobiles have been lost in the underpasses since I moved to Tucson, but so far no one has drowned.

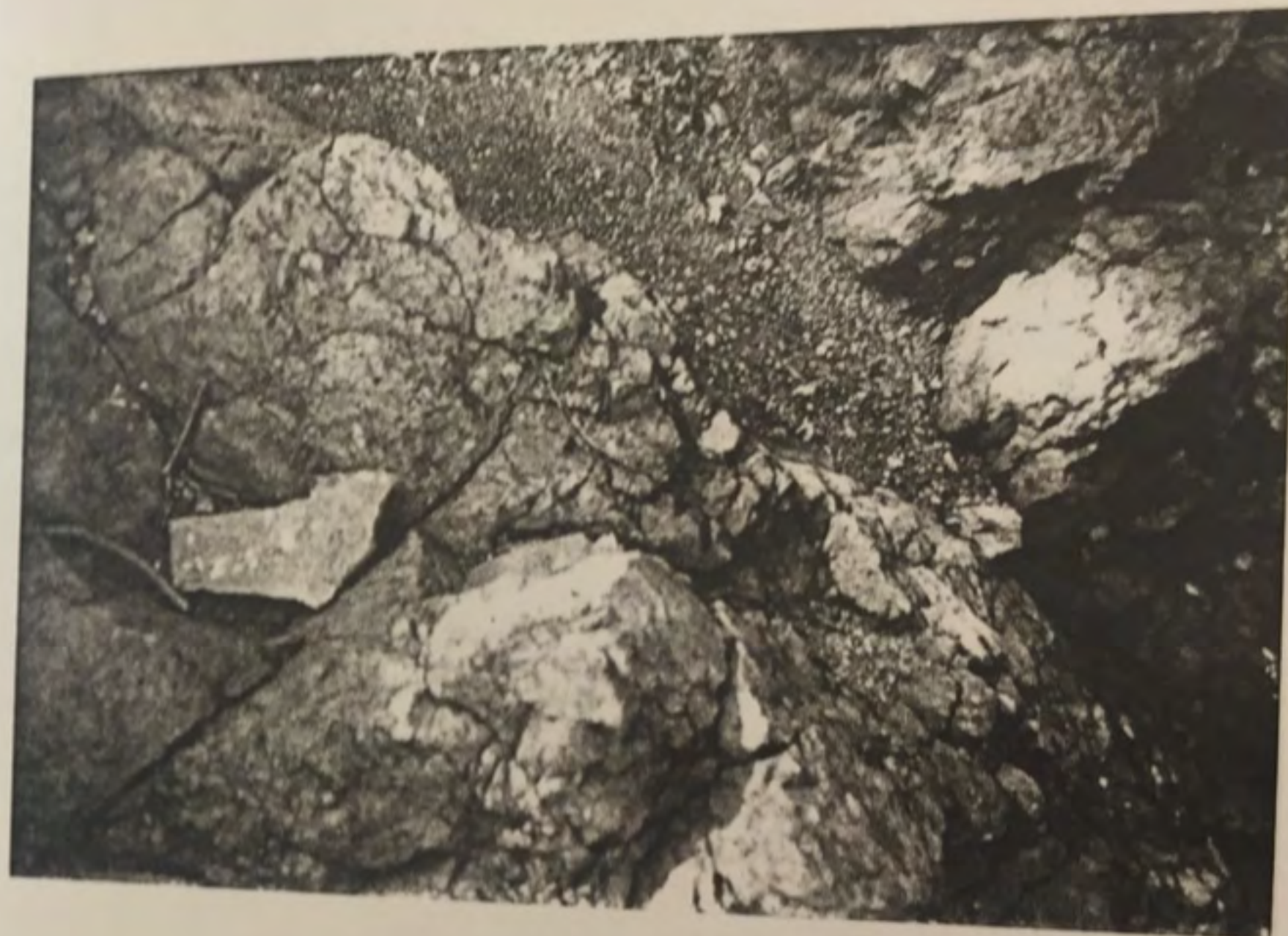
During the 1983 Salt River floods in Phoenix, vandals removed emergency barricades from a washed-out bridge. Two carloads of high school students drove off the bridge in the dark and were swept away by the river. Four students drowned.

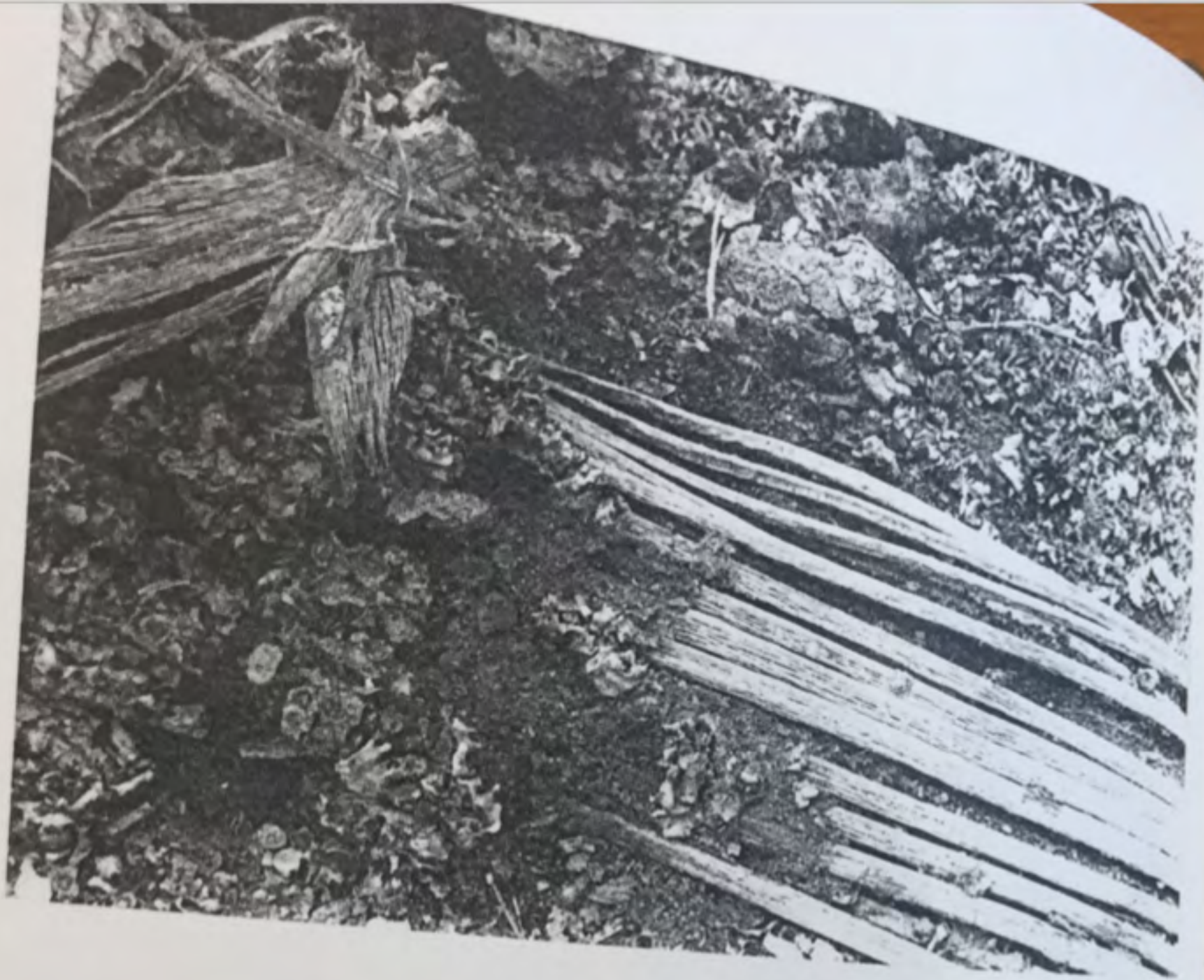


Laguna village is located on a sandstone hill above the San José river. I grew up in an old house at the foot of the village where the people put Presbyterians and mixed bloods like the Marmons.

After big summer rainstorms, the run-off would come swirling past our house, reddish brown with white froth on top. The run-off seldom rose high enough to flood our yard or my great grandmother's yard. But the worry was over our old house with no foundation. Its walls of sandstone and adobe mortar were unprotected from the flood water.

With my great grandmother's house, the problem was that my great grandfather had had a lapse in good judgement. Although he learned to speak the Laguna language and never returned to Ohio even for a visit, still he thought his house at Laguna should have a cellar. He directed the builders to dig a small cellar under the kitchen.

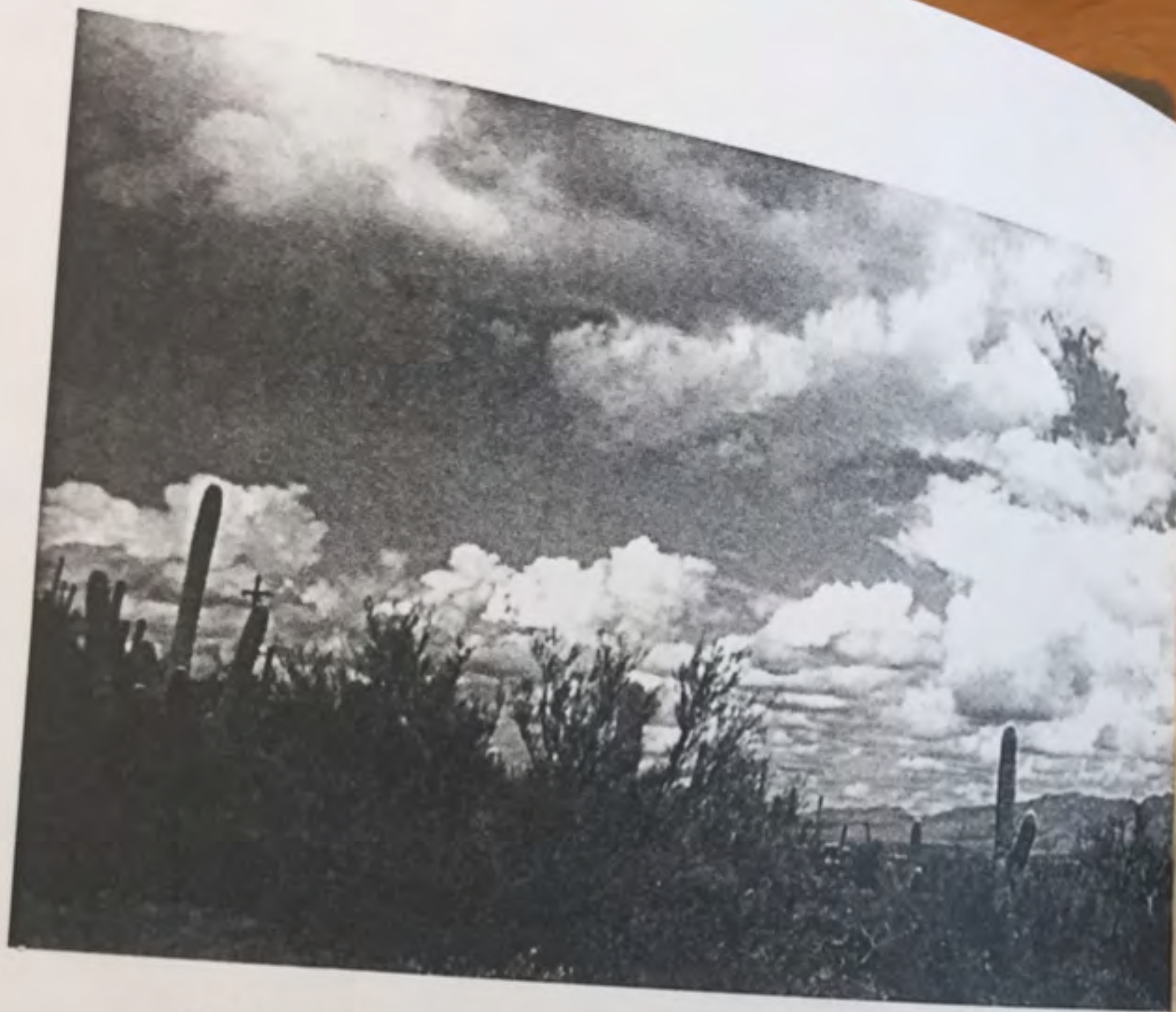




This cellar was all that remained of my great grandfather's Ohio notions. Adobe was the building material used, and the architectural style he chose was a modified Mexican territorial. Because of this cellar, the heavy summer rainstorms used to cause us considerable anxiety. If that damned cellar did flood, the adobe walls would get soaked, and wet adobe will crumble.

Would the muddy brown water with its cargo of tumbleweeds, corn husks, candy wrappers and tin cans boil over into our yard from the road? Once or twice my father and my uncle Wafer had to fill sand bags to hold back the rising water. But the flood we feared never quite developed, not as long as our neighbor, Felipe Riley, was alive.





Felipe Riley used to dry farm with the runoff water from the hillside. He diverted the water with an intricate network of small stone check dams which he carefully engineered so that the rain water fed small ditches leading to his pumpkin and squash plants, his peach and apricot trees, and his big corn field. His granddaughter, Madeline, and I were playmates, and how we used to love to play in the shade among the tall corn plants where we were not supposed to go.

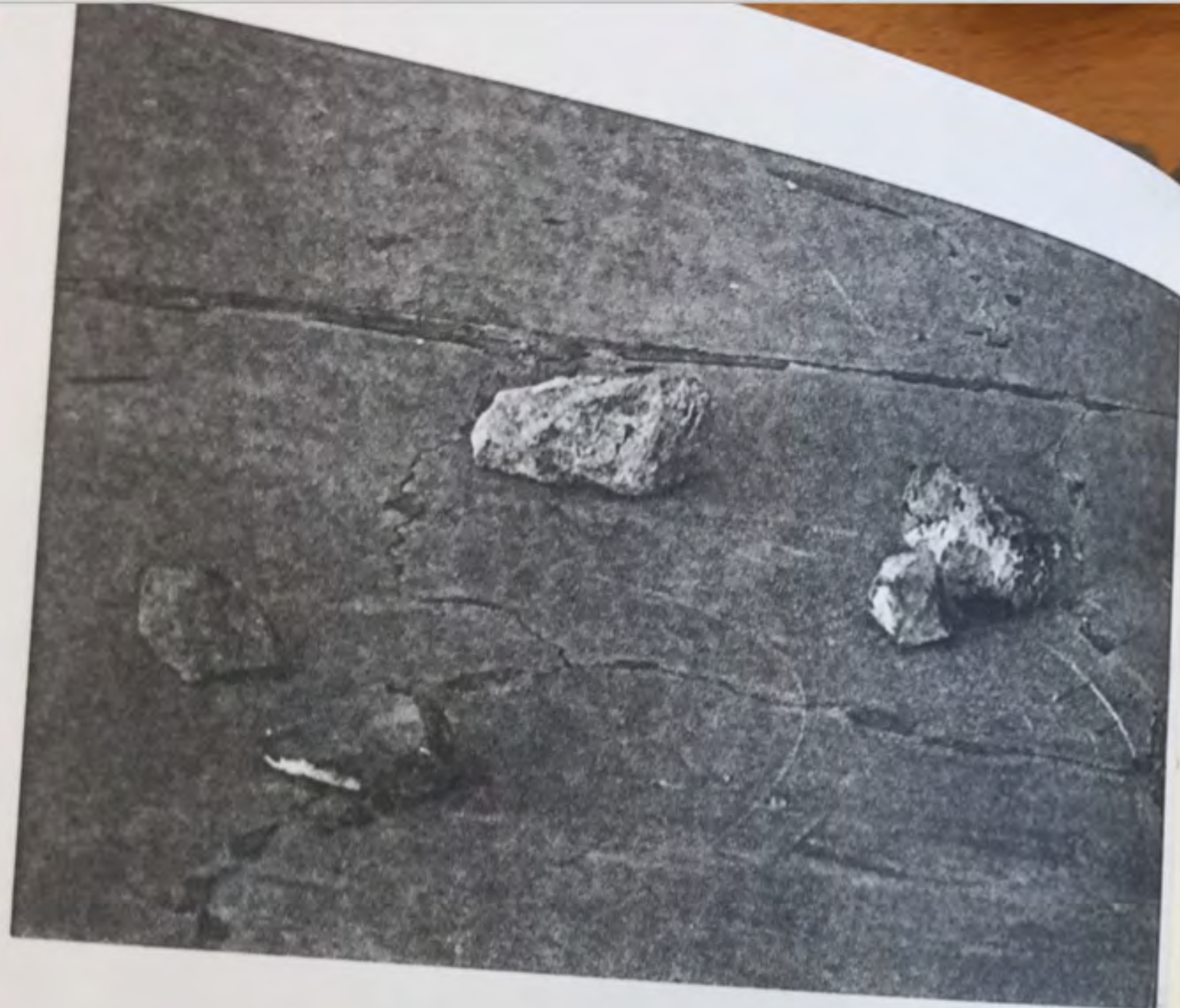


Felipe's arrangement of stone check dams was so subtle, and conformed to the natural contours so well that we never realized how Felipe had saved our old houses from the flood water until after Felipe had passed on.

Without Felipe's care, the rocks which formed the check dams gradually scattered. The run-off from the village above began to increase until finally, when I was in college, the cellar at Grandma A'mooh's house was flooded as were tribal warehouses located nearby.

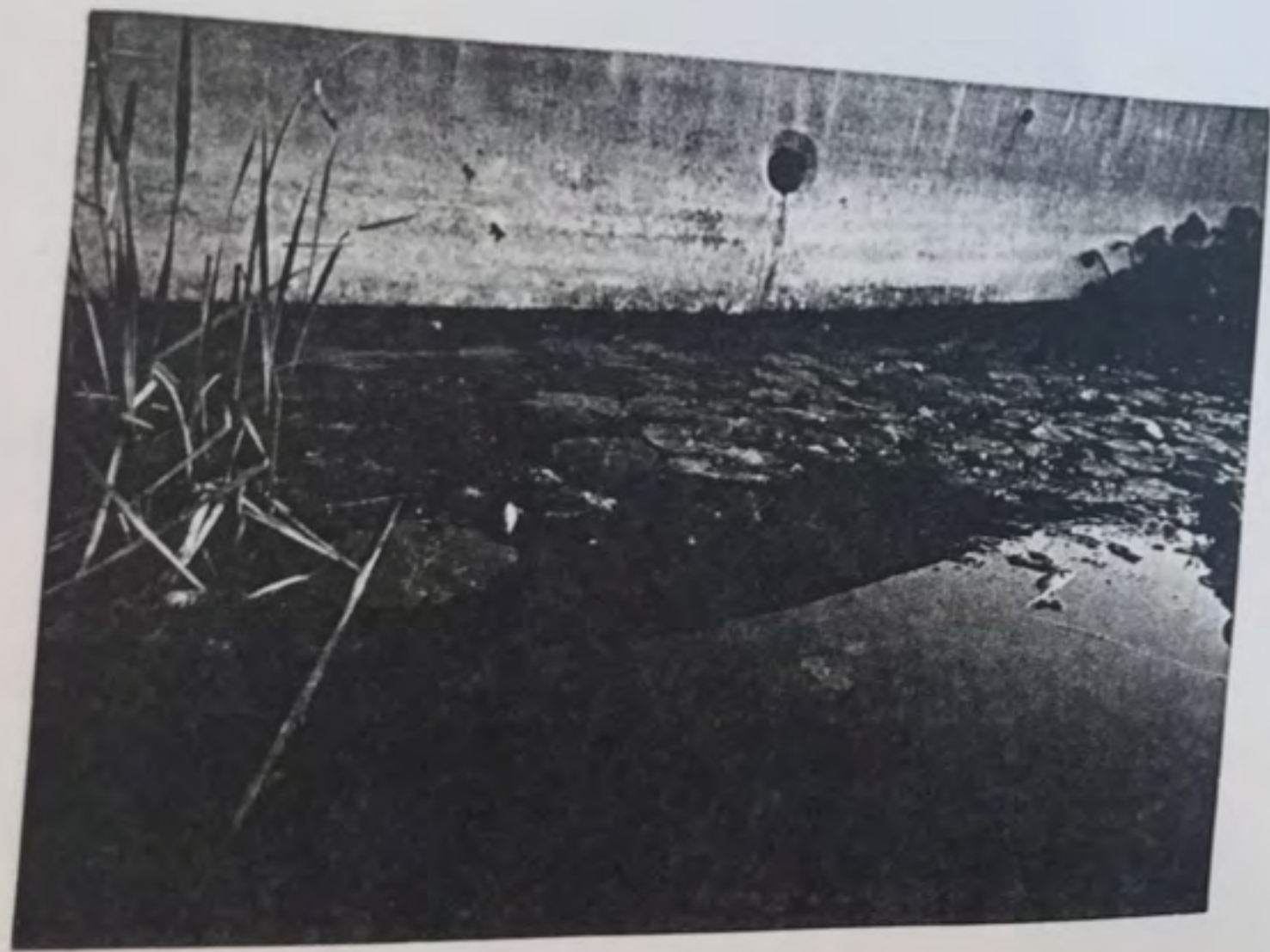
Later, U.S. Government engineers spent months, and many thousands of dollars to install giant storm drains that dump the run-off into the river.





The roof of my house in Tucson used to leak whenever the rain was driven hard by the wind. The house where I grew up in Laguna also leaked if the rain was hard and steady. The leaks used to appear at the edges where the walls joined the ceilings. That's what used to happen to the old-time Pueblo roofs: the alternate layers of sand and clay were nearly impermeable except at the edges. The adobe mud that leaked down the walls reminded us kids of melted chocolate ice cream.

There is an old story about a terrible winter which followed eight years of drought and poor harvests. Heavy rain and snow fell for days and finally saturated the roofs; storehouse and granary collapsed. The meager rations from their scant harvests, and even the seeds they had saved for the spring planting were lost. The people starved, and they referred to that winter as "the winter we had to eat our dead children in order to survive."

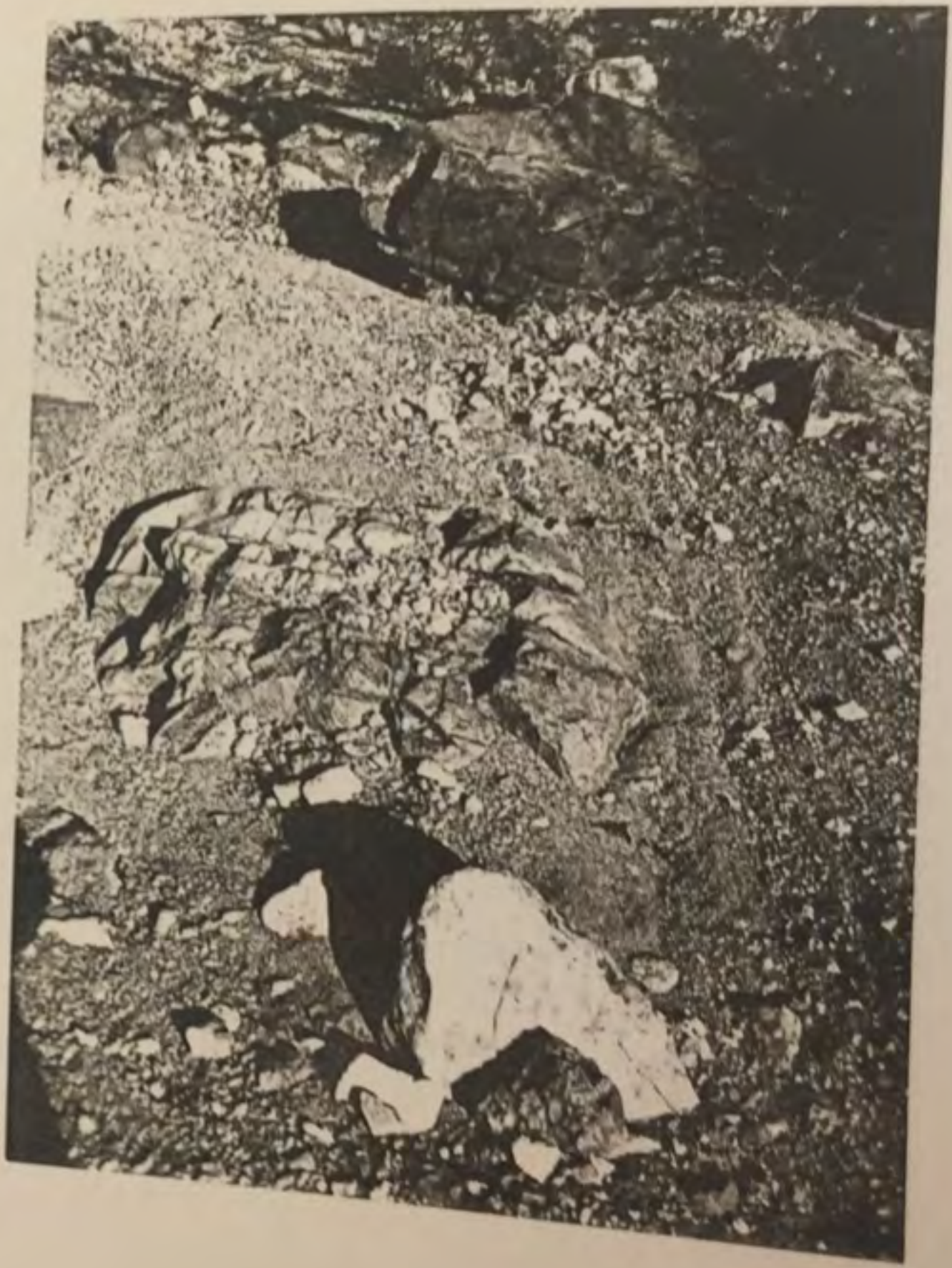


I first saw household water systems which use rain water collected off roofs in Ketchikan, Alaska where the annual rainfall exceeds one hundred eighty inches. Due to the proximity of salt water, drilling wells for fresh water is unsatisfactory. So rural homesites depend on big wooden storage tanks which collect rain water from tank tops and from gutter systems off the roofs of houses.

If more than ten days pass without rain in southeastern Alaska, the level of the big lake north of town falls below the level of the intake valves to the municipal water pumps and the pumps shut off. Without all the rain, the lush foliage and thick underbrush dry out and the great Tongass forest faces imminent danger from wild fire.

My old ranch house in the Tucson Mountains has a similar rain water catchment system which routes all rain water from the roof into a concrete pool. Run-off from a gravel-covered slope is also harvested and stored in the pool.

Water in the Tucson Mountains has never been abundant. Wells must tap into deposits of "fossil water", underground pools and lakes formed by steam trapped in molten lava. The two ranch wells produce only meager amounts of water. When I first came to this old ranch house, rain water was the primary source of water for household use. Tucson sits on an aquifer which has receded so far that the two hundred year old cottonwood trees along the Tanque Verde wash are dying. City wells on the southside of Tucson are contaminated with trichloroethylene and other industrial chemicals and are no longer pumped. Hundreds of miles of concrete canals costing billions of tax dollars carry salty Colorado River water to Phoenix, and most years, to Tucson. But the river must be shared with other western states and with Mexico; in the driest years when the flow of the Colorado River declines, there will not be enough water to go around, and the canal to Tucson will be dry.



In Tucson and Phoenix, more young children die from drowning than from traffic accidents. Backyard swimming pools are numerous; the clear, still water, the colorful tiles, pool steps and pool ladders are all designed to be attractive and inviting. A safety gate is left unlatched; the parents always insist they only looked away for a moment.





Because of all the rain, in Ketchikan, Alaska leaky roofs are inevitable. The jade green moss thrives on cedar shingles and on asphalt roofing as well, forming thick, velvety slabs which grow until the weight of the moss finally collapses the roof.

All this rain is necessary; otherwise, the water levels of the rivers and lakes decline so much that the spawning salmon and steelhead trout can't make their way up river. Dry summer cause the berries to be scarce and the black bears get hungry and come out of the forest to eat garbage and small pet dogs.

Tribal clans acknowledge the kinship between human beings and other beings. Most of the clans in southeastern Alaska are linked to the ocean: coho salmon, king salmon, humpback salmon, halibut, dogfish, killer whale, and sea lion all have human clanspeople in the villages. Fresh water clans include the beaver, otter, and frog; and there are clans of grizzly bear, wolf, raven, and eagle who all owe their existence to the ocean.

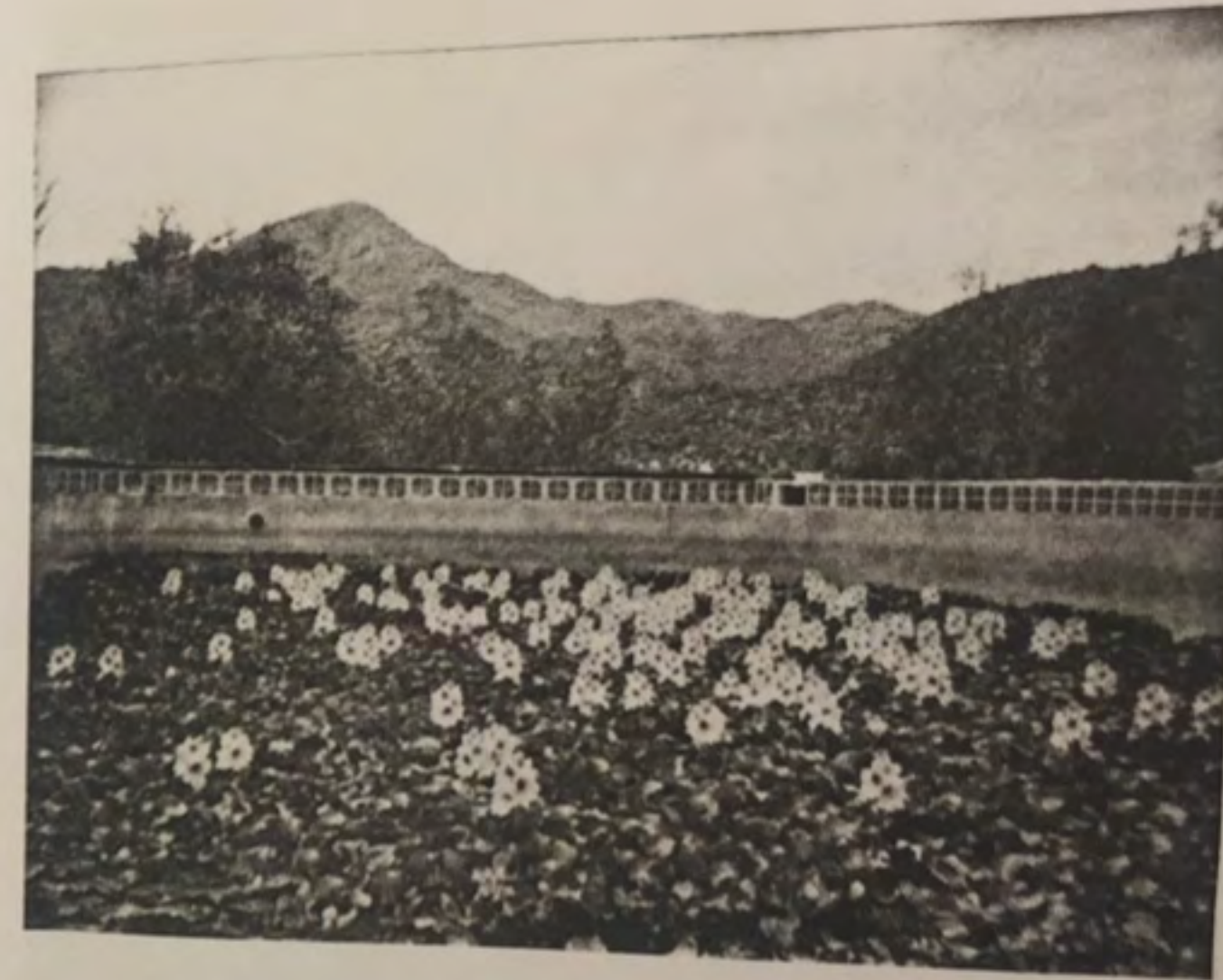
The tribal people of the Alaska coast built great ocean-going boats of yellow cedar, and sailed the coastal perimeter of the Americas. Yet clan totem poles frequently include the wan face of the "drowned man", used to fill space between other totem figures. Great sailors though they were, still they frequently were "taken home" by their Ocean Mother, the stormy north Pacific, because she became so lonely for her human children.

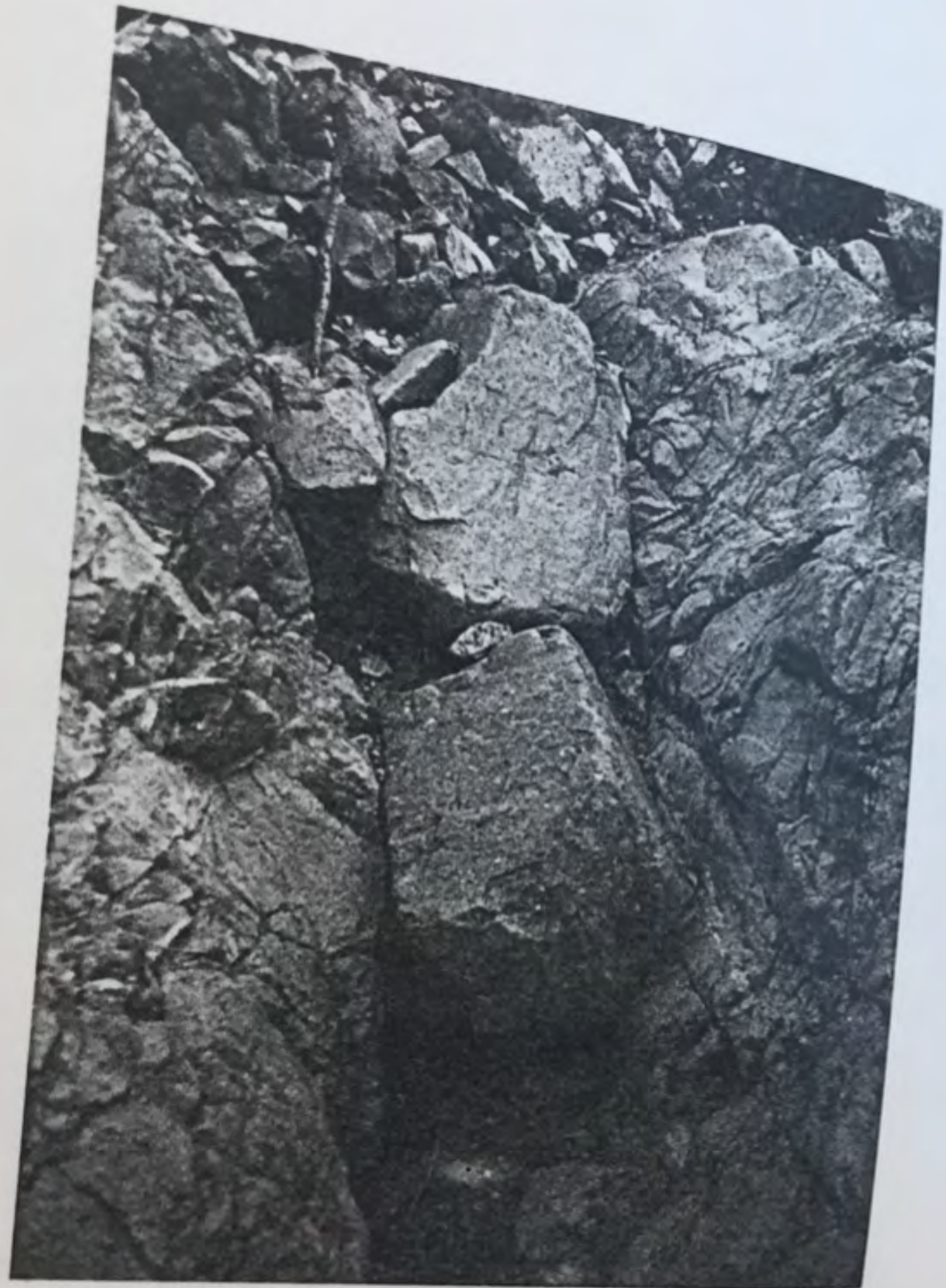


*

The first year I lived in Ketchikan, Alaska, forty-two and five-tenths inches of rain fell during the thirty-one days of October. I began to better appreciate a Tlingit story I heard about a village on a small island occupied by sea lion people who originally had been human beings.

A great storm blew in which lasted for weeks, and when the storm finally had passed, the people on the small island no longer possessed human form. They all had become sea lions, because that was how they could best survive in that place.

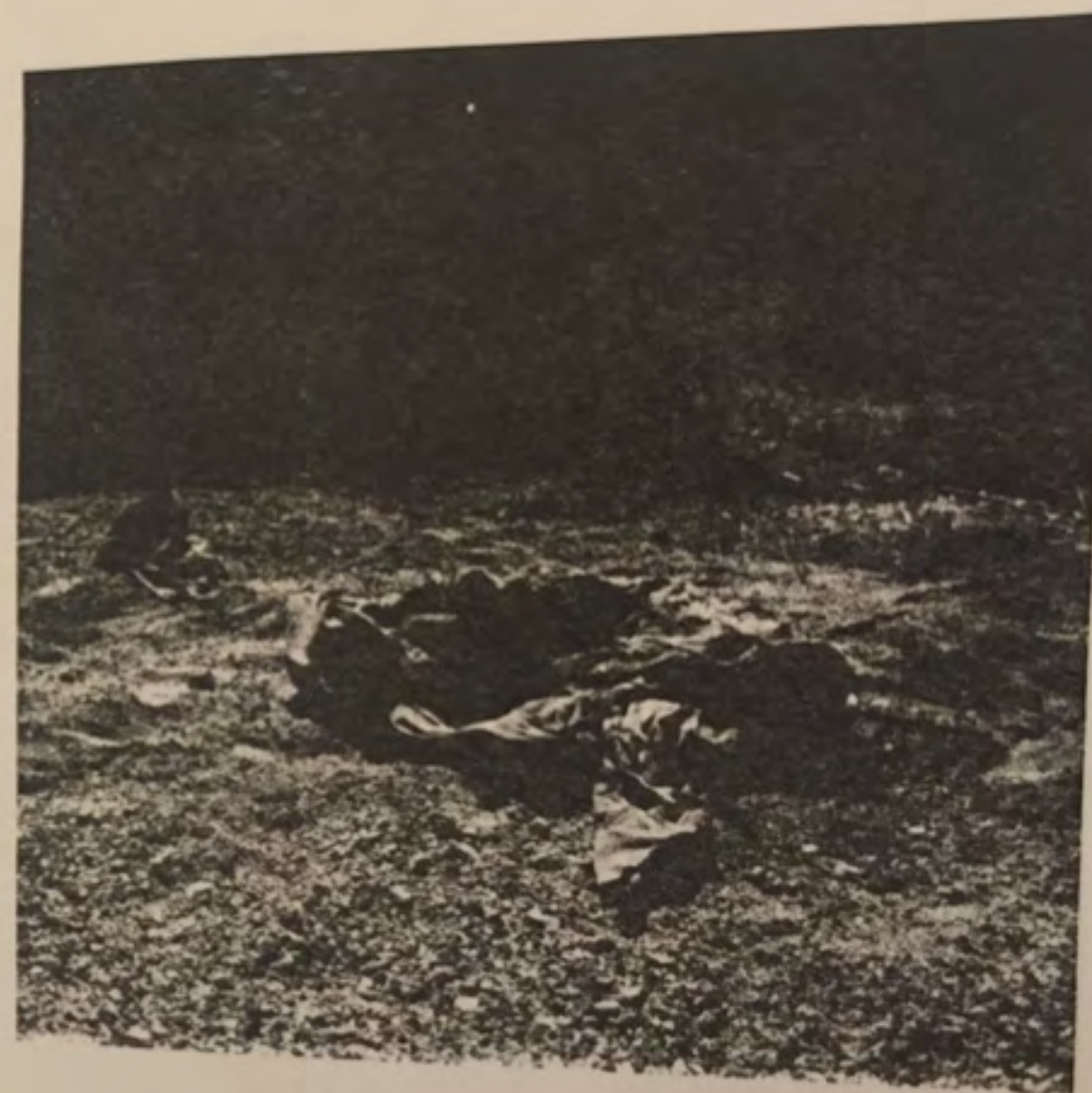




For a long time I had a great many Sonoran red-spotted toads around the rain water pool behind my house. I also had a few cattails and a yellow water lily. This was a modest accomplishment since the pool is replenished only by rainfall, and there is no electricity to operate a filtration system. Hundreds of toads used to sing all night in magnificent choruses with complex harmonies.

One summer when the water level of the pool was low, a man I had recently met brought his sons and his dog for dinner at my house. The boys were eleven and twelve years old, and they had been adopted off a Canadian Indian reserve by the man's wife.

After dinner, the boys took the dog outside to enjoy the coolness of the twilight. A few minutes later, when the man and I joined the boys, we found them with the dog by the rain water pool. Strewn all around the pool were the remains of toads smashed flat by the boys and the dog.



I managed to keep my composure until the dinner guests and their dog had left. I never saw them again. The night-long choirs of multitudes of toads ceased. The Chernobyl nuclear reactor disaster occurred not long afterward and may also have effected the toad population. Last summer the pool had polly-wogs again, the descendants of the red-spotted toads which had survived radioactive fall-out and the boys with the dog. The night-long choirs have not resumed yet; the toads need few years more to recover.



Some months after the Chernobyl accident, neighborhood dogs trapped a big mule deer doe as she came to water at the pool. I heard the commotion of the dogs and water splashing, and I ran outside to the pool. I chased off the dogs with rocks and sticks so the deer was able to escape unharmed.

The water lily was trampled to pieces, and the cattail was torn apart; still, I did not expect long-term damage from the deer's frenzy. But soon after the deer's ambush, a strange red algae with the texture of mucous began to float on the pool's surface. This red algae smothered the yellow water lily, and even the cattail died.



I did not visit the pool often after that; red algae slime covered everything. But sometimes, when I did visit the pool, I found the floating remains of drowned creatures, deceived by the red algae which gave the surface of the water the appearance of solid material. I considered destroying the pool, but since most of the desert animals and birds managed not to drown, and depended on the rain water pool for survival, I gave the pool a reprieve. But then I discovered a decomposing mule deer partially submerged, and I decided that I had had enough of the pool. I ordered six dump truck loads of crushed rock to begin to fill in the pool.

The crushed rock created a natural escape ramp which the lizards, birds and other animals used to avoid drowning. The rock also acted as a natural filter, and the red algae seemed less hearty than before. I decided to try one more time. I resumed my struggle against the red algae. I skimmed off tons of the red slime, but this only seemed to stimulate the red algae's growth.

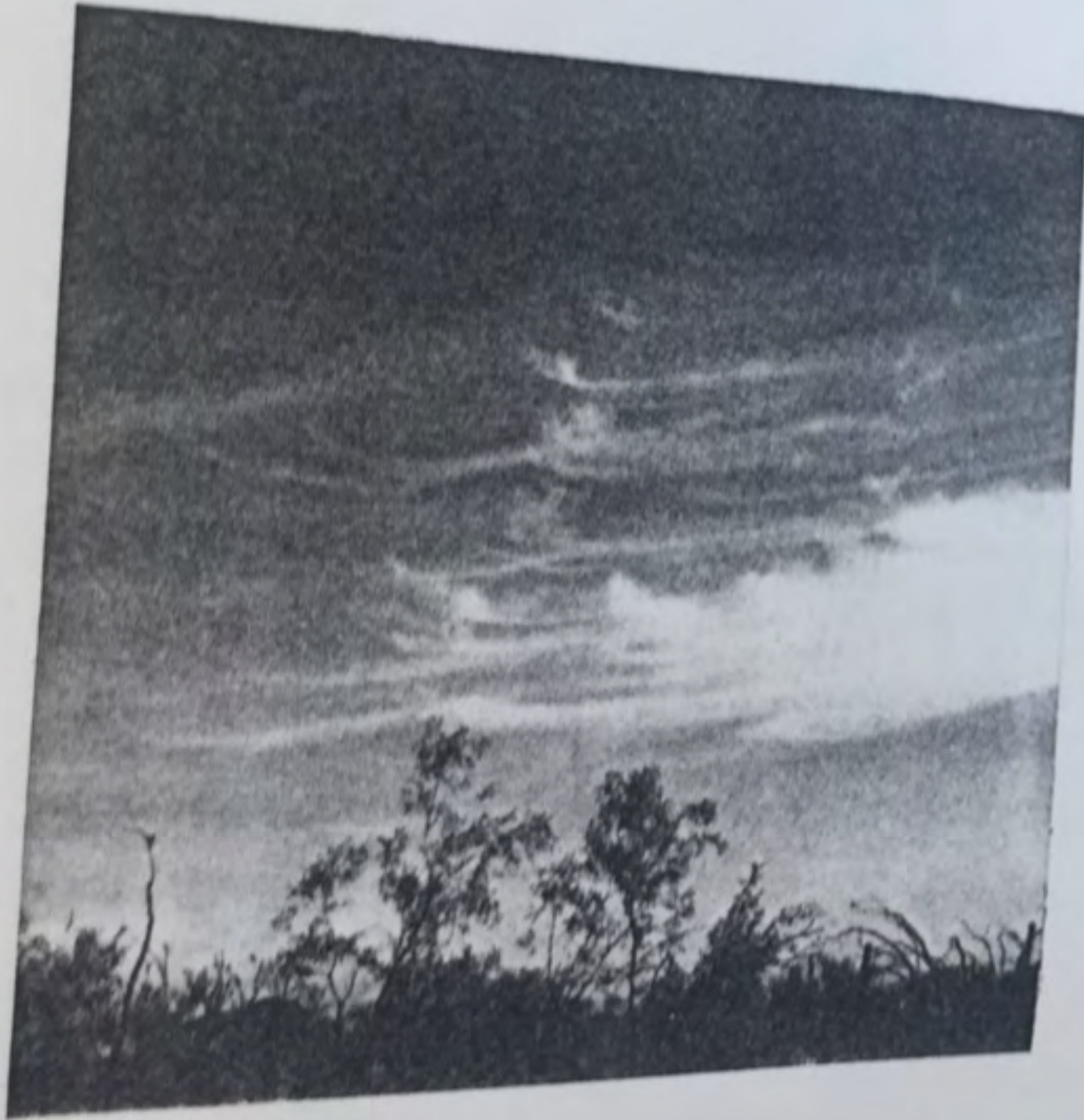
I tried water plants. At first the red algae overpowered and smothered the roots of all the water plants I tried: duck weed, water lettuce, or water lily--- they all succumbed to the red algae and its ally, the fierce ultra violet rays of the sun.



I located some water hyacinths after I read that they are hardy and pestiferous, the bane of waterways and lakes throughout the tropics. The water hyacinths might have a better chance against the red algae and the summer sun. But at first I only put a handful of water hyacinths in the pool, and the red algae made short work of them. So I put more hyacinths together, and when I had assembled thirty plants, a sort of "critical mass", the red algae began to recede. Thirty water hyacinths became thirty-three hundred, then thirty-three thousand water hyacinths.

The water in the pool began to clear and smell cleaner because water hyacinths digest the worst sorts of wastes and contamination: decomposing rodents and dead toads---nothing is too vile for the water hyacinth. Water hyacinths even remove lead and cadmium from contaminated water. I write in appreciation of the lowly water hyacinth, purifier of defiled water.





Only the night-blooming datura, jimson weed, sacred plant of the Pueblo priests, mighty hallucinogen and deadly poison, only the datura has the power to purify plutonium contamination. Datura not only thrives in soil contaminated by plutonium, the datura actually removed the plutonium from the soil so that the soil is purified and only the datura plant itself is radioactive. The datura metabolizes "heavy water", water contaminated with plutonium, because, for the datura, all water is sacred.



Across the West, uranium mine wastes and contamination from underground nuclear tests in Nevada ruin the dwindling supplies of fresh water. Chemical pollutants and heavy metals from abandoned mines leak mercury and lead into aquifers and rivers. But human beings desecrate only themselves; the Mother Earth is invioable. Whatever may become of us human beings, the Earth will bloom with hyacinth purple and the white blossoms of the datura.





Beinecke
Library
Zz6
S134
9935
copy 1



YALE UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY

DANFORD N. BARNEY, JR., Yale 1916

A memorial fund established by

FRANCIS HYDE BANGS

Yale 1915

