Garrett Grove

OUR RECKONINGS, EXPOSED

From behind the walls of America and Fukishima, two distinctly different photographic projects confront the blackest barrier to hope and healing: fear. These coastline portraits ask us to peer into our starkest truths—and then darkness may die.

By Lisa Richardson

Garrett Grove

WHEN THE PHOTOGRAPHER peels back the film and hands the old woman a Polaroid photo, she stares at it for a second. "*Ii, ne*," she says quietly in Japanese. "That's very nice. It's the first time I've seen myself smile in a long time." On March 11, 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake unleashed a tsunami along the coast of Honshu, Japan's main island. Black waves reaching as high as 40 metres (130 feet) razed the entire northeast region, called Tōhoku, to the ground. Communities were engulfed, almost 250,000 homes were destroyed, and 16,000 people died. Hundreds of thousands of people were displaced.

The old woman lost her daughter-in-law in the devastation and became the primary caregiver for her granddaughter. In the image, she and her husband stand with the young girl—a new family portrait. "I will show this to my son," she says. She covers her mouth with her hand to hold back the grief. "I've cried so much. I never imagined I could smile again."

The photographer is Brian Scott Peterson, an American who has been living in Tokyo since 2004. He sticks the photo, along with several others he's just taken of the family, into a brand-new album. He's crying too. "I can't believe we have a new photo album," says the woman, as her husband looks over her shoulder. "There are still many pages to fill," answers Yuko Yoshikawa, who co-founded the Photohoku photo-giving project with Peterson.

"Thank you," says the woman. "We'll do our best."

PHOTOGRAPHER GARRETT GROVE, who's based in Skagit Valley, Washington, has found himself staring out at the Pacific Ocean often over the past year. He sought out North America's western coast and has been rigging his camera up to his bicycle or loading his gear and dog, Tilly, into his maroon 2008 Honda Element, and wandering from the Mexican border north to central Oregon and up again to Canada to try to understand the collapsing hope of his country, the great unravelling empire that might never actually have been as great as its own mythology.

A planet-traversing photographer who has contributed to *Powder* and *Climbing* magazines and the outdoor

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brands Patagonia and Black Diamond, Grove was living a charmed life as one of the most prolific and established outdoor photographers when, in April 2014, an avalanche took him for a 400-metre ride over a cliff band in Alaska's Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and spat him into an existential crisis. "It was the first time in my life that I thought, 'This could be it. I could die,'" says Grove, who was 31 years old when it happened. "My mind went to that place." He survived the avalanche, but his innocence did not. "When that happens, no matter the outcome, it changes you." After shooting professionally for over a decade, he began to question what he was doing, where safety lay, whether the risk inherent to working in the mountains was worth it. His exploration led him into the Masters of Fine Arts program at Connecticut's University of Hartford, where he deleted his online presence, cut off contact with most of his community, and entered a two-year cocoon. "I had to get rid of external pressures," he explains. "I wanted to give myself the opportunity to go into internal mode and just see what happened."

OVER THE PAST YEAR, GARRETT GROVE HAS SOUGHT OUT NORTH AMERICA'S WESTERN COAST, **WANDERING FROM THE MEXICAN BORDER NORTH TO CANADA TO TRY TO UNDERSTAND THE COLLAPSING HOPE OF HIS COUNTRY,** THE GREAT UNRAVELLING EMPIRE THAT MIGHT NEVER ACTUALLY HAVE BEEN AS GREAT AS ITS OWN MYTHOLOGY.

It was the first time in his life he couldn't assume a happy ending, wasn't working to a client's brief, and was free to explore his own emotions and reactions; it coincided with a nation in a state of duress, as Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign exposed the fissures in the American myth. Over the next two years, he took his camera and his turmoil into the heartland for months at a time, giving space to the confusion. He discovered the things that were living in the darker places of his mind — and of the nation. It was a pilgrimage of sorts,

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guided by the advice of American photographer Robert Adams: "Go to the landscape that frightens you most and take pictures of it until it doesn't scare you anymore."

On the strength of that project, called Errors of Possession, Grove emerged out of his cocoon with a clearer sense of what mattered to him, the kind of work he wanted to make, and his privilege and his responsibility to make better choices. When he was accepted in 2018 as one of 36 emerging fine-art photographers from around the world into Parallel, a two-year mentorship co-funded by the European Union to stimulate and showcase contemporary photography, he went as far west as an American can go: Where the land meets the Pacific Ocean. The place where the frontier finds its reckoning in the water's roil and salt. It's not that the ocean frightens Grove. It's what arises when you can't run anymore and everything you've fled catches up with you. The moment the avalanche stops moving and you're forced to take stock.

IN THE MONTHS after the Great East Japan Earthquake, 20 aftershocks a day would shudder through the wreckage of Tōhoku, stalling recovery and cleanup efforts. Buildings had been flipped upside down, emptied out, their contents scattered across neighbourhoods.

Along the east ridge of the Ōu Mountains, beside the Pacific Ocean, are the prefectures of Fukushima, Miyagi, and Iwate, which ran their infrastructure — water, railways, roads, nuclear power plants — along the water's edge, the only flat ground. The tsunami destroyed it all. The national army, the Japan Self-Defense Force, and volunteers waded through the muck, searching for missing people, pulling debris from ditches, removing mud from homes, clearing rotting fish carcasses from the processing plants; they also respectfully retrieved Buddhist memorial objects, photos, albums, cameras, and memory cards, handing them in for safekeeping, slowly accumulating a massive collection of lost memories. To flee the wave, people left everything behind. Those who didn't perished. Sometimes all the survivors got back of their former lives was a water-damaged photograph. Many didn't even get that.

Yoshikawa, then 27, was running an agency for foreign photographers in Tokyo and managing a family-photography studio. Peterson, 34, worked with her. Galvanized to help, they organized a series of portrait sessions for Tokyo families and

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donated the proceeds to the tsunami victims. There was a surge of sentimentality around family photos; it was easy to book the sessions out, and Peterson's exuberant energy generated beautiful portraits. But it didn't feel like enough.

Yoshikawa didn't want to just send money to the tsunami victims. She wanted to do something more direct. In September 2011, six months after the tsunami, Peterson and Yoshikawa decided they would travel to the city of Ishinomaki, one of the most devastated areas, and donate family-portrait sessions directly to the survivors. Photohoku, a hybrid word that blends "photo" and "Tōhoku," was born. The idea took an unexpected twist when Peterson, who is a Polaroid camera collector and trader, grabbed his Konica Instant Press camera and a stack of instant film at the last minute. On the way to the train station, he bought up every photo album at the closest camera shop.

"Life was barely getting back to normal," recalls Peterson of their first trip. "People were coping. But it was sombre." The cleanup was ongoing. The bays were so full of debris that fishers couldn't set their nets. Residents displaced by the tsunami or forced to evacuate by the nuclear disaster at the breached Fukushima plant were living in temporary housing complexes. Radiation-monitoring stations stood at the edge of parking lots and playgrounds. Life was in severe limbo for everyone, but the global news cycle had begun to move on.

Unable to contain the unfolding Fukushima nuclear disaster, the Japanese government announced it would build a wall. Hundreds of concrete seawalls and breakers, some over 20 metres (65 feet) high, were poured along the length of the coast, a US$12 billion (1.35 trillion Yen) project to keep the ocean out, severing a quarter of a million coast dwellers in rural Japan from the source of their livelihood, their view, and their history.

Meanwhile, every month, Peterson and Yoshikawa returned to Tōhoku to take portraits with instant film. There's something about a portrait that offers dignity to the subject, muses Yoshikawa. "You just need one to prove that you are here and you are alive." They hired minibuses and filled them with photographers and other volunteers, a band of camera-toting minstrels with clear instructions: You are to give away the photos and take nothing in return. Do not even keep a negative.

The "rule" had been set at their very first encounter. A man shrugged them off when they offered to take his photo, as he was inured to the demands of the foreign press that had swarmed the region in the aftermath of the tragedy looking to document the victims' stoicism and their brokenness, before suddenly disappearing. "Nobody seemed to register what we meant when we offered to take their pictures," recalls

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Peterson. So he loaded the instant film into his camera, snapped a portrait, and waited awkwardly as it developed. "It was a perfect exposure." Handing over the freshly developed photograph worked magic. The man's armour fell away. When he showed his Polaroid to the people sitting with him, they all began to applaud. Peterson had peeled the negative away and thrown it in the trash. "It's for you," Peterson told the man, wanting him to understand he had the original and the only copy. It is only for you. We aren't here taking photos. We are giving them. Suddenly everyone wanted one.

Families look forward to Photohoku's visits, when they can show off their photo albums that have become fat and full with their children growing tall and strong and their new houses and neighbourhoods being rebuilt. They can add a few more photos to the record of their lives, a testimony of their ability to walk bravely into the future after everything has been taken away. "We got to be a part of those stories and lives," says Peterson. "And we got to create something for the sake of creating. We called it photo giving, but really the gift was to us."

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HISTORIAN Greg Grandin writes in his book *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in America* that America finds itself at the end of its most potent myth, finally forced to confront "extremism turned inward, all-consuming and self-devouring." Grove elaborates, "The West has always represented hope, the frontier, economic prosperity, and the opportunity to avoid the past, the place to go that let us keep distracting ourselves with new growth." But now there's nowhere left to go. Instead of looking to expand, America is closing itself off, talking endlessly of building a wall along its souther border.

Grove was born and raised in Western America — Seattle, Leavenworth, and Sedro-Woolley, Washington; Anchorage, Alaska; Los Angeles, California — always living along that wild coastline. "I don't think I realized the way the idea of expansion and having open space

and freedom was instilled in me as the American dream. I wasn't specifically taught that," he says. "It was just an ingestion process of being an American. It's in me. I can't do anything about it." But he can reflect on it, and that's what he's doing with *The Edge of Some Dream*, his new series of black-and-white images of the coast for the Parallel platform. "It's stirring this time of reckoning with our past," says Grove. "We've run out of places to run." He wanted to shoot the geographical place where the United States of America ends, against a neutral horizon, the impassive ocean bearing witness to the extremes of the poverty, wealth, destruction, and beauty that ram up against it. "I think it's a very potent and fertile time in our country. What we do now.…We're making a very conscious choice about what our future looks like."

Trump's wall is a distraction from this inevitable reckoning, an attempt to control situations that are really uncontrollable. "Nature is going to find a way," says Grove. "People are going to find a way."

Trebbe Johnson, the 70-year-old wilderness guide and author of *Radical Joy for Hard Times*, says that part of acknowledging the damage happening to the planet is not avoiding the most damaged places, or walling ourselves off from them, but looking right at them. "Going to a wounded place and looking directly at it, gazing at it, can actually be the first step toward rebuilding the relationship," she writes, spinning the idea of the photography subject staring back on us. "Gazing is a very particular kind of looking. It is open and receptive. It lingers. It demands nothing, either from the subject who gazes or the object gazed at." Since 2009, Johnson has been inviting people to practice Earth Exchanges, loose gatherings that self-organize around the world but share a general format. Go to a broken place, tell stories about what the place means to you, get to know the place as it is now, share what you discover, and make a gift of beauty. It's a way to offer acknowledgement, ceremony, and gift back to the place, to begin that act of repair. Something will happen, Johnson affirms, it always does. And though it may seem unexpected, joy is likely.

Peterson and Yoshikawa say that Photohoku changed their lives. But they were afraid of what they would find when they got off the train in Ishinomaki, confronted by the gap between their idealistic desire and the reality on the ground. What equipped them to ask complete strangers, "Were you in the tsunami? Did you lose anybody?" They'd travelled through the night and were standing on top of an overlook where many of the survivors had fled to escape the tsunami when a local wandered up, curious about Peterson's big camera. "What's going on over here?" he asked.

"Were you in the tsunami?" asked Peterson.

"Yeah, I was in the tsunami."

"What question should I ask you if I'm coming here wanting to help?"

"You could ask me where I used to live," offered the stranger.

Peterson and his team had their point of entry. Not, "Are you okay? Is your family okay?" But, "What was life like before it was like this? Where have you come from? What is this journey you are on, friend? Because I've come here to witness it with you."

After eight years, 50 trips, and 10,000 portraits, Photohoku isn't happening as often anymore. With five young children between them and several jobs each, Peterson and Yoshikawa no longer go monthly. But they still are passionate about the project, in large part for what they learned about their own power to help by being willing to be implicated, not as neutral observers but as participants, equally capable of doing harm as helping. The camera, professional dispassion, cynicism, despair, or any other kind of wall did not stop them from entering into a relationship with someone, or someplace, that is wounded. "Photography has usually been used in a humanitarian way to shed light on the plight of a bad situation or a marginalized group and influence resources," says Peterson. "But this was different. The photos didn't have value as journalistic photos. They were only valuable to the one person they were meant to help."

But that was enough.

Garrett's first exhibit of 20 images from The Edge of Some Dream were hung in France in May 2019. He did not go. One less casual flight made around a finite planet was a privilege he opted not to exercise. "I definitely feel it's a time of reckoning, and you have to look at the cost of what you do."

Every now and then we are gifted an opportunity, often a painful one, to consider that there are limits, edges, endings. Do we have the courage to go around the walls, to let our gaze linger on what confronts us for as long as it takes to stop being afraid and for awe to return?

SINCE 2009, TREBBE JOHNSON HAS BEEN INVITING PEOPLE TO GO TO A BROKEN PLACE, TELL STORIES ABOUT WHAT THE PLACE MEANS TO YOU, GET TO KNOW THE PLACE AS IT IS NOW, SHARE WHAT YOU DISCOVER, AND MAKE A GIFT OF BEAUTY. **IT'S A WAY TO OFFER ACKNOWLEDGEMENT, CEREMONY, AND GIFT BACK TO THE PLACE, TO BEGIN THAT ACT OF REPAIR.**

Lisa Richardson is trying her best to look at the hard things, say the true things, and decolonize her imagination. She writes from her adopted home of Pemberton, British Columbia, in the unceded territory of the Lil'wat Nation.