

LESSONS LEARNED

from a Master Photographer

Michael Powers

It is natural for most of us who love the outdoors to yearn to preserve some of those pinnacle moments we experience there. Today we have such a vast array of image recording devices at our disposal — still and video cameras, drones that give us eyes like eagles in the sky, even our ubiquitous cellular phones that possess more processing power than the early computers that used to fill whole rooms at science labs and universities. Yet all this technical power does not in itself guarantee great pictures.

Opposite page: Galen Rowell in northern Peru. After trekking all day with participants of his photo safari through the Cordillera Blanca, Rowell still had the energy to climb even higher in pursuit of more vistas. (Photo: Michael Powers)

Right: Author (right) with Wilderness Travel guide Peter Frost on a rugged trail in the Cordillera Blanca. (Photo: Galen Rowell)





First and foremost, Rowell emphasized the importance of keeping the Golden Rule of strong composition in mind: Less is more. The most common shortcoming he found in amateur snapshots, he stated, was the random inclusion of unnecessary and distracting information. A strong, uncluttered composition was basic and essential for a successful photograph. This could be achieved only by carefully excluding all unnecessary elements from a composition before the shutter button was pressed—or later, on our computer screens using such image applications as Photoshop or Lightroom.

The distinct differences in the pictures each of us took on the Peru trek confirmed Rowell's contention that every photographic image reflects the energy of the subject matter and the cameraman. Rowell counseled us against striving to create photographs that merely bore a close resemblance to the "real" world. He encouraged us instead to bring our personal power and concentration more fully into the image gathering process, to attempt to feel what we see deeply. "The skills themselves," he explained, "are only tools." The most sophisticated equipment is only an aid, not a substitute for our physical and mental resources. "What makes for better music—or better pictures—is simply a better human being, who naturally evolves a more complete world view from life experience or gains it through understanding."

Unquestionably, the lessons Galen Rowell taught were pivotal to my evolution as a photographer. More



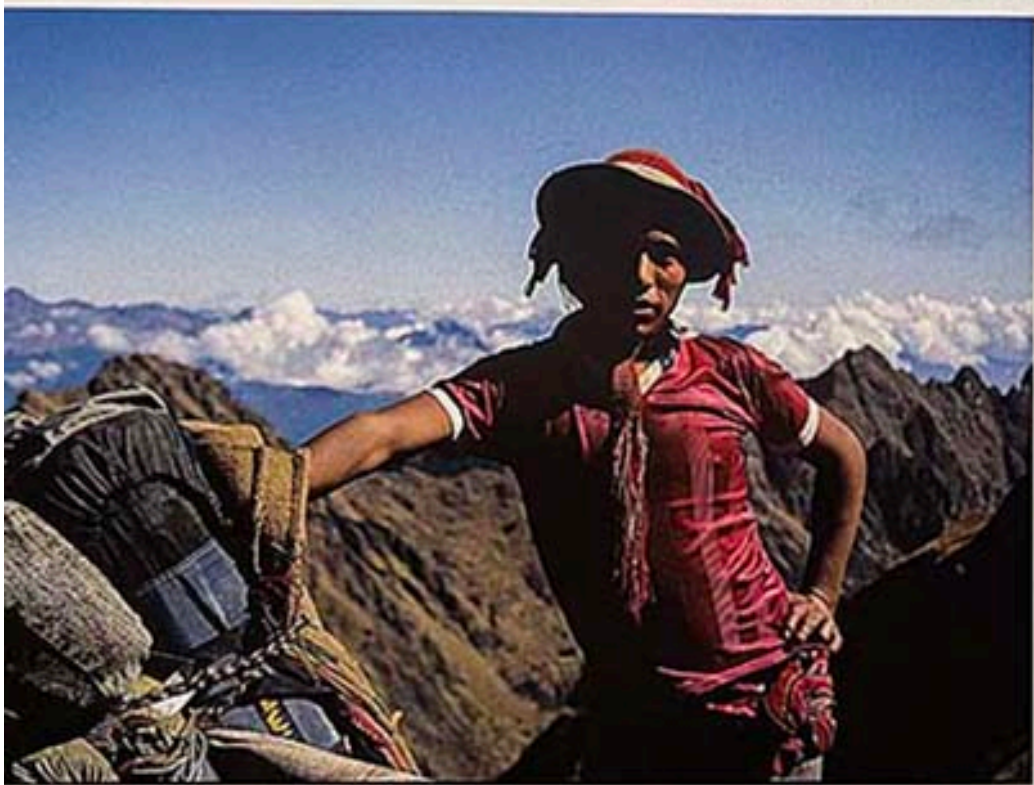
than a half-century of traveling the world with a camera and a notebook has shown me that he was right. I realize now too that creating exceptional photographs is truly a life-long learning experience.

So those of us who wish to take beautiful photographs, let us venture out into the wilderness with our cameras to practice our craft, celebrate our successes and learn from our failures as well. Learning to capture photographs that are more powerful and evocative is an immensely rewarding experience.

Above: Sherpa woman porter, carrying a heavy load on the high-altitude trekking trail around Mt. Everest in northeastern Nepal.

Right above: Less is more. The weathered hands of a Sherpa woman in Nepal as she waited patiently for her yak to be loaded.

Right below: A flimsy bridge constructed by Sherpas over a Himalayan stream on a secondary trail high in northeastern Nepal.



Early in my career as a freelance photographer, I was very fortunate to be sent to South America by Wilderness Travel, a leading adventure travel company, to participate in and document a photo safari led by master cameraman Galen Rowell.

To me, Rowell was already a legendary figure. In his youth he had been a climbing bum, scaling the big walls in Yosemite with an Instamatic camera. Then he got an assignment from *National Geographic Magazine* to photograph big wall climbing (because none of their staff photographers could do it), resulting in a photo on the cover of that august magazine.

Many big coffee table books and photo exhibits across the nation later, this rising star in the heady field of adventure photography was now leading a group of other photographers on a photo safari trek through the Cordillera Blanca range in northern Peru. I didn't realize it until later, but that time spent with Rowell in the mountains of Peru would have a profound effect on my own work as a photographer.

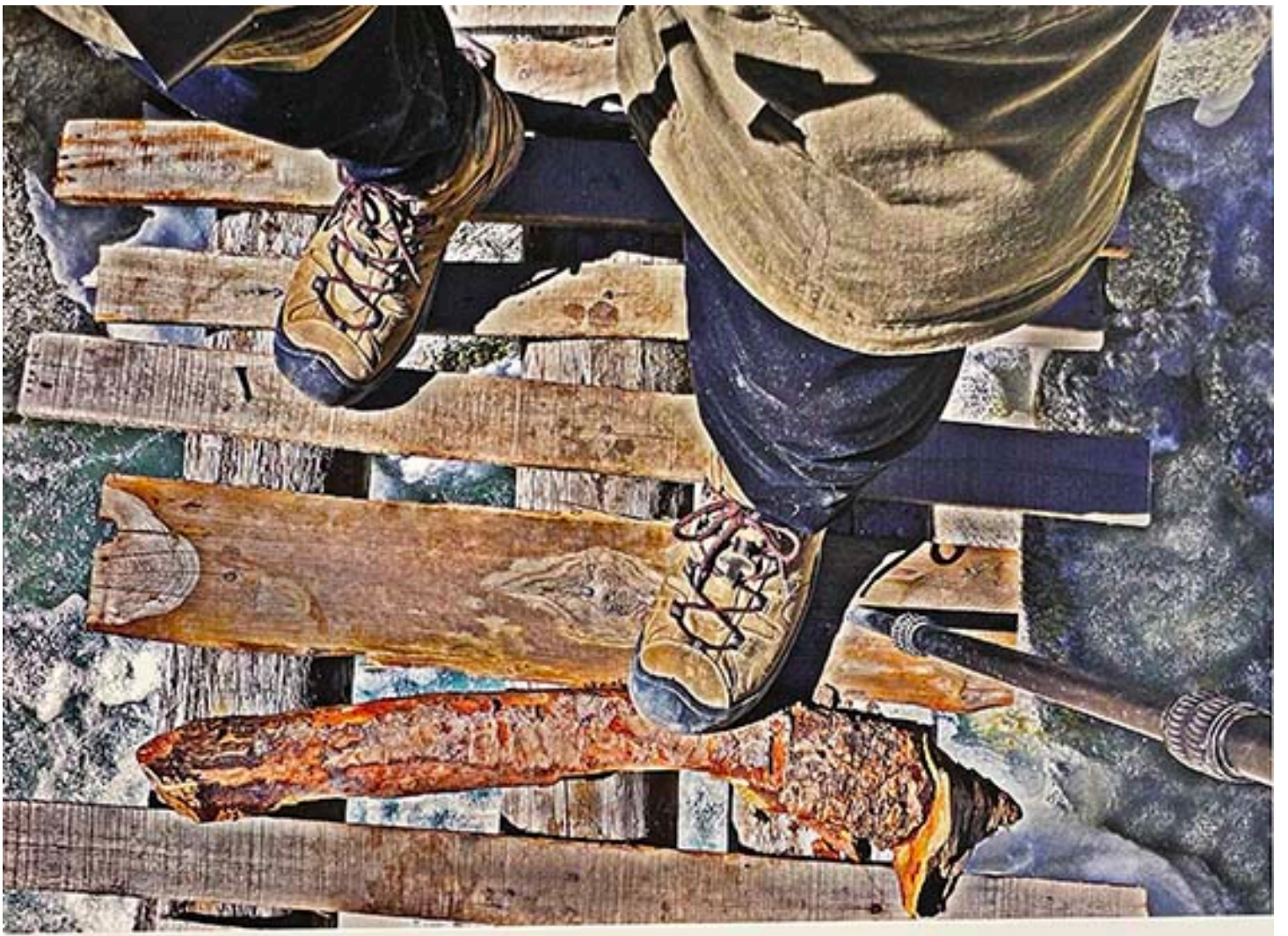
It was not so much the camera techniques that Rowell employed as we followed him for ten days through the spectacular Cordillera, it was how he became hyper-focused whenever we entered a high-altitude Indian village or crested a mountain pass revealing another vast alpine vista. Galen seemed to connect emotionally with each amazing photo op we encountered; and later on when we saw these images on his website or published in his books or in magazines, they seemed to possess a

Above: Young Quechua girl on an ancient Inca wall in the highlands of Peru. (This and following photos: Michael Powers)

Below: A Quechua porter on a trail to the Inca ruins of Machu Picchu.

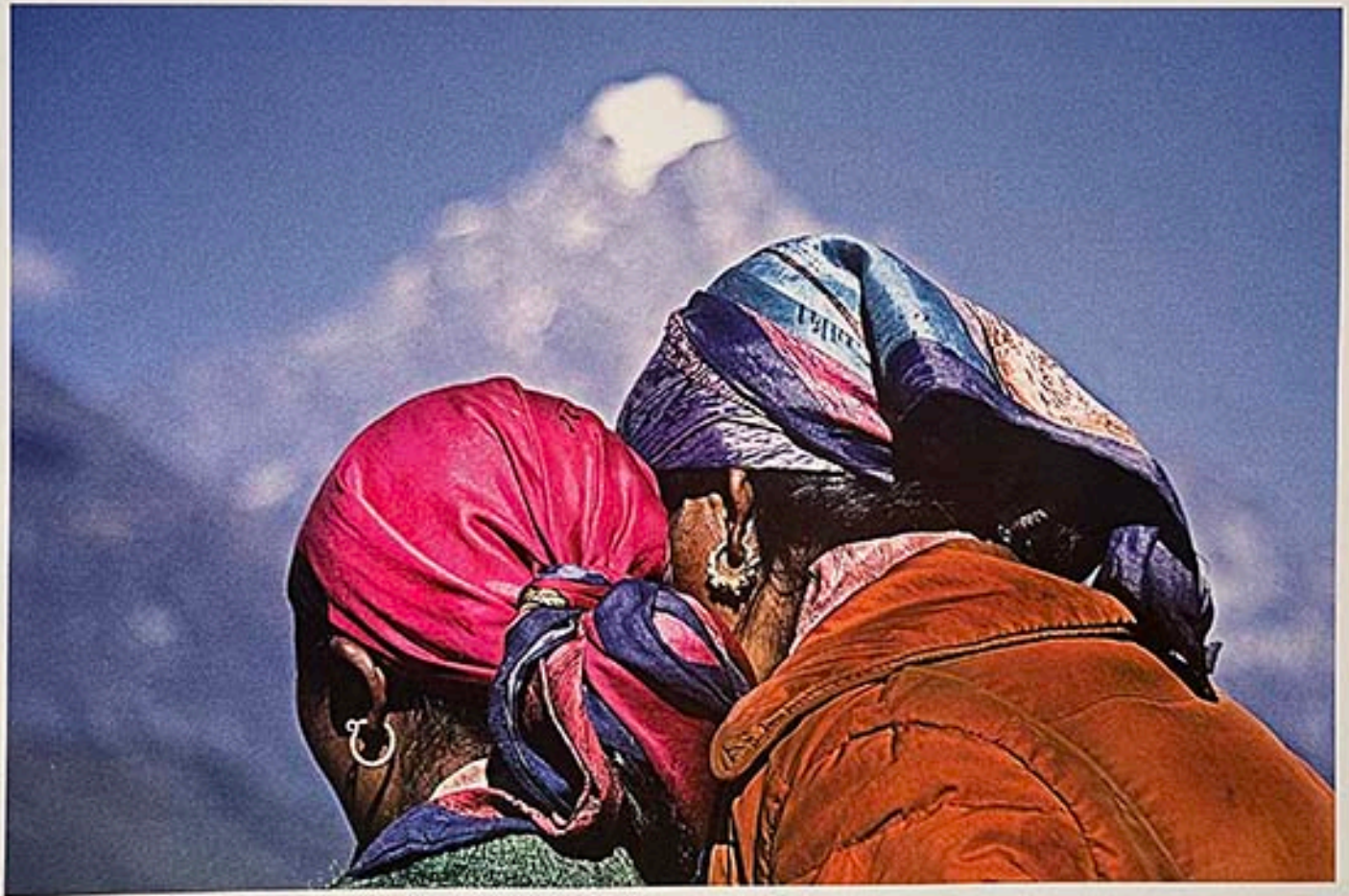
Right above: A stone along the trail to Mr. Everest base camp resembling the shape of the mountain peak above, Nepal.

Right below: Sherpa women in Nepal with a snow-capped peak rising up thousands of feet behind them.



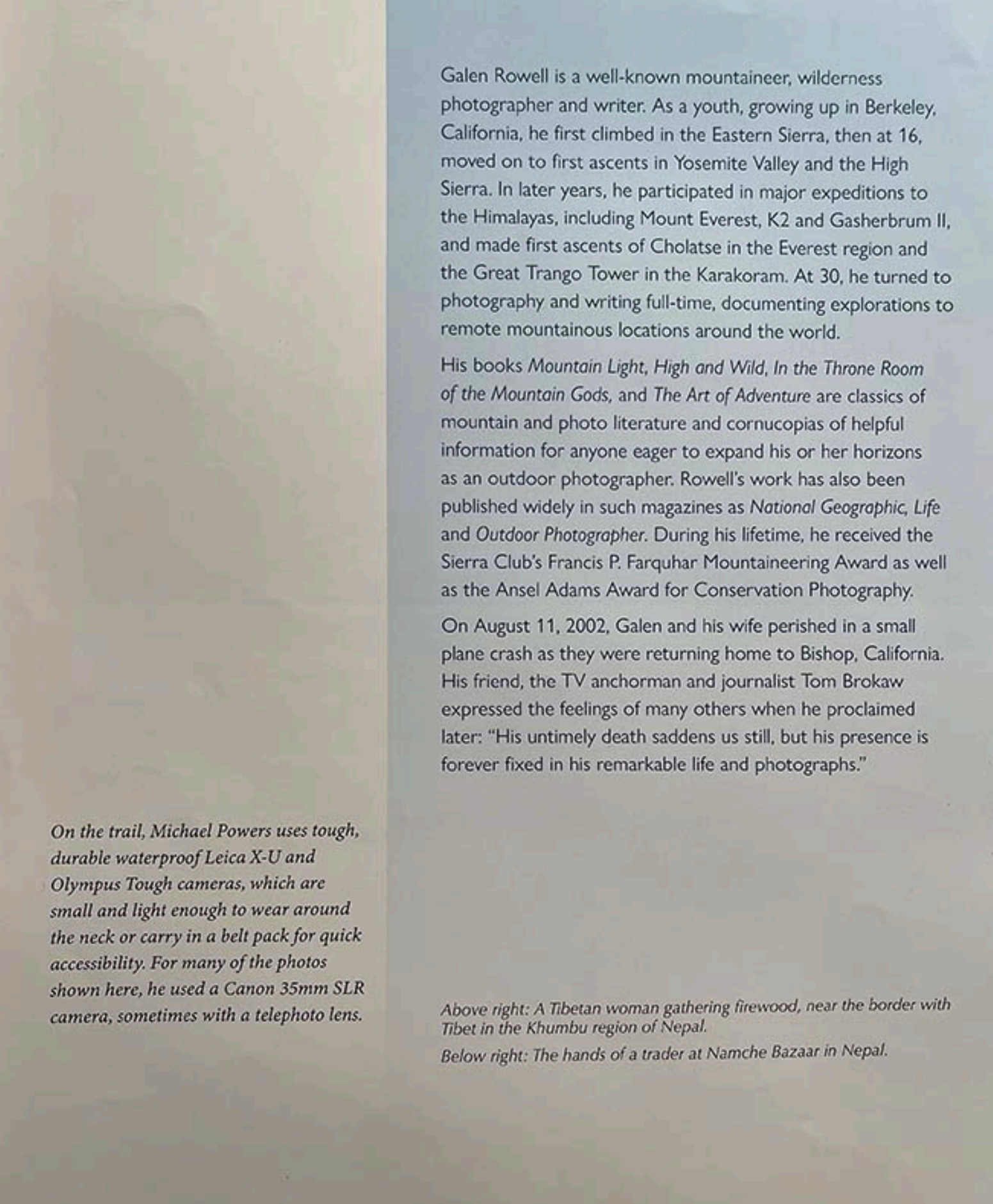
powerful, visceral quality. "Seeing from the heart," was how he described what was happening when he took his best pictures—and he encouraged us all to develop this ability too. This, he assured us, would help us begin to capture more images that really had stories to tell.

Rowell reminded us that our still photos were just static, two-dimensional replicas of the mountain landscapes we would encounter as



we trekked through the Cordillera Blanca. Motion, sound and space would all be lost in the recording process. So for a photographic image to have great power and impact, he declared, other qualities had to be present too.





Galen Rowell is a well-known mountaineer, wilderness photographer and writer. As a youth, growing up in Berkeley, California, he first climbed in the Eastern Sierra, then at 16, moved on to first ascents in Yosemite Valley and the High Sierra. In later years, he participated in major expeditions to the Himalayas, including Mount Everest, K2 and Gasherbrum II, and made first ascents of Cholatse in the Everest region and the Great Trango Tower in the Karakoram. At 30, he turned to photography and writing full-time, documenting explorations to remote mountainous locations around the world.

His books *Mountain Light*, *High and Wild*, *In the Throne Room of the Mountain Gods*, and *The Art of Adventure* are classics of mountain and photo literature and cornucopias of helpful information for anyone eager to expand his or her horizons as an outdoor photographer. Rowell's work has also been published widely in such magazines as *National Geographic*, *Life* and *Outdoor Photographer*. During his lifetime, he received the Sierra Club's Francis P. Farquhar Mountaineering Award as well as the Ansel Adams Award for Conservation Photography.

On August 11, 2002, Galen and his wife perished in a small plane crash as they were returning home to Bishop, California. His friend, the TV anchorman and journalist Tom Brokaw expressed the feelings of many others when he proclaimed later: "His untimely death saddens us still, but his presence is forever fixed in his remarkable life and photographs."

On the trail, Michael Powers uses tough, durable waterproof Leica X-U and Olympus Tough cameras, which are small and light enough to wear around the neck or carry in a belt pack for quick accessibility. For many of the photos shown here, he used a Canon 35mm SLR camera, sometimes with a telephoto lens.

Above right: A Tibetan woman gathering firewood, near the border with Tibet in the Khumbu region of Nepal.

Below right: The hands of a trader at Namche Bazaar in Nepal.



Photo: Courtesy of Carey Kish

Carey Kish is an outdoors and travel writer based out of Mount Desert Island in Maine, the author of AMC's *Best Day Hikes Along the Maine Coast* and editor of the *AMC Maine Mountain Guide*. A veteran of some 20,000 long trail miles in the US, Canada and Europe, he is currently working on a new book, *Beer Hiking New England*, which features fifty great hikes and craft brewery pairings around the six-state region.

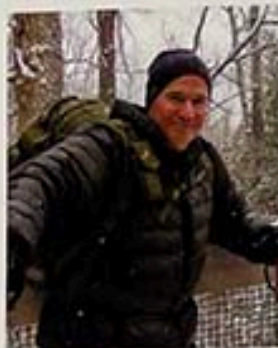


Photo: Taylor Reynolds

Jonathan Schechter is a naturalist and four-season adventurer who writes weekly nature and wildlife blogs for the Oakland County, Michigan, Government. He is also a semi-retired ER paramedic, a member of the Wilderness Medical Society and a seasonal volunteer lighthouse keeper on South Manitou Island for Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore. He enjoys photographing the wilder side of nature's way and finds peace and truth in the words of John Muir, "In every walk with nature one receives far more than he seeks."



Photo: David Starkey

Dr. Alyssa Kuhn is a physical therapist and arthritis specialist with Keep the Adventure Alive, in Sandy, Utah. Her mission is to help arthritis sufferers all over the country break free from pain without surgery or medication. Inspired by adventures of her own, including hiking, road biking and skiing, she wants the world to know that arthritis pain doesn't have to end adventures. keeptheadventurealive.com



Photo: Lucille Stott

Sandy Stott writes analyses of search and rescue in the Accidents column for AMC's journal *Appalachia*. The founding editor of the Thoreau Farm Trust's blog, "The Roost," he writes often about wild lands, their spirit and Thoreau for a variety of publications. His book *Critical Hours—Search and Rescue in the White Mountains*, released by University Press of New England, and an audio version of the book, published by Tantor Media, are available at bookstores and online.



Photo: Helen Mort

Robert Macfarlane is a bestselling British author of books on landscape, people and language, including *Mountains of the Mind*, *The Wild Places*, *The Old Ways*, *Landmarks* and *Underland*. His writing has been published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *London Review of Books* and *Harper's Magazine*, among other publications, and adapted for TV, film and radio. He is currently a Fellow in English of Emmanuel College, Cambridge.



Photo: Courtesy of Tom Watson

Tom Watson is a freelance writer specializing in self-reliance in the outdoors, kayaking, camping and other backcountry activities. He's a former owner and operator of a kayak touring venture on Kodiak Island. A frequent contributor to several outdoor websites and publications, he's also authored several guidebooks on hiking and camping in Minnesota. He's an active, award-winning member of the Association of Great Lakes Outdoor Writers. tomoutdoors.com



Photo: Benson Louie

Michael Powers is internationally recognized for his photography, writing and participation in cause-related expeditions to wild places around the world. He is also founder of Ocean Studio, an alliance of adventure writers, photographers, filmmakers and composers, and author of the coffee table photography book *Wild in Spirit*. He lives in Half Moon Bay, California. wildinspirit.com



Photo: Christopher King

Wendy Weiger is an MD/PhD who left Boston's halls of academe for the wilds of Maine's North Woods. She is founder of Achor Earth Ways: a nonprofit whose programs guide people into deeper, more joyful connection with nature. She believes that rekindling our intimacy with the natural world will renew our own health on multiple levels—physical, emotional, spiritual—and will inspire us to work toward healing the Earth. wendyweiger.com

