

Shadow & Light Magazine

The Art of Photography



Image: Torrance York (detail)
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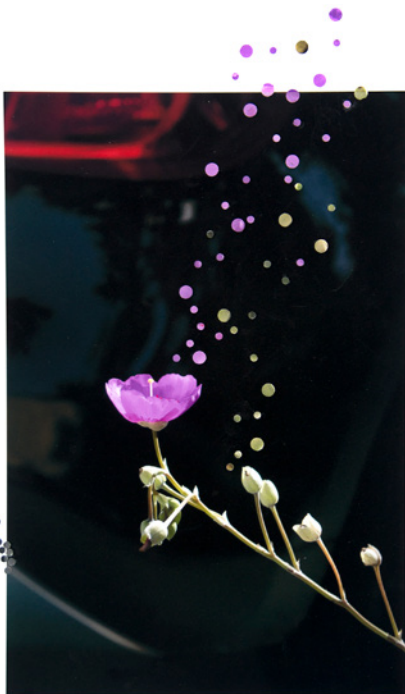
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Showcase Featured Portfolio

Starkman & York: *A Shared Journey*



When *Shadow & Light Magazine's* Tim Anderson asked me to interview Torrance York and Stephen Starkman about their work, I was a little intimidated. Torrance was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and Stephen with small cell lung cancer that initially responded to treatment but has spread to his brain. While this may not seem like the stuff of a photographic project, both Stephen and Torrance bring a keen artist's eye and tremendous courage to work that gives us a glimpse of what encountering a life-altering disease means. A number of photographers have looked at illness as family members or caretakers but Stephen and Torrance are among the few who are patients themselves. How, I wondered, could I ask them respectfully about their experiences of making such difficult work. When I finally met them—via Zoom—I found two lively, candid, and extremely thoughtful people who responded with candor to my questions. I also discovered that their work had brought them together and they are friends! I am deeply touched by the work of these two wonderful artists and honored to be part of this presentation of their projects.

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EMc: What led you to make such a personal experience public? Was there a moment or experience when you knew you had to make this project?

Torrance: My book, *Semaphore*, developed out of a workshop assignment to picture two adjectives. I was given the words nurturing and optimistic. Puzzled at first, I grew attached to the challenge of finding visual metaphors for my aspirations and perils. Optimism and nurturing were already among my life goals as a result of my Parkinson's disease diagnosis in 2015, so this assignment felt personally relevant.

I suddenly saw metaphors everywhere. For example, I saw a branch growing through a chain-link fence (page 2) and recognized it as a lesson in adaptation.

Often my life is reflected in my art—picturing my environment or aiming to capture a certain mood or sensation. However, in this case, my art was also informing my life. As I worked, I might begin with one intention but then wind up seeing so much more in my composition afterward. I saw a wasps' nest (this page) during my afternoon walk one day. I marveled at its fascinating architecture. As I got closer and brought my zoom lens to the site, I could see that because of how the nest had been damaged, it appeared as a face in profile, mouth agape, and one eye staring at me. At that piercing moment, I connected to the consuming fear I felt from having Parkinson's and living with such uncertainty about my future health.



The power of this process, both rewarding and therapeutic, created an opportunity to use my art to improve my life. I felt lucky that I already had a creative process that I could use to help me manage this new vulnerability. That is when I knew I was committed to making *Semaphore* and sharing it.

Stephen: There was a moment in July of 2021 which stands out. I was enrolled in an online critique group. It was the last session of the year, and I chose to show some work. I was very concerned that I was taking on a task that I wasn't yet ready for. It was all so new, so raw. It was my first public statement that I had just been diagnosed with cancer. My voice was trembling as I described what was so new to me but not obvious outwardly in any way. To my surprise, the group got behind the idea of photographically documenting my journey.

At the time I thought I may have had only a few weeks to live. Perhaps a bit more. Maybe up to a year.

Thus, it was with a great deal of uncertainty that I took on this project. I was highly skeptical that I had the time to finish it.

Of course, all this was in conjunction with the knowledge that I was one of very few photographers documenting my own terminal cancer. It was another reason to take this highly personal story to the public

as was the fact that I also am a survivor of small cell lung cancer, a particularly aggressive and fast-moving form of the disease.

EMc: How would you say your work changed when you were diagnosed—physically, conceptually, and emotionally?

Stephen: It changed everything.

My work had evolved over time due to the pandemic. I no longer took close up portraits of people in faraway lands. I soon became much more distant from subjects and shot less and less during that time.



After being diagnosed, I started shooting practically right away, even though I didn't envision a book as the final product. My waiting room times were spent surreptitiously photographing with an iPhone, in reception areas, and other "clinical" hospital environments. I did not want to draw any attention to myself, and an iPhone is an ideal tool for this.



After the diagnosis, my work became more abstract (right, bottom). I used the few short weeks before the start of chemo and radiation plus time afterward to shoot with my Sony Alpha, usually paired with a 100-400 telephoto, 35mm f1.4 and a variety of other lenses. For the film images I used an old Nikon F100 loaded with Portra 800 and processed it in a manner that allowed me to show film grain the size of boulders!

So much of what I shot was in the moment. Whatever I felt like on any particular day. You can see/sense that by looking through the book. For example, I adopted a new custom color palette for presenting the work (which is desaturated and definitely not cheery!) and began to formulate the project as a whole – meaning a book.

Torrance: My artwork changed in two steps.

First, a few months after my diagnosis, I took a Transcendental Meditation course. Because of my focus on brain health, I hoped to reduce stress and find greater peace of mind. I had also been advised to do more activities that bring me joy. Throughout my career as an artist, I have photographed the landscape. I bought a used Hasselblad camera with a waist-level viewfinder in 1990. I have been primarily shooting in the square



format ever since. Before my diagnosis, I created a project called “Road Works.” Playing with focus and depth of field, I photographed marks on the road in my then new hometown in Connecticut. A large percentage of each picture was dark, macadam black.

Once I began meditating, I intentionally focused on brighter, more uplifting colors (left/cover image). The result was an homage to the light and colors in nature that I observed in two local parks. I chose the palette for this series, *Common Ground*, in contrast to the moodiness and darkness of *Road Works*. I title the *Common Ground* images with the GPS coordinates of the point from which they were photographed, anchoring them to a specific place and potentially one shared by others in the past or future.

was when I began *Semaphore*, in 2019, and the shift in my perspective after being diagnosed became the subject of my work.

EMc: How did you make the decision to include both documentary (e.g. medical images) and metaphorical photographs? How do you think they inform each other?

Torrance: Forever, I have been fascinated by medical imaging and how we can peer within the human body. I’m the kind of patient who brings a camera to my doctor’s appointment, and I photograph the images off the computer screen when the doctor is explaining their findings. In *Semaphore*, I include such pictures of the inside along with exterior photos of my body. I am curious to see how my physical form is impacted by Parkinson’s.

The x-ray and MRI images reduce the scanned body part to a simpler representation of shapes, and then these shapes speak to similar forms in my metaphorical images. This conversation is essential to me and my journey to decipher and articulate my experience. The x-rays also mark time and a chronology of orthopedic problems because they are only taken as needed.

Overall, the types of subjects pictured in *Semaphore* include nature, light, details from daily life, childhood toys, the body, and medical images. Short text phrases alongside some of the photographs serve to communicate with words several of the themes or concerns I point towards with the imagery. The words help guide the viewer in a literal way to the arena in which the images operate.



Stephen: I thought it would be interesting to juxtapose documentary images (right) with the metaphorical ones. A bit jarring, a little mysterious, and without doubt somewhat surprising as you look through the book. Each is a counterpoint to what the other one is describing. I wanted to include both experiences under the same cover.

I also chose to use other people's voices – their own words and thoughts – as a sort of illustration to my own documentary images. Each separate text was from a cancer survivor, so it took me right back to hospital, to the chemo IV's and infusion chairs.

It took a great deal of experimentation to find the right overall flow, sequence, and survivor statements.

EMc: What meaning did your project have for you personally and what meaning do you hope it will have for viewers?

Stephen: I can't help but think that it saved my life. I know that on some level this is nonsensical, but it kept me alive and engaged. Without *The Proximity of Mortality - A Visual Artist's Journey through Cancer*, I would not have an overlying purpose.



For my viewers, I hope the book brings a sense of solace, even with the blatantly medical images. Where I exist right now is a nuanced reality. I'm constantly aware of my state of being. Things can change virtually at any time with or without warning.

Torrance: For me, this work has been a lifeline. I asked myself early on, "What does acceptance of my new reality look like?" I thought if I could visualize it, I could grow closer to the moving target of acceptance and adaptation (not resignation).

I harken the process of making the work to the practice of meditation using a mantra. Focusing on the mantra allows the brain to relax and recharge. In making *Semaphore*, I have found that the images become containers for the ideas, experiences, challenges, and goals they represent. Once the concept is pictured, I can let go of some of my concerns about the issue and examine it outside of myself. On this level, the images inform my growth and adaptation. They also move the concern into a form that others can receive.

Fundamentally, photographs are a medium of communication. I thrive on connection. While *Semaphore* is sourced from my specific experience with Parkinson's, I believe the imagery speaks more broadly to connect with others whose journeys require growth, patience, and perseverance to move forward. I hope *Semaphore* will offer a viewer room to explore their emotional responses to the imagery and text and also serve as a window into the challenges faced by people with Parkinson's. In addition, I want to encourage dialogue that values vulnerability and includes the often-taboo subject of illness.

EMc: Did you come to understand yourself, and your illness perhaps, differently as a result of making photographs about it? How so?

Stephen: What amazed me were the number of people sitting in the public areas (right) awaiting their cancer

treatments or consultations. There were almost too many to count in my immediate area alone, and I certainly was not present every day or throughout the day. During the height of the pandemic, when most patients were instructed to wait in the hospital by themselves, the sheer numbers of people shocked me.

As we all know, this is a killer disease. Although there are more survivors each year, my diagnosis affected me in ways with which I didn't know how to cope. I saw patients in chemo react poorly to their treatments. I saw teamwork amongst the staff that could have substituted for a training film on the subject. At one point a few days into radiation therapy for lung cancer I passed out and found how relevant and quickly staff were there with the “crash cart.”



In time, I felt more responsible than ever to contrast metaphoric landscapes with the reality of the clinical/medical scenes which I saw so frequently. It is along the lines of what I can now enjoy vs. what the future might portend. And I wanted to include each, photographically.

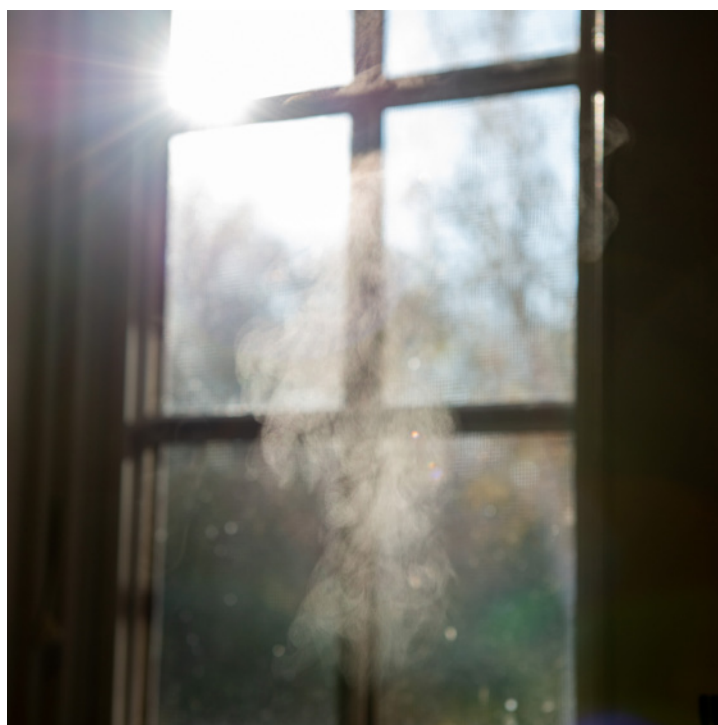
Both are poetic. Both had truth to my story. Both are my reality. And the separate true stories of the cancer survivors also became an important voice representing millions of people.

Torrance: Yes! In addition to what I've already described, the opportunity to be creative gave me another way to take action on my own behalf. The joy of making photographs and the reward of finding a way to express myself both contribute to the opportunity to be present and to move forward with new knowledge.

EMc: Did you protect your audience—or yourself—in any way? Were there experiences or emotions that you decided not to include? Can you describe the decision you made about this? You do not need to tell us what you left out.

Stephen: Yes. It's very hard for me to discuss this one experience in particular as it is a common diagnostic technique that did not go smoothly, causing me a great deal of discomfort. I didn't include it as I do not want to deter anyone from having the technique performed. Despite this one incident, a single procedure does not represent the entirety of the disease.

What I may not have expressed strongly enough is the power of a terminal cancer diagnosis – the entire spectrum of how this affects you as an individual. I hope some of that does come across in the book.



Torrance: Optimism is so important in all aspects of life. Studies have shown that maintaining an optimistic outlook is biologically, not just psychologically, significant. With this fact in mind, I use *Semaphore* to help nurture my optimism, for example, through images in which light is the subject. While I picture fear, sadness and confusion, for instance, I try to show these emotions in a beautiful way to invite my viewer into the journey.

I also decided not to take a more straightforward narrative approach to the subject. I felt that abstraction and metaphor provided the most efficient route to exploring the embodiment of this experience.

EMc: Is there a spiritual aspect to your project that you would like to share?

Torrance: I find that there is a spiritual aspect to being creative, and I certainly tapped this well in making *Semaphore*. I often felt connected to a life force larger than myself as I followed the thread unfolding just ahead of me. Such a wide variety of symptoms can manifest from Parkinson's disease. The more I learned about the disease, the more pointedly I observed my surroundings and experiences. Sometimes I would raise the camera to my eye because of a literal connection—like photographing the horizon on a foggy day at the beach to refer to brain fog. But when reflecting on the image later, I would see more. I recognized the almost indecipherable transition between fog and water as a representation of that fine line between, for example, inside and out, aging vs. illness, and confusion and clarity. Additionally, I would later interpret the ocean as a symbol of collective consciousness. Ultimately, the book designer chose to use this image for the end pages. I felt it formed the perfect container for the book's content.

Stephen: Hopefulness, yes. Spirituality, no, not really. Although many others have found spirituality within my book, *The Proximity of Mortality - A Visual Artist's Journey through Cancer*, I didn't put it there deliberately.

EMc: Hope has different meanings under different circumstances. Is there a feeling of hope in your work, do you think? And if so, how would you describe it?

Stephen: I couldn't agree more. At the beginning of a progressive illness, one may have hope that the doctors have got it wrong. But it evolves. Hope can also be the ability to walk a single kilometer and perhaps no more. Or Hope can be wishing your loved ones well in their lives ahead.

I have no doubt that Hope will change for me as my illness progresses.

Torrance: I believe hope is in the images, words, and the sequence of *Semaphore*. And in the fact that creating the project generated improvement in my life experience of managing a neurodegenerative movement disorder.

The last image in the book shows the constellation of Orion, the hunter. Within Orion, Bellatrix (Latin for Female Warrior) is its third brightest star, also known as the Amazon Star, after the Greek legend of a mythical female warrior tribe. In the face of Parkinson's disease, I plan to keep fighting and growing through the challenges I will encounter.

EMc: Torrance, can you describe how the project flowed as you created it, and how connections with others kept the project going?

Torrance: *Semaphore* developed its own momentum. One image would lead to another just as I moved through the stages of turning the project into a book. Another example was the fortunate connection with Rebecca Senf, Ph.D., Chief Curator at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona, who wrote the book's essay. I applied to a portfolio exhibit that Becky was jurying. While she did not select my work for the exhibition, she contacted her friend Rick Wester, Owner/Director of Rick Wester Fine Art gallery in NYC, about *Semaphore* because she thought it might interest him. Fortuitously, Rick was already consulting

with me on sequencing the book! Through him, Becky offered to write the essay. Working with her was an honor; her words elevate the images and product overall. Coincidences like this helped me push forward, believing the value of sharing the project outweighed the fear.

EMc: Stephen, you have published your work in the medical literature—*Journal of Medical Imaging and Radiation Sciences*—as well as in the fine art photography literature. What do you want medical professionals to know from your work?

Stephen: I was excited that medical professionals would gain a sense of empathy from simply hearing my story. It must be quite something to flow people in and out of this amazing technology like clockwork.

My sense is that it's a very difficult position in which to be employed. One must be very careful to balance the lives and quality of life of patients. I imagine it to be a very demanding occupation yet still very routine day in and day out. I was hoping to give to these professionals the sense of empathy and compassion which I was treated with on a daily basis.

Recently, I have received a very positive book review by Sue Robins, a health care activist here in Canada. Sue is also a cancer survivor. In the review, she writes “Every cancer hospital should share Stephen’s book to start bringing healing to their space.”

I’m very proud of that.



Stephen Starkman







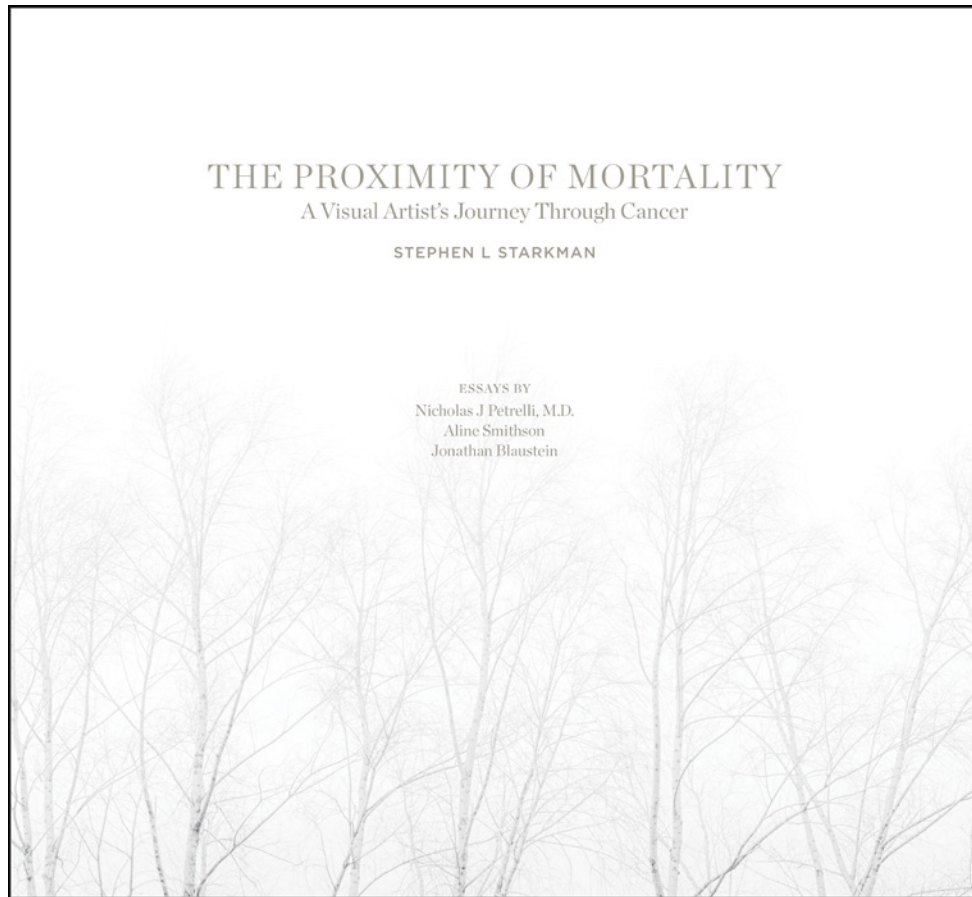












This work is about the end of my life. This is expected within the next several weeks or months.

I began this project shortly after my initial diagnosis of cancer. It is a visual representation of having cancer, using images that are both documentary and metaphorical. The images are mine and the quotes and poems throughout the book are from other cancer patients.

A few weeks after the conclusion of chemotherapy, a routine scan showed that the cancer has spread to my brain. My understanding is that it is incurable.

I have become and remain determined to finish this project. To create new images that reflect what I see and what I feel. To help myself and others express and deal with mortality.

These are my images, and this is my story – not only of my cancer but also of those who generously shared their own most poignant moments.

Stephen Starkman

*For additional information about Stephen and his book, please click on this link:
www.stephenstarkman.com/Book-%22The-Proximity-Of-Mortality%22/1*



Semaphore examines the shift in my perspective after having been diagnosed eight years ago with Parkinson's disease. Through images, I consider what it means to integrate this life-altering information into my sense of self. What does acceptance look like?

Post diagnosis, everyday items and experiences take on new meaning. New tasks top my "to do" list each day. Simple tools now present a challenge. Uncertainty pervades the periphery surfacing my vulnerability. As I look around me, the branches of trees become networks of neurons or resemble tendons in my wrist imaged by an MRI. Acknowledging these signals facilitates the process of adaptation. Optimism holds the key for me right now. Connection inspires. Light, always an inspiration, illuminates a path for me to follow. And I go.

Parkinson's disease is the world's fastest growing brain disorder. Currently, over ten million people live with Parkinson's worldwide. While this project and book are relevant to the Parkinson's community, it also connects with others whose journeys require growth, patience, and perseverance to move forward.

Torrance York

*For additional information about Torrance and her book, please click on this link:
www.torranceyork.com/copy-book-1*

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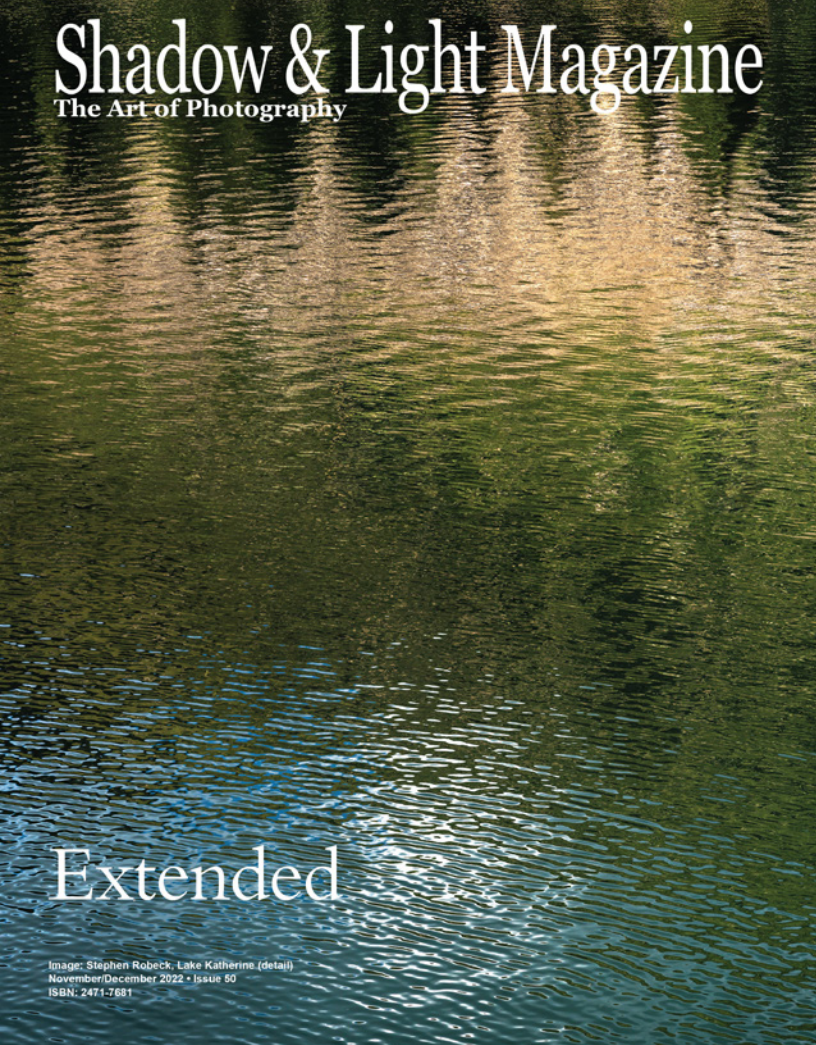


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Image: Heidi Egerman, Horseradish Leaf (detail)
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Extended

Image: Stephen Robeck, Lake Katherine (detail)
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Language of the Land

Image: Karen Tilgson, Multnomah Falls (detail)
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Color It Red 2022

Image: Suszi McFadden, Crimson (detail)
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