

FROM THE STUDIO

Photography rarely begins and ends with the finished image.

Behind a photograph there may be a story, an unexpected encounter, a journey, an idea,
or simply a moment that made it worth stopping to look.

FROM THE STUDIO

brings together some of those stories, alongside occasional glimpses into the making,
thinking and experiences behind the photography.

Latest Article:

I DON'T TAKE PORTRAITS

Tell someone you are a photographer and sooner or later the question arrives.

"Can you take my photograph?"

My answer is usually no.

I don't take portraits.

I have never considered myself a portrait photographer, and probably never will. But that doesn't mean I don't photograph people.

Perhaps it is the expectation that comes with the word portrait that troubles me. The expectation that somehow the
photographer will create a better version of the person standing in front of the camera. A little more flattering.

A little more polished. Perhaps even someone they would like themselves to be.

There are photographers who do this extremely well. I'm simply not one of them.

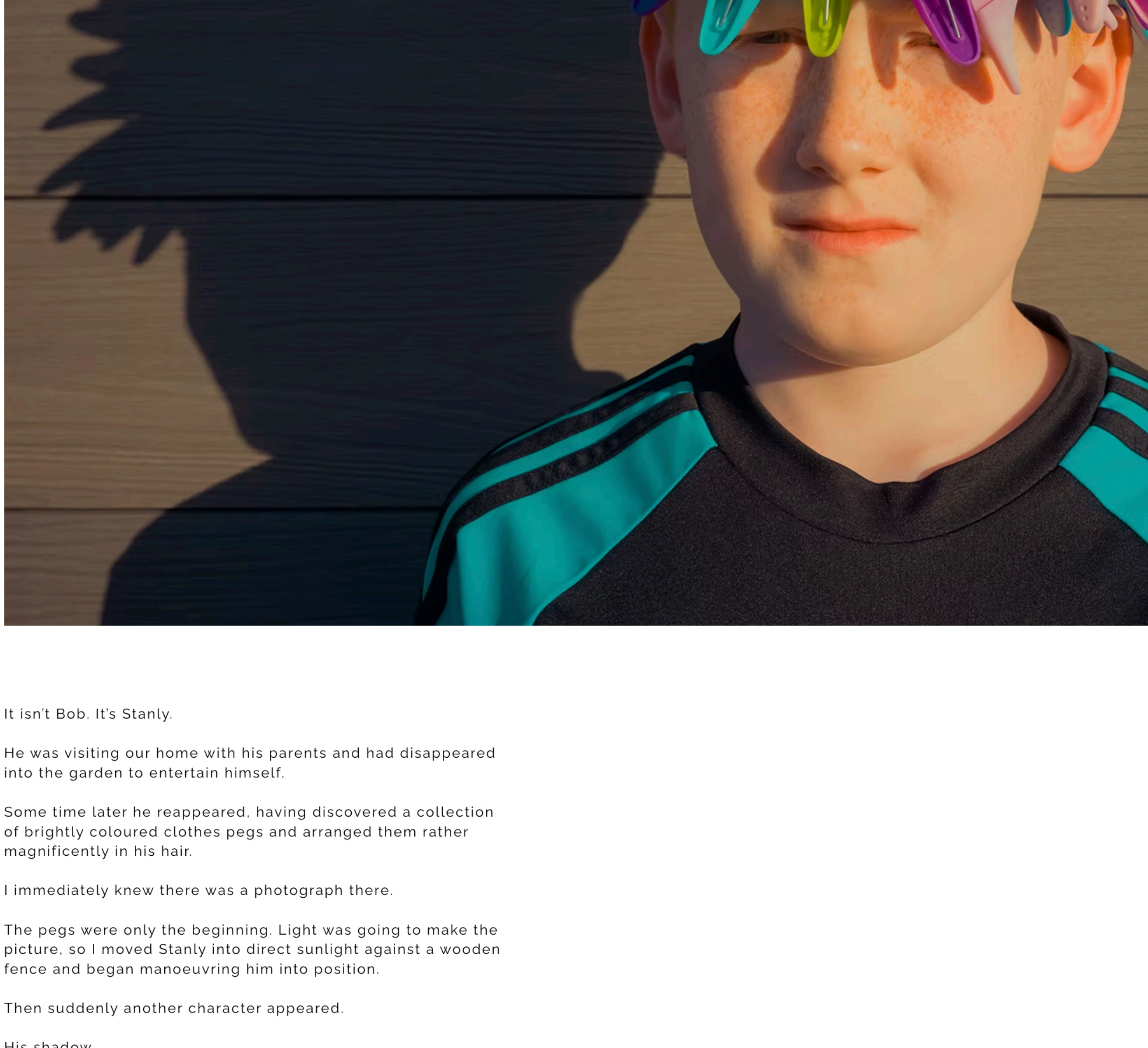
When I do turn the camera towards somebody, I am usually looking for something else.

Sometimes I find it. Sometimes they give it to me.

And sometimes I have to shout, "Watch the birdie."

SIDESHOW BOB

When shadows join in



It isn't Bob. It's Stanley.

He was visiting our home with his parents and had disappeared
into the garden to entertain himself.

Some time later he reappeared, having discovered a collection
of brightly coloured clothes pegs and arranged them rather
magnificently in his hair.

I immediately knew there was a photograph there.

The pegs were only the beginning. Light was going to make the
picture, so I moved Stanley into direct sunlight against a wooden
fence and began manoeuvring him into position.

Then suddenly another character appeared.

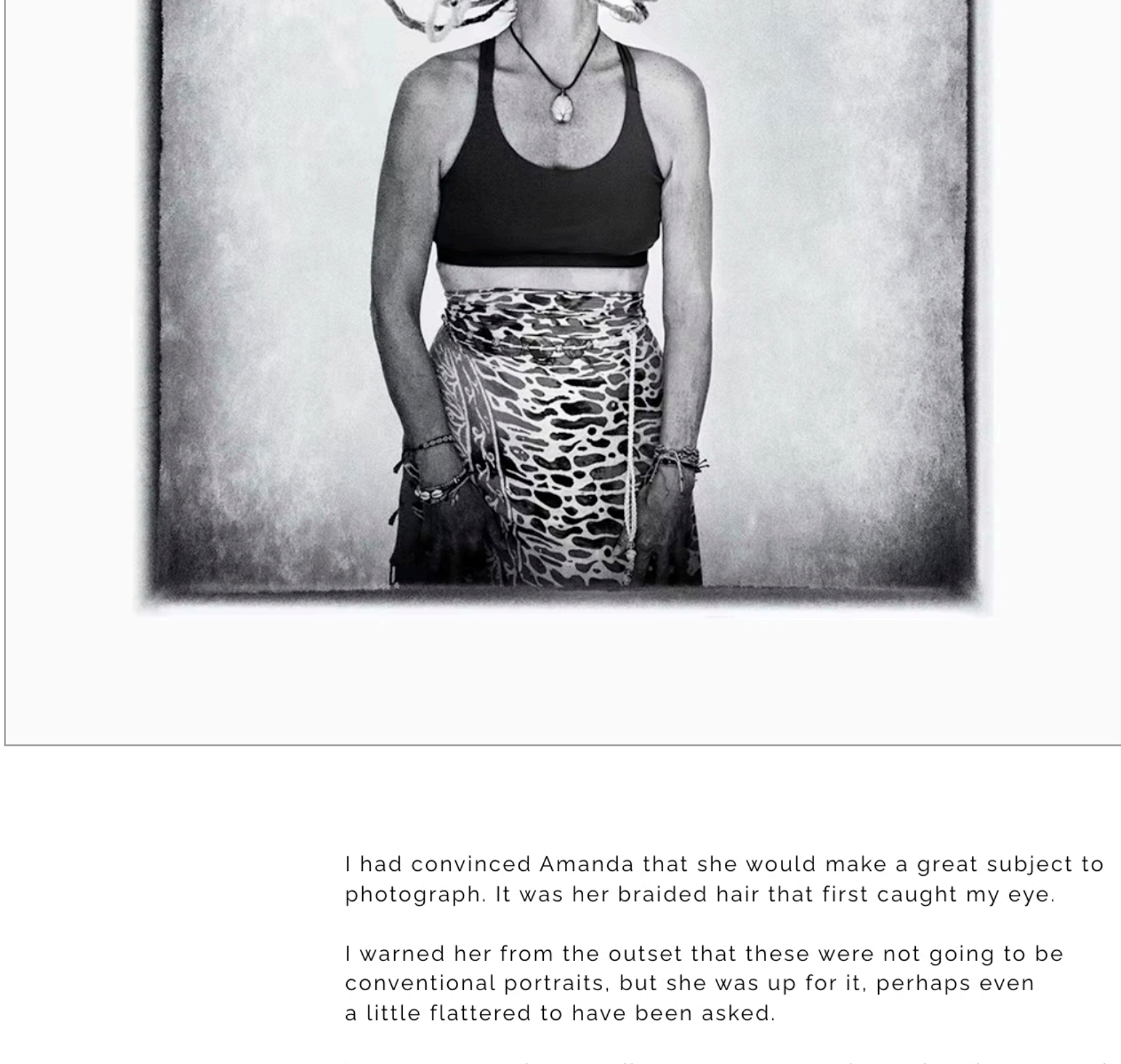
His shadow.

With the exaggerated spikes of the clothes pegs thrown across
the fence, SIDESHOW BOB had joined the photograph.

I hadn't set out to make a portrait of Stanley. He had simply
presented me with the beginning of a photograph,
and I had recognised it.

CANDLE

A little giddiness



I had convinced Amanda that she would make a great subject to
photograph. It was her braided hair that first caught my eye.

I warned her from the outset that these were not going to be
conventional portraits, but she was up for it, perhaps even
a little flattered to have been asked.

I set up an outdoor studio on an overcast day, using three speed-
lights as fill-in light. I knew that the hair needed movement, so I
began directing Amanda to toss her head quite aggressively,
trying different movements and positions to send the
braids out around her.

We kept going until eventually she became so giddy that we
had to stop.

But somewhere amongst all that movement was the photograph
I had been looking for.

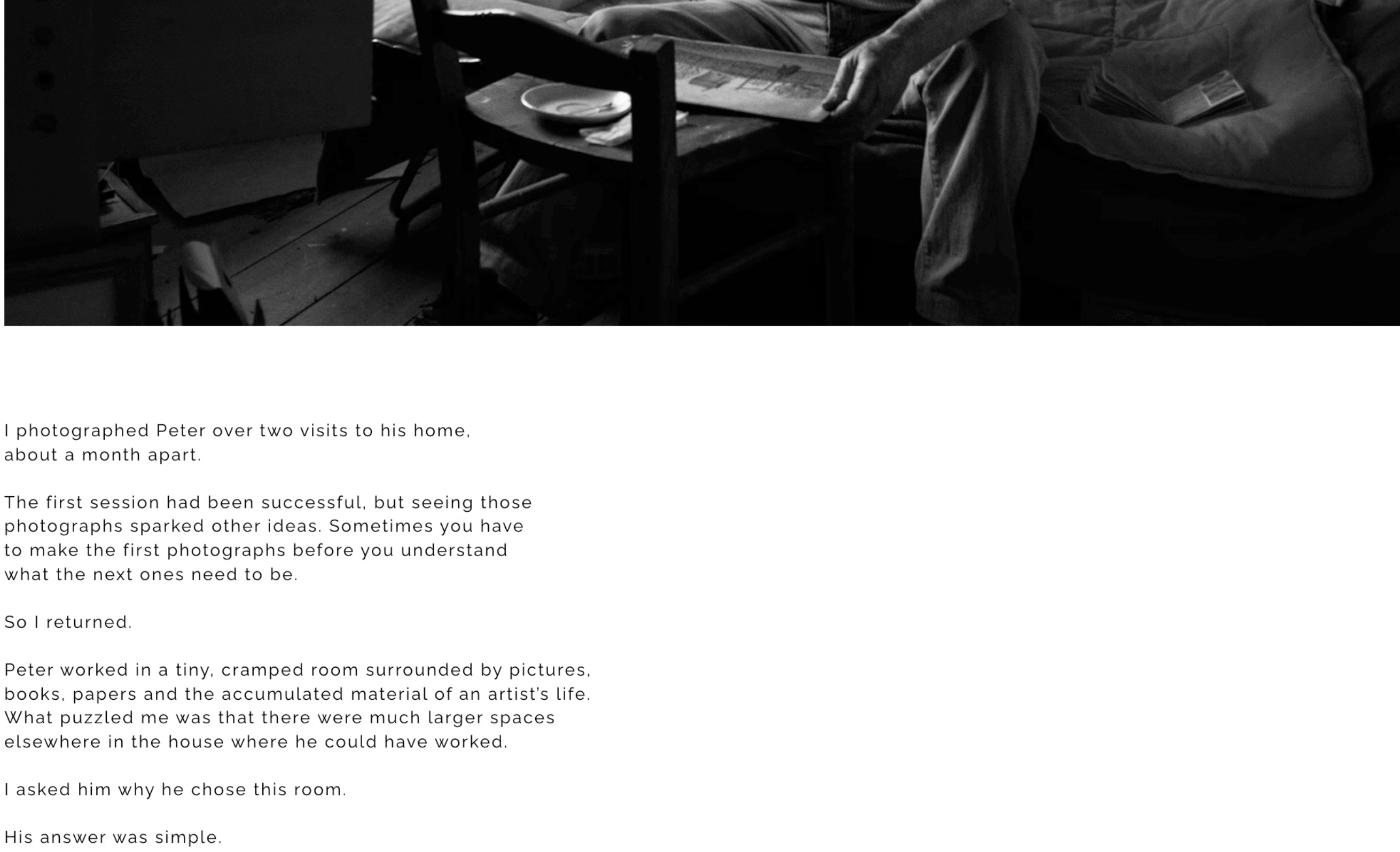
The final image was completed on the desktop. All the lovely
bright colours of Amanda's clothes were distilled into black
and white, revealing the structure and form I had been
trying to create.

Amanda loved the finished photograph, and I gave her a print
for all that giddiness.

R.I.P Amanda. May your candle shine forever bright.

THE ARTIST AT WORK

It's all about the light



I photographed Peter over two visits to his home,
about a month apart.

The first session had been successful, but seeing those
photographs sparked other ideas. Sometimes you have
to make the first photographs before you understand
what the next ones need to be.

So I returned.

Peter worked in a tiny, cramped room surrounded by pictures,
books, papers and the accumulated material of an artist's life.
What puzzled me was that there were much larger spaces
elsewhere in the house where he could have worked.

I asked him why he chose this room.

His answer was simple.

"The light."

Suddenly I understood.

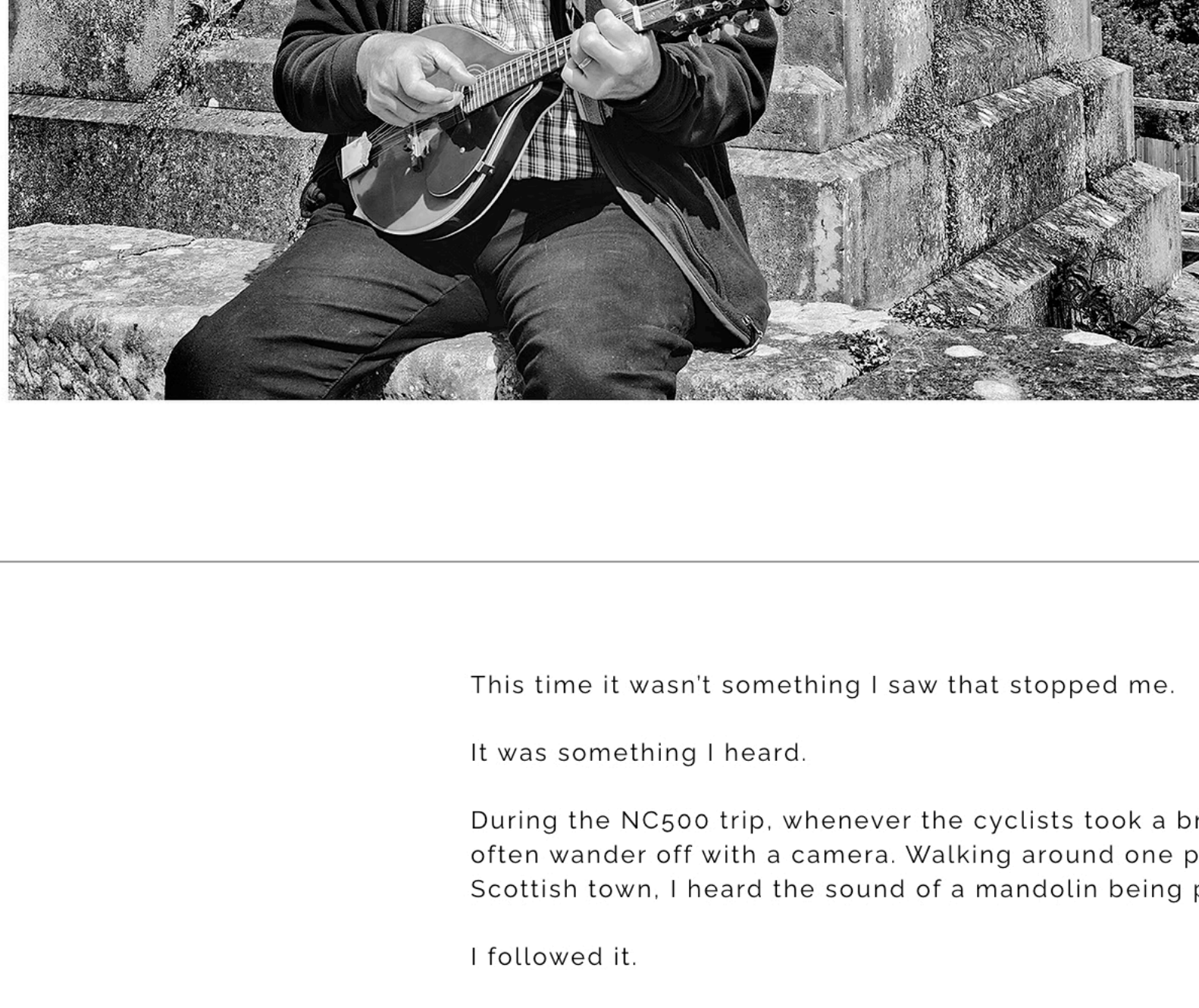
On that second visit, I knew that was what I had to photograph.

Not simply Peter.

Peter, in his space, with the light that made him choose it.

PLAYING FOR KENNETH MURRAY

To hear a photograph



This time it wasn't something I saw that stopped me.

It was something I heard.

During the NC500 trip, whenever the cyclists took a break I would
often wander off with a camera. Walking around one particular
Scottish town, I heard the sound of a mandolin being played.

I followed it.

Eventually I found the musician sitting on a wall beneath an
imposing stone monument. I stopped, complimented him on his
playing and the beautiful instrument, and we began talking.

It was also my icebreaker.

Eventually I asked if I could photograph him. He agreed.

Now my attention returned to what was behind him. High above
sat the stone head of Kenneth Murray, looking down over the
scene.

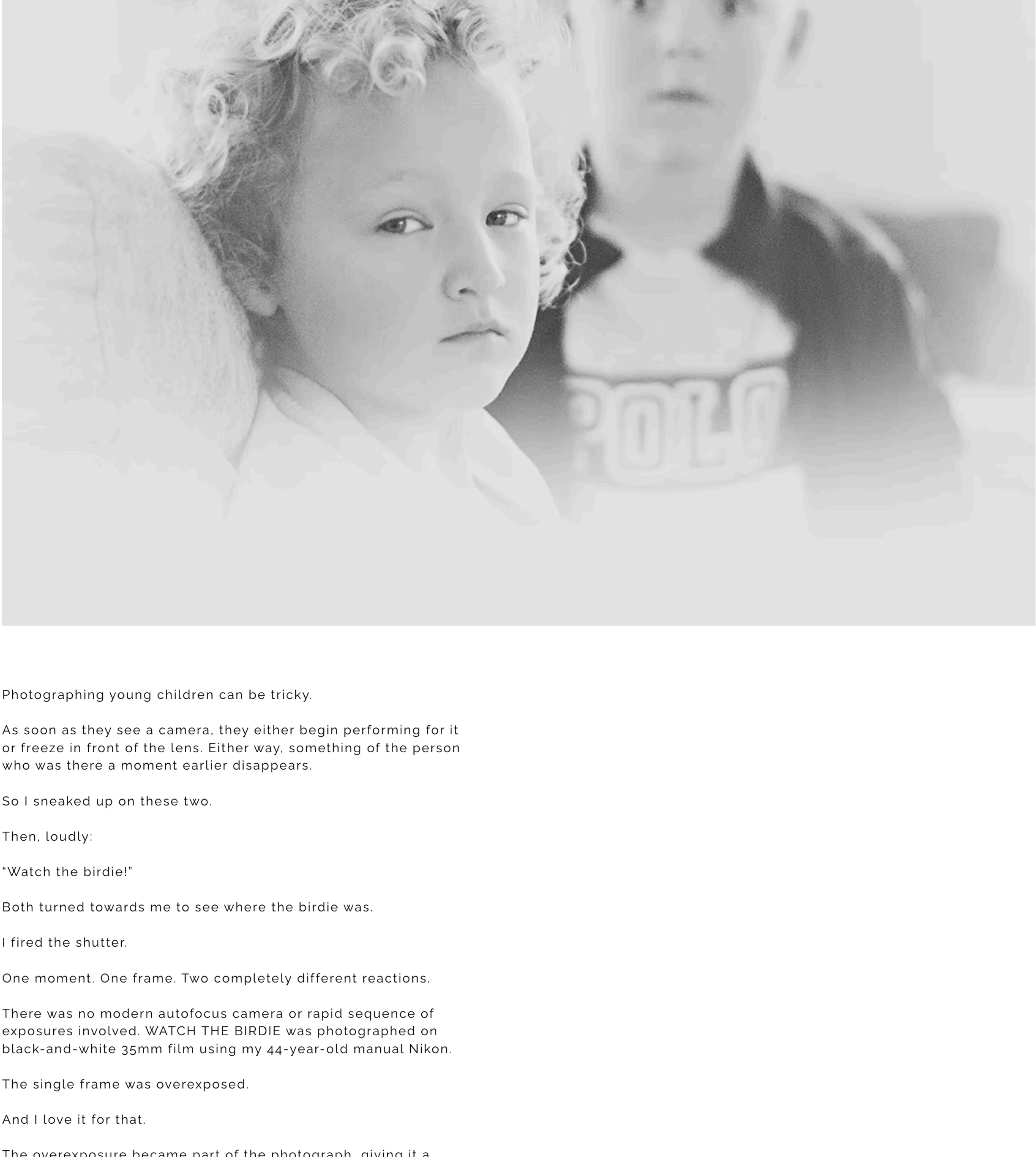
The musician, the mandolin and the rather grand silent gentleman
above him suddenly belonged together.

PLAYING FOR KENNETH MURRAY

Whoever Kenneth Murray may be.

WATCH THE BIRDIE

One frame. Two reactions. No bird



Photographing young children can be tricky.

As soon as they see a camera, they either begin performing for it
or freeze in front of the lens. Either way, something of the person
who was there a moment earlier disappears.

So I sneaked up on these two.

Then, loudly:

"Watch the birdie!"

Both turned towards me to see where the birdie was.

I fired the shutter.

One moment. One frame. Two completely different reactions.

There was no modern autofocus camera or rapid sequence of
exposures involved. WATCH THE BIRDIE was photographed on
black-and-white 35mm film using my 44-year-old manual Nikon.

The single frame was overexposed.

And I love it for that.

The overexposure became part of the photograph, giving it a
quality I could never have anticipated when I pressed the
shutter. Nor could I check a screen to see whether I had
caught the moment.

The photograph remained hidden.

I wouldn't discover what those two faces had given me until
the film was processed in the darkroom.

CLOSING

So perhaps saying I don't take portraits isn't entirely true.

Clearly, I do.

But I don't think of them as portraits when I make them.

I am not looking for the perfect pose or necessarily trying to create the version of someone they would most like the camera to see.
I am looking for the photograph.

It might begin with a handful of clothes pegs. A head of braided hair. The light through a window. The distant sound of a mandolin.

Or two children looking for a bird that was never there.

The person may be the subject.

But the portrait begins when something else appears.