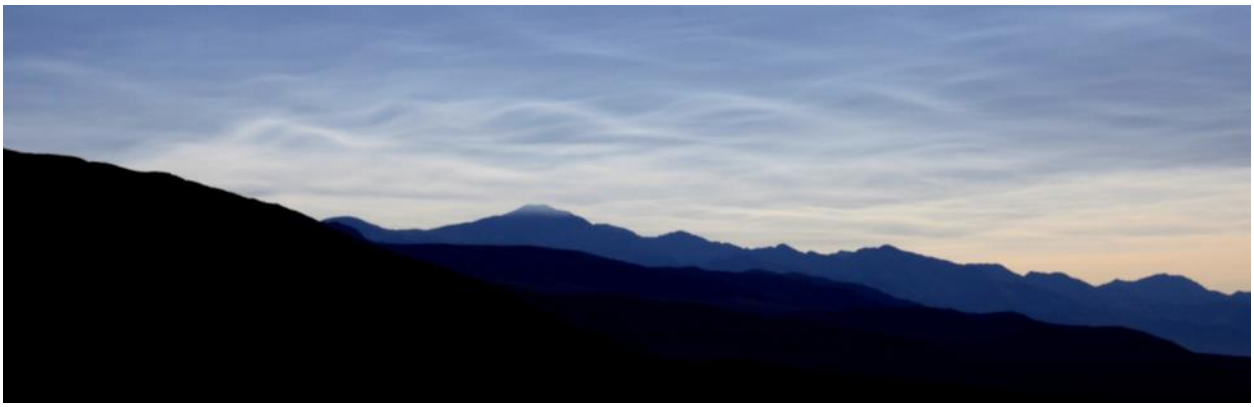
The Desert in Scorpio

A Death Valley Sojourn for George and Wells in November, 2019

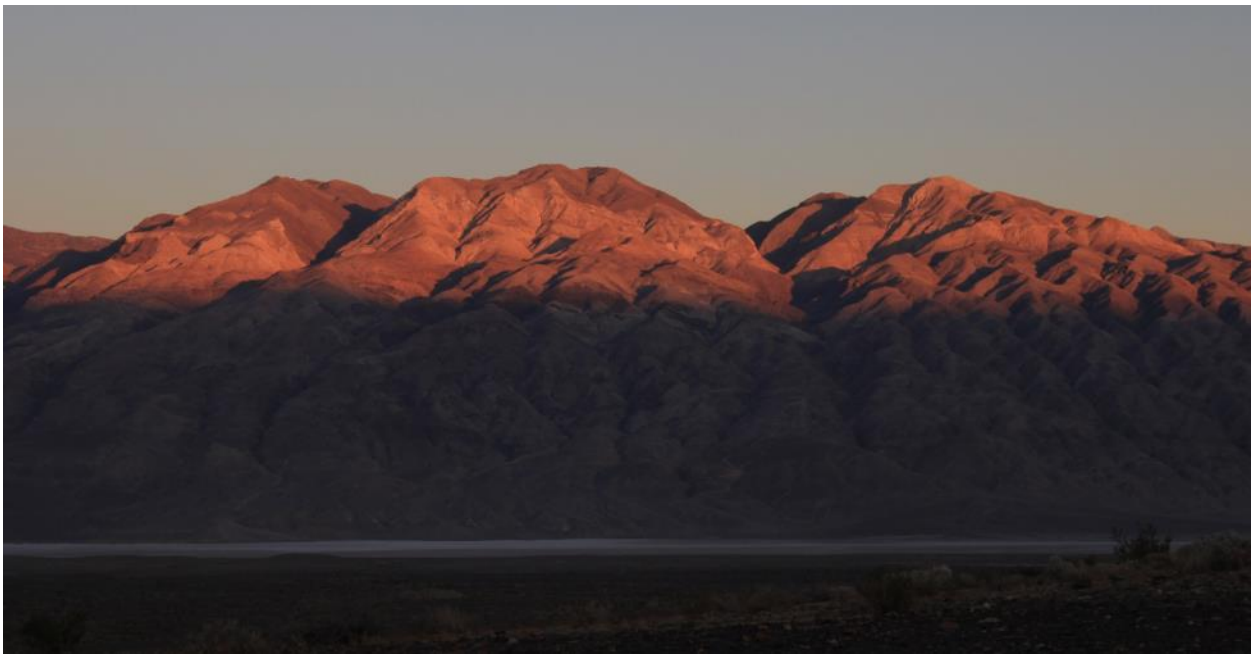
Fossilized sperm whale breaching beneath the Panamint Dunes

For 20 years, I've sought the solace and inspiration of Death Valley around the Winter Solstice, particularly the Eureka Dunes. This year, George and I took off a little earlier, and we gathered many rewards. The weather was relatively warm, and despite the windblown smoke from California's fires, the skies remained blue and the moon bright. Most notably, and possibly without precedent, we enjoyed ten consecutive days with nearly wind-free conditions.



Braided smoke hovers above the Panamint Range

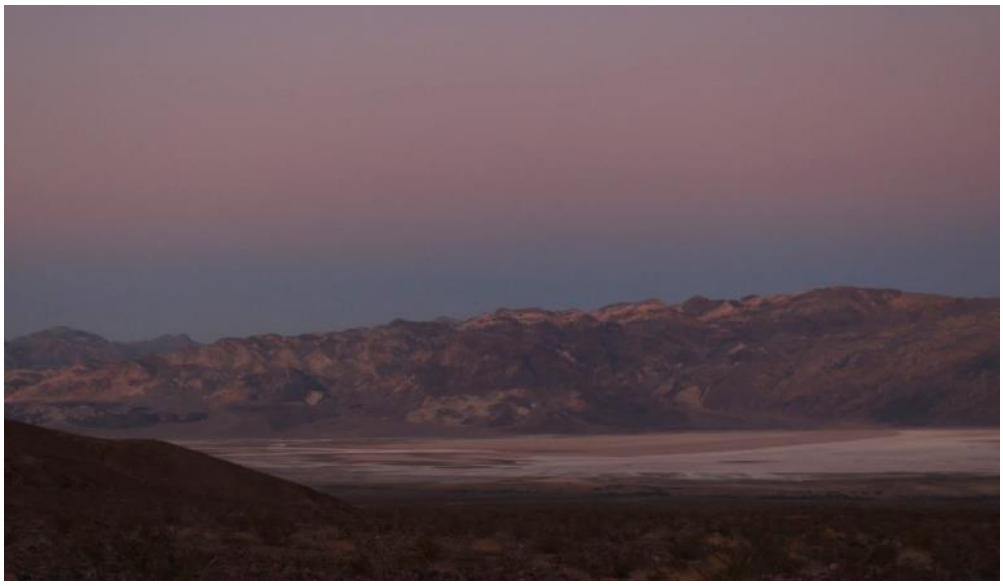
As usual, we started at our traditional first night destination, the NOTR, or the North of Trona Resort. Then it was on to Hanaupah Canyon, with its unparalleled vista of the entire Death Valley playa, Badwater, and the Funeral Range to the East. Telescope Peak loomed over that campsite, too, just from the other side.



Telescope Peak looms above the Panamint Valley at last light...from the NOTR looking East

Same peak, this time from Hanaupah Canyon looking West...at first light

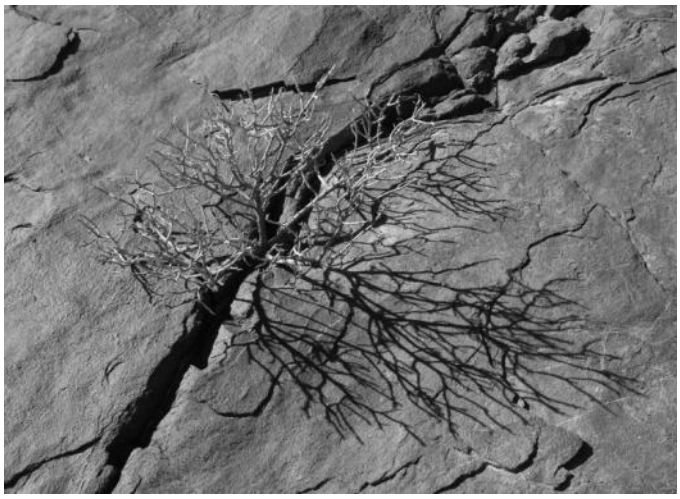
No snow yet even at 11,000'...an ominous sign in what's already the driest spot in North America.



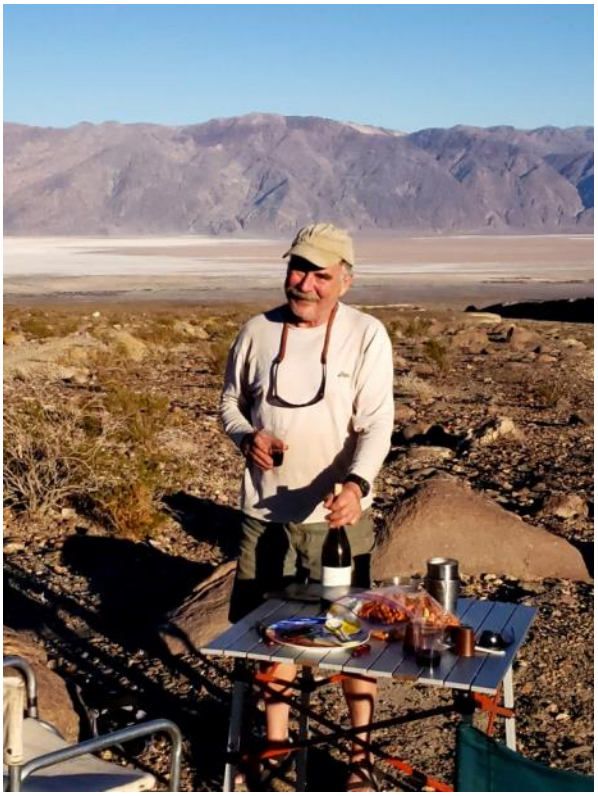
The Earth's shadow creeps over the Death Valley Floor and the Funeral Mountains...
View from top of the alluvial fan at Hanaupah Canyon.
Probably some Primitivo in a glass by now.

We typicallyalternated a long hike one day, then moved to another location the next.
The Hanaupah Canyon wash extends over a rough 4 WD track for 4 miles...keep hiking...and then you find a perennial stream...with snowmelt filtered down from Telescope Peak.

(An earlier trip)



The Hanaupah Canyon wash has some interesting plant features...and an excellent restaurant



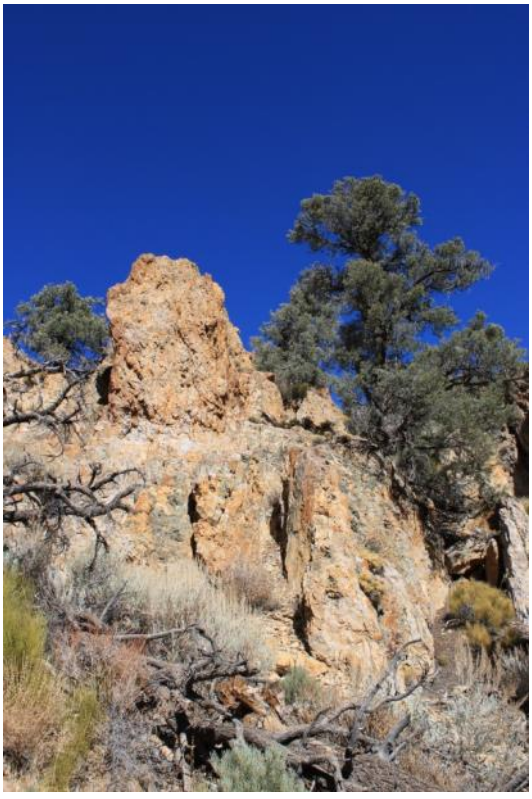
Snobby sommelier, though

Next destination: Phinney Canyon. You drive over Daylight Pass, out of the Park to Beatty, head North, and then turn West over the Sarcobatus Flat...a Pleistocene Ocean now covered with sage and Sarcobatus...greasewood. This trip the wild horses were hiding.

Grinding up to 7500', we passed mining ruins, scuffed through geodes underfoot and climbed rocky spires in a lush piñon forest. At the top, one can peer West out over the Northern swath of Death Valley and rippling ridges leading all the way to the Eastern Sierras.

100+ year old mine construction still holding its own in this climate

A rare pine siskin, a peace pipe, and a pinnacle



After Phinney, it was off to the Panamint Valley to a favorite perch of geological splendor. To the North, the Panamint Dunes wait for wind. To the West, the sun sets over the volcanic Argus Range, sometimes spectacularly. Up the canyon to the East, the rusting relics of the Big Four Mine make one wonder how guys ever survived in that place. Then the rest of the canyon pulls you inexorably upward through time. To the South, the Split Crater tells a tale of long ago fiery violence, and above, F16's roar overhead and occasionally tip their wings to our salute.

Climbing the steep canyon above our camp, the Dunes make an appearance below

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Moods of the Panamint Dunes

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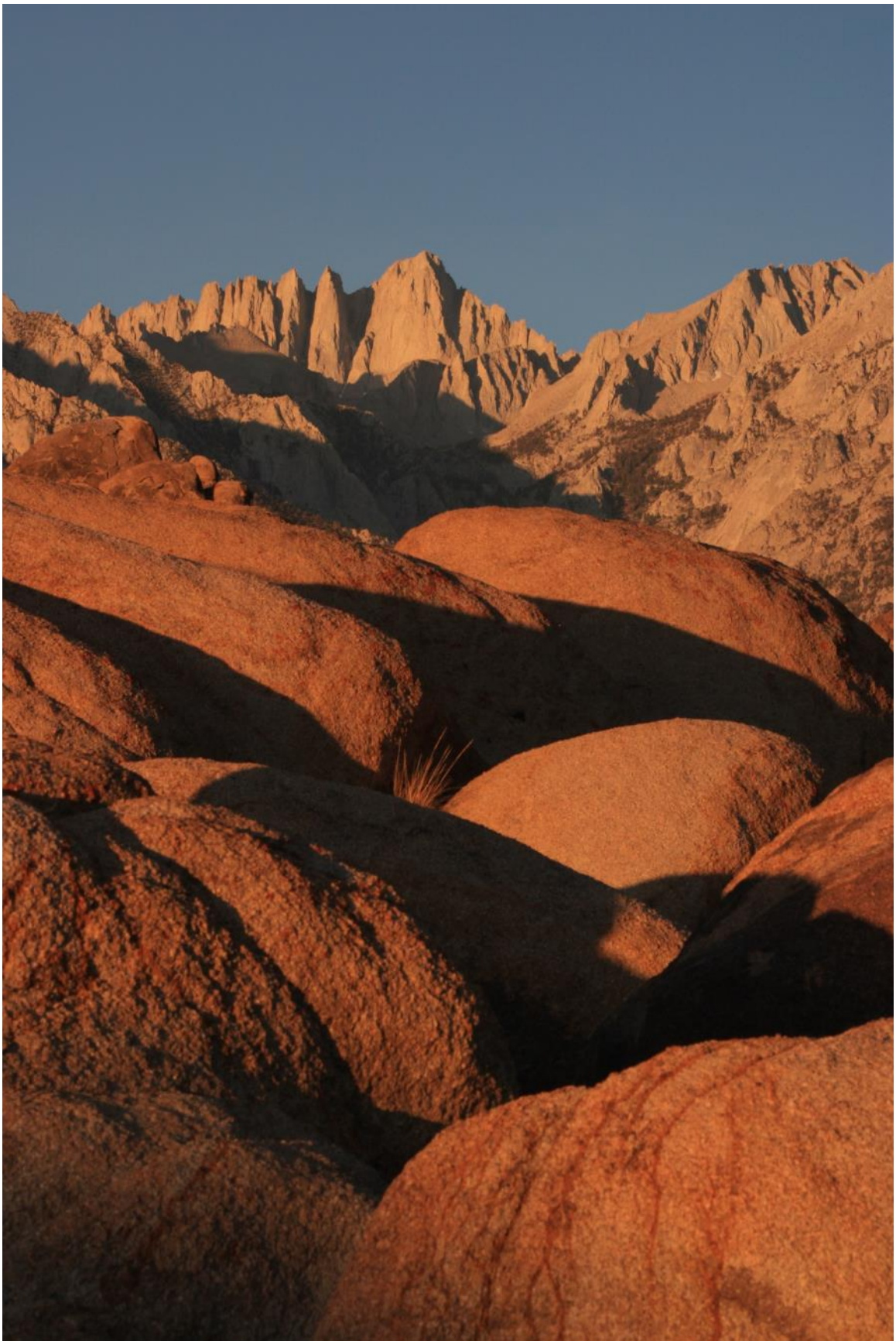
It was hard to leave our Panamint perch, especially after having done some “good neighbor” road building on the scrabbly 4 WD access to our campsite. But the Sierras beckoned, and the Alabama Hills and Mount Whitney called for a full moon howling.

Approaching Lone Pine from Death Valley...and getting closer to Whitney

Whitney glows red long before dawn, and then goes to gray, still before sunrise

And then, when the sun finally hits, everything turns gold...next page



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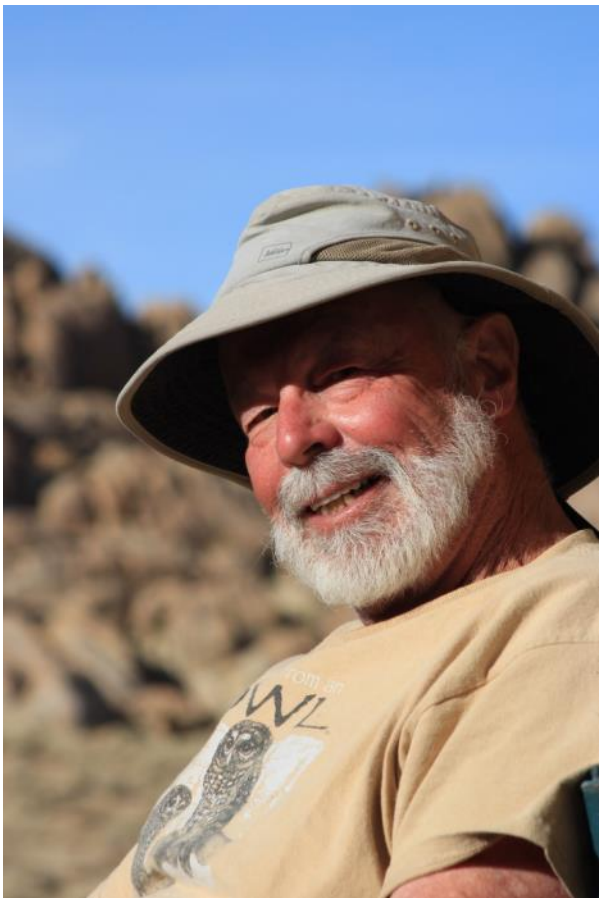
We saw lots of fine creatures...the tarantula, of course, jackrabbits, coyotes, and a rather remarkable wild burro.

...and birds aplenty...a roadrunner, migratory finches, meadowlarks hiding in the weeds, ravens playing tag, and naval air force pilots hugging the ground at 800 miles an hour...

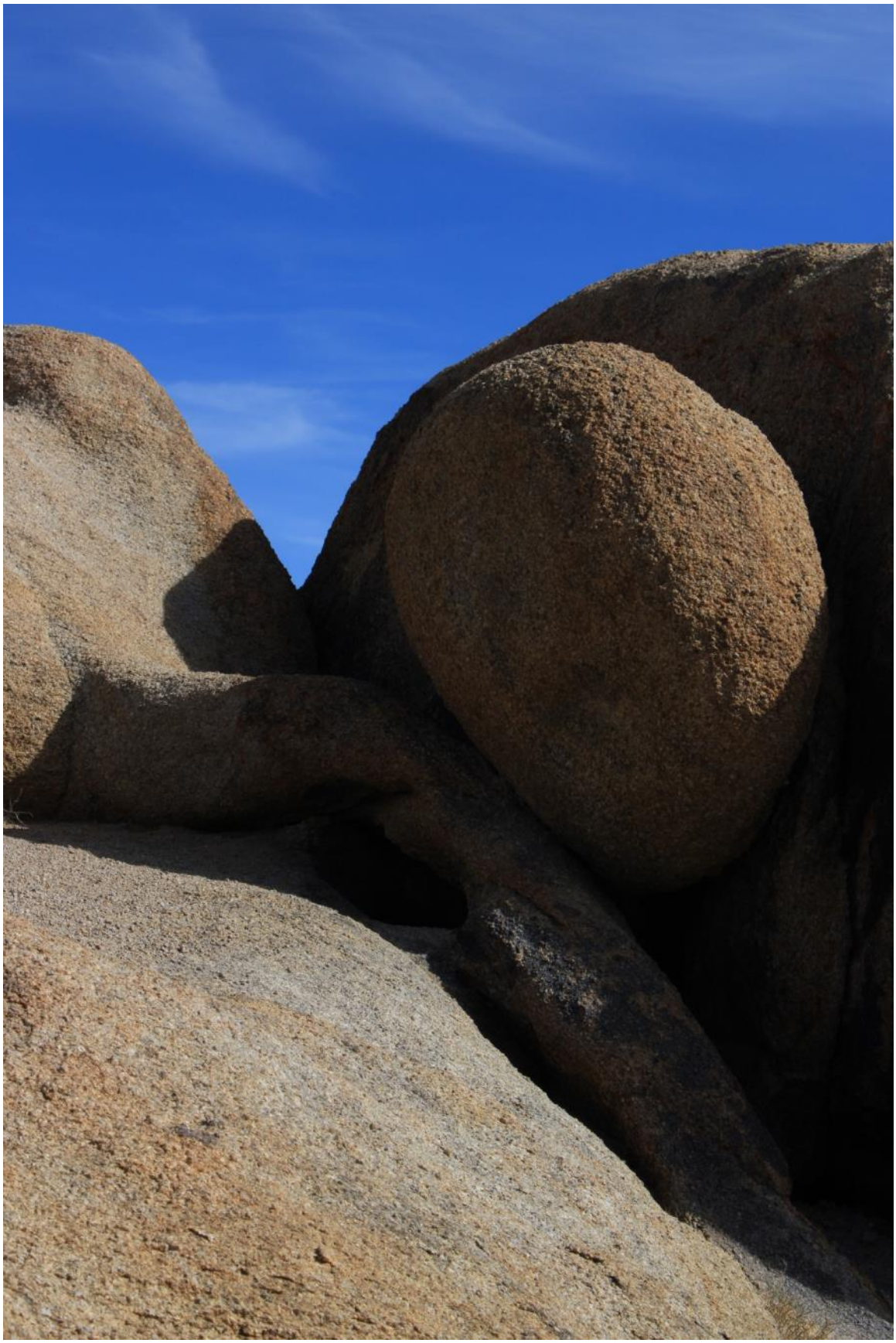
...and a petrified giant banana slug...

We had a fine time...



George

Wells



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