

IMAGES, IDEAS, and REFLECTIONS

Periodical Letter #48
May 2026

from
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Luna moth

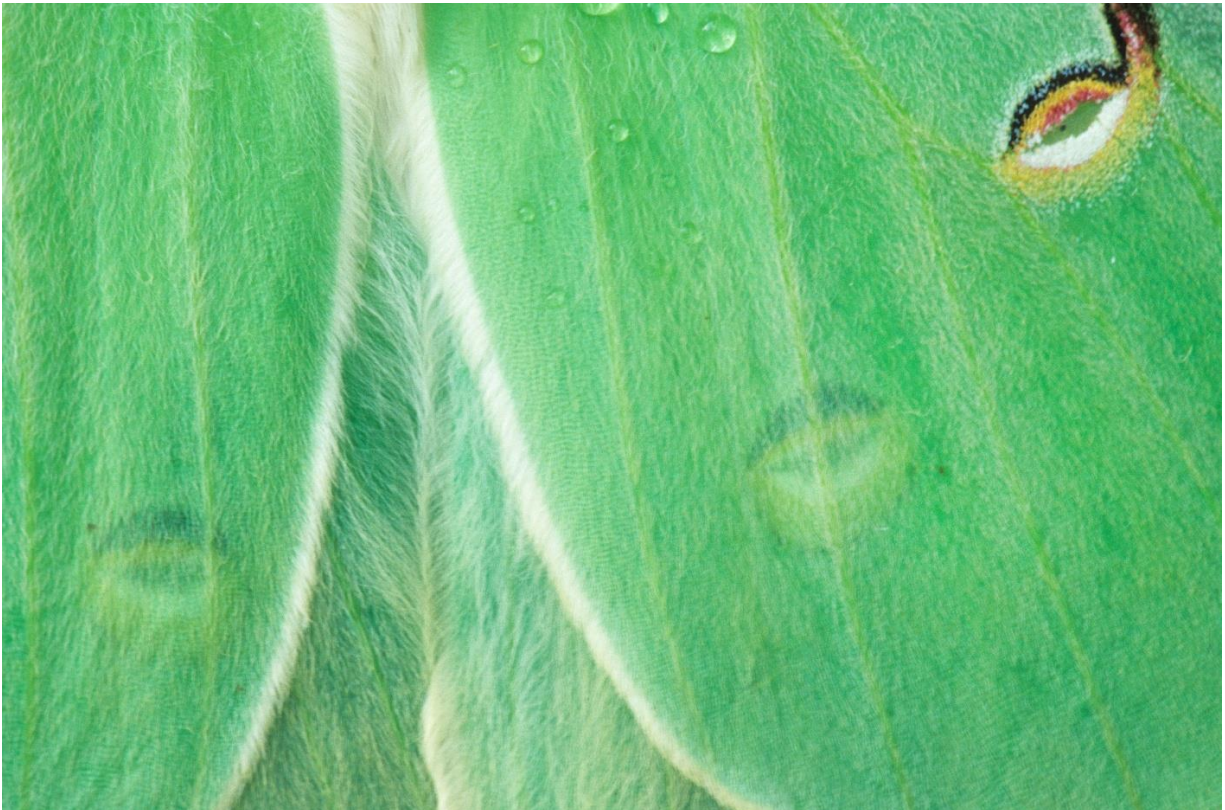
The arresting appearance of a lime-green Luna moth resting on a screen or a window bar is a sure sign of late spring and early summer at Shampers Bluff. Some years I'll see several, occasionally none, but usually I find them in the early morning near an interior light source that has drawn them to a porch or barn window during the night. This far north the Luna moth has only one generation a year, but in the southern United States it may well have three, the first generation appearing in March.

The moth's typical wingspan is roughly 114 mm (4.5 in,) although wingspans can exceed 178 mm (7.0 in,) ranking the species as one of the larger moths found in North America. (Close-up of wings below.) Adults do not feed, but live for about a week on energy from fat stores created while a caterpillar. The caterpillars are also green.

The female moth has a larger body in order to accommodate 200-400 eggs, but the male has much longer and broader antennae in order to detect the presence of a female. All giant silk moths have a mating process wherein the females, at night, release volatile sex pheromones, which the males, flying, detect via their large antennae. Males can detect these molecules at a distance of several kilometres, and then fly in the direction the wind is coming from until reaching the female. Luna moth females mate with the first males to find them, a process that typically starts after midnight and takes several hours.

About five years ago I had the good fortune to come across a pair mating on one of my azalea bushes and, sure enough, they enjoyed themselves for a long time. From the azalea the female flew to a nearby paper birch tree and laid her fertilized eggs on the underside of a leaf. The leaf became the food for the hatching larvae.

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Houstonia caerulea

***Houstonia caerulea*, a.k.a. "Bluets," "Innocence," and "Quaker Ladies," is one of the most common spring wild flowers here, often carpeting old pastures and transforming last year's mowed paths into rivers of white and pale blue until new grass obliterates the spectacle. However, although the great burst of bloom is in April through May, I can always find a blossom here or there even in early November.**



Bluets grow in eastern Canada and in the U.S.A. as far south as Louisiana and as far west as Wisconsin, depending of course on soil and local climate conditions. As they are very easy to transplant, you can dig up a few if you're visiting Shamber's Bluff and give them a try at home, but if you live in the U.S.A. you'd be wise to gather some on your side of the border.

CONTRAST and related considerations

Contrast is fundamental not only to seeing, but also to photography, painting, and all other forms of visual expression. Blindness is the inability to see contrast – temporarily or permanently. The world becomes one tone.

When a person can perceive only one tone there are no lines and no shapes, the two basic building blocks of visual design. However, if blindness is partial, not pure black for example, a person may be able to distinguish colours, i.e., colour contrast, and will therefore be able to distinguish shapes.

When we are making photographs with film, we pay attention to contrast in both the situation and in the printing process, except for colour transparencies. With slides we are stuck with the contrasts we have at the moment we press the shutter. When we are processing digital files, we can alter overall contrast easily, especially tonal contrast, and we can emphasize or de-emphasize particular areas of an image with dodging and burning tools.

Recently I looked at thousands of slides I'd made in the high Canadian Arctic between 1970 and 2014, selecting about five per cent for scanning to create digital files. When I had finally finished processing these new files, I realized that paying attention to overall brightness and tonal contrast had been of paramount importance and running a close second was the brightness and contrast of this or that portion of an image.

It's important to remember that the decisions one makes about tonal contrast are personal, just like colour preferences. Simply put, some artists generally prefer less contrast, others prefer more – even though every situation we photograph makes its own demands.

It can be instructive to scan a couple of slides, give copies of the digital files to half a dozen other photographers and ask each of them to send you back their processed version. When you compare them, the results may surprise you.

This is a great exercise for camera clubs. Have somebody choose five original digital files or scanned slides and give them to five to ten different members to process. Then, at a club meeting project the various renditions of the five images., i.e. all the renditions of file #1, then file #2, and so on. Not only will you learn about the individual management of contrast, but also about other preferences.

Personally, I think it would be a mistake for club members to turn this into a competition and vote for a winner of each series. Far better to respect and learn from what each photographer has chosen to do.

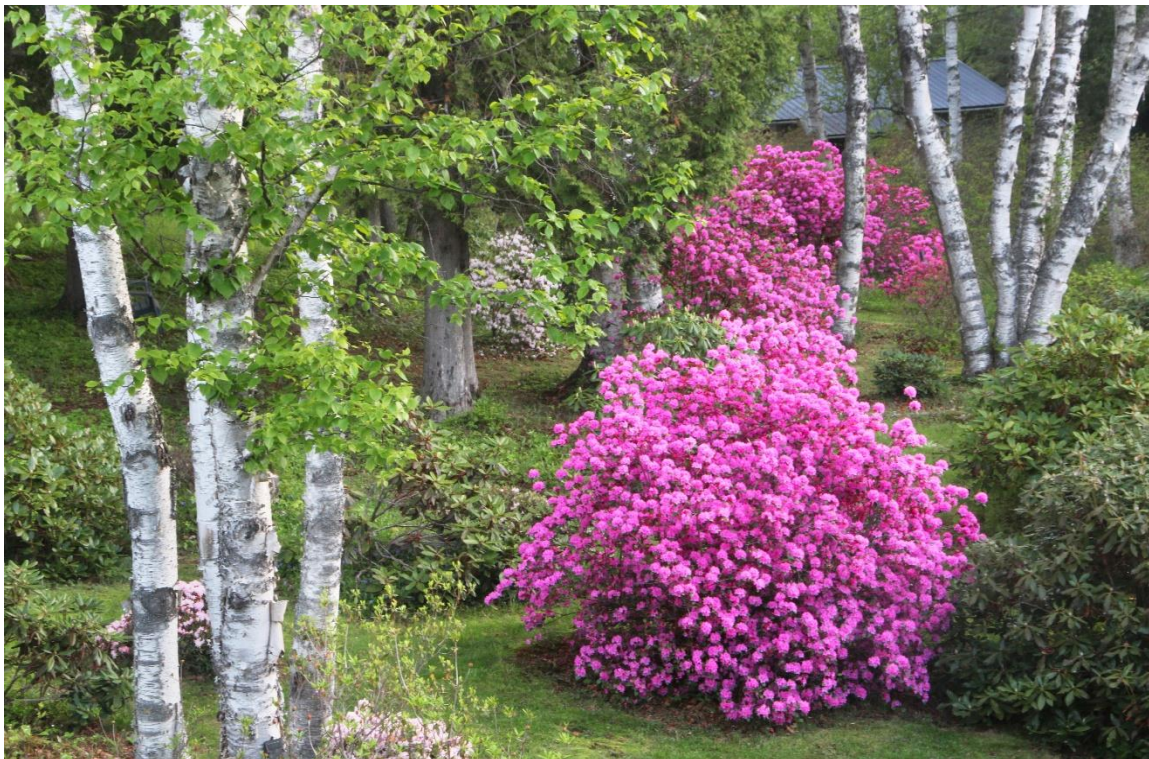
However, why not begin by studying the photographs in this letter! Ask yourself if you feel the tonal and the colour contrasts are appropriate for the subject matter of each image. If you feel they aren't, ask how you would improve them or alter them to your own personal preference.

For example, I am very familiar with carpets of bluets (*Houstonia caerulea*) like those in the pictures on page three. The petals of many of these flowers are white to creamy white, but just as many have a barely visible to quite visible blue colour. None is a rich or deep blue. My biggest challenge in processing the file was to bring up the blue just enough to make it visible without sacrificing colour accuracy. But, if you're not interested in accuracy as much as pictorial impact, you should do whatever you want.

It's That Time of Year in My Garden



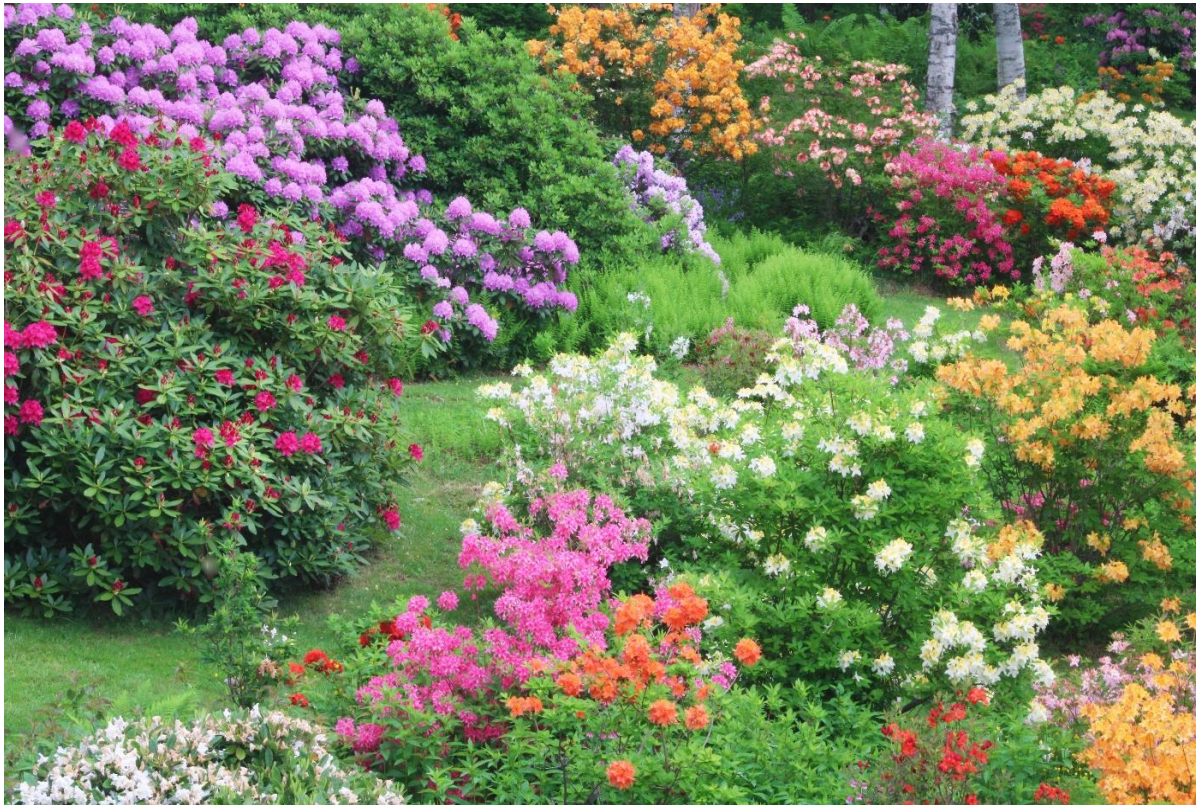
Very early rhododendrons



Early rhododendrons



Early Midseason



Midseason



Midseason

“It could have been otherwise. That one defiant particle of matter could have never broken free from the equipoise of antimatter to sound the first note of something out of the mute nothingness, singing a universe into being. The universe could have withheld gravity, could have never compacted those first few atoms into a common center to bud the first star, could have never bloomed with billions of them. But here we are, circling a middling star in a modest solar system on a rocky planet replete with mountains and music, lichen and love, and on it the mirror the universe invented to contemplate itself: this shimmering consciousness.

It can be hard to bear, the weight of wonder, hard to hold all this bright improbability, hard to do laundry and email while reckoning with how the cosmos forged from the iron rib of dying stars creatures capable of the *Benedictus* and the atomic bomb.”

Maria Popova

“ I love that art doesn’t ask for permission.”

Boy George

BOOKS and The Design of Language

In 2010 Time magazine named Michael Pollan as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. The author of ten books, including *This Is Your Mind on Plants*, *How to Change Your Mind*, *In Defense of Food*, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and *The Botany of Desire*, his most recent book, *A WORLD APPEARS: A Journey into Consciousness*, is a real zinger. I indulged myself for days, finding it difficult to put down on the one hand while on the other telling myself to slow down and “absorb” what I’m reading.

From the front cover flap: “When it comes to the phenomenon that is consciousness, there is one point on which scientists, philosophers, and artists all agree: it feels *like* something to be us. Yet the fact that we have subjective experience of the world around us remains one of nature’s greatest mysteries. How is it that our mental operations are accompanied by feelings, thoughts, and a sense of self? ... Michael Pollan traces the untapped continent that is consciousness, bringing radically different perspectives – scientific, philosophical, literary, spiritual, and psychedelic – to see what each can teach us about this central fact of life.... Eye-opening and mind-expanding, *A WORLD APPEARS* takes us into the laboratories of our own minds....”

If I didn’t agree, I wouldn’t be recommending this book and, while I’m at it, all of Pollan’s previous titles as well.

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“Some 40% of Americans didn’t read any books last year and another 27% read between just one and four. Canadian numbers are similar.... Overall there are more books and more aggregate readers, but they are more often in search of bullet-point summaries and ‘actional insights’ than style, challenge, or wisdom. Indeed, reading entire difficult books of any length is on a steeply declining downslope.” *From an article by Martin Kingswell, University of Toronto*

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The content of every book is affected by the quality of the writing. Readers will struggle through some books simply because the subject matter is of great personal interest, while they sail through others because the writer knows about linguistic design, i.e., the building blocks of language (the main ones being the noun and the verb, some others being adjectives, adverbs, conjunctions, and prepositions) and composition (how to arrange the building blocks in sentences and paragraphs.)

Photographers will immediately see the parallel with visual design (the main building blocks being line and shape, some others being depth and texture) and composition (how to arrange the visual building blocks within a picture space.)

The reason for paying close attention to both the design of language and the design of pictures is to ensure clear communication or effective expression.

Good design matters to us; it matters in cars, it matters in stoves, washing-machines, boots, clothes, can-openers, highway construction, the pictures we make, and on, and on. So why do we choose our clothes more carefully than our words and their arrangement?

Even in grade school the design of language was important to me and I paid for a substantial portion of my junior and senior years at university by marking the bi-weekly essays of first-year English students. The professor who hired me was tough! One major error in grammar and/or sentence structure or three minor ones constituted a failure.

Here are some very common, current examples of incorrect grammar or poor word choice, the equivalent of which a thoughtful photographer would never make if she or he were composing a picture. (BLUE represents incorrect, inaccurate, or inappropriate phrasing or usage; RED, the correct or more appropriate usage.)

I spent **quality time** with her. (As all experiences and all products have quality, it's important to specify the level of quality. "Quality" is not an adjective.) **Good quality, poor quality**, etc.

I'm sorry **to hear about** his illness. (My reply to this comment would be: "I apologize for having told you.") I'm sorry **about** his illness.

He's older **than me**. (In English we would never say, "He's older than **me am**;" we'd say, "He's older than **I am**." So, let's be consistent when we contract the sentence and say, "He's older **than I**." French usage is different.

There were **multiple** items in her basket. (This word has only recently come into common use, and the original meaning has changed. "Multiple" is now used to represent any number exceeding the number one, the result being that it never communicates accurate or even generally accurate information. We used to employ other words that, while not specific, provided a better indication of the number we were talking about.) **A few, several, numerous, many, a lot, and a great many** are all better choices than "multiple."

I'm doing **as best I can**. I'm doing **the best I can**, or **as well as I can**, or I'm doing **my best**.

At this moment in time, he's... (Redundancy! Where can you find a moment, except "in time?") **At this moment, at this time, at present**, or even **right now** are better. (By the way, we say "at this place," never "at this place in space." Presumably, this is because all places are "in space," just like all moments are "in time.")

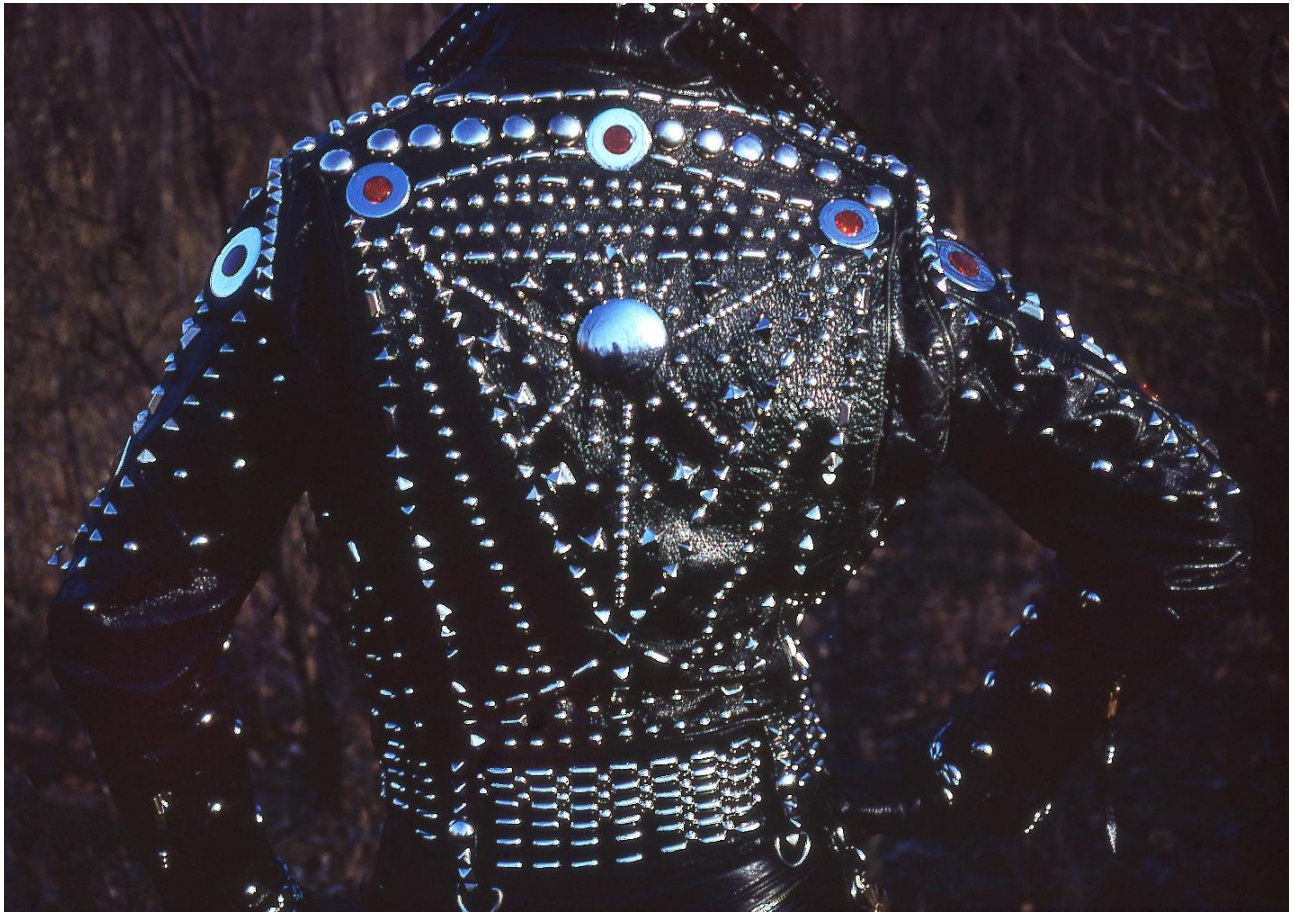
It's **very unique**. ("Unique" means one of a kind, so adding "very" destroys the meaning.) Never precede **unique, absolute, complete, perfect, or excellent** with "very" or "more."

None are going today. ("None" is the contraction of "not one.") Hence, **none is** going today.

Fewer items, not **less** items! "Less" applies to mass, e.g. **less water, less air**.

If you find all of this a bit much, be glad you didn't know me in my essay-marking days, when my main claim to fame was that I knew all 26 possible errors you can make with a comma.

Yes, he rode a Harley!



This is not my jacket. It's just one of the photographic opportunities that I had because I rode a Harley for many years.

At this time of year especially I miss the liberation of hopping on my bike and going wherever I wanted to go – to the supermarket, off to teach a workshop, or for a half-hour ride to give myself a break from whatever job I was doing. Spring gives me the same feeling of release.

I belonged to the Harley club in Saint John (the nearest city) and, every Sunday during the riding season, members who were free would meet at a suburban restaurant for breakfast and decide on the route for a three-hour ride. A side benefit of my membership, a very important one, was learning the huge range of people who enjoyed motorcycling and the sheer comfort of riding a Harley – kindergarten teachers, university professors, truckers, nurses, business executives, pharmacists, plumbers. Many of them were people I would probably never have met otherwise.

Why did I sell my Harley? It's simple, really. A person can't have two priorities, and eventually rhododendrons and azaleas began to dominate. I could no longer bear to leave my garden on Sundays during the spring and summer. However, a Harley should not sit idle.

Sometimes our lives change abruptly, but more often the change is so gradual as to be barely perceptible for a while. That was the case with me. However, I've kept my motorcycle licence, so I can still rent or borrow a Harley and ride off into the sunset if the mood strikes.

The owner of the jacket? He wasn't a member of the Saint John club, but I met him through our common interest. He was a theatre director and a much-loved university teacher of theatre.



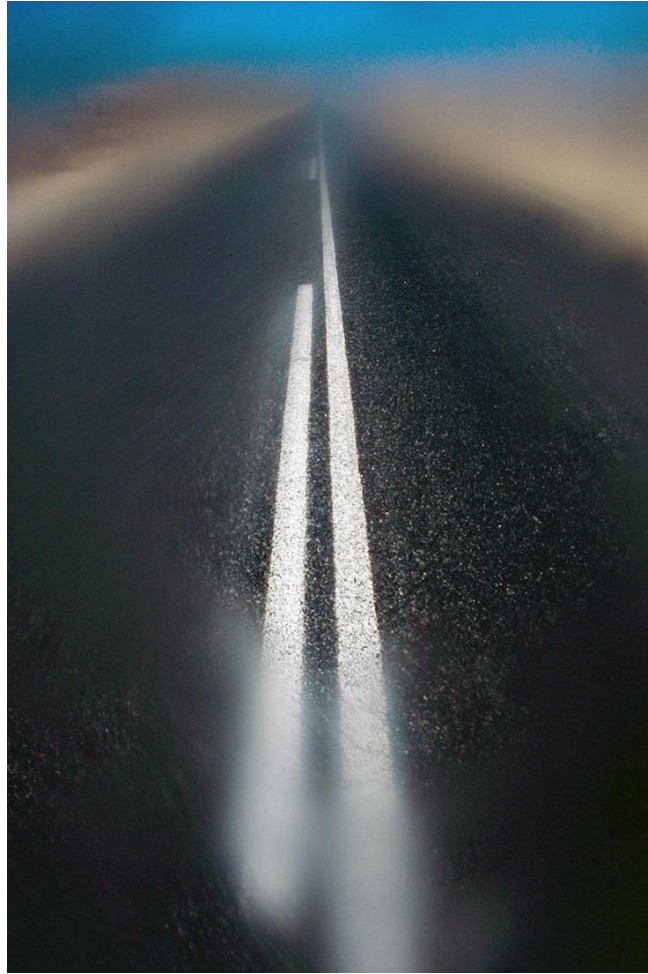
En route to a Harley rally in Australia (my bike is nearest to camera)



Family at rally



This photo of me was not made yesterday. (Yes, I always wore a helmet.)



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