

PORTRAIT OF THE WEST

Douglas Keister in Nevada's Big Empty.

Words and photos © Douglas Keister.

In Australia it's known as The Outback. In Nevada it's known as The Big Empty. It's a place of what seems to be nothingness where much of what's important exists. My personal Big Empty is an unpopulated and unfenced slice of sage and solitude in northern Nevada. It's where I get a fix on my insignificance. Looking up at the Milky Way on a warm, clear night gives me great joy and perspective. I'm just a hiccup on Earth's time line. But my insignificance is significant. The odds of me being here are billions (trillions? quadrillions?) to one. But here I am.

The older I get, the better I realize what I do or don't do isn't going to affect the trajectory of the universe. Depressing? Not at all. What I realize is I might as well do something that pleases me; something that in a tiny, tiny way makes the world a better place; something that gives more than it takes.

Everyone needs their own Big Empty. Some find it in the ocean or a mountaintop or a quiet meadow or a serpentine stream. Where isn't important. What is important is to visit it now and then. For there you will find yourself waiting for you. ■

Douglas Keister is an internationally renowned photographer who has photographed, authored, and co-authored 46 critically acclaimed books. He also writes and illustrates magazine articles and contributes photographs and essays to dozens of magazines, newspapers, books, calendars, posters and greeting cards worldwide. He is one of America's most noted experts on cemetery symbolism and "storybook style" architecture (he coined the term). His 45th book, "People, Places & Pieces of Paradise" (2019) documented the devastating Paradise/Camp Fire which occurred 10 miles from his home. His 46th book is an expanded edition of his memoir, "Heart-Land: Growing Up in the Middle of Everything" (Spring 2023). He and CJ, editor of RANGE, are old friends, thanks to photographer Linda Dufurrena's "Shooting the West" creative weekends in Winnemucca, Nev., where, for decades, Linda invited world-renowned photographers (including this one) to share their secrets with a few hundred other friends. Doug lives in Chico, Calif. For more information, go to www.douglaskeister.com.

