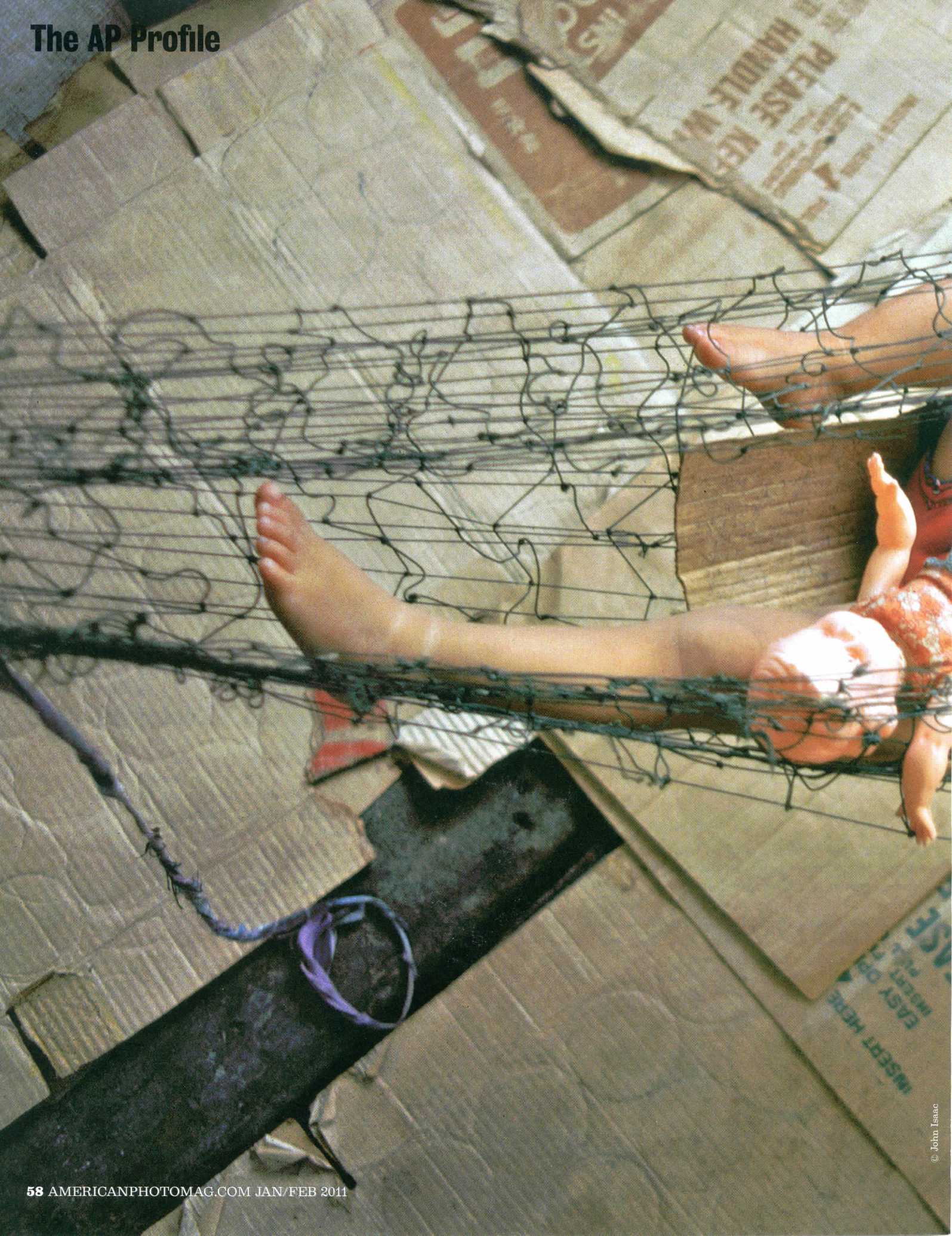


John Isaac shot this image of a sleeping Vietnamese child in 1979 on Malaysia's Pulau Bidong Island, a refuge for tens of thousands of boat people who fled Vietnam after its takeover by the Communist-led north.



OUT OF DARKNESS



INTO LIGHT

From motherless children to dancing cranes, photography has taken John Isaac from the depths of human sorrow to the saving grace of nature

BY RUSSELL HART



The AP Profile



Migratory sandhill cranes perform their ritual dance at New Mexico's Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, one of Isaac's favorite places to photograph.

The AP Profile

One of the first friends John Isaac made when he arrived in New York City was John Hammond. It was 1968, and Isaac had just come from Chennai, in his native South India, intent on becoming a folk singer. Never a slave to protocol, Isaac showed up unannounced at the recording impresario's Columbia Records office, where he was dogged by security. Hammond, the revered discoverer of artists ranging from Billie Holiday to Bob Dylan, called off the guards and invited his young visitor to stay for a recording session with Pete Seeger.

Despite a promising yodeling gig on *The Original Amateur Hour* with Ted Mack, Isaac landed on the streets of Greenwich Village singing in front of an open guitar case. One day, shortly before his visa was due to expire, a passerby stopped to admire his voice and invited him to try out for the choir at the United Nations, which needed a good baritone. "I asked her, 'If I get in can you find me a job at the UN?'" Isaac recalls. He got in, and his accidental patron found him a job as a lowly messenger.

Though he remains a dedicated guitarist and singer who likes nothing better than strumming and crooning a Johnny Cash song, Isaac's music career was not to be. It did, however, indirectly lead him to a global journey in photography. When a position opened up in the UN darkroom he took it, and spent the next six months washing and drying prints. During that time a Pentax SLR arrived from Isaac's brother, a photography buff, and Isaac's initial efforts with the camera garnered him first place in a UN photo contest. The prize was a brand-new Leica rangefinder.

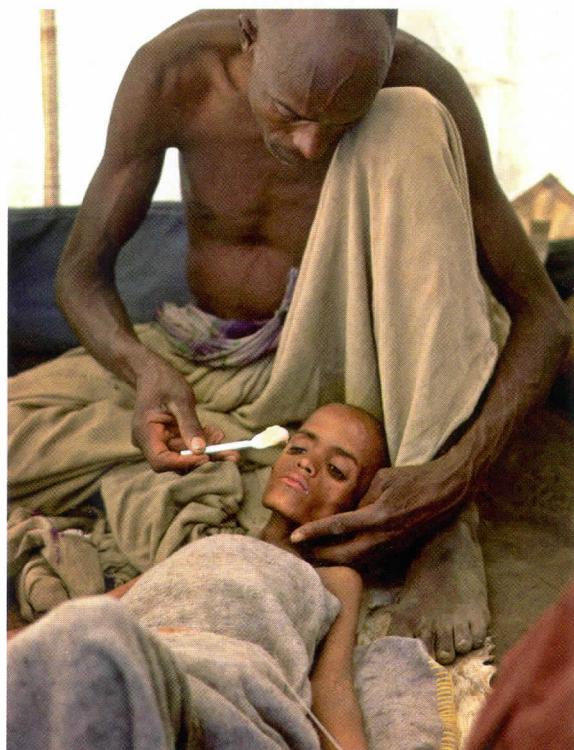
"What's a Leica?" Isaac asked when told what he had won. When he went to buy lenses and realized he could get an entire SLR system for the price of the M5 body, he traded it for a Minolta SR-T 101 and three lenses and kept the change.

Heart of Darkness

Isaac also won a two-day workshop with Ansel Adams and a promotion to printer. For six years he worked in the UN darkroom when he wasn't shooting more award-winning photos with his Minolta. Then, in 1978, his black-and-white image of an Indian milkman washing water buffalo along the Bay of Bengal won him a gold medal in the Photokina International Photo Contest. When Isaac returned from picking up his prize, his boss told him that her chief photographer was ill and that she wanted to send him to South Lebanon to cover the battle between Israel and the PLO and the UN's key role in it.

Over the next 20 years, Isaac shot for the UN in more than 100 countries, including Pol Pot's Cambodia, where he saw the Killing Fields firsthand; Khomeini's Iran, where he waited out the U.S. hostage crisis; and the Ethiopian Sahel, where in 1984 he was among the first photogra-

"THEY WERE TAKING BODIES AWAY IN TRUCK-LOADS TO BE BURNED."



From top: Rwandan refugees who have died from cholera are trucked away for burning in Zaire, 1994; an Ethiopian father feeds his starving son at an aid camp, 1984; Rwandan refugee children scrape a barrel for food, 1994.

phers to document one of the worst famines in modern history. His image of an Ethiopian father spoon-feeding his dying son won first place in the Missouri School of Journalism's prestigious Pictures of the Year competition. It was a photo Isaac initially couldn't bear to shoot, doing so only when the father asked him to.

Isaac's pictures of human suffering ran in



Newsweek, *Time*, and many other publications throughout the world. His 1991 coverage of the first Gulf War was followed by several trips to Iraq's Kurdish region. At a hospital full of female burn victims, his Iraqi minder told him the patients had all had cooking accidents. Isaac realized that they had in fact been seared by Saddam's now-infamous chemical bombing—and he kept returning to the area until the Iraqi authorities told him that they would no longer guarantee his safety. Around the same time, on one of several trips to warring post-communist Yugoslavia, Isaac's dark complexion brought him closer to death. "Some Serbian soldiers stopped me and told me they'd let me go if I said I was a Muslim bastard," Isaac recalls. "I wouldn't do it. One of them slammed me up against a car and was about to stab me when an armed UN soldier came running up, shouting, 'He's a Hindu, he's a Hindu!' I was pissed off, since I'm not Hindu, and it was like if I'd been Muslim it would've been OK to kill me."

What Child Is This?

But the complicated hatreds of the Balkans hardly prepared Isaac for what he would face next. In 1994 he flew straight from Sarajevo to Rwanda to cover the genocide of the country's minority Tutsi by the African nation's Hutu-controlled government. One of his tasks was to document the camps of Tutsi refugees who had fled across the border to Zaire. "There were huge piles of bodies of people who had died from cholera," he says. "They were taking them away in truckloads to be burned." In one camp a woman, mistaking Isaac for a doctor, insisted that he take her infant to spare her from the disgrace of burying her last child. "The little girl died in my arms," Isaac says. "I had to find out whether she was Muslim or Christian so I could bury her the correct way."

Isaac was shooting in a camp for children who had been orphaned or separated from their families when he encountered a little boy who was totally withdrawn. "His name was Innocent," says Isaac, tearing up as he tells the story. "He finally started to talk when I gave him a little



From left: An elk in high grass at Yellowstone National Park; a young male tiger cooling off in India's Ranthambore National Park.

toy car, and he said that he had seen his parents hacked to death from a hiding place in his yard. "You look just like my father," he said. And I said, "I wish I were your father." When I said I would have to leave soon, he asked, "Can you take me with you?" Isaac knew he couldn't, and instead of photographing the boy, he arranged for UNICEF to take care of him. "He could have been my son," Isaac says.

Isaac drove back to Kigali, Rwanda's capital, where he joined a pool of journalists that included an up-and-coming Christiane Amanpour. "Everybody was saying how great the stories they'd gotten were," he remembers. "One photographer was just thrilled about the low-angle shot he'd gotten of a pile of bodies. He was running around showing it to everyone." Their cynicism reminded Isaac of a woman he'd seen giving birth in the back of a car. "The baby was still connected to her by its umbilical cord," he says. "I just couldn't bring myself to take a picture of them, even though I had a momentary thought that it could have won a



A yawning cheetah (left) and male zebras sparring at a watering hole (opposite) in Namibia's Etosha National Park.

Pulitzer. So I covered up the woman and her baby and arranged for a nurse to come. Then a British videographer came running up to the car and saw the woman and said, 'Who put her clothes back on?' I said, 'I did,' and he said, 'You fucking asshole, you ruined my shot!' He was about to hit me when some doctors showed up."

Rwanda pushed Isaac into an emotional abyss. He couldn't bear to see any more misery and death, and he was sickened by photojournalists' incessant jockeying for the money shot. Perhaps he wasn't cut out to be a photojournalist after all, as one hard-nosed photo agency director suggested. "It wasn't the first time I'd been criticized for not going for the gut of a story," he says. "Even in war, I always tried to find something peaceful, something that would show peoples' determination to make a good life." When Isaac returned to New York, he suffered a nervous breakdown and took an extended medical leave from the UN. When he returned to work he lingered for a few years, but he finally quit for good in 1998, despite appeals from his longtime friend Kofi Annan, then Secretary-General, to bring in the millennium with him.

Out of the Ashes

When you ask Isaac what pulled him out of his long depression, he says it was the simple sight of a butterfly on a sunflower—which of course he photographed. It was this unextraordinary image that opened him up to the world of wildlife photography.

Isaac has always loved animals—he even trained as a vet before following his musical dreams. He harbors a special fondness for India's endangered tigers, which he photographs twice a year in the poorly policed national parks where they are living out their days as a species (his work will be the

subject of his tenth monograph later this year). Even before he became an American citizen a couple of years ago, Isaac was withering in his criticism of his homeland's government. "Everybody is blaming China because it won't stop the market in so-called virility tonics," he says. "China plays a role, but nothing is being done by the fucking Indians. There's total corruption in the forests."

Isaac is not a political animal, though. Most of his work since leaving the UN has dealt with the outright beauty of wild creatures, from the migratory cranes of New Mexico's Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge to the hippos of Zambia. And the beauty of these images—as well as his success as a wildlife photographer—is due in large part to his meticulous approach to craft, both behind the camera and in front of the computer.

Patience and Persistence

Some photographers refuse to believe that Isaac has created his recent wildlife images with a 10-megapixel digital SLR (the Olympus E-3)—or, for that matter, anything other than a Canon or a Nikon. Yet Isaac's first wildlife work—his first digital photography, in fact—was with far fewer pixels. He took his first digital pictures of his beloved tigers with the two-megapixel Olympus C-2100 UZ, an electronic-viewfinder model with a nonremovable 10X zoom, from the back of an elephant he was sharing with two other photographers, both of whom were bemused by his amateurish equipment as they struggled with their massive telephotos. It was photographs from this camera that garnered Isaac the first raves for his wildlife work. He moved on to the Olympus E-10, a four-megapixel DSLR with a nonremovable 4X zoom, then the 4X, five-megapixel E-20.

Isaac used the E-20 to shoot for 2002's invitation-only project *A Day in the Life of Africa* (many of the 100-plus participating photographers used their Nikons and Canons despite Olympus's sponsorship of the project). The luck of the draw landed Isaac in Chad, a landlocked nation in North Central Africa that few other photographers wanted to cover. Yet six or seven of Isaac's Chad images ended up in the final book—by his estimation, more than any other photographer represented. From the E-20 he graduated to Olympus's five-megapixel E-1, the company's first digital SLR with interchangeable lenses. And when the Olympus E-3 was introduced in late 2007, doubling the E-1's count to 10 megapixels, it became Isaac's primary camera until just a few months ago, when the 12-megapixel E-5 replaced it.

The images and image quality Isaac is able to achieve with tools many other photographers dismiss offer an important lesson: It's not the camera that makes a photograph good; it's the photographer. Indeed, patience and persistence are two of Isaac's most important assets. He reports that

**WHAT PULLED
ISAAC OUT OF
DEPRESSION?
THE SIGHT OF
A BUTTERFLY
ON A FLOWER.**



The AP Profile



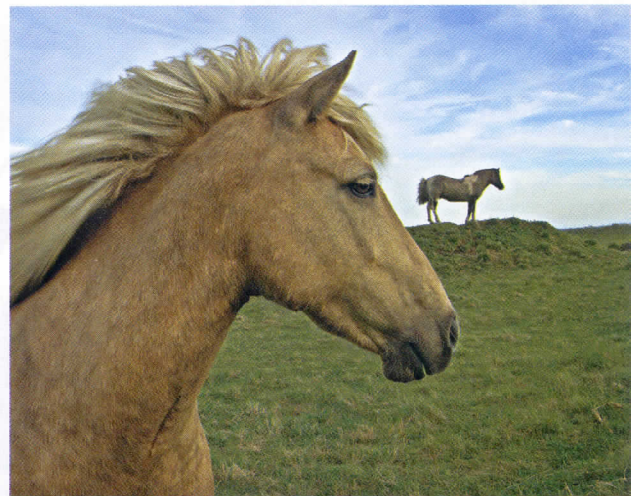
when he's waiting for a shot—whether for a crane to come in for a water landing or for the light to turn just right—other photographers sometimes arrive on the scene lugging massive amounts of Canon and Nikon gear, take their pictures, and leave grumbling about the failure of the animals to perform, or of the light to conform to their whim. Little wonder Isaac's images stand out from typical wildlife fare, much of which misses the moment, the light, or both.

Craft and Creativity

Isaac's impeccable image quality starts with steadiness. He shoots handheld much of the time, and though he likes to point to image stabilization as the source of the consistent sharpness of his pictures, other photographers with the same benefit are less fortunate. One Olympus photographer using the same consumer-level zoom as Isaac was so convinced that his lens was to blame for the inferior sharpness of his images that he arrived one day at Isaac's home to compare the two optics. He taped sheets of newspaper on the wall, carefully squared up his camera to the pages, and shot frames with each lens so that he could look at them side by side on the computer. He reported no visible difference, Isaac says. The point is that technique—not necessarily bad technique, but technique that could be better—can be the undoing of even the finest lens.

It also helps that Isaac is an exceptionally good printer. His approach to the digital darkroom, though, is a far cry from Photoshop orthodoxy:

From left: A puffin with its catch on Machias Seal Island off the coast of Maine; wild horses in Iceland.



For the most part he has adapted the methods he used during his years of conventional printing at the UN. Rather than elaborately mask his images to control their tonal relationships, for example, he relies largely on burning and dodging, using tools from the standard Photoshop palette to add density here, subtract it there. One of his tricks is to set the burn tool to a very small brush size and run it along edges to darken them, which gives objects more definition and apparent sharpness without the crunchy artifacts that can result from actual sharpening. (He will sharpen only enough to suit the size of his final print, and only in luminosity mode.) He sets his opacity to a very low percentage so that the effects of burning and dodging are gradual enough to control. He'll mouse over an area for minutes at a time—sort of like in the old days, when printers waved a sheet of cardboard with a hole in it between enlarging lens and printing paper.

Isaac prints at sizes up to 15x20 inches, sometimes even larger, on his aging Epson Stylus Pro 7600. But his beautiful 8x10s make a strong case—often forgotten in these days of jumbo-size output—that a small print can create a uniquely intimate viewing experience. His have a jewel-like color that conjures up Indian miniatures and an atmospheric perspective, achieved with his signature tonal control, that gives them extraordinary depth.

Those skills attract legions of photographers to Isaac's workshops. Along with slide talks, often introduced with a YouTube clip of his TV yodeling performance, workshops have become his mainstay. Isaac's acolytes follow him from one gig to another, as if searching for a father figure. Indeed, the most important lesson he gives his students is emotional: how a love of photography can be undiminished by years of using the medium to show the world at its most horrific. And what they want most is to be John Isaac's friend. "I've always been a human being first and then a photographer," he says. In the end, that abiding sense of priorities has made him a *better* photographer. **AP**