THE FORCES OF NATURE

The experience of painting directly from nature is an essential part of my creative process, even when I'm working in my Kansas studio. As I explain here and in my diary entries, it helps me capture both the appearance and the spirit of the landscape.

BY JOHN HULSEY

It is absolutely essential to the life and vitality of my studio work that I paint outdoors as often as possible. No matter what level of success and facility I have achieved over the last 25 years, I am constantly reminded by these plein air sessions that I am just the student, not the teacher. These small plein air studies executed on location are the foundation of my work. The impressions allow me to build larger studio works that capture some of the power and beauty of nature.

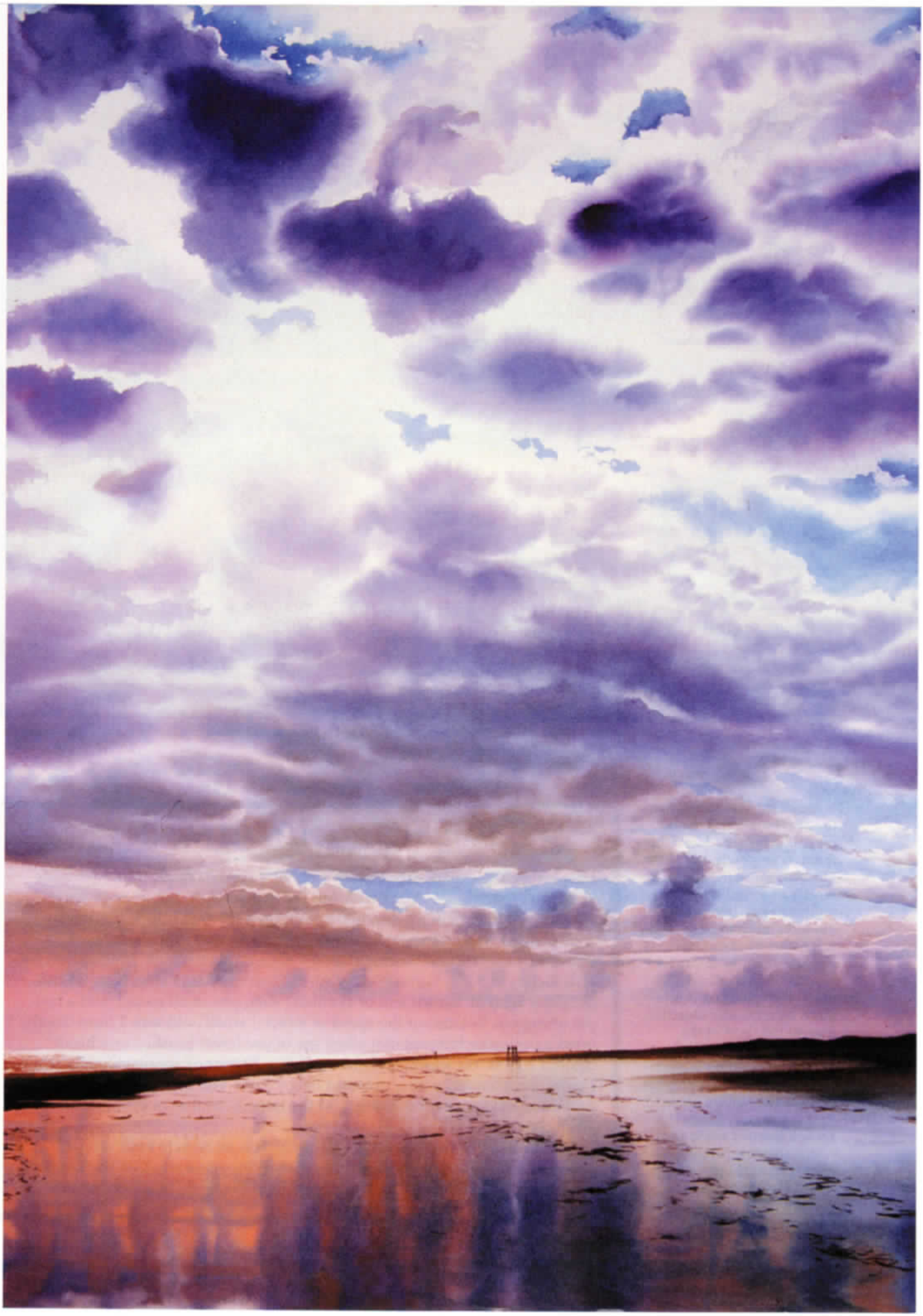
Nature surprises, delights, tricks, and sometimes pummels me as I am working, but I always come away feeling rewarded by the time I spend painting outdoors. Anyone who has ever painted in watercolor on location also knows the additional levels of unpredictability that the materials themselves can add to the party: It's too hot, too cold, too wet, too dry, too windy—you name it. So why do it? Like most artists, I did not choose this occupation so much as it chose me, and I soon discovered that the uncontrolled conditions of the outdoors were stimulating my art in ways that studio work did not. This is never truer than when painting the shifting light and changing topography in a marine environment. I am not as interested in capturing a particular moment as I am in expressing something existential about the experience of this brief exchange with nature.

***Cumulus*, 1999, watercolor, 12 x 16. Private collection.**

Smoke, 1999, watercolor, 12 x 26. Private collection.

Opposite page: *Ocean Light I*, 2000, watercolor, 40 x 30. Collection the artist.

I AWAKE AND LOOK AT THE CLOCK: 4:45 AM. DAWN IS COMING, AND I AM HERE TO PAINT. IT TAKES A LOT OF EFFORT TO FORCE MYSELF, AFTER REPEATED ATTEMPTS, TO GET OUT OF BED INTO THE CHILLY AIR AND GET DRESSED. BY NATURE, I AM NOT AN EARLY RISER, BUT SOMEWHERE IN MY SLEEP-ADDLED BRAIN A STRONG VOICE REMINDS ME THAT THIS IS WHAT I WAS BORN TO DO — I CAN ALWAYS GET MORE SLEEP LATER. I GRAB A COFFEE AND MY POCHADE BOX AND SET OFF DOWN THE BEACH IN THE SOFT CREPUSCULAR LIGHT, LOOKING FOR SOMETHING. "NOW IS THE TIME," I REMIND MYSELF, "CLEAR THE HEAD AND OPEN UP TO POSSIBILITY." THINGS HAPPEN FAST AT SUNRISE, SO I SET UP MY PAINTING KIT AND WITH A PENCIL LAY IN A COMPOSITION OF THE BARE ESSENTIALS. I AM HERE TO CAPTURE SUBTLETY AND NUANCE — SENSATIONS OF LIGHT AND SOUND. I WHISPER A PRAYER, "THIS IS THE FIRST AND ONLY SUNRISE, AND THIS OCEAN, THIS BEACH, IS THE BEGINNING AND THE ENDING." THE OCEAN IS CALM, WITH FINE WAVELETS GENTLY BREAKING ON THE SHORE. A LINE OF PELICANS SILENTLY SKIRTS THE WAVE TROUGHS AS DOLPHINS FIN THE SURFACE. NO ONE ELSE IS ABOUT. THE SUSURRATION OF THE WAVES BECOMES THE PULSE AND RHYTHM OF MY HAND AS I LAY IN MY WASHES WITH A BIG LOADED BRUSH. I AM PAINTING WATER WITH WATER, COLOR WITH COLOR, LIGHT WITH LIQUID. THE WET SAND MIRRORS THE SKY AS A BAND OF FOG ON THE HORIZON PERFECTLY BLURS THE TRANSITION FROM SEA TO ATMOSPHERE; WATER INTO LIGHT. MY PIGMENTS AND MY PAPER ARE OF THE EARTH AND SEA, SO THERE EXISTS A PERFECT AFFINITY BETWEEN MATERIALS AND EXPRESSION. AGAIN, I WHISPER, "REMOVE YOURSELF AND LET THE PAINTING FLOW FROM EYE TO HAND — YOU ALREADY KNOW EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO AT THIS MOMENT." ON MY PALETTE, I LAY OUT A BROAD MIX OF COLOR FROM NAPLES YELLOW THROUGH ORANGE AND RED TO VIOLET AND CERULEAN BLUE ALLOWING ME TO PICK UP COLOR AND PAINT WITH NO EXTRA MIXING. I HAVE ONLY MINUTES IN WHICH TO WORK BEFORE THE LIGHT HAS RADICALLY CHANGED. I PICK UP ANOTHER SHEET AND START ANEW, THIS TIME WITH NO SKETCH. I HAVE TO PAINT SWIFTLY, TALKING TO MYSELF, CAJOLING THE PAPER, THE PAINT, AND THE SKY. THERE! I THINK I HAVE IT, AND THE LIGHT HAS CHANGED AGAIN. PEOPLE ARE OUT ON THE BEACH NOW, AND THE SUN IS GLARING. TIME TO PACK UP.



***A Little Night Music*, 1999, watercolor, 12 x 16. Private collection.**

Large studio pieces allow time for introspection and invention because I develop them more slowly, but I also must transfuse the spontaneity and vitality of my outdoor work into my studio work for it to be successful. Although it can be heartbreaking to discard a painting that required a lot of effort to produce, it is better to be ruthlessly objective than to fall short of the mark. In so doing, I believe that every painting is essentially an accurate biography of the artist's entire life up to that moment. When I show a finished work, I am saying that this painting represents all my hopes, dreams, knowledge, and skill, and perhaps things of which even I am not yet aware.

MATERIALS FOR PLEIN AIR PAINTING

I use either a backpack-size French easel or a custom-made Maier pochade box. The French easel works well, but the extra weight becomes an issue when I hike to a painting location. I paint on a 12"-x-16" block of Arches cold-pressed watercolor paper, unless I intend to make quick sketches. In that case, I use a spiral-bound, 11"-x-14" Canson sketchbook. My brushes are Jack Richeson & Co. Series 9000 synthetic hair rounds in sizes Nos. 20 and 24, along with an assortment of synthetic flats, one small round, and a couple of riggers. Because of the speed at which I work outdoors, I have developed painting techniques that allow me to use fewer brushes to achieve desired effects. For example, I use three No. 20 rounds simultaneously while I paint, each loaded with a different major color. The flats are reserved for a particular kind of mark-making, and the large 1" oval is an essential all-around tool.

In addition, I have sea sponges, paper towels, an X-Acto knife, and a kneaded eraser. My selection of tube colors is the same whether working outdoors or in the studio, and I use a plastic John Pike palette in both situations.

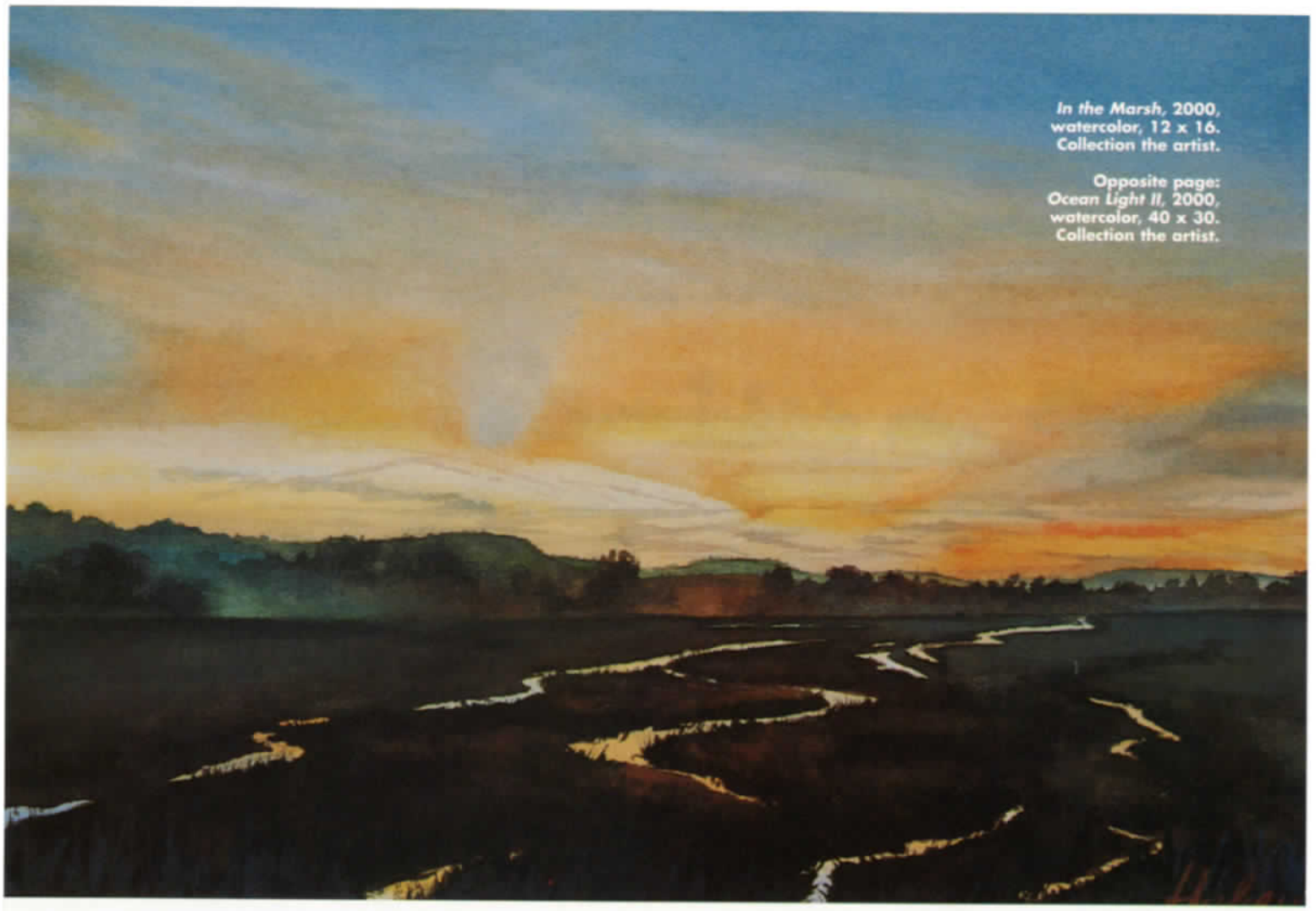
***In a Soft Season*, 2000, watercolor, 30 x 40. Collection the artist.**

MATERIALS FOR STUDIO WORK

My brushes in the studio are the same as the ones I use outdoors, except for the addition of much larger versions. My largest flat washes are 2", 3" and 4". My rounds generally don't change. I leave the sheets untaped and paint on a table that is inclined slightly. This allows the washes to run downill toward me, making gravity do most of the work. The light is primarily natural, although I have balanced artist's lamps and track lights if I need them.

I use 300-lb Arches paper, in sheets measuring 20" x 30", 30" x 40", and 40" x 60". Because of the heavy weight of the paper, I don't need to stretch it even though I use a wet-in-wet technique for most of my painting. Because I work from studies, I can premix large washes, apply them alla prima, and create a spontaneous, fresh painting surface.

So much of watercolor painting depends on the balance of water and pigment, both in the brush and on the paper, and I am always sensitive to the relative dampness of the work as I apply each new stroke. It's easy to ruin a seamless wash by painting across it before it is thoroughly dry, and it is easy to get an offensive hard edge if I wait too long to paint a new wash of color.



In the Marsh, 2000, watercolor, 12 x 16. Collection the artist.

Opposite page: *Ocean Light II*, 2000, watercolor, 40 x 30. Collection the artist.

I AM DRIVING DOWN A LONG TWO-LANE ROAD, RACING THE LATE AFTERNOON SUN. THE ANCIENT LIVE OAKS FORM A PERFECT TUNNEL AS THEY ARCH COMPLETELY OVER THE ROAD, CREATING A STROBE-LIKE EFFECT WITH THE SUNLIGHT THAT MAKES IT HARD TO SEE. I AM HEADING TOWARD A MARSHY INLET NEAR THE OCEAN THAT I HAD SCOUTED EARLIER IN THE DAY, IMAGINING THAT THE LOW WESTERN SUN WOULD MAKE THE PICTURE COME ALIVE. AS I CREST THE HIGH ARCH OF THE LAST BRIDGE, THE ESTUARY IS LAID OUT BEFORE ME IN PERFECT LIGHT AND REPOSE. I PARK THE CAR AND GRAB THE PAINTING KIT. AS I'M SETTING UP, I NOTICE THE BITING GNATS FOR THE FIRST TIME. CLOUDS OF THEM. I SAY TO MYSELF, "ALRIGHT, THIS A CHALLENGE, AND I DO HAVE A CHOICE HERE. I CAN WORK THROUGH THIS, OR I CAN RUN." I DECIDE THAT I DID NOT DRIVE SO FAR TO BACK OFF NOW, SO I GRIT MY TEETH AND TRY TO LOSE MYSELF IN THE WORK, BUT WORK FAST! THE SUN SINKS, THE AIR COOLS, AND THE GNATS ABATE AS A MIST RISES FROM THE SURFACE OF THE GLOWING WATER. THE SUN AND WATER BECOME ONE WHILE THE AIR SHIMMERS WITH A THOUSAND PALE HUES AND THE GRASSES AND RUSHES GENTLY WAVE IN THE SOFT BREEZE. I FEEL THE EARTH TURNING AND EVERYTHING MOVING INEXORABLY FORWARD, PULLING ME ALONG WITH IT. I WANT TO GET IT ALL DOWN, SO, WORKING LIKE A MADMAN, I THROW PAINT EVERYWHERE, RUNNING WASHES TOGETHER AND DROPPING BRUSHES ON THE GROUND. "NO DETAILS YET, NO DETAILS!" I TELL MYSELF. "THERE IS SO MUCH MORE," I THINK, BUT I HAVE TO CONTROL THE IMPULSE TO OVERDO AND CONCENTRATE ON MAKING THE PAINTING WORK NOW. SUNDOWN, AND A FEW TOUCHES MORE AND I AM FINISHED. AFTER THAT PERFORMANCE, I AM READY FOR THE PEACE OF TWILIGHT. AS THE LIGHTS ON THE SAILBOATS ANCHORED FOR THE NIGHT DANCE IN THE PROTECTIVE EMBRACE OF THE BACKWATER, I CANNOT IMAGINE A BETTER LIFE. ■