THE VISUAL TOOLBOX

50 Lessons for Stronger Photographs

DAVID DUCHEMIN

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

If I were to begin a school of photography right now it would send the geeks screaming for the hills . . . or at least avoiding my school in droves. Every student would spend one year with one camera: a fully manual 35 mm camera like the Pentax Spotmatic, or the Canon AE-1. It would have one prime lens and a light meter. Students would be restricted to black and white film only, and they'd be restricted from using anything digital except an iPhone. There'd be no magazines, and no how-to books. Students would spend a year making photographs and talking about them, and would study the work of photographers—past and present—who had something to say and made their mark in some way. They'd study stories, painting, and some art history beyond merely the annals of photographic history. For some people it would be a long, long year.

A friend asked me recently if I felt photographic education were these days too strongly biased towards the technical, and paying not enough attention to the aesthetic. I do. But it isn't just a problem today. It was the same almost 30 years ago when I first picked up a camera. And that was when there was little more to learn technically, than how to focus and expose. Easily mastered with some time and a hundred roles of film. I know I'm painting with a broad brush, but really, what more is there in terms of how the camera itself works? The rest is making a photograph that comes alive in some way for us, or for others.

So because it's not likely anyone's signing up soon for my sadistic school of photography, despite the likelihood that grads would have a better chance at making more powerful images in less time, this is my short-form curriculum. It contains some compromises, because I know my own brand of idealism doesn't appeal to all, nor does it work for all. I've written it to be somewhat non-linear so you can pick any point and begin reading, though the lessons are all interconnected so starting at the front isn't the worst idea. I've also written it with what Scott Belsky, the author of *Making Ideas Happen*, calls a "strong bias towards action." In other words, we learn best by doing and there's a minimum of handholding in these pages. I've given you as much as I feel you need to know in that beautiful brain of yours, the one none of us gives enough credit to. The rest you will learn as you do everything in life: by repetition, failure, and trying again until it becomes yours.

You will notice here an absence of rules, because there are none. We will not be exploring the Rule of Thirds, because there is no such rule and I want to encourage a healthy anarchy among my students. I want to introduce you to a handful of photographers that changed this art form and taught their generation, and later us, to see in new ways. I want to show you principles and invite you to play with them, turn them on their heads and try new things until you prove me wrong. I won't be marking your assignents so there's no one to please and there's no exam to cram for only to regurgitate the contents the next day and then forget about them. There is no right way. Only ways that will give you the tools you need to create new, beautiful, honest things with your camera.

Before we get into it, I want to leave you with an expanded version of a blog post I published called The Magic Wand. I think it sets the stage for what I hope you will take away from this book.

I've been saying for years that there is no magic wand. I was wrong. There is. It's making photographs. Thousands and thousands of photographs. It's being honest with ourselves and not trying to be someone else. It's giving the craft time to grow and not expecting to master something overnight that others have taken a lifetime to do. It's studying photographs and knowing what they evoke in you and why. It's looking to painters and designers and others who work in two dimensions and learning from them. It's relentlessly looking for light, lines, and moments. Some of us can do astonishing things with 12 strobes, and can HDR the crap out of 16 frames taken on a $40,000 Hasselblad, but still can't make a photograph anyone truly gives a damn about. The Internet is full of them: technically perfect, frequently lauded with, "Nice capture, man," and utterly forgettable. I think I'd weep if the best you could say about my photographs is that they're tack sharp or perfectly exposed.

We're all looking for the perfect little box with a hole in it, and they're sexy little things, I'll give you that. The best ones feel good in the hands and I'm the first one to tell you I love the tactility of this craft, but Leica's red dot isn't going to make my photographs any better if they're not already good. Think-

ing differently will do that. Wrestling with new ideas and compositions will do that. Replacing the gear catalogues 1and popular magazines that are packed with ads—those voices telling you that "you can shoot like a pro" with the newest camera—with books of actual photographs will help you do that. Putting down your fancy D4 and picking up a completely manual 35 mm camera for awhile might do that, too. And yes, a small mirrorless camera like the new flock of Fujis might do that for you. Or it won't. If you aren't making beautiful, honest, photographs with the camera you have now, you won't do it with the one you're lusting for. I promise.

I know I've preached this sermon before. I know it gets old. I also know it might get read as a rant, but it's truly not. The camera collectors will collect, with no interest in making something that moves hearts or opens eyes, and God bless'em if that's what makes them happy. But most of you, at least the ones reading this, want that. So do I. We want it so badly it hurts, and the long years ahead to mastery feel like a joy on the rare days they don't feel so damn frustrating. But things get cloudy sometimes and it doesn't help that people like me once in awhile tell you how great this new camera or that new lens is.

And those people—including me sometimes—need also to be reminded that none of it really matters. Just get a camera that feels good in your hands, does what you need it do without getting in the way, and then go make photographs. How new, shiny, sexy, small, large or European your camera is doesn't make a hill of beans' worth of difference to how it moves the human heart. Astonishing work is created on old lenses, Polaroids, Holgas, old Digital Rebels, and the venerable AE-1. You won't impress anyone, other than other photographers, with your list of L-lenses. The only thing most of us truly care about are the photographs—the rest is irrelevant. Don't let it sidetrack you. Envy, gear lust, and the lie that better gear will make more compelling photographs just pulls your mind and heart from making art. Beauty can be made with the simplest of means.

Just as you will become no better an artist or craftsman merely by the purchase or use of a new tool, neither will you become so with new knowledge. You will read nothing in this book that proves to be a magic wand or secret formula of any kind. Some of the lessons will seem basic. They are. But don't dismiss them. You will not get better at this craft with merely a passing familiarity with the basics. Head knowledge will not get you any closer to mastery. It is in performing the basics over and over again that you will find they become intuitive, that suddenly you're speaking this language fluently and creating not just dry prose, but poetry that moves the heart, visually speaking. Mastery doesn't come quickly, and after nearly 30 years I see it more as a journey than a destination—it comes incrementally with practice. There is no secret thing you will learn here or anywhere else, except this: study, practice, and don't forget that your most important assets as an artist are imagination, passion, patience, receptivity, curiosity, and a dogged refusal to follow the rules.

1
MANUAL

R ead your manual. Yes, really. Download it if you have to, and read it. Chances are, it comes in several languages. Read it in yours. Then file it away in case you need it. You're doing this so you'll know what amazing things this glorified box with a hole in it can do. You're doing it because creativity is about possibilities and you never know which possibilities will leap out at you when you discover this camera does in-camera multiple exposures or can show you your previews in high-contrast black and white. I'm not saying you need to use even a fraction of the to-or even remember t—just to read the manual. Trust me.

Now I want you to put your camera on manual exposure and leave it there. Really.

"But I'll miss shots!"

Yes, you will. And stop calling them "shots."

"But I don't understand exposure. I'll screw up."

You'll learn, and your screw-ups will be your best teacher.

"This is hard!"

Try painting.
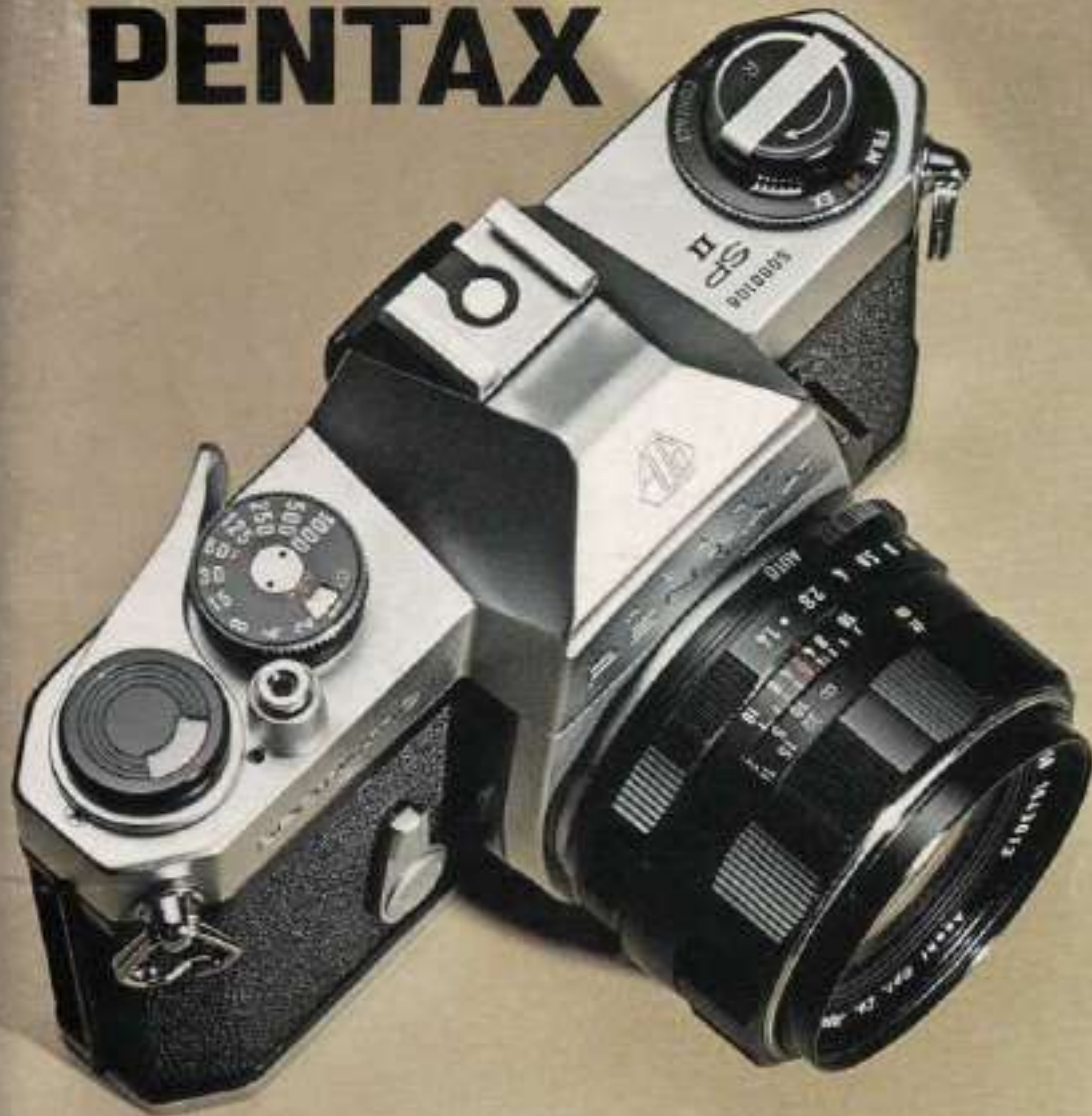
Again, trust me. One day you can go back to Aperture Priority or whatever your preference is, but this is about learning your craft and you'll do that faster and deeper if you stop letting your camera think for you, and build this into your memory. While you go through this book (and I hope for longer than that) make your exposures manually. You can still let the camera focus for you.

2
OPTIMIZE YOUR EXPOSURES

I've already asked you to consider using your camera on Manual mode for your exposures. Trust me when I tell you that it will make you better at what you do. Now make the best exposures possible. Before I tell you how to do that, I want to make clear three important assumptions. One: You're using a digital camera. Two: You're making RAW files, not JPGS. And three, you plan to refine these images in the digital darkroom later, which is a must if you're in RAW mode. Now, let's make the best possible exposure, which means creating the best possible digital negative.

The digital negative is really just information—a series of ones and zeroes—and the *best* digital negative is the one with the most data. Why? Because most of us are going to want to refine that image in the digital darkroom and more data means greater flexibility and ability to do more with the image before the quality deteriorates. You can do two things to get the best quality digital file. The first is using the lowest ISO you can get away with. Sensors are getting really, really good at higher ISO, but you still generally want to use the lowest possible ISO if less noise is important to you. Secondly, understand your histogram and expose to the right of it.

R **33.1** G **32.4** B **33.9** %

☐ Original Photo

The histogram shows this image at least one stop underexposed.

ISO 800   31 mm   f / 7.1   1/160 sec

☐ Original Photo
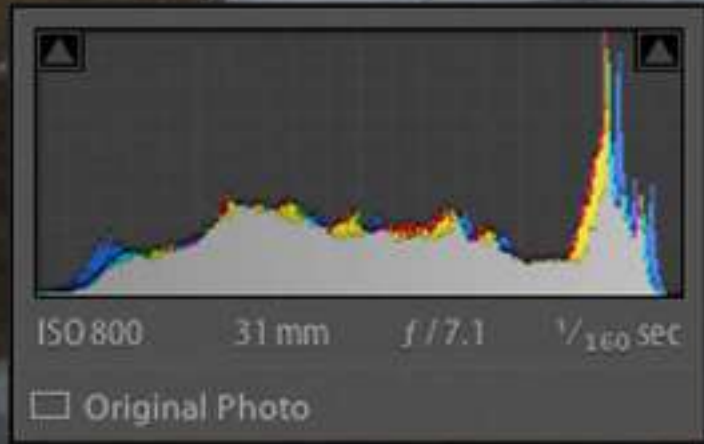
Adjusted in Lightroom, the histogram shows this image much closer to the way I should have shot it.

THE HISTOGRAM

The histogram (Figure 2.1) is a graphic representation of how much light—from blacks to whites—has been captured by the sensor to represent our scene. It'll look a little like a mountain range. The exact shape of the mountain range will vary from scene to scene because each scene is different, and there's nothing you can do (unless you're using flash or working in a studio where you've got control over this kind of thing) about the shape of the histogram, so forget about it right now. What you need to pay attention to is the where the mountains sit, from left to right, within the frame of the histogram graph. Figures 2.2 and 2.3 (next page) show images with no details in the white and no details in the blacks respectively. Losing details can be a big deal, but so can losing unnecessary information.

Remember, the best digital negative for anyone who plans to work on it in the digital darkroom is the one with the most

BLACKS   MIDTONES   WHITES
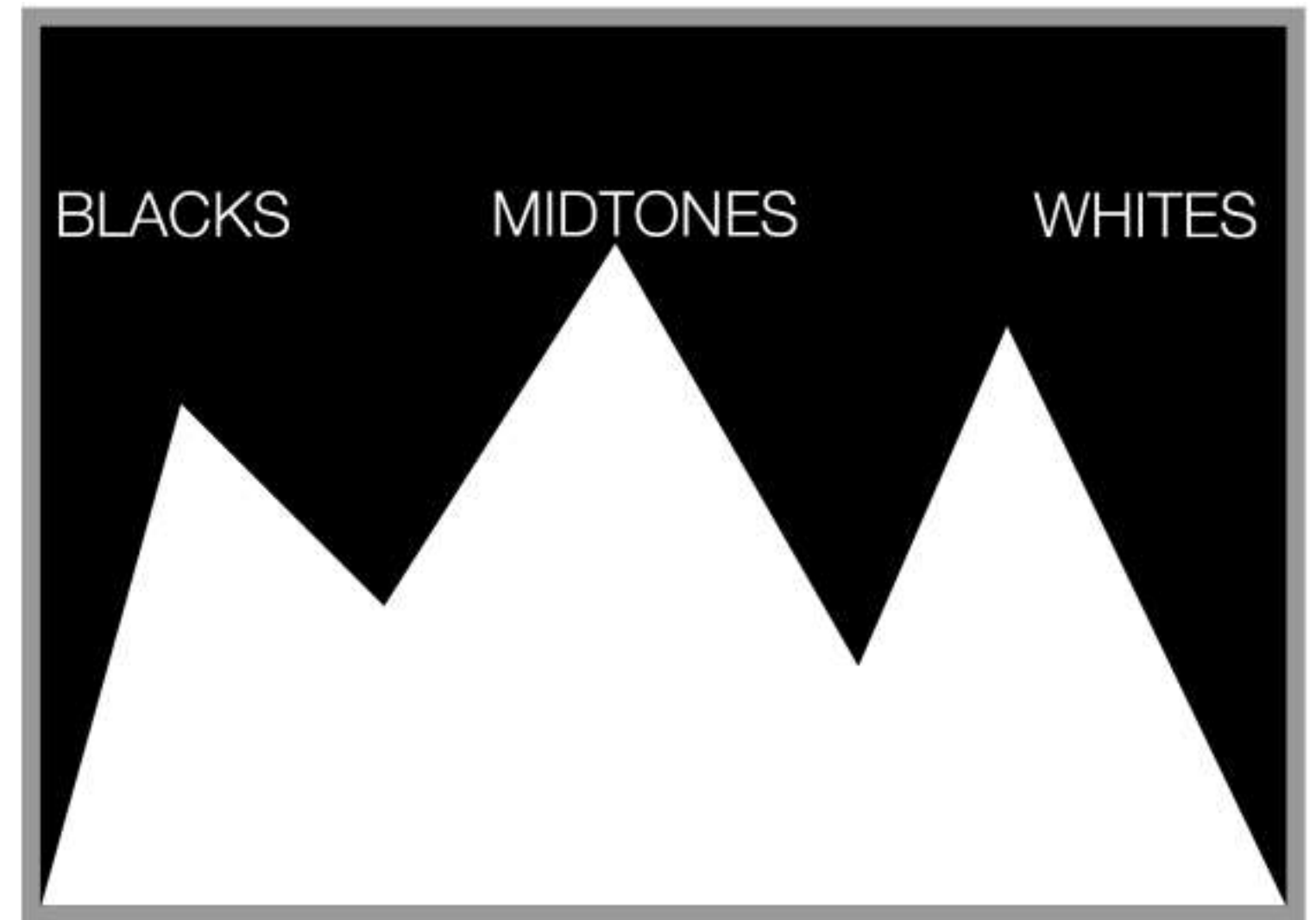
Figure 2.1

Figure 2.2

Figure 2.3

information. The histogram can tell you whether you're getting more or less data. Here's the short version: a histogram that sits more to the left of the graph has less data than the same histogram sitting to the right. Why? Because the amount of potential information contained on the right is exponentially more than what is contained on the left. If Figure 2.4 represented a 5-stop histogram, there'd be way more data in that first stop, and therefore way more flexibility because it represents a more robust file. The left represents the blacks and shadows and the right represents the whites and highlights. Without going into the math, there is much, much more information in a histogram sitting to the right—as long as it doesn't go off the right side of the graph—than there is in the same histogram sitting to the left.
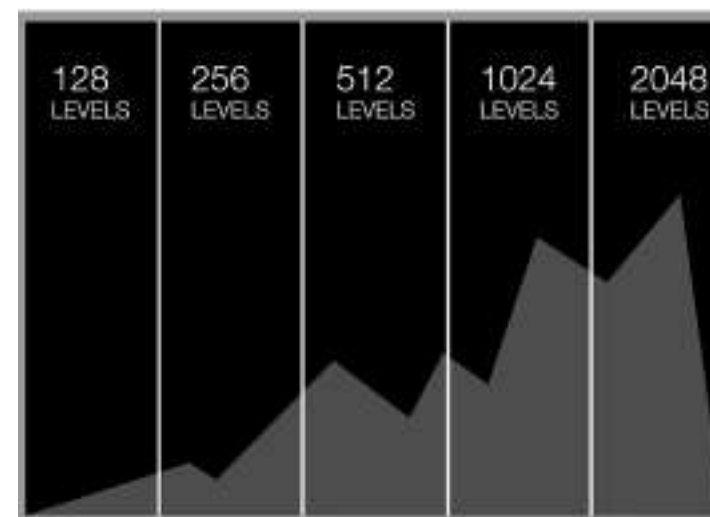
Figure 2.4

Where this trips us up is because often the ideal digital negative doesn't look great in the back-of-camera preview; it looks too bright, or washed out. This is why I use my LCD

only for looking at the histogram, checking focus, and being critical about my composition. I never use it to judge the exposure without the histogram. Histograms don't lie. So the principle is this: expose to give yourself the most amount of information, easily made possible by exposing to push the histogram to the right, without allowing it to run off the right side. The exception to this is when there are bright elements in the frame without details, and they're meant to be without detail. The sun would be one of these, as would glints of sun off reflective surfaces. So it's not so much a question of never allowing the histogram to run off to the right, but when it does, to determine in which highlights are you losing detail. For this reason my "blinkies" are always on. Highlight warnings can be set in your camera. You know where to find them: just read your manual. Go turn them on. Now when you preview your image you'll see "blinkies" (you'll know them when you see them) where the highlights are blown and you can make a decision about which ones you want to let blow out, and which ones you need details in.

Sometimes your scene will exceed the limits of what your sensor can capture, then you just have to make a choice. My own choice is almost always to expose as far right as I can without letting important highlight details get lost, and let the shadows fall where they may. I like shadows and I don't always need details there, but exposing to the right—and getting the most amount of data—will give me the best shot at recovering some of those shadow details later if I want to. You could also choose to do a couple different exposures with different exposure values and blend them later, but I opt not to do this. Sometimes a flash will solve this, and yes, sometimes a filter (like a split neutral density filter) will help, but I want to give you the broadest strokes and not get into the minutiae.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Turn the blinkies on. Stop using the LCD to judge exposure and colour, and use that histogram. Now go make some photographs, and keep the exposure as far right as you can. Tweak exposure and colour later in your preferred processing program.

3
MASTER
THE TRIANGLE

When I learned photography, I learned it as first a technical craft, long years before ever truly beginning to learn it as an aesthetic one. While the technical is important and forms the spine of our craft, what I should have been taught all along is that every decision I made also has aesthetic results and that those results are my choice. That choice gets easier when you're comfortable with the give-and-take of the exposure triangle, because you'll understand what you're choosing—and what you're giving up with that choice—with respect to the aesthetic of the image. So to get started, here's a basic lesson.

Light enters the camera, hits the film or sensor for a certain amount of time, and makes an image. Too much light and the resulting image is overexposed (if there's an image at all on that white print). See? There really is too much of a good thing. Not enough light and your photograph will be underexposed, or completely black. Sometimes less is just less.

There are three basic ways to control how much light gets in. The first is to control the sensitivity of the sensor or film itself. With either medium you will choose an ISO that is an international standard for light sensitivity. ISO 100 is "slow"

SHUTTER SPEED   APERTURE

+ FREEZE ACTION
- BLURS ACTION

+ GREATER DEPTH OF FOCUS
- SHALLOWER DEPTH OF FOCUS

- LESS NOISE, LESS SENSITIVE
+ MORE NOISE, MORE SENSITIVE

ISO

Each setting has an aesthetic effect on the image. You can pick two; the third is where you compromise.
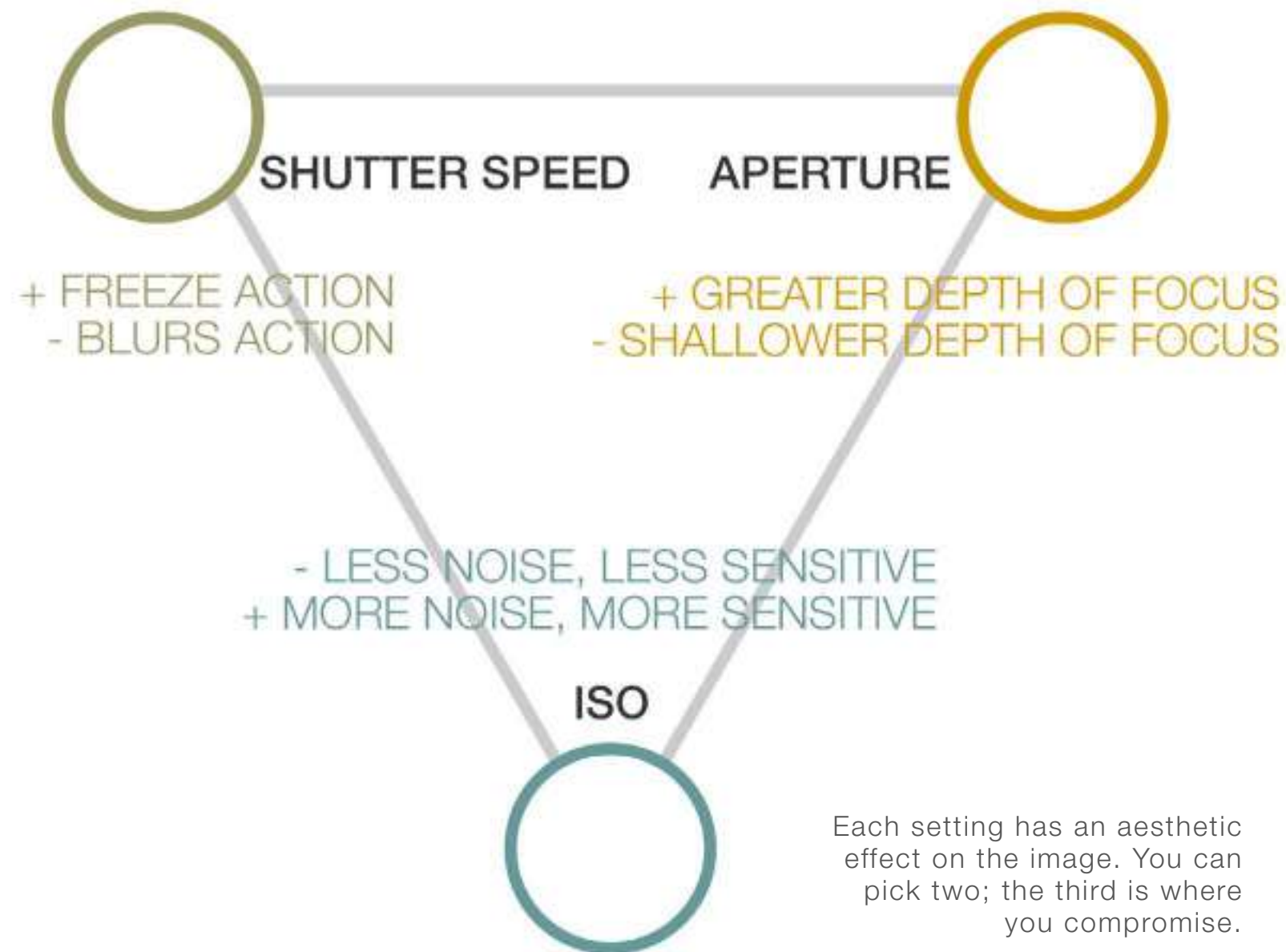
which means much less sensitive to light. ISO 3200 is "fast" or much more light sensitive. The slower the ISO the more light you'll need to let in through the lens or shutter. The faster the ISO, the less light you'll need, but the image will often get grainier—or noisier in digital capture—as a result. There's a little give and take here, as there is with the other two points on the exposure triangle, which I'll explain in a moment.

The second way to control the light is the aperture in the lens, which is a diaphragm that opens and closes to control the light. It's measured in cryptic little numbers that only mathematicians and practitioners of the occult understand. F/1.8 is a very large opening despite it's small number. F/22 is a very small opening despite it's large number. A large opening lets in more light, and a small opening lets in less. The side effect of this is that the tighter hole focuses the light much more than the larger hole. So letting in more light gives you much less focus from foreground to background. Letting in less light gives you more focus. Remember how I said there's a give and take? This is part of it. Not only are we tasked with making a good exposure, but we also have to choose how we make that exposure because each choice has an aesthetic consequence. In this case, how we control the light with the aperture also controls the quality of focus.

The third way we can control light is with the shutter itself. In most cameras the shutter is like a curtain hiding the sensor from light until we press the shutter button. The shutter opens across the sensor for a specified amount of time, exposing the sensor to the light coming through the aperture in the lens, to the sensor, which is more or less sensitive to light depending on the ISO we've set. The give and take? Fast shutter speeds will freeze action because the sensor sees that action for such a brief fraction of time. 1/1000 of a second is pretty quick. Slower shutter speeds, like 1/15 of a second can blur action because the shutter is open longer and sees more movement in that time, recording it as a blur.

That's the Exposure triangle. They work together and where you push the camera in one way, it will demand a little pull in another. In choosing what you want the photograph to look like, if your first priority is a fast shutter speed (1/1000), then you will have to use either a much larger aperture (f/1.8) or, if you also need some depth of focus and need, say, f/8, then you'll also need a higher ISO. It's give and take. If numbers confuse you, as they do me, it'll take awhile before you're comfortable, but you'll get it.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Pick a scene and get comfortable—you're going to be here for a while. Assuming you're on Manual exposure mode, meter the scene and then adjust it so your histogram is well to the right. Begin with the highest shutter speed and widest aperture, with ISO at something like 400. Now slow the shutter down a stop, and   open the aperture. Make another frame. Check the histogram. Now do it again, and again, until you're at the tightest aperture. Now keep going by raising your ISO. Pull the images all into your digital darkroom and study the progression. Do the exercise again until you're comfortable with the give and take and with each adjustment you have a sense of what's going on. I know it's basic, but even professional musicians do the scales as practice. The more natural this is to you, the easier it will be to make decisions when it matters. Few of us do our best creative work when we're frustrated.

4
USE A SLOWER SHUTTER SPEED

From the beginning, we are taught to freeze motion. The fastest shutter speeds get all the glory; I think it's partly our weird addiction to perfect sharpness in all areas of the image. But the sense of motion created by a slower shutter speed brings energy and life to a photograph. The longer I photograph, the more comfortable I become at the slower end of the shutter dial. I already have nearly 30 years of usually sharp photographs under my belt and I'm no longer asking, "Are they sharp?" I'm asking, "Are they alive?"

You don't need a fast shutter speed to give a sharp image. As long as there are parts of an image that are sharp, we're not bothered with other areas that are blurred due to motion. It's not a question of sharpness, it's a question of which part of the image is sharp, or intentionally choosing to make none of the image sharp, and we'll get to that, too. For now I want you to spend some time getting comfortable with slower shutter speeds; they're a powerful way of communicating life and action, and can bring life to an otherwise static photograph.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

You pick the amount of time, but I'll suggest a week. No shutter speeds over 1/60 of a second. Bonus points if you give me a full week, with one day on 1/60, the next day on 1/30, then 1/15, and so on. One shutter speed, all day. You might have to seek lower light situations to do this, or put a polarizing filter on to knock back the light a little. Your ISO will be low. Don't just put the time in; that's not the point. Look at what subjects work better on which shutter speeds. Study your results. At what point does a moving person look graceful and at what point does that same person blur so entirely they almost disappear? At what point does your camera begin to shake so much that you might be better with a tripod? What speeds give you results you respond to in some way? Each shutter speed you get comfortable with will add a new tool to your visual toolbox, a new way to communicate with greater intent.

5
LEARN TO PAN

Once you've started playing with slower shutter speeds, it's time to harness some of the possibilities. If the open shutter allows elements moving in relation to the camera to blur, then moving the camera at the same speed as a moving object will cause the moving subject to remain sharp while blurring the background. Getting good at panning isn't easy, but it's a great technique to have in your toolbox as it lends greater energy to a scene.

Pulling it off consistently takes practice, but the basics are easy to understand:

- You want to choose a shutter speed appropriate to the speed of the moving subject. Panning with a walking person will require a much slower shutter, like 1/15, than panning with a moving car that might be done best at 1/60 or 1/100.

- Brace your camera as securely as you can, holding it close to the body, and tight to the eye.

- To pan, move the camera with the subject, and while the natural thing is to begin panning from a natural standing position, you end up a little twisted and unstable. If you know where your subject is headed, it's better to start

facing that direction and then *twist* into the direction from which they will come. Moving from the hips as you pan will allow you to unwind into the most stable position.

- Focusing is usually pretty easy. The slower shutter speed will require a lower ISO and a tighter aperture. The tighter aperture will give you greater depth of field, which will help if you don't quite nail the focus, and while you might normally not want that much depth of field, here it's OK because all that background will be blurred into a streak of motion.

- Use high speed burst mode. It'll take more than one frame to get this right.

- Don't get so caught up in this that you forget to compose. You're creating an image about motion—it's dynamic, so use a dynamic composition. Placing the subject almost anywhere other than in the middle is a good start.

- Practice, and don't get discouraged. It takes work to find the right shutter speed, and even more to get the speed of your own motion to match the speed of your subject.

6
USE INTENTIONAL CAMERA MOVEMENT

Almost as soon as we pick up a camera we are told to hold it still, but intentionally moving the camera can create dramatic results and is a powerful tool in creating impressionist or abstract photographs. Panning is one type of intentional camera movement, but the moving subject dictates the direction and speed of that movement. To use intentional camera movement more expressively, the movement of the camera and the speed of the shutter are determined by your imagination. Trees become more vertical if the movement is vertical, streaked by a slow shutter and a rapid up and down of the camera. Pinpoints of light become brush strokes and take the shape of the path of the moving camera. Colours blend and blur. This technique, which is really just an idea from which all kinds of possibilities open up, has the potential create some unpredictable but beautiful photographs.

- Consider using this technique with a moving subject—not panning—but in a similar or contrasting movement. Stationary subjects are fine too, but movement along different planes adds another visual element.

- Experiment with shutter speeds. To get them lower you'll need a tighter aperture, and a lower ISO. Want them lower still? A polarizer or a 3 or 4-stop Neutral Density filter will help.

- Experiment with motion, moving the camera up and down, left and right, in and out, diagonally, even spinning.

- Pay attention to the lines and colour. Remember this is not a literal image, so the specific details of your subject are less important than the feeling evoked.

- Be conscious that while you know what your subject is, others may not. If it's important to communicate something about this subject—a cat for instance—then be sure the readers of your image get this sense without having been there.

- The unpredictability of this process is one of the best things about it; be aware of your expectations.

The photographs in this chapter are of a bouquet of red and orange orchids, which I took using the Slow Camera app on my iPhone.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Head out with your camera, and for a while see if you can stop thinking so literally about the scenes in front of you and look instead for colour and shape. If you're not exposing manually, set your camera to Tv or Shutter priority, and set it to something really slow. Try ½ second initially. Your aperture will have to be pretty tight, and your ISO as low as it goes. Find some vertical trees and, while moving the camera up and down, press the shutter. It'll take some time to get the timing right. Now slow the shutter a little more, and do it again. Move on. Find something colourful and do the same exercise but move the camera in a circle, or back and forth. Find a high-key scene, one with lots of contrast, and do the same. Experiment with slightly faster shutters. Now find something that's already moving, and combine intentional camera movement with the motion of your subject.

If you enjoy this, and want to play with it more often on your iPhone, try the app Slow Shutter, which is what I used to create the photographs that accompany this chapter. Even if the resulting work doesn't thrill you, it can help open your eyes to lines and energy already in a scene, and give you new ideas for more static compositions.

7
USE WIDE LENSES TO CREATE A SENSE OF INCLUSION

One of the best lessons I ever learned was to look at our lenses in terms of their behaviour, more than simply how wide they are or how big they make things. Our lenses are a huge part of what we say in the photographs we make. In some cases they magnify, and for the photographer making photographs of lions on the Serengeti, that's an important behaviour, but it's not the *only* behaviour. It drives me crazy when I hear photographers telling each other that this lens is a "portrait lens" and that lens is a "landscape lens" or when you go to such and such a place you won't need one lens or another. Lenses are about aesthetics, not applications, and unless you tell me exactly the kind of aesthetic you want, it would be extremely presumptuous of me to tell you what tool you should have to make your photograph. Despite the logic that longer lenses are the "right" lenses, my best photographs of grizzly bears were made with my shorter telephoto lens and my 16-35 mm. It's purely a question of aesthetics and these days I know my aesthetic preferences well enough to know that— hands down—I prefer the intimacy, energy, and inclusive feeling I can create with a shorter lens to the compressed, isolated, flatter feeling of a long lens. But they each have their place.

In this lesson, and the next, we're going to look at the extremes of our lens choices—the wide angle and the telephoto—and how the two can be used to say different things and create different visual experiences. And then you're going to go out and become familiar with these tools.

- As the name implies, wide-angle lenses have a wider-than-normal angle of view. They have the exact opposite effect of a telephoto lens, which has the appearance of compressing elements: they appear to push those elements apart.

- Because a wide-angle lens more closely approximates the peripheral vision of normal life (if not the magnification), it is capable of creating photographs that create a much more immersive or inclusive feeling for the reader of the photograph.

- Because wide-angle lenses diminish the size of elements in the frame relative to normal life, they must be pushed in closer to a subject to keep them larger in the frame, and doing so exaggerates the lines. These exaggerated lines, and the need to get so much closer, have the potential to create images with greater energy.

- Wide-angle lenses are harder to use because they allow so much to be included in the frame, so greater intention and care is needed to choose a point of view that controls the foreground and the background.

- Wider lenses are prone to distortion—an aesthetic effect all its own—and can give a comic look to people placed too close, but they can have the same effect on lines, bending them and leaning them in ways that need to be chosen carefully. The more the lens is tilted off-axis (pointed up at a building instead of straight on, for example) the greater the effect.

- Remember, a lens can't change perspective. A wider lens can exaggerate the lines that result from a change in perspective, but the only thing that can change perspective is the position of the camera itself. There's no substitute for moving the camera.

ASSIGNMENT

Spend a week exclusively with a lens that is the full-frame equivalent of 16-35mm. The wider, the better, but not wider than 14, and not a fish-eye lens.

Notice how much closer you have to get to fill the frame. If you don't get closer the elements in the frame will most likely lose impact because they don't fill the frame.

Notice how much more energy the photograph gains when you get closer, especially from diagonal lines.

Notice how much more difficult it is to control the elements in the wider frame, and to isolate those elements.

Which scenes did the wide lens work particularly well with, and whichscenes would you chose a different lens for next time?

8
LEARN TO ISOLATE

It's been said that photography is the art of exclusion. In making a compelling photograph, it's as important to exclude what we do not want within the frame of our image as it is to include what we want. In fact, when we include what we want without carefully excluding the rest, we introduce too much to the image and we dilute the impact of the elements we were hoping would make the photograph what it is. Honing this art of exclusion is a significant step forward on the photographic journey, and learning to isolate your subject is an important part of that. Here are a couple significant ways you can begin to isolate your subject and give it greater power within the frame, undiluted by the noise of elements that do nothing to help you tell the story. We'll look at two other ways—the use of shallow depth of field and longer lenses—in the next two lessons.

POINT OF VIEW

The first and most obvious way to isolate elements with the frame is the intentional use of point of view. What appears and does not appear in front of, around, and behind your subject, has everything to do with where you stand and put your camera. Yes, there are plenty of situations in which moving around will do nothing to get rid of background chaos or unwanted

elements, but too often a simple change of position can move that unwanted element in relation to your subject. A little movement to the left or right, standing on a ladder or lying on your belly, can push those elements from the frame. Just playing with our point of view can improve an image with no other changes. Next time you're photographing something, take a little extra time to be aware of what is both in and out of the frame, and try moving (do a complete circle around your subject if you have to) and see if you can't strengthen your image that way.

OPTICS

Of course there are plenty of times that moving in relation to the subject isn't preferable. Moving changes the perspective, and with it, the lines. Moving changes what the light is doing and if you've got your heart set on a backlit photograph, then moving 180 degrees will change the photograph completely. When that happens, it's time to explore other options. The first one I try is a change of angle of view. Where a change of point of view (POV) means a change of position of the photographer relative to her subject, a change of angle of view is all about which lens you choose. A wide-angle lens, as the name

implies, has an angle of view that is extremely inclusive; it pulls a lot into the frame. By definition, a telephoto is a much tighter angle of view. The most obvious move in pursuing a more isolated subject is to use the longer telephoto lens, and that often leads to beautifully simple images, free from extraneous elements. Next time you're trying to really isolate something, try backing up and using a longer lens. But that's the next lesson, so I'm getting ahead of myself. It's also not the only way to use optics to make a subject stand out.

A wide-angle lens can also be used to isolate, though it'll involve both a change of optics (put that wide-angle lens on!) and a change in position (get as close as you dare!). A wide-angle lens pushed in close will still be a wide-angle lens and will still include more elements than a tighter, longer, lens. So how can that be used to isolate? Isolating an element is about making it more prominent than others, giving it greater

Using a wider lens (16mm) forced me to push in tighter, making the foreground larger relative to the rest of the elements, isolating it in a way a longer lens would not have done.

visual mass, and diminishing distractions. When you push a wider lens much closer to your subject, in the right circumstances it does two things simultaneously: it enlarges the subject and diminishes the rest. When a longer lens doesn't give you the look you're hoping for, or excludes too much of the context, try going much wider and much closer.

MOTION

Sometimes the use of depth of field doesn't help. And sometimes it just doesn't give you the aesthetic you're looking for. Motion can be a great isolator. When the subject is moving, you can use a slower shutter speed and pan the camera to create a sharp subject against a blurred background. When the subject is stationary, but its surroundings are in motion, you can use the reverse technique to keep the subject sharp while the moving surroundings blur around them. Both techniques require practice and a slow shutter speed. In the case of allowing the surroundings to blur around a sharp subject, you'll also

need a means to stabilize the camera, like a tripod. A friend of mine uses her handbag; others use beanbags or part of buildings. However you do it, the longer shutter speeds create blur of the once distinct and distracting elements and simplify them, allowing you to isolate—or more clearly point to—your desired subject. If you're skipping around this book, now would be a good time to review lessons 4 and 5.

These aren't the only techniques. You can also use a shallow depth of field (DOF), but we'll talk about that in lesson 10. Consider too, for example, the role of light and the ability to blow out a background or plunge areas into shadow. However you do it, the most important part of this lesson for some will simply be the awareness that intentionally isolated elements can dramatically strengthen a photograph, giving the main subject greater visual mass, and allowing other elements to remain outside the frame, gain reduced visual mass, or fade into blur.

9
ISOLATION: USE A LONGER LENS

Telephoto lenses (anything over a 35 mm equivalent of 50-60 mm) have the opposite effect of a wide angle, and the longer they get (200, 300, 600 mm), the greater the difference. As telephoto lenses get longer in focal length, they have tighter and tighter angles of view and greater and greater magnification. They excel at pulling far things near, compressing elements, and really isolating—not just to get that great shot of a duck, but to set that duck (or tree, or child on a swing)— against its context and excluding all else. Photography is as much about what we exclude from the frame as it is about what we include. Every element in the frame exerts some visual mass (a subject we'll talk more about later), and the more elements exerting that pull on the eye, the less impact each of those elements has. Sometimes the best tool for achieving impact is isolation, and the shallow angle of view and illusion of compression that's created by telephoto lenses does isolation really well.

The other advantage of using a longer lens is that the depth of field at a given aperture appears much shallower than with a wider lens. In my humanitarian work, I've often put a 200/2.8 lens on and backed up a little to give me a bit more context, but still powerfully isolating my subject. Shallow depth of field and a tight angle of view make background control much easier.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Beg, borrow, or steal a 200 mm lens and, resisting the urge to use it merely to bring far stuff a little closer, pay close attention to three behaviours:

1. How tight is the angle of view? What are you able to exclude from the frame? You might not want the main subject to fill the frame, so back up a little. I know, it's as counterintuitive as getting close with a wide lens, but back up and use that telephoto. When I use a wide lens I think, "Wide lens close," and when I use a long lens, I think, "Long lens distant."

2. How do foreground and background elements appear compressed? Could that change what you're trying to say with your photograph? Could it create a more graphic look than a wide or standard lens in the same scene?

3. How does the combination of a long lens and a shallow depth of field (wide aperture) allow you to isolate elements in ways you couldn't do with a wide or standard lens?

This Whooper swan was photographed tight with a 300 mm lens.

10
ISOLATION: USE A WIDER APERTURE

We've already touched on the ability of a longer lens to isolate subjects and give them greater visual mass—or pull on the eye—than they might have otherwise. A shallow depth of field can strengthen that, but it doesn't have to be used in conjunction with a long lens. In fact, photographs made with a wider lens can often benefit because the wide lens makes background control difficult simply by virtue of there being so much more background to wrestle into place. A softer focus on the background can diminish the pull on the eye, which in turn strengthens the impact of the elements in focus. Here's what you need to know about depth of field:

• Depth of field at any given aperture is narrower if your subject is closer than if your subject is further away. Camera-to-subject distance matters, so if you've opened your aperture as wide as you can and you want way less depth of field, get closer. Vice versa if you want more depth of field at a given aperture; step back a little.

300 mm @ f/7.1. This focal length and the extreme proximity of my subject blurs the background beautifully.
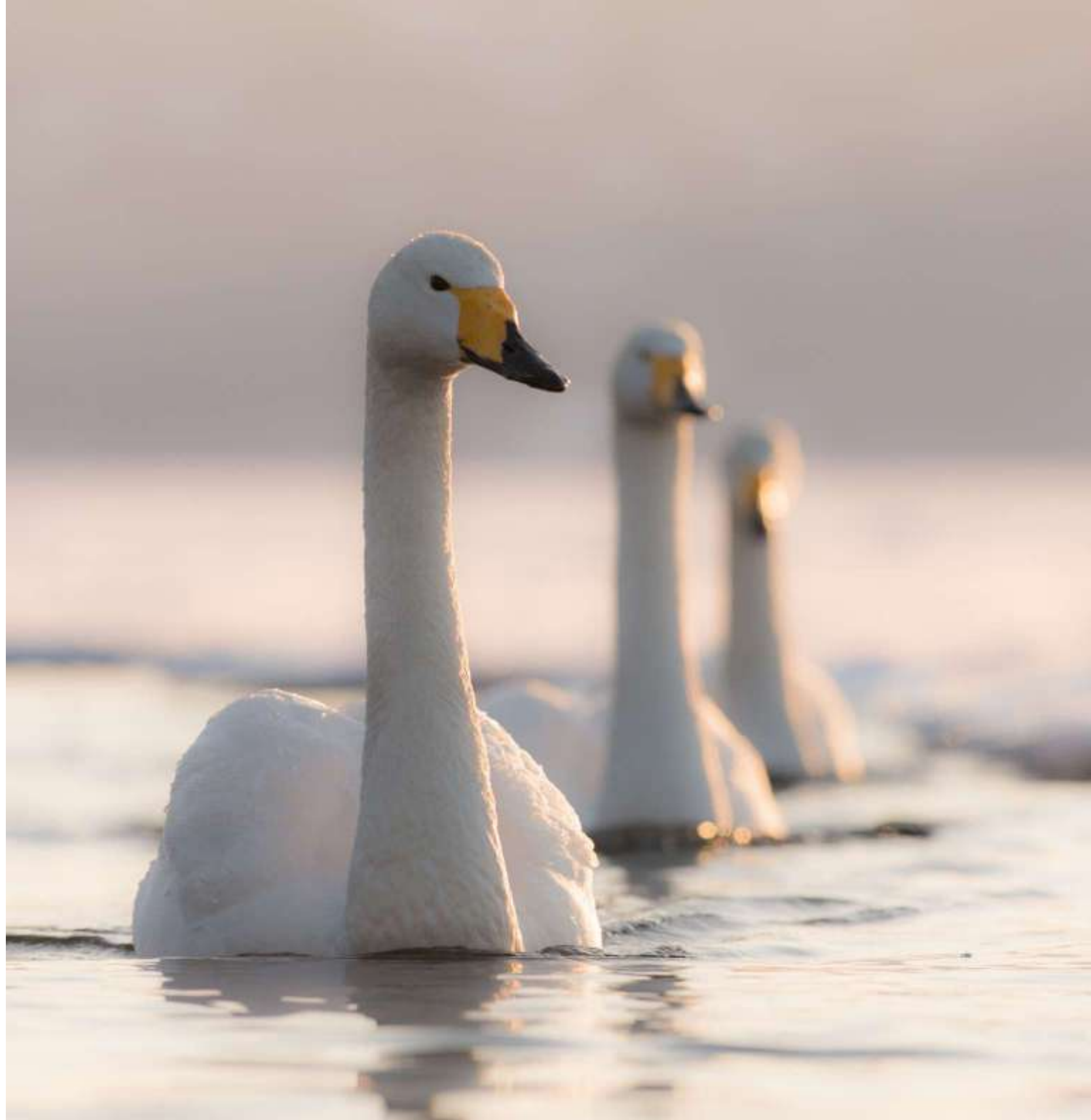
- Depth of field can be seen through the lens, but only if you tell the camera to stop the lens down for you. Remember when you read the manual? There was a button called the Depth of Field Preview. Using it will cause the viewfinder to get dark, which makes things harder to see, but I find the DOF Preview to be very helpful.

- It's helpful to know that the in-focus zones in front of and behind the subject are not the same. The in-focus subject does not even split the in-focus zone, but cuts it in thirds: one-third in focus in front of the subject, and two-thirds behind. Knowing this allows you to pull the focus back towards you if you're finding the background too sharp and you've already opened the aperture as far as you can. Or, you can get closer.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Spend a day or two making three sets of photographs, all of them the same subject, focused at the same point, but changing the aperture. Start with f/1.8 or as wide as you can go, then f/6.3, then f/16. The more you get a sense for the difference between shallow focus, deep focus, and the middle ground in between, the more able you'll be able to comfortably make choices without the mystery. Now do the same with a subject quite close to you, perhaps within 3 feet. Notice how much shallower the shallow zone of focus is, and by comparison, how much deeper the deep zone (f/16) is.

11
USE TIGHTER APERTURES TO DEEPEN FOCUS

I'm not sure how it happened that we become so obsessed with wide apertures and thin-as-a-leaf planes of focus, but there is something we seem to like about shallow depth of field. Perhaps it's the way it simplifies the image, softens the details into colour and shape, allowing us to subtly guide the eye of the reader where we want it to go. But while dreamy bokeh (a Japanese word used to describe what, without this word, I'd just call the blurry-out-of-focus-bits) gets all the glory, it's not the only tool in the box. I spent years shooting wide open, happy as can be with my shallow depth of field, until I began making photographs with greater depth, and wanted my photographs to have sharpness beyond the first few feet of foreground.

Photographs are about light, lines, and moments. What those lines look like, and the kind of information or impact they are allowed to carry in an image, will depend, in part, on how focused they are. And what is in—or out—of focus can significantly change how the story is told. For instance, a bride may look stunning in her gown, the background allowed to fall off into fuzzy oblivion, but if the groom is in that background, blurring him doesn't just render him a soft, tuxedoed man, but a detail about which you are saying, "the particular identity

of this man doesn't really matter." You might not need him perfectly sharp, but don't get so seduced by the look of shallow depth of field that you let your storytelling skills go dull.

The same things you needed to know about wider apertures are things you still need to know about tighter ones, so if you skipped Lesson 11, head back there and read up. But now we're talking about tighter apertures and deeper depth of field, so here are a few things you need to know specifically about this:

• If you're going for maximum sharpness, the initial temptation is to crank the aperture as tight as it'll go. Dial it down to f/22 and leave it there. But while this seems right in theory, in practice lenses get a little softer at the tightest apertures, so you're not likely to gain much in going too tight. I usually stop around f/16 these days, focus a third into my scene (remember the 1/3 in front, 2/3 in back rule about depth of focus?), and leave it there.

Antarctica. 16 mm, 1/400 @ f/11.
Sharp from front to back.
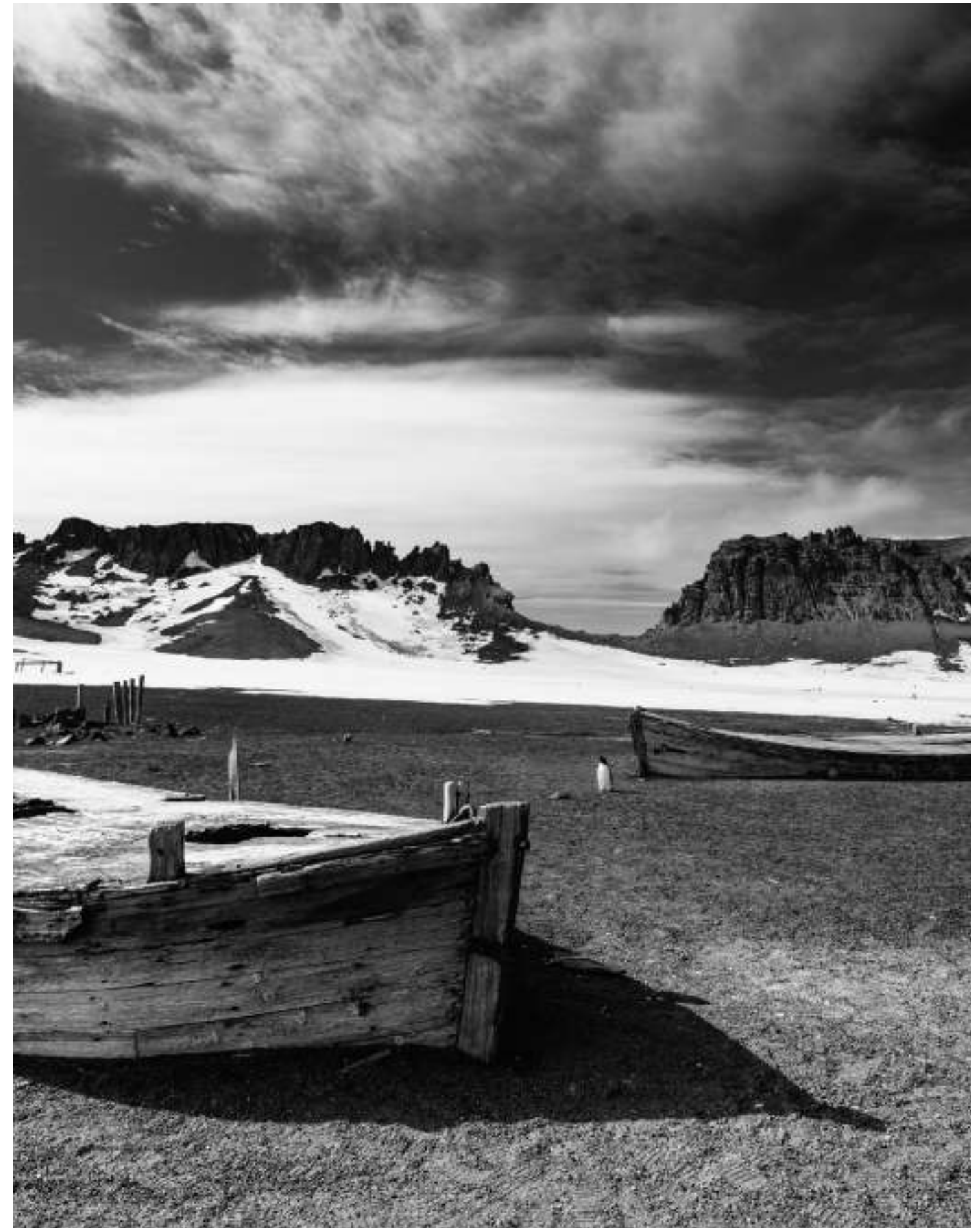
- The tighter your aperture, the deeper the focus. This extends even to things like dust on your sensor. If you've got dust there—and most of us do—then you might not have noticed it while making photographs at f/1.2. You're going to notice it now if you're at f/16. Don't panic. Get the sensor cleaned and be a little more diligent about keeping it clean.

- A tighter aperture has another curious effect, and one I use often. At around f/16 small pinpoints of light become starbursts. You may not specifically need your plane of focus to be that deep, but choosing the tighter aperture is the only way to render this effect without digging through bins of used filters from the 1980s.

ASSIGNMENT

Spend a few days shooting at f/10. It's tight enough to give you good depth of field, and not so tight that it'll really restrict you to low shutter speed. Bump your ISO up a little if you have to. What I'm hoping you'll notice is that your images—particularly if you tend to shoot wide open—will look sharper. Sharper elements have greater visual mass, or pull on the eye. That's neither good nor bad, but a reality you need to be aware of because your job as a photographer is to manage or manipulate that visual mass. You may need to choose your moments more carefully, change your point of view to give you a cleaner background or use a longer lens, all of which will allow you to keep the benefit you've gained from a sharper, deeper focus, while still controlling how the reader looks at the photograph and what she thinks or feels about it.

12
USE BOKEH TO ABSTRACT

We notice bokeh as the shape of out-of-focus highlights in the background of an image, and while it's true that it can be beautiful, we often relegate it to a happy bi-product of the photograph we're making of something else—some other element in the foreground—instead of the very point of the image. Using the aesthetic possible with out-of-focus elements, we're able to reduce sharp line and form to something less specific and something more abstract. There are other ways to do it, but using a lack of focus can be as powerful a way to abstract as any other.

Since the birth of photography, we've been striving for greater focus and creating sharper optics, but that should only create possibilities for us, not tie us down; there's no reason every image we create should be focused. Sharpness of focus creates one aesthetic, lack of focus another, and both can be used to say different things and create very different photographic experiences.
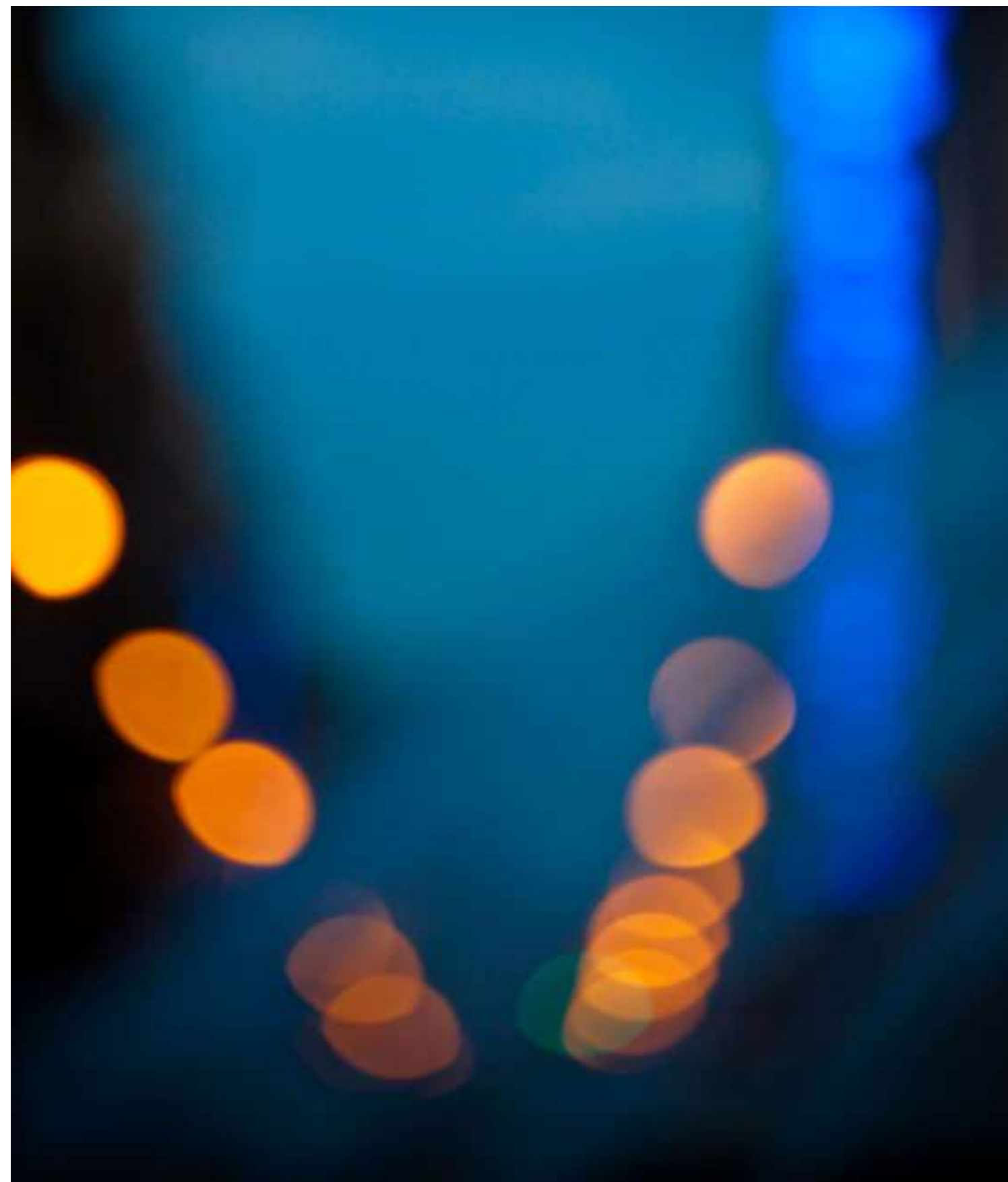
YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Spend a day getting over your need for sharp focus. Try different subjects, at different times of day. Backlit dew on the grass in the early morning. Streetlights in the evening. Combine techniques and add some slower shutter speeds and streetlights become halos; car lights become streaks of diamond and ruby. Add some intentional camera movement and see what happens. The point is never to "do it right." The point is to add as many different visual effects to your vocabulary, to light your imagination on fire. This is a chance to play with light and shape in new ways without the need to be literal.

Technically, the easiest way to accomplish this is to throw your lens and body to manual focus. To abstract close elements, focus to the extreme distance until the amount of de-focus matches your intent. To abstract distant elements, focus on the extreme foreground. Keep your aperture wide open, but using your depth of field preview, experiment with different apertures. In what way does the look of the bokeh change?

I'm going to add a new element to your assignment because I've seen how well this works with my students: I want you to not only go play with this, but to create a small body of work, to begin thinking not in single images, but in a series. In this case, my suggestion is to think in terms of 6-8 images that work together in some way. They might complement or contrast each other. They might be variations on a theme, or an exploration of the full colour spectrum. What matters is that you begin to explore things laterally and begin to get familiar with the idea of creating bodies of work.

13
CONSIDER YOUR COLOUR PALETTE

One of the things you'll notice consistently about the bodies of work of photographers who've been doing this for a while is that many of them, though not all, seem to work very intentionally to create a consistency within that body of work—some kind of unifying element. Often that element is on a theme, so one example might be a body of work about the female nude figure. That theme alone can create a visual unity. Another way of doing the same thing is with consistency in other constraints, like a shared crop ratio: for instance, every image being square or 4:5. A consistent colour palette also does this powerfully, with every image sharing a common set of hues and tones. This creates a flow when the images are presented together, creating a common mood or emotion through the work, even when the gesture within the images changes dramatically. You can choose this palette while you photograph and refine it as you become more and more aware of what the body of work is becoming. Not all of us begin a body of work to find it becomes the thing we imagined it. There's often an evolution and that often creates stronger and more unexpected work than if we'd not allowed ourselves to divert in a new direction. You can also choose or refine this palette in the digital darkroom. In the case of my Hokkaido series, I was very intentional while I photographed and needed very little

adjustments in Lightroom. The grizzly series from the Khutzeymateen all shared a consistent palette when I photographed it, but not the one I wanted; I worked hard to subdue some of the hyper-saturated greens and bring a common warmth to the images, which were shot over seven days in very different weather and needed some help with the tones to bring them all a little closer to being cohesive.

Intentionally chosen colour palettes are not only for unifying bodies of work. A painter sitting at his easel and wanting to create a certain mood will choose a colour palette. It's a little easier for painters, but photographers work with an existing reality. While we can do anything we want with Photoshop or Lightroom, it's not my style to be so heavy-handed. But you can be selective while you still have the camera

in your hand. Being intentional while you look at the scene, choosing weather or time of day that contributes to what you're trying to accomplish, or lighting the studio and dressing the set; none of these happen accidentally and if you go into your work remembering that a well-chosen colour palette is a powerful tool, you can at the very least begin to exclude elements that do not conform to your vision.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Fashion photographers and commercial photographers do this very well. If you can get your hands on either Applied Arts or Communication Arts, both magazines produce photography and illustration annuals. Take some time to look through these and look at the way both photographers and illustrators chose their palettes. You'll notice it in both single pieces and bodies of work. Often you can tell a photographer simply by her consistent use of colour. My friend **DAVE DELNEA** does this really well, and at the time of this writing, his website has some excellent examples of this. Do a Google image search for **ERIK ALMAS** and you'll notice an amazing intentionality and consistency. Same thing with **BROOKE SHADEN**. Spend some time looking at all three of these. I like Google image searches because they show the images well together and allow easier comparing and contrasting. Note that when I talk about consistency (and you'll see it in the work I've suggested you look at) that I do not mean homogeny or uniformity.

14
EXPLORE COLOUR CONTRAST

While we're on the subject of intentional use of colour, consider the role of contrasting colours in your compositions. Contrasting colours (at least the way I will refer to them) are not colours that clash and work against each other, but colours considered complementary. When you look at the colour wheel, it's the colours lying across from each other that are considered complementary, and it's there you'll find ideas about using colour contrast. But why consider this at all?
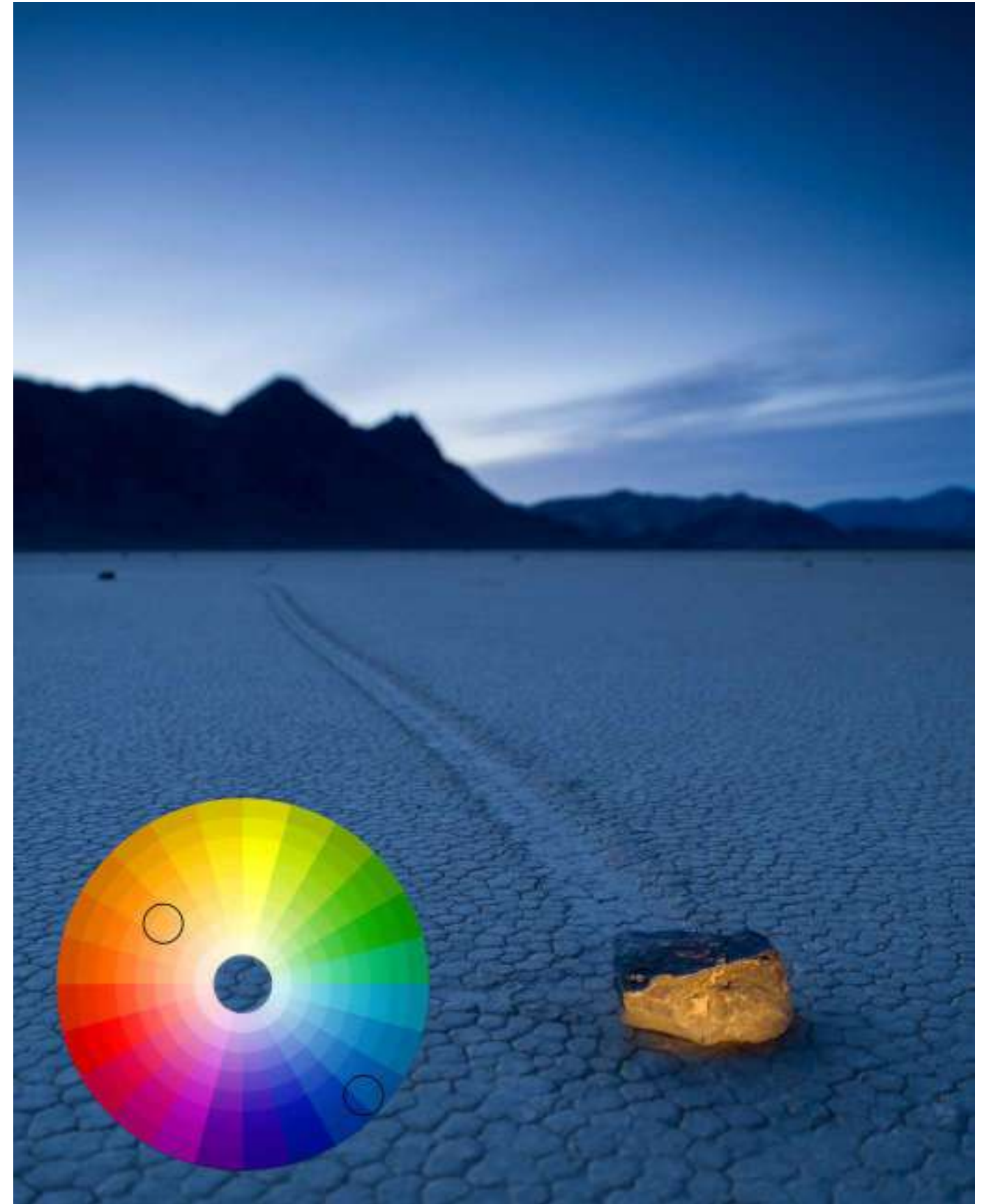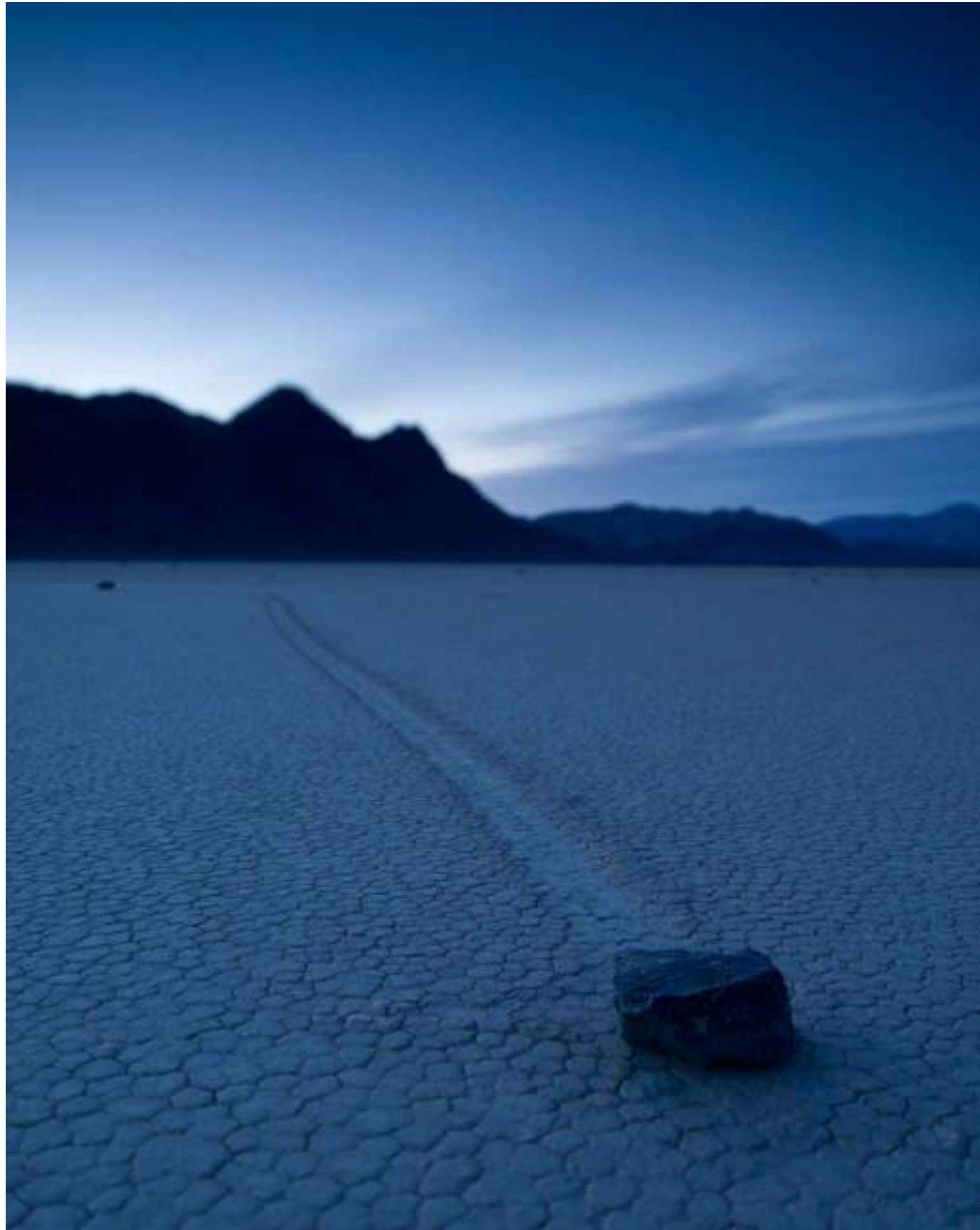
Adding the light from a warm-gelled flashlight
increased the colour contrast and the depth.

Stronger colour contrast introduces stronger visual mass to the contrasting element, pulling the eye with greater strength. It can also give the image a greater sense of depth, because colour contrast creates separation; in general terms, the principle is that brighter/warmer colours leap forward while cooler colours fall back. The brighter and more saturated these colours, the greater the contrast and depth. This addition of depth will be experienced differently than a flatter image, which by virtue of its more uniform colour palette might seem more serene. Again, as with so many of these visual tools, it's not a matter of one tool being better than another; it's a matter of one tool creating a different aesthetic and giving us the choice between those aesthetics as we look to create photographs that express certain things or create certain experiences.

There's another effect of using complementary colours we need to be aware of: the presence of other colours affects the way we see a colour. In the case of complementary colours, the presence of one will make the other more appear more intense. Not unlike using scale, when we put something large in the presence of something small, by contrast, the larger thing appears even larger. Green will look green enough, but put something magenta into the scene and the green will look even greener. Just one more tool to be aware of. Every effect will find a way to be useful if we're aware of it.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Using colour contrast begins with awareness of it. Look through your recent work and identify contrasting/complementary colours where they are present. Could they be made stronger? What would the effect become if that colour contrast were reduced? How would the eye read the image differently if the hue were changed slightly? Next time you're out making photographs, look for opportunities to introduce an element of contrast. Would a yellow cab pop against that background better than a green car? Is that what you want, or do you prefer a blue car that blends in? One image says, "Hey, look at this yellow cab!" The other says, "Look at the way the car and the background almost become one." What you are visually pointing at will determine how you use colour contrast. You can also use this understanding to refine your work later in the digital darkroom. With the control we have over hue, saturation, and luminance of different elements, you can more intentionally guide the eye by adding or removing saturation, or shifting the hue to make elements more or less complementary.

15
TRY IT IN BLACK AND WHITE

Colour is extremely seductive; it has an enormous pull on both our eyes and our emotions. In broad strokes, the brighter and more saturated the colour, the greater the pull on the eye and—as there can only be so much impact in a photograph—it is often those elements of brighter colour that get all our attention, pulling the eye of the viewer away from other significant elements. Colour often overpowers lines and moments, and there are times when the colours and how we respond emotionally to them conflict with the story in the photograph. If, for example, you're creating a photograph about a tragic event, the presence of happy colours like bright yellow can pull our emotions in the opposite direction, creating a photograph that creates a cognitive or emotional dissonance in the reader.

There are a lot of reasons to both keep the colour in a photograph, and as many to render it in black and white, not the least of which is personal preference or in keeping with the visual cohesiveness of a series. What I am not suggesting is that you pull the colour from an image that fails on other counts in order to fix it. My suggestion is to use a conversion to monochrome as a way of helping you see your own work with greater clarity, free of the pull of colour.
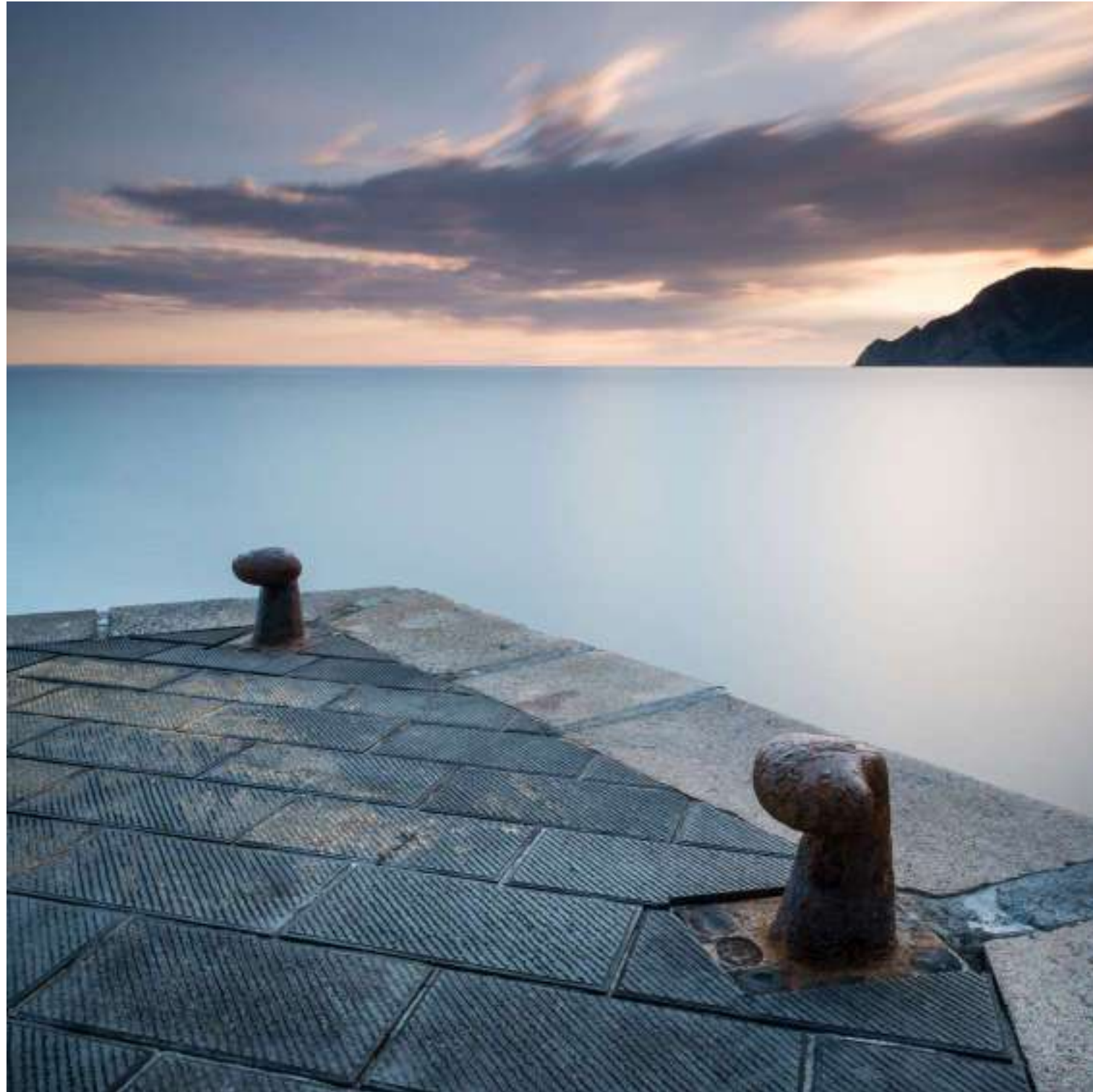
I use Adobe Lightroom exclusively and it's an easy matter to apply one of several black and white presets to my work, evaluate it, and then return it to colour if that's my intent for the image. Looking at the black and white rendering, I'm asking myself questions like:

- What does the image gain without colour?

- Is my eye now drawn toward, or away from, my subject?

- Are there lines, textures, or the gesture of a moment that are now stronger for the lack of colour?

- How does the mood of the image change?

- How does the balance change?

- What changes does this suggest when I return the colour to the photograph?

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Spend some time with a dozen of your favourite colour photographs and, using your favoured digital darkroom software, look at them in black and white, asking yourself the questions I've just suggested. My intention is not to convince you to change them, but for you to become aware of the pull of colour, how the visual mass can change without it, and consider adding a minute or two to your creative process in the digital darkroom to look at your work in black and white. Remember that not all black and white conversions are the same. Changes in tonal values (make the reds darker and the blues lighter) and overall contrast can also significantly change the visual mass of the photograph, so don't just "throw it into black and white." Take your time to do a good conversion.

16
POV: CONTROL YOUR LINES

A couple years ago I tried to answer this simple question for myself: what makes a great photograph? My own reply was contained in three elements: lines, light, and moments. What we do with those three is everything in a photograph. If every student of photography learned to ask three general questions before they pressed the shutter button, their work would improve faster than any new piece of gear could ever do in a lifetime. Those three questions for me are: What is the light doing? What are my lines doing? Is this moment the most powerful?

You take a significant step forward in your ability to create strong photographs when you understand that you can wield a great deal of control over the lines in your photographs. This matters because our photographs are two-dimensional so, in a sense, all we have are lines. Lines are formed by contrasts in tone or hue and they connect to form shapes (people, buildings, shadows, trees, the representation of emotion on the face of a portrait subject), all of them created in the photograph by lines. Lines can direct the eye into, or lead it out of, the frame. They can connect elements and tell a story. The thinnest lines can reveal details; the thickest ones can conceal details. Through the laws of perspective, they can create the illusion of depth.

The same scene looks very different with six
different points of view (see following pages).

During the Renaissance, painters began to perfect our under-standing of perspective. How we represented depth had never been very precise, but we began to get the math right in the Renaissance. Our cameras automatically reproduce perspective, so unlike painters, we don't need to learn the math and draw vanishing points. But we need to *understand* perspective in order to be able to manipulate it. This allows us to reintroduce an experience of depth, as well as control, and more carefully place our lines and shapes, and thereby shape our content—the message—of our photographs more intentionally.

What you need to know about perspective as a photographer is different from that of a painter, and it boils down to this in relation to lines: your point of view or position with the camera determines the direction and energy of lines in a photograph, and because the eye experiences different lines in different ways, has a dramatic effect on the photograph.

Here is an example in simple line drawings. Imagine a bar suspended in front of you. Your position relative to that bar could give you endless possibilities of how that bar appears in your photograph. Here are four possibilities: facing the end (1), the side (2), and the end from a sideward angle both left and right (3, 4). The same physical object, but very different shapes.
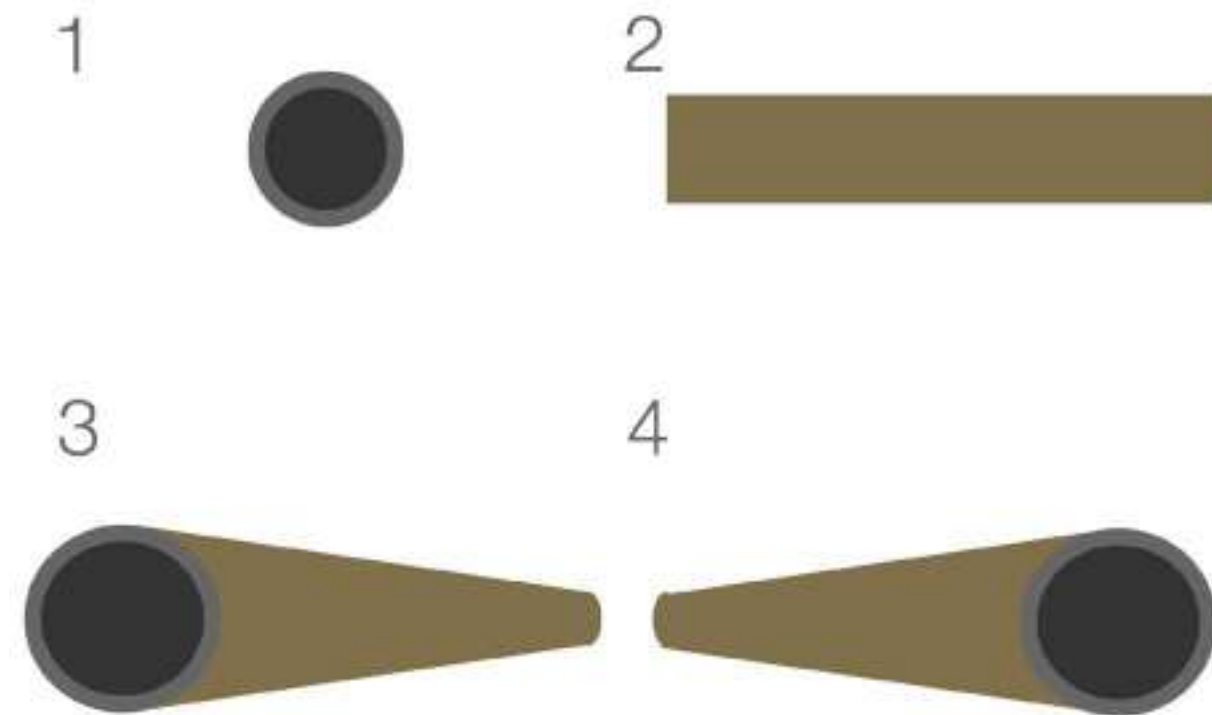
What this one bar looks like in your photograph has every-thing to do with your choices. Taken another step, a change in perspective will also change the perceived relationship between elements. Imagine a sphere placed near a triangle. Again, your position relative to the two elements will change how those two objects look in relation to each other. Your change in position can make them look closer to each other, can force their shapes to bisect each other or distance them from each other. Here are four more possible interpretations of that scene, the differences made by only one change: your position. The shapes begin distant, side by side (1), then you move closer and to the left and the sphere gets larger, partly eclipsing the now-smaller pyramid (2), moving further, the sphere completely eclipses the pyramid (3), and if you keep moving you can place the pyramid in front of the sphere, blocking it (4). And it would all change more if you moved up and down relative to these objects.
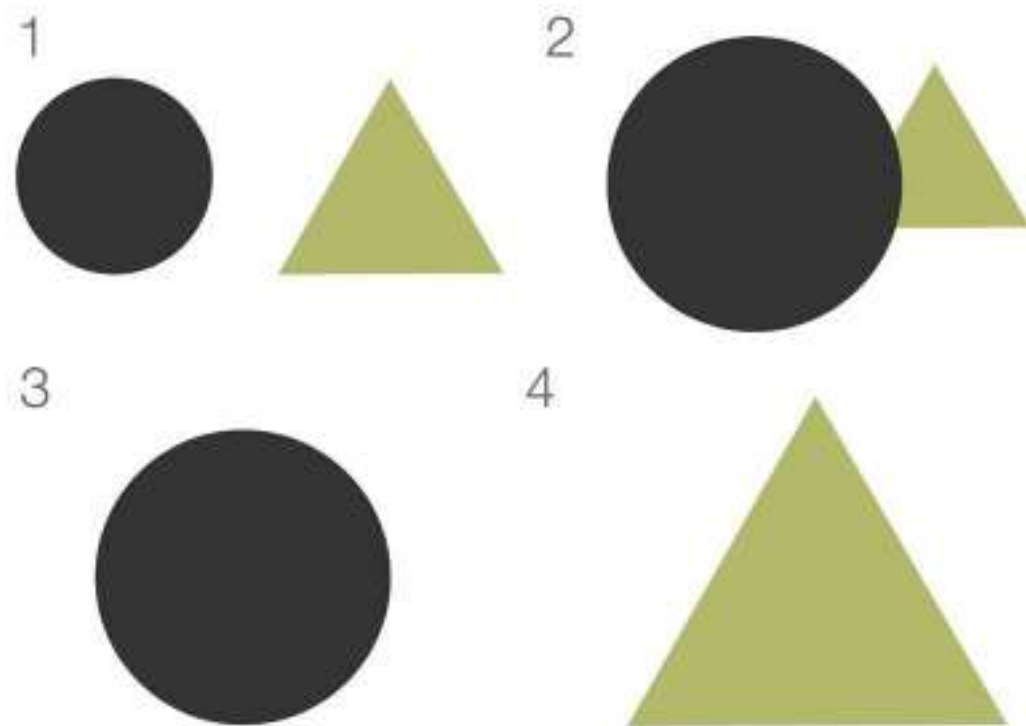
Paying attention to your position can keep lines straight, or give them greater energy. Your position is rarely unchangeable. Find a scene and camp out for a while:

- Concentrate on one element. The simpler the scene, the better. Now make 6-8 different photographs, changing only the position of the camera relative to your subject. Get higher. Get lower. Move left. Move right. Walk around it. The element might not move in a hundred years, but you have astonishing control over its shape relative to the frame.

- Study those 6-8 frames. How does the energy and vbalance change? How does the shape of that primary element change as your position changed?

- Now find a scene with two prominent elements and make another 6-8 frames, this time concentrating on moving the camera in ways that change the relationship between elements. Simply by moving, are you able to position one on top of the other, then beside it to both left and right?

- Now move your position to reverse the elements; make the foremost object the background object. How does moving closer to one make it larger relative to the other?

- It's a simple assignment but understanding the control you can exercise over lines and shapes relative to the frame will give you more control over your photographs.

17
LINES: USE DIAGONALS TO CREATE ENERGY

All we really have are lines and shapes in a photograph to recreate what we see out there in the world; they're created by shadows and reflections, trees, buildings, the woman in our photograph and the smile on her face. All of them made into two dimensions, formed by light, represented by lines, which in turn create shape. There is no woman in the photograph itself, only lines to represent her. So it's the lines we choose and manipulate within the frame that give us the control over what that woman looks like. And it's the moment we choose. And the lens we use. It is the photographer who puts the lines on the print, and to the photographer that credit or responsibility falls when it fails to move us, or others.

So if lines are such building blocks, it's important to know how to control them, and how people read them in our photographs. That discussion is a larger one than the scope of this book allows, but you can read up on the way we read horizontal and vertical lines with a simple Google search or by reading another of my books, ***PHOTOGRAPHICALLY SPEAKING***. The discussion of diagonal lines, however, is much more interesting to me because the effect within the frame is more exciting. In the shortest terms possible, diagonal lines give energy to the frame. In some cases they are there because of the laws of perspective, and as they lead to a vanishing point they introduce depth to the image, which in turn draws the viewer in, inviting them to look longer and deeper, and hopefully paying off with a richer experience. If you want depth in your image, you have to put it there, and lines leading diagonally to a vanishing point are one way of doing that. Of course, your position determines where those lines go, how symmetrical they are, and with how much energy they take the eye into the frame. Though it won't change the perspective, using a wide-angle lens will also exaggerate that perspective and increase the visual momentum created by those lines.

We read diagonal lines as though they exist in the real world. And generally speaking, we also read frames from left to right, and from top to bottom. I've been asked if this is because we read the written word this way in much of the west, and if other cultures read images differently, and I don't think that's the case. I think it might have started that way, but that it's more related to the conventions of the movie industry; being the most popular storytelling medium of our time, we've derived much of our visual literacy from films, which are also generally read from left to right. So because we read from left to right, there's a natural momentum already there. And because we infer the effect of gravity into our images, we feel its pull on elements towards the bottom of the frame. So if there's already momentum, moving left to right, and there's pull from the bottom, a line that runs from top left to bottom right has the greatest potential energy in an image. We can use this in two significant ways: the first is to harness it to increase the energy in a photograph; the second is to work against it to slow the pace in an image. Both have their place. Look at the images of the mountain slope (on the following two pages). The first (Figure 17.1) is generally read as a downhill image, because that's the direction of the energy. The second (Figure 17.2) is generally read as an uphill image.

Figure 17.1

Figure 17.2

As with other lessons in this book, the point is not to give you a comprehensive understanding, but to awaken you to the possibility and encourage you to begin intentionally experimenting, hoping that if you're like most of us, you'll learn faster and make this information your own by real-world learning. We read different lines differently. They are among the most basic building blocks of our art, and that's really the task of a much bigger topic of composition: answering the question, "Where do I put my lines in this image?" It begins with a different question, "What do I want my image to say or feel like?" and then, being aware of the influence of diagonal lines, you can place the lines with greater intent.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Look through the last year of your own work and look for lines, specifically diagonals. Spend some time with them, asking yourself the following questions:

- How would this photograph feel differently if I had made the lines more diagonal? Less diagonal?

- What could I have done to make the lines more or less diagonal? A change in my position? Adjust the framing?

- How would the image feel differently if I flipped the image horizontally? Would the resulting change in the diagonal give the image more or less dynamism?

The point is not to change the images you've already made, just to get you thinking about possibilities and the strong role of diagonal lines in creating—or changing—the energy in a photograph, so you're already thinking and seeing differently the next time you put the camera to your eye.

18
LINES: PATTERNS

One of the tools graphic designers use so well is the repeated element. They create a visual echo and draw greater attention to the shape itself, like the repeated shape and colour of the swans. Patterns are recurring elements of lines or shapes that repeat themselves more than just a couple times, and they're important as a visual tool because our eyes are drawn to them. We like rhythm and patterns can do that in a photograph. Because pattern draws our eye, we find it interesting, and that can be reason enough to learn to see them. But rarely is pattern enough to create a compelling photograph; without something more, our images of patterns aren't really interesting photographs, just photographs of interesting patterns. But add a juxtaposition or break the pattern in some way and that pattern is not only interesting but serves a visual purpose, not unlike the set-up to a joke, which is little more than verbally creating a pattern or

expectation and then zigging when people think you're going to zag. The more sure the audience is that you're going to zag, the funnier the zig is likely to be. I'm not suggesting we use pattern to make our photographs funny, though there's no reason not to, but that the stronger the pattern, the stronger the expectation that the pattern will continue to repeat, and when it doesn't, that contrast has greater visual mass and will captivate our attention. Make that break in the pattern a living thing, or human element, and we're bound to care even more.

Looking for patterns is not so much the point as looking for breaks in the pattern.

Using contrast, the broken pattern here is a way of isolating one element while drawing our attention to the pattern itself.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Spend a day looking for patterns. Actually, looking for patterns is not so much the point as looking for breaks in the pattern, but it's a little like looking for leopards in Africa—you don't so much look for leopards as look for the places you know you're likely to find them. Look for that parking lot of black cars and see if there's not a red one in there, or a little red scooter in a line of Harley Davidsons. Look for crowds of people and that one guy going the other way, or holding an umbrella when no one else is. Go to the fruit market and look for the one apple in the display of oranges. Seek out a row of parking meters, the pattern broken by a sudden tree. Whether you have your camera or not, this is an exercise in perception, which is more fundamentally the job of the photographer than anything else. See how many times you think, "Hey, look at that!"

19
LINES: LEAD MY EYE

The eye will follow a line. Whether that's a power line or the shadow of a tree, or the line created by several sheep standing on a hillside, it'll follow it. It'll even follow a line that doesn't really exist, like when a boy looks across the frame at something on the other side—an eye-line that we'll always follow. Here are some questions to consider when we're choosing to include or exclude lines, and deciding how to place them once they're in our frame:

- Is this line leading somewhere? In other words, is there a pay off? If you allow that line there, and you let me follow it, please let it take me somewhere.

- Is that line leading where you *want* it to? If the reader of your photograph is going to follow that line, is it, for example, staying inside the frame or leading out? Both can be interesting, but does it help you tell the story or create the experience you want it to or doesn't it?
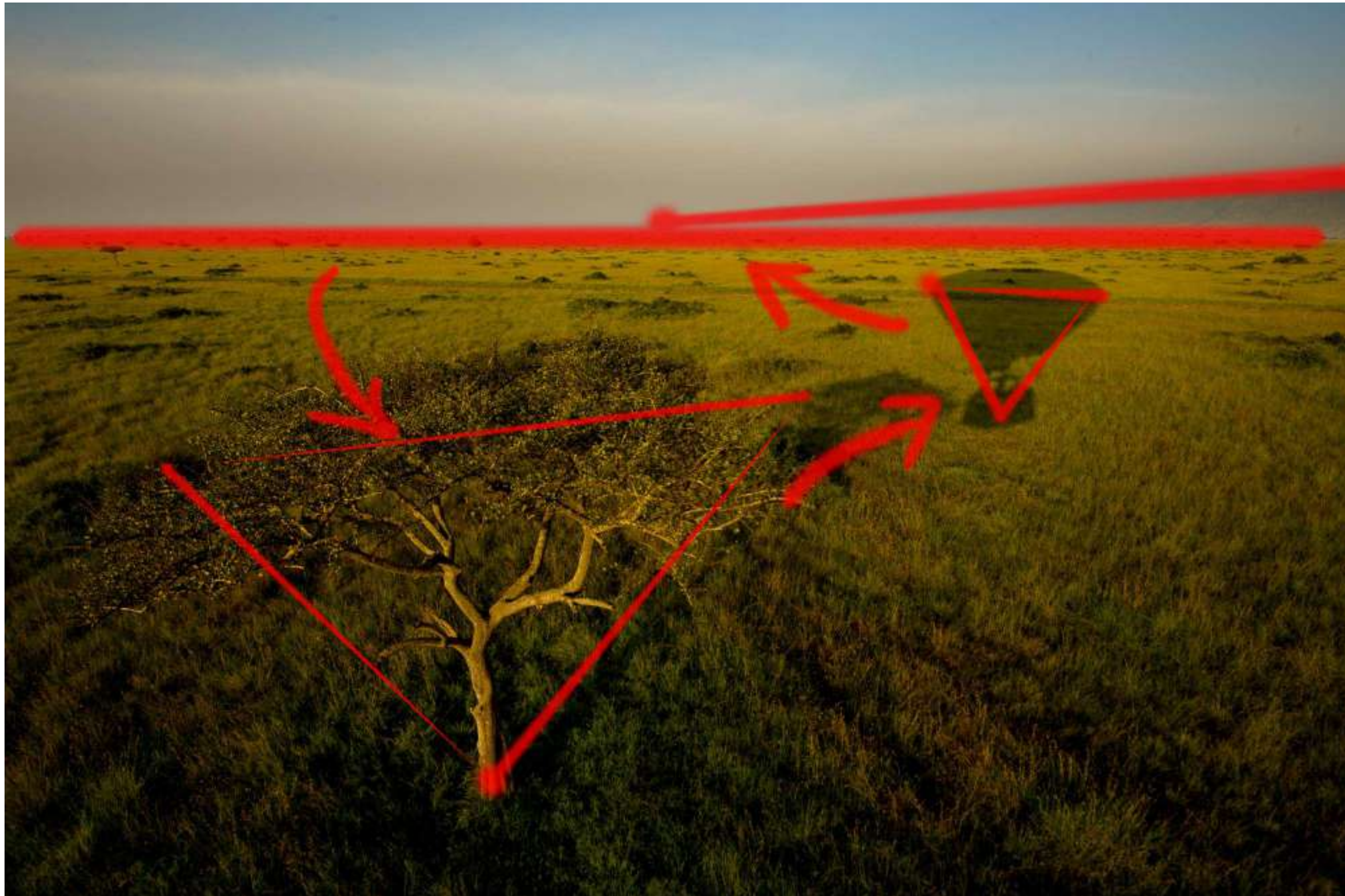
- Does the line have the energy you want it to? How would making it more diagonal make it more interesting and give the frame more energy? How would changing your position flatten that line out and give it less energy? More is not always better. If the line really isn't the point of the photograph and you can't exclude it, you can give it less visual mass by making it more perfectly horizontal. Can you get higher or lower to make the line even thinner?

- How does that line balance against other lines in the frame? If it's a tree, how does the placement of that tree allow it to balance off the line of the horizon?

- How does the placement of that line in the frame, in the case of the horizon, change the balance or message of the whole photograph? For more on that, read the next lesson.

I worry sometimes that my students think I'm obsessed with lines. Wow, look at that great line! But when you realize that you've got so much control over what lines do, and how much they accomplish in a photograph, this changes everything. You still have to wrestle with your vision, or intent for the photograph. That never really gets easier. And ultimately you still have to make decisions. You still have to risk and try new things. You still have to ask a lot of questions that are purely speculative because they're the kind of questions that are most helpful when they don't lead you to answers so much as they do to possibilities.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

In the next chapter you're going to do an exercise with your camera in your hand. If you're really gung-ho, do that for this one too. Pick up your camera, go find some lines, and play. And while you play, ask yourself the questions above. In one way or another I am always asking these questions of myself, and my scene, while I photograph. But here's what I want you to do first. Go get a magazine of photographs and your red sharpie marker, and tear out twenty pages of photographs: ads, editorials, whatever. Now with the red sharpie, trace the most prominent lines. Straight lines, curves, lines that form shapes. Implied lines. Horizons. Then ask the questions above. Add arrows that indicate the lines that draw your eye from here to there. Just think about the lines. Pour a cup of coffee and do it again. The point is to get you looking for lines and thinking about them. Next time you put the camera to your eye you'll be more sensitive to the presence and impact of the lines, and more able to make decisions about them in your photograph.

20
LINES: HORIZONS

As with so much well-meaning but muddle-headed photographic advice, the best place for the horizon is not the top or bottom third of the frame. Those are two of so many options, including the option not to include the horizon at all. When we ask, "Where *should* I put my horizon?" we're abdicating the responsibility that is the artist's alone to decide what we're trying to say and how we want to say it. Yes, putting it on a third might be more interesting, but is that the greatest good we can hope for in our photographs, that it's simply less boring? If that's the case, I'm not sure placing the horizon a little higher or lower is going to help much. A boring photograph starts long before we get to "where do I put my horizon?" But there was a reason you put the camera to your eye and asked the question in the first place, right? Here are some more interesting questions to consider:

- Does placing my horizon on the bottom third of the frame give prominence to the sky? Is my sky interesting enough to give it a full two-thirds of the frame?

- What is it about the sky that draws your attention so much that you'd give it two-thirds of the frame? Should you give it more? Is including the horizon at all necessary?

The same scene framed four different ways:
horizon at extreme bottom, extreme high, exact
middle, and top third. Which one's "right?"

- Likewise, is my foreground interesting enough to merit two-thirds of the frame if I place my horizon high on the top third?

- Are there other lines in this scene that merit inclusion, like a waterline on the ocean's edge? That gives you three zones to work with: sky, water, and land. Do you assign each a third again? That can be really beautiful, but you're back to being static and symmetrical; is that what you want? How can you change your position to place those elements differently, for example by lying down and giving your viewers less foreground, or getting higher and giving them more?

- Have you considered playing with the extremes of scale and balance, pulling out really wide and placing the horizon at the bottom sixth of the frame, or pushing in much tighter and playing with a more symmetrical frame and putting the horizon unapologetically in the middle?

With camera in hand, find a horizon and ask the questions above. A simple horizon, like the one on the open ocean, gives you the most elegant canvas with which to experiment. Make a photograph that's as purely about colour and symmetry as possible. Now make one that's more about the ocean, then one that's more about the sky. Now find an object of interest in the frame, like a lighthouse or sailboat (for those on the prairies find a tree or a grain silo) and incorporate that. Put the tree in the middle, and the horizon in the middle. Now put both on thirds: the tree on the leftmost and the horizon on the bottom. Now reverse it: tree central and horizon high. The point in this exercise is not to create a new body of work for you, and you won't get better at this if all you do is follow my instructions. I want you to play, and then *critically study your resulting work*. Sit down with a cup of coffee and the prints from this exercise and ask yourself which ones you prefer. Which ones feel more interesting, or dynamic, and which ones feel more serene, or even abstract. You're not trying to dial in your preferences here, you're trying to become familiar with which tool does what, so the next time you're tempted to ask where you should put your horizon, you ask yourself better questions. Better questions lead to better art.

21
LEARN TO SKETCH

No artist just gets it right the first time. The process of expressing the intent of our imaginations (unlimited as they are by the constraints of the real world) with any craft, let alone one so necessarily limited by technology, is not an easy one. The idea that this craft is easy gets unfairly promoted from all kinds of corners, not the least of which are the camera companies themselves. But it's not easy. No new camera will help you "shoot like a pro" even if that were a goal worth aspiring to. And because this craft doesn't come instantly, it's probably a good thing to pay more attention to our own creative process and stop expecting instant gold from ourselves.

Because we so often see only the final work of the photographers we respect, I think we miss what would be an otherwise very eye-opening chance to see that all of them have a process of their own. Most of them, if their contact sheets are to be believed, have some kind of sketching process.

I call it sketching because it's the closest thing to a visual rough draft that I can think of. Painters sketch out their images, and even have a process in painting that often involves scraping the canvas clean and starting again. Writers do the same. I suspect most creative people do, and it's because the very act of

creating something allows our initial vision or idea to get worked out by contact with real-world forces, and that brings about new ideas, new direction, and stronger ways of executing those ideas. But you have to be open to the process of not getting it *right* the first time. You have to be open to playing, to experimenting, and not holding the final work too tightly. This is one of the reasons I can't get on board with this idea of pre-visualizing an image, at least not the way I understand people to generally mean it. I have no idea exactly what the image is going to look like. I usually know what it's going to *feel* like, and that's much more helpful to me. But if I attempt to know what it's going to look like, I am going to be much less open to change or evolution.

So I don't look at my failed images as failures. I look at them as a necessary part of the process of getting to the images that *do* work. They are my rough drafts and I make hundreds of them. I shoot variations and explore possibilities and I ask myself, "What if I...?" Sometimes those sketch images result in a final photograph several minutes or several hours later.

My final photograph, Arctic Circles, after working the scene and creating sketch images over about 12 hours. The next day the circles were gone.
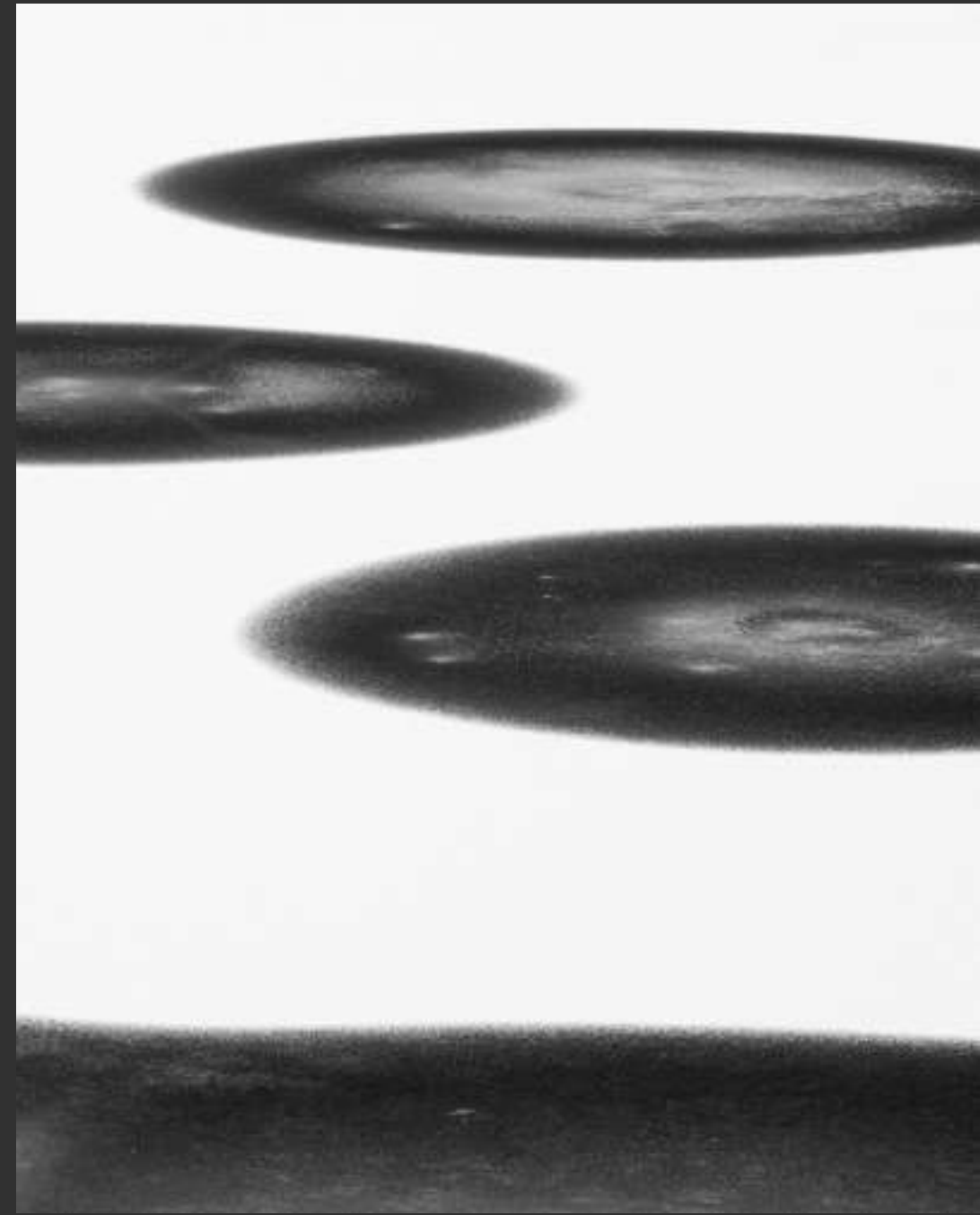
Sometimes it's several days or months, or even years. I keep most of them, looking through old hard drives like old sketchbooks or notebooks of ideas, which I also keep and look through. And they lead me to new places. They also remind me not to get discouraged, because doing so only kills me creatively. And getting discouraged only leads me to give up, stopping me from making those few more sketch images that might lead to that moment things click and get me to the heart of this thing I'm trying to create, sabotaging the very process I desperately need.

Here are my thoughts on making sketch images:

- Make many of them. If you're shooting digitally, they cost nothing.

- Make them intentionally, as visual responses to variations on the question, "Hey, what if I did this or that?"

- Study them and react. Don't just hope 100 sketches will get you somewhere new. Look at them. What's working? What's not working? How could you keep what's working and run in a completely different direction?

- Creativity is the connection of previously unconnected ideas, and the more divergent the better. So take the thing you love about earlier sketches and see if you can combine it with the thing you love about the latest one. Sure, it might result in something equally unworkable, but that one unworkable idea might lead to the very one you needed to realize the final image. Only the process will get you there.

- Be open to having a completely different way of doing this than the way I do it. I don't see crappy photographs, only sketch images that haven't gotten me to where I'm going yet, but without which I'll never get there. Find your own process. Allow it to be messy. No one will see these if you don't want them to. All they will see is the final work.

22
SEE THE DIRECTION OF LIGHT

There are several ways to see light and as I think it's more important to be aware of it, understand it, and use it to create the strongest photographs you can. I'm not going to try to create categories and labels so much as describe them and begin a conversation that I hope will continue to resonate with you long after you're done with the book.

My focus in this book is natural light. If you can learn to see the light that nature provides, you can re-create it, modify, and add to it in the studio with all the latest artificial lights. But let us assume it begins with one light, because it does, and from that one light there are more than enough lighting scenarios to inspire even the most attention-deficient studio photographers.

I'm going to begin with the direction of light, because that will open more immediate topics to us than other conversations, like, for example, the colour of light. Understanding the effect of the directionality of light matters when you photograph in the middle of a field, as much as it does if you're positioning lights in a studio. While it's easy to think that we simply take what we're given, it's not so simple. Imagine this: you walk into a field of tall green grass. It's late afternoon and the sun is half-way between its zenith at high noon and the horizon, where it'll set. The sun is behind you. In front of you is a maple tree. It's October in the Northern Hemisphere, so the leaves are turning. Beautiful.

In the scenario I've just described, you can't do a thing about the position of the sun. But you can move yourself and your camera in a circle around the tree and as you do, the light—relative to you and the scene—changes. As it does, the look and feel of the resulting photograph changes as well. Keep reading.

23
LIGHT: FRONT LIGHT

A front-lit portrait from several years ago. I'd do things differently now.
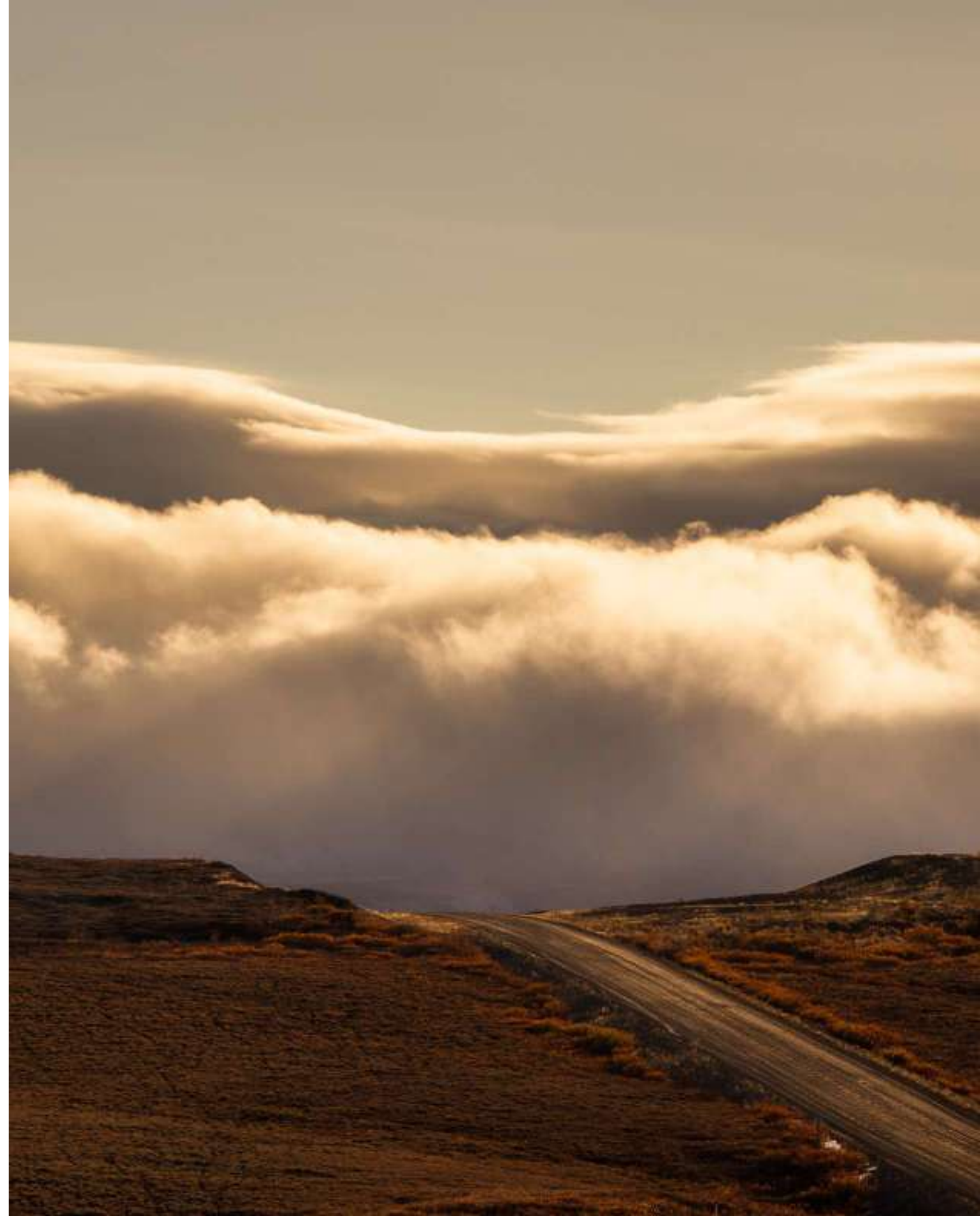
Y ou're still standing there, in front of that tree in the middle of the field, with the sun at your back. This is where too many well-meaning, but boring, instruction manuals will suggest you make your photographs.

When the sun comes from behind you, it hits your subject straight on; the light bounces back, and brings with it the picture of a tree in a field. The sun is not in the scene, so it's easier to meter and expose. The sun shadows cast fall away from the sun, blocked by the very thing casting them, so there are no dark shadows to fool the meter, either. You raise the camera, and make the photograph. It's probably very well exposed due to the evenness of the scene. It's as likely that it's also boring. There are no shadows to create texture, and where there are no shadows there is less depth. The light is reflected and the colours are fine, but they could be much more alive.

It is there that most of us begin our photography, and rightly so. It's good to become familiar with a baseline and get used to exposure issues before things get more complicated by issues of dynamic ranges and exposure compensation. But if we end up there, we'll miss the chance to capture light from other directions, which is more challenging, to be sure, but also creates the possibility of more compelling photographs. Does this mean front light can't be used, or is somehow "bad light?" Not at all; it just means the photograph needs to be carried by something else, perhaps a stronger gesture or amazing moment.

24
LIGHT: SIDE LIGHT

Returning to our imagined scenario, imagine that you're walking around the tree to the left. As you do, the sun comes into your peripheral vision on the right, over your shoulder, and as you move more and more to the left, the sun moves more and more to the right until it's halfway between your right side and the tree. The tree is now lit, according to your own position, from the side. The light streams through the leaves and creates many small shadows in on the surface of the canopy. Here and there a leaf flickers and the light comes back to you not because it bounced off the surface of the red maple leaf, but because it shone through. For a moment there is a blaze of brighter, more saturated red. The shadow of the tree, minutes ago hidden by the tree itself, now thrusts itself sideways to the left and along the grass, creating not only a darker area created by the shade of the tree, but a strong, dark, tree-shaped compositional element that moments ago wasn't present. The light hits the round surface of the tree trunk and feathers off from one side to another, falling off from light to dark, revealing the texture of the bark which before seemed smooth, and giving greater depth to the tree itself. You raise the camera to your eye and make a photograph.

Sidelight takes strong advantage of shadow because, unlike the front-lit subjects, the shadows become visible to the camera. Shadows model a subject to reveal the textures and dimensions we don't see as well on a front-lit subject. Those shadows form lines and shapes. They give us a little more to work with, especially if we're trying to create depth and detail in our work.

Most of us have more experience than we ever needed photographing front-lit subjects. For some of us it never occurred to us to move around our subjects until, relative to our own position, the subject was lit from the side, or to wait until the sun was in a different part of the sky. That's going to change. Spend a week within this constraint: to make no photograph with the sun behind you. And because we've not talked backlight (lets not get ahead of ourselves) nothing with the sun directly in front of you. Photograph a week's worth of subject matter that is lit only from the side. Then sit down with that work and study it:

- Do you like the increase in mood and depth?

- What new challenges does this introduce to your work?

- How did you deal with the new lines and compositional elements created by shadows?

25
LIGHT:
BACK LIGHT

Back one last time to our imagined scenario in the field. Now keep walking to the left, and walk until the sun is directly in front of you, though it's partly obscured by the leaves of the tree. The tree is now completely backlit. Standing in the shadow of the tree itself now, you look up to see the red leaves of the tree ablaze with the light as it streams through instead of bouncing off the leaves. The grass in the field around you is the same, an impossible green, like it's lit from within. Dust motes dance on the wind, more visible than you remember them before, and like the grass, lit with transmitted light. The trunk of the tree is dark, almost black, and without depth or texture, but if you look carefully you'll see the last licks of light as they form a halo of rim light around the tree, outlining its inky black silhouette. You make another photograph.

If I could photograph only one kind of light for the rest of my life it would be low natural backlight. Low in the sky, the sun's light is warm, the shadows are long and it's harder to avoid lens flare, which to many is a liability but to me often adds to the magic. Backlight is harder to work with, and it usually takes me a couple guesses to get my exposure right, but I've gone from avoiding it, to wrestling with it, to seeking it out for the mood and emotion it creates. It's not remotely

appropriate for every subject, and there are stories a plenty out there that should be told with other light, but the stories I seem to resonate the most with all seem best told with backlight. There's nothing to know about light— backlight or otherwise—that you yourself can't learn from observation and experimentation, so get out thereand play with it, but here are a few thoughts about technique:

- Choosing a wide aperture will create a look consistent with the dreamy mood backlight can give. It'll also exaggerate lens flare, if you like that kind of thing.

- I know you still have your camera in manual exposure mode, but just in case you slipped it back to a program mode, it'll be easier to work in manual.

- If you're shooting portraits, you probably don't want the faces to be too dark, so it's going to be easier to shoot with the histogram to the right, but you're going to have to pay attention to which highlights blow out. Shooting towards a background other than the open sky will give you more drama.

- Moving around will help. You've got three choices about the sun: (1) hide it behind something (like your subject), (2) allow it to peek out or be visible entirely in the frame, or (3) keep it out of the frame. All three will create different aesthetics. Behind your subject, the sun's likely to create a beautiful rim light. Peeking out slightly, you can create an edge-cut sun effect; crank your aperture down to f/16 and you can make a starburst of it.

- Autofocus systems work on contrast and backlit situations are usually quite low contrast and harder to focus. They can be hard to see in, too, which makes switching to manual a little harder. Try moving slightly so the sun is obscured, find focus, and then re-frame. Or have someone flag your lens, blocking the light, while you focus. However you do it, a little patience is helpful. There's nothing wrong with your camera, they just struggle with this kind of light.

- Look for scenarios with dew, haze, rain, dust, high grass, or anything else that will pick up the light, transmit or diffuse it, and add mood to your work.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Like your homework for becoming familiar with sidelight, spend a week photographing nothing but backlight and backlit subjects. Then again, sit down and study the work and think about these questions:

- Did you find exposure harder? Why? How did you solve it?

- With subjects plunging deeper into shadow, did you find it hard to deal with the absence of detail? Did you find yourself paying more or less attention to the subjects as silhouettes, and to the moments that gave you the strongest silhouettes?

- Look for areas where the light is transmitted through the subject instead of simply reflected off it. How does the inclusion of these elements change the look and feel of the photograph?

26
QUALITY OF LIGHT: FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

If you read our imagined scenario all the way through without stopping to do your homework, you'd have made three photographs in a couple short minutes, much less time than it took for me to write it or for you to read it. The sun wouldn't have changed enough to notice it. The tree was the same tree. The field too, remained the same. And yet in those brief moments you'd have created three very different photographs. You'd likely have composed those photographs differently, as each new scenario gave you new possibilities and drew your eye in new directions. For example, placing the side-lit tree to the right of the frame to give room for the pull of that great shadow. You might have chosen to close your aperture to f/16 when you photographed that backlit tree, knowing the tighter aperture might make a starburst of the points of light shining through the canopy. You might have shot the first scene much wider and given more importance to the clouds, since the light on the tree itself lacked drama.

Such is the effect of the direction of light, and where the light remains unchanged, there's often the possibility of moving the camera. There are a few other things to consider, and they also change the look and feel of the photograph considerably.

The first is this: the position of the sun relative to you and your subject will create shadows. These shadows are more than merely the "areas where the sun don't shine." They're powerful indicators to us about how to read a photograph, helping us to establish the logic of the scene and place ourselves within its reality. It's one of the reasons (Oh, Lord, I knew he'd go off on a tangent about this!) that high dynamic range tools in the hands of overly enthusiastic novices make surreal images which photographers like me react so strongly (and negatively) to. It's not the fault of the tool, but the removal of strong blacks—the mystery of the unseen—and the visual clues we rely on shadows to provide makes us feel uneasy. We'll revisit the discussion about shadows later, because they're important and they can be used to create depth, shape, line, and mood. For now, just learn to observe them, and see how the presence of shadows can help you guess where the light might be coming from.

REFLECTED AND TRANSMITTED LIGHT

The second consideration is whether the light shines on a subject, creating reflected light, or shines *through* a subject, creating transmitted light. Neither is better than the other, per se, they are what they are, but they both contribute a different aesthetic. So does a combination of the two. Reflected light is of course responsible for reflections and specular highlights, the texture created by shadow on a rough surface, or the catch light in the eye of a child. If the subject is opaque, and even dimly lit, it's reflected light. As a rule, light does not shine through stones. But with less opaque subjects, like a leaf, the light can go from bouncing off the surface to shining through, depending on the direction of the light. The difference is not unlike looking at a small printed photograph and then looking at a transparency or slide on a light table. The colours can be richer, more vibrant, and seem to glow from within. How we experience the two photographs can be quite different.

Light passing through the feather of this Whooper swan creates a very different mood than if the light had simply reflected. I'll shoot transmitted light any chance I get!

INTENSITY OF LIGHT

Regardless of direction, not all light is the same. There are subtle nuances of difference, and so much depends on what the light is bouncing off, or through, or which combination of the two is happening. One of the further distinctions that's so important to be able to recognize, and play with, is whether the light is hard or soft.

Coming from any direction, hard light is undiffused; it comes straight from the source and hits the subject head on. The easiest way to distinguish hard light from soft is in its effect, notably the shadows it creates. Their edges are harder, the contrast greater; these shadows add more drama but can be hard to control in portraits. Softer light, light that is found on the shady side of the street or on a cloudy day, will lack these shadows, and colours will be less washed out. Neither is good or bad, just different, and it's important to learn to see it and make use of it according to your intent for the photograph.

Look at the shadows: which light is soft and which is hard? How does that affect how you feel about each portrait?

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

The next time you're out photographing, ask yourself this question: What is the light doing? What's it doing to colours and shadows? What textures and depth is it creating? What mood? Is there a way you can change it? With so much of this it's just a matter of approaching your subject from a different angle, circling around that flower until you've gone from front-lit to side-lit, and finally to back-lit. Now you've got some transmitted light and the look and feel are totally different. It might not always create the mood you're looking for, but you can't know until you've explored the possibilities. It's the same as being told to turn around and see what's behind you, except when you do that your subject changes. Walk around and look at your subject, and the light, from all angles. "What is the light doing? " is one of my favourite questions in my own process. The second is, "What are you doing about the light?"

27
WHITE
BALANCE
FOR MOOD

While there's a lot of talk about achieving accuracy in our white balance, I think the whole conversation misses a larger opportunity, specifically the ability to use colour balance to achieve a greater emotional response to an image. If you do catalogue work or something else requiring accuracy of colour, then it's worth going the extra mile to do colour balance as accurately as possible, but for most of us, we're making photographs for other reasons and accuracy is a moving target that distracts us from the bigger issue.

Given how powerfully we respond to colour, it should be no surprise that we respond emotionally to the colour of light. We will *feel* differently about a photograph with apparently cool light than we will about apparently warm light—that is to say our experience will change from one to the other.

When people talk about making colour accurate, they generally mean the neutral tones in the scene are rendered neutral in the photograph, without colour cast. It's generally worth taking magenta or green tints out of our images, because light doesn't generally take on these hues. But the yellows and blues? Colour temperature is a great creative tool,

and experimenting with your white balance will help you understand that, either in-camera or later in the darkroom when you've got a little more control over it. Let's go back for a moment to the issue of neutrality. If I place a perfect neutral target, like a grey card, into a scene during the golden hour before sunset, that neutral target will be naturally contaminated with warm light. Removing the warmth of that light, which is ironically a *cooler* colour temperature on the Kelvin scale where blue is hot and red is cold (go figure!) would be anything but accurate. Likewise, if I placed a grey card in the blue shade of a tree in winter, removing the blue would warm the scene up and make the scene feel very much the opposite of what it truly felt. If anything you might want to cool it down even more.

Dealing with people within these settings introduces a complication, because while we can forgive—even desire—a change in colour temperature in landscapes and other scenarios, we know quite well what skin tones look like; a change in colour temperature is thus not only noticed, but creates an even stronger reaction, not always positively. So mind how creative you get. But ignoring the issue of skin tone for now, my suggestion is that you look at white balance in-camera as a creative tool as much as (or more than) one to achieve accuracy, even more so when you refine things later in Lightroom or Photoshop.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Pick up your camera and make a photograph on Auto White Balance; if you're like me, that's your starting point most of the time. As I know I'm going to work on my images later, I let the camera do its best and that's usually good enough for me. Or I'll put it on Cloudy or Shady, because I like warmth in my photographs. Still in AWB? Good. Make the photograph. Now try all the other settings and react to them. If nothing else, this will give you a sense of the full range of possible temperatures of light, from very warm to very cool. How do you feel about them? That feeling can be controlled or even exaggerated in your photographs. Now open one of your favourite images in Lightroom or Photoshop. This time we're going for subtlety; move the colour temperature slider a little to the cool side of things, and a little to the warm side. How do you feel about those changes? All I want to do is open you to the possibility that this is your decision, not that of the camera, and the mood present in your work is up to you.

28
LIGHT:
REFLECTIONS

The next four lessons are less about how we accomplish one effect or the other and more an exercise in awareness. Because we see the world three dimensionally until the camera flattens a scene, and because we take these effects for granted, we sometimes neglect to truly see them. By doing so, we miss an opportunity to incorporate them into our compositions, only noticing too late that we were looking at the subject so intently that we didn't notice his shadow and so we cut it off prematurely and now the lines in the image don't resolve as powerfully as they could if they hadn't been cut off by the frame.

If you spend any time photographing near shiny surfaces like glass, water, or wet pavement, you'll run into reflections. With any luck you'll learn to recognize them, incorporate them into your photographs, and seek out the conditions that make them happen. I recently spent an evening in Venice chasing reflections in a flooded Piazza San Marco and the glass storefronts of the shops and bistros that surround the square. Playing with my position relative to the windows allowed me to photograph the dual worlds of Venice and her reflection, creating some beautiful symmetry and mood.

There is no magic in photographing reflections; the hardest part is just learning to see them, and then treating them as you would other lines and shapes and making conscious choices about them. Among those choices are how much to include or exclude, seeing beyond the reflection into the surface of the reflective thing itself (it's easy to shoot a reflection in a shop window only to see later that you can also see *into* the shop, which can either help or hinder the image, but you have to be aware of it) and playing with different reflective surfaces, all of which will give you different effects. Spend some time playing with reflections and you'll be more aware of them when they present themselves, and more able to control them when they're part of the scene.

29
LIGHT: SHADOWS

It is so, so easy to overlook shadows. We take them so much for granted that when they appear we see them more as a shadow than a graphic element to be incorporated into our composition. Galen Rowell talks about this as pattern recognition; we see something familiar and our brain, from a lifetime of dismissing that thing as irrelevant, continues to dismiss it, and in the end we don't really see it at all. How many of us have ever had much cause to really consider shadows important before we picked up a camera? It takes some retraining for our brain to begin seeing them, but retraining's not hard. You see, we see/perceive what is important to us, and the more important shadows are to you, the more you'll see them. It's the classic Red Car Effect (that's what I call it). You don't see many red cars until you fall in love with one and buy one, and then they're everywhere.

What's important about shadows is that when they're present they can create a significant amount of impact in a photograph. Why? Because what we do not see in real life due to pattern recognition, we see very clearly on a photograph. Pattern recognition works in real life, and in three dimensions, not merely a two-dimensional representation. It's why we don't notice the lampshade growing out of our subject's head

until we see the photograph. And so because we notice them in the photograph, like reflections, it's important we control them. Shadows appear as dark lines and shapes in photographs—they're like any other real-world material element once they're in the frame. As such, they can lead the eye around the frame and have visual mass that pulls the eye. They can clutter an otherwise beautiful image, or can be the subject of the image itself. What matters is that you see them. When you ask yourself, "What is the light doing?" make sure part of the answer includes an awareness of where the shadows are, because the one causes the other.

30
LIGHT:
SILHOUETTES

Silhouettes are an under-used way to isolate, turning otherwise chaotic scenes and blown out skies into pure shape, gesture, and light. When other attempts to work with a high key scene fail because colours aren't working well, or that one dude's got a funny look on his face, or the sky isn't doing it for you, try exposing for the sky, and letting the rest of the frame go to shape and form. While others are trying to eliminate the shadows with HDR techniques, try taking advantage of them. Silhouettes simplify and abstract. They turn individuals, recognized by their features, into anyone. They turn buildings into nothing more than their iconic outlines.

Making silhouettes is nothing more than exposing for your sky. If you're shooting RAW you'll still want to keep the histogram over to the right, but for this to really work you need a high key scene anyways, one where the dynamic range of the scene is close to—or more than—what your camera can handle. Set the spot meter to read the values in the sky, and use that as a starting point. You can always darken the shadows further in Lightroom later. Compositionally, remember that not all silhouettes are equally powerful. Look for the shapes, not the details. We're so used to looking for smiles and the light in a person's eyes, but in silhouette these things all but disappear,

so look for the best possible outline: strong gestures, the climax of an action, and recognizable profiles.

While shooting in Kenya last year, I visited the village of a friend to introduce them to some students of mine and make some photographs while members of the tribe danced under the hot mid-afternoon sun. We were in a tight village, surrounded by huts. Colours were contrasty, faces were in and out of shadow and the whole scene was very chaotic. The Maasai dance involves a lot of jumping and vertical movement and I knew I could exaggerate that by getting really low, so I lay down in the dirt and shot upwards. I chose a wide lens to capture the action and exaggerate the verticality of the dance. And I cranked the exposure down, shooting towards the sun.

Even as an occasional exercise, using silhouette is helpful because it helps us to see. For some reason, there's greater visual mass in the details of things than there is in the shape of them (probably a lot like the way we'd rather look at what's in the frame of the photograph than the frame itself), but with a silhouette in the photograph, that shape is there whether we like it or not and, as a line in the frame, the more we perceive, the greater our ability to control and make stronger images.

31
LIGHT: LENS FLARE

I read something recently on a list of "here's a bunch of things that make a photograph weak," which always amuses me because the moment you tell me, "Don't do it," I want very badly to do it. The article explained how lens flare was a weakness in an image, a result of either cheap optics or lazy photography. This made me laugh because I try very hard and go to great lengths to achieve lens flare with some of my very best lenses. In fact, lens flare is an effect that motion picture animators work to re-create in order to strengthen a sequence by adding realism and drama; the DOP (Director of Photography) for my favourite sci-fi series, *Firefly*, had such a hard time achieving the lens flare he wanted with the expensive cinematic lenses they were using that he took them back and bought cheaper ones. I assume it had something to do with the coatings, but either way, it seems funny that cinematographers—the primary visual storytellers of our generation—are using lens flare to strengthen their imagery while still photographers are telling each other to eliminate it. It's an aesthetic. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

Lens flare is created when direct light hits the front element of the lens, enters the lens and, in non-technical language, bounces around and stuff, creating artifacts like rays and rainbows, usually lowering the contrast of the image. The more

elements in the lens (like a longer zoom), and, as we discussed, the cheaper the lens, the more prone to flare it is likely to be. Preventing the light from hitting the front element with a lens hood or by having someone block the light (off camera, preferably) can prevent lens flare. Opening the aperture wider and making *sure* the light hits the front element is a good way to ensure it.

But why lens flare? It makes us more aware of the sun, and the media we're using to photograph it. It points it out. And ever since *Easy Rider* was released in 1969, cinematographers have been incorporating it into our visual vocabulary. We associate it with an increase in drama and an increased feeling of luminosity. But more than that, it can be beautiful. The haze it creates in a scene can be soft and warm, giving a romance to the scene. Or it can complement the presence of the sun in the frame, creating a connection between foreground and background.

Whether you like it or not, you need to be aware of it if you're going to prevent it or seek it out. And sometimes a backlit scene—especially when the sun is low— can't be shot without it, so you might as well learn to control it through placement of the sun through your own choice of position relative to other elements in the frame. In other words, move around until the sun is blocked by something.
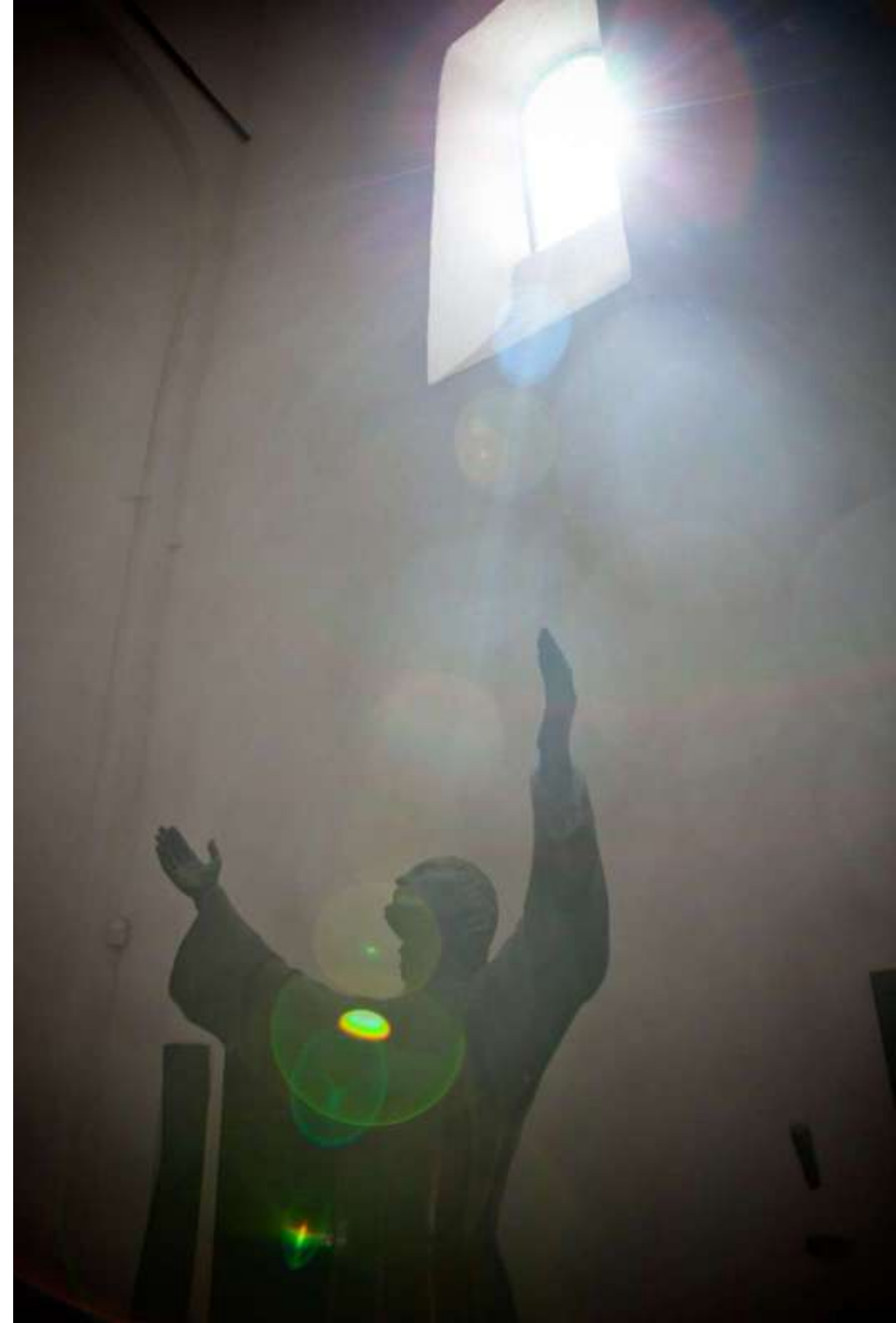
32
MOMENTS: TIMING

Timing is everything. Every photographer knows that, and wrestles with that very constraint because it's one thing to know it and entirely another thing to be able to anticipate the moment, recognize it when it arrives, and react to it before it's over. I think what cripples us a little is that we're taught quite early to pay a great deal of attention to the length of the moment we capture (is it 10 seconds, 1/10 of a second, or 1/1000 of a second?) but less on *which* moment we capture, and moments—at least in the eye of the camera—are not all created equal.

One of the gifts of photography is the way it elevates mundane things. Moments we'd never notice in real life, because we aren't paying attention, get observed and suspended in time when we make a photograph. We say, "Look at this!" and for as long as that photograph remains, so too does our chance to experience in some way the moment it represents. To the camera, a mundane moment between unknown people can be as universal, even iconic, as the great moments in history. It doesn't take Martin Luther King Jr., Winston Churchill, or JFK within our frame to make the photograph iconic. Henri Cartier-Bresson's photograph "Behind the Gare St. Lazare" is a good example of this. Who knows whom the man jumping the puddle is? For that matter do we care any less

because he's unknown? We don't. He's Everyman. What makes the photograph great is not the subject but the universality of the moment and the way it creates such an engaging composition. And that's a matter of timing.

While we're talking about Henri Cartier-Bresson, it was he who first coined the term "the decisive moment" and it's an important one for photographers. What Cartier-Bresson was pointing out was the importance of timing and when he described this decisive moment he described it as the moment when the apex of the action in the scene corresponded with the best possible composition in the camera. It's an important way to look at it. What he was not saying was that it was the best possible moment, or the hardest one to capture, but the one that was best represented in the camera. And that's what makes some timing good, and some timing less than ideal. Not only is Cartier-Bresson asking us to carefully choose our moment, he's asking us to take care in where we put that moment. As if it wasn't hard enough already. But if we wanted something easy, we'd have been better off taking up finger-painting.

The photographs that accompany this lesson were made seconds apart in Northern Kenya. The final select from the sequence is only fractions of a second different than the others, but that difference in timing means he's running, one foot off the ground, his staff in the right place, just at the horizon, and he doesn't yet obscure any of the figures on the horizon, which would break the rhythm.

The key with timing is not merely waiting for it, though that's important. The key is anticipating it and recognizing it when it arrives, and for that there's no substitute for knowing your subject intimately. A wildlife photographer who knows well the kind of birdshe photographs will know to anticipate behaviour that someone else might never be able to do. In the same way, a portrait photographer who pays attention to the people he photographs will know when a smile is coming, and what might happen after that smile breaks. The seasoned wedding photographer will know the commonalities that she's seen in a thousand weddings, and anticipate moments that are much more symbolic, universal, or emotionally charged, and

she'll know which part of that moment will be the strongest compositionally. You can guess at this stuff, or you can become more familiar with your subject. It's a strong argument for not photographing absolutely everything, but choosing certain subjects and staying with them. The familiarity you develop over time will allow you to anticipate moments, and be ready for them, not just hope for something to happen.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Find a dozen of your favourite photographs, preferably by another photographer so you can look at them a little more dispassionately. For each of them, ask yourself this one question: How might this photograph be different if the photographer had chosen a different moment—perhaps a few seconds, minutes, or even hours, before or after? In the case of photojournalism, that story might be completely different, or long over. In the case of a wedding, it's the difference between a stolen glance, a kiss, or the caressing hand of the groom on the small of his bride's back. Landscape photographers might not miss the light by a couple seconds, but in minutes it can be gone, and that light can be what makes the photograph spectacular or dooms it to be unexceptional. Now look at your own work, and ask yourself the same kinds of questions. How might this image be stronger if I'd chosen a different moment? What should I have been paying attention to in order to anticipate a stronger moment? Did I miss it because I wasn't present in the moment? Was I chimping? Was I unfamiliar with my gear?

33
MOMENTS: PATIENCE

I am not the most patient man on the planet. In fact I'm known for the opposite. My belief that life is short, coupled with a sense of urgency to cram it all in, and the knowledge that if I don't do the things I want that no one will do them for me, makes me deeply impatient. So when I tell you patience is more important to a photographer than half the nonsense we spend our time on, it's not because I find it easy or have a particular knack for it. It's because, pragmatically, I've found it to be true. On safari in Kenya I've watched time and time again as people have become impatient, put their cameras away and give up. I tell them not to. I tell them to wait it out. They don't. And that, inevitably, is when the magic happens. It's the same thing with portraits. Unless you're patient and wait for the moment, you'll have given up before it comes. The smile, the unexpected gesture, the one look that reveals your subject in a way that all the clever posing guides can never anticipate.

"Why is patience so important? Because it makes us pay attention."
~ Paulo Coelho

Grizzlies in the Khutzeymateen, BC, 2013. I waited a long time for the bears to get comfortable with us, but was eventually rewarded with this scene. Had we pulled out and moved on, we'd never have seen scenes like this.

Your need to make a photograph and life's need for certain things to happen in sequence are notorious for lining up a little out of sync and the sooner you get used to it the better. We all need to slow down a little (and I'll talk about that towards the end of this book) and that's part of it, but slowing down is not the same as being patient. Slowing down is about the pace of what we do; being patient is about how long we're willing to pace ourselves. It's about waiting.

We like the spontaneity of photography, and when the moment finally happens, we need to be ready for it. I'm all for being spontaneous. But these moments do not come at our bidding. Without waiting we will see fewer and fewer of them, unwilling to put in the time, unaware that the waiting is what it takes because these moments are rarer than we like to think—at least the truly great ones are.

Patience is needed not only as we wait longer than we thought we'd have to for a great moment, but in bigger ways. For that moment when we finally stop thinking so consciously about exposure or composition and it begins to feel a little more natural and for the first time we feel we might be getting somewhere with this craft and art. For that moment when our

work begins to truly feel like our own and not just exercises in imitation of others, helpful as they've been. For the dry period to be over. For the plateau to end. If you thought waiting for the UPS guy to come with your B&H order was tough, then, baby, you're in for a shock. But patience is what will keep you from giving up, from chasing shortcuts, from getting so paralyzed by your disappointment or fear that you can't do anything but make the same photograph over and over again. Patience with your scene, the light, the people you work with, and most of all yourself and the creative process that's uniquely yours, imperfect and tormentingly slow. Do what you can to seek it out, grab it by the tail and hang on tenaciously; don't be passive. But don't for a moment think that your tenacity means things will just roll over and play nice. You'll still have to wait it out. But do. Patience, said Aristotle, is bitter, but the fruit is sweet.

34
MOMENTS: AWAIT YOUR FOREGROUND

If I could encourage you to wait for one thing, beyond the sweeping generalization that all you have to do is wait for the light, the lines, and the moment to appear, it would be to await your foreground. Over the last few years as I've taken students around the world and we've sat talking about their photographs, I've noticed my observations beginning to fall into a few repeating patterns. One of those observations is this: you've got a really beautiful/interesting background. It's gorgeous. But I feel like it's an empty (though beautiful) stage awaiting the character(s) and the story can't begin until the character(s) show(s) up. Now, if you're story is about the absence of that character and you want to express that absence, or vastness of space or something, then great, but then you need to compose it in such a way and most often the photograph is composed as though the photographer were hoping something would show up. And I tell them this and you know what they say, to their credit? Nine times out of ten they say that's what they were hoping for. I say, "to their credit" because it thrills me they recognized the image was missing something, and they knew what that something was. That's important.

There are only two things missing now. The first is the discretion not to show others your work when you know it's lacking, but in a teaching environment I applaud that courage. The second (and here's the point I'm getting to) is this: the patience to wait for that character—or missing element—to appear. Sometimes it never happens, but most of the time that's because we didn't wait long enough. Or we did, and some amazing things came through our scene, but we never saw them because we were waiting so hard for something *specific* that we didn't see the possibilities when they presented themselves.

Not unlike the wisdom that says if you find beautiful light, go find something in which to photograph it, or if you find a great background, it's worth finding, or waiting for a great foreground. Life doesn't stand still. Some places certainly have more movement than others, and in them it's worth the waiting, or alternatively, the going back for. In the others, when no great specific moment is likely to appear, then tap into what it is you love about the empty stage in front of you, and

Antarctica, 2012. Neither the seal nor the penguin were there when I arrived.

make that the star. Get in closer, do studies in colour, line, or texture. Do an abstract. Or find a way, as I mentioned earlier, to make the photograph about that absence or emptiness. But my dollar's betting on something happening if you wait long enough—either the missing element will appear, or you'll see what you didn't before—that it was there all along and just needed time to perceive it.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Just wait a little longer. You've got another assignment later that's more specific to waiting out a scene and Lord knows most of us find this kind of thing hard enough to do once, so I won't ask you to do it twice. What I do want you to do is consider that waiting time as time spent thinking about possibilities. If you could make anything in the world appear as your foreground, what would it be? Why? Is there a more likely alternative that might accomplish a similar thing in this scene while also having the advantage of being remotely possible? If nothing appeared, what compositional choices could you explore to make a different photograph? Use your camera (or just your iPhone, which is great tool for making sketch images) to make a series of "What if…" photographs. Consider doing the exercises in Chapter 43, "Explore Possibilities."

35
PEOPLE

Photographing people is a subject that can, and has, taken whole books. If there were three things, and only three things, I could teach about photographing people, it would be these: first, making photographs of people is not primarily a technical pursuit, but a relational one. Second, photographing people is no different than photographing everything else; a photograph of an interesting person is not the same as an interesting photograph. Third, almost everyone I know is nervous—or downright frightened—by the prospect of photographing people, and the ones that aren't are a little weird, and probably to be avoided.

Let's go back to the first idea. The best portraiture is not done by people who are profoundly technically proficient. In fact, the geeks who know their camera specs inside and out are probably the ones that'll make really, really sharp, and perfectly exposed photographs of cats. To them I can only say, it might be time to turn off the Star Trek reruns, take William Shatner's advice and get a life, and in that life include some social interaction. Come back to this chapter when you've done that. The others among you just need to make the relationship the first priority. Why? Because it's within the context of the

relationship, however brief, that you will truly see the subject and you can't photograph what you don't see. Great portraiture is about revelation and you can't portray that until something about the subject has been revealed to you. That happens when the subject is relaxed, when they trust you, and when you are genuinely interested in—and curious about—them. It's about trust, even on the most basic level. If they trust you, they will open up to you, follow your lead, and in some way reveal themselves to you.

The second idea adds to the first. You want the subject to trust you because when they relax they act more like themselves and that leads to a genuine laugh, an authentic gaze, or the removal of the masks most of us wear in some form. A truly interesting-looking man is no guarantee of an interesting or engaging photograph. What interests us is the gesture, the lines, the representation of connection, and that won't be there in the photograph if it's not there with you. I'm talking specifically about portraits here, but the same logic applies to candid photography. We are connected as reader and viewers by engagement. We respond most to photographs of people where there is some recognizable (what we can recognize, we can feel) emotion. Even boredom, if shown strongly, can work, but make

it something. If photographing a couple in a fight, choose your moment so the fight can be *felt*. For a couple in love, show that love by some gesture. It doesn't have to be passion. It can be tenderness. But the gesture has to be there and it has to be obvious to those of us who weren't there at the time. If we need to have seen the moment on either side of the one you photographed in order to truly feel this one, it's not going to work.

The third idea is the one most photographers find hardest, and it sends them in droves to photographing landscapes. Working with people can be scary. We are no longer completely in control. If they are strangers, they could say no to our request to photograph them. Despite our best efforts, we might never click and the moment where they reveal something of themselves to us might never come. So I'll tell you what I tell any of my students who ask me about this, hoping I have the secret. There is no secret. Courage is not the absence of fear; it's the act of the will to act in the presence of fear. So, to be blunt, either work up the courage to do it, or don't. For most of us our fear is strongest where we have the most to lose, so hold it lightly. So what if they say no? So what if the photograph isn't amazing? If you can relax about it, and lean into the relationship, it can

be much easier. Get to know them. Laugh with them. Ask them about their children. Make the photograph the record of that time together, not the only experience of it.

The rest is easy. Anyone can move a subject or a light to create a catchlight in the eye. And everything else is in this book already. Pay attention to your background. Be attentive. Choose your lens and the orientation of your frame based on the story you want to tell and the feelings you want to evoke based on the situation, not because one lens or frame is considered more appropriate. There's no place for what is proper or appropriate in art. Lastly, consider again the advice of Robert Capa: if your photographs aren't good enough, you aren't close enough. Get closer. Spend more time. Find a level of intimacy that creates trust. Spend even more time. And at a certain point the camera (you think you're scared of your subject, some of them are terrified of that camera) stops being so present, stops being a barrier, and then (and only then) will your photographs become something more universal and compelling. No posing guide or clever "Secret to Better Portraits" article online is going to get you there. This has much more to do with your heart than it does to do with your eye. Connect with the heart first; let the eye take over later.

This one's for the fearful. Give yourself a personal project that puts you in a place where you can make more portraits. I have a friend who photographs everyone who visits his house. Utility guys, friends, UPS drivers, whomever. Why not? It doesn't get much easier. Why not ask one stranger a day to make their portrait? Need to start easier? One co-worker a day? Why not ask the guy who serves you coffee? You have to start somewhere. Just start.

And for the less-than-fearful, my experience with people for whom this comes a little too easy is that it's easy to make one photograph or two, then move on. For you I suggest an ongoing project. Don't make it a run-and-gun. Find someone you can photograph over a month, a season, or a year. Ask your mother, your grandfather in his final years, or your children in their first. There really is nothing better than making photographs of people to learn how to make photographs of people.

Now pick up a book or two by people who made photographs of people. Look at people like Vivian Maier who photographed strangers, or Yousuf Karsh, who photographed notables, or Annie Leibovitz' early work when she shot for *Rolling Stone*. What is it about their work that engages their subjects? Do you see commonalities? Do you think it was easy for them? The best creative work happens on the ragged edge, just past the point where our comfort would ask us to stop and head the other way.

36
UNDERSTAND VISUAL MASS

Every element in the frame exerts a certain amount of pull on the eye of the reader. Our eyes (and by that I really mean our brains, our attention) are drawn to some things over other things. Elements that pull the eye are said to have visual weight, or mass. Understanding— and playing with—this is key to almost any further conversation about composition. For example, you can't talk about balance without talking about the relative visual pull of the elements in the frame. Of all the concepts I ever wrapped my mind around in photography, this one has made the greatest difference to me.

Some things pull at our attention more than others. Generally speaking, our eyes are pulled by larger objects before small ones, moving objects before stationary ones, bright before dark, sharp before blurred, human or organic before inorganic, and so on. These are examples; there's no definitive list because it all changes with context. A white pebble in a sea of black sand will potentially draw the eye as much as a black pebble in a sea of white. In this case, it's not about whether the pebble is black or white, but the contrast. Similarly, a man blurred by motion in an otherwise static scene might exert great pull on our eyes, but no more than, say, a stationary man in crowd of moving, blurred people.

Every element in the frame pulls the eye with greater or lesser force. Where does your eye go? What path does it follow? Why? How does the first image differ from the second?

It is this ever-changing context that makes it hard to be definitive, but the principle is what matters, not a memorized list. Photographers are observers, and you should be able to come up with your own. It is understanding and noticing visual mass that makes the difference.

How can you use this understanding? If you have a sense of what will pull the eye you can more intentionally choose what you include or exclude from the frame. If you know that the eye finds diagonal lines more dynamic than parallel lines, you can shift your perspective to make those parallel lines diagonal, changing the potential energy in the frame. If you know the eye tries to balance one element against another, and won't stop moving around the frame until it does, you can play one visually massive element against another and extend the experience of the viewer. Or conversely, you can eliminate that tension, make a composition that's more static and creates a more serene experience.

Photographs are not taken. They are made. And we are the makers. We have the ability through our optics and our choice of perspective and proximity to exert control over the way elements relate both to each other and to the frame. Being conscious of visual mass will help us make those decisions, giving us a greater sense of how the final photograph will be experienced by others.

Here are the short notes on visual mass:

- Every element in the frame will exert a measure of pull on the eye. Elements with greater pull are said to have greater mass or weight.

- Balance is an issue of weight, as is tension, so first understanding visual mass will help you fine-tune the balance in your image.

- Tension is created when we create competition between elements by assigning similar visual weight to them, creating a dynamic viewing experience.

- Visual weight is not only about composition but also about message. Making a significant element larger, brighter, sharper, etc., will make it dominant. Is that what you want? Is there a way to tone that down, or exaggerate it? We point with our photographs, saying, in essence, "look at this." Giving elements greater weight is a way of saying, "look at this," more specifically.

- Visual mass can be used in the digital darkroom as well. Subtly sharpening or blurring elements creates either a push or a pull on the eye. Same with dodging and burning, or even changes in the crop.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Set aside a couple hours, and put the coffee on. Find a magazine that's full of photographs. Grab a Sharpie marker, preferably red. Now go from image to image and circle the elements with the greatest visual pull. Put a square around the element with the second greatest visual pull. Notice how your eye moves in the frame from one to another. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Why is my eye drawn to this instead of other elements? Is it larger, brighter, sharper? What gives it its weight?

- What is their relationship on primary and secondary, even tertiary, elements to each other?

- How are they positioned relative to each other and to the frame?

- How do they contribute to the balance or tension in the frame?

- Is there anything in the frame that pulls my eye that might not be part of the story the photographer seems to be telling? What could you, if you were the photographer, have done to reduce this? Change in position? Change in lens choice? Less depth of focus?

- How would the visual mass of the whole photograph change if it were in black and white?

For further study on visual mass, try my book *Drawing The eye, Crea Ting STronger imageS Through ViSual maSS.*

37
EXPERIMENT WITH BALANCE AND TENSION

Like so many things not directly related to the mechanics of photography, it took me a long time to wrap my brain around balance, much less the need for it in the first place. But the issue of balance is, ultimately, not something we can opt out of. Our photographs will be balanced—statically or dynamically—or imbalanced, and we may have nothing to do with it, but the balance in an image will affect how people experience your photograph and is a key consideration in composing your photographs; the sooner you pay attention to your own sense of balance and learn to play with it, the better.

Balance in a photograph is much the same as it is in the so-called real world. Visual balance takes its cues from physical balance; it's all about mass. Physically, if you have an object on one side of a seesaw, a heavier object on the other and the fulcrum in the middle, it will not be balanced. Replace the lighter object with one of the same weight and the seesaw balances out again. That's static balance. But there's another way to balance it if you insist on keeping the objects of different weights: changing the placement of the fulcrum, moving it towards the heavier object, makes a lever of the seesaw, and allows you to regain balance. That's dynamic balance.

It's helpful to get a sense of this because it's not often that we'll be able to, or even want to, change the visual mass in our images to find perfect static balance. Complicating it even further, there's truly no way to objectively weigh the visual mass of the elements in a frame. Remember, visual mass is not about the *size* of the elements, though that plays into it, but the pull on the eye. A large black rock can have the same mass as a small child, and depending on how large the rock and how adorable the child, the mass of each will change. How do you assign a value to how much my eye is drawn to a red raincoat, the laugh of a child, or the shape of a lone tree on a hill? You can't. But you can play with it until it *feels* right and that's one of the things that allows us to put our own stamp on our work; we'll all treat balance and tension a little differently and in doing so we'll create different photographs that create different experiences in each of the readers of our photograph.

This is why the so-called rule of thirds is so slavishly followed; it so often works. The rule says put your main subject on one of the thirds of your frame, not in the middle. Why? Placing it in the middle is static. Symmetrical. Potentially boring. Putting the subject on the leftmost third, for example, is like shifting the fulcrum. Now the visual mass of the main

Static Balance
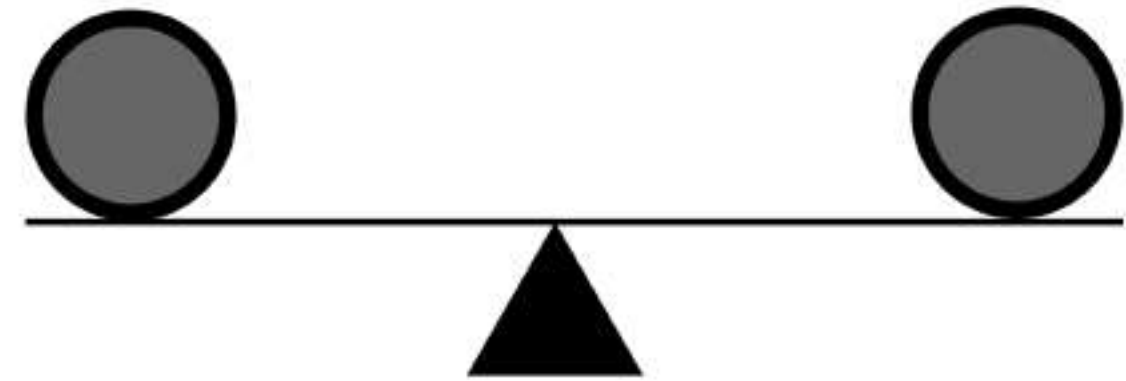
Imbalanced

Dynamic Balance

subject on the first horizontal third of the frame balances against the two-thirds of negative space. Balanced but in tension. Dynamic. More interesting. But will one-third always do it? Not necessarily. It depends on the subject. And the negative space. And the feeling you intend to create. And it depends on all kinds of other decisions and constraints, like what you've chosen to do with scale in your image. There's no reason it shouldn't sometimes be the "rule of fifths or sixths." And when what you want is symmetry and static balance to create serenity, then the right place—rule of thirds be damned— might be right smack in the middle. Understanding why the rule of thirds sometimes works will help you know when to use it, when it doesn't work, or when to modify it.

ASSIGNMENT

Spend an hour with a magazine and your red sharpie marker. You know where this is headed, so make sure it's a magazine you're OK with destroying. Pull out 20 photographs, and do the following:

1. Outline the frame of the photograph in red.

2. Outline the element that represents the primary subject in red.

3. Ask yourself: Is this image balanced? If yes, is it balanced statically or dynamically? If dynamically, against what is it balanced? Another element? Negative space? If it is not balanced, why not? What creates this imbalance? Is it intentional? What might the photographer have done to restore that balance?

4. Repeat.

38
USE YOUR NEGATIVE SPACE

Negative space is the space in a photograph that is not your main subject. In the case of a portrait made with a very shallow depth of field, the negative space would be the blurred background, which in this case contrasts with your subject, better defining them and giving something with which to create balance and/or tension. What you do with that negative space is important because contrary to what the name implies, it is not the absence of space; it's a compositional element and what you do with it will determine how freely the eye moves about the image and whether the eye is given a place to rest. Important to also remember that this space isn't necessarily "empty"; it can be textured or coloured, or contain details, just not enough that they distract, becoming distracting subjects of their own.

What makes negative space so hard to grasp at the beginning is that we don't see it naturally. When we look around the three-dimensional world, we naturally see first what we're looking at and disregard the context a little. But when you see the way the camera does, which is in two dimensions, the context gets flattened against the subject, making the relationship between them impossible to ignore. Forcing yourself to see negative space, to look through the camera (and later at scenes

without the camera) and see it in two dimensions, or flattened, is a great first step. Patches of open sky in the background can become squares of blue in the photograph, so learn to see it that way. Learn to anticipate the blur of a wide aperture or the compression of a long lens, and imagine how you might play with this negative space to frame your subjects.

The well-meaning advice that encourages photographers to "fill the frame" often gets misapplied and new photographers get in so close that they all but eliminate the negative space. A frame can be filled with negative space, and some of the most elegant compositions have a bold amount of negative space. It is not, however, whether you have a lot of negative space or not, it's how you use it and why.

The negative space in this photograph accomplished several things: it allowed me to play with scale, established mood, isolated the crane in the foreground and created a certain elegance that honours the Japanese aesthetic I was trying to achieve while in on this trip to Hokkaido.

Look at the images that accompany this chapter and consider the following questions:

- Can you readily identify the negative space in each image?

- Does the negative space distract from the main subject or serve to draw your eye towards it?

- How does the negative space balance against the positive space (the main subject)?

- Imagine two alternate versions of these images. What would it look like with twice as much negative space? What would it look/feel like with less?

- Notice the way your eye reads these images and the path it takes, does it feel rushed or does the negative space give you a little breathing room before returning to the main subject?

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Next time you head out to make images, play with your composition and intentionally make three frames of each scene you choose to photograph. Make the first the way your eye naturally wants to see it. Now create two alternate images with your imagination (as you did above), but this time with your camera: one with a much more expanded use of negative space, and one with much less. Then study them. Not all photographs require expansive negative space, some benefit from a constricted use of space. It all depends on what your want your photograph to say, to feel like. And in those images with more negative space, how your readers experience the photograph can depend very much on where you put that space. Negative space has visual mass, and the more you include the more mass your positive space will need—and in the right place—in order to create balance.

39
JUXTAPOSITIONS: FIND CONCEPTUAL CONTRASTS

One of my favourite photographers is Elliott Erwitt. There's a humour about his images that I've never been able to (nor, frankly, have I desired to) create in my own, despite 12 years as a professional comedian. That humour comes from an impeccable sense of timing and an eye for juxtapositions. Juxtaposition is the long word for the putting-together of elements that contrast with each other conceptually. An old man holding a young child is a juxtaposition of two different ideas: old and young. A portrait of a comedian not laughing but crying: comedy and tragedy. The images that accompany this short chapter contain juxtapositions: a full boat next to an empty one, modern next to ancient, Asian rice paddies next to North American-style teepees.

While not every photograph contains a juxtaposition of concepts (and there are some, like abstracts, that don't generally use them), I'd bet you could find contrasting elements in the best of them. Like stories that move forward only through conflict of some kind, photographic stories—or images that imply a sense of story—do so because of contrast, and the stronger that contrast, the stronger the sense of story. Two similar people (unless they're twins, and they're inter-

esting to us for the same unexpectedness of them as contrasts are) next to each other is less interesting to us than two people who differ in some way from each other. Small next to tall is a story. So is boy next to girl. Priest next to clown. I'm making stuff up now, but you get the point. You can of course imply story in other ways, but beginning with the question "Where is the contrast?" helps tremendously.

In landscapes, that contrast can come on the edges of things. Land meets water. Wind meets tree. Put a person in the landscape and it's man meets nature, depicting one of the classic themes in literature as man struggles to come back to harmony with the natural world. You don't have to tell the whole story, just hint at it. Provide the characters or the contrasts and the imagination can do the rest. And that's really the point: the engagement of the imagination. The piquing of curiosity. The raising of questions. The creation of an experience for the readers of your photographs that gives them a role in interpretation.

Just like in a written story, there can be devices like irony, surprise, or comedy, and our photographs can make use of similar tools, all of them by paying attention to placing elements in the frame that play off each other. And just as you can do this in one single image, you can pair images together to create this same hook on our attention. In 2012 I attended an Elliott Erwitt exhibit in Venice. Coming down the stairs at the end of the exhibit were two photographs, side by side. One, titled "Segregated Water Fountains" (1950), was black and white, a photograph of an African American man drinking from one of two fountains, one signed WHITE, the other signed COLORED. The photograph beside it was the only colour photograph in the exhibit, of Michelle and Barack Obama, celebrating Obama's first presidential win, and the first presidential win ever for an African American. It was a stunning juxtaposition and it brought tears to my eyes. Such is the power of creating tension through ideas.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

I strongly suggest you spend some time looking at the photographs of Elliott Erwitt. You'd be hard pressed to find a photographer with a keener eye for juxtaposition in his compositions. For every image ask yourself:

- What are the contrasting ideas in this image?

- From where does the humour or wit come?

- Could this contrast be stronger? How?

- How can I employ contrasts of concept or idea into my work?

40
ORIENTATION
OF FRAME

Somewhere along the line someone got the goofy idea that a vertical orientation of the rectangular frame should be called a portrait orientation and the horizontal orientation should be called landscape. And so thousands of new photographers are given yet another ridiculous guideline that will hinder their creativity for years to come unless they stop thinking in these terms. If you search for tips on land-scape photography you'll find—over and over again—the helpful advice to "try landscapes in portrait mode," and conversely, a similar search for portrait tips will tell you to "try it in landscape!" Great. The orientation of your frame should have nothing to do with what you are photograph-ing, per se, and everything to do with what you are trying to say with each particular photograph. What do you want this photograph to look and feel like? Then do what you have to with the orientation of the frame. The first question is not, "What shape is my subject?" There are plenty of great photographs that horizontally frame a vertical subject and vice versa. The more interesting, and more helpful, question is, "Is the story to be read vertically or horizontally?"

This is the same image, just cropped in Lightroom, showing the same scene in different orientation. The direction of the frame will make certain lines stronger than others, and create a different sense of balance.

This is the same scene, but different orientations chosen at the time, not in Lightroom. Different orientations will force new compositions and there is rarely one right answer. They express different things.

When we frame a photograph one way or the other we provide the first clues to those who will read it, about how you intend it to be read. You are saying, not just look here, but also look in this direction. It's not that the reader usually needs to be told, but part of our job is to make decisions that put the fewest barriers possible between the audience for our photographs and the thing we are trying to express or the experience we're trying to create. A horizontal framing of an essentially vertical story is likely to require that we include much more in the frame than we need to, which means the reader has to sift through more, and her eyes will explore the image less directly, trying to sort out the heart of the story from the extraneous. And with every extraneous element, the impact of the necessary ones is diminished, resulting in a diluted photograph that's weaker than it could be.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

When you look through the viewfinder, take a moment to identify the heart of this story:

- Is it vertical or horizontal? What kind of energy do the lines in the scene have?

- Will one framing or another give you more energy, or stop that energy from gaining momentum?

- What about implied lines, like the way a person in the frame is looking? Would there be greater mystery if you framed one way over another and excluded the thing they are looking at?

- What about negative space? Will one orientation give you more room for the eye to move?

- What about balance? Frame orientation affects all these things.

- Try both orientations. Which one *feels* right?

41
CHOOSE YOUR ASPECT RATIO

The aspect ratio of your frame is the proportion of one side (the vertical edge of the frame) to the other (the horizontal edge of the frame). While the 3:2 aspect ratio of the 35mm frame has become the standard, it's not because it's a "better" ratio so much as it is that the 35 mm film camera simply became the most affordable and therefore popular. I have on my shelf cameras that create a 1:1 frame, a 3:2 frame, and a 3:4 frame. In my portfolio I have images with 1:1, 3:2, 3:4, 4:5, 16:9, and a few that don't seem easily measured because I cropped them until they felt right, not according to a conventional ratio. The aspect ratio of our frame is not set in stone, and recognizing this gives us a chance to tell our visual stories the way we want to, not the way our camera tells us to. If your choice of frame orientation tells your readers to read the story one way or another, it's the aspect ratio that exaggerates that sense of verticality or horizontality.

Lately I'm framing much of my work in a 16:9 frame, in part because I thrive on new constraints and forcing myself to compose within a different frame forces me to make different decisions about relationships one to another and in relation to the frame itself. And I'm doing it in part because the extreme

1:1

horizontal bias of the 16:9 frame feels like a beautiful storytelling frame to me. But on a recent trip to Italy, I set my Fuji XE-1 to allow me to both see and photograph my scenes through a square (1:1) frame because it felt right to me. For a while before that— particularly with vertically framed landscapes—it was rare that I didn't set my Nikon D3s to frame my scenes as a 4:5 ratio, which seems really elegant to me and less vertical than the usual 3:2 frame. In part it's purely preference, and in part it's a decision I make based on what allows me to play with the elements the way I want to. What's important is not that there is magic to one frame or another (despite any talk you might have heard about the golden ratio, which is beautiful, but not the *only* beautiful ratio), but that you understand the effect of the frame on your scene and the people reading your photographs.

3:2

5:4

7:5

16:9

A change in aspect ratio will change the way you frame your work. It determines which elements you fit into the frame, and if you're determined to have them all, then it determines which lenses you use and where you stand when you make the image. It either forces or allows different choices that you might not have had with a different frame. A scene framed at 16:9 allows so much focus on the horizontal elements. If you decide to photograph the same scene at 1:1, you force yourself to give the vertical elements greater play, weakening the relationship between horizontal elements.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Open Lightroom or your favourite darkroom program, and choose six of your favourite photographs. Crop each of them as a 1:1, 3:2, 4:5, and 16:9. Now study those changes and interact with them, asking yourself questions like:

- Which images work best with which crop?

- Do any of these work better with one of the alternate crops? Why?

- Why didn't I think of that crop while I was making the photograph?

- Do I naturally prefer one aspect ratio to another? Do I particularly dislike one over another? Why?

- Is there room in my work to experiment with different aspect ratios a little more?

I'm not suggesting you make cropping to different ratios a habit, though if that works for you, fine. You can crop your images to different ratios later, but for me it's almost always too late. You have much more control over your composition if you make your aspect ratio decisions while you photograph. My Nikons don't allow me to set an in-camera crop of 16:9, but I make the decision to crop this way while I have the camera in my hand, not later. It's not the only way, but I find I make better decisions this way than sitting around the computer later and wondering what kind of crop I should do.

42
USE SCALE

Scale is a powerful compositional tool, and can be thought of in two ways. The first is to define scale as a relationship between elements in the frame; the second is to define it in terms of the relationship of elements in the frame to the frame itself.

When we look at a photograph, we're looking at a two-dimensional scene pulled from its context. Normally that context, out in the real world, gives us clues about the size or scale of things. You know how tall a dog is because it's standing beside a human being and you just *know* how big humans are. In other words, you have a frame of reference for comparison. To make that dog seem smaller put him next to a really tall man, to make him seem gigantic, put him next to a really short one. The same is true in landscapes and careful use of how we read scale, and how you manipulate elements within the frame can allow you to more intentionally control what you express through your photograph. In Antarctica, for example, I wanted to give a sense of just how large the icebergs were. Without a known point of reference—there was sea and ice, that's all— it would have been very hard to create that sense. But put a Zodiac inflatable boat, or even the larger ship we were travelling in, near that iceberg and suddenly others know exactly how big the ice really is.
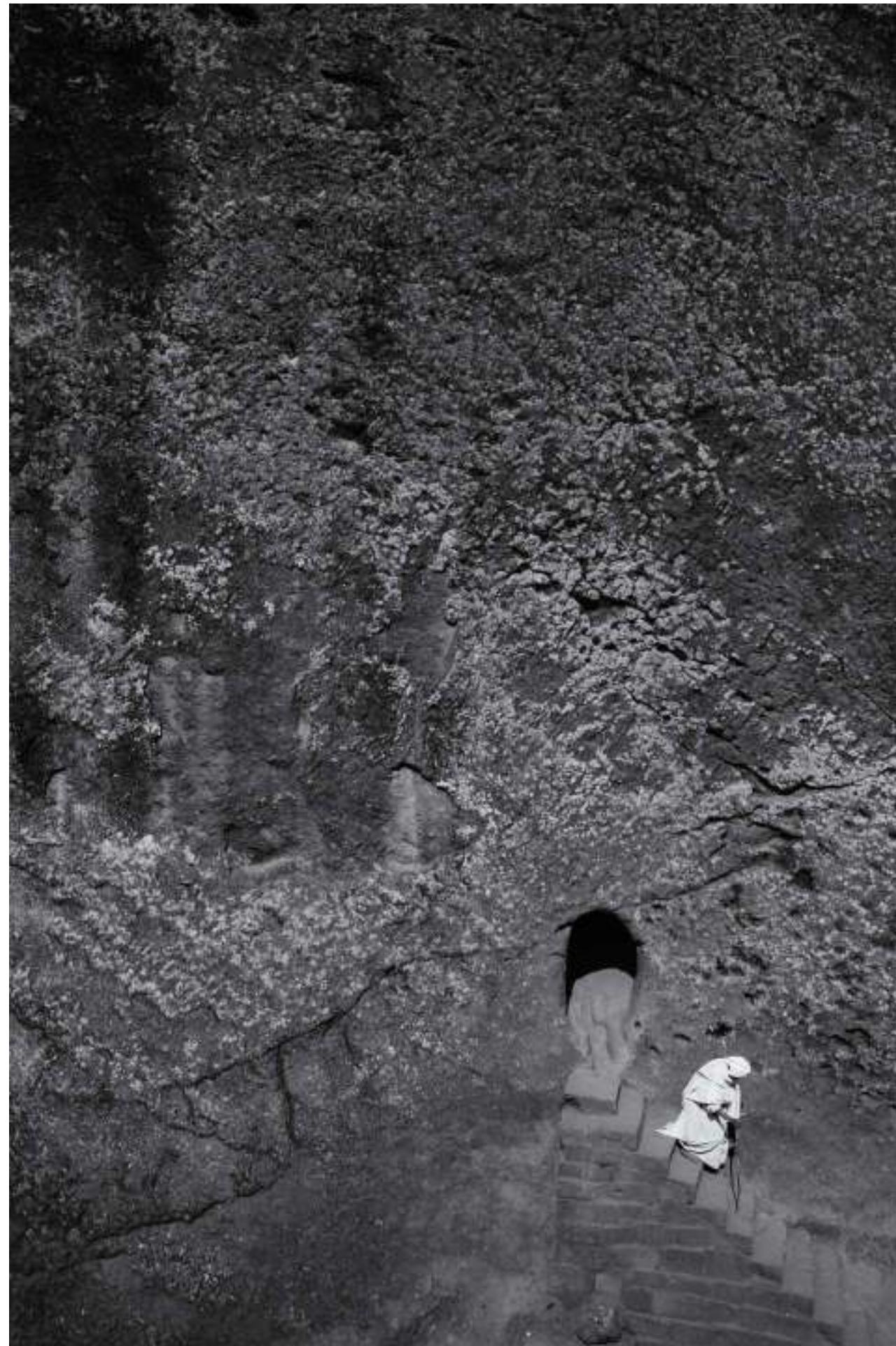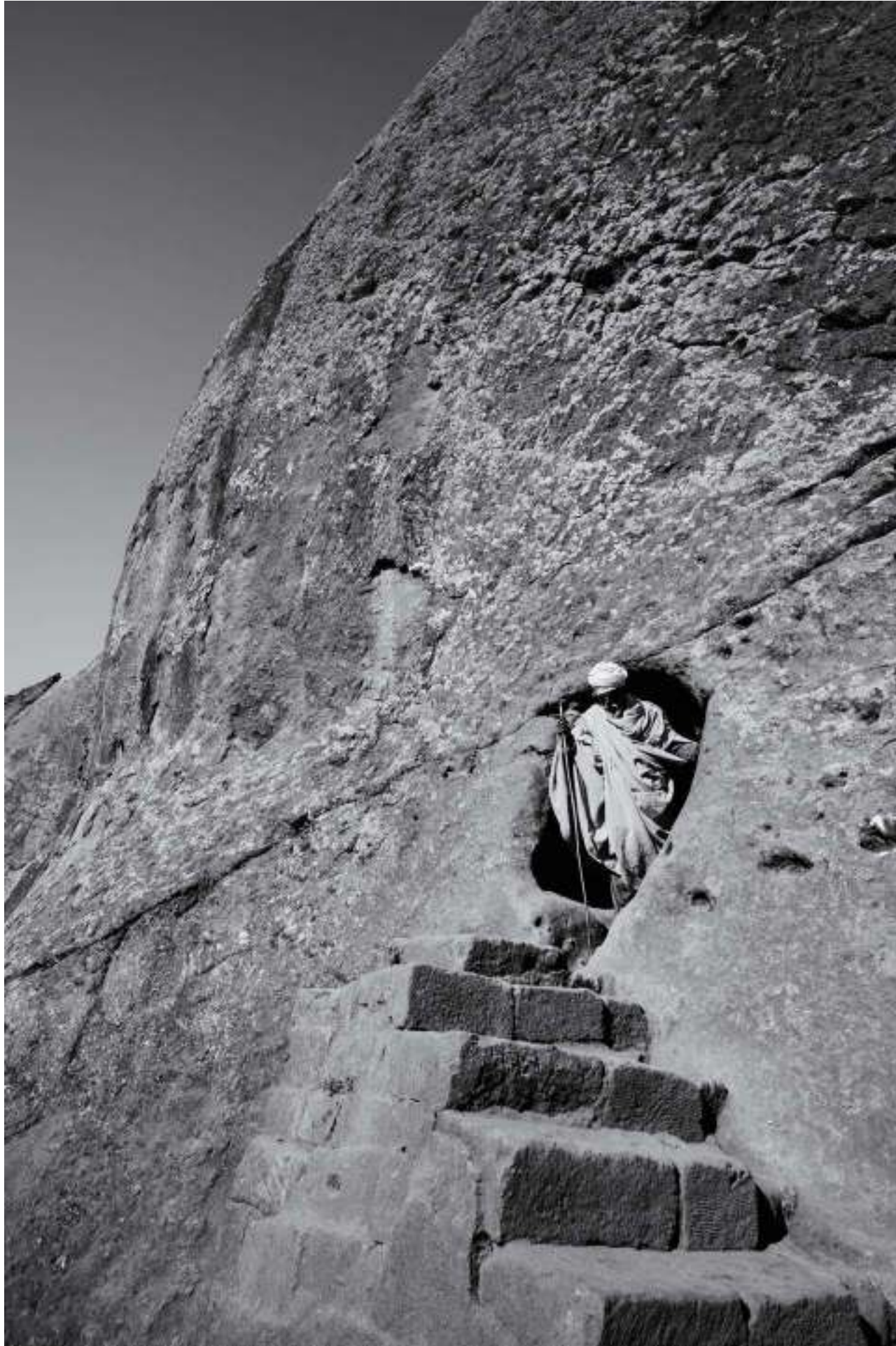
Three different photographs of the same scene in Ethiopia. How does the different use of scale change your experience, or how you see the place?

Furthermore, knowing what we know about perspective—specifically that closer objects appear larger while distant objects appear smaller—we can use that to exaggerate the appearance of scale. You would not, for example, put the ship in the foreground, the iceberg in the background, and use a wide-angle lens. In fact, you'd be creating the reverse effect, so if that's what you're going for, well, go for it. But if you backed up a ways, made sure the boat and the iceberg were really close to each other and used a longer lens to further compress the feeling of distance between them, you'd exaggerate the scale, creating the sense of just how big the iceberg really is. Now put a small inflatable boat in the scene next to the ship and the iceberg and the sense of scale has changed again and you've made the ship look massive and the iceberg look truly gigantic.

Sometimes to go back to the second way in which we look at scale, it is not elements in relation to each other, but in relation to the frame, that give a sense of size or space.

To stay in Antarctica for a moment, you might have nothing but a penguin and snow to work with. Placing the penguin very small in relation to the rest of the frame—nothing else but white snow—will give the feeling that he's very small and lonely because we can see from the vastness of space around him, devoid of other penguins, that he's alone. In a sense we're still reacting to his size in relation to another element in the frame, but that element is negative space itself.

Playing with this will change the way readers of your photographs experience the space within it, and that will affect their feelings and thoughts. A large elephant placed small in the frame can say, "Look how vast the savannah is." That same elephant completely filling the frame with the tiniest of birds on its head can say, "Look how huge this elephant is (or, how tiny the bird is)."

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Every photograph you make, unless it's an abstract study of the colour red or something similar, has a sense of scale. In some it's subtle, hardly noticed, and in others it's the subject of the photograph. And in others too, how you play with scale is less in the image itself and more in the size of the print. Some photographs look best really big, while others look best small. Regardless, scale will play a role. So for now, let that roll around in your brain. Look at photographs and consider the size of elements in relation to each other and in relation to the frame. Now go out and make some photographs that play with scale. Find something to photograph and juxtapose it with something that gives it scale. If the subjects aren't moving, make several photographs and play with the scale of both those elements next to each other and in relation to the frame. How much negative space can you create before the image stops feeling right?

There's a lot to think about, I know, and by the time we've considered all these 50 lessons our heads will be spinning. But you don't learn a language overnight; you learn it by practicing each element until it's comfortable and can be used with less conscious intent and just accessed a little more subconsciously. You'll get there. For now, don't focus on speaking the whole language—just wrap your brain around a few words at a time.

43
EXPLORE
POSSIBILITIES

Photography is an act of creativity and some of the most useful words in the vocabulary of the creative soul are "What if . . .?" What if I photographed this from a different angle, what if I got into the water? What if I lay on my stomach, shot through a wine glass, moved the camera, got a cheap lens and scratched it up? "What if" opens possibilities and paves the way for the essential task of creative thinking which is the combination of previously divergent elements. What if I used a fisheye lens for portraits? What if I photographed rainbows in black and white? What if I use a tilt-shift lens, usually considered an architectural lens, for sports photography? What if I used a wide-angle lens for wildlife? That's one way of pursuing possibilities.

Another avenue of pursuit is simply being open and allowing possibilities to come to you, which is not so simple, but that kind of receptivity is key to learning to see as a photographer, not only to see them but also to recognize them as possibilities when they show up. The most important step towards this is abandoning—or holding loosely—your expectations. Our expectations that the final photograph will be this or that can prevent us from seeing what actually is. When we focus too tightly, anticipation of a moment that *might* happen can stop us seeing the moments that are actually happening.
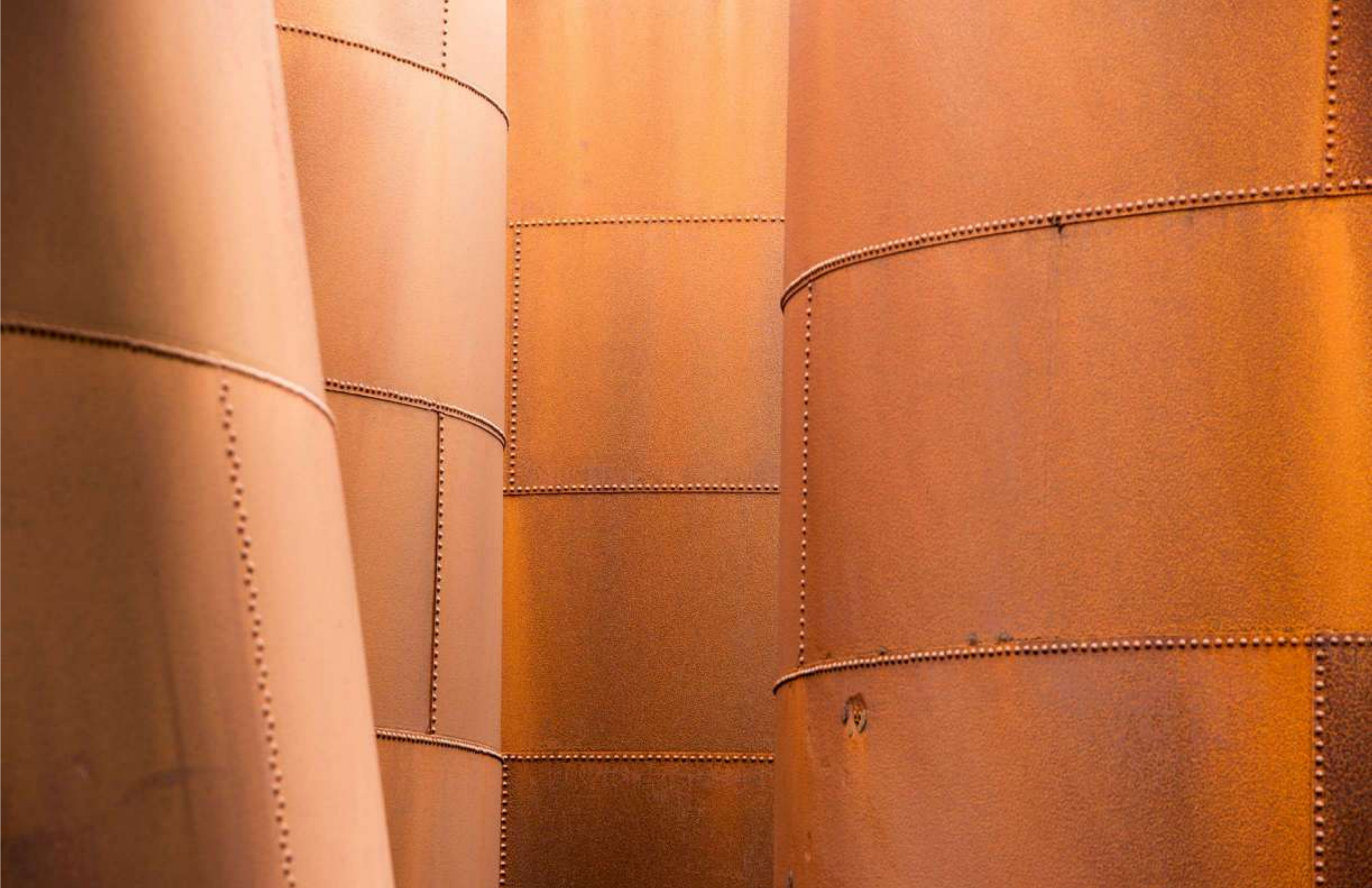
There was a sociology experiment conducted at Harvard in which subjects were asked to watch a video of six people passing around basketballs. The subjects were asked to count the number of passes by the three people in white shirts. Halfway through the short video, a kid in a gorilla costume walks slowly through the frame. At the end of the video subjects were asked if they noticed the gorilla, and half of them didn't see it. A *gorilla*. We see what we're looking for, and more importantly, what we're looking for blinds us to what's really there: an important lesson in perception for photographers. Being open to possibilities means being careful not to look so hard for things that we miss others. Active looking is important but mustn't prevent—or take the place of—passive perception as well.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Break this assignment into two parts. The first is to find a scene and photograph it twelve different ways. Significantly different. Mine the scene. Work it. The first four will be easy. The next four will be harder. The last four should begin to get creative, if not beautiful. You aren't looking for good ideas, but for more ideas. Once you've got them, you can play with them and test how good they are in the real world. Bad ideas that lead to better ideas and then to better work are not bad ideas; they're just the grease that gets you there. So if you censor yourself too quickly, you'll never let the bad ideas out to play.

For the second part of the assignment find something to photograph, but before you pick up the camera, make a list—on paper, your iPhone, your brain—about what you see. Mentally make the obvious photographs. Don't use the camera. Trust me. Make a dozen photographs. In your brain. Now pick up the camera and make twelve more. None of them can be the same as the images you made. The only way to do it is to take your time, to make some bad ones to get to the good ones, and to be receptive. You've shot what you've expected to—now ask yourself what if…. twelve more photographs. Go.

44
SLOW DOWN

When I started writing this book, I got onto Twitter and Facebook and asked my own circle of friends, fans and followers about the most significant lesson they ever learned about photography. Given a chance to talk about some great visual revelation, I was surprised how many of them said that lesson was simply to slow down.

"Fear of Missing The Shot" is a pandemic among photographers, as though there are only so many photographs out there, they've grown to this perfect point and must be harvested now before someone else gets it or it dies, unseen, on the vine. How many photographs do we need to make? No one will ever see the photographs you do not make, and worse, being so wound up and frantic to "get the shot" will probably blind you to what's actually going on. You don't know the photograph is there until you've made it, and that's something you can only see in hindsight. No amount of pre-visualization will guarantee the creative process or that the light will do what you hope, or that the moment you anticipate will unfold in front of you. So calm down.

Rushing through our work is only self-defeating, and sabotages what might otherwise happen if we lingered. Lingering helps us

see possibilities and alternate angles we might not have considered in our rush. It allows for the ramp-up period most creative people need to get into that space most beautifully called Flow.

I notice this franticness in students when I travel. There for only a week or two, they're terrified they'll miss out and so they run helter-skelter, hoping they'll see it all. But you can't. Seeing, in photographic terms, is not about what passes before the eyes, but about perception, and we perceive better that which we've really experienced. What do you really long for? 200 half-baked images of an Italy you think is out there, fast copies of photographs you saw when you did a Google image search or in the pages of the Lonely Planet, or a dozen photographs that thrill you, that move you? I don't know why you photograph, but today's cameras are so good that if all you want is a record of "I was there," then put this book down; you don't need it. Just point and shoot and move on. But if you want something more, then you need to take your time. It is this way with travel, and it is this way with portraits or landscapes.

Taking a break and soaking it in.
Khutzeymateen, BC, 2013.
Photograph by Jon McCormack.

Slowing down will help you see better, and it will put you in a better creative space. It will help you avoid obvious mistakes. Even just taking the time to scan your frame and check your corners before you press the button will improve your work. But the best reason to slow down is this: you'll be more aware of the moment itself. Listen, how we live our moments is how we live our lives. All we have is this too-brief time on earth, and rushing through it only gets you to the end faster. Photography is about life; life is not about photography. You can't photograph what you've not experienced, and to experience life, people and locations, you have to put the camera down, have a glass of wine, and open not only your eyes but your mind and your heart.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Would it surprise you if I told you your assignment is just to slow down? Pick up your camera, one lens (and a tripod if that's your thing) and go find one place to make photographs. Give yourself the smallest place you can stand. 50 square feet near the ocean. Or a street corner. And stay there—and only there—for an hour. Make it two. Linger. Have coffee. Be present. Make photographs if something moves you. Don't get discouraged if nothing does. You didn't come here to make photographs, you came here to be receptive, to see what was there, to notice. Forcing yourself to make photographs of things that haven't moved you in some way is no way to be in the moment. And if something does really move you, then mine the scene. Look at it with different frame orientations, do slower exposures, change your perspective, zoom with your feet. Giving yourself time means you can do this stuff intentionally, and with a clear mind.

45
STAY PRESENT

While we're talking about remaining in the moment, it's a good time to talk about *staying* present. Stop chimping. Chimping is the almost compulsive need to look at your images on the back of the camera the moment you've created them. I understand the desire for the feedback—and when you're new at this you're going to want to check your histogram or your composition—but the sooner you trust your technique and stop looking at the LCD, the sooner you'll stop popping in and out of the moment.

I've seen it too many times to count, and I never know whether to laugh or cry. A student will put the time in to make a beautiful photograph; they'll start making their sketch images, then stop and look at the LCD. And it's in the distraction, when they retreat from the moment, that the subject they were working with relaxes and laughs, and they don't notice because their portrait session suddenly became about the camera not the human being in front of them. This back and forth between moments and non-moments (what I call the time spent fiddling, looking at screens, and doubting ourselves) kills spontaneity and confidence and you won't make better photographs until you tame it. Set your exposure, then connect to the moment and stay in it until it's over.

46
SIMPLIFY

Antoine de Saint-Exupery said, "A designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away." The same applies beautifully to the photograph as well. Elegance is about simplicity and the removal of everything unnecessary to the telling of the story or the expression of emotion. Pulling everything extraneous from the frame, or forbidding it to go there in the first place, allows the necessary elements to play their strongest.

Trying to include more in the frame and asking more of the photograph than it's able to communicate only weakens it. Better to create three powerful, elegant frames than one that is cluttered and suffers from so much dilution that the reader of the photograph doesn't know what you're pointing at.

I'm not suggesting you make your photographs so clear that they suggest no mystery. On the contrary, mystery is best created by what you do not show—another argument for simpler images.

- How much can you take out of the frame through the isolation techniques you learned earlier?

- Can you further simplify the background, giving a little less information and a little more impact?

- Can you change your point of view in order to shift some strong lines and give them less energy in order to let other elements play more powerfully?

- Does pulling colour out, or diminishing the saturation a little, simplify the frame in a way that gives you a stronger frame?

- How can you break this one scene into three or four photographs, each a little stronger than the scene as a whole because each speaks a different thing, in a different way?

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

This exercise is like the one from Chapter 43, but this time instead of looking wider, you're looking deeper. Find a scene that pulls at you and make a photograph the way you normally might. Don't think too much about it. Now find the "photographs within a photograph" and make six simpler photographs. They don't have to tell the whole story. In fact, that's the point. It doesn't have to be a large scene, either. Pick a vase of flowers, make a photograph of that vase of flowers, and then simplify; find six photographs within that scene that are less busy, and more about line and colour and pattern. Make the simplest photographs you can. Exclude everything that is unnecessary. Can you make one photograph of only a stem, or an abstract of de-focused petals, eliminating even the need for sharp focus? Could you reduce the colour palette to only different shades of red or green? Could you find a way to remove the colour entirely? How much can you remove before you've no longer got a photograph?

47
SHOOT FROM THE HEART

In case you've not heard me preach this sermon before, keep this one thing before you: life is short. We've no idea how short it really is for each of us, and if we live to a so-called ripe old age, there's a good chance we'll look back and think, "My God, it all went so fast." And in that brief time, we've got only so many experiences to have, only so many photographs to make and share with the world. From what I've read, those people who have gotten to the end with time and inclination to express regret do not regret things they did and mistakes they made—they usually see those as necessary steps in becoming the people they did. What they regret, instead, is what they did *not* do. Sadly, it is the things we do that take up all our time, leaving no room for the things we might otherwise have done. So what's my point? Life is too beautiful, and too short, to be making photographs of things that you don't want to. And if we really knuckle down on it, it's barely long enough to become fully ourselves—let alone some else—so it's also too short to spend our days in imitation.

Imitate, if you must, as a way of learning. Artists trace the great works to become familiar with their forms. Singers do cover tunes, and new guitar players cut their teeth (and set ours on edge) playing "Stairway to Heaven." But it's the artists who adapt that knowledge into their own growing way of doing

things and absorb them into their own voice as soon as they are able. Imitators merely adopt; artists adapt. There's got to be a reason you resonate with one artist over another; something about what they do and how they do it that pulls you towards them. What is it? How do they do it? Figure it out. Try it on. And as soon as you can, move on.

I read too often that you've got to know the rules before you break them, and I know what people mean, though it still begs the question: why? Why acknowledge the rules at all? There are principles, sure. But rules? It's this kind of thinking that leads students to ask, "How should I do this?" and it's not until they stop asking that question and look to their heart, their will, and ask "How do I want to do this?" that their work becomes their own and they create not from obligation but from their most honest, unique places. Colour outside the lines, and with any colour you chose. Photography is as much about expression as anything else, and it's hard enough to find the courage to do that vulnerably without also feeling the need to do it the way someone else wants us to. Follow your heart first. Life is too short, and your art too important, to do anything else. Find what you love to photograph—it can be a subject, like children, or birds, or love itself, or it could be amazing light and lines, present in all kinds of subjects—but whatever it is, do that. Your passion (and your disinterest) will show in your art. Leave everything else that doesn't make you say, "Oh my God, look at that!" to others.

48
PRINT YOUR WORK & LIVE WITH IT

Almost nothing in the last year has impacted my own work and made me a better craftsman than beginning to print my work myself again. I'd been travelling for a while, with no real address, so for a couple years most of my photographs went into books, were seldom printed, and when they were printed were printed by someone else. Returning to printing feels like coming back to a fuller photography, as though I'd been missing something for a couple years.

If you can afford to do it, look into a printer that'll allow you to print as large as you can afford to do. If that's nothing more than gorgeous 8x10 prints, so be it. Printing's not cheap, but I'm not sure that's a liability. A commitment to print the best of our work, and the fact that each print costs something, means that most of us will be more selective about the images we select and that we'll take greater care in our development of that image into a final photograph. It doesn't take long before you tire of spending $5 or $10 on each work print only to find a missed dust spot, or that we've forgotten to check for noise or chromatic aberration, before we start paying more attention both while we edit and while we're behind the camera. The spin-off is that we'll pay more attention while making the photographs, and that will result in better photographs.

Putting our images online—without cost—means more people can see them, and I love that reality. More people can see our work today than ever before. But the downside is that the signal to noise ratio suffers. Quantity goes up, quality goes down. The "good enough for Flickr" mentality cripples us as craftsmen and robs us of the chance to give greater care to our work.

I don't want to be prescriptive about this; we all do this for different reasons and there is no "should" in art. But I think photography is incomplete until that photograph becomes tangible and gives us a chance to complete the process. I also believe we need to live with our work awhile. We're often very quick to declare a photograph done, and then move on. I think time gives us a little more objectivity, gives us the luxury of letting go of the need for this image or that image to be great, when in fact it could be stronger. Living with our work gives us time to get over the novelty of it.

Often we think our work is great when what it is is merely new. Spending time with our work gives us that time to reconsider our edit, our processing, or the sequence of images in a series. I hang new work on a long cable wire hung in the entry of my loft, which means I have to look at my photographs each time I enter or leave my home, or use the washroom, which is down the same hall and ensures I see the work often. I think we rob ourselves of a chance to make stronger decisions about our work if we do not print it and live with it.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Give yourself a deliverable on your next personal project. Be more specific about the final output. For example: after editing, I will print a sequence of twelve photographs, which will work together to tell the story. Or 20 images you'll print and bind into an 11x14 portfolio. Perhaps you're doing something that plays with scale and the work would look great really large, so then your output might be two or three images printed 20x30 or larger. If you can afford it, consider setting up a printer. I have two right now, an Epson 3880 and 7900. They're getting more and more affordable, or at least less and less inaccessible, and the quality is out of this world. There are few aspects of creating photographs that I like more than finally holding my work, touching it, as a large print.

For further study, look into Marin Bailey's Craft & Vision eBook, *MAKING THE PRINT*. This is the book I used when getting back up to speed with printing, and it was tremendously helpful.

49
LISTEN TO OTHER VOICES (VERY CAREFULLY)

If you're serious about your craft and your art, then consider getting off the online forums as fast as you can. Stop hoping for "likes" and atta-boys and the unhelpful, but enthusiastic, "Nice capture, man!" Anyone in the world can find hundreds of people to offer affirmations and tell him or her their work is the best work ever. That's your mom's job; let her do it, and cut the others loose. All of us need voices in our lives telling us to keep at it, encouraging us. Most of us can use a little more confidence and a little less fear as we take greater risks and create our work. So find a couple of those. But don't let those be the only voices you listen to. In fact there are four different voices most of us hear, and I'm going to suggest you cut half of them out of your life entirely, at least as far as the voices you allow to influence you.

The four voices are these: The Critic, The Mentor, The Friend and The Sycophant. Consider them the four archetypal voices in the artist's life.

The Critic we have no use for, not in this sense. They are a dime a dozen with opinions aplenty. They come uninvited into our lives, but for some reason they don't seem to leave until we insist. They have less interest in your art than their own voices. They don't want to make you better, they want to you to see how much better they are.

The Mentor tells you the truth, unvarnished and raw, but he tells you the truth from both sides, the positive and the negative. And he does not come into your life uninvited. You choose him or find him, but his voice comes because you ask, and you ask because you respect him and see something in his life and work that can help you take next steps.

The Friend tells you how much they love your work. They don't understand it, and might not be qualified to comment on it, but what they know and understand is you, the artist. They are your cheerleaders and you need them because all but the arrogant have times we need to be reminded to keep pushing on and that our recent failures don't define us. These too come invited into our lives, and we should listen to them on matters they are qualified, by their love for us, to comment on.

The Sycophant just spews praise, and before you get to thinking there's no harm in that, remember praise can be as toxic to us as anything good taken in greater measure than we're capable of absorbing. We can be as paralyzed by unearned praise as we can by undeserved criticism. The latter threatens the confidence we need to move forward and take risks, the former threatens the humility we need to be open to new directions and keep moving beyond our ruts and comfortable places.

YOUR
ASSIGNMENT

Take stock of the voices you listen to and of the reasons you listen to them. Salvage the time you spend in online forums and put it towards your craft. Go make art. Even the best voices will only help us so much. The one voice we must always listen to, with both confidence and humility, is our own. The clamour of voices on the forums will make it very difficult to hear that most important voice. You'll hear it louder the closer you are to your work. Your ego can handle to separation anxiety. It *needs* to be able to do so. For some of us it's an addiction and the sooner you wean yourself from it the sooner you'll make honest art that you want to make, the way you want to make it, without the need to please another person. Eject the critics; if they know so much, let them go make their own damn photographs. And eject the sycophants; making art to please others will only ever ensure we create mediocrity. Always.

50
STUDY THE MASTERS

Consciously or not, we all stand on the shoulders of giants. Men and women have gone before us, experimenting, creating the so-called rules we will go on to break, and earning our reverence or criticism, and probably caring about neither, if they're still among us to do so. But whatever we feel about their work, whether we love it or are indifferent to it, we can learn a great deal from it. After all the words in this book, I still maintain the best way to learn photography is to make a great many photographs and to look at—and study—a great many photographs. To find for ourselves what we love and what we don't, and how others have achieved what they have. The beauty of course is that it's all there to learn. There are no secrets in photography; almost every effect you see can be deduced. It's still nothing more than lines, light, and moments, and if you put your mind to it you can figure out how it was done, if that's the lesson you really want to learn. It's why the young and brazen can look at the work of a master and say, "I could do that." Of course you could. It's likely that most of us could. But we didn't. And if we're smart, we won't. We'll do our own thing. We'll do our own work, which some kid with a better camera than we'll ever own or even imagine, will say 30 years from now, "Phhhh, I could have done that." That's the circle of life.

If you're serious about growing as a photographer, cut back on the budget you've given yourself for shiny gear and buy a book of photography—not a book *about* photography—once a month. Or once every two or three months. Or go to the library. But better if you buy it because the first people to patronize photography and declare its value by *paying for it* should be photographers themselves. As a starting point, past and present photographers who are on my own shelves, or will be soon, are listed below. You'll see my own biases here, but that's OK; we all have them. I don't think my list is remotely authoritative, just that these are photographers I've learned from. Make your own list, but spend time soaking in photographs. To do so is to spend time with the photographers themselves as they show you how they saw the world, and if you can only do one of the assignments in this book, let it be this one, because these masters will open your heart, your mind, and your eyes . . . and that's the starting place and the foundation for everyone who wants to make stronger photographs.

Here are the photographers on my bookshelves:

Bill Brandt	Michael Kenna
Robert Capa	Annie Leibovitz
Henri Cartier-Bresson	Vivian Maier
Alfred Eisenstaedt	Steve McCurry
Elliott Erwitt	Irving Penn
Walker Evans	Man Ray
Robert Frank	Galen Rowell
Ernst Haas	Sebastiao Salgado
Fred Herzog	Edward Weston
Yousef Karsh	Art Wolfe

I also strongly recommend *Magnum Contact Sheets*, edited by Kristen Lubben. The book is large (massive) and not cheap, but it's a photography course all in itself with the amount of photographs in it, all of them appearing in context of the ones that never made the cut. With any of these books, don't just flip through them. By all means, enjoy them, but then study them. Interact with them. Why did he make that decision instead of another possibility? What was she trying to show me? Why colour? Why black and white? Why did he stand here and not there? How does this photograph make me feel? What unifies the work of each artist? How would you describe the their work? What might have happened if...? In any creative field, if not all fields in life, the questions are more important—and more interesting—than any answer you might come up with.

CONCLUSION

I hope you made it this far. I hope that you've seen this less as a book to be quickly skimmed, pulling out bits of information here and there. I didn't write it to be a repository of information, but a suggestion for further and constant study. Fodder for thought. A source of questions that make great starting points for your own journey. I hope it's opened your eyes to new ideas, and given you the courage to keep learning, knowing it's a journey we're all on and none of us have arrived. In fact, it's the masters I know, the ones I really adore and respect, who seem most likely to be humble about all of this, and it's the ones striving so hard to master this quickly who seem most likely to crash and burn. Pace yourself. Anyone can master a camera; that just comes with time. It's the other stuff—learning to *think* like a photographer—that takes so much work and allows this craft to become the means by which you create art. At a certain point you're going to stop caring how others would do it, or think you *should* do it, and you're going to realize it's all too important to take so damn seriously, and you're going to begin to play, and create photographs the way you once did, purely for the joy of seeing how things look when the camera sees them and *that* is when you'll fall in love again with photographs themselves instead of these ever-changing black boxes. Sure, they seem miraculous at times but, technical wonders though they are, they're nothing

compared to the miracle of opening the eyes and heart of another when the photograph you made connects with them in some way.

At whatever point you are on this journey, you're learning a new language. As I write this conclusion I am at a photography conference in New Brunswick teaching, and I've been sitting in on the sessions with Freeman Patterson, a long-time hero and mentor, and I'm still learning; my head today is swimming with new ideas. But you won't learn a new language by reading books on grammar or vocabulary. You've got to do the homework. So while I hope that this book is a source of ideas and

questions for you, I hope even more that you'll seriously consider actually doing some version of the assignments I've suggested. No one speaks a new language without wrapping their mouths many, many times around the new words, experimenting with the sounds and meanings until it comes naturally. For photographers, that act is largely a matter of making photographs—often—and trying these new tools until they fit in our hands more comfortably, until we can weave them into our photographs a little more unconsciously. To loop back to the beginning of this book, the magic wand is not in reading about this stuff, but in doing it—working it out over months and years.

It's a long, beautiful, journey. These lessons and assignments can be way points on that journey, but the real lessons are the ones you learn in the margins and the time you spend with the camera in your hand and your prints laid out before you on the coffee table, fueled by the thrill we all get when we hold those photographs and think, "I made this!"

I wish you winding lines, beautiful light, and unexpected moments.

David duChemin
Vancouver, 2013

Photo Credit, Al Smith.

You know great photography happens where craft and vision meet, and both of those take time and effort. They will never be substituted by gimmicks and shortcuts. They can't be bought, and they don't come in the latest camera or lens.

You know it's hard sometimes, especially on those days when your vision outpaces your craft. But you also know the joy of looking at a photograph, or holding a print in your hand, and smiling, thinking, "I made this!"

And we know that you do this for the love of it.

We are, and always will be, fans of the amateurs—the ones who do it for love, regardless of whether or not they ever make a dollar at it.

And we're here for you because the world would be poorer without photographs that remind us of the beauty and brevity of life.

The resources we make—our magazine PHOTOGRAPH, eBooks, podcasts and upcoming video projects—would be lifeless without you. Thank you for giving us the chance to do what we love, and for sharing us with your world.

David duChemin, Chief Executive Nomad
CraftandVision.com

FOR THE LOVE OF PHOTOGRAPHS
AND THOSE WHO MAKE THEM

CRAFT&VISION