

BEFORE THE CLICK

Thoughts on Craft, Perception & Intention



In memory of
Bryan Peterson
1952 - 2025
Friend and Mentor

Before the Click

Thoughts on Craft, Perception & Intention

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pacifcLIGHT Productions, Richmond, BC Canada

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A Note to the Reader

Photography improves slowly.

Not because the tools are difficult to learn, but because seeing clearly, takes time.

This book contains 25 ideas gathered over many years of teaching and speaking with photographers. Over those years, I've learned that the strongest images come from small shifts in how we observe the world — how we pay attention to light, shape, gesture, and timing.

The short ideas collected in this book grew out of those conversations. They are not rules, and they are not meant to be read in order. Instead, think of them as reminders — small adjustments that can gradually change how you approach making photographs.

This is not a book that needs to be read from beginning to end.

Each idea stands on its own. You may find it more rewarding to open the book at random, read one or two at a time, and then take those thoughts with you the next time you head out with a camera.



Preamble

We've all been there.

We're in a creative slump. The images don't feel as strong as they once did. Nothing quite works. And somewhere in the back of our minds a familiar thought begins to form:

Maybe it's time for a new lens.

There's nothing inherently wrong with good equipment. Cameras and lenses are wonderful tools, and there's real pleasure in using beautifully made gear. But over the years — through teaching, through conversation, and through my own struggles with photography — I've noticed something consistent:

The photographs that matter most rarely depend on what was in the bag.

They depend on attention.

They depend on patience.

They depend on intention.

And, they depend on the habits of mind we bring to the act of seeing.

The ideas collected in these pages are not rules. They are not technical formulas. They are not quick fixes. In fact, none of them will transform your photography overnight.

But applied consistently — quietly, thoughtfully — they will change how you approach image-making.

Photography is a craft. It is also a way of paying attention to the world. These 25 ideas are small adjustments in how we practice that attention.

Think of this not as a checklist, but as a companion. Something to return to when you feel stuck. Something to remind you that better images rarely come from buying something new.

— they come from seeing differently.



Isola Capri, Italy

Part I - The Practice of Seeing

Photography begins long before the shutter is pressed.

It begins with discipline — not rigid discipline, but the simple willingness to show up.

To practice. To fail. To try again.

To be present.

We live in a culture that rewards instant results.

Photography does not.

The habits that shape stronger images are quiet ones: patience, curiosity, repetition, and the courage to experiment without knowing the outcome.

The ideas in this section focus on those habits. They address how we approach the act of seeing itself — how often we practice it, how willing we are to fail at it, and how open we remain to what unfolds before us.

Before we worry about composition, lenses, or post-processing, we must first become more attentive observers.

Everything else builds from there.



DO THE WORK

“Inspiration exists, but it must find you working”

—PABLO PICASSO

It might seem harsh to start with this idea, but, like any learned skill, photography improves with practice. The more often you photograph — thoughtfully and attentively — the more your visual instincts begin to develop.

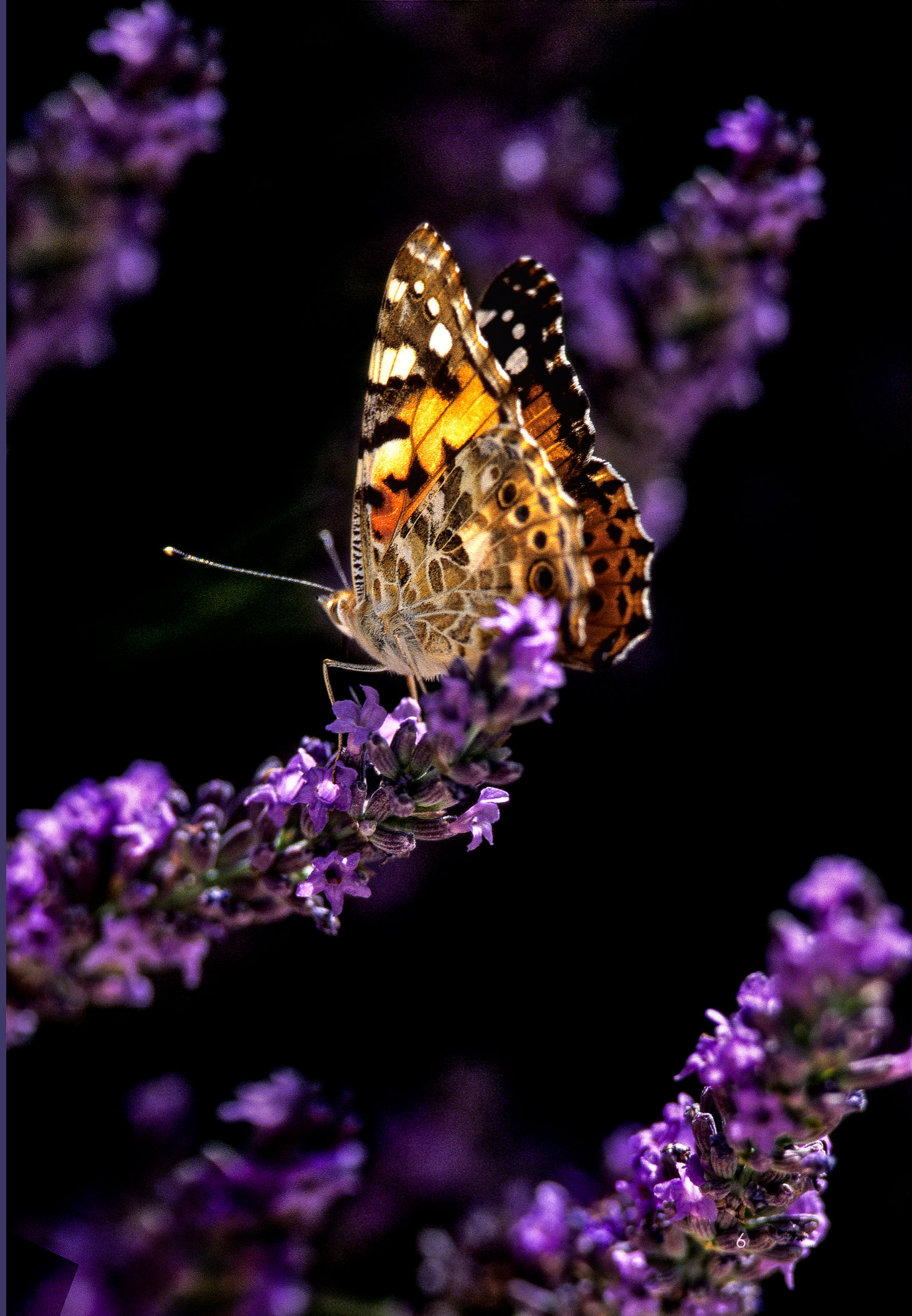
Shooting regularly strengthens what you might think of as your visual muscles. Combined with an understanding of composition and visual design, frequent practice sharpens your powers of observation. Gradually, you begin to notice image possibilities that once passed you by.

If work responsibilities get in the way, look for small opportunities during the day. A short walk with your camera on a lunch break, or a few quiet minutes exploring a neighbourhood or local park, can reconnect you with the act of seeing. Even better, rise a little earlier to experience the calm, subtle beauty of pre-dawn light.

“Vision is the art of seeing what is invisible to others.”

— JONATHAN SWIFT

To become more creative photographers, we must practice this “art of seeing.” Ideally, that means spending time with a camera in hand, but even without one, we can practice photographic seeing simply by being attentive, quietly present, and observant.



KNOW THAT YOU WILL FAIL

Fear of failure can be creatively paralyzing. Ironically, failure itself is often the very thing that helps us become better, more creative photographers. When we fear failure, we stop taking chances. We stop experimenting. We stop asking the most important creative question: “What if?”

What if I used a slow shutter speed and moved the camera in circles during a long exposure?

What if I got down low and close to the pattern of faded paint and rust on the door of that old truck?

What if I lay on the ground and photographed that swath of poppies along the path with a very wide-angle lens?

Then the inner voice appears:

“Wait... I can’t do that. I’ll look stupid. The images won’t be any good anyway. No one will like them, and I’ll probably delete them later.”

The only creatively paralyzing statement in those thoughts is the one that doesn’t begin with “What if?”

Even if none of these experiments produces a successful image, the attempt itself is valuable. Failure is instructive. Reflecting on what didn’t work often suggests small changes in approach or technique that lead to the next attempt.

Creative people accept this process. They try, fail, adapt, and try again. It is simply how we learn.

Yes, there are occasional prodigies who make learning look easy. They are the exception. For most of us, mastering any worthwhile skill requires sustained effort and many failed attempts.

Creative seeing is no different. It is a skill that can be learned. Anyone can develop the habits and vision needed to become a more creative photographer — but only if they are willing to take chances and accept failure as part of the process.



Spoon on iPad. The image above is derived from the inset image on the right. That one involved multiple false starts and failures. In the interest of brevity, I'll say it involved a kitchen sink strainer lit from below with a red-gelled light, and a background of blue paper and bubble wrap lit separately with two more lights. Suspended above it all was a sheet of glass with carefully applied water droplets. The droplets become tiny lenses that image the objects below.

I liked the final result, but then the inevitable "What if?" thoughts began to surface. What if the first image became a background for something else? I loaded it onto my iPad — and my wife's as well. Using one as a stage and the other as a background for a spoon, I photographed the tip of the spoon with a macro lens, almost touching the iPad "stage."

"Action always generates inspiration.
Inspiration seldom generates action."

— FRANK TIBOLT

PRACTICE PATIENCE

Great images rarely present themselves exactly when we want them to. Often, we must wait for the elements in an image to arrange themselves, or we must work to find a point of view that creates a pleasing arrangement. At times, it's a specific moment that captures the essence of what we are trying to convey to a viewer; capture the 1/60 of a second before or after that moment, and the image fails.

Know your subject, observe intently, and anticipate, but realize that the best arrangement of elements, the peak moment of action or defining gesture rarely happens on cue. The best we can do is recognize potential and wait patiently for the image in your mind to present itself. Patience is a highly underrated skill in photography. Often, the difference between a mediocre image and a great one comes down to the patience needed to wait and watch for just a few extra minutes.



Skogafoss, Iceland: The most important element in this image is the lone red-clad figure. She provides scale and a secondary centre of interest that balances the image. When I first arrived here, a dozen or so people were milling around the base of the falls, creating visual clutter. Ten minutes later, all but the lone individual in red exited the scene, creating a moment with a clear and much stronger visual message.

BE OPEN

“Be open. When you go out with your camera, leave behind your preconceived notions of what you will see or shoot”. I’m paraphrasing photographer Jay Maisel here, and I think this is one of the best pieces of photographic wisdom I have ever heard.

In my work, I’m drawn to colour. When I can’t find great colour, I’ll likely pack up and head home. But that attitude is not about "being open".

Colour is what I gravitate to, but sometimes colour gets in the way, not just in the way of your message, but in the way of seeing what is right there in front of your eyes.

Walking around this lake in early January, I wasn’t finding much colour. But there were these great patterns of snow and ice on the lake, contrasting with the branches of the shoreline trees. I only saw this once I allowed myself to be open to what was there.

Be open.



ASK BETTER QUESTIONS

“What should my exposure be?” “Should I shoot this at f/8 or f/4?”

These, and variations on them, are the most common questions I hear in my location workshops. My usual response is, “I don’t know. What are you trying to show the viewer?”

Photography is not primarily a technical pursuit. At its heart, it’s an aesthetic and creative art form – a vehicle for expression. Technical decisions matter, of course, but they should follow aesthetic ones. Too often, photographers reverse that order, choosing shutter speed, aperture, or lens before deciding what they want the image to say. If any of these decisions support the photographer’s aesthetic intention, it will only be by intuition – or luck.

Having something meaningful to say about your subject begins with asking better questions. Start with simple ones:

Why this image?

Why right now?

What made me raise the camera?

What am I trying to show the viewer?

Sometimes the subject is not just the literal object in front of you. It might be a mood, a gesture, or a fleeting sense of place. Ask yourself how you might guide the viewer to see that subject in the same way you see it in the moment.

I cannot answer your versions of “why” or “what.” We may all photograph the same scene and see something different in it. Discovering your answers to those questions is part of the journey toward creating images that express your own way of seeing.

And what is a “perfect” image anyway? In my mind, it is one that elicits in the viewer the same emotional response the photographer felt at the moment the shutter was pressed.

Creating images like that begins with asking better questions.



A "perfect" image elicits in the viewer the same emotional response the photographer felt at the moment the shutter pressed.



Near Pienza, Italy. Driving slowly along a back-country road in Tuscany, I came across this elderly gentleman making his way up the hill toward the village. With the Sun streaming through the early-morning fog, I was struck by how scenes like this had likely played out here for centuries. I also felt sympathy — perhaps misplaced — for this lone figure in the fog. I wanted the image to convey both loneliness and the timeless rhythm of life in this part of the world.

With that in mind, a moderate wide-angle lens allowed me to place the subject well back in the frame while keeping the Sun and the fog-shrouded foreground trees in the composition. In post, I chose a warm colour balance, added a texture overlay, and introduced some grain to express what I felt in that moment.



STUDY THE LIGHT

Awareness of light is about much more than producing an accurate exposure. All photographers need to understand three essential characteristics of light: quality, colour, and direction. Is it hard or soft? Warm or cool? Where is it coming from? Do the shadows it creates hide important detail, or reveal form and texture?

Sidelight emphasizes form and dimension, while backlit silhouettes reveal shape more than detail. The hard light of mid-day sun can work well for architecture or street photography, but it is often less flattering for portraits. Softer light, created by large diffuse sources, reveals subtler shifts in tone and colour and is usually kinder to the human face.

The colour of light is one of the strongest contributors to mood in an image. Blue – the colour of sky and sea – can suggest calm and tranquillity. Yellow and orange often suggest vitality and warmth. Red, perhaps the most commanding colour, can imply aggression, anger, or danger, but also passion and romance.

I believe there is no such thing as bad light – only light that is inappropriate to the subject and the message you are trying to convey. Light will never rescue a poorly composed or poorly timed image, but light that suits the subject can be the difference between a good image and a great one.

Study the light in your own photographs. Study how photographers you admire use it in their work. Spend time with each image. Where is the light coming from? Is it hard or soft? Does it suit the subject? How does it shape the mood?



Chania, Crete

SKETCH FIRST

Tripods are great, aren't they? They're big and heavy... at least effective ones are. They're also hard to carry, cumbersome to set up, and good ones are expensive.

Sarcasm aside, tripods are an essential evil. They facilitate small apertures, slow shutter speeds and low ISO settings when needed. Technologies like image stabilization have meant we can shoot hand-held at lower shutter speeds than might have been otherwise possible, but true photographic sharpness is still spelled,

T-R-I-P-O-D.

I always have a tripod at hand, but one thing I never do is set the camera on the tripod and use it to explore a new subject. If you do, you will quickly tire of constantly moving the tripod to adjust your framing and will likely end up settling for something that is "close, but not quite there". Instead, set up your tripod and set it aside. Begin exploring your subject with your camera in hand, free of that 10 lb. pendulum swinging beneath it.

While you are closing on your ideal framing, begin making exposures. With each one, think about what you are trying to say about your subject. Activate your depth-of-field preview (read the manual!) and begin asking questions. Are there distractions in the background? If I move a bit to the left or the right, can I move those distractions out of the frame? Can I get closer? Should I move back and show more of the environment around that subject? Maybe if I shoot from above, I'll reveal a pattern or a symmetry within this subject. Each of these sketch images can be a little learning experience, allowing you to slowly home in on the final expression of your subject. Once you have decided on the point of view and framing that realizes your intent, only then should you reach for your tripod.

The first position and framing you choose will rarely be the one that fully realizes your vision and intention for a specific image. Give yourself the best chance of finding it by taking the time to work with your subject and create a few sketch images first.



Gatineau Park, Quebec, Canada
APS-C camera, 55mm, 1/250sec. @ f/6.4, ISO 1600





Before moving on, consider...

- When was the last time you photographed simply for the sake of practice?
- What might change if you allowed yourself to fail more deliberately?
- How often do you pause before pressing the shutter to consider what you're saying about the subject, beyond just a mere likeness?

Part II - Compositional Awareness

Once we learn to see more attentively, the next question becomes:

What do we include?

What do we exclude?

What are we really trying to show?

Composition is not a set of rules to memorize. It is the art of organizing attention within a frame. Every element inside that frame speaks — some clearly, some as distractions.

Simplifying, moving your feet, changing your point of view — these are not tricks. They are decisions about emphasis. About clarity. About intention.

A strong composition is rarely complicated. More often, it is deliberate.

This section explores how small physical adjustments — a step to the left, a lower point of view, a moment of waiting — can transform a busy scene into a coherent visual statement.

You are responsible for every square millimetre of your viewfinder.

That responsibility is also your creative freedom.





STOP WORRYING ABOUT WHAT YOU DON'T HAVE

If you do, you may be overlooking the possibilities of what you already have. Photographers often fall into the trap of believing that more gear leads to better images. In reality, the opposite is often true.

I'll admit that I sometimes carry more gear than I need — or use. Over time, however, I've learned that most of my photographs are made with just two camera bodies and two lenses. In fact, the majority come from a single “street zoom” in the 24–85mm range (full-frame equivalent).

Too much gear can be creatively paralyzing: too many options, too many choices.

I remember a participant in one of my workshops — we'll call him Dave. Dave always seemed to be digging through his rather large backpack, switching lenses, looking for a filter, or pulling out yet another piece of equipment.

Dave missed more photographs than he made.

Creativity often thrives under limitations. Working with one camera and one lens forces you to look more carefully at what is around you. You spend less time thinking about equipment and more time exploring your subject.

If you want to push yourself creatively, try going out with less — not more.



SIMPLIFY

This is the easiest suggestion to describe, and yet it seems to be the hardest for many photographers to apply.

Placing a frame around an image conveys a level of importance to everything you include within it. Everything within that frame speaks to the viewer, and the more competing voices there are in your frame, the more difficult it will be for the most important one to be heard. When we pay money for a concert with our favourite singer, we don't expect her to be drowned out by the band and the backing singers.

Every image should have a primary centre of interest; a singular voice that speaks to the viewer. Everything else in the frame must either support that voice, recede to the background or get off the stage. The art of composition has more to do with what you exclude from the frame than what you choose to include.

Quoting photographer Jay Maisel, "You are responsible for every square millimetre of your viewfinder." Make it a habit to scan your viewfinder for distracting elements, paying special attention to the edges. Get closer, or find a point of view that places your subject on stage with a supporting, non-distracting background.



MOVE YOUR FEET

This is another simple idea, yet I rarely see students use it effectively in my workshops. The art of composition involves arranging shapes within the frame created by the viewfinder. Other elements of visual design matter, but two-dimensional shapes are fundamental in the two-dimensional world of a photograph.

One of the most common mistakes I see is allowing mergers to creep into an image.

Mergers occur when two similarly toned objects overlap in the frame. The distinctiveness of each is lost, and the message in the image is weakened.

Looking at the diagrams on the right:

1. Often, a small adjustment in camera position is all it takes to eliminate a merger. Moving right or left, or up or down, shifts the relative positions of the subject, foreground, and background elements. In the upper-left diagram, our subject stands in front of a grove of evergreen trees, with a lone tree some distance behind. The subject merges with the trees behind him.
2. Moving the camera slightly to the left and reframing separates the subject from the background trees, eliminating the merger.
3. Lowering the camera and tilting upward lowers the apparent horizon and pushes the subject higher in the frame — in this case, clear of the background against the sky.
4. Raising the camera raises the apparent horizon and shifts the subject downward relative to the background, diminishing the subject's apparent stature — while lowering it tends to enhance it.



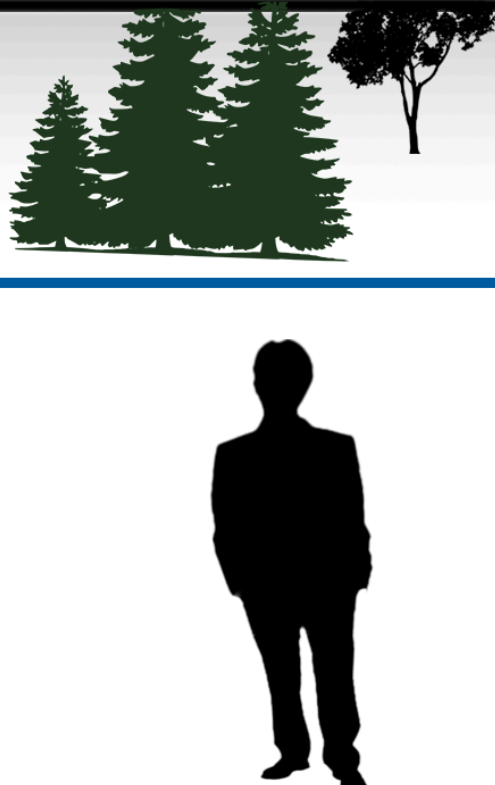
1. Initial Camera position.



2. Camera Moved Left



3. Camera position lowered, tilted up.



4. Camera position raised, tilted down.

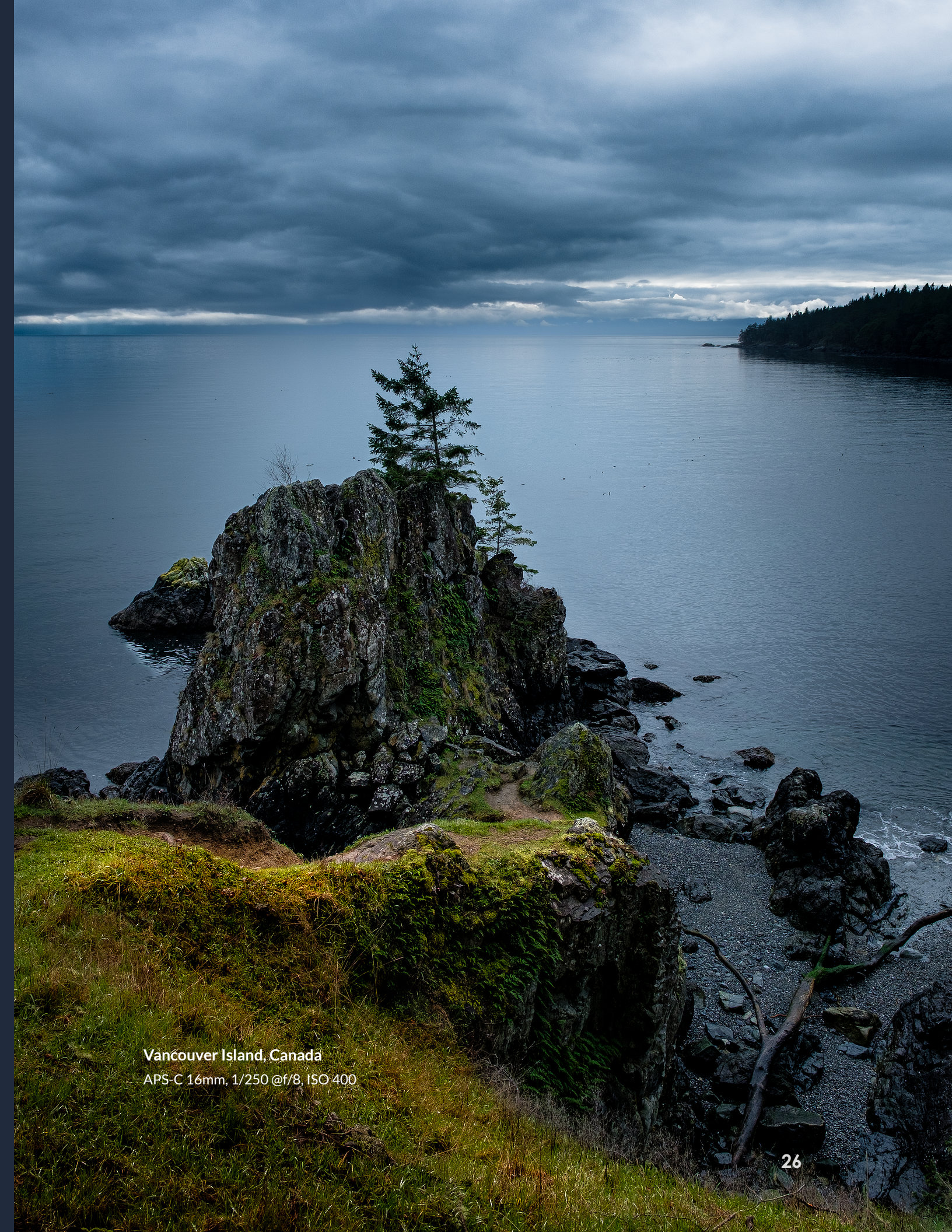
Changing your camera position relative to the subject and background gives you control over where shapes fall in the composition — allowing you to create balance, guide the eye, emphasize important elements, and diminish others.

However you choose to frame an image, be intentional. Pay attention to how the shapes created by the elements relate to one another, and to the visual story you want to tell.



(Above) **Steveston, Canada.** Someone had thrown a handful of wildflower seeds on a small grassy area next to a parking lot, across the street from a commercial/industrial area. Lying on my side, really low, made it possible to hide the buildings in the background behind a foreground of wildflowers. This allowed me to create the illusion of a young girl in a field of flowers, rather than just a small patch next to a parking lot..

(Next page) **Near Victoria, Canada.** Climbing back up the hill behind this rocky point of land and standing on some logs ensured that my point of view was high enough so the lone tree on the point was sitting against the water, rather than allowing the horizon to divide it. This would have diminished the sense of depth created by the tree and the (now unbroken) horizon. The elevated point of view also highlights the curved path to the small cove below. (APS-C camera, 16mm lens, 1/250sec. @F/8 ISO 400)



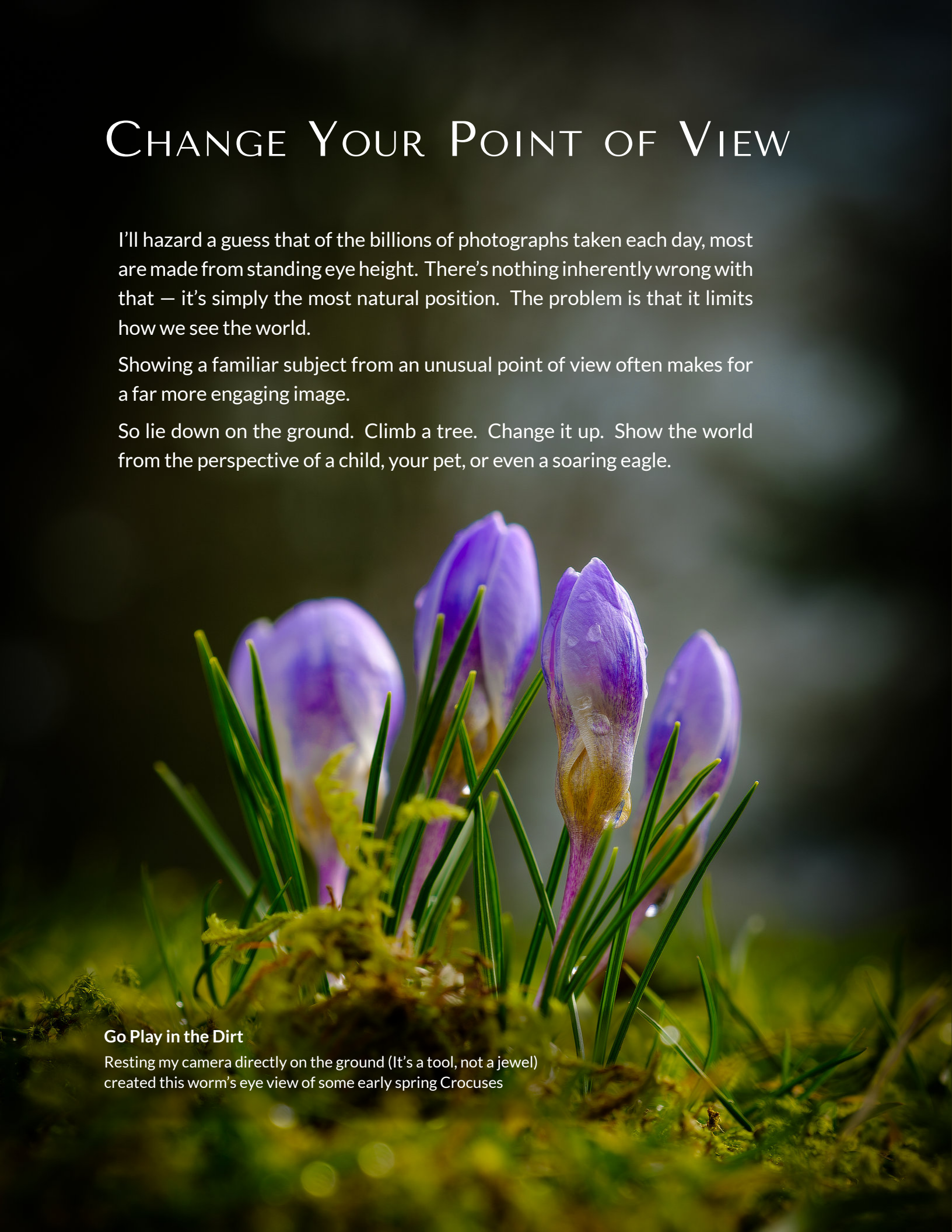
Vancouver Island, Canada
APS-C 16mm, 1/250 @f/8, ISO 400

CHANGE YOUR POINT OF VIEW

I'll hazard a guess that of the billions of photographs taken each day, most are made from standing eye height. There's nothing inherently wrong with that — it's simply the most natural position. The problem is that it limits how we see the world.

Showing a familiar subject from an unusual point of view often makes for a far more engaging image.

So lie down on the ground. Climb a tree. Change it up. Show the world from the perspective of a child, your pet, or even a soaring eagle.



Go Play in the Dirt

Resting my camera directly on the ground (It's a tool, not a jewel) created this worm's eye view of some early spring Crocuses



Venice, Italy - Taking the elevator to the top of the Campanile in Venice's Piazza St. Marco is well worth your time. In fact, looking for elevated points of view anywhere will often produce interesting images.

FRAME YOUR SUBJECT

"Art consists of limitation.
The most beautiful part of every picture is the frame."

— G.K. CHESTERTON


It might seem odd to suggest you frame your subject. After all, simply looking through the viewfinder already places your subject within a frame, making it hard to imagine creating a photograph without doing so. What I mean is using foreground elements to create an additional frame around your subject.

This can create a stronger sense of depth and three-dimensionality, while also directing attention more clearly and adding a sense of intimacy. It introduces layers of interest: the framing elements, your subject, and the background.

There are two ways to accomplish this. The first depends on some luck, or a willingness to reposition your subject behind a framing element. The second uses a large aperture, like $f/2.8$ or $f/4$ —often with a medium telephoto lens—while shooting through a foreground element. This throws the foreground out of focus, creating a soft blur of colour that helps isolate and frame your subject while hiding distracting background elements.



Shooting through some foreground foliage isolates this Fuchsia bloom amid a swirl of out-of-focus colour
APS-C camera, 60mm macro lens. 1/640 sec. @ F/2.8 ISO 200

A photograph of a man and a woman embracing in a narrow, cobblestone street in Cassis, France. The man is wearing a grey long-sleeved shirt and blue jeans, and the woman is wearing a dark blue dress. They are standing in front of a light-colored building with a door. The street is lined with colorful buildings in shades of yellow, orange, and red. In the foreground, there are lush green plants with bright pink flowers, which frame the scene. The lighting is soft and warm, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The overall mood is romantic and intimate.

Cassis, France: This one is the result of pure luck... and quickly recognizing the emerging potential of the situation — this image lasted for only a few seconds. The vine covered archway offered a perfect frame for this fleeting moment.
Full-frame dSLR, 105mm, 1/320sec. @ f/5.6, ISO400

Before moving on, consider...

- What is competing for attention in your recent images ?
- Where could you simplify more boldly ?
- When was the last time you actively worked on finding a point of view that prevented a merger or hid a distraction ?





Part III - Tools in the Service of Vision

Eventually, we must talk about tools.

Not because tools create vision — they do not — but because familiarity with them frees us to express that vision more fluently.

Technical competence is important. It allows instinct to operate without interruption. When you know your camera well, when you understand what different lenses will render the subject — when you can develop your images intentionally rather than mechanically — at that point your tools fade to the background and the craft becomes intuitive rather than all-consuming.

This section is not about gear acquisition. It is about gear fluency. Your camera is a tool.

Your lenses are tools

Your editing software is a tool.

The more intuitively you use them, the more attention you can devote to what matters most — the image itself.





MASTER YOUR CAMERA

This one is simple. Read the darned manual.

I can't begin to count the number of times someone has approached me during a workshop and asked, "How do I change 'x', 'y', or 'z' on my camera?" I know my cameras, and I still remember a bit about Canon, but I'm no expert in every make and model out there. My answer is usually something like, "Not off the top of my head. Let's have a look at your camera manual..."

"Oh, you don't have it with you?" "You left it at home?!"

You should know where every important setting is on your camera and be able to locate it by feel.

Can you adjust shutter speed, aperture, or ISO without taking your eye from the viewfinder? How about metering mode or auto-focus points?

Seriously.

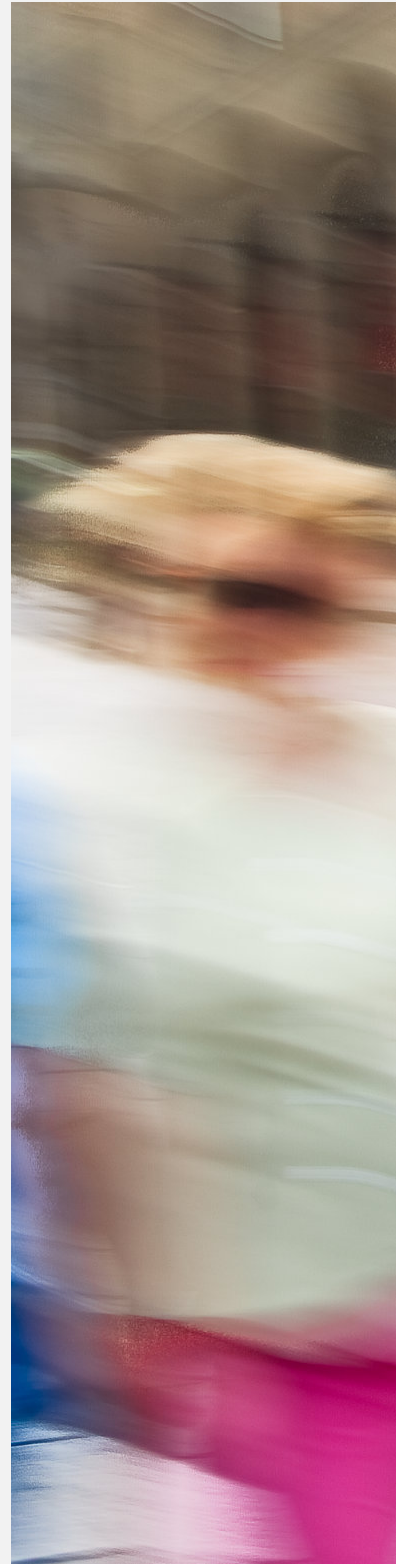
Adjusting the physical settings on your camera should be intuitive, requiring as much conscious thought as putting one foot in front of the other on your walk for morning coffee.

Inspiration and vision depend on your ability to wield the tools of photography. The more comfortable you are with those tools, the sooner they will get out of the way and allow you to concentrate on the image in front of you.

Know your tools.

Milan, Italy. 1/6 of a second @ f/10.

I sensed these ladies approaching on bicycles from my right, and instantly thought, "Panning shot!". Since I almost always shoot in Aperture Priority exposure mode, spinning just one dial, the one for aperture, allowed me too quickly slow the shutter by setting the camera to a smaller aperture; forcing the camera to set a slower shutter speed.





UNDERSTAND YOUR LENSES

Soon after I first became interested in photography, back in my early twenties, I lusted after a particular 200mm telephoto lens. I wanted it to make faraway things appear closer. I also wanted something wider than the 50mm lens that came with my camera — all the better for dramatic, expansive landscapes... or so I thought.

What I quickly realized, once I had that 200mm lens in hand, was that if you truly wanted distant things to appear much closer, you needed lenses longer than my 200—much longer, and much more expensive. As for the wide angle, the optical physics that crammed more "stuff" into the frame also made everything appear farther away. That towering mountain range in dramatic sunrise light was reduced to a ripple on the horizon.

Eventually, I learned something about focal lengths that struck like a thunderbolt. The real value of any focal length lies in two things: its effect on perspective — the relative near-far relationships between elements — and background control.

Telephoto focal lengths, longer than the so-called "normal" lens, appear to compress the distance between near and far objects in your frame. Shorter focal lengths do the opposite, stretching the apparent distance between those same elements.

With their narrow field of view, telephoto lenses also limit how much of the background is included. Switch from a normal lens to 200mm, walk back to keep your subject the same size in the frame, and you'll find the telephoto includes a much narrower slice of the background.

This is a telephoto's most overlooked — and, I think, most useful — characteristic.

** Technically, these effects are illusions. The only thing that affects perspective is the distance from your subject. If you would like to explore this further, you might like [this essay on my website](#)

Super Moon Setting, Steveston, Canada

Although the background mountains appear imposing and practically on top of the foreground, they are quite modest in size and about 80 kilometres (50 miles) distant. A 300mm lens (full frame equivalent) compresses the apparent distance between the foreground and background elements in the image.



Strong compositions usually have a single centre of interest. A telephoto makes it much easier to exclude what doesn't matter. Combine this with the inherently shallower depth of field of longer focal lengths, and you have a powerful way to isolate your subject and let it take centre stage.

Flipping this around, try using a shorter wide-angle lens — but move in close so your subject occupies a large part of the frame. Used this way, a wide-angle lens shows more of the background, providing context by revealing more of the environment around your subject. This can be an effective way to create strong environmental portraits.

But be careful: wide-angle lenses have a tendency to let unwanted elements sneak into the frame. If it doesn't contribute to your story, it detracts from it.

Reframe accordingly.

And be cautious with very short focal lengths — particularly under 35mm (Full Frame equivalent). Getting close enough to fill the frame with these lenses is rarely kind to faces.



Icelandic ponies. Use a moderate wide-angle close to your subject, and still show their environment

Near Pienza, Tuscany. A 24mm lens, framed up close to this stone bench in the yard of a 10th-century Romanesque church creates an expanded sense of depth by exaggerating the apparent distance between them.



LEARN TO DEVELOP YOUR DIGITAL IMAGES

All digital images require some post-processing. All of them.

Even if all you shoot are in-camera jpegs, those images were processed — processed using decisions made by engineers who work for your camera manufacturer. Some of those engineers may be photographers... a few of them might even share your aesthetic taste in photographic images.

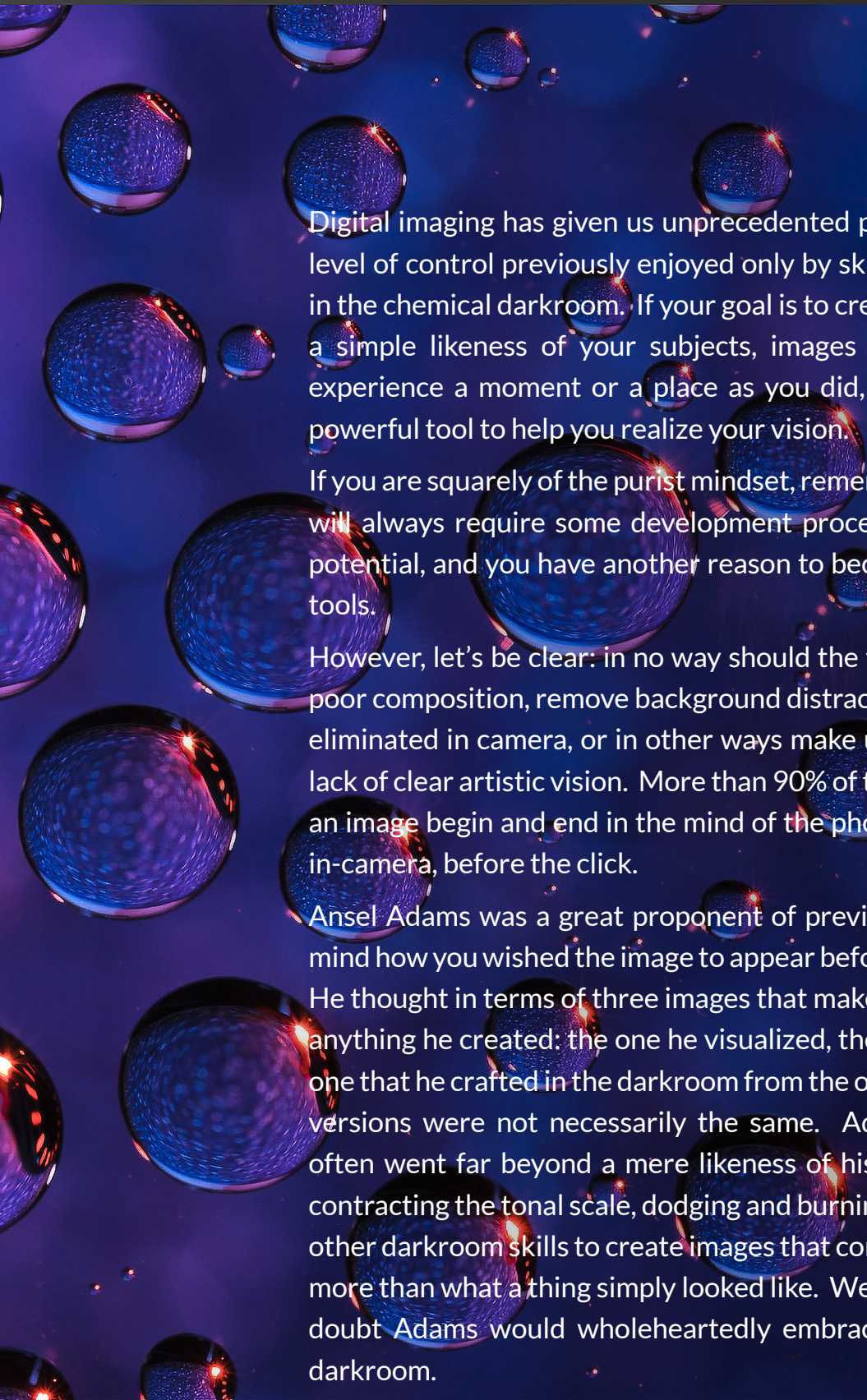
Maybe... but not likely.

Notice in the title that I said “develop” rather than “edit” your images? In some corners, what some might think of as a “purist view”, there is an aversion to any form of post-processing which places an image outside the realm of some perceived individual sense of reality. Anything that isn't a literal depiction of what was in front of the camera is not “photography”.

I've never really understood that point of view. Photography is about much more than simply recording a likeness of our subjects.

Photography can be much more: a creative art form and a vehicle for personal expression. Each decision we make in the process of creating an image affects this expression, including those made in post. Since all digital images require some post-processing, wouldn't you rather take control of these aesthetic decisions yourself? If you don't, you're leaving them to others who may not share your personal vision. If you are one of those in the purist camp, it may be helpful to think in terms of developing your images, rather than editing them.

It doesn't matter, whether your preferred development workflow includes Photoshop, Lightroom, Affinity, ON1 or some other image editing software program, spend the time to learn it, really learn it thoroughly. Learn not just how each slider or control affects the image, but also how the various controls interact with each other.



Digital imaging has given us unprecedented post-processing control. A level of control previously enjoyed only by skilled practitioners working in the chemical darkroom. If your goal is to create images that rise above a simple likeness of your subjects, images that allow the viewer to experience a moment or a place as you did, then post-processing is a powerful tool to help you realize your vision.

If you are squarely of the purist mindset, remember that digital RAW files will always require some development processing to achieve their full potential, and you have another reason to become proficient with these tools.

However, let's be clear: in no way should the tools in post be used to fix poor composition, remove background distractions that could have been eliminated in camera, or in other ways make up for sloppy technique or lack of clear artistic vision. More than 90% of the elements of success for an image begin and end in the mind of the photographer; what she does in-camera, before the click.

Ansel Adams was a great proponent of previsualization: seeing in your mind how you wished the image to appear before you tripped the shutter. He thought in terms of three images that make up the final expression of anything he created: the one he visualized, the one he captured, and the one that he crafted in the darkroom from the original negative. The three versions were not necessarily the same. Adams created images that often went far beyond a mere likeness of his subjects — expanding or contracting the tonal scale, dodging and burning, localized bleaching, and other darkroom skills to create images that conveyed to the viewer much more than what a thing simply looked like. Were he alive today, I have no doubt Adams would wholeheartedly embrace the tools of the digital darkroom.

The screenshot shows the right-hand side of a photo editing application. At the top is a histogram with a color-coded curve. Below it are camera metadata fields: ISO 160, 105 mm, f/1.0, and 1/250 sec. A 'Tone' panel includes sliders for Tint (+21) and Tone (Auto). Below that are sliders for Exposure (0.00), Contrast (+27), Shadows (0), Whites (0), Blacks (0), and Presence. A 'Texture' panel has sliders for Texture (0), Clarity (0), and Vignette (+5). A 'Saturation' panel has a slider for Saturation (0). A 'Tone Curve' panel shows a graph with a diagonal line and a point being adjusted. At the bottom is an 'HSL / Color' panel with a 'Saturation' section containing sliders for Red (+67), Orange, Yellow, Green, Aqua, Blue, and Purple (all at 0). Navigation buttons for 'Previous' and 'Reset' are at the very bottom.





Before moving on, consider...

- Do you know your tools well enough that they disappear while you're shooting?
- Are your technical choices supporting your intent — or preceding it?
- What one technical habit would most improve your creative fluency?

Part IV - Depth, Design and Perception

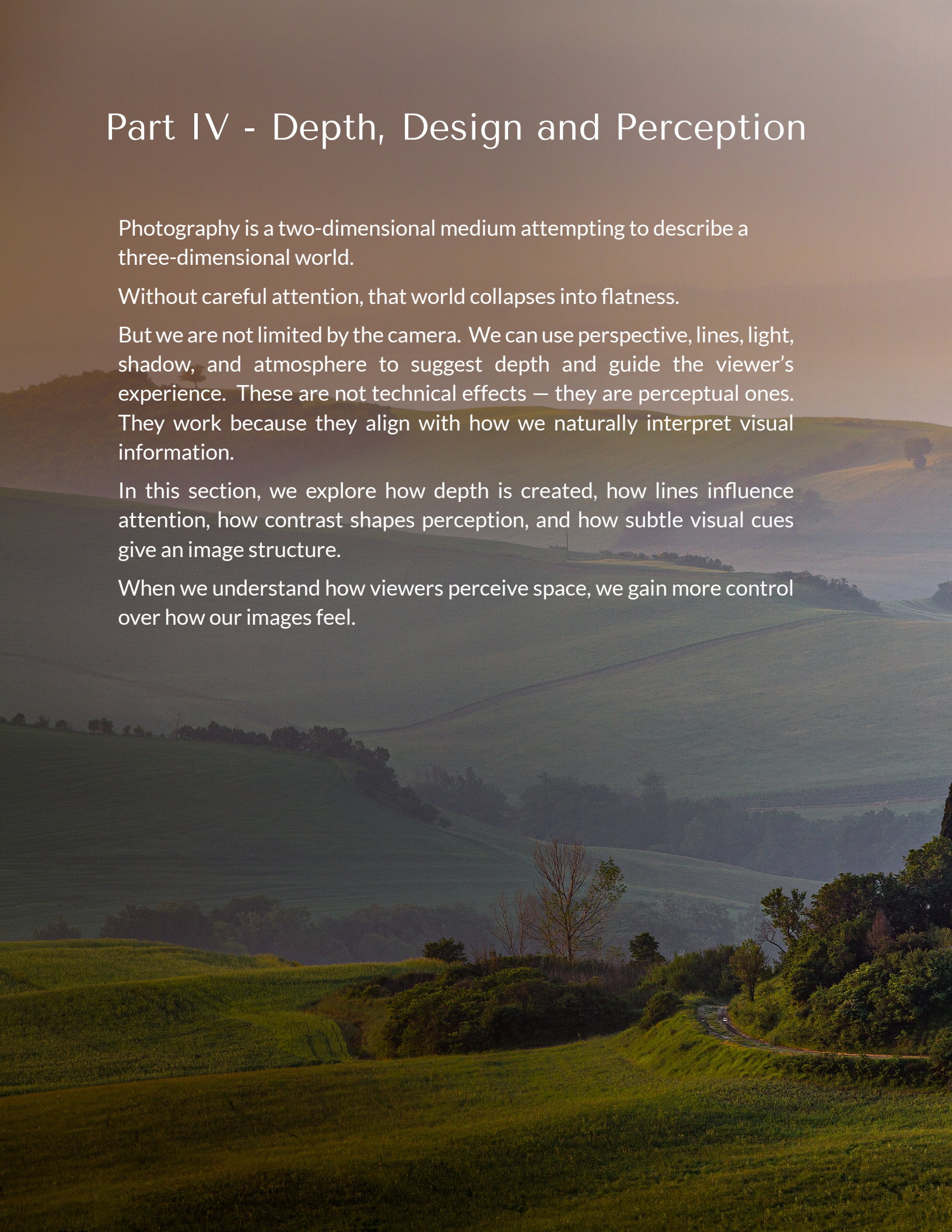
Photography is a two-dimensional medium attempting to describe a three-dimensional world.

Without careful attention, that world collapses into flatness.

But we are not limited by the camera. We can use perspective, lines, light, shadow, and atmosphere to suggest depth and guide the viewer's experience. These are not technical effects — they are perceptual ones. They work because they align with how we naturally interpret visual information.

In this section, we explore how depth is created, how lines influence attention, how contrast shapes perception, and how subtle visual cues give an image structure.

When we understand how viewers perceive space, we gain more control over how our images feel.





CREATE DEPTH

Photography is a two-dimensional medium desperately trying to represent a three-dimensional world. Without our help, it often fails.

We view the world with two eyes rather than one, so a sense of three-dimensional depth is an intrinsic feature of our vision. Not so for our cameras. You can't recreate three dimensions using two, but we can create a sense of that lost dimension by playing to a few inherent biases of our eye-brain visual system.

Before we dive in, I need to point out that it is not always necessary to push a three-dimensional sense on a viewer. Compressing a scene with a long telephoto tends to flatten the perspective and may reduce the sense of depth. Shooting with wide apertures will (in some situations) render backgrounds as soft, out-of-focus blurs, minimizing any sense of three-dimensional depth. Each approach can be highly effective... it depends on your goals at the time.

Images with a strong sense of depth tend to draw a viewer in — creating a heightened sense of reality; inviting them to explore your image further. So, let's look at a few ways we can create a sense of depth in a photograph.

Go Wide, Get Close

Getting close with a wide-angle lens stretches the apparent perspective, making objects close to you appear much closer than they are relative to those farther away. This stretched perspective contributes to a much greater sense of depth. For this to work, you need to push in close to your subject ... really close. A bit of care is required if your subject is human; you will both need to be comfortable with the intimacy this will create. And remember, lenses shorter than about 35mm on a full-frame camera (23mm on an APS-C or "crop frame" sensor) will tend to distort the features of any subject placed near the edge of the frame.



Singapore

48

FF DSLR. 16mm lens. 1/40 sec @ f/13 ISO 400

Use Lines When You Find Them

Diagonal lines that recede into the background will become a strong visual pull, greatly enhancing the sense of depth. Altering your point of view can turn even horizontal lines into obliques that will lead the viewer's eye in the direction you wish it to go... toward your subject, for example.

Getting low and close with a wide-angle lens created strong converging lines from the art displays along this storefront in Montmartre, Paris.



Rue Norvins, Paris FF DSLR, 16mm lens; 1/40 sec @f/20 ISO 100

Highlight and Shadow

All other things being equal, we tend to perceive darker areas in an image as farther away than those that are lighter. This is why side light reveals form and texture so well. The darker shadow areas in this side-lit portrait are perceived as being somewhat farther away than the brighter highlights. This creates form and dimension in the face and body.



Take Advantage of Aerial Perspective

Any elements in a rural or urban landscape — a distant series of receding ridges, for example, that are viewed through progressively more layers of dust and atmospheric moisture — will appear lighter, lacking in contrast, cooler, and more diffuse. Our eye-brain visual system interprets the less distinct, distant ridges as being farther away. All of which contribute to a greater sense of depth in any landscape where this effect is found.





EMBRACE CONTRAST

When most photographers think of "contrast", they think of differences between light and dark. But there are many forms of contrast beyond simple tonal contrast. Differences in colour, saturation, sharpness, and apparent size also create contrast. In a hierarchy of contrasts, our eye-brain system tends to respond more strongly to light over dark, warm over cool, sharp over soft, and saturated over pastel. Evolution has also wired us to instantly recognize — and be drawn to — the human form. These preferences create visual weight in objects that possess them, and objects with greater visual weight will attract the viewer's eye more strongly than those around them. Visual weight is also one of the few things we can influence significantly in post.

Conceptual contrast is a bit more obscure. It arises from contrasts between ideas or visual elements within an image. A classic example is a young child holding her grandfather's hand — a contrast between youth and age. Waves crashing on a rocky shore suggest contrasts between wet and dry, hard and soft, or force and resistance. A surfboard carried through the streets of Cassis, a town in southern France dating back to the first century, creates a contrast between the ancient and the modern.

Watching for contrasts like these can elevate an image and make it more engaging.







Na Pali Coast, Hawaii

Contrast of wet vs dry, hard vs. soft. Also illustrates the value of persistence and patience. This is one of about 60 exposures made over a span of about 45 minutes... and one of the few capturing the peak of action.



COLOUR CREATES MOOD

"Color is a power which directly influences the soul."

~WASSILY KANDINSKY

Our best images are more than good composition in good light. They succeed because they evoke an emotional response — transporting viewers back to a place and time and allowing them to experience a moment much as we did when making the photograph.

For this to happen, an image must resonate with its viewers. Mood plays an important role in shaping viewers' responses, making them more receptive to the visual message you wish to convey. Colour can be a powerful mood trigger, helping frame the story as you intend. Think of mood as the atmosphere or prevailing tone within an image.


Many factors influence mood, but colour, perhaps more than any other single element, has the greatest impact.

Warm colours are active and emotionally charged. They carry strong visual weight and naturally draw the eye. Red, perhaps the most commanding of these, can suggest aggression, anger, or violence. Paradoxically, it can also signify passion or romance — red roses, for example. Warm colours such as yellow and orange may suggest health, happiness, or anticipation — like the promise of a perfect cast on a tranquil lake, as in the image on the next page.

Cool colours, by contrast, suggest calm and tranquillity. Many of the dominant colours in nature are cool greens and blues. These tones can also introduce unease or suggest that danger may be nearby.

Mood can also be strengthened in post-processing by altering colour balance — globally or through selective local adjustments.

Thinking consciously about the mood you wish to convey strengthens the visual message of your images. Consider the psychological impact of warm versus cool light, as well as its direction and quality.



APS-C camera. 60mm lens. 1/125sec @f/4 ISO 200



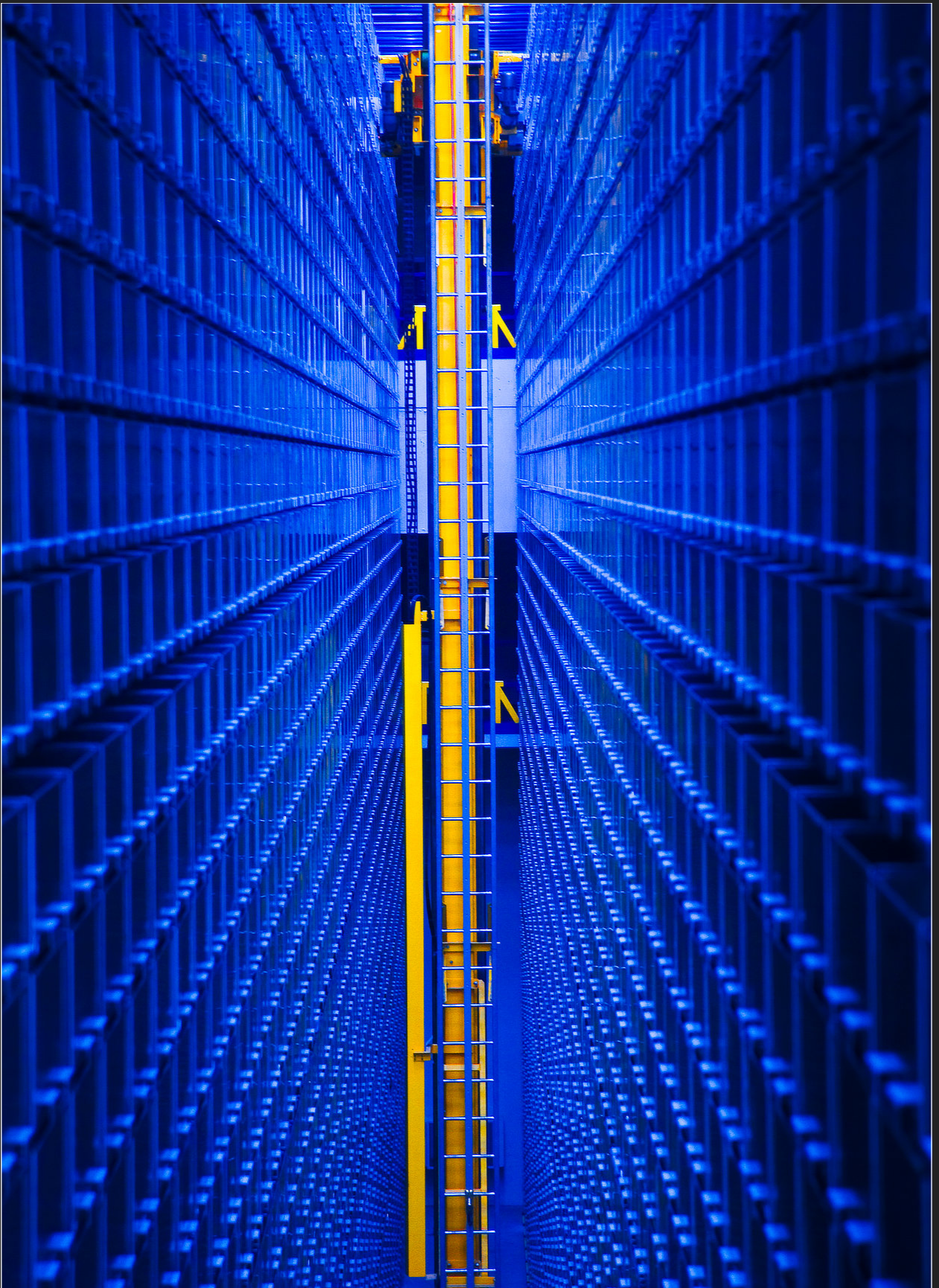
Pass Lake, Washington State





UBC Library Retrieval System, Vancouver, Canada (FF dSLR, 105mm lens, 1/4 sec @ f/5 ISO 1000

Re-imagining this straight from the camera image on the left creates a futuristic, sci-fi-inspired variation with a dramatically different mood (right). Selectively shifting the colour balance of the library storage areas on either side, along with warming and saturating the yellow colour of the retrieval robot, is all that was needed



NO BAD LIGHT

Don't shoot during the midday hours on a sunny day! We hear this rule again and again: shoot only during the golden light of early morning or late afternoon, or in the soft light of overcast days. While this is generally good advice and can produce wonderful light for revealing texture and form, the opposite statement — to never shoot during the middle of the day — is unnecessarily limiting.

There is no such thing as “bad” light, only light that is inappropriate to your artistic intent. Bemoaning the light because it doesn't meet your expectations can mean missing opportunities right in front of you.

After several cloudy days scouting locations for a photo workshop in Tuscany, we finally woke to blue skies and brilliant sunshine. I had spent the previous days exploring the villages of the Val d'Orcia and was determined to find new landscape locations. So we headed out to explore the countryside.

I found the image shown here while driving along a back road toward Montalcino, where we planned to stop for lunch. In a way, it was fortunate that I encountered this scene at this time of day — precisely when conventional wisdom says you should leave your camera in the bag.

This image could not have been made at any other time.

The high Sun rendered the cypress trees and the curved ridge of the hillside in silhouette, clearly revealing their form. The steeply angled light created strong side-lighting across the red clay of the Crete Senesi, revealing the texture and colour of the newly tilled earth. That colour was important — not only is it characteristic of the region, it also complements the deep blue sky and provides a counterpoint to the softness of the lone cloud.

The lesson is simple: compelling images can be found at any time of day and in almost any kind of weather. The key is to remain open to possibilities and let go of preconceived ideas about when — or how — we should photograph a scene.



Near Montalcino, Tuscany

Late October, 12:45pm

APS-C camera 24mm, 1/850 sec @ f/8 ISO 200

Positano, Italy: mid-May, 11:30 am

Direct overhead light in this image is important to its success. Midday light penetrates the water, revealing the intense blue and turquoise shades of the Mediterranean while providing sufficient contrast to reveal the layers of sand on the beach. Without it, the important graphic qualities of the lines created by the waves and layers of sand would not be nearly as apparent.

Most of the time, this type of lighting is inappropriate for images of people, but the figures in the lower right are small, and placed there to provide a centre of interest. Classic portrait lighting rules don't apply in this case.

Full Frame dSLR. 280mm, 1/250sec. @F/14, ISO 200





Near Banon, Provence 11:26am

Mid-day light on a day in early July leaves the trunks of these trees in deep shadow, rendering them as near silhouettes. The graphic quality of their multi-branched trunks becomes the main centre of interest, contrasting with the lavender field beyond

APS-C camera. 200mm lens; 1/80sec @ f/16 ISO
200





WAIT FOR THE TRIGGER

This is such a simple concept, and yet it's so often overlooked by photographers.

Jay Maisel, in his book, "It's Not About the F-Stop" (highly recommended), points out that every image needs a "trigger": a reason to make that image at that exact moment. Quoting, Jay, "Without it, your picture lacks a reason to shoot at that moment. Without it, it becomes an image that "would be nice if it only had something more in it."

How often do we encounter a lovely scene, point our camera at it and press the shutter? How often is the result a lovely, well-composed background without anything significant going on? I see this often in my classes and workshops, particularly so in travel images. How many pictures of the Eiffel Tower have you seen that look remarkably alike?

The trigger is that unique convergence of light, visual elements, and the moment when everything comes together to create a unique, compelling image.

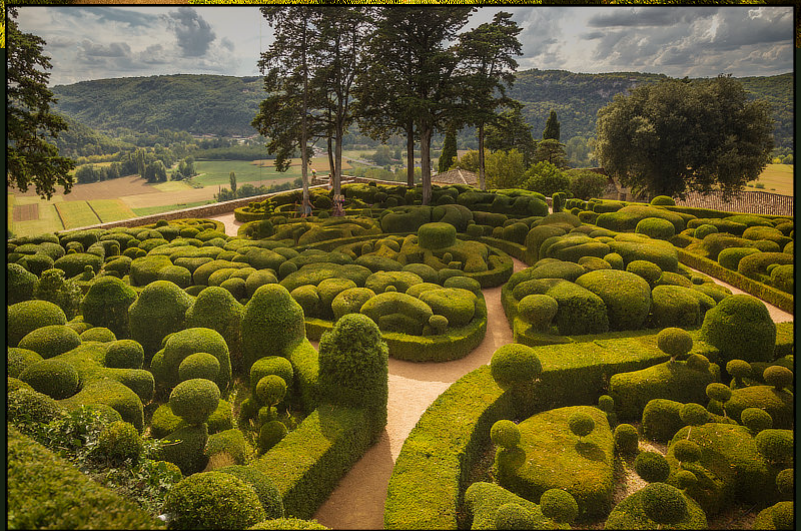
The question to ask yourself is, "Why this image - why right now?" "What makes it unique?" "What makes it my image'?"

The image on the right is from the Jardin de Marqueyssac, above the Dordogne River in southern France. Compare this to the "postcard shot" below it. I wasn't happy with this rendition; it needed something more, something to make it unique. Fortunately, it had been raining earlier in the afternoon, and a little patience soon paid off when, a few minutes later, a lady walked into my frame hold

That was the trigger. Click... got it.



FF dSLR; 24mm lens, 1/100 sec @ f/7.1 ISO 800





Sunrise, Shipwreck Beach, Kauai.

APS-C camera, 135mm lens, 1/250 sec @ f/8 ISO 200

I watched this group of people at the top of the cliff as the Sun rose over the horizon. Amidst all the selfies they shared over the next 10 minutes, nothing stood out visually. Nothing provided the trigger... until one brave fellow ventured near the edge of the cliff.

The trigger isn't always related to a specific moment. I love the patterns on Hosta leaves, but as lovely as they are, after a while, you begin looking for something different, something unique to set the next image apart from all the others. The lone water droplet clinging to this leaf was the trigger. It breaks the symmetry of the pattern on this leaf, creating a unique centre of interest.

The trigger is often something that provides a unique centre of interest by breaking a pattern, introducing an unexpected element, or providing contrast in colour or tone.

Water Drop on Hosta

APS-C camera. 60mm macro, 1/50 sec @ f/11, ISO 200





Jay's idea of "waiting for the trigger" is partly a variation of Sam Abell's idea of finding an interesting background and waiting for something interesting to happen in front of it. This often requires patience, but just as often requires thinking about what needs to happen in your image to create the trigger and make it uniquely your own.

Sometimes that patience is even rewarded.

Wandering the streets of Aix-en-Provence early one spring morning. I was intrigued by the patterns and colours of this storefront. Taking up a position across the narrow street, I waited. I waited as the store owner arrived and began to open for business. I waited as she moved her displays out past the store entrance.

This was starting to look promising.

I tried several exposures as she went about setting up her shop for the day, but nothing was working – until she emerged from the store with a watering can in hand.



Late afternoon in the harbour of Chania, Crete. The play of light and shadow was interesting, but there wasn't enough happening in this scene to create an interesting image. Needing something on the left to balance the visual weight of the Lighthouse and Lamp post, I asked my wife to walk into frame along the water's edge from camera left.

Without her walking into the frame with her white hat catching the late-afternoon Sun, the image doesn't work.

Adding a human figure (particularly with the white hat) balances the visual weight relationships in the image. It also creates a triangle with the tops of the lamp and distant lighthouse, the white hat and the base of the lamp post.

The triangle is important to the success of the image because it creates a visual path for the viewer's eye to move through the frame. Finding ways to move the viewer's eye through your frame helps to hold their attention and prevent visual boredom.



Before moving on, consider...

- Do you actively look for ways to create a sense depth in your images
- Do you consider the emotional impact of the colours you include in your images?
- How often do you pause and ask yourself,
"Why this image – why right now?"
"What makes it unique?"
"What makes it 'my image' ?"

Part V - Artistic Growth

Photography does not grow in isolation. Over time, our images are shaped not only by the places we visit and the subjects we photograph, but by the ideas we absorb and the influences we allow ourselves to explore.

Many photographers spend enormous energy studying cameras, lenses, and editing techniques, yet relatively little time looking beyond photography itself. Painters, designers, filmmakers, and other visual artists have spent centuries exploring the same questions photographers face today: how light shapes form, how colour influences emotion, and how visual elements guide attention.

Growth often happens quietly, through exposure to ideas that at first seem unrelated to our own work. A painting may suggest a new approach to colour. A piece of music might influence the emotional tone we pursue in an image. A simple collection of visual fragments — a scrapbook of sorts — can gradually shape the way we see.

The ideas in this section encourage you to broaden those influences. By exploring colour, mood, and inspiration beyond the camera itself, you begin to develop a richer visual vocabulary — one that helps you create photographs that feel more personal and more intentional



FILL YOUR SCRAPBOOK

I am constantly surprised when conversations with students and other photographers make it apparent how little time is spent absorbing the work of other visual artists.

Photographers, it seems, are a fairly incestuous lot – spending non-camera time absorbing input on equipment and other technical matters, talking about their work, or the work of their peers. Notice the absence of consideration given to other forms of artistic expression, particularly other visual forms.

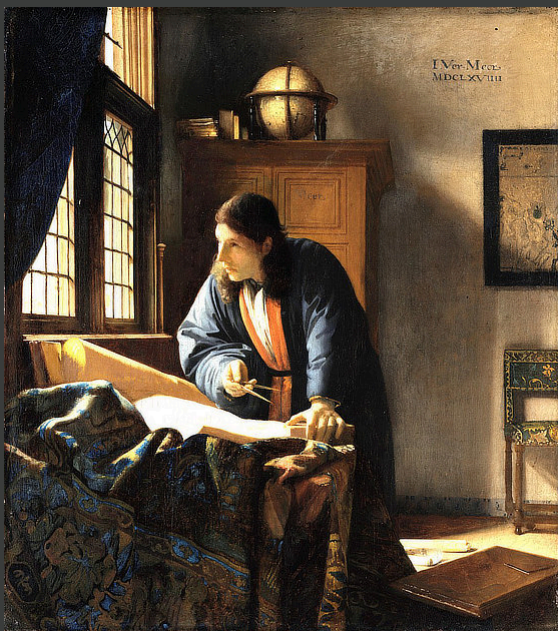
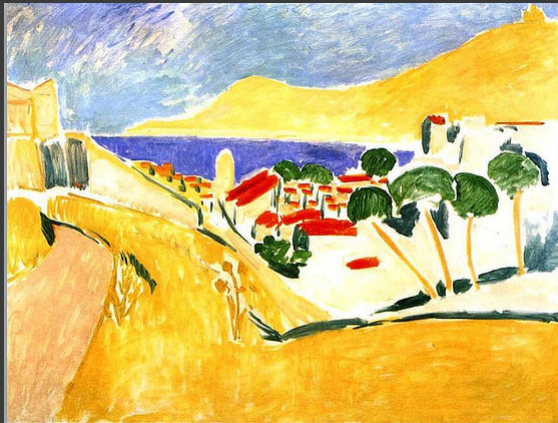
Earlier, I made the case that taking action (by doing the work) is the best way to find inspiration. Translating inspiration into creative expression also depends on having a sufficiently rich set of ideas and approaches to image-making. “New and creative” often arises from combining disparate ideas in novel ways. Limiting your sources to just photography creates a smaller basket of ideas. It can lead to simply emulating the work of others rather than uncovering and understanding your unique view of the world.

When was the last time you looked at the work of painters like Vermeer, Van Gogh, or Matisse? It’s possible to learn just about everything you need to know about lighting by studying – really studying – the works of Vermeer or Rembrandt. Study paintings by Norman Rockwell, to name a more contemporary artist, and see how he used light and composition, particularly how he placed supporting characters and other elements within the frame. Study film as well. I have sat through many movies where, completely absorbed in how the cinematographer lit and composed each scene, I couldn’t tell you anything about the movie beyond its basic premise.

I have heard it said that there are only nine (or was it nineteen?) original themes in art – everything else is derivative. Very little new artistic work is so unique that it doesn’t draw on influences from earlier works. So fill up your subliminal scrapbook with ideas, elements, and approaches to visual expression drawn from as many disparate sources as you can find. At this stage, the process is not about generating new ideas directly from specific works – it is about allowing yourself to appreciate and absorb new ways of seeing and expressing ideas. At this stage, the process is not about generating new ideas directly from specific works, or picking something you like and immediately incorporating it into your own – it is about allowing yourself to absorb new ways of seeing and expressing, letting those influences work on you beneath the surface. Sometimes it will arrive out of the blue like a bolt of lightning, and other times so subtly you’re not aware of it until someone else points it out.

"REFINE YOUR SENSES THROUGH THE GREAT MASTERS OF MUSIC, PAINTING, AND POETRY.
IN SHORT, TRY INDIRECT INSPIRATIONS, AND EVERYTHING WILL COME BY ITSELF."

— ERNST HAAS



Clockwise from top left:
Henri Matisse: View of Collioure, Johannes Vermeer: The Milkmaid, Vincent Van Gogh: Starry Night .
Johannes Vermeer: The Geographer

FORGET TECH - STUDY DESIGN

The technical side of photography can be quite seductive. It's the first mountain we must climb, after all.

But some photographers never move beyond it. Forums and magazines overflow with discussions about the latest camera bodies and lens test charts. Far less is written about visual design — what many call “composition” — yet this is where meaningful images are born.

Great photographs do not come from exotic gear, nor from technical perfection in every respect. They come from the mind and imagination of the photographer, guided by a foundation of sound visual design.

And a strong sense of visual design is not a rare gift bestowed on a fortunate few. It can be learned. Like any skill, it begins with understanding a handful of fundamentals and then applying them deliberately, frame after frame.

Line. Shape. Form. Texture. Pattern. Colour.

Every photograph can be understood through these six elements.

Two points create a Line. Close the Line, and you have Shape. Rotate it, and Form emerges. Light reveals Texture. Repetition creates Pattern. Subject and illumination determine Colour. However complex the scene, it can be reduced to these building blocks.

This is not a course in visual design — that would require a book on its own, perhaps several. But it is a reminder: a preoccupation with equipment will not move your photography very far.

Beyond the basic tools required for your chosen genre — long lenses for wildlife, perhaps, or a compact kit for travel and street — you quickly enter a realm of diminishing returns. From that point on, the greatest gains come not from adding hardware, but from refining how you see.

If you want to grow, invest in your perception.



DON'T OVERLOOK THE ORDINARY

"We walk by wonders every day and don't see them.
We only stop at what shouts the loudest"

— BARBARA BORDNICK

Wandering through a small town in southern France, I turned down a side street, leaving behind a rather large group of photographers (part of a workshop, I assumed). The street was deserted with not a soul in sight. As I walked past this doorway, I stopped dead in my tracks.

Maybe it was the harmonious combination of cool blues and greens contrasting with the warm tones of the steps and the industrial shine of the metal watering can that made me pause. Perhaps it was the texture in the roughhewn limestone. Without question, the turquoise handle propped in the watering can was a visual gift.

More than anything though, I think it was the obvious care and attention with which these simple objects were arranged on the doorstep of this home in such an artful way. I began to imagine the owner of the home was, at least in their heart, an artist or musician... perhaps a poet; someone attuned to the beauty in the everyday things in life.

The average person, let alone the average photographer, walks past many seemingly mundane things every day, failing to see the visual possibilities that exist there. As photographers, we must learn to see these things that do not shout loudly, and to tell their story.

Don't overlook the ordinary



SHOOT THEMES

Artistic growth requires practice – lots of practice. But despite our best intentions, all of us go through periods of creative block – or its evil twin, creative inertia. We look everywhere but see nothing.

Shooting to a theme is a powerful antidote – it answers the question "What is there to shoot?" It encourages you to see familiar subjects in new ways, and often grows into projects that last years. Consider a theme with nearly endless possibilities: hands.

Hands tell the story of a life – young hands, old hands, working hands, caring hands, healing hands, hands that build and hands that create. Holding hands, frail hands, scarred hands, rough hands, giving hands... the list is endless. Here are a few more themes to get you started:

Abandoned Buildings, Abstracts, Bad Weather, Balloons, Bark, Barns, Bicycle Parts, Black and White, Bridges, Broken Glass, Butterflies, Car Details, Cats, Celebrations, Church Windows, City Skylines, City Streets, Close-ups, Clouds, Colour (single colours, complementary colours, colour harmony, triadic colour), Contrasts, Doors, Eyes, Femininity, Fences, Festivals, Fire Engines, Petals, Flowers, Forms in Nature, Gardens, Gates, Glass, Hands, Harvest, Hats, Isolated Objects, Joy, Children, Lazing Around, Masculinity, Minimalism, Opulence, Patterns, Peeling Paint, People at Work, Peppers, Polished Objects, Porches, Railroad Cars, Railroad Tracks, Raindrops, Rainbows, Red, Reflections, Rural Life, Rust, Rustic Details, Sand Dunes, Sand Patterns, Shells, Seascapes, Seasons, Shadows, Characters, Silhouettes, Skulls, Sky, Smiles, Snow, Soft Curves, Sadness, Speed, Spring, Stairs, Statues, Steam Railways, Still Life, Strange Signs, Sunrise, Sunset, Sweets, Swings, Tattoos, Textures, Toads, Tombstones, Tools, Transportation, Tree Knots, Trees, Umbrellas, Uniforms, Urban Life, Dishes, Vacation, Valves, Vegetables, Vineyards, Water, Waterfalls, Weather, Weathered Wood, Wet Surfaces, Wheels, White, Wildlife, Windows, Winter, Forests, Yellow, Zig-zags.

Now pick one – and get out there.



IGNORE THE CRITICS

Success is personal, so stop comparing your apples to their oranges.

— YOHANCÉ SALIMU


Criticism can sting. If you put your work out there for others to see, you will undoubtedly receive feedback at some point, and some of it will be less than favourable. Most of it, even the negative, will be well-meaning — some less so.

Dealing with criticism is hard; we all want our work to be appreciated. The danger lies in taking unfavourable comments—especially unsolicited ones—too much to heart. Criticism can stifle creativity, and the fear of it even more so. We need to learn how to deal with both the negative and the positive.

Adverse criticism often comes from people who share few, if any, artistic influences with you, or who are drawn to different subject matter. Even when interests overlap, they may have very different ideas about how something should be expressed visually, and will judge your work within the framework of their own approach, often with little sensitivity to what you are trying to say.

Criticism comes from all levels of experience. Some will have decades behind them; many—perhaps most—will not. This latter group often feels the greatest urgency to offer advice. Remember that criticism rests on the expertise of the one offering it. It often reflects where the critic is on their path more than where you are on yours. Someone who has just mastered sharpening, for example, will see everything through that lens.

In time, it becomes easier to recognize those in the early stages of their development. They tend to focus on perceived technical deficiencies—too sharp, too saturated, not saturated enough. You can safely ignore most of this... and even take some comfort in it. Technical issues are the easiest to fix, and you have likely moved beyond that stage.



In their rush to be helpful, many critics never consider what you are trying to convey—the story, the intent. More useful feedback begins with questions, not conclusions.

As my grandfather often said, “Consider the source, then either follow the advice or smile, thank them... and move on.”

And then there are the trolls—the kind that inhabit the internet. Often frustrated creatives, they are too insecure to share their own work and instead tear down the work of others to validate themselves.

Paradoxically, trolls are drawn to good work. People gather around strong images, and trolls follow. If you attract one, you are likely doing something right. People respond better to encouragement than criticism. Something to remember when commenting on others’ work. Try to understand the intent first. Begin with what works, then offer suggestions as questions—“Have you thought of...?” rather than “You should...”

And just ignore the trolls.

“Criticism always sits on a foundation expertise
— that of the one offering it.”

- AUTHOR UNKNOWN

Clearing Storm, Howe Sound, Canada

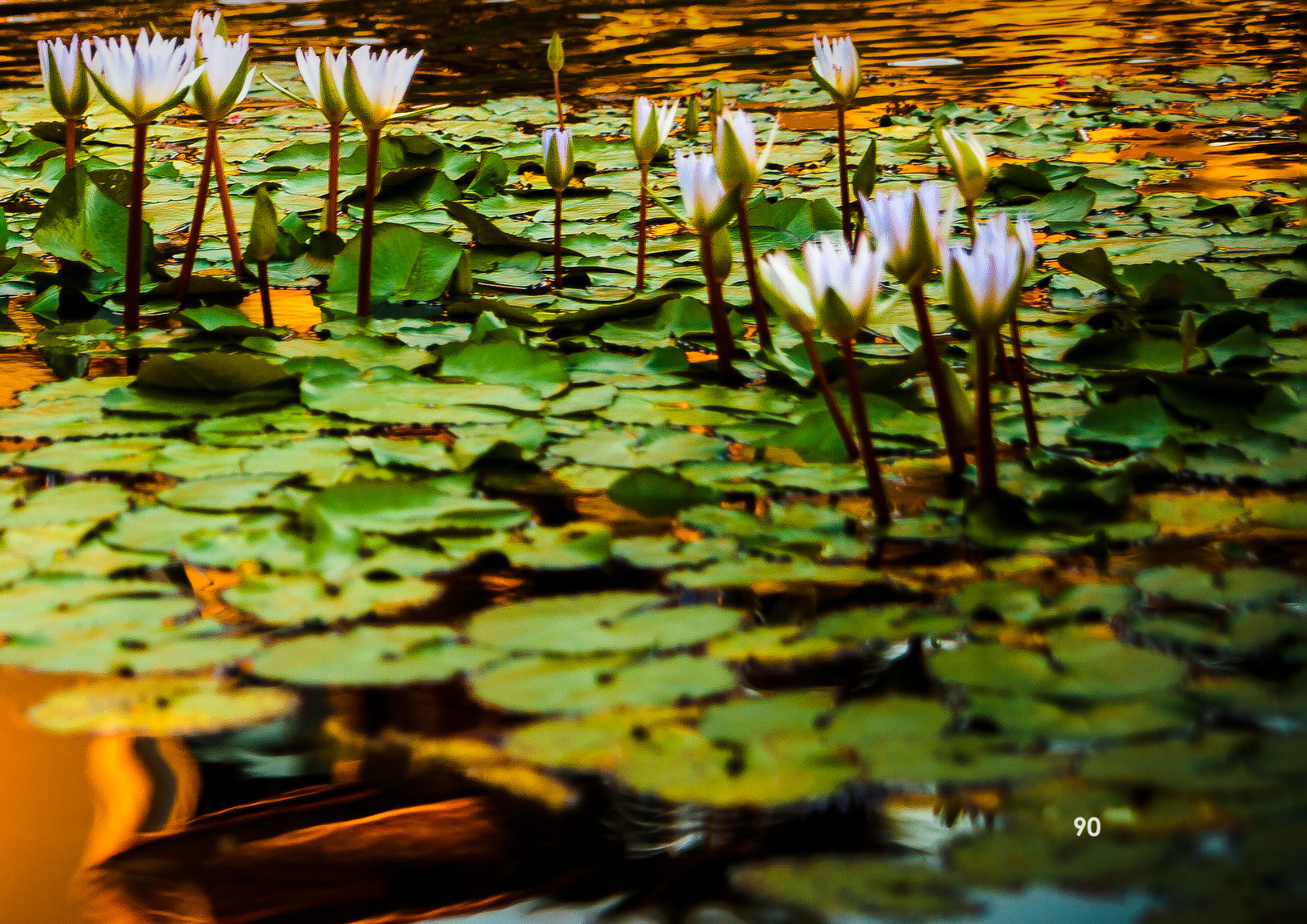
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Before moving on, consider...

- When was the last time you studied a painting for its light?
- What non-photographic influences are shaping your visual taste?
- What emotional tone do you most naturally gravitate toward — and why?



"The worst enemy of creativity...
is self-doubt"
- SYLVIA PLATH



Parting Thoughts

There is no single moment when a photographer “arrives.”

The craft unfolds gradually — through repetition, curiosity, reflection, and quiet persistence. The improvements are often subtle at first: a cleaner composition, a more intentional use of light, a clearer sense of what you are trying to say.

Over time, those small refinements accumulate.

The ideas in this small book are not revolutionary. They are foundational. They simply ask you to think a little more deeply, to observe a little more carefully, and to rely a little less on external solutions.

If even a few of these ideas shift the way you approach your next photograph, they will have done their work.

If these ideas resonate with you and you would like to continue exploring perception, composition, and visual design, I share additional essays, resources, and occasional teaching notes at pacificlight.ca.

You are warmly invited to continue the conversation there.

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"Creativity is seeing what others see
and thinking what no one else ever thought."

- Albert Einstein

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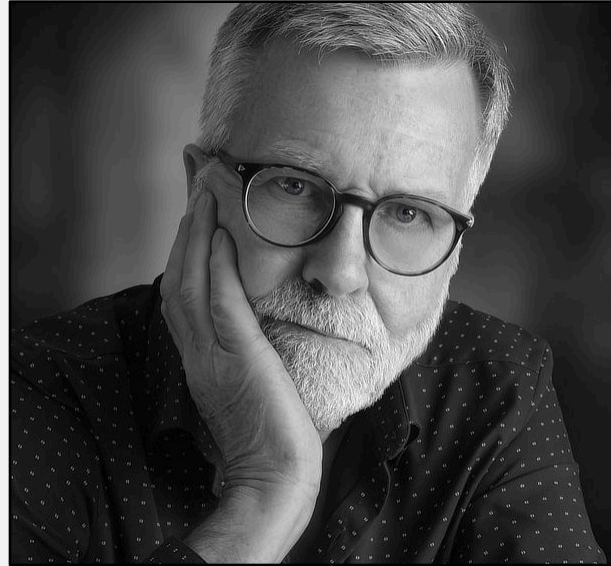


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About the Author

Mark English is a photographer, educator, and writer based in Vancouver, Canada. With more than forty years behind the camera, he brings both deep experience and a thoughtful, encouraging approach to teaching.



As one of the founding instructors at Bryan Peterson's online school in 2008, Mark taught thousands of students worldwide until the school's closure in 2025. His workshops and courses have helped photographers at all levels strengthen their visual awareness, refine their compositions, and develop greater confidence in their work.

Mark believes that great photography comes less from gear than from learning to see more clearly, think more deliberately, and trust one's own creative instincts.

He continues to write, teach, and explore the creative possibilities of photography through essays, workshops, and courses.

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BEFORE PRESSING THE SHUTTER:

OBSERVATION BEFORE ACTION
INTENTION BEFORE TECHNIQUE
CRAFT BEFORE EQUIPMENT
THOUGHT BEFORE EDITING