Before you dive into this guide, here's a few other free resources to help you learn photography:

What is Your #1 Photography Killer?

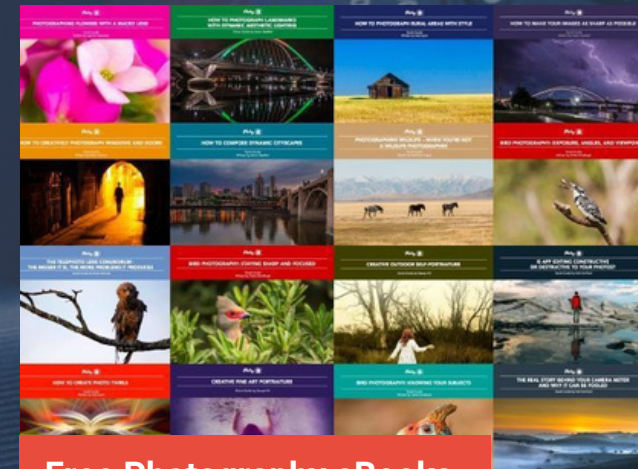Take this 30 second quiz to find out the #1 thing holding your photography back.

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Breaking the rules is always fun, right? Funny enough, the rule I love to break is literally eliminating a grey area! What I'm talking about is contrast, and lots of it! Over the past several years, I have found myself drawn to high contrast photography, and I thought it was time to share my fondness for the subject.

I've found that the emotions created by an image with lots of black, white, and very little grey areas can be remarkably engaging. I'm always asking questions about what's hiding in the black or white of an image, and the purpose of the negative space created by the relationship between the black and white areas.

I know, that's a little bit of bourgeois speak, but those are the questions that I enjoy asking. I also enjoy seeing others ask those questions, and that intrigue is what drives my creativity – using contrast to make my viewers wonder what's going on within an image.

My history with high contrast photography stems from accidently (not having a clue) misusing professional lighting equipment in photography school. I set up a scene with only one light, and it was very close to a particular object. Only a portion of my subject was illuminated, while everything else went pitch black. I'm sure my camera settings were also horridly off, but the resulting image was quite alluring.

Photo by Teddi Tostanoski

The photo of an open book on the previous page is from this first series of images. The abrupt difference between the dark background and my well-lit edges of the pages of the book are what made me fall in love with contrast. This image, among other photographs taken that day, catapulted me into trying to find myself in other similar pieces of work.

Just to be clear, for the rest of this tutorial, I'm only talking about black and white high contrast.

High contrast, in regards to color, is a completely different animal!

> ◆ **Key Lesson:** Black and white contrast is also known as tonal contrast, and refers to the difference in tones from the whitest white to the blackest black. High contrast means the difference between the whitest white and the blackest black is large, while low contrast photographs have minimal differences between the blacks and whites and ultimately look very grey.

Well, you can't break the rules unless you know the rules! So let's talk about the rule I enjoy breaking. I want to make it as simple as possible for you to understand how a "good" black and white photograph has traditionally been determined.

In the early days of photography, exposing photographs could be extremely problematic. At the time, this was due to the primitive design of many cameras and the lengthy process to take a single photograph. You didn't want to overexpose your photograph because then it would print extremely light, but you also didn't want to underexpose your photograph because then it would print extremely dark. If you messed up your initial film exposure, you could use two techniques called dodging and burning to bring back some of the details in your final image – this was through the darkroom process; however, that could be tedious and not the easiest of tasks.

What's tough about correctly exposing a photograph is finding the right balance between your ISO, aperture, and shutter speed settings to achieve perfect exposure. Finding the correct exposure trifecta became the obsession of photographers, and art critics, as they pursued to judge a "correct" black and white photograph.

In almost all my photo classes, I was taught that I need a balance of blacks, whites, and greys (as explained above).

Photo by Teddi Tostanoski

Take a look at this photo of Half Dome in Yosemite. You can pick out each of the tones (indicated in the grey scale on the right) within this image, correct? That's all fine and dandy in a darkroom class that's teaching you techniques about exposure and post-processing.

As an emerging photographer, you have to push your boundaries.

I passed my classes by bending to the rules, and the harsh critiques. However, I never quite got why my classmates and I were all trying to find the same balance in our images.

We are now in the digital era, and anyone can take a trip to Yosemite and come home with a perfectly exposed photograph, eerily similar to an Ansel Adams image. Does that mean we are all as good as Ansel Adams? I would say not!

As an emerging photographer, you have to push your boundaries. The boundary that I'm pushing is to eliminate the greys in my images in order to create high contrast photographs that are both striking and creative.

Goals and Objectives

By the end of this guide, and the two subsequent assignments, you should be able to do the following:

1. Identify why high contrast is working, or not working, for any particular photograph.

2. Spot opportunities that will create interesting high contrast photographs, and then be able to set up your camera to take those photographs.

3. Edit almost any photograph, so that it becomes a magnificent high contrast piece of artwork.

4. Learn techniques for locating great photo opportunities with high contrast photography.

Photo by Teddi Tostanoski

RECOGNIZING CONTRAST

I want to give you an example of how I spot my high contrast photographs, and then I will teach you how to see high contrast opportunities for your photography.

Let's look at this archway photo on the left. I was walking around this historic site on a pretty busy weekend in the middle of July. I spotted this gem of a photograph. Even in color, there was a stark contrast between the first arch and the sunny walkway beyond. Then, there was also a high contrast situation in the next archway and the window with the bars.

I had to wait five minutes to snag this moment when no one was walking into my frame.

In the end, the resulting photograph was entirely worth it, because I have **never** seen another image taken at the Colosseum in Rome that looked just like this. Did you even know that's where it was taken? How many images of the Colosseum have you seen like this? It's one of the most visited and photographed places in the world, and just by noticing the contrast between these spaces, I pulled off a photograph **that no one else has.**

brightest area

darkest area

Photo by Teddi Tostanoski

Then, with some minor editing to transform it into a black and white image, viola: a creative, high contrast photograph, and a vastly unique image of the Colosseum in Rome!

Now it's your turn!

Let's start by thinking about what sort of situations will aid you in taking a great high contrast photograph. The best advice that I have for you is to look around your surroundings right now. Pick out the brightest area in your field of view and then the darkest area in your field of view.

What did you find?

If you're indoors, your brightest field of view is likely going to be a light or a window. If you're outdoors, the brightest field of view is likely wherever the sun is shining. If you're looking around and it's at night, the brightest field of view is probably going to be a street light or a light in a building.

Right now, in my kitchen, my brightest area is the light on the ceiling, and my darkest area is the shadows under some pillows.

Obviously, my example on this page isn't the most amazing photograph, but it demonstrates how you can practice looking for both light areas and dark areas in your everyday life.

Recommended Reading: Aside from contrast, understanding other composition concepts including color, shape, space, etc. will help you improve your photography. Learn more about these topics by grabbing a copy of Photzy's Advanced Composition guide by Kent DuFault.

fast shutter speed

open f stop

low iso

ideal settings

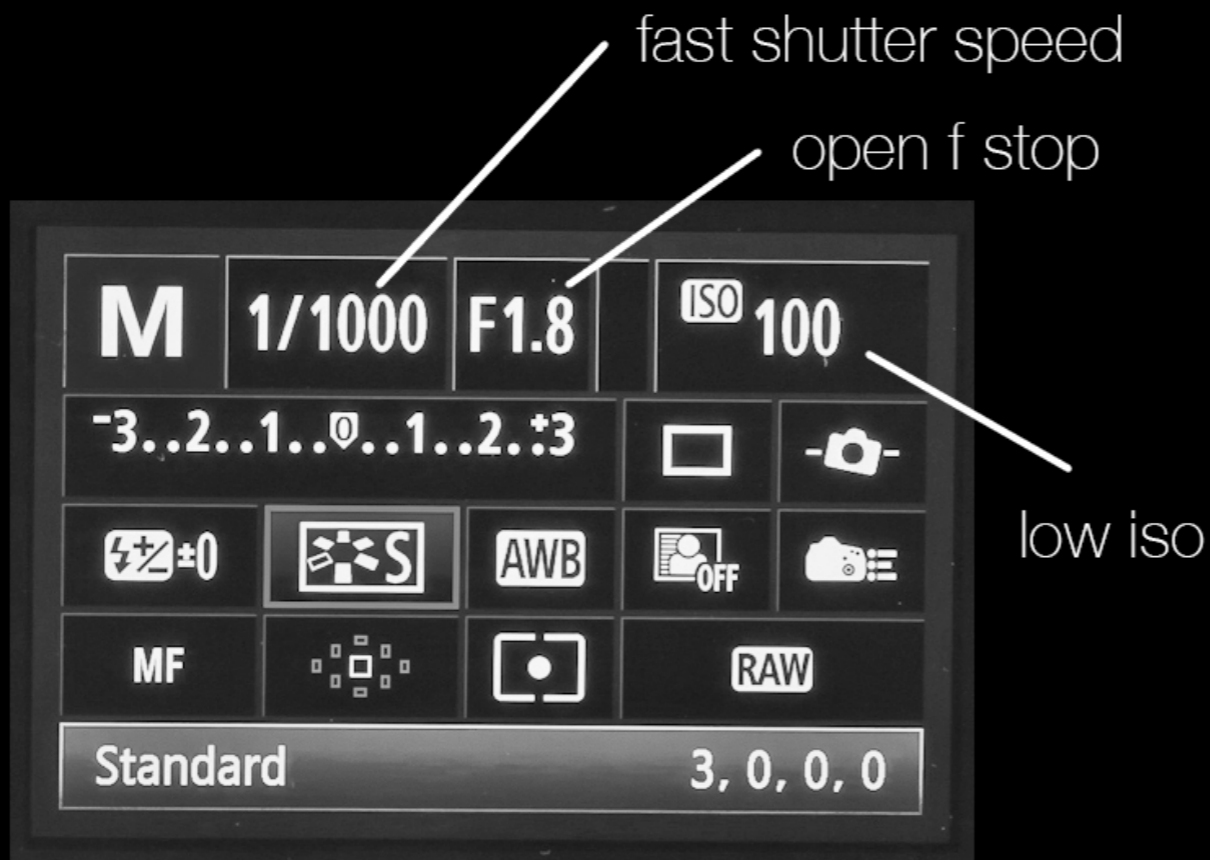Illustration by Teddi Tostanoski

SETTING UP YOUR CAMERA

To create images like my Colosseum shot, you're going to need a camera with some manual functions, and/or editing software like Lightroom!

I use my smartphone as my camera much of the time, because most of my images get posted to social media, but any DSLR will work too!

Unless whatever you're photographing is already lit in such a way as to provide you with high contrast, here are my recommended camera settings and why.

ISO: I try to use ISO 100 (or as low as possible) not just to decrease the amount of noise in my image, but also because it helps highlight the brightest parts of an image by making those areas the only areas that get exposed.

Shutter Speed: Make this setting as fast as you can, without losing the brightness around your main area of focus. What I mean by that is, don't make your shutter speed so quick that you're just getting a black image and not letting in enough light to see your subject.

80 — iso
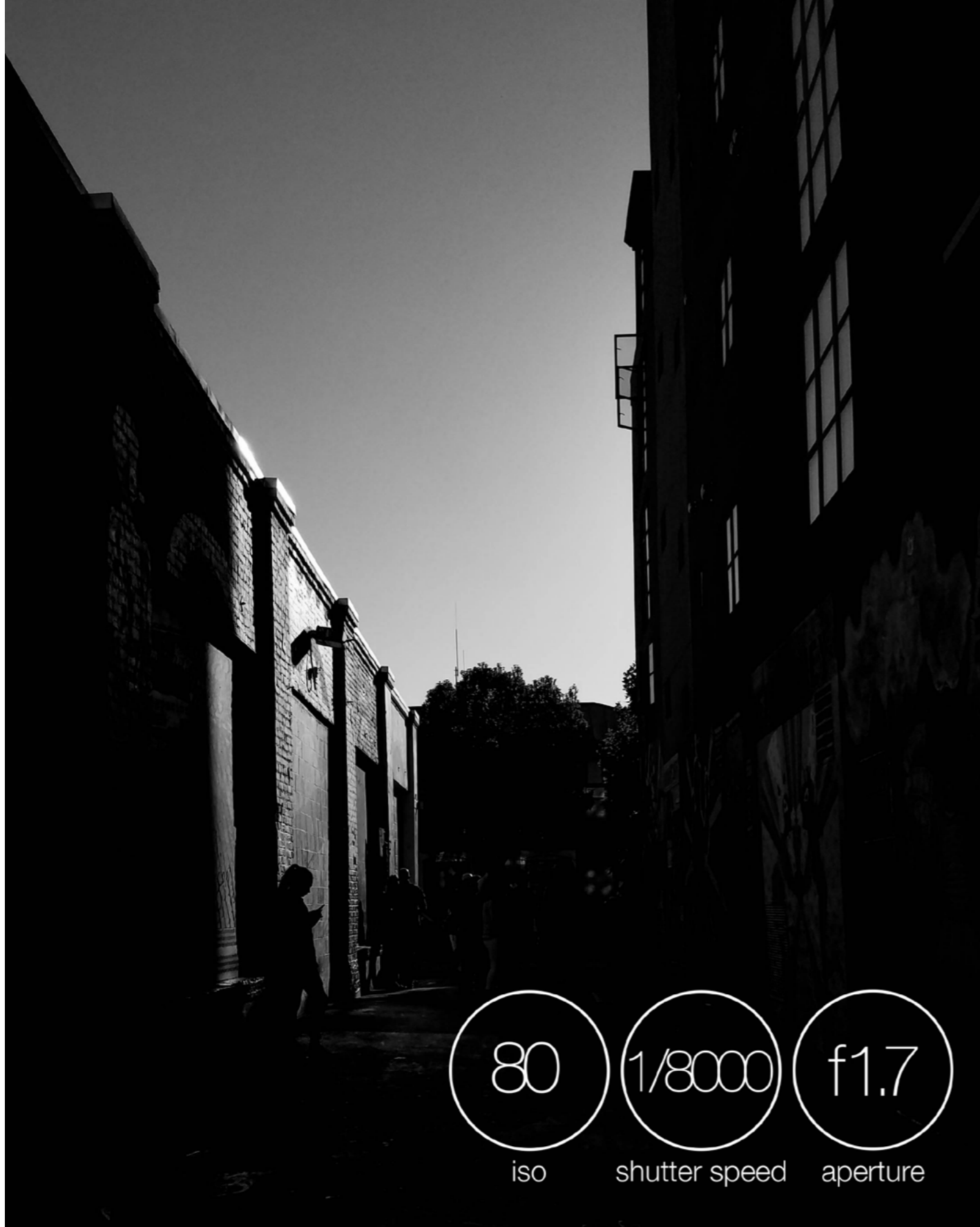1/8000 — shutter speed
f1.7 — aperture

Photo by Teddi Tostanoski

Aperture: I generally keep my aperture as wide open as I can (low f/stop number), because I generally don't care about my depth of field (DOF). Short DOF adds another creative factor to a high contrast photograph, but you're the artist so don't let me persuade you to do otherwise!

The photograph on the left is from the Mission District in San Francisco. Let's determine why the settings help make this photograph work.

Using a low ISO of 80, the fast shutter speed of 1/8000, and an open aperture of f/1.7 helps to produce the deep blacks and shallow depth of field that defines this image. The girl with her phone is outlined flawlessly as the subject, and you can see each individual brick because there isn't any noise to muddle your view. Even though I used a low ISO, and the shutter speed is not letting in much light, the very wide aperture of f/1.7 exposed a lot of light onto the sensor in the brightest areas. These settings give subtle highlights to the top of the bricks and maintain the gradient of light from the sun across the sky.

This is another image (similar to the archway photo) that required very little editing due to my use of the right camera settings and the available light!

Learn the basic camera settings to be able to effectively create high contrast images

Definitions:

ISO is the sensitivity setting of your camera to light. The lower the ISO – like 100 – the lower the sensitivity, and in turn your camera sensor picks up less light. Your image will also have minimal noise. A higher ISO – like 6400 – makes your sensor more sensitive to light. At high ISO settings, your camera can record almost any visible light, but with the caveat of increased digital noise.

Aperture is the size of the opening inside your lens when you take a photograph. The larger the opening (aperture), the more light the camera will let in, and vice versa (the smaller the opening, the less light passing through).

Shutter speed is how fast the camera's shutter opens and closes in a single exposure. The slower the shutter speed, like 1/30 of a second for example, the more light is allowed to expose the sensor. And vice versa for a higher shutter speed like 1/8000. (With a higher shutter speed less light is allowed to pass through and expose the sensor.)

Recommended Videos: If you'd like to know more about ISO, aperture, and shutter speed, watch these videos:

· Understanding ISO
· Understanding Aperture
· Shutter Speed Explained

50
iso

1/500
shutter speed

f1.7
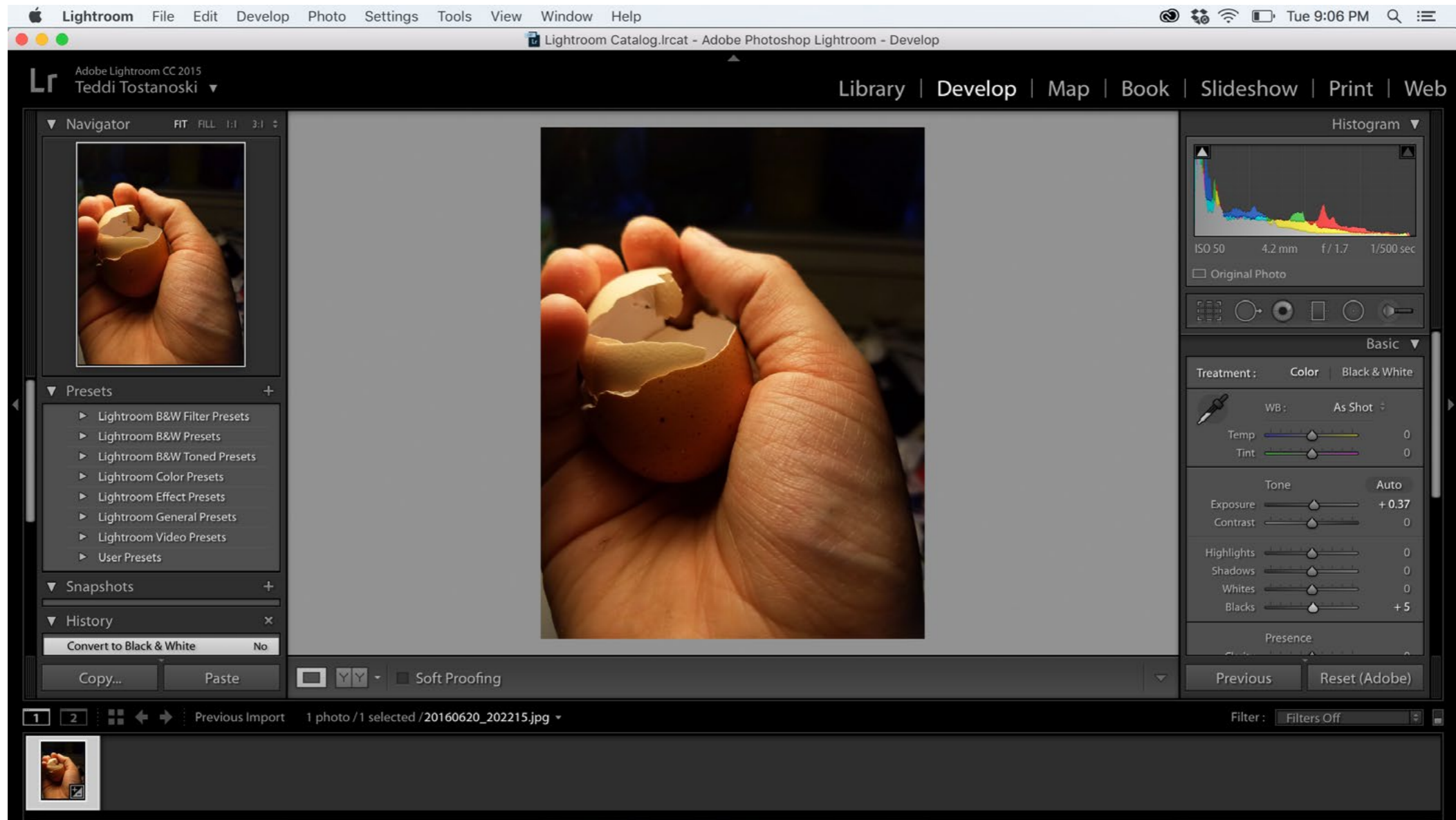aperture

Photo by Teddi Tostanoski

EDITING YOUR PHOTOS TO HAVE HIGH CONTRAST

Let's be honest, the ability to achieve an excellent high contrast image with just your camera can be a bit tricky. I even have difficulty!

Obviously it can be done, as the above examples demonstrate, but I think it's also crucial for you to know how to edit a photograph to create this look. After developing my interest in high contrast, I went back through a massive amount of my old photographs and edited them to give them a new edgy look! You might be inspired to do this as well.

So, I have this egg, right? Fun fact about me: I love to photograph eggs. It's my "thing," besides high contrast black and white photography. It has to do with family heritage and whatnot, but I'll save that for later! I chose this image because I wanted to show you that high contrast photos could really be of anything. It doesn't have to be just outdoors, or just lights.

Here we go! I edited this photograph in Lightroom, but you can also transfer any of these concepts to Photoshop, other editing suites, or even smartphone apps!
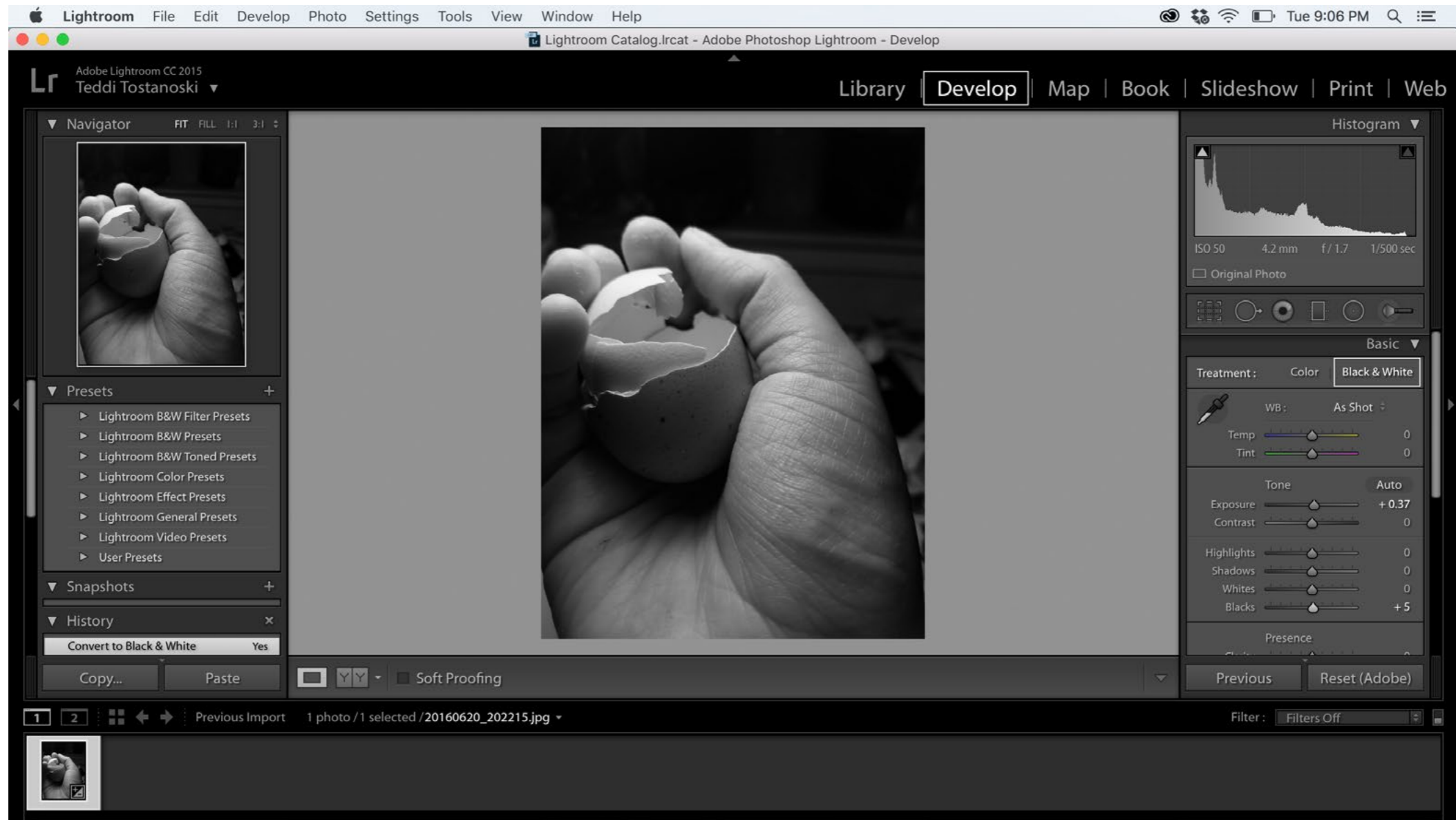
Screenshot by Teddi Tostanoski

The camera settings that I used for this photo were ISO 50 (low sensitivity, which is what we want), a shutter speed of 1/500 (fast, which is what we want), and an aperture of f/1.7 (wide open, which is what we want).

But, this image doesn't look high contrast, does it? There is black shadow behind my hands, and the top of the eggshell is quite bright, but this just isn't cutting it...so let's take the image into Lightroom.

Once in Lightroom, make sure you're in the Develop module. Remember, Lightroom never alters your original image, so feel free to play around with the settings as much as you want!

Screenshot by Teddi Tostanoski

(1) Convert your image to black and white. You can use a preset on the left-hand side of the workspace. I generally go straight for the Black and White "Treatment" button on the panel on the right-hand side. I end up changing the settings so much that a preset doesn't do me any good.

Recommended Reading: If you'd like to effectively convert color images into black and white, take a look at Photzy's premium guide "Better Black and White."
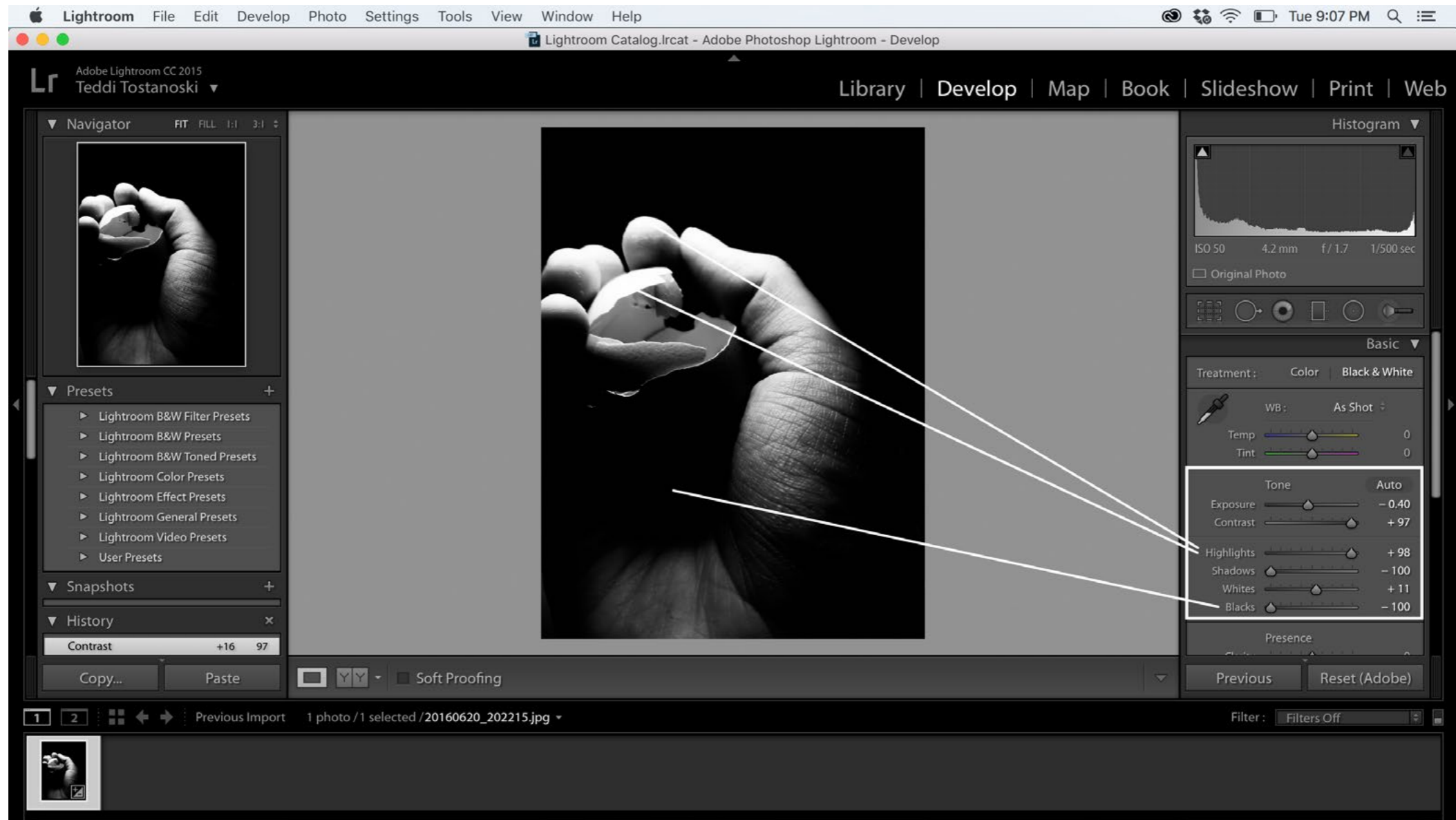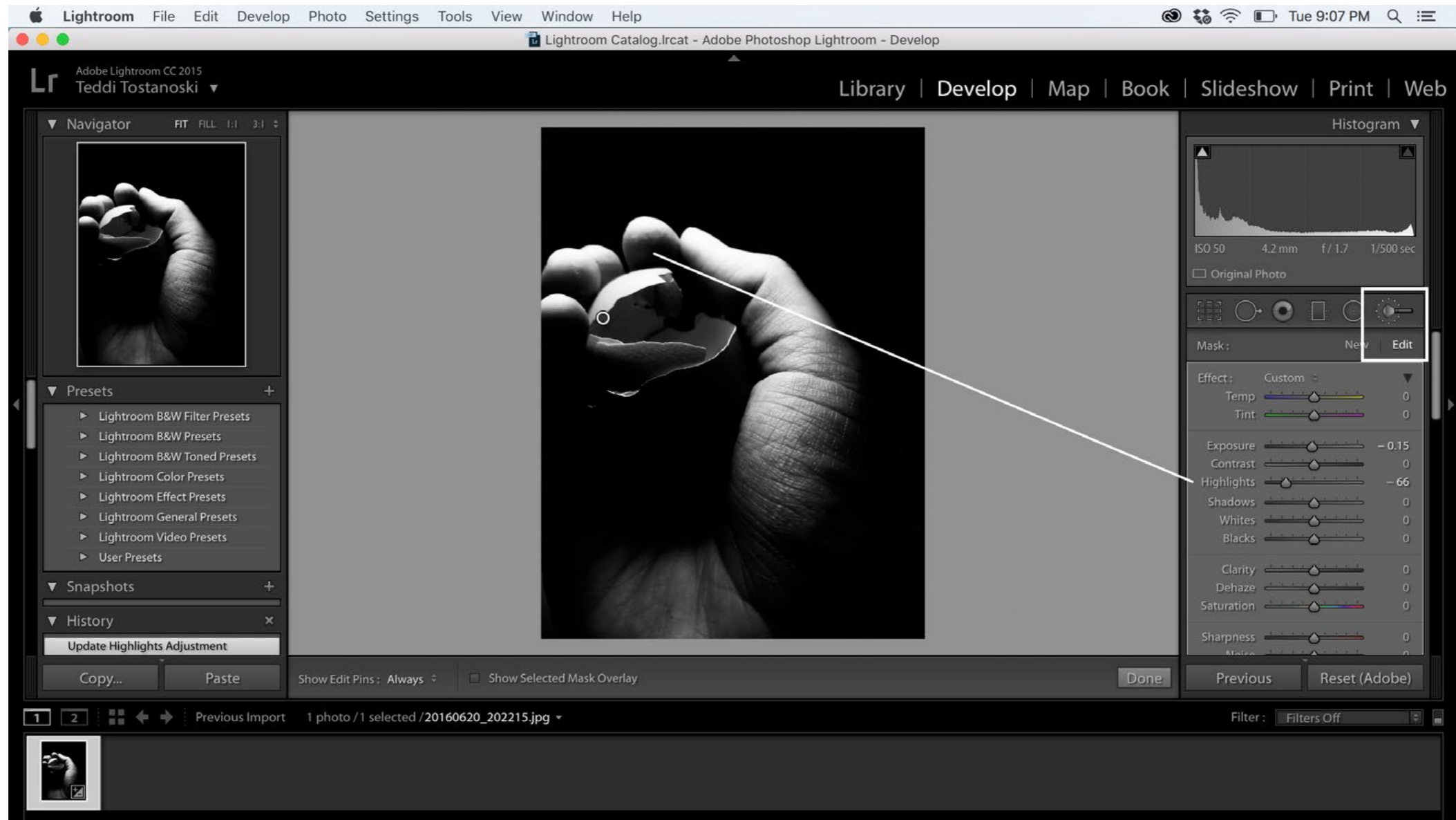
Screenshot by Teddi Tostanoski

(2) Play with the settings in the Treatment section on the right-hand panel. If you originally set your ISO to a low number, you should barely have to touch the Exposure slider. I almost always end up bumping up the Contrast slider to close to 100 (slide the slider to the right). By doing this, you increase the difference between your blacks and whites, and ultimately eliminate a lot of grey tones.

If you're not a pro at Lightroom, feel free to stay at Step 2 and continue playing with your settings until you find something that you love.

If you want to learn another new trick, keep reading!

Screenshot by Teddi Tostanoski

③ One of the great things about Lightroom, and Photoshop, is that many of their functions are based off of photo editing from the film days, including dodging and burning.

In my egg photograph, I want to have more contrast where the tips of my fingers meet the top of the eggshell.

Right now, there is a fair amount of grey tone there, and I want there to be simply dark shadows.

To accomplish this, on the right-hand panel, I will click on the Adjustment Brush (see screenshot above).

This nifty tool can change your settings based on where you "paint" with a brush.

Screenshot by Teddi Tostanoski

The Adjustment Brush panel has the same settings as in the main panel. However, when you paint a mask with the brush, only those areas are affected by any change that you set in the panel. What I did, as illustrated in the screenshot on the previous page, is I dropped my Highlights down to -66. This created an effect similar to the old-school film technique called "burning" a photo print in the darkroom.

Then, I painted where the egg meets my fingers, and that area there became even darker, creating more contrast and drama!

Recommended Video: If you'd like to learn more about enhancing your images in Lightroom, including how to use the adjustment brush, grab our bestselling Lightroom video tutorial by award-winning photographer, Mitchell Kanashkevich - "Understanding Post-Processing Video Course."

SUMMARY

I'm assuming that you've found some interest in using high contrast in a creative way. It's not the go-to method for all photographers and artists, but it will help set you apart from a good number of other photographers.

Thinking about the difference between blacks and whites is also a great exercise for you to apply to the rest of your work as well.

When you're looking at old photos, think about how contrast could improve, or possibly take away from, your existing work. Find your blacks, whites, and grey tones. Determine how they are helping or hurting your images.

For me, I was breaking the rules that were set out by a fine arts education. I hope, for you, this guide provides a tool toward creativity, and not hard-set rules.

Shooting Assignment

Step 1: Go someplace that you think might have high contrast photography possibilities, but don't take a photograph right away. I recommend taking some time to plan your shot. Think through what your ISO and shutter speed settings might be. Ask yourself if you are planning a **mostly black** or a **mostly white** image. What's going to pop off the print once you take the photograph? Can you set your camera up so that there will be minimal post-processing, or will you have to go in and play with the post-processing to get just the "right look"?

Step 2: Once you have an idea on how you're going to photograph your high contrast image, go for it! Take the photograph the way you planned it out, and then change your settings so that when you get to the post-production phase, you can compare the images and see how changing your settings affected the overall look and feel of the photograph.

Editing Assignment

This is a fun one. Go back through some of your old images and edit them so that they become high contrast masterpieces! There are probably photographs in your archives that were tossed out because they were dull or uninteresting. Think about how you can use your newly-developed high contrast skills to make those images pop and draw attention!

Hey there!

Let's get real for a minute... Learning photography can be super challenging! But we're here to help you every step of the way! Here are 3 of our most useful *(and FREE!)* photography resources:

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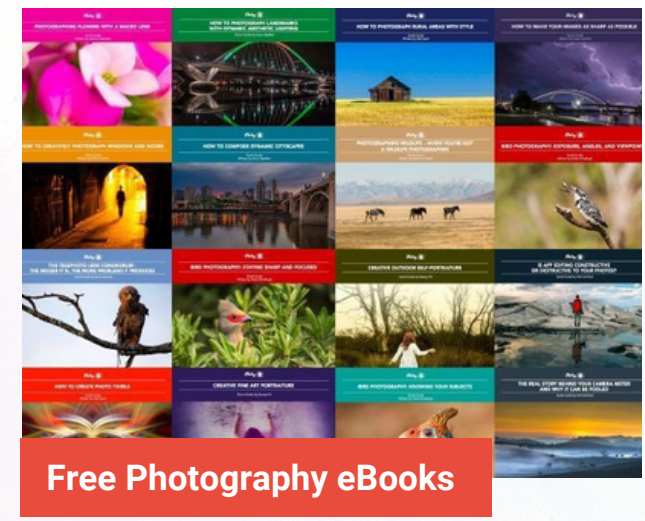
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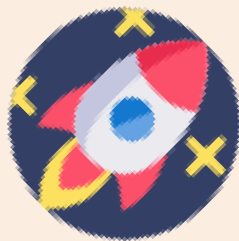
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Like many photographers, Teddi Tostanoski has been creating photographs since she was very young and has continued her passion into early adulthood. During her time at the University of Colorado, she found her love for high contrast photography, whilst also digging deep into her family heritage and exploring alternative photographic mediums. Teddi supplements her artistic endeavors by contributing to many areas of the photography industry. Besides writing and reading up on photographic art history, she has carved out a space for herself within the marketing realm for companies like Canon and Ricoh Imaging-Pentax.

If you liked this guide, connect with Teddi here:

Instagram 1: @tteddles
Instagram 2: @thelightingbug
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/tedditostanoski
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/teddles.t