
THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF CRAZY HIGH CONTRAST

Quick Guide
Written by Kent DuFault

Tone

Color



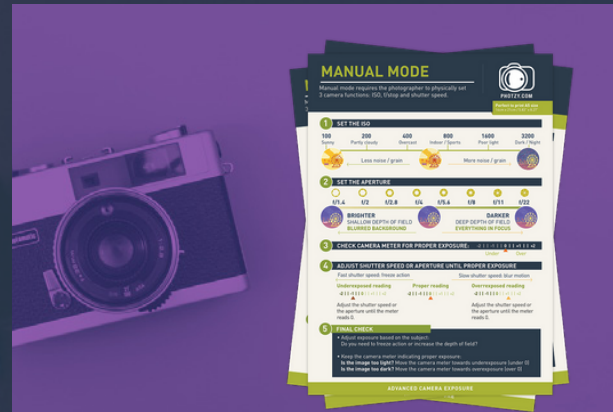
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Why is high contrast so darn appealing?

Contrast, both tonal and color, conveys an intense sensation of mood and emotion. These images often feel fresh, dramatic, and edgy. They are high energy and appeal to all individuals across all age groups.

Conversely, low-contrast images tend to be dreamy and ethereal. But that's a discussion for another guide.

I have always been drawn to high contrast in my photography efforts. As a teenager with a darkroom in the basement of my parents' home, I often experimented with high-contrast techniques, including the use of lithographic film.

In this guide, we will examine images that use high contrast and then decide what we think about them. We will also highlight contrast techniques.

Here is what is covered:

- What is tonal contrast?
- What is color contrast?
- Black and white is the ultimate high-contrast tool

- Extremely high tonal contrast
- Combining tonal and color contrast in a single image
- The difference between color contrast, color separation, and monochromatic color
- Subjects that work well with high contrast
- Planning a high-contrast photoshoot
- Color contrast is not dependent upon the saturation level
- Using still life to learn about contrast
- Mixing high contrast and low contrast in a single image



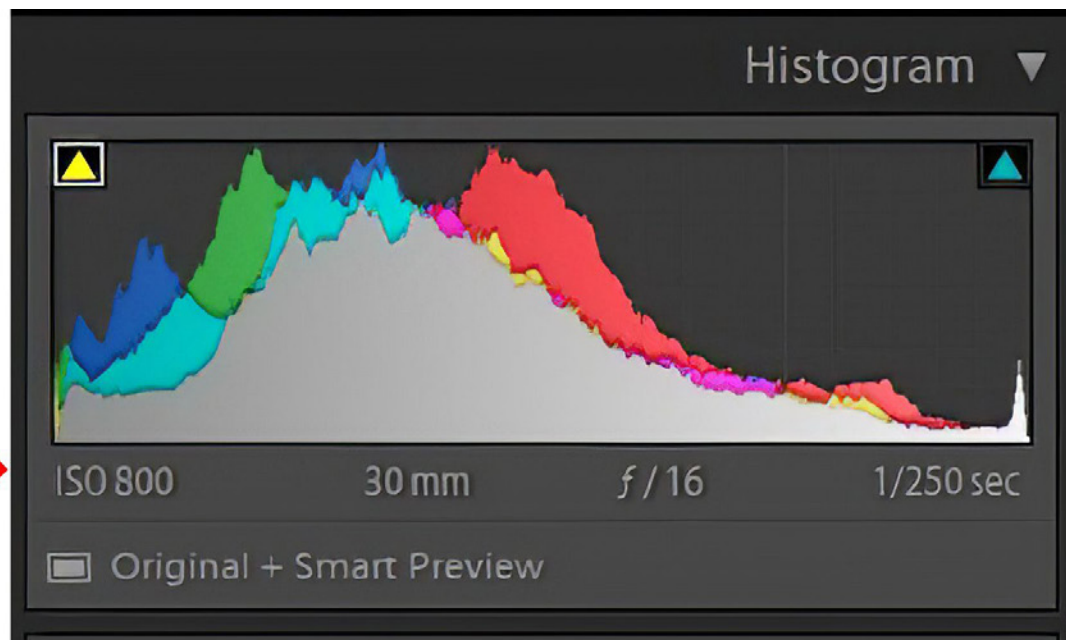
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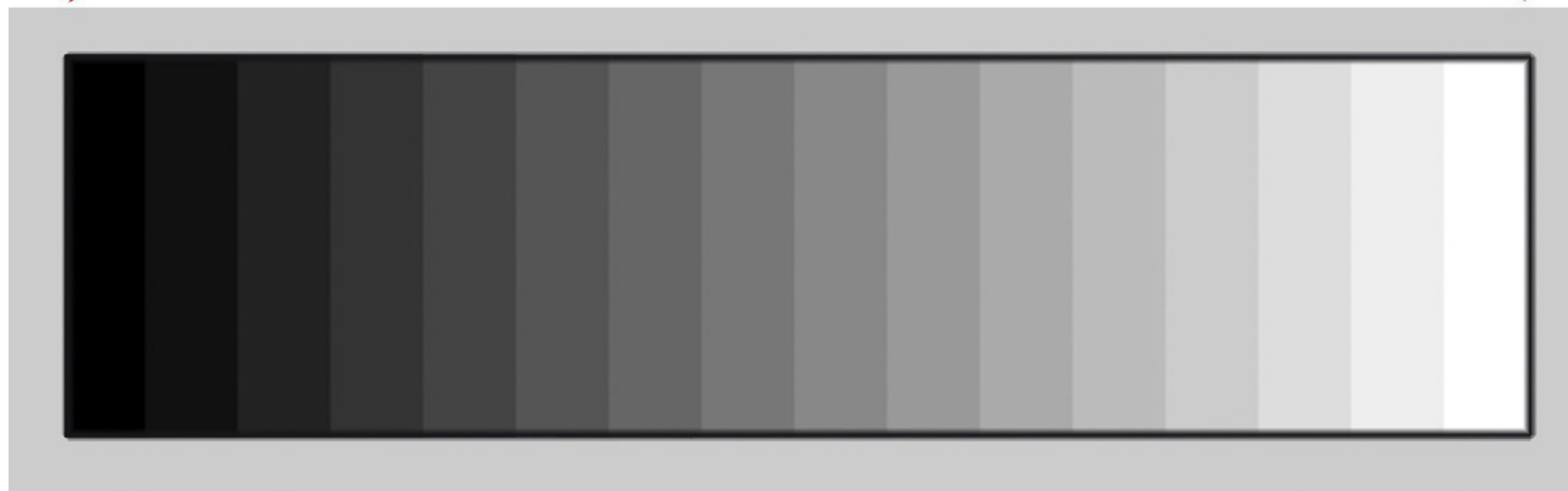
Photograph by Nora Hutton

WHAT IS TONAL CONTRAST?

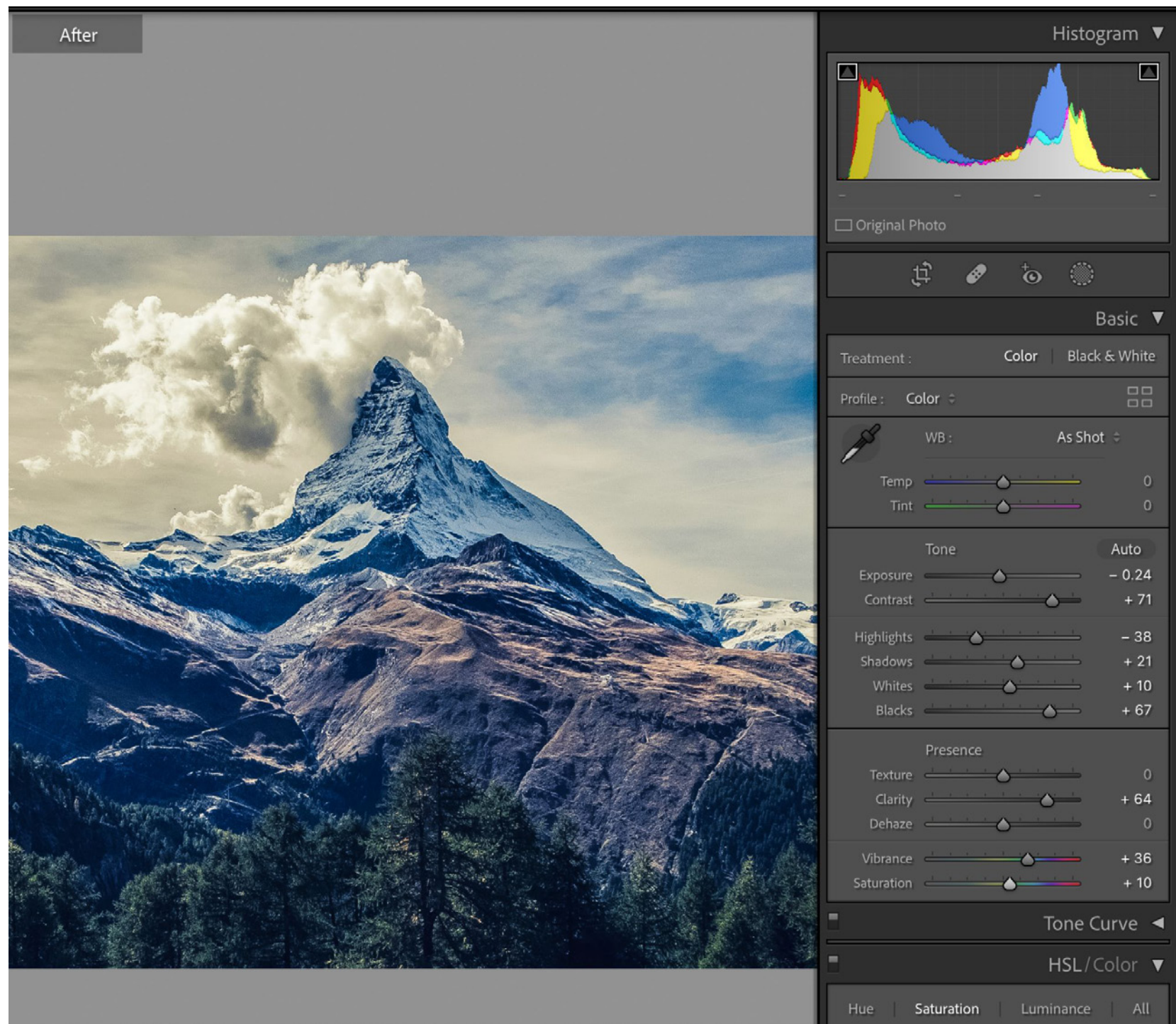
Tonal contrast is the **difference** in tonal density from the brightest to the darkest tone as measured on the histogram scale.



Contrast is represented on a scale known as a histogram. In the example on the left, the gray section down below depicts the tonal contrast. The left side of the histogram graphs the darkest tones, and the right side graphs the lightest tones. The chart is spread evenly from left to right when an image has normal tonal contrast.



Graphics by Kent DuFault



When a photograph has high tonal contrast, the histogram will show higher peaks on the far left and the far right. The middle section will be lower on the scale.


Photograph by Sven Scheuermeier and Screenshot by Kent DuFault



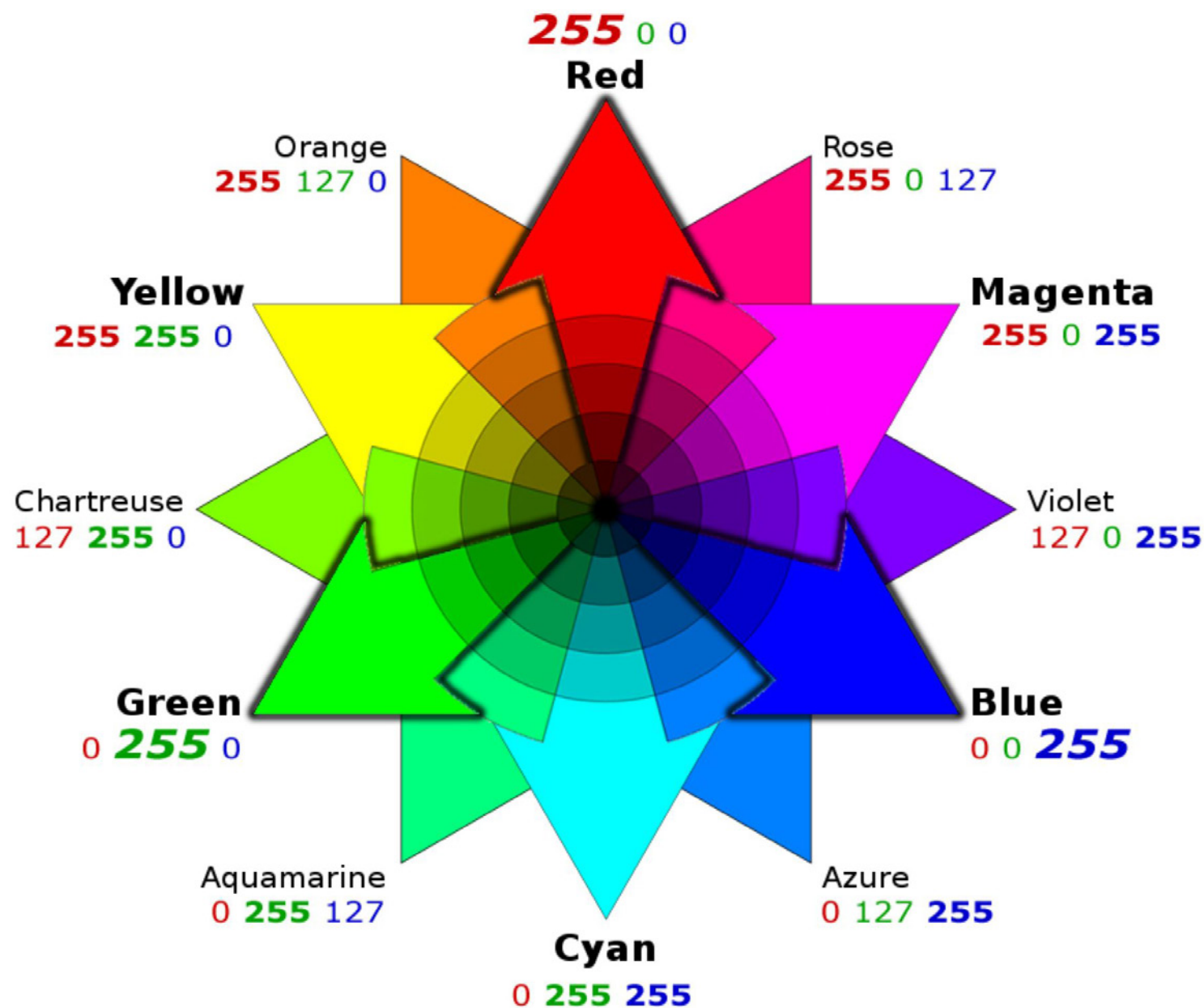
Photograph by Cottonbro Studio

WHAT IS COLOR CONTRAST?

Color contrast is measured by where the colors in a photo fall onto a measuring scale known as a color wheel.

 **Key Lesson:** Tonal contrast is measured with a histogram, and color contrast is measured by a color wheel.

The image on the left represents high color contrast. Let's look at a color wheel to see why.



RGB Color Wheel by Kent DuFault

Half the color wheel is cool colors, and the other half is warm colors. There are different types of color wheels, but the most widely used in digital photography is the **RGB Color Wheel**.


💎 **Key Lesson:** Any color that opposes another color on the color wheel is a contrasting color. The ultimate color contrast is when the two colors are directly opposite on the color wheel. For example, blue and yellow create the highest contrast, but blue and red are also contrasting colors.

The image on the previous page has high color contrast because the dominant colors are red, yellow, and blue.



Photograph by Nora Hutton

Does the image on the left have high color contrast? It sure does! Cyan, red, and orange are opposites on the color wheel.

 **Key Lesson:** The colors black and white are the ultimate contrasting colors because they contrast with every other color and offer tonal extremes.



Photograph by Ivan Tsaregorodtsev

EXTREME TONAL CONTRAST

The image on the left depicts an example of extreme tonal contrast. The photo includes black and white tones with nothing in between.

This type of effect is accomplished with a specialized film known as lithographic film. In digital photography there are many apps, presets, and actions to create this style of image.



Photograph by Kent DuFault

I created this extremely high tonal contrast image of my dog using the app Snapseed. I chose this treatment to make his intense eyes stand out even more.



Photograph by Caramel

COMBINING TONAL CONTRAST AND COLOR CONTRAST IN THE SAME IMAGE

What is your contrast evaluation of the image on the left? Does it have high tonal contrast? Does it have high color contrast?

The image on the left has used both types of contrast very carefully. High contrast of any type often doesn't look appealing in food photography.

The inclusion of the shadowed area below the table adds a pleasant tonal contrast that makes the image pop from the background.


That shaded area also adds color contrast to the food without affecting the appeal of the food. Remember, the colors black and white add color contrast to any other color.



Photograph by Unjay Markiewicz

How about the example image on the left? Does it have high contrast, and if so, what type?

Correct! It has both types! Do you understand why? If not, re-read the previous sections of this guide.

 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to learn how to create amazing black and white images, grab a copy of Photzy's best-selling premium guide: [Better Black and White](#).




Photograph by Engin Akyurt

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN COLOR CONTRAST, COLOR SEPARATION, AND MONOCHROMATIC COLOR

Does the image on the left exhibit color contrast? It does, but it doesn't really qualify as a high-contrast photograph.

Why?

 **Key Lesson:** There is an artistic term known as 'color relativity.' Color relativity considers the composition weight based on the relative quantity of the various colors represented in a picture. Even though green and red are high in color contrast, the abundance of the color red versus the small amount of the color green removes this from a high color contrast situation and becomes a color separation composition.

Color separation occurs when one color dominates the others and separates opposing colors from the rest of the frame.



Photograph by Nora Hutton

Does the image on the left qualify as either high tonal or color contrast?

This is a tricky one, and here's why.

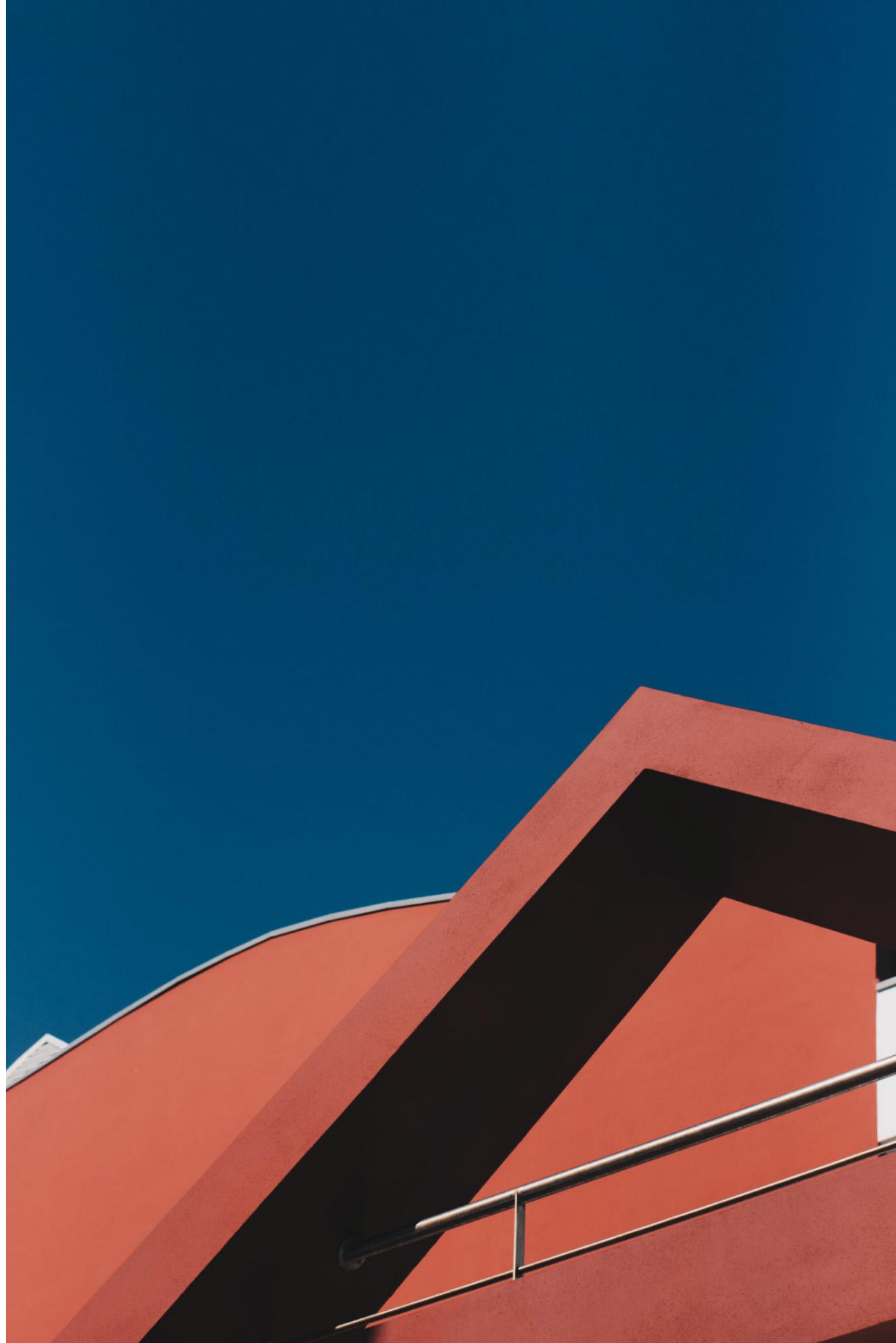
The background is dark but not black. The highlight in the eye is light but not white. The rest of the represented color is very similar. So, no color contrast. The rest of the defined tones are very much middle tones. So, no high tonal contrast.

💎 **Key Lesson:** This is an excellent example of a technique known as **monochromatic color**. With monochromatic color, the entire image is represented within the same slice of the color wheel. In this image, all the colors are found within the orange slice.



Photograph by Kent DuFault

Here is a photo of mine where I created a monochromatic color effect. The original was black and white and low in tonal contrast. By adding a blue-cyan overlay in Photoshop, I added a lot of mood and interest through monochromatic color.



Photograph by Joao Jesus

WHAT TYPE OF SUBJECTS WORK WELL WITH HIGH CONTRAST?

If you're new to working with high contrast, an easy subject to start looking at is architecture. Architecture is appealing both with high tonal and color contrast.

Other subjects that work well with high contrast include:

- Street photography
- Still life
- Abstract
- Landscape
- Nature
- Specialized portraiture



Photograph by Victoria Akvarel

PLANNING A HIGH- CONTRAST PHOTOSHOOT

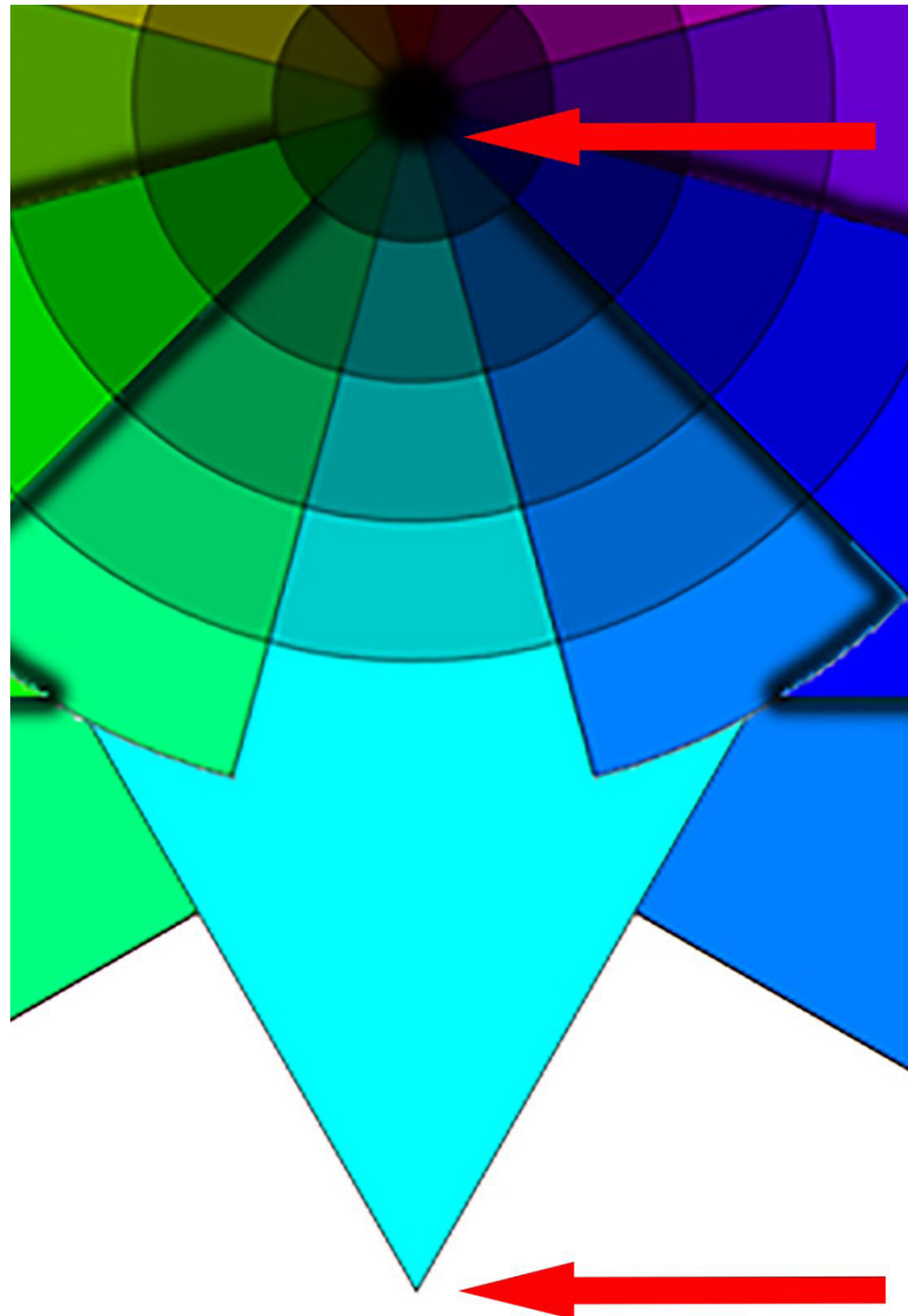
Here's an idea!

Create your own self-assigned high color contrast photo shoot. It doesn't have to be complicated; be sure to experiment with different color combinations.



Photograph by Moose Photos

💎 **Key Lesson:** Color contrast **does not** require heavy color saturation to work. The image on the left is a low tonal contrast, low color saturation, and high color contrast photo.



Cyan

0 255 255

💎 **Key Lesson:** Color saturation is represented on a color wheel by the distance from the center of the wheel. A color hue close to the center of the wheel is highly saturated. A color hue more proximate to the edge of the wheel has low color saturation.

Does it make sense to you now why you can have low tonal contrast and low color saturation images that are still presenting high color contrast?


Graphic by Kent DuFault



Photograph by Ann H

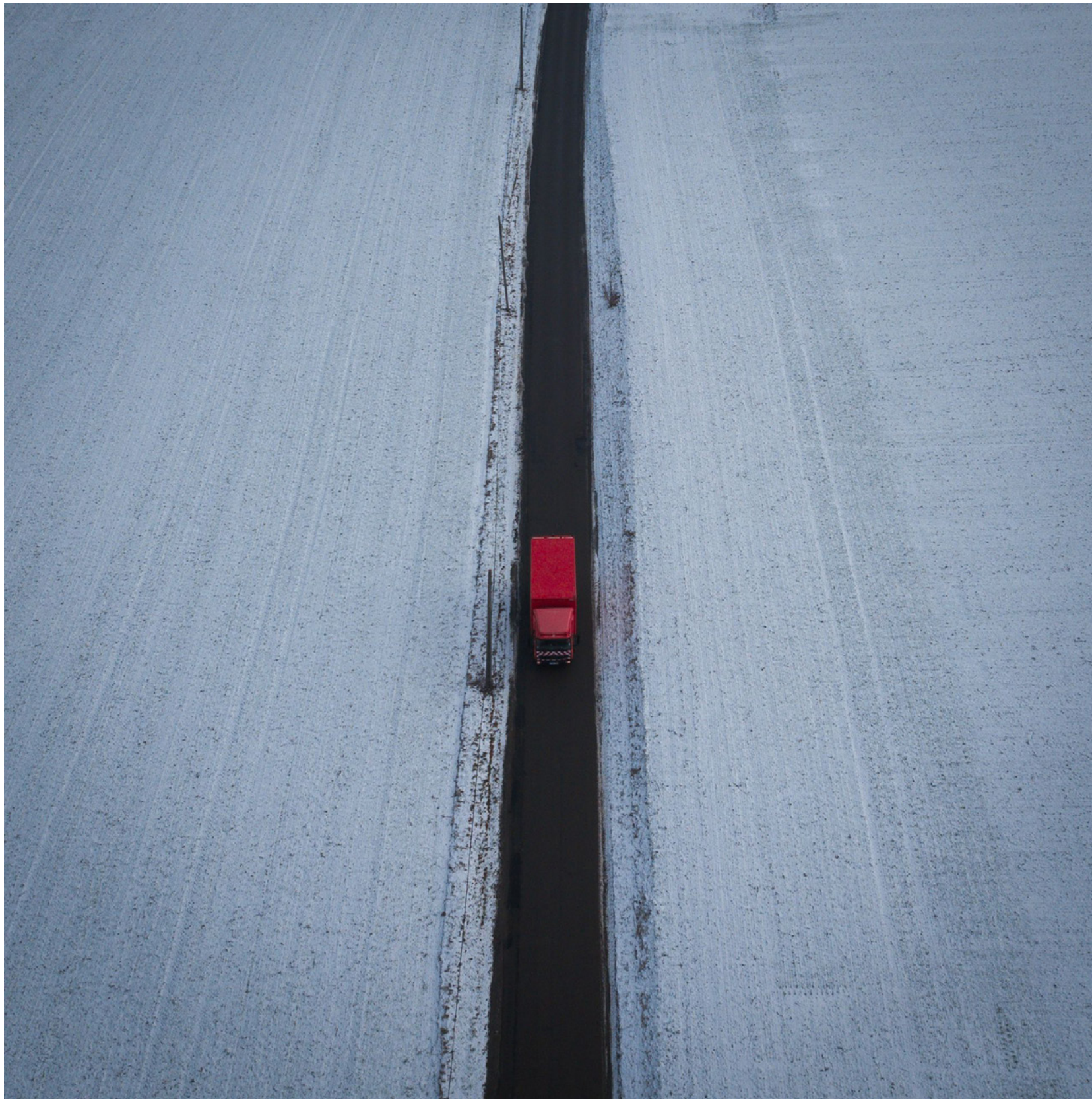
USING STILL LIFE TO LEARN ABOUT CONTRAST

When teaching my students about contrast, I often give them the assignment to explore tonal and color contrast using the still life genre.

 **Key Lesson:** Still life creates an excellent environment to learn about contrast because you can control every aspect of the photo being created.

The image on the left is an excellent example of using still life to explore contrast. It is visually exciting and was created using the simple props of pencils and paper.

Why don't you give this a try yourself?





Photograph by Alotrobo

This image uses low tonal contrast and high color contrast to make a stunning and unusual photo dripping with mood and storytelling.

MIXING HIGH CONTRAST AND LOW CONTRAST WITHIN THE SAME IMAGE

Pro Tip: Mixing high and low contrast within the same image can be stunning. In addition, it is rarely tried. Put together a portfolio using this concept to create interest in your photographic work.

 **Key Lesson:** By mixing high and low contrast in either tone or color, you can create visually stunning photos that no one else is producing.

 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to learn how to create amazing black and white images, grab a copy of Photzy's best-selling premium guide: [Better Black and White](#).



Tone

Color

Photograph by Nora Hutton

CONCLUSION

The human mind is trained from birth to look for and evaluate contrast. It is a survival instinct, and that makes it a mega-powerful composition tool for you. Mix and match contrast to create special effects and unusual scenes that are sure to be liked online.

Self-Check Quiz:

- 1) Why is high contrast so appealing?
- 2) What is tonal contrast?
- 3) What tone does the far-right side of a histogram scale represent?
- 4) What does the histogram scale look like if an image displays low contrast?
- 5) How is color contrast determined?
- 6) What is the most common color wheel used in digital photography?
- 7) What color is the opposite of blue on an RGB color wheel?
- 8) What is the difference between color contrast, color separation, and monochromatic color?
- 9) What is color relativity in photo composition?
- 10) Name three genres of photography that work well with high contrast.
- 11) True or False: Color contrast is dependent upon color saturation.



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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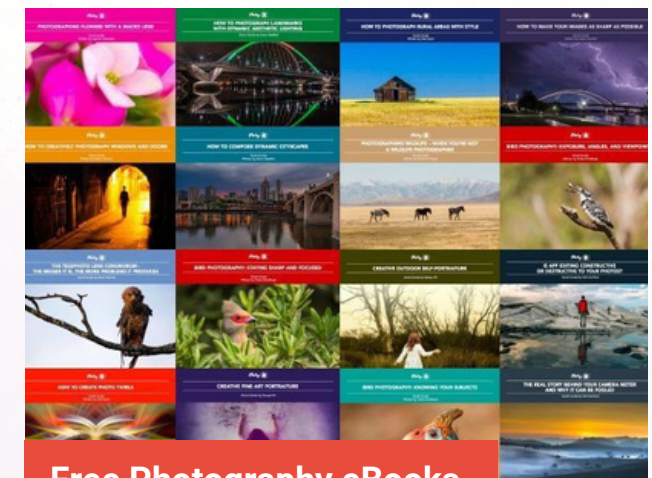
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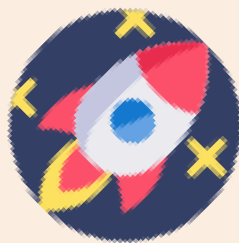
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



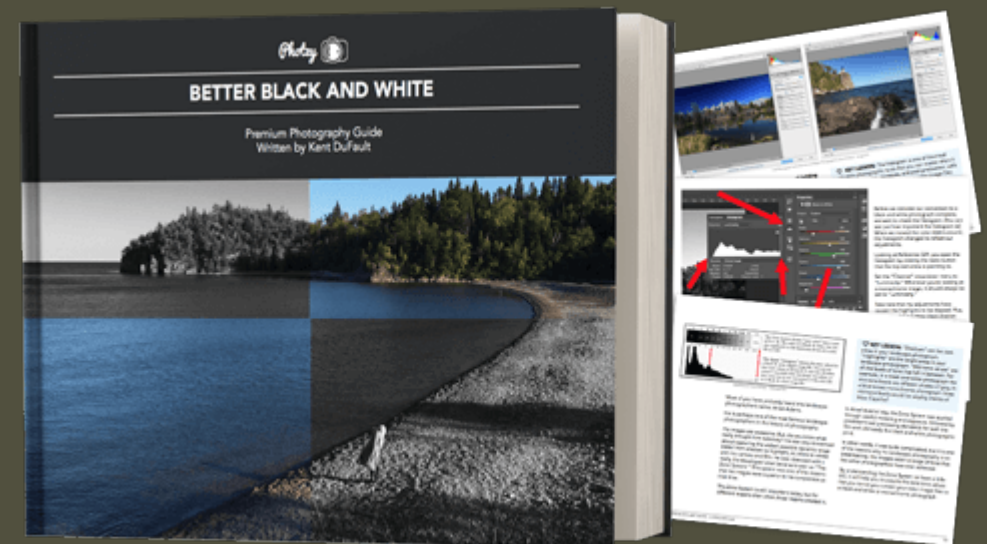
Kent DuFault is a professional photographer and author.

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