

Composition Case Study #11

ADVANCED COMPOSITION

I'm a big-time cat person, so there is a lot that I love about this photograph right from the start.

However, from a composition perspective, it has some serious problems.

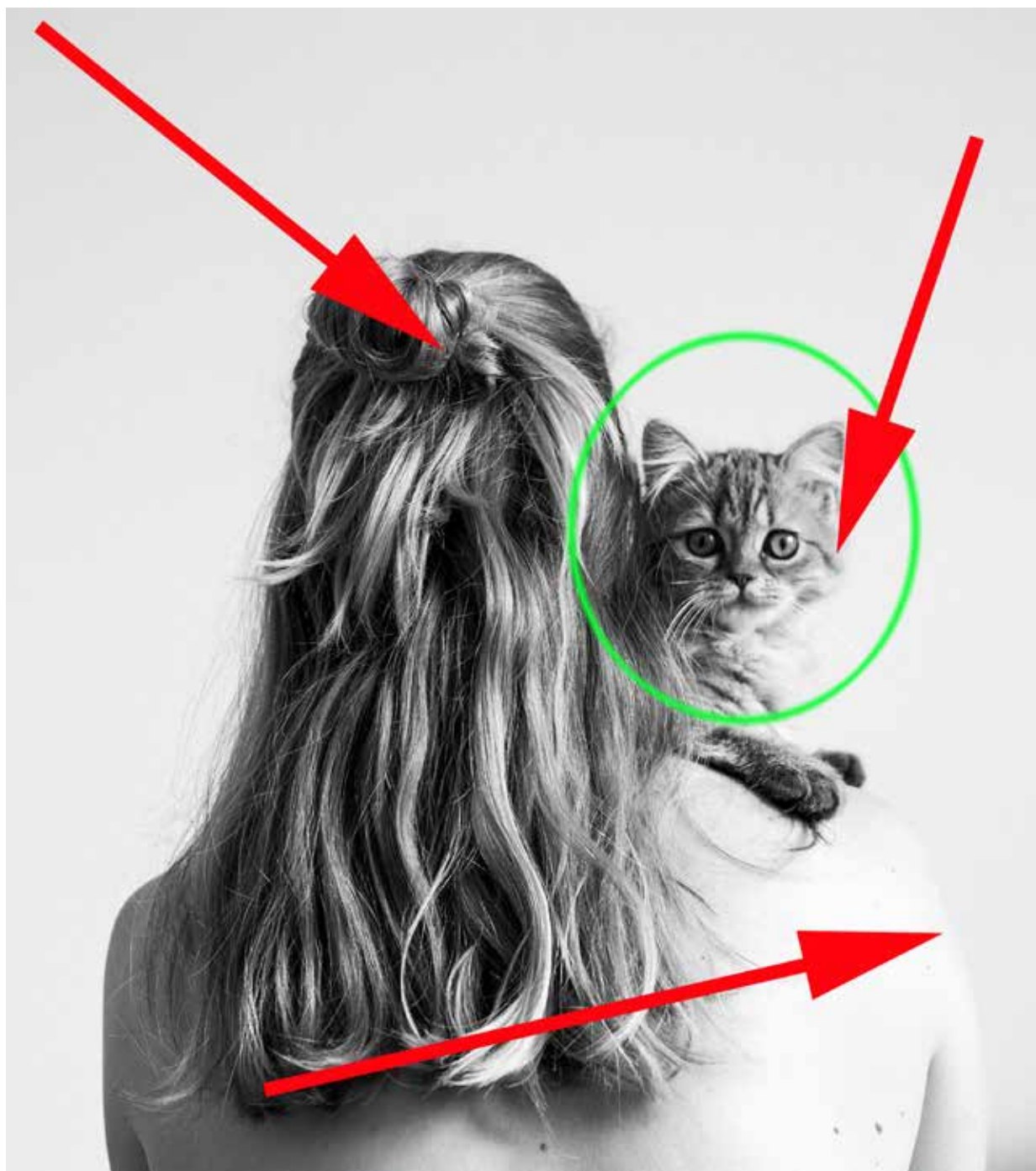
After evaluating the histogram, what do we do first? We identify the subject.

The subject here is the cat. The photographer is making a statement about tone, texture,

light, shadow, and a relationship. The direct expression of the cat solidifies the cat as the subject.

What is the woman? From a composition point of view, she plays two roles: she is a frame and a focal point. She helps direct the eyes toward the cat. This means she is negative space, as well as part of the background.



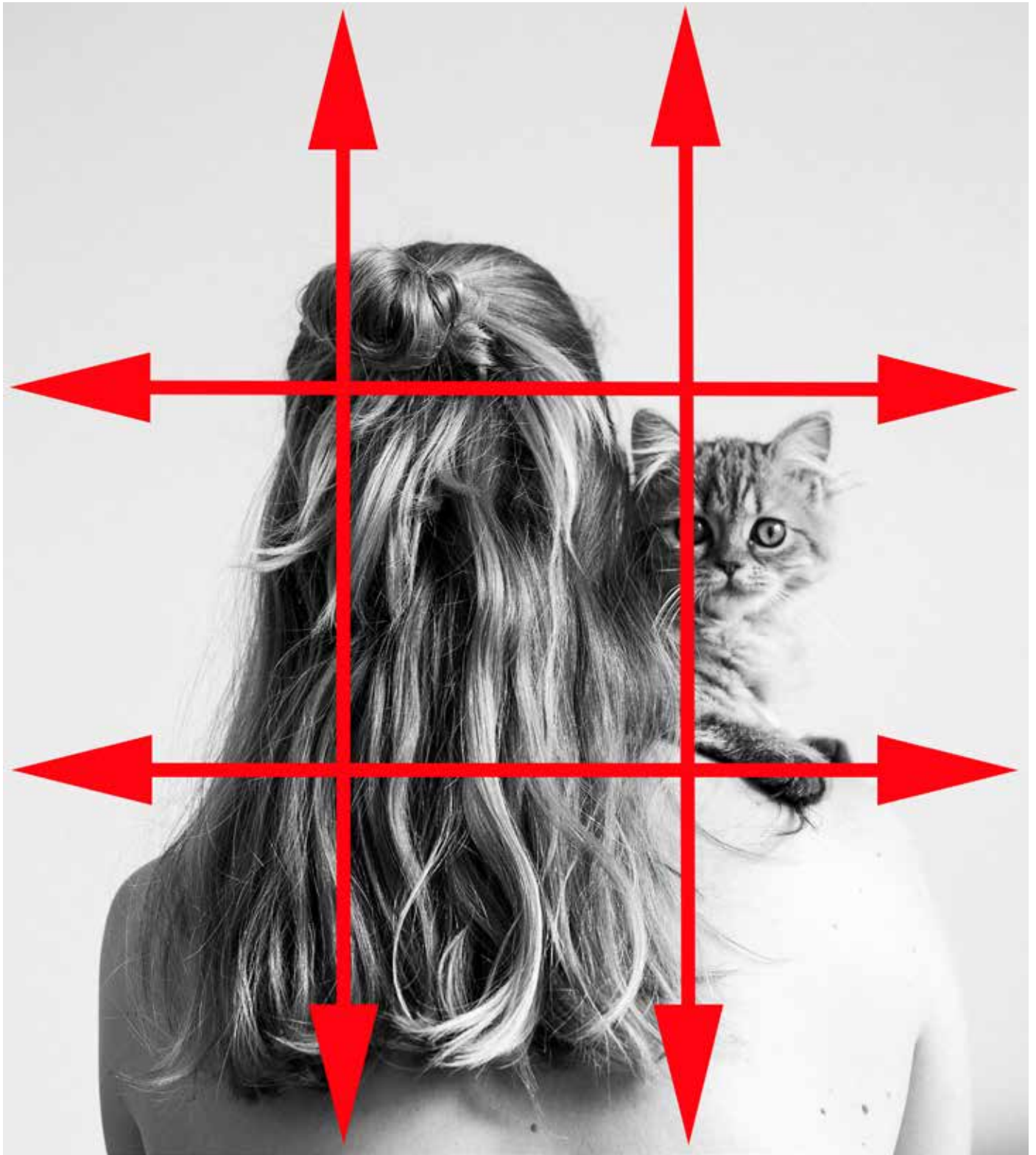


The first major problem here is that the critical focus is misplaced. The cat's face is slightly soft. The woman's hair up near the bun received critical focus.

This is a major problem. Unless you have a very good reason for the subject not to be the sharpest element in the photograph, it should be – especially in a portrait setting.

When the focus isn't too far off – as in this case – there is a potential repair, which I will share with you in this case study.

Another issue here (just as in Case Study #06, that of the patriotic dog) is that even though the highlight areas along the cat's face and the woman's shoulder are not clipped off on the histogram, they are bleeding into the background from lack of tonal separation.



After taking a look at the composition using the Rule of Thirds, we can see that the cat is not ideally placed.

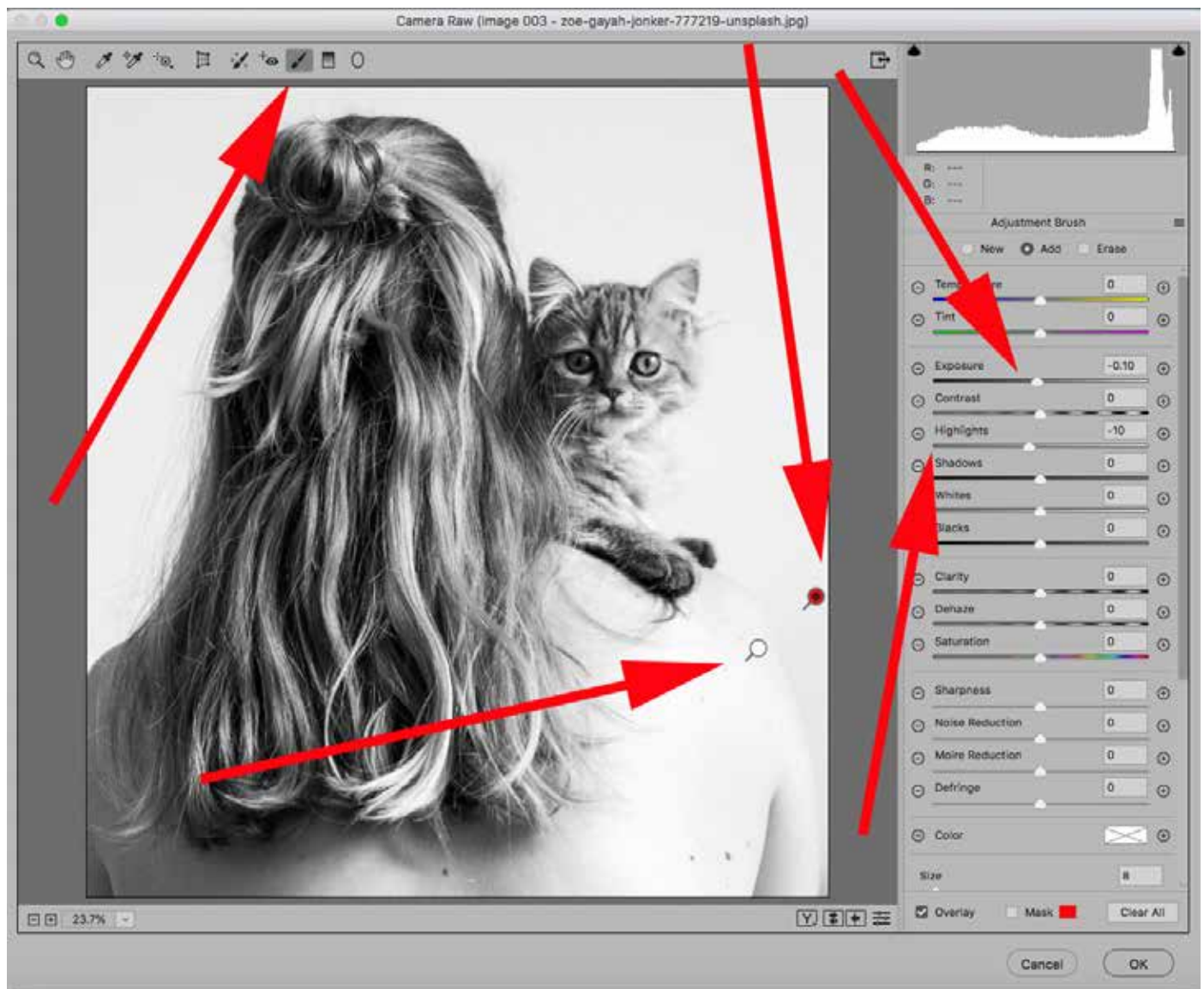
There appears to be excess background. Let's take a look at a crop.

Tighten a Composition with a Proper Crop



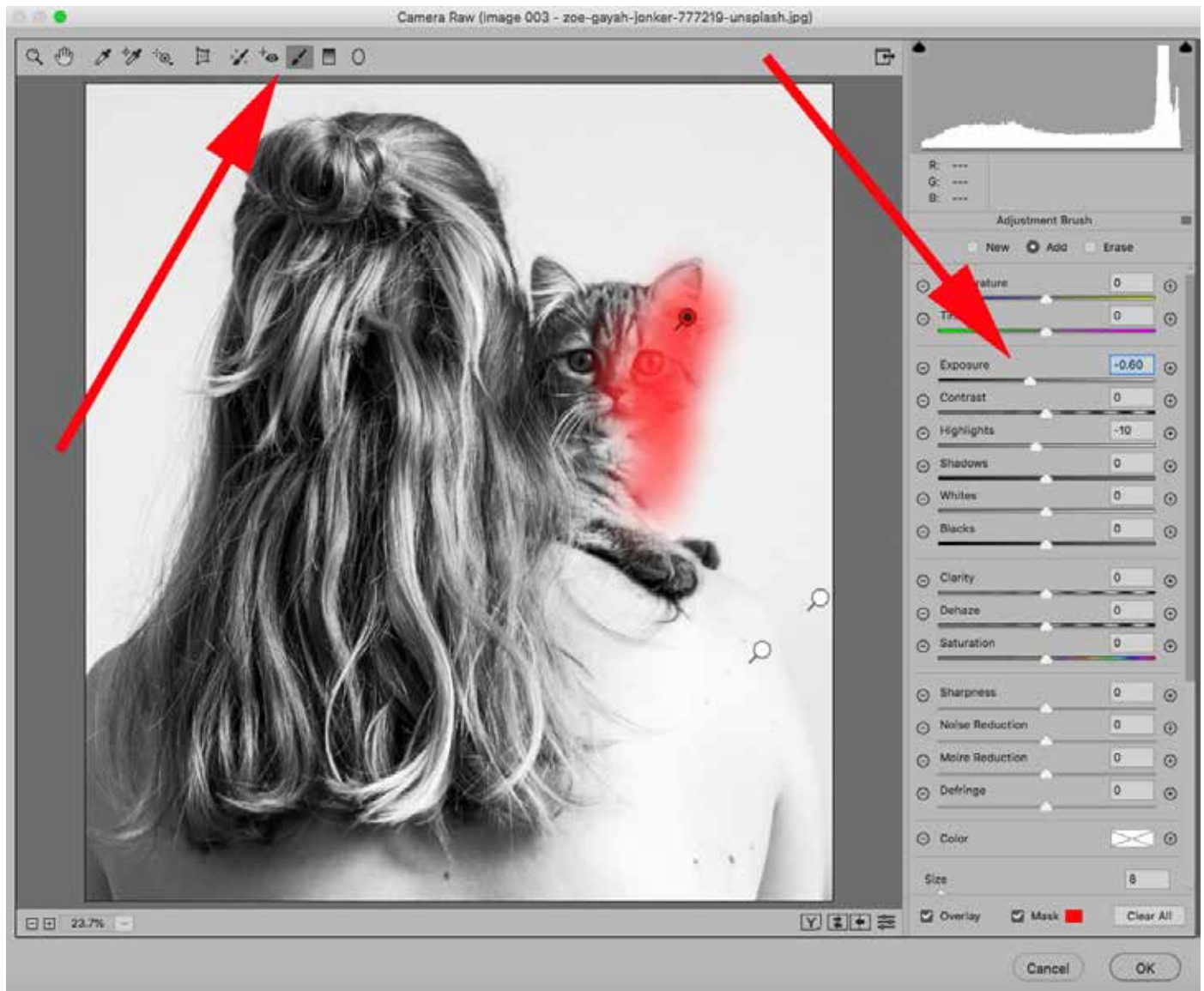
In this image, we can see that a crop really tightens up the composition, and it also puts the cat's sharpest eye onto the sweet spot for the Rule of Thirds.

Repairing Tone Separation



After cropping the image, I used the Adjustment Brush tool in Adobe Camera Raw to create some separation between the shoulder and the background. Notice that my adjustments are minimal.

I worked the area just enough so that I could clearly see the shoulder separated from the background.

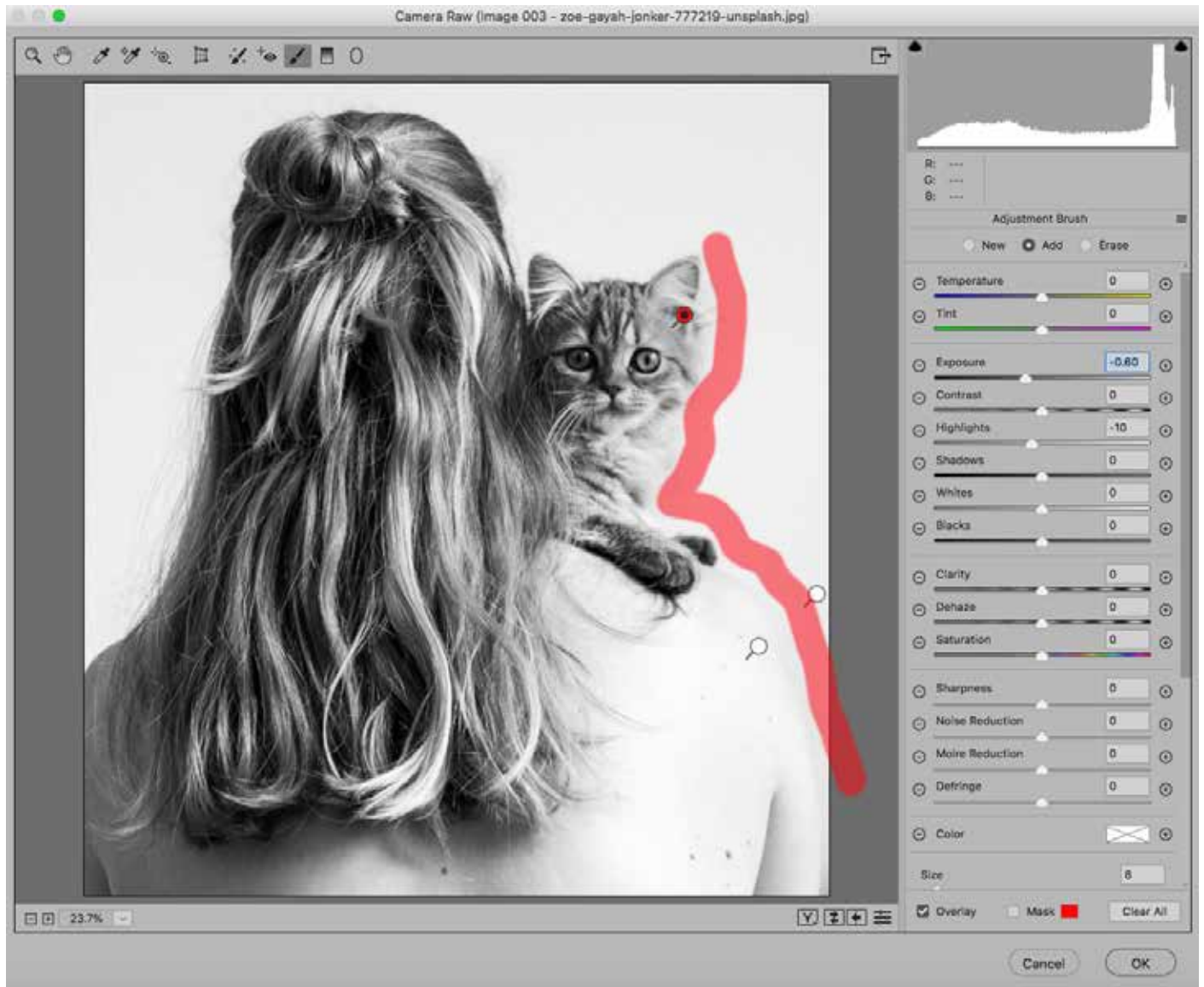


Next, I am going to darken the highlight side of the cat's face. This change will be more dramatic than the shoulder, as I want the cat's face to really pop from the background.

When using the Adjustment Brush, you can click on the 'Mask' box in the bottom right. This allows

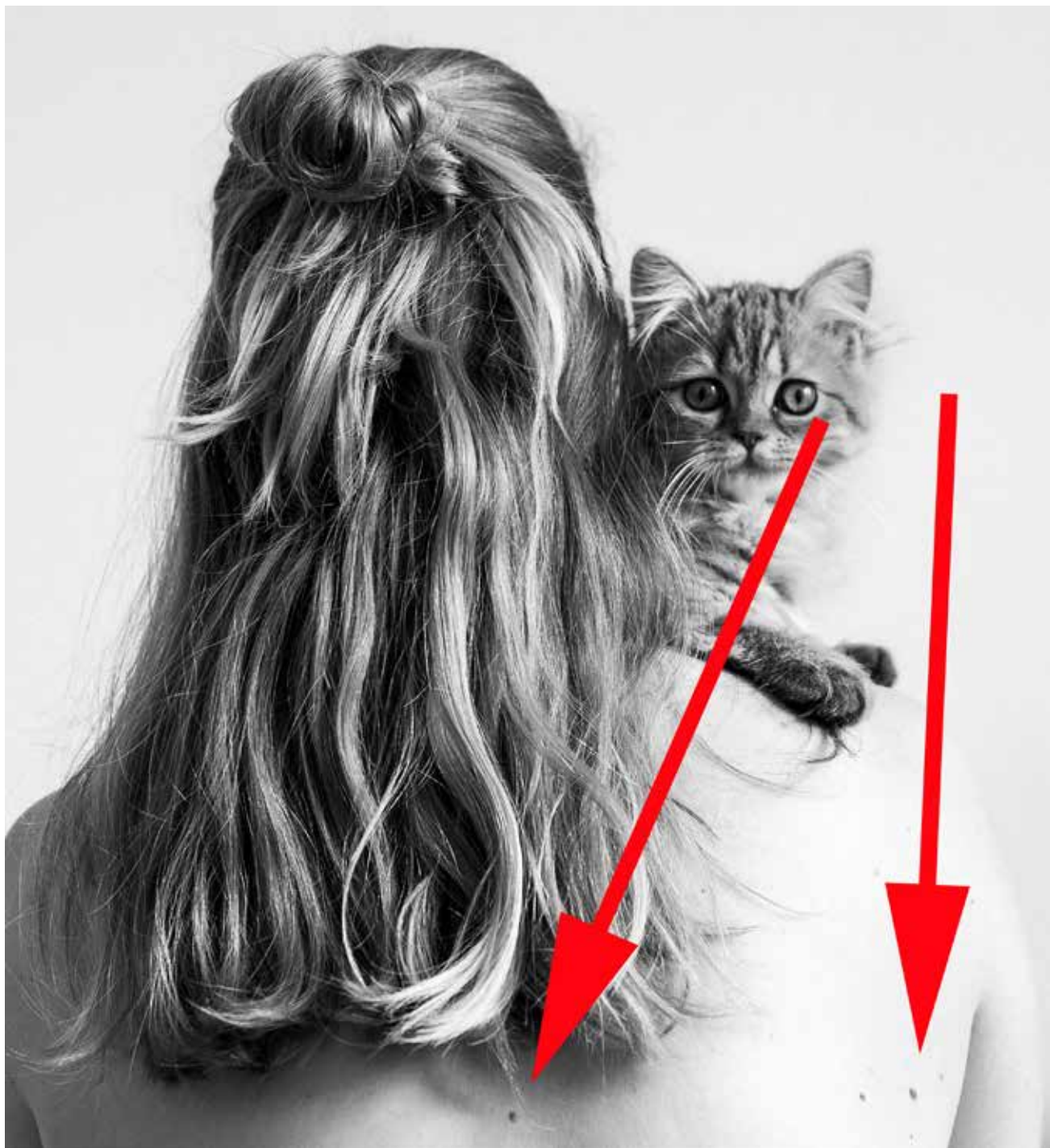
you to see the mask. The mask is the area that will be affected by your changes.

You can 'Add' or 'Erase' from the mask to fine-tune the areas that will be affected.



These adjustments with the Adjustment Brush have now created a defined line between the subject, the woman, and the background on the

highlight side of the image, as indicated by my red line in the image above.



Contrasting objects near the edge of frame can divert attention and visual weight away from the subject.

I usually like to remove all of them. In this particular case, we have some moles on the woman's back, which I intend to remove.

Now, this is important.

If this were a commissioned portrait for the woman, her significant other, or any other client, I would ask before removing anything distinguishable on the body or the face. This includes moles, freckles, scars, or tattoos. Typically acne is fine to remove without raising a question.

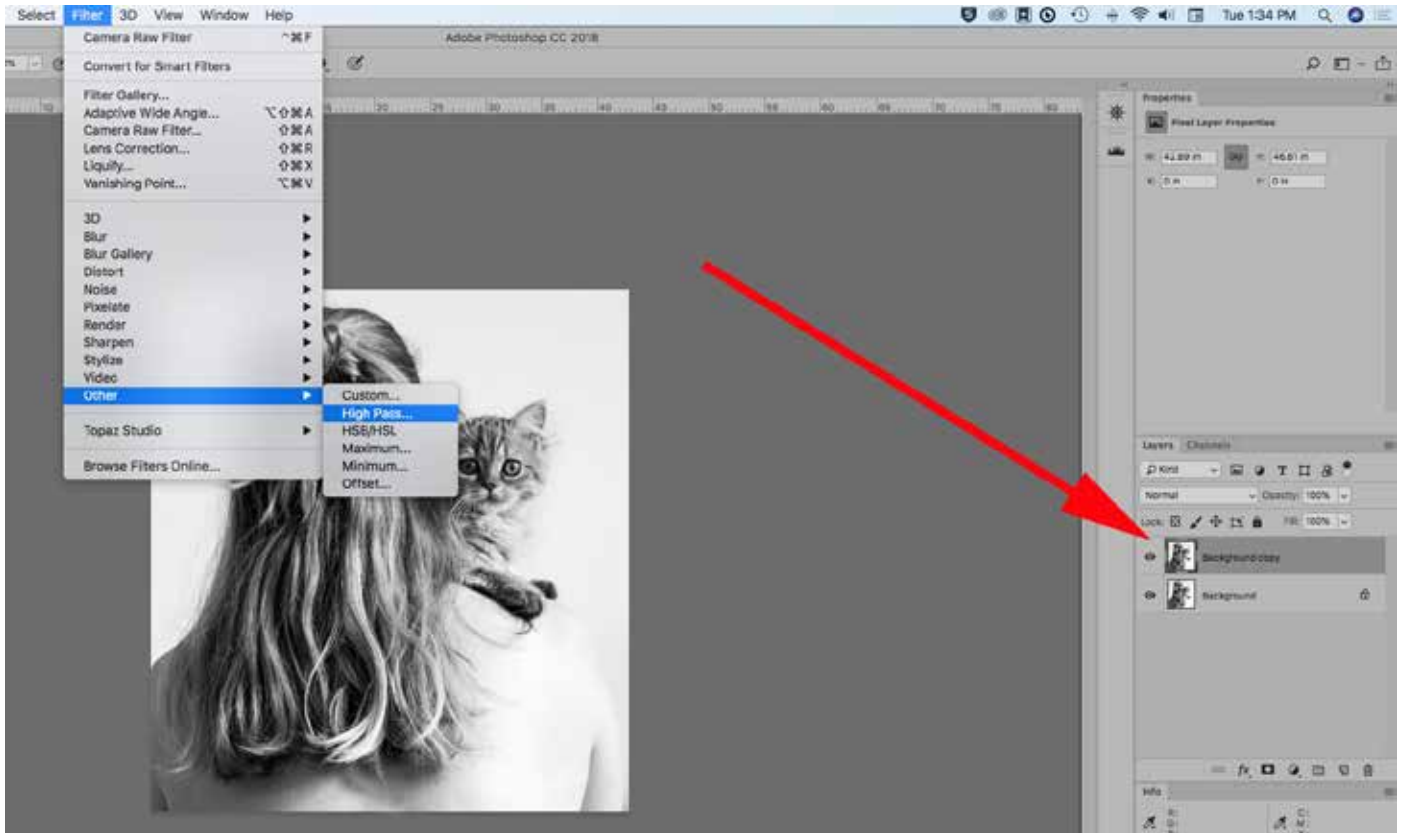
The reason one should ask is because these are identifying marks for that person, and perhaps they would wish for them to remain.



Here is where our edits have taken us thus far.
It's looking much better.

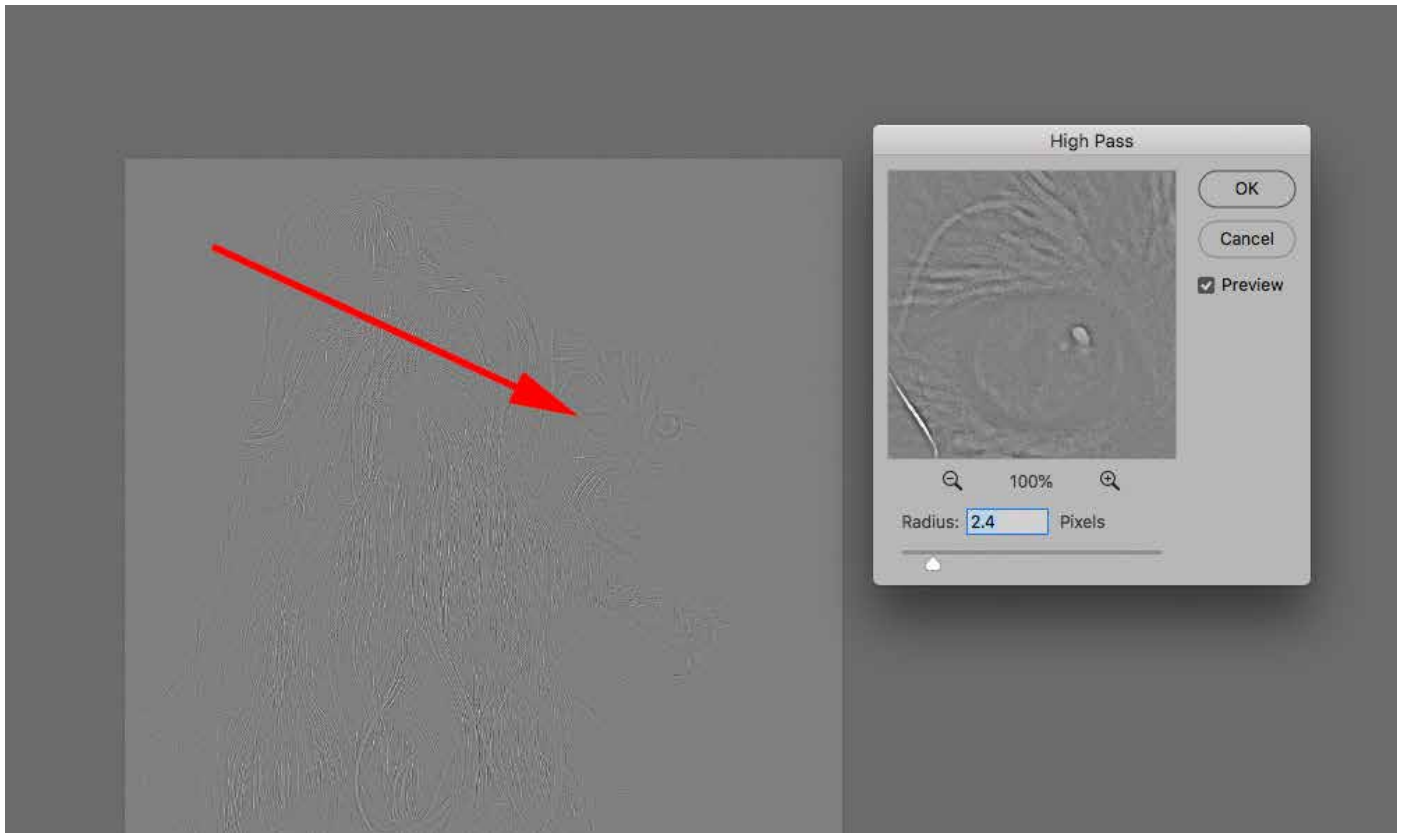
We still have to overcome the issue of the
misplaced critical focus.

Follow along as I fix this problem.



First, I create a copy of the Background Layer and I make sure it is selected.

In Photoshop, I go to 'Filter: Other: High Pass' and select it.



When the High Pass filter box pops up, I navigate to the area where I want to place the critical focus and click on that spot in the preview image.

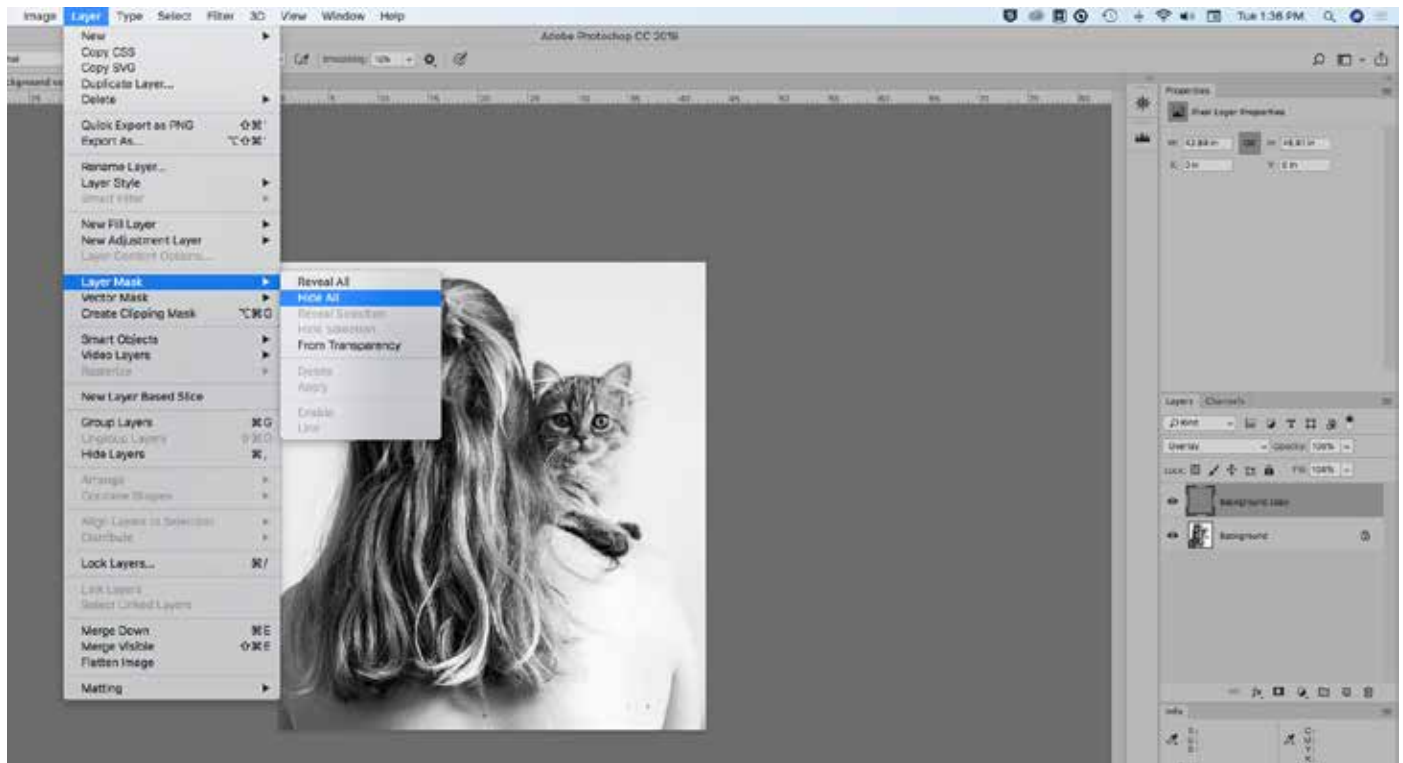
In this case, it's the cat's right eye (camera left).

I will then set the Radius. I've always used a Radius between .8 and 4. You want to raise the Radius just enough so that the area that you have selected comes into view in the High Pass filter box. In this case, I selected a Radius of 2.4 pixels.



After clicking 'OK,' I will change the layer blending mode. For this technique, the blending mode will always be Overlay, Soft Light, or Hard Light. 99% of the time, I use Overlay or Soft Light.

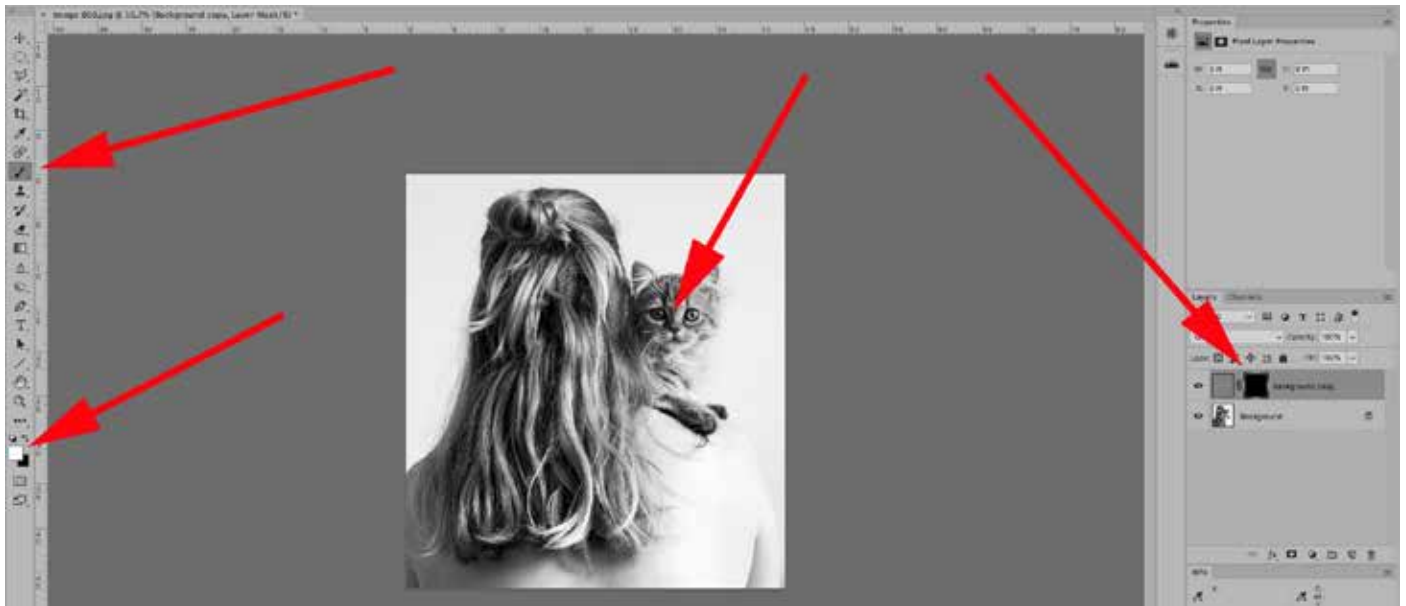
Overlay is the lightest blend for the effect, Soft Light is the next lightest, and Hard Light is the most significant in its effect.



Currently, the High Pass filter is affecting the entire image. We don't want that. What we are attempting to do is to shift the critical focus away from the woman's hair and onto the cat's face.

To accomplish that, we need to create a layer mask.

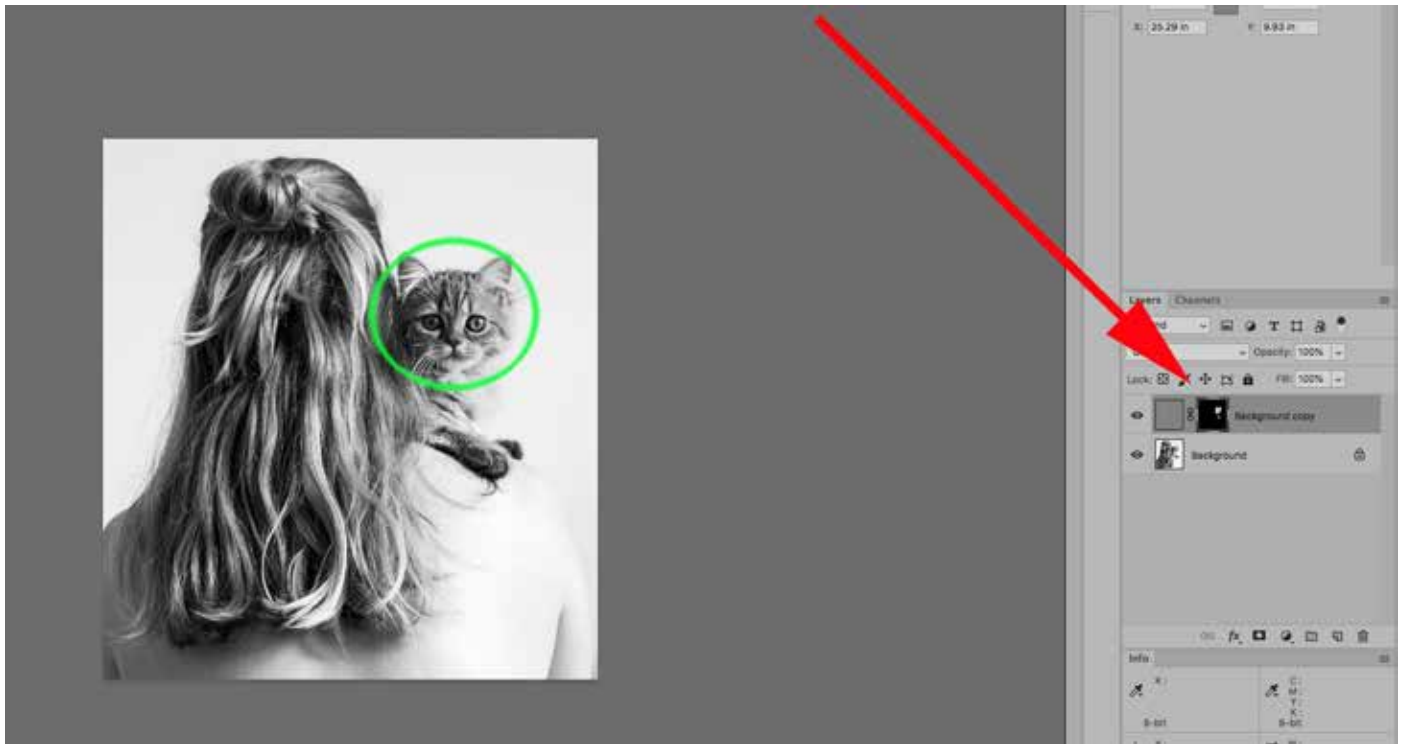
Go to 'Layer: Layer Mask: Hide All.'



The effect of the High Pass filter is now hidden from the entire image. Make sure that the second layer is selected and the mask (the black box) is selected on the second layer. The mask should appear as a black box.

Select the 'Paint Brush' tool. Set the paint color to 100% white. I will make the brush just a bit larger than the cat's single eye.

I will now paint over the cat's face on the preview image, while avoiding the woman and the background.



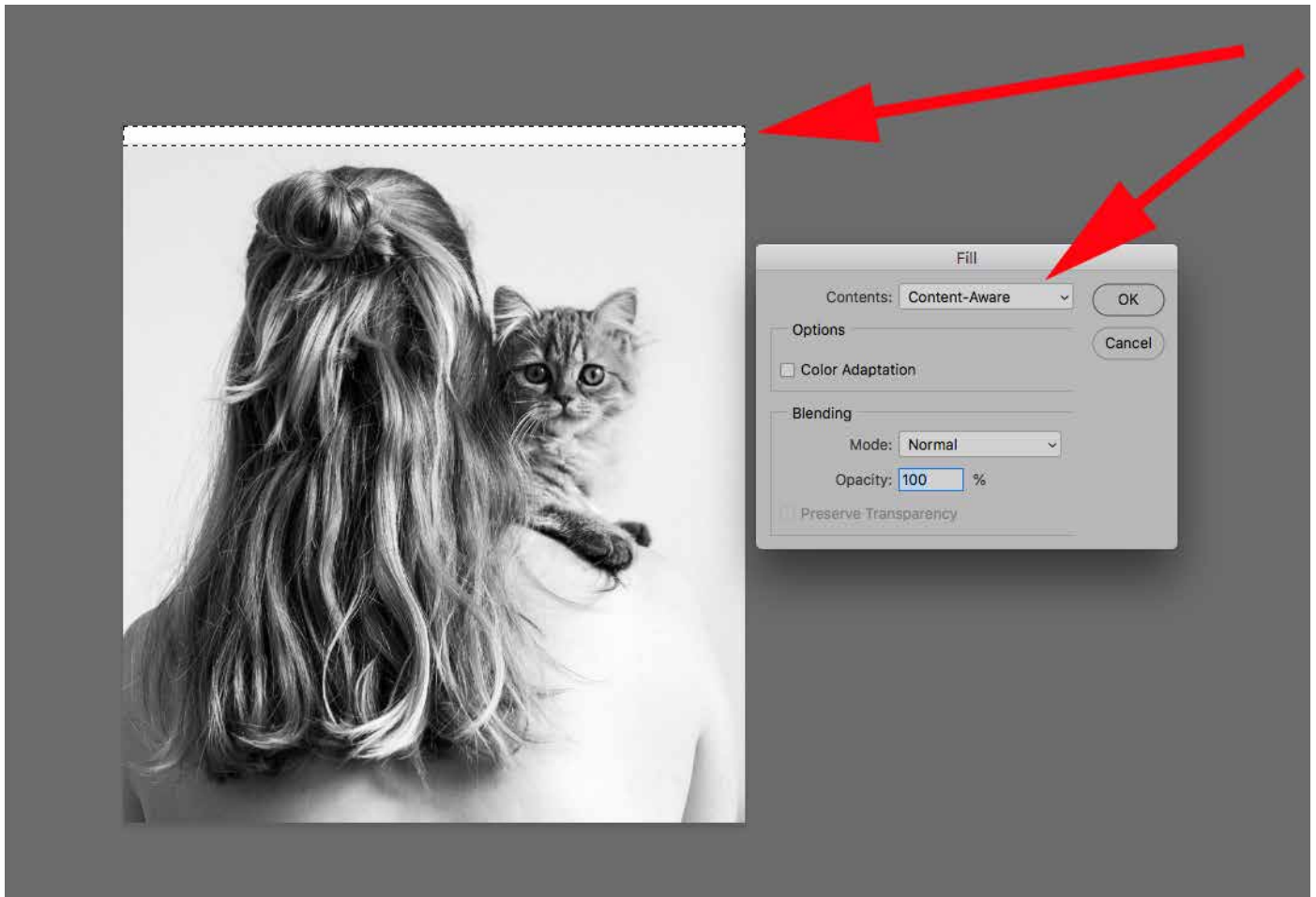
You can see where my painting has appeared on the mask. The High Pass filter is now visible only on the cat's face. The rest of the image remains intact, as it was in the original image file.

Merge the layers.

Take the Blur Brush tool and set the strength to 60%. Paint over the woman's hair while avoiding any other area, especially the cat's face.



In this image, you can see how I have now placed the critical focus onto the cat's right eye (camera left), and I have also removed focus from the woman's hair.



In reviewing the composition at this point, I felt that the space was too tight to the woman's head at the top of the frame.

I decided to add some 'Canvas' and fill it in using 'Content-Aware.'

This shifted the position of the cat's eye slightly. However, it was still an improvement and a better choice for the final version.



On the left of this image is the original, and on the right is the post-processed version to enhance the composition.

As you can see, the composition is vastly improved.

It's the attention to detail that will define your photographic work.