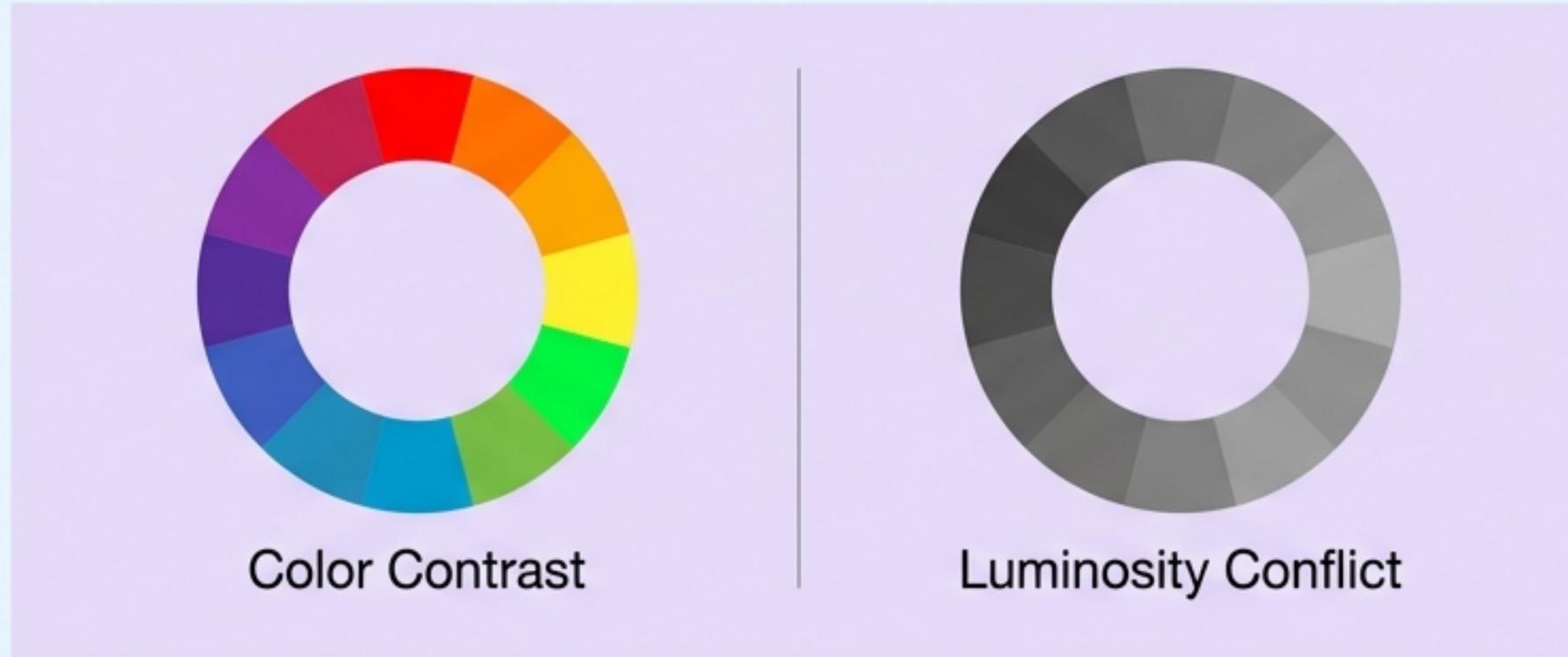


Mistakes in B & W Photography

A Step-by-Step Guide to Professional Tonal Control

Based on expert insights from Richard Brockwell, Joel Tjintelaar, and Light Stalking.

The Foundation: Seeing in Luminosity



The Mistake: Relying on color. Red and Green often share the same luminance, creating “gray soup”.

The Fix: Squint to separate light from dark before shooting.

Capture Settings: The RAW Reality



- ☑ The Mistake: Shooting JPEG Monochrome (Data Loss).
- ☑ The Fix: Shoot Color + RAW.

Set Picture Style to Monochrome for the preview, but ensure Format is RAW to keep the color channels for editing.

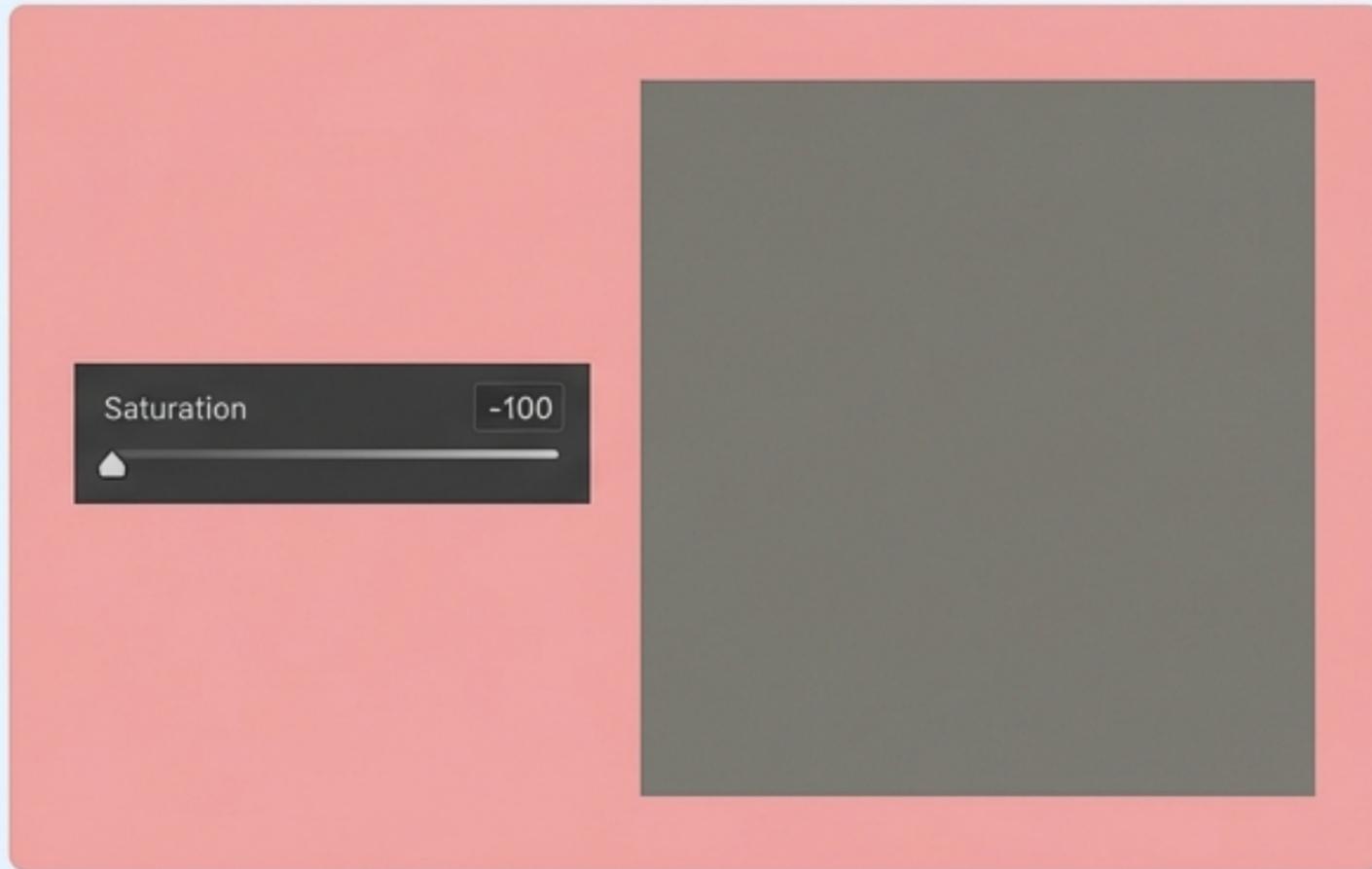
Composition: Structure is the Subject



The Mistake:
Weak structure.
Without color, the
eye wanders.

The Fix:
Master Figure and
Ground. Use “Ma”
(Negative Space) to
define the subject.

The Cardinal Sin: Desaturation



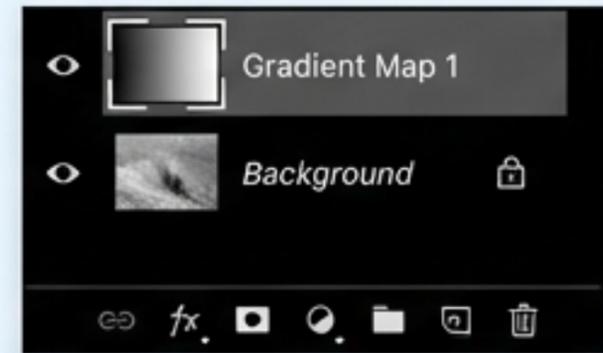
The Mistake: Global desaturation averages RGB values into mud.



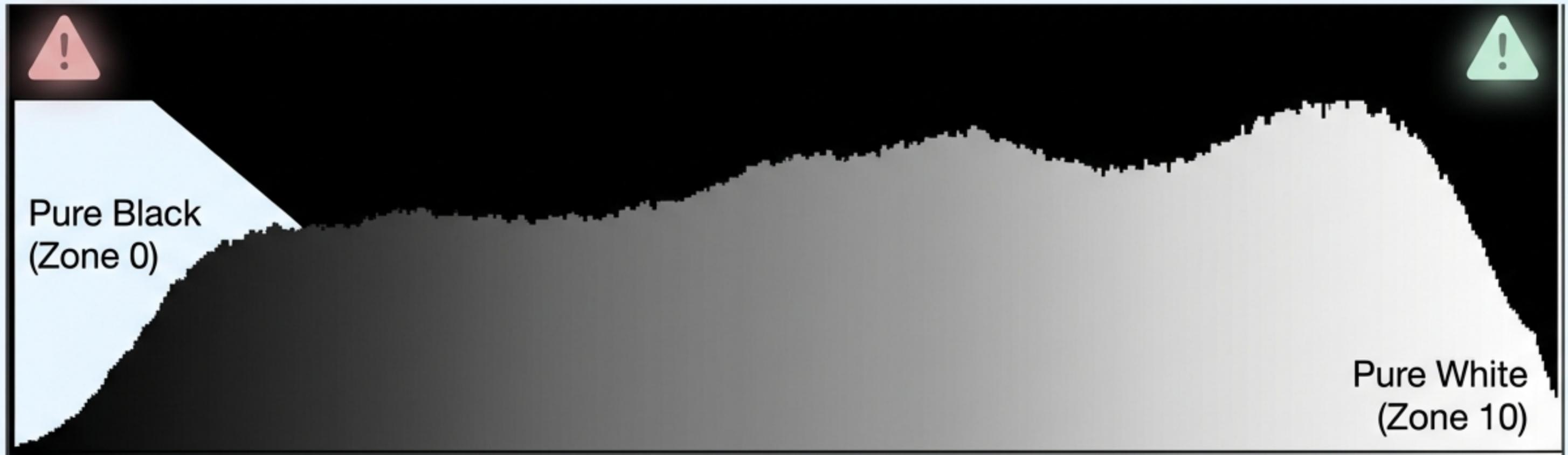
The Fix: Use Channel Mixers to manually darken blues (sky) or lighten reds (skin).

The Gradient Map Secret

1. Layer > Adjustment Layer.
2. Select 'Gradient Map'.
3. Choose 'Classic Black and White' (Black to White).
4. Result: Instant depth.



Defining Limits: White & Black Points



The Fix: Hold Alt/Option while dragging sliders. Push until pixels just begin to clip. Ensure the tonal range stretches wall-to-wall.

Mastering Tone: The Zone System

	ZONE	DESCRIPTION
Pure Black (No Detail) →	0	PURE BLACK
	I	NEAR BLACK, WITH SLIGHT TONALITY BUT NO TEXTURE
	II	TEXTURED BLACK, THE DARKEST PART OF THE IMAGE IN WHICH SLIGHT DETAIL IS RECORDED
	III	AVERAGE DARK MATERIALS AND LOW VALUES SHOWING ADEQUATE TEXTURE
	IV	AVERAGE DARK FOLIAGE, DARK STONE OR LANDSCAPE SHADOWS
Middle Gray (18% Reflectance) →	V	MIDDLE GRAY, CLEAR NORTH SKY, DARK SKIN, AVERAGE WEATHERED WOOD
Skin Tones / Light Stone →	VI	AVERAGE CAUCASIAN SKIN, LIGHT STONE, SHADOWS ON SNOW IN SUNLIT LANDSCAPES
	VII	VERY LIGHT SKIN, SHADOWS IN SNOW WITH STRONG SIDE LIGHTING
	VIII	LIGHTEST TONE WITH TEXTURE, TEXTURED SNOW
	IX	SLIGHT TONE WITHOUT TEXTURE, GLARING SNOW
Pure White (Light Sources) →	X	PURE WHITE, LIGHT SOURCES AND SPECULAR REFLECTIONS

The Mistake: Ignoring mid-tone placement leads to muddy skin and lack of texture.

Contrast: Global vs. Selective



Figure (Highest Contrast)

The Rule: The eye is drawn to the area of highest contrast. Don't crank the global slider. Brighten the subject; darken the environment.

Ground (Lower Contrast)

Shaping Light: Dodging and Burning



Dodge
(Lift)

Burn
(Deepen)

Recipe:

1. New Layer (50% Gray).
2. Blend Mode: Overlay.
3. Paint White to Dodge, Black to Burn.

The Texture Trap: Oversharpening



Global Sharpening (Bad)

Masked Sharpening (Good)



The Masking Slider restricts sharpening to edges and details, preserving smooth areas like the sky.



Masking View
(Alt/Option + Drag)

Gradient Hygiene



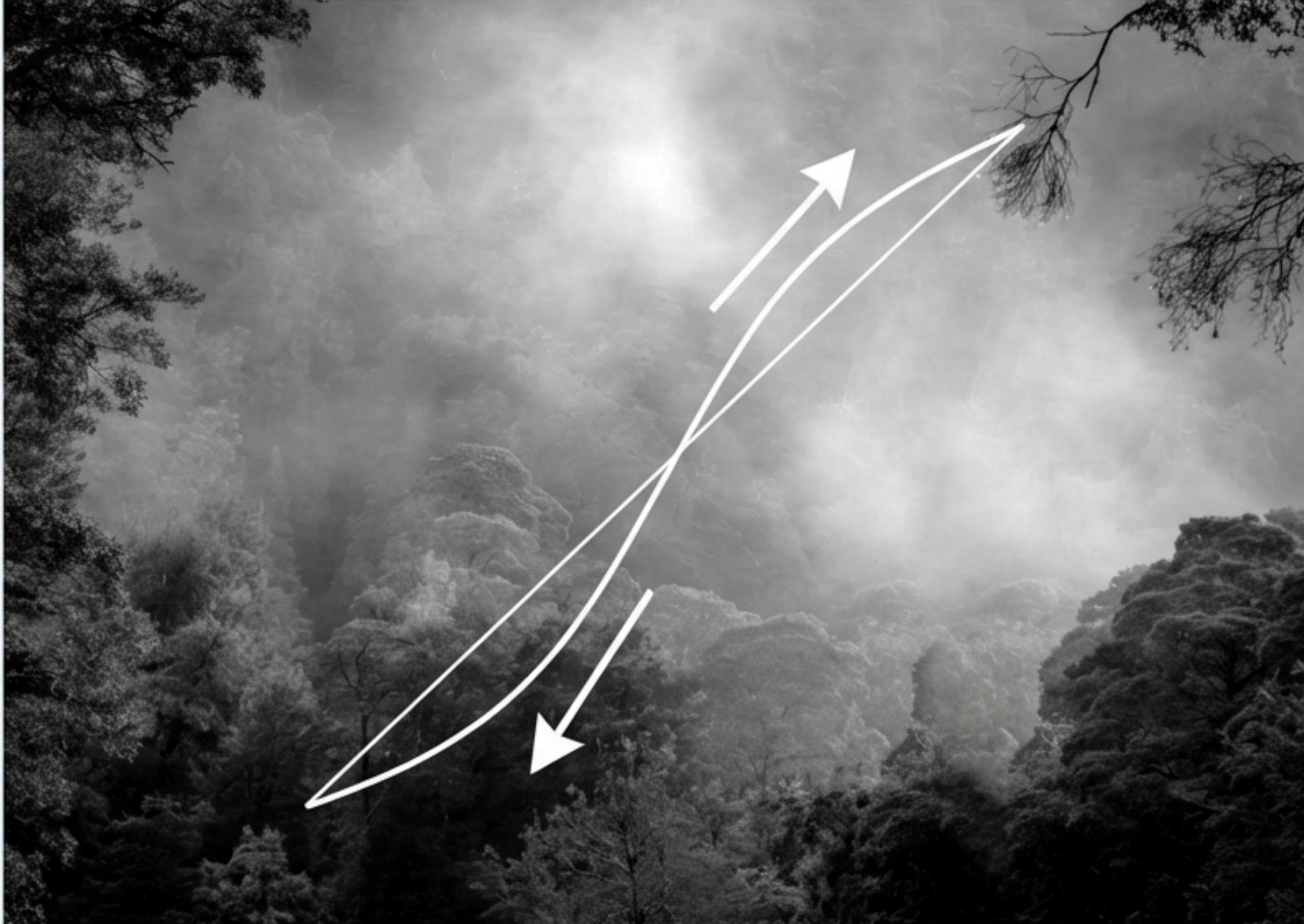
The Mistake:

Linear Banding from lazy gradient tools.

The Fix:

Zoom out to thumbnail size to spot banding. Use radial gradients or luminosity masks to disrupt the pattern.

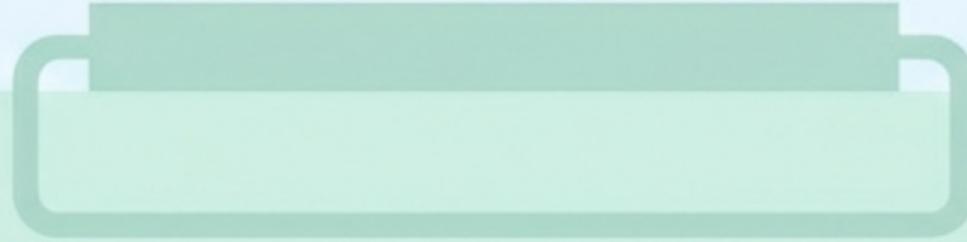
Midtone Separation



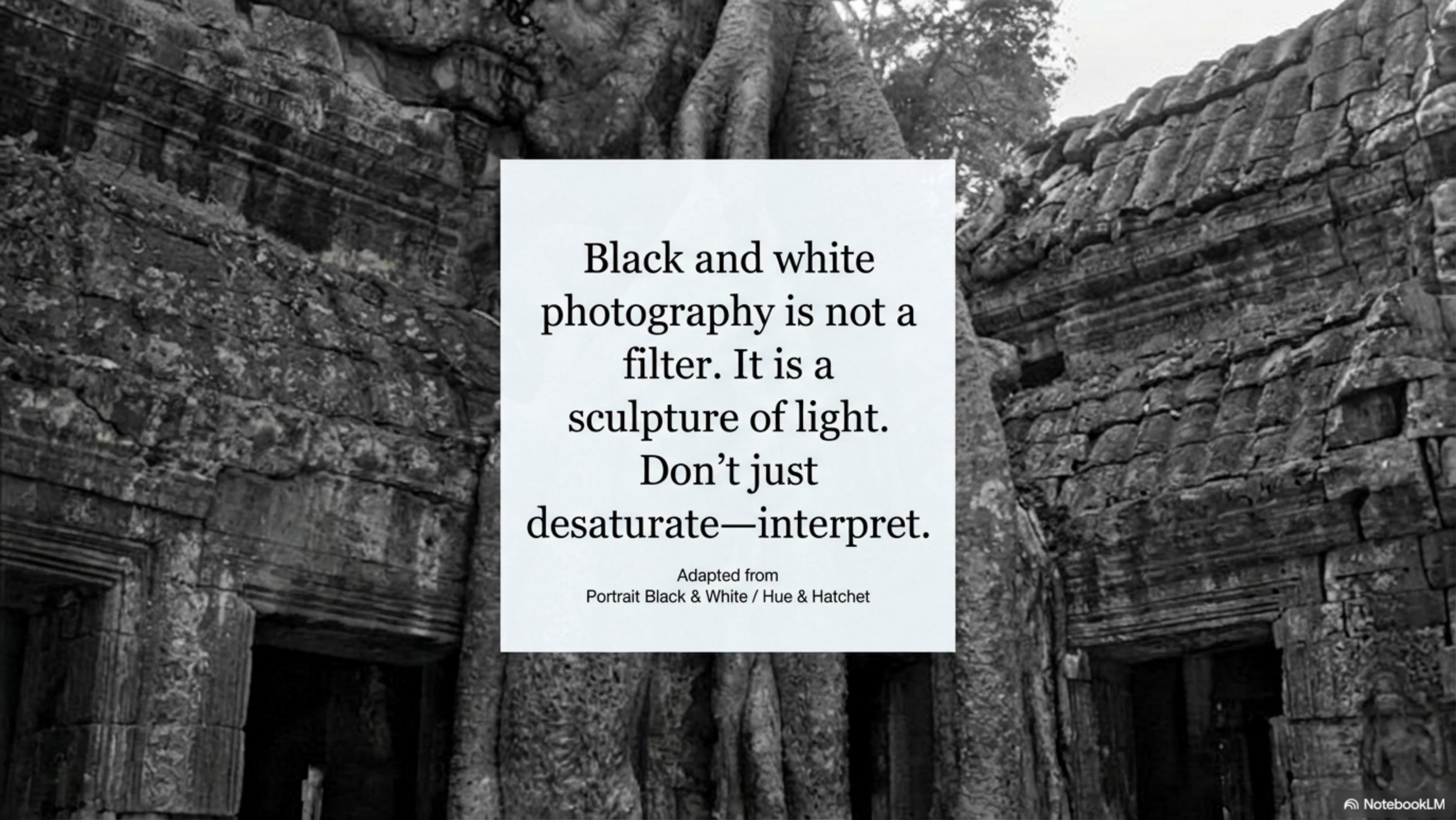
The Fix: The S-Curve

Stretch the midtones apart to separate the subject from the background atmosphere.

The Final Checklist



- 1. Histogram Check: True Black (Zone 0) and True White (Zone 10)?
- 2. Zoom Out: Visible gradient bands in the sky?
- 3. Squint Test: Does the 'Figure' have more contrast than the 'Ground'?
- 4. Sharpness: Is the sky masked and noise-free?
- 5. Edge Burn: Are the corners darkened to keep the eye central?



Black and white
photography is not a
filter. It is a
sculpture of light.
Don't just
desaturate—interpret.

Adapted from
Portrait Black & White / Hue & Hatchet