



FOREWORD

Don't you love it when photos materialize before your eyes, and everything clicks? The photo almost takes itself. But then there are those stubborn moments of silence when nothing clicks.

"Finding the Photograph" is written for that silent moment.

After nearly 70 years of photography, teaching, and printmaking, I want to leave something behind that most creative books skip - real, ready-to-use tools, not just inspiration. When my muse abandons me, here's the toolbox I use. This is no "rule-of-thirds" book, but provides a set of tools and techniques you can use in the field.

This book breaks down the formal elements of fine art (line, shape, form, space, color, value, texture, tone, pattern, rhythm, balance, proportion, emphasis, and unity) not as abstract ideas, but as forces you can see and use while you are shooting. Once you spot them in a scene, you're no longer at the mercy of mood, location, or a lack of creative spark. You now have a workflow to find the photograph.

What I finally realized was that creative block isn't about absence, it's about expectation, and the real issue is not that your muse has departed, but that she's been boxed in.

Photographers have a particular knack for getting stuck. We cling to a way of seeing that has always served us in the past, and we keep expecting the same spark from the same direction, on the same timetable. When it doesn't appear, we assume nothing is happening.

What's actually going on is that our expectations have narrowed the doorway so tightly that nothing gets through. If you're waiting for

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a flash, a rush, a grand idea that declares itself, you'll miss the quieter nudges. And when you can't force them to appear, you get discouraged and stop looking altogether.

This isn't unique to photography. All artists experience creative block: composers, writers, painters. We are no different.

I finally realized that asking *what* to photograph was the wrong question. In the middle of a creative block, that question is a trap. Instead, I turned to ask what's actually *happening* right now, in front of me? Is there a line pulling my eye somewhere? A shape that just became interesting? A shadow doing something unexpected? Those are not consolation prizes; they're doors that can open and invite the muse back in.

She doesn't need a new destination or a perfect day; she needs you to stop insisting she come wearing the same outfit she wore last time. Don't trap her inside your expectations and then blame her for not performing. She's ready when you are. You just have to ask a different question.

In the midst of a creative block, the question isn't *what* your art says, but *how* it says it.

In the next part, I'll show what happened when I stopped asking "what should I photograph?" and learned how to listen to the artistic elements right in front of me.

SNIP...

CHAPTER 1

LINES



Lines are the most simple marks we can make, yet they're the bedrock of almost everything. Think of a line as one point reaching toward another. The trace it leaves can be confident and steady or wobbly and uncertain. It might run straight like a focused arrow or meander and curl. It can be thick, thin, smooth, or rough. Sometimes a line shouts its presence; other times it whispers, hinted at by a subtle edge or the way shapes lean toward one another. Often the most powerful line isn't the one you see at a glance, but one you feel tugging you forward.

Lines guide your eye. They're the pathways through an image,

directing where you pause and where you move on. A line can slow you down or accelerate you. It can calm you or unsettle you. With nothing but line, an image can feel serene, tense, rhythmic, or chaotic.

Lines carry emotion. Horizontal lines feel restful—mirroring horizons, waterlines, the act of lying flat. They bring calm and stability, as if the image has found its footing. Vertical lines stand tall and assert themselves, evoking structure and authority, like columns or upright figures. Diagonal lines inject action and tension, hinting that something is shifting or about to happen. Curved lines soften everything; they feel organic, like growth instead of construction. Imagine the diagonal of a fire escape clashing against a building's flat face, versus the gentle curve of a shoreline.

When I think about these elements, I naturally drift to drawing or painting, where lines abound. I find it easy to see music as a close cousin - a melody is a line in time, notes rising, falling, bending, and resolving. In dance, a line is the invisible path a body carves through space. Across all the arts, line isn't about the mark itself—it's about the journey it sets in motion.

Once you start tuning into lines, you'll notice how much of an artwork's emotional tone relies on those quiet directional forces, and not on the subject itself. Lines rarely steal the spotlight, but they're always doing the heavy lifting.

In the field

Lines are often the first thing that gets things moving—direction before meaning. You might be standing on an ordinary street, feeling stuck, like there's nothing worth shooting. But then you notice a curb, a shadow edge, a railing, a seam in the pavement. Suddenly there's direction. The scene stops being static. If you stop hunting for a subject and follow that line - watching where it leads, where it breaks, where it collides - the photograph starts assembling itself. The muse shows up when your eye starts moving.

Lines = energy, direction, rhythm.

CHAPTER 2

SHAPES



There's something that happens when a line loops back around and connects to itself. It transforms. Movement gives way to presence. All of a sudden you've got an inside and an outside, something held together, contained. That's really what a shape is at its core—a flat area with edges, complete enough to stand on its own.

Lines, circles, squares, triangles are simple shapes, but shapes that actually matter in images aren't that neat. They are often lumpy, soft, a little awkward. Some feel intentional, like someone sat down and figured them out on purpose. Others seem to have evolved—worn

down, grown into, nudged into place by chance. And honestly, I find that those often feel the most alive.

Shapes do a lot of quiet work. They're the skeleton of an image. Before you even know what you're looking at, before you can name it – a body, a building, a tree - your eye is already sorting things out. This chunk feels solid. That one pushes back. This shape dominates, that one supports. All of that happens fast, without asking your permission. Shape is what keeps an image from falling apart into visual noise. Without shape, everything is just a jumbled mess.

Shapes also carry different emotional weight. Geometric ones feel deliberate, human-made, measured. A square feels stable, dependable—maybe a little stubborn. Triangles point somewhere. They stack power and hierarchy whether you intend them to or not. Circles feel enclosing, complete, sometimes comforting. Organic shapes play a different game entirely. They feel grown, not built. They carry irregularity naturally. Even sitting still, they suggest motion, fragility, adaptation. They feel more alive.

And this idea of shape isn't just limited to images. For example, you feel it in poetry too—when a stanza tightens up or opens out, when lines repeat or break in a certain way. That's shape at work. In architecture, it shows up in the outline of a building against the sky, in how space is carved out and held, and where you feel cramped or released as you move through a building. No matter the medium, shape is how form announces itself. It's how something says, "Here I begin, there I end."

Once you start paying attention to shape, you notice something - meaning shows up early. Really early. Before color gets emotional, before texture gets sensual, shape has already set the rules. It has established order, tension and identity. It's subtle, and you don't always notice that it's happening. But ultimately everything else in art leans on it.

In the field

Shape works differently. It lets you drop the burden of description. It is a way in without having to explain what things are. In a

cluttered alley, everything feels chaotic at first. Too many objects, too much information. Squint. Details collapse—a trash bin and a shadow merge into one dark mass against a light wall. The alley stops being a place. It becomes an arrangement of shapes. The photograph comes from how flat geometry organizes itself, not from what the scene is supposed to be. That's when representation slips away, and abstraction takes over - and that's often when creativity returns.

Shape & form = order, containment, logic, or freedom.

CHAPTER 3

FORM



When a flat shape begins to suggest depth, it becomes more than a shape—it becomes form and that moment feels a little like magic. You're still staring at paper, canvas, or a screen, but suddenly the surface seems to have volume and weight. A circle can look like a sphere, a rectangle can feel thick. Nothing in the material has changed, yet your eyes convince you, and that conviction makes all the difference.

While shapes live in two dimensions, forms are three-dimensional. Form is what gives things a sense of solidity. With light, shadow, and subtle shifts in tone, a flat image can make you imagine

SNIP 31 PAGES...

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SUMMARY

With all of these elements, the same principle keeps coming back: the creative spark does not ignite simply because something interesting happens. Your vision ignites when *one formal element becomes strong enough to organize the rest*.

So when you're stuck out there, don't ask what the photograph is *about*. Instead ask *which element is speaking* right now, and whether you're willing to follow it all the way. When you do, the photograph starts talking back. That back and forth is what people have always meant when they talk about the muse.

In short, the formal elements provide a vocabulary for something you've already been experiencing your whole life without quite having the words for it.

Now expand your understanding: take any art form you love - music, architecture, dance, poetry - and spend some time looking at it through the lens of the formal elements. Notice how line becomes melody, how space becomes silence, how rhythm carries you forward even when you can't explain why. The elements are always the same. The medium is just different.

In photography, the elements work exactly the same way, and consciously looking for them when you're standing in a field with a camera - that changes everything.

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CRIB SHEETS

Lines provide energy, direction, rhythm. Look for direction before subject.

In the field - Follow one visible or implied line until it either breaks, collides, or leads you somewhere unexpected.

Shape & form encompass order, containment, logic, or freedom.

Shape - Squint until objects flatten into masses.

In the field - Compose the scene as if nothing had names.

Form - Look for depth before detail.

In the field - Move until light turns flat shapes into volume. Follow the shadow, not the object, and photograph from the position where the form feels most physical.

Tone & value control mood, tension, clarity

Value - Look for light-and-dark structure before content.

In the field - Find the darkest dark and the lightest light in the frame. Decide which one will dominate, then let the rest of the tones organize around that choice.

Tone - Look for atmosphere before explanation.

In the field - Name the emotional weather of the scene - heavy, brittle, tender, harsh, still, restless - then expose and frame to protect that feeling, even if it costs you detail.

Color & temperature harbor vitality, calm, memory. Look for color behavior before color beauty.

In the field - Ask whether the color is actually organizing the photograph or merely decorating it. Then imagine the scene in black and white; if the image collapses, find another structure to support it.

Texture provides intimacy, realism, and distance. Look for surface before object.

In the field - Move closer until the subject becomes less important than what time, weather, touch, or light has done to its surface.

Pattern & rhythm introduce harmony, repetition, predictability. Look for repetition before event.

Pattern - In the field - Find what repeats, then wait for either confirmation or interruption: the one window open, the one dark shape, the one broken interval.

Rhythm - Look for visual pacing before placement.

In the field - Watch how forms, figures, shadows, or intervals carry the eye through the frame. Photograph when the spacing begins to feel like movement.

Space gives freedom, isolation, and contemplation. Look for relationship before subject.

In the field - Give more attention to the distance around things than to the things themselves. Compose so the empty area creates pressure, release, isolation, or breath.

Emphasis and Contrast suggest conflict, vitality, revelation. Look for attention before inclusion.

In the field - Decide where the viewer should arrive first. Then use contrast, sharpness, placement, isolation, light, or surrounding quiet to make that first point unavoidable.

Scale & proportion hint at intimacy, awe, humility. Look for comparison before measurement.

In the field - Change your distance until one thing feels larger, smaller, more vulnerable, more dominant, or stranger than expected. Let scale alter meaning.

Unity provides resolution, harmony, rest. Look for coherence before completeness.

In the field - Choose one governing idea, mood, or formal force, then remove or ignore everything that does not serve it. The photograph is finished when nothing essential feels missing and nothing unnecessary remains.

WHEN NOTHING RESOLVES

Stuck? Look for line.

Too much clutter? Collapse the scene into shape.

Flat scene? Search for form.

No subject? Use space.

Color failing? Check value.

Everything feels equal? Find emphasis.

Too much information? Squint until only the large relationships remain.

Nothing feels alive? Look for rhythm.

Too static? Introduce imbalance.

Too chaotic? Look for pattern.

Too pretty? Search for tension.

Too literal? Let the subject become shape, surface, or light.

Too much subject? Photograph what surrounds it.

Too much empty space? Ask whether the emptiness is active or merely unused.

No mood? Look for tone.

No depth? Move until light begins to model form.

No clarity? Decide where the viewer should enter.

No energy? Follow a diagonal, interruption, or visual collision.

No intimacy? Move closer to texture.

No scale? Put one thing in relation to another.

No surprise? Wait for the pattern to break.

No unity? Remove everything that does not serve the strongest idea.

Too balanced? Let one side carry more weight.

Too tasteful? Risk an awkward frame.

Too familiar? Change your height, distance, or direction.

Too much beauty? Look for structure underneath it.

Too much structure? Let accident enter.

No photograph yet? Stop asking what the scene is about and ask which visual force is already speaking.

CHAPTER 17

ADDITIONAL FIELD RESETS

P*ick one thing and stick with it.* Seriously, before you even think about anything else, lock in one variable. Pick your focal length, nail down your exposure, decide on your working distance – then stop negotiating with yourself. The camera eats commitment up, and honestly, so does that part of you trying to see clearly.

Here's something I've found useful: *resist the obvious subject for a moment.* Instead, aim for the edges – what's around it, leaking into it, interrupting it, or even messing it up more often than not; the real photograph lives in the boundaries, not the headline.

Sometimes I find myself hunting, desperately adjusting the viewfinder. When that happens, I'll lower the camera, keep it low, and *compose from my body instead of my eyes.* It shifts the whole authority of the frame. Suddenly, the world stops looking like a perfect photo op and starts feeling like a place again.

Sometimes I deliberately *go against my taste* and pick the least flattering light in the scene. Not "bad" light, just the light that doesn't seem to perform – that dull corner, the flat patch, the awkward mixed illumination. That's often where structure hides when dramatic lighting isn't doing all the work.

Direction-change is another quiet discipline. If I feel myself scanning too much, I'll force myself to only shoot into the light for a while, or only with light behind me, or only head north. Staying true to one rule surprisingly quickly brings coherence when you stop constantly turning.

If a scene feels too static, I *look for things that refuse to pose.* Wind tugging at fabric, reflections that won't sit still, shadows sliding across surfaces, people passing through without noticing you.

Those unstable elements break that frozen, touristy way of seeing and open the door to seeing time pass.

Distance often trips me up based on habit. If my first instinct screams, "Step back! Get it all!", I'll deliberately step closer and let the frame tighten until it feels almost uncomfortable. Conversely, if my instinct says, "Move in, get intimate!", I might back up and make that intimacy fight for its space in the frame.

Here's a wild one: ***expose for what you're ignoring.*** Meter the supposedly empty wall, the pale sky, the dark corner, and just let the "subject" land wherever it ends up. That can totally flip the power in the picture in ways your usual plans might never allow.

When I'm waiting for "something to happen," I sometimes ***wait for subtraction*** instead of addition. Instead of hoping someone walks into the frame, I wait for a distraction to leave it. Honestly, I'm amazed how often the image was already there, just blocked by one annoying element.

I have often found that my real enemy when out there shooting is often my own restless evaluation—scanning, tweaking, ***debating myself endlessly***. I'm stuck in a loop of micro-adjustments. The simplest fix? Just turn ninety degrees. Breaks the rut clean.

Sometimes the photograph isn't the event itself, but the space around it – the pause, the residue, ***the feeling hanging in the air*** before or after. I'll hold the frame, count to twenty, and press the shutter, no refining, no fussing. Just giving the scene a moment to confess.

If you feel trapped by the viewfinder, ***let your feet do the work***. Just change your position. Step left, right, forward, back, and watch the parallax rearrange the world for you. You can also *impose a temporary constraint* – decide you'll only shoot reflections for five minutes, or only shadows, or only where one form blocks another. It's not a gimmick; it's a way to train your attention to see relationships, not just objects.

When you're really stuck, ***take the frame you're avoiding***. The one that feels too simple, too quiet, too obvious. Often, that's the

honest one. Pretend it's the *only* frame you'll get. No safety shot, no backup plans, no rescue mission later. That little bit of pressure clarifies everything immediately.

Underneath all of this is a subtle truth: when you're truly stuck in the moment, it's rarely about not seeing.

It's about seeing too much, all at once, and refusing to choose.

These little tricks work because they reduce options, force commitment. Vision rushes back the moment you stop evaluating and simply decide.

CHAPTER 18

OTHER CREATIVE BLOCK SOLUTIONS

Like many photographers, I'll travel somewhere new because everything there feels alien to me. Something always catches my eye. It's hard to a picture of my own backyard or the block I live on - once you're used to a place, it fades into the background. That's how we humans are wired: we ignore what's familiar and keep our attention on what's out of place, or what might be dangerous. It's a survival trick, but it can keep us from noticing things right in front of us. When we do notice, it's often because something is threatening. That's just human nature, and it's the enemy of creativity.

As you've seen having made it this far, I often lean on the formal elements for inspiration. Still, it helps to have other ways in - different doors to try when the usual one won't open.

Over the years I've developed a few tricks when the muse goes silent. They're not gimmicks. Each one is a way to interrupt the autopilot, to jolt myself out of the complacent seeing that familiarity breeds. These are the "in my head" replacements for actually going somewhere new. Maybe one of them will work for you or seem so absurd that you're shocked out of your complacency...

Flip Your Assumptions

Pick a basic assumption about how photography works and turn it upside down. Maybe you tell yourself that "highlights are heavier than shadows," or that "distance makes objects feel smaller," or that "space recedes." Then you pretend the opposite is true. The goal isn't to believe the false premise; it's to make the familiar impossible, so your eye can't coast on what it already knows. When you follow the premise, you make a technical choice. If highlights are supposed to