# A shot in the dark
by Malcolm McElvaney

Black is a canvas with its potential ready to work with the photographer's vision of the scene, be it already existing or made from scratch, where the accumulative nature of light is an asset to help build up the vision in a way an abundance of light would hinder otherwise. A painter often starts with a blank white canvas and through a dedicated process crafts a scene based on their perception grounded based on reality or more whimsical by choice; on the other hand, a photographer shares some of that same perception of the world but is working through the cameras optics and limits so must work within the the presented options of a scene. The same powers of observation and rules the viewer will see as correct can be practiced in both forms of art, so in post processing a photographer can deviate from reality as well and achieve the impossible too. A skill set I have not had the needed reason to pursue but others do and master well, but this blank black canvas has the advantage of erasing some of the context encoded into every picture taken.

Black is the absence of details, so is where the viewers imagination is allowed to roam wildly and fill in missing information. As someone who likes to hike under a full moon I can definitely say the world as seen in the sun light is much different when under such a dim alternative, I know the places well usually and find my progress slowed down. To go beyond merely creating memories I use a camera to capture some element of what I experience; light must be present in some form though to produce a picture. The light source isn't the sun and on my full moon walks given ideal weather I have a level of light I can use but a flashlight is still a must have tool, artificial light is therefore going to be needed to compensate because without a light no detail can be perceived.

Black is a challenge to the photographer to use existing light and whatever they bring along with them to pull those details out and take advantage of the mood inherit in the situation being explored. This is where I have had to learn how my camera works and what I can do in post processing to make the picture possible, so the pursuit of this task has given me a reason to dig deeper and therefore go full circle on a cycle. As the photographer I didn't have to start from scratch but pulled from light painting and low-light photography as a starting point, my own unique insights and discoveries are present as well and it is part of that journey. Those discoveries are what I want to share here and pass on as a way to help the next photographer venturing into the dark and pushing their skills in a new way.
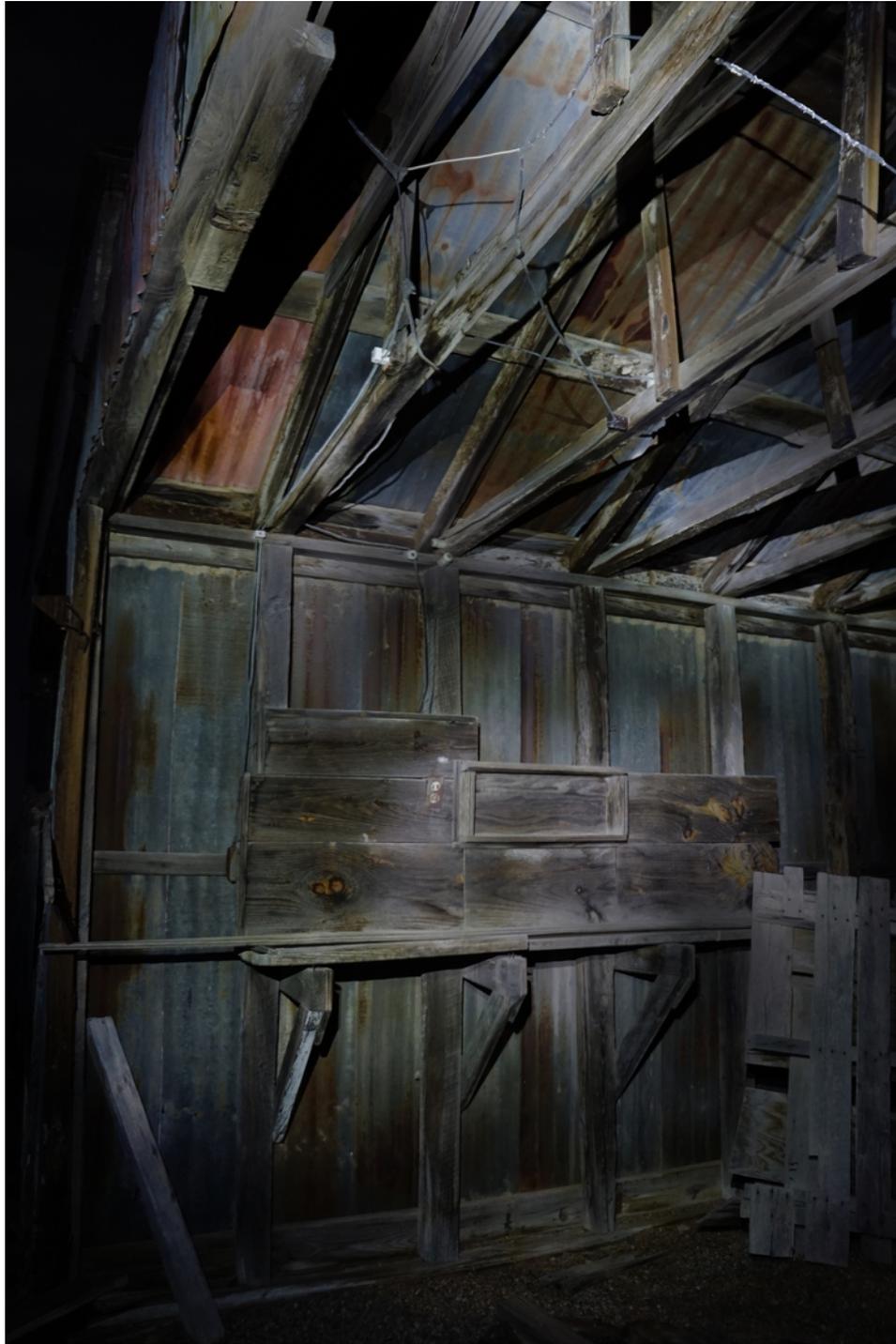
Penwell, TX on 4/16/2022

The canvas wasn't blank but something I wanted to capture as is, so here it is presented just because the photograph stands on its own. I was out in Penwell under a full moon partly because the camera lead me there, yet, I do enjoy venturing out to see a place because it exist. I'm sharing one of around seven photographs I took that evening, some better than others, in the way most of us see other peoples work; however, more goes into this process than just the final presentation as it is a sum of the parts that helped

create it. This wasn't by full moon light because it was inside a building but the photographer is only as limited as the skill set they develop overtime, in this case I was exploring compositing to capture this image via a headlamp. One of the ideas implemented in processing this image was noted down and ready for this opportunity before hand; while photography and the tools you use may not live in your head like they do in mine, there is value in working out ideas in this manner.

Something as simple as a flashlight or headlamp is also complex but knowing about the tool opened up a new way of using it. A bulb or LED has a reflector designed to put as much light out into a beam through a lens in front, simple enough, but quality will vary and it is here having a post processing strategy helped me out. I used my headlamp to just light up the scene as needed and dealt with the hot spots later. A hot spot is the brightest area illuminated with light at the edges called spill light. Color tint and color rings may also be an issue with other flashlights so each one of these tools will be unique. In my case the spill light was perfectly fine for the task, I just needed to mask out the brightest point so all the images could be blended in more evenly. We take so much for granted but knowing something extra is a way to better utilize that tool, in my case I realized the light I wanted to use could be used for its component parts and not only the whole of it.
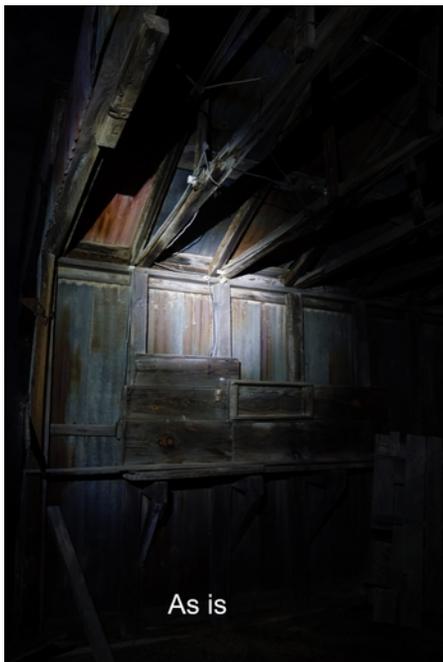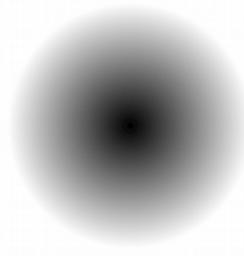
As is   The mask   With mask applied

As you can see the majority of the hot spot is gone or diminished because the mask turns off those pixels via a gradient and allow the areas now vacant to be filled by another image. Layering images and overlapping usable areas can yield the best photograph.

Layer 6 DSC04200 [mask created] blend mode lighten only @ 100%

Layer 5 DSC04197 [mask created] blend mode lighten only @ 100%
Layer 4 DSC04198 [mask created] blend mode lighten only @ 100%
Layer 3 DSC04199 [mask created] blend mode lighten only @ 100%
Layer 2 DSC04194 [mask created] blend mode lighten only @ 100%
Layer 1 solid black color blend mode normal @ 100%

Familiarity with Photoshop or similar graphics software is a plus here but I said I layered the images, this is seen above in layers 2 through 6 and each mask is unique to the specific hot spot of each image. I didn't vary the opacity any but I did use a blend mode called *lighten only* because of how it works, only if the pixel in the layer above is brighter is it used instead of the pixel in the lower layer. I discovered this particular blending mode for this use with another image I processed. Layer 1 is solid black because I need a foundation to build upon and being black the layers above will replace these pixels easily. This is a minimal expansion on a short hand notation I use to document each image I learn from but hopefully it does show some of the steps not seen just by seeing the final presentation.

> **In field:**
>   **- Fix the camera in place on a tripod**
>   **- Take overlapping shots to capture the full scene**
> **Post processing:**
>   **- Test of masking off hot spots**
>   **- Layering shots for best coverage**
> **Post-post processing:**
>   **- Write an article about the details**

Be it the beauty of the challenge to capture the picture in the first place or the results simply presented as is this is why I enjoy photography so much.