

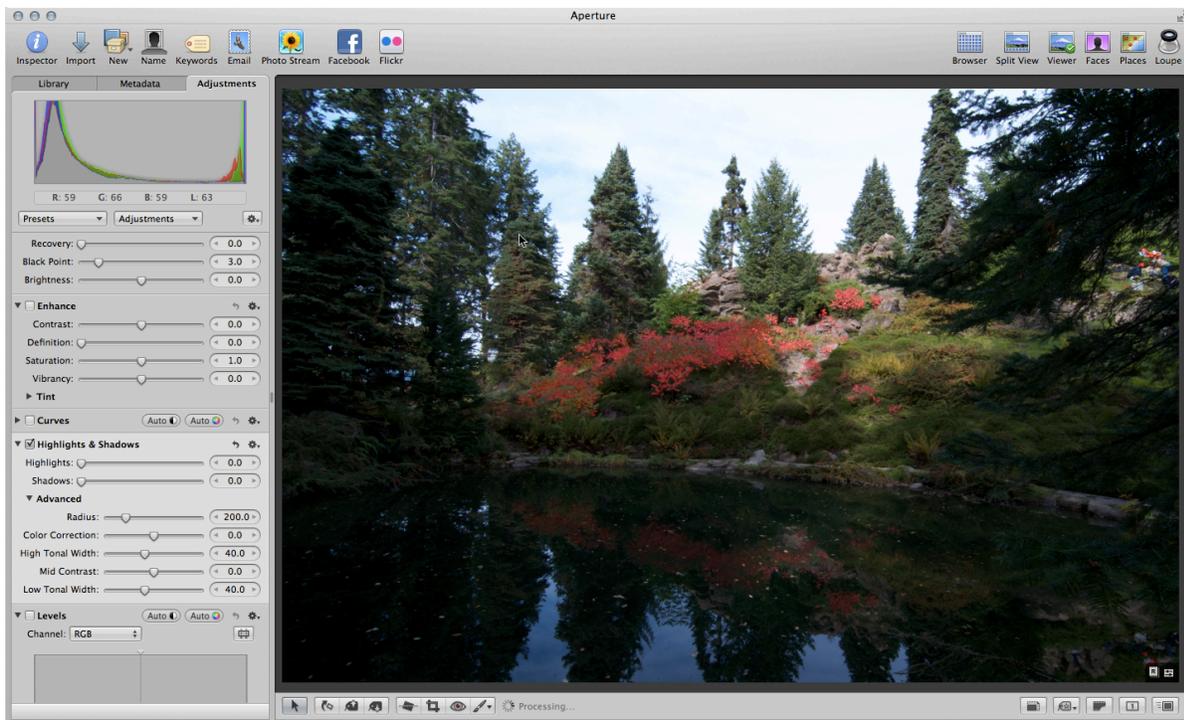
Aperture Essentials Lesson 2

Last week we started looking at the basic image adjustments in the Exposure and Enhance bricks (bricks are the Aperture term for the different adjustment panels). This week, we're going to go into some of the more commonly used adjustments - you might not be using these every time, but after exposure and white balance, they are the most commonly used adjustments in Aperture. Split Toning is the exception here, but since it ties in with black and white so tightly, I felt it was appropriate to include now.

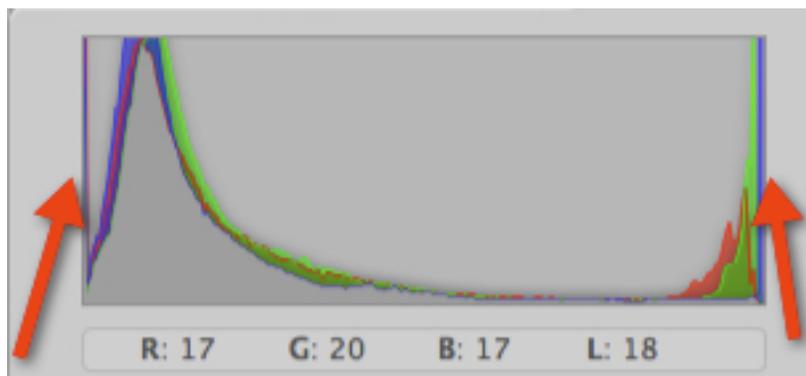
Highlights & Shadows

We'll start off with the Levels, Curves, Highlights, and Shadows controls. I used the Shadows and Highlights a bit in part two of the lesson 1 videos, but you should be aware of how these controls work.

While Exposure adjusts the entire image by moving the light values up towards white, or down towards black, Highlights and shadows works on the extreme ends of the histogram without actually changing the end points of your image. Consider the image below:



Here's a closer look at the histogram:



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As you can see, there is a large spike at the ends - both highlight on the right, and shadow on the left. In the next image, I will increase the highlights setting. This will pull the histogram to the left, but not the end point which will stay where it is:

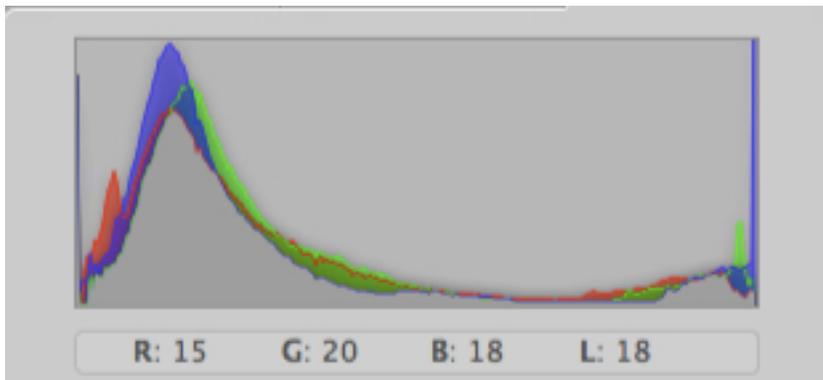


As you can see, compared to the first image, there is now significantly more detail in the sky than we have with the original image, but the shadows haven't been affected by our adjustment, and we still have a spike on the far right where the brightest white is all the way against the edge of the histogram.

By doing a similar adjustment with the Shadows, we move data towards the right, or lighter tones, without changing the black point of the image. This gives us significantly more details in the shadows without affecting the overall exposure or highlights:



Here's a closer look at the resulting histogram:

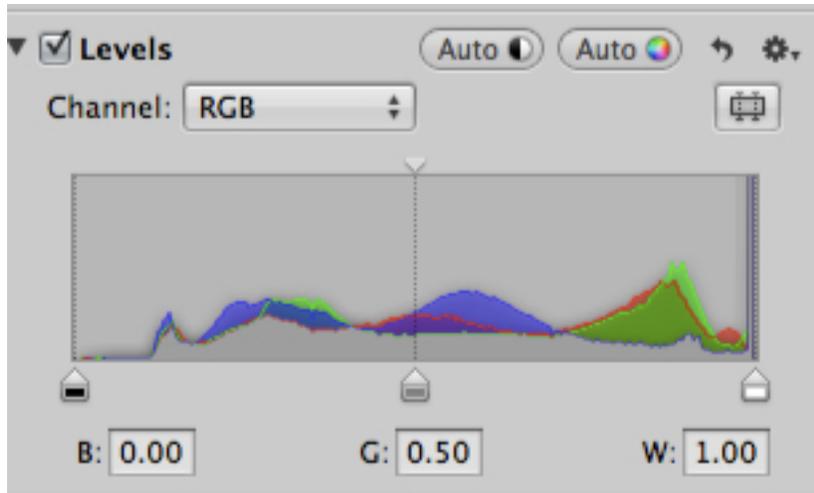


While Shadows and Highlights adjustments can make a huge improvement in your image with just a couple of clicks, you do need to be aware that large scale adjustments will come at the cost of contrast. Particularly the shadows control - adjustments above 20-25 start to give the image a washed out or flat look that should be avoided at all costs.

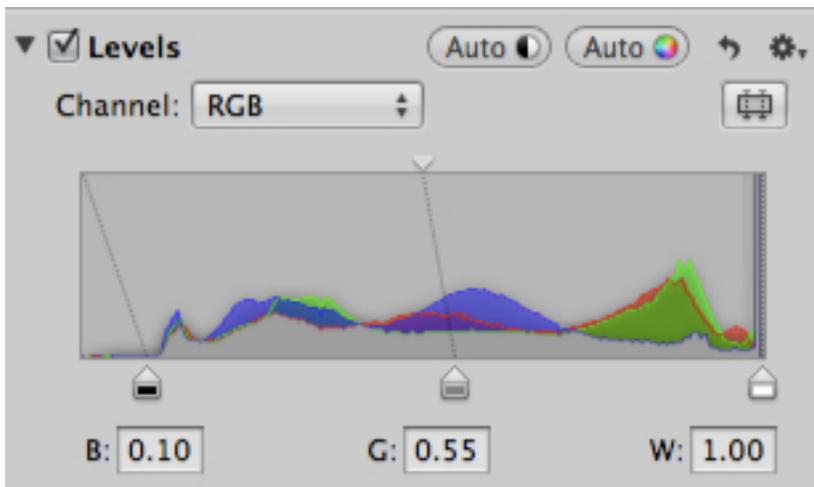
The other thing to notice is that while the individual color channels had minor changes because of the adjustments, the L, or Luminance (brightness) channel did not change as a result of the highlight and shadow adjustments.

Levels and Curves

The next set of controls to look at is Levels and Curves. Both of these work in a similar fashion, and you will usually use one or the other. Levels are easier to understand and will be the best place to start unless you're familiar with working with Curves in Photoshop.



The Levels control shows the same histogram as the histogram display at the top of the Adjustments Inspector. Unlike that display though, this one is interactive. You can control where black, white, mid tone (gray) begin and end by dragging the three bars to the desired location. The idea is to spread your image data across the entire histogram with information going from black to white. Not every image is going to follow these rules, but in general, if you have areas where there is no information, you aren't getting the full range of tones from your image. In the example above, the blacks on the left are a ways in from the edge. To correct this, I would drag the black bar to the start of my data:



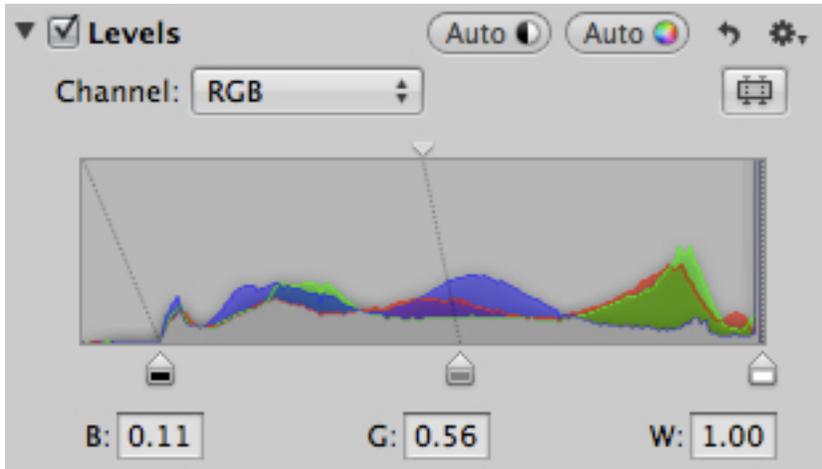
This has the effect of boosting the blacks and adding more shadow detail to my image. You'll notice that as I did this, the gray point also moved. This is to keep gray at the half way point - equal distance between black and white. If I don't want this, I can move gray as well - moving to the left will make more of the image area light in tone, while moving the right makes more of the image dark in tone.

The Levels control also has two Auto adjustment buttons. Auto Luminance adjusts the levels for brightness, while Auto Color adjusts each color channel (red, green, blue) for optimal levels for each color channel and attempts to remove any color cast in the image. In general, I find that Auto Luminance works well (it usually gives me very similar results to what I would manually set), while Auto Color would be useful if your image has a color cast in it. But, if you're working

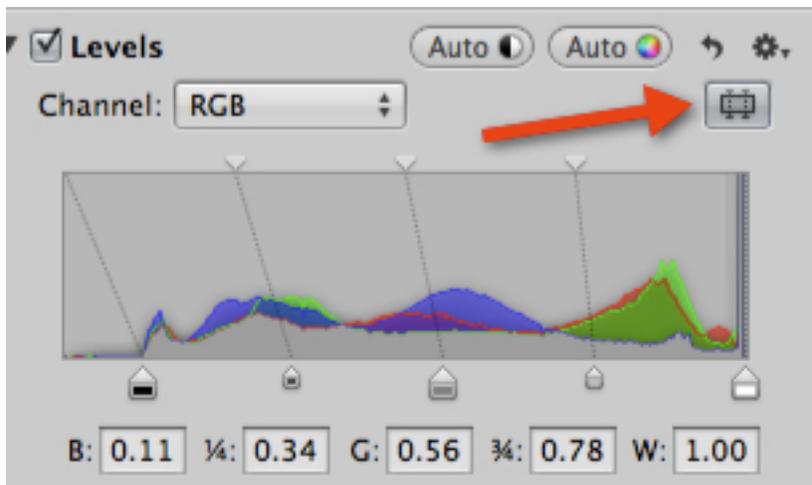
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in the correct order, you should have already removed any color cast from the image with the White Balance adjustments!

Here's the Levels control after applying the Auto button. As you can see, it's only one point off from my manual adjustment:

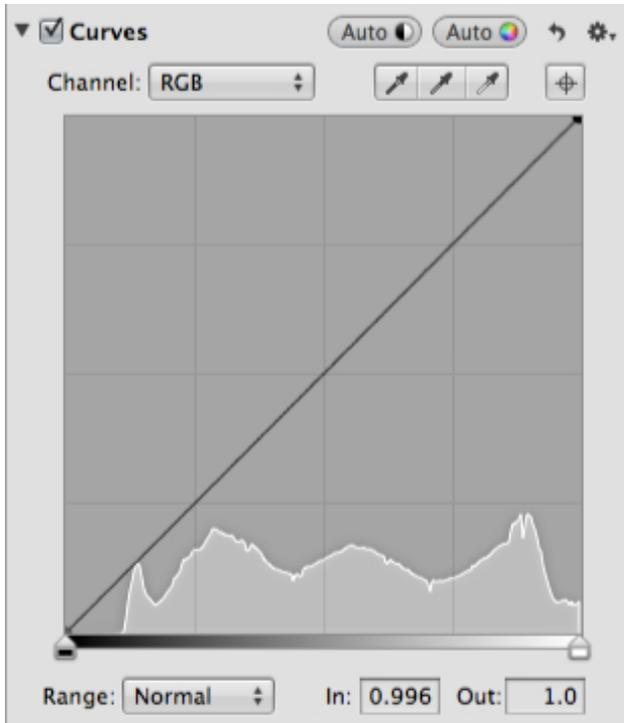


Aperture also has a Quarter tone option for levels adjustment that gives you much finer control over how the adjustments are made to your image.



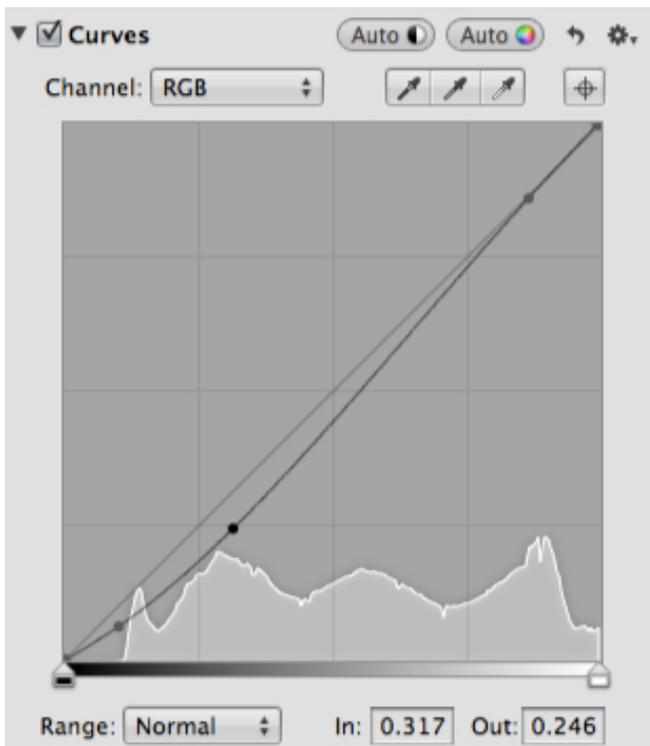
With the Quarter tones enabled, you can affect how quickly the the change from black to gray or white to gray happens, adding more or less contrast to your image. You'll be able to see this more clearly in the video that accompanies this lesson.

If you want total control over how the histogram is modified, the Curves control is for you. With the curves control, you are making similar adjustments to black, white, and gray, but you have control over how quickly these tones change, and exactly where they change.



The curve starts as a straight diagonal from black on the left, to white on the right. This is referred to as a linear curve - an even change from one end to the other. By raising or lowering the curve at any point, we affect whether that point becomes lighter (above the curve) or darker (below the curve).

To make a similar adjustment to that made with the levels control, I need to lower the darks while leaving the highlights alone as shown below:

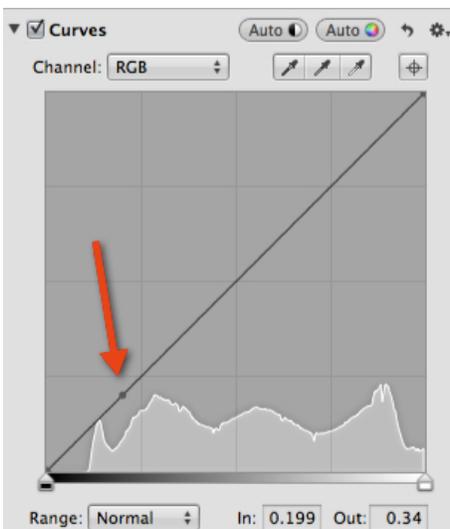


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As you can see, I've made three points on this adjustment - two to control how much I reduced the darks, and one near the upper right to keep the highlights in the range I want.

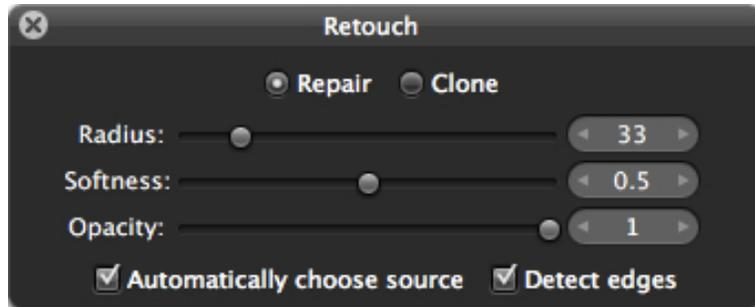
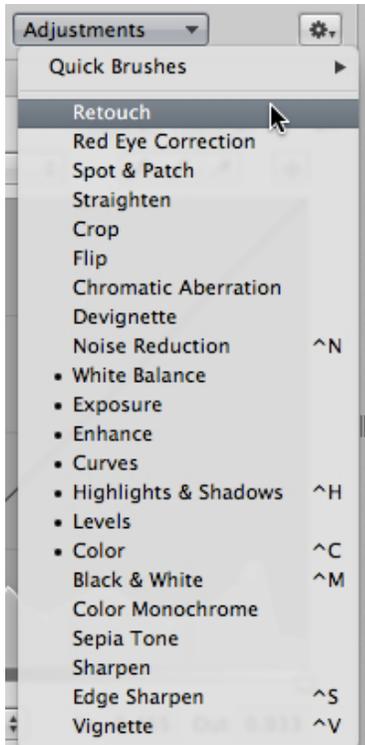
You can also see three eye droppers and a cross hair tool at the top of the curves control, along with the two Auto options we saw in the Levels control. Auto works exactly the same way here, so I won't go into that again. The eye droppers let you sample the areas you want to set as pure black, gray, and pure white. I will use the gray to set a neutral if I feel that there is still a slight color cast to the image, but once again - if you've properly corrected the color in White Balance, you won't need these options.

The cross hair is very useful though. Using this tool to click on a specific area in the image will set a point on the curve automatically - when you want to affect or protect a specific part of your image, this can make the selection easy. In the images below, you can see where I've clicked, and in the second screen shot, the point it creates on the curve:



Retouching, Cropping, Spot Removal

Retouching in Aperture is done with a single tool found under the Adjustments drop down list:



Like Photoshop's Clone and Heal tools, you have two options with Retouch - Repair (similar to Heal in Photoshop) will blend the area you paint over with surrounding texture and color. Clone will duplicate pixels that you sample from, and paint them onto the area you paint over. The three controls are Radius, which affects the size of the brush, Softness, which controls how quickly you go from full strength to no adjustment (think of feathering), and Opacity, which controls how solid the adjustment is.

While Radius and Opacity are pretty clear, Softness can be less intuitive. In the example below, I have a high softness set for the brush:



You can see two circles on this brush. The inside circle is where the adjustment is applied at full strength. The outer circle is where the adjustment ends. The area between is how fast the adjustment falls off from full to none.

In the image below, I have the brush set to 0.



In this case, the effect has no drop off at all - it's an all or nothing adjustment. When you're working with areas that don't have clear transitions, such as sky, skin, etc, you'll have better results using a soft edge brush. In the case of areas with lots of fine detail, such as buildings, trees, fur, you'll want to use a harder brush to confine the adjustment to a specific area.

The other two controls in this dialog - Automatically choose source, and Detect edges can assist with making a more natural adjustment. Automatically choose source is only available when using Repair. With this selected, Aperture will examine the areas around where you paint to try and pick up color and texture to match. With it off, you'll need to sample the area you want to use as the source by holding down the Option key and clicking before painting (see the video for an example of this). The Detect edges option will help you to keep the adjustment from spilling over into areas with different tones that you don't want to modify. For example, you may be painting an adjustment in the sky and don't want it to affect the mountain or horizon line. This will detect any major differences in color and brightness as you paint and block the changes from going into those areas.

Spot and Patch is best seen by example and you'll see this in the video accompanying this lesson. Spot is similar to retouch but works only in a circular area where you click. Patch works by clicking on the area you want to change, and then dragging a second point to serve as the area to replace with. To be honest, in general it's better to use the Retouch tools. But, you'll see in the video examples of where Spot and Patch can be useful.

Color Channels and Grayscale

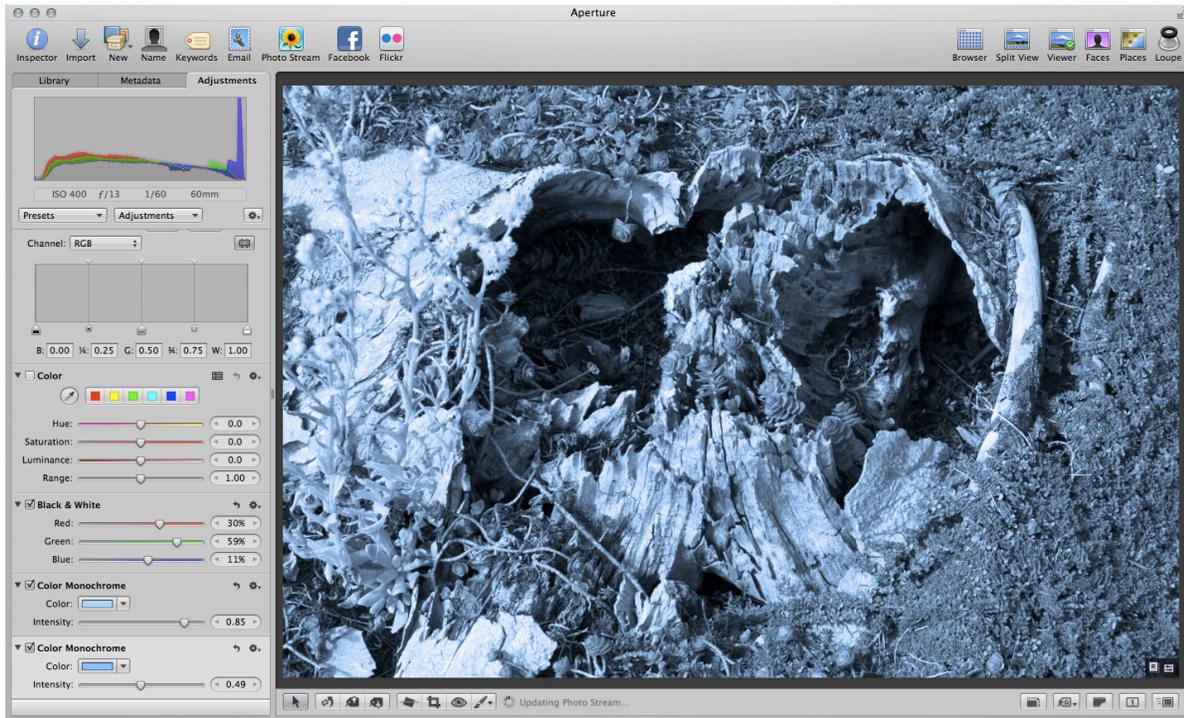
If you're interested in black and white, Aperture can produce some excellent results. Rather than a simple conversion to grayscale, when you select Black & White from the Adjustments drop down menu, you have full control over how the Red, Green, and Blue color channels mix.



When making adjustments to the color channels, you want to keep the total for the three channels to 100%. In this example, Red is at 30, Green is 59, and Blue is 11 - totaling 100%. Going over 100 can lead to clipping of detail - watch your histogram as you make these adjustments!

Split Toning

OK, I confess - there isn't split toning in the traditional sense in Aperture. But, we can fool the program into giving us a similar result by applying two Color Monochrome adjustments. It's not perfect, and to be clear, it isn't something I'm crazy about - I use Nik Silver Efex for both black and white and split toning work, but it can be done. By creating two Color Monochrome adjustments with similar colors at different intensity settings, you can achieve more than what you'd be able to do with a single adjustment. In the sample below, I've used two blues to give a platinum type effect:



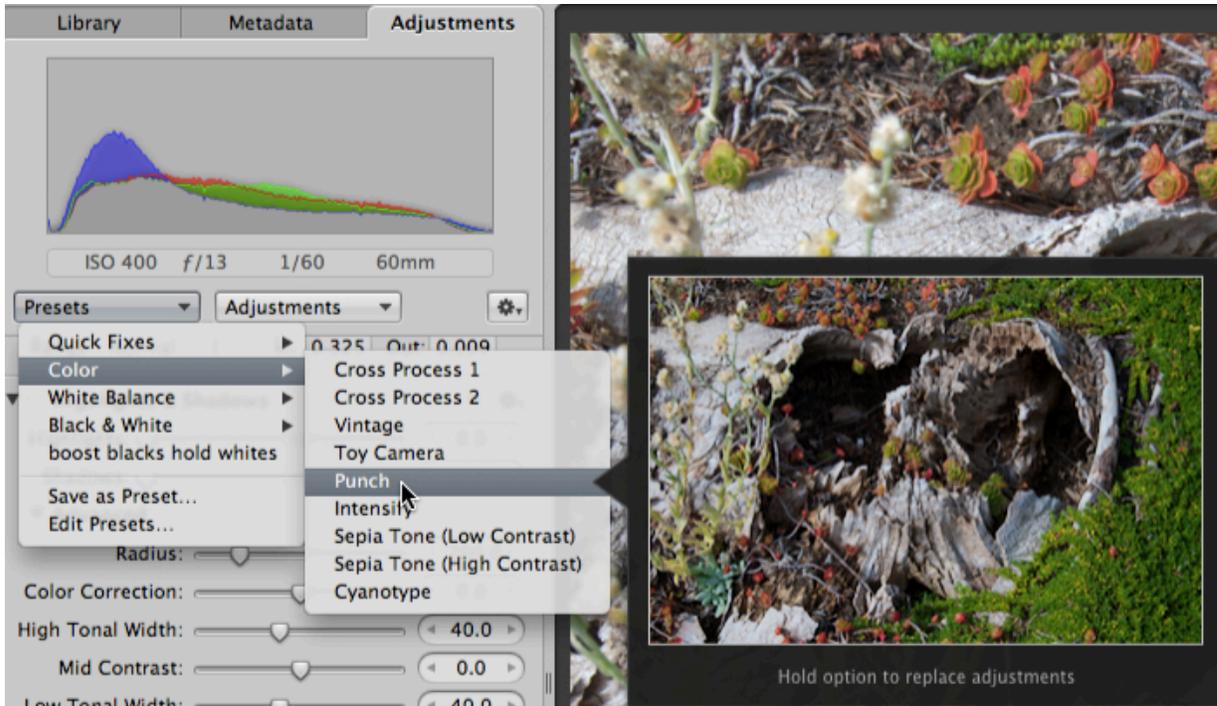
In a similar vein, you also have a Sepia Tone adjustment available in the Adjustments drop down menu. This is simply a Color Monochrome adjustment with no option to change the tone - Aperture presets it to Sepia, and you can control the intensity of the adjustment.

Using and Creating Presets

One time saver that you'll find throughout Aperture are presets. In Import and Export they save time and ensure consistent use of metadata or image size. In the Adjustments Inspector, they let you easily reproduce effects that you like. Aperture includes several useful presets, particularly in the black & white presets, but you can also easily create your own as you find adjustments that work for you.

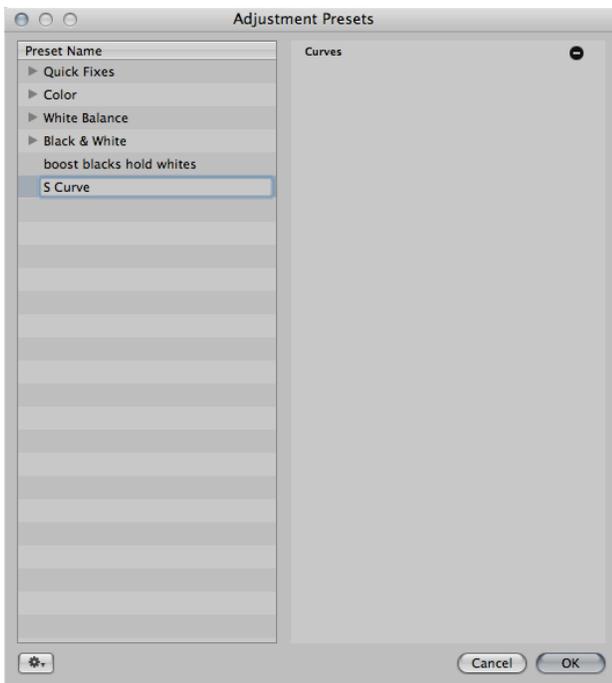
One nice thing about presets is the ability to preview what your image will look like with the settings applied:

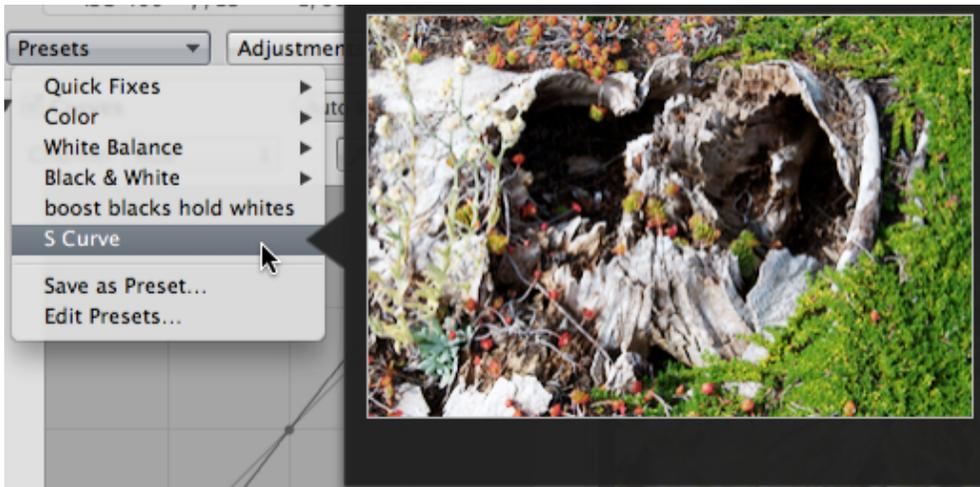
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As you select each preset, the preview updates to show the results. It's important to note that if you select a preset, it applies the adjustments on top of any existing adjustments you've made unless you hold down the Option key when selecting the preset. In this case, your image is reset to the default settings and then the preset adjustments are applied.

If you come up with an adjustment that you find useful in multiple instances, you can create your own by selecting Save as Preset. As an example, I typically apply a modest S curve to my landscape images to boost contrast and detail. So, I can now quickly apply this to any number of images:





Assignment

For this week, I'd like to see 3 images that use the adjustments we've covered here and in the video. While not required, I'd love to see at least one of these as a black & white or color monochrome image, and if you're interested, use the paint effect away technique shown in the video.

As always, be sure to include your adjustments with the image so that I can comment on the changes and make suggestions.