

From the Discard Pile: Making One Swan Out of Many

The first draft of Chapter 2 featured a full blow-by-blow description of everything done to combine the eight swan images. The beta readers, in my view correctly, rejected it as being too hard to follow without an undue amount of concentration. They suggested that I should record a video instead, and forget what you're about to read. Nevertheless, for those interested in going deeper into the topic after seeing that video, this fragment may be useful.

—D.M.

A Closer Look

From now on, each chapter is broken in two. The second part is optional. In the first halves, the assumption is you know how to boot up Photoshop, create a layer or adjustment layer, change its opacity, and open various palettes, but that's about all.

These second halves assume you have no need of Photoshop's online help. Explanations of how commands work are cursory at best.

Often these sections delve into theoretical matters or explanations of *why* things work as opposed to *how* they work. This time, however, we focus on the practical: given two or more reasonable versions of the same picture, what are some of the choices in combining them? The eight versions of Figure 2.6 will illustrate.

I reiterate a standing recommendation: if extra time is available, making two or more quick versions from scratch and then combining them creatively is better than doing one version carefully.

How many versions should you make? It depends on how much time the photo is worth. If you're determined not to spend more than three minutes per image, then it's going to have to be one version and out. Some variants of Figure 2.6 are better than others but all are much better than the original.

It also depends on your level of comfort. The more you use PPW, the less apt you'll be to make some ugly error that destines the version for the trash.

With the luxury of extra time, try not to do one version right after completing the last one. That way, you won't remember exactly what you did the first time and your second version is more likely to be different.

In the current exercise I was lucky: days or even weeks separated each of my versions, so what I had done the previous time was long forgotten. I certainly don't advocate making eight

versions of an image, although three or four can sometimes be helpful. However, as noted earlier, events dictated that I have eight in this case. Let's see what they can produce.

The Tale of the Tape

In principle we ought to compare each version to each alternate, and let them duke it out. With eight originals, that's a total of 28 comparisons.

I am highly disinterested in spending the rest of the book on ringside reports of 28 or 36 comparisons. The following procedure gets it down to more manageable number.

I stacked everything up in eight layers, earliest version on the bottom, with the other seven layers made invisible. The idea is to show the second layer, compare it to the first, then decide whether to junk one or to combine the two. Whatever survives gets compared to the third version, where new combinations are possible, and so on. Hopefully the picture gets better and better.

And what will all these comparisons show? The possibilities are limitless.

- One version may have better color than the other.
- One may have better detail.
- One may be better in the lighter or darker areas.
- One may be better in lighter or darker areas, but only with respect to color or to detail.
- One may be better in certain colors.
- One may be better, period.

If it's that last possibility, junk the one that's worse. But it happens less frequently than you might think. If you think, for example, that Figure 2.6B is clearly better than 2.6A, you've fallen into the same trap that the audience did in stating the street scene in Figure 2.1B was more colorful than in Figure 2.1C. It *was* more colorful, but only in certain respects, to wit, the blue jeans. Similarly, Figure 2.6A *is* worse than Figure 2.6B, but only in certain respects, namely, its color. In terms of depth, detail, I'd say it's better.

FIRST ROUND

Title vacant. The Matchup:

Figure 2.6A vs. Figure 2.6B/2.7A

Figure 2.7A is a larger copy of Figure 2.6B. Figure 2.6A is ugly enough not to merit the space. However, let's consider a blend. Figure 2.7B uses the color of Figure 2.6B/2.7A, but substitutes the detail, or contrast, or luminosity, of Figure 2.6A. And now we embark on the perilous path of personal preference.

Shake Hands and Come Out Fighting

People's tastes vary. I've gotten to test my own

against those of thousands of others in my classes, so I can tell you my own peculiarities.

Throughout most of my career my preferences were distinctly more colorful than those of my students. In the last five years or so there's been a clear shift in public preference. Younger retouchers of today are apt to prefer more color than I do.

Speaking of age, as humans get older their corneas get yellower. I can't be as sensitive to the yellows in this water as a younger person would be.

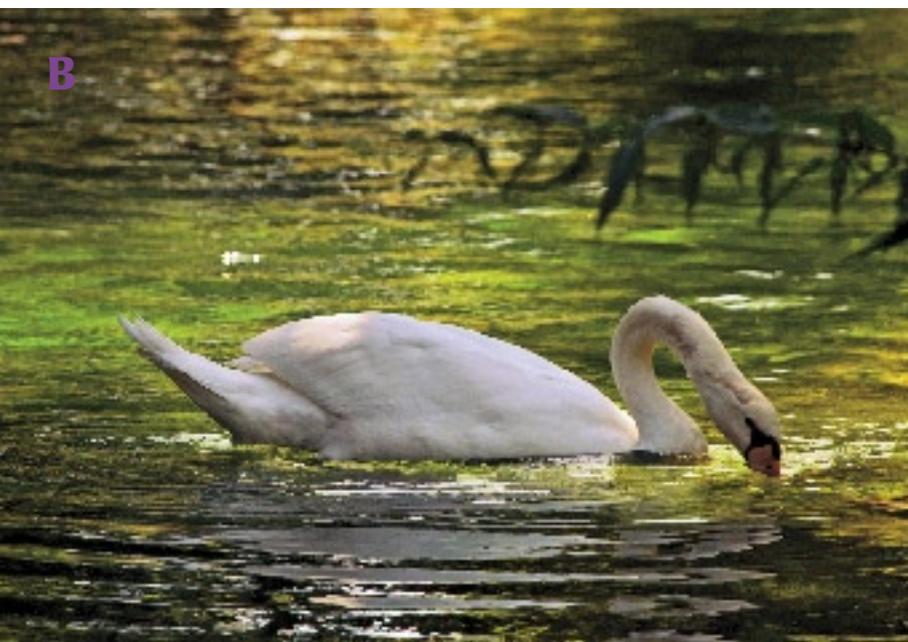
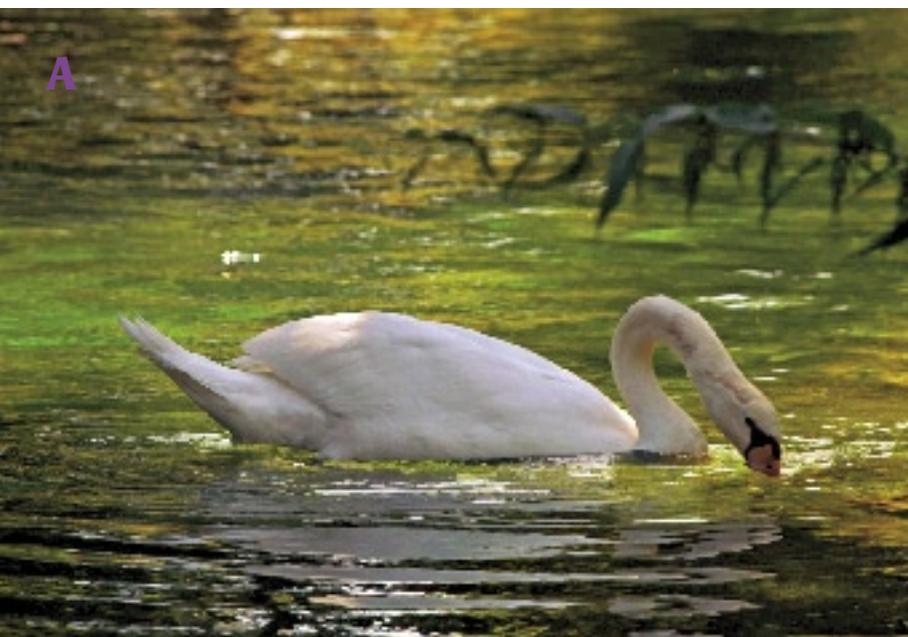
Plus, when the subject is a swan or some other white animal, the question is how much detail to put in the feathers or fur. More detail, though, creates a slightly darker animal, and some people, looking for a really white appearance, don't like it. They want something like Figure 2.6H.

If you don't agree with me about this, don't worry. I'm sure you have a lot of company. A whole slew of these exercises and classroom votes has indicated that my own prejudices are for a heavier-looking white object than what some people like.

Now that there's been full disclosure, I say that the extra depth of Figure 2.7B is too harsh for the soft colors of Figure 2.7A. I prefer to split the difference. My hybrid is a straight 50–50 blend of the two for contrast. 100% of the color, however, comes from Figure 2.7A. .

Separate blends for color and contrast are easy enough once

Figure 2.7 *The first round. Above, a larger copy of Figure 2.6B. Below, with the addition of the luminosity of Figure 2.6A.*



you are comfortable with Luminosity and Color modes. Here, the start point is two layers, Figure 2.7A on top, Figure 2.6A beneath. As I wish to use the color from the top layer and the detail from the bottom, I change layer mode from Normal to Color. This produces Figure 2.7B.

A temporary extra layer, another copy of Figure 2.7A, is now needed. From bottom to top we would see Figure 2.6A, Figure 2.7A set to Color mode, 100% opacity; another copy set to Luminosity mode, 50% opacity. The three layers produce Figure 2.8A, the winner by unanimous decision of the only judge, namely me.

Had the original order of the layers been reversed, with Figure 2.6A on top and 2.7A beneath it, the third layer wouldn't have been needed. The top would have been set to Luminosity mode, opacity 50%.

SECOND ROUND

*Champion, Figure 2.8A,
Challenger, Figure 2.6C*

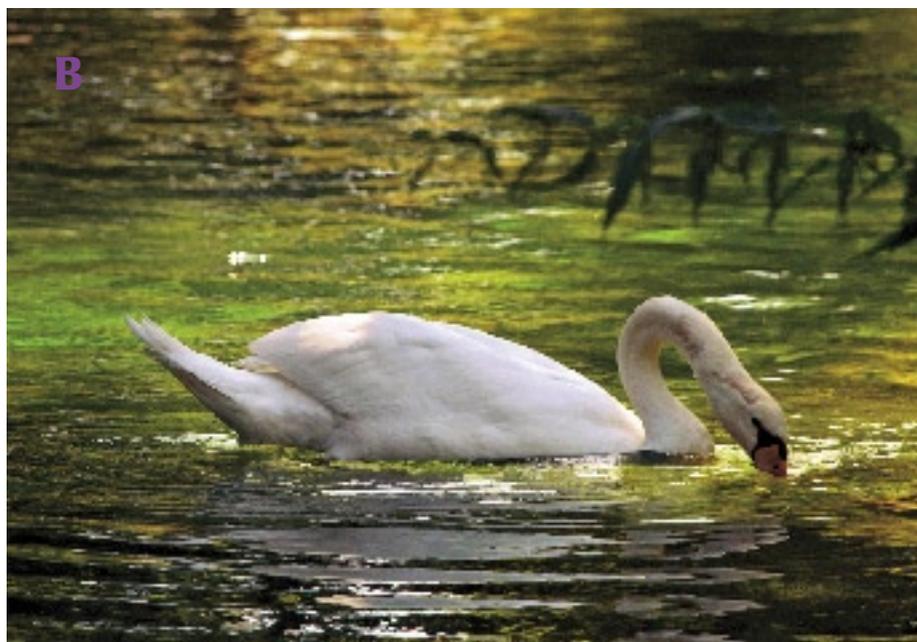
The challenger shares an unpleasant greenness with Figure 2.6A. I therefore rejected any use of its color. But, as before, I considered its detail. Figure 2.8B hitches the luminosity of Figure 2.6C, 100% opacity, to the color of Figure 2.8A (which is the same as in Figures 2.6B, 2.7A, and 2.7B).

The swan is now much better. If, for the sake of argument, we were to accept Figure 2.8B as the new champion, it would render the first round irrelevant. Figure 2.7B partially replaced the luminosity of Figure 2.7A, but Figure 2.8B replaces it totally!

Figure 2.8 *The second round. Top, a 50–50 split between Figures 2.7A and 2.7B. Bottom, with the addition of the luminosity of Figure 2.6C.*

I do not, in fact, accept Figure 2.8B as the new champion. The shadows lack detail. The darker water is preferable in Figure 2.8A.

To summarize, I find Figure 2.8A's color superior, period. Figure 2.8B's luminosity is better in the lighter areas but it gets worse as the picture gets darker. Consequently, this should not be a 50–50 luminosity hybrid, as Figure 2.7B was. Instead, the top layer is set to Luminosity mode, 100% opacity, but with a layer mask that gets darker as the picture does. There were a thousand alternatives. I copied the RGB composite, which Photoshop automatically converted to



grayscale, into the layer mask and blurred it. The new champion, Figure 2.9A, has three parents.

THIRD ROUND

Champion, Figure 2.9A,

Challenger, Figure 2.6D/2.9B

Two of the first three contestants had color issues, so the comparison was luminosity only. But the new challenger, repeated here as Figure 2.9B, is credible in both areas. I like the more orange flavor in the reflections, although I'm of two minds about the swan.

When unsure of how to proceed, it's good to

launch trial balloons. Figure 2.10A is the challenger's luminosity, the champion's color. Figure 2.10B is the other way around.

Figure 2.10A isn't bad, but after toggling back and forth a few times, I decided that the swan was better served by the darker water of Figure 2.9A. So, no action taken.

Figure 2.10B, however, packs more of a punch. I opted for a 50–50 split between it and Figure 2.9A. In other words, this round added 50% of the challenger's color, none of its luminosity.

FOURTH ROUND

Champion, not shown.

Challenger, Figure 2.6E

The new challenger is the weird one, where I had created a pink swan through carelessness.

I went through the same procedure as before. The challenger's luminosity is fine, but again I had a slight preference for the champion's, and so did nothing. The challenger's color is definitely *not* fine. There is, however, something to be said for a warmer look. So, I blended the challenger, Color mode, 30% opacity, into the champion. The difference between the two is so minor that it isn't worth the space to show them both. The new champion, with the slight additional pinkness, is Figure 2.11A

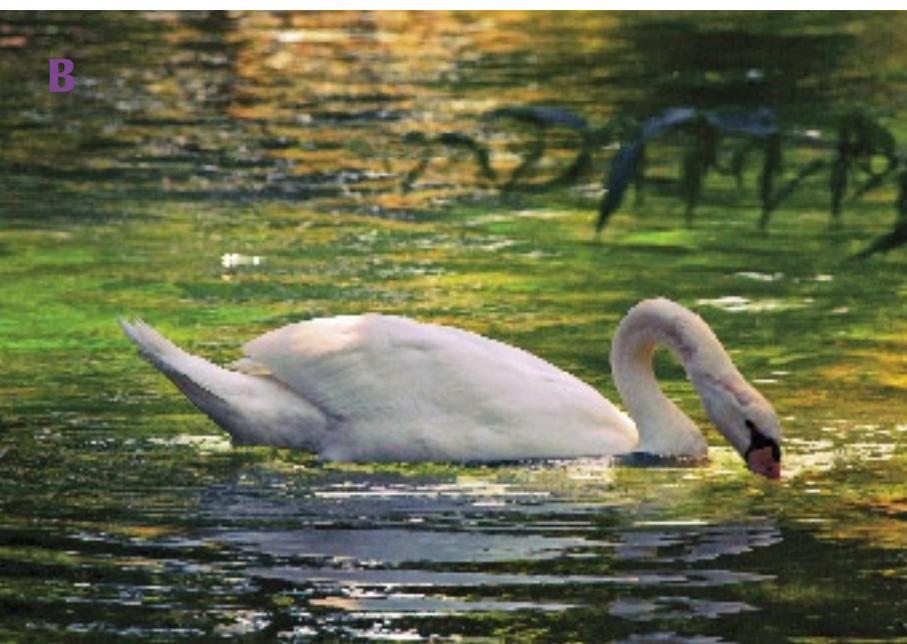
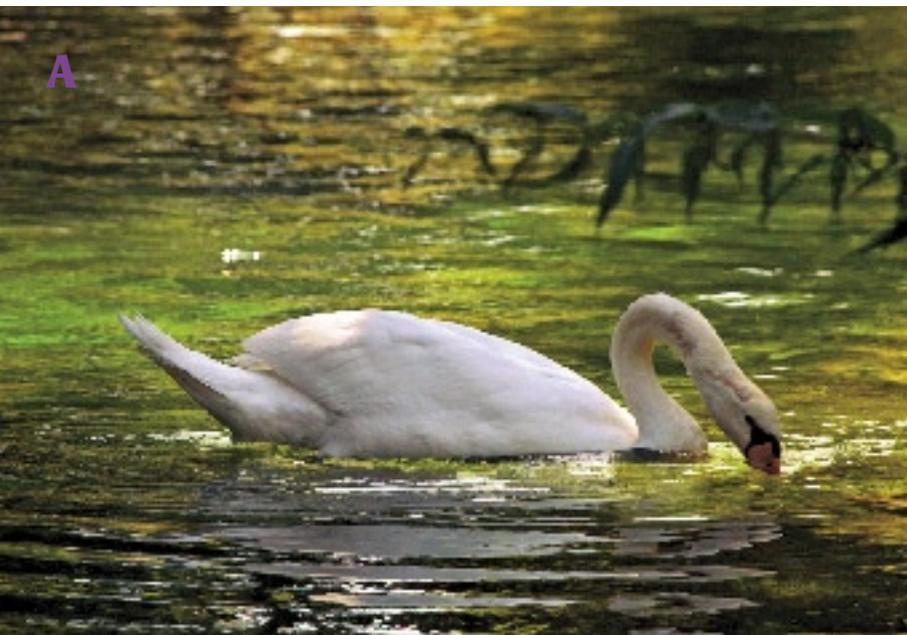
FIFTH ROUND

Champion, Figure 2.11A,

Challenger, Figure 2.6F/2.11B

The latest challenger, repeated as Figure 2.11B, is definitely one of the stronger ones, but it's facing a

Figure 2.9 *The third round. Top, a version that combines the light parts of Figure 2.8B with the dark parts of Figure 2.8A, Bottom, the new challenger, seen previously as Figure 2.6D.*



blend of the best of five. Its attractive colors lack the champ's separation of yellows and greens. Unlike Figures 2.6A and 2.6C, which also had a green feeling, this challenger has a nice, white swan. However, I prefer the champ's warmer feel.

Figure 2.11C is the challenger's luminosity, the champion's color. It's one of the best versions yet. But by now we can afford to quibble. The original photograph was taken in shadow. Having the swan as light as this is a lie, but then again so was the entirety of the Emerald Lake exercise in Chapter 1. The picture is about the swan. Chicanery is permissible. The current lake, however, strikes me as marginally too light under the circumstances.

The solution is the same as that found in the second round, Figures 2.8A and 2.8B. One of the pugilists is better in the light areas and one in the dark. Combine the two with a blurred layer mask. The new champion is Figure 2.12A.

SIXTH ROUND

Champion, Figure 2.12A

Challenger, Figure 2.6G/2.12B

We're reaching the point of diminishing returns. Seen on its original page, Figure 2.6G is hardly a bantamweight—indeed, it packs one of the best punches of the eight. But (larger, as Figure 2.12B) it can't stay in the ring with Figure 2.12A, which combines the best of six others. The color is nice, yes, but its hybrid opponent scores points with more neutral dark areas and a warmer swan. The soft swan appeals, but there's more action everywhere in the champion.

Figure 2.10 Top, the luminosity of Figure 2.9B combined with the color of Figure 2.9A. Bottom, the opposite.

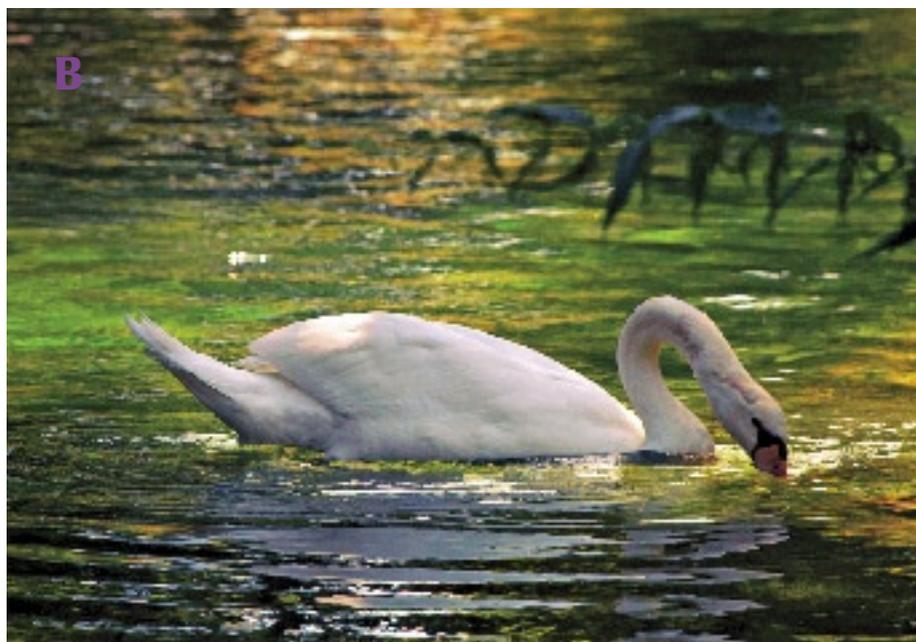
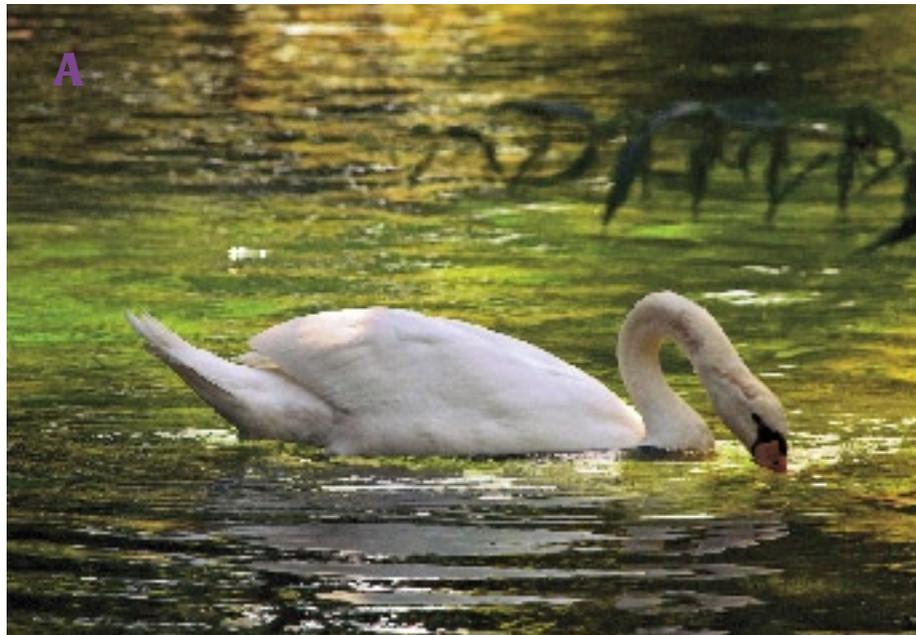
Figure 2.12B goes down for the count. We move on, unchanged, to the final comparison.

SEVENTH ROUND

Champion, Still Figure 2.12A

Challenger, Figure 2.6H/2.12C

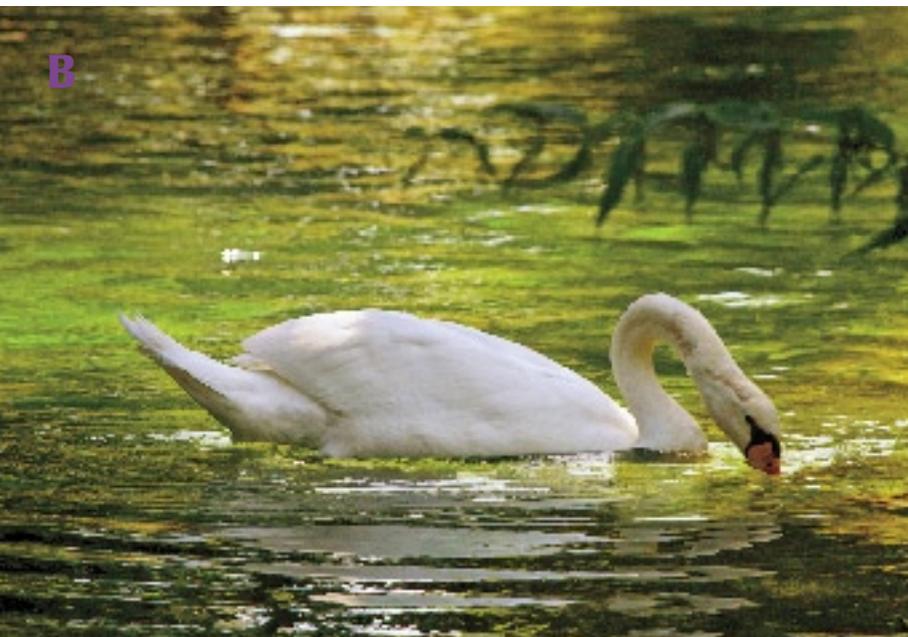
We may have saved the best for last. The new challenger is the lightest of the eight originals. It arguably has the best color of any: a nice transition from neutrality to warmth in the swan and a good, rich transition from one color to another in the background. Making the swan as light as this one risks losing detail in the feathers, but it doesn't seem to be a big issue here.



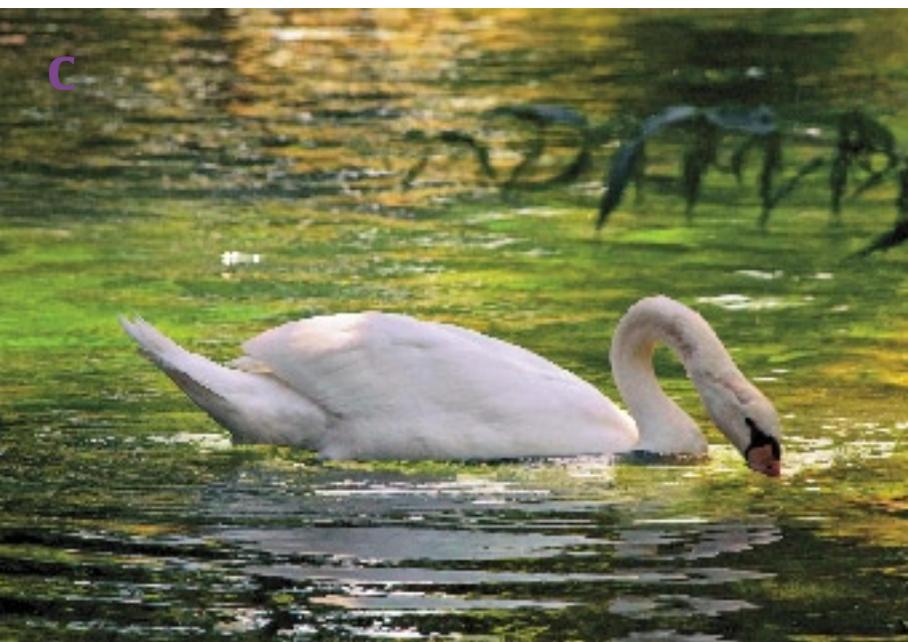
A



B



C



Therefore this opponent, repeated as Figure 2.12C, is the first one that someone might reasonably think beats the current champion, although I don't. As a rule, I am not a big fan of super-white swans, even though I happened to make one on that particular day.

Another suggestion why this might be the best of the original eight variants: in each of the six other comparisons we worked either with luminosity or color, but never both.

This challenger, however, hits us with the old one-two. Some of us will certainly like the very white swan, even if we feel that the overall effect is too light. The color varies nicely, particularly in the golden tones.

The Decision of the Judges

Figure 2.13A shows the champion's color, the challenger's luminosity. Figure 2.13B reverses the mix.

The two make the point that lighter areas—the quartertone region, specifically—usually want brighter colors. Figure 2.13A looks washed out to me, because the color that looked good in a darker picture is inadequate for a lighter one. I find Figure 2.13B more pleasing, but the color seems to me a little much.

The fun now begins, provided you have the time. If not, almost

Figure 2.11 The fifth round. Top, the current champion has the luminosity of Figure 2.9A but parts of the color of two other versions. Middle, the new challenger, Figure 2.6F. Bottom, the champion's color, the challenger's contrast.

any kind of blend between champion and challenger will be better than either parent. If you're looking to deal a knockout punch, however, you may wish to consider more esoteric options, of which there is no shortage.

The simplest blend is one layer for each picture, change opacity. Next comes having one layer for luminosity changes and another for color; and finally we can modify either of these two methods with layer masks.

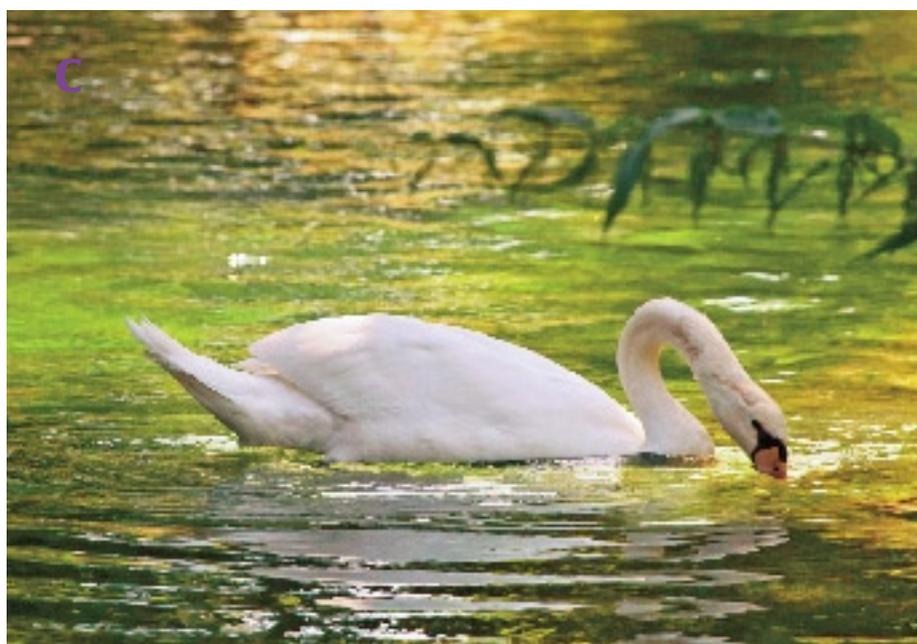
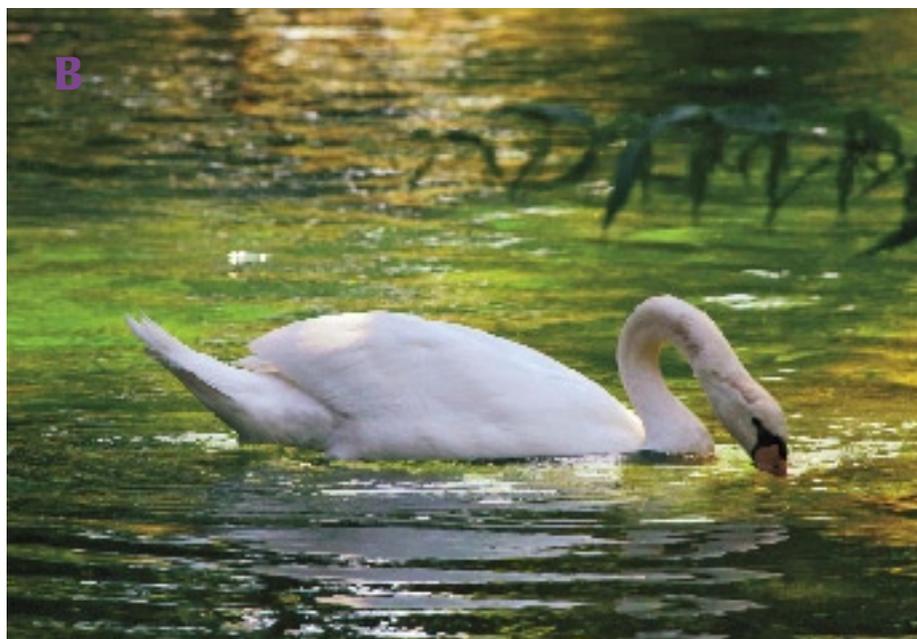
Figure 2.14A uses the second method. It's the champion (Figure 2.12A) modified by 75% of the luminosity and 25% of the color of the challenger, Figure 2.12C. Figure 2.14B reverses these ratios. I prefer it to Figure 2.14A for the same reason that I prefer Figure 2.13B to 2.13A.

That these percentages happen to add up to 100% is merely coincidence. You would choose your own, and not expect them to be the same as mine.

Figure 2.14C argues for the use of nonstandard layer masks. I was thinking that maybe instead of using the champion's luminosity, maybe we should favor the champion in greener areas, which is a slightly different definition.

The blend here is Normal mode, not Luminosity or Color. It is controlled by a layer mask that I produced by making a copy of the challenger and converting it to

Figure 2.12 The sixth and seventh rounds. Top, a version uniting the light half of Figure 2.11C and the dark half of Figure 2.11A. Middle, a copy of Figure 2.6G. Bottom, Figure 2.6H.



LAB. Knowing that the A channel of that color-space is dark where the picture is greener, I stole a copy of it and used it, somewhat modified to add contrast, as a layer mask in the other file.

Note how the greens now resemble those of Figure 2.12A, but the yellows are more like those of the lighter Figure 2.12C. If that idea isn't appealing, I could have gotten both the yellows and the greens to resemble Figure 2.12A by using a copy of the blue channel of RGB rather than the A of LAB as the layer mask. Then again, doing that might produce a result so like one of the others as to be a waste of time to try. Or you

might decide that Figure 2.14C is pretty good but that, say, you want the swan's bill to be more orange, in which case you might try painting in some darkness in that area of the layer mask.

You would make the call on how much experimentation to do, just as you would on opacity. For the record, my final version, Figure 2.5C, used no layer mask. It is 60% of the luminosity of Figure 2.12A and 30% of its color; everything else comes from Figure 2.12C.

Advice to the Punch-Drunk

This has been a chapter of extremes. We don't usually find such striking examples of a single color derailing an image as we did in the street scene of Figure 2.1. Failing to check the original color before the opening bell, which produced the blue swan of Figure 2.5B, is a grievous sin, but rarely is it punished so severely. And it is wildly uncommon to have eight versions to choose from, as in the second half's exercise.

On the other hand, the mistakes were real, unintentional, and were posted publicly. The eight versions of the swan are authentic and produced in front of bloodthirsty crowds.

Vivid colors are good things. Everybody likes them. Loudness is a bad thing. Nobody likes it. Sometimes a picture is in fact overall too intense. More frequently one or two parts are too intense, and they con the viewer into thinking that the whole picture is no good. Don't be hasty in deciding that everything needs to be cut back. Look for the specific areas that

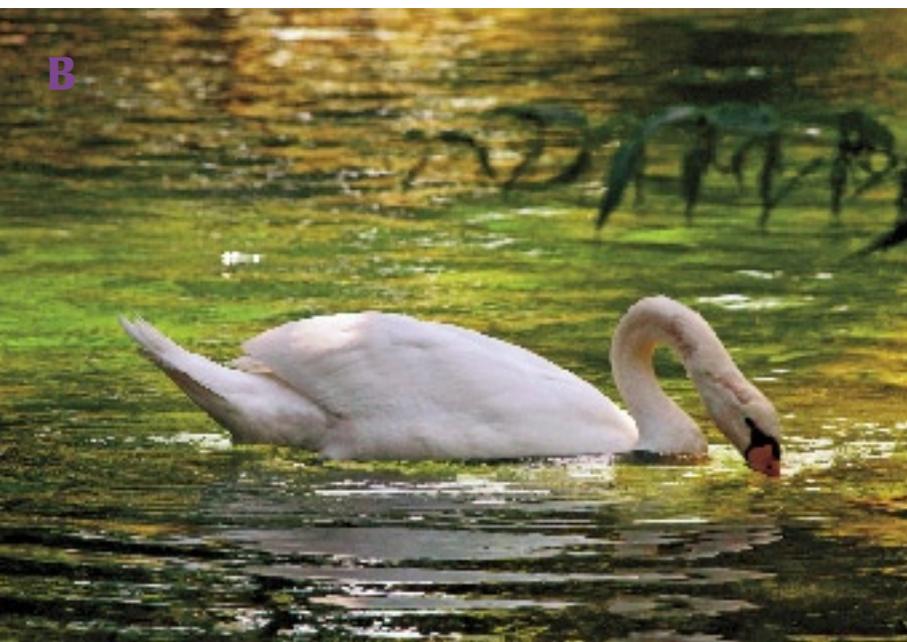
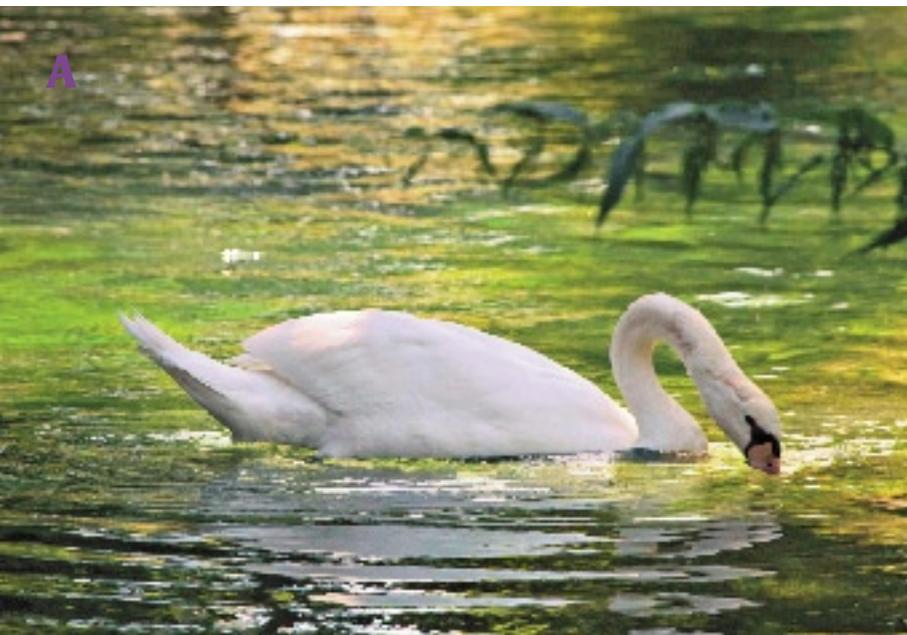


Figure 2.13 Top, the color of Figure 2.12A married to the luminosity of Figure 2.12C. Bottom, the opposite.

are offensive, and find a way to weaken their color.

Resist the curse of trying too hard. Decades of experience suggest that we should be careful at each step of the correction process. The decades of experience are wrong. Go fast, and then do the job again from scratch. None of the eight versions of Figure 2.6 took more than three minutes. If three minutes is all you have, any one of them is acceptable. If more time is available, some are better than others. The weaker ones were hampered by questionable decisions about color—the kind that all the time in the world wouldn't help. You've seen how much variation there is in my own work. In yours, there will probably be more. Protect yourself from bad decisions. Give yourself opportunities to take the best features from multiple versions.

Finally we are about to enter the most frustrating and seemingly pointless part of the workflow, the first step, which checks for, and occasionally finds, color issues. Most of the time there isn't a serious problem, but we should remember Figure 2.5B's blue swan. If that step is forgotten or ignored, now and then the picture that you hope will float like a butterfly will turn out to sting like a bee.

Figure 2.14 Top, 75% of the luminosity and 25% of the color of Figure 2.12C, applied to Figure 2.12A. Middle, these ratios are reversed. Bottom, The two originals are merged through a layer mask that emphasizes Figure 2.12A in greener areas.

