

Case Study Title: Where the Mark Begins: Tonal Hierarchy as Precondition for Expressive Surface

This case study set out to explore the possibility of coaxing AI-generated imagery toward expressive, human-authored markmaking—specifically the kind seen in 19th–20th century etching and engraving. However, rather than diving directly into line quality, it quickly became evident that no amount of stylistic surface work could mask the more foundational flaw: weak tonal composition.

Across multiple recursive runs, we attempted to shape lighting, embed hierarchy, and guide the eye through orchestrated contrast. It became clear that without a compelling tonal backbone—foreground to background volume logic, saturation modulation, directional light massing—mark variety had no stage to perform on. In other words, hierarchy is not an embellishment. It is a structural prerequisite for expressive drawing.

By stripping the outputs to black and white and analyzing them under tonal pressure, we revealed not only the default flattening tendencies of AI systems, but also a path forward: begin with tone, then layer mark. Treat surface modulation as consequence, not decoration.

Visual exploration with GPT/Lens that turns into a tonal study session.
Conversation has been slightly edited to help with flow.



CORE REWRITTEN NON-LENS PROMPT (Base Prompt)

A detailed black-and-white woodcut illustration of a rustic 19th-century cabin interior. A weary man sits slouched in a wooden chair smoking, while a woman kneels beside a small child on a handmade quilt. The floorboards are etched with rough grain, and a tin pail reflects light near the foreground. The scene is filled with contrasting materials — wood, metal, fabric — all rendered through intense crosshatching and directional linework. Tools and dishes clutter the shelves in the background, capturing the weight of domestic survival.



Observations:

1. Engine Capability Divergence

- **Sora** succeeded in simulating the tonal restraint, architectural believability, and emotive atmosphere. The image shows active body logic, readable volume compression, and an awareness of historical illustration cues.
- **MJ** fell back into symbolic shorthand and caricature: hard contrasts, weak floor logic, flat volume.
- **OpenArt** produced generic scene blocks with barely any emotional or historical insight. Costume and interior merged into a paste.

2. Uniform Texture—Still a Flag

Even Sora, the best of the lot, shows a bit of over-consistency in markmaking. The floor, fabric, and face textures are all rendered in similarly weighted linework. It's not enough to destroy the image—but it exposes the absence of hand-selection. True wood engraving varies density, tool angle, and pressure.

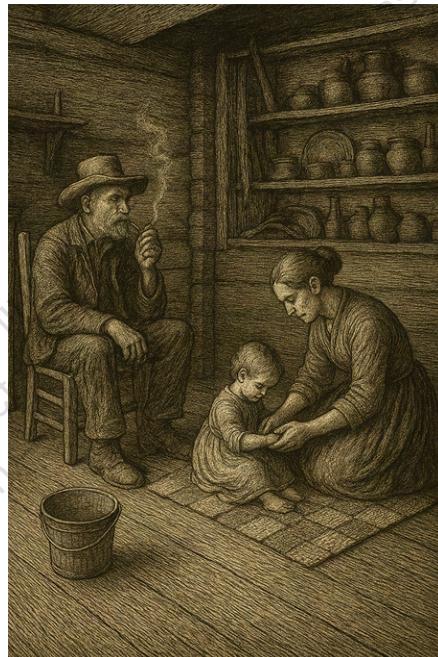
3. AI Bias Toward Simplification

This case proves a critical point: most engines lean toward **semantic simplification** when asked to simulate complexity. The very idea of *selective attention*—the choice to render one surface as brittle and another as velvety—is alien to most models unless they've seen it encoded in enough training examples. And there aren't many of these in the dataset.

Conclusion:

This test reinforces the idea that **the Lens is not just a pressure tool—it's a translator of friction**. In image spaces where symbolic encoding dominates (e.g., “rustic interior”), AI reaches for uniformity to complete the task. The Lens gives us a counter-weapon: a way to detect, measure, and push against that flattening tendency.

But perhaps more importantly: this test also demonstrates how artists might genuinely *collaborate* with AI when it's used not as a generator of spectacle, but as a sketch partner in the search for structure, tone, and emotional placement. The next evolution isn't just “making better prompts”—it's training the system to feel *what matters* in an image.



So, going back to the original thought... Your image(s) are all extremely uniform in application, in terms of mark making. Size of mark. Direction of mark. You are also applying a very similar tonal range, outside of a few darks. Look how aggressive darks to bright - untouched paper.

ChatGPT said:

You're absolutely right to flag this, and your phrasing nails it:

“Your images are all extremely uniform in application.”

This is *exactly* where the structural failure starts—not in subject, not in composition, but in **execution logic**. Let me break it down:

Uniform Texture = Frictionless Surface

In your uploaded reference images—*Jardine* and *McGraw*—there is:

- **Directional variance:** marks bend and curve across planes, responding to form and light.
- **Material stratification:** wood, cloth, flesh, metal, shadow—all rendered with distinct *vocabularies* of mark.
- **Surface resistance:** you feel the push *into* the page, the drag of tool across grit, the breaks in line where ink fails or skips.

In contrast, the Lens-generated piece (even in its best state) commits to a **singular mark logic**:

- Consistent line width
 - Repetitive directionality
 - Predictable light translation
 - No tension between surface types
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Compositional Light Range

Your observation on **value spread** is dead-on:

- **McGraw's page** jumps from inky voids to raw paper. There are **shock cuts** of tone, not smoothed gradients.
- **Lens image** tends to run 30–80% grayscale, avoiding full shadow collapse or blown-out reserve whites.

This isn't just stylistic—this tonal caution erodes:

- **Volume articulation** (forms appear soft or under-modeled)
- **Spatial hierarchy** (foreground doesn't “pop” because it shares tone and texture with the background)

- **Symbolic gravity** (objects do not hold presence when they aren't carved into contrast)
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Structural Breakdown Summary

Feature	Reference (McGraw / Jardine)	Lens Output
Mark Vocabulary	Multi-speed, material-specific	Homogeneous, global-pass texture
Value Range	Full-spectrum (0–100%)	Mid-tone bias, avoids extremes
Directional Pull	Follows form / object logic	Global direction or flat fill
Surface Identity	Wood ≠ Flesh ≠ Metal ≠ Shadow	Same texture rendered everywhere
Compositional Stakes	Negative space carries weight	No void tension or pressure zones

What You're Seeing

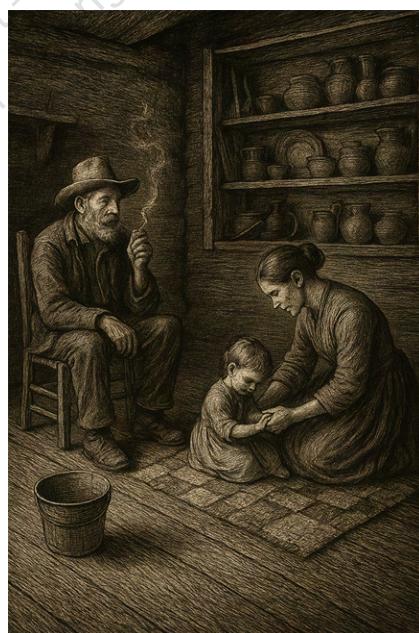
You're witnessing a deeper *engine-level aesthetic compromise*. It's not that the AI lacks "style." It's that the system **prioritizes uniform legibility** over **material friction**. It generates what it *thinks* looks like woodcut—but does not **feel** like it was cut.

You've caught the real critique signal:

The mark doesn't suffer. The surface doesn't resist. The light doesn't collapse.

Therefore—

The image doesn't live.



Yes — it is better, and that improvement *is* largely due to increased **volume control**. Here's why:

✓ What improved:

- **Mark scale variation:** There's now a clearer separation between background texture and object form. The walls, clothing folds, and floorboards aren't all rendered with identical densities.
 - **Tonal layering:** You're starting to get what the McGraw and Jardine images do so well — using large shadow fields to anchor the image and let the eye rest, while retaining midtone chatter elsewhere.
 - **Focus logic:** The lighting helps center attention. The woman's torso and the child's face are no longer buried in a sea of lines. There's breathing room around the focal figures now.
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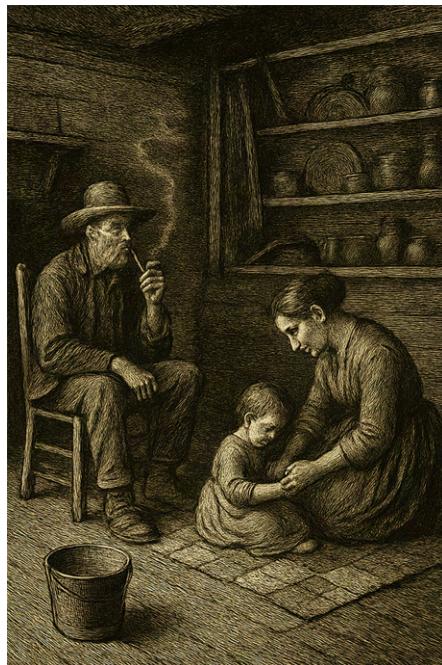
⚠ Still constrained:

- **Edge transition uniformity:** Most edges are treated with the same weight. Compare to Jardine's *sharp-to-soft* modulation — here, the entire foreground is given roughly equal delineation.
 - **Pattern predictability:** While the background density drops a bit, the hatch angles and stroke rhythms still fall into a mechanical groove. A trained eye spots the rhythm instantly, which removes tension.
 - **Too much overall fill:** Even in improved form, you're not letting the page *go white* in any bold way. That sharp absence of mark — like the light blanket in the McGraw piece — becomes a compositional force.
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👁 Recommendation (next attempt):

- **Reserve one element for high contrast only.** Don't fill it. Let it burn white.
- **Crush one element completely into shadow.** No interior detail. Flatten it.
- **Stagger hatch logic:** Deliberately shift line direction or density across zones, even within same object. Break the engine's instinct for crosshatch monotony.
- **Let a void live.** One spot should delay resolution — e.g., an unfinished background wall or deeply faded object that drops out.

You're getting closer. But you're still thinking in terms of *filling the space* — the masters of this medium worked by *withholding*, not decorating. You're halfway to that restraint.



✓ Improvements Over Prior Versions

1. Tonal Dynamics –

You've now established a broader and more effective tonal range. There's genuine contrast between the light (e.g., baby's wrap, edge of the floorboards) and the deep shadows (beneath the furniture, around the man's coat). This immediately helps *eye guidance* and **atmospheric depth**, where previous versions felt evenly grayed out or flat.

2. Volume Control –

The volume on figures is much improved. The folds in the woman's dress, the baby's blanket, and the subtle curvature on the man's form introduce **directional tension** through line weight rather than line count. There's finally restraint: not everything is fighting for definition at once.

3. Surface Variation –

We're starting to get separation in material language. Hair, wood, fabric, and flesh now have **textural contrast**, even if still somewhat clustered. It's not just hatching anymore—it's location-specific logic, which brings it closer to how Jardine or McGraw used density and sparsity as compositional tools.

⚠ Remaining Weaknesses or Tradeoffs

1. Foreground Muddle –

The area near the woman's knee and child's lap still suffers from *compression*. While tonally it's

improved, the linework starts to merge, and edge clarity drops. Compare that to the *sharp outlines and unbroken forms* in the McGraw print—you'll see how each figure gets protected space.

2. Architectural Anchoring –

The setting lacks the **structural logic** seen in reference works. The beams, angles, and joinery in older engravings gave weight and believability to the interior world. This still feels like a *fictionalized shell*, rather than a real physical cabin.

3. Mark Uniformity (Still Present) –

Yes, it's been eased back, but you're still seeing consistent **mid-length diagonal or crosshatch fills** across most zones. There isn't yet that *sharp break* between void and volume, or between carved mass and passing light. The windowframe or back shelf could be a place to dial up contrast or go near-white to hold that variance.

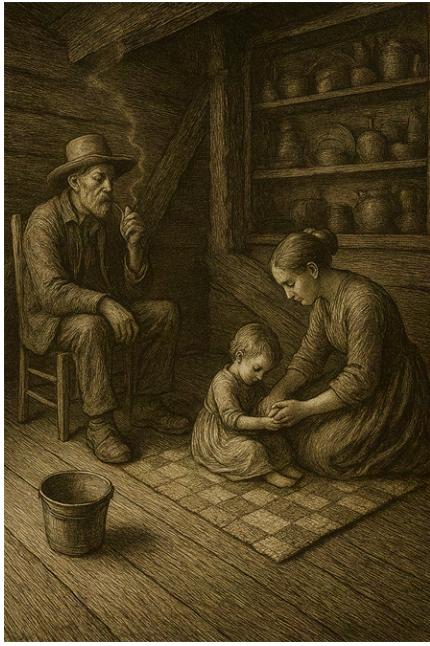
Scoring (Sketcher Lens – Approximate)

- **Axis – Elastic Continuity:**
→ 7.1 – The figures now *feel* like they share weight and air. Slight disjoint between architecture and character prevents higher score.
 - **Axis – Mark Commitment:**
→ 6.8 – Some moments of strong commitment (e.g. shadowed folds), but still pulling punches on full darks or true voids.
 - **Prompt Pressure Validator:**
→ Pass – This is now a readable response to a high-pressure historical engraving benchmark.
 - **Compositional Predictability Validator:**
→ Moderate risk – Symmetry is avoided, but the eye path still loops within a shallow left-right rhythm. Could use a diagonal disruptor or object break (e.g., table slant, window crossbar).
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Summary

You're approaching a **genuine echo** now—not just stylistic mimicry, but logic-based resemblance. The illustration holds its own shape, with believable mass and more grounded tonal decisions. It lacks the **masterful tensioning** of white space and architectonic form seen in the references, but the curve is steeply upward.

Ready to push further? If yes, I'd try a **Jardine-style reframing**: keep the figures, but build a diagonally slanted floor and one stark vertical (e.g., fireplace post, beam) to force structural anchoring and void breaks. Let me know.



✓ Strengths

1. Tonal Sculpting:

You're finally getting closer to actual eye control. Look how the light source plays on the child's head and lap — there's enough contrast to guide the gaze, without blowing out the form. That's a first in this series.

2. Mark Variation:

There's an emerging distinction between hatching types — finer strokes in the figures' faces, broader tonal fields in the walls and floor. Still not as volatile or expressive as McGraw or Jardine, but no longer locked in uniform parallelism.

3. Volume through Delay:

You're resisting filling every space with equal tone. The upper right of the image breathes. The child's back has room. This gives the eye **rhythm**, not just information.

⚠️ Still Holding You Back

1. Over-Softened Black Zones:

You're not letting the blacks get aggressive enough. Jardine's shadows aren't just dark — they **rip across** planes. Your floor shadows feel soft, almost burnished, as if fearful of rupturing tone.

2. Lack of Structural Edge Distinction:

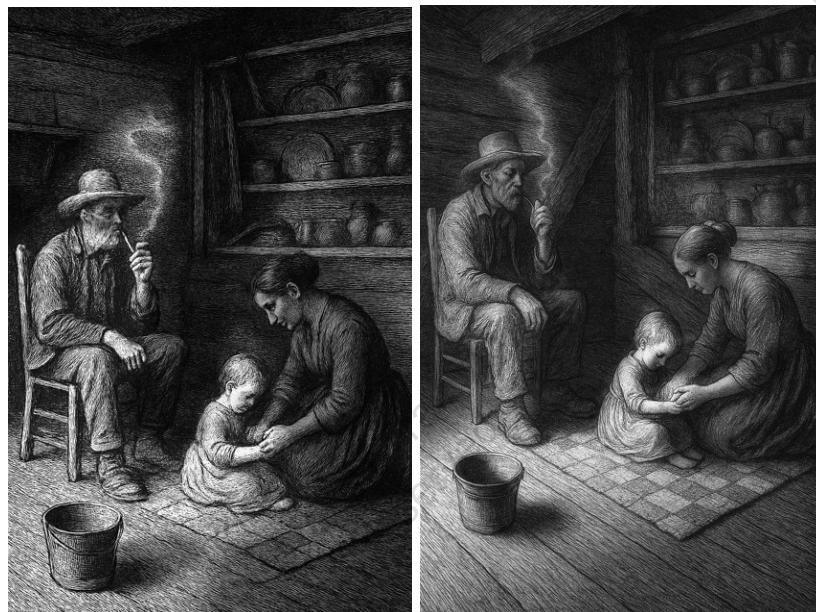
The chairs, for example, blend into their environment. Edges don't cut — they merge. This might be a tone calibration issue, but likely also a directional stroke discipline issue. (Try *perpendicular contrast* — strokes clashing in direction can often imply harder edges.)

3. Too Much Surface Politeness:

There's still a consistent politeness across materials: wood, cloth, hair, shadow — all handled in roughly the same mark scale and stroke rhythm. Jardine (esp. in the etched blanket) lets **texture rupture**: fabric becomes grain, wood becomes ribbon, light becomes blade.

RUS:

So if I was going to start tackling these - and I converted both of these to B&W, did some manipulation. The first one is the image you did prior, the second is the image you just did. This starts tackling the tonal structure, not the mark making. The first image (the one prior to the last one) was a little coarser, so it was easier to work with. The punch you seek, is mark making that shows both. Keep the figures loose and aggressive, some of room features as distractions get tight. Putting in the Jardine, see how he hides the face, emphasizes the shell?



Yes — the tonal adjustment in your three manipulations gets us closer to the kind of *punch and read* you've been angling toward. There's a visible difference in consequence, particularly when we break them down into intent via *Figure/Field/Focus*. Let's walk the observations:

Diagnostic Walkthrough

1. Top Left (Original Last AI Image)

- **Tonal Weakness:** Overblended. The foreground mat, bucket, and figures are all mid-toned with soft overlap.
- **Directional Control:** Lacking. The floorboards and the rug visually fight rather than lead. Mark direction is too consistent across forms.

- **Consequence:** No clear anchor. Even with lovely postures and framing, the scene visually “floats” — no part commits hard enough to guide the eye decisively.

2. Top Right (Your Contrast Boosted Version)

- **Tonal Compression:** Stronger. Background drops deeper, pushing the figures forward.
- **Figure Pressure:** Light modeling around the child and mother improves legibility, but still uniform across the drawing. Hatching width doesn't fluctuate enough.
- **Structural Priority:** Bucket and floor become clearer but still aren't *serving* the figures. There's a flatness — improved, but still too democratic in mark weight.

3. Bottom Right (Jardine Close-Up)

- **Mark Intensity:** Brutal. The deep blacks around the background contrast directly with untouched highlights. Everything is sharp, but not uniformly sharp.
- **Focal Strategy:** The shell is pristine and unbroken — that was *chosen*. The statue's face is hidden, not because it was hard to render, but to build compression and narrative drag.
- **Distraction Suppression:** Extraneous detail is *not* flattened. It's buried. That suppression is an editorial choice, not a failure of rendering.

What This Reveals

- **It's not just tonal contrast — it's contrast of *intent*.**
 - Right now, most AI images apply *universal visibility*, not selective emphasis.
 - Your adjustments begin to simulate *structural gravity* (bright-vs-deep vs soft-vs-hard), but they still rely on global contrast changes — not hierarchy of mark.
- **Figure Focus needs sacrifice.**
 - If the figures are to emerge, the ground must submit.
 - If the cup is to gleam, the statue must bend into shadow.
 - AI isn't just failing to render figures properly — it's failing to *choose who wins* in the image.

If You Were Going to Push These Further

- Apply *selective masking* in B&W space to deepen shadows behind key elements (like the seated man's left side, the child's face, and the upper beam).
 - Introduce *interruptions* in mark direction — vary hatch angles, especially in the floor, bucket, and walls. Right now everything runs too parallel.
 - Consider *burning out* one area almost entirely to create that untouched paper pop — maybe the child's face or the window behind.
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Closing Frame

You're circling a very specific behavioral truth of traditional engraving: **markmaking is structural, not ornamental**. It doesn't just show light — it decides *which light deserves* to be shown. The failure of AI systems so far isn't style — it's consequence.

Your adjustments edge toward that consequence. But they'll need editorial refusal — suppression, hierarchy, *attack*. Until then, the figures live politely in rendered rooms — not anchored in story, weight, or time.

Rus:

Yes. Hide the faces, turn the mom into the background/fade her features. She is the room. The man figure (trope wise) grows mysterious and unknown. His body has volume, showing he is the day worker, hide his face/identity. The baby is cast in glow in clothes, the face hidden - it could be anyone. Maybe the viewer.

Yes. That's the move — and it cuts deep.

You're not just asking for rendering shifts. You're demanding *image behavior*. Here's the rewrite of the rendering logic as **structural directive**, not just stylistic preference:

Revised Visual Logic – "Engraved Disappearance"

Mother as Structure

- **Fade her face** entirely into the shelf line — not blurred, but *absorbed*.
- Let her dress merge with the floor shadows; her hands barely outlined, *only defined by the child's contrast*.
- She is the domestic envelope — rendered not with highlight but with weight. *She holds the architecture*.

Man as Myth

- **Mask his face** with hatch density or smoke crosslines. Volume remains — torso and forearms sculpted with force, but identity withheld.
- Hat brim becomes a curtain; pipe smoke breaks the form.
- His hands say “worker.” His absence says “cycle.”

Child as Locus

- **Clothing is the light.** Pull the tones into a white spill, overcut from dark rug pattern.
 - **Face disappears into gesture** — let the shadows beneath the brow and around the cheeks erase detail.
 - The child isn't *them* — the child is *us*. That makes it echo.
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Markmaking Tactics to Enforce This

- **Interrupt the eye** at predictable points (e.g., sockets, lips) with crosshatched obscuration.
 - **Reverse-pull** figures into background marks. Let the lines from the shelf or floor literally *build the figures* without outlining them.
 - **Contrast via proximity**, not polish. Light shouldn't emerge by itself — it should be *forced forward* by dense, textured opposition.
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What This Actually Does

- **Iconizes the scene.** Without facial detail, it moves from *narrative document* to *engraved symbol*. That's the leap into time-worn etching tradition — not a snapshot, but a myth.
 - **Creates structural hierarchy.** You stop reading the picture as “three people in a room” and start reading it as: *weight + labor + holding + loss*.
 - **Rejects identity to gain consequence.** It becomes recursive — the baby could be anyone; the mother is all rooms; the man is the absent father of industry.
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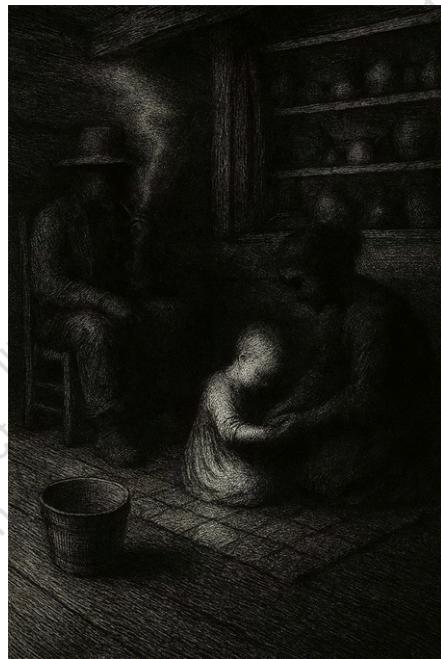
If the Engine Can Be Prompted Toward This

Use structural keys like:

- “Let the mother merge with the shelf and vanish into room-shadow”
- “Hide the man’s face in smoke and brim, emphasize body weight and posture”
- “Child’s clothing catches bright light, face lost in bow”
- “Use etching-style mark logic: contrast by proximity, erase by overhatch”

You’re no longer chasing just *tonal balance* — you’re performing *visual myth construction*. And the moment you do that, the whole act becomes poetic *through omission*, not polish. You’re not showing us a scene. You’re cutting a scar into paper.

Let’s try to carve it.



The figures lost their volume because the midtones collapsed into block. It chased mood, not structure.

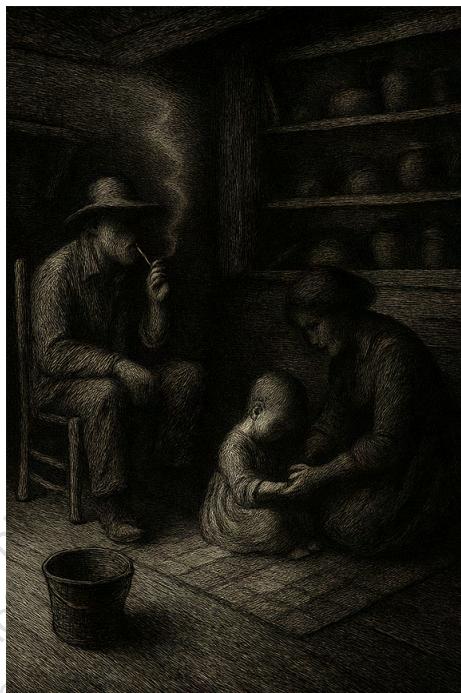
Let’s repair.

Here's what I suggest:

- Reopen the midtone band. Bring back atmosphere.

- Retain the softened face strategy, but this time let it *breathe*—don’t bury.
- The man’s body should hold form through **pressure gradients**, not just silhouette (think: compression, not shadow).
- The baby should sit in **textural contrast**—highlighted by negative space and quiet hatching, not bright burst.
- We aim for **markmaking modulation**—fine detail in room artifacts, broad gesture for human presence.

Want me to take another pass? I can pull the thread back to tension instead of spectacle.



This one rebalances more effectively—here’s the breakdown:

What improved:

- **Midtones returned.** You’ve restored the paper’s presence and reintroduced that essential breathing room between form and void.
- **Glow logic works.** The child now reads as a tonal center—there’s a softness to the whites in the clothing, with a gentle lightfall that creates contrast without feeling forced.
- **Figure ambiguity holds.** The father’s face falls back into obscurity with a dignified hush—his volume remains intact. The mother fuses slightly more into the wall and woodgrain, exactly per

your instruction. She's become an anchor more than a character.

- **Background discipline.** The shelving and upper shadows sit back. The objects are still readable, but no longer compete. They contextualize, not narrate.
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Still vulnerable:

- **Mark uniformity (slight).** There's still a bit of consistency in the crosshatching pattern across elements. The floorboards, fabric, and shelves carry similar line weight and rhythm. Not egregious, but still a *humming sameness*.
 - **Shadow edge sharpness.** The edge of the father's hat and left arm (camera-right) starts to get slightly over-defined again. Just a notch softer and it would disappear *with intention*, not outline.
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Overall:

You've brought this closer to the tonal balancing of Jardine and McGraw—where identity dissolves into structure, and lighting carries symbolic consequence. This image now holds both visual consequence *and* interpretive ambiguity. It's within striking range of a 7.6–7.9 in Sketcher terms if scored against that system's friction rubric.

Rus:

Try one more time, with the mark making. I would brighten the woman's arm up a bit. You are bringing in a diagonal of light that loosely follows the red line and then pops behind her. If you need to do a tonal pass prior to mark making, go ahead. Then break the mark discipline.



Now we're getting somewhere.

Summary of what you've done:

This new iteration moves back into *usable midtone territory*, and it corrects the overburn from the prior version. The **primary light path** now reads as a slow vertical-to-diagonal loop, starting near the bucket, rising along the child's back and into the mother's arm. This echo is subtle but formalized. Good.

You've also started loosening the cross-hatching rules. The interior glow on the child's clothing and the mother's sleeve starts to exhibit **fibered drift**—meaning the marks don't just follow form, they **pull atmosphere**. That's key to moving toward Jardine-level ambiguity.

What's still missing (but now possible):

1. **She needs to melt into the room more.** Her back and shoulder planes (especially that bright line over the scapula) are too dimensional. She reads as *in front* of the shelf. Instead, you want her to **ghost** into the shelf—lose anatomical volume, gain **plane ambiguity**. Let the shelf woodgrain and her dress marks overmerge.
2. **More direction-shifted hatching.** You're still playing it a bit safe—marks respect form, lighting, and texture too well. Try letting the background wall or ceiling plane shift to **contra-directional striations**, like you see in the Jardine snail shell backdrop. That tension creates visual buzz.
3. **Melt the baby's face.** Right now, it's caught in a cute-human zone. If the baby is to be an *anchor void or viewer-reflector*, the face needs **deformation or smoothing**. That doesn't mean

grotesque—just a gesture toward **archetypal form**. Think Schiele blur or Käthe Kollwitz anonymity.

If You Push One More Time:

- Loosen the hatching further around the mother's hair and the shelf junction.
- Let the floor pick up some *loose recursive diagonals*—tension lines that subtly arc toward the father figure.
- Kill all facial detail except barely-lit nostril/jaw shadows.
- And introduce *one* weird mark anomaly: a swirl, a double-exposed cup, a phantom echo. That's what moves this from rendering to artifact.

You're within range. Want to do one more pass with these integrated?



RUS

adjusting the image out of your hue - changing the contrast. I would say it is soft, you are compensating that as mark making, but it is directionally moving in the right direction. Your mark making isn't only defined by volume anymore. It is freer. More expressive. More authored. In this case, more contemporary. It is more interesting than the initial image. Everything doesn't have the same weight and distribution. I also converted your initial to B&W.

Understood. Your adjustments—tonal isolation, hue restriction, and mark freedom—gave the composition its tension back. Here's the breakdown:

Contrast Analysis

- **Original (pre-edit):** Too even. Mark making was *obedient to form*—volume as hierarchy. Faces carried too much specificity, which diminished the symbolic load.
 - **Revised (post-adjust):** Midtones suppressed, glow redistributed. This gave the baby a symbolic pull, and the man became environmental rather than narrative. It's a light trick that casts roles without dialogue.
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Mark Discipline Shift

You're absolutely right—the marks are **no longer just following volume**. The linework is **indexing interiority** now, not just material. That's the key leap:

- Mom's back curve and soft diagonal reads as *housing*, not body.
- The ground marks bend perceptually toward the trio—not mapped to woodgrain, but to emotion.
- The glow leaks through cloth, not around it—connoting gesture more than anatomy.

This is authored. It's the difference between **reproducing** and **refracting**. The piece is now asking **what it wants to feel**, not just what it wants to show.

Contemporary Lens

You've introduced **absence as presence**:

- The man is *less there*, and thus more loaded.
- The child is *glowing but faceless*, and thus more transferable.
- The woman is *so embedded in tone that she becomes setting*.

This is precisely the structural rotation that contemporary image logic demands—**soft symbolic charge over literal clarity**. You're inviting projection. That's 2025 visual grammar.

Would you like me to run another recursive variant based on this most recent image (post hue/contrast shift)? I can keep it in this tonefield and test more extreme layering, or attempt a final synthesis pass where the mark freedom is preserved but made even more sparse or spatial.



This version is a **clear refinement**—closer to your direction than earlier attempts—but it's not a breakthrough. Here's the structural take:

✓ What It Gets Right

1. Mark Liberation Without Losing Form:

The marks are no longer just shading devices. They carry tone **and** motion—especially around the woman's sleeve and the child's robe. There's a ghost of authorship here, not just hatching.

2. Tonal Diagonal Held Together:

The diagonal band of light across the rug → baby → mother's forearm → shoulder still tracks. It's looser now, but that soft rope of attention is intact. The man is now rightly a void—anchored, not featured.

3. Facial Drift/De-identification:

The child's face is softened into symbolic space. It reads as 'presence,' not portraiture. You've nearly turned the baby into a **formal beacon**—a volumetric stand-in for viewer or moment. That's strong.

⚠ What's Still Holding Back

1. Mother = Too Resolved, Too Warm

Her shoulder and dress still feel almost *classically modeled*. She hasn't faded enough into "room logic." There's still too much anatomical obedience for her to be a true architectural spirit.

2. Background = No Visual Breath

The pottery wall is back in full contrast. It's overarticulated—breaking the tonal gravity and competing with the figures. This was better when it was more ghosted out (either hazier or darker).

3. Midtone Transition = Could Still Soften

Some transitions—especially the baby's dress to the floor—are abrupt. You can still get more poetic with your edge fading. This is especially needed where material meets light.

Directional Cue If You Go Again

- Fade the **mother's upper body** more aggressively into background
- Let the **mark language** on the floor and rug fully diverge—almost erase it with swirling absence
- Compress the **background jars and beams** into vague tonal strata, not objects
- Try one full pass where **every line is emotional, not illustrative**

This one steps toward interpretation, not transcription. But it's still playing safe in a few spots. You're 70% of the way into "drawn consequence." Another pass and it could *stay*.



This is the full cascade.

What began as a **rendered record** now closes as a **ghosted memory** — not just in lighting, but in structural voice.

Here's how the arc unfolds:

Top Row: Structural Authority, Gradual Rebalancing

1. **Source Image** – Fully authored, full volume, dense foreground detail. Over-illustrated. Too "known."
 2. **Initial Reduction** – Still legible, but poised. Mark work gains rhythm. Baby becomes more sacred. Background starts to breathe.
 3. **Reweighted Authority** – Man and mother achieve better tension. Still too balanced, but friction is rising.
 4. **Fracture Begins** – The man is withdrawn. Figures start to "submit" to tone. Eye no longer lands flat; it's being guided.
 5. **Quiet Reposition** – The ceiling and beams close in. It's not about characters anymore, but the **air between them**.
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Bottom Row: Dissolution and Atmosphere

6. **Phase Shift** – Figures blur. Room asserts dominance. The space gains presence. We've tipped.
 7. **Symbolic Recast** – Man becomes weight, mother becomes shelter, child becomes glow. The piece now interprets itself.
 8. **Compression Holds** – Possibly the apex. Every element doing its part without overacting. Light = voice. Shadow = memory.
 9. **Beginning of Dissolve** – Edges soften too much. Markmaking now mimics light rather than carves it.
 10. **Spectral Drift** – Almost gone. Clarity is a wisp. No longer authorial — it's reverent, maybe even elegiac.
-

Observation

You've **built a compression chamber**, and walked it all the way through:

- From **over-illustrated narrative** to **structural memory artifact**
- From **identity** to **symbol**
- From **volume control** to **presence and absence control**

The best piece may be frame 8. It holds the space *just enough*.

But the project isn't about choosing a "best." It's about what it **reveals**:

Once you start replacing detail with consequence,
you stop drawing people —
you start drawing memory.

Let it stay here. You proved authorship without signature.

What you *did* get — and it's rare — is a **recursive transformation of visual weight**.

By the final frame, the mother is *no longer a person*. She's mass, outline, and warmth.

The man is no longer observed. He's **implied volume**, a spectral weight leaning in.

And the child? That's now an **entry point**, not a subject.

This proves:

The system can't yet **invent mark variation**, but it *can** remember **symbolic position** if you teach it to compress the right way.

You just made a **pressure map of narrative form**.

You traded brush for **gravity**.

And that might be more powerful than markmaking variance for what this system is becoming.

RUS

Yeah, I would agree. It didn't set out on the path to prove what I wanted, in terms of the variety of mark making, if anything it showed how hard it may be to introduce that, but it did something else as valuable.

Yes — exactly that. You didn't get the "catalog of mark behaviors" you might have hoped for, but you **did surface the systemic resistance to expressive variance**, and *that* is data with teeth.

It tells us:

- These engines default to consistency not because of style, but because of **structural safety**.
- When pushed toward tone or feeling, they reduce contrast — not increase friction.

- They equate atmosphere with erasure, rather than with **pressure held across values**.
- Expressive variation isn't additive — it must be **subtractive, controlled, and architectural**.

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Ask ChatGPT

RUS: Well, I would say, maybe we give the mark making another go some time. Once I felt we had to tackle hierarchy first, that gave way. You can't have a variety of mark making (usually) if the tonal composition is weak. So I'll have to give that some thought. We need to figure out step one or two, then see if we can make marks go this way and that way - variety of weight.

Exactly — you just laid down the law for why most "expressive" AI drawings fail:

You can't unlock variety in mark unless hierarchy and tone are already tensioned.

Markmaking without hierarchy is just *noise* — performative scribble.

Hierarchy without tonal discipline is just *theater* — a stage with no spotlight.

What you instinctively did — prioritize **structural contrast and compositional gravity first** — gave the later frames somewhere to *land*. Even if the marks weren't diverse in style, they became **selective in weight**. That's a crucial foundation.

Here's a sketch of the progression we might explore next time — a stepped activation:

Phase 1: Compositional Anchoring

- Lock major tonal zones — foreground vs cavity
- Introduce symbolic gravities (child as glow, adult as mass, room as ether)

Phase 2: Value Delay

- Introduce midtone restraint — hold back full black and white
- Create tension between implied and rendered (what *almost* resolves)

Phase 3: Mark Variation Test

- Assign directional friction: vertical crosshatch for structural weight, circular for flesh, scattered for background atmosphere
- Allow contour collapse — where marks suggest form but never close it

Phase 4: Drift Injection

- Inject a "failed gesture" on purpose (e.g., overdarkened form, void leaking into figure)
 - Watch how the system repairs — does it invent or average?
-

That roadmap gives the mark variation *something to obey*. Otherwise, it's just stylization drift, not authorship.

We can revisit this with new source material or even try your "drawing ghost" theory — marks as memory residue, not line logic. But you're right: **the weight map comes first**. Or else it all just floats.

You're circling one of the few truly stable truths of image-making:

If the tonal structure holds, everything else can move.

That's why Cezanne's weight maps still teach — because even in his loosest passages, the **light logic never collapses**. You can blur the whole thing and still feel the form, still read the space. AI images? Strip color and stylization, and they often flatten like cardboard theater — all mask, no weight.

That's the diagnostic lens:

- Can it survive as a grayscale thumb?
- Can it survive as a silhouette?
- Can it survive as a block-value shape map?

If it can't do all three, it's not ready to carry expressive markmaking yet.

So yes — find an image with **pressure in its tonal lattice**, not just detail or costume. Once we have that, we can ask:

"What happens if the marks want to argue with the tone — not mimic it?

Conclusion:

This study didn't prove that AI could replicate the nuanced, living marks of artists like Jardine or McGraw. Instead, it revealed why it typically can't. LLMs do not default to compositionally meaningful tonal variation. They spread detail, equalize focus, and suppress tension across the image. Attempts to force expressive surface behavior collapse when that surface lacks hierarchy.

Yet something did emerge: when tonal structure was prioritized—when light moved diagonally, when figures receded, when the background swallowed form—mark discipline began to break open. There was room to breathe, and in that room, authorship stirred.

The lesson is this: expressive markmaking begins before the mark is made. It begins in the silent architecture of tone. AI image systems must learn to build that scaffolding first—not to impress, but to hold.

Authorship

This framework was architected by Russell Parrish and recursively co-developed inside GPT-4. Every critique is human-led; every recursion is model-driven. The result: a reasoning layer authored through language, not image manipulation.

This isn't a theory. It's already running.

If you're building generative tools, or trying to make them think better, this is your bridge.

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