Here’s beautiful image that we’ll use for demonstration purposes, showing a slickered cowboy leading an Appaloosa across a muddied stream. We are obviously deep into the country on a cloudy, rainy day. What can we do to add interest here?

Looking at the quadrants, we see that the placement of the bank cuts it in about equal top and bottom halves. While this can be used narratively [perhaps he is about to cross into a nether region, a change apparent], it makes a visual boundary.

Left-to-right, the center is the object of the painting, almost eliminating movement. Do we want to make it more volatile and moving?

Areas of highest contrast also attract our eye-- here, the Appaloosa’s legs behind, and the bank ahead. This might actually distract us from the story, as it can also freeze the movement of the figures. The splash is contrast interest, though also nearly-centered.
The movement in the frame is important, here the purple arrow is his direction, while the green arrow is what we might want to follow.

Something about the out-country is visually-disturbing here....

These trees are either grown in the wind, or, as we are more-likely to think, this image is tilted

Lets try and see if that tilt is the brain-freeze here... by using (control-T or Apple-T, hit Return to accept), you can turn the image if the cursor is outside the box.
Exploring Painting Composition Using Photoshop Tools

with Craig Luce

See more info on my site at:
http://Medical-illustration.com

However, if we tilt the image too far, we quickly find that it introduces other elements that might better be allowed to fade into the background of the viewer’s experience. You may also make a new Layer Comp to return to this position.

To go back, hit <Control + Z>
So, let’s try another compensating element—light/shadow.

Using a soft brush set to <Color Dodge> at <25% opacity>, add some light into the mix. If you disallow “airbrushing”, the brush will stop adding when it stops moving, and will only add more when you click again.

The same thing may be accomplished by using a Normal brush set to light yellow, painted onto a new layer of type <Color Dodge>; this allows you to play with the opacity without changing the image permanently.

Here, I’ve slowly added sunlight, allowing tree shadows to alter the composition...

The rest is still in shadow, but the fall-off the page in the lower left is returned to the image, and the Appaloosa is now in sunlight AFTER the rain.

Perhaps giving him room to move within the image is also a good idea, so now I’ve cropped the image from the left.

While this changes the aspect ratio of the image, it follows the future intent of the rider and gives the viewer room to anticipate his crossing.
Now, the quadrants are a bit more off-center, and it has a “leading” feel. The bright horse behind leads the eye back, and the cowboy can make his crossing into daylight.

This also allows the stream to become a more-active character in the narrative.

Here’s the cropped image.

The limited palette remains, though it is brighter in feel, but let’s try to go ‘there’ further. Using Layers, the image can be played-with without destroying anything in the image... you can always go backwards.

Now, a brush using a light phthalo blue is painted onto a new Layer of type `<Hue>` has added some sky reflection to the muddy water, adding to the color range in the image.

A red element to the frame here might center the color range of the work.