

# Making a Picture

Prose — Ciarán Francis

Photography was a gift given to me through the dust covered antiques and dead hobbies of those before me. My father and my mentors, as generous as they have always been, gave me machines sometimes double my age. Every camera I've ever used has been someone else's. How ironic is it that these tools are my eyes, my excuses. These were the promises still being fulfilled: this moment could last forever. They are heavy swords made of glass; They are hammers driving delicate nails. I use an old Cannon that threads the tongue of fresh film by itself with a wirrrrr, like a toy car. It is a heavy lance with a long lens. Old cameras are tools of legend, like Gae Bolga, the spear that never misses.

There's a kind of assumption we've built around photography. From its infancy it was questioned as an artform; it was seen as a mere presentation of what was. It is an objective thing. We all see the colorful pictures of birds and exotic landscapes that pass as backdrops to our electronics. It's easy to assume that the image presented exists as though a square was cut in the fabric of our vision. It isn't true, though.

The way I see the world changes when I hold a camera. I collect little pieces, taking chunks out of my life like marble. A collection of these is called a roll of film. The branches of a tree are texture and all the colors of the world exist on a continuum: light to dark. These are stills, like stories suspended in plastic. They are invisible until made ready by development. I am a different person when I hold my camera. I could walk anywhere, talk to anyone, move through walls and transcend all sociological boundaries. I have a camera, that's why. This is silver pulled in strings to make faces through chemistry. This is strings of faces wet with soap. A line of film hangs in the cabinet, delicate as caribou velvet ready to peel. This is easy.

The hard part is everything else. Walking home one night I happened upon a woman in her car, lining her lips and eyes as the engine purred. Her windshield was like a TV screen projecting the orange overhead light. It was as though nothing else existed but her little world. I stopped, stared, but I had to move on. I had nothing to capture it with. These are the most preventable failures. Want is fruitless with such a fickle master. How many times have I sent the shutter in motion, smiling at my own brilliance, only to find a blank square? How many times have I beamed with joy only to find a dim and blank figure at my hand. This is the violence of failure, the erasure of memory.

Deciding is hard. My sister always thought I was indecisive. I walk in a coffee shop I've been to a hundred times and ponder for five minutes what I should eat. I get the same thing I always do. It's not because I'm unsure. It is reckoning of, for a moment, all that is possible. Legendary photographer Bernice Abbott said, "A photograph is or should be a significant document, a penetrating statement, which can be described in a very simple term... selectivity." It is written on the very walls of the building I learned to control a camera in. Decision is everything there is. There is a whole planet to photograph; there is only so much film.

The enlarger awaits. His eye hangs suspended from a rack or floating on tracks; he finds his face in the film threaded through his cornea, a tiny light bulb and a lens. His deadly gaze brings magic paper to life like a movie screen, a projection of stillness. Light trickles down and touches the delicate skin of the enamel on paper. An impression is made, invisible for now, the mark left by an X-Ray. This, despite what you've been told, is photography. There is taking a picture, and there is making a picture. You have only ever seen the product of the latter. Photography is not so much cutting from the world, but assembling what it should look like.

The paper is bathed and, like waking up, a road appears and bodies and a soft light. The sun in threads of cotton, spooled through the branches. The moments I catch most photos are insignificant. I have, in fact, dedicated whole rolls to good, boring shots. These are nothing out of my wheelhouse, nothing I will regret losing if experimentation fails. I'm sometimes walking to get dinner, or going downtown, or losing myself in a lonely cabin. The moment from me deciding to shoot, to pressing the button is barely longer than the time it took to expose the film. In that time mechanical malfunctions occur, hair rises and falls, and half a breath is taken. Silver grains explore every inch.

It's not always easy. I throw myself at failure's foot. Each passing sheet of paper is another go at what should be. The highlights are too muddy, the shadows too gray, the development too strong. The difference between good and bad is the same as deciding a new outfit for an important date. I dash myself again and again at those jagged rocks until finally, like sunlight passing into a clearing, something beautiful shows itself in that wicked pool. Making a single print takes a lot of failure, and if you do alternative process (you like it dirty), then it also takes a lot of experimentation. I call all of these little experiments, these little shots in the dark, interpretations.

Like interpreting the Bible, the original text doesn't exist. People carried those stories first by mouth, then by scroll, then by press and pocket and pillow. The moment is gone, and the negative is extremely difficult to read. The only way I can experience what I've made is by making decisions: more contrast, sharper highlights, brush direction, time developing, clutter clutter clutter. It is the decision that makes the whole thing exist. There is no truth in any of it. Don't let anyone tell you a camera doesn't lie; a camera cannot speak but for what I tell it to say. It is only what I think. It is only what has survived until the end. It is my eye, my excuse.