

My Philosophy in Photography

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by Songgun Lee

I die. All the moments I have sacrificed so much to seize what I wanted become meaningless. Yet recognizing the inevitability of death has set me free. The instant I understood that time flows only one way, the present became desperately precious. I feel nostalgia for right now—

"Ah, someday I'll miss this very moment, too."

My heart aches after parting with someone I love; I shrink when my boss scolds me; I bomb a final exam—still, every second tastes rich to me. When I let the present flood my whole body, I know I am alive, and I record this fleeting instant that will never return. That is why the world I see is so breathtakingly beautiful.

To capture the now I remember, I press the shutter. Unlike many photographers, I don't edit afterward. My photos are simply "eye screenshots," not attempts to make something look grander or prettier. You won't find the usual "artistic intention" critics and photographers talk about.

The images on display show the world exactly as Songgun Lee experienced it. You are, in effect, a spectator inside my eyeball. It's my answer to the question that goes a step beyond "What would I look like through your eyes?"—namely, "What would the whole world look like through your eyes?"

You were beautiful. Your image in my eyes was a white pearl beauty without a trace. I wanted to remember that kind of image of you. I wanted to show you this beauty that can only be seen from my point of view.

Your first gift was a used camera. The Nikon 5300, which was 300 dollars, was too big for me at the time, was what I had saved as a favorite in Facebook marketplace. I always took the Nikon

with me when I met you. Your youth, given into my hands, was breathtakingly beautiful. I knew that it would be the image of you I wanted to look back on someday, not to let it slip away with my own eyes. What a waste it would be. I wanted to capture your most beautiful self, the 'you' as you are, and you as you are from a subjective angle, 'my eyes'. I wanted to let you know that you are not just beautiful in my eyes, but that everyone who actually sees you is looking at such a beautiful woman. I wanted to show you how beautiful you are, that it is an 'objective beauty' being able to capture with a camera, not a 'subjective beauty' that I only see.

I didn't want to let this stupid memory of mine lose you, with few memories from before high school. I didn't want to forget this view of mine. The world I see is a completed canvas, and at the center was always the main character of a beautiful heroine, you.

You're gone, but thanks to you, I know that this world in my eyes is a perfect piece of art. The beauty of this world that I would not have been aware of before is now caught in my eyes dozens of times a day. You gave me the gift that the world, the scenery in front of my eyes, is a work. I have decided to pay it forward to this world for this grace I have received from you. In the same daily life that someone may pass by unconsciously today, I discover the beauty and capture it with my eyelids, through shutters.

I chased a good job to buy a good house, chased a good school to land a good job, and slogged through studies I hated to reach that school. A fat tuition bill came as a bonus. Paying what I never wanted to pay and doing the job I thought I wanted, I found myself forced to communicate with people I never wanted to talk to. Following the success formula others handed me, my mantra "You can't only do what you like" turned into "Will I ever get to do what I like?" and finally into "What did I even want in the first place?" I charged toward what I thought was a distant utopia, but landed in hell—and even there, I was hopelessly lost. On the way I lost friends, family time, money, hours—above all, I lost myself, only to fall straight into hell.

But once I harnessed death's certainty, everything felt light.

‘When I'm dying, will I really care that I didn't get into a top school or failed the perfect job hunt? Since I'm going to die anyway, why not do what I actually want?’

My first real dream, the earliest one I remember taking seriously, was to become a pilot. Not the kindergarten fantasy kind—this was middle school me thinking: travel the world, earn great money, and after a long-haul flight get at least two days off. To that middle school kid, it was the ultimate job. Looking back as an adult, the core was "freedom." I wanted to spend my time on things I chose—roam, experience, and most of all, have fun. Yet scanning my 24 hours, I found no action intentionally and deliberately made purely for the sake of fun. Stretching the view to a whole month, I realized photography was my single act of joy that I intentionally make time for the sake of “fun”. I would go through my day, and when I notice a beautiful scene, I would remember the time and location, then a couple of days later, I would come back with my camera to capture the beautiful piece of art that stands in front of me. The world is a 3-dimensional canvas to me, the flowing artwork I experience with my whole body, and I'm just a part of it.

This exhibit is just one ordinary person's example of returning to an original dream, remembering the reason behind it, and turning that reason into action.

So I ask you: What was your primal dream? What reason or desire fueled it? Whether it was happiness, freedom, fun—are you, in your current 24 hours, your current 30 days, doing anything with that deliberate intention in mind? If we can't reverse or stop time, perhaps living truly means plunging into the present with every fiber of our being, riding its one-way flow like a current, not fleeing it. Acting on our first intentions—consciously, deliberately—may be one path. Death's certainty isn't a weight on my back; it's the wind at my heels. As I conclude, I invite you to this thought.