

Viewfinder Vision

I am stuck in the viewfinder of a camera. To explain the extent of my *stuckness*, let me rewind to March 2020, back when the days were long – or short – or all just blended together, really. My family had journeyed a few hours north to Whidbey Island, Washington, to a destination we had come for the past twenty years called the Blue Heron beach house. This house had always been my “place.” I had never traveled there without immediately feeling enveloped by pure relaxation. I suppose this peace flowed from the ebbing tides and the soft clouds that parted each day to let the sun stream through, and from childhood memories of kayaking on serene waters before returning home for an evening spent reading or painting alongside the sunset and roasting s’mores under the stars. For years, I journeyed to this pentagonal wooden dwelling with its sea-facing windows for an intermission from the bustling city life. In March of 2020, however, every day felt like such an intermission. This particular journey to the beach house was not an effort to seek respite from urban life, but from the monochrome moments of self-isolation, and from too-familiar walls that seemed to be gradually inching inwards. Quarantine transformed my former words into whirlwinds of thoughts, and without the outlets of daily catch-ups, thoughtful discussions, and bouts of gossip that I once took for granted, I began to feel hyper-aware of every thought that entered my mind. This trip to Whidbey Island was more than just an escape from the physical reality induced by the Coronavirus pandemic; it was an attempt to temporarily escape my own crowded mind. For much of my life, I have turned to photography because it is a mechanism for such an escape. When I peer through the viewfinder of my DSLR, the stress and excitement of the world fall away, and it is as though the only two beings in existence are me and my subject.

One evening that week, the artist painting day into dusk spilled his palette. Pastels were splattered across the horizon, and a glob of raspberry-orange acrylic slowly slid down the edge of the canvas. A sharp evening breeze gnawed through the gaps in my cable-knit sweater as I drifted down the sandy shore. I made no notice of the chill, however, as every sense except my vision had drifted away with the wind. My mind was vacant save for a dream of an untaken photograph. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed what looked to be a dilapidated house.

To any *unstuck* individual, this house would appear just as described: dilapidated. The *unstuck* might first notice how its skeletal structure crumbled around a large window, and how in the center of the frame glowed the artist's mess, brilliantly reflected. The *unstuck* would endeavor to capture this striking scene in a photograph, using some predetermined template for success such as the Rule of Thirds. Beautiful, but objective.

By dividing the world into nine squares, viewfinders break down the superficial into the elements of design that compose it. Without lifting my camera to my eye, I could see the scene before me not for *what it was*, but for that of which it was *composed*. I perceived the contrasts of rich pastels and fading grays, of cumulus clouds and peeling eggshell paint. I simultaneously detected the symmetry of the window, divided in two with a sage-colored strip of wood, and the juxtaposition of vertical and horizontal siding. I noticed the shadow cast by the triangular roof and the highlights of the falling sun. And, all around, hung a discordance of space filled and empty, positive and negative. I perceived a story, a history. Not a run-down shack, but a weathered lifetime of things done and undone.

It is this viewfinder vision that renders me *stuck*. While "stuck" tends to hold a negative connotation, I am *stuck* simply because I physically cannot will myself to stop at the surface of the world. Whether analyzing a seemingly mundane old house or an ostensibly rich passage on

the philosophy of time, I cannot help but perceive situations through a viewfinder. My eyes penetrate the surface of every scene, every experience, in a never-ending attempt to see things for more than just *what they are*. This viewfinder vision manifests itself physically, as in the stairway to heaven that my eye fashions from a reflection on a neglected house, as well as mentally. When reading a novel, for example, I find it difficult to fully perceive the professed story. Instead, my mind darts between the composition of the sentences - the flow of the words, or lack thereof - and the processes the author employed to imagine such a plot. A viewfinder frames my personal interactions as well. I am both thoughtful in my own expression and quietly observant of the feelings of others; I rarely speak without first developing and analyzing the potential effects of my own thoughts, and I rarely listen without breaking down the perspective of the speaker.

I question the world around me constantly, sometimes wondering so intently about the infinite nature of the universe (The universe can't just *end* suddenly, like at a wall or a drop-off. But how can something be infinite?) or how I have come to be conscious (How can science alone explain consciousness and perspective? Mustn't there be some greater power?), that I frighten myself into wishing to escape this *stuckness*. However, it is in moments like that March evening that I relish my introspective nature and take pride in my perceptiveness. My viewfinder vision allows me to question, wonder, and philosophize. It allows me to see beyond what am I told is true and craft beauty from ambiguity. It is why, when I looked at the cumulus fairytale reflected before me, I didn't simply see a sunset, but watched the lingering sun spin pirouettes around the crescent moon before lowering into a deep bow and disappearing behind a curtain of falling stars.