

Aaron Brame

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In the closet of my office, I keep a large plastic bin, full of all the negatives and prints that I have been accumulating and caring for since I was a teenager, when my parents gave me a second-hand Nikon F as a high school graduation gift. During one particularly dark evening in the winter of 2020, I retrieved some sleeves of negatives from this bin and started digitizing my shots from two decades ago.

Film is a medium of discovery. These days, we glance at the back of our digital cameras to see if everything looks okay, if anything interesting is happening in front of the lens, whether or not we should bother with taking another frame. But when we shoot on film we defer the surprise, elation, or disappointment of the shot. By the time we see our results, we have become a different person, and the discovery of the image can, and in fact should be, a thrill.

I used to take my film cameras with me to bowling alleys, ball games, classrooms, and protests. My subjects were my brothers, my friends, and the musicians we heard in the nightclubs of Memphis and Baltimore. I shot myself in a mirror at age twenty, at a venue on Beale Street while an artist played Clarksdale-style blues in the tiny hall outside.

The image of a television playing to my empty kitchen might have been right-clicked into the trash had I taken it today, but as it survives, so too does the desolation of a mid-December afternoon, when dusk falls between *Jeopardy!* and dinner. This winter I scanned over two hundred rolls, pictures from the first decade of my adulthood, the last ten years or so before everyone switched to digital. Night after night, as I archived my pictures, I watched a body of work taking form, and I discovered a photographer I had never really known before, one with a style and bravery of his own.

These days I'm back to shooting on film. Every time I release the shutter I feel a special connection to the art of creation, a satisfaction in actually imprinting my images on layers of emulsion that will chemically transform into a negative. I like to hold the negs up to the light and see all my images there, strung one after another like jewels on a necklace, tangible artifacts of my imagination at work. And when it's a product of bravery or beauty--my friend Audrey, pausing in the Philadelphia train station to answer one last call on her new-fashioned cell phone, say--I feel a similar satisfaction as when I read a finished poem that I wrote some years ago and forgot about. That one took a little courage; I like it.



