

Fleeting Moments

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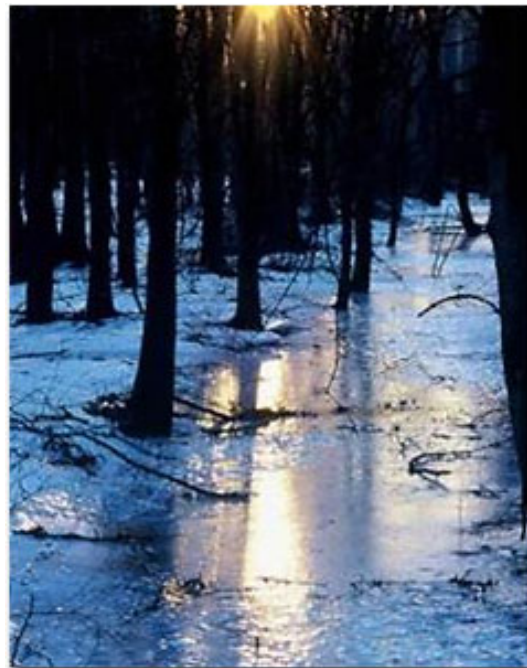
It was a rainy Saturday afternoon and I was lounging in my living room watching the last innings of a rain-delayed baseball game. With nowhere to be and no errands to run, I was in couch-potato heaven. Dozing on the couch, I nearly jumped out of my skin when my girlfriend burst through the door. By the time my sleep addled brain could form the words, "what in the world are you doing?" she was in my office grabbing my camera. "Rainbow," she replied excitedly. Without thinking, I ran out the door with her to see a rainbow that seemed to grow right out of my front yard. It extended like Jack's beanstalk into the sky and landed in a splash of color in a parking lot behind my home. To top off the magical display, a spectacular sunset was beginning to take shape, making the sky a wonderful burnt orange background to the vibrant hues of the rainbow.

I quickly grabbed the camera and began to fire. After two or three shots, I realized that I was violating just about every rule of photography and that if I didn't slow down and focus (no pun intended), I would miss the moment entirely. Extending my tripod legs, I began to compose my shot. The rainbow extended through a large oak tree that with the right exposure would silhouette beautifully against the orange sky. I snapped my Canon A2E into place, determined the correct exposure to darken the trees sufficiently and began to shoot, moving slowly and deliberately to ensure the best possible composition. The moment lasted for less time than it took to take the exposure reading and as the sun sank, the rainbow faded and the fleeting moment was over.

On another weekend in early February, I wanted to get some early morning shots of the recently fallen snow. Saturday dawned gray and dreary, so I decided to sleep in and try again at sunset. As the late afternoon approached, the sky showed no signs of clearing, but determined to get some images, I drove to a nearby county park where I hoped to get some good shots of a stream and the surrounding trees.

I wandered around in the cold for 30 minutes, but my only reward was a stark gray landscape with no discernible features to photograph. After burning a roll of film and waiting for something to present itself, I decided enough was enough; the home theater system was calling my name. As I drove home, the sun began to peak through the clouds and the sky began to brighten. Lamenting my bad timing, I debated turning around. As the two sides of my brain argued for control, I looked off into the woods and saw the sun beginning to sink through the trees. I sat in my car and watched the floor of the forest suddenly illuminate with a golden light. The area of woods on either side of the road I was driving on had apparently been flooded just before the temperature dropped below freezing and now was covered in a layer of ice. The sunlight was reflecting off of the ice making the entire area glow. I nearly pulled a muscle leaping out of the car. I set up my tripod in the middle of the road and took my meter reading off of the ice. The golden color looked to be a stop lighter than medium tone, so I set the exposure accordingly. I fired a full roll of film in the short time it took for the sun to sink below the horizon, taking full advantage of my camera's five-frame-per-second winder. As quickly as it appeared, the sun was gone and I was left in the cold winter's night.

These seemingly unrelated incidents form the basis of the photographer's relationship with nature. We are merely spectators to the production of light and color that is perpetually on display. If we are lucky, we get the chance to record the performance in its entirety. If not, we must wait for the elements to again converge in perfect synergy. A friend and fellow photographer once remarked to me that photography is all about opportunity. Unfortunately, for nature photographers too often it is missed opportunity. Personally, I can't count the number of times I have been driving in my car and have stumbled upon a spectacular sunset, or a tree virtually aflame with fall color, but had no camera with which to record the moment. It is these missed opportunities, or more accurately, fear of missed opportunities that drive many of us to climb out of bed before dawn in search of the ideal light of the magic hour, or to lug our equipment up a mountain for the perfect sunset. Fleeting moments keep us coming back to our passion, much as one perfect tee-shot will keep a high-handicap golfer returning to the course season after season. Without special moments like a rainbow or a glimpse of sun through a storm, all of our shots would be identical and nature photography would be a stagnant endeavor.



Unfortunately, many a moment will be missed. The marvelous thing about our craft, however, is that nature will always provide us with another chance. Our goal as photographers must be to record the opportunities that nature grants us, as beautifully and artistically as possible. Perhaps Ansel Adams described it best when he said, "Sometimes I get to places just when God is ready to have somebody click the shutter."

About the images...

Rainbow - Canon A2E, Canon 28-135/3.5-5.6 IS, Fuji Velvia, Bogen 3221

Ice Reflection - Canon A2E, Canon 70-200/4 L, Kodak E100VS, Bogen 3221/Bogen 3047

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