

## The Faithful Fifty

*Oh, the fifty. The honest speaker, and the most cunning liar. The boring normal that takes a lifetime to master. The lens that suggests, whispers, and beguiles, rather than shouts, insists, and spotlights. The lens of my life: the one I'd give up last of all, if cruel destiny made me sell my glass, one by bitter one.*

There is a fuzzy area between the exuberant wide-angles and the ever-growing phalluses of telephotos, the no-man's land of "normal." It begins somewhere around 35 millimeters, and extends to somewhere just below 100. There is acrimony over which length is the real "normal," as if there were some magical natural way to project the three-dimensional world onto a flat paper. Some swear by the versatile 35, others by the intimate 85... but I am and will always remain true to the Fifty.



*"Bric-à-brac" (Tyre, 2002)*

## The Queen of Optics

I am not an optics designer, and all I know about it I've picked up from conversations between more knowledgeable people. However, there is something magical about the "normal range" that makes possible the simple designs that make for legendary lenses. The 50 sits at the fulcrum: it is the reference lens, which provides a fixed point of comparison for all others. Yet it holds an endless fascination for optics designers... and certain kinds of photographers.

If photographers had armies, wars would have been fought over the relative superiority of the 'Cron or the 'Lux (Summicron or Summilux, two of Leica's legendary 50's -- for an example, look here: [http://www.photo.net/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg?msg\\_id=002cKx](http://www.photo.net/bboard/q-and-a-fetch-msg?msg_id=002cKx)). Canon has no less than four 50 mm primes in its line-up -- the 1.8, 1.4, 2.5 macro, and 1.0L (recently discontinued). For all manufacturers, the Fifty is the showcase lens, the demonstration of what their optics designers can really do. Even Canon's humble 1.8, priced around 100 Euros, puts zooms costing thousands to shame, and if someone made a Fifty that's actually bad, I haven't heard about it... although some have made pretty serious trade-offs to

maximize some particular quality, such as brightness.

### *The Human Scale Lens*

For me, the best thing about the Fifty is the perspective. The wonderful optical qualities of normal primes come as a bonus. The world at 50 mm is in some indefinable way close to the world as we see it. The lens takes in a scene close to what a person can see at any time without moving his head. Perspective appears natural, verticals stay under control, and there is a very strong impression of photographing the world in some sense "as it really is."



*"Dialogue," (Helsinki, 2003)*

I've always liked best those photos that capture something I saw. For me, photography is about seeing more than about creating pictures. The Fifty is the human-scale lens. There's something about a good picture shot at 50 that pulls the viewer into the scene, as if he were looking through the paper or screen into the scene the photographer saw. Most of my pictures I like most are 50's, and I hope some of them have this quality.



*"Shy," (Helsinki, 2003)*

It is this quality of "realism" that makes the Fifty such a good liar. The perspective claims that this really happened. However, there's nothing inherent to the focal length that prevents engineering a scene -- by setting it up, like Cartier-Bresson with some of his famous kiss scenes, by selective framing, or any number of additional photographic devices.

### *Speak with the Fifty*

However, the Fifty isn't restricted to "documentary" pictures, not by a long shot. Because of its position at the fulcrum between wide-angle and tele, it has some traits of both. Tilt it down or up, step back, put some converging lines into the picture, and turn to portrait format, and you have a perspective that looks a lot like a wide-angle picture. Step in a little closer, make your subject fill the frame, stop up, and you have something that looks a lot like a short tele or "portrait lens".



*"Laetitia and Leia" (Beirut, 2002)*

Other lenses force their perspective on you -- the bubbly 28 or the masterful super-tele -- but the Fifty can be coaxed into the perspective of your choosing. Other normals have this quality too, with the longer ones leaning into tele, the wider ones, into wide-angle.



*"The First Tram" (Budapest, 2002)*

The Fifty is not an easy lens. Other focal lengths impose their character on pictures, at the same time adding photographic quality, and in a sense dictating the composition. The Fifty doesn't: instead, for a composition to work at 50, it has to be inherently photographic. This is why many consider it the best focal length for learning to see photographically. With it, the distance between the scene and the photo is at its shortest. The Fifty does not give up her secrets easily, but her intelligence and quiet charm make her a companion for life.

### *How to work with a Fifty*

Learn to see. Wide-angles embrace complete scenes, telephotos pick out detail. The normal just... sees. The Fifty is the human-scale lens, so look for things on the human scale. If you can see something easily, chances are that so can the Fifty.

Learn to see the context as well as the center: the Fifty is loose enough to include a good deal of it. Look for counterpoints and interactions, things talking to each other across space.



*"What are you looking at?" (Helsinki, 2003)*

Take timing into the equation. You might be able to see a setting, and see an event approaching. Prepare, anticipate, and grab it when it clicks together. A wide-angle scene won't change dramatically with small events. A tele opportunity will either be there, or be gone. A scene for the Fifty is alive in time, again at the human scale.



*"Run through time" (Tyre, 2002)*

Look for the little things that might otherwise be ignored: light falling on a statue, birds forming a pattern, something humorous in a rusty bicycle or a shop window; the touching or funny or unusual in the mundane. Wide-angles can be grand, quirky, or funny, but because of its human scale, nothing can communicate feeling like the Fifty.



*"Drake Flotilla" (Helsinki, 2003)*

Listen to the Fifty. If you see something nice, point your lens towards it, and the composition won't fall into place, don't force it. Look for the bigger picture. Include context. Don't worry about the ones you lost, because the ones you got will likely be better than if you had had a zoom. With a zoom, the instinct is to zero in on the subject. With a Fifty, you must make the context work as well. This isn't easy, but the results can be worth it.

Learn to know the Fifty. With time, it may become your constant companion, an extension of your eye, and a partner for your vision.

## *Assignment*

This assignment isn't as much about the photos as it is about learning to see photographically. That's why it's more work and stricter than some I've set before. This is no longer about snapshooting; it's about the craft of photography. It will take a good deal of work and a good deal of time to complete. I hope at least a few will participate -- but I won't expect any results until a few days from now at the earliest.

1. Set your camera to 50 mm and leave it there. This is surprisingly hard to do, if you're used to shooting with a zoom, so a small physical reminder will help. For example, cut a 5 cm strip out of a plastic bag and take a couple of rubber bands and use them to fix it around the lens barrel -- the changed texture will remind you not to touch the zoom barrel. Or, if you have really good willpower, just trust it.
2. Give yourself a brief: a situation, time, scene, building, interior, portrait, landscape, cityscape, or other subject you want to photograph, or a story that you want to tell. Events, crowds, and situations can be particularly fruitful. Times with special light can be as well -- but the Fifty is good for just about anything.
3. Go and shoot it. Use only 50 mm. Take at least 100 frames, preferably 200 to 300 or more (no more than 3 "identical" frames for bracketing purposes). Increase compression if needed to fit them on the card.
4. Do an edit: throw out all but the 10 to 30 best frames.
5. Present 1 to 5 of your best shots, and discuss.



*"Ostrich 31 On Watch" (Helsinki, 2003)*

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