ON WRITING

Photos Aren't Sticky

By Austen Tucker · 2026

On photomanipulation, toonsonas, and the only camera that works.

I can recall a few photos that have been taken of me. They're the ones I made something of.

The first time I tried to make visual art, I was fourteen and had just learned Photoshop. I spent months figuring out how layers worked, practicing with brushes that gave the illusion of fur. The result was as cringey as you'd expect from an obsessed teenager. Technically impressive for the time, and not good. People laughed.

I turned myself into a red squirrel. Changed nothing else. The change was the point. That I could be different, could be wild and free, and the world would not fall apart.

For a kid from the sticks, that was freeing.

That was what hooked me. The bricks were still bricks. My friend was still my friend. The world stayed the same, but I changed who got to exist inside it.

I still remember the grain of the bricks I knelt by for the photo. I remember explaining my art idea to a friend, and how they took the picture anyway.

That fantasy of another world kept me alive. It was proof that real, radical change was possible. One day, somehow, I'd get there. I'd make my adventure real.

The other problem is that I'm forgetful. I can't remember what I did an hour ago, let alone a month ago. Dissociation's a bitch like that. So every time I'm out having a great time, I get to live with a pit in my stomach: This, too, shall disappear.

But let me take that photo and make something of it — push the colors, redraw the lines, pull a muzzle out of a jawline, breathe a story into it. Now it's sticky. Now it's mine. Manipulating a photo into its toonsona cements the memory in my head. The original was an event that happened to me. The edit is a thing I did.

That's the whole trick, and it took me years to see it. My memory holds on to what I made. Change a photo — even a little — and the act of changing becomes the handle. I remember the choices, and they bring me back to the picture.

This is how I came to be obsessed with photomanipulation. Photoshop is the only camera I've ever owned that works.

There's a practical layer here that sighted people miss. I can barely see my own face at this point. Detail vision is going out, and it will only get worse. A toon is high contrast — clean lines, flat color, shapes that announce themselves. My eyes can parse a toon in a way they will never parse a photograph.

It gives me a version of myself I identify with: visible to me, fun, unique. Why would I not dive into that?

So the manipulation does three jobs at once: it makes the picture legible, it lets me imagine a story into it, and when I see the image again, it hands the narrative right back.

I guess that's also how I ended up a writer.

If I don't write, I forget.

The day I don't turn into words evaporates. The face I don't turn into a toon dissolves. Making is how I keep my life.

I wrote in “Boredom Is the Engine” about making fun out of a blurry world. This is the other half: holding on to it.

I can't remember what I did yesterday, but I can tell you about every piece of art I have ever made.