



The Color of Hay by Kathleen Laraia McLaughlin



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Commentary

I've often quoted the following from a long-lost source: "It's one thing to make a portrait of a person that tells us what they look like, but a much higher goal to show us a little bit of who they are." Consider all we know of this individual by looking elsewhere than in his gaze. His hat his coat, the turn of his collar, the dirt on his face and hands, the gray in his beard, the holes in his sweater, the unkempt hair, and of course the scythe and sticks he carries over his shoulder. In a single photograph, we certainly cannot know his story, but we can know just a bit about his current life. Think how much all those elements add and contribute to the facial expression we see in his eyes.

What more can we know? He doesn't work alone (woman in the background); he lives in the country (dirt road, orchard on the left); he is a laborer (the strength of his hands); he is poor (at least by our standards). That is a great deal of information to know from a 60th of a second. Sure, we know what he looks like, but we know a great deal more than that because of the way McLaughlin framed the photograph and what she chose to leave in.

The great challenge of portrait photography is that most of the time the individual we see in the photograph is a complete stranger. Because we see them in a photograph, we can have no conversation with them, cannot experience them in time and get to know them better. Nonetheless, in spite of those restrictions, the challenge of all portraiture is to foster

some sort of relationship between the subject and us. Photography is about relationships, which I've said so often I know I'm starting to sound repetitive. But, it's such a fundamental aspect of every photograph that it's worth repeating. Our relationship with this individual is based on compassion, contrast, in this moment of direct visual connection. As portraits go, I'm not sure what more we could ask.

It's worth considering this project as a whole, too. This portrait is great, but the project consists of a few dozen portraits all equally as revealing. Building one after another, we soon have a portrait of the village and the countryside. It is a "portrait of a place" type of project. It succeeds because each individual photograph contributes to our cumulative understanding. Add a little text, and suddenly there is enough for a wonderful book — precisely what McLaughlin has done.

So, how could this portrait have failed? If she were too far away for us to see the details, we'd know less; if she were so close that we only saw a "head and shoulders" shot, we'd miss the environment; if he didn't have the implements and sticks over his shoulder, we wouldn't know about his work. Paying attention to such details is the foundation of successful photographing.