



Momentos Rurais (Rural Moments)

by Rui Pires



Published in *LensWork* and *LensWork Extended* #102

Commentary

I am not skilled at portraiture, but I'm about to start a project that will involve making lots of portraits. Consequently, I've been reading a lot about portrait theory, practice, and strategies. I've discovered that there are all kinds of opinions about what makes a good portrait. The more I study the portraits I admire, however, the more I'm led to conclude an observation I've not seen anyone else make: *portraits are about relationships.*

In fact, I'd go so far as to say that a portrait that shows us merely what someone looks like is destined to be easily forgotten. People look different from one another — so what? People dressed differently — so what? People do all kinds of different work — so what? That someone looks differently, dresses differently, or works differently than we do would seem to lead us nowhere other than the conclusion that people are different — not a very insightful bit of observation or art-making.

The portraits I'm drawn to the most are the ones in which the true subject of the photograph is not the person photographed, but some sort of relationship — between the people being photographed (as in this example), the subject and the photographer, the subject and their environment, the subject and their own thoughts. Relationship is the true subject of portraiture

The fact that this woman has no shoes is a curiosity that may be of interest; the fact that she has no shoes

but he does says something about their relationship. The fact that they both have worn clothes, strong but worn hands, worn faces, and tentative smiles tells us something about their relationship with their environment, their work, and the photographer.

These two people are not gazing at the *photographer*, but rather at the *camera*, specifically the lens. By doing so they now have a relationship with *us*. I want to engage them in conversation, but hesitant to do so because they appear to be hesitant about being photographed. What is implied in the relationship between them and the photographer, and in turn between them and us as viewers?

If, as I'm proposing, portraits are about relationships, then it would seem that the relationship comes first, and the portrait follows. As I say, I have limited experience with portrait-making, but I have found it true that when I take the time to talk with someone, get to know them however briefly, share a story or two, perhaps even a beverage (or two), it becomes easier for me to make the portrait. The portrait is then founded in, however fleeting, a relationship. Besides, I've thought for years that the purpose of art is to foster connections between people. How better to begin that connection than with a portrait!