

Sweet Sorrow

A review of Disfarmer: Heber Springs Portraits 1939-1946

by Peter Brown

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Disfarmer: Heber Springs Portraits 1939-1946

From the Collections of Peter Miller and Julia Scully

Essay by Julia Scully

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It is safe to say that Mike Disfarmer was a very odd man. Sometime during mid-life he broke off communication with his family, the Meyers - rice farmers who lived outside the small town of Heber Springs, Arkansas. He also broke with the Lutheran church - a self-imposed ostracism of sorts in this family oriented Bible Belt town, and he drank, though Heber Springs after the mid-forties was dry. While apparently not unpleasant, he was virtually friendless. Strangest of all, he took on the name of Disfarmer, convinced inexplicably that a tornado had carried him away as an infant, and had deposited him with a family not his own. He was not a Meyer, he maintained - a German word that he mistranslated as "farmer" (and an occupation he abhorred), but a "Disfarmer" instead. And legally changing his name, he took up photography.

His main connection to Heber Springs then, and an ironically intimate one, was through his work. Mike Disfarmer, the Boo Radley of his world, the oddball bogeyman of Heber Springs still managed to photograph anyone who came through his studio doors - and these people came, from Heber Springs and beyond, by the hundreds - on occasion lined up down the block. And these portraits haunt me.

They are straight-forward and plain; yet at the same time almost claustrophobically creepy in a surface lushness of wrinkles, sun bleached cotton, shining skin, military garb, clean farm clothes and Sunday dress-up - all set against the sparest of studio backdrops. While one cannot finally know, the photographs seem, on evidence of expression and posture, to be truthful: open-faced depictions of a small American town at a specific time. In them there is a steadiness that pulls one back, right back into that Main Street studio, back across all those miles of culture and time.

When a daguerreotype is opened, it uncases a world, and a soul from the deep past, peers through a century into the present, questioning and strangely alive. Disfarmer's photographs produce the same secret, disquieting sensation in a viewer - one of a shared seriousness, of intimacy with the distant and the dead. The photographs are too stark to be sentimental and the people in them too vulnerable to put one off. Disfarmer's subjects simply look out to us as we look in. And as the pages are turned and the book eventually closed, one is

left with a strange lack of resolution, as though those photographed will not quite go away.

The design by Jack Woody, in the Twin Palms Press edition of this work is remarkable. A few descriptive points: the book is small enough to be easily held. It has the heft of something serious. The cover is black - a young girl on the front, an old woman on the back. The pages are a matte black. The photographs are small - contact prints from the original 3 1/2 x 5 inch glass plate negatives. And there are many: page after page of old people, soldiers, mothers, fathers, farmers, young men and women, brothers and sisters, girlfriends, high school kids, little boys, men with large fish, little girls, babies. And on and on. There are no words beyond the title of the book until one has experienced the vast majority of the photographs, at which point, Julia Scully's text answers most of the questions that one might have.

There is something both exhausting and exhilarating about this procession. Exhausting in that one must look closely and think hard; exhilarating because, here, if one takes the time, is a town. We fill in the gaps - and there are many. To my thought, the physical but unphotographed town of Heber Springs, coupled with its myriad untold stories, roll jointly beneath these photographs like waves. One's imagined visions of Main Street, the stores, the high school, the movie house, the homes and farms, the trees and creeks, combined with the mute potential of all those unsaid words - the gossip, jokes, tragedies, crops, weather, crimes, holidays, pioneer paths and family histories - all those incidentals that describe these lives and at some point led these people first to Heber Springs and then to Mike Disfarmer's homely studio, float the photographs like cork. The design of the book melds the photographs with this perceived history (the "photographic fiction" that Richard Avedon described but did not seem to capture in his photographs of the American West), with the result being an experience that is transporting.

In the background of all this of course hovers the Second World War. Most of Disfarmer's subjects had never left Heber Springs, and we can assume that many of those pictured in the photos either are about to be shipped out to dangerous places, or are about to be left behind. With the utilitarian purpose of these photographs then likely being one of remembrance, or a safeguard against death - and the yearning looks an attempt to express all those things that are so difficult to express (be careful, I love you, come home safely, this is what I look like, remember me, please don't go) - we must remember also, that hovering in the background is the photographer, this strange Mike Disfarmer who somehow has enabled these people to be free enough with their quiet, tentative expressions to communicate the same sorts of things to all of us today. This is what we look like, this is who we are, we want to be remembered, we care about you. We hope this is not good-bye.

Spend some time with this book and these people may stay with you forever.