

Series Number Fifteen

Iraqi Kurdish Uprising - Iraq 1991

Twenty-Three Photographs

Essay - January, 2022

Michael Nye

Iraqi Kurdish Uprising - 1991

War is the wind that blows tumbleweeds across prairies and towns with violence and revenge. Permanent black ink can spill and stain without regret.

Before my sixth birthday, my father bought me a BB gun and ammunition. I am sorry that we shot gentle and friendly birds. How could we? My neighborhood best friend, Richard asked me to shoot him in the back one summer afternoon. He assured me that the BB pellet would bounce off his tough skin. He took off his shirt and told me, *"Shoot me in the back, Mikey!"* He spoke with such authority. Even with a reluctance, I aimed and pulled the trigger. The BB lodged just under his skin in the middle of his back. He ran to his parents, bleeding and screaming, *"Mikey, shot me in the back."*

In my University World History class our professor asked on the first day, *"How many wars have there been in the last 6000 years? What are the reasons for war and violent conflicts between groups and countries?"* *Why do insects and animals and communities fight each other? How can war best be avoided?"*

The earliest recorded evidence for prehistoric warfare dates back to the Mesolithic period, approximately 13,000 years old. Historians estimate that some 14,500 wars, (probably more) have taken place between 3500 B.C. and the late 20th century, costing 3.5 billion lives. History does not calculate or measure the cost of emotional trauma.

The 1991 First Gulf War:



The First Gulf War was between Iraq and a coalition of nations led by the United States. The U.S. and Coalition forces defeated Iraq and forced Iraq to retreat from their invasion into Kuwait. Toward the end of the First Gulf War, February - March, 1991 the Kurdish Iraqis as a result of years of systemic brutal repression, rose up against the Iraqi government demanding self-rule and independence. The Iraqi government retaliated against the Iraqi Kurdish communities. They rounding up the men, women and children for mass executions. Estimates of 35 thousand were killed or captured. Some 400,000 Kurds fled to the mountains and borders of Turkey and Iran.

In February, 1991 I was on a freeway in San Antonio driving home. I listened to a news report of the Kurdish uprising against Iraqi government. I listened to the indiscriminate killing of Kurdish families fleeing their villages. At that very moment, I decided to would travel into the war area in Northern Iraq, as a photographic journalist.

I had friends working at the San Antonio Express Newspaper and obtained from the editor a letter and an identification card. I took with me my 8 x 10" large format camera, film plates, clothes and a tent. On a budget, flew to Istanbul, then to Ankara where I obtained a "*Turkish War Press Card and Credentials*". I took a 950 km bus ride to Diyarbakir, in southeastern Turkey. (Diyarbakir is considered the unofficial capital of Northern Kurdistan.) At an American military base, I got a ride with several war journalist who were traveling overland into Iraq and the fighting conflict.

A war from a distance is not the same as war close up. On March 8, 1991 in Zakho, Iraq (Northern Iraq near the border of Turkey) and the surrounding villages, tens of thousands of fleeing Kurdish families were arriving from the mountains. A Kurdish mother was carrying pillows, blankets and pans on her back. Parents were holding their children. Refugee agencies were setting up tents and medical facilities. The U.S. Marines and a few coalition forces created a temporary safety zone for the frightened refugees. No one seemed to be in control.

Even on the hard desert floor, a shoe leaves something behind, an unmistakably trail. Smoke rising from campfires was circling and forming a question mark high above the camp. One woman's hand turned into a waving fist. I watched the sharp blade of the sun resting against the silver mountains then fading back into earth. I witnessed the compassion of volunteers, relief groups and doctors. The soldiers were so kind. I heard a grandmother coughing. I watched villagers cooking soup. I heard words in Arabic and Kurmanji that I did not understand. Children were not playing or laughing, just silent. On one night of cold rain, not everyone had tents. War carries a basket of words and a song of silent melancholy: Anxiety, assault and agony. Misery, mistrust and memory. Then, there are other words that rise to the surface later: infrastructure, public health provisions, social disorder and food.

I met a French naval officer. His unit was the first to arrive and fight in Kuwait. They allowed me to stay with them in their large tent. Twelve of us slept on cots with guards holding rifles outside at night. They were serious and cautious. They introduced me to a Kurdish taxi driver. He agreed to take me into the mountains near Duhok. Approaching an check point on an isolated desert road was frightening and arbitrary. Justice was not a virtue here.

I was invited into tent after tent by Kurdish families. They offered me self-rolled cigarettes and tea heated from campfires. The stories made me cry – would make anyone cry. With an interpreter, the language was slower and more immediate. Like a virus everyone was impacted. I stayed with one Kurdish family for a day. A father told me, *"Ten days earlier, the Iraqi army had entered our village. We were ordered to stand outside our house. While we looked on, an Iraqi soldier shot and killed one of my daughters, age seven. He then demanded that we pay for the bullet."* (The second daughter that witnessed the atrocity, dressed in white, the daughter that was not shot is: **Kurdish Portrait Three**) How can such things happen?

The Kurdish people have their own language and culture. At the end of WWI and the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Kurdistan failed to obtain statehood. An estimated 30 million people of Kurdish ethnicity are spread mostly across southern Turkey, northern Iraq, north and eastern Syria, and Iran. The Kurdish peoples are the biggest ethnic group in the world without their own country. The last 100 years are marked by revolts and uprisings against these countries that have opposed Kurdish demand for self-rule and identity.

Photographs – Kurdish Refugees:

Photographs can be thought of as a continuity of touching. Light reflecting off a person travels through the lens and touches the negative. Then in a darkroom, light from an enlarger moves through the same negative and touches the photographic paper. Looking forward or backwards in time is still a measure of looking. I remember thinking, “*What right do I have to be here? What right do I have to make these photographs? How can I help in some small way?*” Maybe, as a witness to the murmur and presence of it all? Everyone feels the same wind that blows through these ancient mountain ranges.

The black backdrop invites a hardness of imagination. I did not photograph any mile of the scattering of blankets and tents. I did not photograph the bombed-out homes and villages. I did not photograph the anxiety of the land or the always hopeful nature of air. I did not photograph mothers and fathers crying. I did not photograph death or the verbs of war. Others have made those images. These photographs are not of faces but of breathing individuals that had the same hopeful stare that we all share.

The photographs in the Kurdish Iraqi series are made in two separate visual representations.

Part One: Portraits - (Fifteen photographs)

Part Two: Toward not Forgetting: (Eight photographs)

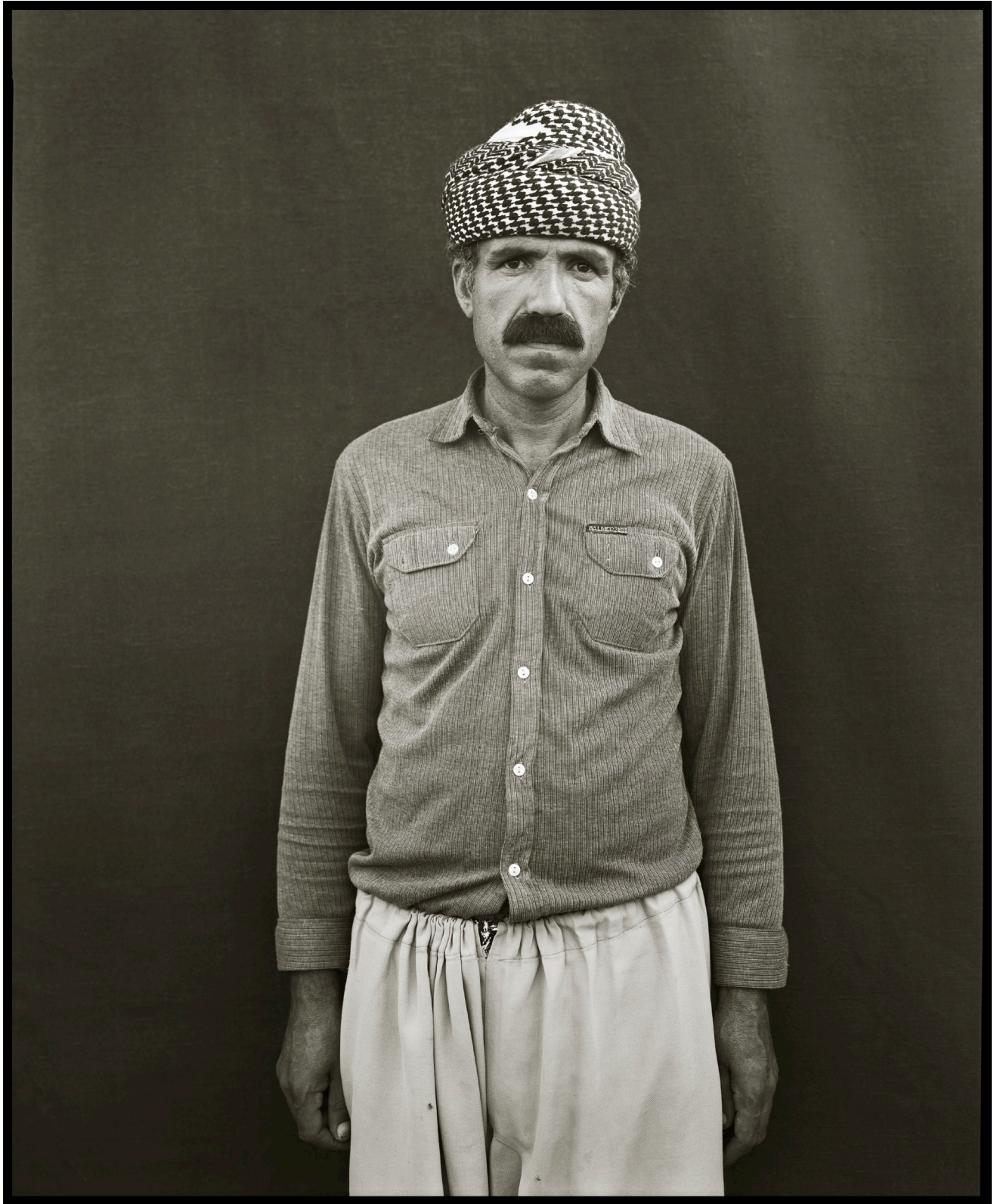
It was much more difficult to leave Iraq than to get in. A pilot in an Italian helicopter agreed to give me a ride back into Turkey. The sky was wearing a blue velvet vastness. The doors were open and two Italian soldiers with machine guns were positioned at each open door. They flew through the desert and then down into the Tigris River, just above the blue flowing water. They were looking for Iraqi guerrilla militia. I wore a radio headphone and listened to the soldiers speaking in Italian. On the flight back, looking down upon the wide space of land, I saw Kurdish families in brilliant colors walking in straight lines, other times in circles. Their thinking, I can only guess, was somewhere between where they stood and some far distant place I could never imagine.

Part One: Portraits - (Fifteen Photographs)

A photograph of someone says so little about that person and sometimes the portrait is not that person at all. There is so much more to know. It is the surface of a person, a small sliver of that person in a moment unlike other moments. Each person spent some time before the camera. I used a large 8 x 10" view camera, film plates on a tripod against a clumsy black backdrop. The backdrop is an open letter, an invitation toward the intensity of what is not seen but present.



Kurdist Portrait One



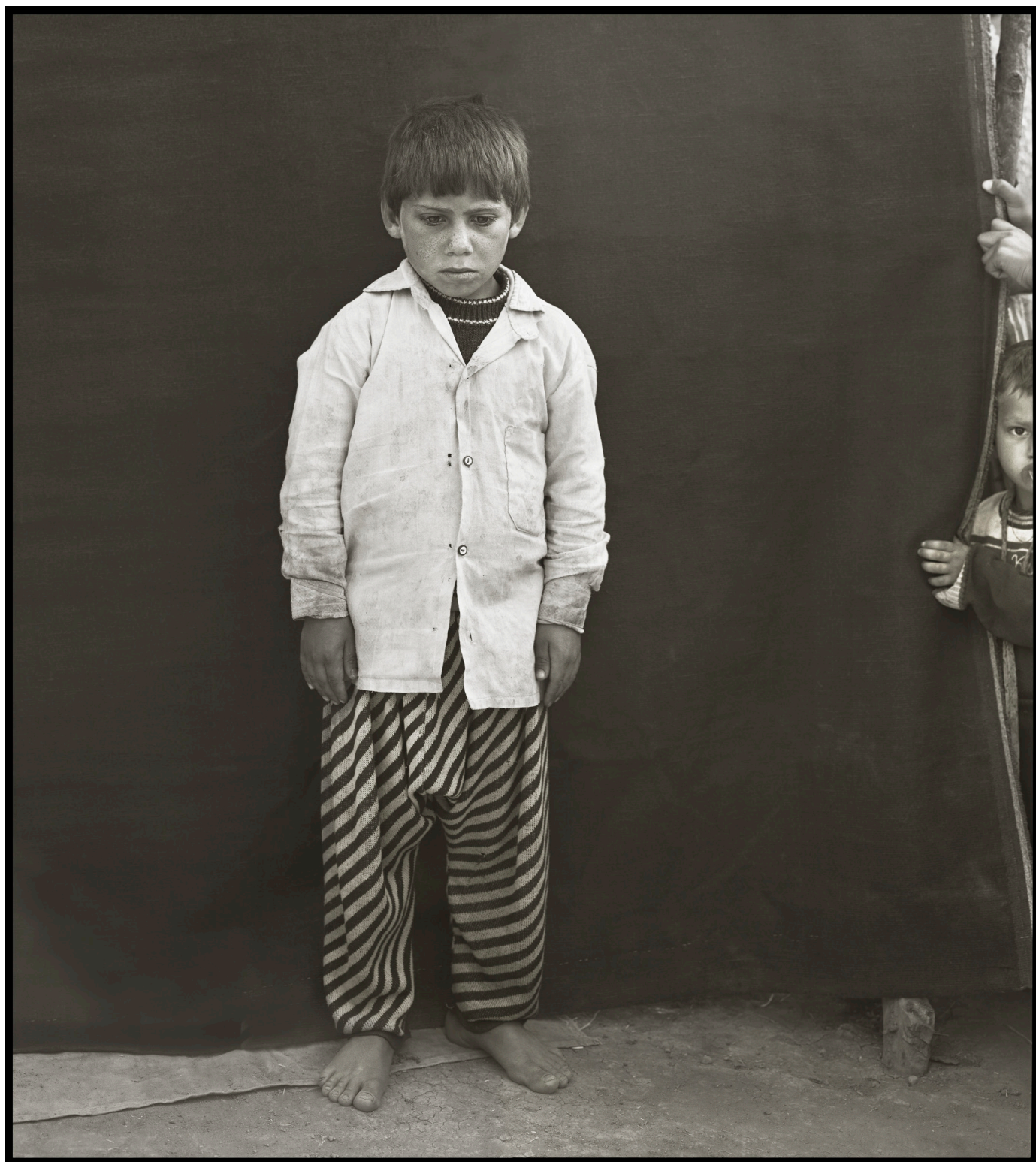
Kurdish Portrait Two



Kurdish Portrait Three



Kurdish Portrait Four



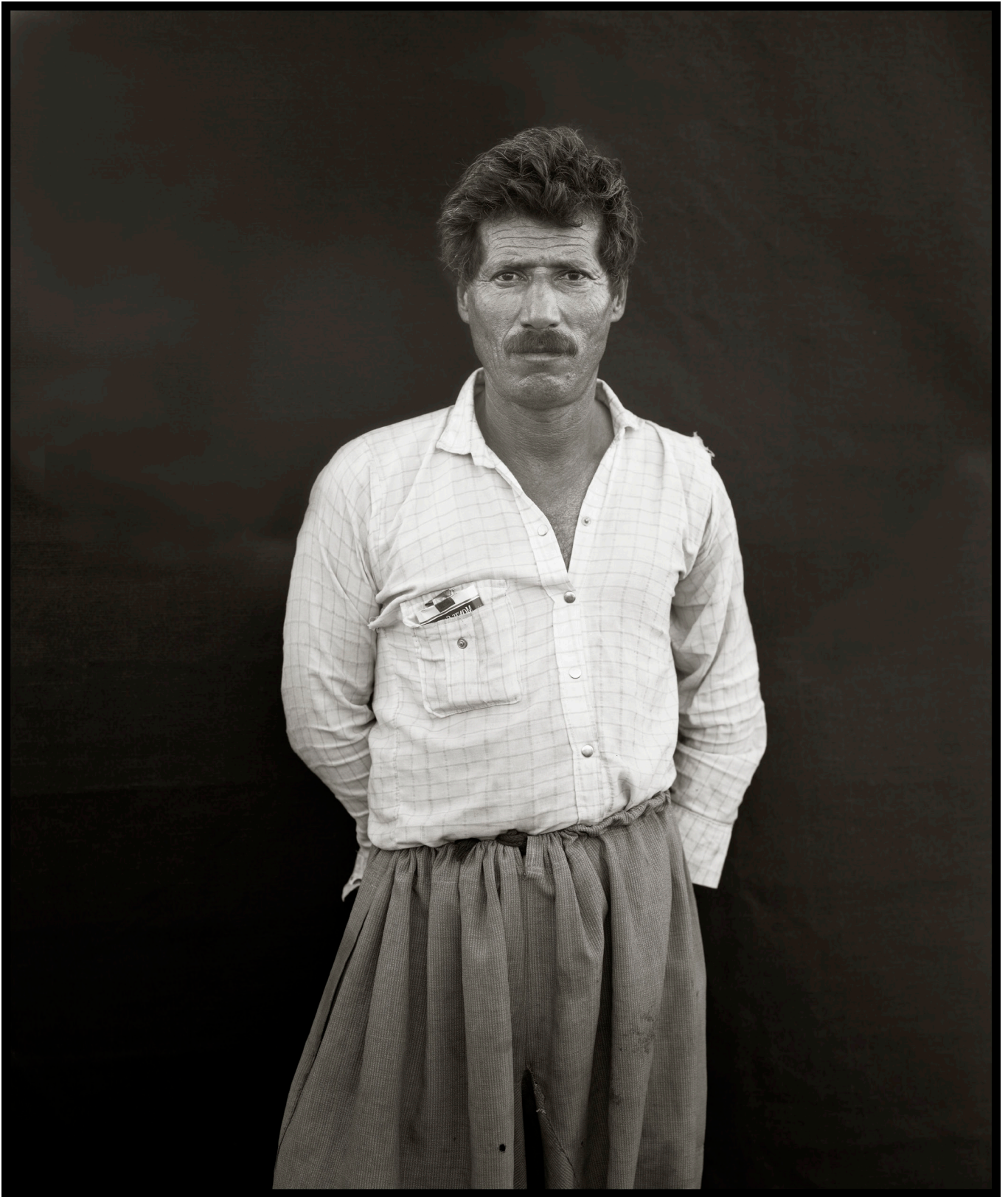
Kurdist Portrait Five



Kurdish Portrait Six



Kurdish Portrait Seven



Kurdist Portrait Eight



Kurdish Portrait Nine



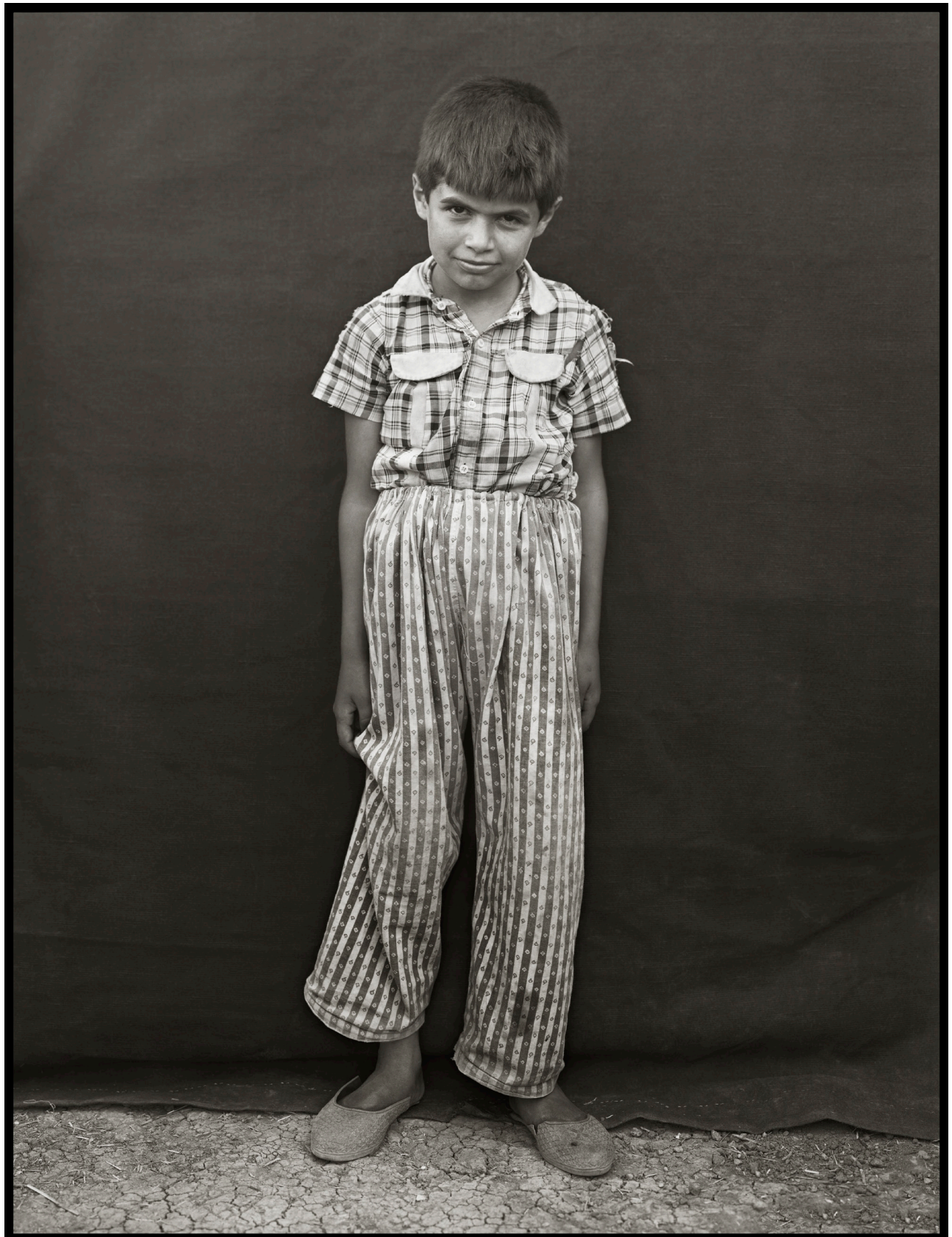
Kurdist Portrait Ten



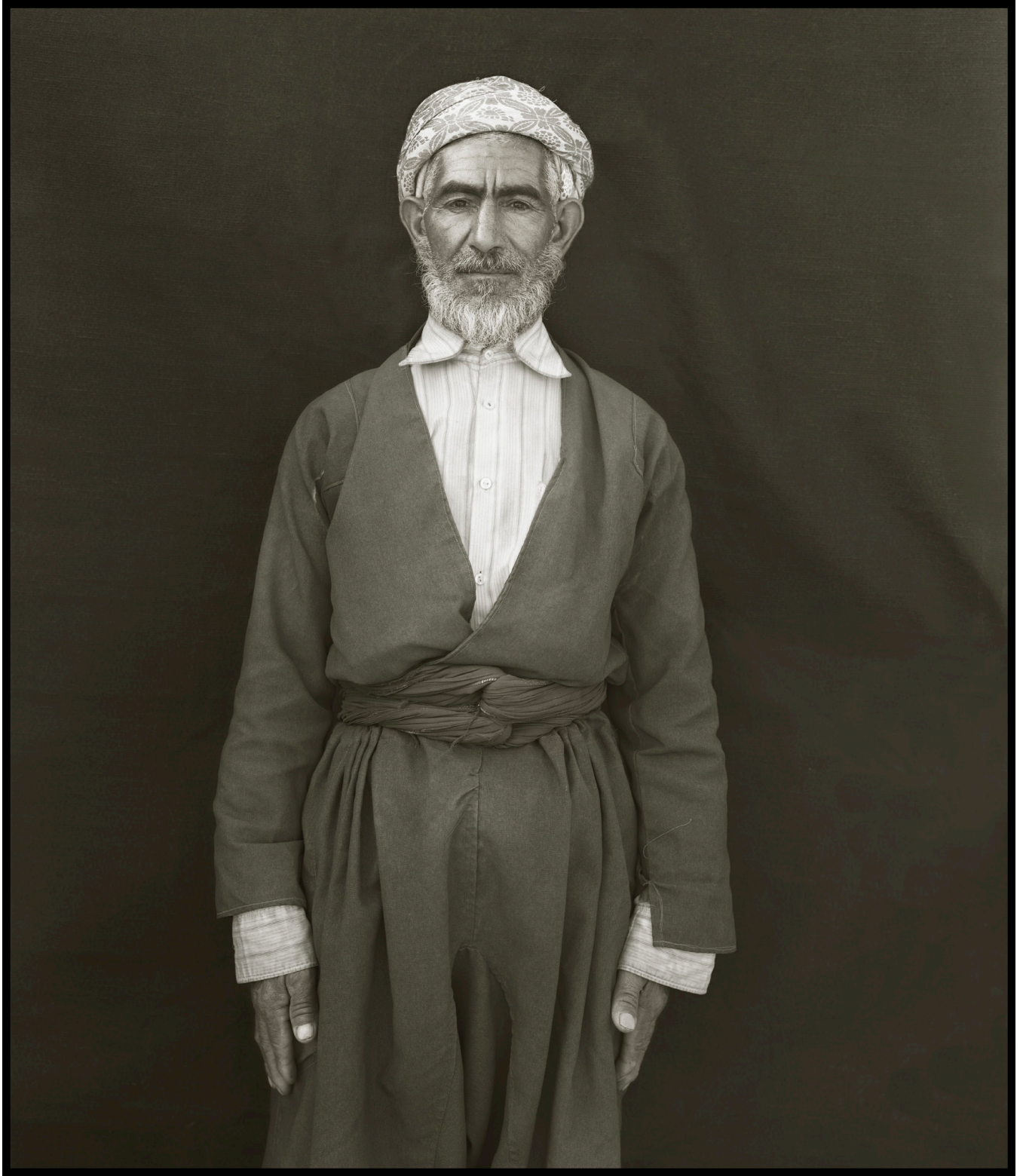
Kurdist Portrait Eleven



Kurdist Portrait Twelve



Kurdist Portrait Thirteen



Kurdish Portrait Fourteen



Kurdish Portrait Fifteen

Part Two: Toward not Forgetting: (Eight photographs)

In the darkroom I turned on the lights while the photograph was still in the development process. Strange pinks and oranges and purple tones emerged on the black and white photographic paper. These images are maps of *"then and now"*. These photographs point toward a history of: *"Don't forget who we are"*. Not so much of injury or death but of the ferociousness of the reality of present moments.



Toward not Forgetting - One



Toward not Forgetting - Two



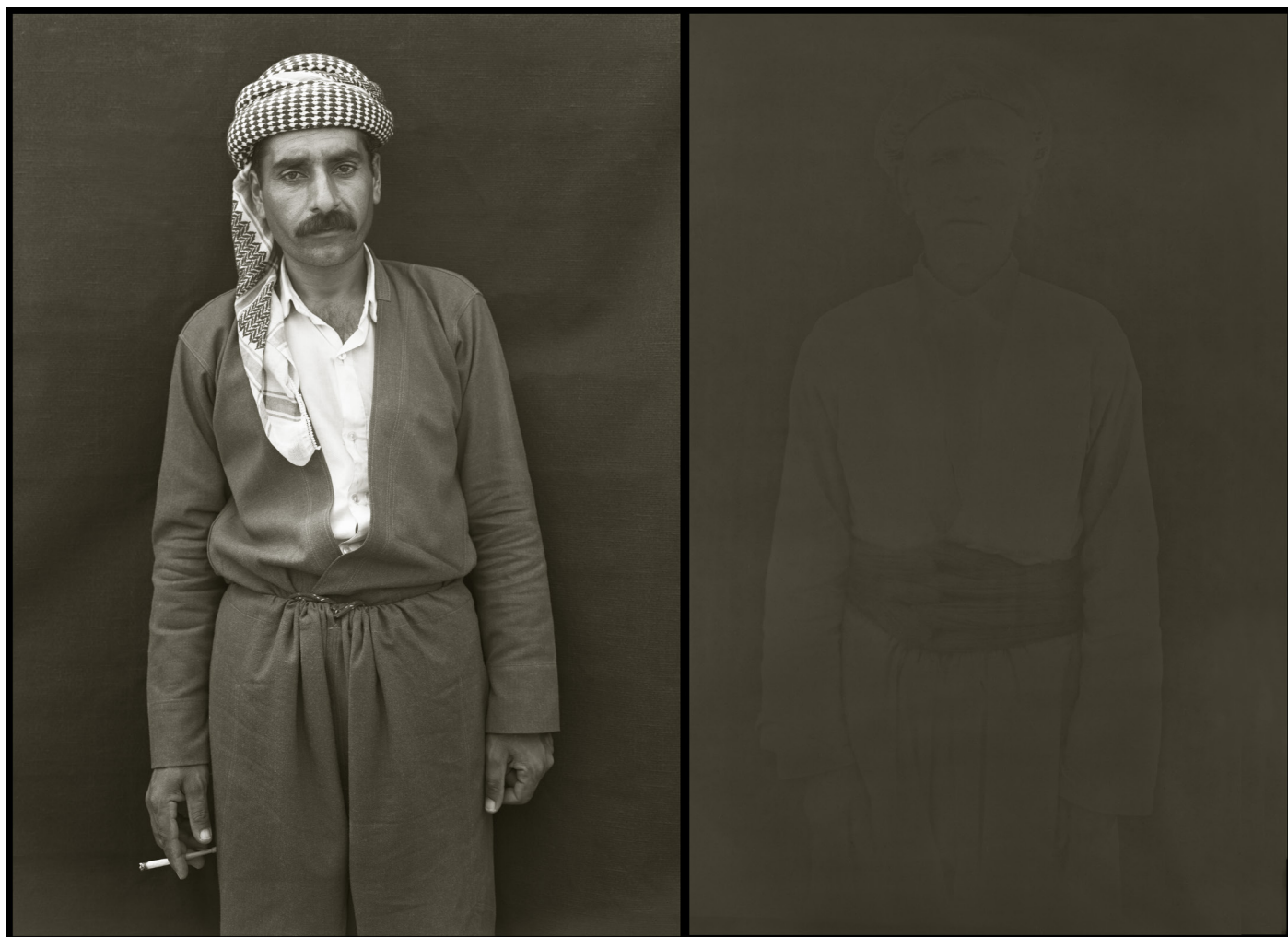
Toward not Forgetting - Three



Toward not Forgetting - Four



Toward not Forgetting - Five



Toward not Forgetting - Six



Toward not Forgetting - Seven



Toward not Forgetting - Eight