

from Another Way of Telling
by John Berger & Jean Mohr
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WHAT DID I SEE?



Was it a game, a test, an experiment? All three, and something else too: a photographer's quest, the desire to know how the images he makes are seen, read, interpreted, perhaps rejected by others. In fact in face of any photo the spectator projects something of her or himself. The image is like a springboard.

I often feel the need to explain my photos, to tell their story. Only occasionally is an image self-sufficient. This time I decided to allot the task of explanation to others. I took a number of photographs from my archives and I went out to look for those who would explain them. Of the ten people I asked, only one refused. He was an old gardener and he said it was too much like a television guessing-game.

All the others agreed to describe what came into their minds when presented with the photo I was showing them. I said nothing myself, simply noting what was said. The choice of people was largely a matter of chance. Some were acquaintances, others I was seeing for the first time.

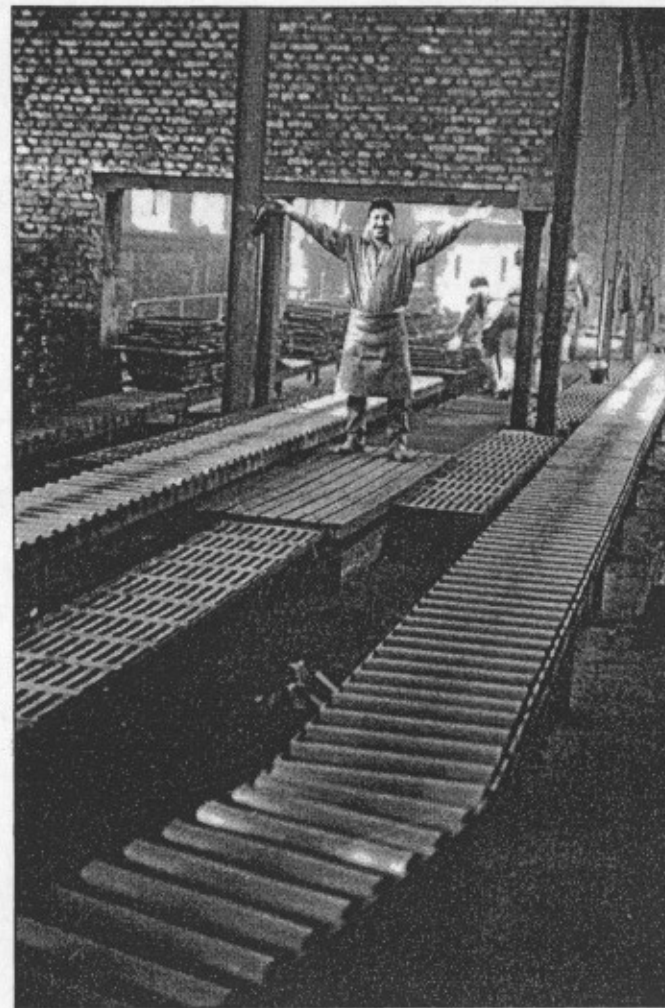
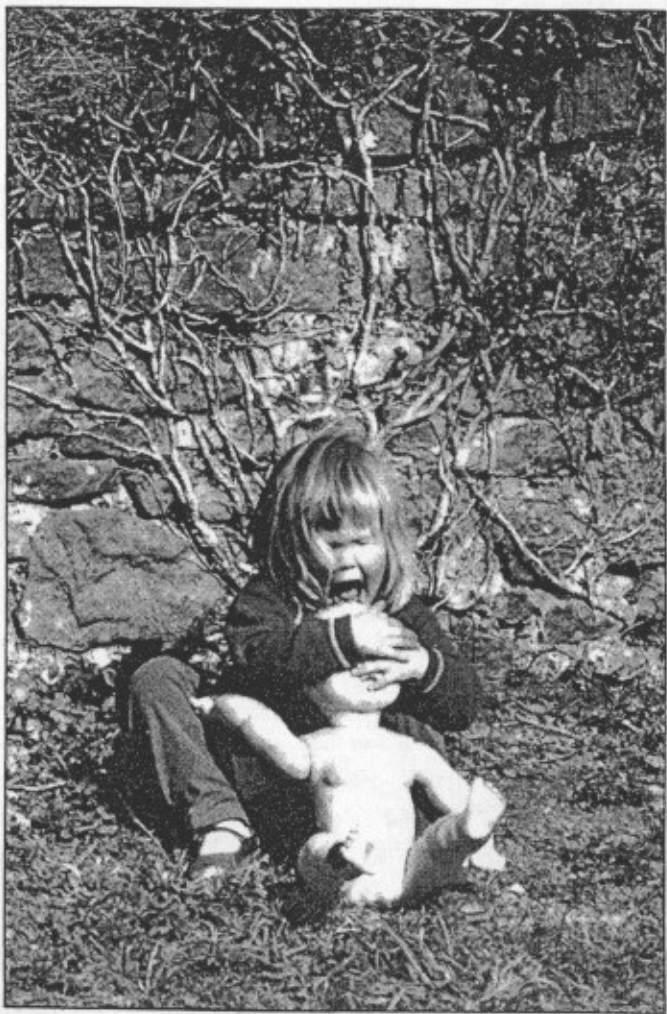




PHOTO N° 2



PHOTO N° 3



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PHOTO N° 4

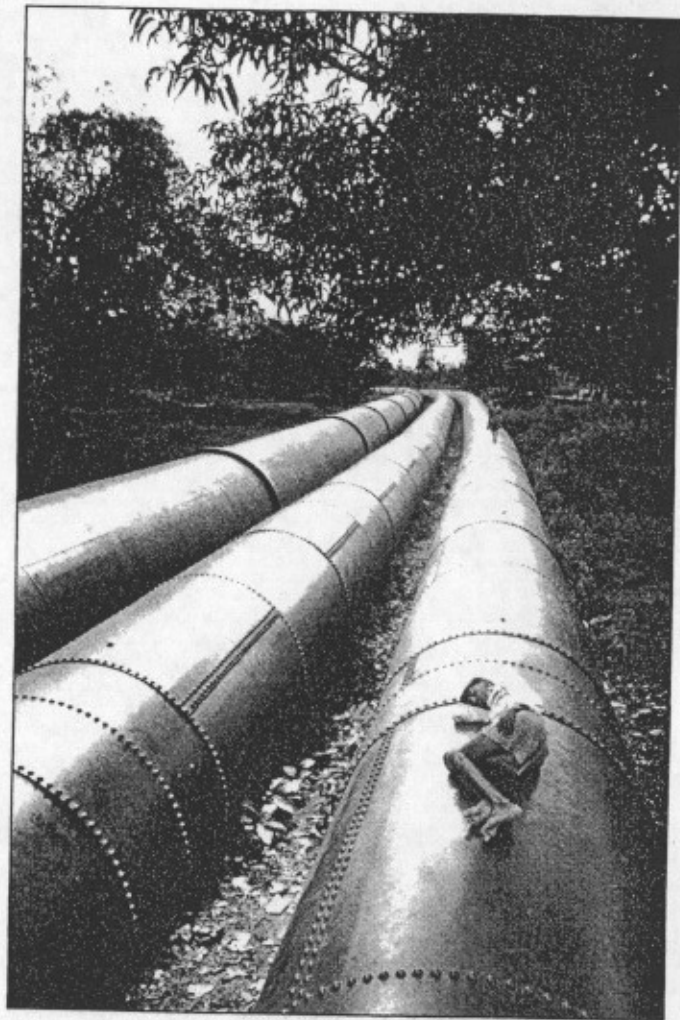


PHOTO N° 5

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E. J., market-gardener: According to the social position you find yourself in, the fact of being able to work, even if it's hard, is a positive joy.

H. M., clergyman: A happy worker who isn't ashamed. I find his gesture, as he turns towards us, fantastic. His gestures are the opposite of a dictator's. Marvellous. He moves me and he's making no concessions. I admire a chap like that.

C. M., schoolgirl: Somebody who's happy. He has finished work.

A. R., banker: Work makes you healthy! That's the slogan this friendly worker seems to be illustrating for us. But it can only be for a moment, for it's hard to imagine that anyone can be so cheerful when working for eight or ten hours on the production line. Unless he's one of those rare people whose aims are nobler than the common run of mortals!

A. B., actress: Long live the production line! I feel two things here. The line has stopped. Work is over. The man's happy. He's proud of the workshop. Work's over. My factory is great.

F. S., dance-teacher: I'm a bit lost. What does it mean? A warehouse? No, there's nothing in it. He likes being photographed. He's happy. He works. He's happy. He could complain, he doesn't. Is he the ideal worker? Perhaps it's the boss? I'd be unhappy there.

J. J. B., psychiatrist: He's happy the day is over. It's a factory with an assembly line. There's nothing more to do. He's taking off his gloves.

L. C., hairdresser: Happiness! His way of opening his arms as if to welcome somebody who has just arrived. He looks like a worker who has a hard job and earns little money. It makes me think of the prisoners in the German camps, an armaments factory.

I. D., factory worker: A coincidence. We have the same rollers in our factory! By his expression I'd say it was Friday night, the end of the week's work. He looks happy, I wish him a good week-end.

What was happening: It was a foundry in West Germany. I was photographing a Yugoslav worker for a reportage made for the International Labour Office. A Turkish worker nearby, seeing me, shouted out: "So there are only Yugoslavs here! Me, I don't exist!" Yes, he existed too, and I took his picture.



Market-gardener: It makes me think of someone who's looking for the best place to take a photo! He enjoys nature. He's a modern type who likes to get out of the city. He looks elsewhere for what he can't find at home.

Clergyman: Tomorrow belongs to the young! An image of hope. His face and his shirt are touching. I have to stop myself saying: Spring!

Schoolgirl: A bloke in a tree which is in flower. He's hiding and playing. And he wants to show to somebody that he's hiding.

Banker: A link between the person and the way the picture has been taken. It's symbolic: youth, beauty, the spring of life. I like his expression, it's healthy, both physically and morally. If only there were more young people like that. Or am I being over hasty? I guess he's an outdoor type who may nevertheless have brains.

Actress: A young man in a flowering tree. Spring. Sexuality. It reminds me of the moment in Fellini's *Amarcord* when the man exclaims: "I want a woman!" Only here the man is young and the tree is in flower.

Dance-teacher: A chap in a tree with flowers. But he's more realistic than the tree. Youth. Spring. But his face is too tense.

Psychiatrist: A Spanish worker in an orchard full of blossoms. A contrast between the fact that he's proletarian, and it's springtime in the countryside. Yet no, there isn't really a contrast. I can see he's carrying something — but cameras aren't white. He looks surprised but not guilty. Perhaps there's a girl sunbathing in the orchard.

Hairdresser: Somebody high up in a tree. Nothing else. Oh yes. He's a photographer, looking for a picture.

Factory worker: It's pretty, but the flowers would be even prettier in colour. He climbed high up, he has a head for heights, that one.

What was happening: Washington 1971. A demonstration against the war in Vietnam. 400,000 demonstrators in front of the White House. The young man had climbed the tree so as to see better and to take his photographs.



Market-gardener: The eyes of these men tell you about their lives. They've never had anything, or any advantages. Today, when things are changing politically and it seems possible for man to change his fate, such people are becoming aware of the differences between different countries.

Clergyman: Who is going to reply to them? They all look at the camera, they are all waiting for something. I like this photograph. I see in it all the problems of our Christianity. Am I going to offer them the usual *spiel*, or am I going to listen to them and share their waiting?

Schoolgirl: It's a group of poor people and they are waiting to be given something.

Banker: This image immediately brings to mind the stirring of the Asian masses. As racial types, they have fine features, and their expres-

sion suggests that they are questioning the why of their existence, which is probably very precarious.

Actress: My first impression: a group of men like choral music. They are waiting for an answer. Or are they just looking at the photographer? The situation is very tense.

Dance-teacher: These people believe in what? It's frightening, the way they look. One would like to offer them something. Not food — it's not what they're asking for. They are waiting and they are worried. And what will they do to us, if we disappoint them? It's there, in that moment, an uncontrolled force, either positive or negative.

Psychiatrist: I wouldn't like to be in the photographer's shoes. Perhaps it's a political meeting. They are very serious and grave, these men. Scarcely a smile. All of them young. No old people, no children. All of the same age-group.

Hairdresser: They are holding papers in their hands. They must be waiting for a signal. It's in Asia. Men waiting to be vaccinated, or waiting to vote. Their faces are all similar. And the filth. Men waiting to be paid. They are poor.

Factory worker: What country is it? Are they Algerians, perhaps Moroccans? Are they posing for a photograph? It's hard to know what they are doing, or what they are waiting for. From their faces and their eyes, you can see that they don't eat every day.

What was happening: A tea plantation in Sri Lanka. A group of workers came to hear a talk in favour of vasectomy (male sterilisation). After the talk, thirty of them agreed to be operated on straightaway, in the mobile hospital unit outside.



Market-gardener: (Laughs) This one makes me think of a little girl who already has a maternal capacity, and who's treating her doll like it was her own baby. All right, the doll is not pretty and is undressed, but it's hers!

Clergyman: An odd photo. Should one protect children from seeing the cruelty of the world? Should one hide certain aspects of reality from them? Her hands over the doll's eyes shouldn't be there. One ought to be able to show everything, to see all.

Schoolgirl: She's crying because her doll hasn't any clothes.

Banker: Well-fed, well-dressed, such a child is probably spoiled. Given the luxury of no material worries, people can give in to any whim or fancy.

Actress: "My baby is crying but doesn't want to show it." What surprises me is how she hides the doll's face. There's a strong sense of identification between the doll and the child. The girl is playing out what is happening to the doll and what the doll feels. The vine in the background is strange . . .

Dance-teacher: She has everything, yet she doesn't realise it, she is crying with her eyes shut. And the tree behind. The doll is as big as she is.

Psychiatrist: It puzzles me. She's crying as if she has a pain, and yet she's well. She's crying on behalf of her doll, and she covers the eyes as if there was a sight which shouldn't be seen.

Hairdresser: It's a child and somebody has tried to take her doll, which is precious to her. She's going to hold on to it. Perhaps she's German, she's blonde. It makes me think of myself when I was that age.

Factory worker: It's sweet. It reminds me of my niece when her sister tries to take her doll away from her. She's crying, screaming, because someone wants to take her doll away.

What was happening: Great Britain, in the country. A small girl was playing with her doll. Sometimes sweetly, sometimes brutally. At one moment she even pretended to eat her doll.



Market-gardener: This reminds me how dependent we are today on the petrol-producing countries, and how it would be better to get on together instead of quarrelling. Today I'm turning off the tap, tomorrow I may open it. That's no way to go on.

Clergyman: Funny! my first reaction: I'd like to be able to sleep like him, without any worries. To sleep is a kind of freedom. Second reaction, more thought out: what have these pipes — petrol? water? — to do with the country and its population? I'd rather he was sleeping against the tree on the left, or in the doorway of a house. He's defying the pipes!

Schoolgirl: This person is lying on that thing to warm himself. Somebody else is coming who thinks the first one is hurt.

Banker: What an unattractive and uncomfortable place to take a siesta! Or is he meant to be on duty, guarding the pipes? No, that's mean. Why is it that what is useful is always so ugly?

Actress: "A rest during a long journey." Is it a pipe-line? A feeling that it goes to the world's end. An image of going-on, and of rest. The direction has already been decided. Everything else in the landscape disappears.

Dance-teacher: How do you get a photo like that? It's crazy, that tiny creature asleep. A man. Just as it was men who made those pipes. But the men who made them never imagined how immense they would look in a photo. They go on and on, those pipes.

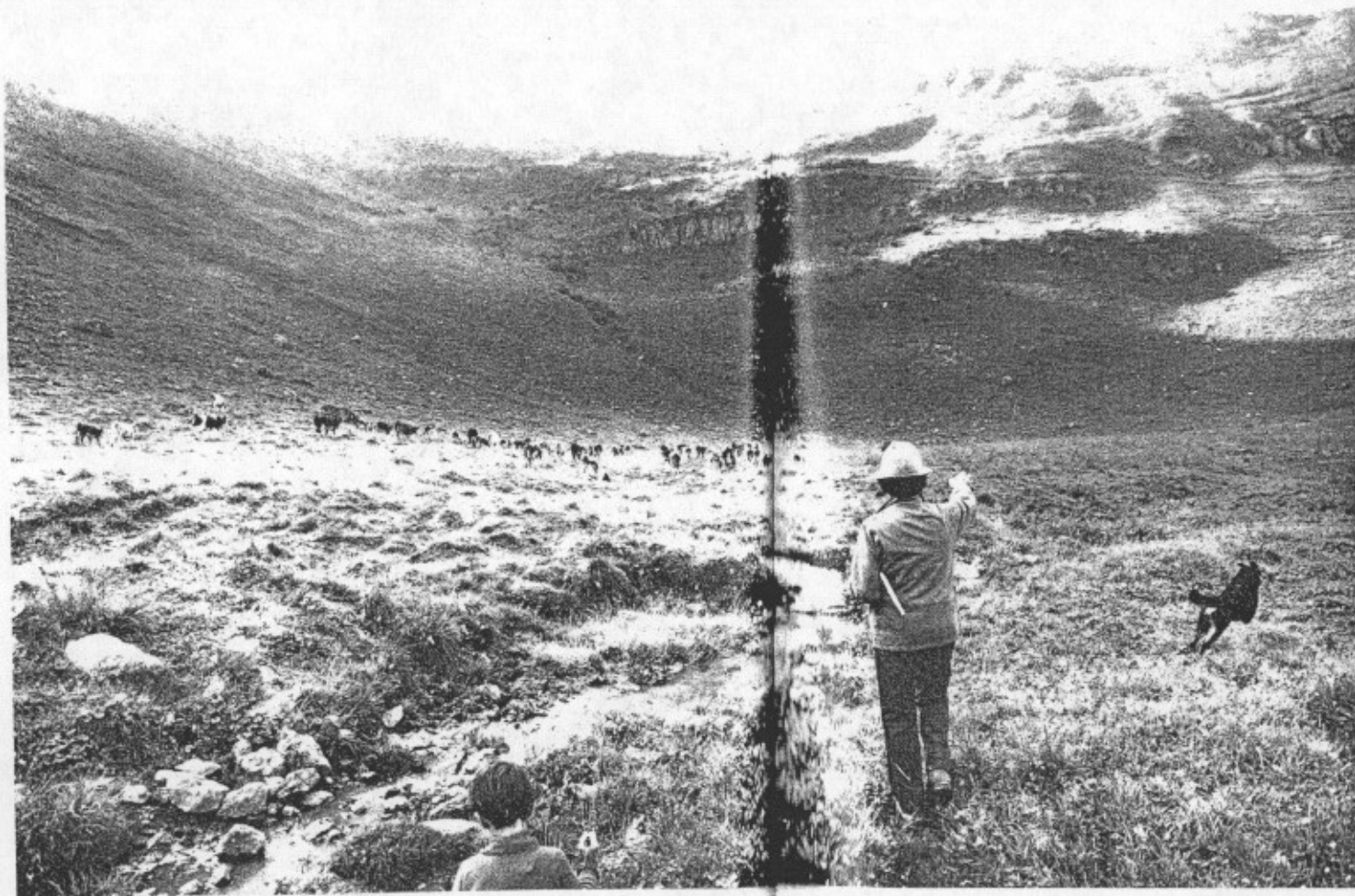
Psychiatrist: Pretty extraordinary. What's in the pipes? Perhaps they are warm, yet the country doesn't look like one where people would seek warmth like that. Is it water?

Hairdresser: Water. Massive water-pipes. It's in India. The people are thin. Weary. And the pipes go on and on. Into the distance.

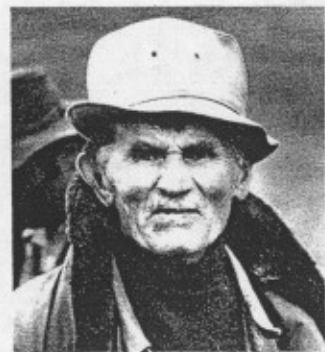
Factory worker: What's flowing along those pipes? Water or fuel? From the way he's sleeping, it looks as though he's earned the right to sleep well.

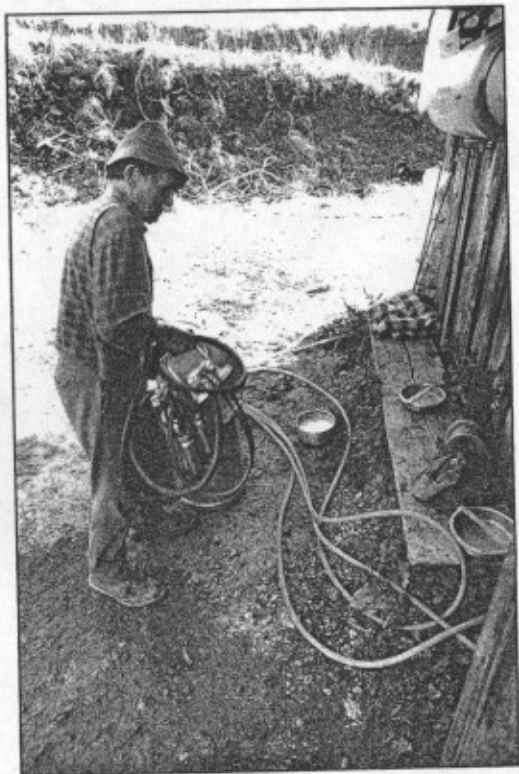
What was happening: Ponai, thirty kilometres from Bombay. Water pipes taking water to the city. The boy had gone to sleep on the pipes because they were cool.

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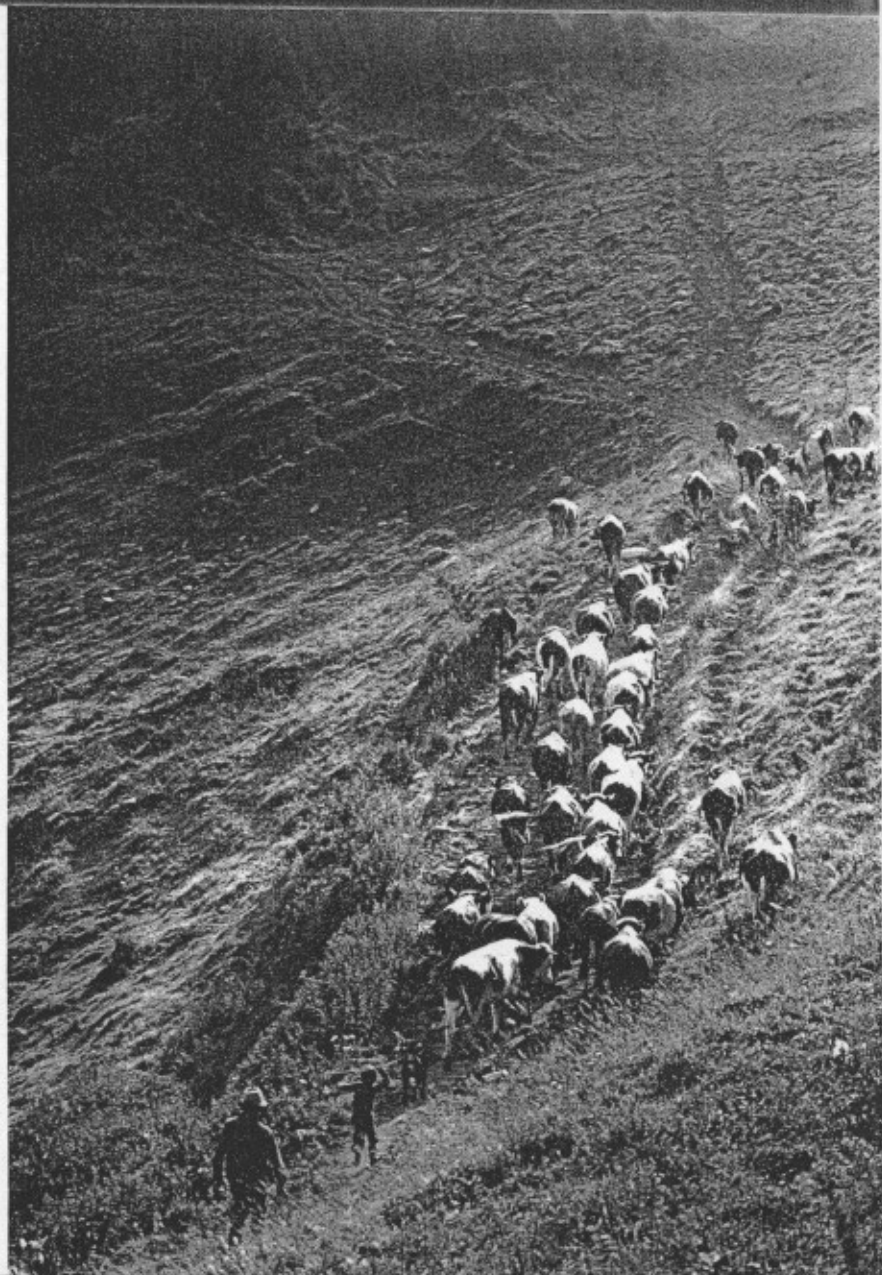


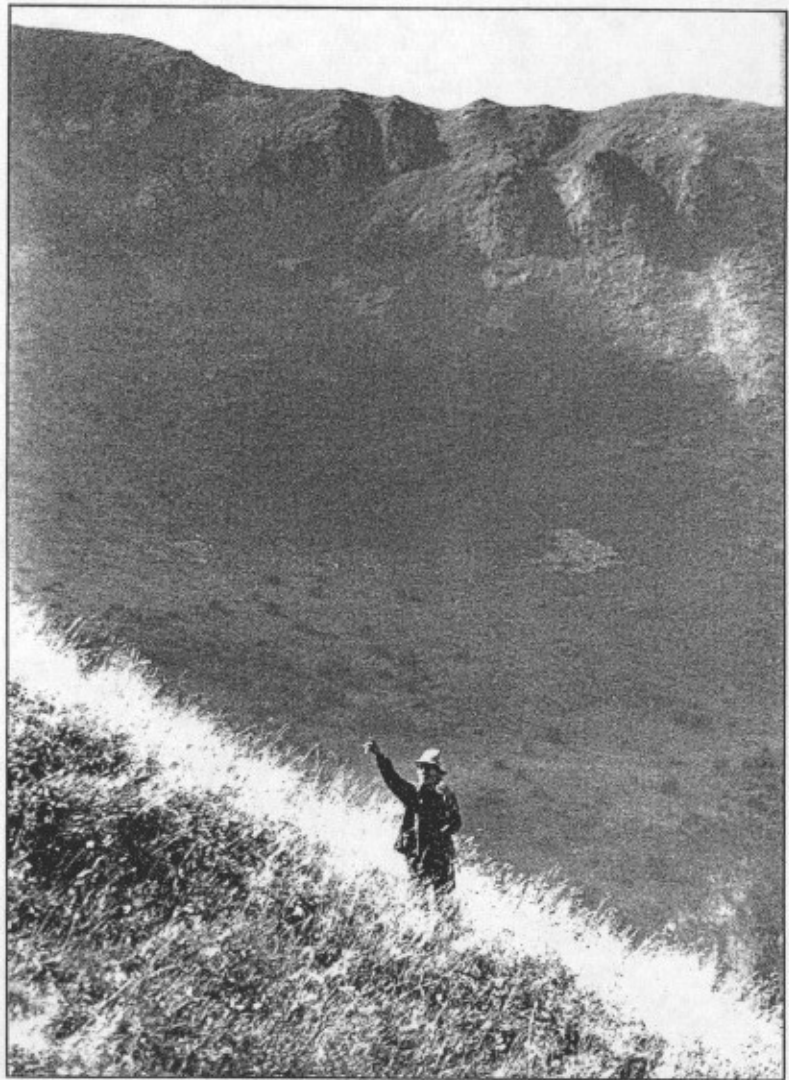
MARCEL
OR THE RIGHT TO CHOOSE

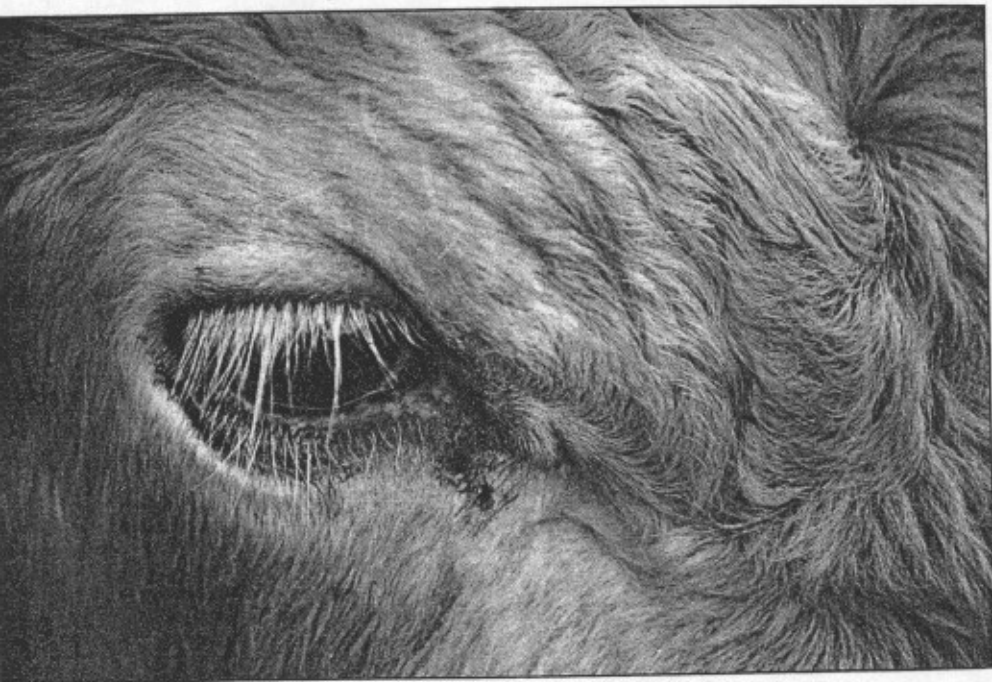




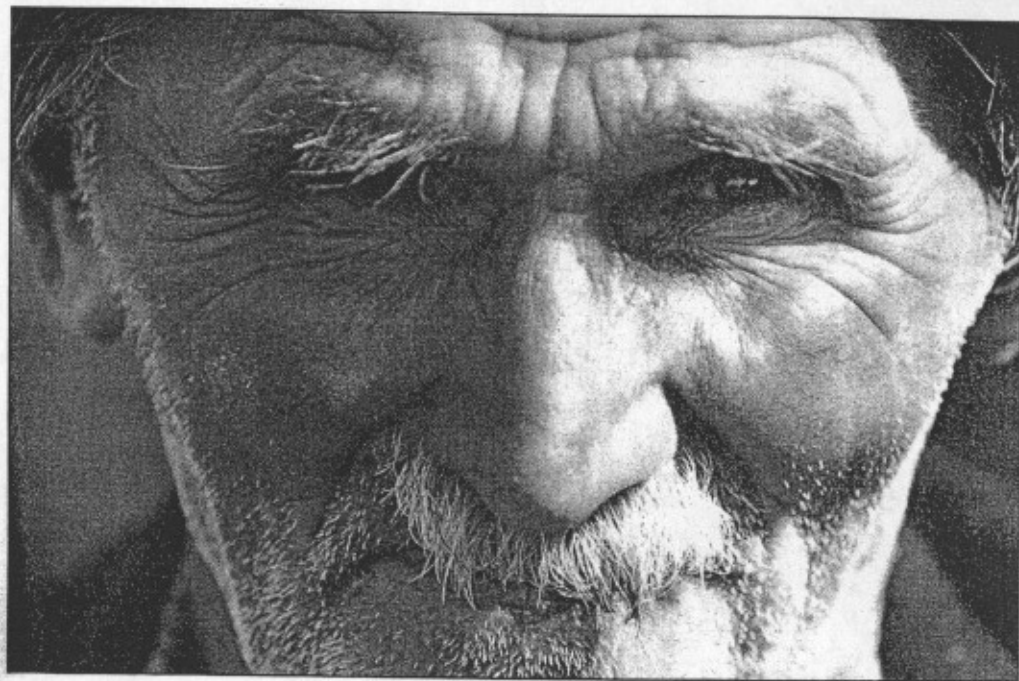
During the summer Marcel lives and works alone in the *alpage*, at an altitude of 1,500 metres. He has a herd of fifty cows. Occasionally his young grandson pays him a visit. He seemed to enjoy the two days I spent with him. I was a kind of company for him.



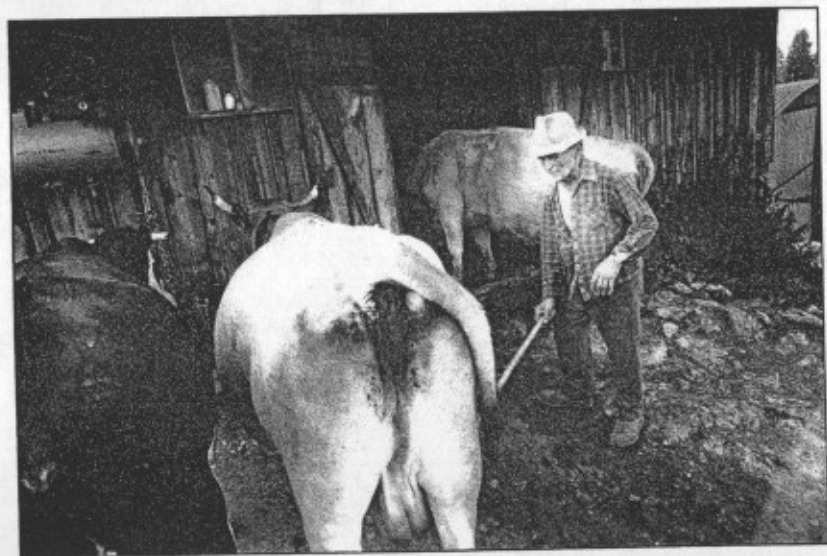
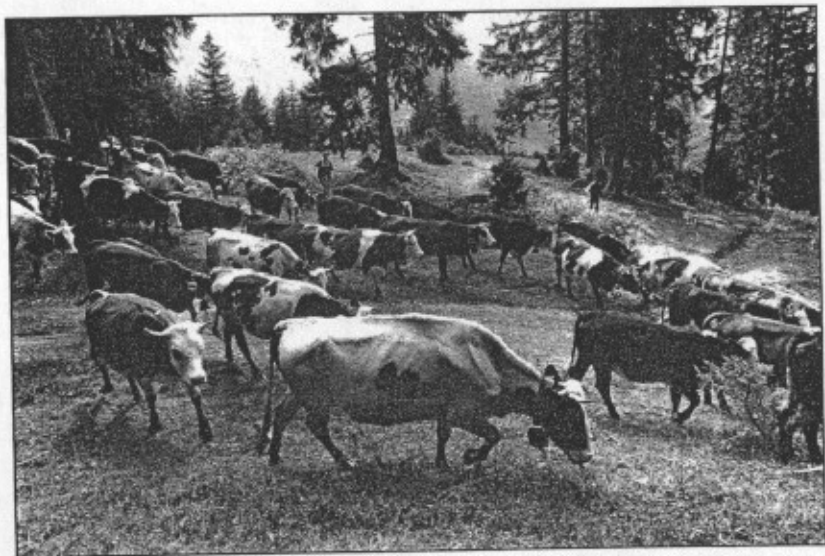




The following Saturday when I took him a pile of prints, he examined them very carefully, spreading them out on the kitchen table. Pointing his finger at a close-up of a cow's eye, he said categorically: "That's no subject for a photo!"



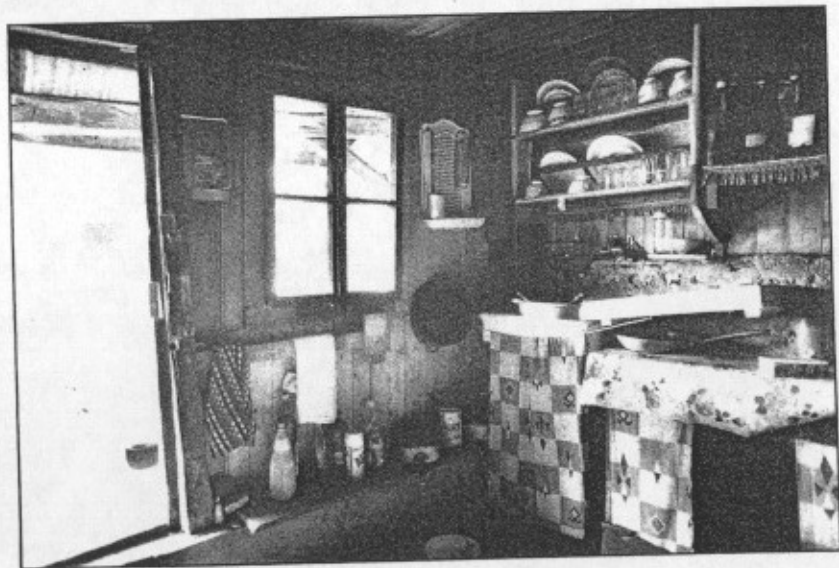
Silence. Then he added: "But don't think I can't tell which cow it is! That's Marquise." Another silence. "The same principle," he continued, "applies to pictures of people. If you take a head, you should take the whole head, the whole head and shoulders. Not just a part of the face."

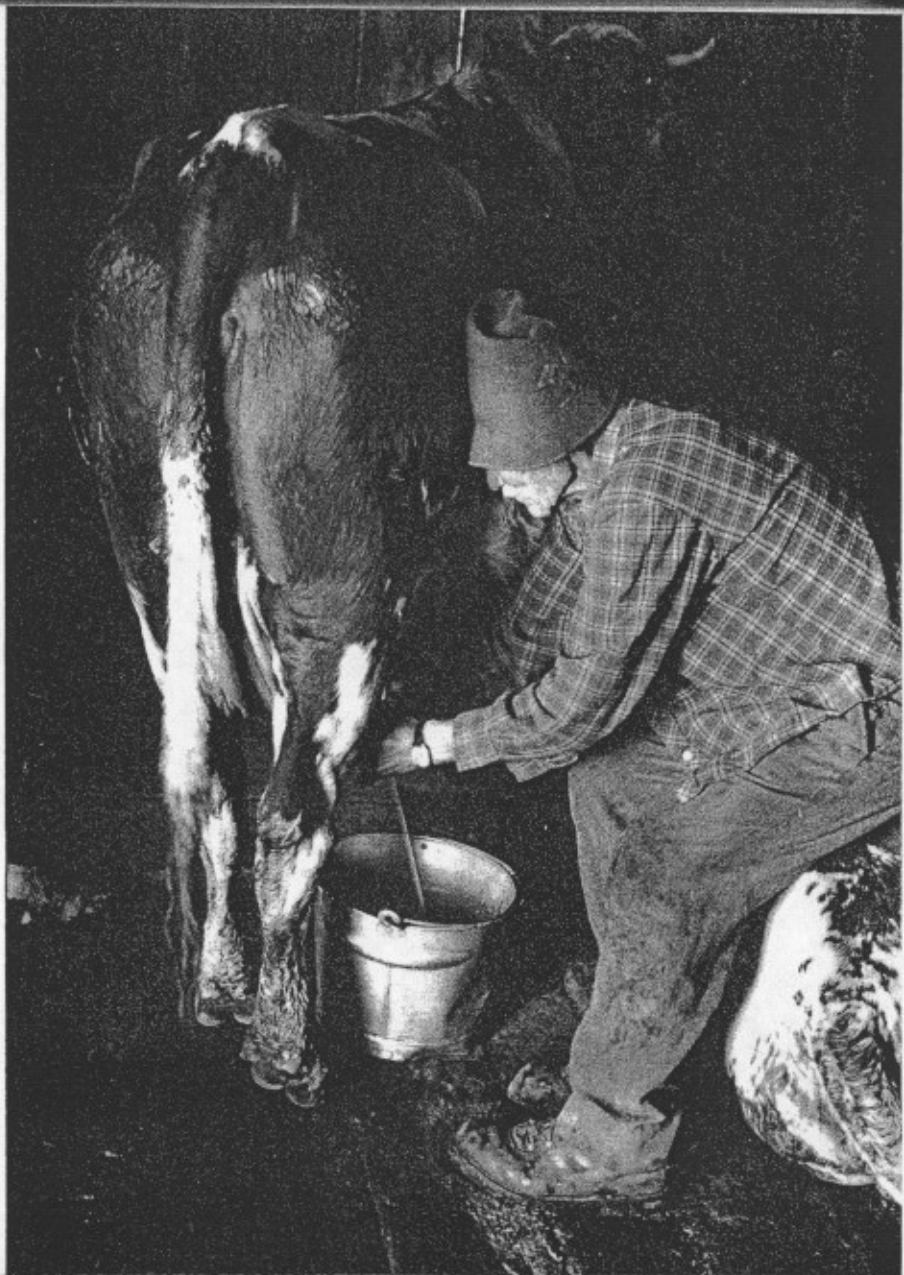
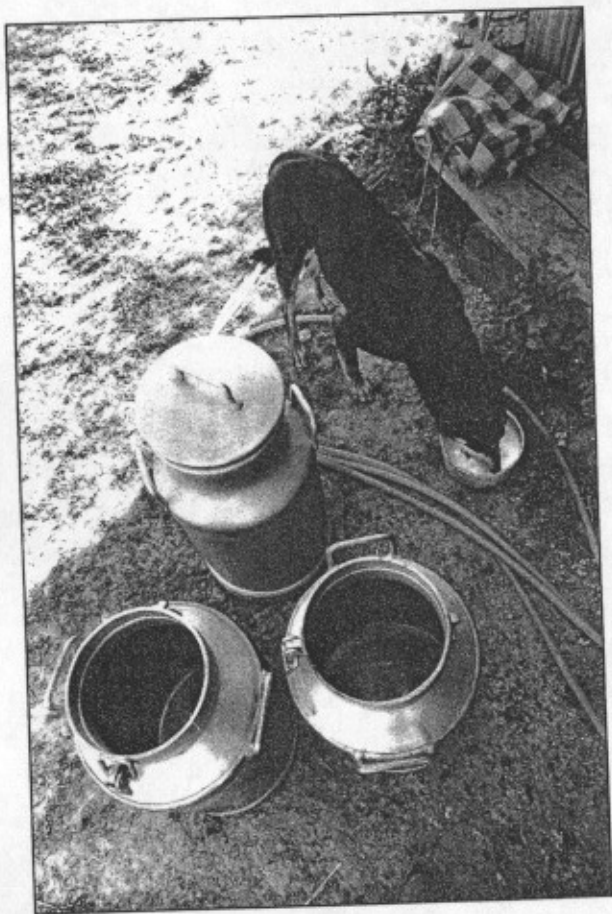


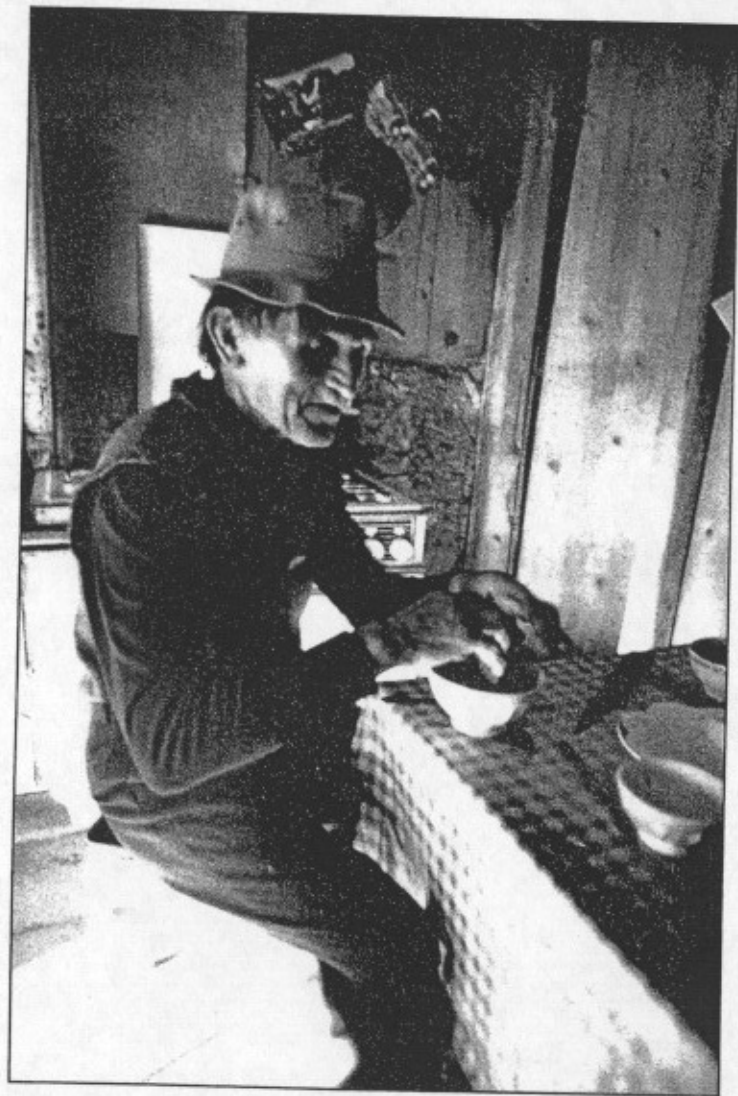


"That's very good! It's all there." He picked out the pictures he liked best. They were those which showed what gave pleasure to him in his life. His large herd. His grandson. His dog.



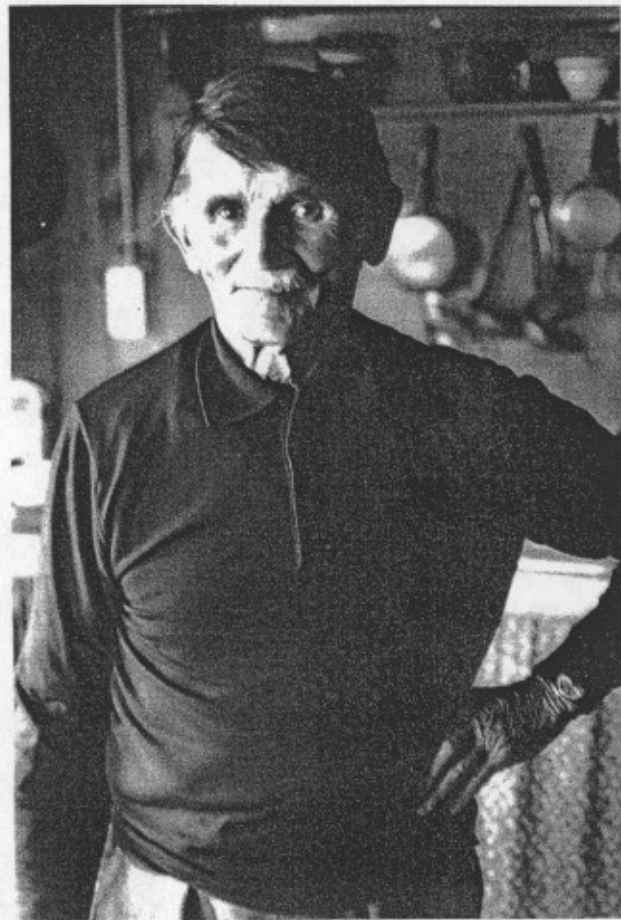








The next Sunday, early in the morning, Marcel knocked at the door. He was wearing a clean, freshly ironed, black shirt. His hair was carefully combed. He had shaved. "The moment has come," he told me, "to take the bust. Down to there!" He indicated his waist with one hand. Below this chosen line he was wearing his working trousers and his boots covered with cowshit. Sunday or not, he still had fifty cows to look after. He stood in the middle of the kitchen and concentrated on the camera which was going to take his portrait.



When he saw this portrait, in which he had chosen everything for himself, he said with a kind of relief: "And now my great grandchildren will know what sort of man I was."